

## Notes

1. Rosalie Jones, final scene of *Allegory of the Cranes* script. Paraphrased from a poem by Sir Isaac Newton.
2. Ibid.

## Work Cited

Johnston, Basil. 1976. *Ojibway Heritage*. Toronto: McClelland and Steward.

## Rulan Tangen

*To me, life is essentially movement, and much of my journey has been living so that I may dance. Now, as a woman of color confronting disabilities as well as heightened awarenesses in my post-cancer reality, I dance to live; my dance has become a functional ritual for the continuance of all of life. I believe that art in some of its highest forms can be healing, thus I create dances to sustain health, harmony, and balance of all forms of life and interconnected relationships—the dance of ecology.*



*Medicine man Hehaka Sapa said that a person cannot receive the power of a vision until he/she had performed that vision for the people; this manifestation of a collective vision for healing and renewal is thus activated by every moment of my own performance, process and practice of dance. I and Dancing Earth dedicate ourselves to this purpose, as is said in the Hopi prophecy: “We are the ones we have been waiting for.” With humble respect, I offer love and gratitude for the honor of being able to revitalize and expand the circle in any way that I can, through my movements, vision, concepts, words, breath . . .*

## Dancing Earth: Seeds Roots Plants and Foods, from Origi Nation to Re-Generation

When Dancing Earth is invited across Native country, the invitation is often not to be inside a theater or studio, but onto land.

At Noli High School on the Soboba reservation near Riverside, California, I am greeted by Cahuilla/Serrano cultural leader, ceremonial Singer and Bird Singer, and reviver of Cahuilla coyote dances Kim Marcus. He shows me a garden of cacti that serve as food, shelter, basket materials—all that is needed for life. He quietly says: at one time they didn’t need to have gardens, they could just find these things out on the land. But, the land gets reduced, the plants get endangered, and gardens are the response to those aspects of colonization, to create places to care for these plant relatives and retain the knowledge of all that they carry.

On the Pacific coast, we dance on Pomo territory now known as Sonoma County, in a backyard of tree carvings where canoe knowledge is being recovered by Pomo and Pilipino, who describe themselves as being connected by water, not separated by land.

In the Bay Area, under an oak tree, a tattooed woman named Sage shows a map, and describes how peoples could be named for their principal food sourcing: here is the line for where the acorn people end and the salmon people begin; here are the areas of the people of corn, here the people of buffalo.

At Ayaandagon art gallery on a small island up north, we canoe into a performance to embody a creation theme of “where we came ashore.”

Nearby, I learn that Anishnaabeg have Gitigaan gardens with names like “spots on a fawn’s back” (like the stars, like “your face”—freckled !). They grow from seeds randomly thrown to give the impression of looking natural, untouched by humans, to show respect for the beauty of things as they are found.

This is how I have been led to this multiyear exploration of seeds, roots, plants, and food. My annual work with Native Wellness Institute reminds me that this work, and the remembering of ancestral food cultivation and gathering practices, has immediate practical crucial application for Native youth: to inspire good health through movement, to combat health and food insecurity. Sometimes I call this “remembering the future” —my way of articulating a once prevalent Native consciousness described by quantum physics as a ‘burrito’ of time that rolls past, present and future into a continuous interactive continuum.

The rehearsal process begins where these gifts were given: outdoors, where for decades I have danced when I haven’t been able to access studio space, finding movement in collaboration with wind, rock, grass, on pavement where weeds sprout between cracks. Sometimes we are chased through parks by authorities demanding license to gather (yes, that still happens). All of this is our “land-dance” practice. I follow the practices of “foragers” in looking with multiple senses. Seeing with eyes, like knowing through thoughts and words, carries an overload of responsibility in the present era. It is often useful to allow the eyes to close and rest and discover how much can come in through other means. Closing the eyes is a deceptively simple way to learn important tools for understanding the world, and is part of many Indigenous “games.”

In our ‘land dance’ practice, we find the tactile response of feet and spine to uneven ground. We find multi-dimensional observation and listening. We find taste, which—like movement—truly brings us into the present moment. We find scent, the partner of breath, constantly transmitting information about the world around in a primal and under-recognized way. We find and follow kinetic portals to understanding, through the five senses and beyond - into the countless unacknowledged senses, some of which may fall within what is called instinct, intuition, and imagination. I acknowledge these as the “I’s” that precede the “I” of me, as the less tangible that channels into the tangible.

This is my dance making: tuning my multi-senses, remembering the future and moving myself out of the way to make room for the great mystery force of creation.

It begins, as all life does, with water.

It begins, as all life does, with exchanged breath.

It begins, as all life does, reaching from deep hidden roots towards the sun and moon and stars as forces of growth.

It begins, as life now does, confronting the very real challenges and struggle against attempted genocide on this land, composting this into rich soil of creativity.



*Photo 1. Rulan Tangen, Sandra Lamouche, and Waawate Fobister in Tangen's Zhishodewe at William Kingfishers's Ayaandagon garden installation, Peterborough Art Gallery for the Odemin Geezis Festival, made possible by Marrie Mumford and Indigenous Performance Initiative.*

We are the seeds of our ancestors. We carry culture like a precious gift, to be shared in the right conditions at the right time, like a seed. What are our roots? What are we cultivating in our lives, what are we nourished by? What are we generating for the future?

It requires a gentle humbleness, to allow the self as dancer, or choreographer, to serve as instrument for embodiment of a theme that resonates as much bigger than self. I often have short creation periods, often working with novice performers. I know the importance of honoring their contributions, of generating confidence and trust in what they have to offer--not only for the dance, but for their lives.

I know that what often comes up may look akin to pantomime.

I know that mime, symmetry and simple repetitions can make dance sophisticates shudder. But I see these as repeated themes in Native life. I always encourage myself to look at how can I decolonize my work process and outcomes, and root ever more deeply in Indigenous values and philosophies—such as prioritizing meaning and message over aesthetic and innovation, symbolism over abstraction. I acknowledge a long vibrant history of sign language, vestiges of which are reflected in the oldest of elders, who are 'hand talkers' speaking as much with their hands as with words.

I recently re-considered the work of DAYSTAR/Rosalie Jones, the matriarch of Native modern dance, which I have experienced as performer and audience, in which she incorporates elements of sign language of pantomime as part of the storytelling of her dance dramas. This storytelling includes multi-point perspectives, with narratives that don't neatly 'make sense' on the first telling.



*Photo 2. Rulan and students, post-workshop at Sherman Indian School, made possible by Jacqueline Shea Murphy and UC Riverside.*

It includes characters that morph, or return to life at surprising moments, and plots that may have elements of bawdiness, spirituality, humor, or pure entertainment – maybe even all at the same time! It is non-formulaic, with embedded secrets to the universe.

This storytelling, and the importance of the ancient practice of sign language/pantomime in it, is Indigenous to me. Sometimes I have to move myself and my ego and preferences out of the way and allow it to be, even if it challenges dance field gatekeepers of taste. Because, even if the dance field dries up and blows away in this era of arts being under-supported to a point of threat, the cultural people will continue, and will remain vital if the stories, songs, languages, foods remain intact.

So why contemporary dance, if the focus is first and foremost to make dances by, with, and for the people? Why not focus on maintaining the traditional dances? Because, as our lives and experiences grow and adapt and regenerate, with resilience and innovative renewal in the most dire of circumstances, our stories and ways of telling them can grow and adapt and regenerate with fundamental values and philosophies staying largely intact.

Sometimes, contemporary embodiment can protect the traditional by allowing that to stay private, while filling in missing links that have occurred through various treacheries of colonization: removal, relocation, adoption, erasure of identities through governmental certifications, silencing of languages in educational system, criminalizing of dances with links to the sacred. There are gaps, yes. The stories that are remembered and interpreted are important, but so too are the ones that had been forgotten, and that emerge from the creative process without a word or thought or plan, but come into being and knowing because of the entity of motion.



In working with dancers, including myself, I use a process called “undoing and remaking.” Others have felt and described this process as decolonization; others as discovering the Indigenous body. I encountered some of it in my journey through illness and recovery with healers, and with visions. First, to Undo: I work with a series of movements which can be assembled in different orders for different outcomes. They all have parallels with practices of shedding, cleansing, releasing, purifying. Attentive to the space we are in and to the bodies there that day, through intuition, I know what to offer when. It takes a while to peel away even one layer, for even a short period of time. In the course of a session, I plan for the undoing to be followed by remaking. Once undone, it is crucial to rebuild anew, with as little imprint as possible of habit, and past trauma, and all of the conceits, impositions, expectations and prejudices that have been placed upon a body and spirit. By believing in ourselves and in the process, by amplifying the known senses to pave the way for the less known, we begin to fill in with Intention, Intuition, Instinct, Imagination.

I like to think of my process as organic. I think of the undoing and remaking states as heightened awareness to the visible and invisible worlds, to the past present and future simultaneously. Often bodies, when lifted for a moment from the fight or flight patterning of constant stresses of modern life, coupled with ancestral traumas, tend to use the words ‘relaxed’ to describe their state, or even “sleepy” —but not tired: sleepy as access to a dream realm and alternate reality; relaxed as the ideal way to respond, rather than to react.

There is a lot of respect given, including by me, to very demanding, exacting, arduous forms of movement training. But in my fourth decade of practice, I have come to be sensitive to the importance of not re-traumatizing bodies who are already living in states of social and ancestral trauma. Thus, allowing my work to be guided by cultural principles that were gently placed inside and around me, I aspire to find what can evolve from using kindness, good words, encouragement, support. I may not have been able to always maintain these ideals, but I try my best. While my mentors

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*Photo 3. Dancing Earth with students of Ronan School District, Montana. Photographer: Paulo Tavares for Dancing Earth.*





*Photo 4. Dancing Earth Summer Institute students, land dance in arroyo, Santa Fe.*

have acknowledged this “good way” of doing in my work, I constantly strive and fall short and pick myself up to keep striving until it becomes reality.

That is some of the WHAT and WHY.

HOW: with seed exchanges, planting, and potluck feasts.

WHEN AND WHERE: throughout four seasons in canyons, galleries, hallways, museum staircases, arroyos, farmers markets, parking lots, on steps of capitol buildings, in activist activations to protect water and bees.

WHO: with elders coming to rehearsal to give words and gestures, with environmental sustainability majors and farmers becoming dancers, with beekeepers who are filmmakers, and activists who are muralists, with participants falling in love and pollenating!

GUIDED BY: local, regional, continental, global Indigenous culture carriers who have charged Dancing Earth to create dancework that cultivates relationship with water, with earth, with all living beings.

This is how I find Indigenous dance: not only to live to dance, but to dance so that all may live. And decay and die and compost and renew and recreate and live again.