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DANC 321

Dance Research Essay

Dance in the 2000s has become an increasingly interdisciplinary venture, and the most successful choreographers are those who have been able to maximize the fluid social and cultural landscape on which dance is created and shared. One example is Parris Goebel, an internationally recognized dancer, choreographer, director, and model most famous for her unique, dynamic hip-hop movement. Goebel's work has a vast global reach thanks to her collaborations with music artists, designers, and political recognition. Another note-worthy choreographer of the 21st century is Crystal Pite. Pite uses her ballet background to explore themes of human connectivity, explores the concept that the physical body holds knowledge, and seeks to challenge hierarchy in the industry by valuing and crediting dancers for their creative collaboration in the dance-making process. Although Pite and Goebel operate in different spheres and sectors of dance performance, they both bear influence over the dance landscape today and represent the innovative trajectory of dance in the 21st century.

Parris Goebel is a thirty-one-year-old creative from Auckland, New Zealand who has loved dance from a young age. During her early childhood, she took classes in ballet, tap, and jazz, but dropped out of strictly codified dance classes at age ten to explore hip-hop. Goebel shares, "I didn't like anyone forcing me to move a specific way" and that she saw hip-hop as her calling because she "loved the sounds, the lightness, the music and the freedom of it" (Feller). She grew her confidence in hip-hop movement styles by learning music video choreography from artists such as Missy Elliot, Usher, and Béyonce. Growing up half-Polynesian in a predominantly white area, Goebel faced bullying and discrimination from her Caucasian peers

for her appearance, leading her to drop out of school to pursue dance at just fifteen years old (Feller). She credits Jennifer Lopez for helping her break into the industry when she was nineteen years old (Villegas and Edmunds). Since beginning her career, she has established an extensive resumé choreographing for major artists such as Rihanna, Justin Bieber, SZA, Janet Jackson, and Shakira and runs a hip-hop studio in New Zealand based around self-empowerment called “The Palace” with her father and manager Brett Goebel.

Parris Goebel’s choreography stands out among other hip-hop artists because of her artful fusion of hip-hop, traditional Polynesian dance, and her personal artistic fingerprint. Goebel named her style of movement “Polyswagg” as a testament to her commitment to speaking loud, embracing her identity, and empowering women in the hip-hop industry (Rudulfo). For Goebel, dance is not only a collaboration with music but also with fashion. She has collaborated with Rihanna and choreographed every Savage x Fenty since the first show in 2018. Through collaboration with the fashion industry, Goebel’s reach extends beyond frequent consumers of dance and seeks to validate diverse identities through movement. When asked about the process behind Savage x Fenty Vol. 4, Goebel noted, “It’s a very diverse and very international show. People all over the world get to experience it, and we take that very seriously” (Betancourt). In many of her works, Goebel retains a hand in the music, mixing Caribbean influences with R&B, Latin music, and pop, to create nuanced and percussive music that can be broadly enjoyed.

Although Parris Goebel’s choreographic style and digital media influence contrast that of esteemed mid-20th century dancers and choreographers such as Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, they share a few factors in their careers that suggest a similar path to success and innovation. For instance, both Goebel and Graham left their respective dance school feeling stagnated by the movement being taught in dance classes, worked independently, and then

curated their own movement styles taking inspiration from traditional cultural dance and other art forms as well as establishing their own studios. Martha Graham is remembered as conceiving all production aspects of each of her new works including the dance, music, costuming, and stage design (“History: Martha Graham”) which can be paralleled with Goebel’s passion for incorporating fashion and hand-mixed music into her choreography. Additionally, both Goebel and Graham have received national honors for their work. Martha Graham was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1976 by President Gerald Ford (Terry) and Goebel received the New Zealand Order of Merit for her services to dance in 2020 (Presbury). Both artists sought to reach a global audience. Graham took her ballets on tour across the world and Goebel has created works for musical artists of many nationalities as well as maximizing televised performances and social media as a platform to share a dance. Goebel choreographed Rihanna’s halftime show for the 2023 Superbowl and broke records making it the most viewed halftime show in history with 118.7 million views, with more people tuning into the halftime show than the game itself (FOX Sports PR). Since airing, the choreography has been trending on TikTok. Endless recreations of Rihanna’s “Rude Boy” Superbowl Halftime performance have been recreated on TikTok; from a South African girl’s school (<https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRCjr59c/>) to senior living homes (<https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRCj8464/>), to the Australian cast of Hamilton (<https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRCjennv/>), and countless more. The trending choreography is a testament to the power choreographers such as Goebel have on social trends and their ability to promote empowering representations of women confident in their bodies.

Crystal Pite is another example of a successful woman leading the dance industry in the 21st century. Although Pite’s choreography is not trending on TikTok, her contributions have reached large concert dance audiences and encouraged healthy collaboration between dancers

and choreographers. Pite was born and raised in Terrace, Canada where she began her formal dance training. Before switching her focus towards choreography, she was a company member of Ballet British Columbia and of Ballett Frankfurt under the direction of William Forsythe. In 2002, Pite formed Kidd Pivot out of Vancouver (Associate Artists-Crystal Pite”). Kidd Pivot is a performance group with a unique choreographic language fusing classical ballet elements and structured improvisation with theatricality, irreverence, and bold visual design. Pite is also the recipient of numerous choreographic awards as well as the Jacob’s Pillow Dance Award (2011), and Governor General of Canada’s Performing Arts Award Mentorship Program (2008). Mentorship has been a valuable asset in Pite’s career; from her years with William Forsythe, she was able to assimilate Forsythe’s structured improvisation techniques and deconstructive theatricality to develop her own performance and choreography (Dickinson). Now, as an established choreographer she seeks to pass on the privilege of quality mentorship to inspire dancers to continuously seek innovation. In an interview about her artistic process, Pite says, “I’m inspired by things that can’t be measured or understood. What interests me is the human spirit and how we connect to each other” (“Crystal Pite: Biographies”) and that connection is not only between the dancers and the audience but also in the studio.

As dance continues to decentralize from concert stages across new venues and alternate methods of consumption, the concert dance space remains highly influential to dance pedagogy and collegiate dance education. Pite’s work is known for “radical hybrids of dance and theatre that are assembled with a keen sense of wit and invention” (“Crystal Pite: Biographies”). The success of hybrid forms in choreographers such as Pite encourages dance education programs to strive for excellence in multiple genres, as opposed to a narrowly focused program. Loyola University Chicago’s Dance major, for example, requires students to take modern, jazz, and

pointe in addition to daily ballet classes rather than offering additional ballet-based classes such as a ballet partnering or variations class. Additionally, Pite credits the contributions of her dancers in the choreographic process. Transparency and respect for a dancer's agency is a practice beginning to be implemented more widely across college dance programs with guest artists, professors, and student choreographers noting if any dancer-generated movement was included in the performance.

Pite represents the idea of innovation through adding, not rejection. She calls upon her ballet knowledge, in conjunction with the teachings of choreographers she has learned from, visual design elements, and influence from theatrical dance styles to create a beautiful fusion from a plethora of inspiration. Multiple groundbreaking artists of the 20th century took a different approach, creating techniques or works that served to contrast or reject other forms. For instance, Martha Graham (1894-1991) left the Denishawn school in 1923 because she “rebelled violently against its eclecticism” and went on to create a “dance technique that became the first significant alternative to the idiom of classical ballet” (Terry). American dancer and choreographer Alwin Nikolais (1911-1993) questioned the foundations of modern dance that emphasized the solar plexus as the visual focus and instead proposed a theory he called “decentralization” that sought to depersonalize dancers and bring attention to the overall production design (Cofesi). With the internet becoming increasingly accessible in the 2000s, artistic inspiration is at every creators fingertips. Therefore, shifting from seeking to create something new in isolated toward focusing to evolving the art form through embracing the ideas around us is representative of the progressively interconnected world in the 21st century.

Crystal Pite and Parris Goebel are only two of many 21st-Century artists shaping the climate of dance today. However, scope of their influence is indicative of the gradual progress

being made toward gender equality within hierarchical dance systems and the empowering effect of the female voice in dance. In the remainder of the millenia, the examples set forth by Goebel and Pite to maximize dance as mixed media, empower dancers to retain agency over their bodies, and seek collaboration as a means of evolving the art form can be used to conduct the integral role of dance in today's society.

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