Death-Defying Indigenous Dance: "Palest-Indian" Solidary Love

ABSTRACT:
This article, composed six months after the Oct. 7th Hamas operation "Al-Aqsa Flood," in the shadow of Israel's retaliatory genocide, was catalyzed by a viral social media video with alternating clips of Palestinian and Native American people dancing in defiant resistance to ongoing white settler colonial ethnic cleansing and genocide, in loving embrace of their own Indigenous ways of being. After an introductory setting of the stage for this video, the first section rehearses the two historical chapters of dance scholar Jacqueline Shea Murphy's *The People Have Always Danced*, emphasizing the paradoxical late nineteenth-century campaigns (1) criminalizing Indigenous American dances, and (2) appropriating these dances and dancers for non-Indigenous audiences. The second section then pivots to Australian choreographer Nicholas Rowe's *Raising Dust: A Cultural History of Dance in Palestine*, emphasizing the appropriation of a traditional shepherd dance (Dabke) into the Zionist project of fabricating an orientalist tradition to justify their colonization. Finally, the concluding section spotlights Palestine's Birzeit University and the El-Funoun folkdance troupe as exemplars, captured in the Palestinian hip hop song's neologism "Palest-Indians," of loving Indigenous death-defying dance resistance.

Keywords: Palestine; Indigenous Americans; dance; Dabke; decolonization; liberation

Since an attack on October 7, 2023, which the Palestinian political party Hamas termed "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood," Israel has retaliated by radically escalating its ethnic cleansing and genocide of the Palestinian nation. But as with the antiracist protests provoked by the U.S. police killing of the unarmed Black citizen George Floyd—with which cause the Palestinian people stood in solidarity, for example by sharing tips for how to protect against tear gas from settler colonial police during protests—social media has proved to be an unprecedently powerful democratic tool in the cause of social justice.[1] In the case of Palestine since Oct. 7th, this has enabled everyday Palestinians to record their firsthand experiences and other to create videos raising awareness for Palestinian liberation.

[1] See, for example, the account by Derecka Purnell, *Becoming Abolitionists: Police, Protests, and the Pursuit of Freedom* (Westminster, MD: Astra House Publishing, 2022), 95, 292.

One such social media video that has gone viral in recent months consists of alternating clips of Palestinian and Indigenous American dancers.[2] Although each clip is only a few seconds long, making precise identification and critique a somewhat speculative endeavor, the Palestinian dance is identified in a related video as "Dabke," a traditional shepherd dance from Palestine, and the Indigenous American dance appears to be a modern "Fancy Dance," which features prominently in today's powwow circuit and derives from the Omaha Dance of the southern Great Plains nations, and thereby is associated with the religious Crow Dance and Ghost Dance ceremonies.[3] In the video, both Palestinian and Indigenous American dancers twirl more-or-less in place, with the Indigenous American man surrounded by shadows, and the Palestinian men in the light of a blazing bonfire in the background.

Perhaps seeking to explain and interpret this short video, another popular video on social media features a slideshow of images and accompanying text, which I will briefly summarize. The first image consists of two men's heads facing each other in profile, one Indigenous American and one Palestinian, both in traditional regalia, with "NO MORE NAKBA" printed between them.[4] The next image consists of two women in mid-twirl, one Indigenous American and one Palestinian, also in full regalia, which in the former case includes a long shawl (suggesting that her dance might be the "Women's Fancy-Shawl Dance" from the present-day powwow circuit).[5] The third image is the same as the second, except with men instead of women, and mid-stomp rather than mid-twirl, with their outer legs bent at the level of their inner legs' knees. The fourth image is the second image again, but with "FROM TURTLE ISLAND

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[2] See, for example, https://www.youtube.com/shorts/XcvO6-51uMM.
[3] For more, see Thomas M. Kavanagh, "Southern Plains Dance: Tradition and Dynamism," in *Native American Dance: Ceremonies and Social Traditions*, ed. Terence Winch (St. Cloud, MN: Starwood Publishing, 1993), 105-123, 111.
[4] See https://www.youtube.com/shorts/jbP3u8BTM_Q.
[5] Lynn F. Huenemann, "Northern Plains Dance," in *Native American Dance: Ceremonies and Social Traditions*, ed. Terence Winch (St. Cloud, MN: Starwood Publishing, 1993), 125-147, 138.

TO GAZA" between the women. And the fifth image is the third image again, but with "FROM TURTLE ISLAND TO GAZA" between the two dancing men. Finally, the soundtrack for the entirety of the video is the song "Leve Palestina" (Long Live Palestine), by the Nazareth-born Palestinian songwriter George Totari, for the Swedish-Palestinian band that he founded, called "Kofia" (a Swedish spelling of "keffiyeh"). Though the song was originally performed, and censored, over fifty years ago (in the 1970s), it was recently named "Song of the Year" by the Palestine Museum US, and has become today's defining anthem of Palestinian liberation.[6]

If these two social media videos comprise a popular staging of present-day Indigenous solidarity among Palestinians and Native Americans, this relationship between the two groups is not always so straightforward and affirming, as noted in a recent (2022) opinion piece by Dr. Ramzy Baroud, a U.S.-Palestinian journalist and editor of *Palestine Chronicle*.[7] For example, Baroud notes that the most powerful and influential leader in modern Palestinian history, Yasser Arafat, during a 2004 interview, made the racist remark that: "We are not Red Indians." In the context, Arafat seemed to imply that the Palestinian nation would survive Israel's attempted genocide, and that the Indigenous Americans nations had not survived their own genocide. Moreover, Baroud notes, at a recent conference in Istanbul attended by numerous Palestinians, this same racist phrase "was quoted repeatedly and, occasionally, solicited applause from the audience."

Encouragingly, however, one "well-regarded Palestinian professor" challenged this statement, and insisted that Native Americans "are the natural allies of the Palestinian people, like numerous indigenous communities, who have actively supported their struggle for freedom."

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[6] Louis Brehony, "Leve Palestina: The Rhyme of the Undamned," *Palestine Chronicle*, 1 Jan 2024: https://www.palestinechronicle.com/leve-palestina-the-rhyme-of-the-undamned/.

[7] Ramzy Baroud, "Palestinians are Native Americans, not 'Red Indians': it's time to liberate our language," *Middle East Monitor*, 14 Nov 2022: https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221114-palestinians-are-native-americans-not-red-indians-its-time-to-liberate-our-language/.

Also encouragingly, Baroud cites an academic presentation by noted Indigenous American (Mohawk) scholar Audre Simpson, delivered at Columbia University's Center for Palestine Studies, entitled "'We are Not Red Indians' (We Might all Be Red Indians): Anticolonial Sovereignty Across the Borders of Time, Place and Sentiment."[8] In a summary of her talk on the Center's website, Simpson writes that "This paper uses this point of comparison of a departure point to reflect upon the deep specificity and global illegibility of Indigenous struggle and life in the face of death and dispossession in North America."

As for how this progressive transition has occurred, from Arafat in 2004 to the viral social media video in 2024, a partial answer is provided by Asian Studies scholar Sunaina Maira's 2008 essay, "We Ain't Missing: Palestinian Hip Hop – A Transnational Youth Movement," which explores how Gen Z Palestinian artists have increasingly embraced the structural analogies between Palestinians and Indigenous Americans.[9] This embrace is illustrated, for example, in the following lyrics from the song "No Justice" by the group Arab Summit, which open the essay, as follows: "whether you an immigrant or children of slaves you can see it in the difference / of the living in conditions like missions tortured Indians / force em to christians we call 'em Palest-indians / we ain't missing" (161). Similarly, Maira notes that the lyrics of "Iron Sheik," another Palestinian hip hop artist, "also make links to the genocide against Native Americans ('As a Palestinian / feel more like an Indian / driven into reservations / living under occupation / as a shattered nation / a Western creation')" (168). Overall, Maira concludes, there is "a persistent theme in Palestinian and diasporic hip hop that articulates a critique of settler colonialism in the United States and in Israel" (168).

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[8] For more, see the following description on Columbia's Center for Palestine Studies' official website: https://palestine.mei.columbia.edu/news-1/2016/8/26/we-are-not-red-indians-we-might-all-be-red-indians-anticolonial-sovereignty-across-the-borders-of-time-place-and-sentiment.

[9] Sunaina Maira, "'We Ain't Missing': Palestinian Hip Hop—A Transnational Youth Movement," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 8(2): 2008, 161-192.

With the stage thus set, the present investigation is structured as follows. The first section explores the history of Native American dance, including the criminalization of Indigenous dances in Indigenous spaces and appropriation and commercialization of Indigenous dances in settler colonizer spaces. The second section explore the history of Palestinian dance, detailing the analogous criminalization of Indigenous dances in Indigenous spaces and the appropriation and commercialization of Indigenous dances in white settler colonizer spaces. And the concluding section offers a template for present-day resistance in Palestine's Birzeit University and the professional folkdance company it helped support, *El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe*, the most popular and successful in Palestinian history.[10]

I. Indigenous American Dance vs. White Settler Colonialism

Jacqueline Shea Murphy summarizes her first chapter (of two) on the history of Indigenous American dance as follows: "this chapter explores this resilience in the face of late nineteenth-century Indian assimilation policies that targeted Indian bodies, and dancing Indian bodies in particular" in the U.S. and Canada in the 1880s and 1890s (29). "Because it posed this threat to assimilation," she argues, "dance became central to the definition of 'Indians' as irreconcilably different from non-Indians" (29). And the latter was "a crucial move," Shea Murphy explains, because "once difference was established it could be eradicated, further justifying European colonists' attempts to take over tribal lands" (29). For this reason, she concludes, "Native peoples have since engaged not only with dance, but also with rhetoric surrounding American Indian dance, as a means of asserting Native self-determination" (29).

[10] For more on the troupe, see their official website: https://el-funoun.org/content/who-we-are.

Shea Murphy begins the detailed story with colonizers' "outlawing of resource sharing among groups rather than individuals or nuclear families" for Native families, which included what she terms "corporeal policing." (30). The most famous example thereof is "the U.S. 1887 Dawes Allotment Act's imposition of individual private property ownership on Native peoples" (31). This move was so powerful, Shea Murphy writes, that "by the time the allotment was repealed in 1934, some two-thirds of Indian lands in the United States—eight-six million acres of what was often the richest land—had been taken from Indians and sold to white settlers" (31). Thus, in addition to the psychosocial goal of manipulating Indigenous Americans, coercing them to assimilate to white settler colonial norms of nuclear families and capitalist consumerism, there was also a deeper goal of dissolving the bonds of community, so that the colonial state could negotiate with Indigenous individuals (more vulnerable than groups) in pursuit of land theft.

With the general historical stage thus set, Shea Murphy then pivots to dance. "Aboriginal dance practices," she begins, "threatened governmental assimilation in multiple ways" (31). First, Indigenous dance practices "threatened assimilation policies based on classroom education and literacy, as they affirmed the importance of history told not in writing or even in words, but rather bodily" (31). Second, dances "were seen as wasteful of practitioners' physical energy and time, and thus as excessive expenditures of bodily labor," which could otherwise be exploited from workers under normal capitalist conditions (31). More specifically, "U.S. officials outlawed 'war' and 'scalp' dances and later restricted numerous other dance practices they saw as uncivilized, barbaric, immoral, or wasteful" (31). These attacks, then, "construed Indian dancing as a cornerstone of what made Indians Indian"—and so effectively so that, even today, "in children's books, films, and popular imaginings, dancing continues to define what Indians do and are" (31-32). In short, "perhaps the most central popular-cultural image of an Indian remains that

of a dancer, or at least one who embodies ideas of Indian dance (most often hopping around in a war bonnet)" (32).

Zooming in to the details of the criminalization of Indigenous American dance, Shea Murphy notes that U.S. opposition to Native dance goes back no less than 400 years, and includes some of the famous founding figures of the original colonies. For example, she cites "Puritan minister Increase Mather's 1684 tract, *An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing Drawn out of the Quiver of Scripture*," which text "decried the 'Heathenish customs' of dance, and urged Christians in the New World to desist and condemn the practice, by pointing to Aboriginal dancing" (33). More specifically, Mather claims that amongst "the Indians in the Americas, oftentimes at their Dances the Devil appears in bodily shape" (35). And the crucial importance of this account is that, by the 1880s, "Mather's tract," Shea Murphy concludes, had "provided a lens through which agents could view Indian dancing, from a safe distance of over two hundred years," rather than experience it firsthand (33).

This historical influence, Shae Murphy continues, meant that Indigenous American dance would increasingly only be "known in the arrogant way the colonizer has of knowing through representation, and in so doing to consolidate mass-mediated European *representation* of Indians as authoritative and constitutive" (33). In short, the laws again Indigenous American dance never managed to touch the Native dances themselves—instead targeting the exoticized, caricatured imaginings of racist white settler colonizers. In this way, such anti-dance laws constituted another form of "corporeal control," which worked to "replace the authority of dancing practices that require the physical participation/witnessing and active investment of not only Aboriginal bodies but also of the agents and other authorities, with authoritative written representations of it" (34). No more Indigenous dance *presentations*, only white *representations*.

Against this historical background, Shea Murphy relates, on December 2, 1882, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Henry Teller wrote a letter to Hiriam Price, “a devout Christian and a lay leader in the Methodist Church, in the position of Indian commissioner” (37). Teller’s letter referenced what he regarded “as a great hindrance to the civilization of the Indian, viz, the continuance of the old heathenish dances, such as the sun-dance, scalp-dance &c” (37). For this reason, Teller instructs Price, “if the Indians now supported are not willing to discontinue them, the agents should be instructed to compel such discontinuance,” especially insofar as such dances “are intended and calculated to stimulate the warlike passions of the young warriors of the tribe” (37). Note here the explicitly political fear—more precisely, a fear of armed rebellion.

Price carried out Teller’s command, Shea Murphy continues, by creating a “Courts of Indian Offences” to try any Native person accused of participating in such dances. These courts were “to be staffed by ‘civilized’ Indians who would rule on Indian cultural practices that the U.S. federal government deemed offensive” (37-38). And of these offences, she emphasizes, the “very first Indian offense named in 1883, and again in the 1892 reissued Rules for Indian Courts” is “dancing” (38). More precisely, a Native person convicted of dancing, as articulated in these rules, “shall be punished for the first offence by the withholding of his rations for not exceeding ten days or by imprisonment for not exceeding ten days” (38). And for subsequent offenses, the same punishments are to be repeated, but “for not less than ten nor more than thirty days” (38). In short, starvation and imprisonment for nothing more than dancing.

Far from being a mere historical anomaly, moreover, Shea Murphy notes that “a directive listing dance as a federal ‘Indian Offense,’ punishable by fines and imprisonment, remained on the books for over fifty years, until its repeal by Commissioner John Collier in 1934” (39). One significant change during this half century, however, was that Native dance stopped being seen

as inherently religious, and instead, “the rhetoric bemoaning the waste that accompanied dancing recurred, invoking capitalist concerns about productivity” (42). This change happened, in part, according to Shea Murphy, because of a shift in white settler colonists *away from* seeing Indigenous Americans as radically Other, and *toward* seeing them as able to be assimilated. That is, if Indians are essentially religious dancers, then they are “Other”; but if Indians are merely diverting resources toward secular dance that would otherwise be reserved for capitalist labor, then they are potentially the “Same.”

Courageously, though, Shea Murphy notes, “Native peoples refused, in multiple ways, to accommodate the rhetoric of either absolute difference or absolute absorption and instead continued to engage with the communal use and sharing, healing, religiosity, and history telling and making of dancing, much to the dismay of agents, reformers, and missionaries” (42-43). What made this resistance courageous, she elaborates, were the “dance restrictions and their enforcement psychically and physically enacted on Native peoples caught dancing, whose perceptions and consciousness were berated and attacked and who were sometimes imprisoned, kept hungry, forced to wear Western clothing and cut their hair, and otherwise forcibly disciplined” (43).

On the one hand, Shae Murphy acknowledges, this criminalization caused “unfathomable losses of cultural, spiritual, and religious knowledge developed over multiple generations” (43). In the words of Andrew Brother Elk, “chair of the Native American cultural center in San Francisco and director of Earth Dance Theater,” this amounted to a “spiritual genocide of Native Americans,” and one which, he adds, “is still much too often dismissed or ignored in academia, from elementary school curriculum on” (43). But on the other hand, Shea Murphy adds, “these disciplinary measures were not a fraction as successful as a cursory reading of the agents’

representations of them would at first suggest" (43). More specifically, although such reports "argue—repeatedly—that the practices are just about to die out, Native peoples' subtle and not so subtle refusals of agents' categorizations and restrictions bubble up throughout" (43). Shea Murphy then explores the commonest forms that such refusal took.

First, some "Native dancers, as well as some government officials, refused to obey or enforce the regulations" (44). In a representative report from 1883, which Shea Murphy describes as "almost comical in its exasperation," the Pine Ridge agent in Dakota "complains that the Northern Cheyennes [sic] 'have remained in their normal condition of general worthlessness'" (44). A second "tactic successfully deployed to curtail the effects of the anti-dance laws during this period," she writes, "was the taking underground of dance," wherein "practitioners moved the events to locations away from the agents' surveillance" (45). Third, some Indigenous Americans "adhered to the letter of the laws, yet did so in ways that redirected their intended effects," which efforts "read, at times, like a comedy of errors" (47). "For example, dancers used the distinctions made between different dances to legally continue dancing even during period in which certain aspects of ceremonial dance gatherings where proscribed" (47). Fourth, other Native Americans "began using legal system rhetoric even more directly to protest and circumvent anti-dance laws" (49). In a final form of refusal, "Native dancers effectively circumvented the anti-dance restrictions by somehow convincing agents they had agreed to cooperate with or succumb to the new laws—and nonetheless continuing the dance practices unabated" (49). In such cases, "agents believed, or represented themselves as believing, that dancing was stopping—or at least, almost about to stop," which Shea Murphy christens the "strain of almost disappeared Indian dancing" (49). Quoting Paula Gunn Allen, , which "Paula

Gunn Allen calls white culture's 'homicidal wish'—that they (and then presumably Native culture) were just about to die out" (49, 50).

I now turn to Shea Murphy's second chapter (of two) on the history of Indigenous American dance, which concerns the historically simultaneous coopting of Native American dance for white settler colonizer audiences. What made this appropriation possible, in her view, is the nineteenth-century "French music and drama teacher Francois Delsarte," whose "theories on the link between Christina spirituality and movement as manifested in dance were" massively influential also in the U.S. (53). Delsarte's theories also, of crucial importance to Shea Murphy's narrative, stood in "direct opposition to earlier claims by Christian ministers, such as Increase Mather, that dance was a non-Christian manifestation of the devil" (53, 54).

Summarizing this second chapter, Shea Murphy writes that "During the 1880s, the government deployed, as a tactic in its attempts to 'other' and subsequently erase Indians, the increasing codification and policing of what an Indian could be" (53). And this happened "on two fronts," as follows: (1) "the rise of fevered pronouncements, by Indian agents and other non-Indian authorities, denouncing the 'authenticity' of Native religious dances and decrying its practitioners as 'fakes'"; and (2) "the staging of 'real' Indians in theatrical arenas such as *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*" show, created by William Frederick Cody (54). Nevertheless, Shea Murphy observes, "despite various practical and ideological attempts at deploying the theater of the 'Wild West' as a disciplinary institution, Native performers took possession of and danced (and have since continued to dance) actively and effectively in the space the arena provided" (54). A space which, I would add, more recently includes social media, wherein appears the Palestinian and Indigenous American dance video that catalyzed the present investigation.

In response to criticisms of this inclusion of Native American dancers as exploitative, Shea Murphy insists that "Buffalo Bill's Indian performers seem to have found, at the very least, amusement in the Delsartian pantomime performances that" their white artistic director "worked on training them to do" (64). Audience members observed "'the Crows' acting it up as 'simply "'Hams'" and 'the Sioux' doing 'fairly well as 'light comedians'," which Shea Murphy glosses as "actors overdoing their 'real Indian' act and along the way refusing whatever level of serious drama of Indianness an exhausted [white director] was trying to get them to perform" (64). It is "no wonder, then," she concludes, "that so many Native peoples participated willingly in *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*" show, since "they saw themselves as agents in their own performances and self-depictions" (65). Moreover, some Native people "used the show as an entrance into a career in show business" (67). One such dancer, Black Elk, later said that he participated in the show's celebrated 1887 tour to England because he "wanted to see the great water, the great world, and the ways of the white men" (69). After performing for Queen Victoria, he recalled proudly, "All the people bowed to her, but show bowed to us Indians" (67).

Most importantly for Shea Murphy, "the performers saw in their work with Buffalo Bill's and other shows an extension of, and space in which to continue, their way of life, rather than a stark departure from and containment of it," as evidenced by the numerous Native boys who dreamed of joining the *Wild West* show (69). In this way, these boys and "the performers, somewhat paradoxically, saw more of a connection between the stage and their own worldviews and ways of life than audience members—supposedly titillated by the performers' status as 'real Indians' on stage—did" (70). In fact, "Christian reformers and government officials—and not Native peoples—led the opposition to Indian performance in Wild West shows" (70). Shea Murphy then elaborates, as follows:

> The very acts these reformers opposed, and which the stage required (men wearing their hair long, painting their faces, riding, dancing) served as spaces in which the performers (and the school boys wanting to "dance Omaha") found affirmation and agency, spaces in which to continue, and choose to experience honor for, their way of life (71).

To reassure these white settler colonizer critics, Cody "promised to feed, clothe, and care for the men" who danced with him, "who were all to be married, and their wives" (71). He also promised to "hire 'Indians all of whom shall be of the same [Christian] religious faith,' and to pay a representative of that religious denomination one hundred dollars a month to accompany the group on tour and look after their 'moral welfare' (Moses, *Wild West Shows*, 33)" (71).

Finally from Buffalo Bill's show, it is also implicated in the famous religious-political movement known as the "Ghost Dance Religion." At the outset of Shea Murphy's discussion of the latter, a key religious and political movement in Native American history, she makes the unusual move of suggesting that the whole thing may have been merely a "'craze' manufactured by reporters" (73). And although she names "Some Native scholars" and "Others" in support of this surprising contention, this move is significantly misleading, because in her endnotes the only things cited are one unpublished paper (for the "Some" reference) and one social media post (for the "Others"). Turning back to the main body of her text, and to a more reputable source, Shea Murphy notes that a Buffalo Bill dancer named Black Elk "reports that Wovoka," the alleged founding prophet of the Ghost Dance, had told them "'to put this paint on and have a ghost dance, and in doing this they would save themselves, that there is another world coming—a world just for the Indians, that in time the world would come and crush out all the whites'" (73). Following this instruction, several such dances were organized near Pine Ridge, which "led to the identification of sixty perceived leaders of the Ghost Dance" by a terrified U.S. government

(73). These leaders included Black Elk, as well as another man named Standing Bull, who was a former dancer in Cody's show (73). Because of that prior employment relationship, U.S. officials asked Cody "to go to Standing Rock [Reservation] and induce his former employee to come in" (73-74). Shea Murphy then summarizes the ensuing massacre, as follows:

> Two and a half weeks later, on December 15, the Indian police did attempt to arrest Sitting Bull at Standing Rock. When they did, a shooting match erupted and Sitting Bull, seven of his supporters, and six police were killed in what some Hunkpapas believed then, and since, to be Sitting Bull's assassination. What followed in the next two weeks is what has become known as the Wounded Knee Massacre: refugees among Sitting Bull's and other bands joined Big Foot's band and fled to the Badlands… The next morning, December 29, during preparations to disarm the people, one man refused to give up his gun, and in the ensuing struggle over it shooting started. In the fighting that followed, Lakotas killed forty-three soldiers, and the 470 soldiers killed three hundred Lakota people, most of them women, children, and elders. Some had been shot in the back as they ran, their bodies found scattered and frozen to death for up to two miles from the site, though a few hundred were found still alive three days later, after a blizzard had cleared. Journalists arrived at the scene and their descriptions of the frozen contorted bodies of dead Indian women—some holding babies that had been wrapped in shawls and were barely still alive—led to a national outcry, as well as to increased fears of Indian attacks (74).

Bizarrely, "Fears of Ghost dancing Indians also quite literally garnered Buffalo Bill additional performers for his for his Wild West shows," namely "men imprisoned at Fort Sheridan for Ghost dancing" (74). One U.S. official, "who had outlawed the performance of Ghost dancing

and ordered his agents to arrest anyone defying the ban—enthusiastically supported the idea that Cody hire them, although he despised Indian shows and made sure it was clear the army, and not the Indian Bureau, had made this recommendation" (74).

In Shea Murphy's judgment, "the government's support of the shows—often begrudgingly granted yet enthusiastically endorsed as a way of containing the off-stage dancing of 'restless spirits'—demonstrates [U.S.] federal belief in the power of the stage, and the stage life, to quell real warlike passions" (75). As "always," she concludes, "the fear of warfare threatens U.S. acquisition of Indian lands and resources" (75). In sum, "Theatricality was thus a disciplining institution, imposed on Native peoples in the late nineteenth century with the collusion of the U.S. government as a way of containing and controlling Native people's agency and stealing more Native land" (75).

Ultimately, however, the colonizer government's effort failed, because "despite the Wild West show's two-year attempted containment of potentially troublemaking 'Ghost dancers,' rejuvenation practices" like the Ghost Dance "continued in many places and many ways, as they do today" (76). In fact, "some have suggested that the Ghost dance has been and will continue to be effective in its quest to bring Indigenous peoples, lands, and worldviews back" (76). More precisely, transcending "the European logic of cause and effect," these dances, Shea Murphy suggests, "may have effects in spiritual realms unreadable by the disciplining institutions of the day or of today," or even in "other realms entirely," one of which "might include the invention of the Indian itself" (76). As she elaborates, this "imagined being," namely "the Indian," "held and continues to hold incredible agency in the U.S. cultural, political, and legal imagination"—as it also does "for contemporary Native people who access, as they perform, its powers" (77).

This Native power might take place, Shea Murphy suggests, when "young men find a space in today's Fancy Dance powwow competitions," for example, as further dramatized in the Palestinian and Native American dance social media video that catalyzed this investigation (77). Admittedly, "powwow dancing such as contemporary 'Traditional' and 'Fancy' dance practices," Shea Murphy acknowledges, involve their "own complex and controversial debates" specifically regarding their status as commodified objects of non-Indigenous consumption (78). Nevertheless, she counters, perhaps "viewers, including contemporary viewers who understand themselves to be sympathetic or enlightened, tend to focus more on the act of viewing and containment and commodification enacted through their own imperialist gazing than on the 'yes' engaged by practitioners' act of dancing" (78). In other words, perhaps white settler colonizers continue to center themselves, and dispossess Indigenous dancers, and then complain endlessly in their own echo chambers about the tragedy invented by their own limited imaginations. Whereas other Indigenous people today, such as the West Asian Indigenous people of Palestine, perhaps imagine bigger, and dream more truly.

II. Indigenous West Asian Dance vs. White Settler Colonialism

At the beginning of *Raising Dust: A Cultural History of Dance in Palestine,* Australian choreographer Nicholas Rowe notes that the "oldest first-hand written documentation of dance practices in the region that I have come across is about 3,800 years old," appearing "in a long letter from King Zimri-Lim of Mari (a kingdom that stretched from Palestine to Persia) to his wife Queen Siptu" (16). This letter references a group of female weavers, including "priestesses," from whom the most "handsome" are to be chosen to perform "the Subarean dances" (16). From this, Rowe infers the following three facts: (1) "four millennia ago, set

choreographic patterns were directly taught to females by what might be considered to be a dance guru"; (2) "these dances were intended to be performed and viewed (by a deity or human audience)"; and (3) "there might have been a variety of specific choreographies or dance styles in existence" (17). In short, dance in Palestine is ancient, religious, and sophisticated. And broadening from written to visual representations of dance in Palestine, a "distinct image of stylized movement can be seen on a tile from the Canaanite town of Laish in Palestine, from sometime between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries BC" (19).

For the remainder of his book, Rowe weaves between general history and dance history, wherein similarities to Indigenous American history and dance abound. Beginning with the general historical strand, I will now consider three such similarities. First, in "the travel writings of European and American Bible tourists in the early nineteenth century," Rowe relates, local "indigenous activity was generally viewed as a decaying remnant of a more glorious ancient past," which in turn "led to the notion of a stagnant indigenous culture in Palestine" (25). And the latter, finally, prompted what Rowe terms "salvage anthropology" in the twentieth century, which attempted to record what was imagined as a dying ancient culture (25). "Much of the literature generated by these tourists/pilgrims" Rowe relates, "contributed to what Edward Said"—himself Palestinian-American—"described as Orientalism: an occidental view in which the 'West' is perceived as austere, rational, dynamic, and progressive, and the 'East' as sensual, irrational, stagnant and passive" (34).

Secondly, regarding the borders of Palestine, which was then governed by the Ottoman Empire, Rowe observes that these political boundaries were set very early, then over the course of time, repeatedly violated. For example, "the Ottoman Empire established a temporary administrative entity (approximately along the borders of what would become British Mandate

Palestine) three times during the nineteenth century – in 1830, 1840, and 1872" (31). Additionally, "The creation of the independent Sanjak of Jerusalem within the Ottoman Empire in 1872 increased the city's prestige as a legal centre in the region, and contributed to the subsequent growth of a Palestinian identity centered on Jerusalem" (35).

Finally, the Ottomans also perpetrated extensive landgrabs in Palestine, including through the "1858 Ottoman Land Code" (35). Whereas in "certain areas, rural land ownership had been based on a collective system, with land parcels being rotated between kin groups on an annual basis," Rowe relates, in "the lowlands, the peasants generally participated in such *musba*, or communal tenure" (35). By contrast, the 1858 Code "required that all land be registered with the state," resulting in "a massive land grab by the wealthy" which "dispossessed local farmers of family-held land, placing them under tenancy agreements and the economic rule of absentee landlords living as far away as Beirut, Damascus and Constantinople" (35). In short, "More and more peasants lost the title to their land as they failed to pay loans subject to huge interest rates" (35).

Having set the general historical stage, Rowe then turns to the dance of this period, to show how it was both impacted by and impacted the general history, which in the nineteenth century involved "the early entertainment trade in dance" as part of "indigenous folk culture" (35). Much here also resonates with (preceding and contemporaneous) European observations of Indigenous Americans. For one thing, the Europeans' aesthetic tastes are egregiously racist. For example, a European observer of a dance in Bethlehem in 1875, Charles William Dudley, explicitly compared the Palestinians to Indigenous Americans. "Two vagabonds step into the focus of the half-circle, and hop about in the most stiff-legged manner, swinging enormous swords over their heads, and giving from time to time a war whoop, — *it seems precisely the*

dance of the North American Indians" (40, emphasis added). Dudley reiterates this analogy in another observation in Bethlehem in 1875. "A pretty face was here and there to be seen, but most of them were flaringly ugly, and — to liken them to what they most resembled – physically and mentally the type of the North American squaws" (43). Note, in addition to the racialized epithet, the imputation of an essential identity between Palestinians and Native Americans that is not merely physical, but also mental. In short, a European positing of an essential identity between the West Asian and American Indigenous peoples.

In this way, literal dancing set the figurative stage for the European colonization of Palestine. As Rowe notes, the "Zionist goal of creating Israel as a national homeland for Jews was but one colonial dash toward Palestine from Europe at the time, and [the Zionists were] relatively late to join the competition" (45-46). In fact, as he emphasizes, "at the end of the nineteenth century, Zionism as a political/colonial ideology still remained highly unpopular among Jews in North America, with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations roundly condemning the notion of a Jewish state in 1898" (46). For this reason, at late as "1880, just before the first major wave of Zionist immigration, there were 24,000 Jews in Palestine, less than 5 per cent of the population" (47). However, at the same time, "Baron Edmond de Rothschild formed the Palestine Jewish Colonization Association and began buying land in Palestine from absentee landlords and forcibly uprooting and removing the local tenant farmers to make way for Zionist colonies" (47). In other words, Indigenous Palestinians were forced to exchange absentee Ottoman overlords for settler Europeans ones.

What resulted was a devastating transformation of all Palestine, which took place in less than one generation. "As a result of land purchases by the Jewish National Fund," Rowe relates, "indigenous tenant farmers were evicted to make room for European Zionist immigrants," such

that “by 1930 approximately 30 per cent of all indigenous villagers were landless, and 75-80 per cent held insufficient land to meet their subsistence means” (60, 61). Compounding this ethnic cleansing, moreover, were racist labor practices creating mass unemployment, as the “‘Hebrew labour’ policy system promoted by the Zionist Histradut labour union had, by the mid-1930s, rendered most of the indigenous population unemployable” (69).

By this point, however, the Indigenous people of Palestine had enough, and mounted “the Great Revolt of 1936-9, the largest indigenous rebellion against European colonialism in the Middle East between the World Wars” (69). In what was “essentially a peasant rebellion,” the target broadened from European settlers to include wealthy Indigenous Palestinians as well, who were perceived to be corrupt and complicit with the Europeans (69). Despite a valiant effort, however, the rebels were crushed. In just three years, Rowe summarizes, “5,032 of the indigenous population had been killed,” compared to only “several hundred British and Zionist casualties” (70). In the aftermath of this resounding defeat, in 1947 the UN General Assembly “voted in favour of donating 55 per cent of what had been British Mandate Palestine to a European colonial movement that constituted only 37 per cent of the population and owned less than 7 per cent of the land” (76). Exacerbating this ethnic cleansing, and legalizing its intended permanence, the following year, “the new Israeli government passed a resolution barring the return of the exiled indigenous population into what had become Israel,” along with “the Law of Abandoned Territories and the Absentee Property Law, which allowed for the official expropriation of refugee property by the Israeli state, which then sold it on to the Jewish National Fund” (77). This, in turn, left the Israeli government and the JNF, jointly, “suddenly owning 95 per cent of the land in the state of Israel” (77). Finally on this point, Rowe writes, “500 villages of the exiled indigenous population were subsequently razed” (77).

As in every other area of life in Palestine, the establishment of the new state of Israel also fundamentally changed the place of dance, as "the conflict between an indigenous population and a colonization population in Palestine" shifted from "disputes over the region's environmental resources and historical truths" to include "cultural ownership as well" (79). More specifically, there were multiple dance revival movement during this period in the history of Palestine, which involved "taking a dance from its 'first existence' as a specific communal activity and affording it a 'second existence,' as a representation of cultural identity" (79). More precisely, "Since the nineteenth century, such folkdance revival movements have been a common means of establishing new national identities," which occurred "not once but three times in the twentieth century, resulting in very different interpretations of the same dances" (80).

For reasons of space, I will focus on the first, Zionist nationalist wave, before concluding with a few observations about the Palestinian one. "In the early twentieth century," Rowe writes, "Zionist interest in dances of the indigenous population of Palestine appears to reflect an 'imperial nostalgia,' an indulgent lament by a colonizing people for vanishing cultural legacies whose demise they themselves have actually brough about" (81). The "research and the subsequent performances of these dances in Israeli nationalist events by Zionists," Rowe suggests, "can be seen as attempts to make their Occidental presence in an Oriental landscape culturally legitimate" (81). One motivation for this search was the rise of new ideals of Jewish identify. For example, "Max Nordau's 'new muscular Jew' in 1903 sought to reimagine the cultural identity of European 'ghetto Jews'," which Rowe notes "stimulated Zionist pioneers to create a more assertive, masculine and powerful collective identity" (82).

In this context, Rowe writes, as "Israeli dance historian Zvi Friedhaber explains, this resulted in '…the longing for the creation of an original Israeli dance style, to express the new way of life then coming into being in the land of Israel'" (82). For example, Israeli choreographer Mirali Chen Sharon recalled that "we were against all European traditions so we needed new things, new steps, new music" (82). Finally on this point, a third Israeli choreographer, Rivka Sturman, whom Rowe describes as "one of the leading Zionist choreographers of the British Mandate era" recalls her feelings as follows: "I was, frankly, outraged that Israeli youth should be bringing German songs and dances to others" (83).

Although during this period much Zionist literature depicted the Indigenous population as backwards nomads, according to Rowe, while Zionist academic writing acknowledged urban Indigenous populations only to deem them inherently inferior, "Other Zionist representations had a more nostalgic and paternalistic flavour, similar to those produced by white colonizers in South Africa" (83). And this "nostalgia was particularly strong in representations of the local dance culture, especially among those who perceived local traditional dances as a legacy from an ancient Jewish civilization" (83). For example, Rowe cites Israeli ethnographer Vera Goldman's thoughts on the original shepherd dance version of the Dabke, as follows:

> Now, the "Deppka" is on – the Arabs sheperd-dance: a few light running steps, then little leaps on both legs with a turning of the hips – and running and leaping, running and leaping … And the "Deppka," the Arabs' sheperd-dance, is danced with spontaneous gaiety by the youth of our settlements. Perhaps, in some of these customs, occidental Jews felt as if they might have known them once in the forgotten past and recognized them now (84).

As Rowe glosses this passage, Golman "implies that through a process of either genetic recall or spiritual association, Jews returning to their ancient homeland felt an innate (rather than socially constructed) aesthetic appreciation and connection with local peasant dance products" (85).

Building on this white settler colonialist fiction, during "the 1930s and 1940s, Zionist dancers researched the local peasant dabkeh," whose "steps where then re-choreographed into stage presentations of folk dance by Zionist youth" (85). For example, in "the late 1930s, Yardena Cohen won the Tel-Aviv municipality's competition for showing the most authentic dance sources of Israel, based on her studies of dabkeh in the indigenous rural communities of Palestine" (86). Rowe then details how this process then degenerated, in a series of four steps, namely (1) erasing urban Indigenous people, (2) weaponizing Dabke against the Indigenous people generally, (3) diminishing Indigenous artists' contributions to the dances, and (4) erasing Indigenous dance altogether, by metabolizing it into colonizing dance.

First, in "the subsequent discourse of Zionist/Israeli folk choreographers learning these local dances, no comment is made on the cultural practices of an educated and urban indigenous population at the time; they appeared not to exist" (87) Instead, the Israelis perceived "villagers behaving in simplistic ways and offering nostalgic images of bygone eras," and their "dance steps, formations, and movements were studies and replicated for their aesthetic value and accorded new symbolic meanings with Zionist nationalism" (87).

Second, "Appropriated dabkeh steps were subsequently even used in an antagonistic context against the indigenous population," as when Rivkah Sturman's dance artwork "*Debkeh Gilboa* glorified the Gilboa Settlement's conquest of a new hill after expelling the local indigenous population," and another of her dances, entitled "*Yes, They Will Lose*, performed by hundreds of Israeli soldiers at the first Independence Day in 1949, mimicked acts of attack and

final triumph over the local indigenous population (87). As elaborated by Israeli choreographer, Gurit Kadman, these rebaptized "Israeli" dances "spread to the towns and cities as well and conquered the youth, helped to integrate new migrants into the country, shaped the character of big celebrations like Independence Day, etc." (88). Further elaborating this point, Israeli choreographer Shalom Hermon observed that "these dances became '…one of the best known ambassadors of the spirit of the new State of Israel and its people,' promoting Israeli cultural identity to the international community" (88). As with the white settler colonists' ethnic cleansing of the Indigenous Americans, "the salvaged culture was glorified while the population from whom the culture was salvaged were subsequently denigrated" (88).

Third, in "subsequent years, the Zionist salvage and appropriation of the peasant dances of Palestine involved a historical revision that would erase, or at least diminish, any recognition of the cultural input of the indigenous population" (88). Elaborating on the diminishing, Rowe notes that, even when the Palestinian sources are acknowledged, "Israeli choreographers in subsequent generations place a greater emphasis on the creative adaptations of the Israeli folk choreographers than on the actual cultural sources" (89). For example, Rowe quotes Rivka Sturman again, as follows: "The most important fact is not that we Israelis used the Arab debka or Yemenite steps or were influence by landscape"; rather, the "artist's personality is the most important, more so than the steps he uses, which are really the means of expression just as crayons for drawing are a painter's tools" (89). Note here the implicit dehumanization and infantilizing of the entire Palestinian population here, comparing their bodies' movements to mere children's crayons.

Fourth, Rowe writes that a book promoting Zionism in the U.S., entitled "*Palestine dances!* provides step-by-step instructions in dabkeh as a traditional Jewish dance, with no

reference to its recent sourcing from within the peasant folklore of Palestine" (88). As for the last nail in the coffin, "Following the establishment of Israel in 1948," Rowe concludes, "even references to Palestine disappear" (89). For example, Israeli choreographer Gavit Kadman "attributed Israeli folk dance to the spontaneous creations of rural kibbutzniks living in the land of Israel and reviving biblical memories" (89). More generally, "Among the second generation of Israeli folkdance choreographers, the discourse that emphasized the creativity of individual Israeli artists had effectively cleansed the collective memory of any process of cultural appropriation from the indigenous population of Palestine" (90). Thereby, "Israeli ingenuity is credited with fostering a sudden folkdance culture, and this folkdance culture is credited with legitimizing Israeli cultural identity abroad," which "continued a more general legend that the State of Israel had emerged by divine intervention" (90). But alongside such involuntary danced oppression, there were also bright lights of voluntary danced resistance.

III. Conclusion: Birzeit University and El-Funoun Dance Troupe

The primary challenge of such a forced erasure, of course, is that the group who created the form in question can continue to create more content, thus concretely contradicting and disproving the colonizers' claims. Seeking to get around this problem at the level of Indigenous artworks in general, Rowe relates, "West Bank publications about indigenous heritage and folklore were delayed permission and heavily censored by the Israeli military" (119). Folk dance, as so often, proved a special case, because it "presented a medium that, while laden with emotive potential and local historical associations, was seemingly more innocuous than spoken or written words" (119). Nevertheless, Dabke "troupes were denied permission to travel between towns, and individuals attempting to promote dabkeh became subject to house arrest, detention,

interrogation, imprisonment and physical abuse" (119). For this reason, Rowe suggests, the Israeli "military occupation might therefore be considered as a major stimulant in the politicization of folk dance" (119). One part of this politicization, Rowe writes, was a "trend amongst Israeli soldiers forcing men in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to publicly dance during random military inspections, as a form of ritualized humiliation" (130). On Rowe's analysis, "the forcing of community leaders to dance publicly can be seen as a particular form of psychological warfare aimed at dismantling social cohesion" (130). This was, he concludes, "particularly inflammatory in a political environment that was increasingly influenced by religious ideals of modest behaviour" (131).

In one shining example of pushback against this oppression, Palestine's Birzeit University "became the central forum for experimentation and debates over cultural interventions in the West Bank," including when, in 1980, it "initiated an annual dabkeh competition" (134). This competition was then followed, in 1984, by "the annual month-long Birzeit Nights summer festival," which featured "competitions for local drama, dance and music groups in order to 'increase theatrical appreciation'" (134). Although these dancing events were "continuously disrupted by the Israeli military"—with Israel even closing the university entirely for five years, from 1988-1992—the university persevered, and "also encouraged the formation of student dance groups" (134, 150).

One such Birzeit student group, called Juthoor, "had a significant influence on local theatre dance" (134). Another group, Sharaf, was formed "on campus by students in 1985 and named after a Birzeit University student killed by the Israeli military" (135). Most influential of all, though, was Birzeit's "support and feedback" for "the more established off-campus dance groups," especially "El-Funoun Popular Dance Troupe and the Sareyyet Ramallah Troupe for

Music and Dabkeh" (135). On a personal note, Birzeit University is also the alma mater of my fiancé, whose channeling of that defiant spirit, as a first-generation immigrant to the U.S., inspired the present investigation.

Of these two groups, Rowe focuses primarily on El-Funoun, "the longest established and generally most popularly renowned dance collective in the Occupied Palestinian Territories during the late twentieth century" (135). For reasons of space, I will relate only a few of their most salient characteristics. First, El-Funoun was founded by "three friends who had informally participated in dabkeh at weddings" (136). Second, the "troupe's leftist political leanings" could be seen, according to co-founder Mohamad Atta, in the fact that, "in the early years there was no artistic director, and El-Funoun's rehearsals involved collective decision making among all the dancers" (137). Third, El-Funoun's dancers "were generally from a working-class (or recently urbanized rural) background, with a mix of local residents and refugees from other parts of Palestine," and were "even able to perform in traditional peasant wedding clothes that had been borrowed from their own grandparents" (137, 138). Fourth, one of El-Funoun's more theatrical dance performances was the 1986 artwork entitled "*Mish'al* (the lead character's name, literally translating as Lantern)," which "explored an oral legend about a young freedom fighter during the British Mandate, glorifying resistance against foreign occupation" (140). Fifth, that same year, El-Funoun "traveled to North America on its first international tour," and in 1987 "established the Popular Arts Centre as a separate institution with the mission to document traditional dance in Palestine" (143). Finally regarding El-Funoun, "Like many indigenous cultural activists during the late 1980s, dance artists from El-Funoun, Sareyyet Ramallah and other dance collectives were targeted by the Israeli military" (150).

In fact, Rowe relates, “Almost every male and many of the female members of these troupes were imprisoned without charge or trial for periods ranging from a week to two years, and subjected to mental abuse and physical torture” (150). For this reason, as one former El-Funoun dancer recalls, “Nobody at that time would admit that they were part of El Funoun,” because they “would go and be tortured for a week for them to get out of you that you were part of El-Funoun” (151). In response, this same dancer continues, “Nobody used to use names, who was doing what” in terms of creating the dances, which “was also part of this group struggle idea” (151). In short, the dancer concludes, “It was underground” (151). As one might expect, Rowe writes, “This also produced a large amount of solidarity for the dance artists among the general public” (151). More specifically, “Since the Israeli military often raided performances to try and arrest performers, being a dancer in such a group became perceived as a heroic act of resistance again the occupation” (151). Finally on this point, as part of said resistance, El-Funoun’s dance theatrical production *Marj Ibn ‘Amer* “was largely devised and composed in Israeli prison camps, as indigenous musicians, dancers and writers found themselves gathered in such facilities” (151). Thus, the brutal white settler colonial oppression continues, but the courageous Indigenous dancing resistance also perseveres.

More generally, as this investigation has attempted to show, despite the commonsensical notion that dance is ephemeral and meaningless (especially compared to electoral politics, “serious” political activism, and other democratic methods), the enormous power of dance can be inferred directly from the history of white settler colonizers’ criminalization of Indigenous folkdance, while simultaneously appropriating it to create a façade of legitimacy for their own nationalisms. As Indigenous American scholars Rina Swentzell and Dave Warren note, among the Tewa Pueblo people of Turtle Island, “S*hadeh* is the Tewa word for dance,” and translated

"literally, shadeh means 'to be in the act of getting up, of waking up'" (93).[11] This is so, Swentzell and Warren explain, because by "dancing, one awakens, arises in a heightened sense of awareness to the dance and participating in its meaning" (93).

In the same spirit, and by way of conclusion, Ben Black Bear, Sr., a "respected traditional Lakota singer and dancer," describes participating in the Omaha Dance—precursor to the Fancy Dance of the present investigation's catalyzing social media video—as follows:

> What evil things you had planned to do, you will not do. You will keep your mind on only the dancing and your body will be well… Whoever dances is never sick as long as he dances. Going to dances is good fun, and also, dancing can make your disposition good. If someone does not do this, I do not know why he is on this earth… While you are alive, you give homage to the Great Spirit, and you will do favors for others, and then you will enjoy yourself. If one does not do these things, he will explode within himself. These three things are the highest in law… Realize this. These are truths. So be it.[12]

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[11] Rina Swentzell & Dave Warren, "Shadeh," in Native American Dance: Ceremonies and Social Traditions, ed. Terence Winch (St. Cloud, MN: Starwood Publishing, 1993), 92-93, 93.
[12] Quoted in Huenemann 129.