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Rangi Ruru walk: Social and spatial connections through hybrid intermedial practices

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Abstract:

In 2013 Becca Wood, Spatial Performance Practitioner, and Molly Mullen, Applied Theatre Practitioner, collaborated to create a short ambulatory performance with audio score for a group of drama educators attending a conference workshop on the possibilities of walking as performance. The performance was created remotely from the intended site: Rangi Ruru Girl's School, in Christchurch New Zealand. Following the destruction of the 2012 earthquake this site was in a state of transformation and recovery. The performance walk attended to the histories, geographies and politics of this place, somatically, architecturally, and socially. This paper engages with three critical questions: How might mediated listening and walking activate the coming together of bodies and place? What performative shifts occurred for the participants in the walk and workshop? How might we come to our senses?

Through a performative practice of mediated site-based listening and walking, this paper is a reflection on the creative process and performance. We consider the potential for technologically mediated performance to offer new modes for learning and creative practice through interdisciplinary and evolving intermedial practices.

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Rangi Ruru walk: Social and spatial connections through hybrid intermedial practices

Becca Wood* and Molly Mullen

“Take a moment to bring your attention to your feet, to where we stand. What is it to stand, to make a stand? What do our feet tell us as they root into the ground? Perhaps of a time before, feeling through the concrete layers, before the architecture began to mark time and interrupt the vast plains, covered in swamp, coarse scrub and flax” (listen to supplemental content to hear the full *Rangi Ruru Walk* audio score from 2014). This vocal sound score began the ambulatory performance, *Rangi Ruru Walk*, created for the 2014 Drama New Zealand conference at Rangi Ruru Girls School, Christchurch. The performance was followed by a workshop for drama educators exploring the possibilities of walking as performance. This practice report is shaped around three questions: How might mediated listening and walking activate the coming together of bodies and place? What performative shifts occurred for the participants in the walk and workshop? How might we come to our senses? As we explain and reflect on the project, we address each of these questions. In doing so, we introduce practice-informed theories about the geographic, social and cultural effects of this applied intermedial practice.

Background: a place to stand

The *Rangi Ruru Walk* responded to the conference theme: the art forms and genres that we work with. We intended to invite new modes of practice for drama educators and applied theatre practitioners. We wanted to share aspects of our separate projects, which combined ambulatory performance and new media technologies to create participatory experiences in urban environments. Wood’s practice-led research has generated an original term choreoauratics to describe a mode of critical spatial practice activated through social choreographies for the ears. Combining somatic processes, prosthetic listening (listening to digital audio scores through headphones on MP3

players) and walking activates the grounds for rethinking the way we might come to know place and each other. The practice of somatics introduces some fundamental operations in this walking/listening enquiry: a focus on process over end-gaining, moving from invisible scores, listening as a means to make connection, working as community, and doing less. Choreoauratics has been tested in a series of site-based participatory events over the last four years. Mullen first worked with ambulatory performance on a collaborative research project with Te Puna Kōhungahunga, a Māori medium early childhood centre¹. The project explored early childhood teaching and learning in the performing arts (Lines et al., 2014). With the mutual aim of developing a sustainable culture of performing arts, Molly and the kaiako – educators – sought modes of performance that resonated with the centre’s existing culture and practices. Te Puna Kōhungahunga has an established practice of walking on Maungawhau – Mt Eden – a volcanic cone that overlooks the centre and has cultural significance to the centre and the “children’s collective emerging Maori identity” (Lines et al. 2014, 16). Molly joined these walks and suggested exploring walking as a performance practice. They experimented with bringing drama, storytelling, dance and song into the walking practice without displacing its cultural value or strong child-led ethos. Children generated stories, dance, and music as they walked, and digitally recorded sounds, movements and images in the environment as material for further creation. The process culminated in a performance hikoi – walk – for whanau – family/community (for more on this event see Lines et al. 2014; Matapo & Roder 2014; Te Puna Kōhungahunga & Mullen 2015). Informing this work were paradigms of early childhood education that conceptualise the pedagogical potential of relationships with community and environment. In this project learning was understood to occur through Mana Aotūroa – exploration and the playful coming together of bodies and place (Ministry of Education 1996, 16) and as rhizomatic – open-ended, experimental inquiry with multiple possibilities (Olsson 2009; Dahlberg 2003).

The question: how might mediated listening and walking activate the coming together of bodies and place? arose from the above projects to inform the creation of the *Rangi Ruru Walk* and workshop. We found a common concern with possibilities for recovering or generating connection to community and place through the act of walking.

¹ This is an early childhood education centre for children aged 10 months to 5 years providing an environment in which children experience te reo Māori (language) and tikanga (culture).

As a fifth generation New Zealander and a recent British immigrant to Aotearoa New Zealand, our practice is specific to our particular relationships to this place. So, we begin with tūrangawaewae – finding a place to stand, here, in this place, locating the self and the practice in both the global and in a local context. Pre- and post-colonial culture informed the way we attempted to connect place and body through a mediated walking/listening practice, specifically finding connections between principles of Māori tikanga and somatic thinking. In te reo Māori, whenua translates as land, ground, placenta and together (Mead 2013, 15). This resonates with the notion of an ‘ecological body’ within somatic practice; understanding the body as always in relationship with the environment (Batson 2009, 5). We attempt to bring indigenous understanding and somatic practice together in the act of making a stand as a key strategy for this practice methodology. Asking how we make connection to the ground we stand on, how we stand on our own two feet, resonates with two cultures that identify the body and the environment as entangled. Inviting participants to ‘tune in’ to the relationships we make to our geographic location was critical to the methodology for our choreographed listening walking event.

Reflection on practice 1: Research and preparation

The plan was to produce a walk for the conference site, and a workshop process that would give participants (mostly drama teachers) a creative vocabulary for making walks with their students. Separated from the site by over 1,000 kilometres, we designed the walk for a place that we had never experienced physically. After researching remotely, it was a database giving the origin of Christchurch street names that provided the most provocative direction into the area’s colonial history. This led to more detailed social histories in physical and online repositories. Web-based maps, aerial photographs and environmental studies showed the changing nature of the land from pre-colonial times onwards. The school is located in what would have been an area of low-lying swampland with no permanent Māori settlements. In the 18th century, European settlers drained, cleared and cultivated and then as Christchurch expanded, the early farm estates were developed into built up suburban spaces. Situated on the Pacific Rim, earthquakes have always shaken New Zealand and the Canterbury region has experienced a multitude of significant quakes historically. The September 2010 and February 2011 earthquakes damaged Christchurch to the extent that the city’s swampy

origins have literally resurfaced. Through poetic narrative, layered sound, and travelling through space with heightened sensory attention, we wanted the walk to include imaginative and sonorous movement through the substratum of the city, unearthing dissonant layers of social, political, geographic and personal histories.

We drafted scores for the walk from historic and contemporary material about the school and surrounding area, producing narrative fragments and instructions for activities that choreographed bodies through and in relation to the site, its histories and each other. Wood shaped these into the final audio score (hear supplemental content). Incorporating our own practices, and elements of the works of other artists working in similar territories, we designed the workshop 'toolbox'. Participants would choose a walking route, a guiding system, and up to three 'mediums' that would invite different qualities of relationship between body and place: sound, sight, touch/texture, movement/stillness, play/games, tasks, character, people, memory, story, history, writing/drawing, signs and symbols.

Reflection on practice 2: Encountering thresholds

The walk

Each participant is equipped with an MP3 player pre-loaded with the sound score and a small bag containing chalk, pencil and paper. We lead the group to stand on a rectangle of grass, sheltered by trees. On cue the participants start the audio score. The voice they hear is Wood's mum in the role of Helen Gibson who co-founded the school with her sisters and was headmistress from 1889-1938. She is remembered, amongst many other things, as a nervous public speaker. The walkers hear her share her memories, experiences and imaginings of this place. They move according to her instructions or invitations. Some take out their chalk, drawing and writing across the cracked concrete. Then, almost together, the group move into a narrow passage between two school buildings. They stop and lean against the cool walls. For the first time they are asked to notice each other, and there is a visible exhalation, letting go, as they take the prompt to talk and walk with each other. Then they disperse, out into the open space in front of Te Koraha, the original school building. Bodies stretch and expand into the playground space. Having accompanied Helen on this walk through her school, her memories and

imaginings, they are invited to help her prepare for a public speech. Each walker writes a message and slips it into the pocket of a coat placed in a doorway.

Figure 1: Messages to Helen Gibson written by participants on the *Rangi Ruru Walk* in April 2014

The walk finishes with the group standing together, staring up at the pale grey sky.

The workshop

Participants work in small groups to create a walk using our 'toolkit' and then we take each of these walks in turn. The walks draw our attention to the mundane– mesh fences, gravel paths, passing traffic. Their guiding systems and choice of mediums heighten our senses, calling on us to look closely, listen carefully, touch curiously and interact with unnoticed environmental features of the school. The first walk takes us over a threshold, from inside the temporary classroom building onto the path outside. A human guide asks us to attend to subtle changes in the environment such as texture and temperature, moving in bare feet from the cool grey concrete to the hot black tarmac and across crunchy gravel. The next group use chalk marks to direct our attention to a temporary fence that frames a landscape in a process of reconstruction and recovery following the earthquakes. Other walks take us on imaginary journeys, into poetic spaces where we hide from giants or imagine travelling away in a passing car. We end by sharing examples of ambulatory performance and inviting the group to reflect on how they might work with this practice in their own settings. We discuss ideas for walks to engage students with their local environments and histories. There is much interest in the method of researching and creating an audio score and many participants leave with embryonic project ideas.

Through the *Rangi Ruru Walk*, and the creation of the participants' walks, we suggest that multiple thresholds were activated. Bodies became co-present to layered sensory, somatic and poetic realms. Participants are drawn to the thresholds of these realms through the act of walking that is mediated by prosthetic, narrative and environmental sound, activating the sensate. In the workshop, thresholds were encountered as heightened sensory awareness was activated by physical engagement with the site, story-telling, listening, vocalising and kinaesthetic activities.

Tuning in to space and place

In following the headphonic² score the participants on the walk became both subject to it, but were also de-centred and desubjectified as the sound distributed boundaries and thresholds within and outside the body. (Dis)organised in sound, the multiple bodies that participated in this work; the fleshy bodies, the bodies of the land, the architecture and place became bodies without organs (Deleuze and Guattari 1984). Through the practice of walking and listening, thresholds emerged as bodies, place and the headphonic spaces acted as vehicles for interrogating limits. We argue that mediated listening becomes a strategy for tuning into the sub strata of the urban landscape. Walkers, and the creators of walks, connect to that which is not visible, the unseen, the hidden, the lost or the forgotten, and through doing so find the perceptual limits of the landscape – limits that are also thresholds. Listening, augmented by the headphonic and by the activity of walking mobilise this experience of space and place.

We suggest then, that this practice of listening can bring us to a closer reading of the body without organs as a non-productive body. The capacity for listening is activated through this walking practice with and we suggest that it does so as a way of pitching a distributed, mediatised body. Soliciting the body, sound and landscape in this way, participants come to listening not only with the ears but through the whole body. We could understand this as the immanent body. The participants become the passage. As plateaux they modulate corresponding fields of intensities. Bodies and land are felt through the experience of multiple thresholds, embodied, historic, cultural, social and located (Deleuze and Guattari 1984, 153-60). Thus, the headphonic score becomes a social agent through its influence on the participating subjects in space. The author's voice performs the instructive text heard on the headphones, bringing the participants together, they move through rhizomatic pathways and encounter threshold spaces, and momentarily come to stand together.

² Heaphonic is a term that implies the use of prosthetic technology, (headphones that are either inserted in or over the ear) and that enable an immersive and mobile sound experience for the participant.

Coming to our senses

The performance walk at Rangī Ruru Girls School created a sonorous map that led participants through multiple sensory realms where the kinaesthetic, the haptic, the visual and the aural were activated. Tuning into the sensate, the activity of listening and walking asks walkers to come to their senses differently. We suggest walking becomes an act of recovery, a recovery of the lost and remembered histories that are embodied in the landscape, a recovery of community, and perhaps a provocation for recovery of the city. Sound theorist and artist Brandon LaBelle (2006, 104) suggests that 'sound may amplify the inherent forces and drives of physical experience and what it means to be a body.' La Belle infers that sound makes the corporeal explicit, tuning into the frequencies of 'the body and the tensions of its social performance' (104). Within the physical, social, cultural and historic spatiality of the *Rangī Ruru Walk*, sound assembled bodies together.

Headphonic sound is experienced in this work as an intimate and entangled 'rhizo-music' (Braidotti 2011, 108), contained mostly within our bodies, mobilising and internalising our acoustic habitat, creating 'spaces of intensive connection to impersonal and often indiscernible others'. The participants standing in the school grounds imagine the land before it was industrialised, through participating, they collectively remember the swamplands, the soggy ground, 'a city built upon a utopian dream, a city that was built on poetry' (*Rangī Ruru Walk* audio score 2014). The shifting rhythms and refrains of the acoustic space created by the score, merging field recordings with vocal cues, move the participants through their environment and create possibilities for new modes of experiencing place. Stepping into the shadows, the participants pause together, feeling the coolness on their skin, they form a line and begin walking. The choreoauratic score for this performance walk mixes the real-time environmental sounds with recorded internalised sound scores. School yard recordings, merge with the sounds of live traffic and construction. The body becomes co-present to layered sound spaces, through the prosthetic sound space, the environmental sound space and the bodily sound space.

Conclusions

The *Rangi Ruru Walk* and workshop generated learning that is rhizomatic. Taking place through playful exploration and heightened moments of awareness participants encounter multiple thresholds and make multiple connections. This active and creative performance listening practice entangles dissonant histories, events and bodies, activating, we suggest, the possibility for recovery. We theorise that the mediated act of listening moves participants through the substratum of the city and brings them to stand together. Participants are invited to become attuned to 'whenua', to the body and the land in an open ended process of coming together. So, we end as with began with an ongoing pursuit of tūrangawaewae, finding a place to stand as ecologically and somatically tuned beings.

Notes on contributors

Becca Wood works in performance practices that slip between the intersections of the body, space and digital environments. She has recently completed a PhD at The Auckland University where she also lectures in the Dance Studies department. Through her research and practice she continues to work across the arts in performance, somatic research and education, and digital-based art and design.

Molly Mullen is a lecturer in applied theatre at The University of Auckland, New Zealand. Her research focuses on funding, management and organisational practices in applied theatre. Her other research and practice foci include applied performance and ecology, and drama and performance in early childhood education.

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