

**Keith Hennessy's *Bear/Skin*:
Ritual in (my) contemporary performance**

Keith Hennessy

Bear/Skin is a one hour performance that promises folk dancing, fake healing, and political magik to gather people for a ritualistic “moment” outside of daily life. *Bear/Skin* appropriates Nijinsky's 1913 choreography for *Le Sacre du Printemps* and explores the current resurgence of bear dances in folk and indigenous cultures to ask questions about ritual, art, and sacrifice today. The intimate and low-tech performance pretends to be informal and yet is motivated by grand spectacle and experimental prayer. Rejecting formal coherence and exploiting the (queer) potentiality of failure, *Bear/Skin* explores the antagonisms between killer cops and virgin sacrifice, imaginary activism and plastic shamanism, modernism and cultural appropriation. And yes, *Bear/Skin* is a dance.

In the promotional materials I wrote, "Yes there will be bear dances that have little to do with gay bears and everything to do with The Rite of Spring, native bear dances, teddy bears, mylar mountains, springtime in the northern hemisphere, the land I grew up on and where my parents are buried, and the land I now live on where my uncle and many others are buried. But it's mostly about dancing, and how dancing implicates history, ritual, appropriation, and the paradox of settler and indigenous... Come to heal and be healed, or not."

I do not believe in god or any deities. I trust that art and ritual are creative practices that are older than god, and by that I mean the human invention or revelation of god (as deity, spirits, god/esses, God, ghosts...). I am inspired by indigenous spiritual-cultural-life practices but I am trying neither to copy nor to destroy these practices with my attention to them. I see ritual in the ways that we go to school, exhibit art, make or witness theater and dance, engage in sports events, drink coffee, take vacations, construct a family, get a license for marriage or driving a car...

Bear/Skin is an experimental dance-performance of postcolonial ritual by a queer, middle-aged white man wondering if and how the magic of coming together around live art can be used to decolonize the worst spells of 'western civilization'. I'm assuming that not all rituals are "good" and that the magical spells that enchant us need demolition as much as re-imagined enchantment. By “worst spells of western civilization” or “magical spells that enchant us” I am referring to white supremacy, capitalism, sexist homophobia, anxiety, depression, and alienated loneliness. We could consider these “spells” to be the basic conditions of settler colonialism. I am working artistically, energetically, and politically to investigate and disrupt the rituals that most of the world's population have accepted as normal, traditional, or unable to change.

In *Bear/Skin* I am concerned with the roots of Modern art and especially Modern Dance, and how studying these roots (uprooting) might reveal also the roots of our current cultural, political, ecological, and psychological crises. Many of the early Moderns were inspired by the indigenous and folk cultures being destroyed by industrial capitalism, slavery, and conquest of the New World. Picasso improvised with the aesthetics of Ibo sculpture (central Africa), Ruth St. Denis re-imagined south Indian dance, white vaudeville performers in the US wore black face to invent racist versions of African American culture and identity, and several Modern dance choreographers appropriated (and fantasized) indigenous and pagan dances.

The ground breaking, Russian ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, working with Les Ballets Russes in Paris in the early years of the 20th century, created a dance to *Le Sacre du Printemps*, a bold musical

composition by Igor Stravinsky, a fellow Russian. Nijinsky's dance references the bear dances of Eastern Europe, in which dancers draped an actual bear skin over their bodies. But the choreography also imagines a fictional practice of female virgin sacrifice as the climax of the dance. The Rite of Spring they conceived was not so much a cultural appropriation of an existing or historic ritual but a fantasia 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 imagine pagan ritual in which the young woman's death is a communal restorative, a cure. But we could also 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 pretend death for the cathartic cleansing of social anxieties and fear. She dances as an empowered shaman-artist rather than as a virgin victim.

But where Nijinsky and his collaborator Nicholas Roerich were more historically accurate, 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. This image of the pagan bear cults of Eastern Europe is resonant with bear dance echoes now being heard in many regions of the world. 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, but also in various regions in Canada, Finland, Japan, Bulgaria, Slovakia, France, Spain, Germany... often in places where bears no longer exist outside of zoos.

In *Bear/Skin* I find resonance between contemporary action films with Nijinsky's Rite of Spring, especially in the ways that female sacrifice and male protection are necessary to drive the action. Action movies tend to follow the dominant theatrical structure of western dramaturgy since the ancient Greeks. They provide a cathartic experience, a place to safely work out our social anxieties, fears and conflicts. They satisfy both the apocalyptic feeling that everything is lost and should all be blown to bits, and the need for a hero to restore the social order through vengeance. We want revenge on politicians, bankers, cops, Russians, terrorists, mafia of all kinds, Black and Latino criminals, and maybe the one or two women who work with them, and we don't care who gets caught in the crossfire. When I considered female sacrifice in *Sacre*, it helped me to unpack the representations of gender in action films: nowhere is a white woman as weak and vulnerable as the kidnapped victim in an action film, and nowhere is a white man as powerful, astute, and resourceful as in the performed masculinity of the action film.

Another ritualistic aspect of *Bear/Skin* is the four-direction mapping of contemporary identity. Instead of invoking the elements, earth-air-fire-water, I call the settler, the indian, the nomad/refugee, and the slave. I use the term "precarious freelancer" to describe most of the world's population who struggle at the intersections of these four identities or economic conditions.