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Proceedings

Society of Dance History Scholars

Twenty-First Annual Conference

University of Oregon

Eugene, Oregon

18 - 21 June 1998

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# CONFERENCE PAPERS

Twenty-First Annual Conference  
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Linda J. Tomko, Compiler

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## POWOW DANCING AND NATIVE RAP: AMERICAN INDIAN DANCE PATRONAGE AND THE POLITICS OF SPIRITUALITY

Anita Gonzalez

Native American festivals, as cultural dance arenas, reaffirm spiritual and communal roots of dance, and expose traditional dance practices to wider audiences. They also serve as a forum for political and economic interests. Multi-million dollar powwows and multi-national prayer ceremonies are now sites for the expression of both local and global cultural power as Native American producers become articulators of performance aesthetics. In this paper, I cite two events as examples of the reconstitution of dance sites as active political forums: the Schemitzun Powwow sponsored by the Mashantucket Pequot Nation and the Crowdog Sundance on the Rosebud reservation in South Dakota. In the paper I show how internationalization of the dance arena complicates issues of ownership and cultural autonomy.

The Schemitzun powwow, sponsored annually by the Mashantucket Pequot Nation, was held this year (1997) in the Hartford Coliseum in Connecticut. I was one of the over 20,000 people who attended the event.<sup>1</sup> In addition to three thousand dancers competing for prizes, the powwow featured political activists such as Russell Means, Native American rap artists Haida and Litefoot (the movie star featured in "The Indian in the Cupboard"), country western music by Susan Whipple, Oneida comedian Charlie Hill, and the film star John Trudell.

Schemitzun is a traditional powwow with contemporary overtones. A typical day-long powwow includes one or two opening processions or grand entries, opening prayers, speeches, a veterans parade, one or more featured drum groups, competitive dancing, a give away and a feast. Although there are various accounts of the origins of the modern powwow, most writers acknowledge the ceremonial roots noting that the dance event synthesizes secular versions of the Ghost Dance, the Sundance, the Grass dance, the Gourd Dance, and war dances associated with specific nations. Author Abe Conklin credits the Ponca He-Thus-Ka Society with originating the Powwow in 1876.<sup>2</sup> Gloria Young, describes the modern powwow as an "intertribal event chosen after World War II to honor servicemen and bring together Native Americans in urban areas,"<sup>3</sup> while Tomas Kavanagh, in the book *Native American Dance*, maintains that the term derived from Naragansett and originally referred to curing ceremonies. He later concedes that "[a]lthough many of its elements are traditional, powwows are not unchanging continuations from the depths of time, but rather are the dynamic and creative expressions of Indian identity and pride, both for individuals and communities<sup>4</sup>."

The Schemitzun powwow commemorates a pre-modern, agricultural society. The title, which means the Festival of the Green Corn, alludes to the time of the year when pre-modern civilizations celebrated the harvesting of the corn. However, in 1997, the Pequot Times describes the Schemitzun as "the world's largest Native American dance competition with some \$850,000 in prizes." By offering large amount of cash prizes and

profiling highly successful, commercial artists the event promotes economic and political as well as cultural sharing.

Schemitzun is unique because it is sponsored by the Meshantucket Pequots, a nation whose casino revenues have made them one of the wealthiest Native American tribal groups of the United States. Their economic power enables them to stage an elaborate cultural fair and entertainment spectacle. Although Schemitzun has been held at various locations over the years, locating the powwow in the Hartford coliseum in 1997 added a consumerist atmosphere to the event. Billboards advertising local banks dominated the arena. The arts and crafts exposition, with over one hundred vendors, was held on an open conference area where displays of compact discs, videotapes, fine art pieces, clothing, leatherwear, and jewelry were mounted on linen-draped tables. Food vendors sold traditional fry bread from behind carts and within hotdog arcades.

In the actual dance arena over three thousand dancers and sixty "Drums" participated in competitive events that ranged from the traditional women's blanket dance to a more contemporary hand drum competition. During the two-hour grand entry (a processional in which all of the dancers parade before the judges) the arena was crowded with dancers in full regalia brushing and pushing against one another. The size of and scope of the event was impressive. Accompanying the dancers were sixty drum groups representing nations from the east and west coasts, the southwest, Canada and, of course, the eastern nations. A few of the "Drums" also included women players--an unusual movement towards erasure of gender differences, given that Native American ceremonial dancing is intentionally gendered. Female members of drum groups usually stand and sing rather than play.

Particularly thought-provoking was the mid-afternoon rap concert of Haida and Litefoot. The performers were placed on a high platform above an audience of youth and teenagers who stood on the arena floor. African American gestures and street rhythms coupled with visual evocations of Native American spirituality (fog and prayers) raised the spirits of the youthful observers as red, green and magenta lights played on the singers. Rapping about the hardships of reservation life, Haida talked about the conundrum of waiting for a man to return to the reservation from the big city and wondering how to support the children. During the finale number Litefoot threw hats and articles of clothing to audience members from the platform, then disappeared into a cloud of machine-generated fog. The technical elements—swirling lights and amplified sound reverberated in the midst of the dance arena while the elders watched from the stadium seating area.

Powwow organizer Michael Goodwin (in a February 1998 interview) said that rock concerts like that of Haida and Litefoot intend to touch the youth/teenage constituency and garner within them an awareness of social activism. Inculcation of traditional Native American belief systems into the youth is still one of the goals of ceremonial gatherings, even though today's society calls for cultural producers to present the material through contemporary arts genres. Not all event sponsors, however, are in agreement with the inclusion of modern aesthetics. In his interview, Michael Goodwin

mentioned that tribal elders have decided that next year's Schemitzun will be held in the open air on the nation's reservation. Apparently, there are differing opinions about what is a decorous atmosphere for a "traditional" powwow.

I return to the notion that the powwow is a spiritual event designed to unify and educate through dance. What is interesting is that although images of spirituality (pipes, mountains, feathers, and smoke) are stereotypical (and often used by dance sponsors to promote Indian dances), they actually reaffirm cultural roots for Native American participants. One of the legacies of the cultural pride movement of the 1960's was to embrace past negative images as an act of cultural power. Contrary to the nineteenth-century anthropological imagery that portrayed "Indian" dance events as static phenomenon, modern representations are dynamic and contest the power of the majority culture to name and define American Indian dance. Like the controversy surrounding the use of the label "American Indian" vs. "Native American," differing factions of Native Peoples may embrace or negate labels and past images associated with them.

There is a tension between traditionalists and pan-Indianists that has reverberated through Native American political and cultural groups since the mid-twentieth century. The advent of the civil rights movements of the 1960's led to a national reconsideration of the political rights of African Americans, Native Americans, and other minority populations. One direct result of the civil rights effort was the formation and promulgation of AIM or the American Indian Movement, an organization whose political tactics included occupation, cultural advocacy, and armed resistance. AIM mobilized some sectors of the Native American population to return to traditional beliefs, and called for national recognition of the continuing presence of Indians in America. Efforts like the occupation of Alcatraz prison, the armed confrontation at Wounded Knee, and the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) building on Washington, D.C. brought national attention to American Indian politics and culture. In addition to political and economic rights, AIM leaders fought for the recognition and legalization of ceremonial dances. Many of the dances like the Ghost Dance and the Sundance had been outlawed through a series of federal acts passed between 1890 and 1940.

Russell Means, one of the original AIM organizers, was a featured speaker at the Schemitzun powwow. He often lectures on the college and university circuit and has published an autobiography about his involvement in the Indian rights movement called Where White Men Fear to Tread.<sup>5</sup> Although he is an inspiring speaker, he is controversial, and has been accused in the Indian press of capitalizing on his AIM associations for personal gain. Phil McCombs writes in a Los Angeles Times article from January 10, 1996:

It may be symbolic of our age that Russell Means, one of the biggest, baddest, meanest, angriest, most famous American Indian activists of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century—a man who faced off federal agents at Wounded Knee, S.D. during a 71 day seige, who helped take over the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in Washington a year earlier, and who once climbed Mount



Rushmore to pee on George Washington's face—is now Chief Powhatan in the animated Disney adventure “Pochohantas.”

Means' presentation at the Schemitzun powwow included a speech and a demonstration of a traditional men's dance that he had learned from his father as a child on the Pine Ridge reservation. Means has also spoken at the Crowdog Sundance in Rosebud South Dakota, but in a very different context—as an activist and a promoter of national AIM activities. At the Sundance, he speaks from the sidelines, expressing his solidarity with the dancers, and using the arena microphone to explain programs and policies of various AIM chapters.

The Crowdog Sundance is the second event which I cite to illustrate the dynamic use of the traditional dance arena as a forum for political statement, and to explore the conflicts/tensions that arise when public dance events embrace contemporary/global agendas. The Sundance, held annually on the Rosebud reservation in South Dakota, is a prayer ceremony in which men and women fast, dance and sacrifice for four days for spiritual renewal. During the nineteenth century, Plains Indian tribes openly practiced the ceremony until federal acts outlawed the dance. In the 1970's, the Sundance was re-introduced to Rosebud, South Dakota as a revivalist activity initiated by the American Indian Movement. The organization selected Chief Leonard Crowdog as a spiritual leader for their cause, and in 1972 he sponsored a dance on his property outside of Rosebud to introduce the mostly urban AIM members to traditional Lakota practices.

What was unique about AIM was that it was intertribal and national, seeking to define a new identity for those Native Americans who had migrated away from reservation settings and settled within urban environments. AIM leaders reformulated the concept of pan-Indianism, which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, and used it to mobilize tribal groups with similar interests in promoting Native American rights. Ceremonial dances like the Sundance galvanized the disparate cultural beliefs of the organization's members around a common set of practices.

The 1972 Sundance at Crowdog's Paradise was one of the first dance gatherings. Because the American Indian Movement, like the Black Panther Party, that was its inspiration, mobilized Black and White, as well as Native American supporters, the ceremony also included non-native participants. The event, with its civil rights overtones, laid the groundwork for the visualization of a wider community of people participating in Native American dance events.

Many reservation elders and traditionalists opposed AIM's revival of the Sundance because it opened a local and tribally specific ceremony to a national audience. One result of the media interest in Indian activities was that the unique and differing cultural practices of Native peoples were homogenized into the image of the angry Plains rebel warrior. Not only did the Sundance make tribal religion international, but it also took a single image of the Native American and publicized it for global impact

The Sundance, as it is practiced today at Rosebud continues to draw non-native and international participants to a sacred ceremony and creates an atmosphere of tourism and voyeurism around a ceremonial event. The 1997 dance attracted 280 dancers and several hundred observers. Native American members of Southwestern (Dineh, Ponca, Acoma, Pima), West Coast (Kima, Modoc, Yakima), Canadian (Haida, Inuit, Tlingit) and Mexican (Otomi, Perepechua, Nahautl) nations came as well as "clans" of non-native dancers from Japan, Germany, France, and of course, the United States. Although many dance leaders, in the spirit of universal humanitarianism, advocate for inclusion of people of all colors and nations, other leaders regularly object to the internationalization of a tribal, local, and sacred ceremony. Articles such as the following excerpted from Indian Country Today frequently appear in the Native American press:

Mainstream America said us Injuns was crazy! What is really crazy is that in 1997 non-Indians would pay thousands of dollars to participate in something as sacred as our own Lakota Sun Dance. Four days without food and water, piercing of the flesh under 100 degree heat so that people shall live? Their people are not candidates for the endangered species list as mine have been for the last 500 years. Do they have the traditional vision of their ancestors guiding them as American Indian people do? What do people who derive from entrepreneurs of exploration and exploitation hope to achieve from exploiting our last traditional stronghold...our American Indian religion?"<sup>6</sup>

What is central to this type of controversy is the issue of ownership. Who has the right to define and disseminate cultural beliefs and practices...and to whom? Traditionalists believe that dance ceremonies should remain local and culturally specific while pan-Indians advocate for inclusion of diverse tribal groups and non-Indian supporters in dance events. Essentially, one group views dance as a preservation activity while the other sees dance as a way of acquainting or re-acquainting westernized participants with Native American cultural beliefs. I believe that there is room for both positions, but engagement with outsiders (and the educational stance that this necessitates) diffuses the affirmation rites of the dance. As an African American I see similar issues addressed in Afrocentric or Black heritage cultural events.

For centuries (500 years) European and other settlers have had the power to establish cultural agendas for the conquered Indian nations of America. Consequently, American Indian performance has entered the mainstream of dance history in only a marginal way. Early American settlers saw tribal dances as barbaric displays of primitivism. Descriptions of Ghost Dance and Sundance ceremonies circulated by 19<sup>th</sup> century explorers and fictionalized by writers like James Fenimore Cooper, frightened settlers and eventually led to government prohibition of many Native American dance gatherings.

When the emergence of American modern dance in the early twentieth century, called for a re-imagination of the cultural constituency of America, choreographers searched for source material that would redefine American dance motifs. Ruth St. Denis,

and later, her partner Ted Shawn, incorporated Native American themes into concert dance presentations, developing works like "Invocation to the Thunderbird" (1921), "Hopi Eagle Dance" (1934), "Ponca Indian Dance" (1934) and "Osage-Pawnee Dance of Greeting" (1930) that referenced Native Americans without actually including them. As Susan Manning demonstrated in her paper at last year's conference (which discussed the "Negro Spirituals" of Helen Tamiris), choreographers of the 1930's embraced cultural dance forms of "exotic" minority cultures as defining motifs for the then emerging American modern dance.<sup>7</sup>

Since the 1930's Native American artists have enriched the American concert dance scene as choreographers (Raoul Trujillo, Daystar) and dancers (Maria Tallchief), but have had little impact upon dance production and the circulation of dance aesthetics. Perhaps the most notable exception is the American Indian Dance Theater, a production that toured nationally and internationally and presented an Indian-centered perspective of Native American dances. Although Western and Native American dance traditions have intermingled and cross-fertilized one another, the wider dance community may not generally recognize American Indians as dance producers who set cultural agendas and have economic resources to promote imagery about the American experience. This may no longer be the case.

The reinstatement of Native American civil rights over the past 30 years has increased awareness of cultural agency—the ability of minority groups to determine cultural and political agendas for themselves. There is a need for both dance scholars and minority dance producers to reconsider and theoretically assess what constitutes the American dance scene. Important questions should be raised about economics and power: who controls the mechanisms for promotion and dissemination of cultural agendas.

At the same time, globalization and technology complicate issues of representation. How far can or should Native American presenters move towards contemporary aesthetics to establish cultural relevancy? What is the significance of these cultural traditions in the context of a global world? Internet resources and media outlets expose ceremonial traditions to wide audiences and negate the local qualities of culturally specific dance. New technology can give a sense of ownership of "insider" cultural traditions to anyone who logs onto a public website. At the same time, most Native Americans, whether they reside on reservations or in urban centers, participate in a consumerized, American culture and practice westernized American lifestyles. Producers of cultural events like Schemitzun and the Sundance make their dance events more "relevant" when they incorporate modern cultural references and address contemporary political concerns like the environment, entertainment, legal actions, social welfare conditions, health, and diet.

Although there are differing opinions about how ceremonies should be organized and who should participate, each "sovereign" Native American nation wants to have the right to determine the programming and select the artists/participants. As American Indian dance ceremonies are peopled by non-native tourists, "mixed-blood" participants,

and migrant dancers from other countries who join in dance ceremonies for cultural exposure, the boundaries of what constitutes Native American are being stretched. This in itself has raised political and autonomy concerns.

Both the Schemitzun Powwow and the Rosebud Sundance are examples of local dance production enacted globally. Of particular interest to me are the artistic agendas of these new dance patrons. The Pequot nation promotes both Euro-American and American Indian events. They are sponsors of symphony orchestras, ballets, powwows, community social gatherings, Native American filmmakers and urban arts festivals. Like any producer they select events which promote preservation of cultural practices and events which challenge pre-conceived notions of what constitutes Native American lifestyles. Organizers of the Crowdog/AIM Sundance also embrace globalism by incorporating international and non-Indian guests into their ceremonial practices. These inclusions are controversial because they touch upon issues of ownership and cultural agency.

The African playwright, novelist, and critic Ngugi Wa Thiongo writes in a recent article for the Drama Review that "the politics of the performance space is much more than a question of a physical site for a theatrical show. It touches on nearly all aspects of power and being in a colonial and postcolonial society. It is germane to issues of what will constitute the national and the mainstream."<sup>8</sup>

If the dance circle becomes a professional forum and the producers of circle dances now have the power to define how Euro-American dancing fits into that arena, then there is a possibility for inversion. Can we conceptualize an American dance database that incorporates the Schemitzun website as a cross-reference for ballet events? Will the new Mashantucket-Pequot museum and library be listed as an American dance archive? Native American and other non-western dance producers are looking for ways to enter the existing network of dance production and scholarship. Perhaps the Native American dancing that was once an addendum, a marginal inclusion, can become a conceptual inspiration for a new American dance and a viable forum for reconsideration of the aesthetics of dance production.

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<sup>1</sup> Attendance figures come from the Pequot Times description of the Schemitzun powwow (a publication of the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation in Connecticut). Vol. 6, Number 10, October 1997, pg.1

<sup>2</sup> "Origin of The Powwow: The Ponca He-Thus-Ka Society Dance," Native Americas. Fall/Winter 1994, p.17.

<sup>3</sup> "Dance: Dance as Communication," Native Americas. Fall/Winter 1994, p.9.

<sup>4</sup> pg.105.

<sup>5</sup> Where White Men Fear to Tread: The Autobiography of Russell Means by Russell Means with Marvin J. Wolff. New York: St Martins Press, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Iron Shell, Andrew. "Lakota Spiritualism Not a Fantasy for Cosmic Guests," Indian Country Today, August 25-September 1, 1997

<sup>7</sup> Smithsonian, Native American Dance, pg. 169.

<sup>8</sup> The Drama Review, 1155, Fall 1997, p. 28.