

## Being Kaitiaki:

# A response to contemporary dance—a Māori perspective

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*Independent choreographer*

*Ko Hikurangi raua ko Tarakeha nga maunga*

*Ko Waiapu raua ko Moetangi nga awa*

*Ko Horouta raua ko Mamari nga waka*

*Ko Tuatini raua ko Matihetihe nga marae*

*Ko Te Whanau a Ruataupare raua ko Hokokeha nga hapu*

*Ko Ngati Porou raua ko Te Rarawa nga iwi*

### Abstract

In this article I respond to Stephen Bradshaw's reprinted article in which he investigated significant issues in the development of Māori contemporary dance in the forty years prior to 2002 when the article was published. Bradshaw offered a personal perspective as practitioner and narrated some of the meetings between those involved in Māori and contemporary dance, specific wānanga in which Māori artists investigated culturally appropriate ways of using theatre dance arts, and discussing examples of cultural exchange. Bradshaw engaged with key issues and definitions relating to inter-cultural and intra-cultural exchange and offered an understanding of continuum Māori dance that was timely and insightful. My purpose in the article is to respond to Bradshaw's work as a current contemporary dance practitioner myself and to engage with how I interpret 'being *kaitiaki*'. I offer examples of my experiences in defining myself as a Māori contemporary dancer, in my activism and in my use of social media as a site for activism.

### PRELUDE

I was once detained at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) simply for not revealing that I was a dancer. Ironically I was trying to avoid that whole scenario after a previous ambassadorial dance scholarship trip to the United States where I was accused/confused (complimented?) as being an 'exotic' dancer. I was on my

way to Hawaii for a conference with academics and scholars writing on the topic of ‘Post Colonial Balefulness’. Unfortunately, this admission ‘failed’ to match with my profession/purpose when asked why I was coming to the United States of America (USA).

“Nope, there was definitely something fishy going on. This guy (me) wasn’t conforming, wasn’t ‘normal’,” instead alerting ‘terror inducing’ signals to the great kaitiaki (guardians/airport security/gatekeepers) of the USA. If only there was a box I could have ticked for ‘Māori Contemporary Dancer’, it would have all been much smoother sailing. Imagine this:

Hello Sir. What’s the reason for your visit to the United States?

Kia ora, ko Jack Gray taku ingoa, kei te kaikanikani ahau.

BEEP

Open the door boys he’s good. Over.

Have a great time Sir, enjoy the United States.

If only life were as simple as saying: ‘It’s ok guys, I work in ‘Continuum Māori Dance’, or maybe ‘Contemporary Māori Dance’ or perhaps ‘Māori Contemporary Dance’. Yes, in an ideal world, airport security briefed in detail on all the differences (having thoroughly read Stephen Bradshaw’s essay *Contemporary dance: A Māori perspective* (2002), and would clearly be able to ascertain that I, a Māori dancer, was not a ‘terrorist’, and permit entry to my merry indigenous artful way.

No, life is not that simple it seems. Funnily, I ended up presenting this scenario as a ‘true life’ experience of the ‘baleful post colonial’ at the conference and even wrote it into a final published essay titled: *Manaakitanga in Motion*, co-authored with Professor Jacqueline Shea Murphy (Shea Murphy & Gray, 2013).

That story reminds me of another time, returning to the United States border on a bus after teaching an Indigenous Summer Intensive programme in Toronto, Canada. I had forgotten a piece of paper, to go with the visa stamp in my passport, an ‘official’ letter stating, I, Jack Gray, was an Assistant Professor of Dance Composition at the University of California, Riverside. The end result was a voiding of my Visa by a very aggressive (non-listening) border control officer (freak). Another moment, place, authority and occupation that had no legitimacy (I’m sensing a theme here). This unfortunate incident (which included him yelling at me while I calmly tried to explain my situation) was emotionally exhausting. Yes, I cried on the bus. These incidents are just two of the many situations that have

caused both rupture *and* resilience, making me the artist I am and was chosen to be.

## MĀORI DANCE AND ACTIVISM

When we talk about the art form of Māori Dance, perhaps what is now more important than explaining identity to others, is to find ways to bring the story back to ourselves. The ability to self define, self determine, the desire to empower one's voice and take control—*kaitiakitanga* (practices of guardianship)—is what matters to me.

What I discovered in the United States in relationship to our cultural ideals were major discrepancies with how we, as Māori people view *mana whenua*—not so much as having authority over the land, but rather with it. In its simplest essence, it is perhaps obvious to state that Native Americans would be considered (with a Māori lens), *tangata whenua* or people of the land. Yet from an American point of view, this basic acknowledgement of indigenous authority is absolutely not at all a part of mainstream historical understanding. How and why these possibilities became eradicated, all contribute to perpetuated mass amnesia. 'Native invisibility' is part of our continuum as kaitiaki too, whether we like it or not.

Thinking about what makes a Māori dancer legible, whether 'contemporary', 'continuum' or 'exotic', extends not just within our own insular communities and tribal-ness (sounds more exotic than intended) but outwards to all, as a living breathing *mauri* (life force) inviting reciprocal exchange of one to another, from all to the universe.

'I'm a Māori contemporary dancer', is always inevitably accompanied by a puzzled look of, 'I-just-don't-know-what-box-to-put-that-in'. In Aotearoa (I never realised the indigenous name of New Zealand was actually 'non-official'), if I am speaking to 'urbanites' or *Pākehā* (New Zealanders of European or other 'Western' descent), I refer to mainstream New Zealand contemporary dance, saying, 'Do you know *Black Grace Dance Company*?' (for under 40's)<sup>i</sup> or 'Do you remember *Limbs Dance Company*?'<sup>ii</sup> (for the over 40's). Surprisingly it usually works.

Māori contemporary dance, I then explain badly, is 'like ballet, but a bit more 'creative' and with Māori themes'. People usually crack jokes about 'interpretive dance' with the inevitable 'tree blowing in the wind' impression. Though I think the expression I might use in response is 'ballpark', little do they realize how correct they actually are, if you consider the wider implications of what 'indigeneity' means (as I understand it involving a reflection of the natural

world). Through my research in Aotearoa, particularly as a participant, dancer and choreographer for *Te Whare Tapere*, a cultural revitalisation project by Dr Charles Te Ahukaramu Royal and Louise Potiki Bryant between 2007-2012 (Royal, 2004), I have been able to explore the natural environment as a resource for dance making processes internationally. In Hawaii during a residency at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum where I created *Te Reinga* (2013) this meant a day spent in the lo'i, a community taro plantation where a collective planting workday was later transformed into a dancer photo shoot and performance space.

I am drawn to Bradshaw's idea that *whakapapa* (genealogy) is a continuum: that the words 'contemporary' and 'traditional' are inappropriate and are Pākehā cultural constructs. As a kaitiaki of Atamira Dance Collective, I still endeavor to 'place' our work carefully. I generally explain that I 'work' at Corbans Estate Arts Centre<sup>iii</sup>, because a recognised (static) 'workplace' (as opposed to the fluid and indiscrete exceptions of everywhere and anywhere) somehow makes it more credible. I say, 'We work with painters and visual artists' to give ideas about collaboration/ intercultural work we might do. (It's not crazy if it's with others right?) Sometimes if I'm feeling adventurous, I might say, 'Mau's old shed'<sup>iv</sup> as a dark, distant reference to another time, another company, another brewing storm.

The simple, often overlooked, truth of people's existence (whether Māori, Pākehā, 'Native', 'Indigenous' or otherwise) is that we all come from somewhere. But whether this 'somewhereness' has anything to do with whakapapa, genealogy or seeing, feeling, breathing—is part of the cellular mapping of the seen and unseen that I believe dance artists bring to the world.

As a Māori dance maker, 'creative indigenous explorer', whatever I am, the label often comes loaded with responsibility. This responsibility comes from others needing/expecting/wanting the demonstration or display of an indigenous *mana* (authority) to account for their possibilities of change and transformation too. *Mana* is often described in the dictionary as 'power, prestige, status, authority' which comes close, but is not close enough to my understanding.<sup>v</sup> My journeys to the United States and Canada during which I have had opportunity to teach, perform and facilitate indigenous empowerment workshops, bring me into contact in multiple ways with the continued failure of United States authorities to recognise the sovereignty of their Native and Indigenous peoples. The follow on result of this is a conditioning that shifts the focus of people away from perpetuating and exploring cultural identity, to one of steadfastly defending their own right to be visible and exist. How Māori comprehend these intense

experiences, mean our expectations and greater understanding of the power of the indigenous voice becomes muddled, unclear and distracted.

Bradshaw stated in 2002 that “Māori choreographers must be aware of their own tribal movements and develop ways of learning and not appropriating from other iwi” (2015, p. 79, [in this volume]), a statement he made two years before the launch of Facebook in February 2004. A decade later we are able to keep abreast of the pulse of the world, using the current social constructs of a world we are virtually a part of. I participate in many tribal activations, including contact with my own ‘lost tribes’, in ways I never would, could or have imagined before. All nations can come along for the ride via social media, glimpses of photos, friends, events, openings, projects, ceremony, protests and behind the scenes moments that were never revealed to the world before until now.

For example, hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter about the recent Ferguson black rights/anti police brutality protests, and #IllRideWithYou about the recent Sydney siege and Muslim ‘terrorism’, show mass accessibility/appropriation is both positive and negative, opening portals for individual and collective boundary making, integrating explicit and overt measures as part of a global continuum revealing ‘how it all works’. Our contemporary world has been redefined in many ways, impacting how we see, feel, touch and understand each other and ourselves. As a dance artist, I utilise the internet as a medium for the expression of *ihi*—the activation of the self and vibration from earth/sky that puts out, pushes forward, influences, inspires, arouses and conflicts. Like Bradshaw commented, “what was in our hearts was to acknowledge our whakapapa or ancestral past within a changing world” (2015, p.80 [in this volume]), I suggest the internet, like the *marae atea*<sup>vi</sup>, the domain of humanity and war, is a valid space in which to meet each others truths, life force and enact the spiralling forces of our whakapapa.

## ACTIVISM AND FACEBOOK

In this section I share a Facebook status update I made in September 2014 as an example of activism—activation of *ihi* in our virtual world:

Today I honoured my father's *whareniui* (meeting house), *Ruatepupuke II* that was sold to the Field Museum in Chicago, Illinois in 1905. The first *Ruatepupuke* stood in Tokomaru Bay made by my Ngati Porou ancestors until it was dismantled and hidden in the Mangahauini River to prevent sacrilege by other warring tribes in 1828. The second *Ruatepupuke* was commissioned

on the same spot by Mokena Babbington in 1880. Ten years later after a family disagreement, the whareniui was sold by Parekura Pewhairangi to a Mr Hindmarsh, a collector of exotic curios. *Ruatepupuke* was dismantled, shipped to Dunedin, London and then Hamburg, where it was cut into smaller parts by J. F. G Umlauff, a German museum seller. It found its new home in the Field Museum in 1905<sup>vii</sup> and was kept in pieces in the basement until 1925. Since then delegations of Māori have visited including *Te Māori*<sup>viii</sup>, a touring exhibition in 1986, and the community of Tokomaru Bay who went in 2003 to reconstruct parts of the house. It is the only whareniui originally from Aotearoa that is in the United States of America. There is one, *Hinemihī* in London<sup>x</sup>, and two others in Germany, *Rauru* and *Te Wharepuni a Maui*<sup>x</sup>. What I knew as my father's marae, *Tuatini*, now stands on the same spot in Tokomaru Bay, the third incarnation of our settling.

*Ruatepupuke* by the way, was the ancestor who went into the ocean to find his son strapped to the first whare of *Tangaroa*, God of the Sea. He retrieved his son, slayed the fish and broke off a piece of the house to bring back to the world of light. It is our creation story of how carving was brought to the Māori people<sup>xi</sup>.

I only discovered these stories very recently and am saddened to know it does not take that many generations at all for people to forget about their *taonga* (treasures). To reconnect to my ancestral whareniui was an incredible, complex, beautiful, frustrating, hopeful, dislocating and deep experience. I shed tears for my Dad too, for the way I saw our whare being treated and the pervasive sense I got that no one is really here to take care of it in the proper ways. Alternately, I am grateful and know that I am continuing to hold up the mana of my whānau and find true purpose to my time here in the United States. Below is a picture and we also shot a home-style documentary to keep showing proof that we are really existing as indigenous peoples, activating real everyday connections and understanding to what it means to be Māori.



Photo 1: Jack Gray at *Ruatepupuke*, Field Museum, Chicago, United States of America (Facebook photos from Jack's iPhone)

## REFLECTIONS

This year I am mindful of the fact that it is the 30th anniversary of Māori Contemporary Dance, and with Atamira Dance Company celebrating 15 years of existence, it seems that revisiting the words and desires of our elder generation, like Stephen Bradshaw, keep us informed of how we are swimming through the currents of our Māori political arena. My sense is that through our own global openings, through social media and simple opportunity, we are able to take more risks and be bolder in our negotiation of cultural identity and artistic expression. I have been able to connect to global responses to our culture, which has in turn empowered my own relationships and understandings of what it is that we have retained, and what we have still to offer as revolutionary and cutting edge.

*Mauriora*

*Kerei Te Aho*

*Kuru Kerei*

*Tiaki Kerei*

*Jack Gray*

*Hikurangi—Waiapu—Horouta—Tuatini—Te Whanau a Ruataupare—Ngāti Porou.*

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<sup>i</sup> [www.blackgrace.co.nz](http://www.blackgrace.co.nz) an internationally renowned New Zealand dance group formed in 1995.

<sup>ii</sup> Limbs Dance Company were the pre-eminent national contemporary dance company in New Zealand from 1978-1989

<sup>iii</sup> [www.ceac.org.nz](http://www.ceac.org.nz)

<sup>iv</sup> The shed used by Atamira Dance Company since 2010 (<http://www.atamira.co.nz>) was formerly the site of Lemi Ponfasio's Mau group <http://mau.co.nz/>

<sup>v</sup> See the online Ngata dictionary: <http://www.learningmedia.co.nz/ngata/>

<sup>vi</sup> Courtyard area in front of the meeting house and site of ritual, oratory and debate and potential warfare.

<sup>vii</sup> <http://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2012/06/26/borrowing-and-lending-latest-news-10/>

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/te-Māori-exhibition-of-traditional-Māori-art-opens-at-the-metropolitan-museum-of-art-in-new-york>

<sup>ix</sup> <http://originsproject.org.uk/resources/london-Māori/hinemih-restoration>

<sup>x</sup> <http://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/handle/10092/1027>

<sup>xi</sup> [http://www.jps.auckland.ac.nz/document//Volume\\_37\\_1928/Volume\\_37\\_No\\_147/The\\_story\\_of\\_Rua\\_and\\_Tangaroa\\_An\\_origin\\_myth\\_How\\_the\\_art\\_of\\_wood-carving\\_was\\_acquired\\_by\\_man\\_p\\_257-260/p1](http://www.jps.auckland.ac.nz/document//Volume_37_1928/Volume_37_No_147/The_story_of_Rua_and_Tangaroa_An_origin_myth_How_the_art_of_wood-carving_was_acquired_by_man_p_257-260/p1)