

Environmental and site dance in Aotearoa New Zealand: Tracing the legacy of Alison East

Karen Barbour

The University of Waikato

ABSTRACT

Tracing lineages of dance practice and research has provided much insight into the growth of dance internationally. The focus of this paper is to extend the identification of lineages in environmental and site dance research in Aotearoa New Zealand, and particularly to consider the ways in which dance artist Alison East and her students have acted to embody relationships with land. This consideration of relationships with environment, site and land through dance weaves interdisciplinary understandings of deep ecology and environmentalism with somatic pedagogies and phenomenological research in ‘the-more-than-human’ world. In tracing a lineage from Alison East, I share my own embodied experiences of this socio-cultural context through an autoethnographic methodological approach. This methodology integrates empirical evidence collected as a member of the dance community, with embodied lived experience and research literature. In tracing lineages in environmental and site dance practice, I consider the work of Origins Dance Theatre and evolving practices that develop relationships with land. In this tracing I aim to contribute to documentation and discussion of dance history in Aotearoa, to honour Alison East’s legacy and to share insights into living in dance in relationship with this land.

Mihi

Hei timatanga māku, ko te mihi nui ki te mauri o tēnei whenua me ngā tai e ngunguru nei ki Aotearoa nei. Ka mihi nui anō hoki au ki ngā iwi o Tainui. Ka huri aku mihi ki ngā iwi o te Ao, ki ōku tūpuna kei tāwhāhi, kei Kotirana me Kānata hoki. I whānau mai au i konei i raro i te mana o te Tiriti o Waitangi. I tipu ake au i te rohe o Maungamangero, i te pūtahi o ngā awa o Waitanguru me Mangaotaki, ki Piopio nei. E noho ana au i Kirikiriroa ināianei, i ngā tahatika o te awa o Waikato.

Ko Barbour, me Hunt ōku hapū. Ko Karen Barbour tōku ingoa. Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.

Introduction

The focus of this article is to extend the identification of lineages within dance research internationally to consider environmental and site dance research in Aotearoa New Zealand. I am interested to trace the ways in which dance researchers in Aotearoa have acted to embody relationships with land and to express ecological and environmental concerns, most particularly through tracing the legacy of Alison East (Ali). This consideration of relationships with environment, site and land through dance weaves interdisciplinary understandings of deep ecology and

environmentalism with somatic pedagogies and phenomenological research in ‘the-more-than-human’ world.

The structure of this article flows from this introductory section and a brief outline of methodology, into origins and then to specific practices in environmental and site dance, before offering overall reflections and conclusions. The introductory sections address the socio-cultural context of Aotearoa and broad understandings of environmental and site dance. This context is nuanced by indigenous *Māori*, *Pākehā*, colonial and immigrant relationships with the land. Through an autoethnographic methodological approach, I situate my embodied experiences within the socio-cultural context and document the development of relevant dance research through a personal perspective. I draw on empirical evidence collected through ethnography as a member of the dance community (including photos, journal writings and teaching notes) and embodied lived experiences. I also refer to research literature by Ali herself and other key contributors from Origins Dance Theatre, considering the influence these ‘origins’ had on Ali’s pedagogical practices with a generation of contemporary dancers. Delving into my own embodied experiences as a member of this generation, I identify particular practices that continue in my choreographic and pedagogical practice as traces of her legacy. In this autoethnography, I aim to contribute to documentation of dance history in Aotearoa and to extending understandings of the interdisciplinary practices of embodied dance research. In contributing understandings of the lineages and legacies in contemporary dance in Aotearoa, this article is intended to complement others in this volume of *Dance Research Aotearoa*. In particular, considering the lineage and legacy of Ali, I draw on her own publications and those of New Zealand colleagues about dance practice, pedagogy and research.

Aotearoa: Socio-cultural context

I began this article with *mihī* (acknowledgments and introductions in *Te Reo Māori* (indigenous Māori language)). I introduce myself as a woman of Aotearoa New Zealand, born into the remote community of Piopio and growing up where the rivers Mangaotaki and Waitanguru meet. As a result of my own experiences growing up in an era of much political discussion about relationships to land, and the influence of my remote childhood home in which the mountains, the rivers and the weather spoke loudly, I began learning my small part in the socio-cultural and ecological environments of Aotearoa as a child. Like other non-indigenous people in Aotearoa, my Scottish and Canadian parents were able to immigrate to Aotearoa as a

consequence of the 1840 signing of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* between *ngā iwi Māori* (indigenous Māori tribes) and the colonial British government. The history *Te Tiriti* is complex, documented in scholarly literature, and present every day in contemporary Aotearoa as we continue necessary legal processes to address conflicts arising from the treaty being broken, indigenous lands being confiscated, and violence and oppression inflicted by the British government on *ngā iwi Māori* (Durie, 2012; Fisher, 2016a, 2016b; Keenan, 2012; O’Sullivan, 2007; Orange, 1987; Salmond, 2012).

In the context of this article, I draw attention to the recognition that the word for land—*whenua*—is also the word for placenta in Te Reo Māori, a double meaning that people are grounded in and originate from *whenua* (Durie, 2012; Keenan, 2012; Mead, 2013; Salmond, 2012). As Hirini Moko Mead wrote:

The net effect of various cultural bonding mechanisms and traditional tikanga practices was to develop a relationship with the land. This relationship is about bonding to the land and having a place upon which one’s feet can be placed with confidence. The relationship is not about owning the land and being master of it, to dispose of as the owner sees fit. (2013, p. 294)

Thus, for *ngā iwi Māori* as *tangata whenua*, people of the land, a practical, spiritual and genealogical relationship with land and environment was, and still is, embedded within indigenous worldviews. The lands and environments of Aotearoa are the origins and grounding of Māori, and this is a different worldview from that in which land is bought and sold and environments are used as resources for people. The breaking of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* and the consequences of the illegal confiscation of land from *ngā iwi Māori* was extremely significant, removing not merely economic base but affecting the bonding relationship of people with the land and the loss of a place to stand with confidence.

In contrast, to immigrants from Britain and elsewhere, *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* allowed other people with different worldviews to immigrate, to buy land and make a home in Aotearoa, as my parents did. Access to new opportunities in Aotearoa drew many immigrants with multiple and contrasting ideas to those of *ngā iwi Māori*. For some people of British and European ancestry who understand themselves now as *Pākehā*, acknowledging relationships with Māori, a connection to land and sense of place (topophilia) in Aotearoa, may be part of their worldview (Barbour, 2011, 2016b). For those who think of themselves as New Zealanders (perhaps adding their

ancestral homeland as Chinese New Zealanders or Samoan New Zealanders for example), or those who are literally recent immigrants and who continue to identify with other lands and places, there are many diverse, complex and sometimes traumatic relationships to land that are revisited in memories and lived in the process of coming to find a home in a new land (Barbour et al., 2019).

Thus, in reflecting on the socio-cultural context of Aotearoa, including my own history as a Pākehā childⁱ of immigrant parents, I suggest that the emergence of dance that expresses relationships to land (either on stage or sites) arises within this context of multiple and often conflicting worldviews of ngā iwi Māori, Pākehā, colonial and immigrant peoples. For some Māori contemporary dance artists, relationships with whenua are necessarily expressed in sharing personal stories in performance and for some Pākehā contemporary dance artists, a sense of place and relationship with land may be expressed. In dance, such relationships may be expressed on stage or in site dance performance, and these performances may or may not have explicit environmentalist themes.ⁱⁱ

In seeking to understand her own experiences growing up in Piopio on a sheep farm, Ali traced the influence of the land on her artistic sensibility, critically unpacking her archives of dance choreography and pedagogical practice (East, 2011, 2014). Ali researched connections with land, identity and ecology, and argued 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” (2014, p. 102). Seeking responses from former students allowed Ali to articulate ways in which dancers “have opened themselves to the energies and visual rhythms of this land and its people” (East, 2014, p.121). Extending Ali’s agenda, as a former student myself, I consider dance research that engages in understanding relationships with environment, land and ecology through environmental and site dance practices.

In tracing a lineage of research about environmental and site dance in this socio-cultural context, the worldviews of Māori and Pākehā dancers are revealed in a range of publications (Barbour, 2011, 2012, 2016a, 2016b and in Barbour et al., 2019; Brown, 2015; Buck & Barbour, 2007/2015; East, 2011, 2014, 2015; Hiroti, 2019; Houghton; 2016; Marler, 2015; Reihana-Morunga 2018; Williams, 2015, 2019; Wood, 2011). Each of these authors engaged in research about their relationships to environment, land and site through different perspectives and methodological approaches. For example, Pauline Hiroti’s (2019) doctoral research investigated the ways in which community dance practices in Aotearoa may serve to foster

connections to whenua for young Māori dancers. Reihana-Morunga (2018) focused her doctoral research on exploring indigenous dance practices in Country in Western Australia, alongside her own indigenous perspectives. Miriam Marler (2015) considered her relationships between dance and place developed through Body Weather practices. In my own research I explore somatic and phenomenological approaches to environmental dance (a broad term for dance that takes up environmental themes) and site dance (a term I use broadly again, to refer to a range of types of dance created and performed in atypical performance sites outside of theatre and dance studio venues) (Barbour et al., 2019). Thus, multiplicity and diversity characterise the dance research engaged in understanding relationships to environment, land and site. As I traced these lineages through dance research and engaged with ecological, somatic and phenomenological understandings, I also suggest that our history of culturally nuanced and interdisciplinary weaving has left traces for future generations of dancers. These tracings are evident in creative, improvisational and performance dance and research practices that often reveal a lineage in Ali's work that foster ecosystemic awareness and, arguably most crucially, concerns for environmental justice. Further, I suggest that our history in Aotearoa is distinct from what has been revealed in such histories in North American and British dance research to date (Barbour et al., 2019; Hunter, 2015; Kloetzel & Pavlik, 2009), reflecting the different land and environment as well as the socio-cultural context of multiple worldviews.

Methodology

Dance research in many areas has confidently embraced ethnographic methodologies that support participation, participant observation and documentation through field notes as well as interviewing, analysing collections and archives, including photos and videos, and developing forms of creative journaling (Barbour, 2019; Davida, 2011). I draw on empirical evidence collected through ethnographic methods as a member of the dance community of Aotearoa and participant throughout my life in contemporary dance making, pedagogy and research. Through an autoethnographic approach in this article, I situate my embodied experiences within our socio-cultural context and comment on relevant dance research through a personal perspective. As an ethnographer and autoethnographer, considering my own personal identities and my sociocultural positioning with Aotearoa is crucial. Thus, I engage in self-reflexive considerations of my experiences as an insider dance researcher (Barbour, 2011). Alongside discussion of interdisciplinary literature, I situate creative writing,

embodied experiences, teaching notes, poetry, photos and personal history with socio-cultural commentary in order to write backwards and forwards between my ‘self’ (auto) and our cultures (‘ethno’) in Aotearoa (Barbour, 2011; Ellis, 2004; Madison, 2019). As a consequence, in writing this article, I integrate my teaching notes with memories elicited from archival photos, journal notes of embodied experiences participating in dance practices and academic literature. As I write, I offer one partial commentary on embodiment of our history, noting that my embodiment and this tracing of ‘origins’ is one of many.

Origins

Tracing the development of environmental and site dance in Aotearoa begins as a personal tracing for me, a lineage embodied through experiences with Ali as teacher and mentor. I first met Ali as a child in the rural community of Piopio in which we had both grown up. We met sometime in the early 1980s in a dance workshop in the Mairoa Community Hall and in the Piopio Town Hall. Ali was the first ‘real’ dancer I had met and I was absolutely captivated by her presence—her improvisational sophistication, pedagogical genius, and artistry as a performer. Ali was touring and teaching community workshops with Origins Dance Theatre at that time. Origins Dance Theatre had begun working together in 1980, building collaborations amongst dancers and other artists interested in discussing deep ecology and their relationships with local landscapes (East, 2011, 2014; Trussell, 2004). Included on the tour schedule were visits to Ali’s home town and to other remote communities.

Origins Dance Theatre were exploring deep ecology, an environmental perspective that situated humans within the wider ecological system and as part of that system, and advocated that all diverse living beings within the ecological system have the right to flourish. This perspective had its birth in the work of Rachel Carson (1962) and was extended by Arne Naess (1973), amongst others. Within Origins Dance Theatre, key members in the 1980s interested in deep ecology included poet Denys Trussell, choreographer Ali East and composer Ivan Zagni. Their interests manifested in a major performance work, *Dance of the Origin*, which toured theatres in this time. In one of Trussell’s books of poetry published later (2004), the *Dance of the Origin* poems were accompanied by Nigel Brown’s paintings and essays by Ali and Denys about the work of Origins Dance Theatre. Denys described that his poetry for *Dance of the Origin* reflected ecological perspectives in which he

takes as given that nature is the foundation of human existence, and represents a group of natural cycles in which even the most urban of lives is involved. It was hoped that the words would carry back to beginnings—not those absolute beginnings that some believe they find in physics or theology—but the constantly recurring beginnings. Cycles of the day, the year, of lives, of seasons. Origins that are always here in death and rebirth. (Trussell, 2004, p. 60)

Reflecting on Origins Dance Theatre and the performances of *Dance of the Origin*, Ali commented that their interest was to be a “subtle mouthpiece for the expression of eco-political concerns” (East, 2011, p. 16). She continued: “I increasingly became aware of my environment and myself, not as separate forces meeting, but more as an interactive community where dialogue raised awareness and consequent inter-connections were realised and reinforced through collaborative artistic endeavour” (East, 2011, p. 17). Trussell’s poems from the performances reveal more of this approach from deep ecology, to bring awareness to and realise human interconnections within the ecological system, and between dancing and the world:

You will take
into your body
the blue ocean
of the sky, the
high drifting
sky cloud.

(from *Dance of the Origin* - Denys Trussell, 1980, (cited in Trussell, 2004, p.13))



Figure 1: Reflections on interconnection, Karitane Inlet, 2000, photograph by author.

From my photo archives, taken soon after sunrise while on a dance camp in 2000—embodied memories of the stillness of the Southern Ocean within the embrace of the inlet, the clouds drifting in the quiet morning reflections on the water and in the blue of the sky above, and the chill of the sea water as it permeated my skin. In those memories—in the bliss of that moment of solitude twenty years ago—I resonate with Trussell’s expression of deep ecology. I embody a moment of interconnection between my dancing self and the world within which I move.

As a consequence of the deepening environmental understandings developed within Origins Dance Theatre, their collaborative work engaged improvisational practices in urban and in rural, bush and beach places. While some members were involved simultaneously in political protest to prevent the destruction of environments, the performances of Origins Dance Theatre were not overtly political. Ali described herself as “nature performing nature—or nature performing herself” (East, 2015, p. 166). Their practices weaved considerations of environmentalism and deep ecology, with what later came to be called somatic pedagogies and with eco-phenomenological research in ‘the-more-than-human’ world (Abram, 1996; Barbour, 2018b; Barbour et al., 2019; East, 2011, 2014, 2105; Fraleigh, 2015, 2018; Olsen, 2002, 2014). Somatic pedagogies supported artists to deepen their awareness of themselves in the experience of moving and being, and to attune sensitively to environment within which they moved. Such an approach shared with phenomenological philosophy and methodology focus on experiencing the world anew, being present to the moment of lived experience. Ecological phenomenologist David Abram later brought phenomenology and ecology together, expressing this awareness, attunement and wonderment about lived experience, together with the recognition of our human place within the larger ecological systems, through the phrase being in the ‘more-than-human’ world (1996). In a sense, it might be argued that the work of artists in Origins Dance Theatre was quietly radical, uniquely nuanced by Aotearoa, and paralleling developments occurring in other disciplines and by other researchers and artists in different parts of the world.

From the collaborative successes of Origins Dance Theatre and the desire Ali perceived in young dancers to study contemporary dance, she and colleagues undertook a major initiative to establish a contemporary dance programme for students, and The Performing Arts School began in 1989 in Auckland.ⁱⁱⁱ Ali’s vision for The Performing Arts School attracted me to study dance full time in the 1990s. The

pedagogies and programmes led by Ali were somatically informed and engaged holistic movement practices, growing out of her work in Origins Dance Theatre. Studying dance in this programme, my experiences of these grounded, environmental and embodied pedagogies aligned with my rural childhood upbringing and my outdoor activities as a young adult. The movement fundamentals classes introduced me to a wider range of other sophisticated movement practices that allowed me to deepen my somatic awareness as a dancer, fostering embodied reflexivity, enhancing kinaesthetic and proprioceptive knowledge. Participating in improvisational dance practices and learning about site-specific dance offered me opportunities to think about the potential of dance to express how I related to and understood the world through dancing. Importantly for me, these practices broadened my understanding not just of myself as a dancer, but of how I related to others and to the world around me. Through Ali, I became part of a community in Aotearoa working within ecological, somatic and embodied pedagogies, environmental and site dance.

While studying dance history and site-specific dance within the programme of The Performing Arts School, I encountered the work of American dance artists such as Meredith Monk and Trisha Brown, two of the first site dance practitioners in the 1970s in the context of post-modern and contemporary dance (Kloetzel & Pavlik, 2009). Monk and Brown had, and continue to have, widespread influence in the ‘westernised’ dance world, including in Aotearoa. Monk and Brown drew upon the legacy of artists like Anna Halprin and Merce Cunningham (Kloetzel & Pavlik, 2009), performing outside the traditional theatre and studio venues of dance. Acknowledging these international influences, I found it useful to appreciate the ‘ground-breaking’ activities of these early site-specific dance artists of the 1960s and 1970s:

When Monk and Brown began making site performances in alleys, lofts, parking lots or museums, they were not making a grand statement about environmental protection or animal rights; rather they were arguing for the need to ‘wake up’ to whatever your everyday surroundings might be, whether urban, rural, natural, designed or wild. In other words, they had zeroed in on the principle of ‘awareness of place’ as a critical concept to emphasize. This does not mean that they were not focused on the smallest details of an individual place (far from it, in fact); rather, they aimed to highlight such details as well as the larger context (Barbour et al., 2019, p. 226).

I suggest that the work of such American dance artists, in advocating for people to experience and develop awareness of place and alertness to ecological elements, may be understood as aligning with ‘subtle mouthpiece’ that Ali identified in Origins Dance Theatre in Aotearoa in the 1980s. From the depth of her investigations with Origins Dance Theatre, Ali developed her practice of eco-choreography and extended this within her pedagogy in higher education. In her book *Teaching dance as if the world matters: Eco-choreography: A design for teaching dance-making in the 21st century* (East, 2011), Ali reflected on her practice and pedagogy shared through The Performing Arts school and beyond, summarising that:

key objectives include learning to tune into the environment on both a micro and macro level; to practice seeing things in relationship; to practice empathetic participation with nature and each other; to experience a sense of connection with self, each other and community; and to practice a form of dance/art-making that is conscious, spontaneous and transitory (East, 2011, pp. 127–128)

Ali continued her pedagogical innovations through her later teaching in the Dance Studies Programme at The University of Otago and reflected further in ongoing publications and workshops, including in her article in this volume of *Dance Research Aotearoa*. Becca Wood continues the story of The School of Performing Arts/Unitec School of Performing and Screen Arts in Auckland in this volume of *Dance Research Aotearoa*. In my article I deepen my focus on particular practices that were embodied within Ali’s pedagogy and have subsequently become embedded in my own and the work of other dancers in Aotearoa. In particular, I identify four practices of offering dance camps, facilitating the slow walk and the ‘weta-eye view’ and the creation of site-specific dance. Each of these practices has relevance as a research method within pedagogical and choreographic processes, leading to both dance with environmental themes (on stage or in site) and to site dance. These are four of many more practices through which relationships to environment, land, site and place may be fostered, embodied and expressed.

Practices

To contribute to tracing the development of environmental and site dance research in Aotearoa, in this section I discuss some of my embodied experiences of particular practices that have consistently deepened dancing and fostered an awareness of environment, land and site. I offer discussion of four practices, and, as I reflect, I

acknowledge that my memories may be somewhat different from those of others with whom I shared the time and place. Further, I recognise that I myself was arguably predisposed to appreciate such practices as a consequence of my own rural upbringing and history, and my many years of working with Ali. Regardless, four particular practices I have found uniquely valuable, and still influence my ways of working as an artist and educator, are: offering dance camps, undertaking slow walks, engaging a ‘weta eye view’ (a weta being a larger indigenous insect found in the bush in Aotearoa), and teaching site-specific dance.

Dance camps involved multiple days staying in basic accommodation away from the city and the context of dance in higher education. In the final week of the Performing Arts School programme in Auckland during the 1990s, students stayed in the remote Whatipu Lodge on the west coast and participated in living, eating, walking and immersive activities together. The camp involved simple activities with few instructions, including “going on planned and mapped easy walks together, tuning in, paying attention to everything on a macro and micro level, listening to [our] own inner voices and thoughts, noting (in [our] journals) memory flashes and associations as they occur ...” (East, 2011, p. 136).



Figure 2: Dance camp, Whatipu Beach 1995, photograph by author.

From my photo archives—This photo stimulated memories of dance camps with Ali, wild west coast winds, black sand beaches and stormy skies one year, and the next year, clear sunny days and moonlit nights during which we wandered, delighting in night time swims and phosphorescent trails in the water as we splashed. Following each other’s footsteps along the high tide line, improvising in the sheltering cave behind the dunes, eating together, unwinding after the intensity of a year navigating the busy city and the complexity of

dancing relationships. These were days I treasured and in which dancing and wandering allowed for healing and rest in an enriching and stimulating environment.

In addition to the Whatipu camps, I attended one of the annual camps with students at The University of Otago after Ali moved to Dunedin to teach. During this camp we tramped into Trotters Gorge, improvising as we crossed streams and stopped in clearings. At Karitane Beach we engaged in beach observation tasks, created art works on the sand from found materials such as kelp and shells, and improvised together. I also attended a camp with university students from Auckland and Waikato in which we took a slow walk through the bush in Whaingaroa, collected movements from our quiet observations, danced our experiences on the beach and in the local town hall together with the local community (Buck & Barbour, 2007/2015). Writing about this experience, Ralph Buck and I described students experiences in these activities moving from bush to the beach:

Following along the path sometime later, we pass a student squatting comfortably inspecting fern fronds, another paused with head tilted towards the call of a Tūī above and another resting at the lookout taking in the view of the headlands and harbour mouth in the distance. One and a half hours later, everyone emerges from the bush and re-groups on the hot black sands of Ngarunui Beach. We pause together to share a little of our experiences on the walk: each a personal and slow dance through the bush. (Buck & Barbour, 2007/2015, p. 96)

Dance camps supported dancers to take time to engage more deeply with others, to improvise, reflect and share experiences of interconnection in relationship to environment, land and site.

The slow walk was a task regularly undertaken on camps in the bush or the beach, and also regularly in urban areas, as a meditative task involving acclimatization to the specific environment. Tuning senses to sound, smell, touch and taste, dancers were encouraged to feel the wind, sun and shade, the surfaces underfoot and to become more conscious of the impact of actions within the environment too. It was Ali's suggestion that by "letting nature 'in' [we] may learn more about [ourselves], each other and [our] local environment, to experience [ourselves] as permeable, empathic and participatory" (East, 2011, p. 136). Having spent much of my childhood wandering remote areas in the bush and the neighbouring high-country farms I grew up in, slow walks were a way of life, whether

night time walks with my father looking for glow worms, evening walks along quiet gravel roads with visitors, or well-worn paths to the best swimming spots, lookouts and caves (Barbour, 2016a, 2012). Walking became a way of knowing a place, experiencing the weather, observing the footprints left on the land over time and the way the environment shapes movement when climbing, negotiating uneven surfaces and walking long distances. Knowing place in such a way also allowed a yielding to the more-than-human world that provided a rich context from which movement could arise, to be expressed in place or site and investigated through improvisation. I have expanded walking practices as part of my work in creating dance when travelling as well as at home, and in engaging with the more-than-human world as well as in response to urban environments (Barbour et al., 2019). Other dance researchers articulate walking practices and urban cartographies (Bannon, 2010; Hunter, 2019; Satin, 2019).



Figure 3: Slow walk, Karitane Beach dance camp, 2000, photograph by K. Barbour.

Slow walk practices offer an ideal somatic methodology for seeing local environments anew. During this extraordinary year of 2020 and COVID-19, we were all required to redevelop our dance teaching so that students could meaningfully engage in learning online. Drawing from my own research and pedagogical practices, I encouraged students to engage with their local environment by walking a 30 minute slow walk at least twice a week to deepen their awareness of places around them. This slow walk became the initial research in beginning a dance assessment:

From my 2020 teaching notes—Walking and observation tasks. Walk a regular route twice a week through your local place, taking at least 30 minutes. Choose a route that allows you to spend some time in a more natural environment such as a park, near water, and with trees and

vegetation, as well as walking on footpaths and around buildings. Slow down so that you can pay attention to details of the place around you. Pause regularly. Pay attention to your embodiment as you move, observing your breath, the movement of your limbs, any tensions in your muscles, and your emotions. Pay attention as you walk to all the external sensory information of the place—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch and sensation. Observe the weather, light and shadow, warmth and cold, wind and stillness, rain and humidity. Stop at least once on each walk to pay attention and video details you experience. Stop at least once on each walk to write a short journal entry about what you notice.

Learning to see the world from a **‘weta eye view’** was a practice that Ali introduced as a way of turning attention to the micro details of the environment, bringing oneself to the level of the earth, undergrowth, sand, bark and rock to see things that we imagined insects might see. Lying on the ground, coming to know the damp smell and rich texture of the soil in the bush, or the sting of sand blowing against hot skin, or the detailed activities of insects in long grass, offered much perspective and appreciation of scale, perspective and our human place within the world.



Figure 4: ‘Weta eye view’, Zion National Park, Utah, 2012. Photograph by K. Barbour

This practice emphasised the need for an awareness of our place in the more-than-human world, as inherently immersed in and connected to, rather than

separate from, the natural or ‘more-than-human’ world (Abram, 1996). These practices of the slow walk and ‘weta eye view’ that Ali developed (East, 2011), and other evolving practices she is sharing at present, offer much to dancers in deepening somatic awareness of the relationships between our own cellular embodied experiences and those of others in the ‘more-than-human’ world. Ecological phenomenologist David Abram introduced the term ‘more-than-human’, a term that reveals the traces of Husserl’s ‘lifeworld’ (1989/1952). The lifeworld is both unified and multiple, and “the intricate material phenomena of bodily life extend out interactively toward the environmental world and cycle back in. The breath evidences such cycles” as Sondra Fraleigh described (2018, p. 13) The broader aims of ecological phenomenology are revealed in these practices in the desire to see the world anew: using a method of ‘bracketing’ to bring awareness and attention to experiences in the ‘more-than-human’ world (Barbour, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Fraleigh, 2018).

Invisible the music deep
in tree, bone,
sap and star
and all that dances
(Trussell, 1986, p.17)

In Trussell’s (1986) poem above, he articulates some of the sense of engaging with invisible, unseen forces of the more-than-human world, and embracing a perspective that supports both micro and macro-observation. This practice stimulated my own long-term enthusiasm for movement on a low level, in and out of the ground, and for exploring the movement of unseen forces. Sensing geological processes in the formation of sandstone and canyons while travelling and dancing in Utah, I wrote:

Holding presence in Snow Canyon,
the touch of wind, water and dance on my skin were
Barely discernable, and yet, the memory of the rock revealed rich
dynamic forces and fluid
Flows in the movement of the stone.
Through stillness, I heard the movement of the stone.
I heard timelessness in the more-than-human-world.
(Barbour et al., 2019, p. 263).

Becoming attuned to sensing and adopting multiple perspectives provided somatic openings to the world around me. Insights into micro and macro perspectives supported a shift from a human ego-centric perspective towards the potential to empathetically and kinesthetically sense other beings and processes in the more-than-human world. Whether sited in environments in which human cultural life or the more-than-human world dominates, the practices of *slow walks* and *weta's eye view* offer an opportunity to see specific sites with 'fresh eyes'. These practices may be understood as specific phenomenological 'bracketing methods' that allow the familiar to be seen anew and the details of place to be appreciated (Barbour, 2018b). These practices are also integrated into teaching site-specific dance in the context of university dance education.

Site-specific dance, within the broad practices of site dance, is dance made in response to and performed in a selected non-typical dance site, and in which multiple layers of the site are revealed, including historical, current use, text, objects, actions, cultural perspectives, ecology and more (Barbour et al., 2019). In learning about site-specific dance initially at The School of Performing Arts, we dancers undertook mapping of sites, identifying borders and boundaries, structures and patterns, materials and activities. Using Ali's improvisational practices, we explored movement within sites in Auckland city urban centres, beaches, parks, pools and buildings, and choreographed our first works for assessment. The unique challenges of rehearsing in public sites in which, for example, weather, people's activities, surfaces, light and sound all changed from moment to moment, stimulated a curiosity about what constituted dance, public response to the work of dancing and how to express a relationship with an environment. This curiosity has resulted in a substantial body of creative practice research and written publication for me and this work connects me with a community of others in Aotearoa and in other parts of the world. Site dance practice and research is integrated into my teaching in university dance.

From my teaching notes on site-specific dance—*Two Square Metres assessment: Working collaboratively in pairs within a specific site of two square metres on campus, research and map the site, investigate movement repertoire (of people, insects, animals, machines, plants and light) and create a site-specific dance. Use improvisation and choreographic principles and draw on a range of types of movement to create and perform during class time. Assessment will be based on: applying learning and demonstrating understanding of places and sites, including researching found movement*

repertoire and mapping; Applying learning and demonstrating embodied knowledge of improvisation and choreographic principles as applied to duet activities; Demonstrating both willingness to collaborate and effective self-management/responsibility.

I have often used the Two Square Metres assessment outlined above to introduce undergraduate students to basic site dance practice at The University of Waikato. This assessment had its origins in Ali's teaching, and I further developed it drawing on Dee Heddon's 'one square foot' project (2007) and Andrea Olsen's daily site practices (2002). As I walk the campus today, I remember the many dancers I have worked with as I pass park benches, lakes, rocks and trees, stairwells and foyers, outside picnic tables, fitness training stations and footpaths, all used as sites for dance. In 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown, students learning online in their homes undertook this assessment individually and submitted videos of site-specific dance in their kitchen, bathroom, orchard, garden, bedroom, outside veranda and other sites. The potential of site-specific dance to bring attention to even the most familiar of our cultural environments, our homes, offered valuable insight for students and stimulated much creativity.

In summary, these four practices (amongst others) of offering *dance camps*, *slow walks*, the '*weta eye view*' and *teaching site-specific dance*, have not only influenced my generation of dancers, but are also being developed and expanded in work with new generations of dancers in Aotearoa. *Site-specific dance* is taught in different university dance programmes, in some schools, and continues to be a context for professional public performance. Such activities provided an ideal context in community, campus, park and urban environments to share dance and to express relationships to local environments. The *dance camps* in rural and beach environments situated dancers in contexts in which the immediate world might seem more overtly natural than cultural, and provided an opportunity for immersion in the experience of the more-than-human world.

Reflections

Writing after immediate embodied experiences, I have often attempted to choreograph sensations into words, awareness into descriptions, movement into concepts, dancing across the page as a different expression. In the excerpt below, I wrote to express my embodied ways of knowing, my curiosity and the insights that arise for me in environmental and site dance. I often now use the concept of place rather than site, acknowledging the interdependence and ongoing relationships

between people and environment that shape engagement in the more-than-human world. I include another excerpt from Trussell's poem *Dance of the Origin* below, suggesting that in immersion in the more-than-human world, we may sense something of our being.

For myself, in yielding self to place and embracing place as self, I experience myself as part of a large holistic system, simultaneously cellular and ecological, local and global, constantly in flow between movement and stillness ... The surfaces of skin, and of a place—materials of earth, sand, water, stone or wood, for example—may be experienced alike as porous, rather than as fixed surfaces with distinct boundaries. Fluid flows from skin to earth and from earth to skin, breath is exchanged with trees and on the wind, temperature shrivels or softens flesh and wood alike, and sun and wind burn skin and earth ... Dancing in place, I participate in the uniqueness of movement of a place, sensing the qualities of movement as I dance in the flow of place, as I open to being in the more-than-human world. (Barbour in Barbour et al., 2019, p. 277).

Dance then
the genealogy
of light to know
the youngest pattern
of your being.

(from *Dance of the Origin*—Denys Trussell, 1980 (in Trussell, 2004, p. 20)).

Considerations

The legacy of environmental and site dance has stimulated research within western dance practice as well as within the work of diverse artists in Aotearoa, and certainly for me. In more recent research I have undertaken with colleagues Vicky Hunter (United Kingdom) and Melanie Kloetzel (North America) we continued to trace the lineage and legacy of site and environmental dance. In our co-written book, we asked how localised site dance practice is implicated in and affected by global events, trends and currents, and how forms of site dance research and practice articulate and/or possibly influence the socio-economic, political and ecological concerns that impact the sites, communities and ecosystems in which it occurs (Barbour et al.,

2019). We are also writing in the time described as the ‘Anthropocene’ (Crutzen 2002), a term coined to describe this current geological era from the mid twentieth century onwards, in which the economic and ‘resource’ needs of people have been prioritised over the wellbeing of natural ecological systems, creating radical imbalances, global warming and extreme weather, loss of habitats and species extinction. This term has become accepted in scientific and wider communities (Stratigraphy Working Group, 2019).

Writing and dancing in the Anthropocene, across very different environments in our geographically distant parts of the world, Hunter, Kloetzel and I nevertheless share experiences in teaching site dance in university dance programmes and presenting our own site dance workshops and performances. Amongst the many insights from our dance research, I comment here on what we described as the emergence of ‘ecosystemic awareness’ in site dance, and consideration of the ethical base of the site dance field—what we might think of as our moral obligations in the relationships between humans and the environment. Kloetzel argued that “site dance creators are jumping into this fray, employing an already well-developed ‘place-attending’ sensibility to dissect the many facets of the environmental crisis” (Barbour et al., 2019, p. 233). Critical discussion and dance practice as local acts alongside consideration of global and interdisciplinary perspectives on environmentalism and ecology have certainly shaped my own work. In creating environmental and site dance, we share a desire not only to dance in non-theatre sites and about the wider more-than-human world, but importantly to “disrupt anthropocentric thinking and to engage with places—whether natural, built or mixed” (Barbour et al., 2019, p. 186).

In this deepening awareness of ethics and what I have argued as a recognition of long-standing indigenous relationships to place in Aotearoa, there arguably is also a shift away from the ‘nature’ ethic that has dominated the environmental movement (and that often encouraged, perhaps inadvertently, a human versus nature opposition, within the Anthropocene). Further, a critique of environmentalism and what might be seen in ecological and systems studies, is of a blindness to indigenous worldviews (or the prioritising of environmentalist perspectives over indigenous worldviews), or a naïve, romantic desire to appropriate indigenous worldviews for environmentalist purposes. In the socio-cultural context of Aotearoa, I argue that blindness and appropriation are untenable positions, given the awareness of Māori indigenous rights, world views and relationships to place, and given that Māori are literally people of the land. To naively grasp and

appropriate Māori (or any indigenous) worldviews in undertaking environmental and site dance is unacceptable, just as is claiming another's parents or home as one's own. At the same time, I also suggest we cannot ignore the significance of desire for a sense of place that comes from knowing and feeling one belongs to a place, a desire arguably embedded in the experiences of some Pākehā, and some more recent immigrants.

A conscious level of rigorous reflexivity is required in articulating embodied and artistic awareness of and relationships to environment, land and site, and in acknowledgement of the many diverse experiences of peoples of place. In this reflexivity, there is a deeper opportunity to appreciate the more-than-human world. In contemplating and enacting *environmental justice*, we may be able to reintegrate issues of poverty, access, agriculture, racism, urban development, wilderness and culture into our wider ethical discussions about the planet as a whole. In doing so, we may better reflect the multitude of diverse and specific experiences in the more-than-human world. The challenge of our work in environmental and site dance, I suggest, is to decentre the human claim on the planet and advocate for the more-than-human world.

Conclusions and inspirations

In concluding this article, my autoethnographic tracing of the lineage of environmental and site dance research, and the legacy of Alison East's practice and pedagogy, has led me to appreciate that researchers and practitioners may approach the crises of the Anthropocene with a broad view, underscoring both the details of the crises in local contexts and the larger philosophies and ideologies. With such considerations, environmental and site dance practices that foreground ecological awareness, respond to the climate crisis and/or adopt methodologies that specifically undermine anthropocentrism have much to offer. As a consequence, I celebrate the legacy of Ali's work and join her in affirming the role of dance artists in fostering eco-systemic awareness and embodying eco-political concerns. I continue this affirmation in my own work as an artist, researcher and educator and celebrate the new generations of environmental and site dance artists and researchers in the 'dance of the origin' community.

References

Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous*. Vintage Books.

- Bannon, F. (2010). Articulations: Walking as daily dance practice. *Choreographic Practices*, 1, 97-109.
- Barbour, K. N. (2011). *Dancing across the page: Narrative and embodied ways of knowing*. Intellect Books.
- Barbour, K. N. (2012). Standing centre stage: Autoethnographic writing and solo dance performance. *Cultural Studies ⇔ Critical Methodologies*, 12(1), 67-71.
- Barbour, K. N. (2016a). Places we call home: Representing place and identity in contemporary dance performance. *International Journal of Social, Political and Community Agendas in the Arts*, 12(1), 1-13.
- Barbour, K. N. (2016b). Place-responsive choreography and activism' in Robert Rinehart and elke emerald (Eds.), *Global south ethnographies: Minding the senses* (pp. 127-145). Sense.
- Barbour, K. N. (2018a). 'Whispering birds': Site-specific dance, affect and emotion. In J. Butterworth & L. Wildschut (Eds.), *Contemporary choreography: A critical reader* (2nd ed., pp. 295-308). Routledge.
- Barbour, K. N. (2018b). Dancing epistemology: Situating feminist analysis. In S. Fraleigh (Ed.), *Back to the dance itself: Phenomenologies of the body in performance* (pp. 233-246). University of Illinois Press.
- Barbour, K. N. (2019). Dance and movement research. In P. A. Atkinson, S. Delamont, M. A. Hardy & M. Williams (Eds.), *SAGE encyclopaedia of research methods*. Sage.
- Barbour, K. N., Hunter, V., & Kloetzel, M. (2019). *(Re)Positioning site dance: Local acts, global perspectives*. Intellect Books.
- Brown, C. (2015). City of lovers. In V. Hunter (Ed.), *Moving sites: Investigating site-specific dance performance* (pp. 199-222). Routledge.
- Buck, R., & Barbour, K. N. (2015/2007). Experiential learning: A narrative of a community dance field trip. *Waikato Journal of Education: Special 20th Anniversary Collection*, pp. 93-101.
- Carson, R. (1962). *Silent spring*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Crutzen, P. (2002). The geology of mankind: The Anthropocene. *Nature*, 415, 23.
- Davida, D. (Ed.). (2011). *Fields in motion: Ethnography in the worlds of dance*. Laurier University Press.
- Durie, E.T. (2012). Ancestral laws of Māori. Continuities of land, people and history. In D. Keenan (Ed.), *Huia histories of Māori. Ngā Tahuhu Kōrero* (pp. 1-11). Huia.
- East, A. (2011). *Teaching dance as if the world matters: Eco-choreography: A design for teaching dance-making in the 21st century*. LAP Lambert Academic.
- East, A. (2014). Dancing Aotearoa: Connections with land, identity and ecology. *Dance Research Aotearoa*, 2, 101-124. <https://doi.org/10.15663/dra.v2i1.24>
- East, A. (2015). Performing body as nature. In S. Fraleigh (Ed.), *Moving consciously: Somatic transformations through dance, yoga and touch* (pp. 164-179). University of Illinois Press.
- Ellis, C. S. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. AltaMira Press.
- Fisher, M. (2016a). "I riro whenua atu me hoki whenua mai": The return of land and the Waikato-Tainui raupatu settlement. *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, NS23, 19-36.
- Fisher, M. (2016b). The politics of history and Waikato-Tainui's Raupatu Treaty Settlement. *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, 50(2), 68-89.
- Fraleigh, S. (Ed.). (2015). *Moving consciously: Somatic transformations through dance, yoga, and touch*. University of Illinois Press.
- Fraleigh, S. (Ed.). (2018). *Back to the dance itself: Phenomenologies of the body in performance*. University of Illinois Press.
- Heddon, D. (2007). One square foot: Thousands of routes. *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 86, 29(2), 40-50.
- Hiroti, P. (2019). *Resting our bodies upon Papatūānuku: An exploration of how community dance may foster connections to whenua for rangatahi* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. The University of Auckland.
- Houghton, C. (2016). Memorials for lost environments: Participatory practices and minimal ethics. *Dance Research Aotearoa*, 4(1), 89-115.
- Hunter, V. (2015). Embodying the site: The here and now in site-specific performance. In V. Hunter (Ed.), *Moving sites: Investigating site-specific dance performance* (pp. 95-114). Routledge.

- Hunter, V. (2019). Vernacular mapping: Site dance and embodied cartographies. *Choreographic Practices*, 10(1), 127-144.
- Husserl, E. (1989/1952). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy, Book 2 (Ideas II)*. Trans R. Rojcewicz & A. Schuwer. Kluwer Academic.
- Keenan, D. (Ed.). (2012). Introduction. Land, culture and history interwoven. In D. Keenan (Ed.), *Huia histories of Māori. Ngā Tāhuhu Kōrero* (pp. 1-11). Huia.
- Kloetzel, M., & Pavlik, C. (Eds.). (2009). *Site dance: Choreographers and the lure of alternative spaces*. University Press of Florida.
- Madison, D. S. (2019). *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics and performance* (3rd ed). SAGE.
- Marler, M. (2015). Dance and place, body weather, globalisation and Aotearoa. *Dance Research Aotearoa*, 3(1), 28-41.
- Mead, H. M. (2013). *Tikanga Māori: Living by Māori values*. Huia.
- Naess, A. (1973). The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement. A summary. *Inquiry*, 16(1), 95-100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00201747308601682>
- Olsen, A. (2002). *Body and earth. An experiential guide*. University of New England.
- Olsen, A. (2014). *The place of dance: A somatic guide to dancing and dance making*. Wesleyan University Press.
- O'Sullivan, D. (2007). *Beyond biculturalism: The politics of an indigenous minority*. Huia.
- Orange, C. (1987). *The treaty of Waitangi*. Allen & Unwin.
- Reihana-Morunga, T. L. (2018). *Te mana motuhake o te kauri: A kaupapa Māori exploration of intercultural praxis* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. The University of Auckland.
- Salmond, A. (2012). Ontological quarrels: Indigeneity, exclusion and citizenship in a relational world. *Anthropological Theory*, 12(2), 115-141.
- Satin, L. (2019). Walking as site dance: Choreography and conflict in Tel Aviv. *Choreographic Practices*, 10(1), 25-42.
- Stratigraphy Working Group. (2019). *Working group on the 'Anthropocene'. Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy*. <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/>
- Trussell, D. (2004). *Dance of the Origin*. Origins Dance Theatre.
- Trussell, D. (1986). *Words for the rock antipodes*. Hudson Press.
- Williams, S. (2015). Sustaining Māori indigenous performative knowledge: Engaging practices that foster ihi within a contemporary dance theatre context. *Dance Research Aotearoa*, 3(1), 7-27.
- Williams, S. (2019). *Ngā whatinga-rau o Iho: Critical reflections of iho in Haka Theatre through personal pūrākāu of four Hawaiki Tū kaihaka* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. The University of Auckland.
- Wood, B. (2011). Coming to our senses. *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*, 3(1 & 2), 85-99.

ⁱ Reflecting on what it means to be Pākehā and developing relationships with land and place are ongoing processes for me, explored in earlier writings (Barbour, 2011, 2016 and in chapter 2 of Barbour et al., 2019).

ⁱⁱ While I do not provide an exhaustive list here, a few examples of Māori contemporary dance that expresses relationships to land include Atamira Dance Company's *Ngāi Tahu 32* by Louise Potiki Bryant (2003), *Te Houhi - The people and land are one* by Maaka Pepene (2011), and *Mitimiti* by Jack Gray (2015). Some examples of Pākehā dance artists who expressed relationships with the local and natural environment include Lyne Pringle's *Lung Tree* (2013), Christina Houghton's *Survival Tour Series* (2013-2015), Carol Brown's *Tongues of Stone* series (2011-2013), Karen Barbour's *Whenua/Land* (2014/2015), *Places we call home* (2012) and *A place to stand* (2012), and Alison East and Origins Dance Theatre *Dance of the Origin* (1980) and many more works by East (East, 2011, 2014).

ⁱⁱⁱ See articles by Becca Wood and Ali East in this volume for a further discussion of the development of The Performing Arts School/UNITEC School of Performing and Screen Arts in Auckland, and East's (2014) article.