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THE SACRED CIRCLE: OSTENSION IN NATIVE AMERICAN HOOP DANCE

by

Emma George

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Folklore and American Studies

Approved:

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2020

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## ABSTRACT

## The Sacred Circle: Ostension in Native American Hoop Dance

Emma George

This thesis examines the role of the semiotic concept ostension in folk dance, specifically in Native American hoop dance. Although the discipline of folklore is well-versed in ostension, folk dance has not been examined through this lens. I argue that dance is a form of ostension, of demonstrating a narrative, and this is especially apparent within Native American hoop dancing. In constructing my argument, I focus on interviewing dancers who have experience with the hoop dance. As such, I interviewed four dancers at the World Championship Hoop Dance Contest held in Phoenix, Arizona, in February of 2019. These are included along with another ten interviews I conducted previously with the Brigham Young University Living Legends dance team. My key texts for examining powwow and intertribal culture include *Heartbeat of the People: Music and Dance of the Northern Pow-wow* by Tara Browner (2004), and *Indians and Wannabes: Native American Powwow Dancing in the Northeast and Beyond* by Ann Axtmann (2015). Ostension and its role in dance is explored in relation to “Folklore as Expressed in the Dance in Tonga” by Kaeppler (1967), and “Does the Word ‘Dog’ Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend-Telling” by Linda Dégh and Vázsonyi (1983). I begin with a brief history of Native Americans in North America before discussing the origins of powwows, intertribal culture, and hoop dance. I then look at both the sacred nature and material culture of the modern hoop dance before establishing hoop dance as a form of ostension.

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role of the semiotic concept ostension in folk dance, specifically in Native American hoop dance. Although the discipline of folklore is well-versed in ostension, folk dance has not been examined through this lens. I argue that dance is a form of ostension, of demonstrating a narrative, and this is especially apparent within Native American hoop dancing. I begin with a brief history of Native Americans in North America before discussing the origins of powwows, intertribal culture, and hoop dance. I then look at both the sacred nature and material culture of the modern hoop dance before establishing hoop dance as a form of ostension

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Emma George

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Watch:  
 always this dance is a questing  
 anointed with feathers and sweat,  
 an avid, invigorating cry, Father Sky,  
*of Wait, there's more;*  
*a whole world is coming!*  
 More hoops! More hoops!  
 More wondrous forms:  
 From Cyrus Cassells' "Hoop Dance" (1991:230)

## INTRODUCTION

As a sophomore attending Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, I received an invitation from a young Navajo woman to join a hoop dancing class for Native and non-Native dancers. As I participated in the class, I realized that hoop dancing is not just about cool tricks and formations (although those do happen); it is an act that carries deep meaning and pertains to an ongoing and changing tradition that has roots from many different Native American tribes. I immediately fell in love with hoop dancing, and I was impressed with the sheer amount of skill that it takes to become competent in it. This thesis will discuss the origins of intertribal culture, powwows, and hoop dance as well as the role of ostension in hoop dance.

Ostension is defined as a behavior such as a gesture or changing position that signals a communication from the mover to the viewer. It is a semiotic concept that was introduced into the discipline of folklore by Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi. While a great deal of scholarship has been done on legend-tripping and enactment as forms of ostension, there is limited to none that discusses dance and ostension. I argue that dance is a form of ostension, of demonstrating a narrative, and this is especially apparent within Native American hoop dancing. Origin stories about the hoop dance as told by both



dancers and audience members provide a perfect venue to analyze dance as ostension, which, in the process, helps to develop a pan-identity. The aim of this paper is to establish hoop dance as a narrative form, an act that performs belief and a symbol of intertribal beliefs. It will also increase folklorists' awareness of dance, particularly folk dance, as ostension as well as encourage more analysis of dance from a folkloric perspective.

In constructing my argument, I focus on interviewing dancers who have experience with the hoop dance. As such, I interviewed four dancers at the World Championship Hoop Dance Contest held in Phoenix, Arizona, in February of 2019. These are included along with another ten interviews I conducted previously with the Brigham Young University Living Legends dance team. My key texts for examining powwow and intertribal culture include *Heartbeat of the People: Music and Dance of the Northern Pow-wow* by Tara Browner (2004), and *Indians and Wannabes: Native American Powwow Dancing in the Northeast and Beyond* by Ann Axtmann (2015). Ostension and its role in dance is explored in relation to "Folklore as Expressed in the Dance in Tonga" by Kaepler (1967), and "Does the Word 'Dog' Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend-Telling" by Linda Dégh and Vázsonyi (1983). I begin with a brief history of Native Americans in North America before discussing the origins of powwows, intertribal culture, and hoop dance. I then look at both the sacred nature and material culture of the modern hoop dance before establishing hoop dance as a form of ostension.

In this paper, I use the terms "Native American" and "Indian" interchangeably. As noted in Christopher Oakley's *Keeping the Circle*, the categories of "Native American"

and “Indian” are originally the categories of Europeans, whereas to these so-named “Indians,” “Prior to contact with Europeans, there was no such thing as an ‘Indian,’ but rather hundreds of peoples living in North and South America with a variety of different cultures” (2005:2). However, modern indigenous peoples often identify themselves by such blanket terms as “Native American” or “Indian,” especially when dealing with those outside of the in-group. This is not meant as disrespectful or generalizing but as a recognition of the shift in Native American identity from tribal to intertribal.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF INDIAN COUNTRY

Native peoples settled and cultivated this hemisphere, creating unique traditions, societies and cultures or thousands of years before Europeans “discovered” the continents (Calloway 1994:1). It’s hard to put a specific number to the different tribes and societies in existence before and after the arrival of Columbus in 1492 as tribes usually pass on knowledge and traditions orally, leaving behind no written record. There is also the added difficulty of imposing European classifications and boundaries on Native American cultures. Many scholars “break North America—excluding present-day Mexico—into 10 separate culture areas” based on geography and similar cultural practices among the estimated 10 million people living in the continental United States (“Native American Cultures” 2019). These 10 million people belonged to diverse groups with complex languages, trading routes, governments, and art forms (Dennis 2016:2).

With the arrival of Europeans, many of these existing groups were devastated by disease and war resulting in the amalgamation of tribes and the formation of new tribes. These tribes fought for survival through the various alliances, wars, and treaties to come. Numerous treaties have been formed between various colonizing principalities and

sovereign Native American tribes well before and after the founding of the United States of America. Tribes allied with different sides during conflicts, such as the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War, so they were not always a united front of native peoples.

After the American colonists won the Revolutionary War and officially established the United States of America, however, Native Americans found themselves much more united as they faced a common enemy: the new government. The conflicts between Native Americans and non-natives generally occurred because of land disputes and attempts to forcefully assimilate Native Americans (Calloway 1994:170). Conflicts over land escalated once the land had been officially “won” from the British. In a missive by Corn Tassel (a Cherokee Chief) to the Governor of Virginia in 1787, he states quite clearly that “Truth is, if we had no Land we should have Fewer Enemies” and that they “have Taken almost all our Country from us without our consent” (*Calendar of Virginia State Papers* 2015:318). This was a fairly common occurrence. Settlers continued to encroach on Indian lands, leaving them with not enough resources to survive. Some tribes (like the Lakota) fought back to try to keep their lands, but even more peaceful tribes who attempted to work with the government (like the Cherokee) were being stripped of their homelands (*Calendar of Virginia State Papers* 2015:318). Native Americans “began to unite in resistance to American demands” as they continued their ongoing (and seemingly endless) battle over “cultural and territorial boundaries” (Calloway 1994:170). The conflict between westward expansion and the Native Americans standing in the way of that expansion resulted in Congress passing the Indian Removal Act of 1830 with the full support of President Andrew Jackson. Tribes were officially forced to move from their

lands into Indian Country, which constituted everything west of the Mississippi river (“Indian Removal Act” 2019). This created intertribal conflicts as tribes removed from their homelands were placed on the homelands of other tribes who resented the invasion and increased competition for resources (Dennis 2016:18). Tribes allied with the federal government when it suited their best interests, regardless of how it affected other tribes, and this continues today in the form of tribal politics.

The battle for land progressed as the battle for culture continued as well. In 1860, the Bureau of Indian Affairs established the first Indian boarding school. This eventually turned into sixty schools with over 6,200 students with reservation day schools and a “placing out system” where children were sent to live with non-Indian families added to the mix (“History and Culture: Boarding Schools” 2020). The aim of these schools was to assimilate Native American youth into mainstream American culture, and these schools included lessons in English, arithmetic, and other standard educational subjects. However, along with learning a new culture, the youth were taught to abandon their own culture. Brigadier General Richard Henry Pratt, headmaster of the Carlisle, Pennsylvania Indian boarding school, is infamous for his motto of “Kill the Indian, save the man” (“History and Culture: Boarding Schools” 2020). For the Indian children under his care, this meant the cutting off of braids; the banning of languages, all religious practices, and, of course, dance; the adoption of Christianity; and removal from their parents and tribes. Children were often forcibly removed from their parents; the Bureau of Indian Affairs would withhold rations or send in their agency police to collect the children. It wasn’t until 1978 that the Indian Child Welfare Act passed, and Native American parents could legally keep their children out of the boarding schools (“History and Culture: Boarding

Schools” 2020). The obvious goal of these schools was to forcibly inject American culture in the Indian youth and to rid them of their cultural practices (with a possible added benefit of more land becoming available).

Future Congressional legislation well into the 20th century aimed to dissolve tribal unity, create infighting, obtain more Indian land, and force assimilation at the cost of native culture. The Dawes Act of 1887 gave land to individual Native Americans rather than tribes as a whole to further isolate Native Americans from their culture and people while still giving more land to settlers (“Indian Reservations” 2019). As settlers continued to move west and land became scarcer, the reservation system was created with the Indian Appropriation Act in 1851. This act removed tribes to farming reservations that they could not leave (“Indian Reservations” 2019). In fact, one of the few ways Native Americans could leave the reservations was as performers. Religious ceremonies and dances were banned by various commissioners of Indian Affairs throughout the early 1900s, until the only way to perform dances was through Wild West shows (and other shows held for the non-native public) or in secret (Browner 2004:28, 29). Buffalo Bill recruited around 100 Native American performers for his 1890s European tour at a time when there were few employment or travel opportunities available to Native Americans (Reddin 1999:77). These Wild West shows are often credited as the beginnings of powwows and intertribal culture as we see them today throughout Indian Country.

### INTERTRIBAL CULTURE

When hearing the word “powwow,” the images that often come to people’s minds are of old western films with cowboys or Indians dancing around a campfire. The word “powwow” is supposed to have originally been a Native American word meaning a

meeting or a gathering, as is the meaning in the modern day. Some consider this word to be outdated and offensive because of its historic and all-encompassing attitude towards Native American tribes. However, the term “powwow” has now come to represent a social gathering of Native American tribes to sing, dance, and interact. Many Native Americans have adopted this potentially offensive term for their own use and so removed most of its negative connotation.

A succinct definition of what a modern powwow is comes from the book *Heartbeat of the People* by Tara Browner. As a professor, she has her students memorize and recite this definition: “A pow-wow is an event where American Indians of all nations come together to celebrate their culture through the medium of music and dance” (2004:1). Notice that her definition includes the phrase “their culture,” indicating already that Native Americans do have a shared culture despite their tribal affiliations or geographical distances. Regardless of the varied languages, dances, religions, and customs of these individual tribes and the efforts of Indian boarding schools to eliminate native culture, powwows create a sense of unity and a celebration of common cultural practices.

Powwows generally have live music for the dancers, as singing, drumming, and dancing always go together. There can be any number of drum circles present at a powwow, with singers from all over North America. There are two types of drumming styles in the powwow circuit: Northern and Southern. Northern style is faster and the singers are at a higher pitch. Southern style is slower and the singers sing at a lower pitch. This Northern-Southern division goes beyond just the drumming styles and into the origins of powwow itself.

The Northern style began in the Northern Great Plains and the Great Lakes regions and now occurs throughout the northern tier of states and in Canada. Southern pow-wows sprang from unique circumstances in Oklahoma, where numbers of unrelated tribes were crowded together during the mid- to late nineteenth century and where the concepts of “pan-Indianism” or “intertribalism” were born from necessity (Browner 2004:3). To have community dances where everyone could participate seems a logical, if not necessary, step in that situation. Social events between various tribes helped to build solidarity and shared beliefs. As a colonized and persecuted group, Native Americans banded together to protect and help one another. Modern powwows are a testament to the continuation of this thinking.

These social gatherings of many different tribes also led to the development of intertribal dances, or dances that have no set origin in any of the tribes (although many assert that they were the creators), and are now performed by members of any tribe. Unlike individual tribe’s ceremonial dances, “the modern social dances most often associated with the intertribal powwow phenomenon can be danced by anyone who is willing to get the proper regalia together, learn the dance steps and customs, and act appropriately during the event” (Toelken 2003:85). The most common and well known of these dances include the men’s grass dance, women’s jingle dress dance, men and women’s traditional, men’s fancy dance, and women’s fancy shawl (Browner 2004:48). These are commonly seen at powwows all over North America, and through folklore and tradition, have reached the status of intertribal. There is also a Northern and Southern variation of each of these dances depending on the song and the drummers.

The origins of these dances have many different stories and folklore associated with them. The *Modern Fancy Dancer's* authors, C. Scott Evans and J. Rex Riddick, state that, "The Fancy Dance, and all modern powwow dance styles, can be traced to the warrior society dances of the Plains tribe. The original regalia and ceremony were similar among various tribes, and the purpose of the dance was almost always to help the people of the tribe" (1998:5). In *Indians and Wannabes*, Ann Axtmann, makes a point about the Buffalo Bill Wild West Shows as a possible origin for the intertribal dances, specifically for the men's fancy dance, as this is an energetic and exhibitionary dance (2015:45).

Regardless of where the dances came from (whether from internal groups like the Plains Tribes or external ones like Buffalo Bill), the dances have become intertribal. For example, when asking about the origin story of the men's grass dance, the most common response from members of different tribes is that "grass dancers prepared the ground for camping and for rituals before or after war by stomping down high prairie grass" (Axtmann 2015:17). I have heard this origin story from multiple people, even in the West where there are no high grasses to stomp down. There is a shared culture behind these dances that goes beyond having the same dance steps; Native Americans have a shared folklore surrounding these dances, and this is especially true when considering the hoop dance.

Often, Native Americans are grouped together as one people and not distinct tribes, so rather than fight this notion, various tribes have embraced and subverted this concept for their own purposes, creating unity where it may not have existed and presenting indigenous people as a united force. A "native identity" is created and recognized by members of the in-group. This is done through intertribal dances



performed at various powwows. Not only are dances shared but beliefs are shared among many tribes. There are values and beliefs that are collectively found among different Native American tribes because of intertribal dances, and nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the hoop dance. It is through the folklore surrounding the hoop dance that we see common beliefs being formed among many different Native American tribes as the hoop dance becomes a symbol of intertribalism.

### HISTORY OF THE HOOP DANCE

Hoop dance is defined by the book *Word Dance: The Language of Native American Culture* as

[a] dance performed with one or more hoops, a sacred symbol. It probably originated among Indians of the western Great Lakes, in particular the Chippewas, Ottawas, and Potawatomis, who used one hoop, and Menominees, who used two. It was popularized in the 20th century by the Tiwa Indians of the Taos Pueblo, and is now performed by various tribes at powwows with sometimes more than a dozen hoops (Waldman 1994:101).

As put forth by this definition, the hoop dance is purported to have come from the Taos Pueblo tribe in the Southwest as a religious dance. However, when tourists began to visit the Pueblo people, the dance moved from a religious ceremony to an exhibition dance (Browner 2004:62). The hoop, or circle, is a sacred shape in many Native American tribes as it represents patterns and objects in nature as well as the circular nature of time and life. Because of the sacred nature of the hoop, early ceremonies from many different tribes often used the hoop (Figure 1). Eventually, the hoop from these ceremonies became a part of a public dance rather than just a ceremonial one. Anyone can watch the performance of the hoop dance, and most everyone can perform it. I'm not Native American and yet I learned and performed the hoop dance at a powwow. Although the

dance may have originated from an exclusive ceremony, it is now an intertribal dance. The hoops are used to depict various animals and actions from everyday life as well as abstract shapes (Browner 2004:62). In this way, the hoop dance still retains sacred meaning that ties it back to traditional practices and philosophies.



Figure 1: 1926-1927 video screenhot showing Pains Indian dancers dancing with a single hoop

The founder of modern-day hoop dance is widely recognized as Tony White Cloud. “Many tribes lay claim to the Hoop Dance. It wasn’t until the 1930s that a young man named Tony White Cloud, Jemez Pueblo, played an instrumental role in its evolution and began using multiple hoops in a stylized version as ‘founder of the modern Hoop Dance’” (Zotigh 2007). Tony White Cloud actually appeared in the 1942 film *Valley of the Sun* as a hoop dancer, and some of the moves he used in that film are still seen by hoop dancers today (RKO pictures). Although many tribes say that they are the

creators of the hoop dance, this most likely stems from the hoop having special, ceremonial purposes in the individual tribes rather than them having actually created a dance with multiple hoops.

The hoop dance is not performed at every powwow, and it is often a special exhibition or small competition event. It is considered a specialty dance rather than one that is always performed at powwows, mostly because of how long it takes to learn the dance. The World Championship Hoop Dance Contest that is held every year at the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona, is the only powwow with just hoop dancers. Events like this and others held at various powwows create a folklore surrounding hoop dance. At these events dancers can share stories, tips, and traditions. The hoop dance is a combination of old and new tradition as seen by the stories hoop dancers tell about the origins of the dance; the hoop itself is an older symbol, whereas the dance itself only came about in the 20th century.

#### THE SACRED NATURE OF THE HOOP

While a dance using multiple hoops is fairly new to Indian country, the hoop itself is purported to have been a part of different indigenous people's beliefs since pre-colonial times. This claim is made through the folklore surrounding not only the hoop dance but the hoop itself.

Many different Native American tribes say that the shape of the hoop or circle is a sacred shape. In *Black Elk Speaks*, a 1932 book by John G. Neihardt, Black Elk, an Oglala Lakota medicine man, tells of a vision where he

saw the mountains there with rocks and forests on them and from the mountains flashed all colors upward to the heavens. Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world...And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that

made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy (Neihardt 2014:26).

In this vision, Black Elk speaks of the sacred hoop of his people that is related to the “whole hoop of the world.” How much of this vision is an accurate retelling of his experience and how much is Neihardt’s artistic license is still up for debate, but whether or not scholars consider this as Black Elk’s words is inconsequential. Many readers look to these words for wisdom, so to many, his words are true and, due to the lack of other early, written Native American accounts, this becomes a valuable resource. In any case, we have evidence from 1932 that at least one member of the Oglala Lakota people from South Dakota considered the hoop a sacred shape at around the same time that Tony White Cloud began creating the modern hoop dance. There is also a metaphor still used today among the Lakota people known as the “Sacred Hoop,” which “symbolizes a protective spiritual force that surrounds them” (Axtmann 2015:53). These early examples of a sacred hoop either through written records or traditions has led many to believe that it was the Lakota people of South Dakota that originally had a dance using a hoop. There is strong evidence that the Lakota people have been using the hoop for a long time as “Paintings that date back to the 18th century depict Lakota dancing with hoops, which was then called the rainbow dance” (Anton 22). Whether or not they were the originators is impossible to verify, but this idea of a sacred hoop still continues in the folklore of the hoop dance regardless of where a dancer is from.

Even now that the hoop is used in an exhibitionary, public dance rather than a sacred ceremony or metaphor, hoop dancers still repeat the folklore about the symbolic nature of the shape itself. One dancer remarked that the circle symbolizes “the circle of

life and the Great Spirit” (interview, March 10, 2017). Another dancer stated that “the hoop is round, obviously, so there’s no beginning and end. So that’s kind of the central part of the hoop dance is it’s eternal—there’s no beginning and end” (interview, March 10, 2017). For these dancers, the hoop or circle doesn’t necessarily symbolize the “whole hoop of the world” or “a protective spiritual force,” but it does have a symbolic meaning to them as dancers (Neihardt 2014:26; Axtmann 2015:53). Some of these meanings seem clichéd, like the circle of life or an eternal circle, but I believe this is because the dancers are discovering the meaning of the hoop for themselves. It isn’t the same for everyone as each dancer has to discover what the hoops symbolize for them personally. The shape itself is symbolic, but the meaning of this symbol is different to every dancer and even to every viewer of the hoop dance.

Another common connection to the hoop as being a sacred shape is that many dancers have heard that when the dance first came to be only the elders were allowed to dance it. This would put the older version of the hoop dance into the category of a sacred dance. As explained by Barre Toelken, “in the case of sacred dances, there are particular places where the dancing should be done, [and] particular people who are trained and responsible for performing the dance properly” (2003:85). Many dancers have heard that in the beginning, the hoop dance could only be performed by a certain group (elders) at a specific place and time (as part of a ceremony). One dancer stated that “the Pueblo’s used to really apply it [the hoop] into their ceremonies and it was only the elderly that were allowed to dance the hoop dance” (interview, March 4, 2017). All the dancers who said that it started with elders stated that, later on, the children started to do it, and that’s how the modern hoop dance came to be. This dance went from an elders-only ceremonial

dance to an intertribal powwow dance. Even though the criteria for a sacred dance has been removed, vestiges remain. The hoop is still seen as a symbolic shape and as having ceremonial purposes, whether or not these ceremonies still occur as private ceremonies.

### ORIGIN STORIES OF THE HOOP DANCE

The most common origin story that is told about the hoop dance is that it is a healing dance, so much so that it is the explanatory story given at the World Championship Hoop Dance Contest put on by the Heard Museum. Under the events tab on their website, they state that “The art of hoop dance honors the cultural traditions from multiple Indigenous communities that first employed hoop dance as a healing ceremony. Today, hoop dance is shared as an artistic expression to celebrate, share and honor Indigenous traditions throughout the U.S. and Canada” (Heard Museum). The Heard Museum acknowledges that the dance is intertribal by stating that it honors traditions from many different indigenous peoples, but it also states that many of these peoples used the hoop dance as a healing ceremony. This statement already points to different tribes having the hoop not only in a ceremony, but specifically in a healing ceremony. Whether this generic description is just a way to avoid a fistfight over who originated the hoop dance is unclear. In any case, this explanation gives the impression of a shared culture and shared beliefs among various tribes despite their differences and the distances between them. Already, the idea of a shared Native identity is being expressed. The hoop dance is shared among many different people to celebrate and honor shared cultural beliefs, including the idea that the hoop dance is a healing dance. The announcer for the 2019 World Championship Hoop Dance Contest stated that

Some of the teachings and the stories that our hoop dancers from different parts of Turtle Island [North America] have told us is that each time you pass through the

hoop, you're adding life. And whether that's you're adding another year of life or you're adding life to the people here, you're adding life to those trees up there on the hill, Earth. You're adding life to the grass and the landscaping, the birds that are flying around, you're adding life to the birds. It's a wider way of thinking, a bigger way of thinking, and so we ask each dancer to pass through each hoop (interview, February 10, 2019).

Again, the idea that tribes from all over North America have brought a similar story of healing to share with one another is told. The folklore of the hoop dance tells us that various tribes did have similar teachings regarding the hoop dance as a healing ceremony that has now become the official story behind it. In an article on hoop dance published by the *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, it states that "Originally a sacred object in traditional healing ceremonies, the hoop was eventually introduced into dance" (Anton 2009:22). Regardless of how the story came to be, the folklore surrounding the hoop dance makes it clear that the healing origin story is now the official and accepted meaning of the dance.

This origin story is not just found at the World Championship Hoop Dance Contest or in articles. Many hoop dancers are telling this story as well. In order to compare the various healing origin stories as told by hoop dancers, I have organized a table that includes quotes from a number of dancers as well as some basic information about them. Even though these dancers are from different tribes and places, and they learned the hoop dance from different people, they all have heard and recount similar origin stories.

Female, Navajo	"There's lots of different interpretations but I guess the biggest one is that it's just seen as a prayer and just like kind of giving thanks is what I see it as"
Female Navajo	"And then I heard another one that every time [the hoop] goes through your body, like over your body, it passes through your body that gives life to you. So that, it's like a healing dance"

	and how represents eternal life and like the cycle of life”
Male, Yakima, Tulalip	“So, they used the hoop dance first as a healing ceremony. They believed that every time the hoop passed through your body it added time to your life”
Male, Mohawk	“So that kind of developed more into a dance to symbolize the ceremony of giving life back to those that are sick or afflicted”

All four of these accounts include the concept of healing and giving life as a part of the hoop dance, while two specifically say that it is through passing the hoop over the body that health is gained. This exactly mirrors the explanation given by the Heard Museum’s website as well as by the announcer at the event. When I learned to hoop dance, my teacher told me the same story, and it’s changed the way that I dance. I always start my routine off by taking just one hoop and quickly passing it over my body multiple times. These origin stories that are now a part of the hoop dance change the way that dancers approach and perform the dance. These stories have helped to create the modern hoop dance as it is today.

Hoop dance is different from other forms of intertribal Native American dance because it is the only dance in which both men and women compete. Creativity is not only a judging factor but a crucial part of the dance, and it is a far more individualized dance. Hoop dance allows the dancer to express individuality and is more about the individual dancer than their tribal affiliation. The hoop dance is outside the powwow circuit, so it has both advantages and disadvantages. All dances change once they become a competitive dance. The dance conforms to the judging criteria rather than individuality or Native identity. However, that doesn’t entirely apply to hoop dance as, again, it is mostly outside of the powwow circuit. There is only one official hoop dance contest, and that is held annually. Occasionally, a powwow will have a hoop dance exhibition or



competition, but these often have fewer participants and do not occur at every powwow. This is most likely because of how long it takes to be truly competent at the dance.

Special competitions are held across North America, but whether or not these competitions share the same judging criteria as the contest at the Heard Museum is difficult to determine. Because the criteria for hoop dance differs from other intertribal dances, it actually encourages innovation and individuality. The official criteria for the World Championship Hoop Dance Contest are precision (this includes any fumbling or dropping of hoops), timing/rhythm, showmanship/creativity, and speed (Heard Museum). Part of the judging criteria also requires dancers to pass each hoop over their body as they dance. This ties back to the origin story of the hoop dance as a healing dance and helps to remind the dancers its purpose.

The folklore surrounding the dance has actually influenced the official judging standards and criteria of the dance on the highest possible level of competition. One dancer recalled that before dancing at the Hoop Dance Contest, in the “pre-meeting they [the organizers of the event] said, ‘Remember what the dance is about, so as you’re dancing remember that’” (interview, February 10, 2019). The dancers have to remember that “we’re not just out doing hula hoops. This is a different kind that has a different meaning, and we represent people around the United States and Canada when we dance” (interview, February 10, 2019). Because the hoop dance is an intertribal dance with intertribal beliefs associated with it, dancers feel that they are dancing for more than just themselves or their tribe. They are representing all Native peoples. The folklore surrounding the hoop dance has given the dancers from many different places a shared cultural belief as they dance, a shared community, and an identity as a Native person.

Multiple tribes have seen the hoop as a tool for healing and giving life probably much longer than the dance has been around. This origin story of the hoop dance as life-giving indicates an assigning of traditional beliefs to a modern practice. The hoop as a symbol may have been used and may still be used in healing ceremonies long before the creation of a hoop dance using multiple hoops. The actual shape of a hoop or circle is supposed to be held as sacred among indigenous peoples for centuries. The Lakota people often use a metaphor known as the Sacred Hoop, which “symbolizes a protective spiritual force that surrounds them” while *Black Elk Speaks* tells of “the whole hoop of the world” (Browner 2004:3; Axtmann 2015:53). The hoop has symbolic value to many tribes, and so the hoop dance carries these symbolic meanings as well. For example, the four cardinal directions are considered sacred by many tribes, so at the beginning of a hoop dance performance, many dancers will signal the four directions by raising one hoop to the north, south, east, and west. In this way, the hoop dance is a combination of traditional practices and beliefs with a modern dance form. The folklore surrounding the hoop dance combines the ancient meaning of the hoop with the modern dance to create something that is both modern in practice and ancient in philosophy. Nowhere is this concept demonstrated more clearly than in the actual making of the hoops.

#### THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE HOOP DANCE

Originally, the hoops were made from wood, most commonly willow as it is a rather flexible material. Today most hoop dancers use plastic hoops, while some still use wooden hoops. Lane Jensen, the 2019 Senior Division World Champion hoop dancer, used hoops made of juniper wood when he danced at the Heard Museum. He was the only one of the finalists in any age category to use wooden hoops. Terry Goedel, the

Senior Division second place winner from this year, recalled using rattan reeds from Vietnam for his earlier hoops, but he also elaborated on some of the problems of using wooden hoops:

Back when I started dancing we used to use rattan that came from Vietnam, and they were really small, probably a quarter inch . . . I began using those, and I used those for probably 20 years. I tried different sizes, a little thicker a little smaller, but the problem was . . . they needed to be kept damp, and if you kept them damp they would become really flimsy. And if you let them get too dry, they would crack, they would break. We were always breaking hoops and always trying to fix hoops, and it was kind of frustrating (interview, February 10, 2019).

Keeping the hoops damp but not too damp presents an extra challenge especially when traveling to various powwows. Wooden hoops are also prone to breakage, and if that happens at a competition, unless there's a spare, there's nothing to be done. Goedel told a story about switching hoops with a fellow dancer and what happened when that dancer's hoop broke at a competition:

I came to the hoop dance and there was a dancer here [at the Heard Museum] who—I had the really thick wood, rattan reeds— had plastic, and his rolled so nice and mine had a tendency to kind of bounce because of the way they were put together. So we were standing over here in the hallway and talking, and I said, “Hey I like your hoops. Can I see one?” and I looked at it. And he goes, “Yeah, I like your hoop. Can I see it?” and I go “Yeah.” I said that, so he said to me, “You want to trade?” And I go, “Yeah, I'll trade.” So I took one of his and he took one of mine, and he changed and started using the wooden ones and I . . . started using the plastic ones. The plastic ones for me work better and I don't have to worry about them breaking all the time. In one of the competitions, he came here and he danced, and he only uses five hoops, and his fifth hoop broke. And he was in deep trouble because there is no way to go out there and fix it (interview, February 10, 2019).

As told in this story, a problem with the wooden hoops is they break more easily than plastic ones, and they are difficult to fix or replace. However, it is also apparent that different materials have different benefits and drawbacks. The wooden hoops have a

bouncier quality, which is good for moves involving one hoop, such as bouncing the hoop off of the foot into the hand, or having a more stable shape when creating formations (Figure 2). As Goedel said, “The really tiny reed are really fast,” so if you are passing a hoop over your body very quickly, reed hoops are a better choice (interview, February 10, 2019). Goedal further remarked, “You kind of give and take. It depends what you use; you get something and you lose something depending on what you use” (interview, February 10, 2019). Most people choose their type of hoops based on what kind of dancer they are, their style, and personal preference.



Figure 2: Hoop Dancer using wooden hoops made of juniper

In contrast to the wood, the plastic hoops don't easily break and they can be fixed with electric tape if they do happen to come apart. Even with using plastic hoops, Goedel remarked that “there's a really sturdy plastic and there's a real flimsy plastic. Some people just think plastic is plastic and it's not” (interview, February 10, 2019). Based on the thickness of the plastic, the way the hoops look when dancing can be affected. Most

dancers use PEX pipes (a kind of plastic tubing) of varying sizes to make their hoops because it's cheap and available at any home improvement store, but the size and thickness of the hoops people choose to use varies. Generally, a dancer will make the radius of their hoop the approximate length of the tip of their shoulder to their hand (usually around 24"). This ensures that the hoop will be the appropriate size for a specific dancer. Once the length of the hoop is measured, pipe cutters are used to cut out the appropriate size from the PEX pipe. Using that length as a standard, they can then be cut the same length multiple times to make as many hoops from the pipe as needed. Then using a metal or wooden dowel, the two ends of the pipe are connected to the dowel and pushed over the dowel until the ends meet. It's important to have a dowel that matches the pipe size so that the ends of the pipe won't slide off of the dowel. Using electric tape, the ends of the pipe are secured together over the dowel (1stcha 2011). PEX pipe usually comes in the colors blue, red, or white, so technically the hoops could be left at this stage, but doing so leaves the dancer with a number of risks. For one, it visually doesn't look as nice and is harder to decorate. Without a covering of electric tape, the hoops are very slippery and have a lot of static cling which makes them harder to grasp and prone to sticking to various parts of the regalia. Every hoop dancer that I have ever seen has covered their hoops with electric tape because it allows them to make designs on their hoops and provides an easier grip when dancing.

The design of the hoop usually involves a base color of electric tape that covers the entire hoop. The usual base color is white because that helps the hoop to stand out from the background. Audience engagement is very important to hoop dance, so it makes sense that a lot of people use this color. The second most common base color is black.

Even though the hoops do not stand out as much when the main color is black, it does help the designs on the hoop to stand out more. After those two, the base colors really vary based on individual dancers' regalia. Oftentimes a dancer will try to match the main color of their hoops with their regalia's main color as this adds an overall harmony to their visual performance. One of the dancers at the world championship had orange tape as the major color on all of his hoops which might have been off-putting as orange is not necessarily a calming color, but it worked because the rest of his regalia was also mainly orange. This created a unity between his regalia and his hoops, strengthening the connection between dancer and apparatus as he danced.

After the base color is determined, the next step is purely decorative: choosing what colors and patterns will adorn the hoops. This is done most commonly with different colors of electric tape that usually match a dancer's regalia. All the hoops may have the same patterns on them or some may differ. Sometimes every hoop has a unique design. It all depends on what the dancer wants to convey through those patterns or what will visually interact the most with the audience and judges. There are several repeated and popular patterns that are seen regularly adorning hoops. One is where the tape forms tiny stripes across the hoop in equidistant places. This design works very well aesthetically as when the hoop spins it almost creates an optical illusion.

While the colors chosen for designs usually references a dancer's regalia, sometimes the colors are chosen for their symbolic meaning. One hoop dancer I knew decorated one of her hoops with red, white, and green electric tape to reflect her Mexican heritage. I personally chose to use the color purple for my designs because my teacher told me that purple was a sacred color because of its rarity in nature. I wanted to remind

myself of the sacred elements of the dance while I was dancing. I also had multiple purple ribbons in my regalia so I used purple electric tape to create patterns on my white hoops because I wanted to connect the two to have a greater visual effect. Some people choose to use colors associated with their specific tribe or tribal seal or because of what those colors mean symbolically to them or their tribe. Many dancers, depending on tribal affiliation, usually use “the four sacred colors of the Plains: red, yellow, black, and white” which are also known as the sunset colors (Browner 2004:62). There are lots of reasons why a dancer might choose a particular color as well as pattern.

The thickness of the PEX pipe also plays a significant role in how the hoop looks and functions in a performance. With a thickness of  $\frac{1}{2}$ ” to  $\frac{5}{8}$ ” the hoop will be more flexible, so if you jump through the hoop a lot or make formations that require more flexible hoops than that thickness is best. This thickness is more elastic so “when you go to jump through, number one you can see them make more of an oval shape and so it’s easier for a person to jump through the hoop, but they don’t stop and go as easily, so they’re a little slower in some ways” (Terry Goedel interview, February 10, 2019). The elasticity of the hoop allows for more room to move through the hoop but it might also make them slower. The hoop takes a more oval shape when used in the dance and this can be a problem for making formations. The hoops may sag in a formation and not hold the shape as well. This is especially a problem when making the world formation as this formation requires the hoops to balance in a circle on their own and are held together by only one hoop around the middle. If the hoops are too flexible, the shape cannot hold on its own. A hoop made with a thickness of  $\frac{3}{4}$ ” to 1” will hold the shape of formations better. However, this thickness does make it more difficult to pass through the hoop or

bend them in general. All these principles apply as well to how large the hoops are made. The larger they are, the easier it is to fit through them but they are slower. The smaller they are the faster they can pass over your body but the harder it is to fit your body through. Whatever choice you make, you gain or you lose different things, so it depends on a dancer's routine and skill set. That's why it's very important for dancers to make their own hoops so they can customize them to their routine.

The transition from wooden to plastic hoops was a fairly easy one for most dancers mostly because of convenience, but is something lost in this transition? Or is this an example of, as Henry Glassie puts it, "the creation of the future out of the past," a continuation of the tradition into the modern age? (1989:176).

I would argue that it is both. Beyond just the practical uses of the wooden hoops, they also provide a sense of connection to the earth and a reminder to the dancer of the purpose of the dance. Barre Toelken gives an excellent example of the role that process plays in the creation of items when he talks about making Navajo moccasins. It is an extremely thorough process. The moccasins are made "from a sacred deer hide, that is, a hide from an unwounded deer. To get such a hide, someone must catch a deer, smother it with corn pollen, and remove the hide in a ritually prescribed way" (Toelken 2003:45). This complicated and long process of obtaining a deer hide helps to remind the Navajo of the "difference between food and clothing[;]clothing goes a step further toward providing for our comfort and requires us to acknowledge a very personal reciprocation," which is why the act of killing a deer for moccasins and the act of killing a deer for food are different (Toelken 2003:46-47). The reasoning behind the process is what gives the process meaning. This applies directly to wooden hoops. With these hoops, there is a



process: going out to gather the reeds or branches to form the hoops, soaking them in water, and bending them to the correct shape. All these steps help to remind the dancer of the purpose behind the dance as a healing dance. Here again, the principle of reciprocity is at work. The hoops come from the earth, and when dancing, the hoops give health to not only the people watching, but also the earth, the grass, the birds and so forth. As one collection of Native American myths stated, “Native Americans who live by traditional beliefs hold that humans are an integral part of nature and should be in harmony with it” (Monroe 1987:x). Wooden hoops help to represent this connection to nature that many Native American tribes hold as precious and important. With plastic hoops, it is much easier to forget about the origins or purpose of the dance and its connection to the earth; the plastic hoops make it easier to think of this dance as hula-hooping or as merely exhibitional. The connection to the earth is lost.

However, just like with the process of making moccasins, the evolution of the hoops indicates the changing and progressing nature of the dance, especially among the young. Toelken recalls that he once asked Yellowman about the use of cowhide as the sole of the moccasin since this was obviously a practice adopted after the introduction of cows by outsiders. He states that

When I asked Yellowman if he had an explanation for the change (thinking there might be some new Navajo theory about human/animal relationships), he gave me a quick look to see if I was joking. Then, after a long pause, he said, as if the answer was obvious, “Cowhide is thicker. It lasts longer when you walk on it (Toelken 2003:47).

Despite the relationship between item, material, and creator, practicality and availability play huge roles in the continuing tradition of folk objects. Cowhide is a practical and readily available material that works very well. When looked at through this lens,

Yellowman's incredulity at Toelken's question is apparent. Of course, if something works better and is more readily available you use it. Toelken further remarks "For all the traditional nuances, the art of moccasin making, like other arts, is open to dynamic change mirroring developments in Navajo life" (Toelken 2003:47). The tradition is still there; the moccasin is still made with an animal hide and is still made with traditional techniques, but modern changes are allowed because they reflect the experience of the current makers and users.

Hoop dancing still has hoops: the shape is the same, and even the process of bending the hoops to create the shape is the same regardless of the material. But now, the material reflects the experience of modern-day hoop dancers. PEX pipe may not be necessarily cheaper, but it is far more durable, common, and easy to work with than reeds or wood. For younger dancers who have school and other extracurricular activities but still want to dance, the plastic hoops are an easy way to make your hoops only one-time rather than remaking them continually. Again, the only dancer who had wooden hoops at the 2019 World Hoop Dance Contest was in the Senior Division, presumably because he was used to the traditional way of dancing but also because he would have the time to maintain his hoops. The plastic hoops allow for more people to participate in the dance because they require less care and are more durable.

Rather than seeing this as a degradation of the traditional practices of hoop dancers, I choose to see this as a continuing development in the evolution of hoop dance as a tradition. As Henry Glassie clarified, "Though a force for continuity, tradition is not the antithesis of change. Tradition lives only in the individual minds as part of the adaptive process of daily life, so it exists in a steady state of change" (1989:252).

Tradition does not mean stagnant or unchanging as traditions exist with people and their daily lives and processes. Hoop dancing is not a revival of a previous dance as there is no evidence of the dance having existed before the 20th century or disappearing in any of the time since its creation, but it could be viewed as having small, relative revivals. Karen M. Duffy, when speaking on revivals of traditional arts, states that usually for something to be “deemed successful by artists and audiences alike, performances of key cultural expressive forms must effect a convincing sense of connection with the past, one that provides a satisfying experience of linking with one’s predecessors” (2011:195). This is what the origin stories of the hoop dance do for this folk tradition. The origin stories told by hoop dancers and others create a connection to their past and to their ancestors. These stories surround the shape of the hoop rather than focusing on the material.

While the wooden hoops serve as a reminder of the purpose of the dance (healing, giving back to the earth) this purpose is not lost with the transition to PEX pipe hoops. When I learned hoop dancing we only used plastic hoops; I had never even seen a wooden hoop until this past World Championship Hoop Dance Contest. Even so, I knew that the purpose of the dance was as a healing dance. My friend told me that every time the hoop passed over my body, I was adding life, and that this dance wasn’t about hula-hooping or trying to show off. I learned this even while using a plastic hoop made from materials found at the local Home Depot. The most important thing was that I made my hoops myself and that I respected my hoops. It is not so much the material that the hoops are made out of but the meaning that you give to them. The shape as a symbol can outweigh the value and purpose of the material. That is why the making of the hoops is a combination of new and old. The shape of the hoop is traditional and holds the symbolic

meanings associated with that shape; the material that the hoop is made of serves a more practical use and looks to the continuing future of the hoop dance.

### HOOP DANCE AND OSTENSION

Semiology is the science of sign systems, signs being something that stands for something else (Guiraud 1975:1). Signs take on a multitude of forms such as language, writing, illustrations, photographs, and gestures. For example, to communicate the idea of a dog without having an actual dog present, someone could write the word dog, or draw a dog (Nicholas 2017). In this example, an actual dog is the signified (the object or idea being conveyed) and the drawing is the signifier (the stand-in or sign being used to represent the idea) (Guiraud 1975:24). These signs can not only stand for objects but also for abstract ideas and even narratives. However, rather than just trying to share an idea through signs, there is also the option of enacting or showing that idea. This is known as “ostension,” the act or process of showing, like showing a child the color red to communicate the idea of red (Klein 2019). Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi state that, “Ostension can be defined as a type of communication where the reality itself, the thing, the situation or event itself functions in the role of the message” (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983:6). Therefore, ostension is showing reality.

Ostension was introduced to the discipline of folklore in a 1983 article by Dégh and Vázsonyi titled, “Does the Word ‘Dog’ Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend-Telling.” Ostensive action is defined here as “the showing of an action by showing the action itself or by another action” (1983:8). In other words, the signified is shown through action rather than a signifier if the sign or signifier is being defined as “a sensibly perceptible object” (Wallis 1975:1). Ostension is shown through action—it is

experienced, rather than a sign, which relies on communicating information. From this definition, we can exclude performing, acting out—they then fall under the term ostension. For example, instead of telling the urban legend Bloody Mary to a group of friends using language as the signifier, ostensive action would be the performing of the legend with the friends going into a bathroom to enact the tale themselves. The communication happening in visiting the sites of reported and shared supernatural happenings is not a telling but an enacting, and that is ostension. Dégh and Vázsonyi focus on legends and the role of ostension, specifically as it is found in Halloween rituals, and their ultimate conclusion is that “not only can facts be turned into narratives but narratives can also be turned into fact” (1983:29). By commenting on the fluidity of narratives, they show that real events can turn into narratives and then into legends, and similarly, narratives can become real through action.

Ostension is further explored in Bill Ellis’s 1989 paper, “Death by Folklore: Ostension, Contemporary Legend, and Murder,” and added onto by his presentation at the 2019 American Folklore Society annual meeting titled, “Death by Folklore: Case Closed?” Ellis focuses on the murder of two teenagers and the satanic panic that followed. The two murders reached the status of legend because of the dismemberment of the bodies and an altar with a bull’s head found nearby, but they also were shaped by the legends of satanic rituals happening in the woods. Legends preceding the murders shaped the way in which the murders were committed, and legends about the murders became part of the folklore, demonstrating the fluid nature of legend and ostensive practices. Whether or not legends are based on actual events is a contested point, but Ellis defines legends as “normative definitions of reality, maps by which one can determine what has

happened, what is happening, and what will happen” (1989:202). Legends, tales, informal communications between groups, and all types of folklore are not things only happening in the past; they are current events built upon things that have passed and on concerns for the future. This again emphasizes the fluidity of narratives and their ostensive functions. Stories of animal mutilations inspired acts of animal mutilation that spawned stories of Satanists and mutilation which connected Satanists to the mutilation of the teenagers’ bodies. Narratives and their enactment are entangled. Ellis’s ultimate conclusion is that folklorists can contribute greatly to the analysis of crime and the role of legends and ostension in solving and perpetuating them.

More recently, the term “ostension” has been applied by many folklorists to the 2014 Slender Man stabbing as it is a clear example of a story being made into a reality (Blank, McNeill 2018). Jeffery Tolbert in his 2013 article “‘The Sort of Story that has You Covering Your Mirrors’: The Case of Slender Man,” published in the *Semiotic Review*, focuses extensively on ostensive acts in connection with the creation and dissemination of Slender Man. Tolbert’s definition of ostension, taken from both Dégh and Ellis, defines it as “the act of referencing a narrative by providing an explicit, real-life example of it” (2018: 2). However, Tolbert delves further than the other two articles into the concept of “reverse-ostension,” using Slender Man as a case study. Slender Man was created by many different people on an online forum based on folkloric conventions of legends and cryptology. He was created from “‘experience’ (in the form of personal encounters with the creature, documentary and photographic evidence, etc.) into a more or less coherent body of narratives,” demonstrating the reversal of what is traditionally thought of as ostension (2018:3). Rather than the narratives becoming actions, the actions

are becoming narratives. This coincides with the previous two articles' assertion that ostension is not a one-way street, but where their explanation was only in theory, Tolbert provides a concrete example of this give and take relationship between narrative and action.

All of these articles on ostension deal with ostension and reverse-ostension and specific case-studies. Most of the literature on ostension in folklore involves crime, murder, and legend-tripping. However, all these terms and concepts on ostension can also be applied to dance, specifically Native American hoop dance.

In Adrienne L. Kaeppler's 1967 article "Folklore as Expressed in the Dance in Tonga," she notes that Tongan dances accompanied by poems:

do not pantomime the words, nor do they symbolize in the sense that one movement symbolizes one phrase, or idea. Rather they are figurative: the movements create an abstract picture to which a number of meanings can be assigned, and conversely, one idea can be alluded to by several different sets of movements (1967:160).

Even though the dances are accompanied by poems, the movements do not exactly follow the words being spoken or sung. One movement can mean many different things and many different movements can point to one idea. For Tongan dance and many other dance forms like ballet and Hawaiian hula, a narrative accompanies the dance, but the movement doesn't explicitly tell the story. The movements can be figurative, whether you're depicting the volcano goddess Pele devouring the land by bringing your hands to your mouth or by acting out the painful transformation of a mermaid into a human by remaining en pointe while traveling across the stage. There are multiple meanings that could be derived from these movements, but they are still examples of ostension; they are telling a story through action thus bringing it into the physical realm. Rather than looking

at the dance movements as signs or as merely figurative, they are enacting the narratives, showing the narratives through action, as ostension. This is echoed in Elizabeth Bird's 1994 article "Playing with Fear: Interpreting the Adolescent Legend Trip," which takes a slightly different approach to ostension than the previously mentioned articles. Bird looks specifically at legend trips where teenagers visit a graveyard statue and the surrounding rituals and performances. Bird argues that these trips should be seen "as play, involving not only story-telling, but also doing particular things. The emotional power of the experience derives from a combination of setting, narratives, and actions, all of which are interdependent" (1994:192). Ostension is not just the action, but also includes the narrative, setting, and emotions happening simultaneous to the action. This applies to dance because dance is not just a narrative or movement; it is an experience formed by different interdependent elements such as music and setting along with narrative and movement. These different elements create a complete ostensive experience.



Figure 3: Hoop dancer creating a basket



Hoop dancing is an example of this ostensive experience. Hoop dancers show the meaning of the dance through their movements, like passing a hoop over their body, or creating a basket to give blessings to the audience (Figure 3), or making an eagle that surveys the world. There is no verbal or written transfer of knowledge taking place, no direct signifiers, but these actions tell a story. It is unclear whether the story about healing or the movement of the hoop over a dancer's body came first. The narratives are told as though they precede the dance, but given that the hoop dance as it is performed now was created in the 1930s, it's difficult to say which came first. Whether the story of a medicine man healing someone by using a hoop or the movement of the hoop in the dance came first is irrelevant; as discussed in the previous paragraphs, ostensive practices flow both ways, ostension and reverse-ostension, and everything in between. Hoop dance also follows this pattern by having a movement that tells a story and a story that describes a movement. In any case, the healing nature of the dance is the main story being communicated by the dancer in the "act of referencing a narrative by providing an explicit, real-life example of it" (Tolbert 2013:2). The hoops and the dancers bring the narratives of the origin of the hoop dance into reality.

While Dégh and Vázsonyi don't address dancing directly, they do address acting and theater and its role to ostension. The argument in regards to acting is that "acting...is a series of signs and stands for the objects (actions) it signifies" and is therefore not an act of ostension (1983:9). This can also apply to dance as the dancer doesn't attempt to make "their acts acceptable as real" (1983:8). The narratives surrounding the hoop dance make the performance a communication between dancer and audience. In hoop dancing,

the dancer is not attempting to portray an act that can be taken as a reality; they are communicating a narrative through movement and enactment not through signs.

In the hoop dance, some of the movements are abstract and don't hold any specific meaning or interpretation. But a number of formations do have a specific interpretation. The placement of two hoops on both arms with one overlapping the other and moved up and down by the dancer is always interpreted as wings (Figure 4). The hoops by themselves may not look like wings but the movement the dance puts them to create this illusion. The hoops form wings and the dancer adds movement to effectively communicate the story of an eagle flying.



Figure 4: Hoop dancer forming a small eagle out of hoops

Hoop dance is a blend of both objects and action (dance) to send a narrative or message to the “receiver” or audience. The hoop formations of large or small eagle, or the world are all ostensive actions that have one interpretation not many. The community involved with hoop dance has given these movements specific meanings, so when they

are performed, a particular narrative is being told and received. An eagle is an eagle, and the world is the world. Both the formations made by the hoops and the dancers' movements tell a clear narrative. The ballet term "chassé" means "to chase" and that is an accurate description of the fundamental movement it signifies, but when it is used in actual choreography, it doesn't always portray chasing. In the previously mentioned hoop dance movements, the meanings always remain the same even when choreographed into a full routine. The whole routine may not tell a complete and cohesive narrative, but certain movements contain a narrative within themselves. For example, many dancers felt that the multiple versions of the eagle present in their routines told the story of a bird and that "by the end of this dance you see that this bird has grown into this eagle" (Interview, 2017). The shape of the eagle made by the hoops and the dancer's movements tell the story of an eagle in and of itself, and multiple eagles in a routine tell a story in conjunction with each other. The hoop dance is both semiotic and ostensive because the shapes made with the hoops function as signifiers for outside ideas like an eagle, but it is also ostensive because the dancers are enacting beliefs.



Figure 5: Hoop dancer passing the hoop over their body

Like the eagle and the world formations, passing the hoop over the body (Figure 5) is an enactment of the story of healing and adding life as told by dancers. However, unlike the eagle and the world, the passing of the hoop over the body is an actual performance of a healing ceremony. In a performance, the action is itself a healing practice not just a reference of one although it does reference outside narratives as well. The passing of the hoop is done by the dancer as an active healing ceremony. Therefore, this specific movement may be a real-life example of the purest form of ostension, as a narrative told through action without a signifier present because the passing of the hoop is the “reality itself, the thing, the situation or event” being used to signify itself (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983:6). Reality, the action is being used to communicate that same action.

It is not only the healing narrative that dancers are performing but also the meaning of the narrative. Dancers are performing an intertribal identity. Hoop dance is an intertribal dance, and it belongs to all tribes, making every performance and performer an

ostensive act. It is also an ostensive expression of the blending of tradition and innovation evidenced by the materials and patterns used to construct the hoops and the incorporation of early beliefs. Whether it's wooden or PEX pipe hoops, dancers remember and pay homage to their ancestors through their movements. By signaling the four cardinal directions, dancers remember what their elders held sacred but also express what has now become a tribally shared reverence for the four directions. Through the hoop dance, dancers are able to ostensibly connect the past and the present by performing communal beliefs and practices.

### CONCLUSION

As a hoop dancer myself, I have had the unique experience of understanding what these traditions mean “to the people who construct and enact it, not only the scholars who study it” (Shukla 2011:147). Hoop dance is an immensely popular intertribal dance that requires a great deal of practice to master, and as dancers practice and invent new moves, they are living these traditions. In the origin stories recounted by many dancers, the ancient principles of many tribes are represented and tied to the performance of the modern dance. As Leslie Marmon Silko stated in her novel *Almanac of the Dead*, “Throughout the Americas, from Chile to Canada, the people have never stopped dancing; as the living dance, they are joined with all ancestors before them” (1992:117). The people in the Americas will never stop dancing as tradition and modern practices combine to continue their cultural practices into the future.

The article, “The Never-Ending Circle of Life,” states that, “the dancer who performs the hoop dance pays respect to the sacred circle (encompassed by the sky and the earth) and all that is connected to it—nature, animals, and people” (Anton 2009:22).

Hoop dancers acknowledge the earth and nature through the various formations that they make, but they also acknowledge the shared heritage and folklore between the different tribes. These intertribal dances, specifically the hoop dance, create this shared folklore that unites Native peoples as one people, creates unity where there may have been division and commonality despite their differences. The early tribes couldn't stop the government from relocating them and forcing them all together, but through intertribal dances and shared cultural beliefs, Native Americans have developed a Native identity that unites and connects them as a community, as one people.

Specific movements in hoop dance are examples of ostension because they are communicating a specific narrative to an audience not orally or verbally but through action. However, this is just one example of ostension in folk dance. As Bill Ellis stated in his 1989 paper, "Folklorists must acknowledge that traditional narratives exist not simply as verbal texts to be collected, transcribed, and archived. They are also maps for action" (218). Traditional narratives for folk dancers don't exist as only verbal or written texts; they exist in the movement, in the performance, in action. Dance in general has not been a focus for the discipline of folklore or anthropology, and I wish to echo Adrienne Kaeppler's resolve that the "field of anthropology needs more specialists in movement and dance" as this is the same for the field of folklore (1967:504). Kaeppler's article was written in 1967, but there is still a lack of scholarship focused on dance from an anthropological and folkloric perspective. Eric César Morales observes that "with the field of dance being historically understudied in folkloristics . . . choreopoetics [is] an opportunity to create a theoretical niche for folklorists interested in writing about dance" (2019:326). Morales identifies choreopoetics as a possible avenue for folklorists to

become more engaged in studying dance, and I would add ostension to this group of theories that folklorists can use to analyze dance. Folklorists have a responsibility to include movement in folk dance as a category of ostension and of storytelling and to more fully research this topic.

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## Figure

- 1: Smithsonian Institute, Human Studies Film Archives: HSFA 1987.9.6-1. This is a screenshot from a video provided by the Smithsonian archives from 1926-1927 which depicts Plains Indian dancers dancing in a round with a single hoop.
- 2: Hoop dancer using wooden hoops made of juniper wood at the 2019 World Hoop Dance Championships. Photograph by Emma George, February 8, 2019.
- 3: Hoop dancer creating a basket at the 2019 World Hoop Dance Championships. Photograph by Emma George, February 8, 2019.
- 4: Hoop dancer forming a small eagle out of hoops at the 2019 World Hoop Dance Championships. Photograph by Emma George, February 8, 2019.
- 5: Hoop dancer passing the hoop over their body at the 2019 World Hoop Dance Championships. Photograph by Emma George, February 8, 2019.