

# Dancing in different tongues: A surplus of meaning in illuminating indigenous terrains of contemporary dance

Linda Ashley

*Independent researcher*

## Abstract

In this article, contesting the belief that dance is a universal, nonverbal language, I consider the different dance languages used by indigenous contemporary dancers to express their worldviews. I also explore, how as dance languages intertwine with or run parallel to verbal languages, performances result in 'dancing in different tongues'. Setting out to illuminate 21st century indigenous terrains of intercultural contemporary dance, I follow a trail of thoughts that emerged during my role as co-convenor for the 2013 *Atarau Symposium: Illuminating Indigenous Terrains of Intercultural Dance*. Along this trajectory I find contemporary relevance in the semiotics of C. S. Peirce as a means of interpreting two indigenous contemporary dances made in New Zealand. In exploring how these dances function expressively I aim to clarify ways in which indigenous contemporary dance can create a surplus of meaning and how a semiotic translation can illuminate the various cultural terrains in the dancing.

## Introduction: Background, rationale

This article arises out of the *Atarau Symposium: Illuminating Indigenous Terrains of Intercultural Dance*, held in November 2013 in Wellington, New Zealand. Atarau aimed to be inclusive of a broad range of worldviews on indigenous contemporary dance, bringing together academics, dancers, choreographers, educators, theatre critics, indigenous community leaders, festival organisers and interested public from Aotearoa, New Zealand and overseas.

Universal dance language, as a common belief, could be regarded as a colloquialism or useful metaphor to attest to some essential belief systems that dance can represent. During the development of, and at *Atarau*, the colloquial sense was in frequent use by speakers and participants. The belief straddles a fine line, however, between its colloquial use and becoming a philosophical causal and ideological validation. Scrutinising the colloquial understanding of dance as one language was, therefore, a topic that I felt could be of interest to the broad range

of *Atarau* delegates. In this article, I set out to explore more deeply how the notion of ‘dancing in different tongues’ could illuminate meaning in indigenous contemporary intercultural dance terrains. In so doing, I am mindful that such endeavours are unlikely to build bridges across the “baleful postcolonial space between us all” (Shea Murphy & Gray, 2013, p. 242). I sincerely hope, however, that writing in the spirit of supporting contemporary indigenous dance sheds a glimmer of light on the culturally different terrains that can be encountered. In striving to be a part of the process of creating a different postcolonial dynamic, I am sensitised to Shea Murphy’s observation that “the background of everyone is critical to the outcome that occurs, and there are no interactions or exchanges that are not of value” (Shea Murphy & Gray, 2013, p. 247).

Following this introduction, in the interests of clarity, I present a brief historical background of the longstanding debate about dance as a universal language. I then present a brief overview of current semiotic understandings surrounding the suggestion that indigenous contemporary intercultural dance is ‘dancing in different tongues’ in which spoken and movement languages intertwine. Translating dance by investing in how dance and spoken languages intertwine is an approach to analysis that emerged from doctorate studies between 2004 and 2010 (Ashley, 2010, 2012). It involves reading dances as language-like signs that can inform, delight and challenge our thinking about the world, and takes a position from which any single viewer’s interpretation of a dance is essentially defined by the parameters of their language/s and informed by their cultural worldview/s.

I then move on to introduce one aspect of the semiotics of C.S. Peirce and apply it to interpret two intercultural indigenous contemporary dances. Giving glimpses of the dance and cultural backgrounds of two choreographers resident in Aotearoa, New Zealand born Sāmoan, Mario Faumui, and Māori, Tanemahuta Gray, I set out to illuminate the role that their indigenous dance languages play in their intercultural choreographies. Translating dances as semiotically, language-laden signs is quite a different approach to the application of Western Laban analysis and I feel it can reveal more about the intercultural terrains of indigenous contemporary dance. Moreover, it could go some way towards establishing what marks ‘indigenous contemporary dance’ as different from other contemporary dance; a question that was discussed by delegates of *Atarau*. The semiotic underpinnings I use to consolidate the notion of ‘dancing in different tongues’ have, arguably, contemporary relevance because they open up a fresh way of

interpreting dances that embrace diverse cultural beliefs and tell stories about identity and values. I contend that if Western and indigenous contemporary dance terrains are semiotically translated, being mindful of verbal language and sign-like functionality, the surplus of meanings as generated by intercultural, indigenous dance could be better understood.

Provision of online links to the two dance works *La’U Lupe* (2011)<sup>i</sup> and *Maui: One Man Against the Gods* (2005)<sup>ii</sup> enables readers to view, consider and add to my suggestions about how dances as signposts to worldviews and spoken languages function together semiotically. Drawing on literature from dance researchers, anthropologists of dance, contemporary semioticians and Pacific scholars and dance artists, I aim to synthesise pertinent worldviews and illuminate the intercultural terrains that are trod in the dances that I analyse.

### **Universal dance language—myth or reality?**

The philosophical argument that dance is a universal language is not new, as revealed in dance writings such as those of Margaret H’Doubler from 1940:

The universal interest in dance rests upon every fact that it carries on and systemizes an activity that is operative in everyone’s experience. It is co-existent with life. (H’Doubler, 1974, p. 3)

Such proclamations as these (Sachs, 1937; Sorrell, 1960) can result in arbitrary and reductive approaches that bind dance to a certain period of Western culture (McFee, 1992). Such a Eurocentric approach to understanding dance, springs from positivist philosophy of human mental thought as found in Comte’s (1798-1857) evolutionary theory, wherein intellectual evolution of societies starts with theological animism, progresses through the ecclesiastical metaphysical depersonalisation of human spirit to the highest stage of positivism as accredited to ‘high’ arts, science and industry. Comte’s foundation of sociology viewed social development as ‘natural’ and was subsequently used as a one-size-fits-all approach to describe the intellectual development of everything, including dance. It can, however, lead to unfounded and even racist colonial claims about ‘primitive dance’ being no more, “than random, impulsive movements unorganized movements” (H’Doubler, 1974, p. 4). As a starting point for understanding indigenous contemporary dance something far more culturally democratic would be required.

Anthropologist of dance, Drid Williams (2004), amongst others, has argued against universality on various grounds including the following. Resistance on

philological grounds is found in the fact that some cultures have no specific word for ‘dance’ and the use of the word can change through time (Peterson-Royce, 2002; Hughes-Freeland, 1999). Associating dance with a romantic cosmic terrain, where “Old mystics tell us that the universe is nothing other than a dance of the stars around a divinity” (Laban, 1971, p. 57) invests in metaphysical meta-myths. Engendering the need to position human well-being in spiritual oneness with a universal, cosmic soul, the natural world of animals, celestial bodies and oceans, however, could increase the superficial ubiquity of dance at the expense of the profound specific significances it can have for different cultures. Moreover, emotional reactions and expressions, both verbal and physical, “are affected by cultural learning experiences plus local linguistic formations” (Cowling, 2005, p. 140) and therefore resist universality.

A universally understandable status for dance could make the specific intentions of every dance event understandable to everyone. Yet people sometimes declare that they do not understand it. Moss Patterson, Director of the Māori contemporary Atamira Dance Company, is quoted as saying “One of the things about contemporary dance is often people feel that they don’t understand it” (Morton, 2014, p. 30). I wholeheartedly agree. Patterson’s strategy to overcome such a possible impasse is to verbally introduce each of the dances.

Despite the longstanding debate, the philosophical assumption of universality continues to emerge in ways that dance is practiced and conceptualised. Some current dance practices and theories that emanate from the 1960s phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962) depict a ‘lived body’ as an underpinning rationale. One of the most influential of these practice-driven theories is that of somatics, as “derived from the Greek word soma, which means living body” (Hanna, 1979, p. 3). Originated by Thomas Hanna in 1970, somatics prescribed attention to, “the body as perceived from within first person perception ... it is immediate proprioception—a sensory mode that provides unique data” (Hanna, 1986, p. 4). Hanna’s is a singularly modern view of life, having “only one essential form: that of the individual—the single soma” (1979, p. 9). In this rationale, Hanna clearly lays out that action is determined as individuals adapt internally and physically to the environment.<sup>iii</sup> However, as argued by philosopher of dance the late David Best: “Purely physical things like nervous systems and mechanisms cannot develop understanding, cannot have emotions, cannot have artistic experiences” (1999, p. 111). Best’s rationale being one wherein dance, as analogy for life, involves language use and concept formation. In attempting to transcend the mind-body

dichotomy, somatics leaves behind, I suggest, an embodied palindrome of Cartesian dualism - matter over mind.

Considering these strong arguments, universality for dance language is a status that becomes less credible.

## Dancing in different tongues

Sally Ann Ness (2004) exposes the current usage of somatic, phenomenological, participatory methods of inquiry as inadequate to deal with the ethnographic study of dance. According to Ness, because somatics examines the inner body as self it is incapable of sharing specific cultural realities, and has a propensity to overlook humans as language users. Ness makes clear that such embodied accounts are likely to be part of a much more complex project, and she connects this to language use and Peircean semiotic theory.

Other dance scholars have applied semiotics or the language of signs to the study of dance (Adshead-Lansdale, 1999; Bannerman, 2010; Eddy, 2002; Farnell, 1996; Foster, 1986; Preston-Dunlop & Sanchez-Colberg, 2002).<sup>iv</sup> Only one of these researchers has explored Peircean semiotics in any depth. Henrietta Bannerman (2010) uses Peircean analysis to show that Merce Cunningham's dance *Points in Space* (1986)<sup>v</sup> is analogous of everyday objects, images in the natural world, words and conceptual understandings. In so doing, she challenges Susan Foster's (1986) interpretation using Barthes' sign theory that *Points in Space* is arbitrary or ambiguous in meaning. I find common ground with Bannerman insofar as I see untapped potential in furthering the study of dances, particularly intercultural dance, as Peircean signs than previous research has explored.

Pre-empting Roland Barthes (1977) and Ferdinand Saussure (1983), Charles S. Peirce emphasised language as central to meaning making in the human condition, as outlined from his 1861 description of language as:

[M]eaning the mode of expression between man and man, by Meaning—  
whether this language consists of gestures or speech or music or what.  
(Peirce, 1982, p. 86)

Peirce identified language as not only text or spoken, and portrayed how human language becomes as one with kinesthetic signs. Peirce's sign theory is dense and this could explain why it is relatively unexplored in terms of its application for informing dance research.<sup>vi</sup> I find Peirce's theory of understanding

how humans think through a mesh of signs, of which spoken language is but one, helpful for enhancing the understanding of indigenous contemporary dance.

Perhaps sometimes we overlook the ways in which spoken and written languages permeate our understanding of dance languages, as located: in programme notes and titles; in reviews; when making and rehearsing dances; when interpreting dances as audience and performers, and; in teaching and learning to and about dance. Edward Warburton's observation that "learning to dance is much like learning a foreign language" (2000, p. 194) endorses the argument that verbal and dance languages are intertwined in practice.

### **Illuminating intercultural terrains**

In this section, I introduce one aspect of Peirce's semiotics and argue for its contemporary relevance by practically applying it to illuminate intent and feelings in culturally diverse dance terrains. I explore how intercultural, indigenous contemporary choreography is danced in different tongues via a Peircean interpretation of *La'U Lupe* (2011)<sup>vii</sup>, choreographed by Mario Faumui for LIMA Dance Productions. I also attempt to indicate how this intercultural contemporary dance makes meanings as the movement languages work with or alongside verbal languages.

Peirce (1982) classified three kinds of signs or images that make up language and other sign systems:

1. *Icons*—resemble the object that they represent.
2. *Symbols*—classified by their formal, conventional, arbitrary connection.
3. *Indexicals*—physically contiguous with the object, no smoke without fire for instance.

Peirce was insistent that icons, symbols and indexicals function in a dynamically interactive manner, and I now highlight these interactions in Faumui's *La'U Lupe* (2011).<sup>viii</sup> Faumui is a young, New Zealand born, Sāmoan. *La'U Lupe* is a story of gender and cultural identity as pertinent to his status as *fa'afafine*.<sup>ix</sup>

In *La'U Lupe*<sup>x</sup> the birdlike movement appears to be a mimetic icon. I feel that Faumui's synthesis of this word into the kinaesthetic essence of *La'U Lupe* illustrates how language "is like a cloak which clothes, envelopes, and adorns the myriad of one's thoughts (Ko te reo te kakahu o te whakaaro te huarahi i tea o o te hinengaro)" (Sir James Henare as cited in Smith, 1999, p. 188).<sup>xi</sup> Such awareness tends, I suggest, towards dance being, in part at the very least, a verbal experience.

Understanding Faumui's story with a fuller contextual significance, however, would require the viewer to have some knowledge of the dance languages juxtaposed in *La'U Lupe*. Undulating hips, graceful and articulate hand movements and percussive slaps of feet and hands of Sāmoan *siva* (dance) language can be seen alongside stylised Voguin' arms that emanate from North American gay club culture, and confrontational group formations reminiscent of the national Sāmoan rugby team's *tau* (pre-match challenge dance). As an arbitrary symbol, the Voguin' styled arm gestures and 'cool' are only fully understood if the viewer is literate with the fashionistas from North American gay club culture in 1980s Harlem; later developed in the 1990s song of Madonna *Vogue*<sup>xii</sup>. Recognising *Voguin'* as representative of gay pride, it has been adapted in New Zealand by young people much as hip hop has, and both have taken on a distinctive Polynesian 'flava'.

Digging further into the notion of indexicals is, I feel, where some more of the nuanced and less easily understood meanings that dances can carry come into play. Indexicals include indications of human intention such as gestures, tone of voice and demonstrative and personal pronouns, for example 'this', 'there', 'here', 'now' 'then', 'I' and 'you', and are deictic, that is, only meaningful in reference to the overall cultural context in which they are used (Peirce, 1960, vol. 2, pp. 337-338). In making sense of how one thing signals the spatial, temporal, or causal co-presence of another, Peirce depicts humans as using indexicals to indicate location, direction, orientation and time. In dance, I see indexicals manifest as kinaesthetic signs that correlate to specific concepts, beliefs and worldviews on self in relation to others.

A pivotal part of the story being told in *La'U Lupe* is an indication of gender ambivalence, an indexical of male/female androgyny, an us/you, then/now conversation provided by the contrasting symbols of *Voguin'* and the recognisably Polynesian female *siva* with the very male challenge of the group formations recalling the *tau*. The challenge of Faumui's intercultural, gendered identity is laid down for the audience via a Sāmoan *tau*. The dancers' cold, defiant stares are a striking opposite to the usual smiling faces of many Polynesian dance performers. There is also a twitchy unease in some of the usually free flowing *siva* hand gestures and a birdlike fragility that evoke Faumui's struggle to reconcile Westernised liberalism in confrontation with *fa'a Sāmoa* (Sāmoan way of life). Overlapping indexicals, icons and symbols in *La'U Lupe* affirm Peirce's theory that functionality derives from how they intertwine dynamically.

Other features of *La’U Lupe*, that perhaps are more culturally and indexically illusive, lie in similarities with Sāmoan *sasa*<sup>xiii</sup> and tau in terms of its predominant unison movement, gestural and rhythmical dexterity, and shifts from sitting to standing. Sasa also tends to use a collage movement structure to capture slices of everyday life and this is, I contend, a predominant feature in the overall structure of *La’U Lupe*. Faumui’s indigenous, intercultural contemporary dance follows a common Polynesian lineage of telling stories about everyday life and cultural heritage. Polynesian people, and particularly Sāmoan and Tongan, have both some shared cultural heritage reaching back three to four thousand years (Sykes, 2001) and a longstanding custom of borrowing from each others’ cultures, as attested to by Tongan song and dance specialist, Niulala Helu in my research (Ashley, 2012, pp. 141-142; see also McLean, 1999 and Teaiwa, 2014).

Tongan dance scholar and father of Niulala Helu, the late Futa Helu (1999) illuminated how “a common feature of [Tongan] dance systems: [is] the desire to translate the text of the song into motional semantics” (p. 268). He also described Tongan dance as having to be both “close to the meaning of text ... [and] ... far from the meaning of the text” (p. 268). ‘Okusitino Māhina in a “realist reflection” (2004, p. 168) on Tongan, Queen Sālote’s poetry describes the concept of *heliaki* as literally meaning ‘to say one thing and mean another’. Māhina also identifies how Tongan dance can both intersect and runs parallel with the poetic lyrics in the sung accompaniment (2005). *Heliaki* can explain how understanding Polynesian dance on its terms may derive from understanding that “illusion is not the objective of Polynesian dance, but allusion is” (Keali’inohomoku, 2001, p. 35). Anthropologist of dance, Adrienne Kaepler describes an example of how the 1975 *lakalaka* (a Tongan communally sung speech and dance) of Kanokupolu “allow[s] for the movements to refer to the poetical allusions in two different ways, one appropriate to men and one to women” (2005, p 158). In this way:

Tongan *lakalaka* serve as frames for painting socio-political metaphors that encourage present day Tongans to preserve old aesthetic forms while evolving these traditions into the modern world. (Kaepler, 2005, p. 166)

As allusion in movement and sung language intersect, I perceive how certain culturally important values, adjunct with specific social realities and historical lineages, are embodied, respected and preserved.<sup>xiv</sup> From this perspective, dance can be identified as having, semiotically, a double functionality (Jakobson, 1997),



in that it conveys the thoughts, metaphors and figures of speech from the everyday (metonymic) as well as reciprocal aesthetic choices of action and rhythm. Interpretation of the verbal richness of both poetry and dance therefore relies on the reader's knowledge of wider literary and social codes.

Even though *La'U Lupe* has no vocal accompaniment, the different dance languages are choreographed as allusion and allegory to paint a portrait of a life lived both at odds with and within traditional Sāmoan values and siva. Indeed, the inclusion of Western dance language of Voguin' could be read as allusional, representing Faumui's political advocacy for fringe gender status in Aotearoa's Sāmoan diaspora. Semiotically, I argue that these features can be identified as providing an overarching aesthetic form indexical of both Sāmoan siva and its associated communal values.

What can be seen in the dance, I suggest, aligns with semiotician and ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino's (1999) observation that migrant and diasporic communities blend languages and signs from their original home with those from their new home, creating new composite signs in order to articulate who they are. *La'U Lupe* is a cultural and emphatic indexical statement of "This is us-Now!" It is both personally and existentially indicative, being informed by the challenges with which young people such as Faumui are dealing as they defer to Sāmoan cultural values and expectations amidst different cultural terrains. Mixing Western with Polynesian dance languages reveals Faumui's struggle with an androgynous identity in the two social environs in which she lives, liberal Western New Zealand society and traditional Sāmoan community. Faumui's indigenous intercultural dance tells a story about a life that is simultaneously traditionally Polynesian and contemporarily Western by juxtaposing different dance languages and socio-cultural terrains.

*La'U Lupe* is, like Faumui, bilingual, gender ambivalent and danced in different tongues. As a political statement of identity and belonging I feel that *La'U Lupe* is at the sharp end of indigenous contemporary dance terrains because it resonates with current cultural concerns whilst being recognisably Polynesian dance. A remark made after watching this dance at my spoken presentation by one of the *Atarau* participants, a highly experienced New Zealand dance reviewer and educator, summed this up for me. Surprised on seeing the dance she said: "I've never seen Sāmoan dance like that before!" To my mind, in choosing *predominantly* Sāmoan dance language, *La'U Lupe* represents a complex and indigenous story about life and identity.

I contend that semiotically interpreting *La'U Lupe* illuminates Faumui's auto-narrative as an intercultural indigenous contemporary choreographer, and discerns the meeting grounds of different terrains where the light and shade of delight, political contentions and surprises may be found. I suggest that understanding intercultural indigenous contemporary dance, as informed by a semiotic frame, requires some understanding of how different dance and spoken languages work in synthesis to present the worldviews of choreographers. By envisaging the different dance languages that feature in *La'U Lupe* as intertwining with verbal languages, I argue that important socio-cultural and personal meanings are illuminated.

### **A surplus of meaning**

Peirce's semiosis (1982) identifies humans as thinking with signs, generating diverse possible meanings through time, and how diverse meanings can result from different viewers' interpretations. I suggest, however, that indigenous, intercultural contemporary dance, embodies verbal languages within dance vocabularies from more than one culture and generates a surplus of meaning at its creative source. It is, therefore, especially interesting to illuminate because it engages with the probability that outsiders may struggle with translation of multiple languages and concepts other than that which they can bring from within their own cultural terrains. With multilingual choreographers, dancers and onlookers, English itself could be understood differently (Chambers, 1994). This situation can produce a state of incommensurability in which different senses of meaning can pass each other by, insofar as two cultures may not be able to understand each other because they do not share linguistic or conceptual worldviews. Incommensurability brings into question the value of watching dance for onlookers who have insufficient cultural and linguistic knowledge to translate the surplus of meanings that they are watching. Sharon Mazer (2013) presents a possible antidote in suggesting the importance of creative misunderstandings via a process of:

[T]he scholarly production of meanings that can be put into play, connecting, challenging, contesting and creating conversations across the cultural divide in ways that may not always be correct but that, in the friction between the two sides of an exchange, might just provoke new ways of thinking about, as well as of making, performance in and of culture. (Mazer, 2013, p. 1)

Mazer's argument is cogent, not only in the scholarly arena but also in positioning other audience members as agents creatively responding to what may be for them unfamiliar terrains of dance and language. Nevertheless, La'U Lupe tells a very personal story with dance languages learnt in familial, community and educational contexts, and I have an impression, having heard Faumui speak about the work, that it could well be important for her that others understand her side of things. Arguably, creative misunderstandings could be viewed as a Western convention more suited to understanding the surplus of ambiguous meanings that contemporary dance often deliberately generates.

I now apply a semiotic analysis to a second example of indigenous contemporary dance in a bid to illuminate further the challenges of understanding the surplus of meaning that can emerge from 'dancing in different tongues'. Māori contemporary choreographer, Tanemahuta Gray's full-length production *Maui: One Man Against the Gods* (2005) includes ballet, Western contemporary and traditional haka ("Māori posture dances", Matthews, 2004, p. 9)<sup>xv</sup> to tell a traditional Māori myth of a young man's hubris as he challenges the gods. Throughout the whole production there is spoken narrative in English and te reo Māori. Gray is a te reo Māori speaker and is "tangata whenua tuturu, someone who traces his ancestry back centuries in Aotearoa" (Gray et al., 2013, p. 91). I argue that Gray's choreography, as did Faumui's, reveals a synthesis of different cultural legacies that he can include comfortably in his movement and language palette. Gray trained from a young age in haka, ballet and contemporary dance, as well as aerial dance later on. *Maui* synthesises these different dance languages.

I have selected the section *Pou*<sup>xvi</sup> (2005) from *Maui* (2005) for interpretation. Tanemahuta Gray explains the title *Pou*:

We titled this dance the *Pou Dance*, as we were looking to find a way to build our present state in the story after coming out of the creation myth (which we call Te Ao Tawhito, or Te ao o nehera), and to house our characters in that present day setting with Taranga and her family. So the pou dance was to build the wharenuī and the marae that Taranga and her 5 sons would inhabit for several of the following scenes in the production. They are pou whakairo (ancestral carvings used to depict different ancestors (tipuna) in the building of a wharenuī and of the whaanau line of Taranga and her husband Makea-Tuutara). We also worked with artistic license that our pou inhabited many other spaces in the production. (Pou normally don't move, but we gave them physical manifestation in many different environments).

They were the observers of the story and also the providers of support (literally and metaphorically and excuse the pun) to the action and objectives of our lead characters. (Gray, T., personal communication, January 21, 2015)

Viewers can interpret *Pou* via three dance languages (haka, ballet and modern/contemporary dance). In describing the use in *Pou* of the side-to-side vibrating, trembling hand gesture of *wiri* characteristically seen in haka, Gray explained its derivation from the story about Tāne-rore, the child of Te Manu-i-te-rā and Hine Raumati, the Summer maid and the sun. When Hine-raumati visits the earth and summer heat rises, the air trembles above the ground and this is believed to be Tā ne-rore dancing for his mother (Gray, T. personal communication, January 21, 2015; see also Armstrong, 1964; Matthews, 2004; Shennan, 1984). Gray also draws attention to how *wiri* is seen “in the shimmering and movement of our natural surroundings. The rippling of the water when the wind causes it to stir, or the rustling of the leaves of a tree with a passing wind also provide a context for understanding *wiri* ...”. Witarina Harris makes the same observation (Shennan, 1984)<sup>xvii</sup>. Thus *wiri* in *Pou* could be interpreted as embodying overlapping symbolic and indexical cultural significances, making wide references to human relationships with the natural world.

The characteristic symbolic facial gestures of bulging eyes of *pūkana* and protruding tongues of *whātero* or *whētero* are used in haka to dynamically emphasise certain moments or words by adding a sense of ferocity or emotional intensity (Matthews, 2004)<sup>xviii</sup>. Also indicative of haka dance language are the delicate steps on tiptoe, *hiteki* or *hitoko*, and other step patterns. *Hiteki* or *hitoko* movements, often seen in *whaikōrero* (formal speechmaking) or *wero* (ritual challenge to guests on the marae), can compare actions of a person or group to the behaviour, physically or socially, of a particular bird (Matthews, 2004; Shennan, 1984). In *Pou*, an oratory narration starts the dance but from that point on there are no spoken words. I translate the facial gestures and steps as embodying, as Gray implies, the guardians in their role as observers and supporters, watchful over both the unfolding narrative and of occasions when different types of haka of the past, present and future are performed. *Pou* also features group formations that can be found in haka such as rows of dancers facing the audience and certain group formations such as arrow and rectangle (Armstrong, 1964). Jennifer Shennan (1984) draws attention to the impression of group solidarity that is brought by these formations; an analogy that is pertinent also to *Pou*. In *Pou*, I interpret the

semiotic synthesis of Māori symbols, icons and indexicals as illuminating the everyday understandings, metonymy, that haka, being a potent transmitter of a wide variety of social and political messages, embodies (Matthews, 2004).

Other dance vocabulary seen in Maui is unlikely to appear in Māori haka. Although iconic, mimetic movements such as paddling actions can feature in traditional waiāta-a-ringā (action songs) and haka, the iconic chipping arm gestures, that mime carving on the pou, are recognisable as Western creative dance language originating from Gray's imagination. Jennifer Shennan (1984) notes that in both older and newer waiāta-a-ringā, the paddling ringā (arm or hand gestures) indicates unity of the group, being "used in symbolic context from an association of ideas, and not to portray a narrative drama" (pp. 63-64). I suggest that in *Pou*, Gray has used the gesture more as narrative, indicating a shift from traditional symbolic usage to one more of mimetic icon. In locating fine shifts in usage, therefore, Peircean semiotic translations may provide valuable insights into illuminating the terrains of indigenous contemporary dance.

Fully turned out deep pliés in a balletic second position also feature, and although men use a wide leg stance in kapa haka, women are less likely to do so. The full pliés in a balletic fifth position and balances on one leg are also indices of European dance that are simultaneously laden with reciprocal historical and cultural significances (Biagioli, 1995; Cohen Bull, 1997). The close physical contact in the lifts, a prominent feature in Western contemporary dance, speaks of indexical notions of touch and equity of gender (women lifting men and so forth). Also, unlike the explosive, forceful dynamic of haka vocabulary, the overall dynamic of *Pou* is slow and sustained bringing a sense of watchful guardians as carved on the posts. The dynamic seems to have a poetically double function in setting tone and rhythm as a kind of indexical canvas, placing the viewer in a theatrical time-space in which the two dance languages can coexist.

In bringing culturally diverse icons, symbols and indexicals into a symbiotic relationship, *Pou* is also a potent, intercultural 'cocktail', and the surplus of meaning it generates could also invoke images whereby:

People are taken back to a pre-Euro world where tribe and not state is key. This going back to tribe, this realisation of a tribal past, this reconstruction of a primal memory is very important to the participants and reflections on the ancestors, nga matua, tupuna and the world they lived in te ao o nehera occur many times. (Cleave, 2014, p. 31)

In describing the performative significance of kapa haka as a theatre of resistance for Māori people, Peter Cleave (2014) presents audiences with the challenge of understanding an underpinning worldview. I highlight the surplus meanings found in *Pou* as being clearly deictic (specific) to the bicultural political mandate of Aotearoa, New Zealand as based on The Treaty of Waitangi, signed by representatives of the British Crown and 540 Māori *rangatira* (chiefs) in 1840.

In *Maui*, a chain of development across time and space, catapults a longstanding Māori cultural ‘story of origins’ into a 21st century rendition. I draw some observable comparisons between *Pou* and *La’U Lupe* with the choice of group formations and the use of mimetic icons. Choreographers of contemporary indigenous dance in New Zealand, such as Faumui and Gray, are often bi- or multilingual in both dance and spoken languages. Interpreting such cultural terrains using an informed approach as to what icons, symbols and indexical values are active could, I suggest, illuminate the surplus of meaning that such choreographies can generate. Application of Peircean analysis, therefore, presents opportunities for avoidance of mistranslations, misinterpretations and even total misunderstandings on terrains where dancers are ‘dancing in different tongues’.

## Conclusions and summary

In this article, I have explored, with reference to two examples, how different dance and spoken languages intertwine on intercultural indigenous terrains. As different languages and poetic double functionality overlap, indigenous contemporary choreographers may appropriate, deconstruct and reconstruct meanings with new cultural twists. Considering the choreographer and dancers linguistically and not just as bodies are, I suggest, critical to appropriate interpretation of ‘dancing in different tongues’. Comprehension of how the dance languages overlap with, emerge from or run parallel with spoken languages and heritages, I suggest, can assist in illuminating the resultant surplus of meaning when viewing intercultural contemporary dance.

I also explored how a Peircean semiotic analysis can reveal important interpretations when considering intercultural indigenous contemporary dance theatre in which more than one cultural terrain intertwines. In drawing on selected semiotic theories of Peirce, I contend that his perspective that “feeling is spatial, temporal and relational ... not only is all thought in signs, but all signs are embodied” (Smith, 2005, p. 196) has more to offer dance research than has been explored to date. Reading dance languages as embodied signposts of feelings in

space, time, with and for others is revealing of the underpinning everyday realities, cultural values, political beliefs and identities as seen in performances.

Applying this Peircean analytic approach, I have attempted to illuminate two choreographies of Gray and Faumui, as they mix dance with verbal languages to tell stories that align closely with their worldviews. Faumui's and Gray's work offer examples of how here in New Zealand and globally, indigenous contemporary dancers, dances and dancing are becoming increasingly bi- and multilingual. One thing that particularly strikes me about both *Maui* and *La'U Lupe* is the tightly woven *kete* (basket) of different dance languages that originate from each choreographer's identity. What power struggles and politics may seep into such intercultural choreographic terrains? Peircean semiotics, in all its complexity, could enhance and further inform research of indigenous contemporary dance and culturally diverse dance more widely.

I argue that indigenous contemporary dance may be more fully understood through familiarity with more than one cultural practice, language and belief system. The socio-cultural metaphors that underpin Māori, Sāmoan, Tongan and other Polynesian dances provide suitable examples of the type of literacies to which I am referring. In New Zealand these indigenous forms are particularly cherished alongside a thriving Western contemporary dance terrain. It seems likely, therefore, that meaningful understanding of a choreographer's intentions are valuable in building politically meaningful comprehension for the onlooker. How such strategies may assist in fostering understanding of and increasing support for indigenous contemporary dance in other parts of the world is an area that could produce worthwhile research.

In summing up, an acknowledgement that people converse intentionally in a language-like manner through movement admits the possibility for dances as signs, in association with other sign systems as found in dress, music and so forth, to communicate profound socio-culturally shaped feelings and values semiotically. Semiotic translation of kinesthetic signs, as statements of linguistically defined understandings about the human condition in specific cultural worlds, becomes an antidote to claims that dance is a universal, nonverbal language. Dance is not necessarily nonverbal, and, I argue, not one language but many tongues. As choreographers and viewers tread intercultural indigenous contemporary dance terrains they do not, I contend, abandon spoken languages. Interpreting 'dancing in different tongues' will require close scrutiny and careful translation, in attempting to understand and respect indigenous artists' worldviews of themselves and others.

## Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to Dr Sharon Mazer for her assistance as a critical reader friend in the preparation of this article. I would also like to thank Tanemahuta Gray, Merenia Gray and Jenny Stevenson of Kowhiti Dance for their support and for honouring me with the opportunity to co-curate *Atarau 2014* with Dr Peter Cleave. I also acknowledge the various reviewers' thorough scrutiny through different sets of cultural spectacles.

## References

- Adshead-Lansdale, J. (Ed.). (1999). *Dancing texts: Intertextuality in interpretation*. London, England: Dance Books.
- Armstrong, A. (1964). *Maori games and hakas*. Wellington, New Zealand: Reed.
- Ashley, L. (2010). Teaching dance from contextual perspectives in the New Zealand Curriculum: Concerns, dilemmas and opportunities in theory and practice (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.
- Ashley, L. (2012). *Dancing with difference: Culturally diverse dances in education*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.
- Bannerman, H. L. (2010). Movement and meaning: An enquiry into the signifying properties of Martha Graham's *Diversion of Angels* (1984) and Merce Cunningham's *Points in Space* (1986). *Research in Dance Education*, 11(1), 19-33.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-music-text*. (S. Heath, Trans.). New York, NY: Hill & Wang.
- Best, D. (1999). Dance before you think. In G. McFee (Ed.), *Dance education and philosophy* (pp. 101-121). Oxford, England: Meyer & Meyer Sport.
- Biagioli, M. (1995). Tacit knowledge, courtliness and the scientists body. In S.L. Foster (Ed.), *Choreographing history* (pp. 69-81) Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP.
- Chambers, I. (1994). *Migrancy, culture and identity*. London, England: Routledge.
- Cleave, P. (2014). Memory, body and dance: A review of literature. *Te Kaharoa: The e-journal on Indigenous Pacific Issues*, 7, 25-61. Retrieved from <http://www.tekaharoa.com/index.php/tekaharoa/article/view/167/125>
- Cohen Bull, C. J. (1997). Sense, meaning, and perception in three dance cultures. In J.C. Desmond (Ed.), *Meaning in motion: New cultural studies of dance* (pp. 269-285). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Cowling, W. E. (2005). Restraint, constraint and feeling: Exploring some Tongan expressions of emotions. In I. Campbell & E. Coxon, (Eds.), *Polynesian paradox: Essays in honour of Professor 'I.Futa Helu* (pp. 139-153). Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific.
- Eagleton, T. (1996). *Literary theory: An introductory reader* (2nd ed.). London, England: Blackwell.
- Eddy, M. (2002). Somatic practices and dance: Global influences. *Dance Research Journal*, 34(2), 46-62.
- Farnell, B. (1996). Metaphors we move by. *Visual Anthropology* 8(2-4), 311-35.
- Foster, S. (1986). *Reading dance*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Fitt, S.S. (1996). *Dance kinesiology*. New York, NY: Schirmer Books.
- Gray, T., Gray, M., Stevenson, J., Ashley, L., Moon, P., & Cleave, P. (Eds.). (2013). *Kowhiti Dance special collection*. Palmerston North, New Zealand: Go Press.
- Hanna, J. L. (1979). *To dance is human: A theory of nonverbal communication*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hanna, T. (1986). What is somatics? *Somatics*, 5(4), 4-9.
- H'Doubler, M. N. (1974). *Dance: A creative art experience*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Helu, F. (1999). *Critical essays*. Canberra, ACT, Australia: ANU.



- Hughes-Freeland, F. (1999). Dance on film: Strategy and serendipity. In T. J. Buckland (Ed.), *Dance in the field: Theory, methods and issues in dance ethnography* (pp. 111-122). Hants, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jakobson, R. (1997). *Linguistics and poetics*. In K. M. Newton (Ed.), *Twentieth century literary theory: A reader* (2nd ed., pp. 71-77). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kaeppler, A. L. (2005). The Tongan *Laklaka* as socio-political discourse. In I. Campbell & E. Coxon, (Eds.), *Polynesian paradox: Essays in honour of Professor 'I.Futa Helu* (pp. 139-153). Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific.
- Kaiwai, H., & Zemke-White, K. (2004). Kapa haka as a 'web of cultural meanings'. In C. Bell & S. Matthewman (Eds.), *Cultural studies in Aotearoa New Zealand: Identity, space and place* (pp. 139-160). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Keali'inohomoku, J. W. (2001). Signatures embodied in dance: Their transformative power. In H. Reeves (Ed.), *Traditionalism and modernity in the music and dance of Oceania: Essays in honour of Barbara B. Smith* (pp. 33-40). Sydney, NSW, Australia: University of Sydney.
- Laban, R. (1971). *Rudolf Laban speaks about movement and dance*. Surrey, England: Laban Art of Movement Centre.
- McFee, G. (1992). *Understanding dance*. London, England: Routledge.
- McLean, M. (1999). *Weavers of song: Polynesian music and dance*. Auckland, New Zealand: University of Auckland Press.
- Māhina, O. (2004). Art as *ta-va* "time-space" transformation. In T. Baba, O. Māhina, N. Williams, & U. Nabobo (Eds.), *Researching the Pacific and indigenous peoples: Issues and perspectives* (pp. 86-93). Auckland, New Zealand: Centre for Pacific Studies, The University of Auckland.
- Māhina, O. (2005). Tattau, potupotutatau and mālie: A realist reflection on the symmetry, harmony and beauty of Queen Salote's poetry. In I. Campbell & E. Coxon, (Eds.), *Polynesian paradox: Essays in honour of Professor 'I.Futa Helu* (pp. 168-183). Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific.
- Matthews, N. (2004). The physicality of Māori message transmission—Ko te tinana, he waka tuku Korero. *Junctures. Journal of Thematic Dialogue*, 3, 9-18.
- Mazer, S. (2013, November 7). *A case for creative misunderstanding*. Paper presented for the Kōwhiri Academic Symposium: Atarau—A beam of light. Te Papa, Wellington, New Zealand.
- Morton, F. (2014, April). Dancing clever. *Metro*, 328, p. 30.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *The phenomenology of perception*. (C. Smith, Trans.). London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Ness, S. A. (2004). Being a body in a cultural way: Understanding the cultural in the embodiment of dance. In H. Thomas & J. Ahmed, (Eds.), *Cultural bodies and ethnographic theory* (pp. 123-144). Padstow, England: Blackwell.
- Peirce, C.S. (1923). *Chance, love and logic: Philosophical essays by the late Charles S. Peirce. The founder of pragmatism*. New York, NY: Barnes & Noble.
- Peirce, C.S. (1960). *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, & A. Burks (Eds.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Peirce, C.S. (1982). *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A chronological edition. Volume 1, 1857-866*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Peterson Royce, A. (2002). *The anthropology of dance*. London, England: Dance Books.
- Preston-Dunlop, V. & Sanchez-Colberg, A. (2002). *Dance and the performative*. London, England: Verve.
- Radakovich, J. (2004). *Movement characteristics of three Samoan dance types: Ma'ulu'ulu, Sasa And Taualuga* (Unpublished masters thesis). University of Hawai'i, Hawai'i.
- Sachs, C. (1937). *The world history of the dance*. (B. Schoenberg, Trans.). London, England: Allen & Unwin.
- Saussure, F. de. (1983). *Course in general linguistics*. (R. Harris, Trans.). London, England: Duckworth.
- Shea Murphy, J., & Gray, J. (2013). Manaakitanga in motion: Indigenous choreographies of possibility. *Biography* 36(1), 242- 278. doi:10.1353/bio2013.0008.
- Shennan, J. (1984). *The Maori action song*. Wellington, New Zealand: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Smith, H. A. (2005). Peircian theory, psychosemiotics, and education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 37(2), 191-206.

- Smith, T. L. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London, England: Zed Books.
- Sorrell, W. (1960). *Dance throughout the ages*. London, England: Thames & Hudson.
- Sykes, B. (2001). *The seven daughters of Eve: The science that reveals our genetic ancestry*. London, England: Bantam Press.
- Teaiawa, K. M. (2014). Culture moves? The Festival of Pacific Arts and Dance Remix in Oceania. *Dance Research Aotearoa*, 2, 2-19. Retrieved from <http://www.dra.ac.nz/index.php/DRA/article/view/27>
- Turino, T. (1999). Signs of imagination, identity and experience: A Peircian semiotic theory for music. *Ethnomusicology*, 43(2), pp. 221-255.
- Warburton, E. C. (2000). The dance on paper: The effect of notation-use on learning and development in dance. *Research in Dance Education*, 1(2), 194-213.
- Williams, D. (2004). *Anthropology and the dance: Ten lectures*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois.

<sup>i</sup> *La'U Lupe* (2011) can be viewed online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSvuWjmroa8>

<sup>ii</sup> *Maui: One man against the Gods* (2005) can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/20031974>

<sup>iii</sup> Somatics continues to proliferate and is currently useful to facilitate body awareness in dance training as in “knowing oneself from the inside out” (Fitt, 1996, p. 304). It provides an effective means to counter what some consider a more intrusive, authoritarian and unsafe traditional training pedagogy.

<sup>iv</sup> Similarly to Susan Foster (1986), Janet Adshead-Lansdale (1999) applied Barthes’ semiotics to depict choreographers, dancers and viewers as co-creators “of a mobile text, breathing new life into a dancing text” (p. 21). The resulting possibilities of interpretation are, therefore, on a scale of plurality that weaves together the artists’ and the onlookers’ intentions within the cultural context, in what Terry Eagleton described as “a constrained affair” (1996, p. 75).

<sup>v</sup> Merce Cunningham’s dance *Points in space* (1986) can be found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qf\\_kLcdijz8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qf_kLcdijz8)

<sup>vi</sup> Please note that summarising Peircian semiotics in this article necessarily omits several nuanced insights that it contains.

<sup>vii</sup> The name *La'U Lupe* refers to a Sāmoan native pigeon.

<sup>viii</sup> If you are watching the dance online I suggest that you consider what different dance languages are in evidence, and also identify any icons, symbols, or indexicals that may be present. Repeated viewings may help. It is important to acknowledge that other languages are also informing the viewer’s interpretations and these include musical, set, costume, light and filmic effects. You may wish to consider how these languages overlap with the dance but word count prevents inclusion of these features in this paper.

<sup>ix</sup> Male by birth but embodies both masculine and feminine behaviours.

<sup>x</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MQvS3w583o>

<sup>xi</sup> I am mindful that many traditional indigenous dances are closely woven with accompanying sound, sound, dress and other significant sign systems, and that this may be equally so for contemporary indigenous choreography. Word count, however, prevents me from addressing such a synthesis. Nevertheless, the application of language as a cloak applies across the various art forms.

<sup>xii</sup> The music video for Madonna’s song *Vogue* can be viewed at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuJQSAiODqI>

<sup>xiii</sup> A rhythmically intricate dance of clapping hands and slapping chests, with legs and arms moving in unison and in various combinations usually performed mainly seated (Radakovich, 2004).

<sup>xiv</sup> Helu (1999), Māhina (2004) and Kaeppler (2005) also emphasise that for a viewer to understand Tongan dance, knowledge about the movement and dress alone must be supplemented with a literary understanding of politics, history, culture, shared values and language.

<sup>xv</sup> For a more detailed description of kapa haka and its developmental history the reader may wish to consult Kaiwai and Zemke-White (2004).

<sup>xvi</sup> On this link <https://vimeo.com/20031974> the selected extract begins at seven minutes and ends at nine minutes.

<sup>xvii</sup> I also draw attention the nuances in haka vocabulary of *ringa* (arm and hand movements) and posture that space prevents from detailed interpretation in this article (Shennan, 1984). I hope to develop these and other ideas in further semiotic interpretations.

<sup>xviii</sup> It should be said that there are subtle variations surrounding such gestures as well as male and female differences in their usage. See Matthews (2004).