Dancing Aotearoa: Connections with Land, Identity and Ecology

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Preamble

"Dancing Aotearoa" emanates from my conviction that, even in today's highly globalised and mobile world, it is not only possible but also important to recognise a contemporary dancer and choreographic practice that is distinctly from Aotearoa New Zealand. Its importance resides in the fact that, 174 years after the signing of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (The Treaty of Waitangi), between the British colonisers and the Māori, Aotearoa New Zealand is still grappling with its social and cultural identity. Dance, along with the other arts, is one way of working out what it means to be a New Zealander in these times.

Arguably more than the other arts, however, the dance artist experiences the world sensuously, emotionally and physically. S/he is attuned through a dancer's embodiment to be able to respond to the shapes, forms and energies of place by matching, morphing, shaping and re-shaping the space. His/her rhythms derive from an internal pulse and from the visual and felt rhythms of the landscape. This landscape might be constructed, angular and urban or elemental. It might be psychological, intuitive or imposed. It is my view that a dance artist has the potential, along with the other arts, to speak for 'this' time and place—ecologically, socially, culturally or politically—and in so doing help define our national identity. In the following article I offer a commentary on connections with land, identity and ecology that can be seen in the work of some dancer/choreographers of Aotearoa. My commentary reflects my own depth of experience as a dancer/choreographer and educator, as well as some preliminary research with a small group of other dancer/choreographers whose artistry I have witnessed and who chose to engage with this issue.

The artist and the land

Even as most contemporary dance practice and educational preparation takes place in urban centres, I contend that our histories and experience in Aotearoa are influenced in some way by the natural environment and rural landscape. This influence may shape the psyche and tune the artistic eye of dancers, whether acknowledged or not. Most major cities are coastal or situated along the banks of a major river. Early arrivals to Aotearoa depended on the water for transportation and survival, and these waterways are acknowledged in *whaikorero* (formal oratory) to this day. Nowhere on our three-plus islands is very far from the sea and, consequently, I believe that a kind of, what I will term, 'oceanic consciousness' abides in all of us to some degree. For suburban or inland dwellers this sense of the ocean and remoteness may be more metaphorical and mythological (the demi-god Maui fished our northern island from the sea) than real or a result of a media-generated, tourism-promoting image of golden sands, pohutukawa trees and sailboats. But for many of our population, the surrounding pounding oceans have shaped our sense of an island identity and potentially influenced the quality of our dance. Behind the beaches rise dense bush-clad ridges interspersed with steep valleys, rocky creek beds and cascading waterfalls. The horizon, with its rhythmic undulations and jagged peaks, offers to some a reading as an avant-garde musical score. Crashing of waves on rock and beach, and asymmetrical birdcalls offer an aural awhi (embrace) of the natural environment—even visible and audible from parts of the city. And the cities—with their rich mix of Polynesian, Pākehā, European and Asian cultures—layer the somatic landscape with mythologies that make links to lands far away.

Situated on a major fault line, we are in motion even as we sleep. Everything here is a seismic reminder that we cannot take this life for granted. Things grow in such abundance that early Europeans sometimes felt as though they would be swallowed up by the forest's energy. Hence their maniacal 'burning off' of the native vegetation in favour of the hedgerows and fields they had been accustomed to in Britain. This is the backdrop against and amongst which we make our art.

Each artist responds to life here differently—to our relative isolation, our racial and socio-cultural dynamics, to the ecological devastation caused by reckless migrants and profiteers combined with our family and cultural background, our upbringing, our individual character and our somatic experience. Whether these artists are poets, painters or dancers, this land—its geology, its weather, and its energies—has the potential to exert a profound influence on the work. The

evocative poetry of poet, pianist and ecologist Denys Trussell (1991) is one such response:

> Archipelago.
>
> The forest
> withdraws from us.
>
> A shattered canopy
> And lattice of shadows.
>
> A collapse of time
> in the wood.
>
> Diminution
> In the mind of light
>
> And the slow shrinking
> Of living waters. (p. 57)

Trussell has written extensively of the way that dancers, painters, musicians and poets draw inspiration from the landscape and of how our identity is interwoven with that of place. He describes the inspiration for his poem "Walking into the Millennium" (Trussell, 2008) thus,

> I was bound as a poet … living mainly in an urban environment, to speak of 'the things of nature', their actuality, the resonance between them and the Māori myth that had named the coastline we walked as the edge of a giant fish's tail … a metaphor, old as the ancient Pacific, yet new as our witnessing the oceanic flux of the earth,

> You walk the serrated coast,
> The ventral edge of the tail
> Of the body of the fish
> Left by the demigod myth
> That lifts again and again
> Terrestrial structure
> From the ocean's shifting bed. (p. 23)

Land and identity

How our identity is shaped by our residence in a particular place on the planet and how we, as human beings, interact with and help to shape that place has been much written about by scientists, anthropologists, ecologists, perception psychologists and artists alike. In their book *Beyond the Scene: Landscape and Identity in Aotearoa, New Zealand*, geographer Janet Stephenson, designer Mick

Abbot and lawyer Jacinta Ruru (2010) contend that "landscape and culture are inextricably one, influencing the other in a never-ending dynamic, [and, that] our embedded experience of the land is always located, specific and distinctive" (p. 200). Poet David Eggleton (2010) describes landscape as "both emotional and physical … a cluster of associations—an inscape—as much as a topographical fact" (55–57). Citing French Theorist Guy Debord, Eggleton (2010) explains that "our evocations of [landscape's] energies and patterns, of its inherent entities or 'life forces' are part of its 'psychogeography'" (p. 56). I am attracted to this term in that it suggests a blending of the human mind/psyche with the land.

Relatively recent research within the discipline of anthropology of tourism describes new ways that relationships between people and place may be understood. Rather than dwelling on an ancestral connection with place, authors such as Anderson and Erskine (2012) describe a "coingredience" (p. 135) with the dynamic energies of a particular geographic location—a challenge thrown out from the land that may be experienced by a more mobile generation of travellers and new arrivals. These researchers suggest a synergistic relationship between place and individual selfhood. It is a way of tuning in to place—to listening, sensing, opening one's consciousness to possible transformative encounters that defines a certain kind of artistic practice that is, in itself an identity marker or a pou (territory marker).

My particular interest in this paper is how our relationship with the land, our participation in an ecology of place, shapes the nature of the dancer/choreographer in Aotearoa. And thus, in how the dancer/choreographer has the potential to speak for 'this' time and place and, in so doing, help define our national identity. My interest concerns the ways that the dancer expresses aspects of this influence, of this land, this place (which includes the urban environment) through his/her dancing and dance-making. The psycho-geographic landscape that Eggleton (2010) speaks of is, in my view, closely linked with a dancer's psychosomatic response to their environment and its inhabitants. I begin my investigation with my own example as a dancer growing up in this place, on this land of the long white cloud, Aotearoa, that has indelibly shaped both my dancing and my approach to teaching. I am curious as to how other dancers may express this connection within their art-making and so the second part of the article explores other dancer/choreographers' experiences.

The sheep farmer's daughter

As a fourth-generation child of this land, raised on deforested farmland, I dreamed of a land covered in forest—a genetic 'cellular' memory perhaps—and lived much of my childhood up in the treetops. Whereas on the farm the sounds I heard day and night were of sheep and cattle and other domestic animals, my artist's sensitivities imagined a previous soundscape of rich native 'bush' and bird life. Living in the country as a sheep farmer's daughter trained my body to run, climb, jump, chase, dodge and carry loads. Later I was to constitute this physical skill and athletic movement vocabulary into eco-political dances such as *Dance of the Origin* (1980) or *Waiting Trees* (1981). This later work was made to protest the felling of native forests—reconfiguration of the natural landscape for commercial purposes. Perhaps I was driven by a need to exorcize the demons that had destroyed my forest dream. I see now that the very activities I was protesting about have shaped and trained my dance expression. *Touch Broken Antipodes* (1987) began with a cacophony of discordant honks and bleats played by three musicians on six-foot long large bamboo pipes (reminiscent of the farm sounds of my childhood). The theme of the dance portrayed human's uneasy residence on this land once inhabited only by birds, insects and reptiles. The choreography contained a series of ineffectual couplings and futile reaching and falling through the space (partly inspired by the occurrence of a major earthquake during the rehearsal period). It ended with sombre measured treading across and around the stage—a relationship with the land still unresolved. However, in *Entering the Light* (1987), another work within the same season collectively titled *Masque for a Forest* (a concert in support of The Native Forest Action Council), the 'dancing' entities suggested a more harmonious connection with the natural world. They depicted, instead, the flickering, dappled light in the forest—nature performing non-emotive and phenomenological aspects of herself. In *Islands 1*, *11*, and *111* (1992), a collaboration with the composer Peter Scholes, the dancers rather than depicting human beings again performed as elemental energies—floating seaweed (a unison moment in the final act of *Islands 111*) or coastal waves crashing against rock (a dynamic duet at the end of *Islands 111*). In this work the musicians—a wind quintet, grand piano and solo clarinet—accompanied the dancers on stage, forming stationary 'islands' of sound and human geology amongst the tidal flux and flow of the dancers.

Photograph 1: ***Islands 111*** **(Galaxy Theatre, Auckland,December,1992).** Dancers: Catherine Chappell, Mia Mason, Judith Froude, Taiaroa Royal. Photo: Brian Curtis.

In a more recent video-dance work, *Anima* (2005), the dancing entity is portrayed as a consciously human, participating naked, sensing, ego-less aspect of nature/place, Papatuanuku (female energy of the earth). Throughout these years of artistic practice, our company of dancers and musicians in Origins Dance Theatre made regular journeys to rural communities to share our environmentalist dance practices through workshops and performances. Our aim was to help local communities to present their environmental concerns through dance, to engage with the landscape. We were practising cross-disciplinary, collaborative, engaged community art-making that arose directly from our artistic interactions and our relationship with (and concern for) the natural environment. These experiences were to later form the basis of an ecological teaching philosophy (East, 2011) whose pedagogy embraces more co-operative, interdisciplinary and process-oriented practices that fosters a connection with their local community and broader world issues.

Towards a pedagogy of place

My first real opportunity to put these pedagogical ideas into practice came in 1989 when, with the support of a small committee of dance educators, I established The

National Diploma of Contemporary Dance. Our stated aim was to train "well-rounded, highly articulate artists, dancers with a sense of connection to the 'place' of Aotearoa New Zealand" (The Performing Arts Trust, National Diploma of Contemporary Dance Prospectus 1989, pp. 1–2). Although I had yet to fully articulate these ideas, my classes at the time included taking dance students out to the ocean, to hike through native bush, to visit the local zoo and investigate urban settings as performance sites. Students studied an eclectic range of dance techniques and somatic practices taught by local and international guests. Within my choreography classes, students were encouraged to draw on narratives of local place, to evolve their own choreographic style and movement vocabulary, to trust their intuition, to reference their own cultural affiliations, and to co-operate with a mix of artists from other disciplines. Some twenty-five years later many of New Zealand's current choreographers are graduates of this initial programme (which has now evolved into the Bachelor of Performing and Screen Arts, Unitec, Auckland). In a sense, in this article I am enquiring into the ways that the landscape of Aotearoa continues to inform the works of some of these former graduates. Using their voices, I investigate the effects of landscape and place on these contemporary dancer/choreographers of Aotearoa New Zealand and the ways that each considers that their choreographic identity is shaped by their residence on these particular islands in the South Pacific.

The dancer of Aotearoa

Curious as to how some of my former students might perceive the influence of the land on their dance, I circulated a request via the National Dance News Network in May 2012, asking dancer/choreographers to respond to the following questions:

- Q.1. If you had to describe the particular characteristics/attributes of an Aotearoa New Zealand contemporary dancer, what would they be?
- Q.2. In what ways, if any, does the landscape of Aotearoa inform your dancing/dance-making? *or,* where do your dance-making ideas originate? What informs, inspires, motivates your dance?
- Q.3. How would you label/describe the kind of dance you make?

It should be noted that the dancer/choreographers who responded do not represent all of the dance artists of Aotearoa. While many who responded were my former students, they also included two senior dance artists, one of whom also taught many of the respondents. Two recent graduates of the current configuration of the programme I set up (now known as the Unitec Bachelor of Stage and Screen

Arts—Contemporary Dance) also responded. Some I name, interweaving their ideas with my own. My qualification to do so is as a choreographer and dance educator in Aotearoa of some forty years. I am aware that these initial reflections invite more in-depth exploration and critical commentary from a wider cohort of dancers in the future. However, I hope this initial research will stimulate further discussion regarding the ways that place can shape both a people's identities and their art-making.

In an autoethnographic research project (East, 2006), following years of investigation of my ideas around pedagogies of place, I attempted an autobiographical description of myself as a dancer. I return to this description now as I ponder the existence of, and influences on, 'dancing identities of Aotearoa':

> My identity is expressed in terms of dance and of 'being' a dancer. This sense of self includes my dancer's eye, the way I move and my affinity with the land that has conditioned the way I move. This is why I describe myself as a four-legged dancer, alternating freely between using my hands and feet on the floor. Rather than resist gravity, I am inclined to use it to give me momentum, speed and lift. As well as using all four 'legs,' I allow my spine to undulate, slither and roll like a fish or snake. Many years of watching and listening to birds has influenced the dynamic accents and time signatures of my dance. I habitually pause on one leg, make quick gestures and shifts of focus with my head and generally alternate fast flowing activity with erratic hesitant stillness. As I move in this way I am able to achieve a transformation of identity, to assume the form, shape, animate (or inanimate) qualities of the 'other'. As the dancer dancing nature, I become, as Sondra Fraleigh (1988) suggests, 'both the dancer and the dance' (p. 31). I am both the thing and the interpretation of the thing. When I become nature, the difference between concepts of self and nature disappears; 'it becomes my consciousness' (p. 40). It is as if I become those ego-less energies that were always there within me. I am transformed within the time/space of the dance. The energies of nature move through me and, in their doing so, I am transformed. (East, 2006)

This somatic empathy (by which I refer to our human attempts to participate with the shapes, forms and energies of/as nature) is one of the ways that a dancer may respond to the environment in Aotearoa.

Dancer/choreographers' responses

I now defer to the thoughtful and illuminating voices of the respondents to my questions, a wide variety of older and younger Māori, Pacific, Asian and Pākehā dancer/choreographers. Somewhat surprisingly considering their very different backgrounds, choreographic approaches and styles, the sample group shared many similar definitive words and sentiments. Among the responses to my initial question regarding how they might describe the character of this 'generic' New Zealand dancer, certain words appeared many times. Key words included "strong", "earthy", and "gutsy, physical". Other similar recurring expressions included "ambitious", "fearless, warrior spirited", "multi-talented" and "grounded", "a grounded sense of lightness", "a robust physique, "strength and agility", hardworking", "awesome", "unrelenting", "dedicated", "intelligent", "open", "diverse", "well-trained", "cultured … aware of culture", "emotional", "expressive", and "passionate".

Grouped together, these words immediately suggest to me a kind of dynamic and physical being that one might expect to find in a country with an indigenous warrior population, a people with a love of outdoor sports and a determination born out of a residual pioneer spirit. I note, as I write from the deep south of Aotearoa, how these words might suggest the frequent 'unrelenting' and 'diverse' weather systems—with high seas, driving sleet and 'strong' winds. I wonder if a dancer's energy can be shaped by weather patterns. Surely, when one is in constant danger of being blown off one's feet or drenched in frozen rain, one might develop a more tenacious 'grounded' grip of the earth and resilience of character.

One dancer described a characteristic tendency towards "luidity and flotation of arms, pelvic drive in space, linear body lines carving into contracted and rounded forms and swinging motions, passing through almost classical positions yet breaking down to animalistic 'gruntiness'". For me, this brings to mind the persistent flow and drive of the Clutha river cutting through straight-sided rock ravines and surging out into the massive valleys and plains of Otago. Another respondent suggested that the dancer of Aotearoa is 'hungry to use up space'. We do have a lot of open spaces here – beaches and farmland to run on, unpopulated mountains to climb. However, some see this spaciousness differently, mentioning, instead, the emptiness and isolation of island life—a 'hunger born out of a sense of isolation'. Others focused more on the metaphysical influences of place, making reference to 'a spirituality, wairua (spirit or life force) or energy felt in seen or

unseen ways'. Other descriptions, such as 'There is a wildness to our dance style, a lonely human physicality', paint a vivid portrait of a dancer raised on these islands.

When asked how the land informed her work, senior choreographer and teacher Lyne Pringle wrote of her sense of turangawaewae (place to stand, connection, belonging to particular place) and added:

> I have been shaped so strongly by the landscape here—physically, emotionally, mentally and artistically. The land is the life-blood and the older I get the more important it becomes.

This concept of being shaped by the land is akin to that of Native American writer Paula Gunn Allen (1997), who explained that "the land is not really [a] place separate from ourselves … it is rather a part of our being, dynamic, significant, real" (p. 266). In responding to my question veteran dancer Kilda Northcott spoke of the influence of a specific piece of land:

> The land, rivers, lakes and mountains particularly, Putauaki, have fed, inspired, nourished, informed and continue to whisper and cajole, the dancing spirit.

Another young dancer wrote that her dance was "informed by [her] childhood in Canterbury with infinite space and physical freedom". She commented that this experience, along with her extensive technical training in classical and contemporary techniques, had shaped her as a New Zealand dancer.

One artist, dance improviser Kristian Larsen, expressed being influenced by the landscape of Aotearoa on a less overt and more "subconscious level". This, to me, is akin to the kind of psycho-geographic inscape that Eggleton speaks of—beyond words and yet deeply influential on one's art-making.

Another respondent, choreographer Malia Johnson, wrote of how the land of Aotearoa innately affected her work: "the space, landscape, environment (physical, political, social) also ebbs and flows through all my decision-making in my work." She described exploring birds as core components in her work; her inspiration from New Zealand writing about "our island nature"; of often exploring notions of "spatial confinement, perching, balancing, containment and isolation"; and of specifically investigating environmental issues within her work. Influence from other art forms and the practice of sharing the dance stage with filmic and visual arts is a feature of New Zealand choreography more generally. In Malia's work, this integration of filmic and visual elements produces a layering of images

and meaning suggestive perhaps of the leaf mould in the forest or the rock strata that may be observed in a cliff face.

Photograph 2: ***Dark Tourists*** **(2007)**
Malia Johnston (Choreographer/dancer). Photo: James Ensing-Trussell.

When asked how the land influenced her work, feminist dance writer and choreographer Karen Barbour replied, "Actually, it permeates everything I do in ways that are often difficult to express." She describes, in the dancer of Aotearoa, "articulate sensuous and conscious movement vocabularies that arise directly from walking the fertile and changeable land of these South Pacific islands" (Barbour, 2011, p.171). Her solo work *A Place to Stand* is a "delving into what it means to be a woman of this land and how the land influences being" (Barbour, in correspondence with the author, November, 2012). She explains:

> Using relevant improvisational and choreographic strategies I … integrate these personalized movement vocabularies with everyday performativity, and express myself as a Pākehā woman 'speaking' of emerging culture. (Barbour, 2011, p.171)

Photograph 3: ***A place to stand*** **Karen Barbour (2012)**
Photo: Marcia Mitchley

Some New Zealand dancers describe a process of intuitive, spontaneous, physical and psychological (psycho-somatic) tuning—a sensuous and unpremeditated connection with surface, or each other through their skin (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009). These dancers' processes are informed by a variety of adapted American and Japanese somatic practices such as Skinner Releasing Technique, Body Mind Centering, Contact Improvisation or Min Tinaka's Body Weather. Engaging with the land, and drawing on adapted somatic practices in this way can become the prime motivation for dance, as another respondent to the survey, Miriam Marler, states:

> My dance originates from a need to connect with myself and my own body as well as others and the world … about connecting to my own sense of self in order to be able to engage 'outside' of myself.

Antonio Damasio (1999) might call this 'sense of self' that Marler refers to "a transient core-self" (p. 171) that is shaped and re-shaped by its contact with the environment. In other words our identities are unavoidably influenced by our contact with particular place and its other inhabitants. Marler's choreography, often filmed out in the natural environment, is a sensual and sensitive immediate response to the local landscape where she was raised. Her body can be observed folding itself around, or carefully negotiating on all fours, the rocky coastal terrain of Otago.

Along with connection to particular land, the all-surrounding and powerful ocean featured significantly in the dancers' descriptions. Taking a more somatic perspective, one dancer wrote: "My internal rhythms are in relation to the body of water surrounding us." Another dancer described "a psychological—isolated—distilled—the island spirituality of being surrounded by the ocean".

The concept of particular places or geographical features having special meaning is familiar here in Aotearoa, since it may be where our placenta and those of our relatives are buried. In Te Reo Māori (Māori indigenous language), the word whenua has simultaneous meanings of both placenta and land. Māori people refer to themselves as tangata whenua (people of the land). These particular burial places are acknowledged in oratory and are considered to be deeply spiritually connected to the local people. In other words, there is an experience of the land as our relation, our whanaunga (extended family) as well as our turangawaewae. These feelings of relationship and belonging are not only experienced by tangata whenua.

Narratives of the tangata whenua

Māori artist/choreographer Louise Potiki Bryant acknowledges narratives of ancestors as a source of inspiration for a number of her works. These works inevitably include narratives of land and place. They also record instances of loss of land and its accompanying loss of a people's mana (sense of agency, and power). Bryant's work *Ngai Tahu 32* (first performed in 2004 by Atamira Dance Collective) is an example of the ways that narratives of the land and the element of water are woven into her danced journey of whanaunga and tipuna (ancestors). In this multi-media work, performed almost entirely in a large trough of water traversing the stage, film projection is used to bring the patterns of light from the natural world onto the stage. The performance that I witnessed was held in the wharenui (large meeting house) of our local Otakau Marae (tribal home). We were called into the meeting house in the traditional way and seated on either side of the water, each group forming a human backdrop for the other. Throughout this powerful tale of migration, romance and personal despair, water was a constant presence, accompanied by live and recorded soundscape of human voices and environmental sounds. A Christian image of baptism by water was also a very present reminder of our bicultural heritage.

Founding member of Atamira Dance Collective Jack Gray responded to my questions by expressing a more philosophical and mystical influence of place:

> My dance-making ideas symbolise Te Ao Māori—places of creation and mystery. I think the wairua [spirit] of the energies that can be perceived and felt, in seen and unseen ways, has always been a huge influence on my choreography.

His most recent work, *Mitimiti* (2012), was born out of his journey of reconnection to his mother's turangawaewae in the far north at Mitimiti. He described the process as "a mapping back that embodie[d] wairua, mana, placement". It was a journey of reconciliation—helping him to bring his dual heritage together to achieve "an inner acceptance of having been an urban born Māori [as] a contemporary urban person".

> There has been a desire within me to feel a land that was part of my essence but not part of my being—to feel it in that space with all its aeons of grief, sorrow and yearning.

Photograph 4: *Mitimiti* by Jack Gray (2012).
Performers Bianca Hyslop and Nancy Wijohn. Photo: Carl Gordon, Planet Pix Photography. http://www.atamiradance.co.nz/

Gray has also spent a good deal of time working overseas where often a distancing of oneself enables a clearer reflection of 'home'. He comments:

> I often find it easier to reflect on the impact of the landscape on my psyche and creativity when I travel overseas and get to compare the way I feel in other lands and other histories. I think there is a young (in terms of Earth's development) feeling in New Zealand that makes us a little naive (in a nice way) and fresh. I think the lushness of our forests, oceans and wildlife bring us a sense of 'plentifulness'.

Perhaps this naivety that Gray speaks of indicates that our national dance identity is still young, evolving and consolidating along with the geology—and subject to occasional tremors and upheaval as new ideas, modes of choreography arrive and join the mix.

Making and reception: choreographing the colloquial

Returning to Aotearoa after many years abroad, dancer/choreographer Claire O'Neil has made several provocative works that reveal a landscape often denied or overlooked. It is a local landscape that is both physical and psychological, current and historical, peopled and empty. She describes the making of two such works:

> *Lost Property* (O'Neil, 2005, Auckland and Wellington) used many different 'colloquial landscapes' in its film snippets, such as a corner dairy, a fishing boat, running in a local park, whereas *MTyland* (O'Neil, 2008, 2010, Wellington) had no landscapes connected directly to it (the stage was as bare as possible for most of the performance) yet it spoke of a land that had everything and nothing at the same time. Through association I employ Aotearoa and its people as a landscape for my creative work as there is no avoiding them. The audience also comes with a context (or several).

O'Neil's reference to the audience's 'context' is important since there is an expectation, or at least an invitation, of each viewer to associate the movements with their own histories and memories of Aotearoa in order to make sense of the work. Adshead-Lansdale (1999) emphasises the role of the spectator in the construction of an essentially "unstable text" (p. xiii). The "everyday behavioural codes" are woven into "dance-specific codes" to create dances that are "part of the social experience; an experience that is by definition, shared and which is shared in language as well as in movement" (Adshead-Lansdale, 1999, pp. xii–xiv).

Witnessing *MTyland* was like watching the social history of New Zealand passing across the stage. A later work, *Southern X* (O'Neil, 2012), used a similar panoramic structure with the dancers repeatedly journeying across the stage, always from the same direction—left to right, as if blown by a prevailing wind. Is it mere coincidence that Claire grew up in 'Windy Wellington', as it is colloquially known?

Writing of "the learnt body", ex-pat Norwegian/Australian actor Nicholas Hope (2013) suggests that

> the learnt body incorporates a physicality and sense of proximal space that is in part defined by the historic and socio-cultural responses of the prevailing community to the meta-geographic and lived urban landscape that the body inhabits. (Hope, 2013, p. 133)

As a teacher of acting, Hope wants to identify these enculturated somatic habits in order to override them. Conversely, O'Neil has researched the dancer's psycho-geographic memory in order to find the contents for her work. She is consciously performing these "colloquial landscapes", as she calls them.

Digitally mediated connections with place

As a yoga practitioner and digital artist with a deep awareness of the somatic body, Becca Wood's work incorporates personal narratives of body and place (in particular those of women) and an interest in sound art. More recently Becca has re-positioned her 'spatial practice' to construct, what she has called "social choreography for the ears".

In her most recent work, titled *A digital meditation and a choreography of mumble—A Social choreography for the ears*, the audience/participants, wearing headphones and carrying programmed MP3 players, simply walk a prescribed journey through the city. Following the aural instructions on the digital player myself, I walk and listen to the interwoven self-told narratives of two immigrant women—a former nun and pupil of a local Dunedin convent, now derelict and empty. By the end of the walk, during which my visual attention to place is heightened by the aural word-score, it is as if those immigrant women and their life experiences have become my own. In Wood's (2011) words, "Participants tune into the city through listening, carrying the voices of the past in their bodies in a performative choreoauratic act of coming together … [where] each step becomes an act of recovery" (pp. 85–99).

Regarding the influence of land and place on her work Becca replied:

> Through increasing connections in my own practice to somatic practices with the dancing body—there is an innate connection with place. The borders of body and place become less distinguishable, especially as new forms of media intervene. This place is Aotearoa where I live, and not just the overwhelmingly powerful natural landscapes but also the urban, social, political and ecological landscapes we inhabit daily.

Photograph 5: ***A Digital Meditation and a Choreography of Mumble*** **(Wood, 2013). The walk towards the old Priory. Photo: Ali East**

While Wood's landscape is as internal as it is visible, the latter largely comprising manmade structures within urban landscapes, it is nevertheless a 'choreoauratic' (as she terms it) response connecting with local narratives of place.

Influence of land on a Taiwanese/New Zealand dancer

Studies of genetic origins suggest a strong link between the Māori and indigenous Taiwanese people (Samson, 1998), whose different cultural behaviours, customs and attitudes towards the environment upon their arrival in the 1980s and 1990s at first seemed irreconcilable. Choreographer Yu Fen Wang is a Taiwanese dancer who came to the National Dance Diploma programme in Auckland in 1990 as a young woman. She learned to speak English in the dance class from a variety of Pākehā, Māori and Samoan 'kiwi' classmates. Twenty-two years later, her contemporary choreography reflects the strong influence of this land and its people. She

explained how her inspiration is drawn from all of the cultural diversity that makes up Aotearoa, and describes her work as "a bridge between two culturally diverse worlds". Her influence is from an urban 'peopled' landscape dominated by a transnational flow "of people, goods, finance and symbols" (Freisen & Kearns, 2010, p. 94), amongst old and new migrant communities of which she is a member.

In a review of her latest work, veteran dance writer Bernadette Rae (2012) wrote:

> Wang takes an immense risk in the structure of her new work, made to celebrate the Chinese New Year. Not only does she cross both New Zealand and Chinese cultural divides but she mixes art forms, combining elements as diverse as classical Chinese opera, contemporary Western dance, folk tales and experimental theatre techniques. (p. 1)

As a first generation New Zealander, both her 'ethnicity' *and* her dance are evolving and changing (Shay, 2006), and in the process she is also helping to re-define the dance of Aotearoa.

Translocated memories of place in the dance of tangata Pasifika

New Zealand-born Pacific island dancers' influence of place is mixed with memories of an island home largely passed down through stories from their immigrant parents and grandparents. Yet culturally specific (often island-specific) dance has remained as a living cultural activity that keeps traditions and sensorial somatic experience of the culture alive. The gestures from which these dances are comprised are based on everyday experiences of island life—swaying of distant palm leaves, rippling lagoons and tropical sensuality. They have little fit with the environment of Aotearoa, and yet, in themselves, they have become part of the make-up of the cultural landscape here.

Neil Ieremia, New Zealand-born Samoan dancer/choreographer and director of the internationally renowned Black Grace Dance Company, has danced in all of the major professional companies in Aotearoa. For almost two decades, he has been creating socio-political works that meld elements of traditional Samoan and Māori dance with what he calls abstract and classically technical 'Pacific Contemporary Dance'. His works are multi-layered and almost always include singing by the dancers themselves. Juxtaposing a rhythmic island quality of movement with highly physical leaping, partnering and sprinting around the stage,

he has even made a dance based on the game of rugby. Large unison sections of dance, equally often accompanied by drumming or by European classical chamber music, reflect his group-oriented Pacific background. At other moments a single dancer on a barren stage evokes a gut-wrenching sense of desolation and displacement that harks back to stories of his parents' arrival in Aotearoa. Projected film images complete the scenography. When questioned about the influence of the landscape of Aotearoa on his work, Ieremia replied:

> The New Zealand landscape has a strong influence on my work. Its diversity and rugged beauty, the living energy that rumbles beneath its stillness seems perfectly matched and constantly in conflict, all at the same time. My movement aesthetic works to emulate this paradox. Theme and concept arrive from various places of interest, reflection, curiosity and dreams.

Photograph 6: ***0916*** **by Black Grace, Director/Choreographer: Neil Ieremia (2012).** Dancers: Carl Tolentino and Thomas Fonua. Photographer Duncan Cole.

Reflections

Circulating these questions and conducting the occasional informal interview have provided a means of gathering individual perspectives of dancer/choreographers and revealing both their differences and concurrences (O'Shea, 2006). What is most evident is that these dancers, through their artistic response to the landscape of Aotearoa, and through their interactions and collaborations with each other, are contributing to an ecology of place. They are participating in an ongoing redefinition and interpretation of this nation with all of its diversity of cultures and values. Writers such as Anthony Shay (2006) assert that dance is also a major vehicle for the construction and reinvention of identity and heritage. In the process, such dance artists are participating in and helping to sustain an evolving diverse 'indigenous' choreographic art form that the respondents variously named "contemporary dance theatre", "somatic experiential investigation", "dance plays", "movement theatre" or simply "relational" dance. Like its predecessor, modern dance, and others before it, the generic term contemporary dance may have had its day and it will now be up to the next wave of dancers to agree on a replacement. We need to remember that, just as national identities are constantly in a state of flux, regardless of how they are named (Shay, 2006), the same may be said to be true for contemporary dance in Aotearoa. This is also likely the case for the dance education curricula that prepare the dancing body/mind, though a discussion of such is beyond the bounds of this paper.

For now though, it seems that I can identify some qualities of Aotearoa New Zealand dancers that perhaps span particular ethnic affiliation or stylistic preference. These dancers of Aotearoa experience a connection with the landscape—urban and rural—that supports and inspires their work. It is encouraging for me to witness a groundswell of environmental concern among the general public, as well as many of today's dance artists, and the efforts being made by some to voice this concern through their work. There is evidence of a growing recognition amongst the current generation of dance artists of the role that art may play in creating a more ecologically sustainable environment.

It has, at times, been difficult to explain this cultural and stylistically diverse performance practice that we call New Zealand contemporary dance that extends beyond and across notions of ethnic or cultural identity. From an ethnographic perspective it is almost impossible to choreographically 'situate' ourselves (Shay, 2006, p. 56). On a recent cultural exchange with traditional dancers in South India, our group was regularly asked to perform our 'national' dance (East, 2013). While

we identified unequivocally as a party of New Zealanders (of various racial backgrounds), defining our dance to these South Indian dancers from such an ancient and established tradition became a major challenge. Small individual solo renderings, loosely assembled into a group dance, accompanied by our singing of all of the appropriate Māori songs we knew, had to suffice as our 'national' offering. While our country is rich in its indigenous Māori cultural traditions, our group was made up of New Zealanders of Polish, Scottish, Israeli, English, and Chinese decent. In this sense our nationhood feels young and our national identity still evolving and to some extent naive. This is not to label the wide variety of innovative contemporary dance currently being presented as naive in any way. One recent reviewer described "a kete [flax basket] of creativity [that is] distinctive to Aotearoa" (Reinana-Morunga, 2012).

I suggest that our richness as a dance community in Aotearoa lies in our own acknowledgment of cultural and individual difference, our respect for a bicultural Treaty of governance and an acknowledgement of our Pacific Island cultures, along with those more recent arrivals from Asia and elsewhere. With the likely increase in migrant recruitment over the next few years to compensate for an aging population of 'baby boomers', the cultural diversity of Aotearoa will broaden even further—and along with it new forms of dance. Yet the land will remain a constant touchstone for those who reside here and who make art.

In conclusion

This country's small yet vibrant evolution continues, through the making of video-dance, through site-specific performance, collaborative interdisciplinary practices, through improvisational and dialogical methodologies, whanau-based company structures, community-based dance projects and a variety of approaches to dance education. I have expressed my sense of connection to this land—its vegetation, geology and people—through an 'elemental whakapapa' (genealogy) (Trussell, 2000, p. 110). This whakapapa influences the shape, form and quality of my work, and arguably the work of other dancer/choreographers. This whakapapa influences individual gestures, spatio-temporal markings and tracks through the performance space. It affects the relationships set up between the work and the viewer. Finally, it influences the very character and identity of these dancers. These influences are acknowledged and openly articulated by the dancer/choreographers who responded to my questions—some more recent arrivals—who have opened themselves to the energies and visual rhythms of this land and its people. Who are

we—dancers of Aotearoa? Earthy? Resilient? Gutsy? Polynesian, Polish, Asian or European? These and all of the other combination of descriptions discussed above suggest a diverse community of dance artists—each responding in their own distinct ways to their residence on these islands. We are, as a nation, still young and evolving, slightly unsure of our collective identity but there is a massive strength in our individual and cultural diversity, as well as in our abiding sense of connection with this land.

I end this article with a section from a long reflective poem by Denys Trussell (1998) written while the poet walked the beach of a remote northern coastline. Here, in Aotearoa, the interface between land and sea represents a transitional journey for all that have arrived on these shores. It may also be a metaphor for transformation and change. The poem most aptly describes an evolutionary journey—a transfigurative shaping of our identity.

> You walk the flux:
> light within light
> and dark within light,
> change within change
> and in change,
> identity …. (p. 92)

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Islands I, *II*, and *III*. (East, A.,1992). Dancers: Catherine Chappell, Judith Froude, Neil Ieremia, Mia Mason, Tairoa Royal. Composer: Peter Scholes with the Wind Quintet and David Guerin. 17 December 1992, Galaxy Theatre, Auckland, New Zealand.

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MTyland. (O'Neil, Claire, 2008, 2010). Dancers: Sarah Knox, Lucy Marinkovich, Anita Hunziker, Jesse Wikiriwhi, Francis Christeller, Jeremy Poi. Created for the Footnote Dance Company 2008 Forté Season. Also performed 2010 at the NZ International Arts Festival, Wellington.

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