

2019

## Inspiration vs. Appropriation: Representation of Indigenous Cultures in Western Dance Companies

Samantha Schmeer  
*SUNY Geneseo*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

---

### Recommended Citation

Schmeer, Samantha (2019) "Inspiration vs. Appropriation: Representation of Indigenous Cultures in Western Dance Companies," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*. Vol. 2018 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol2018/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the GREAT Day at KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of GREAT Day by an authorized editor of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact [KnightScholar@geneseo.edu](mailto:KnightScholar@geneseo.edu).

# Inspiration vs. Appropriation: Representation of Indigenous Cultures in Western Dance Companies

Samantha Schmeer

---

---

*sponsored by* Jonette Lancos

---

---

## ABSTRACT

In modern, Westernized society, we are often fascinated by cultures that differ from our own. The well-meaning interest in other cultures, especially the cultures of indigenous tribes, can become problematic when people unknowingly treat these very real cultures and people as fictional entities. Our words and actions can perpetuate stereotypes harmful to these minority groups, contributing to an idea of “otherness,” the idea that these people are separate from us. Artists have a high degree of responsibility when using other cultures as inspiration for their work. A long, brutal history of genocide, racism, and theft of land and identity makes dealing with indigenous tribes a sensitive and complex matter. Concurrently, it is important their cultures be shared and appreciated. This paper will explore how dance choreographers have successfully navigated the terrain between inspiration and appropriation, focusing specifically on Jiří Kylián, director of the Nederlands Dans Theater, use of the Aboriginal cultures for his ballet *Stamping Ground*, as well as the Limón Dance Company’s piece based on Native American tribes. Their works will be compared to pieces performed by the American Indian Dance Theatre. This paper will also discuss cultural equity, an ideal championed by Alan Lomax, an American ethnomusicologist.

---

---

In modern Westernized society, it is easy to understand why people are often so fascinated by different cultures. This fascination is not inherently of concern; however, well-meaning interest in other cultures, especially those of indigenous tribes, can become problematic when people unknowingly treat others from different cultures as fictional entities. Cultural appropriation is the term used to describe the “adoption of elements of a minority culture by members of the dominant culture” (Cambridge English Dictionary). Cultural appropriation often refers to an unequal cultural exchange, reflecting the power imbalances caused by oppression of the mi-

nority culture by the dominant culture. Inspiration, on the other hand, describes the feeling one gets when a creative idea is sparked by someone or something. Using Native cultures as inspiration as a jumping-off point does not reflect the unequal power balance or appropriation. However, once artists directly replicate aspects of an indigenous culture, then concerns arise. Walking the line between appropriation and inspiration can be complicated, but artists must be careful not to cross it. Unlike a dance company composed entirely of those with Native ancestry, Western dance companies cannot simply copy every aspect of tribal dances without crossing the line into cultural appropriation. Prominent choreographers, such as Jiří Kylián and José Limón, have done a good job at creating this balance.

For many years, the artwork and dance of indigenous cultures were dismissed and ignored by Western societies. As Western scholars and artists began to move past the prejudices, their interest in these cultures intensified, especially in the realm of dance. The movement of depicting indigenous dances eventually, whether directly or indirectly, led to the more structured and codified forms of dance present in Western dance companies today, such as contemporary dance, modern dance, and ballet. For example, Isadora Duncan, the “Mother of Modern Dance,” developed her technique in part by incorporating the less rigid movements of tribal dances (Kraus et al, 1997).

Ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, well-known for preserving and publishing recordings of folk music, opened up the field of study of tribal dances and music with the intent of showing the world that there is something valuable to be learned from these groups. He also worked on The Choreometrics Project, a term he coined for the worldwide study of movements as they relate to and measure a culture. Through this field of study, which Lomax explained in his book *Folk Song, Style, and Culture* and his film *Dance and Human History*, he finds distinction in the dance sphere. The ideas from his study acted as guiding principles by which Western choreographers could bring Native cultural influences to their pieces. Lomax’s idea of “cultural equity” puts forth the notion that ethnic minority cultures should not be overlooked merely because Western society deemed them undeveloped or unsophisticated. Indeed, Lomax thought these cultures “should be equally valued as representative of multiple forms of human adaptation on Earth.” He founded the Association for Cultural Equity which, according to its website, “was founded to explore and preserve the world’s expressive traditions with humanistic commitment and scientific engagement” (Association for Cultural Equity). Lomax’s observations of the basic underlying principles of a group’s dancing are principles that a choreographer may utilize when forming a new piece. Rather than producing an exact copy of a dance, a choreographer can instead use the abstraction of “low to the ground” or “into the air” movements instead. Lomax saw that art, and therefore dance, often acts as an important preserver of culture (Lancos, 2017). The respect Lomax had for these cultures, partnered with his fascination, is what allowed Lomax’s work to be so groundbreaking and to influence the work of noted choreographers such as Jiří Kylián.

Artists must ask themselves questions like, “Who has the authority/ability to tell this story?” and “How can I prevent this story from becoming convoluted or misinterpreted?” when dealing with minority groups or sensitive topics. The type of questions that a choreographer in a Western dance company must ask are not altogether different. A long, brutal history of genocide, racism, and land theft made Western dealings with indigenous tribes a sensitive and complex matter. At the same time, it is important that these cultures be shared and appreciated. Performances by dance companies such as the American Indian Dance Theatre, which presents dances from the Native Americans in the United States and the First Nations in Canada, are one way of sharing and appreciating these cultures. In this company, dancers from a variety of tribal backgrounds recreate dances to traditional music while wearing traditional clothing. They perform the exact choreography that has been passed down through their ancestors. The Fancy Shawl Dance, for example, is performed by women in colorful shawls who twirl and hop athletically and gracefully around each other. Another example is the Hoop Dance, typically a solo performance in which a male dancer uses several hoops as props while he weaves the hoops around his body in order to create dynamic shapes (Los Angeles Arts Education, 2014). Does this mean that only members of this group can take inspiration from these dances? If a choreographer or director from an American ballet company is inspired by the Hoop Dance, are they forbidden from ever using it? How much can diverse cultures truly be shared and admired if only those small minorities who are members of the culture can take part? Answering these questions can be difficult, but it involves understanding the difference between inspiration and imitation.

Separating inspiration from imitation can be especially challenging for choreographers because creating a dance unique from its inspiration can be extremely difficult. Jiří Kylián’s work, *Stamping Ground*, was inspired by his trip to Australia, where he observed and filmed verbal and nonverbal communications of Aboriginal tribal dances. *Road to Stamping Ground*, a film by the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation, details the story behind his inspiration, and it illustrates the internal struggles he faced to maintain a respectful and responsible dance reflection of what he saw in Australia. The film encourages the viewer to ponder complex questions about art and humanity, while suggesting a guideline for creating cross-cultural dances. The movement in *Stamping Ground* reflects movement that Kylián observed during a tribal dance gathering on Groote Island in Australia. The unique movements of these tribes present a stark contrast to movements seen in many Western professional dance companies, as well as the dancing that typifies pop culture. Surely, this contributed to their inspiring Kylián. However, he was extremely cautious not to overstep his boundaries. He specifically drew a distinction between imitation and inspiration, and through this, he implied that to imitate would be to appropriate. He even stated that imitation would be somewhat of a robbery because it is one of the few things the Aboriginal people wholly possess, and each dance is “owned” by those who execute it (Kylián, 1980). He echoes the sentiments of Alan Lomax, that ancestral land was stolen from them, and they rely on their traditions, specifically their dancing, to keep their culture alive. He

did not want to become yet another example of an outsider entering the sacred space of an Aboriginal tribe and stealing something that did not belong to him. Achieving this understanding was a crucial first step toward respectful inspiration.

Kylián's extensive research prior to attempting to create and stage *Stamping Ground* was another important and necessary step in his choreographic journey. By acting as a respectful observer and learning about the beliefs of the indigenous peoples of Australia, Kylián ensured that he would not take inspiration from a culture he did not understand at all. He remained humble and aware of the fact that no amount of research would make him part of a culture he was observing. He stated that he may never completely and truly understand what he saw and experienced there. Other artists might learn from Kylián's research, that they might do the same.

Another crucial realization Kylián came to during his observations was that, although they do belong to a larger group, the Australian Aborigines, the tribes he observed were all distinct from one another. He noted differences in the ways each tribe moved and stamped, and in the body paint each group wore. It would be simple for Kylián and other choreographers to simply copy their stamping patterns, or to recreate their garments and body paint when costuming the dancers in his company. However, this might cross the line from inspiration to appropriation, as it would be a direct imitation of Native art. Because Kylián's dancers are not Australian aboriginals, to have them produce and perform an exact copy of the tribes' dancing would be taking advantage and feeding into the power imbalances that exist between oppressed minority cultures and the dominant culture. To avoid this cultural appropriation, he pulled abstractions from the movements he witnessed to maintain a sense of uniqueness without overstepping. He utilized the groundedness, breath, and basic motor rhythms of the different styles of dancing from different tribes in his own choreography. The Netherlands Dans Company dancers wore simplistic costumes, tan or black leotards, or dance short and tops. Kylián relied on movement, breath, and structural components such as spacing, levels, and pathways to illustrate his themes (Kylián, 1980). To distinguish between tribes, he incorporated solos into his piece in which dancers varied movement from each other. One dancer performed quick motor rhythms in deep plié, while another moved more slowly and incorporated jumps. This allowed the audience to perceive the individuality of different tribes. To some, these differences may seem unimportant, but they are necessary to put an end to a cycle that contributes to the systemic robbery of indigenous cultures.

The method of taking abstractions from solid movements can also be seen in the José Limón Dance Company's interpretation of Native American dancing. In spring of 2018, the company performed their piece *The Unsung* in SUNY Geneseo's Wadsworth Auditorium. The piece, originally choreographed in 1971, is a depiction of Native American chiefs; Limón faced the same difficulty as Kylián in that he had to distinguish between different tribes without producing exact replicas of their dances. The influence of tribal dance became apparent in the use of breath, stamping, and groundedness juxtaposed with jumps and leaps. Like *Stamping Ground*, *The Unsung*

dancers were not dressed in traditional clothing, but in simplistic dance pants. Further, Limón did not use tribal music, but instead the dancers performed in complete silence, which added emphasis to their breath and motor rhythms. His company also utilized lighting and solo sections to reinforce the idea of individuality between tribes. Limón struck a sound balance in emphasizing the different groups without pretending to represent all of them.

It is a sort of paradox to say that indigenous cultures should be shared, valued, and more widely accepted, but also that the non-Native majority has no right to take part in said cultures or to depict these cultures in art. How can a minority culture be shared when the majority culture is not allowed access to it? Companies like the American Indian Dance Company, comprised of dancers from various tribal backgrounds, are amazing to watch because they so greatly differ from what most dancers and the public are typically exposed to. They represent a history that is still relatively foreign to most Americans, but integral to our understanding of the country. A choreographer may see these dancers perform and feel a desire to recreate the dance for their own dance company. While it is great to be so inspired, one must be careful not to be offensive or to pretend to fully understand a culture other than their own. Respect for these cultures is not only important, but an absolute necessity when taking inspiration from them, especially knowing that these groups have such tragic histories. Artists must learn to take inspiration responsibly. There are many Western dance companies and choreographers that have navigated this road well, including the Nederlands Dans Theatre and the José Limón Dance Company. The vast majority of dancers and choreographers within Western dance companies do not have Native ancestors, so it is a responsibility to ensure respectful treatment of those minority cultures. Students, scholars, and artists can learn from these prominent examples within the dance sphere.

## REFERENCES

- Association for Cultural Equity. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.culturalequity.org/alan-lomax/about-alan>
- Cambridge English Dictionary. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/cultural-appropriation>
- Dixon, B., Kraus, R., & Hilsendager, S.C. (1997) *History of dance in art and education*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Lancos, J. (2017) "Alan Lomax Choreometrics". Dance History 221. SUNY Geneseo, Geneseo. 13 Sept 2017. Lecture.
- Lancos, J. (2017) "Ancient and Lineage-Based Dancing." Dance History 221. SUNY Geneseo, Geneseo. 18 Sept 2017. Lecture.
- Lomax-Wood, A. (2014). "Thinking about my father." *Cultural Equity*.
- Los Angeles Arts Education at the Music Center. *American Indian Dance Theatre - Eagle Dance and Hoop Dance*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IP4GBiE4xc>
- Matthews, N. (1997). "Taking Back the Outback." *Travel Holiday*. 180.5.
- Riding, A. (1999). "With a Celebration of Dutch Freedom, He Frees Himself." *New York Times*.
- Road to Stamping Ground*. (1980). Jiří Kylián. Aboriginal Cultural Foundation.