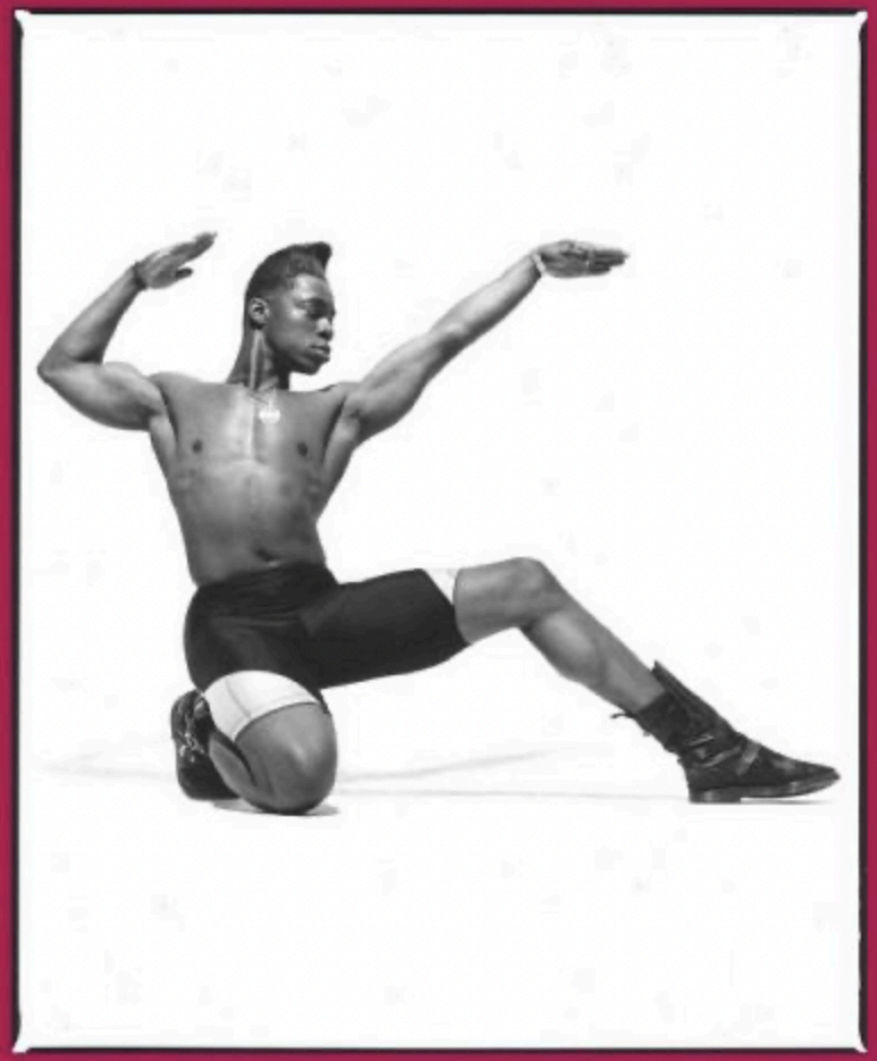
PERSPECTIVES ON AMERICAN DANCE

THE NEW MILLENNIUM



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Syndicated Bodies

Expressions of American Identity in NFL Touchdown Dances

DAWN SPRINGER

On a corner in Milwaukee, a bar erupts as a Green Bay Packer crosses into the end zone and scores a touchdown. The player spikes the ball and leaps into the crowd, performing the iconic Lambeau Leap. The fans at Lambeau Field reach out and hold onto the athlete as his body falls back into their outstretched arms. The Milwaukee bar-goers jump for joy and embrace. Across Wisconsin, bodies move in simultaneous celebration with the signature Packer touchdown dance on their televisions.

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Since the inception of the Lambeau Leap by Leroy Butler in 1983,[1] many Green Bay Packer athletes have charged the crowd and leapt backward over the barrier that separates fans from the field. The jump into the stands is a patriotic expression for Packer fans—a physical expression that speaks of place, of Wisconsin. The Lambeau Leap is one of many end zone celebrations performed by athletes across professional American football. On the surface, these dances are performances of collective joy and victory for players and their fans. The evolution of their choreography through the game's history, however, has brought strict league regulations against "excessive celebration." When athletes dance their way into the end zone, how they choose to move their body is under exacting scrutiny. These moments of individual expression in the NFL therefore hold the potential to become acts of defiance.

Policing of movement is not new in the United States. Throughout American history, formalized rules have enforced social codes of so-called acceptable behavior when mobilized dancing bodies challenged the status quo. The Cabaret Laws of early twentieth-century New York City, for example, emerged when Americans flocked to Harlem to dance together, interracially, in the 1920s. This is just one instance of America's historical penchant for bodily regulation. In fact, the Supreme Court removed "social dancing" from First Amendment Protection in 1989.[2] In 2008, eighteen people were arrested at the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., for performing a silent dance in honor of Thomas Jefferson's 265th birthday.[3] Thus, the NFL's "excessive celebration" rules are part of a larger history of sanctions on dancing in the United States. Dance often acts as a vehicle for inciting controversy, depending on the type of movement, who is dancing, and where the dancing occurs. In America, the public moving is inherently political. Touchdown dances are no exception.

Since Leroy Butler's first leap into the stands in the early eighties, end zone celebrations and touchdown dances have become more elaborate and more culturally relevant. The way a person dances signifies a great deal, either through their movement, the perception of their moving body, or both. When football players dance, it is a highly visible display of the intersection between dance and public perception. From the

figure eight of the hips in a salsa, to the bent knees and polyrhythmic movements of African American dancing culture, to the erect spine of Irish jigs, what America sees when a football player dances is much more than the celebration of a touchdown. This essay examines touchdown dances and personal choreographies in American football culture to reveal how football players' physical expressions embody and perform personal, political, and geographical identities, and resist structures of systemic racism and social dominance.

Thousands of screaming fans cheer for the touchdown and for the dance that ensues. Countless video compilations are made on home computers that highlight the moves. America's obsession with the dancing football player has evolved into marketing campaigns that use end zone dancing to promote products such as credit cards[4] and life insurance.[5] The connection between dance and football is a compelling element of American pop culture. For example, as of January 2014, eleven NFL players have appeared on the wildly popular television reality show *Dancing with the Stars*.[6]

Just two years after the first Lambeau Leap, the iconic "Super Bowl Shuffle" rap song and music video were performed by members of the 1985 NFL Chicago Bears Champion team. The video premiered during the height of Music Television's (MTV) popularity, and millions of Americans watched as the team represented Chicago with simple hand gestures and sidesteps while rapping the lyrics: "You know we're just strutting for fun, strutting our stuff for everyone!" The video became a media phenomenon, and was even nominated for a Grammy Award.[7] The record produced a substantial sum, which was donated to city charities. When the Bears went on to win the Super Bowl that year, the Shuffle became a citywide virtual touchdown dance.[8]

Nationwide television coverage elevated players to epic celebrity status. Wide receiver Will "Speedy Willy" Gault explains: "We were so big that year. There had been the Black and Blues Brothers poster for the linemen, and a lot of commercials, so it wasn't against the norm to do this. It was just like a commercial, almost. Except that this would be for charity. Everyone in the video would be paid some nominal fee, but the main purpose was we would give money to the neediest families in Chicago."[9] Several of the players have short features in which they introduce themselves and have solo dancing/rapping moments. Gault's lyrics, for example: "I practice all day and dance all night, I gotta get ready for the Sunday fight. Now I'm as smooth as a chocolate swirl, I dance a little funky so watch me girl!" showcases him with fluid, rhythmic steps while he bends at the waist and circles his hips. He describes his choreography, "Actually, I didn't plan it, I just went with the beat. It was totally adlibbed. It may have seemed like I did because it was so smooth, but there goes that smooth-as-chocolate-swirl thing."[10]

"The Super Bowl Shuffle" was beloved by many. The song is an American ode to one of our nation's favorite pastimes. On closer inspection, it reveals the tensions created by commercialized, fabricated demarcations of race in the United States. In retrospect, performed stereotypes in the song's lyrics are obvious. African American Walter Payton's lyrics, for example, proclaim, "Well they call me sweetness, I like to dance. Running the ball is like making romance." These lyrics, as well as Gault's, overtly reference a connection between physicality, sexual prowess, and race. Caucasian players Jim McMahon and Steve Fuller are labeled "punky" players who "can't dance." African