

# The Double Life of Pagan Dance

Indigenous Rituality, Early Modern Dance,  
and the Language of US Newspapers

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## KEYWORDS

Indigenous dance, early modernist dance, 'pagan dance', settler-colonialism, colonisation

## SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER

Indigener Tanz, Tanz der frühen Moderne, 'heidnischer Tanz', Siedlerkolonialismus, Kolonialismus

# Summary

What can be made of the fact that American early modern dancers employed the term 'pagan dance' to describe their practices, ideologies, and aesthetics when they were surrounded by a public discourse that disparaged Indigenous dance through the very same label? When used to describe Indigenous ritual dances, the term 'pagan dance' performed a complete cultural recontextualisation upon whatever Indigenous dance that was its object – transforming each dance into a justification for a US settler-colonial and anti-Indigenous stance. However, when adopted by early modern dancers, the term 'pagan dance' could be received by the US public as a revitalisation of ancient spiritualism and a garnering of 'native' ritual knowledge. Tracking the term through American newspapers at the turn of the twentieth century, this article investigates the bifurcation of a 'pagan dance' vocabulary that conditioned dance's social and spiritual reception in the US.

# Zusammenfassung

Wie ist es zu bewerten, dass amerikanische Tänzer\*innen der frühen Moderne ihre Praktiken, Weltanschauungen und Ästhetiken als 'pagan dance' bezeichneten, während der damals zeitgenössische öffentliche Diskurs den gleichen Begriff verwendete, um den indigenen Tanz herabzuwürdigen? Durch die im öffentlichen Diskurs verwendete Bezeichnung als 'pagan' erfuhren indigene Rituale eine vollständige kulturelle Rekontextualisierung und lieferten so einen Vorwand für den US-amerikanischen anti-indigenen Siedlerkolonialismus. Der Begriff 'pagan dance', der von den Tänzer\*innen (?) der frühen Moderne verwendet wurde, konnte von der US-amerikanischen Öffentlichkeit als eine Wiederbelebung des alten Spiritualismus und eine Sammlung von indigenem Ritualwissen rezipiert werden. Der Artikel untersucht den Begriff in Zeitungen der Jahrhundertwende und erforscht die widersprüchliche Verwendung des Begriffs 'pagan dance', die die soziale und geistige Rezeption des Tanzes in den USA prägte.

# Introduction

What is a ‘pagan dance’? The term denotes Christian perspectives of ‘unchristian’ dance and the dances of ‘non-Christians’. Ideas of ‘pagan dance’ have been important to Christian historical address of dance and its spiritual meaning since late antiquity (Dickason 2021: 79). Associations between ‘paganism’ and dancing shaped medieval Christian discourses on dance and emerged within religious debates on idolatry and ritual behaviour during the Reformation (Dickason 2021: 78, Drury 2019: 191-193). Since the rise of colonisation, Christian ideas about ‘pagan dance’ have partaken in performing colonial Christendom in language, narratively tying the dances of colonised peoples to the dances of ‘pagan’ Romans who were proselytised by the Church Fathers. The Christian language of ‘pagan dance’ thus connects the expansion of the Church through European imperialism to the establishment of the Church in late antiquity (Dickason 2021: 4).

This article gives a small history that investigates the consequences of Christian ‘pagan dance’ ideas, focussing on a particular context of their expression in articles published and circulated in US newspapers. I show how terminologies of ‘pagan dance’ worked to overwrite the meanings of Indigenous dances with the generalist Christian visions of ‘pagans’ and their dances. I further argue that early modern concert dancers capitalised on the importance of ‘pagan dance’ language in the colonial setting and the public’s consequent familiarity with the colonial rhetoric of ‘pagans’ and their dancing.

#### THE OLD AND NEW PARTIES.

"There are two parties here," continued the chief. "We call them the old party and the new party. The white men speak of the old party as being pagan and the new party as Christians. I am of the old party, but we are not pagans. A pagan does not believe in God. We believe in a Supreme Creator and Ruler of the universe, who, so far as I can see, is like the God of our brothers who have been won over to Christianity. Our ceremonies of recognition are, of course, very different, but the two parties get along peacefully and harmoniously. There are eight clans among the Onondagas—the Beaver, the Wolf (my own), the Deer, the Bear, the Eel, the Mud Turtle, the Swamp Turtle and the Snipe.

Mrs. Boynton characterized Miss Duncan as the "true pagan woman interpreting Grecian art." In telling of the early life of the now noted dancer Mrs. Boynton said:

"Her mother was very religious and her father possessed an intensely artistic and poetic nature. He was also a lover of dancing. The mother was deserted by the father and had to support four small children. One day when she came home from work, weary and discouraged, the little children gathered around her and said, 'Mamma, tell us about God,' and the poor woman, in a moment of impatience, in her wonderful patience, said: 'Go away. There is no God.' The two older ones went away and grieved. The third child became cynical and skeptical, but the youngest knew no difference. There was never any God to her, but her soul was intensely religious, and so we have the true pagan woman of the Grecian time—Isadora Duncan—interpreting Grecian art to us today. Her art is her religion."

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Figure 1. Excerpt from 'The Green Corn Dance: Annual Festival of the Onondaga Indians', *New York Tribune*, 12 December 1897, p. 8. *Chronicling America Digital Archive*. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1897-09-12/ed-1/seq-32/>

Figure 2. Excerpt from 'Dancer is a True Pagan Woman', *San Francisco Call*, 8 November 1908, p. 10. *Chronicling America Digital Archive*. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85066387/1908-11-12/ed-1/seq-10/>

If the label ‘pagan dance’ generally stands for a Christian view of the dances of a non-Christian world, Indigenous dance, by contrast, encompasses myriad worlds of dance defined differently by the peoples practicing. It is with this in mind that I began researching ‘pagan dance’ as a colonial language, searching for its meaning in American popular writings that historically described Indigenous dances in generalist terms. At the beginning of my research process, I was looking at penny dreadfuls, dime novels, pulp magazines, published sermons, and newspaper articles. I found ‘pagan dance’ tropes used to describe the activities of generic ‘Indians’ in works of nineteenth-century authors including Ann S. Stephens, William Tudor, James Fenimore Cooper, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.<sup>1</sup> However, when my searches turned to digital archives of newspapers from around the turn of the twentieth century, I also came across numerous articles that applied the term ‘pagan dance’ and its various tropes and formulas to white concert dance performers, including Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis. I was already aware of the proclivity among early modern dancers to work with ‘pagan themes’ of classical antiquity (Duncan) or Orientalism (Denis). What I began to realise, however, was that these turn-of-the-century newspapers provided a mass-media space where the ‘pagan dance’ imaginaries of early modern American dance shared the page with settler-colonist, anti-Indigenous writings about ‘pagan dance’ in the US. This shared space was some of the most widely circulated and widely read printed material of the period.

This led me to the questions I will be tackling in this article: How important was the language of ‘pagan dance’ to wider discourse on the meaning of dance in the US? To what extent did descriptions of

1. For further insight on the likening of Indigenous peoples of North America to Europe’s ‘pagan’ antiquity among nineteenth-century US authors, see Niemeyer 2015.

For a bibliography of anti-dance texts including numerous sermons published in the US, see Marks 1975.

the dance practices of Indigenous peoples as ‘pagan’ in US newspapers shape that discourse? Were white early modern dancers influenced by mass-mediatised descriptions of Indigenous dance as ‘pagan’? In addressing these questions, I focus on US newspapers as sites where public languages and social meanings of dance were constructed for a primarily white, settler-colonial readership. I investigate how newspaper discourses addressed the concert dance forms of settler-colonial culture and the social practices of Indigenous peoples to produce a ‘double life of pagan dance’ in newspaper print. This ‘double life’ at once degraded the sacred practices of Indigenous peoples even as it created cultural capital for early modern dancers. In this sense, this article addresses how mass-mediatised Christian-historical narratives of ‘pagan dance’ became a part of settler-colonial language and thus a part of language-as-colonisation.<sup>2</sup>

Over the course of the research process, I was able to characterise the meaning of ‘pagan dance’ as used in American newspapers around the turn of the twentieth century. The two articles at the beginning of this introduction (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) exemplify how the notion of ‘being pagan’ was understood at that time as a state of being without God.<sup>3</sup> This view of the ‘pagan’ was conditioned by the idea that a faith in any but the Christian God would be, by nature, not a true faith (or simply not faith at all). In this context, the term ‘pagan dance’ served as a general label covering several characteristics of how such a state of being

2. By consequence, a limitation of this paper is that it does not address the ‘pagan dance’ moniker and its uses to describe Orientalist dance, classical dance forms of ‘non-western’ peoples, and colonised peoples internationally.

3. On the one hand, these two figures tell completely different stories. Fig. 1 quotes Chief Daniel La Fort of the Onondaga at the reservation in New York. Fig. 2 quotes C.C. Boynton, a childhood schoolmate of Isadora Duncan. Both quoted speakers, despite their differences, define the ‘pagan’ as holding false beliefs that, being such, are essentially likened to atheism, or being without a God.

without God was performed across history. First, ‘pagan dance’ was regarded as a performance of pre-Christian *inheritance*. As such, ‘pagan dance’ inscribed the colonial period into a larger Christian historical narrative extending back to Church Father critiques of ‘pagan’ Roman dances. The term thus facilitated the transposition of Eurocentric ideas of antiquity to the colonial period. Second, ‘pagan dance’ was considered a *transculturally universalist* act. It demarcated a common set of ‘primitive’ ritual practices that human beings in general and across cultures were assumed to ‘start with’ prior to Christian conversion. Third, ‘pagan dance’ was understood as *materialist*. Connected to amusement, festivity, carnal pleasure, gifting practices, and beauty, ‘pagan dance’ was viewed as a spiritual approach rooted in worldliness.

The characterisation of ‘pagan dance’ in terms of inheritance, trans-cultural universalism, and worldly materialism allowed me to refocus my attention upon the particular language that was used to describe Indigenous dances and early modern dance as ‘pagan’ in newspapers. Drawing from this characterisation of ‘pagan dance’, this article’s approach to the overarching topic of this Essays Section on ‘Language and Performance’ is informed by the aim to re-ground dance within its cultural (and colonial) histories. By working with the language of US newspapers, I intend to show that the rise of white early modern dance is not definitively separate from concurrent white suppression of Indigenous dance. The popular mediascape of US newspapers shows a national discourse on the meaning of dance that reused Christian historical language of ‘pagan dance’ to legitimise settler supremacy and delegitimise Indigenous spirituality by use of the same terms. From this perspective, this article aims to show how language can be used as a tool for the politicisation (and policing) of dance through the reappropriation of terms for seemingly opposite ends.

## A Note on Materials and Methodology

US newspaper articles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be described as unsituated archival materials: most authors are not named and many texts were circulated among newspapers and reprinted in various towns around the country. Articles, letters, opinions, and announcements were in themselves often composed of circulated and recirculated tropes, cliches, and stereotypes. As common spaces of readership and trade-zones of authorship, newspapers served as a centrepiece to the white American ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 2006: 198). They used language to narratively reshape not only communities but also dance practices while using dance to produce visions of national identity. Consequently, historical US newspapers, despite being primary archival resources, present a vastly incomplete and non-factual lens on history. As many newspaper articles were written by white settlers about Indigenous groups, they reflect a larger system of social and political silencing. This system is poignantly articulated by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who claims that dominant and colonist groups pronounce that the works and ideas of others ‘deserve being silenced because they are being carried out by ignorant, inferior, backward, retrograde, local, unproductive people’ (2014: 11). Such language is present in many articles I will quote throughout this contribution, and led me to query the archive for its white supremacy.

My own critical approach in this article is informed by the work of Native American scholars whose methods of historical analysis reassess what it means to engage with white-centric historical documents about Indigenous lives. The works of Yankton Dakota scholar Philip J. Deloria, Crow Creek Sioux scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Muscogee

Creek scholar K. Tsianina Lomawaima, Dakota and Apache scholar Kiara Vigil, and Osage scholar Robert Warrior have been essential to the development of my methods. My research on the colonial language of ‘pagan dance’ in US newspapers is further inspired by Christopher Bracken’s analysis of colonial writings about North-American Indigenous ritual and dance in *The Potlatch Papers* (1997). Focussing on ‘the colonial text where an author’s discourse consistently fails to do what it says it is doing’ (1997: 6), Bracken’s work explores the unravelling of colonial logics within its own writings. The language of ‘pagan dance’ is similarly a colonial logic that fractures as it moves between applications to Indigenous ritual and white concert dance.

In this article, I draw from qualitative datasets I have compiled primarily from the Library of Congress *Chronicling America* digital archive. I have focussed on a segment of time in which the development of early modern dance strongly coincides with newspaper-based discourses on intertribal Indigenous dance practices in the US.<sup>4</sup> I more specifically start from the late 1880s, with the proliferation of articles on Ghost Dance practices, and end in the early 1930s, when the white concert dancer Ted Shawn began performing his *Zuni Ghost Dance* for a primarily white American public.<sup>5</sup> My temporal demarcation does not describe the beginning of white reception of Indigenous dance nor the end of its appropriation by concert dancers — as this would be far too wide-ranging for an article

4. Intertribalism is built into the traditional political structures of numerous Indigenous groups throughout North America. A centerpiece of intertribal relations includes the Great Sioux Nation, a political structure held in common by Lakota, Western Dakota, and Eastern Dakota groups. It extends across the Great Plains of the present-day US and Canada (see Hämäläinen 2019). The nineteenth century saw the rise of a number of intertribal religious movements as well, including the Indian Shaker Church of 1881 and the ghost dance religion, which seems to have first emerged around 1869 (see Mooney 1896).

5. The earliest comparison I found between ancient ‘pagan dance’ and Indigenous dance appears in a 1852 article stating that ‘the dances of the Jews and Pagans were doubtless similar to those still practiced by the Indian tribes of America’ (‘Origin of Dancing’ 1852: 2).

of this size. I instead begin with an article on intertribal Ghost Dancing and end with an article about a white man’s ghost dance, bracketing the narrative with a nineteenth-century intertribal dance and its twentieth-century appropriation by an early modern dancer.<sup>6</sup>

Many articles consulted are not quoted in this article but have been gathered into datasets and visualised for reference (see Figs. 7 and 8]. The aim of these visualisations is to gain a picture of the use of ‘pagan dance’ terminologies in US newspapers around the turn of the century. I gathered data on article types, populations each described, newspapers that published such articles, years of publication, and themes of ‘pagan dance’ discourse. My initial dataset included 260 articles that clearly described dance practices as ‘pagan dance’ between 1880-1930. With these, I noted and recorded patterns of language associated with ‘pagan dance’ and used this language in keyword searches to produce larger datasets of articles. I categorised the terms used and populations described, first graphing these according to article types, including pieces on the ‘pagan dances’ of Christian history, of holidays, in the views of preachers, in critiques of social dance, in descriptive pieces, in reviews of concert dance, in the views of missionaries, from tourist accounts, in the articles of reservation newspapers, in film announcements, amateur performance reviews, and pageant descriptions (Fig. 7). I next graphed according to newspaper, looking at what years and types of articles were commonly produced (Fig. 8). These data visualisations helped me make sense of my dataset; more specifically, what kinds of articles discussed ‘pagan dance’, where and when, and what kinds of populations were most discussed.

6. My choice is further informed by Native American historical investigations of the period. Robert Warrior’s *Tribal Secrets* (1995) is a study of Native intellectuals organised around the intertribal political projects and ‘Christian and secular assimilationist writing’ that centred on intertribal spiritual and social ideas beginning in the 1890s (2001: 4). In *Indigenous Intellectuals* (2015), Kiara Vigil pushes back against an historical trend in which the 1880s-1930s have been ‘understood as a decline in Native activities’ (2015: 10).

I found that newspaper writings on ‘pagan dance’ were published nationwide in the period and that they more often described Indigenous populations, histories of Christianity, and social dance than concert dance performance. My data supports the idea that early modern concert dance emerged in newspapers to take up a smaller presence among articles on ‘pagan dance’ after the turn of the century (Fig. 7). With these findings, I theorised that newspaper articles on Indigenous ‘pagan dance’ would have been more commonly read than articles on concert dance, and were thus more powerful in shaping national ideas about dance in popular media than were articles about concert dancers at the time. This buttresses my claim that early modern dancers began addressing themes of ‘pagan dance’ to a white American media that was more generally prone to disparagingly associate ‘pagan dance’ with Indigenous groups.

Given the attention I devote in this article to the terminology surrounding ‘pagan dance’ in US newspapers, it seems appropriate to address my own use of terms. I work with the term variations on the terms ‘early modern dance’ and ‘concert dance’ because similar terms existed in newspapers of the time. Meanwhile, I refer to historical Native Americans either by tribal names or as ‘Indigenous’. The reason for this choice is twofold: on the one hand, the term ‘Native American’ was not in use during the period I investigate, and on the other hand, I wish not to repeat the white habit of simply grouping Indigenous peoples by the political geography of the current domestic US. Instead, my use of ‘Indigenous’ in this article emphatically indicates intertribal solidarity that precedes present-day North American borders and continues to resist US expansionism.

As this article specifically investigates newspapers as a site of dance’s social reception and discursive articulation, I do not extend my arguments to the choreographic, aesthetic, or embodied enactments of Indigenous practices or white dance in the period. I further avoid

**They were also advised to supply themselves with arms, and with ghost shirts, which were to protect them against the white man’s bullet. And so was the frenzy warped and twisted to suit the end desired, which was the preparation of the Indian mind, like that of the Jews, for a warrior king and leader. In this way the, ghost dance, in itself as harmless as any other peaceful amusement, was a source of danger. It was thus made the means of preparing the young men, almost unconsciously, to follow that Messiah when he should appear. One would no doubt have been found in due time by these medicine men. I say the Indian Messiah, as originally proclaimed in Nevada was to be a prince of peace, but the medicine men had already transformed him into a warrior king, a character more congenial to the Indian o, today, as it was to the Jews of old, and had any other kind of Messiah appeared he would doubtless have been crucified.**

**Figure 3.** Excerpt from ‘Indian Troubles in America’, *Portland Daily Press* (Maine), 29 May 1891, p. 2. *Chronicling America* Digital Archive. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016025/1891-05-29/ed-1/seq-2/>

a performance-analysis approach. My attention is instead devoted to how dance performs within and as language and thus within the discursive sphere of mass media, where Christian and colonial visions of ‘pagans’ have shaped settler-colonist perspectives on the meaning of dance itself.<sup>7</sup> If this is a small history of dance reception in print, conducted primarily through study of newspapers, in it I nonetheless explore reception as a formative historical power.

## 1889 – 1890s: The Ghost Dance Religion and Ghostly Historical ‘Paganisms’

I begin my exploration of ‘pagan dance’ with an analysis of the so-called Ghost Dance, as its history provides a telling example of how the discourse in US newspapers refigured Indigenous dance practices to fit ideological and religious biases of a settler-colonist readership. Treated as an ‘age-old’ ‘pagan dance’ by newspapers, the Ghost Dance was in fact a new spiritual innovation. While the earliest dancing practices associated with the Ghost Dance were performed by Paiute followers of the elder Wodziwob around 1869, it was Wokova who in 1889 initiated the Ghost Dance Religion that would become a spiritual movement involving different tribal groups (Hittman 1997: 23).<sup>8</sup> Working with Christian narratives of the second coming, the Ghost Dance in Wokova’s vein beckoned a return to Indigenous ways of life, of lands to Indigenous hands, and of the herds of animals and family members that were slaughtered under settler-colonial rule. By 1890, the Ghost Dance religion was shared among many tribes across the American West. According to the nineteenth-century ethnographer James Mooney, the tribes involved in Ghost Dances included the Paiute, Omaha, Winnebago, allied Sioux tribes, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Shoshoni, Havasupai, and Kiowa, among others (1896: 654).<sup>9</sup> The dance was practiced in

<sup>7</sup> I would like to note that it is also necessary for white historians not to subject historical Indigenous ritual dance practices to yet another amateur ethnographic gaze or claim to authority on the spiritual experience of Indigenous dance.

<sup>8</sup> Wokova was the son of Wodziwob’s follower Tavibo. He was orphaned at age fourteen and then raised by a devout presbyterian family in Mason Valley, Nevada under the name James Wilson (Hittman 1997: 23).

<sup>9</sup> The true number of tribes engaged in the Ghost Dance religion is undetermined. Mooney, noting its widespread practice, wrote that it ‘found adherents alike in the everglades of Florida and on the plains of the Saskatchewan’ (1896: 675).

a time when US policy toward Indigenous peoples had the goal that — as stated by the first director of the US Bureau of Ethnography James Wesley Powell — ‘everything most sacred to Indian society is yielded up’ to white American domination (Talbot 2006: 12). As many Indigenous peoples had already been displaced to intertribal reservation lands by the time Powell took his position in 1879, by the 1880s US policy gained an additional focus: that of breaking newly forged intertribal cultural and spiritual bonds like the Ghost Dance under the guise of ‘assimilation’.

In late 1882, an imminent policy of the Secretary of Treasury was printed in newspapers across the US stating the interdiction of Indigenous dance, ‘the penalty for which for the first offense is withholding rations for 15 days’ (‘Telegraphic Items’ 1882: 2; ‘Indian Affairs’ 1882: 2). Thus, starvation was the US’s chosen punishment for dance ritual practices. In 1883, this policy was enshrined in the Code of Indian Offenses.<sup>10</sup> It was implemented by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in response to a letter from Henry Teller describing the ‘great hindrance to the civilization of the Indians, viz, the continuance of the old heathenish dances’ (Teller 1882: 1). This was followed by the General Allotment Act of 1887, which forced the restructuring of traditional, collective ownership of ancestral lands among Indigenous peoples to the US-American model of private ownership divided into plots (Lomawaima and Wilkins 2001: 77).<sup>11</sup> Finally, in February 1890, the

US government illegally broke apart the largest interculturally held body of Indigenous lands — the Great Sioux Reservation. During that time, Ghost Dance practices flourished among Sioux peoples.<sup>12</sup>

Among the resulting segments of the Great Sioux Reservation was the Pine Ridge Reservation. In December 1890, forty-five Lakota performers arrived there after their European tour with Buffalo Bill, returning home to learn of recent US military offensives at neighbouring Standing Rock.<sup>13</sup> They were further informed that the official expectation by the Bureau of Indian Affairs was to dissuade their people from ‘aggression’ — the definition of which formally included Ghost Dances (Maddra 2006: 86; Moses 1996: 104). Within weeks, on 29 December 1890, US troops slaughtered hundreds of Lakota people at Wounded Knee Creek. A few days later, they buried the frozen corpses — 350 bodies, elderly, adult, and children — in a mass grave (Tinker 1993: 7). Despite the foregoing escalation of US military offenses on Sioux lands, newspapers were quick to blame the Lakota Ghost Dance for the Wounded Knee Massacre. An article published in early January 1891 in the *St. Paul Daily Globe*, for example, states:

An Indian known as their ‘medicine man’ rose from his seat and began to cry out, ‘Kill the soldiers, their bullets will not have any effect upon our ghost spirits,’ and at the same time stooping to the ground and picking up handfuls of dirt, throwing it up in the

<sup>10</sup> The Code of Indian Offenses was adopted as law in 1883. Traditional medicine and shamanic practices, polygamous marriage, gifting ceremonies, and consumption of alcohol were also outlawed. It would nonetheless remain in effect as law until the Citizenship Act of 1924 (Bremer 2015: 272). After that, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, with amendments in 1994, granted fuller, though incomplete, religious freedoms to Native Americans.

<sup>11</sup> As stated by a 2013 Hearing before the Committee of Indian Affairs of the US Senate, ‘between the years of 1887 and 1934, the US Government took more than 90 million acres from the tribes without compensation, nearly 2/3 of all reservation lands, and sold it to settlers and timber and mining interests’ (2013: 24).

<sup>12</sup> White fears of pan-Indigenous revolt centred on the Lakota and their adaptation of the Ghost Dance to millenarianism. For a more in-depth analysis of millenarianism, see Wessinger (2016).

<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that Lakota leader Sitting Bull had been shot and killed on 15 December 1890 in an arrest attempt at neighbouring Standing Rock Reservation. The loss of Sitting Bull was a traumatic blow to Indigenous organisers. It caused tribal leaders to flee Standing Rock, including the chief Spotted Elk and a group of Indigenous allies, who travelled to the Pine Ridge Reservation in search of sanctuary with friends during the military offensive. Spotted Elk and his group were intercepted by the military on the way and brought to Wounded Knee under military arrest (Maddra 2006: 93). They died in the massacre.

air, and after a short performance of perhaps two minutes, fired his gun in the direction of the military which started the fight. ('The Pine Ridge Agents Tells [sic] of the Last Skirmish' 1891: 1)

This fictionalised account of the events that transpired at the massacre joins ghost dancing with firing at the US military.<sup>14</sup> The 'medicine man' also served as a common 'pagan' stereotype when such practitioners were outlawed in the Code of Indian Offenses, which argued that medicine men worked through conjuring 'to prevent the Indians from abandoning their heathenish rites and customs' (Price 1883: 4). Thus, in the article cited above, the medicine man provided the 'pagan' figure through which dance and rebellion could be associated.

In general, newspaper discussions of Indigenous dance in the last decade of the nineteenth century articulated the Ghost Dance as an intertribal uprising that mixed 'pagan' and Christian faith with violent rebellion. A discussion of a local folklore society published in the *New York Tribune* in 1890, for example, described the Ghost Dance as a belief that the second coming of Christ would eradicate whites. Quoting the anthropologist Franz Boas, the article further proposed that the Ghost Dance was historically comparable to European medieval 'dancing manias' ('Ghost Dance Craze' 1890: 3).<sup>15</sup>

14. Articles tying the Ghost Dance to what newspapers called 'The Battle at Wounded Knee' often depended on hazy associations. This is indicated by the caption of a long article in the *Wichita Daily Eagle* the day after the massacre: 'Attempt to Disarm Sitting Bull's Ghost Dancing Followers Leads to a Deadly Struggle' ('Bloodshed' 1890: 1).

15. In *Choreomania*, historian Kéline Gotman argues that Ghost Dances were seen by whites through the prism of ideas about 'dancing mania'. Gotman notes the relevance of news-cycles to her argument, mentioning the 'panicked circulation of news about the "mania"' (2018: 225). Her work was preceded by the Crow Creek Sioux scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, who argued that fabricated descriptions of the Ghost Dance as 'the frenzied acts of a crazed Indian population' behaved as a 'rational for the mass killing' at Wounded Knee both before and after its occurrence in 1890 (2001: 191). In an unfortunate omission, Gotman does not cite Cook-Lynn.

A subsequent 1891 article titled 'Indian Troubles in America', published in the *Portland Daily Press* described the Ghost Dance as follows:

The medicine men, with the crafty old Sitting Bull in the lead, like the false prophets of old, distorted the peaceful character in which their Messiah was at first announced, joined the new belief to their old ghost dance, mixing the Christian sentiment with the pagan practice. The devotees shouted and danced in circles until they swooned and fell, and in their seeming sleep they saw the happy hunting grounds — the country black with buffalo, just as starving white men have feasted in dreams on every dainty dish known to the human palate. The medicine men told them this vision was to be realized, that *the white man and all doubting Indians were to be destroyed*, that the dead warriors were to come back with the buffalo. (1891: 2; italics added)

These and other articles positioned the Ghost Dance between European and US histories, 'pagan' and Christian belief structures, madness and insurrection by explicit comparison to Christian narratives of 'pagan' others. Newspapers like this attempted to justify military aggression against Ghost Dancers by referring to historical wars between Christian Europeans and 'pagan' tribes.<sup>16</sup> The author of the article just cited, for example, brought to mind how 'Kossack tribes of the rivers Don and Ural and the Caucasus [sic] were the terror of all Europe as well as the Turk and Tartar', and importantly added that these tribes 'were all in respects similar to the American Indian' ('Indian Troubles in America' 1891: 2). Such arguments rhetorically turned the Ghost Dance on

16. An early article on the Ghost Dance, for example, addressed white fear of genocidal reversal, and responded by predicting Indigenous death by government-sanctioned starvation tactics ('Local Brevities' 1889: 3). Not only military aggression but also genocide was justified by harkening to visions of historical wars between European Christians and 'pagan' aggressors.

its proverbial head, transforming a dance derived from Indigenous solidarity and Christianity into a dangerous corruption of the Christian faith. In a sense, these articles negatively connotated Ghost Dances with the idea that, like medieval dancing manias and ‘the false prophets of old’, they should be relegated to history.

There remains a smaller quantity of articles from the end of the nineteenth century that explicitly addressed Indigenous rights and contested negative newspaper narratives on the Ghost Dance by dealing with its ‘pagan’ framing. An 1898 piece in the *Indian Advocate* reshaped the transcultural, transhistorical approach structuring the ‘pagan’ Ghost Dance idea into a Christian universalist argument (‘Paradise Lost’ 1898: 58). Printed in a reservation newspaper, the article was unique in that it argued that there should be space for truly Indigenous ritual practices and Indigenous spiritual voices within the diversity of Christian churches.<sup>17</sup> A satirical article by a missionary priest, Reverend Thomas Dixon Jr., took a more bitter tone and lambasted the Wounded Knee Massacre. Countering US claims to the political right to violently suppress Indigenous dance, Dixon further derided the belief expressed in other articles that slaughtering Indigenous peoples could be justified as yet another Christian war against the ‘pagans’ (Dixon 1891: 7). He instead acknowledged white fear of Indigenous memory: ‘We know that we have made a record of brutality and dishonor covering a century’,

<sup>17</sup> Argued within a paper run by a Benedictine Mission on Potawatomi Nation lands in present-day Oklahoma, the article describes the Ghost Dance as a peaceful and meaningful religious practice. It does so while situated in the Catholic tradition, from a position of close proximity to Indigenous groups that practiced the Ghost Dance: ‘The doctrines of the Hindu avatar, the Hebrew messiah, the Christian millennium, and the Hesunanin of the Indian Ghost Dance are essentially the same, and have their origin in a hope and longing common to all humanity’ (‘Paradise Lost’ 1898: 58). As noted by the *Chronicling America* digital archive, ‘Father D. Ignatius, the second and last of the Prefect Apostolics in Oklahoma, established the *Indian Advocate* in 1888’. See: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/45043535/>

**‘The form taken by the non-Puritan celebrations in England were particularly obnoxious to the Pilgrim Fathers who were determined that there would be in the colonies no ‘wanton Baachanallian Christmasses’ spent in ‘reveling, dicing, carding, masking, mumming, consumed in compotations, in interludes in excess of wine, in made mirth.’ Participants in ‘evermerry Christmasses’ were harshly denounced by early chronicles as ‘hellhounds’ who spent the holidays in ‘amorous mixt, voluptuous, unchristian, that I say not pagan, dancing, to God’s to Christ’s dishonour, religion’s scandal, chastie’s shipwracke and sinne’s advantage.**

**Figure 4.** Excerpt from ‘Pilgrim Fathers Frowned on Christmas’, *The Sauk Centre Herald* (Minnesota), 26 December 1929, p. 2. *Chronicling America* Digital Archive. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89064489/1929-12-26/ed-1/seq-2/>

Dixon wrote, ‘that is perhaps unparalleled in the history of Christendom, if it can be matched in heathen or pagan annals’ (Dixon 1891: 7). Dixon’s piece critiques the ‘pagan dance’ descriptions of Ghost Dance practices in newspapers and their dependence on the idea that white, ancestrally European Christendom has the right to suppress ‘pagan’ uprisings. He pointed to such justifications as a cover story for white violence. It is within this social and political context that early modern dance by white Americans took up its place and entered into American discourses of ‘pagan dance’ with its various historical and transcultural reveries.

## 1900 – 1920s: Measuring Pagan Universals against a Puritan Inheritance

In a sense, the ‘double life’ of the term ‘pagan dance’, in its divided application to Indigenous and early modern concert dance, is easiest to witness in formulaic articles written for Christian holidays.<sup>18</sup> Such articles were also widely circulated and reprinted, and therefore served as central sites for discussions on the ‘paganic’ underpinnings of festivity in Christian life. They were also particularly apt to extend their discussion of historical ‘pagans’ and Christians to present-day Indigenous practices. The tone of many such articles further marvelled at the ‘pagan’ leftovers in white American Christianity, proposing that the ‘pagan’ *other* was lurking within the white Christian settler body. They also expressed the idea that ‘modern’ white American culture derived from a Christian past wherein amusement was long conditioned by neighbourly relations with ‘pagans’.<sup>19</sup> This idea was further explored in local articles describing

<sup>18</sup> The Chronicling America Archive shows that the holiday ‘pagan dance’ theme extends at least as far back as 1833 (see ‘May: From the London New Monthly Magazine’ 1833: 2).

the ‘paganic’ Christmas dances of neighbouring Indigenous communities.<sup>20</sup> Many of these articles presented a vision of Christian-‘pagan’ intercultural exchange that clashed with anti-Indigenous articles that framed the Ghost Dance as a dangerous corruption of Christianity.

As Figure 4 shows, these articles discussed either the historical appropriation or interdiction of ‘pagan dance’ on Christmas and other Christian holidays. A 1900 holiday narrative by Peter M’Arthur in the *Pascagoula Democrat-Star* of Mississippi, for example, narrated a story of how the Christians adapted Christmas from Roman Saturnalia, while Indigenous peoples in turn ‘paganised’ the Christian holiday. The article thus wove together a transtemporal vision of the likeness of Christian antiquity on the one hand, to the experiences of missionaries with Indigenous ‘heathen’ peoples on the other hand. It also mentioned the Ghost Dance, ten years interdicted by 1900, within its narrative on pagan-Christian holiday relations:

I spent one Christmas at a mission station among the Indians of the northwest, and when they gathered around their Christmas tree they sang the hymns they had been taught and besides chanted weird, monotonous songs of a maddening rhythm that made me fear that the festival would degenerate into a ghost dance or something of the sort. (M’Arthur 1900: 1)<sup>21</sup>

← <sup>19</sup> A 1903 article reprinted among newspapers in the northeast described that, ‘among early Christians there were many, too, who dwelt in heathen countries, and not a few of this class, having themselves abandoned the superstitions of paganism for the simplicity of the Christian doctrine, introduced heathen festivals among their brethren’ (‘Christmas Feasts’ 1903: 14, ‘Jewish and Pagan Feasts at Christmas Time’ 1903: 3).

<sup>20</sup> An article from Washington D.C., for example, describes the Christmastide dance of the Pueblos while proposing that Christian traditions were being muddled by the ‘paganism’ of ‘Red Men’: ‘Through the open door there sound the drumming of the “tombes.” Nearly naked warriors swept into the church in the contortions of the ancient, pagan hunting dance. It was the beginning of the oldest Christmas celebration of the Southwest’ (‘New Mexico Scene of Yule Mix-Up’ 1935: 4).

In the article, the Ghost Dance was used to signal degeneration — a disparaging term to describe how Indigenous belief systems were either debauched or further deteriorating under assimilation policies, or both.<sup>22</sup>

In opposition to the association between ‘degeneration’ and Indigenous holiday dances, a 1912 article concerning Ruth St. Denis used the term ‘pagan dance’ to narrate a holiday-themed dance of regeneration. First recounting that Denis ‘dances with pagan abandon’, the article went on to metaphorise her dance as Christian birth and resurrection: ‘she rises again, taking a cerulean tissue, and dances as the resurrected spirit of Christianity, suggesting the birth of the spiritual age, which succeeded the material’ (‘Club Pageant Gay Festival’ 1912: 11). The article unironically proposed Christian non-materialism on a holiday that had over the nineteenth century become the most materialistic in the US.<sup>23</sup> It did so in a time when intertribal ritual practices, such as potlatches and ‘give-away dances’, were widely critiqued and often interdicted for their association with materialism and gifting practices (‘Give-Away’ 1908: 3; Bracken 1997: 167).

In the first decade of the twentieth century, US newspaper discussions of ‘pagan dance’ were heavily populated with language about Indigenous dance practices, while those on the ‘pagan’ foundations of early modern dance rarely extended their discussion to Indigenous dance.<sup>24</sup> The double

life of the term ‘pagan dance’ in US newspapers behaved as two discourses running parallel, though dependent on the same basic principles. Not only was early modern dance and Indigenous dance discussed by newspapers as a set of spiritual practices and beliefs comparable to classical antiquity and pre-Christian Europe; they were also both perceived as mixing pagan and Christian ideas. The difference was that Indigenous dancers were critiqued for so doing, whereas early modern dancers were more often lauded. Profile pieces on Maud Allen, Geraldine Farrar, and Lada (Emily Schupp) show that all three dancers situated their dance as ‘pagan’ by describing the ties of their spiritual lives to ‘pagan’ historical narratives (M’Liss 1916: 11; Bindley 1915: 3; ‘Expression Religious Emotions Through The Dance’ 1914: 12). Among them, Lada particularly articulated her adoption of ‘pagan’ ideas as intermixed with her heavily Christian approach to dance, while Allen’s anti-cabaret position resonates strongly with conservative Christian arguments of the day.<sup>25</sup>

One of the rare articles that did bring Indigenous dance into its turn-of-the-century exploration of early modern dance was a piece titled ‘Something About Dancing: Wonderful Terpsichorean Art of the Ancients is Being Revived’. Published in the *Ellsworth American* of Maine in 1909, the article focused on the national importance of dance, contextualising

← 21. The *Chronicling America* digital archive shows at least one other newspaper printed this article, also on December 21 of 1900 – *The Florida Star* (Titusville, Fla.). It was likely written by the minor poet Peter McArthur.

22. An 1897 article, for example, entices New Yorkers to witness the degeneration of ritual at the ‘Green Corn Dance of the Onondaga’, informing them in a caption: ‘How the Ceremony has Degenerated’ (‘The Green-Corn Dance of the Onondaga Indians’ 1897: 8).

23. The commercialisation of Christmas happened over the course of the nineteenth century in the US. For a history of American cultural and capitalist changes around the holiday, see Nissenbaum 2010.

← 24. The exclusion of Indigenous dance was preceded in books on transcultural and ancient histories of ‘pagan’ dance, including Genevieve Stebbins’s influential *The Delsarte System of Expression* (1902) as well as Arabella E. Moore’s *The Dance: Ancient and Modern* (1900).

25. In the *Evening Public Ledger* (Philadelphia), Allen argued for the moral superiority of her ‘pagan’ Greek dancing and its naturalism over the ‘frightful, demoralizing’ cabaret (M’Liss 1916: 11). Farrar was quoted by the *New York Tribune*: ‘I am a pagan. This I believe: I hold the fire that makes me what I am, as a temporary vase, and when I am too worn to hold it longer the same volt goes on and finds another receptacle’ (Bindley 1915: 3). In *The Sun* (N.Y.), Lada most deeply associated her dancing with Christian sacred ritual practice and also connected it to ‘pagan dance’ by explaining that ‘dancing was a pagan art, long before the days of Christianity’ (‘Expressing Religious Emotions Through the Dance’ 1914: 12).

the antecedents of the ‘new school’ within a history including the ‘dance of the priestesses in the pagan temples, the choric dances of the Greeks’ (1909: 4). By further referencing biblical, Renaissance, American social dance, and notably, Indigenous dance, the article connected the world’s dances as precursors to the ‘new school’ of American dance, constructing a transtemporal and transcultural context through which modern American dance would emerge.<sup>26</sup> In other words, it envisioned American concert dance as embodying a universalist ideology of movement.

As the article turned to investigate the history of dance interdiction in the US, it began to formulate a discrepancy. While noting that ‘only in the Puritanic period has it [dance] fallen into abeyance’, the author also mentioned that Indigenous peoples continued to perform dances ‘until the government, in latter years, put a stop to them’ (‘Something About Dancing’ 1909: 4). In part, US Puritans had historically disallowed themselves from dancing ‘where it provoked civil disorder and perceived pagan practice’ (Wagner 1997: 55-56). Against this background, this 1909 article explored the push-back of early modern dance against American anti-dance history. However, the same arguments of puritan interdiction also composed the Code of Indian Offenses, which was still in effect in 1909. As such, ‘Something About Dancing’ treats the interdiction of Indigenous dance in the US as relegated to dance history even while recognising it as presently enforced.

Newspapers show that the early modern dancers Ruth St. Denis and Isadora Duncan likewise framed puritanism as a Christian history of dance suppression relevant to their self-explication as American artists. Both dancers, while not othering themselves from Christianity, signalled their ‘paganism’ as a way to challenge a puritan hold on white

<sup>26</sup> Following coincidental similarities (from Indigenous Sun Dance to the Japanese ‘dance to the sun goddess’) the article argued that non-Christian dance offered an opportunity toward deepening the embodied, spiritual experience of US-American Christians.

American women. Quoted in the *Washington Herald* in 1910, Ruth St. Denis described her conflicted ‘puritan-pagan’ familial inheritance: ‘My mother is a New England woman, with a Puritan conscience and a Pagan love of beautiful things. Before I was out of my cradle she had taught me Delsarte’ (‘Ruth St. Denis’ 1910: 7). Her quote demonstrates the importance of Delsartism to the ‘pagan’ ideas informing early modern dance and relates to the puritan-pagan discourse in newspapers and other popular writings of the period.<sup>27</sup>

Isadora Duncan wrote a strikingly similar account of puritan oppression of women in her family (Duncan 1927: 46). Her self-description as a ‘Puritanical Pagan’ informed the newspaper reception of her dance practice and legacy, including a *New York Times* obituary by John Martin (1928: 3). What remained unclear in newspapers, however, was the degree to which Duncan tied the idea of herself as a ‘Puritanical Pagan’ to white settler confrontations with Indigenous peoples. In her autobiography *My Life* (1927), Duncan in part described her puritan inheritance through stories told to her by her pioneer grandparents of ‘battling with hordes of hostile Indians’ (Duncan 1927: 98). She believed that, even though her Puritan forebears had been justly taming the ‘wild men, the Indians’ of America, they unfortunately had tamed themselves as well (Duncan 1927: 46). Nonetheless, as Kimerer

<sup>27</sup> ‘Puritan-pagan’ popular writings of the period include an 1891 work of fiction, *A Puritan Pagan*, written under the pen name Julien Gordon (Julie Grinnell Cruger). The work was published in segments weekly in newspapers across the country. A 1902 article in *The New York Times* provides another example from newspapers. It quotes William Roscoe Thayer on ‘the anti-pagan legacy bequeathed by Puritanism’ inhibiting American understanding of classical antiquity (‘Pagans Through Puritan Eyes’ 1902: 30). The columnist Marian Cox framed the pagan-puritan concept in nationalist terms within *The New York Times*, stating that Americans are ‘traditional Puritans’ and ‘the inheritors of the Roman genius for law and order’ (1919: 10). The ‘paganism’ of antiquity, which Cox viewed in likeness to modern America, proposed the ‘spell of license’ that for Cox was culturally meaningful to white American life.

LaMothe points out in *Nietzsche's Dancers*, Duncan believed that Puritanism generated the adventurousness and mysticism of American artists like herself (2006: 112). She allied her work with Walt Whitman's poetry, writing that Whitman remained Puritan even as he was 'proclaiming of the joys of the body' (Duncan 1927: 98). Recounting that Whitman's poem *I Hear America Singing* had inspired her to make a dance 'that would express America', Duncan wrote:

It has often made me smile — but somewhat ironically — when people have called my dancing Greek, for I myself count its origin in the stories which my Irish grandmother told us of crossing the plains with grandfather in '49 in a covered wagon — she eighteen, he twenty-one — and how her child was born in such a wagon during a famous battle with the Redskins; and how, when the Indians were finally defeated, my grandfather put his head in at the door of the wagon, which a smoking gun still in his hand, to greet his new-born child. (Duncan 1927: 340)

In this troubling paragraph, Duncan described the birth of her dance practice as akin to the birth of her parent, and she did so within a larger passage that positioned her dance about the birth of the nation as similar to a child born while Indigenous people are killed. In this sense, Duncan's autobiography habitually framed Indigenous peoples as justly vanquished by the birth of America. Only one exception to this questionable alignment can be found in *My Life*. Describing herself standing at the Temple of Athena in Greece, Duncan wrote: 'We could not have the feeling of the ancient Greeks. I was after all, but a Scotch-Irish-American. Perhaps through some affinity nearer allied to the Red Indian than to the Greeks' (1927: 149). Here her famous claim to a Greek 'paganness' may be seen to shift toward a vague recognition of her settler-colonial upbringing, though only for a moment.

## 1920s – 1930s: The 'Pagan' Spectacle and the Touristic Gaze of Modernist Dance

During the rise of early modern dance, Indigenous dance practices were increasingly subjected to white tourism, especially the Pueblo peoples of the Southwest (Stausberg 2011: 183).<sup>28</sup> A 1903 article from the *Daily Silver State* of Nevada emphasised the importance of railroad transit to 'Indian' tourism in the American Southwest with the caption: 'Ready for Snake Dances: Railroad Prepared to Carry People to Arizona' (1903: 1; Fig. 5). Many articles also reported on crowd sizes.<sup>29</sup> In 1925, for example, the front page of the *Winslow Mail* of Navajo County forecasted a massive crowd at the Hopi Snake Dance, noting that 'last year more than 3,000 persons witnessed the snake dance, and it is expected that many more will this year make the trip into the Painted Desert' ('Hopi Snake Dance is set for August 19 this Year' 1925: 1). Modern dancer Ted Shawn was among the tourists who visited the Pueblos that year. Previously, Shawn had already engaged with the tourism of the American Southwest as a dancer. Not only was he hired as a performer

<sup>28</sup>. Pueblo peoples were not legally defined by the US government as 'Indian' until 1913. After that time, they struggled against US policy against their religious practices. As Michele Suina writes, 'In the 1920s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs Commissioner Charles H. Burke used propaganda to attack Pueblo religion to support the Religious Crimes Code and to turn public opinion against the Pueblo Indians' (2017: 89).

<sup>29</sup>. At the turn of the century, the *Daily Ardmoreite of Oklahoma* informed its readers of the 'Moki Snake Dance', mentioning that 'in 1900 it was witnessed by more than a hundred tourists' ('Moki Snake Dance' 1901: 3). A 1914 *Bisbee Daily Review*, announces, 'Pagan Ceremony to Invoke Rain is Planned for This Week', (1914: 5). This eruption of touristic interest in Indigenous practices was preceded by much public spectatorship already in the nineteenth century, especially war dances (Pisani 2008: 90). See McNenly 2015.

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## READY FOR SNAKE DANCES

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### Railroads Prepared To Carry People to Arizona

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Railroads in many parts of the west are already making preparations for the Moki snake dance. This dramatic pagan ceremony of the Pueblo Indians will occur at Tusaya, Ariz., in September and is already attracting a great deal of attention as it is a rare event, and until recent years whites were not allowed to witness it.

Figure 5. Excerpt from 'Ready for Snake Dances', *Daily Silver State* (Nevada), 1 September 1903. *Chronicling America Digital Archive*.  
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86076224/1903-09-01/ed-1/seq-1/>

## NEW MEXICO SCENE OF YULE MIX-UP

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### Dances of Red Men, Spanish Rites and Anglo-Saxon Gaiety to Mark Celebration.

By the Associated Press.

SANTA FE, N. Mex., December 25.—  
It's a mixed-up Christmas here in  
New Mexico.

Pagan dances of the Red Men ceremonies of old Spain traditionally observed by descendants of proud Spanish Conquistadors—and the gaiety of the Anglo-Saxon Yuletide, all are blended when the State celebrates this holiday.

Figure 6. Excerpt from 'New Mexico Scene of Yuletide Mix-Up', *Evening Star* (Washington D.C.), 25 December 1935, p. A4. *Chronicling America Digital Archive*.  
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1935-12-25/ed-1/seq-4/>

of the Santa Fe Railway in 1914, but in 1923 he also choreographed *The Feather of the Dawn*, a large-scale dance work derivative of Hopi rituals (Shawn 1926: 19; Sherman 1989: 368). When Shawn returned to New Mexico to witness Pueblo Indigenous dances in 1925, he visited in January and attended a Winter Solstice dance at Isleta (Adams 2012: para. 1 of 11). He afterward choreographed his *Zuni Ghost Dance* (1931) drawing from his experience (Sherman 1989: 369-376).

Shawn did not align his artistic identity with ‘paganness’, even while partnering with Ruth St. Denis and co-directing their jointly founded Denishawn Dance Company and School. Whereas Ruth St. Denis — as discussed previously — explicitly addressed how her ‘puritan-pagan’ background informed her artistic practice, Ted Shawn instead worked with Christian historical formulas of ‘pagan dance’ without overtly using the term ‘pagan’. Drawing from the common colonial narrative of ‘pagans’ as developmentally inferior to Christianity, Shawn proposed that ‘the first magic use of dance’ within ‘the superstitions of pre-religion’ was historically supplanted by ‘the use of dance in the liturgy of the religions’ (Sherman 1989: 366).<sup>30</sup>

In her 2015 book *Indigenous Intellectuals*, historian Kiara Vigil critically discusses white spectatorial events that ‘called upon’ Indigenous peoples ‘to perform Indianness’ and project ‘a past as largely imagined by white audiences’ (2015: 3). Many such spectacles emerged in contexts of white tourism and produced what historian Amy Corbin terms ‘outsider authority’, a term which describes self-appointed white authority on Indigenous cultures oftentimes emergent from their spectatorship of Indigenous communities (2013: 196). Newspapers enticed white viewership by wielding the term ‘pagan dance’. Vigil and Corbin explain

that ‘pagan dance’ came to signify a performed ‘Indianness’ that was rendered understandable to white audiences through references to biblical narratives and settler-colonial histories of Christians and pagans. According to Denishawn dancer Jane Sherman, Shawn would have been well aware of the ‘pagan dance’ language used to describe Indigenous dance spectacles before white audiences (Sherman 1989: 368). From the time he was growing up in Kansas City, variations on articles describing Pueblo dance to tourists nationwide circulated through his hometown newspapers. These articles created white familiarity with the tribes and dances that Shawn would later incorporate into his modern dance works.

Two articles from Shawn’s hometown exemplify how newspaper writings conditioned white touristic interest in Pueblo dance while he was growing up. In 1898, for example, the *Kansas City Journal* published a human-interest piece titled ‘The Zuni and His Dance’ (1898: 15). Shawn would premier his *Zuni Ghost Dance* in 1931. An 1899 article on Pueblo dance titled ‘Indian Dancers Fear Camera’ described the Eagle Dance to Kansas City residents (1899: 6). Shawn would perform his version of this dance in 1923. To investigate newspaper writings on Indigenous dance from the places where Shawn grew into adulthood is to produce a body of records that read in description somewhat like Shawn’s own works. It is impossible to reconstruct what he read, but it is likely that he was well aware of the discourse on Pueblo dances that was circulating through newspapers. In Shawn’s lifetime, Pueblos also closed off their ritual activities to white spectatorship due, in part, to the heavy strain of tourism (Stausberg 2011: 183). The above article of 1899 prefigured Shawn’s approach to the Pueblo interdiction of photography. In *The American Ballet* (1926), Shawn wrote that no white dancer ‘would be able to reproduce’ the Pueblo dances he had seen (1926: 18). Scolieri, however, argues that Shawn articulated Pueblo dance as non-reproducible in order to camouflage that he ‘actively sought to capitalize on the [photography] ban by providing a live-action reenactment’

<sup>30</sup> Quoted by Sherman from an undated ‘Credo’ pamphlet written by Shawn. The same pamphlet is also cited in Scolieri’s recent biography of Shawn (2020: 485).

(2020: 24).<sup>31</sup> Shawn could also capitalise on the attention to Indigenous performances in US newspapers that over his lifetime had produced a white American public versed in standard, mass-mediated views of Indigenous dance, and widely interested in spectatorial opportunities.

Shawn used his outsider authority on performed 'Indianness' in pursuit of defining a new American art of concert dance.<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, a newspaper article from 1924 highlights that, in the public eye, the Americanism of the Denishawn Company was connected to their work with Indigenous themes:

Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn are not only American born, but have evolved a school of dance which is American and not European in any sense. Every dancer in the company is American born. And this company has pioneered in dealing with subjects the inspiration for which was found upon this continent. Ted Shawn has produced an Aztec ballet 'Xochitl' [...] and a Hopi Indian ballet 'Feather of the Dawn'. ('Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn Will Come to Bismarck with Big Ballet' 1924: 3)

Working with the Indigenous-historical Aztecs with the idea that they were the ancestors of Pueblo peoples, Shawn's ballets envisioned Indigenous antiquity and expressed a transtemporal vision common to 'pagan dance' themes.<sup>33</sup> If Shawn's concert dance was in part publicly

legitimised as American because it transformed Indigenous rituals from the so-called 'New World' into ballets, Shawn further worked to legitimise his art through eugenicist ideas. As dance scholar Paul Scolieri describes it in his recent biography, Shawn 'reasoned that his idealized white male body had the capacity to perfect the non-European, non-Christian dances he performed' (2020: 25). Consequently, neither Shawn's vision of an American high-art dance nor his approach to Indigenous dance can be isolated from his supremacist ideas.<sup>34</sup>

Working toward an American dance ideal, Shawn created 'Indian dances' that derived from a mix of Pueblo and Indigenous-historical sources. One of these mixtures, *Zuni Ghost Dance*, appears in newspapers reporting on Shawn's tour of 1931. The work included Shawn dressed in a rendition of the traditional headdress that women wore in the *Tablita* or *corn dance*. As the Denishawn dancer Jane Sherman describes it, *Zuni Ghost Dance* 'was a distillation of the exhausting, trancelike dances that were an integral part of the Ghost Dance religion' (1989: 376). Yet, the Southwestern Zuni were never involved in the *Ghost Dance*. Shawn drew the title from the musical score *Ghost Dance of the Zunis* by the professor and composer Carlos Troyer. Newspapers show that Troyer billed his Indianist music as true transmissions of Indigenous song to western staff notation ('Weird Melodies of a Strange New Mexican People' 1896: 18).<sup>35</sup> Such public claims to authenticity were common among the composers Shawn chose for his 'Indian dances'.<sup>36</sup> However,

<sup>31</sup>. Scolieri further attributes Shawn's statement to the Pueblo interdiction of photography, and that he 'meant to circumvent a possible backlash for his clear violation of the spirit of prohibition' of reproductions (2020: 182).

<sup>32</sup>. Shawn was by no means the first dancer to rely on outsider authority among white men. The Grand Order of the Iroquois, for example, was a group of non-Indian hobbyists who also performed Indigenous rituals. They treated their dancing of these rituals as a scholarly, research-oriented activity, inviting Indigenous lectures and enthusiastically attempting to undertake ethnographic studies of Indigenous groups (Deloria 1998: 136).

← <sup>33</sup>. For further analysis of Shawn's Aztec ballets and their comparability to his more Orientalist work, see Snow 2019.

<sup>34</sup>. It is striking that, apparently due to his appropriations, a white-run newspaper circulated on the White Earth Reservation mistook Shawn for an Indigenous man: 'Ted Shawn is about the only male Indian dancer now on the stage, and his pay very near equals a movie star's salary'. The piece suggested 'character dancing' like that of Shawn as a viable career option for local Ojibwe tribal members ('Many Avenues of Opportunity for the Indian 1925: 1).

## Conclusion: The Language of 'Pagan Dance'

Troyer's description of the Zuni 'Ghost Dance' instrumentation in a text accompanying his score did not match reality: whereas he cited the use of trumpets and gongs, these instruments, known to Troyer from their use in European classical music, were not used in any ceremony among Zuni or other Pueblo groups. Instead, the firebrands, bonfires, and procession mentioned in Troyer's text rather seem to refer to the well-known Shalako. Moreover, when Troyer described the Ghost Dance as 'calling into view and into presence the spirits of the departed', he too was distinctly drawing upon popular white accounts of the intertribal Ghost Dance Religion of 1889-1890, which I described in the first section of this article (Troyer 1904: 79).

Shawn's *Zuni Ghost Dance* ultimately reinforced Troyer's confused provenance of the dance. This confusion was continued through the writings of Denishawn dancer Jane Sherman. Shawn's own confused *Zuni Ghost Dance* not only reflected the universalist approaches of early modern dancers in their mining of 'pagan' danced spiritual forms, but reflected, as well, the participation of white artists in a wider US settler-colonial project. Fifty years of oppression since Wounded Knee — from massacre, to religious suppression, to assimilation policies, to capitalisation from Indigenous ritual through tourism — had been carried out through the self-claimed authority of white, Christian-American nationalism widely espoused in newspapers. That nationalism was also what Shawn hoped to uplift with dance art.

← 35. The same article recounts that, when Troyer 'declared that he could adapt them [Zuni melodies] to our system of music', the archaeologist Frank Cushing responded that it would be impossible. 'Nonetheless', continues the article, 'the musician persevered, and succeeded in transcribing and harmonizing' Zuni songs ('Weird Melodies of a Strange New Mexican People 1896: 18).

← 36. These include John Philip Sousa and Charles Wakefield Cadman. As *The Evening Star* put it, in the *Feather of the Dawn*, 'Cadman's authentically correct Indian music echoed the action of the dances' ('Amusements' 1923: 27).

In this article, I have endeavoured to show that American newspaper writings that termed Indigenous dance as 'pagan' may be seen to have contributed to the conditioning of the public reception of concert dance as 'pagan'. I turned to archives of historical newspapers, investigating how their white-centric settler-colonial language shaped the wider reception of dance in the US. I further investigated how mass-media use of the Christian historical connotations of 'pagan dance' built a vocabulary of dance's social, political, and spiritual meaning. The vocabulary of 'pagan dance' in newspapers was relatively consistent, but its consequences were contradictory: the language of 'pagan dance' facilitated white justification of the interdiction, belittlement, and otherisation of Indigenous dances even while it lent spiritual value and historical depth to the rise of modern dance.

In *How to Do Things with Words* (1955), J.L. Austin wrote of contractual performative utterances and famously articulated that performative statements are ‘not to *describe* my doing [...] it is to do it’ (1955: 6). Certainly, ‘pagan dance’ was in that sense performative: as a moniker, ‘pagan dance’ spurred specific vocabularies in newspaper writings that had the real-life effect of criminalising Indigenous dance in the US. However, Austin’s theory of language did not extend to a settler-colonial context wherein even contractual language, as inflicted by a colonial government, has continually subjected Indigenous peoples to unequal treatment and has failed to respect or address Indigenous epistemologies. The performativity of language, in other words, always demands the question: *whose language?* Turn-of-the-century newspapers meanwhile reflect the historical malleability of the colonial vocabularies of ‘pagan dance’ and show the performativity of language as formulated to inequitably apply to coloniser and colonised.

Even through anti-Indigenous language, historical newspapers speak of a US dance history shaped by Indigenous presence. Newspapers critiqued, ruminated, disparaged, and at times celebrated Indigenous dance while weaving Indigenous practices into narratives that envisioned the ‘pagan’ foundations of white American culture itself. Indigenous dance had already been vastly subjected to popular ‘pagan dance’ discourse when early modern dancers began to claim vocabularies of ‘pagan dance’ to situate their works in the American context. American dance history has, due to a long track record of extracting concert dancers of interest from social landscapes, treated the strong presence of Indigenous dance in the US as overwhelmingly irrelevant. As Jacqueline Shea Murphy wrote, ‘perhaps this absence itself speaks volumes’, arguing that ‘the recognition of Indian dance’s absence from modern dance history... [is] central to the story modern dance has told’ (2007: 147). I take a slightly more critical perspective, as absence is never a way of telling.

Through this small history of dance and language, I therefore propose that the privileged status of white American modern dance depends in part upon a long-term discursive double standard. The language of ‘pagan dance’ has been used to suppress Indigenous dance forms while it also provided cultural capital to early modern dancers. This double-standard has thus enabled a particular form of misappropriation — not only of actual dances or rituals, but also of historical value. Early modern dancers took up the ‘pagan dance’ moniker used in their own time against Indigenous dance, claimed through it a history of Christian interdiction and suppression as their specific burden, and envisioned themselves as pioneering proponents of the dance. Here, in this time, their pursuits remain an inheritance and a navigational device. Meanwhile, the duplicitous languages of ‘pagan dance’ continue to circulate, manifesting as a colonial inheritance and centring Christian historical narratives of dance and spiritual value.



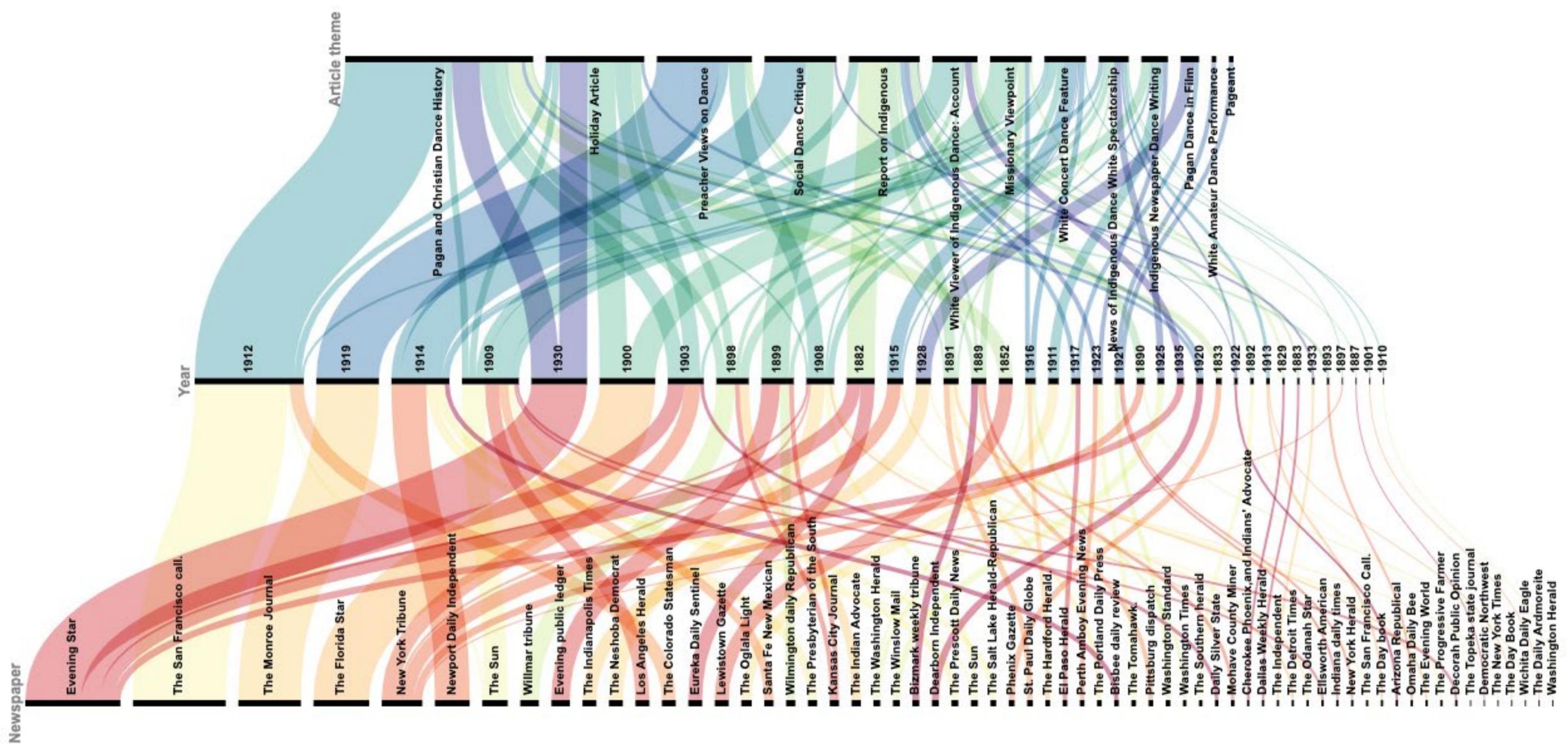


Figure 8: Alluvial Graph of 'pagan dance' articles by newspaper, year, and theme. This graph provides a more detailed look at what newspapers were consulted from the digital archive, from what years, as well as which 'pagan dance' article themes/types. The aim of this research has been to be as exhaustive as possible and the dataset includes all 'pagan dance' articles discovered in the archive that address 'pagan dance' in the time frame studied. To explore the visualisation in depth, see: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5512409> Developed in collaboration with Jan-Erik Stange and Franziska Diehr by use of Open Refine and RawGraphs.

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