

Dancing Between Whenua, Land and Matariki, Stars: On learning how not to be imperial
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This paper was provoked by recent collaborations with a number of Maori and Pacific dance artists and scholars – in particular Moana Nepia, Charles Koroneho and Katerina Teaiwa - as well as with students in Dance Studies at the University of Auckland where I teach. It tracks some recent experiences with and reflections on the *places* where contemporary performance and indigenous epistemologies meet and intersect and the *possibilities* for a new choreographic philosophy to emerge at these points of intersection. In particular it is concerned with the ethics of encounter that dance studies in Aotearoa New Zealand must address if it is to participate in the process of delinking from the largely British and North American models of dance studies that were adopted from the mid 20th century in University departments and have largely determined the values, codes, methodologies and histories of dance that are taught.

I am *Pākeha*, of European, predominantly Irish ancestry. My dancing bears corporeal traces of European tanztheatre, as well as American postmodern, British formalist and somatic informed dance through a largely nomadic career as a choreographer and performer in Europe from the early 90s to 2009 when I returned to my birthplace New Zealand. Currently, I operate transhemispherically as I have homes in both New Zealand and the UK, although I spend most of my time in Auckland where my family is based.

In Aotearoa where I teach choreography to postgraduate and undergraduate students, an emphasis on learning historical models from the canon of Western theatre dance is viewed as largely irrelevant to young Maori, Pacific Island, Pakeha and Asian students.

Many of these students enter University with a strong foundation in one of a variety of non-Western dance forms including Kapa Haka, Samoan, Fijian and Tongan dance, as well as urban Pacific hip-hop.

For these dancers, their culture-specific dance knowledge entails a sense of belonging, identity and community. They create ways of knowing that draw upon intellectual traditions other than those of Western modernism, including the relational thinking characteristic of Māori and other

Pacific life worlds. This is not to deny the benefits of engaging with performing arts from Europe or North America, it is rather my question **how** we do this and through what models of practice do we productively engage in dialogues between Western and non-Western approaches.

These images (**slides 5-11**) capture some moments of the project *RITES* in which the students took over the entire building of the Kenneth Myers Centre in central Auckland for a series of performance rituals that reworked Igor Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* through diverse somatic languages as invented ritual interventions. The audience became participants in this event which culminated in a circle where the gestures and voices of the performers criss-crossed in polyrhythmic counterpoint accumulating to a point of crescendo before resolving in stillness and silence.

If dance studies in Aotearoa is to fully embrace indigenous epistemologies and the physical thought of the Pacific, it needs to shift from an Anglo-American terrestrial centric understanding of dance to one that considers the interconnecting flows between the past, present and future and the spatiality enabled by the Pacific Ocean.

Charles Royal describes indigeneity as a contemporary experimental horizon led by Indigenous people, a principle that:

concerns the unification of humankind with the earth, with the cosmos, the desire to sustain [...] kinship based, creative and mutually enhancing relationships with natural world environments."¹.

A culture that is sensitive to indigenous ways of knowing is one that articulates the natural environment through its creativity.

Royal asks: *What might an indigeneity of the future rather than an indigeneity of the past look like?*

For those of us who lead a 'pluralistic life' resistant to ideologically bound identity Royal's definition of indigeneity is attractive. However I cannot assume any identification with

¹ Royal, Te Ahukaramu, Charles. (n.d.). New expressions of indigeneity through whare tapere. (p.2). Accessed 21 October, 2013, from www.orotokare.org.nz

indigeneous people given the history of my colonial forbearers and the entangled relations I have with a post-settler culture of privilege.

How might however, non-Māori artists and scholars become more attentive to our situated perspectives and our culturally marked positions. Through what methods might our creative labour cultivate relations with the environments we inhabit and the people of this land? How might we engage in forms of reciprocity that are reparative?

For Moana Nepia, Māori do not have so much as a world view as a sense view. He describes the creative path, as *Aratika* (from *ara* - approach, line or path), as taking place in a culturally prescribed ethical and environmental context where the basis for creative encounter is determined through *tikanga*, Māori ethical concerns, values and concepts. Central to this is the expression of whakapapa or genealogy, a way of weaving together the ancestral threads of life, including the places our ancestors belonged to¹. This special relationship with the land, means that Māori are *tangata whenua* (*people of the land*).

In contrast, according to Teaiwa, the spatiality of thought for Pacific peoples is dominated by the sea². In Aotearoa, Pacific peoples are some place between migrant and native because they are *tangata Moana* or *tangata Pasifika* (*people of the sea*)³. Teaiwa describes the ocean as a corporeal and psychic relational vehicle for Pacific peoples and relations with the ocean pivot around the moving body; the ocean is not a place of wholistic unity but a place of tension, it is sacred and taboo.

It would seem that an engagement with one's relationship to land/whenua, sea/moana and stars/matariki is essential for any attempt to address the challenge of decolonization from western imperial thinking about space, the body and creative practice. Dance anthropologist Andréé Grau adds nutrients to this argument through her writing, revealing how our notions of 'space', 'place' and the 'senses' cannot be accepted as universal concepts since all corporealities and spatialities are socially and culturally mediated⁴.

Two examples of recent practice provide some insight into different methods catalyzing a reimagining of the collisions and tensions between Maori cosmology, post-settler culture and the global .

The first, *PURE* is a new work by Māori performance artist based in Montreal, Charles Koroneho, and the second, *1000 Lovers* is a large scale site responsive performance for the Auckland Waterfront developed by myself in collaboration with a group of Maori, Pacific and Pakeha performers and artists.

Charles recently presented his work *PURE* as part of Tuakana **(slide 20-24)**, the opening night of the Tempo Dance Festival in Auckland. In Maori language, *pure* is a ritual and action which consists of “loosening” from dangerous elements and “binding” to beneficent ones.

Set in a place of thresholds, the performance moves through a series of ritual enactments that present Charles’s body as vibrating at a limit between realms; the physical and the spiritual, the present and the past, the material and the virtual. As Charles explains, these performance ‘tests’ of endurance and concentrated energy seek to alter the past to bring about change⁵.

In this context, the theatre becomes a marae, a tribal meeting place that is sacred accenting and embellishing the role of the theatre as a place where we meet the ancestors.

In this collaboration, with Brad Gledhill (performance design, lighting, production) and Alejandro Ronceria (dramaturgy, choreography, direction), initiated in Montreal Charles activates a performance landscape of stone, wood, stars, earth and light, culminating in an extended *karakia* or incantation. Chains of words spilled over the audience in a torrent that seemed to fold back into Charles’s body, thickening his speech until he is gutturally choking in an outpouring cry that shakes his whole body as if to cause a rift in his core, until a point of release.

Theatre is a machine for transformation. The border between the darkened auditorium and the stage, a fourth wall has historically marked a limit. But if contemporary Maori performance like Charles’s invites us to think of the theatre as a marae then it is also a place to dwell. This role of theatre, its ritual potential, aligns with Charles and other Maori choreographers work. But

rather than being organized around acts of disappearance, around what is missing, what cannot be shown or witnessed in an absence/presence duality, we are invited to be with the ancestors in a place of belonging.

Here is how a Jack Grey, a dancer with Atamira described the experience:

The gathered community who show up on Opening Night are all family. People have travelled from afar to be here. It's a Marae. It is also my/our homecoming too. We reform our links, make new connections, energise our clusters and revive our hopes and dreams. We are here for Charles as much ourselves....⁶

As part of his initiative, TŪĀHU a platform for the creation of a new philosophical space for dance, Charles invited me to respond to the work and host a forum after the event.

Unlike any other forum I have been a part of let alone facilitated, my questions for Charles gave way to impassioned responses to the work from his whanau and the community of audience. These included the visceral charge of a haka, a communal karakia or prayer, and the customary reciprocity of exchange as audience members evoked their memories in tears, emphatic speaking and quiet reflection. The energy in the theatre was palpable as if Charles's performance had opened a space in us all for a kind of 'bare' encounter.

The architecture of the theatre, with its black void, its disciplined seating in rows and flat plane for dancing, was transformed into a thick, resonant site, a place of encounter, a marae, a porous threshold that vibrated with multiple presences. But it was also a pairing of live performance with what Levinas calls a 'face-to-face' encounter. As Marama Lloyd said to me after the event, you could not have had the performance without the forum, the two parts of the event were interconnected and both necessary.

Emmanuel Levinas describes the ethics of meeting 'face to face' as an experience that is weighted, rhythmic and culturally positioned. For Levinas, it is the reciprocity of encounter that sustains us: 'all real [*wirklich*] life is meeting'.⁷ Creative exchange is an ethics experienced first through the body. However to be an ethical partner, as Levinas suggests we must also have the potential to be interlocutors, to also be participants.

If for Charles the theatre provides the site for transformation and convening with the ancestors, decolonizing the western stage through transgressive acts of performance that cross boundaries between performer and audience, inside and outside, the physical and the spiritual; the performer and community; my own response to the challenge of loosening the hold of Western hegemonic practices of space has been to work outside conventional theatrical spaces in site responsive dance that acknowledges the multiple layers of places in a state of decolonization.

1000 LOVERS between the city and the sea

In 2012 (slide 25-31) I developed, together with performance designer Dorita Hannah and the composer Russell Scoones, an ambulatory site responsive performance for the Auckland waterfront, *1000 Lovers*. The title was drawn from Auckland's Māori name *Tāmaki Makau Rau*, which translates not only as 'Isthmus of one thousand lovers', but may also be understood as the place of many lovers⁸.

The dramaturgy for *1000 Lovers* was informed by the pan-Pacific story of *Hine* and *Tuna*, and the metamorphic transformation of the long-finned indigenous eel that inhabited nearby *Tuna Mau*, a lost pre-European stream, once well known for its plentiful supply of eels.

1000 Lovers plays on the idea of return through a performative re-remembering of the relation between the city and the sea: one that does not rely on mastery, control or discipline but on desire, recovery and survival.

In this work the waterfront site became a contested zone of meetings and encounters. As Australian writer Paul Carter describes,

the coastline... is also the place where Western and non-Western people are suddenly exposed to one another. As an imaginary place, quarantined off from the normal comings and goings of social life, it incubates strange, and often fatal, performances.⁹

To think through difference in performance and to site work that has emerged through pacific contexts and practices in a harbour city, is to forge connections and to open a space for re-maginations of the past and the present.

A place perhaps where an 'order of relations' rather than 'things', to cite Anne Salmond, might reverberate with the generative force of memories, affects, sensations, ideas and dreams. A place that might include an interweaving, a reconciling and a complicating of the past with the present, the distant and the near, the antipodean and the European¹⁰.

But I want to be cautious here. Any understanding of Māori and Pacific concepts should not have as its aim their incorporation into a predominantly western dance practice.

Rather, I would argue that knowledge of these differences carries the potential to open up the possibilities for new crossings, becomings, methods, collaborations, forms of practice and species of dance. Such work might be considered localized interventions potentially resistant to neocolonial globalism. As practices of encounter that vibrate at the edges, permitting exchange between inside and outside, performer and audience, the theatre and the marae, indigenous and non-indigenous perspectives they are also opportunities to, citing Paul Carter: 'release the global in the particular'¹¹.

¹ Nepia, Moana (2012) *Te Kore – exploring the Māori concept of void*. AUT PhD Thesis.

² Teaiwa, Katerina (2008) "Salt Water Feet: the flow of dance in Oceania," in *Deep Blue: reflections on nature, religion and water*, Andrew Francis and Sylvie Shaw eds., London, Equinox Publishing Ltd.

³ Teaiwa, Teresia and Mallon, Sean (2005) *Ambivalent Kinships? Pacific People in New Zealand*. In Hou-fu, James et al. (ed) **New Zealand Identities: Departures and Destinations Wellington: Victoria University**, 207-229.

⁴ Grau, Andrée, 'Dancing bodies, spaces/places and the senses: a cross-cultural investigation. *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*, Volume 3, Numbers 1-2, 27 April 2012, pp. 5-24(20)

⁵ Koroneho, Charles <http://tuahu.tetokiharuru.com/tuahu-korero.html>

⁶ Grey, Jack <http://www.theatreview.org.nz/reviews/review.php?id=6384>

⁷ Levinas, E. (1993). *Outside the Subject*. Translated by Michael B. Smith. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 36.

⁸ Author's personal communication with Moana Nepia in discussion with Māori artist, Selwyn Muru

⁹ Carter, Paul (2008) *Dark Writing: Geography, Performance Design*, 9.

¹⁰ Salmond, Ann 'Shifting New Zealand's Mindset' The New Zealand Herald 18th Aug 2012 http://www.nzherald.co.nz/politics/news/article.cfm?c_id=280&objectid=10827658

¹¹ Carter, Paul (2004) *Material thinking: the theory and practice of creative research*, Carlton, Vic : Melbourne University.