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Dancing the Pluriverse: Indigenous Performance as Ontological Praxis

María Regina Firmino Castillo

> They were forbidden to sing and dance and dream their gods, even though they had been sung, danced, and dreamt by their gods on the distant day of Creation.
>
> —Eduardo Galeano (2010)[1]

In one sentence, the late Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano pointed to the power of Indigenous dance and to its criminalization. Indeed, one of the first things to be prohibited by Imperial Spain was dance. As early as 1552, the royal arbiter of Guatemala reported that "a great number of gaudily attired people were seen holding hands while dancing around a banner, drinking inebriating beverages, and singing songs of their religion." Fearing rebellion, Tomás López issued edicts against dance, especially "nocturnal" ones escaping colonial scrutiny (in Barrios 1996, 48).[2] Dance held a central position in Mesoamerican societies, as María Sten (1990) discussed in her classic study of Nahua performance; it contributed to social and political cohesion by reproducing relations between gods and humans, but also *among* humans (11). For this reason, imperial Spain made of Indigenous dance an object of colonial control. Paul Scolieri (2013) documented how certain dance forms were prohibited while others were adapted to force "colonial subjects" to portray their own subjugation through dances reenacting imperial battles (20). At the same time, performance was used by Indigenous peoples, albeit in clandestine ways, to activate embodied forms of agency (Taylor 2003, 64)—and, as I will discuss below, to regenerate ontological relationships.

Ontology, understood as a way to imagine and enact worlds, will be discussed in the following as a site of political struggle through the recent history of Naab'a', an Ixil Maya town targeted for genocide at the height of Guatemala's thirty-six year war (1960–1996). After describing the relationship between ontology and domination through this example, I will discuss how performance constitutes a contestatory ontological praxis that creates connections between humans (Sten 1990) and

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between humans and other beings—whether celestial or earthly. These relations are set into motion through practices that are embodied (Taylor 2003), but also *telluric*—by which I mean *of the earth.* I will develop this theoretical proposal by reflecting on two contemporary Indigenous dance projects. The first is Oxlaval Q'anil, which I helped establish in Naab'a' in 2013 with a group of emerging dancers who share a common history and connection to place. 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. The second project is Dancing Earth Contemporary Indigenous Dance Creations, founded by Rulan Tangen eleven years ago in Santa Fe, New Mexico; I performed with Dancing Earth in 2014 and 2015. Dancing Earth is itinerant and composed of dancers from various nations. Because of this diasporic Indigeneity, it endeavors to decolonize a diversity of bodies and places through a somatic "shedding" so that "artistic imaginations" and "ancestral memories" can emerge (Tangen 2014, personal communication). This prepares the ground for a choreographic experimentation that regenerates multiple ontological worlds in dancers' bodies and in relation to a variety of environments.

My participation in these two projects is as a transdisciplinary scholar, artist, and Mestiza.[3] Born in Guatemala, a majority Indigenous nation, I married into an Ixil Maya family. My partner, Tohil Fidel Brito Bernal, is an artist and collaborated with me in the aforementioned projects. Because of my complex social positioning, a critical reflexivity is always at play, as is an acute awareness of my history, traversed as it is with cultural erasure and its own measure of violence. This praxis is complemented with the liminal epistemological approach afforded by performance studies, which Dwight Conquergood (2002) described as a commingling of "analytical and artistic ways of knowing" consciously employed to challenge disciplinary boundaries (151)—and, I would add, regimes of being.

Ontologies and the Pluriverse

Mario Blaser (2009) defines ontologies as the "stories" we tell ourselves about what exists and how these things exist in relationship to each other (877). This results in categorizations: animate/inanimate, human/non-human, material/spiritual, to name but a few central to a particular ontological framework. These are often hierarchical and lead to relations of dominance. These hierarchies are also mutable for ontological formations are "protean"—they are "both productive and responsive . . . subject to reformation again and again" (Stoler 2009, 4). This makes for an ontological complexity which is not deterministic. Furthermore, ontologies exceed language; stories "perform" worlds into being through the relationships we enact (Blaser 2009, 877). Blaser (2013) draws from the work of Indigenous thinkers[4] to stress that ontological stories have "worldmaking effects;" as he puts it, "different stories imply different worldings" but these "do not 'float' over some ultimate (real) world" (552). Instead, we have a pluriverse "constituted by mutually related worlds yet lacking an overarching principle (which would then make it into a universe)" (Blaser 2010, 237). This distinguishes pluriversality from cultural relativism, which tolerates difference, but only accepts the facticity of one ontology. Decolonial semiotician Walter Mignolo (2013) defined contemporary pluriversality (implying the historical contingency of any ontology) as "several cosmologies" inextricably entangled by "a power differential," which he defined as "the logic of coloniality covered up by the rhetorical narrative of modernity." In this sense, a pluriversal ontological praxis is political, for it is "an experiment of bringing itself into being . . . the dynamics through which different ways of worlding sustain themselves even as they interact, interfere, and mingle with each other" (Blaser 2013, 552).

Ontological Praxis and Its Attempted Destruction

> Universality is always imperial and war-driven. Pluri and multi-verses are convivial, dialogical or plurilogical.
>
> —Walter Mignolo (2013)

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When one group tries to exert dominance over a territory and the beings in it, the pluriverse is reorganized "into a hierarchical matrix" in which the dominating power sets itself up as the only true and universal ontology (Blaser 2010, 12). Along these lines, postcolonial intellectual Frantz Fanon ([1952] 2000) observed how colonialism strategically erases ontologies incompatible with its interests, such that "every ontology is made unattainable." As he explained:

> The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. . . . His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him. (257–258)

Similarly, sociologist Andrew Woolford (2009) characterized Indigenous children's internment in Canadian boarding schools as an "all-out assault on Aboriginal ontologies," arguing that these practices constitute genocide—defined as a "networked violence" (92) destroying bodies while controlling surviving ones as sites of ontological transformation. Finally, decolonial theorist and storyteller Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1994) wrote of a totalizing violence that attacks "a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves" (3). Deprecation becomes internalized, provoking genocidal outcomes and ontological formations in line with colonial agendas. Western modernity's attempt to "establish itself as a universal ontological condition through a relentless process of expansion and colonization" is at the root of this genocidal and ontological destruction—a violence which is also ecocidal, with "nonhuman others" forming "part of how colonial difference gets established" (Blaser 2010, 12).

From 2010 onwards, I have worked in Naab'a', an Ixil Maya town of about 20,000 people in northwestern Guatemala; I lived there from 2012 to 2014.[5] In the nineteen-eighties, the Ixil Maya were the target of a brutal military campaign in which seventy to ninety percent of Ixil villages were destroyed (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH) 1999) and approximately six percent of the Ixil population was killed under the pretext of a counterinsurgency operation (Ball 1999). In reality, the Guatemalan war was a case of state-terror leveled against the civilian population (in general), while the violence directed towards Indigenous Guatemalans was genocidal (Gareau 2004, 60). It was also the continuation of a centuries' long imperialist campaign against Indigenous peoples and their ontological relation to territory—a totalizing violence carried out through massacres, torture, rape, population transfer, ecological devastation, and the militarization of daily life. As documented in the Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico's report (1999), the army indiscriminately razed entire communities of unarmed men, women and children. At the same time, a scorched earth campaign systematically burned crops, killed animals, and cleared forests. Hundreds of thousands of people fled to México and beyond, while those who remained were forcibly relocated to *aldeas modelo* (model villages) where the minutiae of life were precisely choreographed as part of a state policy of "*reeducación ideológica*" (CEH 1999, 469). Through these means, the Guatemalan state attempted to clear Ixil territory for mineral and hydroelectric exploitation while turning genocide survivors into wage-dependent laborers—goals premised on the imposition of an ontology congruent with the interests of the national oligarchy and transnational capital (Forensic Architecture 2012).

Despite the attempted genocide, the Ixil survived, as have their particular conceptions of reality, largely based on a biocentric ontology in which human and non-human beings are ascribed subjectivity by virtue of the *itiixhil tiichajil* (an agentive life force, also referred to as *yooxhil*) that they embody (Firmino Castillo, Maxho'l, et al. 2014, 63–65). It is through relationships enacted with *itiixhil tiichajil*-carrying entities that ontological connections are made between the Ixil and their territory—understood here as a *living*-earth, and not the bordered nation-state or titled piece of property through which capitalism establishes its own ontological relations. Reciprocity is practiced

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Photo 1. Performative representation of the genocide attempted against the Ixil people, Teatro Tiichil, Naab' a', 2011. Courtesy of Herbert Reyes.

with beings through the performances of daily life: exchanging names with wild edibles before harvesting, making offerings through *chaj* (ceremony) to the four directions, topographical features, natural phenomena, and repeating cycles of time referred to as *Kub'al* (father) or *Chuch* (mother). *Itiixhil tiichajil* does not fit categories such as organic/inorganic, sentient/non-sentient, or human/non-human. Yet it is a profoundly telluric notion, as demonstrated by Pap Xhas, a *B'aal Vatz Tiixh* (ritual specialist) I befriended while living in Naab'a'. His father was killed by the Guatemalan army in 1983, but the body was exhumed in 2013. During the wake, he performed libations: after pouring firewater on the coffin, then onto the ground, he passed the bottle to me, and explained:

> "We are the Earth. Our bones are the minerals. Our flesh is the dirt. The rivers, our blood. Who am I to know!? But that's how it is. This is why we pour our liquor on the ground before drinking" (2013, personal communication).

Death is the ultimate loss of *itiixhil tiichajil,* and yet, as Pap Xhas's act suggests, this does not cut our ontological connections to the earth; they are enacted, even after a violent death, though performance. Pouring liquor on the ground, on the casket, and then drinking, constitute acts of reciprocity that create ontological equivalences between persons (both living and dead) and the earth below, a substance we become through death and decomposition. The earth is equivalent to person, though composed of what some might call inanimate matter. And the person is a body made of the same matter. Both person and minerals, earth, and water are joined through *itiixhil tiichajil*—the vital force that animates the Ixil world.

Performance as an Embodied and Telluric Ontological Praxis

> "[T]here will be no dancing…under penalty of one hundred lashes, banishment, and excommunication…."
>
> — Fray Sebastian Villela, México, 1631[6]

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Photo 2. Ixil Maya chaj, also nachb'al (ceremony), Naab' a', 2012. Courtesy of Herbert Reyes.

As performance studies scholar Diana Taylor (2003) argued, performative practices such as dance, theater, music, ceremony, and other ritualized activities (37) transmit "social knowledge, memory and a sense of identity" from body to body, across time, to form social bodies (3). Despite their seeming ephemerality, these performative practices constitute a "repertoire" that is enduring

Photo 3. Monument Uma'l Iq', built by Tohil Fidel Brito Bernal and the council of elders at X'ol Salch'il, 2013. Courtesy of Elva Bishop.



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Photo 4. Oxlaval Q'anil choreography session, 2013. Courtesy of Elva Bishop.

precisely because it is *embodied* (Taylor 2003, 3). The indomitable potential of embodied knowledge is articulated by Zapotec *muxhe* (third gender) performance artist, Lukas Avendaño (2015), in this way: "What you can't find in my peoples' codices . . . you will find here, in my body."[7] Building on Taylor's insights, I propose that performance is a powerful ontological praxis not only because it is embodied, but also because it is *telluric*—and by telluric, I mean *of the earth*. Performance enacts relationships between people (Sten 1990)—but also between people and what philosopher Val Plumwood (1993) referred to as "earth others"—that is non-human animals, plants, minerals, and other beings (137).[8] This is a category that can be extended (depending on one's ontological praxis) to include objects of human fabrication, and even hyper objects, as ecological critic Timothy Morton (2013) termed those things (human-made and not) that are as agentive as humans, sometimes more. It is this simultaneously embodied and telluric relationality between bodies—both human and beyond—that makes performance a supremely ontological activity.

Photo 5. "Fenton" Vase, from Naab'a' (Nebaj) (AD 600–800). © Trustees of the British Museum.



It is in the body, and very often, the dancing body, that ontological control and regeneration begins. But the regeneration often transcends individual

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Photo 6. Snake Lady Entwined with Och Chan. Kerr Vase 5164. © Justin Kerr.

embodiment to implicate other earth forces, as we will see below. Jacqueline Shea Murphy (2007) offers an example from the life of Black Elk, the Lakota warrior who toured with Buffalo Bill in the 1880s. To "contain" Indigenous ceremony, the U.S. government criminalized it while simultaneously promoting spectacles for settler-colonists, such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. But even within the spectacle, Black Elk enacted agency: the "choreographic choices" he made "engender [ed] pleasure" in his own body, Shea Murphy argued, while "projecting [a] connection, pride, and defiance" understood only by other Natives (77). In my view, Black Elk's dance in the Wild West show may have been what allowed him, years later, to revive the Sun Dance. This was a quintessential act of embodied agency, but one which extended outward beyond his individual body—for the body as sacrifice, as occurs in the Sun Dance, constitutes a telluric act, creating an ontological relation with earth beings, including buffalo, and cosmological elements, such as the four directions and the earth-sky axis.[9]

Photo 7. Dance inspired by the kamawil. 2013. Courtesy of Elva Bishop.



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Photo 8. Dance inspired by the Kamawil, 2013. Courtesy of Elva Bishop.

Another example comes from Spain's rule over Tenochtitlán. Nahua ritual dances were prohibited while colonial subjects were forced to represent their own conquest through repertoires syncretizing Spanish and Indigenous forms (Scolieri 2013). These hemisphere-wide *Danzas de la Conquista* mimicked battles from the 1492 expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain while simultaneously representing military invasions of Indigenous lands in the Americas shortly after. They are performed (to the present day) with veiled meanings and reversals marking them as contestatory. According to Taylor (2003), their power does not stem from parody, but from embodiment—a type of critique that goes to the core of colonial assumptions about the Indigenous body (30–31). Because the "colonialist discourse" hinges on the notion that the Indigenous body—and I would add, the earth—is an object lacking agency and voice, this double-objectification is undone by performers' insistence on Indigenous bodies' capacity for rebellion (Taylor 2003, 64). I propose in the ensuing reflection that this embodied agency spills over onto the land, vivifying human subjects, but also a living and agentive earth. As anthropologist Kristina Tiedje (2008) suggests through her research on Nahua healing of trauma, recovering agency or vital force is not only a matter of individual healing or embodied praxis; healing

Photo 9. Oxlaval Q'anil, post-performance, Naab'a', 2013. Courtesy of Elva Bishop.



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occurs through the reestablishment of the "ineluctable relationship between humans and their surroundings" (28).[10] This might also be thought of as ontological regeneration, a simultaneously embodied and telluric process.

Oxlaval Q'Anil: Recovering Yooxhil in Bodies and Places Through Dance

In order to create new forms of Ixil dance that would activate a monument honoring Ixil culture-bearers, in 2013 Xhivaska' and I established Oxalaval Q'anil.[11] The monument was built by Ixil artist Tohil Fidel Brito Bernal at X'ol Salch'il, an ancestral site in Naab'a', where in the mid-1500s enslaved Ixil people were forced to build the first Catholic church over a ceremonial site (see Photo 3). Our project intended to recover this historical memory while reactivating the *yooxhib'al* of the site. Composed of *yooxhil* (vital energy) and *b'al* (place), *yooxhib'al* is often translated as altar; but it is not a place of worship. According to Maxho'l, a member of the collective, it is "a place where we go to find our other self—which is to say the ancestors, nature, our own *yooxhil*" (Firmino Castillo, Maxho'l, et al. 2014, 31–32).

We started by petitioning the ancestors and the energy of the day. Nan An, a *B'aal Vatz Tiixh* (ritual specialist), conducted *chaj* (Ixil ritual) on *Kajbal Junajpu,* a day in the Ixil ritual calendar associated with the number four and the hero twins of the *Popol Wuj* who vanquished the Lords of Xibalba through performance (Sam Colop 2011). The ceremonial fire produced favorable signs, allowing us to proceed. During the first sessions, we sought to approximate Ixil dance as it was performed prior to the Spanish invasion of 1529. In time, we came to realize that recreating a pre-invasion dance was highly unlikely, yet creating contemporary dance as a way of understanding and embodying Ixil ways of being seemed possible and desirable. In subsequent sessions we improvised exercises around the notion of *itiixhil tiichajil:* oscillating between beings—maize, *tzoloj* and *tzuk'* (wild edibles important to the Ixil), jaguars, deer and birds—but also fire, stars, and rain, I encouraged an embodied mimesis rather than imitation. We stood in the shape of *milpas* (maize fields) in their growing state, bodies and arms stretching upwards as we received energy from the sun. Doubling over with sunken chests and contorted arms, we withered during drought. Seeking the experience of these diverse forms of *itiixhil tiichajil* in our bodies, we noticed changes in response to breath, posture, movement, vocalizations, thought, music, and interactions with others.

After this preparation, we began to choreograph by studying photos of *kamawil*, archeological objects unearthed in Naab'a', a site of uninterrupted Ixil presence for at least two-thousand years and one of the most important unexcavated archaeological sites in Mesoamerica (Garay Herrera 2013, 49; 2014, personal communication) (see Photo 5).[12] Prints of the *kamawil* were distributed among the youth (originals are in museums outside of Guatemala), who reflected on the iconography and the persons—*their ancestors*—depicted there. Most had never seen these images and had little knowledge of the historical importance of the fields where the *kamawil* were found—fields where maize is planted and elders conduct ceremony. We interpreted the postures depicted on the *kamawil,* enacting movements preceding and proceeding from the moments captured in jade and polychrome (see Photo 4).

The collaborative choreographic process resulted in a performance for the monument's unveiling on the day *Oxlaval Q'anil* (hence, the group's name); the dance was performed in the plaza between the monument and the church. The town's elders, mothers, fathers, and youth positioned themselves the same way that people do when participating in *chaj*—around a central fire—and the dance began this way, too—by greeting the directions. The youngest dancers emerged from the church door. Each carried a cloth representing a cardinal direction: red for the east, black for the west, yellow for the south, and white for the north. They placed themselves in alignment with their corresponding direction around the two youngest dancers, who stood back-to-back, holding blue and green cloths representing the heart of sky and earth. Accompanied by a

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resounding conch shell, they greeted each direction through gestures representing their interpretations of Ixil cosmology. As Maxho'l, one of the collaborators, shared with the dancers, the four directions are not abstract spatial concepts; they are beings with personhood and agency who protect the surrounding mountains. Addressing them with words and gestures constitutes a potential embodiment of an ontological connection and the re-activation of the *yooxhil* of a formerly colonized space. The dancers returned to the church using steps borrowed from the traditional deer dance, as taught by Mario Matom. After this, I joined the entire group and we performed the dance inspired by the *kamawil* (see Photos 6 and 7):

> *We emerge from the church in a serpent-like formation. Through gentle bends of our knees and horizontal arm movements, we become an undulating body. We reach the center of the plaza. On one kamawil, a man's torso has a serpent's tail instead of legs. We embody this through a delicate up and down motion of our feet. We animate the man's face in profile by turning our heads left and right. We multiply the movements: four dancers, each facing a different direction, emulate his elegant hand gestures. Petronila (one of the dancers) arches her back while others stretch their arms, like tendrils of a vine, toward her heart: with these gestures they embody the woman depicted on the kamawil who reclines on her elbows as a being emerges from the jowls of a snake that wraps around her body. Petronila interprets the entwined serpent as a backbend that she twists out of to sit upright, poised on her knees. Seven year-old Dulce climbs onto Petronila's back: standing on her shoulders, she gestures gracefully with open arms, gently dropping down and stepping back (see Photo 8). Petronila improvises a solo. We follow with other solos and duets. With deer steps, we return to the church, disappearing through the doors.*

Perhaps ancestral memory was revived through the dancers' bodies (and even my own), weaving ontological connections to space, but also to the deep history of the place. For example, the church's altar has undergone significant transformations through the years: at the center, the Christian cross doubles as the Mayan configuration of space, defined by the four directions intersecting at the center where heart of sky/earth resides. To the right is the Ixil ritual calendar; to the left, a painting of the *kamawil* that inspired the monument, both made by Tohil at the request of town elders (see Photo 9). These objects add to the centuries-old architecture of resistance; unbeknownst to colonizers, the enslaved Ixils who built the church installed thirteen (a number central to Ixil cosmology) beams to hold the roof up, and aligned the door with the grandfather mountain to the east (Maxho'l 2013, personal communication). The serpent depicted on the *kamawil* marked the bodies and headdresses of the dancers, but not as the embodiment of evil, as a Christian ontology would have it. It was resignified through the dance, and perhaps in our bodies as well, for in the Maya world the serpent is associated with knowledge and regeneration (Maxho'l 2013, personal communication). We may have regenerated the *yooxhil* of this place, too, for through this dance we came to know the history of the ground we walk on, plant on, and conduct *chaj* upon—knowing these to be *yooxhib'al.*

The *yooxhib'al* at X'ol Salch'il, in the surrounding mountains and forests, also exists in the human body. As Maxho'l explained, the thirteen major joints of the body relate to the thirteen potentialities of each of the twenty days in the ritual calendar, while these correspond to the digits of our hands and feet. Thirteen multiplied by twenty totals the two-hundred and sixty days in the lunar year, which is also the approximate length of human gestation (Firmino Castillo, Maxho'l, et al. 2014, 28). These temporal-cosmological aspects in the body intersect with telluric beings beyond, but related to, the body: there are four major *yooxhib'al* in Naab'a', each one aligned with one of the cardinal directions that each reign over five of the calendrical energies (Firmino Castillo, Maxho'l, et al. 2014, 41). As such, our bodies are *yooxhib'al*, too: "We are the Earth. Our bones are the minerals.

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Our flesh is the dirt. The rivers, our blood . . ." (Pap Xhas 2013, personal communication). The performance may have been a way to remember this and perhaps regenerate the ontology that colonial violence and genocide attempted to destroy.

Dancing Earth: Complex Indigeneity

That dance can be a praxis of ontological regeneration was confirmed while I was working with Dancing Earth in the summer of 2014, but in ways that are significantly different to Oxalval Q'anil's. This is because the ontological regeneration occurring through Indigenous performance is responsive to historical and environmental circumstances, as Dancing Earth's praxis demonstrates. Dancing Earth is an itinerant company composed of dancers from various nations (see Photo 10). Participants in the 2014 intensive hailed from eighteen Indigenous nations; many acknowledged complex ancestral connections, with at least three identifying as Mestiza or Métis. Several lived far from their peoples' territories, while others maintained continuous residence in their communities.[13] This complex Indigeneity challenges the 'soft' genocide resulting from state policies of assimilation and deterritorialization (Oliveira Filho 1998, 68). Oliveira Filho's research in the purportedly non-Indigenous Brazilian northeast contributes to a needed rethinking of Indigeneity. He argued that the fetishization of "pure" ethnicities runs the risk of construing Indigenous peoples who remain on their territories (by choice or by force) as ahistorical and of erasing the identities of deterritorialized peoples which Brazil and other nation-states refer to as *no longer* indigenous—therefore legitimizing the denial of territorial and other

*Photo 10. Dancing Earth Summer Institute "International Cultural-Artist Ambassadors," 2014. Norma Papalotl Araiza, Andrea Rose Bear King, Tria Blu Wakpa, Tohil Fidel Brito Bernal, Yvonne Chartrand, María Regina Firmino Castillo, Navi Fong, Justin Giehm, Sandra Lamouche, Cathy Livermore, Maria Naidu, Anne Pesata, Trey Pickett, Coman Poon, Lupita Salazar, Lumhe Sampson, Javier Stell-Fresquez, and AudioPharmacy collaborators Teao Sense, Ras K' Dee, Joana Cruz, Desirae Harp, and Nikila Badua; representing Cherokee, Choctaw, Cree, Diné, Hawai'i, Ilocana/Bicolana, Ixil-Maya, Jicarilla Apache, Kainai, Lakota, Mestizo, Métis, Muscogee/Creek, Ojibwe, Ona*staTis (Michewal Wappo), Papanga, Piro, Pomo, Seneca/Mvskoke, Tewa, Yoeme (Yaqui), Euskal Herria (Basque nation), British-colonial Hong Kong, India, and Sweden. © Paulo T. Photography/www.PauloT.com.*



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Photo 11. Founding Director of Dancing Earth, Rulan Tangen, during a choreography session in Ogha Po'oge (Santa Fe), New Mexico, 2013. Courtesy of Joana Cruz.

rights. This phenomenon surfaces the need for a reconsideration of Indigenous peoples as political subjects with complex histories (Oliveira Filho 1998, 51). Resistance and the maintenance of sovereignty are part of Indigenous histories, as is living through state policies of erasure through eugenics, displacement, and genocide. Along these lines, surviving this violence while keeping historical memory alive is an act of resistance—as is the act of gathering dancers who represent this broad spectrum of Indigenous experience. I argue that Dancing Earth's

Photo 12. Dancing Earth Land Dance Methodology, 2014. Courtesy of Dancing Earth.



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Photo 13. Somatic decolonization exercise, Dancing Earth Intensive 2014. © Joana Cruz.

centering of this complexity potentially enacts ontological alternatives reflective of a pluriversal reality. This is accomplished through the decolonization of diverse bodies and the various grounds they dance upon.

Founder Rulan Tangen takes Dancing Earth's methodologies to various communities throughout North America (see Photo 11). Everywhere Dancing Earth goes is, always and already, Indigenous territory: land permeated with history and by vital forces in mountains, rivers, burial grounds, ancient paths, and sites of resistance—even if these places are forgotten or buried under concrete. For example, the intensives are often held in what is now the capitol of New Mexico and was once the center of Spain's imperialist adventures in the southwest. The city's original name, Ogha Po'oge, is forgotten by most, as is the fact that the area has been inhabited by Tewa peoples since the tenth century (Hazen-Hammond 1988, 132). To respectfully connect to this history and place, Tangen asked Tewa leadership for permission and conducted ceremony with elders and dancers at Tsankawe, a Tewa ceremonial site. Before every subsequent session, smudging rituals were performed to acknowledge the telluric forces in the places where the company worked

Photo 14. Dancing Earth Origin-Nation Performance, 2014. © Daniel Quat Photography.



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Photo 15. Dancing Earth Origin-Nation Performance, 2014. Courtesy of Kalika Tallou.

while activating dancers' senses. As Tangen explained: smoke weaves a web of interrelation with the earth through invocation of the four elements; abalone shell represents water and is used to hold the ashes of the herbs, which represent earth; the herbs are burnt to create aromatic smoke; finally, burning evokes fire, and the smoke, air (Tangen 2015, personal communication). The smudging is performed according to place and to dancers' own cultural contributions, activating bodies and environments while also acknowledging the particular histories and identities of each dancer.

Bodily and Telluric Decolonization

Waziyatawin and Yellow Bird (2005) stressed that decolonization requires "praxis"—the direct action needed to liberate Indigenous minds, bodies, and lands (3). Ian Grand's (1978) observations might offer insights on how colonization structures minds and bodies, while Tangen's methodology illustrates a praxis of somatic liberation (see Photo 13). Grand explains that patterns of social participation "crystalize" in the body-mind, forming "complexes of somatic organisation and structure." The complexes, in turn, structure "[t]issue state, hormonal expression, and feeling . . ." as well as "patterns of touch, sensing, and expression." These are expressed through movement and speech habits, becoming "automated" through repetition and naturalized through psychosomatic indoctrination. But these crystallized "self-enactment[s]" can be dissolved through embodied examination, critique, and transformation, allowing for other enactments to come into being (28). Tangen's praxis of decolonization works along similar lines through a process she described as a "shedding and emptying" of the imprints of colonialism, so that the body-mind can become a "conduit for ancestral memory"—a form of remembering enlivened by the "artistic imagination" (Tangen 2015, personal communication). This dialectic between embodied memory and imagination is related to Grand's (1978) concept of somatic reflexivity, defined as the ability "to experience the marvelous in the real" through the act of "standing in our own flesh" (18). Land Dance is a movement practice developed by Tangen in which something akin to somatic reflexivity takes place; dance is conducted outdoors to regenerate connections to *earth others* and to ancestral memory (see Photo 12). This is how I experienced it:

> *We are at an arroyo. Tangen asks us to enact a "seed migration" from the histories of exchange between Indigenous communities. Because tears begin to stream down my face, I cannot follow Tangen's prompts. I sit at the edge of the dry riverbed, waiting for the tears to subside. When I think I'm ready, I enter the arroyo, but more tears flow. Embarrassed, I walk with my head low, my whole body lowering to the ground. I become curious about the sand, the dry vegetation, the traces left by water. I lie across the sand, belly-down. I raise my torso up, and on elbows and knees, I move across the ground slowly. My head hangs from hunched shoulders and my gaze follows the trace of water which once flowed there. My tears are absorbed by the sand until they stop*

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> *altogether. My torso rises over my bent knees, and I begin to open my arms and chest—but my head remains low. Another dancer approaches, and lays her torso on my back. Breathing together, I receive her movements. I feel her weight, as if she were in flight, with my back as her surface. She snaps away as the ground pulls me down. I surrender to it, turn, and stretch back on the sand, seeing the sky above me. I breathe with it. In my stillness, I feel the sand's subtle dampness, and allow my body to sink. After a time, I rise up, but no longer the same: as I walk, the arroyo resonates in me with the shared memory of water.*

At the start of this experience, I felt entrapped by my body, not enlivened by it. It was the act of standing in my own flesh—its discomfort—that opened me to the "marvelous in the real" (Grand 1978, 18). It was then that I entered the current, as it were. In—but also beyond—my particular body, movement enabled an ontological relation with earth others (humans, but also birds and different qualities of water) in that particular arroyo. Grand (1978) reminds us that the goal of dissolving the crystalized self-enactments is not a state of purity (or perfect decolonization). There is no 'natural human' to return to; one can, however, expand somatic repertoires (28). Along these lines, dancer and scholar Ojeya Cruz Banks (2010) writes that "there is no one epistemology of dance. . ." Instead, we have "somatic paradigms" (13)—and, I would add, ontological ones, *in the plural*.

Dancing the Pluriverse

Dancing Earth's decolonial dance praxis and Land Dance methodology prepared the ground for a choreographic experimentation which sought to perform a "kaleidoscopic performance ritual" witnessed from multiple perspectives, embodying the complex and interdependent nature of reality, as Tangen explained. Origi-Nation, Dancing Earth's tenth-anniversary performance, was an example of this pluriversality. It was the result of a choreographic collaboration involving a diversity of Indigenous dance traditions and contemporary performance genres as well as the cosmologies of the people present in the space in which the experimentation unfolded. And the space, it must be noted, structured the performance. Sara and Sara (2015) observed that when dance happens outside conventional spaces, a fecund liminality is born: "'in-between' . . . mind and body, space and event, object and subject" (77). They call this a "trans-ontology": a way of thinking and being that explodes the rigid dichotomies (nature/culture and object/subject) that mark Western modernity's ontological tendencies. Every corner of the Skylight Theater in Ogha Po'oge was transformed: the central downstairs stage, second-level corridor at the periphery of the stage—in addition to every stairwell and aisle. Tangen stressed that the act of holding and activating space through movement—even if unseen—was as important as being seen at center-stage. This was

Photo 16. Lumhe "Micco" Sampson, Dancing Earth Origin-Nation Performance, 2014. © Daniel Quat Photography.



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not just the representation of a pluriverse, but, potentially, an experience of it for both dancers and audience:

> *Tohil and I descend from the upper realm (Photo 14). I hold a mirror-mask to my face. I can see through the mirror to the other side, and for me it is the tlamatini: the perforated mirror that brings knowledge of self and other.*[14] *I slowly move through the space holding the mirror, reflective-side out, toward the people near me. Reaching the center, I place the mirror on the ground, reflective-side up, invoking heart of sky-earth. Tohil is on the other side of the mirror. We kneel down next to it and give each other water from a gourd. I collapse. Tohil touches my brow and breast-bone with his humid hands. My chest arches up as I rise. I pick the mirror-mask up. We stand facing each other and recite a dialogue in Ixil, Tohil's mother-tongue. We exchange names, genders, elements, dichotomies—among them, life and death—as we walk away from each other and then meet to ascend the stairs. On the second level, our movements activate the cardinal directions, and we witness how, down below, dancers' bodies form roots along the ground and branches that grow in multiple directions (see Photo 15).*

If this tree of different bodies is an embodiment of the pluriverse, its central axis is not a shared ontology, but an ontological complexity. Indeed, Dancing Earth unfolds as an experiment in complexity, performing a praxis of decolonization for Indigeneity to emerge as a pluriverse with trans-ontological possibility. This is no essentialist fantasy, nor is it about relativism. Dancing Earth performs different worlds, with none having a necessary facticity over the other. As such, it is a project of ontological regeneration that does not flatten the multiplicity of Indigenous experiences and perspectives, nor does it attempt to force an aesthetic or cultural pan-Indigeneity based on homogenizing folklorization, reified tokenization, or on illusory universals. In this way, Indigenous dance can be a "political ontology" that counters "the impoverishment implied by universalism" (Blaser 2013, 552). This is not a matter of representing ontologies, or even recovering what was lost. It is, instead, an ongoing act of "reality making"—a theory/praxis based on "telling stories that open up a space for, and enact, the pluriverse" (Blaser 2013, 552–553).

Conclusion

My interest in the foregoing has been in how performance—through an embodied and telluric praxis—potentially regenerates the pluriverse that ontological universalism attempts to destroy. But this regeneration can only happen as long as our stories tend toward life. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1994) observed that colonization persists because we identify with "all those forces that would stop [our] own springs of life." This results in "despair, despondency and a collective death-wish" (3). Though colonialism is said to be over, and the war in Guatemala ended in 1996, there is an epidemic of youth suicide in Ixil communities (Morales 2013) and in Indigenous communities the world over (Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 2014). Projects such as Oxlaval Q'anil and Dancing Earth may yet allow us to sing and dance and dream worlds large enough for all our relations, including the youth who do not find a place in which to exist in this one, and perhaps for our earth others facing extinction in the so-called anthropocene. This is just a beginning: the ontological relationships we enact now—through performance, and everything else we do—will contribute to our collective survival or our universal demise—for what one takes to be real and what one categorizes as life-bearing or not, agentive or inert, has political effects in more worlds than we know.

Notes

1. Original in Spanish; translation mine.
2. Original in Spanish; translation mine.

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3. Here "Mestiza" centers Indigenous ancestry without negating other histories; it is used in conscious opposition to "Ladina"—a social category specific to Mesoamerica which prioritizes European ancestry while erasing Indigenous histories and languages. Some contemporary invocations of mestizaje (Morales 2009) attempt to delegitimize Maya socio-political claims. However, Hale (2002) argues that the assertion of mestizaje presents a potential contestation to the "homogeneous political subject" (504) at the core of "neoliberal multiculturalism"—an ideology advancing the interests of the state and transnational capital (524). I am, therefore, aligned with a "mestizaje from below"—a term that "highlight[s] the heterogeneity of the Mayan movement" while standing in solidarity with it (Hale 2002, 524).

4. He cites Archibald (2008), Burkhart (2001), Cajete (2000), and Wilson (2008).

5. Nab'aa' (or Nebaj) is located in Guatemala's Cuchumatanes mountain range at an elevation of 1900 meters. The town is part of the Ixil area which has a population of some 148,670 inhabitants: ninety-one percent identify as Ixil Maya, with the remaining nine percent identifying as either K'iche', Kanjobal, Mam, or non-Indigenous (Fundación Ixil 2010).

6. Original in Spanish (in Navarrete 1971); translation mine.

7. Original in Spanish; translation mine.

8. Comparable terms are Marisol de la Cadena's (2010) "earth-beings" and "other-than-humans."

9. See DeMallie (2008) for more on Black Elk and the Sun Dance.

10. Original in Spanish; translation mine.

11. Participants in Oxlaval Q'anil included: Xhivaska', Maxho'l, Juana Dalia Estafani Guzaro Tipaz, Petronila and Magdalena Brito Matom, Xhiva B'alam, Dulce María (Elena) and Juanita Marcos, María, Teresa (Nan Tel), Juana, and Manuela Cedillo Hermoso, Teresa and Juana Cedillo Raymundo, Catarina Inmaculada Brito Brito, and Roxana. Tohil Fidel Brito Bernal, Maalb'alay (Susana Raymundo), and Mario Jacinto Matom made important contributions, while Nan An supported the group with ceremony and counsel.

12. *Kamawil* is used in Ixil to refer to these objects; the use of the word may come from Mayanized Spanish, or as a loan word from another Mayan language (Sergio Romero 2015, personal communication). In K'iche', a similar word, *kab'awil,* signifies the non-dual union of opposites and refers to each day's energy according to the ritual calendar (Úpun Sipac 2007, 21); it also referred, in pre-invasion times, to representations of these energies and was the word chosen by Dominican friars to stand for the Judeo-Christian god in K'iche' translations of the Bible (Carmack [1982] 2001, 406). These terms may be associated with *kawil*, a Yucatec Maya root word denoting divinity (Recinos 1947, 197–198).

13. For a full list of artists and dancers, see: http://www.dancingearth.org/summer-2014-cultural-artist-ambassadors/

14. The Nahua "*tlamatini*" (teacher) is mentioned in the *Florentine Codex*, Book X, Folios 19r – 20v and in the *Matritense Codex*; source: Leon-Portilla and Silva Galeana (1991, 9–10).

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