

## DANCE IN US POPULAR CULTURE

edited by Jennifer Atkins. 2023. London: Routledge. 358 pp., 30 b/w illustrations. \$37.56 paper and e-book, ISBN: 9780367819842, ISBN: 9781003011170. \$136.00 hardcover, ISBN: 9780367819729. doi: 10.4324/9781003011170. doi:10.1017/S0149767723000426

In the ten years I have taught dance studies, I have not once assigned a textbook. I made this choice not necessarily because meaningful titles in the field of dance and cultural studies do not exist, but because I had yet to find one that supplied the variety of methods, impact, and personality as *Dance in US Popular Culture*, edited by Jennifer Atkins.

Instead of blanket histories purporting authorless neutrality, the concept here highlights point-of-view works backed by practical experience and pointed argumentation, gifting budding dance studies readers and their teachers a wide swath of smart and tight ethnographic, historical, and theoretical models of what we do.

Pitched for undergraduate and high school classrooms, where the study of dance and popular culture entails interdisciplinary pursuit of media studies, social studies, communication studies, and performance at large, the volume underscores much of our field's broadest concerns while resonating in tenor and content for introductory and intermediate dance studies readers. More like a curated study in a boundless range of topics than a survey of subject by area, period, or other classification, the editorial reach itself reflects its inclusive aims. From TV to movies to sports to nightclubs to a closet disco, the project of the book dares all "as movers and groovers or as content consumers" (3) to dive into bodily discourse as all-encompassing of everyday life.

Original writing from almost sixty artist-scholars (and an impressive number of first-time authors) amounts to eleven chapter-essays followed by multiple short case studies that ground umbrella themes in regionally and historically specific contexts. Accompanying each grouping are "pop culture conversations," which feature practitioner perspectives, either in interview or self-reflexive form. Section reading questions framed as "Next Steps" and interactive components called "Your Move!" carry the critical thinking engagement that allows

for open-ended discussion and group reflection, and often through irresistibly fun assignments.

One such gem comes at the end of chapter 5, whose feature essay by Juliet McMains explores the subjects of femininity and empowerment in J. Lo and Shakira's Super Bowl LIV halftime performance. Inviting readers to find the performance online and analyze its movement, music, costume, staging, and filming as key facets of commercial dance and the representation of gender, the prompt then asks all to imagine a character one hundred years from now, sketch the details of their characteristics, and then create their halftime Super Bowl performance.

Whether a first encounter with the field of critical dance studies or a returning teacher of it, the text provides delightful number of entry points into the meaningful parts of our discipline: connection, reflection, collaboration, expression, and exchange. The introduction's co-authors, Jennifer Atkins and Carlee Sachs-Krook, write broadly, "We carry our experiences, preferences, and latest fads in our physical bodies through our gestures, in family rituals, or in the choices of social choreographies we share among friend groups" (2). Moreover, they remind us that popular culture's strength as subject matter is its ongoing source of new material that allows for engaged interest in varied pasts through the relevance of materials culled from contexts—right here, right now. As they argue, the dance and popular culture classroom works best when students and instructors work together to supply the core materials, bringing their distinctive generational references into the room. "Decentralizing authority" in this way encourages "opportunities for critical thinking" to expand as all enter as knowers in a collaborative prioritization of dance as cultural lens.

Textbook framing questions guide important connections between disparate materials not meant to match. They link culture and embodiment to the migration and transmission of ideas (Irvin Manuel Gonzalez, Natasha Casey, and Maïko Le Lay), their revelatory historicization (Tria Blu Wakpa, Jessica Ray Herzogenrath, and Teresa Simone), their circulation and commodification (Abdiel Jacobsen), their acts of protest (Bhumi Patel), and even the economics of cooption as movement forms are picked up by cultural moments (Aaron C. Thomas), competitive formats (Madeline Kurtz and Karen Schupp), or corporate interests to be bought

and sold in codified forms (Kelly Bowker, Ronya-Lee Anderson, Laura H. C. Robinson, and Colleen T. Dunagan). These mixed method texts, enhanced by artists interviews included throughout (Rachel Carrico and Latanya d. Tigner, among others), are meant to be read in sequence or arranged in purposeful combination, while syllabus-styled objectives encourage readers to regard principle aims: (1) embodied knowledge we carry with us and how we understand history and society through that lens; (2) what stereotypes and expectations are embedded in performance, related to gender and/or race; (3) how these ideas are reinforced, negotiated, challenged, embraced, or rescripted by performers and audiences; and (4) how readers may articulate their own sense of “complex identity” within shifting landscapes of popular culture, and as “springboards” toward dismantling systems of oppression.

This textbook has attitude, and it arrives just in time.

In my home institution, where editor Jennifer Atkins is among several colleagues and former students whose writing is published in this textbook, the mood is grim as we face Florida polices which delimit the study of diversity, equity, or inclusion at school. The chilling effect warms quickly with a book as teachable as this one, and where the undeniable backup from colleagues and co-performers in the field offers scholarly community and somehow glimmering alternatives in a moment of growing academic censorship.

Even as the outline of opening pages spells out the progressive and urgent anthems of this era, authors unselfconsciously guide readers to consider multiple viewpoints and possibilities. Kellen Hoxworth’s “The Invented Choreographies of the Tomahawk Chop,” the first case study of the book, is a prime example for all those looking to fuse historical analysis with social critique in a way that calls the reader “in.”

I gladly started my undergraduate Cultural Perspectives on Dance course this semester with the piece, a three-page explication of the college football war chant choreography and its evolution from a 1956 racist cartoon to a national sports fan tradition. Recalling the Red Power movement of the 1970s, which discontinued much of the mainstream use of indigenous names and iconography as sports team mascots across the country, Hoxworth highlights how the “Tomahawk Chop” only gained

popularity at our university football games in the following decade, a point of curiosity that hits home for students here. Indeed, Hoxworth’s skillful defense of the “we” who “just do it”—a fandom culture in which he took part growing up—allows a connection with readers who are potentially encountering the critique, and in class among peers and professor, for the first time. This is the kind of work that catalyzes an academic politicization through digestible bits of history and context that land with big impact. In our written midterm exam as in our discussion, my students saw themselves reflected in the text, identifying with the college mindset while metabolizing the insult of a form that claims tradition in the (red)face of appropriation.

Continuing on the subjects of gestural vocabulary, how we learn it, and the nature of its charged meanings for multiple audiences, we then read Yebel Gallegos’s “Macho Sensibilities” alongside Jeremy Guyton’s “closet disco: a meditation.” In the former, Gallegos recalls his experience growing up in a Mexican American family watching his family dance. It seemed to him that his uncle would raise his eyes while dancing with chivalry and restraint, as if to say, “This is how you should act in the world,” later observing, “I began to catch glimpses of doubt in my mother’s eyes—in these moments it was clear she knew I was ‘different,’ and it became obvious that my natural performative sensibility did not fit her ideas of what it was to be a man” (114). Exemplifying how nonverbal exchanges can “speak” to the social conditioning of gender and sexuality, the author then reclaims his “cancelled movement” in ways most attending high school and college will well understand.

Paired with Jeremy Guyton’s “closet disco,” the possibility of healing through reclamation of identity continues to inspire the idea of dancing on one’s own terms. The author returns to his childhood home during the quarantines of COVID-19 to rediscover his bedroom closet as a site of memory, past trauma, and future emergence. He stages his “closet disco” with his mother’s jewelry, his father’s uniform, the rainbow hues of a disco ball, and a soundtrack of his most cherished “Afro//queer storytellers”—the performance of a new celebration around the vexed but tender conditions of his growing up. Students in my class most appreciated his writerly vulnerability, which shared a lot but kept

other parts opaque as if on purpose, like the two slashes of the “free//style” and the “Afro//queer” he heralds, which might serve, as one student mused, to keep the reader, along with Guyton, open to all that remains in-between.

As we enter the second half of the semester, we will read Casey Avaunt’s “Bestowing Blessings and Cultivating Community: Lion Dancing in Boston’s Chinatown” alongside participant ethnographies by Emily Kaniuka (on moshing masculinities and whiteness), Beverly Bautista (on a typecasting career in commercial dance) and Somya Jatwani (on belly dance as restaurant entertainment). Tremendously helpful for the study of dance anthropology and cultural politics, these pieces render approachable the mammoth exercise of teaching subject position, participant-observation, interview, and critical reflection at any learning level alongside questions of cultural belonging, identity, and multiple (and even competing) allegiances within a single scene.

Editor Atkins and her team of contributors supply these tools throughout, lesson planning with readings and activities to be taught in sequence or reshuffled for needed use. This inspiration is a credit to the extensive collaboration of authors who we learn met numerous times through Zoom meetings to workshop book content and pedagogy. The effect is equal parts convincing and stimulating. The evident enthusiasm of the book’s introduction fulfills on its promise in this sense, reminding us that “the role that joy and pleasure play in popular dance is critical because they can galvanize people, act as resistance, cement the dance, and preserve it for future generations” (3).

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## ISHTYLE: ACCENTING GAY INDIAN NIGHTLIFE

By Kareem Khubchandani. 2020. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 262 pp. \$80.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780472074211 doi:10.1017/S014976772300027X

Let’s start with the beginning: of what this text is, and then what it does, followed by what it perhaps can do . . .

*Ishtyle* is part of the Triangulations series with University of Michigan Press, edited by Jill Dolan and David Roman, with associated editors Ramón H. Rivera-Servera and Sara Warner. Triangulations focuses on Lesbian/Gay/Queer–Theater/Drama/Performance and features groundbreaking titles such as *Butch Queen Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* by Marlon M. Bailey, as well as *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics* by Ramón H. Rivera-Servera. With triangulations as a process to locate a target by knowing two other points in space, *Ishtyle* begins the process of mapping South Asian queerness through critical engagement with nightlife and self-creation. What is gay Indian nightlife? Where and how does it take place? How can scholars implement methodologies of gathering data through new practices of *accenting* knowledge for academe? These are the questions that Khubchandani works to answer by centering his family experience—informing us that this work is rooted in his own fleshy archive.

Khubchandani takes the meaning of “ish-tyl” from the way he and his cousins would mock each other’s style and adornment choices. I clocked/inferred this as an undefinable mockery and overexaggeration that perhaps accents gayness or references femininity. Khubchandani implies that this is how he and his cousins label dressing or acting a little “gay-ish,” and I think about his mother, and how much she, and Khubchandani’s aunts, inspire him and his sense of looking, fashioning, feeling, and interpersonal study. It is through dancing and dressing with the matriarchs of his family that we come to walk with Khubchandani and see the richness gay Indian life and nightlife has to offer culturally and epistemologically. But first, some music . . .

With a pause, I came to the acknowledgments section, which is keenly aware of how to say what cannot be written but felt and heard. Through a method of gay nightlife, he provides a list of hit song titles with a list of names that he is acknowledging. Khubchandani rehearses for us a listening practice of appreciation. Through the sonic landscape of this playlist, he provides us a script of care about the people, institutions, and collectives that has made this work possible. It is a kind and inspirational playlist that beckons the next generation of scholars, asking, “How can we offer more with our gratitude?”