

Moving touch: Haptic encounters and Pākehā belonging in dance-based research

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Abstract:

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the area of research considering questions of belonging via the bodily knowledge of dance is small but growing, offering fertile ground for further contributions. Drawing on scholarship from dance studies and human geography, in what follows I consider insights and observations around belonging that arose during a dance-based research project investigating imaginaries of place held by Pākehā women. A synergy between the insights I share is how they pertained to haptic encounters or encounters of touch. I discuss how these haptic encounters moved participants towards greater awareness of their settler-colonial subjectivities in relation to place and offered routes for being in, with, and around place in more consciously sensed and sensitive ways. Through my discussion, I highlight insights and observations that arose via the sensory dimensions of danced movement. In relation to exploration of Pākehā subjectivities, it is my hope that the encounters shared in this article illustrate how sensory experiences, impressions and associations arising from engagement in danced movement have the capacity to unsettle settler-colonial ways of being and knowing.

Keywords: belonging, sense of place, dance, haptic encounters, Pākehā

Introduction

To feel one belongs or does not belong is a highly embodied experience (Rowe, 2005; Wright, 2014). In Aotearoa New Zealand, the area of research considering questions of belonging with and through the bodily knowledge of dance is small but growing, offering fertile ground for further contributions (Barbour, 2011, 2020; Brown, 2020; East, 2014, 2020; Marler, 2015; Unni, 2016). Considering sustained calls from Indigenous peoples for those of settler-colonial background to account for their privileges and histories (Jackson, 2020, 2022; Mutu, 2019), and recognising the importance of attending to embodied experiences in decentring White and/or settler-colonial subjectivities (Ahmed, 2007; Mackey, 2014), an area of research worthy of greater exploration through

dance is inquiry that grapples with questions of belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand as Pākehā, or as white-bodied people of settler-coloniser descent.

I identify as Pākehā and tangata tiritiⁱ. In doing so, I acknowledge I am in relationship with *Ngā Iwi Māori*, the Indigenous peoples of this land. While my father was born in England, the different branches of my mother's family have been in Aotearoa New Zealand since the beginning of the 1860s. Drawing on my subjectivity as Pākehā and background as a contemporary dancer, this research was a dance-based project that sought to investigate imaginaries of place held by Pākehā women in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

In what follows, I explore the “slippery” and “flexible” terrain of some Pākehā women's feelings about and around belonging and place that emerged during my research. A striking synergy between the insights I share is how they pertain to haptic encounters or encounters of touch that occurred during dance-based methods. Through this writing, I describe impacts of these haptic encounters on the participants' sense of belonging and relationship with different places. Further, I discuss how these haptic encounters moved participants towards greater awareness of their settler-colonial subjectivities in relation to place and offered routes for being in, with, and around place in more consciously sensed and sensitive ways. In sharing these accounts, I offer a contribution to the small but growing body of knowledge exploring dance and feelings of belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand. I hope consideration of the haptic encounters I describe encourages appreciation of the insights that can arise via attending to sensory dimensions of danced movement. In relation to exploration of Pākehā subjectivities, I also hope the experiences described and discussed illustrate how sensory experiences, impressions and associations arising from engagement in danced movement can offer fertile ground for unsettling settler-colonial ways of being and knowing.

The structure of this article is as follows: first, I provide greater context around the subject and methodology of my research project. Next, I offer detail around scholarship on belonging and haptic experience that shapes my thinking. I then share accounts of the participants' haptic encounters and go on to discuss these encounters in some depth before offering my concluding thoughts.

Background and context: Danced movement and settler-colonial subjectivity

My research offered critique of settler colonial structures. While colonialism is “focused on economic accumulation reliant on peoples and communities dominated by an imperial force which then vacates”, the purpose of settler-colonialism is for people to stay in the

place being colonised and work towards reproducing a society in the colonisers' image (de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018, p. 6). The core feature of settler-colonialism is confiscation of land, and physical and/or psychological eradication of Indigenous peoples in the name of taking a place to be colonised (Wolfe, 2006). As such, in settler-colonial societies, Indigenous peoples live with ongoing colonisation and occupation (Bonds & Inwood, 2016).

Aotearoa New Zealand is a settler-colonial society. Blatantly disregarding what had been promised under *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*ⁱⁱⁱ, across the mid to late decades of the 1800s, the colonial British government and Pākehā settler-colonisers violently invaded and illegally confiscated the territories of Ngā Iwi Māori, outlawing Māori law, language, values, culture, society, symbols and knowledge systems (Mutu, 2022; Simmonds, 2011). Māori have never accepted these false assertions of colonial power and continue to fight to have their sovereignty honoured and upheld (Mutu, 2022).

Situated in the discipline of human geography and drawing on my background in contemporary dance and subjectivity as a Pākehā woman, my research engaged with dance to investigate imaginaries of place held by Pākehā womenⁱⁱⁱ. My project sought to inquire into the ability of danced movement to explore subconscious knowledges of place, and to question dominant androcentric settler-colonial narratives, through attending to embodied knowledges of women of settler-coloniser descent.

As opposed to a performance-oriented process, my research engaged with dance as a qualitative embodied methodology. Through embodied methodologies, scholars across diverse disciplines have taken seriously and engaged with activities and dimensions of lived experience previously passed over by academic inquiry (Chadwick, 2017; Fox, 2015). One such example is dance. Aware of the novelty of my methodological approach within geographic scholarship and to differentiate my engagement with dance from highly choreographed dance styles that adhere to a preordained technique, I framed my research as engaging in “danced movement” (Baker et al., 2022). When referring to danced movement, I refer to forms of bodily movement creatively improvised in response to aesthetic, affective or interpretive cues in space and over time (Baker et al., 2022).

As an embodied, and therefore, sensory experience, danced movement has the capacity to draw awareness to and articulate tacit, subconscious and even ineffable dimensions of lived experience (Baker, 2025; Barbour, 2019). Guided by prompts that can work beyond conscious thought or aim, during danced movement one can be uncertain of how their body may move next, and once they have enacted the next move, they may not consciously understand why they did that (Łuczniak, 2015). More quotidian

forms of movement may be driven by desires and views not consciously known to us and may still result in unexpected experiences. However, their delineated form and functionality may obscure dimensions of experience beyond conscious thought and conventional modes of communication (Baker, 2025). As such, ways of knowing that may usually be experienced peripherally can become central during danced movement (Barbour & Hitchmough 2014; Downing 2015). Integrally, knowledges that are foregrounded when engaging in danced movement are situated. Understandings of situated knowledge emphasise how knowers are always somewhere and are both constrained and enabled by their situation (Haraway, 1991).

Danced movement's capacity to bring awareness towards embodied ways of knowing is of interest in relation to exploration of Pākehā subjectivities. Despite the importance of colonialism in the lives of Pākehā, the privileges and experiences inherited as a result of settler-colonial subjectivity are often rendered invisible, forgotten or un-felt (Mackey, 2014; Turner, 2011). The unsensed nature of settler-colonial subjectivity can be attributed to the degree to which colonial structures feel entitled to dominate land, culture and governance of Indigenous peoples (Mackey, 2014). This state or structure of unfeeling is an embodied experience (Baker, 2024; Rifkin, 2013). As such, engagement in danced movement offers a means of drawing awareness towards the ways settler-colonial ignorance, denial, common sense and entitlement are present in, and emerge via, feeling, bodily sensation and movement (Baker, 2024).

The methodology of my research incorporated both autoethnographic inquiry and working with a small group of three participants who identified as Pākehā women in the Waikato and Te Moana-a-Toi Bay of Plenty regions of Te Ika-a-Māui North Island via a series of in-person and Zoom workshops. An aim of the research was to consider how subconscious historical traces of settler-colonial women were present in Pākehā women living today. Thus, recruitment material specifically invited women who could trace their families in Aotearoa New Zealand prior to 1900. Participants were in no way required to have previous experience in dance. What was necessary from participants was a willingness to engage in improvisational and other forms of exploratory and expressive movement. The two participants whose experiences I discuss in this article are Emma^{iv} and Tess. Emma had prior experience with dance to tertiary level. Tess, whilst greatly interested in embodied ways of knowing, had no prior experience with danced movement.

My research was carried out during the global COVID-19 pandemic. The fieldwork took place during a period in which Aotearoa New Zealand was responding to the Delta

variant. Navigating these uncertain circumstances led to some workshops being carried out in person and others via Zoom.

Methods engaged with during the workshops consisted primarily of guided danced movement improvisations. As researcher/facilitator, I guided these methods. Given the autoethnographic component of the research, I also participated in danced movement methods. However, I would adjust the level of my participation depending on the format (Zoom or in-person) and on the kind of space I needed to hold for the participants. Danced movement methods were informed by existing approaches within contemporary dance-making and somatic practices. Angled towards the exploration of participants and my situated knowledges, some of the danced movement methods invited the women and me to generate a series of movements in response to a specific prompt, such as a verse of poetry or a family heirloom. Other danced movement methods invited us to attend to our embodied knowledges and respond through danced improvisation to a series of verbal suggestions.

Workshops also included journalling, body mapping and discussions to encourage the examination of experience via visual representation and oral and written reflections. These supporting methods provided space to reflect on what had occurred during danced movement. Integrally, these methods also generated material that I could interpret further during analysis. Each workshop consisted of two to three danced movement methods. After each danced movement method, I invited participants to reflect on what had arisen for them via journalling or body mapping. Once participants felt complete with their reflections, time was spent sharing insights and discussing what had emerged. The formal process of analysing knowledge generated by my research included examination of journals, body maps, interviews, the group discussion and recorded danced movement. The variety of different methods engaged with during the research and the diverse nature of insights and observations which emerged from participation in them meant that thematic analysis offered a fruitful strategy for organising insights and observations and discerning meaning. Thematic analysis is widely used across qualitative research. The process codes findings and thus identifies broad themes (Trainor & Bundon 2021). The research's orientation towards gendered experience, Whiteness and settler-colonialism meant that insights around power would be present in findings. Discourse analysis offered a means of exploring how the women and I spoke about power, and how our statements were connected to the exercising of power, the social construction of knowledge and the production of truth (Ozias & Pasque 2019).

“Be longing”: Or how we long to be

Integral to my research was place. Understandings of place within geographic scholarship have arrived at a point where place is not seen to pre-exist as an ontologically discrete entity (Bawaka Country, 2013, 2015, 2018; Bell, 2019). Rather, as Wright (2014) described, “people, places, their emotions, their aspirations and all the processes, beings, and affects that make up those people and those places, co-constitute each other” (p. 403). Thus, the presence and experiences of human bodies are understood as but one element in a complex web of connections that constitute places. In this way, relationality is integral to place and by extension, feelings of belonging to, with, and around place (Bawaka Country, 2013, 2015; Ingold, 2011).

Reflection on belonging is perhaps inevitable when one starts to consider place. For a word often perceived as self-explanatory, belonging “is at once slippery and axiomatic, flexible and self-evident” (Wright, 2014, p. 391). Understood as a feeling, a sense, and a set of practices, belonging can refer to place – or, regarding diaspora, the absence of place – to relationships with and between humans, the more-than-human, ideas, and objects (Bell, 2019; Wright, 2014). To feel one belongs or to claim belonging is always deeply political.

Founded on the violent dispossession of Indigenous peoples, claims of belonging are problematic for settler-coloniser societies such as Aotearoa New Zealand. Whilst in many societies, the dominant culture may be, as Bell (2009) described, “typically unproblematically ‘at home’”, in settler-colonial societies, “the dominant national culture has settler - migrant and colonising - origins. Their occupation of the homeland is then, not so straightforwardly secured. Others were there before them” (Bell, 2009, p. 145). No settler-colonial claim to belong can erase prior claims and ongoing presence of Indigenous peoples. As such, there is a weakness evident in settler-colonial claims of belonging (Bell, 2009). Despite this, structures of settler-colonialism work towards rendering the ‘weakness’ of their claims to belong invisible and attempt to make the presence of settler-colonialism on Indigenous territories appear naturalised (Rifkin, 2013).

A theorist whose thinking around belonging particularly resounded with my research participants’ insights and observations was Rowe (2005). Rowe’s conceptualisation of a feminist politics of relation approached belonging as the command formed when the word is broken in two, “Be Longing” (Rowe, 2005, p. 16). At the heart of the politics of relation is the intention to guide subjectivity “in the direction of the inclination toward the other so that ‘being’ is constituted not first through the ‘Self’, but through its own longings to be with” (Rowe, 2005, pp. 17-18). Rowe situated

a politics of relation as integral to troubling Western assumptions of the individual that have been “part and parcel of colonial conquest” (Rowe, 2005, p. 16).

In relation to my research, what particularly resonated with me about Rowe’s (2005) politics of relation was the salience of bodily movement in her language. Characterising a politics of relation as “a process that places one-self at the edge of one’s self and attends to how we lean and tip towards others” (Rowe, 2005, pp. 16-17); Rowe’s language lent itself to the experience of dancing. In asking questions about where bodies are placed, Rowe’s thinking also intersected with geographic scholarship that has shown place to be crucial to the ways that different emotions and affects are experienced by different bodies, human and more-than-so (Adams-Hutcheson & Smith, 2020). What I drew from Rowe was her suggestion that reflection on how we are, or how we long to be, in relation with others can help us understand ourselves. What I also found impactful in Rowe’s writing was her acknowledgment that it is via the affective, emotional and embodied movements which incline us towards others, that we recognise ourselves to be in relation with forces, beings and objects which co-constitute place.

Haptic experience: At the edge of one’s self

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a number of “turns” within qualitative research highlighted the role of the senses in embodied experiences of place and invited scholars to adopt more “touchy-feely” approaches (see the work of Adams-Hutcheson & Smith, 2020; Bondi, 2014; Duffy et al., 2011; Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2010; Paterson, 2009; Pile, 2010; Wilbur & Gibbs, 2020).

Hierarchies of the senses that have developed in Westernised societies have considered touch to be “bestial and base” and privileged vision (Paterson, 2009, p. 767). When scholars in the humanities began to take sensory experiences seriously, in keeping with historic biases, touch was the modality most neglected in research (Paterson, 2009). In the discipline of geography, scholars eventually started to turn awareness towards the role of touch in relation to the mobility of bodies, space and place (Johnston, 2012; Paterson, 2005, 2009). This inquiry into touch became known as haptic geographies. Geographic inquiry into haptic experience not only pertains to “the sensation of touch or the feelings associated with having one’s skin touched” (Johnston, 2012, p. 3). As Mark Paterson (2009) described, “touch is not reducible to tactility or tactile sensation alone” (p. 768); bodily experiences of touch implicate other sensations, for example, muscular tension, movement, balance and awareness of temperature. If, as Rowe (2005) described, “belonging is that movement in the direction of the other” (p. 27), then haptic encounters, which are inherently proximal experiences between

different objects, surfaces and beings, have much to offer articulations and contemplation of belonging.

In what follows, I describe and discuss haptic encounters that arose for two participants during my research. The women's haptic encounters emerged during different danced movement methods in different workshops. Tess's experience emerged in a Zoom workshop and was evoked from memory and imagination during a danced movement method in which participants were invited to respond to a series of words via movement. Tess reflected on her experience via journalling. For Emma, the touch physically occurred during an in-person workshop during a danced movement method I describe as an exploratory walk; Emma reflected on her haptic encounter via the supporting methods of body mapping and journalling. Both of the women shared and further unpacked their experiences with me, via discussion.

Rowe (2005) centred her politics of relation on connection between humans. However, given the experiences and insights that emerged for these women, I extend these thoughts about "be longing" towards relationships with place, with the more-than-human. Rather than the touch transpiring between humans, these haptic encounters took place between Emma and a river and Tess and a hill. As these haptic encounters took place between human bodies and the more-than-human bodies of soil, grass, water and earth, at the heart of these gestures of touch was an action or sense of inclining towards the environment. It is to Emma's haptic encounter with the Waikato River that I first turn.

Emma: "Like getting to know a friend better"

One of the methods undertaken during the first danced movement workshops was an exploratory walk. Scholars across diverse disciplines have incorporated walking into research practices. Dance scholars have used walking as a means to deepen knowledge of place and engage with the more-than-human (Bannon, 2010; Barbour, 2020; Hunter, 2019; Satin, 2019). Human geographers have also engaged with walking as a way of examining experiences of place-making and space (McCormack, 2013; Wylie, 2005). Walking was of relevance to my research, as it offered insights into place via embodied movement (Springgay & Truman, 2018). While not strictly engaging with danced movement, I approached the walk as a danced movement method. Through the act of walking, I sought to facilitate an experience for participants in which they could focus on their responses to place and how those responses registered through their bodies.

Prior to setting out on the walk, I invited the women to try not to verbally communicate and use the time to be open to other forms of communication and sensory

experience. I encouraged the women to observe the features of the place and what was going on around them at the time. Centrally, throughout the walk, I asked the women to be conscious of their positionality and consider how this influenced their embodied experience of place. The women were not aware of the course the walk would take. As guide, I moved at a slower pace and paused often. To align with the aims of my research, walks were undertaken around sites of significance to Pākehā colonisation and settlement in each town where a workshop was undertaken. On the walk with Emma, through the centre of Kirikiriroa Hamilton, the route I planned led us to the Waikato River.

Before setting out on the walk I provided participants with different forms of historical information about the place we would be walking through. During the lunchbreak of my first workshop with Emma, we looked at paintings illustrating what the riverbank looked like prior to colonial occupation and photographs of the city taken in its earliest days as a colonial military settlement. Emma confided that she had little knowledge of Kirikiriroa Hamilton's history and she was learning a lot. This new historical knowledge greatly influenced the insights and observations that arose for Emma during the exploratory walk.

As part of my research, I wrote vignettes about moments that were impactful for participants or myself. The following is an excerpt from a vignette I wrote about the walk with Emma and describes a moment in the research of key significance for her.

At the river's edge

It is a spring day, and the yellow of newly emerged kōwhai^v flowers mix with the pink of cherry blossoms amid the green of the many trees planted along the riverbank.

Standing at the water's edge, I hear tūī^{vi} singing in the branches of trees, getting drunk on kōwhai nectar. Their song is accompanied by the whirr and clunk of vehicles crossing Anzac Parade Bridge to our left. Quieter and more subtle than these sounds is the gentle lapping of the river against its pebbly shores. An unceasing drone to the seasonal and urban sounds clustered around its banks. I shift my focus to observe the ripples and play of light on the water's surface, and the different colours, shapes, and textures of pebbles beneath the shallow waters of the river.

The word Waikato can be translated from te reo Māori (the Māori language), as “flowing water” - specifically, “wai” for “water” and “kato” meaning “to flow” (Manatū Taonga - New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage, n.d.). The largest urban centre in the Waikato region, the city of Hamilton, as it is officially called, in te reo Māori, is named Kirikiriroa after the major pā^{vii} of Ngāti Wairere, a hapū^{viii} of

the iwi^x Waikato-Tainui. Before its destruction by colonial military in 1864, the pā was situated on the west bank of the Waikato River, on the site that is now the centre of the city, through which Emma and I have just walked. The name Kirikiriroa refers to the fertile sandy loam which makes up much of the soil around the area: “kirikiri” meaning “small stones” or “sand”, and “roa” meaning “long” - a long stretch of fertile land (Manatū Taonga, n.d.).

While the river’s water always moves and flows towards the sea, I wonder how long each pebble has lain on the riverbed, supported by a cushion of sand. For much of the twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century, at the expense of the region’s environment, the wealth of the Waikato region has been seen as coming from the milk produced on its many dairy farms. However, long before any cows arrived, the pebbles, sand and water Emma and I stand before were harnessed sustainably to create an extensive network of gardens. Containing plants for food and medicine, these gardens provided nourishment and healing for iwi who lived by the river’s shores.

Looking back down the riverbank, I see Emma. She is crouching and looking down as one of her hands scoops up water and then lets it trickle through her fingers. Slowly and deliberately, Emma repeats this action several times before removing her hand from the water and gazing down the river for several moments.

After the walk, arriving back at the workshop space, we embarked on creating body maps to record what we had experienced. On Emma’s completed body map, I observed how she had filled in one of her hands with blue crayon (see Figure 1). The crayon was not confined to her hand but reached up to the wrist and lower arm. As it reached her lower arm, the blue crayon became a strand running up the length of her arm until it arched over her shoulder and into a heart shape. Outlined in black and then a faint halo of grey, the core of the heart consisted of two halves, one blue and the other green. Emma’s blue strand penetrated the black and grey, and connected to the blue half of her heart. The strand was not the only tendril emanating from her heart space. Other lines of blue and green reached out of the heart, ending in spirals. Talking me through the body map, Emma communicated that this feature of the map arose from her experience of crouching by the river, feeling its water on her hand. Considering this blue line Emma had drawn, I wondered which was the source: the hand, or the heart.



Figure 1: Detail of Emma's body map. Author's own.

As Emma detailed in her research journal:

While I have lived in Kirikiriroa for the past 5 years, I had never actually made contact with the Waikato River. I had been on it in a boat and next to it on walks. But never in it. Taking the opportunity to reach out my hands to the water and feel the cool current felt very grounding and very special [underlining as appeared in her response].

Despite living in Kirikiriroa Hamilton for some years, this moment during the walk was the first time Emma had touched the Waikato River. This was an interesting observation, as every day that Emma had lived in the city, she would have, in a fashion, touched the river. Kirikiriroa Hamilton's water supply comes from the Waikato River, and through quotidian acts of cleaning and drinking, contact with the river's water permeated life. However, for Emma, crouching at the river's edge and feeling the water against her fingertips seemed to constitute a different encounter with the river, one that spoke of connection to the Waikato River itself, as opposed to the presence of abstract water, coming from "somewhere", arriving in showers and sinks through pipes. This small haptic gesture was a significant moment for Emma, and she later expressed that after this experience, going into the centre of the city felt different for her. Emma did not relate to the historical knowledge she had gained via participation in the research as information offering greater context on the place in which she lived. Rather, the events

of Kirikiriroa Hamilton's history became active forces in the way Emma experienced the place in which she lived. As she shared, regarding her experiences of going to the central business district in the weeks after the "exploratory walk",

[it's] not like you can see scars on the land or ... but I feel like ... The vibes are different. If that makes sense, like I don't know how else to say it, it's just acknowledging what has happened there before has changed the energy of the place for me.

In the language Emma used to describe the effects of her deepening relationship with the place of Kirikiriroa Hamilton, she referred to "seeing" and "looking". It would be a mistake to approach Emma's use of language as solely pertaining to eyesight, and I posit that the ocular leanings in Emma's language speak to relating to place in ways more receptive, more open to taking notice, of looking not just with the eyes but with all different kinds of awareness: haptic, mobile, sensory and otherwise.

Attempting to summarise the ways she felt her relationship to the city had developed since the 'exploratory walk', Emma described:

It feels like I have taken the time to try and understand place better, and in doing that, the place has welcomed me further in a kind of give-and-take relationship. I feel more settled here in Hamilton now, I feel like I understand the place better because I took the time to investigate the history of the place and stuff like that, like getting to know a friend better.

While Emma expressed that she felt "more settled" and named the city as her adult home, she did not explicitly articulate that the experience of touching the river translated to her belonging more in Kirikiriroa Hamilton, and, as such, I am hesitant to claim that this was an outcome of the experience. In relation to belonging, what I feel is significant about Emma's experience is the agency that Emma attributes to place through her language. Acknowledging that a place can "welcome" you brings a different charge, not only to ways of relating to and experiencing place but also to how one sees themselves within place (Bawaka Country, 2013, 2015; Bell, 2019). Likening the city to a "friend" and describing her deepening relationship with place as "give and take", Emma's response intimated a sense of reciprocity had entered her experience of place in the central city. It is possible to perceive Emma's experience during the "exploratory walk" as one which drew her awareness towards the co-constitutive nature of the relationship between her body, more-than-human bodies and place (Bawaka Country,

2013, 2015; Bell, 2019; Wright, 2014). Recognition of, and engagement in, a more dynamic and reciprocal relationship with place provides a promising state of awareness for developing a sense of belonging.

In touching and being touched by the water, in looking below the surface, in taking time and reaching out to what she felt had lain beneath, Emma experienced a source of “connection” and “growth”. Similarly to the way in which Emma had expressed her deepening relationship with the place of the central city, she also described water as something that “gives and takes”, again bringing a sense of reciprocity to the fore. In this way, the small gesture of touching the river inclined Emma towards reciprocity, the quality that characterised both her deepening relationship with place and what the water she had touched represented to her. Thinking back to the body map Emma had drawn with the heart and hand connected by the blue thread, I wondered if it could be that both were, in their own way, the source, each feeding the other.

Tess: “Everything feels different now on that land”

While Emma’s haptic encounter physically took place by the Waikato River, Tess’s haptic encounter emerged as a remembered and imagined experience of touching the earth at her extended family’s farm. During research workshops, I guided participants through an improvisation which invited them to respond to a series of words of relevance to the research, via danced movement; these words included “belonging”. Tess’s danced movement response to the word “belonging” consisted of two phases, the first of which she characterised as “aimless” and “passive”. During discussion after the danced movement method, this is how Tess described what arose for her:

Firstly, I’d got myself on a route of just wandering aimlessly and breathing. It felt a really passive response. I was like, do I, do I not feel a sense of belonging? ... I do definitely feel belonging here, but I can’t ... I need to unpack it a bit ... So, it felt a bit passive and aimless.

Yet this aimless and passive wandering was only Tess’s first impulse. As she continued to respond to the word “belonging” via danced movement, the nature of her movements changed. This is how Tess described what occurred for her:

It progressed, the movement, to me on my knees with my hands on the ground, pushing on the ground and stretching my fingers out. That heralds back ... to my sense of belonging and connection to the whenua^x that I’ve been unpacking in recent years. I always go back to this hill near my house on the farm, and it’s long grass. I’ve taken the kids there, just lying there at night looking at the stars

and looking around. It's just really beautiful, and yeah, it's that touching, that deliberate touching, and it feels a bit more person-to-person. So, I was doing that, and I was remembering. I was visualising that space when I thought about belonging.

As opposed to the aimless wandering which had emerged as Tess's initial response to the word, she described the action of pushing into or touching the ground as an "active" and "reciprocal" thing. Pushing her fingers into the ground, as if she were digging into the soil. Rather than the floating aimlessness that had emerged at first, this second phase of Tess's response seemed to hint at rooting down, relationships and searching for something.

This improvised response to the word "belonging" connected to a story which Tess had shared during a Zoom group discussion that took place between all of the research participants.

When I was trying to learn my pepeha^{xi} a few years ago, I was talking to an artist from Tūhoe^{xii} here [Whakatāne]. There's always been with our farm; there's two of us, my brother and me. He's always going to be the farmer, he's overseas ... but he'll come back and work the land. But there's always that intention that he will buy my inheritance off me and farm it ... When I talked to this artist, I said, 'even though like I'm happy in Whakatāne and this is my community, I still feel this little pang. I will let that happen or whatever, but I feel a little bit of sadness about that.' She said, 'That's your connection to the land that little bit.' That was really cool for me.

Having the "pang" Tess experienced at the prospect of selling her inheritance to her brother interpreted as her connection to the land affected a shift in how Tess experienced her extended family's farm. An integral part of how Tess experienced this shift was via touch:

When I went back up there, it just felt different on the land. I took my children to our hay paddock at night to look at the stars, and just everything feels different now on that land. It feels holy or sacred when I touch it with my feet or my hands, and so that's been really amazing.

Tess's family's farm was a place she mentioned often in reference to a sense of belonging and non-belonging, and her relationship with the place had involved difficult emotions. When Tess had begun to engage with, and learn about, questions around Te

Tiriti and her subjectivity as Pākehā, her feelings of shame around her family's farming history prompted feelings of shame, of "rejection" of her Pākehā history, and disassociation from her ancestors.

Tess described her family's history with the land, as based on "consumption" and "extraction". Articulating further, Tess shared:

I've found and recognised that my history with the land is very Western and capitalist. It's been about forcing the land to produce things. So, it's been quite a broken [history], land as property more than connection.

Tuck and Yang (2012) defined colonialism as a kind of "biopolitical and geopolitical management of people, land, flora, and fauna" (pp. 4-5). Tess's response shows an understanding of how colonial "biopolitical and geopolitical management" primarily perceives land as something to be owned and used. Related to her use of the words "consumption" and "extraction", Tess described her family's history with the land as capitalist. Capitalism and settler-colonialism are closely entwined structures (Grande, 2003). Within settler colonial societies, land is taken from Indigenous populations and sold to settler colonisers as private property. Through activities, like farming, this privatised land creates profit which contributes to capitalist growth - growth fuelled by colonial injustice (Grande, 2003; Wolfe, 2006).

The danced movement, in which Tess imagined her hands digging into soil, and her association of this movement with the memory of her family's farmland feeling "sacred" or "holy" against her touch evoked a relationship with place that contrasted with how she perceived her family's attitude to land. The movement also contrasted with the initial aimless walking that emerged for Tess in response to the word "belonging". Tess's haptic encounter did not confine land as a thing to be worked or owned, nor did it speak of passivity. Rather, echoing Emma's experiencing of perceiving herself in a "give and take" relationship with the place of Kirikiriroa Hamilton, Tess's gesture and memory of touching the earth positioned her family's farmland as a force or entity with which she was in a reciprocal relationship.

Not limited to insights and observations regarding Tess's relationship to her family's farm, haptic contact with the earth proved to be a salient feature of Tess's responses - verbal, journalled, and danced - throughout her participation in the research. When sharing sequences of danced movement during workshops, Tess would often begin them in a crouched or kneeling position, her palms and/or soles in contact with the ground. In these positions, Tess described she imagined the feel of the earth

beneath her hands and feet and that she associated this image and sensation with seeking a sense of “foundation”, “being present”, and “wanting to connect” with the environment.

In drawing her awareness towards the touch of her skin against grass or soil, Tess seemed able to access a feeling of being in relationship to the environment and place that had been absent in her initial response to the word “belonging”. Attempting to describe what it was about the act that was so impactful for her, she described:

It’s that shedding, like getting rid of that layer that separates you, of shoes or whatever ... Yeah, that connection ... I can’t pin down home, and I can’t pin down belonging, but when you bring that up, that’s everywhere, like anywhere that I am ... What is it? It feels a bit more of a reciprocal thing for me to take off my shoes; stand there, be present, and feel that. Maybe it feels more like I am giving back to the Earth that’s cradling me everywhere.

Discussion: Touching, being and longing

As I turn towards deeper discussion of Tess and Emma’s haptic encounters, it is important to note that when talking about haptic experiences, care must be taken with the conclusions and correlations that are made between sense experience of place and politics (Rifkin, 2013). As Paterson (2009) described, “We can firmly differentiate sensations (that is, information routed via distributed nerves and sense-system clusters) from sensuous dispositions (the sociohistorical construction of the sensorium, its reproduction over time and its alteration through contexts and technologies)” (p. 779). Paterson’s (2009) distinction is important; it acknowledges that haptic experiences do not occur within a void. As feminist scholars have highlighted, lived experience is contextual (Johnston & Longhurst, 2010; McDowell, 1999; Rose, 1993). Thus, every haptic experience is mediated via constructions of gender, race, history, culture and place (Johnston, 2012). As such, the specificities of the particular haptic encounters I’ve described affect what the touch might have meant.

Asking such questions of haptic encounters with the more-than-human is of particular importance in the context of settler-colonial subjectivities (Rifkin, 2013). In Westernised societies, imaginaries and discourses at work around sensory experience of the environment have obfuscated colonial histories and reinforced settler entitlement (Rifkin, 2013). A prime example of this was the Romantic movement, which arose in eighteenth-century Western Europe as “a philosophical [and artistic] resistance to modernity” (Ream, 2020, p. 49). Adherents of Romanticism advocated experiences of “communing with nature”, exploring “wilderness” on foot, and exposing oneself to the

elements (Ream, 2020). Such activities were approached and perceived as direct sensory experiences with the natural world (Ream, 2020). In these acts of “communion”, no critical consideration was given to the role factors such as race, gender and class played in sensory experiences of place. Such accounts emphasised discourses and imaginaries of “untouched” landscapes, which ignored the historical specificities of place and rendered invisible the presence of Indigenous peoples (Rifkin, 2013).

As my accounts illustrate, Emma and Tess’s haptic encounters were each unique and emerged via different pathways of knowledge generation. Tess’s haptic encounter involved remembered bodily sensation of touching the earth on her family’s farm. For Emma, the touch physically occurred in the context of exploring place and learning about the history of the city in which she lived. And yet, reflection on both of these encounters offers insights which contest not only the relationships to place but the claims of belonging which settler-colonial projects in Aotearoa have sought to establish.

Emma and Tess’s haptic encounters with the more-than-human both occurred, or were remembered, during activities that invited them to attend to embodied ways of knowing about their subjectivities and relationship to place as Pākehā women. As Emma described, alongside bringing awareness to her subjectivity as Pākehā, learning about the local history of Kirikiriroa Hamilton was an integral aspect of what made touching the Waikato River feel so significant for her. This haptic encounter was not an experience that reinforced ignorance or obscured colonial histories of Emma’s physical context and subjectivity. It was an encounter of re-sensing, of experiencing place with altered awareness. It was knowing more about the place in which she lived in conjunction with acknowledgment of her subjectivity that gave this haptic encounter import. Learning of local history was not a factor in Tess’s remembered haptic contact with her family’s farmland or her re-occurring image of her skin touching the earth. Alongside drawing awareness towards her subjectivity as Pākehā, it was engagement with embodied ways of knowing, accessed via improvisational movement, which made these haptic encounters salient and prompted Tess to consider what meaning they had in relation to her sense of belonging. Via her reflections, Tess’s memories and images spoke to a relationship with place that contrasted with her family’s attitudes towards land and suggested a way of belonging more responsive to positionality as Pākehā and tangata tiriti.

“No simple inside and outside”

Both women’s insights related to contacting a sense of reciprocity via what can be described not only as haptic proximity but as haptic merging. The sense of touch pertains

to skin, and skin is not the impervious shell we so often think of it as (Stewart, 2010). Through the touch of our skin, we are connected to the world. Through touch, where the edges of our body contact the edges of another body, we experience the texture, temperature and pressure not only of the other body but of our own body. For instance, through a friend's embrace, we feel the heat and moisture of our own skin reflected back to us through their cool, dry arms. As researchers engaged in haptic geographies have described, touch has the capacity to catalyse a sense of attunement "to larger forces and energies" (Paterson, 2005, p. 8). If we rest our bare skin against the earth, our sweat may soak into the soil, and microbes may work their way inside us through the pores of our skin. As Stewart (2010) suggested, "One does not begin where the other apparently ends" (p. 35). In this light, the perception of a separation or boundary between person and environment is illusory. To put it another way, "there is no simple inside and outside" (Paterson, 2009, p. 780).

Emma's placing of her hand into the Waikato River and Tess's sense of digging her fingers into the soil of her family's farm, these gestures invite reflection on what it can mean to reach or press into, to enter other bodies, human and more-than-so. Acts of entering something, such as Emma and Tess's haptic encounters, could be described as having a penetrative element to them. In Westernised cultures, penetration has been discursively aligned with patriarchal acts carried out upon women and the more-than-human (Merchant, 1980; Plumwood, 1993). Whether through sexual violation, the male gaze, or activity detrimental to environments such as mining and the building of roads and railways, penetration has been positioned as an invasive act through which "power over" is exercised and the agency of bodies denied (Rose, 1993). Discussion of penetration recalls the ways in which touch can be used as a gesture of threat, a form of violence and a means of marginalisation. However, touch is equally acted out to comfort, show solidarity and protect. As Olsen (2020) described regarding touch, "its effects vary with our intention ... The same activity of touching communicates very different intentions and evokes different responses" (p. 79).

Being in, with, and around place in more sensed and sensitive ways

Tess and Emma's movements of touch which, real or imagined, delved into the bodies of the more-than-human were not gestures that reinforced Western notions of human dominance over other bodies, objects and environments. These haptic encounters were ones in which the more-than-human were perceived as having agency and the specificities of the place, as well as the women's subjectivities in relation to place, were recognised. After Emma's haptic experience, she referred to the place of Kirikiriroa

Hamilton as a “friend” that “welcomed” her further. Her use of language implied more on the part of the place than simply being a backdrop. Emma’s choice of words suggests a more even distribution of power and agency between human and the more-than-human beings, objects and forces which co-constitute place. Tess described the feeling of the bare soles of her feet against the earth as being “cradled”. Such use of language also distributes power differently from traditional Western perspectives of place and refutes ways of being and knowing which position the environment as a resource to be exploited. To feel cradled by the earth suggests not mastery over the environment but dependency and care. To feel herself cradled suggests Tess is in a position of reliance and that it is the earth who is nurturing her.

Via the haptic nature of their encounters, Emma and Tess accessed a different sense of place. As Hetherington (2003) described, “Through haptic encounters a place and our place within it get made and become familiar” (p. 1942). As much as touch can make a place familiar, it can also defamiliarise it, prompting it to be sensed in a different way and thus encouraging us to rework our place within it and how we perceive the others with whom we co-constitute place. Within the women’s different, more reciprocal sense of place and the environment, the more-than-human were an important force. In inclining towards bodies of water and soil (Rowe, 2005), Emma and Tess’s insights and experiences position the more-than-human as active and lively forces, concurrently shaping them and shaping their relationship with place.

Through these haptic encounters, the women were reminded that they were in relationship with the different bodies around them, whatever form they may have taken. These experiences of touch also suggest that it is not proximity with uniformity or sameness that offers potential for kindling or reaffirming belongings, but rather movements towards and contact with difference. As such, it is our engagement with what is other than us that can alert us to possibilities of belonging, be it grass, soil or other people (Rowe, 2005). As Rowe (2005) described, what we are inclined towards and who we put ourselves close to or reach out for tells us about our sense of self and who we feel we are. These Pākehā women’s haptic encounters suggest imaginaries of place that go beyond dominating and exploitative attitudes towards the environment and more-than-human, which characterised the colonial projects Pākehā are implicated in. Imbued with respect, openness and reciprocity, these experiences of touch evoked more sensed and sensitive ways of being in, with, and around place as women of settler-colonial background.

Unsettling: Tentative and unresolved

In countering perceptions of place that characterise settler-colonial structures, the women's haptic encounters can be seen as unsettling. In relation to settler-colonial subjectivities, the term unsettling infers a questioning of colonial certainties and can be understood as an experience that disturbs and shifts one from current positions and places (Howitt, 2020; Paradies, 2020). Unsettling refers to both a questioning of colonial structures and narratives, and the visceral responses that arise from such questioning, whether this questioning is consciously undertaken or taking place in a more subconscious way (Baker, 2024). To be unsettled infers movement away from certainty and fixedness.

The feelings of belonging present in the women's haptic encounters were cautious; their movements and actions did not speak to the colonial impulse to "claim" or "fix" (Mackey, 2014; Ngata, 2022). Emma's hand dipping into the Waikato River, and Tess's aimless and passive walking, which evolved into imagining, feeling and digging into the earth with her hands, were tentative gestures. In both the nature of these movements and the feelings and sensations attributed to them, they diverged from the ambitions towards fixedness and stability that have driven Pākehā place-making and claims of belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand (Turner, 2011).

Both of the women's haptic encounters speak to the emergence of relationships with place, built not upon some solid claim of belonging but upon the desire to acknowledge the precarities and particularities of their situatedness as Pākehā. Tipping away from ignorance and efforts towards naturalising settler-colonial presence on Māori land, these relationships with place suggest an inclination towards other ways of being and knowing as Pākehā: ways of being and knowing that value accountability and work towards right relation with *tangata whenua*^{xiii} via honouring their position as *tangata tiriti* (Mutu, 2019).

Conclusion

Considering the accounts I have shared, it would be faulty to offer some sort of categorical statement regarding belonging. However, reflecting on the insights and observations shared, I would suggest that a sense of belonging, "in place, with place, as place", is close by when one is in care-filled, response-able, reciprocal and respectful touch with the beings, objects and forces that co-constitute place (Wright, 2014, p. 404).

Emma and Tess's tentative insights and observations, which contest not only the relationships to place but also the claims of belonging which settler-colonial projects in

Aotearoa have sought to establish, emerged in a context in which embodied ways of knowing were privileged. The research's emphasis on the visceral and mobile elements of human experience supports what has already been articulated by scholars across multiple disciplines: that belonging and not belonging are both deeply embodied experiences (Wright, 2014). It is through the different facets of our visceral and sensory experiences that new belongings can be woven and sensations of non-belonging recognised. Engagement with danced movement as methodology also highlighted the ways in which belonging is connective and proximal; it draws bodies to other bodies, human and more-than-human, objects, forces and places.

In sharing these accounts, I offer a contribution to the small but growing body of knowledge that has explored feelings of belonging in Aotearoa with and through dance. Pertaining to haptic experience, I hope consideration of the moments discussed encourages those interested to draw awareness towards the rich insights and observations that can arise via attending to sensory dimensions of danced movement. It is especially my hope that scholars and practitioners interested in unsettling settler-colonial privileges via danced movement and somatic practices in Aotearoa and beyond will find the approach I have documented thought-provoking and supportive in relation to their own ways of working.

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ⁱ The term tangata tiriti does not infer an ethnic orientation (Dam, 2022). For a person who is tangata tiriti, it is through tangata whenua and Te Tiriti that they are able to be in Aotearoa New Zealand. Being tangata tiriti requires the ethical and political responsibilities of honouring Te Tiriti, responsibilities that have not been honoured by the British Crown and Pākehā settler-colonisers (Bell, 2009; Ngata, 2022; Mutu, 2019).

ⁱⁱ In the 1800s, a series of agreements were made between *iwi* (nations, tribes) and the colonial British government. *He Whakaputanga o te Rangatiratanga o Nu Tirenī* (the Declaration of the Independence of New Zealand) was signed 1835. This document formally declared the *tino rangatiratanga* (sovereignty) of the *rangatira* (chiefs) of the many *hapū* (tribes, sub-tribes) throughout the country. In 1840, a codicil to He Whakaputanga known as *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (the Treaty of Waitangi) was signed. Te Tiriti, written in *te reo Māori* (the Māori language), confirmed He Whakaputanga and devolved governance over British settler-colonisers to the English Crown.

The colonial British government honoured neither He Whakaputanga nor Te Tiriti. disregarding what had been promised, the colonial government espoused an English language version of the Treaty of Waitangi -drafted as an expression of British desires - as the real treaty. This document falsely claimed Māori had ceded sovereignty to the British Crown (Jackson 2022; Ngata 2022). The false assertion of settler-colonial authority in Aotearoa New Zealand has never been accepted by Māori (Jackson 2022; Ngata 2022).

ⁱⁱⁱ This research was approved by Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee, reference number 0000029269.

^{iv} In this article, I refer to all research participants via pseudonyms.

^v A tree endemic to Aotearoa New Zealand.

^{vi} A bird endemic to Aotearoa New Zealand.

^{vii} A village or defensible encampment.

^{viii} A number of *whānau* or family groups who share descent from a common ancestor.

^{ix} Iwi can be translated from te reo as “tribe” or “nation” (Te Aka, n.d.a). As Mutu (2022) described, “Iwi are groupings of hapū who come together mainly for political purposes, and their membership is usually determined by descent from a common ancestor” (p. 50).

^x The word *whenua* can mean ground, land, territory, the placenta, or nationhood (Te Aka, n.d.c). Through the concept of *whenua*, bodies of earth and human are intimately entangled (Mutu, 2022).

^{xi} Within *te ao Māori* (Māori worldview), *tikanga* can be described as, “the customary system of values and practices that have developed over time and are deeply embedded in the social context” (Te Aka, n.d.b).

Within *tikanga*, a *pepeha* is recited as a means of introducing oneself. A *pepeha* will usually follow a set format and identifies who a person is, via reciting connections to ancestors, tribal affiliation, and places (Williams, 2000). In Aotearoa New Zealand, increasing numbers of people who identify as Pākehā and *tangata tiriti* are developing *pepeha*.

^{xii} *Ngāi Tūhoe*, also referred to as *Tūhoe*, are an iwi whose *rohe* (an iwi’s tribal area or territory) encompasses much of eastern Te Ika-a-Māui North Island.

^{xiii} *Tangata whenua* (people of the land) is a term used to describe those who can *whakapapa* (trace their genealogy) to a Māori ancestor.