

## Editor's Note: Doing Indigenous Dance Today

*To Michael Tsosie, with love*

### A Welcome to This Special Issue

To even begin to talk about “Indigenous Dance Today” trips the tongue before the mouth opens. What is Indigenous,<sup>1</sup> and how do we discuss it (whatever it is) in attentive awareness to complex and ongoing histories of location and dislocation, of seizing and selling, of invisibilization and incorporation, of trashing and taking, of treaties and translations and no treaties and no translations, of desire and disdain? What kinds of “Indigenous dance,” and where? When is “today,” and how is what’s happening “today” in relation to “Indigenous” histories (in which colonizing violence first constituted “Indigenous” in the first place<sup>2</sup>) and futurities? These are all old and new questions, in constant shift. Who is asking, and who is answering? Who is listening to the questions and answers, and who is not? How to begin, and to continue, without shutting up or shutting down?

This journal issue has been taking shape over the past two years, in dance studios and board meetings and airports, around conference tables and coffee tables and dinner tables, on walks through gardens and up mountains in the Riverside region, in conversations and back-and-forths over email and Skype and phone. It is a delight to present it, and with its multiple voices and various kinds of contributions, to the field of dance studies.

I have been working in the field of Indigenous dance studies for nearly two decades now, first focusing on the history of Indigenous dance in relation to modern dance history (Shea Murphy, 2007), and then for the past decade focusing an academic lens more intently on choreography being created and staged by Indigenous choreographers. That work is clearly ongoing. Along the way, I have seen the need for more scholarship, particularly by Indigenous scholars, on the topic of “Indigenous dance.” That need is what sparked this issue. It was also sparked by a desire to support a focus on Indigenous dance as vibrantly alive today—not lost (despite narratives of loss), not absent (despite narratives of erasure), not colonized (despite narratives of colonization), but moving through, with, and beyond these narratives and also activating in layers outside of them: to cite Karyn Recollet, “jumping scale” out of them into other realms (and you’ll have to read her essay, “Gesturing Futurities: ‘Jumping Scale’ through the Remix,” herein, to find out more about what “jumping scale” can mean). So a desire to focus on Indigenous dance “today,” not (only) as something that happened in the past (with the recognition that “today” and “the past,” and notions of time in them, have their own reverberations: as Tanya Lukin Linklater writes in her Statement in this issue, “time can operate simultaneously in Indigenous ways of being—that past, present and future operate simultaneously”), propelled the issue as well. As one of my favorite writers, Leslie Marmon Silko (who seems to appear every time I sit down to say something about this all), writes, “That is the way it was back then, because it is the same even now.”<sup>3</sup>

## **“We intertwine our activities with each other, with the land”**

This issue had (one of) its beginnings in relation to the 2013 CORD/SDHS conference held in Riverside, California, where several of the contributors presented together on a panel, and where I proposed the idea of this Special Issue to the DRJ Editorial Board. In the years since, conversations that took shape at that conference (and elsewhere) have continued, shifted, broadened, focused and changed. Part of the process for growing this issue involved many of the contributors spending a day presenting and discussing drafts of their writing in Riverside, where they had come to gather for the 2015 Indigenous Choreographers in Riverside (ICR) Project. That and previous ICR gatherings—with all their energies, complexities, tensions and negotiations, their meals and outings—infuse this Special Issue. Intertwined with our relationships to one other, and in what we are doing, dancing, and writing about, are what Daystar/Rosalie Jones notes to be four core teachings of the Anishinaabe Medicine Wheel given to her by elder Edna Manitowabi: “respect, relationship, responsibility and reciprocity.” Discussions around these all arose in the conversations we had and the time and space we negotiated together at those gatherings.

These approaches also infuse the contributions here. As Lukin Linklater writes, she sees her role as an artist as “embodying or activating a relational process. I am in relation to the dancer. We are in relation to the text. We are in relation to the ideas,” noting how “all of these relationships, to space, to object, to people, become a part of the process.” As Emily Johnson writes in describing her work, “We intertwine our activities with each other, with the land.” Jack Gray writes about how, “Looking now at my practice, I can say that my research is continually about the same things. Manaakitanga - the artful practice of relational making.” Relationship, respect, responsibility and reciprocity are likewise central to the collaborations discussed in the essays by Sam Mitchell and Julie Burelle, and by Miquel Dangeli, which both address the making of a dance piece that came about through responsible, reciprocal, respectful relationship-building, including those between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. In “*Dee(a)r Spine: Dance, Dramaturgy, and the Repatriation of Indigenous Memory*,” Mitchell and Burelle interweave a narrative together about ways they each approached the making of a dance work – as choreographer and dramaturge, respectively—in relation to Mitchell’s Indigenous background and to the histories of violence, separation, and to the dispossession of Kumeyaay land (and ancient remains) under the University of California, San Diego campus where the piece was staged. In “Dancing Chiaux, Dancing Sovereignty: Performing Protocol in Unceded Territories,” Dangeli discusses the relationship built, over time, between Vancouver-based Aeriosa dance company director Julia Taffe and Squamish Nation dance leader S7aplek, as well as the ongoing and challenging negotiations they each engaged (and/or refused) with the Vancouver parks commission around performing in Stanley Park. It serves as testimony, as well, to the relationships built, over time, between Dangeli and both Taffe and S7aplek, though which Dangeli earned permission to write about the work. These, and the other pieces in this issue, foreground what Dangeli foregrounds as “response-ability”—the ability to attend and respond responsibly to what is getting stirred up, be it the directing of positive, strengthening and affirming possibilities, or the handling of sticky, uncomfortable, tense situations resulting from conflicting understandings.<sup>4</sup>

This Special Issue’s other writers also enact the respect, response-ability, and reciprocity required to sustain relationships, not only in the dance work they discuss, including their own, but also in and through the writing and editing of these pieces for this dance studies audience. Gray introduces his statement, in accordance with Māori protocol, such that the respectful placing-into-connection of oneself with one’s ancestors and land comes first, before one’s individual name. Marrie Mumford, revising her reflections on producing dance at (and in relation to) the Nozhem First People’s Performance Space at Trent University in Peterborough, Canada, weaves in recognition of the many contributors to the project she discusses—and adds in a history of her connection to me and to the Indigenous dance production work I’ve done, recognizing and affirming the particular context of this Special Issue, the way one would recognize, affirm and place oneself in relation to the

particular context and location of a dance. Neil MacLean's reflections on more than a decade of work in support of Ohlone dance in the San Francisco Bay Area are infused not only with his own histories and layered perspectives, but also with the conversations that writing this piece required and enabled: the hours of travel and in-person sharing and listening, the careful re-working in response-able connection to (and with the permission of) those whose stories he includes. Tria Blu Wakpa's essay "Culture Creators and Interconnected Individualism: Rulan Tangen and Anne Pesata's Basket Weaving Dance" likewise both discusses the layers of connection the basket weaving dance's choreography "remaps" and acknowledges—across generations, in relation to place—and also itself names and enacts a scholarly protocol based in reciprocity (listening, sharing her research and writing, listening, responding) that recognizes, respects, and acknowledges the layers of connection Andrews has to Pesata, to Tangen, and to the scholarship she cites.

## **"Granting Permissions": Tensions, Refusals, Response-Able Practices**

These approaches of respect, responsibility, relationship and reciprocity—and, where appropriate or necessary, of refusal—however, are not just ways of *responding* to the Indigenous Dance discussed in this issue today. Nor are they just practices appropriate for scholarly engagement with Indigenous dance (though they are both of those as well). These approaches, I underscore, are also infused *within* and intricately part of the Indigenous dance that propels this issue, and what its circulations put out into the world. It is not (just), in other words, that these practices of respect and responsibility, etc., are useful tools for approaching the dancing discussed (and not-discussed) in this issue. Indigenous dance today—and the negotiations it requires and enables—has also *brought out* these response-able practices, which are deeply ingrained aspects of the dancing itself. As such, they are (or can be) what it elicits. For example, over the past several years, the Indigenous Choreographers at Riverside project has included events and performances by many different Indigenous dance artists, both in UCR dance department studio spaces, the UCR library Special Collections, and at the Culver Center of the Arts in downtown Riverside. The UCR staff helping create and produce these events has been phenomenally generous and open-hearted in their support of them. The Indigenous dance artists have been phenomenally generous and open-hearted in their energies and offerings. Perhaps inevitably, there have also been disconnects around meaning, value and purpose between institutional expectations and requirements, and what the dancing and dance events have sometimes required. Some of these disconnects have come from differing world-views and understandings about what a dance performance is and enacts. As ICR participant Shannon Wray explains, where a non-Indigenous audience may see "entertainment" that starts when the lights go up, in many Indigenous performers' and choreographers' perspectives, "The dances are living response, creation and activation, rather than a consumable production that is essentially discarded when the lights go down."<sup>5</sup> This extends to the handling of what is seen as "materials" or "objects" included in performances—which might, from one perspective, be discarded after having been seen as fulfilling the purpose assigned to them as merely "decoration"—and from another, be understood as living representation of the sacred and to have further ceremonial purpose. It extends as well to the protocol required for things to happen—from institutional and insurance paperwork to ancestral acknowledgment, acknowledgment of place, as well as (to cite María Regina Firmino Castillo's essay, "Dancing the Pluriverse: Contemporary Indigenous Performance as Contestatory Ontological Praxis") acknowledgement of relation within a "telluric" "pluriverse" that includes not only other humans but also "earth others," an understanding underscored by other contributors as well. (Mumford writes, "The Nishnaabeg people consider water to be our relative;" Blu Wakpa describes a reciprocity with non-human entities (animals, plants, and the land) that "transcends human-to-human relationships."<sup>6</sup>) Tensions around these differences, have, from both directions, over years, been leading to compelling connections, conversations, and deepening respect and response-ability. For example, after the last ICR in spring 2015, Tyler Stallings, the caretaker of the Culver Center of the Arts—a beautiful exhibition space used for performances—and I discussed some of where the ICR project was leading us both, as non-Indigenous

presenters, into deeper understanding. Rather than just reviewing paperwork and mapping out future planning, we discussed the issues brought up both by the successes and by some of the tensions of the annual ICR dance events, and Stallings articulated what they were compelling him to see the need for. These included: cultivating the ability to respond in the moment to what is happening, with respect and attention; cultivating a practice of mental calmness and receptivity, and creating production structures that could give more focus and time to responding when things arise that aren't expected or understood; learning more, and gaining awareness about some of what is going on—for example, this year, about the importance of the cedar that was brought into the gallery space; shifting thinking to one where curators and organizers are guests on Indigenous land, as opposed to Indigenous artists being guests in our space; deepening understandings around the issues with institutions granting “permissions” for Indigenous practices (particularly those connected to ceremony) (and how ingrained in settler colonial practices that act of “granting permissions” for Indigenous practices is) (an issue Dangeli also addresses in her essay in this issue); thinking more about how to address this differently—such as cultivating a stronger practice for negotiating possibility, so that if something comes up that needs to happen (i.e. the cedar), there is a practice for discussing and working together to find a way so that it *can* happen, rather than just adhering to the institution imposing a rule that says it can't; accepting “the many important reflections in the gift that the cedar tree gave us with its sacrifice,” as Wray, who offered it at the 2015 ICR, emailed afterwards— and about how our reflections, here, are part of this<sup>7</sup>. All of this complexity—including the connections, relationships, and joys, as well as the difficulties, challenges, and mistakes and missteps—are part of the Indigenous dance that is discussed in this issue, and of the context of this Special Issue of *DRJ*, today.

## Doing Indigenous Dance Today

The Indigenous dance discussed in this Special Issue interweaves through multiple complex historical, political and rhetorical frameworks surrounding “Indigenous dance today.” The issue's writers—who are dance scholars, practitioners, and organizers—each present a few slivers of perspective and understanding in relation to this topic. The intention is not to pin down and define what “Indigenous Dance Today” is—as if that were possible—but rather to present some understandings of what some Indigenous dancers and dance-makers—and those in relationships of response-ability with them—are today *doing*.<sup>8</sup> The writings in this issue each focus on some of the (many) ways that Indigenous dance is happening today in creative, generative, relation to “Indigenous” histories, teachings, understandings, and futurities. They each also show why and how it matters.

Indigenous Dance Today is, of course, a much larger topic than represented in this journal, which focuses primarily (though not entirely) on dance by Indigenous dance artists/choreographers that is presented to audiences on various kinds of stages, asserting its centrality, in this form, as an active, artistically and politically generative, presence. That is likely because this focus on contemporary stage-dance making has been the focus of my own scholarly work, and thus is central to the relationships I have built—and thus where the most robust response to this issue's (apparently hot) topic came from.<sup>9</sup> Some may ask, as contributor Rulan Tangen does in her Statement about her work with *Dancing Earth: Indigenous Contemporary Dance Creations*, “So why contemporary dance, if the focus is first and foremost to make dances by, with, and for the people?” Tangen herself answers, “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.” She suggests, too, that perhaps “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.” Indeed, the writings in this issue all foreground creative engagement as core to their dance-makings' engagements with Indigenous histories and ways of understanding. Rosy Simas describes how, in *We Wait in the Darkness*, “to develop movement vocabulary for choreography, I have been focused on decolonizing somatic and contemporary dance forms in my body and

those I work with.” DAYSTAR/Jones writes of the ‘dreaming imagination’ she engaged in making *Allegory of the Cranes*, describing how, “upon coming up from deep sleep, the free-reign of imagination allowed images both mythic and real to rise up, roam, move and interact in their own unique way and for their own purposes.” Blu Wakpa describes the dynamic work in embodied praxis of Tangen and Pesata as well as Jack Gray’s “expansive and inclusive understanding of dance” and the “attention, intention, intuition, spirit, story,” that his dance making process involves; she writes of Indigenous choreographers not as “culture bearers,” but as “culture creators.” Firmino Castillo, in her discussion of Ixil Maya dance in Guatemala, likewise narrates a focus on dance creation, not recreation. She writes, “Xhivaska’ and I came to realize that recreating a pre-colonial dance was highly unlikely, yet creating contemporary dance as a way of understanding and embodying Ixil ways of being seemed possible and desirable.” Recollet, in her discussion and visioning of Indigenous futurity, focuses on how Indigenous movements today—including her own jogging through the Anishinaabe & Huron—Wendat Indigenous territories known sometimes as Toronto, as well as gestures in Skookum Sound System’s digital remixed video *Ay I Oh Stomp* (which fuses two Kwakwaka’wakw paddlers and dancers sampled from ethnologist and photographer Edward Curtis’ 1914 film *In the Land of the Headhunters* with video featuring popper Julious iGlide Chisolm)—activate/tag space as a decolonial (re)mapping. “Remapping creates a situation where settler colonialism is no longer relevant, nor determinative of Indigenous futurities,” she writes, arguing for ways “we can look to the remix for models for social change, as the mechanics of the remix suggest alternative maps into where and how we can be in the future.” The focus of the Indigenous dance artists and dance scholars in this issue, in other words, is not the replication of some past dance, but the activation and expression and embodiment, today, in various movements and formats and skills, of Indigenous understandings that remap the future. This activation and (re)mapping—discussion of which circulates throughout these writings, including those by Recollet, Mitchell and Burelle, Blue Wakpa, and Mumford—is deeply collective. Firmino writes, “Our collaborative experimentation suggests that dance can regenerate ancestral understandings of the subject and its ontological relationships with a specific place through engagement with Indigenous epistemologies and historical memory.” Mumford, in her discussion of “Naadmaagewin . . . The Art of Working Together in Our Communities,” cites Michi Saagiig scholar and writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s words: “We have the power to vision alternative realities . . . [and] the responsibility to collectivize these visions in order to bring those dreams of our ancestors into realities.”

## This Special Issue Proceeds in Four Parts

When the contributors to this issue have come together at conferences, around presentations, in studios, at other gatherings, we have practiced (sometimes more successfully than other times) ways of acknowledging our different genealogies and of integrating diverse protocols into our practices for gathering and for sharing. Within this Special Issue, I have attempted a structuring that, likewise, attends to a deliberate way of opening, sharing, and closing space, and that invites multiple formats of knowledge sharing.

The first part of this Special Issue is this Introduction, welcoming you to this issue as a guest, introducing myself as the host so you can locate my perspective, and acknowledging those who have arrived and contributed. The second section is made up of Statements by six Indigenous dance artists, who each introduce themselves, and then write about their dance making in relation to a recent work they have made. This section, also part of our welcoming into this gathering, is a chance for us all to listen and hear from Indigenous dance artists themselves assert, in their own words, what and how they engage with dance. The third section is comprised of the five peer-reviewed scholarly essays referenced above, each by an Indigenous dance scholar writing and theorizing about Indigenous dance practices today. The final section, also acknowledging this as long term communal practice, provides reflections that address the issues, layers and levels of connection, and possibilities in producing what the rest of this issue is focused on: Indigenous Dance Today. These are by two long-time activist-producers who

have—and are still—giving their all to growing this field and whose contributions offer both inspirational and practical knowledge about doing so. As a group, these contributions focus on dancing that has happened over a wide geographical span, each touching down on particular dance practices and events in particular places, from Nogojiwanong (Peterborough, Canada) to Tamaki Makaurau, Aotearoa (Auckland, New Zealand), Lenapehoking (New York City area) to Yelamu (San Francisco), X<sup>w</sup>way X<sup>w</sup>way (Stanley Park in Vancouver) to Nab'aa' (in Guatemala), from Ogha Po'oge (Santa Fe) to Mut kula xuy / Mut lah hoy ya (La Jolla) and Pachapa (in Riverside).

At this point, as this issue goes to press, I know all of the contributors in this issue. Some I have known for years, and have long-term connections with. Some I have had the pleasure of connecting with through this issue's call and the development of their contributions to it. The relationships we have and have built with one another are part of this issue, and interwoven into it. Many of the contributors cite each other; we clearly are not distant anonymous influences, but are and have been in ongoing dialogue with each other. Many of us talk about the same dance works, reference the same terms and scholarship, and our connections to and recognition of each other and of the work we have been doing is apparent throughout. Rather than worry about how my dance studies colleagues will perceive this from an academic perspective, I have come to appreciate these interconnections, citations, attentions, recognitions and acknowledgments, including the responses, comments, cautions and corrections we have given one another along the way, and the way this scholarship is emerging in relationship—as integral to what this Special Issue is in fact about. The volume, in many ways, is not (just) about individually-authored works, but also about the greater connections and relationships that we all engage with and depend upon to stay grounded and supported—as well as to jump off from. The importance of connections and relationships, as I have seen them enacted in this issue as well as in the dancing I've been following for many years, *is* at the core of what “Indigenous Dance Today” is about.

Thank you to all of those who have made this issue possible: Michael Tsoie, who has been part of this project all along, whose insights infuse it, whose bright and beautiful light left us too soon in the midst of it, and to whom it is dedicated; the support of the *DRJ* board and especially *DRJ*'s editor Mark Franko; the many colleagues of mine who have made the production of Indigenous Dance Today possible at UCR, including Tyler Stallings, Josh Gonzalez, Wendy Rogers, Stephen Cullenberg, Cliff Trafzer, and Michelle Raheja; all those who have contributed so much to the ICR project, with special thanks to Jack Gray, Rulan Tangen, and Shannon Wray; the peer reviewers who offered such careful and thoughtful responses to the essays; Eva Lopez, for production support; the Indigenous dance artists and scholars who are not in this issue, but whose work is deeply enriching this field; and my family and friends. Most of all, thank you to this issue's contributors for the ongoing negotiations, revisions, and inspirations of their work and of all it is activating.

Welcome again to this gathering, we appreciate your presence here.

Jacqueline Shea Murphy  
Guest Editor

## Notes

1. Throughout this Special Issue, we capitalize the word “Indigenous,” based on teachings from Marrie Mumford, who many years ago explained the importance of doing so in any grammatical instance where “European” would be likewise capitalized. Graham and Penny adopt this practice as well, noting its use by the human rights organization Cultural Survival, and explaining that “such capitalization accords these terms dignity and recognition as collective proper nouns or derived forms” (Graham and Penny, 18). Similarly, and also with thanks to Mumford for the teaching, we do NOT italicize words written in Indigenous languages, as doing so would put forward the



English as the standard language and the Anishinaabemowin, Māori, or other Indigenous language as “foreign,” which is inaccurate to the territories under discussion.

2. Pratt (2007) writes, “social groups become indigenous or aboriginal or native by virtue of the recognition that someone else arrived in a place and found them or their ancestors ‘already’ there. Ironies abound here” (398).

3. Silko (1981, 94). A number of scholars have discussed understandings of time that articulate outside of past, present and future. For example, in this issue, Rosy Simas describes her dance-making process as, “Unfurled in the present, this organic movement expresses the past. The dance is reflection and responsive action in the same moments.” Karyn Recollet discusses the “on-going Indigenous presencing into futurity” in her discussion of Skookum Sound System’s digital remixed video *Ay I Oh Stomp*. Marrie Mumford’s discussion of work coming out of Trent University’s Indigenous Performance Initiatives cites a collaborator, William Kingfisher, who notes how “During the performance, the landscape has become a place for the unity of the people, the environment, the past and the present.” For another example in Indigenous dance scholarship, see Bradshaw (2015), who writes, “Regarding ‘time,’ I prefer to work in continuum and concepts like traditional, contemporary and futuristic do not sit comfortably with me” (77).

4. In her use of the term “response-ability,” Dangeli is drawing from Manning (2009), 158–59.

5. Shannon Wray, personal email communication, November 30, 2015.

6. For additional discussion of this in an Indigenous dance context, see Teaiwa (2008). Teaiwa focuses on relationships not only with land—or with a “terrestrially-centric view”—but with “the vast body of water that constitutes Oceania,” noting how “Relations with water are flexible, pragmatic and reverential” (117).

7. Shannon Wray, personal email communication, May 7, 2015.

8. This focus on “doing” is inspired by Lyons (2010), who argues for defining Indigenous identity as “something Indian people do, not what they are,” noting, “so the real question is, what should we do?” (40).

9. There has been an exciting bustle of publication on Indigenous performance of late, including Graham and Penny (2014), especially Hokowhitu (2014), and the recent *Theatre Journal* special issue on “Trans-Indigenous Performance,” which also includes powerful work on Indigenous dance: see especially Swain (2015) and Shaka (2015). Swain discusses several performance practices engaged by choreographers in the Intercultural Indigenous Choreographic Laboratories that the company she co-directs, Marrugeku, have been involved with. These include two approaches brought in by Serge Aime Coulibaly from Burkina Faso, West Africa: a “memory of tradition” improvisational methodology; and a task-based approach (which she argues “could be seen as having its lineage in Pina Bausch’s Tanztheater and morphing through the Flemish Wave into the work of les ballets C de la B”, where Coulibaly danced) that “stems from dancers devising their own performance material in response to tasks given by the director and choreographer” and which “draws on the dancers’ own memories, embodiment, and family stories.” Swain argues that this approach “takes on specific functions when applied in an Indigenous and intercultural dance environment” (506). She notes as well the Wakahuia process introduced by Maori performance artist Charles Koroneho, which asks “participants to introduce themselves with a presentation of a personal performative treasure box of objects or elements of performance” (509). See also Shea Murphy and Gray (2013), as well as recent online writing about work by the dance artists included here, such as these discussions of Re-Generation by Dancing Earth/Rulan Tangen: <http://writtenwordspokenword.blogspot.de/2015/08/dancing-earths-desert-journey-to-planet.html>; Mitimiti by Atamira/Jack Gray <http://www.theatreview.org.nz/reviews/review.php?id=8537>.

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