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# The We In Me: Exploring the Interconnection of Indigenous Dance, Identity and Spirituality

Sara Moncada

*Dominican University of California*

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**The We In Me:**  
**Exploring the Interconnection of Indigenous Dance, Identity and Spirituality**  
by  
Sara Moncada

A culminating capstone project submitted to the faculty of  
Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the department chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies, Religion, Philosophy, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of the Bachelor of Arts in Humanities and Cultural Studies. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

Sara Moncada  
Candidate

12/11/16

Chase Clow, Ph.D.  
Department Chair

12/11/16

Gay Lynch, Ph.D.  
Thesis Advisor

12/11/16

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## Abstract

An extensive amount of scholarship exists today on Native American and Indigenous people within the realm of music and dance ethnography. Over the centuries research and observations have used these stunning and profound creative expressions as a means by which to document and theorize about the people, their histories, traditions, and ways of being. However, a tremendous amount of this scholarship is developed from specific forms and styles of expression, resulting in a kind of separation that arises from examining an individual dance or song tradition as a stand-alone inquiry. By dislocating individual forms from the overarching whole, we limit our scope and the ability to understand dance as more than sharing stories or recounting history. In this paper we will attempt to experience these traditions through the more holistic scope of lived experience, as a means for considering a larger narrative of dance in Native life. We will explore the intrinsic role of dance as it relates to spiritual expression and cultural identity, as a vehicle for cultural revitalization, and as a place for discourse and transformation – dance as life.

## Clarification of Terms

For the sake of clarity, throughout this paper I will use the following terms interchangeably to describe the people: Indian, American Indian, Native American, Native, and Indigenous. Tribe and Nation will also be used interchangeably. While each term has been used over the centuries to categorize and describe the first peoples of North America for various purposes and also in relationship to changing eras, it should be noted that these descriptors are all in a language foreign to the indigenous groups they are attempting to describe. They are descriptors that cannot honor the immense diversity of the currently 562 federally recognized (United States) tribes that contain over 50 distinct language families, cultural traditions and worldviews.

*For my daughter... dance with all of your being...*



*"When I am dancing, I am being, I am creating, I am giving, I am connecting.*

*I have come into every dimension of life.*

*I dance to the heartbeat of the drum, of the earth, of us all –*

*and in deep reverence I dance for my ancestors,*

*for those who cannot dance any longer,*

*for the community and*

*for the children who will dance our stories into the future."*

*~ Eddie Madril, Pascua Yaqui*

Around the world, song and dance are deeply embedded within the culture and lifeways of Indigenous peoples. From the Maori Haka in New Zealand, to the Mongolian Biyelgee, and the myriad traditions of the Indigenous peoples of North, Central and South America - song and dance are integral parts of Indigenous life around the globe. There are songs and dances for every occasion that reflect beyond the beauty of the presentation itself, holding the knowledge of social custom, spirituality, histories, celebration, and healing. Song and dance hold within their forms and movements the stories of the people, the creation of the worlds and the relationships that are expressed within the interconnectedness of all life.

To be a singer and a dancer means to recognize one's role as a knowledge holder - a sacred storyteller - holding within the song and movement the patterns of how life works and reflecting back to the community what it means to stand amongst the people, relate to the natural world, and traverse life's journey. For Indigenous people,

dance becomes more than expressing emotion or recounting history; it is itself a form of knowledge and being, a place for voice, discourse and transformation.

For as many Indigenous and Native tribal groups that exist around the world, there are similarly thousands of forms of ritual and expression that reflect the amazing diversity of cultures and the complex relationships each group has to song and dance. In acknowledging the power and beauty that lie within each of these rich traditions, I recognize the Herculean task that lies in exploring these relationships on such a large scale. Therefore, for this particular project, we will engage more specifically within the circle of Native American/American Indian dance, cultural identity and spirituality, while holding as truth that Native and Indigenous people the world over share, in equal depth and meaning, similar relationships with music and movement.

There is a kind of separation that can arise as a result of examining an individual dance or song tradition as a stand-alone inquiry. Similar to the difficulty found in trying to put to words something that is experienced internally, there is a space created, a type of void that is brought into being as the shift occurs from one language to another, when dance and song are described rather than lived. In this project, we will attempt to experience these traditions through the more holistic scope of lived experience, as a means for considering a larger narrative of dance in Native life. We will explore the intrinsic role of dance as it relates to spiritual expression and cultural identity within Native peoples, and explore song and dance as a vehicle for cultural revitalization, public education and community healing.



Fig. 3. dancer Marcos Madril

*“The Ghost Dance has never ended,  
it has continued, and the people have never stopped dancing;  
they may call it by other names, but when they dance,  
their hearts are reunited with the spirits of beloved ancestors...”*  
~ Leslie Marmon Silko, Almanac of the Dead

An extensive amount of scholarship on Native American people exists within the realm of music and dance ethnography. Upon the arrival of European settlers, an accompanying wave of study ensued that strived to document and study the practices of the Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Visually stunning and somewhat accessible cultural practices, music and dance observations became a compelling way to document and theorize about the Native population. In so doing, most research and observations focused on tribally specific forms and styles as a means by which “to summarize and categorize the people” (Shorter 173).

It is important to note that these early ethnological studies of Native American peoples and customs were not necessarily conducted by academics, but rather, by government representatives or appointees. In addition to documentation, their purpose was to identify cultural and political ideologies that lay counter to the emerging western structures as a way of identifying the “otherness” of the Native population. “Acquisition of Indian lands was in this way an active, if not always overtly acknowledged aspect of

Indian policy. For example, one effect of implementing these assimilation tactics... removing them from homelands, forbidding them to speak their autochthonous languages... this was the depopulating of Indian land for white settlement” (Murphy 30).

This is vital to understanding the inherent challenges that lay at the foundation of exploring Indigenous dance and music scholarship, as the body of work that was developed from these encounters informs and influences contemporary scholarship today. From approximately 1850 through the 1920’s, these works carry a western socio-political lens through which we experience the dance traditions of the Indigenous populations; the undercurrent of settlement and colonization sets a tone that becomes an almost impermeable barrier to connecting with unbiased analysis of many traditional practices and lifeways. In 1884, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs (CIA) in the *Report of Agents in Indian Territory* notes various opinions on the continuous nature of dance and song: “They make medicine several times during the season, which occupies several months of their valueless time,” the agent writes, “some dance until they drop from sheer exhaustion... their endurance is worthy of a better cause.” (qtd. in Murphy 276). Similarly, Henry Teller, Secretary of the Interior in 1882, conveys an atmosphere of contention within which the aim of abolishing dance rites and customs becomes prevalent in the narrative of documentation. He writes, “I regard as a great hindrance to the civilization of the Indian, viz, the continuance of the old heathenish dances, such as the sun-dance, scalp-dance &c. These feasts or dances are not social gatherings for the amusement of these people, but on the contrary, are intended and calculated to stimulate the warlike passions of the young and tribe” (Murphy 37).

Such a narrative, as noted by Tara Bowner in *Heartbeat of the People*, inhibits the possibility of gleaning deeper understanding of traditional dance and music experiences from these materials. The large amount of documentation that was captured during this time is a valuable and useful archive that contains a strong history of these cultural practices. However, the intrinsic *value* of dance to the community as a whole is lost in the undercurrent of marginalized rhetoric. “It is impossible to escape the legacy” Browner notes, “No matter what the theoretical and racial biases of these researches, their field recordings constitute a legacy that survived almost fifty years of government-sponsored suppression of culture and religion. Their writings, although often useful, constitute a mixed inheritance, part factual blessing and part theoretical curse” (4).

*“Each one of us carries the love of thousands,  
those who stand behind us, our ancestors who guide us in their hearts  
and carry us into our future...”*

*~ Rowen White, Mohawk*

To write about the complex role of song and dance in the Indigenous worldview is, in part, to try to put into words something that cannot be easily defined. In particular, there are many ways of approaching the realm of dance: as a language of movement, as

storytelling, and as individual explorations of creative expression. Within each of these descriptions lies a world of truth in the creative arts; however within the context of Native American culture, dance carries within it something more firmly rooted in our human nature - dance is an awareness of being, it is life.

As human beings we are moved to express ourselves in physical movement, in response to both our inner and outer worlds and dance becomes a reflection of our existence in time and space. "In the performance of such bodily movements, transformation happens. Healing happens. Prayers are answered. Fears calmed. Spirits appeased. Insights revealed. Conflicts resolved. In short, rituals appear to those who perform them as necessary for life..." (LaMothe 156). Dance is a unique aspect of cultural life as expressed in ceremony, ritual, and celebration that is passed down from one generation to another in Native tradition. To dance is to carry more than a love of movement and self-expression; it is to be knowledgeable about the stories of creation, of ancestral heroes, and the interconnection of the people – in other words, dancers are knowledge holders of language, culture and tradition.

Within Native worldviews, dance becomes an avenue through which we explore our concepts of story, history, and the natural world. The dance work carries a substantial role within the living tradition as an exploration of our essence, expanding and contracting. As Jacqueline Shea Murphy describes, dance work "investigates our ways of living, familial and tribal connections, processes, dedication and intentions with which the dance is made" and presented (7).

The dance becomes the embodiment of life that is not disconnected from day-to-day living practices. Dance, at its core, shares. The dancer becomes a storyteller, holding within the fluctuations of movement - shifts in the head, eyes, hands and steps - the interwoven dynamic of the people and the natural world within which the people live. Among these lifeways, dance becomes a delivery of living customs and native science; it transmits collective knowledge, where to plant and harvest, how to properly honor the life of an animal that has given itself to sustain the people, the perils of misconduct, the language of the landscape, stories of how the river runs in each season, and relationships to celestial navigation. Dance is embedded in every stage of life - from birth, to child, to adolescence, to adult, to elder and death – and in its ritual of celebration in conjunction with ceremony, dance can be seen as an expression of life. This awareness of dance at the heart of traditional life permeates every aspect of the community, as it is rooted in the beginnings of the people.

As a culture, the Native world is classified amongst scholars as oral-based societies, those who have relied on the oral transmission of histories, stories, and other knowledge to sustain cultures and identities and maintain a historical record of communities. Within some of the oldest oral traditions we begin to see the emergence of dance movement in connecting the people to the very beginnings of life.

One example of this may be found in the oral histories of the Ojibwe Nation, originally from the Great Lakes Region of North America. The following excerpt is from an origin story shared by an Anishnaabeg man, describing in his voice how dance came to be found at the beginnings of first human life:



To explain [that] dance, you have to go back to the beginning of time of the Anishnaabeg people. Our elders teach us that when the Creator made the universe, after he made Mother Earth and after he made all things here – all these living things – they tell us that he wanted someone here on this Mother Earth to live in harmony with these things he created, to take care of them in a good way. And that is when they say that he created the Anishnaabeg man and lowered him down onto this Mother Earth... We call ourselves Anishnaabeg. And that means the first people lowered onto this Mother Earth. And as he was being lowered he could see the beauty in where he was going. He could see the forests and the rivers and the valleys. All these things he was seeing for the first time. And as he got closer to this Mother Earth he could see the animals running in the woods. He could see the birds flying in the air, fish swimming in the water, and could see all the beautiful plants. And all these things he was seeing for the first time was things he was going to take care of. And his first steps on this Mother Earth – very first steps – were soft and gentle. So soft that he did not offend... so he walked gently and that is the way that traditional men dance today and traditional women. They dance in that way.... When Anishnaabeg first came down the living things made a promise that they would take care of us. They told the Creator they would give us food to eat, clothes to wear, things to make our homes with. And we still keep that promise that we made to the Creator thousands of years ago, to care [for them in return]... When we dance, we dance in buckskins. Our bustles are made of eagle feathers, and our ropes are made of horsehair. We come together. (Browner 123-124)

In *Keepers of the Earth*, Janette Armstrong also discusses Okanagan life in a similar manner, as an experience of deep acknowledgment of our interconnectedness to the natural world. “The Okanagan teaches that we are tiny and unknowledgeable in our

individual selves; it is the whole-Earth part of us that contains immense knowledge” (6).

The Okanagan reflects a human being’s place in creation; reminds the people that disconnection creates discord. This experience of meaning, wholeness, and interconnectedness beyond self is a relationship found at the center of Native spiritual expression.

The role of the dancer in the expression of these profound relationships is essential to the health of the community. Dancers become cultural bearers of that connection to creation and reflect back to the community the embodiment of the relationship with the whole. The interweaving of these relationships is an acknowledgement of the diversity of life beyond the individual human experience and the dance becomes a powerful reminder of that connection in every ritual of prayer or celebration. The deep-seated nature of dance to connect to life, land and people, is held in the strength to examine and express those interconnections, as life itself is reflected in the act of dancing. By its very nature, dance is an act of creation, and, as such, is also an act of togetherness.



Fig. 1 Dancer Eddie Madril

*“I dance for family, for prayer, and for keeping some indigenous culture alive in an ever-changing world. I dance as a way of being - and carrying cultural pride.”*  
~ Marcos Madril, Pascua Yaqui

In order to explore the interconnection of Indigenous dance, identity and spirituality, we must ask, at the beginning, what does it mean to be Native American? To be Native American in the United States today has implications beyond culture and race, as it has both an external society relationship and an internal community relationship. From one perspective, being Native American can mean government support, financial support from tribal affiliations, access to land rights, access to free healthcare benefits, and access to education funds. From another viewpoint, being Native American today can also mean current education dropout rates of twice the national average linked directly to suicide rates among Native youth, disproportionately high rates of alcohol and substance abuse, mental health issues, diabetes and obesity. According to a recent US Census Report, more Native American families (15.9%, more than double the next racial group at 7%) live below the federal poverty line and have the lowest median earnings compared to the national average (US Census, 2012). This dichotomous experience of external Native identity, with its perceived benefits and its realities, exist on a large scale within the Native community and creates a kind of western societal pressure to definitively define *Native American* or *Indian*. These more contemporary

outside pressures layer on top of other aspects of the identity issue, such as connections to ancestry, cultural tradition, and cultural expression.

Identity asks the questions, “Who am I?” and “Who would I like to be?” This drives individuals to deeply investigate themselves through a review of self in relationship to internal and external experiences. As noted by Andrew Jolivet and Sara Sutler-Cohen, the notion of self “becomes vital and is inherently connected to the imagination, to interpretation, to experience and to expression – all of which is constantly shifting” (133). For many, the quest to self begins with cultural identity, asking “Who am I?” in relationship to my family, my ancestors and my culture.

Currently, the arguments of defining American Indian identity center on this complicated question – does identity originate from genetics or affiliation? In the case of Indian identity, is it static (traditional) or can it change (contemporary)? Historically, American Indians and non-Indians alike have defined Indian identity through various aspects of culture, law, and biology and, while the three overlap in specific ways, more significantly, all have ties to outdated nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theories of race (Archuleta 1). In other words, genetics becomes, on paper, the identifying factor. What this means is that the common thread in the current official record of external identification of “Native American” does not take into consideration people’s lived experiences, how they see themselves and how they carry their culture forward.

“I didn’t know,” Eddie Madril, Pascua Yaqui and dancer, reflects in his personal essay “Being Indian for the First Time”. “The truth is, I didn’t know what it meant to be an Indian at that young age. Was I supposed to do something? Act a certain way? Dress

a certain look? In the end, it didn't matter. I was an Indian. That made me special, and I was a dancer, that made my connection to the Native community a serious life commitment to myself and my culture."

As Native American culture and life moves forward in time, dance remains a way by which Native people connect to the living traditions of their heritage, grounding them in a certain respect of their native identity. Rulan Tangen (Métis) is a dancer, choreographer and founder of the Dancing Earth Dance Company. Her work values movement as an expression of indigenous worldviews and dance as a sacred ritual for transformation and healing. She describes dance as an energetic connection with all forms of life and holds the belief that, "to dance is to live, to live is to dance." In *Intertribal Native American Music in the United States: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*, written by native singer, educator and author John-Carlos Perea (Mescalero Apache), Tangen shares her reflections on dance, identity, community and tradition:

I initially wanted to dance fancy shawl [in powwow], as a showcase for my physicality and technical skill that I had grown through my years of dance training, but my grandmother Geraldine declared that I had too much of that crazy contemporary influence in my life, and wanted me to dance in the most ancient form of women's traditional dance. So, with characteristic determination I set myself to learn as much as I could by watching, asking, and dancing, dancing, dancing. She watched me practice the simple traditional women's step, the upright elegant posture and gentle pulse of the knees, with delicate variations of side steps, walking steps, and lifting of fan. I was learning to move with less effort, but evolving connection to the meaning. Although I had initially wanted to do a more physically expressive dance, I eventually found that the repetitive rhythm of the traditional women's step revealed to me the essence of

all movement, the heartbeat of the earth, the counter force up when you are down and down when you are up. It was a groundedness down into the core of the earth balanced with upper body poised as if hanging from a star in the sky, with quiet spiraling nuances all emanating from the central power of the spine.

There are many variations of women's traditional dance, as many as there are clans, bands, tribes, First Nations, and dream visioners. It is for each woman's personal connection with the living traditions of her culture. The materials of current life, such as cloth, beads, metals - are integrated as relevant to the ongoing manifestation of culture, which stays vital and evolving... Each vision should be witnessed with respect, as a beautiful embodiment of each woman's relationship with her culture, in that moment of time and place. I feel that dancers should be mindful of this respect for themselves, in how they carry themselves during the these times, when they are representing their ancestors. Even powwows, which are essentially intertribal socials, are a time to remember how to behave in relationship with each other, using words and thoughts in a kind and positive way, and behaving in reciprocity, from a foundation of respect for self-determination and sovereignty. (qtd. in Perea 123-124)

Through their journeys of self and cultural identity, Madril and Tangen experience dance as a profound link to "being" native and what it means to be in an ever-changing world of cultural shifts and modernization. Dance connects them back to traditional practices that are vital expressions of identity and spirituality. Within their reflections is a deep awareness of the role of a dancer within the community; as well as dance as an integral part of both cultural expression and cultural preservation. Removing dance from indigenous community would be to remove the heart of the people. Within these lived experiences, dance is more than the individual rituals that

include coming of age ceremonies, sun dances, harvest songs, prayers and community celebrations – dance is the living heart of the people. It is life work.



Fig. 2 dancer Anecita Hernandez



*“I dance for those that have dreamt of a healthy future  
for their children and grandchildren. I dance for my ancestors and  
those that have fought for all the blessings that we are able to enjoy  
as we move forward in our journey as caretakers of the water and land.  
I dance to maintain harmony in my heart and mind.”*  
~ Anecita Hernandez, Diné (Navajo)

As Native American dance has evolved through history, it has shifted and reshaped its expressions in relation to the shifting and reshaping of cultural life. Yet through its transformations, dance remains a central pillar in both individual and community connections to the health and sustainability of the people. From traditional life to contemporary times dance fosters relationships, protection and restoration of traditional knowledge, celebration and prayer. As dance weaves in and out of traditional practices - through changing lands and reservations into urban settings and contemporary culture - it continues to reflect the people’s interconnections in life.

In addition to family and tribal affiliations, there exists a larger national Native community identity, which harnesses another layer of indigenous connection and togetherness. The importance of cultural arts traditions in the protection and revitalization of indigenous knowledge and lifeways, is reflected in the ability of dance to empower individuals and communities in the direct application of their traditional knowledge. As knowledge holders, dancers embody that knowledge and share it with the larger community, creating connection. A profound example of this is the powwow.

Powwows came about during a time in Native American history when, among other things, many Native people were dispersed or forcibly moved away from their traditional lands, tribes and communities. In 1952, the Urban Relocation Program moved large groups of Native peoples, from various tribal backgrounds, from their homelands to seven major cities across the United States. The result was that many suddenly found themselves alone in large densely populated urban environments. In an effort to find stability and community in these situations, Native people came together in gatherings, similar in style to those long-held gatherings back home, to connect with culture and traditions. These gatherings centered around the vital expressions of song and dance and became a way for the Native community to connect and heal.

Powwows, by nature, are not tribally specific; rather they are a coming together of Native people in a larger context of indigenous identity and connection. Since their rise in popularity, powwows have been surrounded with a sense of controversy in their “authentic” nature, with people questioning a potential homogenization of dance and song traditions, styles and expressions that result in a loss of individual tribal identity and therefore a loss of authentic practices. However, in a larger context, the opposite may be true. As the powwow connects individuals with the larger network of indigenous identity and practice, it reinforces personal tribal affiliations. For example, a Diné individual may experience both connection and separateness in the powwow dance arena. A dual experience that reminds them of both the larger Native relationship to dance as embodied knowledge; but is also strengthens their particular Diné tribal

identity in standing in the dance arena as a representative of their particular cultural expressions and relationships.

This dualistic experience can also be seen in the particular dance and song styles that are commonly seen at powwows. Though powwows are drawn from historical tradition, these styles are being expressed in the present and they serve contemporary needs for individuals and community. Within the layers of dancer and community experience the powwow is a living event, central to the lives of the people who come together for a chance to “dress to dance” (Browner 2). Regardless, powwows reflect the profound nature of dance and song to connect and keep alive Native identities and cultural heritage in the hearts and lives of the people.



Fig. 4 dancer Sara Moncada

*“We can feel the land,  
and we can feel the beat,  
and we can feel the vibration,  
and that is the connection...”*

*~ Pablo Palma, dancer (qtd. in Murphy 217)*

Indigenous people live strongly in the significance of the interconnection of all life in the natural world and this is expressed in different ways within the cultural practices and traditions of the people. Dance as a way of life lies at the center of echoing this deep connection in all of its expressions of story, creation, social customs, prayer and healing. Dance holds within its forms and expressions the beating heart of the people and, by its very nature, dance is an act of togetherness, bringing into embodied being the voice and life of the community. Dance is more than specific styles of ritual and ceremony, even more than recounting history or expressing emotion; rather, it is itself a practice of knowledge capable of accessing different ways of knowing and being.

Indigenous dance is a living form of exploration and investigation that not only reflects the life journey of the individual, but also that of the entire community. It is a voice of the people, a language of body and movement that allows us to exist in this world and expand and contract in living relationship. Dance is deeply rooted and embedded inside of expressions of self, community and tradition, holding in sacred

space the essential nature of creation and connection. In the Indigenous mind, dance and artistic expression are not separated from daily living; rather creativity is part of who we are as human beings and dance brings us back to who we are at our center, to that common human place of being in deep relationship to the land and to each other. That is the profound and unstoppable power of dance.

*Life is experienced in the body.*

*It is the meeting of our internal self and the external realm that takes shape and radiates out of our center and connects us to the world.*

*It is our voice, our story, our being, our gift to that which connects us to all  
– it is the ecology of life embodied, it is all of us - the we in me.*

*~ Sara Moncada, Yaqui*



Fig 5. dancer Ellie Cruz

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