

# Native American Dance

by *Jacqueline Shea Murphy*

In order to address Native American dance as one of “America’s Irreplaceable Dance Treasures,” we must first establish what this subject encompasses and how it can be meaningfully approached within the limitations of a brief overview.

Let’s start with diversity: today there are over 500 federally recognized tribes in the United States. This does not include tribes that are recognized at the state but not the federal level, or are not recognized by either; nor does it include people who identify as Native but (due to complexities of U.S. settler colonization) are not currently tribally located and/or are largely cut off from their Indigenous heritage. All of these groups and peoples likely have dance practices specific to their communities. Members of each community likely also participate in, and bring elements of their heritage into, dance practices that are common to a larger dance world (ballet, hip hop, contemporary dance). These mainstream practices have themselves been developed with the contributions and influence of Indigenous dancers and dance traditions (think of [Maria Tallchief](#); Puerto Rican/Taino and other Native and Latino contributions to b-boying; the wealth of modern dance “inspired” by Southwest Indian dance; the contributions of Indigenous modern dancers like Juan Valenzuela, [José Limón](#), and DAYSTAR/Rosalie Jones. These are all, arguably, part of “Native American dance,” just as, say, [Alvin Ailey](#), the [Charleston](#), and [hip hop](#) are part of “African American dance.”

Next, let’s consider the historical and geographic scope of the subject. Throughout the area that is now called the United States of America, dances have been practiced by Indigenous peoples for millennia, shifting and changing over the years, with many continuing as vibrant contemporary social, religious, and artistic practices today. So, in addressing “America’s” dance treasures, it’s necessary to ask when “America” began—with the arrival of Columbus in 1492? In 1776, when the U.S. declared itself a nation? Is there a way to address “Native American” dance without defining it through a history of colonization? And, because the answer to that question is probably no, how can the

subject be discussed in a way that recognizes this political complexity, as many “Native American” dances themselves often do?

Some basic U.S. political history is in order. Various forms of Indigenous dance were for many years seen as a threat of one sort or another to American political stability, and to the Protestant moral and work ethics upholding it. In the U.S., a directive listing dance as a federal “Indian Offense,” punishable by fines and imprisonment, was on the books for over fifty years, starting in the early 1880s until its repeal in 1934. The earlier restrictions focused on the military threat the dancing was perceived to pose (as in the so-called “Ghost Dance”)<sup>1</sup>. Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the restrictions focused more on dances’ supposed barbarism (focusing on the “Sun Dance” and “Snake Dance”). In the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the thrust of the regulations became to curtail practices officials saw as wasteful of “Indians’” time and energy. These regulations affected Indian dance practices, yet many Native peoples also refused or circumvented the attempts to ban and restrict dancing, and a multitude of Indian dance practices continue today.

“Powwow” dance—which includes the dance practices that today signal “Native American dance”

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<sup>1</sup> The “Ghost Dance” is a vexed term usually referencing one version of widespread, continuing, and common Native ritual rejuvenation practices. According to ethnologist James Mooney (1897), the so-called “Ghost Dance Religion” “outbreak” began when a number of Lakota from Pine Ridge became interested in the message of a sacred Paiute man, Wovoka, in 1889, about a dance ceremony that would bring peace, unity, and restoration. As famine spread across Pine Ridge, dancing became increasingly frequent and raised fears among U.S. soldiers and Indian agents of “wild and crazy” dancing Indians (DeMallie, 257). Numerous scholars have addressed the ensuing massacre at Wounded Knee in December, 1890, and many have questioned the way discourse about the widely-hyped practices, including Mooney’s own, contribute to its construction as a dangerous “craze.” See Shea Murphy, 72-5, for overview.

most widely in popular cultural images (Fancy Dance, Jingle Dress, Fancy Shawl, etc.)—became the pan-tribal practice it is today during this same period, and partly in relation to these restrictions. Powwows, which are intertribal, inclusive gatherings of Native Americans celebrating their cultures, are today held across the continent. Although practiced everywhere, they nonetheless retain roots in Plains cultures and reflect Plains rhythms and regalia (drums, feathers, etc.) Powwow events, hugely influential in fostering connection and community, enabling innovation, and in shaping contemporary urban “Indian” identity, include only a fraction of the diversity and vibrancy of contemporary Native American dance.

Given the difficulty of addressing the scope and diversity of Native American dance in a limited space, I will use examples of two very different contemporary dance practices that I am familiar with, as a consequence of where I work and the connections I have made. Short descriptions of these practices will suggest the diversity of Native American dance and register the ways in which it often connects with land and location, and engages with and enacts the importance of being in community and in relation to one another and to the world. The first example demonstrates the survival and revival of dance practices rooted in specific indigenous cultures and regional identities, while the second illustrates how contemporary dance training and performance contexts can engage with and strengthen indigenous dance practices and experience.

### **Cahuilla Bird Singing and Dancing**

(Written in consultation with Mountain Cahuilla Bird leader William Madrigal, Jr.)

Bird Singing and Dancing is a dance practice of the Indigenous people of southern California and parts of Arizona, including Cahuilla, Mohave, Kumeyaay, Serrano, Tongva, Tatavium, Serrano, Chemehuevi and Quechan peoples. Cahuilla Bird Songs tell the story of creation and migration to this land (what is today southern California), and are an oral narrative of the people's first interactions with each other and the universe around them. The songs and

dancing present a spatial and historical background of the local Cahuilla landscape. Today, Cahuilla people do Bird Singing and Dancing in order to learn about their relation to the land and to their language; to connect to the place they're from and to other people; and to celebrate and have fun.

The original Cahuilla Bird Songs included more than 300 songs that formed a cycle of stories. They were sung in a specific order that told the chronology of the migration. The singing began at dusk and ended at dawn. Today, the songs are not always sung all night long, though it still tells the old stories and is true to the ancient form and intent.

Cahuilla Bird Singing involves all people, young and old, women and men, coming together to sing and dance and to celebrate life. Songs are sung in the Cahuilla language, and often parts are sung in an ancient Cahuilla dialect. Different bands and tribes in the region have variations in how they sing and dance Bird Songs. So, knowing a particular way of singing and dancing to the Bird Songs is a way of knowing and performing connection and relation to a specific clan and regional identity.

Bird Singing and Dancing is a centerpiece of most Cahuilla social and cultural events, and Cahuilla people sing Bird Songs at many events in the Riverside, California region.

### *Movement*

In Cahuilla Bird Singing, men and women stand in lines facing each other. The men coordinate the songs; the women coordinate their own dances. There are sometimes variations in these roles (though these changes do sometimes raise eyebrows). In general, the focus is not on everyone being able to do anything they want without restrictions, but instead on balance – between genders, and in the universe in the wider sense: between all things. The separate roles for men and women are about maintaining this balance.

Standing in a row, each male dancer holds and plays a gourd rattle as they coordinate the songs (when they start, tempo, etc.) They make a low, resonant sound (an “aha” sound, called “grunting”) to call out

from Chem iva'ah ("the power within" or "our collective power," that which makes us human). At a particular point in the song structure, male dancers can break out into the open space between the men and women and dance, leaning forward with knees bent, torso and head moving up and down and side to side, like a bird's would.

Women dance in a controlled, graceful, subtle style with different levels of movement. Their hands and arms stay close to the body, but elbows are more free to move. At the start of the song, there is slower swaying movement with weight shifting from left to right. Then, when the men start dancing, the women do a more exaggerated move, hopping and moving from side to side. Women's torsos and hips are held mostly still and lifted, with movement initiated by the steps of the feet. Women's skirt bottoms sway evenly back and forth, rhythmically; steps are small and in place, with a little elevation, and weight returning to ground. It requires incredible strength in the legs and lower back to dance this way for hours; the women's dancing demonstrates that strength and power.

The number of performers can range from around three to dozens. Often there are around six to 10 male singers, and about the same number of female dancers, performing in a group, though when those listening are invited to join in, the number of singers and dancers can swell considerably. The music—the Bird Singing and gourd rattle playing (not drumming!)—is essential to the dancing (and vice versa). The outfits worn by dancers have changed over time. Today, men wear ribbon shirts, bandanas, and jeans, and women wear ribbon dresses, not grass skirts, as they did previously. The group members are usually highly skilled and have learned together for a long time. Though the dance steps appear fairly simple, enabling anyone to join, they are also strenuous when performed over lengths of time, and thus require focus, strength, and attention to subtle variations.

### *History*

Bird Singing and Dancing has always been part of Cahuilla identity, but it went through a period of decline due to historical events surrounding the

colonization of the United States and Mexico. These included Missionization (1769-1833) and colonization of California and of Native peoples there; and Boarding School policy, in which Native children were taken (sometimes forcibly) from their families and educated in boarding schools, according to Euro-American standards. This practice directly contributed to Cahuilla people losing their language and their knowledge of their songs. (Students in boarding schools were not permitted to speak their Native languages.) During this time—roughly the 1940s to the 1970s—there was less transference of the actual tradition of Bird Singing from generation to generation.

In the 1970s, American Indian activism changed the political climate in the U.S. for Indians. This activism emerged in the wake of federal termination/relocation policies, and the subsequent growth of Native American urban communities, of pan-Indian identity, and of Intertribal powwows. Both teachers and students of Bird Singing saw powwow culture changing the climate for American Indians, and creating a sense of connection and pride. They wanted this for California Indians too. Bird Singing grew out of this desire and became a whole movement of its own. In the mid-1970s, there was some academic and legislative support for programs that allowed Indian people to learn through a master apprenticeship program. That started an educational movement that made people—especially young people who were discerning their identity as Native people—want to learn.

The first teachers, the elders, took on the challenge and responsibility of reaching out to the youth and spending many hours sharing, teaching, instructing, and then participating and singing with them. Today, Bird Singing and dancing is widely practiced throughout the region.

For those who practice it, Cahuilla Bird Singing and Dancing is about showing and practicing strength and continuity over time (including maintaining your language), even in the face of colonization; about knowing and valuing the place, and land, where you are from; and about knowing whom you

are connected to in your community, and staying connected with them.

### **DANCING EARTH Indigenous Dance Creations** (Written in consultation with Rulan Tangen)

DANCING EARTH is a contemporary Indigenous dance company, headed by choreographer Rulan Tangen, which has been presenting work nationally since 2004. The company and Tangen have received awards and grants from, among others, the National Dance Project, the National Museum of the American Indian, and the Native Arts and Culture Foundation.

DANCING EARTH is not a powwow-based dance company (though sometimes its choreography incorporates powwow steps); nor is it based in a particular tribal approach, though it often draws on the specific tribal backgrounds, knowledge, stories, and languages that its dancers bring with them. It is a contemporary dance company with an Indigenous choreographer and dancers, as well as Indigenous composers, set, prop, and lighting designers, videographers, photographers, stage hands, backstage technicians, musicians and their instruments, costumers and their fabrics, and visual artists who serve as body painters. It is specifically interested in engaging with Indigenous stories, worldviews, and epistemologies in its choreography and its dance-making practices.

The company does not approach dance making with set notions of what Indigenous dance—or identity—looks like. Instead, it engages with the multiple dance and movement vocabularies brought into the company through its Indigenous dancers' bodies and practices. It then works with these in "traditional" ways (which include providing a place and role for everyone). Rather than visual markers or particular dance steps, an understanding—or sometimes the search for an understanding—of Indigenous histories, knowledge, and methodologies propels the choreography.

The Indigenous dancers in DANCING EARTH have trained extensively, and have fit and strong bodies. Several, including Tangen, have substantial

experience in particular powwow dance forms and are prize-winning powwow dancers. (Tangen was a Northern Plains Traditional dancer.) Others, also including Tangen, have a depth of training in ballet and modern/contemporary dance, and strong technique in those fields. Others are connected with "traditional" Indigenous dance practices. Others have trained in the spaces and dance forms that young Indigenous people are engaging with today: several of the men bring strength and power from their training in b-boy street dance practices into the company's dance making. Yet it is not any particular dance form, but rather the act of these Indigenous peoples bringing dances from their diversity of backgrounds into the company, and the ways in which Tangen enables the dancers to engage with these forms, that makes the dancing "contemporary Indigenous dance." The company's first step is to strengthen the identity of young people who, like many of their generation, have been severely disenfranchised and disconnected from their Indigenous communities and practices. Despite colonization, these young artists have retained fragments of their Indigenous cultures, and the company uses various performance art exercises, as well as personal research and inquiry, to strengthen these cultural ties. The company devises work methodologies that honor the cultural background of each artist, including those cut off from a continuous relationship with their tribes. Each minute of choreography contains layers of Indigenous experience and perspective in its narrative, intention, creation of energies, use of space and time, beauty, and strength.

For over two decades, Tangen has been involved in developing Indigenous methodologies to do this kind of work, including appropriate cultural consultation with tribal elders to review what materials are appropriate for sharing with the general public. Over time, as elders have seen a significant drop in language and cultural upkeep, they have become more open to Indigenous performance artists utilizing contemporary art forms as a means of reviving culture. As films and mainstream entertainment continue to create inaccurate fantasies in place of Native historical depictions, there has been an increasing push for

Indigenous performers to step into positions of creative power.

DANCING EARTH is training this next generation of connected, experienced Indigenous performance artists. The company has enabled a number of young Indigenous dancers to attain the clarity, strength, confidence, and experience to shift the world in better directions at a time of global environmental crisis. These dancers are themselves starting to have an impact on both Native youth and general public understanding, through their own mentoring practices, the company's performance and outreach work, and via their entry into the mainstream performance industry.

Two recent evening-length works, "Walking the Edge of Water" (2012) and "OF BODIES OF ELEMENTS" (2011), [add links] convey messages of ecological balance at a time of global crisis brought about by greed. Both works envision and enact a way of being in relation to all other beings, and to the world, at this moment of planetary ecological shifts. "Walking the Edge of Water" is inspired by the Anishinaabe women who have been walking the edges of the Great Lakes to bring awareness of the importance and sustainability of clean water for all life. Of it, Tangen writes:

The Indigenous quality of it is the respect for the sources, along with the willingness to weave together threads from different narratives from different traditional areas and peoples, and to carry all that into the rehearsal process. This process is collaborative, with these artists—young, emerging, experienced—all being welcomed into creative and cultural contribution on the existing themes. It is culture that is being honored and experimented with, and adapted to relevance of the conditions of a particular moment in time, at a particular place, with the presence of individuals present as well as those who are unseen. In this sense, each performance of the water work is an incarnation in which the rehearsal process may lead us to a different outcome, even if working with the same materials - more of a performance ritual; it feels like the water is asking us to shift and change with each

one. The whole process is a true exploration of living culture!<sup>2</sup>

DANCING EARTH creates a space for Indigenous dancers to refuse the disconnection from Indigenous ways-of-being that colonization has wrought, both for those on their tribal lands, practicing their traditions, and for those cut off from them. The company thus rejects colonization's attempts to render contemporary Native peoples invisible and inauthentic, and harnesses contemporary dance making to access and strengthen Indigenous ways of doing.

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<sup>2</sup> Personal email communication, November 3, 2012