

Ep11_BetweenAcrossThrough_VKBallet

Ep11_BetweenAcrossThrough_VKBallet

cdts.admin@utoronto.ca

scribie

Audio Transcription, Perfected

<https://scribie.com/files/1cb88c90349f4ea6b8ce4a936cb298b0b2a2b0d6>

[music]

00:03 Ana Romero: This is Between, Across, and Through.

[music]

00:22 AR: What do you think of when you think of ballet? Choreography? Tutus? Dancers en pointe? How about theatre? Culture? Or being part of the elite? Do you ever think of ballet as a form of cultural resistance, as a place for dissent where form and movement can defy extractivism, colonialism, gender roles and even enslavement? If you don't, by the end of this podcast, you will. Today, Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill, Director of the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies, sits down with Professor VK Preston from the University of Toronto. We will discuss the Ballet of the Americas, a book emblazoned with the history of 16th and 17th century ballet, where historical records on costume design illustrate the political motivations behind the work of a group of French artists in an art form that is so often associated with the dominant class. Please join us as we travel Between, Across, and Through.

[music]

01:26 Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill: Welcome, I'm Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill. I'm joined by Professor VK Preston. Thank you for being on the show. VK, tell me, what is the Ballet of the Americas?

01:37 Professor VK Preston: [chuckle] It's a good question. I began this project on the understanding that there wasn't an influence of the Americas on the early history of ballet, so this project emerged when I sought permission that actually took something like six months to see an album of drawings done by an artist named Daniel Rabel. And as I went through them initially in photographs that were black and white and from probably the '40s or so, I kept thinking, "These are tattoos on the performer's skin." And I was curious about why there were tattoos and whether it connected with other things I was looking for which was signs of the, in some ways, standardized iconography of indigenous figures in France at the time within the performing arts.

02:29 PO: Basically, it's a kind of book?

02:33 PP: Yeah, in this case, the album is probably sewn-together designs or documents of three different performances that are sewn together out of order. It's like a kind of performance of its own in part because there's no performance that ever had all of these characters in it. And part of the cool thing about the performance of that time is that each entry is a different kind of character. So when they all get jumbled together, you might have ghosts and then dancers from Africa, and then scenes of fairies. [chuckle] So it's all jumbled together, but tracing that back to the print history, you end up with specific references to what's going on at this cusp of late 16th century, early 17th century transnational politics.

03:25 PO: So it's 16th, 17th century?

03:28 PP: Yeah, all of the performances in the album are from the 1620s. And they're from a period that's known as the Burlesque. So more ribald, more sometimes overtly sexual, overtly politically engaged moment, but like a lot of satires of the past, it's hard to tell sometimes whether that engagement is what we might frame in any way as progressive or whether in fact it's using tropes to really drive home defamation.

04:00 PO: What does the book look like physically as a material object?

04:05 PP: It's about the size almost of a table so it's quite big.

04:10 PO: Wow.

04:10 PP: It's pretty hard, then the scariest thing for me was actually turning the pages because they're like maybe 11 x 17 each.

04:19 PO: And so then they brought out this book the size of a table and put it on a table itself, and then you had the difficult job of not flipping through it, but carefully.

04:29 PP: Very carefully. I made one mistake right at the beginning because everything else I had looked at in that collection, they had let me handle without... I think I had gloves on, but they usually didn't ask me to do that.

04:40 PO: Mistake, meaning you tore a page?

04:43 PP: No, nothing major.

[laughter]

04:45 PP: I just reached...

04:46 PO: Speak, we'll edit that out.

04:47 PP: No, I reached for it with my hands instead of using a folded piece of cardboard that you're able to complicatedly lift the page and then hold it with a folded piece of cardboard and very slowly turn it over, which seemed to greatly amplify the chances of something going wrong.
[chuckle]

05:03 PO: Yes, right. [chuckle]

05:04 PP: So I felt really highly stressed out in looking at this for much of the time period, but because with albums like this are done with what are called haut, so there are highlights, sometimes done in precious metals which became a new materialist thread of this paper. But what happens is, when gold and silver are open to oxygen or the pages are open, then they began to oxidize. So one of the striking things with this is there's almost no scholarship on it in part 'cause when you open the book, you in a certain sense begin this process of oxidization. So they almost never open the book.

05:42 PO: Wow.

05:44 PP: I knew that separately that there might be gold and silver on the page, though I hadn't made the connection with what I was looking at in the photographs because there had been a flood at Harvard and they have a couple of related drawings. And the people who've done the reconstruction had realized that what looks like almost pencil, if it's been exposed to oxygen over a long period of time is oxidized silver. But what's happened with all of these amazing drawings of these 17th century performances is they were valued as drawings, they weren't valued as performance records.

06:15 PO: So what was the purpose of this volume if it wasn't to record?

06:19 PP: Well, it's a really good question because most of this has been treated as costume designs, and there's a really, really interesting thread of research around costume designs and the history of race, and the history of the stage. These are so elaborate, it's pretty hard to imagine them simply as designs, and I think that those are more memorial than they are design.

06:41 PO: Can you describe the images from the pages that you looked at? For example, what does the first entry of the Americas look like?

06:48 PP: Sure. So part of what happens as you turn over these pages and there's sometimes partly cut off but there's a description of what you're looking at, written in these kind of almost like thought balloons at the top of the page. And so this one says, "Ballet Des Ameriques." So it was really clear at that point that this was a ballet of the Americas, and the phrase I'm taking directly from the drawings and also from the print material that goes with them. There are four different printed versions that connect to this.

07:20 PP: And what I was expecting... I had seen it in black and white photographs... So what I was expecting was to see a crowd of possibly very lightly designed, maybe tattoo figures on the skin of ensemble of dancers working together. When I turned the page, I realized that the drawings and the lines were done in gold and silver, so it has an almost holographic effect. And it's clear that it's... And I think this is what the historians think about this kind of design, but it's almost like a very fine muslin or silk that does an imitation skin, so it plays into these questions about the history of playing Indian decorated then, and we don't know if in performance it was decorated with gold and silver or not but decorated with these really finely drawn haut. And on that, you can see the kind of folds that it's costume, and then some of the figures are feathered, some are not, and as you fold the pages over and over, there were different versions.

08:14 PP: So one of the things I found quite interesting about some of them is they perhaps have been corrected. So you'll have a limb and then it'll be sort of erased, and there'll be a limb somewhere else, so you have these kinds of phantom limbs, beginnings of gestures, revisions. [chuckle] And then the designs of the tattoos are in different groups.

08:32 PO: Okay, and then who are the central characters of this dance?

08:36 PP: Well, this was where it started to get really interesting because although I had seen the print versions of some of this performance, the spelling was hispanicized, so it said, "Atabalipa," in the French text. It took me a minute, but thanks to Google, it took a while. [chuckle]

08:56 PO: Less than a minute maybe.

08:57 PP: Yeah, which people had made that connection before, and I suspect it was because of these variations of spelling and so forth. So it's the entry of the last Inca Emperor of Cuzco, so he's referred to either as the King of Cuzco or as Atabalipa. I don't know if I'm pronouncing that correctly, but that'd be complicated to figure out. Anyways, so it is a staging of the Inca Emperor coming a hundred years after the arrival of the Conquistadors who executed him, allegedly after a payment of gold and silver ransom. He was killed anyways.

09:32 PP: And so he appears on the French stage at the Louvre. The performance also took place at the Louvre, borne by two enslaved figures, in this case, with sort of blond hair and pale skin and silver manacles and the symbol of enslavement at their necks and at their ankles. And we have the same glittering figurations of this enslavement also in the Americas. So the way I started to look at this was the way in which it was depicting emergence of enslavement in the silver mines and gold mines.

10:09 PO: Yeah, why is it so significant that they're wearing silver and gold?

10:13 PP: Well, it was... This is around Las Casas and others writing about this dispossession, and amongst other things, smelting of gold and silver coming from these mines. Lescarbeau, who writes also about Canada in this period, calls them "the graveyards of men." It's quite clear, even in their glancing references in the French writing at the time, that people are quite familiar with the fact that there is what we would call an atrocity happening within the mining system. That itself wraps into questions around the complicated relationship of France and Spain, both vying for different kinds of colonial projects. But what you also have is I think a sense that the stage becomes a place where there is contested understanding of what's happening in global politics.

11:02 PO: So it's in some ways... From your work, I get a sense that it's also something about a commentary on the imperial agenda.

11:12 PP: Absolutely, and part of what's interesting about that is that this is something like 40 years before ballet is purportedly invented in most oral histories, or most ways that the dancers understand the history of ballet.

11:26 PO: 40 years before?

11:28 PP: Yeah. So here are these characters engaged in critiques of histories of enslavement, of excesses of colonial violence in the Americas, of really pretty clear satires of Spanish profit from colonial... Let's say trade at the least. But the repetition of manacles and so on in the images, I think tells us something more is going on. But partly what makes it difficult to parse is that the images are

really finely and beautifully done and quite compelling. The texts are actually more violent.

12:04 PO: It sounds like one could read these materials from our contemporary perspective as what we would call progressive or critical, but at the same time, I can't imagine that anyone was ever familiar with Peru or had been to Peru.

12:19 PP: I think that there is... I think that part of what I'm pointing towards in the project, and I think that's firming up as I move forward, is that people are moving back and forth.

12:30 PO: Oh, wow!

12:30 PP: I think that there's transnational history that's moving in various ways. It's not necessarily... And some of it's very violent, and I have at least one case also termed a ballet of kidnapped children performing a ballet.

12:44 PO: The ballet in France.

12:46 PP: In France.

12:46 PO: Wow.

12:47 PP: But then you also have scenes, for example, of elaborate performances done with the very early histories of the proscenium stage for French elites and then at the same time you have these quite interesting moments that I think point towards the fact that we have people circulating between continents voluntarily and involuntarily. And certainly and that may be material culture, for example, there are references to Petun, so tobacco being smoked on stage. And there are ways in which the impact of what is happening in this transnational or circum-Atlantic context is part of lived experience that we might see on the stage in a way that's different than on the printed page.

13:38 PO: In the first entry of the Americas, you mentioned that they show the execution of a Peruvian chief. Why was it so important to French artists to have a dance about him and about the indigenous people as a whole?

13:53 PP: Well, I think there's a fascination, and it's complicated. So somewhere else also directly from the same period, there are a number of idealizing and in that way quite complicated depictions of the Americas in early 17th century French work. And that material in some ways, and this as traced by indigenous authors more recently, includes alternative ways in which society can be structured, so different senses of the distribution of property and so on, that in some way has become romanticized. Charles Huey in some of his early writings talks about a kind of way in which these stereotypes operate. A time bomb might be the wrong word, but they operate at a distance in a way that they create or ignite different kinds of political imagination that might have, for example, links as he proposes to something like a French revolution in part because some of these figures from the early 17th century writing then get taken up by political theorists later on.

14:58 PP: So it's idealizing and you have these kinds of extremes of those idealized populations

and the more caricatural depictions, which I think you also see in the distinctions in some of these stage works. But that it's operating within a political and cultural imaginary is I think quite compelling when you start to look at what's happening in part because you have their gender non-binary figures that are also idealized from the same performance.

15:26 PO: Well, what kind of other images drew your attention?

15:28 PP: So this particular album is sewn together as I said out of multiple images from multiple performances. Most of the melodies of the Americas are sewn together. So you have a sense that they kind of map on to the descriptions of the performance elsewhere, but I knew from the descriptions of the performance that there were other characters called androgines in that sort of... It was like a seven-hour a day work with the drawings very slowly, I don't know. [chuckle]

15:54 PO: It was your seven-hour a day, yes, slowly moving every page.

15:58 PP: Slowly moving, slowly getting through them, slowly doing also just as methodologically trying to write with the pages as I'm going through, quite dazzled by the visual effects of the gold on paper and it's kind of... As soon as you start to move the page, it gleams and glitters and sometimes it has an effect of gold. But what was quite interesting as I moved forward through the document as I came to these three figures in a triangle with a kind of pencil line that divides their bodies on one hand with a breast, on the other hand with a little mustache, on one hand holding a distaff which is associated with fabric production and skirts and Andean stripes, on the other with feathers which are classic stage, Joseph Rich calls it the floating signifier of the Americas, and armor and a battle axe kind of mace thing. And the bodies are right and left, male and female and they're extremely beautiful drawings. Compared to the Spanish in these drawings, they are more finely drawn, more beautiful in every sense. And looking at the text that goes along with it, there's a passage there that talks about the censors being of the performance and not being very happy with the movements of these figures, so it talks about they had to keep their arms and legs low as they were moving because there's a tension by censors to how these particular characters are moving on stage.

17:33 PO: This was a technical critique of their ability to dance.

17:37 PP: I think also of the way in which the body's norm is being inscribed within particular patterns of movement and then also certain kinds of movement then become associated with that which is not within the body's norm, if that makes sense. So there's a kind of regulation of movement that's part of this larger spectrum of embodied motion that has quite explicit codes as you go through the history of the form. But yeah, the references to censors are the only ones that we have anywhere in the history of this art form, and there are certainly mapped on to in various accounts from that time period to their gender indigenous practices in the Americas. So again, what is it about this performance moment in which there is tension with censorship. There are theorizations it's a kind of queer moment of political performance in France from quite early on, not just because of this but from...

18:45 PO: Very early on, yeah.

18:45 PP: Yeah, very, very early on. But most of this work is cross-dressed where there are fairies and so on. A friend of mine said, "You have the best drag ever."

[laughter]

19:00 PP: And a lot of these performances theoretically went all night. So I don't have... I think right now, I can't think of what time this one is supposed to happen. But ones within the book project end up going from midnight to 6:00 AM in the accounts of them. So I'm not thinking this is like a sit-down solemn...

19:17 PO: No, it doesn't sound like it.

19:18 PP: It sounds like a party to me.

[laughter]

19:20 PO: It sounds a lot like a party to me. How was the entry of the androgyny received as a dance in French theatres?

19:30 PP: That's quite interesting. There are multiple cases. In the book project, I have probably 50 or 60 years of these different male and female moving bodies. Part of what I think is possibly happening, is a preoccupation with the ways that a gendered body moves that are coded male and the ways that a gendered body moves that are coded female, they're happening at the same time, done by the same performer in that kind of version where a performer has a kind of... Literally, you can see the pencil line, between the male and female going through the middle of the forehead, between the eyes, all the way down the body. You have the potential on stage to move right or move left and be playing with a kind of third-dimensional movement where maybe you have a character turn and turn back. And so there's a fluidity inherent to the way in which this performer can choose to move. There are other places by the same author, where people have three faces. So having seen performers work with multiple faces on a mask, once you start to move... [chuckle]

20:35 PO: What is the third face? So there's a face that is...

20:38 PP: There's a monster with three faces in another ballet by the same poet.

20:42 PO: Are the three faces lined up, kind of...

20:46 PP: Who knows?

20:47 PO: Who knows, really.

20:47 PP: But I saw Mary Schuenhart stage a piece where the masks had multiple faces. And so when you have a performer...

20:54 PO: Like one on the left ear, one on the right ear, one on the face?

20:58 PP: Yeah.

21:00 PO: Okay.

21:00 PP: And so when the performer starts to move their head, it get really strange.

21:02 PO: I see.

21:03 PP: Quite distressing kinds of senses of being watched. But it's the sort of side of the performer's head or the back of the performer's head. So it's profoundly theatrical.

21:13 PO: Yes.

21:15 PP: It can be really fun, but then the edge that can come with the political expression. And a friend of mine does, of all things, has an article on breasts in performance, which seems to have been made out of cardboard. But quite explicit stagings of nudity, of figures that are part of... There's other scholarship on third gender stuff in France in this moment and its preoccupations with travel literature, but where people are also making claims for themselves and speaking back to doctors and so on. So there's a moment and there seemed to be also particular moments of greater scrutiny, greater medicalization and greater bends around how gender can be performed. So again, it's interesting what's happening on stage.

22:10 PO: Absolutely. And how do you think the artist who drew this picture felt about this character, the androgines?

22:18 PP: They're far more sympathetic than the Spanish.

22:24 PO: The artist rendering.

22:25 PP: The artist rendering. The Spanish are hyper-grotesque.

22:29 PO: Grotesque in what sense?

22:30 PP: Almost looks like they're 7-feet tall. Also sort of complicatedly gendered. And I would guess that the mask is such that the neck is the performer's face. And then the head is above the performer's face. So almost looks like they have giant goiters. And it looks almost more like manga than it does your typical expectation, I think of a performance.

22:55 PO: But the French artist is far more, what's the right word? Compassionate or...

23:05 PP: Idealizing.

23:06 PO: Yeah, okay.

23:07 PP: I think there's certainly, compared to these images of a really grotesque Spanish woman, so the gender politics is really complex in that kind of a depiction, that you have these quite beautiful figures when it comes to third gender, which I think is striking. I mean, the quality of the drawing, the detail of the face. You can see the thin pencil line through the body. And there's kind of flowing hair and quite clear gesture and almost direct engagement of the drawing with the spectator. So you have a real sense of the gaze.

23:49 PO: Is there any sense that these are efforts to represent life in the colonies?

23:56 PP: That's a complicated one. And part of what's complicated about it is that they're bound together out of order. And so in binding them together out of order, these images that are quite clearly part of the entry of Ballet of the Americas in the written books called livrets, that come from the same performance, those particular characters are bound later in the album, "Among Monsters and Fantasque." So fantastical creatures within the album. So it seems like also you're not just dealing with what the artist is thinking, and that's a complicated question. Always idealizing within the costume drawings or the costume memorials, but also how they've been bound out of sequence in ways that are more estranging over time.

24:45 PO: Maybe this is an opportunity to talk about the organization of the book itself. Were all the pictures organized in order as they represented on stage?

24:55 PP: Well, that's part of what makes it I think, A] on one hand, why people hadn't maybe written about it in the same ways as along with the fragility of the document. But there are on one hand multiple copies of them. On other hands, they've been selected for the most beautiful copies, bound together. But there are three different performances that are sewn together where you have very clearly identifiable figures, sometimes in sequences that map quite clearly onto records of particular performances and sometimes wildly out of order as if it's a kind of performance itself. It's fun in a sense, and you're going through this extremely delicate book because it's like a theatre itself. By moving the page, you have a new scene appear. And then you move the page again, you have a new scene appear. So the way it's been bound certainly amplifies the sense of theatrical entry, which is I'd say the dramaturgical unit at the center of this kind of form, all the characters enter from one side and exit in the same direction. So it's got elements maybe like a parade or a series of passages that's coherent, but they're out of order.

26:10 PO: And these figures have been, as you say, bifurcated with a pencil drawing, and on the male side as it's represented, there are clear signs of indigeneity. But on the female side...

26:20 PP: Both.

26:21 PO: On both?

26:22 PP: So on the male side, you have these classic feathers, which you'll have in most early 17th century drawings. But I'd say the fabrics are very clearly doing the same, same with at the waist. On the female side, the distaff and its relationship to women's fabric production is quite strong within

this period of writing on Peru by foreigners. One other thing that we haven't gone into is there are later depictions too of uprisings happening in Peru against the French that involve dressing up as parrots. So there is insurgent imagery happening, but you can't read it in a completely linear temporal way. [chuckle]

26:57 PO: Of course, of course. The one thing that does stand out is with the depiction of the female side, they appear to be in the drawing to be blond.

27:06 PP: Yes.

27:06 PO: Which doesn't strike me as a particularly...

27:09 PP: And this is the same with the enslaved figures with Atahualpa as well, right? That doesn't happen in the Ballets of Africa, which have the same metal shackles at the ankles and so on. So there is a parallel that's happening dramaturgically on stage and in the drawings.

27:27 PO: But why are they blond?

27:30 PP: My guess is certainly that Rabel certainly never goes to Peru.

[laughter]

27:35 PO: Sure. Or even just asked some fundamental questions.

[laughter]

27:39 PP: Yeah. One of the funny things in these drawings is the music of the Americas has all European instruments, but one of them is a bagpipe, it's on stage with a llama. And that's probably a misreading of degree using European sailors to imagine the instruments of Peru. So that...

28:00 PO: Oh, so the bagpipe is imagined as a Peruvian instrument.

28:03 PP: Yes. It appears to be.

28:05 PO: Wow.

28:05 PP: Yeah. And there's a bit of scholarship on that in musicology.

28:08 PO: Where in the book do the androgine appear, compared to when they would have appeared on stage?

28:13 PP: Right, part of what's interesting about the way this all assembled is that there is writing from 18th century in the front of the book that talks about the figures in the book. And it says these figures are more based on birth grotesque than anything we could put on stage today. So that's 100 years later. But certainly in the past for us, probably closer to the French Revolution my bet is that

this is included in what that collector is saying about these images because he also says that they're extremely beautifully done then sort of compelling as documents. But the set of three androgines rather than being with the Ballets of the Americas, is bound with the figures of monsters and fantastical creatures in the later sewing together of the album. So almost certainly not from the period of the artists working on these early 17th century things, but the kind of taxonomy or classification ends up binding them with the not real.

29:12 PO: Wow. Was this an effort at erasure?

29:16 PP: I mean, does it erase? Yes. [chuckle] There are also really interesting things like people who do that sewing together, often women historically, in book binding.

29:28 PO: Who do the work of binding the books.

29:30 PP: Book binding. Yeah, so that, somebody just pointed that out to me quite recently.

29:33 PO: And you think that kind of binding would have the editorial control?

29:36 PP: Not necessarily. But that's where the anonymity or the project too of taking on an album bound at an unknown moment, out of sequence and so on becomes its own kind of project as it's not positivist in some way. And I think you can do more with it in a sense because it's out of order, because it's presenting these other possibilities and relationships that you wouldn't see if everything were linearly mapped. I got a short grant so I am gonna do some of the linking between the particular text on particular images, so that we can start to see where they come from and how that could happen in a dramaturgical sequence. But that only these characters don't appear in the Americas and that they do appear with the non-human, is I think really striking.

30:26 PO: Yeah, it's very important. What kind of other images appear within the same section? I believe there was one that displayed dancers dressed as parrots, if you wanna say something about that.

30:37 PP: Well, that's an interesting one because the depictions in the texts and the images again, are compelling but in tension with each other in interesting ways. So you have in one case, on one side of the page, you have probably references to more toupee feather cape material on some of the dancers and they're dancing with mirrors. And the text that goes with it seems to imply that they're using the mirrors to hunt the parrots. So there's a sort of crying or maybe prognostication going on in the kind of tropes that are happening there. On the other side of the page, you have the entry of these human-sized parrots, which I guess is pretty funny on stage started happening. [chuckle]

31:25 PO: Sure. I'm with it.

31:27 PP: Parrots entering. And the text itself is complicated because the texts are essentially about being hunted and addressed themselves to the women in the audience saying women as we are being hunted. So I think that there are ways, again, where there's a slippery, who is the voice that is addressing the reader? Are other performance traditions being echoed? So in 18th century drawings,

I also have parrot figures from the same region that are definitively indigenous performance practices, but that in these preoccupations with trying to circulate and depict dances, I think you also have the movement of some of the forms that come in from watching dances in an international context, making their way into European stages and changing forms.

32:21 PO: Can dance and performance be extracted the same way that minerals and even people can?

32:26 PP: Well, that's part of where I think this project began to think about the gold and silver being extracted in a mine like Potosi as having a role on the stage in the sense that sometimes the only things we know about performance are how much gold and silver was used in them, because that's what appears in budgets, but also that these kinds of things that we think of is so profoundly Baroque in terms of staging effects and luminosity and so on are caught up within the circulation of materials, not always from the Americas, but included within it and part of what interested me in this context was that this becomes part of the theorization called the paradox of silver of the emergence of inflation, so part of using this material on stage has to do with its destabilizing economies, with its greater availability.

33:23 PO: It's used on stage because its value is diminishing?

33:27 PP: I would think that that's possible.

33:28 PO: Yeah.

33:29 PP: Yeah. So on the one hand, you have this influx of plundered material that ends up being part of economic destabilization, not just in Europe, but in China and quite globally. And the other hand, you have this preoccupation with observing and reproducing cultural materials in a way that I think of is quite genetic to these ideas of extraction and extractivism, also of practices more widely, and the recurring and ongoing figuration and political valence is associated with these kinds of colonial fascinations and displays of materials become, I think, logics that like Maniolo and others refer to as these mimetic preoccupations with imperialism and under the expansion of European preoccupations with performance in that sense, I think of it as extractivist in the same way that it can be extractivism of biological material, metals, minerals and so forth.

34:39 PO: And what do you think about what this allows us to say about cultural appropriation, or think about cultural appropriation?

34:47 PP: One of the parts in that, I think, is that we can look at that in this case as almost concomitant with some of the emergence of the records, so that we can not just look at it as a contemporary phenomenon, but one that is in fact transforming these forms in these very, very early records and documents.

35:10 PO: Because it was so central to the book itself that it was the appropriation of Peruvian culture, and even, it seems like in the materials themselves, the gold and the silver.

35:20 PP: The gold, the silver, their Andean-striped fabrics, their preoccupations too with gender, with masculinity and femininity sharing a body, but on the other hand, part of what's going on is that you have these materials of colonial expansion and plunder becoming part of the history of the stage even before we think of these forms as having their origin moment.

35:45 PO: So we've talked about how the gold and the silver is an object that can be extracted and that the kind of images from Peru can be appropriated. Dance itself becomes some sort of object here.

35:56 PP: Right. And it's like, how do we think of that preoccupation with kinesthetic experience, the sensorium, even different apprehensions of what the sensorium can do as being part of this possibility for transculturation but also deep history and even maybe genealogy of appropriation.

36:19 PO: Can something like the dance of the parrots ever be re-appropriated or appropriated back?

36:25 PP: That's an interesting one because in the essay, I try to complicate what has been a big threat of Baroque scholarship around performance, which is reenacting, to take these cases where the reenacting is also a redoing and restaging of a paradigm of relationship between viewer and be held, that is structured through the visual records of travel literature, some of the political theory and so on. So this one, I was trying to talk about ways in which we can think about the relationship as researchers or as those engaging with the archives as quite intentionally not reproducing and not redoing in the way that the tendency of dance scholarship has been to reenact. On the other hand, as soon as I said that, instead of making this claim, I actually had Butoh scholars who were working in collaboration with Peruvian experimental artists saying, "Okay, well, would this be something that we could roll with?"

37:28 PP: I thought, "Yeah." And so, and there is this, there is also a trans-political project of looking at third gender Peruvian work across time that also looks to this time period. So I think there are certainly ways in which there is a project that can dialogue quite interestingly with some of these political performance practices, but 1] it gets into more explicitly in the ballets of Africa, which come later in the same performance, you're certainly entering into explicit histories of black phase, pre-black phase, but certainly racial masquerade.

38:09 PO: Do you feel that these dances should ever be recreated?

38:15 PP: I'm quite interested in pushing against the idea of recreation and reenactment, in a kind of way of thinking otherwise about theatrical and performance history as having a broader political and memorial scope. I think that in restaging the explicitly racialized travesty or mimicking characters in this moment that almost directly... We're looking at 1620s very, very closely approximate some of the early moments of transatlantic slavery and certainly of indigenous slavery that's happening through the mita system in Peru. The kind of bodyness of it as reenactment, I think is profoundly problematic, and because the way that this slippage between always wanting to redo the past around forms like this has become a kind of paradigm for the scholarship.

39:21 PP: This is an area where I've been trying to resist and push against that way of understanding the past, to look in another way, that what the cultural heritage indicates of the global awareness amongst other things of what are certainly atrocities and ecological, as well as human. So this is mercury-based mining, was really devastating effects on populations. So I'm certainly not for reenacting this piece, and as I was mentioning briefly, there are contemporary artists who flagged being interested in doing so, but they're themselves politically engaged performers who are critical.

40:05 PO: What's a better approach?

40:10 PP: Part of the process that gets me to this kind of work is having a dance background myself. So I began as a belly dancer very young, and part of the way we trained in this was being shown particular steps and being told that those came from Louie XIV's preferences, like the jump called the "royale." And so that sense that there was this embodied transmission from a kind of history of sovereignty, of Ancien Regime that sometimes is quite sort of rendered precious or even nostalgic around a structure of abuse of power in a certain way, become something that's widespread within a history of dance and the way dancers are trained. And part of what this project became, in a certain way, liberating and maybe against the grain and transgressive for me in terms of looking in a completely different history of political engagement and of bodies and the kinds of ways of moving, that comes from even a period before Louis XIV that is bound up in the history of colonization, of racial capitalism, of changing ecologies, histories of economics that doesn't make the idea that disability, or third gender or nonbinary gender, is a latecomer to something like ballet, but that these questions are really at the center of a history of movement that is super complicated.

41:44 PP: But that doesn't allow the cultural history of elites to be a top-down. Over time it begins with the king's body and becomes the imperfect intervention in the king's body late in culture, but that the space is always contested, always embodied in multiple ways and can be quite explicitly speaking back to those ideas of sovereignty and of bodily authority that is inscribed within a history of art forms.

42:18 PO: Thank you so much.

42:20 PP: Thank you very much for having me. I feel really excited about talking across disciplines, from theatre departments to centres of transnational studies. You don't always have ballet there.

[laughter]

42:31 PP: But we should.

42:31 PO: That is fun. [chuckle]

42:33 PP: That's great.

[music]

42:35 AR: That was Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill in conversation with Professor VK Preston from the University of Toronto. On our next episode, we'll talk to Professor Vivek Goel and discuss how universities like UFT will continue to adapt to respond to COVID-19. Please subscribe on your favorite app so you won't miss it. This monthly podcast was brought to you by the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. I am Ana Romero. Thank you for listening and joining the conversation.

Thank you for choosing Scribie.com

Cross-check this transcript against the audio quickly and efficiently using our online Integrated Editor. Please visit the following link and click the Check & Download button to start.

<https://scribie.com/files/1cb88c90349f4ea6b8ce4a936cb298b0b2a2b0d6>