

Introduction to Terminology and Key Concepts

Coastal First Nations Dance Festival

This is an overview of some terminology and concepts that be may encountered around Indigenous dance. It is by no means meant to be an all-inclusive list but rather an introduction of topics for further research.

While terminology and concepts can be difficult to discuss and navigate, it is important to learn about key issues, topics, and histories especially when in relationship with Indigenous people and dance. Learning about Indigenous topics is an ongoing process. It is important not to avoid important dialogue surrounding Indigenous topics in fear of not knowing or being 'wrong'; rather approach the conversation in a respectful manner and be open to learning.

Terminology from 'Indigenous Foundations' website¹

Why does terminology matter? The history of relationships between the Canadian state and Aboriginal peoples is complex and has oftentimes been paternalistic and damaging. As a result, terminology can represent something more than just a word. It can represent certain colonial histories and power dynamics. On the other hand, terms can empower populations when the people have the power to self-identify. It is important to recognize the potential these words may hold.

Aboriginal: The term "Aboriginal" refers to the first inhabitants of Canada, and includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. This term came into popular usage in Canadian contexts after 1982, when Section 35 of the Constitution Act defined the term as such.

First Nations: "First Nation" is a term used to describe Aboriginal peoples of Canada who are ethnically neither Métis nor Inuit. This term came into common usage in the 1970s and '80s and generally replaced the term "Indian," although unlike "Indian," the term "First Nation" does not have a legal definition. "First Nation" can also refer to a band, a reserve-based community, or a larger tribal grouping and the status Indians who live in them.

Inuit: This term refers to specific groups of people generally living in the far north who are not considered "Indians" under Canadian law.

Métis: The term *Métis* refers to a collective of cultures and ethnic identities that resulted from unions between Aboriginal and European people in what is now Canada. It is sometimes used as a general term to refer to people of mixed ancestry, whereas in a legal context, "Métis" refers to descendants of specific historic communities.

¹ "Indigenous Foundations." UBC Vancouver: First Nations and Indigenous Studies.
<http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/>

Indian: The term “Indian” refers to the legal identity of a First Nations person who is registered under the Indian Act. The term “Indian” should be used only when referring to a First Nations person with status under the *Indian Act*, and only within its legal context. Aside from this specific legal context, the term “Indian” in Canada is considered outdated and may be considered offensive due to its complex and often idiosyncratic colonial use in governing identity through this legislation and a myriad of other distinctions (i.e., “treaty” and “non-treaty,” etc.). In the United States, however, the term “American Indian” and “Native Indian” are both in current and common usage.

Indigenous: Indigenous is a term used to encompass a variety of Aboriginal groups. It is most frequently used in an international, transnational, or global context. This term came into wide usage during the 1970s when Aboriginal groups organized transnationally and pushed for greater presence in the United Nations (UN).

Native: “Native” is a general term that refers to a person or thing that has originated from a particular place. The term “native” does not denote a specific Aboriginal ethnicity (such as First Nation, Métis, or Inuit). In Canada, the term “Aboriginal” or “Indigenous” is generally preferred to “Native.” Some may feel that “native” has a negative connotation and is outdated.

More terminology and key concepts

Capitalization: A common mistake is not to capitalize terminology, such as “Indigenous,” and names of Indigenous languages. Capitalization can be a sign of respect and legitimacy. A comparison is the capitalization of “Canadian” and “English” which would not be spelled “canadian” or “english.”

Ceremony: Ceremony is a fundamental aspect of Indigenous culture. Ceremonies, just like Indigenous people, are diverse. It is important to be respectful of an artist’s cultural practice. People may want privacy and some ceremonies may not be meant to share publicly. Some artists may conduct ceremonies prior to their performance, for example smudging, prayer, etc. Some of these may require support from the presenter and venue, for example providing a quiet room to pray or a space that can accommodate smoke from smudging.

Contemporary / traditional: There is a misconception that there is a binary of “contemporary” vs. “traditional” Indigenous dance. Distinguishing between the two can be difficult and complex. It is important to talk to the artists about how they define their work as it varies greatly between artists.

Crest/ clan: A clan is essentially a large family grouping within an Indigenous community, most commonly along the Northwest Coast. A crest is a symbol that represents that clan and originates from that family’s history.

Form-line design: A style of art that is specific to the Indigenous people of the Northwest Coast. Form-line is the style that is often represented on house fronts, carvings, and button blankets. Form line has specific design components, such as an ovoid and u-shape, and has guiding principles on how to create a design.

Indigenous performance: Indigenous performance is an integral part of many Indigenous people's identities and communities. Through performance, Indigenous people embody songs, stories, dances, languages, histories, and ceremonies. Indigenous performance has historically, and often still is, seen through the colonial gaze. It is often seen as a spectacle that is purely created and enacted for entertaining the audience, however Indigenous performance is often created with greater intention. Performance is both personal and public. For many Indigenous people it is a process of connecting/reconnecting with their identities, communities, land, language, etc. It is also a form of expressing histories that are specific to that person and/or community and expressing shared histories of Indigenous people, with the goal of sharing and teaching the audience. Indigenous performance celebrates cultural resiliency and resurgence.

Oral traditions: Oral traditions are teachings that are passed down from one generation to another by way of storytelling, song, dance, and other oral means. Oral traditions are valid, relevant, and are the foundation of Indigenous cultures.

Pan-Indigeneity: Pan-Indigeneity is the grouping of all Indigenous people as one, assuming they are one culture and one people. While there are many similarities between Indigenous people, grouping all Indigenous people as one is inaccurate and erases diversity and unique cultures. Grouping the more than 60 distinct First Nations (in Canada alone) and their unique languages into one does not contribute to a deeper understanding of the diversity of Indigenous cultures. It is respectful to ask artists how they self-identify and then use the terminology that they use to avoid pan-Indigeneity.

Potlatch Ban: The Potlatch Ban, 1884 – 1951, attempted to assimilate Indigenous people of the Northwest Coast by outlawing Potlatches, dance, song, and other forms of gathering under the Indian Act. The Potlatch Ban was not successful in its assimilationist intentions; however, many communities saw great loss in their cultural practices and belongings due to this colonial trauma. The effects of the Potlatch Ban are still present within many Indigenous communities and families. The Potlatch Ban is most specific to BC, however there were many similar laws preventing Indigenous people from practicing and living their culture throughout Canada.

Protocol: Protocols are an important aspect of complex traditional systems of governance that exist within Indigenous cultures. Although these systems have been disrupted, people have maintained these ways of working and being together. Indigenous artists are constantly required to navigate these bodies of knowledge when they create and share their work. There are often tensions around the discussion of protocol which can result in misinterpretations of the word as rigid 'rules' rather than guiding principles that are grounded in respect for Indigenous ways of being in today's world. Cultural protocols are complex and different among Nations, communities, and families.²

Public/ Private sharing: While performance is public in nature, there may be some things an artist will not want shared widely. This may include not allowing photography or video of their performance.

Regalia/ costumes: Unless specifically told by the artist, do not call what they are wearing a "costume" – it is regalia. The term costume refers to something you dress up as in a temporary informal moment. Regalia is strongly connected to identity and is a representation of who Indigenous people are. It is

² *Proceedings of the Cultural Protocols & the Arts Forum*. First Peoples' Cultural Council. March 3-4, 2015. Penticton, BC

important that you ask before you touch or take a picture of someone's regalia. Some forms of regalia you may see in Northwest Coast dance are:

- Button blanket: There are many variations of a button blanket. They may be square or semi-circle shaped. They are most commonly made with black and red cloth, adorned with white buttons. Most importantly they have a crest representing the dancer's family.
- Mask: Typically worn over the dancers face, masks are carved and painted to represent an animal or supernatural being.

Stereotypes: Colonialism is a structure of domination that deploys certain ideas onto mainstream society about Indigenous people. Misconceptions around Indigenous performance often revolve around the notion of "authenticity." This idea of an "authentic Native person" is rooted in a deep, ongoing, and complex history of colonization that is driven by expectations of what and who Indigenous people are. Rather, Indigenous people are self-defining and diverse people which translates into their unique dance practices. It is extremely important not to impose assumptions of who an Indigenous person or group are and what their dance practice should look like.

Territorial acknowledgment: It should be common practice to acknowledge the people and territory where you are. A territorial acknowledgement is commonly done before an event. If possible, it is good to get local elder to do the territorial acknowledgement. It is also best to consult the local Indigenous communities on how they want to be represented and acknowledged. Territorial acknowledgements are important for several reasons: it recognizes the long history of the land that Indigenous people have been on since time immemorial, and it gives visibility to Indigenous people who are often erased through dispossession of land and development. Some words that you may hear around territorial acknowledgement:

- Traditional territory: recognizes lands traditionally used and/or occupied by Indigenous people.
- Ancestral territory: recognizes land that is handed down from generation to generation since time immemorial
- Unceded: refers to land that was not ceded to the Crown by a treaty or other agreement.

Totem pole: Totem poles are unique to Indigenous cultures of the Northwest coast of North America. Traditionally poles represent the family history of a particular House/ clan. Most commonly they are raised as a memorial after the passing of a Chief by the successor of the title. The crests on the pole represent significant parts of the family history and are located in order from the top down telling the story in order. The bottom crest is not the least important.

Witness / audience: Within many Indigenous practices, the role of audience member is that they are a witness to the event taking place. This means that they are all responsible for actively listening, watching, and remembering what took place.

Recommended Readings

This is a short list of readings, some are books, resource websites, and articles. They touch upon the terminology and concepts listed above and more.

Battiste, Marie. *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000.

“Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society.” Journal: www.decolonization.org Blog: decolonization.wordpress.com/

*note:. Both websites are open and accessible and cover a wide variety of Indigenous topics by Indigenous people. There is a “further readings” section on the blog as well.

“Indigenous Foundations.” UBC Vancouver: First Nations and Indigenous Studies. <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/>

King, Thomas. *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*. Canada: Anchor Canada, 2012.

King, Thomas. *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press Inc., 2003.

Mojica, Monique. “Stories From the Body: Blood Memory and Organic Texts.” *Native American Performance and Representation*. Ed. S. E. Wilmer. University of Arizona Press, 2009. Pages 97 – 109.

Nolan, Yvette. *Medicine Shows: Indigenous Performance Culture*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press. 2015.

Simpson, Leanne. *Dancing on our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Pub, 2011.

Smith, Linda. *Decolonizing Methodologies*. London, UK: Zed Books, 2012.

Taylor, Drew Hayden. Ed. *Me Artsy*. Madeira Park, BC: Douglas and McIntyre, 2015.