

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

BODIES BORROWED, INDIGENOUS CULTURES CONSUMED: THE EXTRACTIVE
AESTHETIC OF AMERICAN MODERN DANCE

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Norman, Oklahoma

2026

BODIES BORROWED, INDIGENOUS CULTURES CONSUMED: THE EXTRACTIVE
AESTHETIC OF AMERICAN MODERN DANCE

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

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Abstract

This thesis argues that American modern dance is fundamentally built on extractive aesthetics, a settler-colonial logic through which choreographers appropriated, reassembled, and claimed Indigenous cultural materials as the basis of a new “American” dance form. Through archival analysis and theoretical frameworks such as Frankenindianism, the project demonstrates how pioneering dance figures, like Ted Shawn, constructed choreographic identities by dismembering Indigenous movement, ceremony, and epistemologies, then stitching these fragments into stylized representations that circulated as what was perceived as authentic, original, and artistically innovative. These practices were not incidental but structural, forming the aesthetic and pedagogical foundations that continue to shape modern dance training, repertory, and institutional authority today. By tracing how these extractive methods became codified as tradition within modern dance, this thesis reveals how the field continues to reproduce colonial narratives under the guise of homage, influence, or artistic inheritance. Ultimately, this project contends that modern dance cannot be separated from the colonial frameworks that produced it, and that confronting these foundations is essential for dismantling the ongoing harms embedded in the field’s practices and pedagogies.

Modern dance foundations, Extractive aesthetics, Frankenindianism, Settler colonial
performance practices

Positionality Statement

All throughout my life, I trained as a ballet dancer. In that time, I have taken countless modern dance classes, many of which I participated in, but it was not until later that I learned about homage ideology. I never liked these types of modern dances, but I participated because I had to as a student or even a company member. This all came to the surface while I was an undergraduate student in the dance department at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. I remember walking out of the studio after a classmate casually mentioned that Modern was based on Native dance. The comment was offhand, but it had a significant impact on me. Even before I had taken a single Indigenous studies course, I noticed the red flags. I found myself stepping out of the studio whenever we would have a Modern instructor come in to teach a master class, which I never dreamed of doing before, even if it was not my favorite. I even backed out of a performance built around “African” drums and “African-inspired” choreography during that time. I told myself it was because of an injured foot, but the truth was simpler: I did not want to participate in something that felt so icky, wrong, and unspoken. Even without formal training in Indigenous studies, I subconsciously recognized the discomfort long before I could articulate it. These moments of discomfort and quiet refusal became the groundwork for how I now understand my relationship to dance and the position from which I approach this research.

I write this thesis as an enrolled member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and as a retired ballet dancer whose relationship to dance has been shaped by more than twenty years of training and performance. After retiring from ballet, I earned a BA in Political Science at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, where my work centered on the politics of sight and the ways Native people are rendered visible or invisible within U.S. political and cultural structures. Alongside this, I completed a dance minor, focusing on ballet and contemporary dance.

My position as both a Native scholar and a former dancer informs every aspect of this work. I approach this research with the embodied knowledge of someone who has lived inside these techniques, who has felt both the exhilaration of performance and the discomfort of recognizing that some of these movements were built from fragmented and stylized versions of Indigenous traditions. I also approach it with the political and analytical training to understand how these appropriations are not isolated artistic choices but part of broader systems of settler colonialism, cultural extraction, and representational control.

This thesis emerges from the intersection of these experiences. It is shaped by my identity as an Eastern Band Cherokee person, my lived history as a dancer, and my academic commitment to examining how power operates through visibility. My goal is not only to critique the historical foundations of modern dance but to illuminate how these histories continue to affect Native dancers today, including myself. By situating my own story within this research, I acknowledge the ways my positionality shapes my interpretations, my investments, and my reasoning behind this research.

1. Introduction

Modern dance is often celebrated as a distinctly American art form, since it is seen as a dance form that is all about breaking free from the restrictions of European ballet, creating a dance that makes it so people are free to move in ways that are deeply expressive. It allows people to celebrate, while empowering them to express themselves through movement. Modern is seen as an innovative and expressive choreographic style rooted in a search for a distinctly American identity-based dance form. Beneath this celebrated narrative of artistic innovation and cultural fusion lies a darker story of unconsented appropriation, particularly of Indigenous traditions, that remains largely unexamined within mainstream dance education and history. Native practices, rich in ancestral meaning and spiritual significance, have frequently been borrowed without acknowledgment and then altered to conform to a white societal lens within the Modern dance form. These extractive and altered performances were then taught to ensuing generations. This led to the many layers of aestheticization, appropriation, and stolen identity that underpinned the foundation of modern dance.

This legacy of appropriation within modern dance has not been investigated through the critical lens of a Native American perspective. My research begins with a vital question: what is the extent, and what are the consequences of an erasure in which Native modern dancers (I refer to Native dancers that practice modern dance within this work as Native modern dancers) later discover that the very forms they've been trained in are stitched together from dismembered and aestheticized fragments of their own cultural heritage? To answer this question, I have traced the historical foundations of modern dance through archival research, performance analysis, and

costume study, beginning with Ted Shawn and extending through contemporary choreographic practices.

To trace the historical foundations of modern dance, my research begins with an in-depth examination of Ted Shawn and the Denishawn Dance Company. Ted Shawn was a foundational figure in American modern dance, known for challenging conventions and redefining masculinity in movement. Still, he was also a central architect of the field's extractive relationship to non-Western cultures. As co-founder of the Denishawn School with his wife and artistic partner, Ruth St. Denis, Shawn helped establish one of the earliest and most influential institutions in American modern dance. Denishawn was not simply a training ground for dancers; it was a cultural laboratory where "exotic" identities were crafted, consumed, and performed for white audiences hungry for novelty. The company's aesthetic and ideological frameworks were built on the selective appropriation of global traditions, and this ethos profoundly and lastingly shaped the development of modern dance.

Ruth St. Denis's own choreographic persona set the tone for this extractive environment. Long before Shawn turned his attention to Indigenous cultures, St. Denis had built her career on Orientalist fantasies, performing works inspired by India, Egypt, Japan, and Southeast Asia. She routinely painted her skin brown, adorned herself in imagined "Eastern" costumes, and adopted an exotic persona that bore little resemblance to the cultures she claimed to represent. Her dances—*Radha*, *The Incense*, and *The Nautch*—were celebrated not for cultural accuracy but for their ability to evoke a sensual, mystical "Orient" that existed primarily in the Western imagination. St. Denis's performances exemplified the early twentieth-century appetite for the exotic, a cultural moment in which white artists were encouraged to embody and reinterpret non-Western identities as a form of artistic innovation. This practice normalized the idea that

cultural borrowing required neither consent nor accountability, and it created the aesthetic and ethical conditions in which Shawn's later appropriations of Indigenous cultures could flourish.

Within this environment, Shawn's fascination with Indigeneity emerged not as an anomaly but as a natural extension of Denishawn's broader project. Just as St. Denis constructed an imagined Asia through costume, makeup, and stylized gesture, Shawn took these ideas and constructed a pseudo-Indianness world through his choreographic and costuming choices. His costumes blended elements from multiple Native Nations, Plains beadwork, Pueblo textiles, and generic Native American clothing, creating a composite image that felt "authentic" to settler audiences but was culturally incoherent. Makeup further exaggerated this effect: darkened skin, painted geometric designs, and stylized facial markings transformed Shawn and his dancers into theatrical "Indians," reinforcing racialized stereotypes under the guise of artistic expression. Stage designs often included tipis, desert landscapes, or totem-like structures, visual shorthand that collapsed the vast diversity of Indigenous nations into a single consumable aesthetic.

By analyzing Shawn's choices, his engagement with Indigenous movement, music, ceremonial clothing, and theatrical design, I aim to uncover how these early practices contributed to the construction of a distinctly "American" dance identity. This exploration draws on archival materials, performance documentation, music assessments, and costume analyses to reveal how Native traditions were stylized, used, and reinterpreted for settler audiences. Through this lens, I investigate how Ted Shawn's legacy helped establish a model of cultural appropriation that continues to influence dance pedagogy and performance today. This legacy not only misrepresented Indigenous traditions but also contributed to their marginalization, as sacred practices were extracted, aestheticized, and performed without consent. Native people were

framed as remnants of a distant past rather than as members of living, evolving cultures, which further justified their exclusion from the very stages that profited from their imagery.

Shawn exemplified this dynamic, viewing what he called “primitive” cultures as raw material to be appropriated and transformed in the service of a distinctly American dance form. He framed Indigenous and ethnic dance traditions as aesthetic resources to be conquered, stylized, and reassembled, laying the groundwork for a choreographic model rooted in what I call extractive aesthetics. Both Shawn and St. Denis operated within this extractive mode, a creative framework that treated the cultural expressions of others as material to be mined, rearranged, and consumed. This approach functioned through a vampiric logic in which settler artists drew vitality, novelty, and symbolic power from the cultural lifeblood of Indigenous and other marginalized communities, sustaining their own artistic identities through the consumption of someone else’s traditions.

Because their work relied on this framework, it was celebrated as groundbreaking, precisely because it drew on cultures that white audiences perceived as mysterious, ancient, or spiritually profound. St. Denis’s Orientalist spectacles and Shawn’s pseudo-Indian (as in Native American) ballets together established a template in which cultural borrowing required neither consent nor accountability, and in which the “exotic” was valued precisely because it could be detached from the people who created it. Their performances normalized the idea that cultural identity could be worn like a costume, painted onto the skin, or choreographed into a stylized fantasy for white audiences, and the acclaim they received reinforced the belief that cultural borrowing was not only acceptable but artistically virtuous. In this way, the Denishawn founders helped institutionalize a mode of artistic production in which appropriation was not merely

normalized but valorized, shaping the trajectory of modern dance and leaving a legacy that continues to reverberate in contemporary performance spaces.

This extractive aesthetic did not end with Shawn. It continued beyond his era, embedding itself in dance institutions, curricula, and performance practices that borrowed from Indigenous and other marginalized traditions without proper acknowledgment or consent. The lineage of modern dance is filled with choreographers who inherited and expanded this model. Martha Graham, for example, absorbed Shawn's teachings at Denishawn and carried them into her own work, drawing on Indigenous and "primitive" sources to construct a modernist vocabulary that was celebrated as groundbreaking. Although Graham later acknowledged her debt to Denishawn and her fascination with Indigenous movement, her works were still framed as expressions of universal human emotion rather than as appropriations of specific cultural practices. Her trips to Native American reservations for inspiration, her use of stylized tribal gestures, and her incorporation of Indigenous themes into her choreography all reinforced the idea that Native culture existed as a reservoir of imagery available for artistic repurposing.

Another foundational figure in modern dance, Lester Horton extended this lineage as well, creating countless of his own "Indian ballets." Inspired by Shawn's Indian ballets, Horton built an entire choreographic identity around appropriated Indigenous motifs. Horton's technique, which is now a cornerstone of modern dance training, was shaped by this extractive engagement, embedding appropriated movement vocabularies into the very foundation of American modern dance pedagogy. Lastly, Jack Cole, often celebrated as the father of theatrical jazz, also participated in this homage ideology. Because he worked with Ted Shawn for many years, his work drew on many cultural sources, blending them into a hybridized movement language that was praised for its originality. Like Shawn, St. Denis, Graham, and Horton, Cole

treated cultural specificity as something to be abstracted and stylized, reinforcing the idea that non-Western traditions existed primarily to enrich the creative possibilities of white choreographers.

Among these figures, the politics of visibility are central. Indigenous presence was reimagined, commodified, and aestheticized, while actual Native voices and bodies were excluded from the stage. The irony is stark: Native people were prohibited from practicing their traditional dances under federal law at this time, yet white choreographers were celebrated for performing their own stylized versions of those same dances. This contradiction was not a historical accident but a defining feature of the early modern dance landscape. While Native communities faced surveillance, punishment, and cultural suppression, choreographers such as Ted Shawn were publicly praised for their Indian-inspired works as early as the mid-1910s. The erasure of Indigenous agency was systemic, woven into the very fabric of how American modern dance defined itself. Native identity was cherry-picked, curated, filtered, and repackaged for white consumption, rendering Indigenous people visible only through a colonial lens that prioritized fantasy over reality.

This selective visibility flowed directly into the creative practices that defined Shawn's work. The act of choosing which elements from different Native cultures to present and how they would be stitched together into a pseudo-Indian stage identity was not incidental but central to his artistic project. It was not simply borrowing; it was the deliberate construction of Indigeneity as an aesthetic object, something to be rearranged and stylized according to settler desires. This process reflects what I call Frankenindianism, a colonial practice in which elements from multiple Indigenous nations are purposely picked, dismembered, and reassembled into a fabricated image that bears no cultural specificity and no relationship to the communities from

which its pieces were taken, then reanimated for settler use. An extractive aesthetic fuels this process, turning Indigenous cultural expression into material to be mined and consumed, its symbolic and spiritual force drained to animate a stage identity with no living connection to the cultures it imitates.

The consequences of this system extended far beyond the stage. Indigenous people were silenced while their movements were applauded when performed by others, and the very dances Native communities were punished for practicing became celebrated once filtered through white bodies and settler imagination. This inversion of visibility and value reveals how deeply appropriation was woven into the foundations of modern dance. Recognizing this injustice is only the first step; dismantling it requires a fundamental shift in who holds the power to tell these stories and how dance institutions understand the difference between homage and harm. The field must stop disguising appropriation behind the veil of respectful tribute and confront the structural conditions that made such distortions possible in the first place.

For Native modern dancers today, this legacy is deeply personal, and its emotional weight is often felt long before its historical roots are understood. Many enter modern performance spaces with excitement, purpose, and a sense of artistic possibility, only to discover that the very techniques they are mastering carry the weight of colonial histories that have been left unspoken or deliberately obscured. The moment of realizing that a beloved movement phrase or foundational exercise is built from appropriated and distorted fragments of one's own cultural heritage can create a profound rupture. What once felt like belonging can suddenly feel fraught, and what once felt empowering can become entangled with grief, anger, and disorientation.

This dissonance is not only intellectual. It is felt in the body. Native modern dancers must reconcile the joy of movement with the knowledge that the form they are practicing was shaped

by artists who extracted Indigenous aesthetics at the same time that Indigenous people were being punished or silenced for practicing their own dances. Questions of identity and legitimacy emerge. Dancers find themselves asking what it means to love a technique that was built from stolen steps, or how to honor their ancestors while moving through a lineage that erased them.

These Native modern dancers must also navigate institutions that have long celebrated the aesthetic of Indigeneity while erasing its origin, commodifying its spirit, and sidelining its creators. In many programs, Indigenous movement appears only as a stylized echo, filtered through white choreographers and stripped of cultural context. It is framed as universal rather than specific, spiritual, or sovereign. The result is a dance landscape in which Indigeneity is highly visible as an aesthetic but nearly invisible as a living presence with agency and authority. The stage becomes a complicated terrain. It has been a site of celebration, innovation, and artistic transformation, but it has also been a site of erasure and distortion. For Native modern dancers, the stage can become a place of reckoning, a space where movement carries the weight of stolen steps and where every gesture is shaped by the histories that made its transmission possible. Yet it can also be a place of reclamation, where Native modern dancers assert presence, agency, and futurity in a field that once imagined them only as symbols of a disappearing past.

This research serves as a powerful intervention into the established canon of dance history, challenging the stories the field has long told about itself and illuminating the deep silences that have shaped those narratives. It confronts a lineage that has privileged Eurocentric perspectives while marginalizing, distorting, or erasing Indigenous contributions, and it brings into sharp relief the ways Indigenous movement, regalia, and cosmologies were extracted, aestheticized, and repurposed for settler stages. By tracing how homage became a mask for appropriation and how visibility was manipulated to uphold colonial frameworks rather than

dismantle them, this work exposes the uncomfortable truth that the celebrated innovations of modern dance were built within systems that rewarded cultural theft and punished Indigenous self-representation. These histories are not distant or dormant; they continue to reverberate in the present, shaping pedagogy, performance, and the lived experiences of Native dancers who inherit this legacy without ever being told its origins.

This project reaches beyond critique to imagine a fundamentally different future for the field. It envisions a dance world in which Indigenous sovereignty, consent, and authorship are not treated as optional acknowledgments or symbolic gestures but as the structural foundations that determine how dance is taught, performed, archived, and valued. It calls for a reorientation toward accountability and relationality, insisting that the vitality of Indigenous dance traditions lies not in their appropriation but in their continued practice by the communities to whom they belong. By centering Indigenous presence, specificity, and futurity, this research opens the possibility for a dance pedagogy that no longer relies on borrowed bodies and fabricated identities. Instead, it honors the depth, integrity, and sovereignty of Indigenous cultural expression.

II. Historical Foundations

In the early twentieth century, American choreographers sought to define a national dance identity distinct from European ballet traditions. Ted Shawn and the Denishawn Dance Company were central to this movement, positioning themselves as pioneers of a uniquely “American” form of dance. In *American Ballet*, Shawn dismissed ballet as foreign to American dancers, declaring that “ballet is essentially European in origin and character. It cannot, therefore, be the true basis for an American dance. Our task is to create a form that springs from our own soil, our own bodies, and our own spirit” (Shawn 15). For Shawn, ballet’s refinement and association with aristocratic European culture carried what he perceived as a feminized quality, one that he believed American dancers needed to reject in favor of something more vigorous and “authentic.” To achieve this vision, Shawn and his contemporaries drew on Indigenous cultures for inspiration, framing Native movements and aesthetics as emblematic of a primal American spirit ripe for appropriation. In *Every Little Movement*, Shawn reinforced this perspective, insisting that “the so-called primitive dances are not crude beginnings, but the most direct expressions of human emotion. They are the elemental movements from which all later refinements have sprung” (Shawn 42). Yet this search for identity was not grounded in genuine cultural exchange or collaboration; instead, it relied on extractive practices that advanced the artistic ambitions of settler choreographers while silencing and sidelining Indigenous voices.

To break away from what he perceived as the feminized qualities of European dance forms, Ted Shawn sought to position his dancers within a framework of “exotic” and “primitive”

influences that he believed could restore a sense of virility and authenticity to American performance. Native American traditions were especially appealing to him, offering a visual and rhythmic vocabulary that he could stylize to evoke spiritual depth while simultaneously serving his vision of a distinctly “American” dance. However, rather than engaging with Indigenous communities or acknowledging the cultural and ceremonial significance of these practices, Shawn approached them as an aesthetic reservoir, material to be mined, rearranged, and displayed.

Essential aspects of Native culture were distilled into theatrical motifs, stripped of their relational and ceremonial contexts in order to accommodate white audiences hungry for spectacle. Movement patterns, costume elements, and musical themes were abstracted and recontextualized, treated as raw ingredients for a modernist experiment that claimed originality while relying on appropriation. Music composed in the Indianist tradition and costumes assembled from disparate tribal references or reshaped Native materials further contributed to this curated pseudo-Indianness image. This carefully crafted illusion felt “authentic” to settler spectators but bore little resemblance to the lived realities of Indigenous communities. In this way, Shawn’s choreographic practices not only misrepresented Native cultures but also commodified them for artistic gain, embedding extractive aesthetics into the very foundations of American modern dance and shaping a lineage that continues to reverberate across the field.

Ted Shawn’s approach to Indigenous dance was profoundly shaped by an archival and preservationist ideology, one that cast Native cultures as vanishing relics of a pre-modern world and positioned him as the visionary capable of rescuing them. He often framed his choreographic work not simply as artistic creation but as a form of documentation, imagining himself as a custodian of traditions he believed were on the brink of extinction. As he declared in *American*

Ballet, “The dances of the American Indian are rapidly passing away. Unless they are recorded and preserved now, they will be lost to future generations” (Shawn 47). This rhetoric reveals both his desire to capture tribal dances, often without consent, and his conviction that it was his artistic duty to “preserve” them, even as federal policy actively criminalized the very practices he claimed to safeguard. Crucially, this mindset shaped the training environment he built at Denishawn.

As Martha Graham later reflected in her book, *Blood Memory*, “At Denishawn, we slowly became involved in the mythologies of other peoples” (Graham 66). Her phrasing captures the ease with which Shawn’s dancers were encouraged to enter, inhabit, and reinterpret cultural worlds not their own—an ease made possible by Shawn’s belief that Indigenous and other non-Western traditions were available for study, stylization, and theatrical re-creation. In his writings, Shawn extended this logic to his dancers as well, urging them to seek out what he imagined to be untouched communities and to record their movement traditions before they “disappeared,” a directive he framed not only as a responsibility but as a right. Through this lens, Shawn’s choreography becomes inseparable from the salvage-ethnographic mindset that fueled it: a belief that Indigenous cultures were fading, that their dances existed to be collected, and that white artists were uniquely positioned to determine what would survive.

This belief was rooted in a colonial worldview that imagined Native peoples as existing in the “childhood of life” (Shawn, *American Ballet*, 44), a phrase Shawn used to describe Indigenous communities as primitive, innocent, and closer to nature. By infantilizing Native cultures in this way, he reinforced paternalistic hierarchies that positioned himself, and by extension other settler choreographers, as cultural stewards with the authority to interpret, record, and reimagine Indigenous practices for posterity. What he presented as preservation functioned

instead as an extractive act that appropriated ceremonial movement and reframed it as raw material for the construction of a national dance identity. This process further entrenched the erasure of Indigenous agency within the modern dance archive. Cloaked in the language of admiration and rescue, Shawn's ideology stripped Indigenous dance of its cultural, spiritual, and communal significance and recontextualized sacred movement into a theatrical spectacle designed for white audiences. Such practices not only misrepresented Native traditions but also contributed to a broader pattern of cultural theft with lasting consequences. In response, many Native communities became increasingly protective of their ceremonies and knowledge, recognizing the need to safeguard their traditions from further distortion. The legacy of Shawn's work helped normalize the idea that Indigenous culture exists to be interpreted and consumed by outsiders rather than respected as sovereign, living, and self-determining.

Ted Shawn, along with other early modern dance pioneers, played a formative role in shaping American modern dance by incorporating elements of Indigenous culture into his choreographic works. Many of his early pieces, such as *Invocation to the Thunderbird*, *Xochitl*, and *Feather of the Dawn*, drew heavily from Native themes, employing movement motifs, musical rhythms, and costume elements that evoked tribal ceremony and spirituality. These works were not isolated experiments but part of a broader modernist impulse to mine Indigenous cultures for aesthetic inspiration while positioning the choreographer as a cultural innovator. In the emerging narrative of American modern dance, such borrowings were celebrated as bold departures from European tradition, even though they relied on appropriated cultural material that had been stripped of its ceremonial, communal, and spiritual contexts.

The legacy of Shawn's approach did not end with Denishawn and his other company, Ted Shawn and his Male Dancers; it reverberated through the work of later foundational figures such

as Martha Graham and Lester Horton, who, like Shawn, turned to Indigenous and “primitive” sources to construct their modernist vocabularies. Their innovations were built upon the same extractive logic, one that treated Indigenous culture as a reservoir of imagery and movement available for reinterpretation. In this way, Shawn’s aesthetic choices laid the groundwork for a lineage of American modern dance that continued to define itself through appropriations of Native culture, embedding these practices into the very foundations of the field and shaping the canon in ways that continue to influence dance education and performance.

The story most often told about Martha Graham exemplifies how this lineage has been obscured. Popular accounts claim she began as a ballet dancer, grew weary of the form’s rigidity, took off her shoes, and single-handedly invented modern dance. This myth, repeated in classrooms and studios, erases the actual trajectory of her career. In reality, Graham began at the Denishawn Dance Company, where Ted Shawn cast her as the lead in *Xochitl* because he admired her “primitive” style of movement. In fact, the sporadic movement she was admired for was because she was not classically trained at all. Later, in *Blood Memory*, Graham herself acknowledged that she drew heavily on Denishawn’s teachings when choreographing her own pieces, and there are even accounts stating that she traveled to Native communities seeking inspiration that worked its way into her work. An act that further entwined her work with the extractive practices she inherited. Yet dance education continues to erase this history, presenting Graham as an isolated genius rather than a product of an extractive tradition that mined Indigenous and “exotic” cultures for inspiration. This silence is not benign; it perpetuates the assimilation Native modern dancers face by normalizing appropriation as innovation and by failing to confront the colonial foundations of American modern dance.

Lester Horton's trajectory further demonstrates how Shawn's influence extended into the next generation of modern dance. Initially not aspiring to become a dancer, Horton was inspired after seeing Shawn perform his Indian ballets, which framed Indigenous traditions as fertile ground for modern choreography. After that, he decided to be a dancer. His first significant role was as the lead character in a pageant of *The Song of Hiawatha*, an idea Shawn himself had pitched in *American Ballet*, where he suggested that Longfellow's poem could serve as the basis for a large-scale dance drama (Shawn 52). Building on this inspiration, Horton traveled to Chicago and studied Native clothing at the Field Museum, learning how to fabricate inexpensive stage replicas (Warren 16). He even taught classes on these methods, showing students how to stain cotton shirts to resemble buckskin and paint beadwork designs that would appear authentic under stage lights. Nevertheless, Horton's engagement with Indigeneity extended far beyond the studio.

Additionally, Larry Warren states in his book *Lester Horton, Modern Dance Pioneer*, that Horton decorated his living spaces with Native objects, grew his hair long, smoked peyote with friends, and even created a stage name, Okaya Tihua, which "was from American Indian mythology" (Warren 25). These performances of Indianness aligned him squarely within the tradition Philip J. Deloria identifies as *Playing Indian*. By personifying the role he had been cast in—this stylized, settler-imagined "Indian"—he stepped into a long lineage of performers who treated Indigeneity as a costume to be worn, a persona to inhabit, and a symbolic resource to claim, rather than a living culture belonging to sovereign peoples.

His disregard for Indigenous sovereignty was further evident in his willingness to dig through burial mounds in search of pottery shards (Warren 19), treating sacred sites as sources of personal inspiration rather than places of cultural and spiritual significance. Throughout his

career, Horton idolized Shawn and continued to choreograph numerous Indian-themed ballets as he had, embedding appropriated regalia, ceremonial motifs, and imagined “tribal” aesthetics into his repertoire. In doing so, he extended Shawn’s extractive aesthetic, transforming Indigenous cultural materials into theatrical spectacle while presenting them as the foundation of American modern dance. To break this cycle, educators must teach Graham’s Denishawn roots alongside the dark underbelly of Horton’s celebrated works, making visible the ways in which appropriation shaped the canon.

What is striking about the choreographic choices of early modern dance pioneers is the near total absence of consent or attribution. Ted Shawn, Martha Graham, and Lester Horton rarely, if ever, acknowledged the specific Indigenous communities whose traditions they were referencing. There was no collaboration, no dialogue, and no effort to understand the cultural or spiritual significance of the movement vocabularies they adapted. Instead, this Native image was treated as a resource, something to be stylized, abstracted, and reimagined for theatrical effect. This lack of attribution not only misrepresented the origins of the work but also erased the cultural authorship of Indigenous peoples, reinforcing a dynamic in which settler choreographers were celebrated as innovators while Native voices remained marginalized. Their work often reflected a romanticized view of Native peoples, portraying them as part of a mythic past rather than as living communities. This framing allowed them to claim creative license over Indigenous culture under the guise of admiration.

By imagining Native Americans as a “vanishing Indian,” Shawn and others positioned themselves as preservers of tradition even as they reinterpreted those traditions through a settler lens. This logic was reinforced by a broader national narrative in which, as Ned Blackhawk writes, “Native peoples inhabited the lowest rungs of humanity... members of a ‘vanishing race’

in need of reform... destined to disappear... [still] inhabiting the twilight of the past” (Blackhawk 508). Such thinking made Indigenous cultures appear both endangered and available, creating the illusion that white artists were stepping in to rescue fragments of a dying world rather than participating in its erasure. The vanishing-race myth functioned as a cultural permission slip: if Native peoples were imagined as fading into history, then their dances, symbols, and stories could be taken up by white choreographers without accountability, framed as acts of preservation rather than appropriation. This mythologizing not only dehumanized Native peoples but also justified their exclusion from authorship; when a culture is cast as disappearing, its knowledge becomes something to be collected, reworked, and displayed rather than something that demands relationship, consent, or respect.

The ongoing appropriation of Indigenous dance traditions likely contributed to the increased guardedness many communities now display around their cultural knowledge. The repeated extraction and misrepresentation of sacred practices seem to have heightened awareness of the need for boundaries and consent, even if we cannot trace a direct line in every instance. This guardedness should not be understood as exclusion but rather as a survival strategy. When traditions are taken without permission and recontextualized in ways that strip them of meaning, communities are compelled to protect their heritage from further distortion. Worse still, when these appropriated portrayals are elevated and celebrated within dominant cultural institutions, they reinforce a dangerous narrative: that Indigenous cultures exist only through the lens of non-Native interpretation. This dynamic perpetuates colonial hierarchies, positioning Native culture as a commodity to be consumed, exoticized, and repackaged rather than honored and safeguarded. Such distortions trivialize what is sacred, reducing deeply rooted cultural expressions into spectacles devoid of soul.

The legacy of these early appropriations continues to shape the politics of visibility in dance today. In Timothy Pachirat's *Every Twelve Seconds*, he discusses how those in power shape and control what the masses see. Dance institutions back in the twentieth century uplifted these distorted representations of Native culture as a spectacle for the masses. This is the politics of sight at work: a system in which Indigenous culture becomes visible only when it is diluted, stylized, or reimagined through white bodies, while the living practices of Native communities remain obscured or erased. The result is a profound distortion of who gets to be seen as a cultural authority. When institutions of today then elevate the choreographers or their pseudo-Indian choreography and teach them as foundational and groundbreaking while ignoring or excluding Indigenous artists, they reproduce the same colonial logic that once criminalized Native dance but celebrated its imitation. By critically examining the work of so-called dance pioneers like Ted Shawn, my research seeks to illuminate these histories, not to diminish their artistic contributions, but to advocate for a more honest and inclusive narrative, one that recognizes the impact of appropriation and centers Indigenous voices in the future of dance.

2.1 Performing the Frontier: Masculine Ideologies in Early Modern Dance

To fully grasp how these artistic practices took shape, it is necessary to examine the intellectual landscape that preceded them, particularly the frontier ideology Frederick Jackson Turner popularized, which profoundly influenced how white Americans imagined Indigeneity. When Turner delivered his 1893 paper, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," he introduced an argument that would profoundly reshape American intellectual life. As George Rogers Taylor notes in *The Turner Thesis Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History*, in the decades following its publication, "the whole center of gravity of American

historical writing and teaching shifted” as historians embraced Turner’s framework and began interpreting American development through the lens of westward expansion (Taylor vi). Turner argued that the frontier was not simply a geographic boundary but the defining force in the creation of American identity. He described it as “the outer edge of the wave — the meeting point between savagery and civilization,” a space where European settlers were supposedly transformed into something distinctly American (Turner 1). In many ways, Turner’s thesis gave scholarly legitimacy to the ideology of Manifest Destiny, which had already shaped national policy and the cultural imagination for decades. By framing westward expansion as both inevitable and civilizing, Turner provided an intellectual scaffolding for the same narratives of transformation, conquest, and cultural absorption that later informed artists like Ted Shawn, who drew on these frontier myths as he sought to construct a uniquely “American” dance identity.

Turner claimed that this transformation occurred through direct contact with Indigenous peoples and environments. In his writing, he sees that the frontier “strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin,” placing the settler “in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois” and compelling him to run “an Indian palisade around him” (Turner 2). This narrative framed Indigeneity as a set of masculine traits, skills, and aesthetics that settlers could adopt, and absorb. Turner insisted that the frontier was the site of “the most rapid and effective Americanization,” where European “germs” were reshaped by the wilderness into a new national character (Turner 2). He also argued that this process produced a composite nationality, forged through repeated cycles of rebirth in which settlers shed European refinement and gained American vigor through proximity to what he imagined as “primitive society.” In Turner’s view, the “true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic Coast, it is the Great West” (Turner 1).

This thesis rested on a deeply colonial logic. It positioned Indigenous cultures not as sovereign nations but as raw material for the making of American identity. It celebrated the appropriation of Native practices as a natural and necessary step in the evolution of the settler body. Philip Deloria's *Playing Indian* helps illuminate the cultural power of this narrative by showing how white Americans repeatedly turned to Indigeneity as a symbolic resource in moments when they sought to define themselves. As Deloria writes,

In playing Indian, Americans invoked a range of identities—aborigine, colonist, patriot, citizen—all of which emerged from the categories Indian and Briton. In the process they created a new identity—American—that was both aboriginal and European and yet was also neither. They controlled the center in an intricate, shifting three-way system of self-identification. Although this control was effective in establishing an American identity as both non-English and non-Indian, its continued openness prevented its creators from ever effectively developing a positive, stand-alone identity that did not rely heavily on either a British or an Indian foil (Deloria 35–36).

Deloria's critique clarifies the cultural logic underlying Turner's frontier thesis: Turner framed Indigeneity as a necessary foil through which white Americans could imagine themselves into being, and Deloria reveals how settlers became psychologically and symbolically dependent on this manufactured proximity to Native identity. This intertwined logic formed the backdrop for Ted Shawn's project of creating an "American" dance.

Ted Shawn and his company came of age in a cultural moment saturated with Turner's frontier mythology. The belief that American identity emerged through contact with Indigeneity

or the frontier, and that white men could claim authenticity, strength, and national belonging by adopting “primitive” aesthetics in order to appear more masculine, was accepted and even sought after. Shawn absorbed this ideology wholeheartedly. His writings reveal how this worldview shaped his desire to create a dance form that broke with feminine European traditions and embodied something he understood as uniquely American. This was also the ethos cultivated at Denishawn. As Martha Graham mentioned in her book, “Miss Ruth wanted Denishawn to embody the spirit of America and to fit the American need much better than any foreign system” (Graham 64). Her observation underscores how deeply the company’s mission aligned with Turner’s logic: American identity was imagined as something that could be constructed by selectively drawing from Indigenous cultures while rejecting European lineage in a way. Turner supplied Shawn with the intellectual blueprint for forging American identity when the settler encounters Indigeneity, takes what he needs, and uses it to make something new within the dance world.

Just as Turner imagined the frontier as a space where settlers were remade, Shawn imagined American dance as something that could be revitalized through the selective incorporation of Indigenous movement, rhythm, and aesthetics. Turner wrote that the frontier “masters the colonist,” forcing him to adapt Indigenous tools, clothing, and practices (Turner 2). Shawn reenacted this process choreographically. He took Indigenous dances and ceremonial elements and reassembled them into theatrical works that he claimed expressed the masculine American spirit he sought after. His own writing reveals how deeply he had absorbed the same evolutionary and civilizational narratives that underpinned both Manifest Destiny and the Turner Thesis. In *The American Ballet*, Shawn describes “primitive” peoples as early humans who, once their basic needs were met, finally had “time to express [themselves], time to give vent to [their]

emotions, to [their] feeling life” in terms of dance (Shawn 4). This framing mirrors Turner’s belief that Indigeneity represented an earlier stage of human development, a raw material through which the settler could be transformed and renewed.

Taken together, Turner’s frontier thesis and Shawn’s own writing reveal how deeply the mythology of westward expansion shaped the artistic imagination of the early twentieth century. Shawn did not simply borrow from Indigenous movements; he approached them through the same civilizational hierarchy that Turner articulated and that Manifest Destiny had long justified. The frontier narrative taught Americans to see Indigenous cultures as both vanishing and available, as something to be absorbed into the nation’s identity even as Native people themselves were pushed to the margins.

Shawn’s “Indian” ballets emerged directly from this worldview. They were choreographic enactments of the same logic that framed Indigenous land, labor, and culture as resources for settler transformation. Moreover, while Shawn was celebrating this imagined Indigeneity onstage, Native communities were facing intense federal scrutiny and punishment for practicing their own dances. The gap between what Shawn could stage and what Native people were forbidden to practice exposes the deeper dynamics at work: the suppression of Native dance was not separate from the artistic world Shawn inhabited but the very condition that made his appropriations possible.

2.2 Spectacle and Suppression: How Colonial Ideologies Shaped American Modern Dance

The federal suppression of Native dance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emerged from the same assimilationist logic that shaped broader U.S. Indian policy. As

Gabriella Treglia explains in her article, “The Consistency and Inconsistency of Cultural Oppression: American Indian Dance Bans, 1900–1933,” “An aggressive attempt to force Native Americans to adopt Euro-American social, cultural, and economic mores—the infamous assimilation policy—characterized the U.S. government policy toward Natives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries . . . This concerted attack on civil liberties portended a grim outlook for Native American cultural expression, especially dances” (Treglia 146). Federal officials made their intentions unmistakably clear. In the 1883 *Rules Governing the Court of Indian Offenses*, Henry Moore Teller wrote,

“I desire to call your attention to what I regard as a great hindrance to the civilization of the Indians, viz, the continuance of the old heathenish dances, such as the sun-dance, scalp-dance, & c. These dances, or feasts, as they are sometimes called, ought, in my judgment, to be discontinued, and if the Indians now supported by the Government are not willing to discontinue them, the agents should be instructed to compel such discontinuance . . . It will be extremely difficult to accomplish much towards the civilization of the Indians while these adverse influences are allowed to exist,” (Price 1).

Together, these statements reveal a federal project that targeted Indigenous ceremonial life at its core, treating dance not as culture but as an obstacle to be eliminated. This is the political landscape against which Shawn’s appropriative “Indian” ballets must be understood.

Shawn’s ability to draw so freely from Indigenous movement did not occur in a vacuum. The same era that celebrated the settler’s imaginative use of Indigeneity also worked to restrict and criminalize Indigenous dance itself. Understanding this contradiction is essential, because the suppression of Native ceremonial life created the very conditions that allowed Shawn’s

appropriations to flourish uncontested. Federal attitudes toward Native dance in the early twentieth century reveal the deep colonial foundations that shaped how Indigenous movement was policed, interpreted, and dismissed. As Treglia documents in “Using Citizenship to Retain Identity: The Native American Dance Bans of the Later Assimilation Era, 1900–1933,” even when non-Native observers defended Native dances, their support was filtered through paternalistic frameworks that reinforced settler authority. Hon. D. Stephens (a member of the U.S. House of Representatives), for instance, praised the dances as wholesome entertainment, insisting, “I have attended these dances myself and consider them perfectly proper and harmless, and as a matter of fact, they furnish an amusement a great deal more wholesome than the average entertainments that are put on during county fairs” (Treglia 781). His defense, however well-intentioned, still positioned Native dance as a public spectacle rather than a sovereign community's cultural practice. Despite such endorsements, federal officials like Assistant Commissioner of Indian Affairs Edgar Meritt remained unmoved, repeating the argument that all Native dances distracted Indigenous people from their “proper” agricultural duties, claiming that “in many cases the Indians paid so much attention to dancing, racing, etc., as to neglect the most important industrial features of the fair and to lose sight of the real purpose thereof” (Treglia 781). This tension between fascination and suppression, spectacle and control, forms the colonial bedrock upon which later appropriations were built.

This fascination within white society regarding Native dance at this time was marked by a profound hypocrisy. As Jacqueline Shea Murphy notes in *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*, “Tourists and artists living in or coming through the region could and did see these thought to be disappearing authentic Indian dancing in numerous locations” (Murphy 83). Non-Native audiences flocked to witness what they imagined to be the “last traces” of

Indigenous culture, consuming Native dance as a rare spectacle. While, at the same time, those dances had been, and still were being, suppressed by the government. As stated by Hiram Price in the *Rules Governing the Court of Indian Offenses* of 1883, also known as the *Religious Crimes Code of 1883*, made this suppression explicit: “The ‘sun-dance,’ the ‘scalp-dance,’ the ‘war-dance,’ and all other so-called feasts assimilating thereto, shall be considered ‘Indian offenses,’” and any person participating could have their rations withheld for up to thirty days or be incarcerated in jail. In other words, the very ceremonies white tourists eagerly sought out as cultural entertainment were simultaneously criminalized for Native people themselves, revealing the deep contradiction at the heart of settler society’s relationship to Indigenous dance.

A 1923 *New York Times* editorial piece, “Preserving Indian Dances,” captured this contradiction with striking clarity. Reporting on a performance of Zuni corn dances at St. Mark’s-in-the-Bowery, the article emphasized that “no one who witnessed the ceremonies at St. Mark’s, nor anyone who has seen these or other similar dances given by the Zuni and other Pueblo Indians in their Native villages could read into them anything that is in any way indecent” (Preserving Indian Dance, 1923). The editorial underscored that white onlookers who watched these dances, watched without perceiving immorality, directly contradicting the claims of missionaries and federal officials who insisted the dances were dangerous or obscene. The article went further, noting that while some Indigenous ceremonies might appear “obnoxious” to outsiders, they were no more objectionable “than some of our so-called ‘civilized’ dances,” and that Native dances were grounded in an “underlying religious motive” that made their suppression especially unjust. It condemned the Commissioner of Indian Affairs of that time, Charles Henry Burke’s efforts to restrict Native dances and argued that forbidding these

ceremonies inflicted “spiritual humiliation” and violated a fundamental American principle of religious freedom (Preserving Indian Dance, 1923).

Ted Shawn was unmistakably one of the artists who benefited from this double standard. He eagerly observed Native dances not to understand or honor them, but to mine them for movement ideas he could reshape into his own theatrical creations. Like many white artists of his era, Shawn believed that Native peoples and their cultural practices were destined to disappear, and he framed his own work as a form of preservation, an effort to capture what he imagined were the final remnants of Indigenous culture before they vanished. This was made possible by the very federal policies that suppressed Indigenous ceremonial life, creating the illusion of cultural decline and clearing space for white artists to step in as self-appointed custodians. As Native communities were criminalized for practicing their own dances, Shawn encountered fewer living sources and more settler-produced accounts, which he treated as authoritative. The suppression of Native dance thus became the condition that enabled his choreographic project. It allowed him to claim access, expertise, and, in his mind, even rescue traditions the state was actively working to silence.

This conviction aligned perfectly with the broader settler desire to extract aesthetic value from cultures they simultaneously framed as dying out. Philip J. Deloria captures this logic with striking clarity in *Playing Indian*, explaining that “imagery began to play on earlier symbolic linkages between Indians and the past, and these images eventually produced the full-blown ideology of the vanishing Indian, which proclaimed it foreordained that less advanced societies should disappear in the presence of those more advanced” (Deloria 63–64). Shawn’s work operated squarely within this ideological framework. The paradox he embodied was fueled by a pervasive “rhetoric of a disappearing southwest Indian culture” that, as Murphy notes, “tourists

and artists invoked . . . to fuel assumptions about outsiders' need to know about Indian dances before they were lost to the world" (Murphy 83).

Deloria's framing shows that settler desire to witness and possess Indigeneity was inseparable from their determination to eradicate it; the same ideology that cast Native people as relics of a fading past justified both artistic extraction and governmental control. The cultural appetite that fueled Shawn's appropriations was mirrored by federal policies that criminalized the very practices he mined for inspiration, revealing a seamless continuum between spectacle and suppression. It is within this ideological landscape that the colonial foundations of federal policy toward Native dance took shape, most starkly in the Religious Crimes Code of 1883, which was approved by Secretary of the Interior Henry Moore Teller, granting Indian agents sweeping authority to use force, imprisonment, and the withholding of rations to suppress any cultural practice they deemed immoral or subversive to federal assimilation goals. Courts of Indian Offenses and federally supervised Indian police forces were created to replace Indigenous governance and enforce these prohibitions, embedding surveillance and punishment into the daily lives of Native communities. This legal regime made clear that Native dance was not merely disfavored but treated as a threat to the colonial order, something to be eradicated through coercion and starvation if necessary.

It is precisely within this landscape of enforced absence that salvage ethnography and the vanishing-race myth took off, shaping both the sources Shawn turned to and the authority he believed he possessed. Federal suppression of Native ceremonial life created the illusion that Indigenous cultures were fading, an illusion that white ethnographers and artists then used to justify their own interventions. Shawn's research practices reveal how deeply he absorbed this logic. In the Jacob's Pillow archives and library (which is an internationally renowned dance

center, school, and archive in Massachusetts, founded by Ted Shawn), there are books he owned or consulted that were written by white authors who positioned themselves as experts on Indigenous dance despite having no cultural or ceremonial grounding. These writers claimed authority precisely because Native people were being silenced, surveilled, and punished. The state's suppression of Indigenous practices cleared the space for non-Native "experts" to step in and define those practices on their behalf.

Shawn treated these settler-authored texts as factual sources, relying on them to construct his "Indian ballets" rather than speaking with, learning from, or collaborating with Native people themselves. By using these interpretations as his foundation, he reproduced the distortions, stereotypes, and inaccuracies embedded in those texts and further legitimized them through performance. In other words, white spectators justified their voyeurism through a narrative of urgency and salvage, positioning themselves as benevolent witnesses to a culture they believed was vanishing; a belief made possible by the very colonial forces working to suppress Indigenous life. Shawn's reliance on these ethnographic sources did not preserve Indigenous dance. Still, it amplified the harms those books enacted, turning misrepresentation into choreography and embedding it into the foundations of American modern dance.

This same ideological framework, one that romanticized Indigeneity for outsiders while restricting it for Indigenous people, also shaped how Native dance was treated by white society at large. Murphy highlights this contradiction: "The rhetoric surrounding the federal drive to curtail Indian dance as wasteful and excessive . . . connects to artists' formation of it as art and amusement" (Murphy 83). Both perspectives, the government's punitive restrictions and the artists' aesthetic appropriation, stripped Native dance of its cultural meaning by reducing it to its use value, severing it from Indigenous understandings of dance as a living religious practice.

Thus, white society managed to hold two contradictory beliefs at once: Native dance was spiritually enriching when consumed by outsiders, yet socially dangerous when practiced by Native people themselves. This double standard created the perfect ideological environment for choreographers like Ted Shawn, Martha Graham, and Lester Horton to appropriate Indigenous movement with praise and acclaim, even as Native communities faced surveillance, punishment, and erasure for performing their own traditions.

The hypocrisy becomes even more striking when Shawn's celebrated "Indian ballets" are placed alongside the federal policies and social attitudes that targeted Native people for practicing their own ceremonial dances. While Shawn and other modern choreographers were praised for crafting pseudo-Indian stage images (works white audiences hailed as spiritually profound and emblematic of a new American art form), Native communities were simultaneously punished for engaging in the very practices these artists imitated. Federal officials routinely described Indigenous dances as dangerous, immoral, or obstructive to civilization, and used this rhetoric to justify restrictions on ceremonies and other forms of religious expression. Missionaries and government agents worked together to curtail Native dance, framing it as incompatible with Christian domestic ideals and federal assimilation goals. These policies, rooted in Protestant moralism and codified through measures like the Religious Crimes Code and subsequent administrative circulars, created a climate in which Indigenous ceremonial life was surveilled, criminalized, and pathologized at the very moment white performers were being celebrated for staging stylized versions of it (Murphy 85-86). Together, these forces reveal how the suppression of Native dance and the elevation of its appropriated forms were not separate phenomena but mutually reinforcing expressions of the same colonial logic.

The racist fervor behind these policies is evident in letters that appear around the 1920s from people that are against Native dance, like that of agent E. E. Mossman, who dismissed Native dance as “the screaming and ki-yi-ing of the squaws, the barbaric TomTom, the savage dress,” insisting such practices were neither elevating nor compatible with the government’s mission to “civilize” Native people (Murphy 88) as well as Henry Moore Teller stating that he particularly “opposed the ‘debauchery, diabolism, and savagery’ that he believed to be an integral part of many Native dances” (Treglia 148). These attitudes translated into real violence: as reported in the *Sioux Falls Press*, when Eagle Elk and his sons performed a traditional Sioux dance—one described as containing “nothing indecent, degrading, or demoralizing”—Indian police intervened with drawn firearms. One of Eagle Elk’s sons was “manhandled and lodged in jail” simply for participating in a cultural practice (Murphy 91). Against this backdrop, the acclaim showered on Shawn’s fabricated Indianness reveals a stark double standard: white choreographers were celebrated for performing stylized versions of Native dance. In contrast, Native people themselves were criminalized for practicing the authentic versions of these “ballets.” This contradiction exposes the colonial logic at the heart of early American modern dance, where Indigeneity was valued only when mediated through white bodies and stripped of its cultural, spiritual, and communal meaning.

Taken together, these contradictions reveal a broader colonial mindset that defined the 1920s cultural landscape, a worldview in which actual Native dance was treated as dangerous, while its staged imitations were embraced as markers of national dance identity. As Shawn toured works like *Invocation to the Thunderbird*, *Feather of the Dawn*, and *Xochitl*, white audiences praised his performances as spiritually profound and authentically “American,” celebrating Indigeneity only when it appeared by being worn by a white person, filtered through

settler-authored texts, and stripped of its cultural specificity. This selective admiration depended on the belief that Native cultures were disappearing, a belief that justified both the suppression of living ceremonial practices and the elevation of their theatrical replicas.

What is most troubling about this pattern is how deeply the mindset persists in dance today. Modern and contemporary programs still tend to value choreographic “homages” to Indigenous or culturally specific forms more highly than the actual dances, communities, and knowledge systems from which those forms were taken. Appropriated movement is framed as innovation, while the original cultural practices are dismissed as static, folkloric, or somehow irrelevant to the rigor and prestige of concert dance. This hierarchy continues to reward extraction over relationship, aestheticization over accountability, and imitation over cultural sovereignty. The field often celebrates the surface level of Indigeneity while ignoring the histories, responsibilities, and living communities that give those forms meaning. The result is a dance landscape that continues to elevate the illusion of cultural depth while sidelining the very communities whose traditions make that depth possible, perpetuating a cycle in which extraction is rewarded, and Indigenous presence is rendered peripheral.

2.3 Reanimating Indigeneity in Sound: The Indianist Movement as Colonial Fabrication

The Indianist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offers a clear example of how these extractive logics were established and celebrated long before they entered the dance studio. The Indianist movement was when white American composers, ethnologists, and cultural intermediaries began collecting, transcribing, and reworking Indigenous music for non-Native audiences. Although the term originally referred to activists who supported Native

peoples, it soon expanded to include anyone who consistently used Indigenous melodies as source material. As Tara Browner explains, in *Breathing the Indian Spirit*, the movement “lasted roughly from 1890 to 1925” and included composers such as Charles Cadman, John Comfort Fillmore, Henry Gilbert, Amy Beach, and Thurlow Lieurance, all of whom “reach back to Baker and Fletcher, if not directly, then in spirit” (Browner 265–266). Their work built upon the earlier efforts of ethnologists such as Alice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche, whose transcriptions of Omaha songs became foundational to the movement. Pisani notes in his book, *Imagining Native America in Music*, that these collectors produced countless bulletins for the Bureau of American Ethnology, shaping how non-Native audiences came to imagine Indigenous sound.

This musical movement developed alongside American comparative musicology, a field that sought to document and categorize the music of cultures considered “other” by Western scholars. Figures such as Franz Boas, Benjamin Ives Gilman, and Natalie Curtis conducted fieldwork among Native Nations, often as “participant observers,” and believed they were preserving traditions they assumed were vanishing. Yet their transcriptions filtered Indigenous music through Western expectations, notation systems, and aesthetic judgments. Pisani highlights this tension in the influential *Study of Omaha Indian Music* (1893), where John Comfort Fillmore proposed harmonizing monophonic chants to make them “more palatable to ‘cultured tastes’” (Pisani loc. 3155). Browner similarly observes that many Indianist composers framed their work through a romanticized narrative of loss, echoing James McNutt’s claim that they “colored their writings and compositions with passages lamenting the passing of the Indian” (Browner 266). Whether framed as preservation or tribute, these practices reshaped Indigenous music to fit settler desires.

The Indianist movement also intersected with American nationalism. Composers sought to craft a distinctly American sound by incorporating what they believed to be Indigenous elements, drawing on the same frontier logic Turner articulated, where American identity was imagined as emerging through selective contact with and transformation of Indigenous cultures. Pisani points out that even John Philip Sousa included Native songs in his 1890 anthology *National, Patriotic, and Typical Airs of All Lands*, arranging them with familiar nineteenth-century tropes such as the moresca rhythm associated with imagined war dances.

Additionally, Browner notes that this nationalist turn intensified after 1900, when Antonín Dvořák's call for an American musical school encouraged composers to use Indigenous melodies as the basis for art songs, chamber music, and orchestral works. She writes that during the first two decades of the twentieth century, "hundreds of thematic Indian pieces were produced," ranging from parlor songs to operas and symphonies (Browner 273). This explosion of output reveals how deeply Indianist aesthetics shaped American musical identity, embedding Indigenous motifs into the nation's cultural imagination while excluding Indigenous people from authorship.

By the early twentieth century, Indianist music had become a popular performance genre. Public lectures, concerts, and "informances" blended ethnographic authority with theatrical spectacle. Browner writes that the founding of Arthur Farwell's Wa-Wan Press in 1900 marked a new phase of Indianist composition, with Farwell and others relying heavily on Fletcher and LaFlesche's Omaha transcriptions (Browner 273–274). These performances and publications taught white audiences to expect Indigenous culture in stylized, curated, and Westernized forms, and they taught white artists that they could claim authority over Indigenous expression simply by studying or reinterpreting it.

Taken together, the Indianist movement created a powerful and enduring mythology about Indigenous music. Pisani argues that nationalism and exoticism were “mutually constitutive,” meaning that American composers could not imagine an “authentic” national sound without simultaneously imagining and appropriating Indigenous sound. The result was a musical tradition in which Indigenous cultures were made hypervisible as symbols while Indigenous people themselves were marginalized, silenced, or excluded from creative control. This musical history laid the groundwork for the extractive aesthetics that would later appear in American modern dance, where Ted Shawn inherited not only Indianist melodies but also the colonial frameworks that made their appropriation seem natural, inevitable, and artistically virtuous.

This same colonial mindset translated seamlessly into the world of early American modern dance, where Ted Shawn found both inspiration and justification for his own appropriative practices. The Indianist movement had already taught white audiences to expect Indigenous culture in a stylized, curated, and Westernized form, and it taught white artists that they could claim authority over Indigenous expression simply by studying it, collecting it, or reinterpreting it. Shawn absorbed this lesson directly. He owned and regularly used many of the Indianist piano books circulating at the time, drawing on the work of composers such as Charles Wakefield Cadman, Homer Grunn, and even John Philip Sousa, whose arrangements had already filtered Indigenous melodies through Western harmonic and nationalist frameworks. This ideology presented Indigeneity as something available for artistic use.

Shawn’s Indian ballets followed this same logic that guided Indianist composers. Just as Fillmore harmonized monophonic chants to suit Western ears, Shawn reconfigured Indigenous movement, costuming, and stage design to suit Western eyes, while also incorporating the

already disfigured sound. Shawn's pseudo-Indian ballets were celebrated as uniquely American precisely because they drew on what audiences believed to be Indigenous sources, even though those sources had been heavily mediated, distorted, or entirely invented. The Indianist movement had taught audiences to accept these distortions as authentic, and it taught artists like Shawn to treat Indigenous culture as a symbolic resource rather than as a living tradition.

The performance culture surrounding Indianist music also provided Shawn with a model for presenting Indigenous material onstage. Pisani describes a wave of early -twentieth-century "informances," in which composers such as Charles Wakefield Cadman and Thurlow Lieurance delivered lectures and concerts that blended ethnographic authority with theatrical spectacle. These events often featured Native performers, but the framing and interpretation were controlled by non-Native composers who shaped the narrative to fit settler fantasies. Pisani notes that Troyer's lectures "were dramatic invocations largely constructed to appeal to audiences' fanciful imaginations," revealing how Indianist performances catered to exoticized expectations rather than cultural accuracy. Shawn adopted this same strategy. His ballets presented Indigeneity as a dramatic, mystical, and visually striking spectacle, crafted to satisfy white audiences' desire for the "primitive."

In this way, the Indianist movement did not merely influence Shawn; it helped make his work possible. It created the intellectual, aesthetic, and cultural conditions that enabled a white choreographer to extract Indigenous cultural elements, rearrange them into a new form, and present them as both authentic and artistically innovative. Shawn's ballets were the choreographic extension of this musical tradition. They reanimated fragments of Indigenous culture into a new, settler-made body, one that bore the marks of extraction rather than the vitality of living Native traditions.

III. Stitched Spectacle: Costuming, Soundscapes, Choreography, and Stage Design in Ted Shawn's Indian Ballets

3.1 The Settler's Second Skin: Clothing the Frankenindian Body

Ted Shawn's "Indian ballets" were a central component of his broader choreographic project to define a distinctly American dance tradition. One that drew heavily from appropriated Indigenous and non-Western forms to construct a national aesthetic rooted in conquest and spectacle. Despite his intentions, these works did not honor Native cultures but rather mined their visual and sonic elements specifically for their reassembly into a consumable identity for white audiences. This impulse aligned with a broader cultural movement driven by the vanishing race theory, which positioned Indigenous peoples as disappearing relics of a pre-modern past. Under this logic, documenting Native traditions, through photography, ethnography, and performance, became a settler imperative, not to preserve Indigenous sovereignty, but to capture and aestheticize what was presumed to be fading into the past.

Costumes and music played a critical role in this fabrication regarding Ted Shawn's "Indian ballets," but they were only part of a larger system of staged Indigeneity. Garments were often made from, or based on, authentic Native materials but were cut, stitched, and layered in ways that disregarded tribal specificity and ceremonial integrity, creating a pan-Indian visual collage that flattened cultural nuance into a singular, exoticized image. Similarly, Shawn commissioned composers to produce soundscapes that mimicked "primitive" music through stereotypical techniques, evoking Indigeneity while obscuring the Western instruments used to

perform it. Yet these distortions extended beyond costume and sound. The choreography itself was built from fragmented gestures observed, abstracted, and reassembled into movement phrases that bore the aesthetic of Indianness without any cultural grounding. Even the stage design functioned as scenic prosthetics, transforming the performance space into a pseudo-Indian world that audiences could read instantly as Indian. Together, these elements worked in concert to animate a fabricated Native presence, each one a stitched-together fragment contributing to a larger illusion. This chapter argues that these choices exemplify Frankenindianism, extractive aesthetics, and the politics of sight in order to serve settler fantasy rather than Indigenous truth.

Victor Frankenstein from Mary Shelley's book *Frankenstein* describes how he was "led to examine the cause and progress of this decay . . . my attention was fixed upon every object the most insupportable to the delicacy of the human feelings" (Shelley 53). His obsessive gaze into charnel houses, graveyards, and dissecting rooms was framed as a search for the secret of life, a way to animate what had already begun to vanish. Ted Shawn's project parallels this impulse. He observed Native ceremonies and dances with the conviction that they were disappearing, dissecting their movements, regalia, and sonic markers into fragments he could reassemble. Just as Frankenstein "paused, examining and analyzing all the minutiae of causation . . . until from the midst of this darkness a sudden light broke in upon me," Shawn believed he had discovered a way to immortalize Native presence by adopting aspects of their dance traditions in order to create the new form of American dance that he was searching for (Shelley 53). His proposed films, photographs, and eventual choreographies became the laboratory in which he sought to animate what he imagined as lifeless matter, a disappearing race transposed into dance.

However, Frankenstein admits that "although I possessed the capacity of bestowing animation, yet to prepare a frame for this reception of it . . . remained a work of inconceivable

difficulty and labor” (Shelley 54). Shawn faced a similar challenge: how to stitch together fragments of regalia, musical tropes, and ceremonial gestures into a coherent stage body. He believed, like Frankenstein, that “if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might . . . renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption” (Shelley 55). However, the result was not renewal, but distortion. Shawn’s appropriation transformed living traditions into a Frankenindian body, stitched together from pieces taken and used by Shawn and his non-Native dancers without consent, and thus animated these aspects of indigeneity for settler audiences, severing them from the cultural worlds that gave them meaning. Just as Frankenstein’s creature revealed the horror beneath the pursuit of perfection, Shawn’s ballets exposed the violence inherent in extractive aesthetics: a vampiric act of dispossession masquerading as preservation.

Mary Shelley’s description of Frankenstein—“I collected bones from charnel houses and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secret of the human frame . . . The dissecting room and the slaughterhouse furnished many of my materials”—resonates with Ted Shawn’s own process of assembling his “Indian ballets” (Shelley 55). Just as Frankenstein scavenged fragments of bodies to construct a creature, Shawn sought out regalia, feathers, beads, and ceremonial motifs from disparate tribal traditions, stitching them together into a pseudo-Indian identity. In both cases, the act of collection was framed as creation, yet what emerged was a fabricated body. An assemblage severed from its original purpose and animated only to serve the desires of its maker, Shawn’s ballets exemplify how the politics of sight could be mobilized to drain Indigenous cultural vitality and refashion it into a fabricated narrative of American artistic innovation. Both Shawn and Frankenstein operated under the illusion of aesthetic mastery, believing that assembling the right parts would yield a transcendent whole. Yet what emerged

was not a celebration of life or culture, but a monstrous distortion, an animated body that reflected settler desire and violated cultural boundaries. Shawn's ballets, like Frankenstein's creature, were born of ambition and transgression, revealing the vampiric horror that lies beneath the surface of extractive creation.

3.2 Encountering the Stitches: Archival Traces of Shawn's Frankenindianism

I was fortunate to gain access to the Jacob's Pillow Archives (located in Massachusetts), in November 2025, where Ted Shawn founded his new company, Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers, after the Denishawn Company disbanded. While visiting the archives, I was able to examine original costumes, music scores, choreography, and stage photographs firsthand. Handling these materials directly, seeing the stitching, textures, and annotations, offered a depth of understanding that looking these up online alone could never provide. This opportunity revealed not only the physical weight of Shawn's fabrications but also the deliberate choices that shaped them, sharpening my analysis of how these costumes and scores functioned within his "Indian ballets."

What became clear in this close study is how Shawn's use of Native-made fabrics and regalia exemplifies extractive aesthetics at work: authentic cultural materials were sourced, altered, and reassembled to serve a settler choreographic vision. Rather than honoring the cultural specificity or ceremonial significance of these items, Shawn's productions prioritized theatrical effect and visual cohesion for white audiences. One of the most revealing examples of Shawn's extractive process appears in *Feather of the Dawn*, one of his "Indian ballets" for which Jacob's Pillow holds an extensive costume collection. The lead woman's one-shouldered dress

was fashioned from what appears to be a Hopi manta, possibly a garment with ceremonial significance (Jacob's Pillow Archives, C-163). As scholars note, Mantas that were used for ceremonial purposes at the time of Feather of the Dawn's creation were usually made with wool from Churro sheep rather than canvas that was made for the tourist market. They were often dyed in multiple colors and adorned with various designs (Antique American Indian). The one seen in the archives of Jacob's Pillow features black, green, and red accents, with diamond designs stitched into the wool shawl. Regardless of its ceremonial use or not, Shawn had this manta cut, pleated, and reshaped into a silhouette that bore little resemblance to its original form or function, severing it from the cultural life worlds in which such weaving held deep meaning. The men's waist wraps were similarly constructed from manta-like material, stitched together to evoke Indigeneity while disregarding tribal protocols (Jacob's Pillow Archives, C-161_2). When a full manta was required for dramatic effect, the company painted designs onto a large canvas rather than use an actual shawl (Jacob's Pillow Archives, C-157_6), further emphasizing the settler imagination being imposed over Indigenous authenticity. Even the traditional moccasins, intended to mimic Hopi attire, were fabricated as single panels with hooks and eyes for rapid costume changes, thereby creating the appearance of leg wrappings and prioritizing backstage efficiency over cultural accuracy.



Figure 1: Cream wool one-shoulder dress worn by Ernestine Day and Louise Brooks as Kodeh in *The Feather of the Dawn* (1923). Cream wool with colored embroidery; likely a genuine Hopi garment based on catalog notes indicating wool rather than cotton. Jacob's Pillow Archives, C-163.

This visual manipulation extended beyond fabric. Dancers portraying corn maidens painted their skin a burnt orange-brown, a fact made evident by the makeup stains left behind on surviving blouses and bloomers (Jacob's Pillow Archives, C-151_1-6). Additionally, upon examining Shawn's makeup case, I found numerous containers of Max Factor's Theatrical Face Powder, most of them shade 19, the same deep burnt orange-brown seen in the staining of many costumes, used to simulate "Indian" skin alongside darker body paints (Jacob's Pillow Archives, C-766). The stark contrast between these pigments and Shawn's own complexion reveals the deliberate and drastic measures the company undertook to construct a theatrical Red Face through racialized coding rather than cultural understanding.



Figure 2: Ted Shawn's theatrical make-up case containing Max Factor Pan-Cake makeup, Stein's lining colors, applicators, and hair tools. The contents illustrate the cosmetic labor behind Shawn's construction of a modern, muscular "Indian" stage identity. Jacob's Pillow Archives, C-766.

One of the archivists also showed me several Kachina doll heads used in the production, which a staff member explained had been designed by copying images of actual Kachina dolls from a book (Jacob's Pillow Archives, C-158_1-7). This choice profoundly disregards the cultural and ceremonial protocols surrounding Kachina figures. Within Hopi and other Pueblo communities, Kachina dolls are not decorative objects or theatrical props. They embody spiritual beings and carry ceremonial knowledge. Their imagery is not meant to be reproduced casually, let alone placed onstage for entertainment. To replicate Kachina figures from a book, stripped of ceremony, community, and purpose, reduces a living spiritual tradition to an aesthetic motif, a

visual shorthand for Indigeneity that non-Native audiences can consume without any understanding of its significance.



Figure 3: Set of seven painted wire-and-canvas masks designed by Earle Franke for Denishawn's *The Feather of the Dawn* (1923). Franke based these designs on Hopi Kachina imagery reproduced in Jesse Walter Fewkes's *Hopi Kachinas* (1904). Jacob's Pillow Archives, C-158_1-7.

What made this disregard of cultural significance even more visible was the condition in which these props were found. While at the Jacob's Pillow Archives, I was told that the Kachina heads had been discovered in a state of disrepair, stored for decades in the basement or attic of the company's property. Their deterioration was not simply the result of time; it reflected the disregard with which these sacred forms were treated once they had served their theatrical purpose. This highlights how cultural materials are only seen as valuable by colonial entities when they can be used to animate their settler fantasy. But once that fantasy is complete, the

materials, and the cultures they come from, are abandoned. The afterlife of these Kachina heads, forgotten in storage, reveals how little Shawn and his company understood or cared about the cultural weight of what they had appropriated.

This dynamic resonates powerfully with Mary Shelley's description of Victor Frankenstein's reaction to his own creation: "I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body . . . but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart" (Shelly 58). Shawn's treatment of the Kachina heads mirrors this arc of desire, creation, and abandonment. He sought out these aesthetics and stitched them together into a pseudo-Indian image that served his artistic ambitions. But once these fabricated objects had fulfilled their theatrical purpose, they were discarded. Their deterioration was not accidental; it was the material afterlife of extractive creation. Just as Frankenstein recoiled from the being he had assembled, Shawn abandoned these appropriated cultural fragments once they no longer animated the stage fantasy he desired. In both cases, the act of creation was framed as innovation, yet what emerged was a fabricated body severed from its origins, animated only to fulfill the maker's vision. The treatment of these Kachina masks—first appropriated, then neglected—reveals Frankenindianism at its starkest.

Later productions in Ted Shawn's Men Dancers company continued this pattern, blending traditional materials such as shells and bone beads with plastic beads and other non-Native ornamentation. Dew-claws, hooves, and what appear to be eagle, turkey, and owl feathers were scattered across costume pieces of uncertain origin, creating a curated "Indian" look that ignored cultural coherence. This is especially evident in the costumes worn in *Ponca Indian Dance*, where dancers wore loincloths decorated with plastic beads, glass beads sewn by non-Native or novice beaders, bone beads, and traditional shells, paired with feathers and partial baldcap-roach

headpieces attempting to approximate a vague Indigenous regalia aesthetic (Jacob's Pillow Archives, C-171_1-4; C-175_1-5; C-174_1-6; C-187; C-173_a-b).



Figure 4: Costume elements from *Ponca Indian Dance* (1934) and *Feather of the Dawn* (1923), including velvet loincloths, feathered arm decorations, a roach headdress, eagle feathers, wrist cuffs, a dewclaw, and a brightly colored beaded headband. Together, these items illustrate the deliberate fabrication of an “Indian” image for the stage. Jacob's Pillow Archives, C 171_1-4; C 175_1-5; C 174_1-6; C 187; C 173_a-b.

This visual collage aligns closely with the ideology of Phillip Deloria's critiques in *Playing Indian*, in which non-Natives adopt and perform Indigeneity to meet their own wants. Shawn's costuming and makeup practices exemplify this dynamic: the use of brown body paint and the curated assemblage of regalia fragments were not acts of homage, but of transformation. These acts turn Indigenous identity into a theatrical persona. Deloria writes, “every generation seems both to inherit and to produce its own distinct ways of playing Indian, creating a long and unbroken chain of American performance” showing the history of American performances built on the appropriation of Indigenous identity, underscoring how these performances are more about claiming than understanding (Deloria 5). Shawn's dancers did not embody Native people; they wore them. The makeup, stitched regalia, and pan-tribal ornamentation became tools of settler self-fashioning, allowing white performers to momentarily inhabit a racialized fantasy

while reinforcing their distance from actual Indigenous experience. In this way, Shawn's ballets did not just misrepresent Native cultures; they enacted a ritual of possession, where Indigeneity was consumed, reassembled, and displayed under the guise of artistic innovation.

Ted Shawn's costume construction methods reflect a deeper logic of unconsented assimilation, where Indigenous material culture was not only borrowed but forcibly reshaped to fit settler choreographic needs. Garments were engineered for theatrical efficiency, stitched with hooks and eyes, pleated for movement, and cut asymmetrically to flatter the stage without regard for the relational meanings embedded in traditional regalia. These alterations were not neutral; they severed the garments from their cultural meaning, transforming them into props for settler storytelling. This is the essence of extractive aesthetics, a vampiric process in which cultural vitality is drained from Indigenous forms and reanimated within a settler framework. The regalia no longer functioned as expressions of tribal identity or spiritual practice, but as visual cues in a performance of Indigeneity designed for white audiences. What Shawn's dancers wore was not costumes in the theatrical sense, but dismembered traditional dress that was stitched together to animate a body that was never truly Native.

This logic extended into Shawn's pan-tribal assemblage, where he fused elements from multiple Indigenous nations into a single, homogenized "Indian" image. Every stitch, bead, and feather was carefully curated to evoke Indigeneity in ways that were legible, exotic, and emotionally resonant for non-Native audiences, regardless of cultural accuracy or ceremonial integrity. This process not only erases tribal specificity and sovereignty but also reinforces the settler fantasy of the vanishing Indian, where Indigenous presence is preserved only through its theatrical simulation. Shawn's ballets thus enacted a form of unconsented appropriation: absorbing Indigenous materials without permission, distorting their meaning, and re-presenting

them as part of a national dance legacy that excluded Native voices. The legacy of this practice continues to shape dance pedagogy and public memory, leaving Native modern dancers to navigate forms built on erasure.

This operates within Timothy Pachirat's ideology of the Politics of Sight. As he notes in his book, *Every Twelve Seconds*, modern power operates through the management of visibility, driven by an impulse "to rearrange and, if necessary, exterminate and create anew their subjects" under the rhetoric of improvement (Pachirat 12). Shawn's costume designs enacted this logic by determining what aspects of Native identity were made visible, distorted, or erased. By privileging theatrical spectacle over cultural truth, Shawn's costume designs reinforced a colonial logic in which Indigenous presence was mediated through settler fantasy. Yet this was not simply a matter of artistic preference; it was an enactment of patriarchal authority and dominant social power, which dictated who could be seen, how they were represented, and for whose benefit. The regalia became not a site of cultural expression, but of visual control, stripped of its ceremonial meaning and reassembled to serve the desires of a white, male choreographer and the audiences he sought to impress. In this framework, Native bodies were rendered as objects of fascination, performance, and appropriation, their visibility determined by the gaze of a dominant society that claimed the right to define them. The costumes thus functioned as both aesthetic and ideological tools, shaping public memory through a lens of conquest and misrepresentation, while reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies that positioned Indigenous identity and culture as something to be consumed, possessed, and displayed rather than lived and respected.

3.3 The Sonic Laboratory: How Shawn Staged Indigeneity Through Music

Much like his approach to costuming, Shawn hand-selected and sought out composers whose work would help him construct his pseudo-Indian soundscapes. During my time at Jacob's Pillow, I discovered piano books belonging to two composers in particular whom he later hired, revealing how deliberate this process was. Charles Wakefield Cadman, for instance, was commissioned for \$1,200 to compose the original score for *Feather of the Dawn*, according to the manuscript for Ted Shawn's book *One Thousand and One Night Stands*. In a music book written by Cadman, titled *Thunderbird* (1917), I found a song titled "Wolf Song" (*War Dance*). Later, I discovered that this same song had been physically taped into the score for what was then called the *Hopi Indian Dance Drama*, later retitled *Feather of the Dawn*, showing how Shawn repurposed existing motifs to fabricate Indigeneity. Similarly, I found another piano book by Homer Grunn, whom Shawn hired to compose *Xochitl*. Within Grunn's *Desert Suite*, the piece "Cholla Dance" contained handwritten choreographic notes, evidence that Shawn mined and reassembled musical fragments to conform to his staged identity.

This pattern extended beyond Cadman and Grunn. I also found a volume titled *Traditional Songs of the Zuni Indians*, transcribed and harmonized by Carlos Troyer (1909), in which the song "Invocation to the Sun God" was underlined and purchased for \$0.30. This likely inspired the title of Shawn's later piece, *Invocation to the Thunderbird*, which used the music from the famous band director John Philip Sousa's "The Red Man" from his suite *The Dwellers in the Western World* (1910). This piece came out years before Shawn's *Invocation to the Thunderbird* choreography debuted around 1917. These layered borrowings reveal how Shawn sought out and stitched together fragments from disparate sources to fabricate a sonic stage-identity that appeared Indigenous yet was, in fact, a settler construction. Taken together, these findings underscore how Shawn's musical choices, like his costumes, were curated through

extraction, transforming Indigenous music into theatrical devices that served settler imagination rather than cultural truth.

This deliberate curation of composers and motifs directly influenced the soundscapes of Shawn's "Indian ballets," which relied not only on visual spectacle but also on carefully crafted music designed to evoke a sense of "Indianness" for settler audiences. Rather than incorporating actual Native music or collaborating with Indigenous musicians, Shawn commissioned Western composers to construct sonic environments that merely sounded Native; musical simulations built from stereotypical tropes and settler imagination. These scores often employed open fifths to suggest "primitiveness," avoided melodic development to imply a lack of sophistication, and used low, percussive piano rhythms to mimic the sound of drums while deliberately obscuring the Western instrument producing them. In *Ponca Indian Dance*, for instance, the music is marked by a relentless rhythmic pulse, with no melodic elements for most of the piece. Harmonies are intentionally obscured, and even as the key shifts, the rhythm remains unchanged, creating a sense of movement without harmonic progression. The use of B-flat, which is described as "not a polite sound," reinforces the composer's attempt to mark the piece as raw or untamed sonically.

Similarly, the *Hopi Eagle Dance* features a dominant bass hand on the piano to establish hierarchy and a silent-film-style score that strips away Western harmonic resolution. At the same time, *Osage Pawnee Dance of Greeting* opens with an attempt to obscure tonality altogether, relying on open fifths and unresolved chords to evoke a non-Western, "primitive" atmosphere. These compositional choices exemplify auditory vampirism or an acoustic extractive aesthetic, in which Indigenous sonic markers are borrowed, distorted, and recontextualized without consent or cultural grounding. The result is an auditory fantasy that reinforces settler myths of the

vanishing Indian. It portrays Natives as a people almost defined by rhythmic simplicity, harmonic absence, and cultural stasis, whose music, like their regalia, could be harvested and reanimated to serve American modern dance.

Costume and sound in Shawn's "Indian ballets" worked in tandem to animate a fabricated Native presence, one that privileged settler fantasy over Indigenous reality. The visual and auditory elements were not merely complementary, but co-constructive, each reinforcing the other's illusion. The stitched-together regalia, with its pan-tribal confusion and theatrical modifications, was mirrored by soundscapes built from rhythmic repetition, harmonic absence, and tonal ambiguity. Together, they produced a sensory experience that felt "authentically Indian" to white audiences while bearing little resemblance to any living Indigenous tradition. At its core, this synthesis reveals extractive aesthetics in motion; sacred elements and sonic traces are pulled from their worlds, stripped of meaning, and re-stitched into a tale of primitivism, conquest, and longing for a romanticized past. The result was a vampiric performance. One that fed on Indigenous presence while denying Indigenous agency, animating a body that could move, sound, and appear Native without ever being so.

3.4 Animating the Creature: Choreography as Settler Invention

In ballets such as *Ponca Indian Dance* and *Osage/Pawnee Dance of Greeting*, Shawn relied on a vocabulary of generalized "primitive" gestures, such as stomping footwork, angular arm positions, and crouched postures to signal Indianness without reference to any specific tribal tradition. Ceremonial motifs were stylized and abstracted, stripped of cultural context and reimagined as theatrical spectacle, producing a veneer of authenticity while erasing the

communities from which these movements were drawn. The choreography emphasized “earthbound” qualities through weighted steps, grounded torsos, and low spatial levels as a deliberate contrast to ballet’s verticality and elevation, reinforcing the idea that Native dance was closer to nature and thus fundamentally different from European forms. Ted Shawn’s interpretation of Julia M. Buttree’s *The Rhythm of the Redman*, a book filled with descriptions and illustrations of so-called “authentic” Indian dances, further shaped this aesthetic. He appears to have treated the text as authoritative knowledge, and many of the gestures and motifs that appear in his later “Indian ballets” can be traced directly to its pages. In doing so, Shawn privileged the word of a white author over actual Native collaboration or listening to Indigenous people themselves, reinforcing a colonial dynamic in which settler voices were elevated as experts while Native voices were silenced. Together, these choices constructed a pseudo-Indian aesthetic that celebrated settler innovation while obscuring Indigenous authorship, embedding appropriation into the very foundations of American concert dance.

The narrative themes of early “Indian ballets” were consistently framed around mythic or “vanishing race” tropes, as seen in works such as *Invocation to the Thunderbird*, *Xochitl*, and *Feather of the Dawn*. These “Indian Ballets” constructed storylines that romanticized Indigenous peoples as closer to nature, spiritual, and positioned them as relics of the past rather than as living, sovereign communities. By casting Native identity in this mythologized register, choreographers reinforced colonial hierarchies that celebrated settler innovation while erasing Indigenous specificity.

The choreography and staging of Shawn’s “Indian ballets” reveal a colonial imagination that treated Indigeneity as a theatrical resource rather than a living cultural reality. *Invocation to the Thunderbird* exemplifies this dynamic. As *The Drama of Denishawn Dance* describes, the

work was framed as “an intensely ‘male,’ intensely athletic representation of a magic ritual,” in which “the dancer, using religious rites handed down to him through the centuries, calls upon the Thunderbird to bring much-needed rain to his region.” The description continues with lavish detail, including how Shawn wore “an authentic Indian feather war bonnet . . . a wide beaded belt . . . brief beaded aprons . . . bands of beadwork around the upper arms and lower legs . . . a heavy necklace of bear teeth . . . and beaded moccasins,” all of which a 1922 reviewer praised as “correctly magnificent” and flattering to Shawn’s physique (Sherman 60-61). The choreography itself was built from imagined ritual gestures such as offering cornmeal to the corners of the earth, drawing the Thunderbird in the dirt, slapping the ground to alert the coming “deluge,” and performing “upright poses reminiscent of the artists-of-the-period concepts of ‘the noble savage greeting the dawn” (Sherman 61). These sequences were not derived from Indigenous knowledge but from settler fantasies of primitive spirituality, filtered through white-authored texts and popular imagery. The ballet’s climax, in which the celebrant ecstatically greets the rain, was hailed by audiences as a sincere embodiment of a fragment of a great culture, revealing how thoroughly white spectators mistook theatrical mimicry for cultural truth. This is the colonial mindset at work: Indigeneity becomes a stage effect as Indianness, a symbolic vocabulary available for white bodies to inhabit, reinterpret, and profit from.



Figure 5: Photographic negative of Ted Shawn's *Invocation to the Thunderbird*, found in an unprocessed Newberry Library box. The unlabeled negative provides rare visual documentation of the work despite the absence of formal cataloging. Newberry Library, Jack Cole Papers, 1900–2008 (bulk 1911–1974)..

According to *The Drama of Denishawn Dance*, the narrative structure of *Xochitl* further exposes the extractive logic. Although Shawn's ballet was praised as "the first contemporary American dance produced with an Aztec-Toltec theme," its plot and imagery were shaped entirely by settler interpretations of Indigenous cultures (Sherman 107). The text recounts that Shawn chose the story after reading Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico* and, inspired by Martha Graham's barbaric and primitive performance quality, crafted a ballet that relied on exoticism, eroticism, and racialized spectacle (Sherman 108). The Emperor's costume was said to have been "copied from Aztec-Toltec art works," featuring a "high, squared-off structure embellished by jeweled flower patterns and golden fringe, with long, curled black-and-orange feathers sprouting from its back," while Xochitl herself (the main woman lead) was costumed in "an ankle-length orange dress of accordion-pleated chiffon," her hair adorned with flowers (Sherman 110-112).

The plot—centered on intoxication, seduction, and an attempted assault—was a colonial fantasy masquerading as cultural storytelling. The violent duet between the Emperor and Xochitl, described as danced to music that became “savage and brazen,” reinforced racialized tropes of Indigenous hypersexuality and brutality.



Figure 6: Martha Graham and Robert Gorham in *Xochitl*. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library. The New York Library Digital Collections (1920).

Even the moments of celebration, such as the final coronation scene, were staged through a lens of spectacle rather than cultural understanding. These ballets were not collaborations with Indigenous communities; they were projections of settler imagination, transforming Indigenous histories and aesthetics into consumable entertainment for white audiences. Their success depended on the same ideology that justified the suppression of actual Native dances: the belief

that Indigenous cultures were available for reinterpretation, ownership, and display by non-Native artists.

Feather of the Dawn extends the same colonial logic that shaped Shawn's other "Indian ballets," presenting a highly romanticized, settler-constructed vision of Hopi culture that bore little resemblance to lived Indigenous realities. As *The Drama of Denishawn Dance* recounts, Shawn promoted the work as "the first complete North American Indian ballet produced for equally wide distribution," building it around a Hopi legend in which "if a feather is blown into the air at dawn and is caught by a breeze to be carried out of sight, an auspicious day has begun" (Sherman 157). What followed was not cultural representation but a theatrical compression of Hopi ceremonial life into a thirty-minute spectacle in which Shawn staged his own versions of "Corn Grinding Song, Basket Dance, Dance of the Corn Maiden, the Eagle Dance, the Proposal Ceremony, the Blessing of the Bride, the Wolf Dance, and the assembling of the Hopi gods" (Sherman 157). The production relied heavily on visual appropriation: the set featured a two-story "adobe dwelling," and while some moccasins and baskets were "authentic," the remaining costumes and masks were "meticulously copied . . . from examples in the Smithsonian Institution," turning museum artifacts into stage props (Sherman 157-158). Shawn's own appearance as Kwahu was crafted to evoke Indianness through theatrical artifice. "His brown body . . . bare except for ochre-red trunks," adorned with "necklaces of shells and turquoise," a "straight, black shoulder-length wig," and beaded moccasins, created an image designed to look "Native" (Sherman 158). The ballet's centerpiece, the Eagle Dance (which became an excerpt and was performed separately until the 1950s), was praised as "a dance of speed and athleticism, combined with grace and ecstasy" (Sherman 161). Yet its movement vocabulary, with leaps featuring pointed toes, balletic elevations, and stylized wing gestures, thus reflects a white

choreographer's fantasy of Indianness rather than any Hopi ceremonial practice. In this way, *Feather of the Dawn* did not honor Hopi dance; it replaced it with a romanticized, theatrical imitation that reinforced settler ideas of what Native culture should look like, while excluding Native people themselves from authorship, performance, and representation.

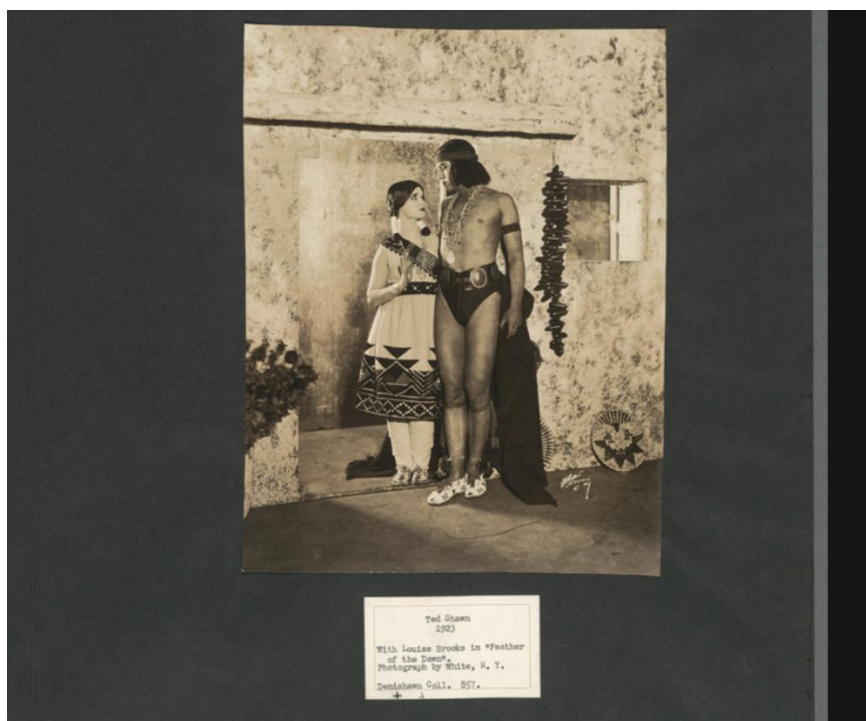


Figure 7: Ted Shawn and Louise Brooks in *Feather of the Dawn*. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library. The New York Library Digital Collections (1923).

The spatial design and staging of these “Indian ballets” reinforced this pseudo-ceremonial aesthetic through carefully arranged formations and patterns. Circular groupings, synchronized unison movement, and “tribal” tableaux were deployed to evoke the impression of ritual, even though they were divorced from any actual ceremonial practice. Stage patterns mimicked the structure of communal gatherings but were recontextualized for theatrical spectacle, transforming sacred forms into choreographic devices. Costumes and props were not merely decorative but were integrated directly into the movement vocabulary, with dancers using them to punctuate gestures or frame tableaux, thereby heightening the illusion of authenticity.

3.5 Sutured Scenery: How Sets Animated Shawn's Fabricated Indianness

Set design in Shawn's "Indian ballets" operated as another crucial technology for fabricating Indigeneity, constructing theatrical environments that signaled "Indianness" to white audiences while bearing little resemblance to the cultural or geographic realities they claimed to represent. Bruce A. Bergner reminds us in his book, *The Poetics of Stage Space: The Theory and Process of Theatre Scene Design*, that "the performance space is an empty box . . . [and] this empty box has the potential to take on a dynamic identity. The movement of performers in the space dictates that identity. Space takes on character, meaning, and life via the movement of humans within it" (Bergner 9). Shawn exploited this potential by filling the so-called empty box with fabricated Indigenous architectures that shaped how audiences perceived the dancers' bodies. In *Feather of the Dawn*, the two-story adobe dwelling, complete with ladders, flat roofs, and a painted desert sky, functioned as a compressed scenic signifier for Hopi life. This structure was not a representation of a specific pueblo but a distilled, romanticized composite, designed to evoke the idea of a Hopi village. The adobe façade became a scenic prosthetic: a surface onto which Shawn projected his imagined version of Hopi culture, transforming dynamic performance space into a pseudo-reservation landscape that appeared culturally grounded while masking the fact that the narrative, choreography, and costuming were stitched together from fragments taken out of context. Like the altered mantas and fabricated regalia, the adobe set was a settler construction, an architectural Frankenindianism that reassembled cultural signifiers into a consumable image of Indigeneity.

A similar logic shaped the monumental tapestry used in *Xochitl*, which appears in archival photographs as a towering backdrop filled with stylized geometric motifs meant to

evoke Mesoamerican grandeur. This tapestry, like the adobe dwelling, does not seem to be drawn from any specific cultural source but from a settler fantasy of an ancient Indian civilization, collapsing Aztec, Toltec, and pan-Indigenous aesthetics into a single decorative field. Its scale and visual density created an atmosphere of exotic antiquity, framing the dancers' movements within a world that felt "authentically Indian" to non-Native spectators while remaining entirely detached from the cultural and ceremonial contexts it referenced. The tapestry functioned as a visual anchor for Shawn's invented narrative, reinforcing the illusion that the ballet emerged from a coherent Indigenous tradition rather than from a settler choreographer's selective borrowing. In both works, set design operated as extractive aesthetics: cultural architecture and visual motifs were harvested, abstracted, and reassembled into theatrical environments that animated a fantasy of Indigeneity without Indigenous people. These scenic constructions, such as the costumes and soundscapes, stitched together disparate cultural fragments into a stage world that was never intended to reflect Native realities, only to satisfy settler desire for spectacle.



Figure 8: Ted Shawn in his Aztec ballet *Xochitl*, with Geordie Graham, Charles Weidman as the father, Doris Humphrey, and members of the fan-dance corps visible in the background. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library. The New York Library Digital Collections (1920–1921).

The adobe dwelling in *Feather of the Dawn* and the monumental tapestry in *Xochitl* also exemplify Frankenindianism, not simply because they depict Indigeneity, but because of how they were constructed through the selective mining, dissection, and recombination of cultural materials into a new, settler-authored whole. Shawn did not choose these scenic elements for their cultural accuracy or ceremonial meaning; he chose them because they were legible to white audiences as “Indian.” The adobe was extracted from its architectural and communal context, stripped of its relational significance within Hopi life, and reassembled as a theatrical façade that could be climbed, lit, and staged for dramatic effect. Likewise, the tapestry in *Xochitl* was not a reproduction of any specific Mesoamerican textile tradition but a stitched-together fantasy, borrowing motifs from disparate cultures and enlarging them into a decorative spectacle. In both cases, Shawn treated Indigenous architecture and visual design as raw material—objects to be

lifted, abstracted, and reanimated within his own choreographic laboratory. This is the logic of Frankenindianism: cultural forms are cut apart, removed from their worlds, and sutured into a new body that performs Indianness without Indigenous presence, authority, or consent. The sets, like the costumes and soundscapes, became prosthetic organs in this fabricated creature, pieces of cultural matter harvested for their symbolic power and animated to serve a narrative that ultimately erased the very peoples it claimed to represent.



Figure 9: Ted Shawn in *Feather of the Dawn*, with Louise Brooks as the Bride, accompanied by kachina dolls and the medicine man visible in the foreground. Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library. The New York Library Digital Collections (1923).

If the construction of these scenic worlds reveals the mechanics of Frankenindianism, their destruction exposes its afterlife. The destruction of the *Feather of the Dawn* set after the disbanding of Denishawn adds yet another layer to this extractive logic. Barton Mumaw recalls in his book, *Barton Mumaw Dancer: From Denishwan to Jacob's Pillow and Beyond*, that

Shawn addressed the company with solemn resolve: “Miss Ruth and I have agreed that there is only one way we can bear to bring Denishawn to an end—with fire—with cleansing fire that will free our spirits from material encumbrances so we may each go on to achieve what we can, alone” (Mumaw 64). Shawn’s decision to burn the adobe structure he had created for *Feather of the Dawn* becomes more than a practical gesture, but a symbolic act of severing himself from this fabricated Indigeneity he had assembled. This moment eerily echoes the 2025 *Frankenstein* film, in which Victor burns down the laboratory where he assembled the creature in an attempt to free himself from it. In both scenes, the creator seeks absolution through destruction, as though eliminating the material evidence might sever the ethical ties to what was made. Shawn’s burning of the set mirrors Victor’s moment of “breathless horror and disgust” after beholding his creation, an impulse not to repair or reckon with the consequences, but to obliterate the thing that now felt monstrous. The adobe dwelling, already a fabricated composite of Hopi architecture, had been constructed through the mining, cutting, and reassembly of Indigenous cultural signifiers; its incineration becomes a symbolic repetition of that violence. Rather than confront the harm embedded in the work, Shawn attempted to erase it, abandoning the fabricated world he had built just as Victor abandoned his creature. This act of destruction underscores the core of Frankenindianism: a settler-constructed body assembled from stolen cultural parts, animated for spectacle, and discarded, or burned, once it no longer served the desires of its maker.

Taken together, the costumes, music, makeup, choreography, and stage environments in Shawn’s “Indian ballets” reveal a unified system of extractive creation—one in which every visual and sonic element was cut apart, lifted from its cultural world, and reassembled into a new body designed to perform Indigeneity without Indigenous people. The altered mantas, brownface makeup, stitched-together regalia, pseudo-Indian soundscapes, circular spatial formations, and

fabricated adobe villages all functioned as prosthetic organs in a larger Frankenindian construction, a creature animated through the dismemberment and reanimation of Indigenous cultural materials. This logic did not end with Shawn; it became embedded in the foundations of modern dance, where rhythmic, non-melodic soundscapes, appropriated movement vocabularies, and settler-legible visual motifs continue to circulate as neutral training tools or “homages.”

For Native modern dancers, these legacies are not abstract history but daily realities, entering studios shaped by distorted representations of their cultures, confronting works still celebrated as innovation, and navigating institutions that often fail to acknowledge the harm embedded in these choreographies. The persistence of these stitched-together pseudo-identities demonstrates how Frankenindianism remains an active force in dance, continually harvesting and reanimating cultural fragments to serve settler imagination. Reclaiming visual, sonic, and choreographic sovereignty is therefore not only a matter of correcting the archive but of dismantling the ongoing structures of appropriation that continue to shape the field and burden Native artists with the labor of defending, correcting, and reclaiming their own cultural presence.

3.6 Reanimating the Fabricated “Indian”: The Stitched Spectacle After Shawn

Lester Horton’s choreographic world emerged directly from the pseudo-Indian aesthetic cultivated by Ted Shawn and Horton’s lifelong fascination with Natives. As a young boy, Horton was fascinated by the American Indian, a fascination that was cemented in 1922 when he saw the Denishawn company perform in Indianapolis, Indiana. This encounter first sparked his interest in dance and introduced him to Shawn’s theatricalized portrayal of an Indian image. This early

captivation quickly evolved into a sustained practice of cultural mining. While working at a Chicago costume house, Horton “added to his understanding of the basics of costume design and construction and learned how to draw costume plates—a skill he was later to use extensively” (Warren 20).

Drawing on this training, he began “combining ideas from Hewes, Denishawn, and his own authentic materials” to create Oriental and American Indian based dances that were theatricalized through elaborate costuming, makeup, and scenic design (Warren 20). In doing so, Horton was not simply inspired by Shawn; he was actively extending Shawn’s Frankenstein-type project of constructing a pseudo-Indian creature for the stage. His work, like Shawn did before, stitched together fragments of regalia, movement motifs, soundscapes, and museum-derived imagery into hybridized forms that aligned with settler expectations of Indianness, helping to solidify a visual and kinesthetic vocabulary that would later be celebrated as foundational to American modern dance. The homage-based ideology Shawn modeled (one that treated Indigenous cultures as aesthetic resources rather than sovereign traditions), became embedded in Horton’s own choreographic character and, eventually, in the technique that bears his name.

Horton’s westward move further entrenched this lineage. Feeling constrained by his director, Clara Bates’ desire to tie him indefinitely to *The Song of Hiawatha*, Horton accepted an opportunity to leave Chicago, drawn as much by the promise of artistic freedom as by the romantic pull of the American West. As Warren notes, “Chicago had not ‘discovered’ him, and he hated living in the city . . . The prospect of spending some time in the far West was actually as intriguing to him as the possibility of professional opportunities in California,” and the fact that “Ted Shawn had once owned a small house in Eagle Rock,” which was in California, and thus seemed to him a favorable omen (Warren 21). In California, Horton found the conditions to

expand his passion for dance and, by extension, to further expand his creation of a pseudo-Indian stage image. The result of this new inspiration was a technique and repertoire that blended what were likely stylized interpretations of Native American movement, such as grounded stances, forceful directional shifts, expansive lunges, and rhythmic, percussive phrasing, with a broader mix of global influences and Horton's own anatomical approach to shaping the body in motion. These Indigenous-derived elements, abstracted and reconfigured through his choreographic lens, became part of the signature vocabulary that the *Dance History Project* describes as a defining feature of the Horton Technique.

Horton's relocation to California unfolded within a broader national pattern that Shari Huhndorf identifies as the late-century phenomenon of "going Native," a cultural practice in which white Americans turned to imagined Indigenous life as a means of regenerating their own identities. As Huhndorf explains in their book, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination*, this narrative, familiar from *Dances with Wolves* and countless earlier cultural expressions, casts Indigeneity as a site of escape, renewal, and self-discovery for alienated white subjects, while simultaneously reaffirming white dominance by making distorted versions of Native life serve the needs of the colonizing culture. Horton's attraction to the West and to the pseudo-Indian imagery he continued to develop there fits squarely within this logic. His westward move was not simply geographic; it was ideological, shaped by the same desire to access an imagined "authentic" Indigeneity that could revitalize his artistic identity. In this sense, Horton's expansion of his pseudo-Indian stage image in California was not an isolated artistic choice but part of a much older cultural script—one in which white artists "go Native" to define Americanness while obscuring the violence and erasure that make such appropriations possible.

Yet this celebrated eclecticism was built on the same extractive logic that shaped his earlier work: Indigenous movement and imagery served as raw material for a modernist vocabulary that bore little resemblance to the living cultures from which it drew. In this way, Horton not only inherited Shawn's pseudo-Indian aesthetic, but he also institutionalized it. Through his technique, pedagogy, and repertory, the homage-based ideology Shawn pioneered became woven into the fabric of modern dance training, shaping the field's understanding of innovation, authenticity, and American identity for generations to come.



Figure 10: Lester Horton in costume for *Prairie Chicken Dance* (1929). The photograph, reproduced in *Lester Horton: Pioneer of Modern Dance*, documents Horton's early engagement with pseudo-Indian themes in his choreography.

Martha Graham's entry into dance, on the other hand, was shaped from the outset by the same colonial aesthetics that defined Ted Shawn's work, and her early training positioned her squarely within the pseudo-Indian world he helped construct. In *Blood Memory*, Graham recalls the moment she first encountered Ruth St. Denis through a poster in a shop window and then

going to the show: “I became enamored of Ruth St. Denis as a performer. She was more than exotic—I realize now she was a goddess figure. I knew at that moment I was going to be a dancer” (Graham 54–55). This formative experience reveals how deeply Graham internalized the exoticist, orientalist, and later, pseudo-Indianness imagery that St. Denis and Shawn trafficked in. When she later joined Denishawn, she entered a choreographic environment where Indigeneity was already being stylized, romanticized, and reimagined for white audiences. Shawn’s influence on her was profound. He cast her as the lead in *Xochitl*, a work he choreographed “based on his studies of the Mayan, Aztec, and Toltec cultures,” in which Graham portrayed a Toltec maiden pursued by an emperor in an opulent, hyper-theatrical production (Graham 76).

What Graham describes in *Xochitl* (the elaborate headdresses, the intoxicating maguey wine, the king’s predatory advances), is not simply a theatrical spectacle; it is an embodiment of the colonial imagination. The ballet relies on familiar tropes that exoticize and romanticize Indigenous peoples: the innocent virgin maiden, the hyper-sexualized Native ruler who cannot help himself after becoming drunk, and the framing of Xochitl as a rare, almost mystical figure whose beauty and purity provoke inevitable violence. These narrative devices cast Indigeneity as both alluring and doomed, reinforcing the idea that Native cultures are relics of a vanished world and that Native women exist primarily as symbols of purity, sacrifice, or tragic victimhood. Graham’s participation in *Xochitl* thus trained her not only in Shawn’s movement vocabulary but also in the theatrical logics that framed Indigeneity as something to be aestheticized, eroticized, and ultimately consumed. She was not merely performing in Shawn’s imagined Indigenous world; she was being trained to embody it, absorb it, and eventually reproduce its logics in her own work.

Graham later admitted that “the first dances I made at Rochester were not terribly original and were very derivative of Denishawn, but that was all I knew” (Graham 106). This acknowledgment is crucial: it shows that her early choreographic vocabulary was built directly from the aesthetic and ideological foundations laid by Shawn and St. Denis. The pseudo-Indian world she inherited from them did not disappear as she developed her own modernist voice; instead, it became embedded in the emotional, spatial, and narrative structures of her technique. Graham’s emphasis on groundedness, contraction, ritualized gesture, and mythic storytelling drew heavily on the motifs and theatrical tropes of the Indigenous movement she absorbed at Denishawn. In this way, Graham extended Shawn’s homage-based ideology into the heart of American modern dance, transforming his theatricalized Indigeneity into a codified technique that would be taught, revered, and replicated for generations.



Figure 11: Photograph likely depicting Martha Graham as Xochitl from *Xochitl*, discovered in an unprocessed Newberry Library box. Newberry Library, Jack Cole Papers, 1900–2008 (bulk 1911–1974).

Her legacy, like Horton's, reveals how deeply the field's foundational figures relied on appropriated Indigenous imagery to construct their visions of American identity. Since both of their techniques became some of the most influential pedagogical systems in the twentieth century, the pseudo-Indian world they inherited from Shawn did not remain confined to their early work, but became woven into the very fabric of modern dance training, shaping how dancers move, feel, and imagine non-Western dance cultures in studios across the world today. In this sense, both Graham and Horton function much like Baron Wolf von Frankenstein in *Son of Frankenstein* (1939), the son who returns to his father's laboratory and becomes irresistibly drawn into reviving the Creature. Just as Baron continues Victor's experiments, believing he can perfect, refine, or redeem what his father began, Graham and Horton extended Shawn's

Frankenindian project, carrying forward his stitched-together cultures and breathing new life into his pseudo-Indian aesthetic. Their work did not break from Shawn's legacy, but amplified, codified, and institutionalized it. In doing so, they helped launch the Frankenindian legacy into modern dance: a lineage in which each generation inherits the stitched spectacle of the last, convinced that homage is innovation and that the fragments of Indigenous cultures can be endlessly revived, reassembled, and taught as the foundation of an American art form.

IV. Contemporary Consequences

Many Native modern dancers encounter this history not through formal instruction but by accident, often years into their training or professional careers, and the impact of that discovery reverberates far beyond the studio. Because most dance programs do not teach the colonial foundations of modern dance, Native modern dancers unknowingly participate in forms built from appropriated and distorted representations of their own cultures. What appears at first to be a neutral technique or universal movement vocabulary is, in reality, a carefully curated silence. It is a silence that has been maintained for decades, especially in discussions of Martha Graham and Lester Horton, whose iconic status as modern dance pioneers is deeply entangled with the colonial agendas that celebrated white innovation while suppressing the Indigenous movement traditions they appropriated.

In Graham's case, the silence feels almost deliberate. Her legacy is protected with such reverence that any discussion of the Indigenous, "primitive," or non-Western sources she drew from is often dismissed as irrelevant or minimized as mere "influence." The story that she was a ballet dancer who grew tired of the form's strictness and took off her ballet shoes, thus creating modern dance, is a sanitized narrative in which Graham emerges as a singular genius, untouched by the messy realities of cultural borrowing. Horton's legacy is similarly insulated. He is frequently celebrated as an innovator who welcomed dancers of color into his company at a time when racial inclusion was rare, and this progressive reputation is often used to overshadow or excuse the extensive appropriation embedded in his work. His Indian ballets, his fabricated regalia, and his museum-inspired costuming practices are rarely discussed alongside his

contributions to technique. The field has learned to praise Horton for diversity while ignoring the ways he consumed Indigenous culture to build his choreographic identity.

This absence of transparency is not benign. It creates a situation in which Native modern dancers must grapple with the truth on their own, without institutional acknowledgment, guidance, or support. The moment of realizing that the movements they have been praised for mastering are stitched together from dismembered fragments of Indigenous traditions can be emotionally devastating. It can feel like a rupture in the body, a sudden awareness that the very dance form that once offered belonging has been built, in part, on the distortion of their own cultural inheritance. The sense of betrayal that follows is profound. Dancers recognize that they were never given the opportunity to consent, contextualize, or prepare for the cultural weight embedded in the techniques they were taught. They must confront the fact that the field has long celebrated the aesthetic of Indigeneity while erasing its origin, commodifying its spirit, and sidelining its creators.

This silence within dance education perpetuates harm by placing the burden of discovery and emotional processing entirely on Native modern dancers rather than on the institutions that continue to teach these forms without addressing their origins. It is a silence that protects the canon rather than the students. It shields the reputations of Graham, Horton, Shawn, and others while leaving Native modern dancers to navigate the emotional fallout alone. In this way, the omission becomes a continuation of the very colonial frameworks that enabled appropriation in the first place. It preserves the illusion of purity and innovation in modern dance by hiding the cultural debts that underpin its vocabulary. The result is a pedagogical landscape in which Native modern dancers are asked to master techniques built from their own cultural dispossession. Learning the truth alone, outside any structured support, can trigger feelings of grief, anger,

cultural disorientation, and even a sense of displacement within the very form they have dedicated themselves to. It forces dancers to reconcile their love for the form with the knowledge that it was built, in part, built on the distortion and commodification of their own traditions.

Philip J. Deloria notes in his work, *Playing Indian*, that “recent years have brought its key questions—the material dynamics of settler colonial cultural work, the nature and parameters of cultural appropriation, and the harms done to Indigenous peoples—into sharp and urgent focus” (Deloria 6). His words resonate with particular force in the field of dance, precisely because these questions have not been brought into focus within dance education. Instead, they have been muted, avoided, or treated as irrelevant. The urgency Deloria describes is felt acutely in modern dance because the silence has been so total for so long. My work enters a field that has not simply overlooked these histories but has actively maintained their invisibility, preserving the reputations of figures like Shawn, Graham, and Horton at the expense of Indigenous truth.

This urgency became unmistakably clear during my own research at the Jacob’s Pillow archives. In my concluding meeting, after I had spent days immersed in materials documenting Shawn’s Indian ballets, an archive staff member asked whether it might be “better” or “more appropriate” to overlay actual Indigenous music onto the early-2000s restaging of Shawn’s *Osage/Pawnee Dance of Greeting*, rather than using the original score. The question was sincere, but it revealed how profoundly the silence around this history has shaped institutional misunderstanding. The staff member focused on the music as the primary issue, missing entirely that the problem was not only the soundtrack but the choreography itself, the costuming, the invented regalia, the racialized makeup, and the settler fantasy of what “Indian movement” looked like. The question assumed that authenticity could be achieved by swapping out one element, as if the harm resided only in the sound and not in the work’s entire structure. It was a

Frankenindian logic: the belief that replacing a single part could redeem a body assembled from components that were fundamentally extractive and colonial. But just as changing one limb does not transform the creature into something human, changing the music does not undo the violence embedded in the choreography's very design.

This moment embodied the consequences of decades of unspoken history. Since the field has not openly confronted the colonial foundations of modern dance, even well-intentioned practitioners can believe that minor adjustments, such as changing the music, softening the language, or adding a land acknowledgment, are enough to repair works built entirely on appropriation. The lack of critical conversation allows people to imagine that these ballets can be "fixed," rather than recognizing that they are products of a settler ideology that fabricated Indigeneity for the stage. This is its own kind of Frankenstein thinking, where the focus falls on tinkering with isolated parts rather than acknowledging that the entire creation was assembled from misrepresentations, distortions, and fantasies about Indigeneity. Without a clear understanding of how these works were constructed, institutions continue to restage and preserve them, convinced they are offering respect when, in fact, they are reviving the very structures of harm that shaped the field from the beginning.

This is why the quote from Deloria's writing raised not an abstract academic concern, but immediate, lived realities within dance. The silence around appropriation has created an environment where people genuinely do not understand what the harm is, or where it resides, or how deeply it runs. It has allowed institutions to continue reproducing settler fantasies under the guise of preservation or homage. It has left Native modern dancers to confront these truths alone, without the structural support or educational context that should have been present from the beginning.

My work intervenes in this silence. It insists that the harm is not limited to a single element but is embedded in the entire aesthetic logic of the pseudo-Indian world constructed by Shawn and carried forward by his successors. It argues that the field must stop treating appropriation as a historical footnote and begin understanding it as a foundational condition of modern dance. And it demonstrates that until these histories are taught openly and critically, institutions will continue to misunderstand the nature of the harm and, in doing so, will continue to reproduce it.

This is precisely why teaching this history is essential. The goal is not to shame dancers or institutes for participating in modern dance, nor to suggest that Native modern dancers must abandon the form. Instead, transparent education prevents the emotional harm that comes from uncovering these truths in isolation. It allows Native modern dancers to enter the field with agency rather than shock, with context rather than confusion, and with the ability to make informed choices about how they wish to engage with a form that has long consumed Indigenous culture while erasing Indigenous presence. It opens the possibility of reclamation rather than rupture, of critical engagement rather than silent inheritance, and of Native modern dancers shaping the future of Modern dance on their own terms.

4.1 From Shawn to the Canon: Choreographies that Embedded Pseudo-Indianness Movement into Modern Technique

Contemporary modern dance technique still carries the unmistakable imprint of Ted Shawn's pseudo-Indian world, even when his name is not taught in an average dance studio. Shawn's early twentieth-century project created the conditions for Indigenous movement to be

extracted, stylized, and rebranded as “American modern dance.” Because Shawn framed his work as both artistic innovation and cultural preservation, he established a model that enabled white choreographers to claim authority over non-Western forms of dance. This logic did not remain confined to his repertoire; it became embedded in the training systems he developed at Denishawn, as well as his later company, Ted Shawn and his Male Dancers. The pseudo-Indian movement qualities he cultivated were passed directly to his students or people he inspired, who then carried them into their own techniques. In this way, Shawn’s extractive aesthetic became the foundation upon which the entire modern dance canon was built.

An example of Shawn’s influence in modern dance pedagogy is the hyper-masculine ideal he worked so aggressively to construct. His vision of the male dancer (muscular, stoic, heroic, and unmistakably “manly”) was not just a personal aesthetic; it became a template that institutions absorbed and reproduced. That template still shapes the field today. Many male dancers find themselves judged not on their technique or artistry but on how closely they approximate Shawn’s imagined masculine form: broad-shouldered, powerful, emotionally contained, and visually aligned with early twentieth-century frontier fantasies. Those who do not fit this mold, such as some queer men, trans men, men with smaller frames, and men whose movement quality is fluid rather than forceful, are often overlooked or not hired at all, a direct consequence of the gendered expectations Shawn embedded into the foundation of modern dance. Because his legacy is rarely named in pedagogy, these hiring biases appear natural rather than inherited, allowing Shawn’s century-old vision of what a “real” male dancer should look like to continue shaping stages, companies, and training programs today.

The Horton Technique is also a clear example of how Shawn’s influence continues to shape contemporary pedagogy. Horton, who openly admired Shawn and followed his example in

studying and stylizing Indigenous dance, absorbed Shawn's belief that Indigeneity could serve as raw material for constructing a new American movement vocabulary. The flat backs, lateral stretches, deep lunges, and rhythmic foot patterns that define Horton Technique are the abstracted remnants of the Indigenous movement Horton collected, reassembled, and codified. Because Horton's technique became institutionalized in universities, studios, and companies, Shawn's pseudo-Indian aesthetic now circulates through the bodies of dancers who may never learn their origins. The result is a pedagogy that continues to teach Indigenous-derived movement as a foundational modern dance technique. At the same time, the Indigenous communities whose practices were mined remain unacknowledged and structurally excluded from the field.

Martha Graham's technique also carries forward the pseudo-Indianness sensibilities she absorbed under Shawn's tutelage. At Denishawn, Graham and her peers were encouraged, as she later wrote, to "become involved in the mythologies of other peoples," a process that normalized the idea that white dancers could inhabit and reinterpret Indigenous and non-Western cultural worlds (Graham 66). Today, dancers learn her technique, composed of contraction and release, spirals, and Graham's mythic dramaturgy, without understanding that these elements were shaped by Shawn's belief that Indigeneity could be accessed, possessed, and transformed into American dance identity.

The cumulative effect is a contemporary dance landscape in which Shawn's pseudo-Indian world remains structurally intact. His extractive logic has become so deeply woven into modern dance pedagogy that it often goes unnoticed, and this silence is not neutral. When Shawn is left unspoken in technique classes, the field loses the ability to trace how these movement vocabularies were built, and dancers are taught to treat appropriated Indigenous

aesthetics as natural, universal, or inherently “modern.” The result is that the very shapes Shawn created or drew inspiration from, like *Rhythms of a Red Man* (angular arm pathways, contracted and crouched stances, sharp facings, and sculptural freezes meant to evoke an imagined “tribal” intensity, and so on), continue to reverberate through technique. These motifs, once theatricalized Indigeneity for white bodies, now appear in Horton’s and Graham’s codified exercises as neutral technical: the angularity of laterals, the forceful contractions, the deep, compressed stances, and the dramatic shifts of weight that echo Shawn’s staged vocabulary. Students learn to value the earthiness of Horton, the ritual intensity of Graham, and the “American spirit” of early modern dance without realizing their roots.

This disconnect has profound consequences: Native modern dancers often find themselves training inside distorted versions of their own cultures. In contrast, non-Native dancers inherit a canon built on erasure and are never taught to question it. The refusal to name Shawn’s role allows the harm to continue, because what remains unspoken cannot be interrogated, contextualized, or repaired. The contemporary field continues to celebrate innovation built on extraction because it has never fully confronted the fact that Ted Shawn’s pseudo-Indian world did not end with him; it became the foundation of modern dance technique itself, and the silence around him ensures that foundation remains unchallenged.

A clear example of how extraction persists beyond early modern dance appears in the 2025 film *Sinners*, which, although not created with this issue in mind, offers a striking contemporary metaphor for the same extractive logics that shaped Ted Shawn’s work. In the film, the sacred music carried by the main character, Sammy, operates as a form of blood memory, aligning with Indigenous understandings of ancestral knowledge and the responsibilities that accompany it. This framing also recalls how Martha Graham titled her

autobiography *Blood Memory*, a choice that reveals how deeply white artists have long drawn from Indigenous concepts without cultural grounding or accountability. The dynamic is not unique to dance; even PBS's documentary on the history of jazz by Ken Burns notes that some of the genre's most recognizable tempos and sonic textures emerged through similar processes of extraction, where elements from multiple marginalized communities were taken up, blended, and celebrated without equal recognition of their origins (Jazz 2001). In *Sinners*, blood memory is depicted as a living force: the music "attracts healing but also attracts evil" (Sinners 2025). That dual pull captures the tension Indigenous culture has always held in settler contexts, drawing both genuine desire for connection and a persistent form of cultural vampirism, a hunger to consume what is sacred without honoring its protocols. The vampire Remmick's fixation on possessing the music for himself mirrors Shawn's attraction to Indigenous ceremonies and his willingness to extract from them in service of his own artistic vision.

The film underscores that the music is sacred because it connects past, present, and future, piercing the veil between ancestors and the living. This resonates with the role of ceremonial dance in many Native communities, where movement is not performance but a more relational practice. Importantly, the music in *Sinners* is not something imposed on the community; it is something "brought from home" and carried with care, much like Native dance. This stands in stark contrast to the way outsiders like Remmick and Shawn treat these cultural forms as objects to be taken, reshaped, and claimed. Remmick's own backstory deepens this critique. Although he comes from Ireland, a place marked by its own history of colonial violence, he reenacts that violence upon Sammy's community by extracting their music for his personal desires. Shawn's life reveals a similar contradiction. As a gay man in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he likely experienced marginalization and social hostility, yet he still

perpetuated harm against Native communities by mining their ceremonies to construct his vision of an American dance identity.

Throughout the film, Remmick sees Sammy not as a person but as a conduit, someone whose songs can reconnect him to his own ancestors. This parallels Shawn's belief that Indigenous ceremony could help him materialize his idea of an American dance identity. The violence becomes literal when Remmick begins biting other characters, spreading his hunger for the music like a contagion. This vampiric chain mirrors the legacy of homage in modern dance, where Shawn's extractive practices were passed down to Graham, Horton, and others, who then "bit" (in a sense) their students to spread the ideology of cultural entitlement across generations. As Remmick insists, "I want your stories, I want your songs . . . we will make beautiful music together . . . I am your way out . . . this world left you for dead," he articulates the same extractive thought patterns as well as the paternalizing logic Shawn used to rationalize his work: the belief that Indigenous culture needs saving, guiding, or perfecting through white intervention, echoing the colonial narrative that people of color require rescue even as he is the one enacting harm.

By the end of *Sinners*, the people who were present and then turned to vampires have fused into a hive mind, completely unable to recognize the violence of their own extraction. This same willful blindness defines many modern dance studios today, where Shawn's colonial framework is still taught as neutral technique, reproduced uncritically, and shielded from accountability by institutions that would rather protect their lineage than confront the harm it continues to cause. The after-credits appearance of Stack and Mary (two of the main cast who were turned into vampires) signals that the legacy persists, lingering into the present rather than remaining contained in the past. In this way, the film becomes a contemporary parable for the

ongoing consequences of extractive aesthetics or settler vampirism. The more outsiders consume Indigenous culture without consent, the less human or accountable they become. And like the hive mind in *Sinners*, the field of modern dance often remains unable or unwilling to confront how deeply this extraction is woven into its foundations.

4.2 Haunted by the Stage: How Settler Choreographies Continue to Shape Native Experience

My own experience reflects the profound emotional impact that the silence within dance education can have. After retiring from nearly four years of professional ballet performance, I returned to school and pursued a dance minor at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. During a contemporary dance course that was deeply rooted in modern dance techniques, we were preparing for a visit from a modern guest artist. In conversation, a graduate student who specialized in modern dance and who, along with her sister, was Apache, casually mentioned that the Graham technique was based on Native dance. She laughed as she said it, joking that this was why she had always been good at modern. Her tone was light, but the comment hit me with a wave of disgust and unease that I did not yet have the language to articulate. In that moment, something inside me shifted. I realized that the dance form I had trained in, performed in, and, in a way, built a career around, was intertwined with appropriations of my own culture, something no teacher, choreographer, or institution had ever acknowledged.

I had taken modern classes throughout my entire dance life, nearly twenty years of training, and not once had this history been discussed. The silence was so complete that the idea felt almost impossible to process. At the time, I could not fully understand why the comment unsettled me so deeply, but I knew something was profoundly wrong. After working on this

thesis, I understand that even the student who made the comment likely did not grasp the full extent of the appropriation she was referencing. For her, it seemed to be framed as inspiration, a kind of benign borrowing, instead of the reality of what actually occurred that includes the mimicry, the cutting up and stitching together of traditional cloth, the use of Native beadwork as theatrical decoration, the distorted piano music being crafted to imitate a tom-tom beat, or the dancers painting their bodies a reddish-brown to appear more Indian onstage. None of that was part of the conversation. None of that was talked about during any of my training. None of that was ever acknowledged.

Once I learned the truth, I began to look back on my entire dance career with a new and painful clarity. I suddenly understood why I had always felt uneasy during modern pieces that claimed to pay homage to African dance or to Indigenous cultures more broadly. I had participated in and watched these works for years, feeling something was off but unable to name it. I felt icky, uncomfortable, and vaguely complicit, but I did not yet have the framework to understand that what I was witnessing was not homage at all. It was extraction. It was the same logic that shaped Graham's and Horton's work, the same logic that allowed white choreographers to consume cultural forms while ignoring the people who created them. The discomfort I felt was my body recognizing a truth that my education had refused to teach me.

The truth was far more violent and far more intimate than the casual comment suggested. The visceral reaction I felt, the revulsion, betrayal, grief, disgust, and anger, was not only about the information itself. It was about the fact that I had been left to discover it practically alone, without context, without guidance, and without any institutional support. It was about realizing that the form I had loved and devoted myself to had been built, in part, on the distortion of my own cultural inheritance. The revelation was so unsettling that I walked out of the remaining

modern-focused classes offered that semester, and I have not stepped into a modern dance studio since. That moment embodied the emotional toll of an educational system that celebrates appropriated movement while withholding the truth from the very people whose cultures were taken. It revealed how deeply the silence runs, how thoroughly it shapes the experiences of Native modern dancers, and how urgently this history needs to be taught so that future dancers do not have to experience the same rupture alone.

4.3 The Colonial Echo Within: How Appropriation Still Harms Native Modern Dancers

What I felt in that moment is not just a personal reaction but part of a broader pattern that researchers have documented across multiple contexts of Native “representation.” The psychological effects reported in research on Native American mascots offer a powerful framework for understanding the harm that appropriative “homages” in modern dance inflict on Native modern dancers. Scholars have long noted that supporters of Native mascots claim they “represent important traditions and honor Native Americans,” while opponents argue that such representations “reflect and reinforce stereotypes, involve offensive appropriation and mimicry, and harm Native American people” (Davis Delano, Gone & Fryberg 2020). This debate mirrors the discourse surrounding modern dance’s pseudo-Indianness works, which are often defended as artistic tributes even as they perpetuate caricatured images of Indigeneity. Empirical research shows that these representations are not harmless. Fryberg et al. (2008) found that Native mascots, regardless of whether Native youth perceived them positively, were consistently harmful to psychological well-being, providing “the strongest evidence of the negative effects” of such imagery (Davis Delano, Gone & Fryberg 2020). In controlled studies, exposure to Native mascots depressed Native students’ self-esteem compared to a no-exposure condition,

demonstrating that even seemingly benign or “romantic” portrayals can produce measurable harm (Davis Delano, Gone & Fryberg 2020).

In a later study with Native college students from more than 150 tribal nations, exposure to mascot imagery, including a white person dressed as a faux Native “Chief,” significantly reduced the number of achievement-related “possible selves” participants could imagine for their own futures (Davis Delano, Gone & Fryberg 2020). These findings resonate deeply with the experiences of Native modern dancers who encounter appropriated movement vocabularies, distorted music, and fabricated Indigeneity in the studio. Just as mascots constrain how Native youth see themselves, pseudo-Indian choreography can narrow Native modern dancers’ sense of belonging, potential, and cultural integrity within the field. The harm is not abstract; it is psychological, measurable, and cumulative, reinforcing the urgency of confronting appropriation in dance education before it continues to shape the identities and aspirations of Indigenous modern dancers.

The psychological consequences of these representations extend far beyond questions of identity or cultural integrity. As the National Indian Health Board emphasizes, “The damage done by Native mascots goes beyond representation – it affects health,” noting that Native youth already face disproportionately high rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. When these young people are repeatedly confronted with caricatured images of their cultures, the burden compounds. The mascots become one more reminder that the broader society sees them not as full human beings but as symbols, costumes, or entertainment. This dynamic mirrors what Native modern dancers experience in modern dance spaces shaped by appropriative “Indian” works. The constant exposure to distorted Indigeneity—whether through

costumes, choreography, or music—reinforces a social environment in which Native modern dancers must navigate misrecognition at every turn.

An example of this is especially evident in the musical landscape of modern dance training today. Many of the rhythmic structures, drum patterns, and percussive motifs used in contemporary technique classes trace directly back to appropriated Indigenous sound worlds, even when their origins go unacknowledged. This lineage can be traced directly to Horton. As Warren notes in his book, *Lester Horton, Modern Dance Pioneer*, he notes, “In his own work, he had used drums of various sizes and materials but always for the same purpose—as accompaniment to authentic and stylized American Indian dances. Now, the aesthetic possibilities of percussion instruments as a motivation for and accompaniment to new dance ideas were revealed to him” (Warren 36). What Horton framed as innovation was built on the extraction of Indigenous musical practices, and those appropriated sonic signatures have since become embedded in the very foundations of modern dance pedagogy.

For Native modern dancers, this means entering studios where their cultures appear only in fragmented, romanticized, or stylized forms, echoes of traditions that were once criminalized, now repurposed as generic “modern” aesthetics. Their own presence and expertise remain marginalized while the sounds and movements of their cultures circulate freely, detached from their histories and stripped of their meaning. The harm is cumulative: each distorted representation, each uncredited drum pattern, each stylized “tribal” rhythm adds to a climate that undermines Native well-being, belonging, and possibility.

The accumulating research on Native-themed mascots makes clear that these forms of distortion do far more than misrepresent culture; they actively shape the social conditions in which Native people must live, learn, and imagine themselves. As Sierra Watt, Ian Record, and

Yvette Roubideaux demonstrate in their writing, *Twenty Years of Research into the Health Impacts of Native Themed Mascots: A Scoping Review*, “the majority of works included in this review provide evidence that Native themed mascots contribute to negative health determinants for AI/ANs . . . across individual, familial, community, and population levels” (Watt 111). These harms span a wide range of sociocultural effects: increased violence and aggression toward Native youth, heightened implicit bias among non-Native observers, lower performance evaluations in experimental settings, and a “dampening of personal beliefs in oneself and one’s community among American Indian youth” (Watt 111). Even though much of the research centers on discrimination, stereotyping, and bias, the authors stress that these forces can negatively affect AI/AN peoples in many ways throughout their lives. This broader pattern of cumulative harm mirrors what Native modern dancers encounter in modern dance spaces shaped by appropriative “homages.” When Indigeneity is repeatedly presented as a caricature, whether on a football field or a concert stage, it reinforces a sociocultural environment that diminishes Native people’s sense of safety, belonging, and possibility. Understanding these documented harms is essential, because the same mechanisms that make mascots damaging are at work in the choreographic traditions that continue to circulate in dance education.

Despite decades of evolution in modern dance, the practice of paying “homage” to Indigenous cultures remains deeply entrenched in today’s dance world. University programs, companies, and even studios continue to stage pseudo-Indian works or teach movement phrases inspired by “tribal” aesthetics, often without any acknowledgment of their origins or the harm they perpetuate. I was even made aware that in the last twenty years, Jacob’s Pillow revived one of Ted Shawn’s pieces, *Osage/Pawnee Dance of Greeting*, while at the archive, and they did this without realizing the harm it caused. Furthermore, these homage pieces are still praised as

respectful nods to the cultures they mimic, as if the language of homage can neutralize the violence of extraction. Their continued circulation functions as a living reminder of modern dance's appropriative roots, signaling that the field has yet to reckon with the conditions that made these works possible in the first place. When institutions revive or preserve these dances as part of the canon, they reaffirm the same hierarchy that allowed white choreographers to mine Indigenous cultures for artistic material. At the same time, Native people themselves were being surveilled, restricted, or punished for practicing their own dances. In this way, homage becomes not a gesture of respect but a mechanism of continuity, carrying the logics of early twentieth-century appropriation into the present and normalizing them as tradition. The persistence of these works demonstrates that the field has not outgrown its colonial inheritance; it continues to perform it.

Ultimately, the contemporary experiences of Native modern dancers reveal that the harm of early modern dance appropriation is not confined to the past; it is reproduced every time institutions choose silence over truth. When dancers are not taught the origins of the techniques they practice, they are denied the context necessary to navigate their training with agency and care. This silence forces Indigenous performers to confront the colonial foundations of modern dance alone, often at moments when they are already deeply invested in the form and in their own artistic identities. The emotional toll of this discovery is not an individual failing but a structural one, created by pedagogies that prioritize the preservation of the canon over the well-being of the dancers who inherit it. The urgency of addressing this harm echoes the broader national recognition that misrepresentation is not merely symbolic but materially damaging. In 2022, the National Indian Health Board called for the immediate retirement of Native mascots, affirming that such imagery contributes to negative mental health outcomes for Native youth and

identifying their continued use as “a serious public health and educational justice issue.” The same principle applies in dance: the continued use of appropriative “homages” is not a neutral artistic choice but an ongoing source of harm. Just as mascots must be retired, so too must the practice of aestheticizing and consuming Indigenous cultures under the guise of tribute. Teaching the truth about modern dance’s origins is not an act of division but of care, ensuring that Native modern dancers no longer bear the burden of uncovering these histories in isolation. It is a necessary step toward building dance spaces in which sovereignty, consent, and cultural integrity are not afterthoughts but foundational principles shaping the field’s future.

V. Conclusion

This thesis has traced how American modern dance was built through a sustained engagement with Indigenous cultures that was neither collaborative nor respectful, but extractive, distortive, and deeply entangled with the colonial ideologies of its time. Early modernists worked within a national climate shaped by frontier mythology, Manifest Destiny, and the vanishing-race narrative (frameworks that cast Indigenous peoples as relics of a disappearing past and framed their cultural practices as raw material for the making of American identity). These same logics animated federal policies that criminalized Native ceremonial life, creating the conditions in which white artists could freely appropriate what Native communities were punished for practicing. Simultaneously, the Indianist movement in music and anthropology normalized the extraction of Indigenous sound, story, and ceremony for white audiences, reinforcing the belief that Native culture existed to be collected, stylized, and repurposed.

Within this ideological landscape, Ted Shawn's pseudo-ethnographic "Indian ballets," Martha Graham's modernist vocabularies shaped by salvage ethnography, and Lester Horton's choreographic experiments all participated in the legacy of the construction of a pseudo-Indian world that substituted settler fantasy for Indigenous reality. Their choreographies, writings, and pedagogical legacies reveal a pattern in which Native movement, regalia, and sound were treated as aesthetic resources for artistic innovation. At the same time, Indigenous peoples themselves were denied agency, and even the right to practice their own culture. This history is not peripheral to the development of American modern dance; it is one of its central organizing logics.

Confronting this legacy requires more than acknowledging isolated acts of appropriation. It demands a reckoning with the extractive aesthetics that shaped the field's earliest innovations and continue to inform its structures today. To dismantle the pseudo-Indian world, dance education must teach about these practices clearly, refuse narratives that frame appropriation as innovation, and deconstruct the institutional conditions that have allowed these distortions to continue. Such a shift requires active participation from educators, choreographers, and institutions. The persistence of extractive "homages" in modern and contemporary dance reflects a deeper colonial mindset that continues to shape how Indigeneity is imagined, consumed, and choreographed.

As Frantz Fanon observes in their writing, *The Wretched Earth*, colonialism relies on a psychic choreography of possession and dispossession, "organized seances of possession and dispossession: vampirism, possession by djinns, by zombies, and by Legba . . . Such a disintegration, dissolution, or splitting of the personality, plays a key regulating role in ensuring the stability of the colonized world" (Fanon 85). This logic is not confined to the past. It echoes in the ways choreographers today still draw on fragmented, stylized, or Frankenindianist images of Indigeneity, assembling pieces of Native culture into forms that feel spiritually potent to them while leaving Native dancers to navigate the psychic rupture of seeing their traditions distorted, dismembered, and reanimated on non-Native bodies.

Educators must therefore teach the history of modern dance with transparency, foregrounding its colonial foundations rather than presenting its pioneers as isolated geniuses. They must also acknowledge that the "homages" still circulating in classrooms are not neutral aesthetic choices but practices that can inflict real psychological harm on Native modern dancers, who are often asked to train inside distorted versions of their own cultures. Choreographers must

move beyond superficial gestures of admiration and instead cultivate relationships grounded in consent, reciprocity, and accountability, thus recognizing that even well-intentioned tributes can reinscribe the very erasures they ignore. Institutions must invest in Indigenous artists not as cultural consultants or symbolic presences, but as sovereign creators whose work expands the field on their own terms. This includes rethinking curriculum, structures, archival practices, and the criteria by which artistic excellence is defined, while also confronting the emotional and mental toll that appropriative works continue to impose on Native modern dancers. Without structural change, the field will continue to reproduce the very hierarchies it claims to challenge as a space for POC dancers, perpetuating a landscape in which Indigenous culture is celebrated only when filtered through non-Native bodies.

Reasserting Indigenous presence, agency, and futurity in dance is not simply a corrective gesture; it is a reorientation of the field toward relationality, responsibility, and truth. Indigenous dance traditions are not relics of a vanished world but living, evolving practices that carry knowledge. Centering Indigenous sovereignty means recognizing that these dances belong to the peoples who created them, and that their continuation depends on honoring the Native community's protocols and the right they have for self-representation. It also means acknowledging the brilliance, innovation, and futurity of Indigenous choreographers who are reshaping the landscape of contemporary dance today in their own terms.

Dismantling the pseudo-Indian world requires sustained commitment, but it also opens the possibility for a dance field that is more honest, more ethical, and more expansive. Doing this work means confronting not only the extractive aesthetics that shaped early modern dance, but also the deeper colonial logics (such as Frankenindianism) that enabled choreographers to dismember Indigenous cultural materials and reassemble them into distorted, hybridized forms.

These stitched-together images of Indigeneity have long circulated as “authentic” within the field, obscuring the living cultures they were taken from and normalizing a choreography built on distortion, fragmentation, and erasure. The pseudo-Indian world was never simply an aesthetic project; it was a political one, rooted in a colonial worldview that treated Indigenous culture as something to be possessed, rearranged, and displayed, while Indigenous peoples themselves were denied authorship, agency, and visibility.

Fanon reminds us that dismantling such worlds requires clarity, strategy, and an unwavering commitment to transformation. As he writes,

From the point of view of political tactics and History, the liberation of the colonies poses a theoretical problem of crucial importance at the current time: When can it be said that the situation is ripe for a national liberation movement? What should be the first line of action? Because decolonization comes in many shapes, reason wavers and abstains from declaring what is a true decolonization and what is not. We shall see that for the politically committed, urgent decisions are needed on means and tactics, i.e., direction and organization (Fanon 86).

His insistence on deliberate, organized action speaks directly to the dance field today. Decolonization cannot be reduced to symbolic gestures or surface-level reforms; it requires a fundamental reorientation of power, pedagogy, and practice.

By naming extractive practices for what they are, transforming institutional structures, and centering Indigenous sovereignty, the field can move toward a future in which Indigenous presence is not appropriated, imagined, or pieced together from fragments, but recognized, respected, and celebrated as a vital force shaping the past, present, and future of dance.

If the pseudo-Indian world was built through fragmentation, distortion, and possession, then its dismantling must be built through truth, relationship, and return. The future of dance depends on the field's willingness to confront the stories it has told, the images it has circulated, and the harm it has normalized. Decolonization, as Fanon reminds us, demands intentionality. It is not a passive shift, but an active reimagining of what dance can be when Indigenous voices are heard rather than sidelined. In choosing the path of decolonization, the field opens itself to a future in which Indigenous knowledge is not borrowed or broken apart but honored as a living force that continues to move us toward something truer.

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