

## **Bear/Skin - Opening talk**

When I started this piece, thinking about early Modernism and the roots of racist cultural appropriation - I didn't intend to reflect also on racist cop killing, action films, and *Le Sacre du Printemps*, *The Rite of Spring*... But somehow action films became the bridge between *Sacre* and cop killing, in the gendered roles of female sacrifice and male protector.

Rite: While making this piece I learned that not everyone knows the narrative or the dramaturgy of *The Rite of Spring*, of Nijinsky's choreography to the music of Stravinsky, created in Paris in that iconic modern moment of 1913. There was a third collaborator, Nicholas Roerich, an artist, mystic, and folklorist/anthropologist, with a special interest in the regions of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus mountains. The Rite they conceived was not so much a cultural appropriation of an existing or historic ritual but a fictional invention, an orientalist projection, of a pagan cult centered on virgin sacrifice, a practice that did not exist in those regions.

We can choose to read *Sacre* as a representation of an imagined pagan ritual, with a virgin sacrifice phantasia in which the young woman's death is a communal restorative, a cure...

Or we could choose a more ancient or postmodern reading, that recognizes the female dancer as someone who trained for this role, intentionally, having already sacrificed herself to dance, to dancing for the inspiration, pleasure, and healing of others. She performs a fake death, more as an empowered shaman than as a virgin victim, for the cathartic cleansing of social anxieties and fear.

But where Roerich and Nijinsky were closer, or more directly appropriative, was with the chorus, or corps de ballet, the dancers representing male elders, wearing bear skins slowly circling the virgin as she dances to death. And this image, or visual representation, of the pagan bear cults of Eastern Europe is resonant with bear dance echoes being heard in many regions of the world today. There has been a bear dance resurgence not only in San Francisco, by the locally rooted Ohlone people, and north of San Francisco by the Pomo, who have communities in Sonoma and Mendocino, but also in Finland, Japan, Bulgaria, Slovakia, France, Spain, Germany, Canada... often in places where bears no longer exist outside of zoos.

Following contemporary debate about cultural appropriation led me to reconsider sports team mascots which tend to be animals or Indians. How does a tribe or species become a mascot?

In 1800s California there was a bounty on native peoples, 25cents, then \$5, then \$10. When the gold rush immigrants thought that the Indians were all gone, the \$10 bounty shifted to bears. Some called it 'taming the wilderness, making the new world safe for white settlers.

The grizzly became the California mascot, on all state flags and crests, only after the last grizzly – who was named Monarch by the humans - was captured, exhibited as a symbol of settler conquest of the wild, and died in captivity.

Which is pretty much what happened to California's indigenous peoples... And thus the sad parallels of Indians and bears – in genocidal practices and legalized bounties, in the exhibiting of the last remaining, and finally in their symbolic appropriation as mascots, tattoos, and movie narratives.

Which led me to the question: Why don't more people kill cops? Especially when it is well-documented that cops target very specific populations, why don't more people kill cops?

We find a partial answer in recent history, when we consider the intense state violence against the Black Panthers (2016 is their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary) and the Black Power movement at the mere suggestion that African Americans have a right to self-defense against police violence. The FBI's COINTELPRO inspired leadership attacks in the form of murder, imprisonment, judicial corruption... But still why don't more people kill cops, especially considering how few US Americans know their own histories? Maybe because they get to work it out in action movies, through ritual catharsis. Before 2012 I hadn't seen any action films, except *Terminator 2*. Then I decided to watch all of them. And I learned that in action movies cops can be killed for any reason, but mostly because they're corrupt or inept. 10 cops, 20 cops, 30... any number of cops can be killed, usually by the hero or heros, who are on an ethically just mission.

Catharsis, from Greek drama, in which a conflict or crisis is represented and then resolved. And we all feel

better. Action movie catharsis. Watching action movies becomes a socio-political cleansing. A safe place to work it out. What are the social anxieties we heal through action movies: firstly, the feeling that everything is fucked and thus the desire to burn it all down in an apocalyptic explosion, and then, for a hero to restore the order through vengeance, revenge. World destroyed, cops killed, in a fictional drama, and now we can all get some rest. And then there's gender in action films. Nowhere is a white woman as weak and vulnerable as in an action movie, and nowhere is a white man as powerful, astute, and resourceful as in the performed masculinity of the action film...

**4 directions** – in process... : Indian (Indigenous), Settler, Slave, Nomad/Refugee

**4 bear songs** – read aloud

Nobody wins. (The neoliberal anthem) You're on your own. (A song from a previous performance) You lied, you made a fucking killing, you got away with it, and then you got promoted. I love the way you feel.

Unless there are any questions, I will now begin, by reading a poem I wrote about action films.