

# A Review of 'We Are Dancing For You'

Dana Lloyd

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*We Are Dancing for You: Native Feminisms and the Revitalization of Women's Coming-of-Age Ceremonies* begins with author Cutcha Risling Baldy's story about her refusal, as a child, to participate in a Ch'ilwa:l – Flower Dance ceremony – that her mother offered to throw for her. It is a touching story, one that lends the book its urgency. As a reader, I felt the impact of the author's passion about this decolonial feminist practice throughout the book.

Revitalized for the first time after many decades in 2001, the contemporary Flower Dance is performed over three, five, or ten days. Each day presents the young woman with different activities through which she can learn more about her role in Hupa society. Daily activities include running, steaming, talking circles, ritual fasting, bathing, learning new skills, learning about herbs, and singing.

Running has been referred to by one of the participants interviewed in the book as “a metaphor for life” and as “totally zen.” Bathing is an important part of the ritual because it used to be routine before colonization. Bringing the girl's family, as well as the whole community, together is another important aspect of the dance. Talking circles and meals are two examples of such communal moments in the ceremony. At night, the community comes together to sing and dance over the girl, who is supposed to remain in seclusion and meditation, and therefore she sits in a corner of the house, covered by a blanket. While she cannot see the dancers and the singers, she can hear them and know they are all there for her. Humor plays a central psychological role in the ceremony, and in decolonization more generally, as the elders and medicine women who were responsible for the revitalization of the Flower Dance explain.

Risling Baldy provides rich historical, ethnographic, cultural, and theoretical contexts for the revitalization of the Flower Dance, thus blurring disciplinary boundaries, just as she so skillfully does on her blog, where she critically reflects on current local events in her Hupa community (<https://www.cutcharislingbaldy.com/blog>). This contextualization is crucial; it not only grounds decolonization – which so many authors write about abstractly – but also teaches the reader the history of northern California from a Native perspective, provides a critical examination of the relationship between California Native peoples and anthropologists, and locates the Flower Dance within the broader discourse on menstruation as taboo. Having taught this book in an upper level undergraduate course on Native American religions and politics with a majority non-Indigenous students, I would note that this latter aspect of the book has had the strongest impact on many students, including on the men in the class.

I highly recommend using this book in undergraduate courses. Its prose is engaging and easy to follow, and its narrative framework does not let you forget how deeply personal it is: “When I was twelve I started menstruating, and my mother insisted on taking me out to dinner to celebrate,” Risling Baldy tells us in her preface (x). And she continues: “During dinner my mother told me about the Hupa women's coming-of-age ceremony. She said, ‘In the old days, we would have done a Flower Dance for you. The Hupa used to celebrate this time. It was very important to us, when girls became women. We could do a dance for you now, if you'd like’.” Risling Baldy wishes she had

known at the time what her mother was offering. She wishes she had known that the dance had not been performed for many years. So, in a sense, this study is her way of getting to know all this. But this personal motivation to study the revitalization of the Flower Dance does not make the study any less academically rigorous. In fact, Risling Baldy's study is an exemplar of feminist decolonial practice: both revitalizing the dance and writing about this revitalization are feminist decolonial practices. Her work exemplifies ethnographic refusal, to use Audra Simpson's term (which Risling Baldy does). Recovering the power women had had in the Hupa community before contact, power that has been constantly undermined through genocidal practices, including the criminalization of the Flower Dance ceremony, the author demonstrates that the biopolitics of settler colonialism is necessarily heteropatriarchal.

More than anything, perhaps, I see Risling Baldy's skilled storytelling as an act of asserting Indigenous sovereignty; I believe this is how she sees her work as well: "Stories were and are how Indigenous peoples define and redefine their sovereignty, spaces, cultures, and knowledge" (23), she writes. My students have told me, and I agree with them, that one of the most powerful aspects of this work is that it does not reveal any of the details about how the ceremony itself is done until the last chapter, and even then, it unfolds slowly, through testimonies of young women who recently participated in it. For this reason, the story of the Flower Dance's revitalization unfolds as a mystery book (and Risling Baldy's background in creative writing is apparent). The reader is exposed to the different layers of oppression that contextualize the suppression of the ceremony before she reaches the catharsis of its revitalization. And throughout the book, the reader is immersed in Hupa epistemology, ontology, and language.

In closing, I would like to talk explicitly about what this book offers to those who study and teach religious studies. Risling Baldy is somewhat of an outsider to the discipline of religious studies. Nevertheless, she offers us, religious studies scholars in general, but especially scholars of Indigenous religions, anthropologists of religion, historians of American religions, and scholars of religion and gender, significant insights, both theoretical and methodological. Scholars of material religion in particular will find fascinating the author's focus on the materiality of Hupa culture and of the Flower Dance, both in its historical and revitalized incarnations. Detailed descriptions of the menstruation hut, regalia, medicinal herbs, and songs central to the ceremony itself and to the broader Hupa culture are woven together with critique of the ways salvage anthropologists, such as the infamous Alfred Kroeber, had used this material culture to portray it both as "savage" and as "dying." And this story is complicated by testimonies of Hupa women involved in the revitalization of the Flower Dance about having to rely, carefully and discerningly, on these ethnographic texts – and the objects kept in museums now – to retrace the ways the ceremony should be done, but without inheriting the bias of those anthropologists' interpretations.

This book joins efforts to decolonize religious studies, in the way it politicizes ritual, but especially in its refusal to explain the ritual by making analogies to "western" or colonial religious terminology. Inviting the readers into the Hupa epistemological and

political world, she asks us to understand this world on its own terms. Indigenous peoples, in their varied struggles for justice, have been forced to use the English language and western concepts (including the term “religion” itself) in order to be heard by lawyers, politicians, academics, and the public. Risling Baldy is doing it differently. And I hope we can learn from her how to be more respectful to the religious phenomena we study.

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