

Dancing at the Crossroads

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Image by Roksan Kohen

In the mythical story of Persephone and Demeter, the arts are stolen from the earth while Persephone is in the underworld. The dark, frozenness that resulted was only thawed by Persephone's return, bringing dance and stories back to life.

Under the direction of Professors Michelle LeBaron and Carrie MacLeod, this project explores how dance and movement combined with narrative can broaden peacemaking capacities in intercultural conflicts. Theoretical grounding for the project comes from interdisciplinary research on dance and kinesthetic learning, neuroscience, social psychology, expressive arts and intercultural conflict resolution.

Building on our earlier CRANEⁱ work in Sierra Leone, Europe and Canada, the Dancing at the Crossroads (DTC) project investigates somatic dynamics of perception, attribution and cognitive habits in conflict, and identifies potential contributions of movement-based practices to training and practice in conflict transformation.ⁱⁱ We focus on movement-based approaches because we are struck at the neglect of the body as a resource in conflict; it is the site of conflict *and* reconciliation. The body is the:

- primary locus of emotion;
- conduit to access memories beneath conscious awareness; and
- most important filtering device in interpreting and negotiating the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the summer of 2010, a DTC week-long workshop brought thirty-four senior conflict resolution trainers, process designers and practitioners from several countries together with artists and students to explore synergies between conflict processes and kinesthetic methods. We met at Saas Fee, Switzerland, hosted by colleagues at the European Graduate School whose ground-breaking work in expressive arts has provided continual inspiration for our own.

With internationally-renowned dancer and educator, Margie Gillis, we interspersed movement-based workshops with dialogue sessions. This dance-dialogue interchange offered multiple lenses into how heightened capacities for sensory and perceptual acuity could be safely and ethically applied to see multiple dimensions of complex conflicts. A myriad of body-based practices were employed to explore how physical flexibility could enhance behavioral flexibility and thus broaden behavioral repertoires in conflict.

Structured activities helped participants reflect on their physical and cognitive habits in conflict and how these related to peacemaking. Exercises touched numerous dimensions including space, time, energy, touch, texture and tempo as participants explored subtle nuances, shifts and turning points in fluctuating conflict dynamics. We examined connections between 'default states of being' and unconscious beliefs, noticing how we move and physically tend to 'meet' each other in conflict. Sometimes in silence, other times with accompanying music, we concentrated on intentionally listening to our bodies and learning from our own and others' physical states and movements.

Together, we explored a number of questions in the movement and dialogue segments, including these:

- How does conflict live in my body and how can I embody it safely?

- How do I embody and respond physically to
 - strong emotions
 - flexibility and fluidity
 - variations and possibilities related to space and boundaries
 - my role as a catalyst for change

in ways that promote healthy, creative approaches to training and practice?

Workshop participants are currently contributing to an edited book on somatic, arts-based approaches to training and intervention arising from their workshop and practice experiences. They reported that the workshop:

- broadened their awareness of how inner intentions and emotions translate through muscular impulses to reveal their own and others' cultural systems of meaning and ways of expressing conflict;
- enhanced their capacities to improvise and imagine more nuanced, creative ways through conflict arising from increased flexibility and fluidity;
- helped them develop cultural fluency as dance and movement vocabularies communicated symbolic dimensions of identity and meaning;
- increased their physical mobility, and –with this –increased their abilities to embody suppleness while navigating challenging relational dynamics;
- taught them how 'negative space' between them and others can transform into a generative zone where wide-ranging possibilities counter entrenched positions and rigid standpoints;
- showed them that experiencing neuromuscular shifts through entrainment and mirroring contributes to new levels of openness, curiosity and empathy;
- gave them concrete experiences of movement, re-patterning cognitive habits and awakening intuitive capacities.

Dancing at the Crossroads has been invited to offer arts-based movement work in a wide range of peacemaking contexts in:

- North American and European cities;
- Lima, Peru; and
- Immigrant and refugee resettlement programs in Canada.

In partnership with colleagues, DTC is helping to midwife new worlds of practice in conflict transformation and peacemaking. Welcoming body wisdom and its inherent beauty into our practice; accessing imagination through multi-modal arts; refining and integrating learning through arts-based reflection and evaluation –these are some of the ways that Persephone's creative genius can transform the most entrenched conflicts of our time. As she is welcomed into peacemaking processes, Persephone can fulfill her transformative potential: "Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking."^{iv}

ⁱ CRANE ran from 2004-2008 and is an acronym for Conflict Resolution, Arts and iNtercultural Experience

ⁱⁱ The name 'Dancing at the Crossroads' is a reference to crossroads in the Irish countryside where people gathered to dance in defiance of a prohibition during occupation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Noland, Carrie, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*. (London, UK and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 2.

^{iv} Joseph Campbell, Ed. *The Portable Jung* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1976), 321.