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Paralyzed Traditions: European Influence on Global Dance

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Paralyzed Traditions: European Influence on Global Dance

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The Hula



What is the hula? → the traditional dance of Hawaii

How did Europe Influence the Hula?

- Captain Cook “discovered” Hawaii in 1778
 - new influx of traders and explorers
- Missionaries arrived in Hawaii in 1820 and wanted to convert the oral traditions and language of Hawaii into a written form
 - since the hula served to maintain culture, it was no longer as valued
 - considered the hula movements pagan and lascivious
 - did not realize the religious merit the hula held
 - banned the dance shortly after their arrival
- American Harry W. Foster witnessed a hula performance while visiting Hawaii and requested to take a tour group back with him
 - felt it represented the “barbaric” customs of the Hawaiian people
 - the hula in America became a turning point for the dance, as businessmen could now use it for commercialization and profit
- Hula became more well known following Pearl Harbor
 - hula had spread globally by the mid to late-1900s
 - hula schools now exist worldwide but do not hold the same cultural merit
- Today, when people think of the hula, they imagine grass skirts and coconut bras at a Hawaiian-themed party
 - while competitions and festivals continue to flourish, the greater American society keeps drifting away from tradition and instead focuses on tourism and profit.



Capoeira

What is Capoeira? → a multi-genre art form from Brazil that combines martial arts, dance, music, and singing

How did Europe Influence Capoeira?

- Capoeira began as a result of oppression and enslavement in Brazil
 - Europe brought enslaved individuals to Brazil via the transatlantic slave trade
 - enslaved individuals used capoeira as a means of physical expression when their voices were silenced
 - capoeira served as a “common language,” since the enslaved individuals hailed from different places in Africa
 - also used as a subtle fighting technique
 - capoeira demonstrates the relationship between art and power dynamics: the enslaved individuals used their art as cultural resilience
- During the Napoleonic Wars, Portuguese king Don João VI fled to Brazil
 - opened trade with other European countries and ended the mercantilist system
 - Rio de Janeiro’s population expanded, and in turn, the number of enslaved individuals increased as well
 - more enslaved individuals meant more capoeiristas
 - Don João VI wanted to suppress the capoeiristas and made capoeira a punishable crime
- Brazil continued to police capoeira until the 1930s
- capoeiristas travelled back to Europe and the U.S. to open new schools
 - capoeira now exists worldwide

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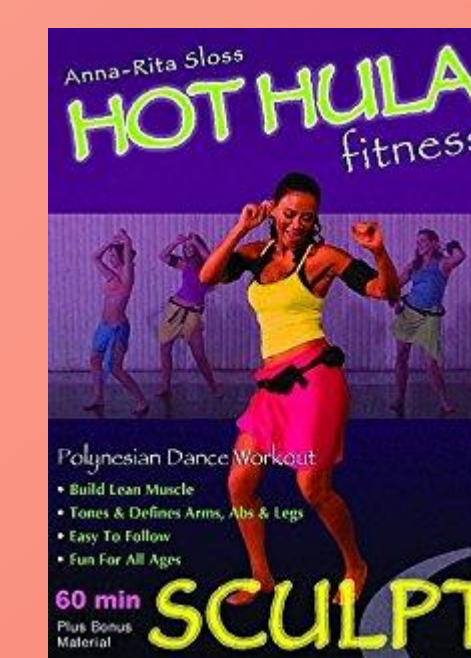
“Dance does not change fundamentally unless some fundamental dynamic in the culture changes”

~ Sharon Māhealani Rowe, dance scholar

Commonalities among Global Dances and Cultural Appropriation

- **Religious roots:** many traditional dances stem from religious traditions. Today, many of those original traditions have disappeared from the dances themselves.
- **Dance as a means of upward mobility:** because dancers were chosen based on talent rather than class or status, dancers within certain cultures had the opportunity to elevate themselves in society.
- **Cultural changes cause changes in dance:** whether colonialists or missionaries populated an area, many times this would hinder the traditional dances of the region.
- **Dance as a means of healing from cultural oppression:** when people groups were silenced, they used their bodies and their movement as a form of cultural resilience and bonding.
- **Ignorance leads to a ban:** as outsiders populated more of the world, they did not attempt to understand the traditional cultures and instead banned many dances.
- **Fascination with “the other”:** many dances have been exoticized by outsiders who simply view them as something “different.”

What’s Wrong with this Picture?



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Bharatanatyam

What is Bharatanatyam? → a genre of classical Indian dance practiced by Hindu women in South India; it stems from a former Indian dance, known as Sadir.

How did Europe Influence Bharatanatyam?

- As Europeans sought to colonize India, certain outsiders viewed Sadir and the associated devadasis (the female temple dancers) with disdain
 - viewed the clothing and movement as promiscuous
 - considered the women to be glorified prostitutes
- When Britain colonized India in the late 1700s and 1800s, the colonialists made no attempt to understand the Hindu religion
 - began an education system intended to reform the “pagan” worship and “erotic” dancing
- By the end of the 1800s, Hindu social reformers started an “anti-dance” (called antinatch) movement throughout South India
 - temple dances were banned and devadasis no longer held their positions in society
- Rukmini Devi helped revive Sadir into Bharatanatyam
 - met and married Englishman and sophist George Arundale
 - while in England, Devi met Anna Pavlova, who convinced Devi to study Sadir
 - changed the name from Sadir to Bharatanatyam
 - Indian dancers started touring Europe and the U.S.
- Bharatanatyam schools now exist worldwide



West African Dance

What is West African Dance? → the traditional dancing of West Africa. In many African languages, the word for “music” and the word for “dance” are interchangeable.

How did Europe Influence West African Dance?

- In West Africa, dance served a purpose for different types of ceremonies—births, coming-of-age rites, marriages, and funerals
- The transatlantic slave trade brought these dance traditions to the rest of the world
 - enslaved individuals continued to practice their traditional dances in their new locations
 - served as a response to the people’s oppression
- West African dance traditions found their way into European and American styles through the African diaspora
 - “for many generations now peoples of African descent have served as the creative source for most of the popular social dances and their accompanying music forms, not only in the United States, but throughout the Western Hemisphere” (Tarver 319).
 - cakewalk, ring-shout
- Missionaries in West Africa continue to play a role in traditional dances
 - as individuals convert to Christianity, they no longer “need” their former religious dances
- People today still try to preserve traditional West African Dance—as long as individuals are interested in keeping the art alive, it will continue