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## From *Buffalo Dance* to Tatanka Kcizapi Wakpala, 1894–2020: Indigenous Human and More-Than-Human Choreographies of Sovereignty and Survival

*Tria Blu Wakpa*

There was a time when our Lakota tribes were in complete harmony with all of the creatures of the lands and the birds that fly in the skies. We spoke with them in our languages and they talked with us. Our sacred customs and traditional ceremonies were a valuable part of our existence together. We took care of each other. Our spirituality with our circle depended on our right to imitate our dance movements and to share our voices. We did these out of righteousness and confidence. Our dependence on each other was a natural way of survival.

—George Blue Bird (Oglala Lakota), a direct descendant of  
Parts His Hair, a dancer in the 1894 film *Buffalo Dance*

This essay, which presents the first extensive study of the 1894 film *Buffalo Dance*, demonstrates the performance as a brilliant expression of Lakota survival. *Buffalo Dance* was shot only four years after the Massacre at Wounded Knee, in which the US government's Seventh Cavalry Regiment murdered three hundred Lakota Ghost Dancers.<sup>1</sup> It features the performers Last Horse, Parts His Hair, and Hair Coat, alongside two drummers, Pine and Strong Talker.<sup>2</sup> One of the earliest films to depict Native Americans, it was created as content for peephole Kinetoscope parlors throughout the United States.<sup>3</sup> The single-shot film—which takes place in a studio setting against black walls—is silent, black and white, and sixteen seconds in duration.<sup>4</sup> The Scottish inventor William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson<sup>5</sup> produced the film, and the German-born cinematographer William Heise<sup>6</sup> shot the work along with three others on September 24, 1894,<sup>7</sup> in Thomas Edison's Black Maria Studio, in West Orange, New Jersey, when William F. Cody and sixteen<sup>8</sup> “Oglala and Brulé Sioux [men and boys] had stopped into the studio for a couple of hours one Monday morning while touring in Brooklyn with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show.”<sup>9</sup> The Lakota performers' activities in the studio received considerable attention in the press the following day, with many articles stereotyping the dancers as savage and clashing with the Kinetoscope's “most advanced science.”<sup>10</sup>

At the time, all the Lakota men in the film were actors in Buffalo Bill's Wild West, the famed spectacle that traveled throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe, which staged outdoor shows depicting frontier scenes that shaped the public's conception of racial, gender, and national identities.<sup>11</sup>

Although the dancers' choreography in *Buffalo Dance* seems to depart significantly from the spectacles in Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows, these performances nevertheless provide important context for understanding the cinematic production. Native peoples constituted a central attraction in the Wild West shows, which featured reenactments of battles and buffalo hunts<sup>12</sup> and humans and more-than-human animals engaged in a variety of performances, including parades, races, horse riding, roping, and shooting acts.<sup>13</sup> In the 1890s, when the US government was attempting to assimilate Native peoples by banning their dances, languages, and martial arts and instituting laws that prevented Native people from leaving reservations,<sup>14</sup> Buffalo Bill's Wild West offered select Native people the opportunity to travel and earn a living, thereby thwarting the genocidal conditions caused by US colonization, including cultural prohibitions, imprisonment, and starvation.<sup>15</sup> Assimilation policies were intended to ultimately undermine Native land claims by socializing Native people into settler society and subverting their unique political status as citizens of and/or connected to tribal nations.

*Buffalo Dance* is a quintessential "American"<sup>16</sup> cinematic production.<sup>17</sup> Although the film has been mentioned extensively in literature,<sup>18</sup> previous scholars have failed to conduct community-engaged research or analyze the movement modalities depicted and therefore have neglected important details about the performance and what the dancers' choreographic choices clearly communicate. Much of the scholarship, for example, entirely overlooks the dancers' use of North American Hand Talk.<sup>19</sup> Familiar to people from hundreds of tribes, North American Hand Talk was Turtle Island's lingua franca prior to colonization—used for intertribal and intratribal purposes—often along with Indigenous spoken languages, but also in warfare and hunting contexts that made communicating in silence strategic and necessary.<sup>20</sup>

Using a Lakota, Indigenous, and dance studies lens, I argue that the *Buffalo Dance* performance evidences sovereignty and survival within and beyond US settler colonial structural and material confines. Drawing on and expanding Indigenous studies scholars' discussions of sovereignty, I define this concept as follows: Native expressions of agency and authority—rooted in Indigenous worldviews, languages, narratives, experiences, and practices—that relate to human and/or more-than-human collectives and promote Native well-being and



**Figure 1.** Video still from *Buffalo Dance* (1894). At the opening of the film, the three performers group closely together, with their knees bent in the center of the frame. William Heise, Camera, Inc Thomas A. Edison, and Hendricks, *Buffalo Dance*, performed by Last Horse, Parts His Hair, Hair Coat, Pine, and Strong Talker, produced by Dickson, W. K.-L., Uction United States: Edison Manufacturing Co, 1894, video, 0:32, <https://www.loc.gov/item/00694114/>.

futurities. I connect these comprehensions of sovereignty to the dominant, Lakota script of masculinity, which is associated with being a “provider and protector” for humans and more-than-humans,<sup>21</sup> because *Buffalo Dance* features five Lakota men as dancers and drummers.

The literature addressing *Buffalo Dance* focuses on the film as emblematic of early US cinema<sup>22</sup> and the trope of salvage ethnographic films representing Indigenous peoples and practices—in particular dance<sup>23</sup>—and, relatedly, the role of this work and other contemporaneous Edison films in racializing non-White bodies in the “American” imaginary.<sup>24</sup> Many scholars cite *Buffalo Dance* in passing and often fail to identify the dancers and performance accurately. Conflating the film’s title with its content, the cinema studies scholar Jeffery Geiger assumes that the film depicts a buffalo dance.<sup>25</sup> The United States Library of Congress’s description of the film uses quotations around “buffalo dance,” correctly implying that

the title of the film may not represent the type of dance being depicted; yet the critique is not entirely clear: “Three Sioux Indians in full regalia perform a ‘buffalo dance’, while two others use drums to supply a rhythm.”<sup>26</sup> The Library of Congress also lists “Dakota dancers” under its “Subjects” or keywords section for the film; however, the dancers are Lakota.<sup>27</sup> Contrary to the film’s title, *Buffalo Dance*, Last Horse, Parts His Hair, and Hair Coat may be performing an Omaha Dance<sup>28</sup> in the forefront of the shot, while Pine and Strong Talker, who are seated, drum in the background. Although Lakota people do have a buffalo dance accompanied by “bellowing and whooping,”<sup>29</sup> as the reporters present for the 1894 performance described,<sup>30</sup> little information about this dance form is available in scholarly sources,<sup>31</sup> and with the exception of some powwows, the buffalo dance is rarely practiced today.<sup>32</sup> George Blue Bird—an admired Lakota knowledge keeper and artist and a direct descendant of Parts His Hair, a dancer in the 1894 film—witnessed buffalo dances done in his community, Hokiyohloka Wakpala (Pass Creek), on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, from 1963 to 1973.<sup>33</sup> As Blue Bird explained to me, buffalo dances typically evidence movement qualities and regalia associated with buffalo: Lakota male dancers

would do the motion of the buffalo when he scrapes his hoof, and they would sing, and they would pray, and they would dance to the buffalo, hoping that [the buffalo] would come their way. . . . They imitated the buffalo as best as they could. Some of them had the buffalo tail. They would use that as a whip. Kind of like for part of their outfit.<sup>34</sup> The purpose of the dance was for Lakota people to call [the buffalo]. [Lakota people] did it to beckon [the buffalo], especially when the people were hungry. [The dancers] would put on their head-dress with horns. . . . [Lakota people] would sing, “Pte oyate, pte oyate / Upo, upo / Lila louncinpiyelo. Buffalo, buffalo / Come, come / We are really hungry.”<sup>35</sup>

Deacon Ben Black Bear, a highly respected elder, renowned for his knowledge of the Lakota language and culture, and a performer from a well-known dance family, shared that *Buffalo Dance* depicted an Omaha Dance after we viewed the film together.<sup>36</sup> Scholarship about the prevalence of the Omaha Dance and its variants in Wild West shows also supports Black Bear’s reading.<sup>37</sup> The name of the film may function as a form of advertising, promoting Buffalo Bill’s brand and a way to differentiate the dances filmed that day for marketing purposes.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Michael Gaudio demonstrates that the Edison Company prioritized marketing over accurately describing the Lakota dance forms.<sup>39</sup> The title *Buffalo Dance* also caters to settler colonial preoccupations, portraying Indigenous peoples as powerful, strong, but nearing extinction—as buffalo were thought to be at the time.<sup>40</sup> However, Lakota and buffalo inter-

dependencies are central to Lakota ontologies, which also illustrate how the film's title could be meaningful to Lakota people. Nick Estes, a citizen of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, notes that Lakota people sometimes use the term *Pte Oyate*, or Buffalo Nation, to describe themselves.<sup>41</sup> Lakota people have also articulated their connection to the buffalo through the settler colonial violence that they and their more-than-human relatives have endured.<sup>42</sup> This may be another reason why the film is titled *Buffalo Dance*, as an allusion to Lakota links with the Buffalo Nation. It is also possible that the Lakota dancers themselves proposed this name for the intricate and innovative choreography that they likely created for the studio setting.

I argue that the choreography illustrates expressions of agency and authority aimed at bringing a Lakota future into being by advancing ongoing Lakota practices and addressing future audiences.<sup>43</sup> Because settler colonial discourses frequently obscure Native sovereignty and relegate Native peoples and practices to the past, analyzing Native cultural productions through the lens of Native sovereignty and in terms of Indigenous peoples' contemporary presence and futurity is an important tactic of resistance. My concept of sovereignty builds on the work of several Indigenous studies scholars.<sup>44</sup> Until recently, scholars have primarily delineated sovereignty in the legal realm and social sciences and in ways that are recognizable to the settler state.<sup>45</sup> However, Michelle Raheja and Mark Rifkin have emphasized that broader and Native-centered understandings of sovereignty, beyond a Eurocentric lens, are critical.<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, some Indigenous studies scholarship takes "sovereignty" as self-explanatory,<sup>47</sup> and rarely do Indigenous studies scholars succinctly and directly define what they mean by this concept,<sup>48</sup> at times even articulating that this omission is purposeful.<sup>49</sup> Yet Indigenous studies scholars do highlight the inextricable linkages between sovereignty, survival, futurity,<sup>50</sup> and even freedom.<sup>51</sup> They also connect sovereignty to the collective, including human and more-than-human kin,<sup>52</sup> and "traditions."<sup>53</sup> In the Indigenous context, the focus on "traditions" implies bodies and movement forms and the overlapping temporalities of past, present, and future, which may depart from Eurocentric constructs of time. Highlighting the connections between Native "traditions" and collective self-determination for and toward the future,<sup>54</sup> Robert Warrior's process-oriented framework of "intellectual sovereignty" has been essential to delineations of sovereignty in Indigenous studies.<sup>55</sup> His theorization combats the construct of Cartesian dualism, which associates Indigenous peoples and practices with the body and irrationality and devalues movement modalities in general.

However, because Cartesian dualism subordinates Indigenous bodies and movement practices and positions them as inferior and even nonexistent sites

of knowledge production,<sup>56</sup> Warrior's concept of "intellectual sovereignty" can be misleading. Instead, Brendan Hokowhitu's theories of "body logic" and "embodied sovereignty"<sup>57</sup> and Mique'l Dangeli's framework of "dancing sovereignty"<sup>58</sup> emphasize how Indigenous bodies and movement modes interweave with sovereignty. Hokowhitu highlights how, according to Māori understandings, the body is a site of intellect,<sup>59</sup> and dance can create immediate kinesthetic and temporal experiences of "radical alterity that reside 'beyond rational thought.'"<sup>60</sup> Dangeli's dancing sovereignty similarly illuminates dance as integral to Indigenous peoples' assertion of their self-determination.<sup>61</sup> Dangeli builds on Michelle Raheja's concept of "visual sovereignty,"<sup>62</sup> which describes Native peoples' authority and responsibility to represent themselves spiritually, individually, and relationally with humans and more-than-humans, and in ways that contribute to human and more-than-human healing.<sup>63</sup> Raheja's concept of visual sovereignty usefully emphasizes how expressions of sovereignty can be revealed through an analysis of the visual realm, including film, "dance . . . and the visual arts."<sup>64</sup>

Visual sovereignty has at times been discussed in ways that seem to imply disconnect from legal sovereignty.<sup>65</sup> Yet Dangeli's concept of dancing sovereignty indicates the linkages of visual/dancing sovereignty with legal sovereignty by identifying how Squamish dances enact governmental protocol.<sup>66</sup> Building on Dangeli's work, I argue that legal and intellectual/visual/embodied/dancing sovereignty are fundamentally intertwined, as in the context of US assimilative policies and institutions, intellectual/visual/embodied/dancing expressions have provided crucial opportunities for Lakota and other Native people to perpetuate their physical and cultural survival, and by extension, their enduring fight for Indigenous sovereignty and freedom, including in the legal realm. Recognizing the ways that legal and intellectual/visual/embodied/dancing sovereignty are interlocking also underscores how movement modes are essential sites of inquiry. Rooted in Indigenous and dance studies methodologies, my articulation of sovereignty thus highlights the necessity of recognizing the knowledge that bodies and movement modalities offer, the connections among legal, visual, and sensory activations of sovereignty, and the process of enacting past, present, and future. Accordingly, I consider the history and politics of the bodies and movements in the *Buffalo Dance* performance not only in the late nineteenth century but also in the contemporary moment.

This essay thus expands on the work of Jill Carter, Heather Davis-Fisch, and Ric Knowles, who discuss sovereignty in regard to *Buffalo Dance* and also acknowledge the film's contemporary circulation.<sup>67</sup> By drawing on interviews

that I did with Lakota and other Native experts about the film, close personal connections to Lakota communities, and scholarship written by and in collaboration with well-respected Lakota elders, I am able to analyze *Buffalo Dance* through a Native and Lakota tribally specific lens. A non-Lakota woman of Filipino, European, and tribally unenrolled Native ancestries, I am a scholar and practitioner of dance, martial arts, and North American Hand Talk who has been conducting community-engaged research with Lakota people for over a decade. Recognizing that academic research has frequently not benefited Indigenous people,<sup>68</sup> I use decolonizing methodologies, centering the knowledge of Native and Lakota experts, crediting them for their contributions, providing honoraria and culturally appropriate gifts to them, and, if they like, allowing them to read my writing prior to publication to make any changes they want to their words or my analysis. I have also built sustained working relationships and friendships with some of the interviewees, which can also be viewed as a component of decolonizing methodologies.<sup>69</sup>

This essay also uses dance studies methodologies to conduct a “choreographic analysis,” a primary intervention that dance studies makes in the text-centric academy by deciphering the knowledge and meanings that bodies, their movement qualities, and arrangements in space and time offer while locating them historically and politically within structures of power. Conversely, nondance scholars writing about *Buffalo Dance* tend to conduct minimal movement analysis<sup>70</sup> and emphasize the performers’ breaking of the fourth wall through their eye contact with the viewer.<sup>71</sup> These scholars also do not contextualize the dancers’ movements within Lakota conventions, which again misses important significances of the choreography.<sup>72</sup> For example, according to Lakota norms, looking someone in the eye can convey anger and disrespect.<sup>73</sup>

The next section of this essay, rooted in the insights of Lakota and other Native experts, offers a choreographic analysis of *Buffalo Dance*, which showcases the performance as a vivid expression of endurance and empowerment. I conclude by considering the contemporary implications of *Buffalo Dance* as they relate to Tatanka Kcizapi Wakpala (Buffalo Fighting Creek), another performance of sovereignty and survival created in 2020 by Blue Bird while incarcerated. Historically and contemporarily, imprisonment is salient in the Lakota context as the 1885 Major Crimes Act—still in effect today—overrode Lakota sovereignty and restorative justice practices in the legal sense.<sup>74</sup> Currently, on occupied Lakota lands, South Dakota jails the greatest number of people per capita in the United States, of which Native people are disproportionately represented.<sup>75</sup> Connecting *Buffalo Dance* to Blue Bird’s contemporary





**Figure 2.**  
Video still from *Buffalo Dance* (1894).  
The center dancer stands in a grappler's  
stance, with his knees deeply bent and  
stares into the camera.

choreographies at the South Dakota State Penitentiary, where he has served thirty-seven years of a life sentence without the possibility of parole, affirms how the *Buffalo Dance* performance extends into the present and the future.

### **Indigenous Choreographies of Sovereignty and Survival in *Buffalo Dance***

Conducting a close reading of the choreography in *Buffalo Dance* through the lens of sovereignty necessitates attentiveness to the overall impression of the performance, the dance's form, including its movement modalities and their context, and how each individual dancer expresses himself in relation to the collective. Grouped closely together in the confined space of the long shot, the dancers circle counterclockwise.<sup>76</sup> All three wear feather headpieces. Two wear feather bustles, one with longer feathers that resemble a rooster's tail, and the other with shorter feathers, resembling a male greater prairie chicken's tail. Along with their attire, the performers' dancing strongly suggests chicken

movements. All the dancers make abrupt, omnidirectional head motions, and one dancer alternates between raising his thrust-out chest and bending at the waist, so that his torso is horizontal with the earth. Their mobilities are martial; two dancers brandish tomahawks while the other holds a short stick. Employing repetitive, chicken-like bobbing, each dancer, in succession, offers a sign in North American Hand Talk.<sup>77</sup>

Black Bear's identification of this performance as an Omaha Dance signals the dance's enactment of legal sovereignty through its history and also the possibilities for strengthening community bonds and spiritually protecting Lakota people during warfare.<sup>78</sup> The Omaha Dance is the foundation for the contemporary powwow and many men's performance styles<sup>79</sup> and is typically based on more-than-human animal movements.<sup>80</sup> The history of the Omaha Dance evidences the international, diplomatic, and economic relationships among tribal nations.<sup>81</sup> The Pawnee people originated the Omaha Dance, which they referred to as the "Iruska Dance," and gave or sold the performance to the Omaha/Ponca Nation, who then sold it to the Yanktonai Dakota and Teton Lakota; "Both nations called the ceremony 'Omaha Dance' in honor of the people from whom they had bought it."<sup>82</sup> Following US efforts from the 1880s to the 1920s to prohibit the Omaha Dance, not all Lakota people supported its ongoing practice.<sup>83</sup> However, the Omaha Dance also communicated and facilitated unity among Lakota people.<sup>84</sup> Similar to the scholar Mark Thiel, Black Bear stated that the Omaha Dance can "symbolically show the actions of war, [such as] reenacting a battle or . . . battle scenes, sneaking up on an enemy, or attack."<sup>85</sup> Because Buffalo Bill's Wild West likewise featured reenactments of battles and buffalo hunts,<sup>86</sup> the *Buffalo Dance* performance perfectly fulfills show business and Lakota conventions while innovating them for the Kinetoscope. Thiel explains that for Lakota men, practicing the Omaha Dance in community settings and Wild West shows somewhat ameliorated the crisis that colonization caused by offering them an activity and an outlet.<sup>87</sup>

Similarly, the more-than-human animal mobilities in *Buffalo Dance*, which suggest prairie chickens and other wild chickens as possible inspiration, contribute to sovereignty through human and more-than-human collectivity, healing, and longevity. Literature on the Omaha Dance has often neglected to mention the form's more-than-human animal mobilities.<sup>88</sup> However, the more-than-human movement qualities apparent in the Omaha Dance are significant because of the relationships between the Lakota and other Native peoples—and in particular, men/warriors—prairie chickens, and chickens, as articulated through dance and other forms of storytelling. Native and settler discourses alike represent the male prairie chicken as renowned for its mating

dance.<sup>89</sup> One origin story for the contemporary Prairie Chicken or Chicken Dance describes the movement mode as a gift exchanged between a Blackfoot male warrior and Prairie Chicken Nations;<sup>90</sup> in this way, the dance symbolizes Native human and more-than-human interactions. A Lakota narrative details how a deathly sick, Lakota male warrior was cured by embodying a rooster's movement and song; this experience, and the rooster's crow in particular, originated "the first song that was openly sung to the people."<sup>91</sup>

In Lakota and Native dances, past and present, chicken and prairie chicken movements also connote a way to express a romantic interest,<sup>92</sup> fertility, sexual potency, and reproduction,<sup>93</sup> all of which have the potential to contribute to perseverance. Whereas prairie chickens are indigenous to Turtle Island, chickens are purportedly not; however, they do predate Christopher Columbus's arrival in America by over a century.<sup>94</sup> In the Diné context, Marsha Weisiger notably complicates what constitutes indigeneity in regard to more-than-humans with whom Native people form vital relationships, by explaining that some Diné creation stories conceive of supposedly nonnative sheep as created on Diné land even prior to Diné people themselves.<sup>95</sup> A dynamic understanding of what constitutes Indigenous more-than-humans seems to operate at least somewhat similarly in the Lakota context in regard to chickens, which again contribute "the first song that was openly sung to the people."<sup>96</sup> Moreover, as Severt Young Bear and R. D. Theisz discuss, Lakota stories recall a "time in the Black Hills [that] there used to be wild chickens."<sup>97</sup>

As with the buffalo, settlers have detrimentally affected the greater prairie chickens' population.<sup>98</sup> Yet unlike the buffalo, which are widely associated with Native peoples, greater prairie chickens are far less apparent as signifiers of Native identity in the US cultural imaginary. The Native constructions of the prairie chicken as brave and generous—notably also important qualities for Lakota masculinity—strikingly contrast with settler discourses in which an informal denotation of "chicken" is a person who is afraid. Blue Bird also clarified that the prairie chickens have observed humans and mimicked them.<sup>99</sup> In other words, humans are not the only animal capable of studying other species' movements and incorporating this knowledge into their bodies, which can challenge settler colonial constructions of humans as intellectually superior to more-than-humans and anthropocentric delineations of sovereignty.

In addition to their movements, the dancers also evoke prairie chickens and wild chickens with their regalia, the objects they hold, and the Hand Talk signs that each performs. It is unclear who each of the dancers is, so unfortunately, I cannot refer to them by name. Instead, I discuss their dancing based

on the order in which they offer North American Hand Talk signs. When the film begins, the dancers are already in motion. Fastened around his neck, the first dancer wears a large object—perhaps even a deceased more-than-human animal, such as a chicken—that creates the appearance of girth. A rooster similarly has a thick neck, and in his mating dance, a male greater prairie chicken inflates and deflates air sacks on the sides of his neck, which interestingly make a “drum-like” sound, the instrument to which the dancers perform.<sup>100</sup> As *Blue Bird* accurately described, the “male prairie chicken . . . can move his chest. It’s got a certain beat to it.”<sup>101</sup> The dancer also handles a wooden stick, the size of a club, which could be used as a weapon and symbolizes hunting and warfare or providing and protecting, all actions integral to Lakota masculinity.<sup>102</sup> The stick may also symbolize a phallic object and the fertility and sexual potency of the dancer and/or prairie chicken or rooster whom the dancer embodies.<sup>103</sup>



**Figure 3.** Video still from *Buffalo Dance* (1894). The performer on the left points down with his left index finger, signing that he is tracking something.



**Figure 4.** Video still from *Buffalo Dance* (1894). The dancer in the center makes the dual sign for “cut throat” and the Lakota nation as another performer in front of him bends forward, so the sign is visible.

This first dancer communicates indomitability and ongoing Lakota warrior prowess, which has been inseparable from Lakota physical and cultural survival. Circling toward the camera, he crouches lower and looks down, in

the direction of his left index finger, which points to the ground/earth as he wiggles his other digits. Dr. Lanny Real Bird (Hidatsa Crow)—a North American Hand Talk expert I spoke with who has dedicated over two decades to revitalizing Native signed and spoken languages—told me that the dancer indicates he and the others are tracking something, perhaps a human enemy or more-than-human animal.<sup>104</sup>

Momentarily, the first performer raises his torso perpendicular to the ground, shimmying his shoulders and extending his neck upward; his thrust-out chest connotes self-assurance, pride, and even cockiness aimed at “impressing” a romantic interest.<sup>105</sup> By shaking his shoulders, he also resembles the movement of the male prairie chicken during his mating dance, and in changing levels, he suggests the way that two male prairie chickens challenge and charge each

other to secure their territory.<sup>106</sup> Then he lowers his chest once again, parallel to the ground, which allows the second dancer to visibly sign. The complex coordination of the dancers' choreography clearly indicates that this performance has been staged for the camera, so that the viewer sees each of the signs in the particular progression.

The second dancer directly addresses the camera, connoting the past and persistent threat of Lakota sovereignty. Like the first dancer, he holds a stick. Dancing in a grappler's stance, the performer transitions from a low, crouched position with a deep bend in his knees to a more upright posture. As he circles somewhat behind the first dancer, his left arm angles like a chicken wing. With his hand at his waist, he appears to reach for something, perhaps a small knife or blade, but the object—if it exists—remains indistinguishable. As the dancer moves toward the middle of the frame—taking the center amid the other circling performers—he takes his left hand to the right side of his neck and draws it across before momentarily making eye contact with the camera, which is the dual sign for “cut throat” and Lakota.<sup>107</sup> He continues his circular trajectory with equanimity, head nodding, body dipping. His nonchalant transition suggests that he is *not* unsettled by the settler state.

By making the sign for “cut throat” and Lakota, the second performer introduces himself and the other dancers and visually communicates Lakota sovereignty and its life-and-death stakes. According to Fred Malon Hans, “Sioux,” an outsider term for Lakota people, “means ‘cut-throat,’ ‘Si’ for ‘cut’ and ‘oux’ for throat.”<sup>108</sup> Taken together, the first and second dancers' signs indicate that Lakota power, while enduring, here remains focused on tracking an enemy or prey. The emphasis on Lakota sovereignty matters, because as Luana Ross explains, there is a direct relationship between the settler state in its attempts to legitimate its claims to land by rendering Native people as “‘deviant’ and ‘criminal.’”<sup>109</sup> Estes emphasizes that in “settler vernacular, ‘Sioux’ became equivalent to ‘criminal’ and was used to justify invasion and endless war.”<sup>110</sup> In simultaneously signing “cut throat” and the Lakota nation, the second dancer clearly connects the performance to Lakota sovereignty and calls for the film to be read with a lens that centers Lakota people and practices as normative. It is the imposition of settler colonialism that has constructed Lakota people and practices, such as the Omaha Dance, as aberrant and illegal. Yet, because *Sioux* is an outsider term for Lakota people, this sign could also indicate the dancer's reappropriation of a disparaging term.

While the second dancer is still finishing signing “cut throat,” the third performer swiftly and skillfully steps toward the camera. In what could be considered a fighting stance, his front foot repeatedly lifts and lowers to the

floor with stylistic boldness while he holds a tomahawk. The fighting stance and tomahawk imply warfare and hunting, practices interrelated with spirituality.<sup>111</sup> Protecting and providing for one's people through warfare, hunting, and spirituality—all of which *Buffalo Dance* represents—are also connected to Lakota sovereignty and survival.<sup>112</sup> The third dancer then stares directly at the viewer and elevates his chest, seemingly growing in height. According to Real Bird, this dancer communicates, “I will kill him,” through North American Hand Talk and martial movements.<sup>113</sup> The dancer forms a loose fist with his left hand and brings it across his body to his right collarbone, which he thumps three times, a sign for “I,” while holding an intense gaze.<sup>114</sup>



**Figure 5.**

Video still from *Buffalo Dance* (1894). The performer on the left forms a loose fist with his left hand and brings it across his body to his right collarbone, which he thumps three times, a sign for “I.”

The dancer menacingly brandishes the tomahawk above his head—still momentarily staring into the camera—and shakes it rapidly thrice, emphasizing his threat, and along with it, Lakota masculinity. Acosia Red Elk, a ten-time champion Jingle Dress dancer from the Umatilla Tribe, shared with me that at times contemporary powwow dancers will use “weapons . . . like they’re in battles. So that’s the warrior mentality, that’s protection.”<sup>115</sup> Red Elk’s description links individual identity to safeguarding the community.



**Figure 6.**  
Video still from *Buffalo Dance* (1894). The dancer in the center of the frame wields his tomahawk above his head as the other two performers circle behind.

After the third performer finishes signing “I will kill him” at the back of the circle, the first dancer repeats the sign for tracking. In the final seconds of the film, the third dancer bobs and weaves like a boxer; he lowers his level, and his shoulders roll from side to side, followed by swift, sudden movements of his head—all of which also correspond with a prairie chicken’s typical movements. Despite the undeniable clarity of the dancers’ sign language, there is a magnificent and generative ambiguity as to *whom or what* they are tracking and plotting to destroy—human, cinematographer, viewer, more-than-human, perhaps settler colonialism itself.

Although much of the scholarship on *Buffalo Dance* dismisses the possibility that the Lakota dancers may have adapted their choreography for film, based on my reading above, it seems very likely that *Buffalo Dance* was not simply a “reenactment” but an invention for the screen, expressing sovereignty, survival, and futurity.<sup>116</sup> Futurity was likely on at least some of the dancers’ minds, as an 1894 article states that the Lakota dancers “had been told that the strange thing pointed at them . . . would show them to the world until after the sun had slept his last sleep.”<sup>117</sup> In the film, the dancers’ tight circle is clearly designed to fit within the frame of the stationary camera, a strong contrast with photos



of Lakota men practicing the Omaha Dance in the 1890s in community contexts that depict them in spacious, outdoor settings with dozens of dancers.<sup>118</sup> *Buffalo Dance* was the final film that the Lakota dancers shot that day in the studio,<sup>119</sup> and the sophistication of its choreography for the camera evidently departs from the earlier film, today titled *Sioux Ghost Dance*,<sup>120</sup> which likely also depicts an Omaha Dance.<sup>121</sup> This suggests that the performers may have polished their choreographies within a couple hours, despite an 1894 *New York Press* article that claims the performers “didn’t understand”<sup>122</sup> the principles of the Kinetoscope.

In *Buffalo Dance*, the performers have also choreographed the North American Hand Talk signs in succession and in a way that is visible to the camera. They weave in and out of the circle they create, sometimes moving together as one group; they change their order and are very attuned to one another and to who is in the spotlight at any given moment. Conversely, dances in community settings are typically improvised and done in a circle, surrounded by audience members, so there is seldom group choreography or movements focused on a single direction.<sup>123</sup>

The Omaha Dance and Indigenous sign language not only illuminate sovereignty, survival, and futurity but also revise cinematic histories in a notable way. The North American Hand Talk signs that the dancers employ demonstrate a clear attempt to maintain autonomy over their own practice, as if they knew that viewers would watch their performance out of context. Interestingly, whereas Real Bird stated that performers today still incorporate North American Hand Talk into Native powwow dance forms—for example, to communicate shooting at an enemy<sup>124</sup>—Black Bear told me he was not familiar with Native dances that incorporate Indigenous sign language.<sup>125</sup> Black Bear’s comment that it is atypical for Native dance to include North American Hand Talk may make the depiction in *Buffalo Dance* all the more remarkable, because the performers’ signing suggests that their possible innovations of the dance may have been a way to subversively communicate with audiences—and Indigenous viewers in particular—in the present and future. Last Horse, Parts His Hair, and Hair Coat’s use of North American Hand Talk shows that they may have adapted their dance for cinematic audiences to convey dialogue and contextualize their performance, much like title cards. A convention of silent film, title cards have two types, dialogue and expository titles,<sup>126</sup> which also serve the same purposes as the dancers’ use of North American Hand Talk. However, title cards were not invented until 1902, nearly a decade after *Buffalo Dance* was filmed.<sup>127</sup> Indeed, as Real Bird told me, “[the dancers] didn’t have captions, so they signed.”<sup>128</sup> Cinematic histories have yet to recognize the Lakota dancers’ important intervention.

### From *Buffalo Dance* to Tatanka Kcizapi Wakpala, 1894–2020

Largely because of Cartesian dualism, and relatedly, the ways that Native peoples, practices, epistemologies, and expertise are often obscured in settler colonial constructions, “American” mainstream and scholarly narratives have frequently disregarded or misunderstood much of the Lakota dancers’ performance in *Buffalo Dance*.<sup>129</sup> In contrast, a choreographic analysis of *Buffalo Dance* in consultation with Lakota and other Native experts has allowed me to reveal the brilliance of this past, present, and future production as it communicates and enacts Lakota sovereignty and survival. Thus the broader implications of this case study point to the ways that dance and Native studies methodologies can deeply enrich the field of American studies.

At the same time, the scope of this essay cannot fully capture the incredible layers of knowledge that are embedded in this dance. Facets of *Buffalo Dance* that remain untheorized include the multiple cultural meanings of the dancers’ regalia and Pine’s and Strong Talker’s drumming. Although when *Buffalo Dance* was filmed, the drumming and the dancers’ “bellowing and whooping” were indeed audible to those present at the performance,<sup>130</sup> the archival production that circulates today is silent. Accordingly, future scholarship might consider more how sovereignty can be theorized as silent, an Indigenous tactic of subversion, similar to when Indigenous people’s actions are illegible to the settler state.<sup>131</sup> Further and certainly critical to the present essay’s approach, Native studies scholars have theorized sovereignty as “dynamic”<sup>132</sup> and “always in motion.”<sup>133</sup> Yet a dance studies lens—which understands immobility as a choreographic choice—might also encourage us to more carefully consider when and how sovereignty is still.<sup>134</sup>

Today, at least some Native people view *Buffalo Dance*, which circulates open-access through the Library of Congress’s website and YouTube channel,<sup>135</sup> *not* as an archaic film but as an enduring and powerful critique. In 2015, Neon Nativez—a Diné/Navajo DJ, producer, and artist<sup>136</sup>—released a remix video, “Burn Your Village to the Ground,” on Facebook, which includes the 1894 *Buffalo Dance* and *Sioux Ghost Dance* films alongside other historical and contemporary footage from diverse sources.<sup>137</sup> The title, “Burn Your Village to the Ground,” derives from words spoken by the character Wednesday Addams in the 1993 film *Addams Family Values*.<sup>138</sup> After critiquing the enduring violence of US settler colonialism, Wednesday states that she will “burn the [Pilgrim’s] village to the ground,” all of which is depicted in the remix.<sup>139</sup> The remix has received over 192,000 views on Facebook and over 4 million views on YouTube.<sup>140</sup> Accompanying the remix is The Halluci Nation’s song “Burn Your Village to the Ground”<sup>141</sup>; The Halluci Nation (formerly A Tribe Called

Red)<sup>142</sup> is “an acclaimed electronic DJ collective known for their genre-bending mix of hip-hop, reggae, dubstep, and First Nations musical traditions.”<sup>143</sup> Neon Nativez’s cultural production, which includes images from the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre, highlights intratribal connections in terms of Native peoples’ experiences of colonization and resistance through the realm of dance. North American Hand Talk and music add additional layers of complexity to the 1894 performance.<sup>144</sup> For George Blue Bird, the connection to *Buffalo Dance* is also familial.

I began writing about *Buffalo Dance* about six months prior to meeting Blue Bird, at a powwow held at the South Dakota State Penitentiary in 2017 for Native men who are imprisoned<sup>145</sup> and their guests. Only two years later I realized that he was a direct descendant of Parts His Hair when I began asking him about whether he thought the dancers and drummers names were Dakota—as they are identified in the Library of Congress—or Lakota. Blue Bird recognized his ancestor’s name, and along with the words that I include at the beginning of this essay, sent me copies of his genealogy and family photographs. As the prison prohibits internet access for the people who are incarcerated there, Blue Bird has yet to see his ancestor’s performance in *Buffalo Dance*. Yet, through “the futured history . . . of a prior body”<sup>146</sup>—that is, Parts His Hair’s body—Blue Bird is a part of the performance. Also, like Parts His Hair, Blue Bird is a Lakota man navigating and attempting to survive settler colonial material and structural confines through creating human and more-than-human choreographies that enact Lakota sovereignty.

On my last birthday, Blue Bird called me from the prison to share a story with me—a thoughtful and generous gesture, a gift he had prepared from one writer to another.<sup>147</sup> Blue Bird works as a groundskeeper; the pay is not as much as for some of the other jobs in the prison, but he likes being outside. He told me about a 120-foot ditch that he had dug months ago in a straight line in the prison yard, so he could see once again what a creek looks like. This act of self-determination within the carceral context was influenced, he told me, by the multiple conversations and correspondences that Blue Bird and I had while I was writing this essay, which were inspired by his ancestor’s performance. For

**Figure 7.**

Image of an untitled painting by George Blue Bird (2021). This depiction shows one side of a two-sided painting that George Blue Bird—a direct descendant of Parts His Hair—created for this essay and gifted to the author at a powwow held in December 2021 at the South Dakota State Penitentiary. At the powwow, Blue Bird gave the author four, two-sided paintings in total; however, he shared with the author that the painting pictured was his favorite of the eight images. At Blue Bird’s request, the author was a keynote speaker for this powwow and discussed the vitality of Native dance.



people who are incarcerated and those serving long-term sentences in particular, self-determination, “even choices that offer only the illusion of control,”<sup>148</sup> is vital to their well-being and futurity. In honor of his ancestor, Blue Bird named the creek Tatanka Kcizapi Wakpala, or Buffalo Fighting Creek. Yet Blue Bird, who grew up on the Pine Ridge Reservation about four miles from a buffalo pasture, has also recounted other familial stories about buffalo. He told me that his father was a hunter and ranger who would speak to the buffalo, along with the elk and deer. His father was “always friendly” with the buffalo: “He’d ask them where [their kids] are. . . . He said [to the buffalo], ‘You live like us. You’ve been through hell.’ He said, ‘You lost your families.’ He said, ‘Now we live on the reservation and it’s faster. It’s got a big fence up. You live on the same reservation.’ He said, ‘But we are one.’”<sup>149</sup>

On the day that Blue Bird called, the snow on Lakota lands had finally melted enough so that the water flowed through the ditch, like a creek that Blue Bird recalled from the “free world.”<sup>150</sup> He said that he dammed the water with stones and, in a different choreography that, like *Buffalo Dance*, adapts to the exigencies of the moment and celebrates human and more-than-human interdependencies, “got down on [his] hands and knees,” sending prayers, singing songs, and giving thanks.<sup>151</sup> When I told him that I appreciated his story and, with his permission, would like to share it in my writing, he sent me these words through the online system that the prison contracts with:

During the night it rained and I went out right away this morning to check on my creek. It was flowing and birds were washing themselves. I grew up by a creek on the reservation. It was called Bear In the Lodge Creek or Bear Creek. It gave life to many of our Lakota families who lived on each side of it. I used to walk for miles and miles alongside of it. We lived the old way with no electricity or anything modern. One of my most important dreams is to go back and visit the creek and the lands down there. We picked a lot of wild berries, mushrooms, cedar, and peppermint tea. I wonder if they’re still there?<sup>152</sup>

I noticed that for the message’s subject, Blue Bird—the embodied future of Parts His Hair, and through that “blood-and-flesh”<sup>153</sup> connection, himself a part of the *Buffalo Dance* performance—had written a single word: “Survival.”<sup>154</sup>

## Notes

The epigraph is from an email message to the author, December 30, 2019. Many colleagues offered invaluable insights that significantly strengthened this essay, which I wrote with the support of a 2017 University of California President's Postdoctoral Fellowship, a 2020 Hellman Fellowship, and a 2021 Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship. I am especially grateful to George Blue Bird, Ben Black Bear Jr., Lanny Real Bird, Acasia Red Elk, Susan Foster, Jacqueline Shea Murphy, Thomas Biolsi, Michelle Raheja, Anurima Banerji, Alicia Carroll, Kate Mattingly, Miya Shaffer, and Sammy Roth. The astute feedback that I received from the *American Quarterly* editor Mari Yoshihara, Editorial Board, and anonymous readers helped me to further my thinking and writing. I dedicate this essay to my daughters, Hante and Azilya. Despite being only six and four years old, they have already traveled with me many times to Lakota lands, including in utero, so I could conduct fieldwork and nurture the community-engaged relationships that make this essay possible.

1. Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso, 2019), 17.
2. Jill Carter, Heather Davis-Fisch, and Ric Knowles, "Circulations: Visual Sovereignty, Transmotion, and Tribalography," in *A Cultural History of Theatre in the Modern Age*, ed. Kim Solga, Tracy C. Davis, and Christopher Balme (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 98; William Heise, Camera, Inc Thomas A. Edison, and Hendricks, *Buffalo Dance*, performed by Last Horse, Parts His Hair, Hair Coat, Pine, and Strong Talker, produced by W. K.-L. Dickson (Uction United States: Edison Manufacturing Co., 1894), video, 0:32, <https://www.loc.gov/item/00694114/>.
3. Michael Gaudio, *Sound, Image, Silence: Art and the Aural Imagination in the Atlantic World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 170.
4. Carter, Davis-Fisch, and Knowles, "Circulations," 98; Gaudio, *Sound, Image, Silence*, 170.
5. Gaudio, *Sound, Image, Silence*, 171; Paul Spehr, *The Man Who Made Movies: W.K.L. Dickson* (New Barnet, UK: John Libbey, 2008).
6. "Heise, William," Library of Congress, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://id.loc.gov/authorities/names/n96107180.html>.
7. Gaudio, *Sound, Image, Silence*, 171.
8. "Dancing for the Kinetograph," *Sun*, September 25, 1894; "Red Men Again Conquered," *New York Herald*, September 25, 1894; "War Dances before It," *New York Press*, September 25, 1894.
9. Scott Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of the Genre's First Half Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6. Oglala and Brulé Sioux are each bands of the Lakota people.
10. Gaudio, *Sound, Image, Silence*, "Red Men Again Conquered."
11. Jaye T. Darby, Courtney Elkin Mohler, and Christy Stanlake, *Critical Companion to Native American and First Nations Theater and Performance: Indigenous Spaces* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 29–30.
12. Louis S. Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and The Wild West Show* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 93, 125.
13. Warren, 222. I define more-than-humans in this essay as nonhuman animals, air, land, water, and the cosmos.
14. Jacqueline Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 29, 65–66; Kathleen Glenister Roberts, "War, Masculinity, and Native Americans," in *Global Masculinities and Manhood*, ed. Ronald L. Jackson and Murali Balaji (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 145; Luana Ross, *Inventing the Savage: The Social Construction of Native American Criminality* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 38.
15. Christine Bold, "Early Cinematic Westerns," in *A History of Western American Literature*, ed. Susan Kollin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 226.
16. I use scare quotes around "American," because it is a construct initially imposed by the Italian colonizer Amerigo Vespucci. In US mainstream discourses, "American" is often conflated with US citizenship and even those citizens who are European American. However, "America" or the "Americas" is actually thirty-five countries and two continents. At the same time, the peoples and practices indigenous to these lands are often obscured and subordinated.
17. *Buffalo Dance* was shot in Edison's Black Maria Studio, features performers from Buffalo Bill's Wild West, and has been extensively mentioned in scholarship. See Jonathan Erland, "The Digital Projection of Archival Films Project: Phase One," *Journal of Film Preservation* 91.10 (2014): 35–42; Alison

- Griffiths, "Science and Spectacle: Native American Representation in Early Cinema," in *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the American Popular Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996); Kathryn Kalinak, "The Dickson Experimental Sound Film, Popular Music, and the Invention of Moving Pictures," *Film History* 31.4 (2019): 61–91; Darby, Mohler, and Stanlake, *Critical Companion to Native American and First Nations Theater and Performance*, 29–30; Simmon, *Invention of the Western Film*, 6; Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America*, 93, 125.
18. Carter, Davis-Fisch, and Knowles, "Circulations," 98; Gaudio, *Sound, Image, Silence*, 170; Jeffrey Geiger, *American Documentary Film: Projecting the Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 35; Kathleen M. German, "American Indians in Silent Film, 1894–1929," in *American Indians and Popular Culture*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 17–32.
  19. At times, North American Hand Talk is referred to as "Plains sign language." However, Makha Blu Wakpa argues that Plains sign language is a misnomer, which downplays the lingua franca's "substantial magnitude and inter-cultural communication qualities" ("Cyclical Continuity and Multimodal Language Planning for Indigenous North America" [PhD diss., University of Arizona, Tucson, 2017], 108). In 2007, Nanna Verhoeff, a media and performance studies scholar, notes that the dance includes "sign language," but does not specify that the performers use North American Hand Talk or translate the meaning of their signs ("Moving Indians: Deconstructing the *Other* in Moving Images," *Native American Studies* 21.1 [2007]: 42).
  20. Jeffery E. Davis, "The Linguistic Vitality of American Indian Sign Language: Endangered, Yet Not Vanished," *Sign Language Studies* 16.4 (2016): 536; Brenda Farnell, *Do You See What I Mean? Plains Indian Sign Talk and the Embodiment of Action* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 4–6; Ernest Thompson Scott, *Sign Talk; a Universal Signal Code, without Apparatus, for Use in the Army, Navy, Camping, Hunting, and Daily Life* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1918).
  21. Joseph Marshall III, "Lakota Itazipa: The Cultural Philosophy of Lakota Bows," Lakota Wisdom Series, uploaded November 13, 2020, video of lecture, 1:03:08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwVg1PTWBec>.
  22. Kalinak, "Dickson Experimental Sound Film, Popular Music, and the Invention of Moving Pictures," 61–91; Erland, "Digital Projection of Archival Films Project," 35–42.
  23. Geiger, *American Documentary Film*, 35; German, "American Indians in Silent Film," 17–32; Alison Griffiths, "The 1920s Museum-Sponsored Expedition Film: Beguiling Encounters in an All-but-Forgotten Genre," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 9.4 (2011): 271–92.
  24. Griffiths, "Science and Spectacle," 79; Lester Tomé, "The Racial Other's Dancing Body in El Milagro De Anaquillé (1927): Avant-Garde Ballet and Ethnography of Afro-Cuban Performance," *Cuban Studies* 46 (2018): 185–227.
  25. Geiger, *American Documentary Film*, 35.
  26. *Buffalo Dance*, video.
  27. Simmon, *Invention of the Western Film*, 6; Bold, "Early Cinematic Westerns," 225; Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 35; Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America*, 407. However, Dakota people also have a Buffalo Dance; see endnote 34.
  28. Ben Black Bear Jr., interview by author, Rosebud Indian Reservation, December 11, 2017.
  29. Clark Wissler, *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History: Societies of the Plains Indians*, vol. 11 (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1916), 10.
  30. "Dancing for the Kinetograph"; "Red Men Again Conquered"; "War Dances before It."
  31. Due to cross-cultural (mis)readings of the dance, "bellowing and whooping" may not accurately describe what occurred.
  32. George Blue Bird, phone call with author, July 22, 2021.
  33. Blue Bird also saw these dances done "inside the walls" at the South Dakota State Penitentiary, where he has been imprisoned for thirty-seven years, as I later discuss (George Blue Bird, phone call with author, October 23, 2021). He shared, "The Buffalo Dance was performed here in the main prison in Sioux Falls from 1983 to 1985 by many older Dakota men who believed in carrying on this dance as a way to keep our reverence to the buffalo alive" (George Blue Bird, email message to author, October 27, 2021).
  34. Blue Bird.
  35. Blue Bird, phone call with author. George Blue Bird is fluent in the Lakota language. In this essay, I rely on his translations and spellings.

36. Black Bear, interview by author.
37. Mark G. Thiel, "The Omaha Dance in Oglala and Sicangu Sioux History, 1883–1923," *Whispering Winds* 23.5 (1990): 5.
38. Geiger, *American Documentary Film*, 35.
39. Gaudio, *Sound, Image, Silence*, 180.
40. Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 77–78.
41. Estes, 7–8.
42. See the anecdote that George Blue Bird tells about his father in this essay's conclusion.
43. Karyn Recollet, "Gesturing Indigenous Futurities through the Remix," *Dance Research Journal* 48.1 (2016): 91. Recollet similarly discusses how Native cinema—and remixes in particular—"creates a future imaginary attentive to the past as it critiques the present, and ventures forward into the beyond" (91).
44. Vine Deloria, *We Talk, You Listen: New Tribes, New Turf* (New York: Dell, 1972); Deloria, *God Is Red* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1973); Robert Allen Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Scott Richard Lyons, "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?," *College Composition and Communication* 51.3 (2000): 447–68; Raheja, *Reservation Reelism*; Brendan Hokowhitu, "Haka: Colonized Physicality, Body-Logic, and Embodied Sovereignty," in *Performing Indigeneity: Global Histories and Contemporary Experiences*, ed. Laura R. Graham and H. Glenn Penny (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 207–29; Michelle H. Raheja, "Visual Sovereignty," in *Native Studies Keywords*, ed. Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle H. Raheja (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015), 25–34; Mique'l Dangeli, "Dancing Chiaux, Dancing Sovereignty: Performing Protocol in Unceded Territories," *Dance Research Journal* 48.1 (2016): 75–90; Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Julie Burrelle, *Encounters on Contested Lands: Indigenous Performances of Sovereignty and Nationhood in Québec* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019).
45. Raheja, "Visual Sovereignty," 27.
46. Raheja, 27; Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 183.
47. Dangeli, "Dancing Chiaux, Dancing Sovereignty"; J. Kehaulani Kauanui and Robert Warrior, "Robert Warrior on Intellectual Sovereignty and the Work of the Public Intellectual," in *Speaking of Indigenous Politics: Conversations with Activists, Scholars, and Tribal Leaders*, ed. J. Kehaulani Kauanui (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 328–42; Burrelle, *Encounters on Contested Lands*.
48. Warrior, *Tribal Secrets*; Raheja, *Reservation Reelism*; Raheja "Visual Sovereignty"; Dangeli, "Dancing Chiaux, Dancing Sovereignty"; Burrelle, *Encounters on Contested Lands*.
49. Warrior, *Tribal Secrets*, xxi.
50. Warrior, 101; Deloria, *We Talk, You Listen*, 123; Burrelle, *Encounters on Contested Lands*, 17; Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 132, 137; Lyons, "Rhetorical Sovereignty," 449.
51. Warrior, *Tribal Secrets*, 91.
52. Raheja, "Visual Sovereignty," 27.
53. Raheja, 27, 30; Warrior, *Tribal Secrets*, 94, 97, 101.
54. Warrior, *Tribal Secrets*, 95, 105.
55. Kauanui and Warrior, "Robert Warrior on Intellectual Sovereignty and the Work of the Public Intellectual," 335.
56. Kim TallBear, "Beyond the Life / Not Life Binary: A Feminist-Indigenous Reading of Cryopreservation, Interspecies Thinking, and New Materialisms," in *Cryopolitics: Frozen Life in a Melting Word*, ed. Joanna Radin and Emma Kowal (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 179–202.
57. Hokowhitu, "Haka," 284, 294–98.
58. Dangeli, "Dancing Chiaux, Dancing Sovereignty."
59. Hokowhitu, "Haka," 284.
60. Hokowhitu, 296.
61. Dangeli, "Dancing Chiaux, Dancing Sovereignty," 75.
62. Dangeli, 86.
63. Raheja "Visual Sovereignty," 27.
64. Raheja, 27–28.
65. Raheja, 26–29, 31.
66. Dangeli, "Dancing Chiaux, Dancing Sovereignty," 75.



67. Carter, Davis-Fisch, and Knowles, "Circulations," 98–99.
68. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 22–23.
69. Nancy Marie Mithlo, "No Word for Art in Our Language? Old Questions, New Paradigms," *Wicazo Sa Review* 27.1 (2012): 120; Tria Blu Wakpa and George Blue Bird, "Zintkala Woihanbla: Drifting and Other Decolonial Performances for Survival and Prison Abolition," *Urdimento* 3.39 (2020): 1–37; Tria Blu Wakpa, "Challenging Settler Colonial Choreographies during COVID-19: Acosia Red Elk's Powwow Yoga," *Critical Stages: The IATC Journal*, no. 23 (July 2021).
70. Bold, "Early Cinematic Westerns," 225; Carter, Davis-Fisch, and Knowles, "Circulations," 98–99; Geiger, *American Documentary Film*, 35.
71. Bold, 225; Carter, Davis-Fisch, and Knowles, 98–99; Geiger, 35.
72. Bold, 225; Carter, Davis-Fisch, and Knowles, 98–99; Geiger, 35.
73. George Blue Bird, email message to author, May 29, 2020.
74. Indian Law and Order Commission, "Detention and Alternatives: Coming Full Circle, from Crow Dog to TLOA and VAWA," in *A Roadmap for Making Native America Safer: Report to the President and Congress of the United States*, November 2013, 117, [https://www.aisc.ucla.edu/iloc/report/files/Chapter\\_5\\_Detention.pdf](https://www.aisc.ucla.edu/iloc/report/files/Chapter_5_Detention.pdf).
75. Arielle Zions, "South Dakota Jails Most Per Capita, Study Says," *Rapid City Journal*, October 7, 2019, [https://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/south-dakota-jails-most-per-capita-study-says/article\\_34584f2b-8a2f-52ec-8bdc-6c98b2484958.html#:~:text=Native%20Americans%20%E2%80%94%20who%20represent%20at,the%20Vera%20Institute%20for%20Justice](https://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/south-dakota-jails-most-per-capita-study-says/article_34584f2b-8a2f-52ec-8bdc-6c98b2484958.html#:~:text=Native%20Americans%20%E2%80%94%20who%20represent%20at,the%20Vera%20Institute%20for%20Justice).
76. Severt Young Bear and R. D. Theisz note, "Only in Omaha and intertribal dancing do the men dancers go in a counterclockwise manner" (*Standing in the Light: A Lakota Way of Seeing* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996], 101).
77. Thiel, "Omaha Dance in Oglala and Sicangu Sioux History," 5.
78. Thiel, 5.
79. Tara Browner, *Heartbeat of the People: Music and Dance of the Northern Pow-Wow* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 48–49; Peter Nabokov, "Hidden Blueprints," *North Dakota Quarterly* 67.3–4 (2000): 256.
80. Browner, *Heartbeat of the People*, 21.
81. Browner, 21.
82. Thiel, "Omaha Dance in Oglala and Sicangu Sioux History," 5.
83. Thiel, 5.
84. Thiel, 5.
85. Black Bear Jr., interview.
86. Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America*, 93, 125.
87. Thiel, "Omaha Dance in Oglala and Sicangu Sioux History," 5.
88. Browner, *Heartbeat of the People*, 48–49; Nabokov, "Hidden Blueprints," 256. The frequent omission of what more-than-human animal movements are depicted in the Omaha Dance perhaps occurs because in a single performance, there might be inherent human and more-than-human interconnections and/or a performer might be drawing on more than one more-than-human mobility (Black Bear Jr., interview).
89. Melvin War Eagle, "A Gift from the Prairie Chicken Nation," *Mind, Body and Soul* (blog), January 21, 2015, <https://hanblechiadesigns.wordpress.com/2015/01/21/a-gift-from-the-prairie-chicken-nation/>.
90. War Eagle. Although the Prairie Chicken Dance or Chicken Dance may differ from the Omaha Dance, they are also related given that the latter is often based on chicken and prairie chicken movements.
91. Young Bear and Theisz, *Standing in the Light*, 31–33. Young Bear and Theisz's story centers a "very brave and fearless" warrior about fifty years old who was so ill that he went to the Black Hills to prepare himself for death (31). The warrior had nearly fallen asleep when he heard chickens singing. Imitating the rooster's choreography and learning its song eventually heals the warrior, who returns to his village, tells the elders about his experience, and states: "I want to sing this song to my people" (32). Young Bear and Theisz continue: "This was the first song that was openly sung to the people. After that, traditional singers all put their neck sideways in a certain rooster way and they would *iyaki sa'sa* (give a high-pitched yelp), crowing like a rooster as they'd start to sing a song. It was done in honor of the first rooster who sang the first special song in the Black Hills" (32–33). In other words, human and rooster choreographies continue to influence Lakota movements in the contemporary day.

92. George Blue Bird, phone call with author, May 31, 2020.
93. Blue Bird.
94. Alice A. Storey, Daniel Quiroz, Nancy Beavan, and Elizabeth Matisoo-Smith, "Pre-Columbian Chickens of the Americas: A Critical Review of the Hypotheses and Evidence for Their Origins," *Rapa Nui Journal* 25.2 (2011): 5–19.
95. Marsha Weisiger, *Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 64–65.
96. Young Bear and Theisz, *Standing in the Light*, 32–33.
97. Young Bear and Theisz, 31. Young Bear and Theisz state that the Black Hills "have always been a sacred place for the Lakota" (28).
98. Juan L. Bouzat, Hans H. Cheng, Harris A. Lewin, Ronald L. Westemeier, Jeffrey D. Brawn, and Ken N. Paige, "Genetic Evaluation of a Demographic Bottleneck in the Greater Prairie Chicken," *Conservation Biology* 12.4 (1998): 836–43.
99. Blue Bird, phone call with author, May 31, 2020.
100. Greg Hoch, *Booming from the Mists of Nowhere: The Story of the Greater Prairie-Chicken* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015).
101. George Blue Bird, phone call with author, May 31, 2020.
102. Marshall, "Lakota Itazipa."
103. Acofia Red Elk, phone interview with author, June 18, 2020. Red Elk shared with me that some Native people view the sticks that contemporary Chicken dancers hold as phallic objects.
104. Lanny Real Bird, phone interview with author, February 1, 2018.
105. Red Elk, interview. As Red Elk also described, the Chicken dancers "[do] all those movements that the prairie chicken and grouse do to impress a female. They really have this cocky head that goes up and down. They like roll their shoulders and kind of shimmy their feathers and they do these weird high steps." These movement qualities are also evident in the *Buffalo Dance* performance.
106. Discovery UK, "Prairie Chickens Fight For Females," YouTube, December 27, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFFVda3Z1wU>.
107. Real Bird, interview.
108. Fred Malon Hans, *The Great Sioux Nation* (Chicago: M.A. Donohue and Company Publishers, 1907), 296. However, Estes writes that "the term derives from an abbreviation of 'Nadouessioux,' a French adoption of the Ojibwe word for 'little snakes'" (*Our History Is the Future*, 69).
109. Ross, *Inventing the Savage*, 5.
110. Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 72.
111. Leo KILLSBACK, "Crowns of Honor: Sacred Laws of Eagle-Feather War Bonnets and Repatriating the Icon of the Great Plains," *Great Plains Quarterly* 33.1 (2013): 3.
112. Tom Holm, "PTSD in Native American Vietnam Veterans: A Reassessment," *Wicazo Sa Review* 11.2 (1995): 84; Phillip Borell, "Patriotic Games: Boundaries and Masculinity in New Zealand Sport," in *Indigenous Men and Masculinities: Legacies, Identities, Regeneration*, ed. Robert Alexander Innes and Kim Anderson (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 167.
113. Real Bird, interview.
114. Real Bird. The dancer solely uses his left hand to sign. Usually in North American Hand Talk, the right hand is more dominant, with the left hand frequently acting as a base (Tomkins). This demonstrates how combat and dance—specifically holding a weapon in one's dominant hand—may shift the embodiment of the language, so that a person signs with their subsidiary (often left) hand. Yet Real Bird also noted that Plains Indians would have carefully surveilled the scene to prepare for battle, which would have lessened and/or entirely eliminated the use of Hand Talk in combat. See William Tomkins, *Indian Sign Language* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969); Real Bird, interview.
115. Red Elk, interview.
116. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism*, 35.
117. "War Dances before It."
118. Thiel, "Omaha Dance in Oglala and Sicangu Sioux History," 4, 10, 11. Many of the performers do appear closely grouped together in the representations; however, this may have been arranged for photographic purposes.
119. "Dancing for the Kinetograph."
120. Gaudio, *Sound, Image, Silence*, 177. Gaudio clarifies that Sioux Ghost Dance does not depict this dance form (180).

121. Black Bear Jr., interview.
122. “War Dances before It.”
123. The round dance, in which dancers hold hands and move together in a circle, is an obvious exception.
124. Real Bird, interview.
125. Black Bear Jr., interview.
126. Katherine Nagels, “‘Those Funny Subtitles’: Silent Film Intertitles in Exhibition and Discourse,” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 10.4 (2012): 368.
127. Nagels, 369.
128. Real Bird, interview.
129. For an explanation of why I use scare quotes around “American,” see note 16 above.
130. Wissler, *Anthropological Papers*, 10.
131. Raheja, “Visual Sovereignty,” 27; Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 183.
132. Lyons, “Rhetorical Sovereignty,” 63.
133. Raheja, “Visual Sovereignty,” 27.
134. Delineating when and how sovereignty is unmoving extends beyond the scope of this essay. However, in the Black context, Harvey Young provides powerful examples of agency and authority, articulated through performances of stillness. See Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 6.
135. Library of Congress, “Buffalo Dance,” Library of Congress, accessed October 29, 2021, video, 0:32, <https://www.loc.gov/item/00694114/>; Library of Congress, “Buffalo Dance,” YouTube, March 26, 2009, video, 0:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAgFyC126Wk>.
136. Neon Nativez, “ATCR”; Yung Wunda, “The Halluci Nation—Burn Your Village to the Ground (Neon Nativez Remix),” YouTube, October 8, 2015, video, 5:12, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GNi\\_\\_fnadTM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GNi__fnadTM).
137. Neon Nativez.
138. *Addams Family Values*, dir. Barry Sonnenfeld (Paramount Pictures, 1993).
139. *Addams Family Values*. In this scene from *Addams Family Values*, the character, Wednesday Addams—who is starring as Pocahontas in an ignorant, inaccurate, and racist play about Thanksgiving—shocks the organizers and audience in the film by completely departing from and criticizing the settler colonial script. Although Wednesday’s critique of US colonization in a mainstream, Hollywood film is notable, it also perpetuates typecasts of Native peoples. For more on how Native remixes evoke past, present, and future temporalities, see Recollet, “Gesturing Indigenous Futurities through the Remix,” 91.
140. Neon Nativez, “ATCR.”
141. The Halluci Nation, “Burn Your Village to the Ground,” 2014.
142. Ben Rayner, “A Tribe Called Red Evolves into the Halluci Nation,” *Globe and Mail*, May 30, 2021.
143. Matt Collar, “Halluci Nation,” *All Music* (blog), n.d., <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/halluci-nation-mn0002917730/biography>.
144. Neon Nativez, “ATCR.”
145. Because language is political, I purposefully use the phrase “Native men who are imprisoned”—in lieu of “imprisoned Native men”—which highlights the humanity of people who are incarcerated, *not* their confinement, thereby combating societal stigmas.
146. Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 138.
147. George Blue Bird, phone call with author, April 15, 2020.
148. Robert Johnson and Anita Dobrzanska, “Mature Coping among Life-Sentenced Inmates: An Exploratory Study of Adjustment Dynamics,” *Corrections Compendium*, December 2005, 8.
149. George Blue Bird, phone call with author, July 21, 2020.
150. Blue Bird, phone call with author, April 15, 2020.
151. Blue Bird.
152. George Blue Bird, email message to author, May 14, 2020.
153. Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 7.
154. Blue Bird, email message.