10.

‘Mōhiti E’: Empowering (Trans) Indigenous Performance

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Abstract

How might a collaborative performance staged across indigenous cultures – in this case Māori and Native American – be seen to create a shared wairua that leads to mārama? For this Symposium, Valance Smith (Ngāpuhi/Waikato) will compose a waiata as the starting point for a hoop dance choreographed and performed by Eddie Madril (Pascua Yaqui) from the Sewan American Indian Dance company. Waiata is, at its simplest, song. It is a vessel for a kaupapa, in the lyrics and also in its music, an embodiment of the singer’s mauri that, in the ideal, resonates in the listener. Hoop dancing has many purposes. It describes the complexities of life, expresses many aspects of the scientific nature of the world through the art form, and invokes the meaning behind the cycle of all living things. In bringing together two distinctive performance languages and cultures, we will be looking for common ground, exploring possible synergies and seeking an experience of the metaphysical in the physicality of our song and dance that can be translated back into a deeper understanding of the potential power of (trans) indigenous performance. How might such a shared, cross-cultural performance not only inform the way we think about the particular practices involved, but also challenge our assumptions about what it means, both in theory and in practice, to perform as Māori and as Native American?

Introduction

> We are physically connected to our Canadian and American First Nations people by the sea and more recently by modern technology. Spiritually, we share the vision of our ancestors, and we still hear their voices over the earth and sky, right across the valleys and down to the sea. We are learning more about each other through our growing relationship. The power of art and the creative spirit helps us to transcend time and cultures and accept each other as part of an extended family. Now that we know about each other, we can never feel alone: our First Nations relatives are always welcome on our land. It is the future we share together that is exciting. (Nicholas, 2006)

Titled 'Breath of the Land', Nicholas's commentary about contemporary Māori art evokes both a physical and a spiritual connection to first nations people across the vastness of the Pacific Ocean to its farthest corners. Nicholas puts forth the notion that spiritually we 'share the vision of our ancestors' and that we are joined in some way. In the context of performing arts, perhaps the shared vision is also to be creative, revolutionary, innovative, forward thinking.

Collaboration between first nations people has a long history. In 1906, the International Exhibition was hosted in Christchurch showcasing performances from various Pacific Island cultural groups including Fiji, Niue and Rarotonga over a six month period (Smith, 2003). What happened in this time? What cultural collaborations took place, and in particular, what did we discover? During the six months, the performers compared their different styles of music and dance. Interestingly the Māori groups paid particular attention to the Rarotongan group who would use hand and arm movements to illustrate and complement their lyrics – a cultural collaboration

that could be seen to have heralded the dawn of a new genre of Māori performing arts – the waiata-a-ringa (action song) (Smith, 2003).

One hundred and ten years on, 'the power of art and the creative spirit', as Nicholas spoke of, continues to excite us, empower us, elevate us. The more we find mediums by which to engage and collaborate with one another, the more we learn about ourselves through other world-views that are, even so, akin to our own. This paper investigates the power of (trans)indigenous collaboration and how creating performances at such a cultural nexus can bring about a deeper understanding of what we experience, both as performers and as audiences. It will begin by exploring the correlation of Kaupapa Māori and trans-indigenous theory, and offer a Māori understanding of the discipline. It will then use this understanding to frame Māori spirituality and how wairua can weave together waiata and hoop dance, concluding with an explanation of the composed waiata 'Mōhiti e'.

Kaupapa Māori

Ella Henry, in her doctoral thesis 'Te Wairua Auaha – Emancipatory Māori Entrepreneurship in Screen Production', examines and develops theory about Māori in screen production, and how Māori artists and filmmakers have seen Kaupapa Māori[1] as an emancipation from Western scientific positivist discourses that often position Māori as the 'other' (2012). She also looks at how Linda Tuhiwai Smith addresses reflexivity, where Smith proposes two specific principles that

[1] In reference to the development of the Māori screen industry, Henry and Wikaire contend in their book, *The Brown Book*, that the development of Kaupapa Māori has enhanced the Māori Renaissance. They identify four objectives of Kaupapa Māori research; (1) 'being for, with and by Māori', (2) 'validating Māori language and culture', (3) 'empowering Māori people', (4) 'delivering positive outcomes and empowering Māori'.

inform and shape Kaupapa Māori research: *rangatiratanga* and *whanaungatanga* (Henry, 2012).[2]

According to Henry, rangatiratanga, (derived from the word *rangatira* – leader) refers to having power and control over one's life and cultural wellbeing. Secondly, whanaungatanga (derived from the word *whānau* – family) is a research principle whereby the researcher may initiate and foster meaningful relationships with individuals and communities they engage in research with (Henry, 2012). This paper will employ a Kaupapa Māori approach to frame this research, grounded in the concepts of rangatiratanga and whanaungatanga, to help understand what it means to perform as Māori, and how Native American dance can complement and co-exist within the space thus created. It is through this cultural nexus that the power of a trans-indigenous performance of waiata and hoop-dance will be explored.

Empowering (trans)indigenous performance

The term *trans* allows one to traverse through, across, beyond the boundaries of the Māori epistemological construction of the world to other places. However, if we are truly to make a meaningful connection, we should be looking beyond a connection that meets boundary to boundary, margin to margin. Rather we should be connecting centre to centre – the heart of a Māori identity to the heart of another. We are in search of a dynamic complementarity that can open up new and exciting ways of watching, listening, engaging and understanding indigenous performance. Trans-indigenous theory helps us to do this. In an interview recorded as part of the Different Knowings Speakers Series, hosted by McMaster College (2010-2011), Chadwick Allen argues that we should move away from identifying differences and/or commonalities

[2] See also: Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

about multiple indigenous contexts; rather we should ask what would happen if multiple indigenous contexts were placed in a 'focused juxtaposition' (Allen, 2011). He says:

> It's very much this idea of thinking how we might understand differently by bringing different indigenous contemporary traditions together and reading across and through, and it's trying to break out of simple comparison, where you imagine a balanced list of same and not same, like, different, but thinking about it as a practice, as a methodology, and in this instance it centers the indigenous with a capital 'I'.

Rachael Swain picks up these issues in 'A Meeting of Nations: Trans-Indigenous and Intercultural Interventions in Contemporary Indigenous Dance' (2015). She tells us that Allen calls for 'purposeful Indigenous juxtapositions' positioned 'firmly in the specificity of the Indigenous local while remaining always cognizant of the complexity of the relevant Indigenous global' (Swain, 2015).

In this way, we may begin to watch, listen, engage and understand the purposeful juxtapositioning of Māori waiata and Sewam Indian Hoop dance as a way of producing new insights and methodologies. In Allen's words:

> What happens if you put indigenous text, indigenous peoples, indigenous audiences, indigenous ways of knowing, indigenous aesthetics, at the centre of your practice. What would happen? What would happen if I read an American Indian poem, in conversation with a Māori poem, in conversation with a Hawaiian poem, what would happen to the way I read? What would I notice that I might not notice if I just read the native poem by itself, or read it in relation to

> say to a dominant poet in the US? What kinds of things might open up? Possibilities? For me that's what's exciting. (Allen 2011)

He encourages us to be thoughtful about the process of crossing multiple indigenous contexts, while asking what would we observe at this crossing. What things might reveal themselves in the crossing of Māori waiata and Sewan Indian dance? How might we identify a shared wairua of performance between the two cultures?

Trans-indigeneity from a Māori world-view

Trans-indigenous theory and Kaupapa Māori[3] are similar in that they were born out of a need to escape a Western regime that serves only the dominant culture, 'the interests of the settler, his culture, his power, his nation-state' (Allen, 2012). In *Trans-indigenous: methodologies for global native literary studies*, Allen states:

> Given the diversity and complexity of Indigenous identities in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the immediate question is not how to define clear criteria for which writers and works can be legitimated for Indigenous scholarship—that is, how to newly articulate old regimes for the regulation of "authenticity"—but rather how to recognize, acknowledge, confront, and critically engage the effects of differential experiences and performances of Indigenous identities. (Allen 2012)

Here Allen considers an approach to research that embraces an acknowledgement of the different experiences indigenous

[3] According to Henry, Māori artists and filmmakers have seen Kaupapa Māori as an emancipation from Western scientific positivist discourses that often position Māori as the 'other' (Henry, 2012).

people have – that is, a shift away from an 'authentic' indigeneity toward recognising the indigenous identities themselves are diverse and complex. Rangatiratanga is 'having power and control over one's life and cultural wellbeing' (Henry, 2012).

Within a context of trans-indigenous performance then, rangatiratanga suggests that each indigenous identity is independent of another and exists in its own mana, its own power and control over its life and well-being. The concept of whanaungatanga can serve to frame our understanding of Indigenous-to-Indigenous relationships, as a kind of 'purposeful juxtaposition' between indigenous people. To this end, my paper acknowledges that the performance both of waiata and of hoop dance exist in a state of rangatiratanga, independent of one another, while acknowledging that the two performing arts practices may simultaneously co-exist in the same time and space, and in a state of whanaungatanga, allowing us to examine what is happening at the interface, at the crossing.

Trans-indigeneity and Wairua

Māori spirituality permeates our customary practices. We realize our spirituality through our language and living traditions. Milroy points out that the word wairua is derived from two root words: wai (water) and rua (two). He contends that the 'two waters' are a representation of one's physical being, and one's divine being, and therefore one's wai-rua is connected to all living beings (Milroy, 2004). Further, Pere contends that wairua is 'immersed and integrated within two streams, the physical and the spiritual' (Pere, 1982) saying that 'we are all spiritual beings having a physical journey' (R. Pere, personal communication, April 28, 2016). These ideas encapsulate the essence of wairua – the physical and the divine.

While we may have a juxtaposition of waiata and hoop dance in the physical, the intention in both is to feel and sense

a oneness through the divine. The paradigm now shifts from what is seen, to what is *felt*. To reframe Allen's contention, then, what would I feel if I heard a waiata next to hoop dance? What would I feel if I saw hoop dance choreographed to waiata? Would what is felt be any different if the audience were to experience either art-form independently of one another? If any answer is to be attempted, one could argue that the physical juxtaposition of the two performance art forms find each other meta-physically, that is to say, a shared wairua.

Weaving together waiata and hoop dance

According to Rangimarie Rose Pere, 'te reo Māori as I see it is a reo wairua, a spiritual language' (quoted in Browne, 2005). That is to say, our spirituality has a harmonious relationship with our language. The Māori language is the medium by which oral narratives are transmitted by word of mouth. It is the metaphoric cloak symbolic of shrouding one's histories in the 'warmth of knowledge' in an effort to understand past events, essentially paving the way for understanding the world both physically and spiritually (Tapsell, 1997, p 329).

I contend that the Māori language is a spiritual language. Rangihau supports this by stating the Māori language 'is an ancient spiritual language', and that through the 'ihirangaranga', one is able to feel the wairua of waiata (Browne, 2005, p. 27):

> Ihirangaranga, the weaving of spiritual power, is one of the words used to describe vibrations felt in waiata…People with that x factor in their voice have that ability, to sing in an ihirangaranga mode and weave spiritual power into the environment they are in, it's as if the reo is a vehicle or 'conductor' of the wairua, and the singer the catalyst.

The ability to 'weave spiritual power into the environment they are in' serves the purpose then of weaving waiata into hoop dance. Accordingly then, the physical act of singing and performing waiata crosses and transcends to its spiritual counterpart as the lyrics acts as a 'conductor' of wairua. In this statement I contend that the reo doesn't act as a gateway from margin to margin, but a cultural wormhole from one centre to another centre.

Robert Ruha contends that the role of waiata is to provide mārama, or enlightenment, interpretation, understanding, appreciation (R. Ruha, personal communication, October 6, 2015). The role of the waiata I have composed, 'Mōhiti e', is therefore to elucidate the hoop dance. Equally the role of the hoop dance is to reflect and complement the lyrics of the waiata. This cultural nexus leading the audience to a state of mārama. Allen claims that it is 'not the inevitability of any particular juxtaposition or analysis but rather the productiveness of this kind of interpretive process among diverse Indigenous texts' (2012). For me, mārama is situated within the interpretive process of interpreting and understanding the combined indigenous text of waiata and hoop dance. It claims a space where two indigenous peoples may come together and perform. It demands a synergy of indigenous energies that are both physical and spiritual – what this paper will refer to as a 'synergeneity of performance'.

Waiata: Mōhiti e – the hoop song (composed by Valance Smith)

The waiata 'Mōhiti e' is a homage to Dr. Hirini Melbourne[4] and the beautiful style in which he composed waiata. It uses the

[4] Dr. Hirini Melbourne was one of this country's greatest songwriters. His ability to capture the essence of a story with the economy of words still serves as inspiration and model to many composers today. The simplicity of his beguiling melodies would hush any audience, spell-bound and captivate all those who were in earshot distance of such magic. He had the x-factor – the ihirangaranga. With songs such as 'Tihore mai', 'Purerehua', Tārere, to name

mōhiti, or hoops as metaphor, a cultural lens, an insight, a window. The hoop also represents the world, which is referred to in the song. The hoop dance begins with two hoops representing two world-views – Māori and Sewam Indian. They exist independent of one another and stand in their own mana – rangatiratanga. The hoops traverse through, across, beyond the boundaries of margin to margin, in search for a state of centre to centre. From one heart to the heart of another: a dynamic complementarity in its new form – whanaungatanga. Slowly more hoops are added representing different insects and animals that both cultures share. The lyrics of the waiata elucidate the hoop dance, and the hoop dance exhibits cultural symbols of te taiao – the natural environment. What is happening? What do you see? What do you feel?

Pihipihi e pua	*spring up Seedling*
Tupu teitei tupu tā	*grow tall*
I te waoku	*in the great realm*
Nui a Tāne	*of Tāne*
Ka porotiti	*encircling*
Potakataka	*spinning*
Mōhiti e	*our World*
E Pūrerehua	*Butterfly*
Rere runga rere rā	*fly high, fly above*
Papaki parirau	*flap your wings*
ka rewa e	*high above*
Ka porotiti	*encircling*
Potakataka	*spinning*
Mōhiti e	*our World*
Pekepeke haratua	*Daddy Long Legs*
Ka pioioi titaha	*sway to the side*

a few, embodied his connection to te taiao – the natural environment. This was not only evident in his writing, but also in the melodies composed to convey the story.

Kotahi te mahi	*you have only one thing to do*
Hanga kupenga	*to build your net*
Ka porotiti	*encircling*
Potakataka	*spinning*
Mōhiti e	*our World*
Pihipihi e pua	*spring up Seedling*
Tupu teitei tupu tā	*grow tall*
I te waoku	*in the great realm*
Nui a Tāne	*of Tāne*
Ka porotiti	*encircling*
Potakataka	*spinning*
Mōhiti e	*our World*

Conclusion

The shared horizon we envisage for our people, as indigenous people, is that we continue to forge pathways of success and well-being for our communities that are consistent with, and in fact transcend all indicators of health and well-being. We can profit from the insight that, because we seemingly want the same thing, it makes sense to collaborate with other first nations people to achieve this. We share an atrocious past, yet we also dare to share a vision for the future that looks exciting and very promising. This trajectory cannot lose momentum. Be excited about finding more and more ways of coming together, as whānau, as yoemia,[5] whether at a conference or just catching up at Starbucks because 'I'm in town'.

'Mohiti e' is a product of a creative cultural collaboration, a 'purposeful juxtaposition' allowing us to explore and discuss the cultural interface where we may gain a deeper insight into what we are *seeing*? What we are *feeling*? What would happen if we watched hoop dance while listening to waiata? What would we

[5] Sewam Indian word for family.

discover? We all come from a long ancestry of researchers, navigators and discoverers – discover.

Whāia ki runga, whāia ki raro
Whāia ki roto, whāia ki waho
Whāia te pae tawhiti kia tata
Whāia te pae tata kia mārama

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Valance Smith has performed haka and waiata all his life. He attended Hato Petera College where his passion for Māori performing arts was ignited, later joining senior kapa haka groups where he learnt from many authorities of haka, waiata and weaponry. While studying at The University of Auckland, he tutored 'Te Whānau o Waipapa' (1999-2006), leading the group to three Auckland Regional Kapa Haka Competition campaigns for which he composed original items including whakaeke, waiata tira, waiata a ringa, poi and haka. Valance has judged at the ASB Polynesian Festival for secondary schools and at the Te Ahurea Kapa haka competitions. He gained a Bachelor of Arts, with a double major in Māori Studies and Māori Media, and a Master of Arts in the Department of Māori Studies, from the University of Auckland in 2003. In 2014, Valance completed a PhD in Māori Development, at AUT. His exegesis, titled 'Ka tangi te tītī, ka tangi te kākā, ka tangi hoki ahau', discusses the role of contemporary Māori music in promoting te reo Māori. For his PhD he composed, performed and produced six original waiata. The process of waiata composition and performance, and its potential to empower communities is central to his presentation, and fuels his enthusiasm to being a part of Ka Haka 2016.