

# The Metaphysics of Dancing Tribes

Richard Drinnon

1987

## Introduction

Chief Luther Standing Bear wrote in his autobiography, "The white man does not understand the Indian for the reason that he does not understand America. He is too far removed from its formative processes. The roots of the tree of his life have not yet grasped the rock and soil...But in the Indian the spirit of the land is still vested; it will be until other men are able to divine and meet its rhythm. Men must be born and reborn to belong..."

Fear of the wilderness, the land, the animals, the other, and thus of the self, pervades North American civilization, so it should come as no surprise that historians have suffered from the same affliction. This was Calvin Martin's idea when he gathered eighteen essays, including this one by Richard Drinnon, in a recently published volume, *The American Indian and the Problem of History* (1987, Oxford University Press). Not only has history writing distorted the reality of this wounded Turtle Island we so awkwardly and destructively inhabit, but it has served as a form of conquest as well, a corrosive material that frays one of the few threads we have that might lead us from this labyrinth called progress.

Yet in the last few decades, the spirit of the land has, inevitably, begun to affect those who study the markings on our mother turtle's shell, and much of the cant of imperial conquest and instrumentalist civilization has started to be overturned. Richard Drinnon's splendid book, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (1980), is a key text in explicating the racist mystifications of Anglo-American imperial ideology and culture from the early days to Vietnam. In this essay on dancing tribes,

Drinnon follows his earlier theme and articulates the recognition underlying it: that we must all become the dancing tribes we once were, and relearn what they knew from the beginning: how to dance with the rhythm of the earth, and finally, to know ourselves and our place on it.

"If I can't dance I don't want to be a part of your revolution," said Emma Goldman to an anarchist enamored with the rationalist, utilitarian mystique. (And Drinnon, interestingly, has also written an excellent biography of that dancing rebel.) To be free, we must dance, we must rediscover our bodies, remember that body and spirit are one, and are one with the earth. All primal peoples knew this, hence all primal peoples have been dancers. Dancing, as Standing Bear said, was the way of "expressing devotion, of communing with unseen power," of reaffirming community.

Slowly, others have begun to divine and meet the rhythm of this land, are being born and reborn, grasping "the rock and soil." Drinnon's essay is evidence of that irrevocable process; it is far more than critical history, it is wisdom. We must remember how to dream. We must remember how to dance.

—George Bradford

*The American Indian and the Problem of History*, edited by Calvin Martin, is published by Oxford University Press, and will be reviewed in an upcoming issue. Richard Drinnon's latest book, which parallels the dispossession of Native Americans and the racist internment of the Japanese-Americans during the Second World War through the career of the man who administered both for the U.S. government, is *Keeper of Concentration Camps: Dillon S. Myer and American Racism* (University of California Press) and will also be reviewed in the future. This essay is published with permission from Oxford University Press.

## **Their worship is dance.**

They are tribes of dancers.

—Suzanne K. Langer

"It is the season of Indian tribal dances," warned the breathless *National News Extra* on December 15, 1974, "and every man, woman, and child in the nation is in danger of being kidnapped and used in the barbaric rituals." Meanwhile, *Indian Trails*, a mission newspaper in Arizona, asked readers to "pray for Mishongnovi, a Hopi village steeped in witchcraft...If you are ever near one of these dances, you can feel the very presence of evil forces as they actually worship the devil. This is in the United States!"

It is, indeed, and the current frozen Fundamentalists are not the only heirs of centuries of fearful clichés about the barbaric madness of Indian dances.

In *Facing West*, I tried to account for this perennial revulsion, and incautiously concluded the book by drawing on the wisdom of *Lame Deer*, the Sioux holy man: with Native American help, "Americans of all colors might just conceivably dance into being a really new period in their history."

That was an "inappropriate ending," reproved a friendly critic. "Drinnon's own work is testimony to the importance of less dancing and more analysis" (LaFeber, 1980). But was it? And a moderately hostile reader disliked my "dark, dancing tribesmen" and undertook to teach me the realities of tribal life: "[O]ne cannot look to Native American societies, past or present, for models of life without repression, projection, sadism, ethnocentrism (God is Red?), and violence. The Noble Savage is also a racist stereotype" (Young, 1981). But "savages," noble or ignoble, had entered my pages only as inner demons of the white invaders, so why this defensiveness and misdirected admonition?

Finally, a thoroughly disgusted reviewer lamented my want of propriety:

"When [Thomas L.] McKenney reveals the sexual limitations of his Quaker upbringing after observing an Indian dance, Drinnon makes some revelations of his own. If McKenney had let go, surmises Drinnon, "a dancing counterpart might have leaped out of him, joined the circle, chanted, copulated, and run off into the free and boundless forest." McKenney may well have entertained such infantile fantasies, but at least he had the good sense to repress them." (Sheehan, 1981)

But had the first head of our Indian service acted out the fantasy—including that hair-raising copulation—would that have been so awful? Should we admire his good sense in repressing his impulses and in throwing his adult energies instead into pulling his wards out of the circle, cutting their ties to the forest, stripping them of their languages, and breaking up their cultures? Anyhow, this offended historian brings us back around to the very presence of evil forces—or at least unseemly fantasies—and to the missionary attitude toward the body's rhythms.

## **God May Indeed Be Red**

Yes, on this Turtle Continent, God may indeed be Red, for all we non-Indians know. Our arrogant refusal to treat the lands and indigenous people with friendly respect has long since become a fixed national tradition. In

his “presidential address” of December 1981, for instance, Bernard Bailyn informed the assembled members of the American Historical Association of his current, large-scale project, “an effort to describe as a single story the recruitment, settlement patterns, and developing character of the American population in the pre-industrial era. It covers a long period of time—the two hundred years from the early seventeenth century to the advent of industrialism.” A long period of time!

And when we are not leaving the original indwellers out of our stories of “peopling” the continent and developing “the” American population, we have been misdiscovering, misnaming, and misunderstanding them. As the quinquecentennial of the archetypal misdiscovery draws near, that collective incomprehension is surely one of our most revealing and least endearing characteristics. Why have we been stone-blind so long? Let us return to 1492 for clues.

With first landfall on October 12 came Columbus’s very first thought of enslaving the gentle islanders, who had “very handsome bodies and very fine faces...they are of the color of the Canary Islanders, neither black nor white.” From then on the entries in his *Diario* made plain that he had jumped at the chance to make himself and his men masters of those who were “very poor in everything” and who went about “naked as their mothers bore them.”

For openers he determined to carry off by force six of these cultureless nudes “to your Highnesses, that they may learn to speak.” All through the West Indies the admiral left copious evidence in his wake that he had spontaneously implemented a cardinal principle of Western “civilization.” In his unsettling volume, *La paix blanche*, the French anthropologist Robert Jaulin called that principle “the negation of the other,” and contrasted it with the principle of affirmation characteristic of tribal cultures, wherein you affirm “the other who affirms you.” (1970)

In those relatively innocent first days of the invasion, that tribal affirmation reached out to Columbus and his sailors: “They remained so much our friends that it was a marvel, later they came swimming to the ships’ boats in which we were, and brought us parrots and cotton thread in skeins and darts and many other things...” In his famous “Letter to the Sovereigns” (1493) he reported that he had been everywhere so received: “They are so artless and so free with all they possess, that no one would believe it without having seen it. Of anything they have, if you ask them for it, they never say no; rather they invite the person to share it, and show as much love as if they were giving their hearts.” Without having seen it, I believe it.

## Filled With “Marvelous Love”

I also confess to having been long baffled by this “first contact” and all the others that followed. Why were tribal peoples almost invariably welcoming, generous, so filled with that “marvelous love” the admiral experienced? Robert Jaulin’s abstract formulations neatly dovetailed with all the evidence of their hospitality, and explained how those who affirmed themselves by negating the Other so easily victimized these people who lived by affirming the Other (who reciprocally affirmed them), but left relatively unexplained the origin and particulars of their life-cherishing affirmation. Columbus himself explained that his misnamed *Indios* located the source of all power and goodness in the sky and believed that was where he had come from, greeting him everywhere with cries of “Come! See the people from the sky!”

But with only an Arabic interpreter along, he had to gather his ethnographic data through signs and gestures, and his reading of those may have simply revealed that he liked feeling like a Judeo-Christian god, a being above or out of the nature in which his hosts so obviously reveled. Still, as in the Aztec myth of *Quetzalcoatl*, maybe the islanders really did see him as a bearded white god. Or so I puzzled over this first meeting and made the monumental error, I now believe, of not seeing that for tribal peoples even invaders from the sky were still in nature, not above it or out of it, just as in their metaphysics the sky and the sea and the land were inextricably connected in the web of life. Supernatural beings were strictly creatures of Columbus’s white world and of mine.

Throughout the Americas tribal people extended their hands in friendship because they affirmed the invaders as parts of the creation they worshipped all the days of their lives. I had failed to see that their principle of affirmation always carried with it the possibility of extension outward beyond family and clan and tribe to all other beings and things, in a universal embrace which reflected humankind’s unconscious yearnings for the unity of all people and lands. Native Americans did not need Charles Darwin to tell them that they were parts of the animal world,

Sigmund Freud to tell them that dreams were prime pathways to the animals within and to other two-legged and four-legged animals without, or Albert Einstein to tell them that their dancing bodies were akin to the dancing particles of dust from which we all came—their “animism” and stones that they believed held life were their benign counterparts of Einstein’s atoms and his fateful discovery of the tremendous latent energy in inert mass. With their keen sense of the relatedness of everything, they did not need the modern biologist Lewis Thomas to tell them that the earth is like a cell and warn them of the mystery of “the enormous, imponderable system of life in which we are embedded as working parts” (Schell 1982).

In every season they venerated that mystery in ceremonies made splendid by their humility and intimate communion with what the Hopi people call the “Mighty Something” (Whorf 1956). And at the spiritual center of their great affirmation was the dance, the moving means of interweaving life, culture, land. As in the Ojibwa song/dance of thanksgiving, the pulsating feet of their bronze bodies caressed and communed with the body of the earth (Evans-Wentz 1981).

Behold! Our Mother Earth is lying here; Behold! She giveth of her fruitfulness. Truly, her power she giveth unto us; Give thanks to Mother Earth who lieth here!

In *Problems of Art*, Susanne K. Langer had the insight that tribal peoples have been dancing worshipers, credited them with having developed the dance as the first “high art,” and defined this precursor form as the “outward showing of inward nature, an objective presentation of subjective reality.” Admirably lucid on the evolution and meaning of the dance in Western experience, this able philosopher still inadvertently illustrated the ethnocentric folly intrinsic to her presumption that she was using objective and, hence, universal terms.

## Nature Is In Their Bodies

Tribal people have no “high art;” or, indeed, any “low,” for that matter, since in their metaphysics the aesthetic, religious, intellectual, social and economic realms form a seamless whole. More importantly, they have never made our alienating disjunction between subjective inner life and objective outer reality—they would be truly mystified, I venture, by Langer’s summary of the dance as “an objectification [her emphasis] of subjective life” (1957). For the tribal mind, their dancing bodies are in nature and nature is in their bodies.

I do not use bodies here as a code word for bouncy genitalia, those “evil forces” of the Arizona missionary and my disgusted reviewer. I do not mean the whited sepulchres of their predecessor St. John Chrysostom, the early Christian Father who reviled bodies as tombs with inner parts full of filth. Rather, I mean whole persons, as the Wintu people are said to render our word.

Whole persons were Columbus’s real discoveries at Guanahani, the island he renamed after the Christian Lord and Savior. Coming out of two thousand years and more of negations, he could not see that in his discoveries he had caught up with his own feared body out there on the shining coral sand. Those “very handsome bodies with very fine faces” were stand-ins for the whole persons, for the soul and body persons buried in him and his crew under their armor of repressions.

His first impulse was to enchain those bodies, just as he sought to subjugate the rest of nature—conquest of nature was always synonymous with conquest of the unconscious. He was stone-blind to the truth that his hosts were whole persons with their own culture and language, in fine, because they represented what he was negating in himself. To have grasped their hands and entered their world, he would have had to become a child of nature. He would have had to see that the Other we negate is ourselves. He would have had to stop his negations.

White history has been the history of such negations. Admiral Samuel Eliot Morrison proved himself no less blind to tribal realities—or in his words, to the “guilelessness and generosity of the simple savage”—than his hero, Admiral Christopher Columbus. Like Morrison and his Harvard successor, Bernard Bailyn, American historians have sung hallelujahs in chorus for the conquerors of the so-called New World. Like Columbus they have tried to leave the growth-and-decay cycles of their own bodies behind by serving as guardians of a linear, continuous, irreversible Time of perpetual progress.

With rare exceptions, they have been the secular heirs of Judeo-Christian teleology with its reified Time—as Vine Deloria, Jr., pointed out in *God Is Red*, “Christian religion and the Western idea of history are inseparable

and mutually self-supporting" (1973). Believing with Francis Bacon that knowledge is power, many have sought to make their discipline scientific in order to predict and control history itself. Even some of the more perceptive champion the repressive domination of reason over feeling and, like my friendly critic, call for "less dancing and more analysis."

With our objectified Time, we historians have hidden the cyclical world of myth under our linear writings and have thereby robbed tribal people of their reality. I am not sure that a marriage of history and anthropology will produce kinder offspring. With rare exceptions again anthropologists have also marched in step with Western "civilization," coming in after the soldier and the missionary to round off the conquest. In their reports back to the metropolis, tribal people are not subjects but "objects of study." Anthropologists have furthered the despiritualization of tribal worlds by thrusting their way into underground sacred traditions. With reason, as Claude Duret reported in 1607, some "Indians, fearing that their secrets would be recorded and revealed, would not approach certain trees whose leaves the Spanish used for paper" (Greenblatt 1976).

With reason the Taos Pueblo people have always kept whites from witnessing their secret ceremonies at Blue Lake. Some secrets should stay secret. But we non-Indians carry along our old patterns of thought and feeling even in the present surge of interest in tribal worlds. "The white man's attitude is positive and dominating," recently observed Emory Sekaquaptewa, the Hopi teacher, "and he is employing this attitude even now in seeking to understand the Indian" (Sekaquaptewa 1976). In such positivistic hands ethnohistory will be merely another way of negating the native.

The Dream of Reason has bred monsters but conceivably we could change. As everybody knows, we are sliding swiftly down our linear history to extinction. The history that has swallowed up so much already will shortly swallow up itself. For that not to happen, for us not to blow up our world and with it all the other worlds that were never ours to destroy, Jonathan Schell suggests that we begin with three basic principles of life: "respect for human beings, born and not yet born," "respect for the earth," "respect for God or nature, or whatever one chooses to call the universal dust that made, or became us." Our power to "stop the future generations from entering into life compels us to ask basic new questions about our existence."

Schell rightly notes, and then wrongly adds that "no one has ever thought to ask this question before our time, because no generation before ours has ever held the life and death of the species in its hands." (1982) No tribal people have ever held such apocalyptic power, of course, but some have been profoundly concerned for the unborn and have judged decisions precisely in the light of that old question.

## The Seventh Generation

The distinguished Onodaga spokesman Oren Lyons, has said that one of the first mandates given to him and other Iroquois chiefs was "to make every decision...relate to the welfare and well-being of the seventh generation to come, and that is the basis by which we make decisions in council. We consider: will this be to the benefit of the seventh generation?" Schell's principles of life have always been basic to tribal metaphysics. That realization and the very extremity of our predicament might help swing us away from our history and toward life.

Nothing less than a full turnabout will do. It will never be accomplished with one foot in ethnography and one foot in history, as we have known these disciplines. It will call forth from within these fiefdoms charges of romanticism, primitivism, of "going native," and will elicit impatient reminders that "the Noble Savage is also a racist stereotype." It will make timely Herman Melville's discovery a century and more ago that it was impossible to be simultaneously a patriotic United States citizen and a committed opponent of Indian-hating. It will require seeing the existence of other metaphysics that call into question the universality and beneficence of all our cherished binary oppositions: time/matter, spirit/flesh, reason/passion, sacred/profane, animate/inanimate, subjective/objective, supernatural/natural, imagination/understanding—the lot. Above all, it will demand humility before the "Mighty Something." We shall have to stop our negations, become children of nature, and lift ourselves to the Sioux truth: "We are all related!"

I grant that this is a tall order, but then so is survival. We shall have to learn to speak a new language, the secret language of the body, as Martha Graham called the dance. Or rather, we shall have to relearn an old language, as

Lame Deer knew we would: Human beings “have forgotten the secret knowledge of their bodies, their senses...their dreams.” We have some way to go and the hour is late.

# fifth Estate

Richard Drinnon  
The Metaphysics of Dancing Tribes  
1987

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/326-summer-1987/the-metaphysics-of-dancing-tribes>  
Fifth Estate #326, Summer, 1987

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**