Dancing Our Troubles Away: Native American

Ways of Alleviating Suffering

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Imagine for a moment that the year is 1790 and you are sitting in a dark lodge filled with people sitting and standing around the perimeter, perhaps the smell of smoke from the fire is stinging your eyes and impeding your vision. You hear people singing and drums beating, and everyone around you appears serious and focused. All of a sudden a bunch of odd looking men wearing grotesque masks made from gourds and ragged clothes burst into the lodge and begin dancing about, twisting and contorting their bodies in such unusual ways that you wonder if they are deranged. Some of the masked men make obscene gestures towards the women, others chase the women who run from them, and to your horror everyone in the lodge is laughing at the spectacle.[[1]](#footnote-1)

To the uninitiated such a scene would probably draw exclamations of disgust and perhaps outrage that people would find their sexual antics toward women humorous. For the Cherokee people, however, the noisy, frightening scene is cathartic.

What the Cherokee are witnessing is a caricature of European men. Take a close look at this mask [slide]. You will see that the face is bearded and the long nose is surrounded by hair to represent male sexual organs [slides]. These masked men are called boogers and they symbolize the violence that white males brought to Cherokee country. Like many Native American women Cherokee females became the targets of Spanish, French, and English explorers and soldiers, who having traveled for weeks and even months across dangerous seas and lands without wives, turned to Native American women to satisfy their desires. Some took Cherokee women to work as servants including as servants of the bedroom, others brutally raped Cherokee women and then sold them as slaves to other Europeans. All the women suffered unimaginable insult to their bodies and their psyches. But the women did not suffer alone. The men, unable to protect them from the sexual aggressions of European males, seethed with anger and shame and often sought revenge. The Cherokees suffered a deep and painful injury to their social well-being.

They faced a crime that had been literally unheard of in their communities before the arrival of Europeans. To deal with the atrocities the Cherokee turned to their traditional stories and practices. Based on their story about the origin of disease the Cherokee could understand what was happening to them as community-wide illness. Sickness can arise when people violate social sanctions or when social oppositions arise between humans and supernatural forces (Gilbert 296). For the Cherokee, their ultimate concern was arguably fostering harmony especially among themselves but also with those whom they considered friends and allies including those of the spirit world. Rape of women violated social sanctions, it disrupted harmonious relations.

To restore harmony among the women and the community as a whole the Cherokee turned to the Booger Dance. According to Cherokee tradition the dance originated in the long ago, at a time when a monster known as Stone Coat [slide] threatened the wellbeing of human beings. He loved to eat people! One day a hunter who had climbed to the top of a high ridge saw an old man moving towards the Cherokee’s hunting camp. The old man’s behavior frightened the hunter so he hurried back to the camp to tell the others about him. After hearing the description of the old man the medicine man said that he was a cannibal monster who would kill and eat them all. He told everyone that the only way to destroy the monster was to have seven menstruating women stand in his path and as the monster encountered each one in turn, he would become weaker and weaker and by the time he reached the last woman, he would collapse.

Everything happened just as the medicine man said it would. When Stone Coat fell to the ground the hunters quickly pinned him to the ground with a stake and surrounded him with fire which burned towards him. As the flames started to lick at Stone Coat he began to talk. He told the Cherokee about all the medicines they could use to cure all kinds of sicknesses. He also told them of his vision of the coming of white and black people and strange Native Americans from the East. Just before Stone Coat breathed his last breath, he gave the Cherokee the Booger Dance as a means for counteracting the social and physical contamination that enemies or aliens (or should I say illegal or undocumented aliens) might bring among them.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Boogers with masks caricaturizing Native American enemies, and even dangerous animals, danced and mimicked those who brought disharmony among them [slides]. [Here is a mask of a Native American woman, and another one of a hornet’s nest]. By ridiculing those who brought misfortune, the boogers took away their power to threaten the people. Instead they became something to be laughed at, humiliated, and ostracized. So it made sense to the Cherokee to use booger masks and booger dances to counteract the malignant acts of Europeans.

When booger dancers caricatured European males, they were, in fact, rendering them impotent. European males became awkward, lewd, and weak intruders controlled by their sexual organs (Speck and Broom 36-37). The negative use of power and knowledge by European males is transformed through the sacred medium of dance into a positive healing practice. Their destructive behavior was subdued by caricature in dance, and as Lee Irwin explains, “what was destructive becomes transformed into traditional patterns of knowledge that are both potent and healing” (248).

The booger dance also worked because it called to mind the power of women who destroyed Stone Coat when he threatened the entire community. In addition, as Irwin noted, the purpose of healing ceremonies is “to restore balance and equilibrium” (248). For the Cherokee although oppositions exist in the world those oppositions can work to balance each other out. So, although Stone Coat was a life-taker, someone who ate people, in his death throes he was also a life-giver, one who provided knowledge about healing and the future. Thus, the act of rape that caused social disharmony was countered by the booger dance which brought the community together in a healing ceremony that worked by creating laughter. And we all know laughter has a positive effect on our health.

Sexual aggression was just one of many factors Cherokees and other Native Americans had to cope with as part of the contact experience. They perhaps faced no greater threat to their well-being and way of life than the introduction of private property and wealth. They entered an economic system that they did not fully understand. Nor at the time could they appreciate the enormous changes that would result from their participation in the system. Everyone is familiar with the story. Native Americans all across the continent lost enormous amounts of land, populations of game animals declined rapidly, and alcohol abuse became a huge problem. Everywhere in North America Native peoples turned to dance to help restore the world as they once knew it.

Among the Cherokee just before the War of 1812 they recognized that they were in a crisis state. People began reporting vision experiences in 1811 and early 1812 in which they learned why the Cherokee were suffering so much. The first report came from three people who were traveling together near Rocky Mountain in Georgia. According to one of them, Charlie, a messenger appeared to the three of them and told them that the Provider was angry with them for letting white people take over their land and for adopting the customs of white people. The messenger explained that that was why the game animals were disappearing. He also told them that if they returned to their old ways and began to hold feasts and dances again, then the game would return and the Mother of the Nation (Earth Mother) would once again provide for them. Although the Cherokees had never fully ceased dancing, they had curtailed their ceremonies. After hearing about the vision many revived the dances with great enthusiasm.

In a second vision experienced by a father who was caring for his sick children a messenger came to them and said that the Provider was unhappy that the Cherokee had sold so much land to white people and that they were no longer giving thanks for the bounty of the land [slide]. In other words, they were no longer holding dances in the Provider’s honor before partaking of the first corn of the harvest season.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In both these instances the Cherokee attributed the loss of land, game animals, and bountiful crops to their failure to show proper thanks to the Provider by dancing. They knew people were no longer carrying out the ceremonies as they once had. Some of the ceremonies had been shortened to one or two days, others were no longer being practiced. People were being disrespectful by drinking alcohol at the ceremonies. The Cherokee knew that the dances expressed Cherokee values such as redistribution of food, the importance of contributions by men and women, and respect for other beings of the world both physical and supernatural. By not dancing the children were not learning proper behavior towards other Cherokee and towards the spirits. They were suffering because of their own failures and only by reviving the dances could they restore the world as they once knew it.

However, in the late 1830s the Cherokee were marched to Indian Territory, and their dances practically disappeared. It was not until the 1890s that Redbird Smith and others started up new stomp grounds and revived the dances.

The Cherokee were not the only ones who believed that they could change the course of events if they danced. All across the North American continent prophets appeared who warned people that they needed to return to old ways, to do as the creator said, if they wanted to see better times. They needed to dance, and dance they did.

However, white settlers often did not appreciate the dancing. They saw dancing as the primitive antics of superstitious peoples. When the Lakota people in Dakota Territory began ghost dancing in the spring of 1890, they did so in hopes of bringing back the way of life they had known before they were confined to reservations. Indian agents and military officers warned the ghost dancers many times to cease dancing but they refused to stop. Even when officers arrested dancers, and local ranchers harassed them, they still danced. They danced for days at a time until one cold December day in 1890 when more than 500 United States soldiers and scouts rounded up a group of ghost dancers and massacred close to 300 unarmed men, women, and children [slide]. For 30 minutes they chased the Lakota down ravines and across the land for nearly three miles.

Before the massacre the Lakota had good reason to believe that their lives were in danger. In fact, some of the dancers were so afraid of what Indian agents, Indian police, and the U.S. military might do to them if they kept dancing, that they fled to the Badlands, but once again they did not stop dancing.

To understand why they continued dancing even under the threat of arrest or worse, we first have to understand what life was like for them in 1889 when they first heard of the dance [slide].Prior to the arrival of white settlers, soldiers, and missionaries the Lakota occupied a territory that stretched from Minnesota all the way to the Colorado Rockies. For at least 2,000 years they had been synchronizing their movements across the Great Plains with the movement of the sun through certain constellations in the sky and with the migration of bison. By observing the night skies they knew where they were supposed to be on the land, when they should be there, and what they should be doing. Life made sense.

Then the wasichus [white men] came. At first the whites were curiosities and then nuisances as missionaries and agents of the government tried to convert them into Christian farmers. Then settlers started appearing in greater and greater numbers either wanting to cross Lakota lands to reach the Pacific Northwest or to settle down in Dakota Territory as ranchers. The U.S. government urged the Lakota to discuss treaties with them. At first the treaties were about declaring friendship and about passage across the plains. Then in 1868 everything changed. The second Ft. Laramie treaty established the Great Sioux Reservation, the beginning of the end of a way of life for the Lakota. Lakota people found themselves confined to reservations, or what Black Elk called little islands that were always becoming smaller and smaller (9). Gold had been discovered. Railroad tracks were laid across the land and settlers came in droves. Whites began killing bison by the hundreds knowing that the Lakota depended upon them for nearly every aspect of their economy from housing to food to clothing [slides].In this slide you can see a huge pile of bison hides and an even larger pile of bison bones. Some just wanted the horns or the skins. They left the carcasses behind to rot on the plains. The Lakota played a part in the destruction as they participated in the bison trade economy. In less than a decade approximately 40 million bison were killed. By 1900 only 26 bison remained in the United States.

The Lakota no longer knew what to do. Whereas before they knew what the Great Mysterious expected of them, now they floundered in doubt and misery. Some tried to follow the instructions of the Indian agents and missionaries. They planted crops and raised cattle. But things never seemed to go their way. In 1888 black leg disease spread among their cattle. The next year the U.S. government called for more treaty negotiations. The Lakota were gone so long at the treaty negotiations that they lost a good part of their crops. The following year they lost their crops again but this time to drought. During this time of crisis the federal government drastically reduced the amount of rations appropriated to the Lakota even though the treaty signed the previous year promised to continue to provide the same amount of rations as provided in earlier treaties (Mooney 824-31).

Starving and disillusioned Lakota must have felt that the Creator was punishing them because they were no longer performing their ceremonial duties. They wanted to but Indian agents had banned their most important ceremony, the sun dance, since the early 1870s. By 1883 the Department of Interior had created their Rules for Indian Offenses that stipulated severe punishments for those Lakota found violating the bans.

The inability to carry out their ceremonies was traumatic for the Lakota. They believed the Creator spoke to them through constellations in the sky, [slide]letting them know when they should do certain ceremonies and where they should do them. The Lakota mirrored the sun’s movements through certain constellations by moving through the Black Hills. Now the Lakota could not follow the Creator’s instructions because they were confined to those shrinking “little islands.” Despair and disillusionment were everywhere as sickness and death surrounded them. Epidemics of influenza, measles, and whooping cough raced through their communities in 1889 and 1890. Hungry and sick they were unable to endure the winter cold without the clothes the government had promised but never provided. Many died.

Imagine how excited the Lakota felt in 1889 when they first heard about a prophet out west who spoke of a medicine dance that could bring better times for Native Americans. In the fall of that year the Lakota sent a delegation from Rosebud, Cheyenne River, and Pine Ridge agencies to Nevada to learn more about the Paiute prophet, Wovoka. When the delegation returned to Dakota Territory in March 1890, they brought good news. The Creator had spoken to Wovoka, telling him that he would send a major catastrophe to destroy all whites in the spring of 1891. There was more good news. The spirits of their deceased relatives and herds of bison and horses would return to repopulate the earth. The sick would be healed and diseases would no longer ravish their communities. However, in order to bring about all these changes, the Creator said they must dance. And dance they did. They danced for days at a time, some until they were so exhausted they fell to the ground.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Many outsiders believe that the Lakota danced so vigorously and in the face of threats from soldiers because they were desperate. Yes, the Lakota were living in desperate conditions, but to assume that they danced out of desperation is to misunderstand Lakota conceptions of the principles of life and healing.

The ghost dance, or more accurately the spirit dance, was a medicine dance, a powerful community-centered world renewal ceremony much like the Sun Dance.[[5]](#footnote-5) To the Lakota dance had the power to draw people together, to unite them in common prayer and purpose. Dance had the power to bring them visions, visions of how to heal themselves, and to restore the world as it should be.

Unfortunately, observers of the time and many scholars saw what they wanted to see, desperate people taking desperate measures. Their descriptions of the dances border on the fantastic. One white observer painted a picture of what could only be described as demonic possession [slide]. He described how dancers “in their frenzy rushed against our horses and were thrown headlong to the ground.” He continued by saying that they all danced until they “became so exhausted as to be able only to writhe on the ground, screaming and moaning all the time” (Utley 89). The descriptions were no doubt meant to horrify and titillate at the same time. One teacher at Standing Rock described dancers as “screaming, dancing and wildly waving their arms” (Vestal 1934, 69). Another woman identified as Mrs. Parker described the ghost dancers prayers and songs as “the most fearful, heart-piercing wails I ever heard,--crying, moaning, groaning, and shrieking” (Folk-Lore Scrap-Book 1891).

It does sound scary and if you didn’t know they were talking about the ghost dance, you would think they were describing a haunted house on Halloween night. Even the descriptions of their dance outfits bring to mind images of ghosts and goblins. One scout described the dancers as dressed “in their devilish toggery” (Kelly 50). [Slide: Look at this artist’s depiction of the dancers.]

Now let me describe the ghost dance to you from a sympathetic perspective that takes into consideration Lakota religious beliefs and societal values. Lakota ceremonies in accordance with the natural patterns of nature last from 4 to 7 days, 4 symbolizing the 4 directions, the 4 winds, and the 4 stages of life; 7 representing the embodiment of the cosmos, the 4 directions, above, below, and this world. In accordance with the natural patterns the ghost dance typically lasted four nights. In preparation for such a lengthy ceremony the ghost dancers brought their tipis and set them up all around the dance ground. They placed a tree in the center of the ground symbolizing the connection between Maka, the earth, and Skan, the Sky, thus creating a cosmic whole. Such an important ceremony required the dancers to purify themselves in sweat lodges and to mark themselves with the symbols of the sacred including the sun, moon, morning star, and the eagle. All of them created the symbols using the sacred color red among others. Some wore sacred eagle feathers in their hair (Utley 1963, 85-90; Mooney 822-24).

When the time came to dance the dancers arranged themselves in a circle around the center tree clasping their hands in unity [slide]. Compare this photo of the ghost dance with the previous one. Their faces are not contorted nor are their arms and legs flailing about wildly. The dance began slowly with people moving to the left in a sunwise direction [slide]. Although this is a slide of an Arapaho ghost dance, you can see the calm concentration of the dancers as they slowly began dancing. Just as the Lakota journey across the land mirroring the sun’s movement through the constellations in order to renew the world each year, the dancers also moved in a circular pattern to renew the world, to bring an end to the pain wrought by whites and to restore the Lakota world as they once knew it [slide].As the Lakota danced they sang songs to Tunkasila, or Grandfather, describing what will happen.

Someone cometh to tell news, to tell news;

There shall be a buffalo chase,

There shall be a buffalo chase;

Make arrows; make arrows. (Utley 88)

For the Lakota and other Native Americans, words don’t just describe the world around them, words sung in the proper ritual fashion has the power to shape the world. The Lakota believed that the bison had returned to the womb of Maka, the earth mother, and through song and dance they were calling the bison to return to the surface of the earth as they had once before in the long ago.

The Lakota had lost a lot of relatives to war, disease, and hunger and they longed to see their relatives again even if only in the spirit world. For the Lakota, it seemed as though the spirits were no longer around. So they sang, calling for them.

The people are coming home,

The people are coming home,

Saith my father, saith my father

Saith my father.

The time cometh, I shall see him,

The time cometh, I shall see him,

Saith thy mother, saith thy mother. (Utley 88-89)

Some of the dancers following the actions of Inyan, that which existed when nothing else did, cut themselves. Their blood flowed just at Inyan’s power flowed when he cut himself, reinforcing the idea that power comes from sacrifice, from giving of oneself for the benefit of the community. Cutting themselves was also a way of showing grief for the loss of land, bison, and relatives. That act of sacrifice had deep symbolic meaning for the Lakota. It was not an act of desperation by deranged people as some have depicted them.

Yes, they were crying or weeping, but not groaning or screaming or shrieking. Lakota cried for specific purposes. For example, when a Lakota goes onto the hill to seek a vision, he or she cries. Crying is a ritual way of making oneself pitiful to Tunkasila. Lakota recognize that all that they have comes from Tunkasila. They weep to express deeply felt humility so that the spirits will come to them in a vision. They also wail over the loss of loved ones. In the ghost dance in which they prayed to Tunkasila for better times and for the return of the spirits of their deceased relatives, they also wept in humility and in grief.

As the dance progressed the dancers began to move faster and faster and faster [slide]. The rhythmic movement, the speed of the dancing, all pushed their bodies to their limits aiding them in achieving trance-like states, a state in which they became open to receiving the sacred, of having a vision. A vision is contact with powerful spirit beings who guide them and protect them. The interaction takes place at a spiritual level. The Lakota believe that a person has four souls. One of those souls, the nagi, sometimes described as the shadow, ghost, or spirit of the person, is the spirit that can move between this world and the spirit world. During the ghost dance some of the people reached a state where their nagi traveled to the spirit world. When the dancers regained consciousness they spoke of seeing their relatives, of being in a beautiful land where everyone is happy, and where they experienced a wonderful reunion with their friends and relatives who had died at some previous time.

The physical demands of the ghost dance were familiar to the Lakota. They have a long history of going through ceremonies that require humility, fasting and thirsting, and physical endurance that prepare them physically and mentally to enter a state in which they are able to communicate with the spirit world. Although Lakota have ceremonies that facilitate communication with the spirit beings, sometimes visions came to people without warning. In such cases the person may appear sick or even dead to their relatives, but then recovers to tell of extraordinary visions.

The ghost dance made sense to the Lakota. It fit in with their understanding of the way in which one prayed to the Great Mysterious when one sought guidance, aid, or power. The dance, itself, was a way to strengthen the community. Through ritual sacrifice of the flesh, through strenuous dance, through expressions of humility the dancers gave hope to each other. They let each other know that they were willing to do what was necessary to help their community. Like in the sun dance the people saw the ghost dancers engaging in acts of bravery and fortitude and that gave them strength. Yes, they were weeping and dancing rapidly and some fell to the ground in a trance-like state, but they were not deranged people possessed by demons as depicted by local whites.

Unfortunately, white ranchers, Indian agents, military officers, and reporters painted a false picture of militant Sioux war dancing as they prepared to attack whites. The ghost dancers never had a chance to help the Lakota people recover from the shock of colonization and the reservation system. The massacre of nearly 300 ghost dancers ended the public practice of the ghost dance as frightened dancers fled to agencies for protection and others stopped dancing for fear of further attacks.

However, the ghost dance did not cease to exist after the massacre as many scholars have stated, but it did go underground, it did undergo changes, and very few danced as the threat of imprisonment or punishment for practicing ceremonies became greater and greater. However, the ghost dance returned to the public eye in 1973. That year American Indian activists occupied Wounded Knee [slide], the location of the massacre that took place 83 years earlier. The occupiers were publicizing their displeasure with U.S. policies including the termination and relocation programs of the 1950s, the mishandling of Native American Affairs by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the suppression of Native American self-determination, and the recent heavy-handed tactics of Oglala tribal chairman, Dick Wilson.

Surrounded by units of the South Dakota National Guard, U.S. Marshall Services deputies, FBI agents, BIA police, tribal police, and border patrolmen, and sometimes exchanging gunfire, the occupiers refused to surrender to authorities. Hungry and tired, the occupiers, who had few resources, turned to the ghost dance for strength and guidance. They found some burlap and curtains and made ghost dance shirts out of them. They also painted ghost dance symbols on the shirts just as the first ghost dancers had 83 years earlier. Leonard Crow Dog led forty men and women in four days of ghost dancing in the gully where the massacre had occurred [slide]. Russell Means reminded the occupiers that the 1890 ghost dancers had suffered from cold and hunger, just as they now suffered. The ghost dance renewed their spirits. Eventually they negotiated the end of the occupation. Symbolically, the dancers reversed the events of 1890 because they walked out of Wounded Knee alive. By facing the might of the American government with their demands, and occupying Wounded Knee for 71 days, and, more importantly, coming out of it alive, the activists helped the Lakota as well as all Native Americans to heal from the devastation of the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee. Wounded Knee became a place of survival and not just of death (Pesantubbee).

For Native Americans colonization has not ended nor have Native people fully recovered from the devastating U.S. policies or missionary agendas of the 19th and 20th centuries. In fact, as George Tinker, an Osage theologian, has pointed out, Native Americans have so internalized the messages of centuries of colonialism that “we have become complicit in our own oppression” (118). In his book, *Missionary Conquest,* Tinker states “Today, an Indian pastor is more likely than a white missionary to criticize the paganism of traditional spirituality” (118).

Yet, arguably dance has done much to overcome that “internal colonialism” (Tinker 118).[[6]](#footnote-6) After nearly half a century of condemning those Native American Protestants who participated in powwows, powwow dancing started becoming an acceptable socio-cultural activity among church members in the 1970s.

Although powwow dancing can be traced back to the mid eighteenth century, the first large intertribal powwow took place in 1926 at a major colonial institution, Haskell Indian School in Kansas. The powwow became a way for Native Americans from diverse cultural backgrounds forced together in an alien boarding school setting to find common means for expressing their Native identities and cultural practices. This was not an insignificant turn of events.

As I mentioned earlier many dances associated with major ceremonies had been banned by the Department of Interior in the 1890s through the early 1930s. Instead of tribal communities coming together to carry out traditional ceremonial dances, a few Native Americans, many of them Lakota, found themselves dancing to entertain whites. The irony here is that although it was illegal for the Lakota to hold ceremonial dances, they could legally dance as entertainment for white audiences (Browner 29-30). At one time there were more than 50 different dance groups touring the United States, Canada, and Europe. Many were recruited by William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody and Gordon W. “Pawnee Bill” Lillie to dance in their wild west shows.

Although the dances originated from traditional dances Buffalo Bill and Pawnee Bill demanded that Native American dancers spice up their dances to entertain the audiences (Browner 30). Of course, the dances and dancers were meant to excite the crowd by reminding them of their claim to greatness as the ones chosen to tame the west including the “wild Indians”.

Some of those dances later morphed into powwow dances such as the fancy dance. However, despite the powwow’s roots in reservation-era and post-reservation colonialism, the powwow became a means for Native American healing. For reservation Native Americans the local, community powwows embody and express traditional religious beliefs and practices. The same is true for urban contest powwows although the spiritual aspects might not be so apparent to uninformed audiences. Powwow dances transmit tribal and intertribal histories, beliefs and customs which, in turn, connect Native Americans to their ancestors and to the sacred. Tara Browner relates how she heard “Many Indians speak about ancestors being present at pow-wows and dancing along with them, joining worlds with a drumbeat sounding simultaneously at both” (98).

Powwows heal because they provide a culturally significant way of identifying as Native American. For centuries missionaries and teachers had tried to Americanize Native Americans, cutting off their hair, forbidding the speaking of their language, and taking away their traditional clothing. Native American children were taught to be ashamed of their traditional ways.

Powwow dances changed all that at least for powwow dancers. Generations of Native Americans had been taught by missionaries and teachers that women were subordinate to the men contrary to traditional complementary roles found in Native American societies. The cost to family and community harmony over generations has been enormous. The powwow is one way in which Native Americans have resisted that message [slide]. For example, the powwow reminds everyone of the importance of women by conferring the title of Powwow Princess upon young women and girls who compete for that honor. To be a powwow princess is to be recognized as someone who exemplifies the best of what it means to be a part of the powwow community and a tribal community. Those who earn the title demonstrate traditional talent perhaps through dance, song, or storytelling. The Powwow Princess is held to a high standard serving as an example to young girls. She is someone who is skilled at public speaking and who conveys traditional values to those around her. Powwow Princesses are always recognized at powwows, and as you can see in this slide of a grand entry [slide], they are a prominent part of the procession.

Powwows are also about healing [slide]. The Ojibwe-Anishnaabe say that the jingle dancer “constitutes a prayer for healing.” Thus every time they dance those who know the origin of the jingle dress know that prayers are being made. The powwow instills pride in Native Americans. As Robert DesJarlait describes it, “whether we are dancers or singers or spectators, when the powwow ends, we walk away from it with a profound sense of well-being. . . . We feel good about who we are and where we come from” (115).

Whether we are talking about the historical and generational traumas resulting from U.S. policies towards Native Americans, or contemporary socio-economic problems in Indian country today, dance is one way Native Americans heal themselves. Dance was and continues to be a way for individuals and entire communities to cleanse themselves of the effects of colonization and to transform the way they see the world, even if only temporarily. Through dance Native Americans maintain their connection to the spirit world, to their ancestors, and to their stories.

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1. This description of booger dances and masks was drawn from the version found in Frank G. Speck and Leonard Broom, *Cherokee Dance and Drama* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), 25-39. Photos of masks are between pages 54-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Stone Coat story was drawn from the version found in James Mooney, *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* (Ashville, NC: Bright Mountain Books, 1992), 319-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more information on the Cherokee movement of 1811-12 see Michelene E. Pesantubbee, “When the Earth Shakes: The Cherokee Prophecies of 1811-12” *The American Indian Quarterly* (Sumer 1993): 301-318 and William G. McLoughlin, *The Cherokee Ghost Dance: Essays on the Southeastern Indians 1789-1861* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See James Mooney, *The* Ghost-Dance Religion and Wounded Knee(NY: Dover Publications, Inc. 1973 Reprint ed. for more information about the ghost dance. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Raymond J. DeMallie, “The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account” *Pacific Historical Review* (1982): 385-405 for a discussion of the ghost dance as part of a larger Lakota cultural phenomenon and not an isolated one, and it’s similarities to the sun dance. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Phrase used by Robert Thomas and quoted in Tinker, *Missionary Conquest.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)