



THE COLLECTIVE WORKSHOPPING OF OUR EMERGING GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP IN TRANSCULTURAL FUSION DANCE (TcFD)

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Abstract

Transcultural Fusion Dance (TcFD) is a global, hybrid genre that fuses dance traditions of North Africa and the Arab World with Hip Hop and Electronica. Starting in the 1990's, TcFD participants utilized the genre to enact their enthusiasm for intercultural exchange, visual cultural mashup, and embodied exploration of global citizenship. The momentum shifted after being confronted with decolonization calls from BIPOC communities in the U.S.A., and is now collectively building ethical practices and interdisciplinary contextualization that also offers a critique of contemporary dance education for its sluggish awakening to decolonization. The author details the historical events that instigated a global decolonization conversation of TcFD practices, conventions, and language, and the unfolding evolution of Fair-Trade Cultural Exchange practices.

Keywords

Transcultural Fusion Dance, TcFD, Raqs Sharqi, Ethics In Dance, Fair Trade Cultural Exchange, Decolonizing Academia, Intercultural Exchange, Mashup Culture North Africa And The Arab World, Secular Dance, Viral Dance Culture, Dance In Online Social Networks, Bellydance, Tribal Fusion

Transcultural Fusion Dance (TcFD) is an umbrella term for dancers who deliberately dialog a variety of cultural traditions and elements together in movement. The particular strain of TcFD discussed in this paper is descended from Egyptian *Raqs Sharqi*, a secular social dance that enjoys commercial and global popularity, but also stigma. It's offshoot, TcFD, persists with a badge of underground status and financial, promotional, and critical independence from the commercial infrastructures of conventional concert dance arenas and higher education. TcFD provides an exceptional and unique case study in how one non-hierarchical community has democratically evolved and exchanged, both aesthetically and ideologically, through online platforms and social media to workshop incredibly complicated questions of what culture signifies, what endures, what transforms, and what falls away, either temporarily or permanently. This paper summarizes through an intentionally mixed format of research, documentation, and essay, recent pivotal decolonizing events in TcFD through first person/primary source scholarship by the author, also an embedded participant, and includes a full positionality analysis and assumption index below. Fusion in dance is as old as contact between cultures. Cultural appropriation in fusion is a thorny issue the TcFD community is openly grappling with, and contemporary efforts will be the primary focus of this article.

The TcFD movement grew through an estimated millions of dancers who studied the dances of the Arab Diaspora, North Africa, Persian and Turkish cultures, often through a legacy of historical caricature and without anthropological study. Orientalist examples from the early 1900's include some of the talents credited with being the grandfathers and grandmothers of contemporary modern dance: and began Loie Fuller, Ruth St. Dennis, and Maud Allan (Müssnich Rotta Gomes de Assunção, 2022). This paper examines the 1990's forward, when movers dialoged these traditions with American Hip Hop and other global dance forms, titling it as "Tribal Fusion." The form has grown to include numerous vernacular and classical dance traditions as part of its dialogue, including Indian Classical dance forms, circus-based movement traditions (aerial, pole dancing, contortionism, clowning), Flamenco, West/East/South African continental traditions, Central and South American cultures, gamer culture, gothic and metal culture, Anime subculture, adult entertainment movement vocabulary, etc.

With such an expansive and permissive definition, questions of cultural appropriation are not only common, but also entirely appropriate. When dedicated to decoloniality and anti-racism, informed practitioners seek common denominators between cultural elements, research the background and contextualization of traditions

to avoid editorial harm, and treat artistic agency with care and respect for the tenuous, emerging understandings of our global citizenship. Notably, the number of TcFD practitioners have increased through Internet exchange, and have benefitted from the vast library of human movement in the repository of digital visual media on YouTube.com. When the Fair-Trade Cultural Exchange methods explained here are practiced, a dedicated effort is made to cite source inspirations, and engage in equitable exchange between all knowledge producing parties: scholars, practitioners, source culture citizens, historians, educators, vendors, technical staff, and producers.

TcFD's ongoing underground status may be due to several important markers. It emerged as a theatrical performance genre in tandem with Hip Hop in the 1970's and is heavily influenced by the permissive creativity of cut and paste or mashup culture, and the novel interplay of dichotomous cultural elements that have driven Hip Hop and viral cultural video cascades in online social platforms. Hip Hop has not appeared to evoke similar charges of cultural appropriation as it globalized, as many of the founding figures set the tone for embracing the spread of Hip Hop through the lens of many geographically specific traditions and nation states (Hip Hop suffered the majority of its attacks from the music industry protecting its royalties and pressing for a clarification of copywrite law) (Said, 2015). As much as participants drive interpretations and abstractions, there is—like Hip Hop—strong emphasis on movement lineage and learning the historical roots of its tributaries and historical figures (Chang, 2005). Differently than Hip Hop, TcFD does not yet carry the same mass commercial heft, and is populated mostly by female-identified persons initially hailing from predominantly white social arenas (those demographics may be changing and await further study).

Secondly, it's descendancy from the stigmatized Egyptian secular dance Raqs Sharqi inevitably requires it also navigate the social scrutiny of being popular, but a dubious and potentially dishonorable profession by conservative legists' interpretations of Islam (Kraus, 2010). Often perceived and critiqued in its commercial manifestation as hypersexualized, and not legibly exhibiting the common choreographic structures of popular concert dance, TcFD remains marginalized in academia, and resultingly, enthusiastic participants of the genre continue to self-fashion a viable community, methodology, and industry for themselves. Before examining their efforts, a brief summary of TcFD's historical development will provide more context.

Historical Summary

Historicizing Transcultural Fusion Dance will require that the locator pin be dropped around the 1960's in the United States, and many sources, primary, secondary, and tertiary, will not be peer-reviewed because, at present, I am still the only tenured scholar of the genre. Many of the sources I cite are from excellent citizen scholars, and credentialed independent historians who produced these works outside the halls of academia, which have not been opened to them as colleagues. Research resources that may have perspectives compromised or not fully vetted in research methodology are still included in the bibliography, because they provided indicators that warranted further study, but have not been referenced in this writing.

The root form of TcFD, Egyptian *Raqs Sharqi*, replicates movement traditions that are more than 7,000 years old and evinces an unbroken lineage of transference through human bodies. The academic accounting for it is another matter, and has been broken, interrupted and filtered through the distorted lens of European travelogues (See the work of Fraser and Lane, and counter-critique by Said), American promoters and sensationalists who exotified it during the Victorian era (see the work of Buonaventura and Schick), biased critics who were uninformed of their Orientalism (see the works of Deaver and Said), and biased scholars who are unable to be reflexive about, or divest themselves from, Eurocentrism (See Hamera, J.L.). My work here is not to repeat those distortions, but bring forward overlooked narratives that aid in historicizing Transcultural Fusion Dance.

The early roots and development of TcFD was honorably detailed and historicized in Barbara Sellers-Young's 2016 publication *Belly Dance, Pilgrimage and Identity* (Thank you Ms. Sellers – Young). It then falls to us, the practitioners of this genre, to contemporize and contextualize how the community has proceeded and evolved, and equally, to press institutions of higher education to do so as well.

It is worth noting, that fusion and cultural borrowing has touched all dance forms. Customarily Ballet is used in academic circles as an example of a purist cultural form. But the most recognizable signature movement of Ballet is the leg lifted behind the body in what is codified and termed to be *Arabesque*. This French word, Arabesque, is a built-in citation to movement that was copied in the style or spirit of the Arabs, whom the royal houses of the French court hired along with many global entertainers when they accompanied the Silk Road Spice traders from India, China, and the Arab world (See the musicology work of Levin and the culinary history work of Lerner).

Transcultural Fusion Dance has a specific lineage from the *Raqs Sharqi* dance practitioner communities of the 1970's – 1990's, mostly (but not exclusively) consisting of white-identifying women in San Francisco, California, U.S.A. To be clear, leagues of professional *Raqs Sharqi*-style dancers of many ethnicities operated across the dance halls, dining clubs, and Middle Eastern secular social ceremonies of the U.S.A., Europe, Mediterranean and Arab World in the 1960's. Many were modeled on the monumental success of costuming, presentation and orchestration masterminded by Badia Masabni, female Syrian nightclub owner of downtown Cairo's Badia Casino, also known as the Opera Casino, founded in 1926 (Buonaventura, 1994, p. 149;

Worlddanceheritage.org, 2023). The California legacy is unique in how the timing of one artist's popularity, Jamila Salimpour, resulted in a cascade of globalization and the formation of a new dance genre.

Jamila Salimpour organized and produced a *Raqs Sharqi*-based performance for a family-friendly crowd at the 1968 Renaissance Pleasure Faire. Historian and dancer Barbara Sellers-Young's description describes Salimpour's intentional application of artistic license and fusion, based on her professional experience dancing in Middle Eastern Diasporic communities of the U.S.A.:

Jamila created a half-hour variety show that was her image of an "Arabian festival, or souk in the Middle East" (1999:17), an interpretation of the dance that would displace Hollywood's harem representation; an image that would correspond with the fair's natural outdoor environment and Renaissance flavour. Never having been to North Africa or the Middle East, she created a concept that she readily admits was half-real, based on dances she had learned from Middle Eastern women friends, and part-hokum. The hokum was inspired by interpretations of photographs, paintings and films of the Middle East or set in the Middle East. These included pictures of tribal groups from the National Geographic, paintings by Gerome, films such as *Justine* (set in North Africa) and a photo from a Moroccan cookbook. These sources provided her with the costumes and physical postures that became the inspiration for these dances, which would be performed by women and men. (pp. 73-74)

That show, *Bal Anat*, commanded crowds and attracted students to Jamilah's already well-established dance school in San Francisco. As one of Jamilah's many artistic profiles and productions, *Bal Anat* birthed a second generation of students transformed into performing professionals who were less interested in the popular cabaret tones of commercialized *Raqs Sharqi*, and craved more access to the folk vernacular of North Africa, Central Asia, the Mediterranean and the Arab World. Much of Jamilah's legendary influence has been preserved and codified by her daughter and second-generation professional dancer, Suhaila Salimpour. Suhaila continued her mother's school, published and augmented her scholarly materials, and recreated a revival of her mother's pivotal production, *Bal Anat*. The recreation was staged at the historical Fusion Festival Tribal Fest in 2009 (personal attendance, confirmed by Salimpour in personal communication with Mejia, Tuesday, March 8, 2023) Like her mother Jamilah, Suhaila has a varied and highly accomplished artistic portfolio focusing primarily on both vintage cabaret, and contemporary experiments in *Raqs Sharqi*. Also like her mother, Suhaila's literal body-of-work and knowledge has been endowed to a third generation in the family, her daughter Isabella Salimpour.

Jamilah's enthusiastic student Masha Archer, was also a visual artist and would take up instructing dance classes of her own in the San Francisco area. Her artistic influence would then inspire another new dance artist named Caroleena Nericcio – Bohlman, who would merge her interest in feminist thought, nature, global dance traditions, and intentional living into a new kind of dance phenomenon: Fat Chance Belly Dance Style (formerly American Tribal Style) in 1987. (<https://fcbd.com/about/>) Nericcio-Bohlman's dance format organized a repertoire of movement cues, allowing anyone trained in the vocabulary to share lead and follow responsibilities in a rotating formation (only women were allowed in Nericcio's early classes). It was a wonderful way to distribute expression, solidarity, and vibrant exchange from an individual leader to a collective of participants. Nericcio's format spread to become regional, then nationally popular in the early 2000's. This was achieved through her distribution of instructional DVDs and live performances at the burgeoning number of fusion dance festivals (*Tribal Fest* in Sebastopol, CA being the first, largest, and most influential). By 2003 Fat Chance Belly Dance Style was global. The growing dance movement mirrored the tandem explosion of global fusion music by musical producers and DJs from the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa, all jumping on self-production through personal computer music software newly available at market scale. The explosion of creativity was palpable.

The sudden enthusiasm to blend, remix, and explore, can and should be attributed to the rise and world domination of Hip Hop music. Hip Hop culture, a Bronx/New York City creation by historic visionaries in Black and Latinx communities, was initially an underground music without major commercial radio play, but the entire world was listening through those underground channels. Hip hop established itself as a best-selling genre in the mid-1990s, and eclipsed to become the top-selling music globally by 1999. (MRC Data Year End Report, 2020) Fusion music was everywhere, distributed through the Internet's early social media platforms such as Tribe.net, Myspace.com, and the 2005 newly minted Youtube.com. It was a fast-moving scene, with people passing unique, experimental gems and discoveries with the newfound ease of wind. Everyone wanted the latest works from beloved DJs and producers like Cheb I Sabbah, Pentephobe, Muslimgauze, Filastine, Mercan Dede, Mutamassik, and Solace. Or they were devotedly scanning social media for unsung and unsigned artists. There were no music streaming services at that time, and no algorithms curating our musical tastes.

Several young students of Nericcio's classes began experimenting on their own, adapting *Raqs Sharqi* movements and global adornment aesthetics with the music of their own generation: Hip Hop, Alternative and Electronica. Jill Parker, originally belonging to Nericcio's Fat Chance Bellydance company, became an independent instructor and founder of her own popular company, Ultra Gypsy (personal correspondence with

Rachel Brice, January 2020). Two of her students, Heather Stants and Rachel Brice, would then individually build independent careers and companies, bringing forward a lush aesthetic of subdued and commanding stage works, utilizing electronic music and movements that brought the hip and torso articulation of *Raqs Sharqi* to a level of jaw-dropping micro-contortionism. Through the distribution of compilation videos, festival and convention performances, the Belly Dance Superstars extravaganza-style show (produced by Miles Copeland), and viral video sharing on social media platforms, hundreds of thousands of practitioners joined in trying to learn and participate. Dancers around the world took to replicating and enshrining the styles created by Salimpour, Nericcio, Stants, and Brice. There are many other astounding artists and inventive remixes of Transcultural Fusion Dance, but these artists were/are clearly regarded as the referential influences of the dance's legacy.

My first exposure to Rachel Brice was in 2003. I was working as an instructional faculty member for the Colorado College dance department, and received a request to accept extra duties advising an undergraduate student, Shaunti Fera, who was producing her culminating project for the dance degree, and requested a faculty member conversant in global dance traditions. This coincided with receiving an email from Bellydance Superstars producer Miles Copeland, offering me a free ticket in exchange for announcing the touring performance occurring in Colorado that week. I sincerely wanted to educate myself to serve as Fera's advisor, and decided to attend the Denver show.

I found Rachel Brice's movement astonishing. Punctuating accents erupted from her torso as if the human body had acquired new junctures and joints! Rhythm was depicted through muscular thrust, pinpoint punctuations, cascading volleys moving ping-pong-style through her torso, and unbelievable, breath-stopping, precision suspensions and freezes. Every little part of the music was rendered visible on her body, as if sound was exploding into a multidimensional representation beyond what I had experienced in other dance forms. Her presentation was regal; her dignified and understated joy compelled me. Her choice of music, a customized commission by electronic music artist Pentophobe, sent me over the edge in ASMR shivers. I'd already started dabbling in *Raqs Sharqi* and Nericcio's FCBD style, but landed solidly in reflection of my own lived history and multi-heritage identity in all that Brice had conveyed in her performance. I dove deeply into discovering this new world, both online and in real-time gatherings, and was taken aback to learn how large this growing subculture was: regional conventions, international practice groups, music labels dedicated to remix experiments, and entrepreneurs vending fabrics and jewelry from Pakistan, Morocco, Egypt, India, and Turkey. Rachel was generous in dropping my name to Tribal Fest Producer Khajira Djoumahna, and I became a featured instructor and performer for her festival for many years. Having relocated to the U.S. East Coast for a spell, one of my own dance performances was bootlegged anonymously to Youtube.com, which was only four months old at the time. The video went viral (by early internet standards), and soon I was touring, hosting immersion trainings, hired in a dedicated university post, and traversing the globe as a soloist.

Although new to *Raqs Sharqi*, I had two decades of professional, embodied learning and experience in African Diasporic forms, Brazilian Contemporary forms, Mexican Folklorico, along with Iyengar, Baptiste, and Ashtanga yoga, conservatory training in Ballet, Jazz, and Modern Dance. At the time, no collegiate programs in the nation featured African, South American, or Arabian forms in their curriculums. Social dancing and club-battling in Hip Hop and Electronica communities had ripened me as a street-savvy global citizen, and I craved to actualize a lifestyle that would externalize my inner love of international travel adventures, and the excitement of accessing so much knowledge through citizen-driven Internet communities. That connectivity was soothing to my life-long wanderlust, my geographic isolation from all that interested me, and the questions my multi-heritage provoked when interfacing with the world.

In truth, I felt my knowledge portfolio in dance could integrously reconcile performing an abstraction of signature elements descended from popular dances of the Arab world. In the Hip Hop culture of my upbringing in the 1970's and 1980's, blending and remixing was a nearly sacred endeavor regardless of the rules or laws it broke. I embraced it as purposeful cultural critique, a constructive challenging of restrictive categories of cultures that I observed already blending under the radar. As much as my hybrid heart was thrilled with these artistic experiments, I was plagued by "participant guilt." As a person of mixed ethnicity, and as a child of Hip Hop culture, fusion was an affirmation of my internal cultural reality and I saw nothing inherently wrong with it at the time, but I could not ignore some of the larger, harmful implications of choices and practices I observed. I felt positive about my personal choices, but knew I was benefitting professionally and financially from a community that had not undertaken the same post-colonial examination. I began to make an academic inquiry that became the largest part of my life work.

Positionality Statement

Historicizing is an act of contextualizing. In the social sciences, good methodology requires disclosure of the author's ethnicity, sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical background. It is well understood that these layers of social indoctrination and reification over one's lifetime have the potential to skew and distort one's lens of analysis. Grown humans are never blank slates. Rather than pretending such objectivity, I firmly support the value

of declaring potential biases, and unique vantage points, with a personal positionality statement.

I am a what would be described in the southern U.S.A. as Creole. My mother's Louisiana heritage contains an unknown mixture of African and European ancestors. My father's Mississippi heritage was African, European, and Choctaw Indigenous. My upbringing was solidly middle class with two working parents.

At the time of this writing, I am in my middle 50's, and have been dancing my whole life. Commercially structured training began at the age of 12. My worldview is somewhere on the mindmap points of Himalayan Buddhist/Witchy/lifelong learner/global citizen/deeply frustrated African-Indigenous-descended woman.

I identify as cisgender, and use both she/they pronouns. At the date of this writing, I work as Associate Professor in the University of Colorado's Boulder Theatre & Dance Unit, and Chancellor's Scholar in Residence for the Renée Crown Wellness Institute, serving as Faculty Director of initiatives, research, outreach and education in matters intersecting the arts, equity, diversity, mindfulness, and wellness. I am an affiliate faculty member of Ethnic Studies, Women & Gender Studies, LGBTQIA2S + certificate program, and the CU Boulder Center for Teaching and Learning. I have experienced, witnessed, and provided intervention consulting in many scenarios of injustice and racism. I have witnessed monumental white fragility, and additionally from humans of all identities, male privilege and ethnocentric arrogance.

My library of life experiences includes congenital illness, consistent meditation since learning at age 11, the privilege of tuition remittance for graduate study, the too common experience of domestic violence and being bullied, motherhood, divorce, standing ovations, loving partnership, access to medical relief for my physical ailments, offering apologies for my mistakes, industry and service awards, and global friendships.

I've enjoyed discovery workshops in many global dance traditions, however my deepest investment in movement training (a decade or more) includes the dances of Brazil, Mexico, the Caribbean, West Africa (Gambia, Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Nigeria, Ghana), North Africa (Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Western Sahara), Ethiopia, Northern India, Silvestre Contemporary Technique, Jazz, Hip Hop, Yoga, and Contact Improvisation. I have benefitted from having a front row seat to the development of Transcultural Fusion Dance, touring as a headlining performer, instructor and lecturer around the globe, but have declined activities such as judging or participating in competitions.

Does this background flavor my perceptions and analysis of Transcultural Fusion Dance? Absolutely. My responsibility is to monitor myself so that my entanglement is constructive and not obscuring. I include myself as a primary source, as I have instigated, participated in, or been present for many of the occurrences described here as a first wave participant in TcFD. The bibliography includes sources that may differ with my stated analysis, as it is important to engage materials from a wide swath of perspectives on all subject matter.

Assumption Index

After disclosing my identity influencers and signifiers, the next crucial methodological task is to conduct an assumption index of our topic: Transcultural Fusion Dance (TcFD). An assumption index is a proactive examination of what I presume to be true about a topic before commencing study or analysis of it. It is an admission of my initial (and perhaps uninformed) biases and ignorance, but also an encapsulation of the acquired learning impacting the topic's examination. An assumption index aims to render foundational thinking visible to the reader, and myself, to avoid letting it distort or interfere in my own further learning. It is an invitation for you to hold me accountable.

Assumption #1: Before learning secular *Raqs Sharqi*-rooted dance myself, I contemptuously assumed it was a dance form for females requiring very little training, relying mostly on one's margin of cleavage and a willingness to pander to the male gaze. I had no exposure to male-identified performers, or the foundational, varied classical and sacred dance traditions in each region and country constituting the Arab World. This misunderstanding has thankfully been corrected.

Assumption #2: The academic landscape for discussing Arabian culture, scholarship, and identity is laden with Western ignorance of how much of our Western intellectual model, and empirical emphasis, is taken from ancient intellectual traditions in the Arab world (see the work of Attar, Bamyeh, Graham, and Hourani).

Assumption #3: The Western hemispheric landscape for scholarly, cultural, historical, and political study of Arabian culture is burdened by ongoing military conflict and political tension between the Arab world and Western nations, all complicated by a global dependency on, and control, of oil.

Assumption #4: The Western hemispheric landscape for scholarly, cultural, historical, and political study of Arabian culture is burdened by current ideological threats by white Christian nationalist, white extremism, and systemic attacks on empirically researched Feminist theory, Queer Theory, and Critical Race Theory. Open hatred of Islam, and disdain for Arabs is unfortunately normalized in the U.S.A.

Assumption #5: My own underlying conflict of conscience in my scholarly work stems from fury over the subjugation of women through social practices, policy and religious doctrines globally, and in concentrated ways through specific, conservative parts of the Muslim world. Resistance to these hegemonic agendas is ongoing among source culture citizens. My scholarly obligation is to understand histories, while also questioning and being in solidarity with men and women who wish to change this inequity.

Assumption #6: A new application of language must be clarified for expansive inclusion of non-European dance forms (Mejia, 2019):

A Broadened Definition of Culture: A categorical display of customs, attire, language, movement, norms, and values signifying membership to a defined and recognizable group. Cultures can be grouped by nationality and ethnicity, but additionally by self-selected membership to sub-cultures within nation states. Many humans negotiate overlapping cultures and identities among several categories of belonging.

A New Definition of Dance: Meaningful patterned movement, as defined by the practitioner.

A New Definition of Dance Technique: The ability to replicate movement with increasing ease, efficiency and proficiency.

Assumption #7: Dance, as a field of study, is not paid equitably in higher education, nor given the same prioritization of research resources, and dance curriculums themselves still center Eurocentricity in aesthetics, choreographic emphasis, and historical focus. I'm pressed to think of other fields of study that can remain entrenched in disregarding global advancements and developments and still remain relevant.

Assumption #8: My positionality as a woman of the global majority affords me some insider track alliances and advantages when travelling abroad. My visual ambiguity as a multi-heritage human may automatically dissuade people from questioning my fusion choices as an artist, and shields me from some backlash. My positionality as a citizen of the United States may impede nuanced perceptions, context, and understanding of the source cultures I have chosen to study. My current lack of fluency in Arabic restricts my research to sources written in or translated to English.

Assumption #9: The global growth of TcFD is inextricably linked to the early founding of social media platforms on the Internet, and full contextualization must account for the online usage norms instigated by this human technological advancement.

Myth and Convention Busting

I've been told, unconvincingly, that the way research works is to wait until a genre has rooted firmly, ascended to the commercial concert arena, and can be studied with some historical objectivity. If not meeting those standards, the form is relegated to vernacular dance anthropology, or media studies as an Internet trend. This gatekeeping no longer serves us; this awards the commercial arena the ability, through wealthy patronage, the industrial non-profit complex, and grant-bearing structures approved by governments to determine the market value and cultural and historic worth of a tradition. It regenerates a skewed history constructed by those who have access to resources. TcFD practitioners chose their own pivotal icons through grass roots community in the same way the vernacular *and* professional dances of the people emerge, spread, and are sustained—because they carry urgent relevance and resonance. That is the very reason it warrants study, not as a relic to be retroactively glanced at in a future age, but as a meaningful emanation of the lived experience that can tell us so much about the values, priorities, practices, relationships, between and amongst us... a living people. Studying current dance practices grants us crucial, primary source voices from first-wave participants, and requires conversancy in all of the sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical forces that served as context for the form's arising. Thus, it is critical that an interdisciplinary approach be welcomed to fully contextualize emergent practices.

Signature Values of Transcultural Fusion Dance

As an umbrella terminology for an experimental form, a few common denominators evolved that I observed to weave throughout dance works online and in communal gatherings. Beyond these points, just about anything could and did happen in performance.

- Inventiveness ruled performances; solid technique backed by visual and movement novelty. Individualism distinguished highly popular solo performances, but strong synchronization ruled ensemble performances.
- The importance of micro-articulation: TcFD, and its ancestral inspiration *Raqs Sharqi*, celebrates a dancer's

ability to render music visible on the body through small, precision accents, curves, and tremors (flutters). The hips, regarded as a primary location for these micro-articulations, is one of the most mobile junctures of the human body. These movements are not necessarily intended to indicate sexuality as the subject of dancing. Other contextual layers of body communication are involved in unleashing sexual intention.

- Musicality is direct, synchronous, and linear in interpretation. Rather than serving as a wallpaper, or an atmospheric backdrop, music is equal in importance to movement, and virtuosity is identified through someone's demonstrated connection to the sonic landscape, with the highest achievement value placed on interchange with live musicians.
- Minimal use of space: The vast majority of the TcFD community aligned with the *Raqs Sharqi* traditional value of enrapturing a room of witnesses from a single title on the floor. Rather than gobble up space travelling around a stage, virtuosity aligned with one's ability to create a universe of movement and visual interest within one's own bodily frame.
- Body positivity: The pressure to conform to a singular reference of allure, beauty, and value is gleefully tossed in TcFD community events. Those who try to put it in play are quickly reminded that body-shaming is not welcomed. Differently-abled bodies, and neurodivergency are included in this circle of protection, but have been less prominent in observable participation numbers.
- Gender queerness: The commercialization of *Raqs Sharqi* occurred on the female body, and has become a hypersexualized trope. (See the work of Buonaventura, the Belly Dance Readers from the Editors of the Gilded Serpent, and nearly all academic publications addressing Belly Dance). There is phenomenal corrective and restorative scholarship addressing the presence of male-identified bodies in the form, although they must navigate the emotional labor of dancing in presumed effeminized ways. (See the work of Drake Von Trapp) This unfortunate stigma potentially dissuades many from taking up the dance. If the curious get past this hurdle, they will discover a community that delights in affirmatively disrupting gender coding both visually and in movement.
- Celebration of human adornment: When humans commemorate extraordinary communal events and passages of importance, we commonly decorate our spaces or implements to signify such specialness. When something extraordinary is happening *within* a single human, we frequently choose to also signify it with special attire and personal adornment. TcFD practitioners celebrate exceptional visual creativity in presentation, and a Do-It-Yourself culture elevates performances to heirloom-worthy installations of personal costuming. This can also be credited to the permeating popularity and resonance of science fiction, Afrofuturism, period-specific recreation, the Society for Creative Anachronism, and matriarchal and nature-based religions amongst many participants.

Building a Methodology and Contextualization for Fusion (Version 1.0)

Three important things are inherent in these TcFD experiments descended from Egyptian *Raqs Sharqi*: (1) participants craving to commemorate meaningful influences in their lives, even if those influences are fleetingly brief, not geographically proximal, or financially accessible (2) offering tribute to aspects of identity that cannot be encapsulated in one category of dance, and (3) for some like me, acknowledging multi-heritage identity, or second generation descendancy from ancestors hailing from source cultures. Life in the 21st century has revealed that our overlapping membership to multiple categories of belonging has become the complexity we must unpack and contend with, and TcFD citizens, bloggers and artists began to take matters into their own hands.

We reached an epoch of connectivity in 2017, when 50% of the world's living humans gained access to the Internet through a home computer or smart device (<https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>). Citizens began to witness each other's experiments, comment and critique each other, and challenge TcFD's inaccuracies and distortions to their beloved home cultures. Elders were being left out of cultural transference for the first time, as youth dominated internet usage, sending cascading videos and content to 30 – 50% of the Earth's population within the timeframe of one week, versus humans' customary span of 15 – 20 years between elders and youngsters. What was not always clear in these dance performance experiments was how self-examined artists were in the degree of editorial agency they awarded themselves over source culture materials.

This cultural fusion—the deliberate comingling and blending of cultural elements in anything—is the living process of culture itself. Culture is never static. Culture becomes a relic when placed under glass and put on a shelf to collect dust. Fusion is highly celebrated and financially rewarded in music and cuisine, but it seems to be regarded very differently when enacted on bodies, perhaps because the body is our last refuge of perceived sovereignty. It is the intimate archive that should not be non-consensually overwritten by someone else's narrative. Perhaps because colonizers attempted to decimate the very bodies and worldviews it encountered through hegemonic conquest. Perhaps because we, collectively, are still so far from being able to reconcile that transgenerational harm, and because the harm is still ongoing and perpetuated. That is precisely why dance fusion can be problematic.

Dance fusion can also be liberating, healing, bridge-building, re-inventing and revelatory when approached thoughtfully. I've witnessed works that evoke rousing collective affirmations from audiences; a veritable "Yes, you nailed it! That's my experience too." That participant accord revealed the importance of the embodied archives we were generating. These embodied exchanges differed from archeological relics recovered from mud beds. They differed from religious texts that would be semiotically argued over in interpretation. These scenarios taught me that TcFD, and dance itself, carried beautiful urgency and shouldn't be discarded as a tool for cultural transformation, nor dismissed as unreadable, illegible, subjective, ephemeral musings of non-professionals. These were self-published documentaries of the peoples' histories. Being thoughtful about it required embracing the complexity, intersectionality, and relational entanglements reflected in such fast-moving expressions.

Here, I intentionally began to apply the phrase *cultural appropriation* as a neutral descriptor of this poly-cultural transactional process for a very specific reason: appropriation is pervasive, and the great majority of industrialized cultures are impacted and discursively interchanging with the political, economic, and cultural happenings of near and distant peoples. *Whether or not the cultural borrowing or expression is problematic or reasonably benign requires a secondary analysis of the power differentials in the agency of the parties involved.*

Often these power differences are problematically real and must be contended with. But the unilateral charge of cultural appropriation/sacrilege towards fusion will not be perpetuated here. Cultural fusion warrants a deeper dive into the dynamics of geographical context, source-culture dispossession, and what kind of meaningful engagement or exploitation undergirds exchanges. It is equally important to remind ourselves that some cultural tradition and conventions warrant being challenged and no longer serve us. Dance, as a cultural practice, shapes and enacts social constructs and values in a multiplicity of functions. It is a full-spectrum laboratory for collective meaning-making:

- a. **Cultural Affirmation/Preservation:** an effort to maintain and fortify traditions, practices, terms, movement and artifacts deemed valuable and inherently important for their cultural worth.
- b. **Cultural Reclamation:** a restorative process by which a group reclaims terms, practices, movements, symbols, or artifacts that were previously used in a way disparaging of that group.
- c. **Cultural Subversion:** an attempt to transform the established social order and hegemonic structures of power, authority and hierarchy. It refers to a process by which the values and principles of a system in place are contradicted or reversed; mocked or defied.
- d. **Cultural Deviance:** enacting behavior that a considerable number of people in society view as reprehensible and beyond the limits of tolerance. Evaluation is based on the expectation that conformity to norms benefits the whole, and those who defy norms are disrupting existence in problematic ways.
- e. **Cultural Suppression/Oppression/Compliance:** the weaponizing of terms, practices, symbols, movements, artifacts against groups in an effort to invalidate, invisibilize, insult, demean and eradicate and their social value.
- f. **Cultural Innovation:** How terms, practices, symbols, movements, artifacts can be enacted to re-imagine, catalyze, galvanize and transform cultural concepts, conventional customs, practices values and perceptions.

Interculturalism is too often the "unequal cultural exchange between the colonizer and colonized" (Chakravorty, p.109). In the collective effort to avoid additional harm, it has been understandably unpopular to consider adjacent questions of why specific cultural content resonates and is popularized or reclaimed, and by whom, under what circumstances. It is this *third space* elucidated by post-colonial scholar Homi Bhabha that draws our attention to the use of mimicry and hybridity as vital exchanges practicing and test-driving two-way negotiations of agency; micro-arenas for the geopolitical power infringements that force unacknowledged narratives into plain view (Frenkel, 2008). In dance, these embodied narratives are offered at lightning speed through non-verbal transactions between movers, or between movers and spectators. Transcultural Fusion Dance events and online forums were sites through which people enacted their own vantage points, embodied experiences, and priorities, without awaiting scholars and governing officials to proscribe what their global citizenship *should* look like or would be *allowed* to look like. That doesn't mean mistakes weren't made in those interactions, and symbolic offenses were frequent. But TcFD represents the first Internet-driven community of lay citizens getting out ahead of intellectual society's analysis to self-author through experimentation, beginning with early social media platform Tribe.net in 2003. It is a pattern of creative self-construction and self-configuration for new or augmented realities that contour the lived realities of people in both meaningful and regretful ways. It continues to repeat itself, as our Internet usage instigates scrambling responses from lawmakers trying to legislate reasonable guardrails. There are clearly consequences in lived reality for online experiments, and the TcFD community's initial free-for-all mashup did rack up enough misadventures to warrant suspicious side-eye and frustration from people of source cultures, and citizens of the global majority.

My challenge was to raise these complexities to the dance community I performed for at conventions and festivals; events in which people wanted to feel release, inspiration, thrill, and escapism from their normal lives. It was the equivalent of me finding a way to say "Welcome! I know you've travelled many miles and saved all of

your discretionary income to enjoy a dedicated weekend doing the dance you love, but before we get started, can we sit down and talk about some problematic and covert racism you are unknowingly perpetuating?"

I began offering a lecture titled "For the Love of the Craft: A Thoughtful Approach to Our Dance Legacy" to accompany my performance and instructional engagements. The first festival to welcome an accompanying academic lecture was TribalCon, an Atlanta-based dance festival produced by Ziah McKinney in 2006. A small cache of TcFD dance practitioners began a collective effort to reconcile the history and influence of Orientalism, colonialism, post-feminist studies, and slavery in their artistic expressions and explorations in 2007.

The lectures spread, the topics varied, but always focused on equity, inclusion, restorative scholarship, and ethics. My aim was to infuse the community with an awareness of ethical methodologies, and the groundswell grew as a labor of love. Although it was still a predominantly white environment, I began to experience a sense of reflection and reciprocity I lacked working in Contemporary Modern dance departments. As was the custom, all TcFD performance events were radically inclusive. Student troupes and headliner faculty alternated sharing the same stage and were cheered equally. Body positivity was the unquestioned norm, and the queering of gender was frequent. Staged works had strict time limits of seven minutes or fewer to accommodate the large numbers of participants. The norms differed tremendously from academic cultures, and there was a concerted effort to affirm all participants in ways that resembled my experience of West African dance communities... and in contrast to how academia often erected biases and hurdles to weed out students defined.

This research tension continued to surface for me in all locations, and all countries. I saw very few event participants from the source cultures we were drawing from. In fact, I saw very few people identifiable as members of the global majority demographic. I was excited to witness the brave choreographic creativity that landed in the land of truly revolutionary works. I also witnessed a bevy of works by artists unaware of their Orientalist tropes, dubious use of the word "tribal," gender-coding assumptions, self-exotification through caricatured stage names, and defensive privilege to experiment without Arabs or Africans in the room to interrogate their choices with accountability. As I spoke more plainly about my concerns, reading groups began to pop up around the country (Atlanta being the first). Discussion threads began to appear on social media. Although slow in uptake, the message was surely getting out.

The watershed moment occurred in 2019. My friend and industry colleague Amy Sigil travelled to Brazil to study with my formative instructors and mentors, Rosangela Silvestre. Her first experience of being in the African-descended community of Bahia was the reckoning of her life-long privilege as a white-identifying woman. Additionally, she had purchased a home near the Winnemem Wintu Nation's tribal lands in CA, and was now supporting my concern our dance community's use of the word "tribal." She called me from the airport, and spoke passionately and eloquently about her new cultural and intellectual humility, and her desire to transform. On January 6, 2020, she announced on her social media that she would no longer use the word tribal in the title of her trademarked dance style. She referenced my work as part of the education behind her shift, and things hit the fan. Her fans and students began to question her strongly, and my own website was receiving over 300 hits per hour.

Knowing it would either create real change, or get me completely ostracized from the industry, I quickly wrote the following open letter, and posted it on my website January 10, 2020. The full communication is archived at Donnainthedance.com, but is edited for brevity here:

On January 6, 2020 my dance sister and beloved colleague Amy Sigil announced a formal modification to her popular, trademarked dance style through social media. She succinctly explained that the title "Improvisational tribal fusion" would be changed to "Improvisational transnational fusion" and beautifully acknowledged me as the originator of her adopted terminology. The online conversations and reactions that followed have ranged from cheering support to exasperated resignations from dance.

It is true that I began my efforts to challenge the genre title 'tribal fusion' in 2011 to whomever would listen. As a woman of Choctaw, African, Jewish, Scottish, French and Creole heritage, the word *tribal* signified membership to a people who endured brutal and perpetual genocide, racism, and political, economic and ideological disenfranchisement. I can't unsee these things. I will not trivialize the sacrifices my ancestors made to survive and uplift me by obscuring the meaning of a word that is one of the few tools we have to challenge the colonialist legacy within our lives. My life is beautiful because of their wise and brave actions. I am descended from slaves in Louisiana. I am the product of my Black and Choctaw Great Grandmother being raped by her employer in Mississippi. A tribe signified DNA-membership to an identifiable group that shared a common language, cultural practices, experiences, histories, food, attire and values. We collectively attempted to retain those practices through hundreds of years of attacks to our sovereignty, values, personhood, homes, health and family structures. It wasn't easy. Many cultural treasures, languages and knowledge have been obliterated. Many humans didn't survive.

A weekend festival gathering of dancers who've gained entrance to a community through paid instruction do not share the same cultural, demographic and physical umbilical cord. Most

certainly, no matter what adversities they have traversed as individuals, they have not experienced the shock of collective genocide and persecution for their way of life. They amalgamate into a family of shared temporal experiences and inspirations, but the ability to adopt or drop that mantle of identity can be timed to begin and end with their time on the dance floor or on social media. Afterwards, home/original identities may be resumed if they so choose. Not all do. For many those identities transform, become integrated, permanent and public facing.

Many tribes of indigenous origin did not/do not have that luxury or editorial agency in their lives.

Transnational is a factual and non-politicized descriptor of the kind of dancing I see in the fusion world. I offer it as an umbrella terminology for our community in hopes of encapsulating the many interpretive variations and styles of our gatherings:

trans / above and beyond + national/a nation-state border

Why this proposed change in language? In summary, I began structured dance training in 1981. Mid-career, I converted to fusion dances of the North African and Arab World in 2001. My inspirations were Rosangela Silvestre, Letitia Williams, Shaunti Fera, Gypsy Ames, and Rachel Brice. These women generously gave me access and instruction to an artistic homecoming that fulfilled me profoundly. Like many, I rearranged my life, priorities, checkbook and career to dive deeply into this dance form.

My emotions were conflicted: I had a deep love of the dance and formed genuine friendships, but also observed perceptions and community practices that made me cringe. I began to be very selective with how my money was spent, what promoters I supported, what events I associated with, who I learned from, how I attired myself onstage and questioning what my own conflicts of interest were in benefitting from the community as a teacher and performer. I began to take responsibility for my participation in this dynamically evolving community. Ballet took 400 years to become a global form, but transnational fusion was a world-genre after 7 years through online exchange. We were in the fishbowl of the internet and had to grow up quickly. By 2011, I could no longer complicitly co-sign the label *Tribal Fusion*. It was too dismissive of the harrowing experience of tribal peoples on all continents.

I recall that a sponsor once argued with me about the length of my proposed retitle. Behind my back she shortened “Transnational Fusion” to “transfusion” because she needed something catchy to easily fit on her printed graphic. She didn’t ask what the new title meant. She just wanted it to fit her marketing mold even if it was a nonsensical descriptor of a medical procedure instead of a dance practice.

My experiences in our dance community between 2001 – 2011 raised the following questions for me:

Was the pageantry and reconfiguring of performance identities and stage names fostering a culture of privileged escapism from what we thought of as normal life? Can extraordinary moments be cultivated without coopting alternate identities?

- Many participants adopted exoticized identities and appearances for weekend festivals or online accounts. Did participants truly understand what it was like to be a member of the disenfranchised peoples whom served as our inspiration?
- Was our community also meaningfully engaged in the economic, political, and social upliftment of the communities that inspired us (Arabs, Africans, Turkish, Persians)?
- The community was mostly middle and upper class European descended women teaching mostly European descended women about dances of the Arab world, and that formula was problematic to me. Could we generously share our body-positive platforms in the spirit of global citizenship?
- A dominant number of performances I viewed thematically focused on caricatured and distorted depictions of “exoticized Middle Easternness.” The tidal wave of historic, political and propagandic misinformation about Arab, Persian, Turkish and African peoples and cultures was larger and older than many knew. Would it be possible to unplug us from those tropes and inspire the community to learn the stories and histories of those who inspired us visually?
- Could we grow in equitable, inclusive participation by disrupting the demographics of our gatherings by inviting the voices and knowledge of Arab, Persian, Turkish and African citizens to the table?
- Could we wrangle our economic sovereignty without wealthy or biased promoters/patrons determining our collective values and practices for us?
- Could we humbly and honorably cite our influences and elders so that their contributions would not be invisibilized, leaving them nameless in the history books?
- Could we find an inclusive language for ourselves that would subvert and challenge our blind spots and implicit biases?

Since receiving professional work in this community in 2002, I have endeavored to raise these charged and controversial topics publicly. Many early adopters and thoughtful people have stepped up to keep the community from collapsing as a passing novelty, while also infusing our practices and norms with integrity. Amy Sigil and the Unmata family has been with me from the start, beginning the deep work of examination. My student collaborators from Smith College were incredible and added to my own knowledge. Producers like Ziah McKinney and Rachel Kay Brookmire provided me platforms to speak my truth without censorship. Other colleagues utilized their forums to speak their truths too (Sarah Johansson Locke, Khadijah K.S. Smith, Karim Nagi, Amel Tafsout, Amar Solunamar, Michel Moushabek and many more). Dancers like Christy Smith started reading clubs to review materials I cited during my keynote talks. Companies like Luciterra in Vancouver brought the conversation to their communities and took the time to thoughtfully communicate their insights to clientele. Fellow dancers of the global majority (non-white) and awakened allies all expressed their mutual craving of the conversations we wanted to have, and this encouraged me. Artists like Mevier de la Cruz, Laura Albert, April Rose, Joanna Ashleigh, Leah Woods, Constance Winyaa Harris, Brittany Banaei, and Abigail Keyes sought wider knowledge through educational systems and shared their research, writing, and re-examined art practices communally. We followed the footsteps of scholars and artists who came before us. Clients respectfully asked if they could adopt and use my proposed language publicly, to which I answered a resounding yes. Through it all, I discovered a web of kindred thinkers and movers that inspired me to keep bringing the conversation forward.

Here we are. This has become a global art movement. We are infiltrating conventional venues, Broadway productions, academia, major music festivals, film, and more. We can hail a roster of practice groups in every major city around the world. We are a multi-billion dollar industry that now spans the globe. YOU have changed the history books as the first art community to utilize online sharing to workshop communal aesthetics and values.

And yet, this is still defined as an underground dance community. You/we operate independently of conventional dance circuits, red-carpet theaters, award shows and major arts funders. You've/We've kept your/our independence. Perhaps you've grown in personal resilience as friends come and go from the active scene, heroes and founders transition from this Earth life, inspirations retire, gatherings shutter their doors and your disappointments poison your inspiration. You have probably traversed many pitfalls in our burgeoning popularity: toxic individuals, exploitative promoters, racist, ageist, homophobic, ableist and sexist infiltrators, injurious physical trends, and conflicting aesthetic interests. You may have made your own mistakes. I certainly have.

But you wake up the next day, fall back in love, keep showing up and keep moving. This is because dance is an enduring orientation that chooses you. It becomes the way you encounter, inhabit and process the world around you. It is a kinesthetic intelligence that, once awakened, doesn't go back to sleep. It is a commitment to feel deeply, and be in perpetual conversation with oneself. You find that you once you embrace those truths, you stop treading water and discover exponential progress. Buckle up.

You, as part of this community, are quite powerful and influential. Collectively, we differ tremendously in priorities and motivational reasons for being here, but we are now a family.

So, what does it mean to truly embrace global citizenship and be a family? Moving beyond lip service to inclusivity, joining this family in earnest would require an acknowledgment and meaningful engagement with our:

- Interconnectivity: beyond the interplay of nation states, 58.8% of humanity is presently connected to the Internet.[1] The epoch of our tipping point has been reached.
- Intersectionality: the ways in which our identities overlap, complicate and compound the negotiation of social exchanges
- Interdependence: we need each other to exist and survive
- Stewardship: responsible caretaking of the environment and eco-spheres we inhabit (individually and collectively)
- Inclusiveness: we treat all with the values we wish to be treated with
- Fostering of open exchange: celebrating and learning about each other does not negate our own culture, but the power differential in our interchanges would need to be examined carefully to avoid distortions and exploitation
- Embracing of multi-dimensionalism and complexity: we do not require reflections of sameness to feel comfortable because we have internalized a locus for our own self-worth. The benefits of difference become legible to us. We no longer fear the unknown and unexpected.

There is unpaid labor in allowing our lives to be complicated with the fullness of diversity. After encountering the stimulation of something different and novel, we begin the real work of evaluating our perception of norms, symbols, assumptions, values, practices, agency, and negotiations of power. If new knowledge is to be truly and experientially integrated into our understanding, there are no shortcuts to this process.

It's what we learn is *the real work*. It demarcates the moment we move beyond being superficial tourist or dabblers, and stretch ourselves to new understandings and embodied realities. Being deeply reflexive and responsive to diversity isn't easy, and I've seen a great number of people feel paralyzed and stunned into inaction

after encountering such complexity. They throw their hands up in exasperation... not knowing where to begin. Inaction can be interpreted as a kind of hopelessness—a presumption that your desires and wishes cannot be actualized (to paraphrase a wise gentleman named Aaron).

Beloved dance community, we are evolving now... so don't give up on each other.

Would you be willing to encourage a new vision that permits questioning? Would you patiently steady yourself as we fumble forward and calibrate to each other? Can you drain the vinegar from your veins or the acid in your tongue, listen with patience and aim to uplift truth with each word? Would you participate in creating new terminologies, practices, aesthetics and values that can stand the test of time? Would you let those things evolve as we learn and realize more? Would you build your stamina for occasional discomfort, and stay present for tough conversations and critical examination so that we can increase our sophistication and understanding of what we do together? Are you willing to see our version of the world through new and different eyes, over and over again?

Can you remember your original inspiration for coming to this community? Can you trust that what you originally resonated with is still there to nourish you? Can you be an active part of resolving the blind spots of our age? Can you pause any tendency to be defensive, suspend the need to prove you are right or one of the "good ones." Can you not tell underrepresented peoples how they should be reacting to the injustices they experience? Can you not insist that disenfranchised and underrepresented populations comfort, reassure and educate you while navigating the legacy of their generations-long wounding?

Can we re-write the script? Yes, we can. Can we own our early origins as a genre and heal our blind spots? Absolutely. Can we grasp our legacy as early adopters of global citizenship and model inclusiveness for other transnational communities? I intend it with all of my heart.

At the core of changing our genre's name lies an important issue that Robin DiAngelo eloquently articulated in her seminal 2011 article "White Fragility:"

While anti-racist efforts ultimately seek to transform institutionalized racism, anti-racist education may be most effective by starting at the micro level. The goal is to generate the development of perspectives and skills that enable all people, regardless of racial location, to be active initiators of change. Since all individuals who live within a racist system are enmeshed in its relations, this means that all are responsible for either perpetuating or transforming that system. However, although all individuals play a role in keeping the system active, the responsibility for change is not equally shared. White racism is ultimately a white problem and the burden for interrupting it belongs to white people. (p. 66)

It is true that underrepresented peoples have been speaking of these issues for a long time. The hard work of deconstructing internalized privilege and fragility are customarily resisted because it requires acknowledgement of our complicity, despite thinking of ourselves as good people. Please don't be seduced into inaction by this oversimplification. The level of resistance you feel to new challenges is commensurate with the degree of transformation that awaits you. If you knew how much you would alchemically transform by clarifying every distortion and untruth from your life, you would run towards your problems instead of away from them. Reconfiguring our language and terminologies is a liberating step away from a colonialist history that impoverishes us all. People of the global majority are not the only victims of hegemonic thinking.

If you find yourself wanting to cry and dump online, may I implore you to hit the pause button. If you've not taken the time to start the work of decolonizing your own thinking, please read two articles by these White anti-racism scholars before you unload onto others:

"Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" by Peggy McIntosh (Originally published in 1970)

- <https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mcintosh.pdf>

"White Fragility" by Robin DiAngelo (original article published in 2011, new book published in 2018)

- <https://robindiangelo.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/White-Fragility-Published.-1.pdf>

Then...

Yes, please. Adopt this new language far and wide as an umbrella term for our genre, and then customize a subtitle-descriptor that aligns with your interests. As an example: "Hello, I'm Donna Mejia, I am a transnational fusion dance artist. My own style is a mashup that dialogs dances of North Africa and the Arab world with hip hop, electronica, and Brazilian dance." Boom. It's customarily the start of a fun conversation. Give it a try. George Clinton wisely said "Free your ass and your mind will follow." Cheers to that. Keep the beats coming and let's keep dancing. Don't avoid or leave the community just to deflect personal reflexivity. Be brave.

Complicate our conversations with good questions and counterpoint ideas. In my courses at the university, I created a practice called *Fumble Forward* to seek exchange and hit the pause

button on conventional responses such as anger. To keep a space of inquiry open in a charged subject matter, students will preface their public commentary by saying “I’m about to fumble with my words.” The community responds as a chorus with “Fumble Forward!” It is our social contract to let confusion be a part of our discourse. Perhaps a student is unsure of the terminologies needed to join a conversation. Perhaps they are unsure if their questions will be offensive. Perhaps they don’t have fully formulated ideas and opinions yet. But for the next few minutes, we’ve all agreed to suspend judgement, lean in and help each other clarify through a process of corrective, delicate or clumsy verbal surgery. *Fumble Forward* allows us to stay open and speak from the heart with diplomacy, even if our voices are trembling and we can’t find confident, stable ground. *Fumble Forward* gives us a starting place to back away from sounding off, moving towards true listening and communication. Please adopt that too if it resonates.

I found it important to put myself in the room to hold space while colleagues, patrons and participants encountered themselves on this issue. I have learned so much from all of you and I thank you. We must heal this together if the awakening and progress is to be real. Let’s show the world how it can be done.

Switch this into high gear. Help this to trend proudly. Shine your courage to do *the work* and pull up a seat to the conversation. Keep creating and moving with a new consciousness of who we aspire to be. Maybe we’ll collectively find an even better name for our genre. Heal this blind spot.

[1] <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, sourced January 10, 2020

Aftermath and Evolution

An explosion of conversation began to trend on Facebook.com. The letter was accessed by readers in over 200 countries and translated into four languages (<https://donnainthedance.com/>. Annual website metrics, 2022). Then, the COVID-19 global lockdown slammed into all of our dancing realities by March 2020, and Amy and I continued global conversations together and apart in online videoconferencing spaces. Dancers in Spain and Brazil informed us that within their countries, the word transnational carried ultra-conservative, exploitive, and hegemonic political associations. Grateful for their feedback, I also knew that nation states were poly-cultural, and not monolithic in their cultural presentation. As a global community, we collectively decided to try out Transcultural Fusion Dance (TcFD). Many organizations removed the word tribal from their marketing materials, and statements of sovereignty appeared online all over the globe.

A small group of informed artists joined together as a research and action team, and we named our initiative Gather at the Delta. The original design team included myself, Jacqueline Westhead, Terri Allred, Amy Sigil, Joanna Ashleigh, and Brittney Banaei. I serve as the principal investigator for the collective which has grown to include Liz Azi, Zoe Nissen, Suhaila Salimpour, and Drake Von Trapp.

The Gathering at the Delta Initiative is a first effort to have a global conversation for Transcultural Fusion Dance, and to imagine what Fair-Trade Cultural Exchange should look like. The initiative was initially designed by me, and hosted by the Earthdance Justice and Retreat Center, the Belly Dance Business Academy, and the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Part one was a Colloquium of relevant topics held virtually on Saturday, February 27, 2021, Sponsored by Earthdance, 10:00 am - 6:30 pm Eastern Standard Time. The event was offered on a sliding scale, and was an effort to investigate, imagine, and seed new ethical practices in a community that has awakened to the harmful histories of Orientalism, colonialism, genocide and slavery. We understood that our emerging global citizenship must acknowledge interconnection, interdependence, intersectionality, and stewardship.

The first generation of this one-day colloquium aimed to provide a platform for intellectual, philosophical, educational and creative exchange between practitioners of the many fusion forms inspired by dances traditions of the MENATH Regions (Middle Eastern, North African, Turkish and Hellenistic cultures). Guest speakers included Amel Tafsout (Algerian), Brittney Banaei (Iranian American), Raïssa Lei, Khadija (Saudi Arabian), Shahrzad Khorsandi (Iranian American), and Simon of Lebanon (Lebanese). Our topics included an opening circle covering community agreements and a movement meditation from one of our community matriarchs; active allyship that could address the harm of colonial dominance, orientalist projections and the uninformed commercialization of vernacular dance traditions; a proposal session covering what Fair-Trade Cultural Exchange could be; a session deconstructing and re-imagining gender, and a concluding call to action.

The evaluation feedback and success of this conversation was aided by early writings sent to all registrants that included a glossary of post-colonial vocabulary words, concepts, citations, and explanations, a detailing of inclusive community agreements for participation and conflict resolution, and an explanation of our objectives. The material endures as a streaming program on the DaturaOnline.com platform.

Part two was a digital performance exploring emerging TcFD aesthetics hosted by the Dance Department of University of Colorado, Boulder October 8 - 10, 2021. The accompanying website, gatheratthedelta.com, served

as a digital program for the event, and will be relaunched as a global repository and archive of our generation's efforts: artistic, intellectual and communal. It will include (1) virtual galleries of dance works from the community, (2) catalogs of interviews with pivotal artists, musicians, producers, activists, scholars, and researchers, and (3) forum summaries from communities around the world and (4) recordings of conference events for future participants and scholars.

Part three will be a global survey of participants, to research the demographics, identities, engagement, interpretations, and varied motivations for our participation in Transcultural Fusion dance. We aim for this information about who we are individually, and what our lives are like, to inform us beyond stereotypes and assumptions. We know that until we have data about this global art movement, we are without tools to fully understand ourselves and our legacy. This data will not be sold to commercial entities. Grant writing and fundraising is underway, and the questionnaire is prepared and peer-reviewed for release in 16 languages.

Observations and Self-Reminders on How to Decolonize Dance Through Fair-Trade Cultural Exchange Principles

Transcultural Fusion Dance contains such a variety and diversity of identities and artistic leanings, yet there exists an interesting common pact to let it be, that it is more than fine, and is the strength of the community. After calls for reconciliation occurred, the willingness to change practices, language, and diversify event lineups was remarkable to witness and has been sustained. The lessons learned are summarized here in hopes of reminding ourselves of the internal and communal work we embraced, and to provide a skeletal map for how the work must continue until dance education can be a welcoming home for anyone. What seems to initially be confrontational in anti-bias work, does transform—and is worth the weirdness of unlearning our resistance.

1. **Learn** and apply anti-racism frameworks to all layers of research and analysis:
 - a. Intrapersonal: Unlearning internalized bias and racism
 - b. Interpersonal: Improving techniques for didactic exchange with compassion
 - c. Communal: Understanding regional norms, unspoken social expectations, demographic and environmental influences, and relational frameworks
 - d. Structural and systemic levels: questioning, challenging and dismantling rules and laws that protect and advantage one group as inherently more valuable. This differs from designing phases of corrective measures intended to level social playing fields.
2. **Stop** assuming Eurocentric aesthetics, training techniques, and choreographic frameworks are more developed, advanced, and concert hall-worthy than most other genres, or that the length of performance-based offerings equates the depth of investigation.
3. **Cease** asserting, imposing, and assuming that current research methods can be applied to all traditions and genres with universality, stifling other frameworks of valid knowledge-generation from offering vital contributions.
4. **Decenter** the voices of singular scholars as overall evaluators and critics of entire traditions, switching instead to collaborative, participatory research methods and honorable, transparent relationships with source cultures. The parade of generalized expertise over all dance traditions must stop. None of us, whether professional, amateur, or recreationalist, can tell others what is meaningful and valuable to them. Let people choose for themselves and offer informative consultation regarding ethical practices.
5. **Resist**, as a practitioner of any movement art, waiting for academia to awaken, and live your valuable life embracing the art you know you need to make. Explore in both solitude and in community, for they are equally powerful and necessary as checks and balances for each other. Resist the definition that you are only a valid artist if you get paid. Dance is a currency of its own. Continue creating your own communities of discourse, and non-competitive exchange, because we all deserve, benefit from, and need community. Keep trying until you locate one that uplifts you.
6. **Embrace** interdisciplinary frameworks: historicizing relies on triangulating from communities that interweave in and through the tradition or genre (the bibliography from this writing expansively pulls from other fields to reflect the intersectional relationships, emersion, and entanglement TcFD shares in its environment).
7. **Build** cultural competency, understanding that dance customarily serves an ambassadorial role as a first encounter, or portal, to an unfamiliar culture (along with cuisine and music). Grow your ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures.
 - a. Increase your knowledge of different cultural practices and world views as a way of becoming cognizant of your own world view, and how it differs from others

- b. Embrace appreciative inquiry when encountering differences and polyculturalism instead of jump-cutting to evaluation and judgement.
- c. Build a tool kit for encountering the unfamiliar with confidence, curiosity, and calm (Fumble Forward) by investing energy into building better questions and diplomatic understanding, rather than investing life force in portraying oneself as an authority.
8. **Remember** that cultural assimilation represents a range of personal choices, taking into account whether assimilation may be an act of survival under duress, or alternately an effort to by-pass or coopt identities through the privilege of social or economic power and agency.
9. **Realize** that oversimplification of cultural appropriation warrants expansion, revealed by the degree of interchange embedded in our use of Internet technology. Susan Scafidi explained in her 2005 book Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law that cultural appropriation is legally regarded as the taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc.
- It's most likely to be harmful when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive, e.g. sacred objects. But since no one person speaks for an entire culture, we must allow for accumulated permission to evolve through genuine consensus-building relationships with many over time.
10. Investigate and name the advantages and differentials that allow those in power to dominate and override those who've been historically marginalized and systemically oppressed. Examine your own advantages and privileges.
11. **Insist** on positionality statements in dance research as a way to increase our collective transparency and accountability.
12. **Revise** research tools together, focusing on the removal of obstructions to broader thinking.
13. **Value** preservation efforts for traditional or vulnerable cultures in peaceful coexistence with experimental innovation, re-invention and remixing.
14. **Practice** cultural humility:
- Investigate resources to build basic conversancy and cultural competency
 - Begin with an assumption index and always provide a positionality statement (Neuhaus, et.al. 2022. pp. 237 – 253)
 - Elucidate and identify the signature cultural values enacted through, or in dialog through, the dance
 - Humanize and dignify the subjects or source culture members of study, render their contributions visible and address harms they have experienced
 - Acknowledge implicit bias and dominant narratives as part of our history without centering them as the de facto reference for comparison, analysis, and historicization in research
 - Identify the trajectory of cultural development for the form: is it emerging, up-trending, established, ensconced as a royal or classical form, etc. Identify markers in the pathways of communal progress the dance form experienced in its unfolding. This helps us to determine what protections and interventions should be enabled to uplift source cultures.
 - Identify the degree of cultural and political sovereignty a genre has had to self-define its own development, expression, representation, and promotion
 - Identify the mode of presentation: historic, traditional, interpretive, inspired, fantasy, etc.
 - Identify the context of the dance: rural, urban, classical, ritual-based, concert-based, contemporary, transnational, online, etc.
 - Explain which cultural practices and values are aligned with a dance's cultural sources, and if the dance may be actively challenging or subverting any signature or contrary cultural practices and values
15. **Practice** intellectual humility as a lifestyle:
- Use "Research mode" versus "React mode" as a first option (enduring narrow-mindedness may require you to switch to react mode)
 - Validate "Multiple Intelligences" in our knowledge generation practices (Gardner, 2011)
 - Consider integrity over conventions = a variety of approaches is needed in the "Social Change Ecosystem" (Iyer, 2022)
 - Investigate power differentials in all social exchanges

- e. Avoid the absolutes of binaries, look for the nuanced grey zones where information resides (*Bhabha, 2004. p. 55*)
 - f. Prioritize humanization: economic and technological advancement does not equate to moral evolution
16. **Invite** voices of all identities into discourse, and uplift systemically marginalized artists towards socioeconomic mobility.
 17. **Question** bravely and diplomatically, listening attentively to the micro-moments of your thinking when something just doesn't sit right with you.
 18. **Welcome** questions with an open heart and thick skin.
 19. **Prepare** and fortify yourself for dominators, trolls, soul-crushers, gatekeepers, manipulators, and bullies. Activate your team of supporters and care-takers, and be equally prepared to provide compassion in return when needed.
 20. **Challenge** and update these recommendations whenever needed without fear of offending me. I look forward to our mutual growth and development.
 21. **Enjoy** and delight in all of the astonishing ways humans, and some animals and insects, dance as a meaningful, potent, crucial, and natural emanation of existence—no different or less important than the spoken word—crucial in work, celebration, religious observation, secular or sacred initiation, military defense, reconciliation in quarrels, rites of passage, healing for individuals and collectives, ancestral and communal communication, liturgical praise, and direct connection to the esoteric and divine realms of existence. Dance does not necessarily NEED to be performed for others, or on a stage, to be a worthy endeavor, a meaningful act, a technology for healing, or an intellectual pursuit.

The Ache and the Quickening

My first exposure to Transcultural Fusion Dance was a virtual download of resonant information that irrevocably awakened my unarticulated but life-long ache to know more of the world. Admittedly, I wanted to be a part of a community that regarded the globe as a good place rather than a suspicious and ugly threat warranting high fences and proactive aggression. For all of TcFD's initial indulgence as a cultural free-for-all, I did grow to understand it as an early and innocent, but naïve, investigation of our global citizenship. I now recognize TcFD participants as early pioneers of a new visual culture, one that reflects their individual and collective enthusiasm for a newfound global citizenship and interconnectivity. After that initial surge, it is moving to witness how the TcFD community is undertaking grounding efforts to collaboratively workshop a theoretical foundation for its art. It is an important time of transaction and interchange. No one should ever be shamed for being curious about other cultures, but we do need to be thoughtful about the impact of codifying and commodifying a dance form. The Gather at the Delta project is an effort to host meaningful community conversations about this issue, so that call-outs and forced reckonings will not be necessary norms to policing innovation.

The aesthetic values of TcFD will continue to be informed by participants' online explorations, and I do not experience this to be automatically, ethically problematic. The aspirational culminating experience for many participants continues to be dedicated dance research travel. However, these online explorations should be equally informed by ethnographic principles (citation, cultivating equitable exchange, sovereignty of source-cultures, immersion and contextual study, engagement with elders, etc.).

My efforts to question and decolonize dance education have required intellectual humility, humor, and patience. However, my internal supply for patience is depleting, and I'm craving the reckoning and reconciliation that is well overdue. At this moment, I serve as the only tenure-track faculty member globally representing Transcultural Fusion Dance. For a dance genre that has been globally established for over 20 years, I hope to see better representation within my lifetime, not only of TcFD, but many other dance forms that are systemically marginalized. The need to humanize each other in scholarship and cultural exchange requires acknowledging we are not, and cannot, be blank slates in movement and cultural studies, nor can we claim expertise in the inner narratives, phenomenology, and lived experiences of others. Lowering our threshold of defensive reactivity and conflict as we encounter the unexpected and unfamiliar in our bodies, and in each other's expressive bodies, invites interchange with trauma-informed somatic sciences. I have been humbled by how the TcFD community supports this depth of inclusivity.

I continue to investigate, through my research, community service, and choreography, how my own multi-heritage background informs the way I move through the world, in the TcFD community, and how I reconcile cultural collisions and social constructs in my life experience (which is a different article). I know very well, and many will no doubt remind me, this relational approach to scholarship is unconventional and should be sanitized of my perspectives expressed here. I honestly don't feel I have much choice in the matter. My experience of predominantly white demographics at multiple universities reinforced how my multi-heritage ethnicity impacted the reception and critique of my creative work and scholarship. I'm regularly advised/admonished to stay in one

legible lane if I wish to succeed in this system. Compliance is a denial too deep to comfortably absorb for me. Dropping the pretense of purported objectivity is a given in the social sciences, and disclosure of entanglement or investment is regarded as foundational, responsible, and productive transparency.

TcFD was recently described to me as a “contested” dance genre by another dance scholar, and this reveals the kind of implicit biases driving what kind of inventiveness will be allowed in a field that celebrates the value of imagination. TcFD practitioners have proven willing to engage the messiness of human identity, rather than suppress the topic. Transnationalism, interculturalism, polyculturalism, overlapping categories of belonging, multi-heritage studies, interdisciplinarity, fusion, and hybridity have always been an undercurrent in dance developments, and warrant being brought into equitable conversation with classicism and efforts to preserve artistic lineage. The two need not be mutually exclusive. The centuries-old source movements of TcFD compelled me as a participant to rearrange my life and artistic study because they are still powerfully relevant to my contemporary embodied experiences. In this, I am unequivocally not alone.

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