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Of Bodies of Elements, Dancing Earth
photo: Anthony C. Collins

Of Bodies of Elements

Jacqueline Shea Murphy | University of California, Riverside



Kalani Queypo in 'We came from stars'

Of Bodies of Elements. Directed by Rulan Tangen. DANCING EARTH Indigenous Contemporary Dance Creations. VSA North Fourth Art Center, Albuquerque, New Mexico. 6 and 7 February 2010, and Roble Dance Studio, Stanford University, 2 April 2010.

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Of Bodies of Elements, the first Indigenous dance choreography to be supported by a prestigious National Dance Project grant, is a compelling exploration of Indigenous ecology and cosmology deployed in the face of continuing colonization of Native peoples in the Americas. The evening-length stage dance piece, over ten years in the making, will tour the U.S. over the coming year and features young Native American dancers embodying multiple stories and dance forms to access Indigenous ways-of-being in the face of enviro-cultural degradation.



Cina Littlebird, Nichole Salazar, and Serena Rascon in 'Three Sisters'

Of Bodies of Elements is the vision and creation of Santa Fe-based choreographer Rulan Tangen, in collaboration with the dancers in *DANCING EARTH* Indigenous Contemporary Dance Creations, and with contributions from choreographer Raoul Trujillo. Act One begins with the dancers as constellations, pulsating out of and contracting back into formations, drawing on Indigenous understandings of the origins of life. It next draws on a Haudenosaunee/Algonquin creation story “The Woman Who Fell From the Sky.” Tangen asked the dancers, who come from diverse tribal backgrounds, to embody the shapes of their Nations; sensual and strong, they incorporate diverse dance moves to music with a heartbeat pulse. The next sections explore connections between humans, other animals, and plants; the sinuous dancers emerge as creatures, lion-like, fierce, hitting sharp formations before dissolving back into the pulse. The intense energy of their rhythmic moves then cools to the delicate trickle of water sounds as three women cross the stage and intertwine as the “Three Sisters”: corn, beans, and squash. In the striking final section of this act, developed by Trujillo, three bare-torsoed men wearing skirted cages lurk, menacing, then encircle and entrap the plants who are thus “captured and caged, patented and owned,” as Tangen writes in the program notes. The layered narratives of destruction here and throughout the work suggest a palimpsest of gender imbalance and global capitalism.

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Edgar Garcia, Erika Archer, Amy Becenti, Serena Rascon, Eric Lopez and Nichole Salazar in 'Caged'

Act Two continues to explore the external and internalized oppression that Native people in the U.S. have faced and the resulting loss and anger. It opens to the music group Ulali's song/prayer "All My Relations" with an aerialist in a suspended hoop, moving through its circular space to the song's message of inclusion for "those who carried on traditions and live strong among their people," as well as "those who left their communities by force and by choice and for generations no longer know who they are." The piece cuts to dancers in traditional muslin, standing against a screen with their backs to the audience, swaying slowly as projected images flicker across their bodies and Robbie Robertson's "Ghost Dance" plays. These ghost dancers collapse and rise and spread in rows, swaying, as a bird struts between them and with a huff of breath releases them into the sky world. The sense of loss and disconnection continues in the next section as a young man violently tears himself off from a cord connecting him to a woman, the Tree-of-Life.



Edgar Garcia and Serena Rascon in 'Disconnecting Cords'

Greed follows in the form of Tengen as the sweeping blue-ocean lifting up across the stage, harnessing the debris of plastic bags, capturing and consuming all in its way, but the piece ends with a powerful embodiment of renewal in the face of this destruction. In "Thunderstomp," the dancers—fierce, combative, sensual—invoke the ancestors as elements of water, fire, and wind

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build a thunderstorm to quench the drought. Drawing from yoga poses, capoeira, b-boy and b-girl solos, powwow/hip hop steps, and modern dance, these young men and women find a pulse together and shape themselves into a powerful, towering totem.

Unlike other contemporary Indigenous dance works that are grounded in one particular tribal perspective (Canadian choreographer Santee Smith's work with *Kaha:wi Dance Theatre*, for example, is strongly rooted in her Mohawk experience), Tangen's work draws on the stories and perspectives of a multitude of Indigenous peoples. She remarked after the Stanford performance that *DANCING EARTH*'s members, some of whom she has worked with since they were 12 years old, do not all have straightforward connections to their tribal identities. "Through adoption, relocation, not everyone here has a clear, continuous line.



Rulan Tangen in 'Oceans of Greed'

For some this [working with the dance company] might be their only connection," she said. *Of Bodies of Elements*, in other words, creates a space for these young dancers—and for Tangen herself—to embody and articulate their experience as Indigenous people, and to refuse the disconnection from Indigenous ways-of-being that colonization has wrought, both for those on their tribal lands, practicing their traditions, and for those cut off from them. After all, the piece asks, isn't the effect of colonization to render Native peoples invisible, inauthentic, separated from land? Hasn't this same capitalist greed created global environmental destruction? The piece presents an alternative: it harnesses contemporary dance making, drawing on both "Native" dance moves and forms not always recognized as such to access Indigenous ways of knowing in the service of establishing harmonious relation with the earth that feeds and sustains us all.

Audience response to the piece has been enthusiastic. It premiered to sold-out houses and standing ovations in Albuquerque, and brought out heartfelt response from Native audience members. "You guys are busting out some moves for our Native community. It's revolutionary," said Gina Pacaldo, herself a longtime dancer and performer, after the Stanford showing. "The examples of what you do with your movement are part of what our community

needs.”



Erika Archer in 'Thunderstomp'

“Our people have been colonized in many, many ways, and we still are,” Pacaldo added. “We are all at risk, and when I see you, I see that your hearts are strong. Really, really strong—whoa. [...] Us Grandmas, we still enjoy this,” she teased, noting the dancers’ “tight, tight abs.” “We like to see our youth being strong. You are a mirror of us and we are a mirror of you. We want you to own this, this responsibility,” she said. “I hope that as long as the Creator keeps you here, you all keep moving.”

For touring schedule see <http://www.dancingearth.org/>

Jacqueline Shea Murphy is Associate Professor of Critical Dance Studies at UC Riverside. Her book, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing”: Native American Modern Dance Histories* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), was awarded the 2008 De la Torre Bueno prize for Best Book in the field of dance studies by the Society of Dance History Scholars (SDHS). In 2009 she traveled to Aotearoa, New Zealand, on a Fulbright Senior Scholar Award to learn about the work of contemporary Maori choreographers. She is developing a new project about how contemporary Indigenous choreographers (in North America and Aotearoa primarily) are using stage dance making as an act of inhabiting Indigenous epistemologies and for engaging with colonizing institutions.