

## Moonwalking “Backwards into the Future”: “Poi E,” Music Video, and Documentary

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Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua.

*I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past.*

(Rameka 2017: 387)

The above *whakatauki* (proverb) perfectly expresses the time-travelling dimension of the music video for “Poi E” (1984), and its relationship with its forebears and descendants.<sup>1</sup> It also speaks to the production process and reception of this music video, and to my own process for this chapter. Examining these intertexts has propelled me on a journey “backwards into the future,” where my eyes have necessarily been firmly fixed on the past. This required psychologically travelling back to 1984, to recall the first time I watched “Poi E” on television as a sixteen-year-old growing up in *Aotearoa* (New Zealand).

Following the release of this music video, the song became so popular that it was eventually considered by many as the unofficial national anthem of *Aotearoa* (McDonald 2022). While the recorded song was unique for its fusing of traditional Māori music with a popular rhythmic composition, the music video went viral not only because of its innovative musical arrangement, but also due to its convergence of *te reo Māori* (Māori language), *poi*, and *kapa haka* (Māori dance and performance) forms, with trans-national break-dancing and “bopping” moves and intertextual references to Michael Jackson’s costume and dance moves.<sup>2</sup> As well as the visual and kinetic intertextuality exemplified by this music video, it also provides a rich case study due to its incorporation of documentary aesthetics and for being an enduring exemplar of hybridized cultures and genres. The song and video have travelled extensively, with Taika Waititi remediating the music video in the form of the “Poi E Thriller

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**Haka**” concluding his film *Boy* (Robati 2010). **“Poi E”** was also the source of inspiration for a theatrical rock musical and a reverberation of video mashups, performances, and documentaries, including the award-winning documentary *Poi E: The Story of Our Song* (2016).

Taken together, these examples illustrate Tomáš Jirsa’s and Mathias Korsgaard’s definition of music video as a “hybrid audiovisual configuration driven by the interaction of recorded sounds, moving images, and lyrics; an intertextual space of perpetual remediations where one medium transforms the other” (2019: 117). This definition provides a useful approach to studying the transformational impact of this music video, along with the broader process of remediation. However, the localized focus of this chapter requires contextualizing in relation to the concept of *whakapapa*. Lesley Rameka explains that, from a *Mātauranga Māori* (Māori knowledge) perspective, *whakapapa* is a “continuous lifeline from those who existed before to those living today, encompassing everything that is passed from one generation to the next” (2017: 387). *Whakapapa* is an important aspect of one’s identity and is “firmly embedded in the Māori psyche” (Te Rito 2007: 4). Rameka emphasizes the significance of this concept to temporality and the environment:

*Whakapapa* connects the individual to the past, present and future: to *Ranginui* (Sky Father) and *Papatūānuku* (Earth Mother); to *whenua* (land); *whānau* (families), *hapū* (sub tribe) and *iwi* (tribe); to *moana* (lakes), *awa* (rivers), *maunga* (mountains) and *waka* (ancestral canoes).

(2017: 387)

In a Māori worldview, the interrelationships between all of these facets of the social, spiritual, and natural world are “captured through creation stories which include layers of symbolism and metaphor” (2017). These relationships are also transmitted through cultural forms such as *waiata* (song), *haka* (dance), *whakairo* (carving), film and music video, all of which serve as vessels for transmitting *whakatauki*. Referring to the *whakatauki* cited at the opening of this chapter, Rameka explains how this proverb transmits the significance of *whakapapa*:

This *whakatauki* [...] speaks to Māori perspectives of time, where the past, the present, and the future are viewed as intertwined, and life as a continuous cosmic process. Within this continuous cosmic movement, time has no restrictions – it is both past and present. The past is central to and shapes both present and future identity. From this perspective, the individual carries their past into the future. The strength of carrying one’s past into the future is that ancestors

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are ever present, existing both within the spiritual realm and in the physical, alongside the living as well as within the living.

(2017)

This perspective suggests the fluidity of time and the porousness of any vessel that might be used to carry the past into the future. If we imagine songs and music videos as time-travelling vessels, then we might also perceive these forms as leaky ships that travel through time and space, distributing gems from the past for new generations to play with. Metaphorically using the concept of *whakapapa* as a navigational beacon, this chapter charts the travels of “Poi E” across time, mediums, genres, and cultural space.

### “Poi E”—The Song

The song “Poi E” was born out of a collaboration between linguist Ngoi Pēwhairangi and Maui Prime (known as Dalvanius), who was born in Pātea, South Taranaki. The song emerged from a desire to make *te reo Māori* accessible to the younger generation. As Dalvanius explains “Ngoi said to me once, ‘how do I make our language acceptable to the younger generation?’ and I said ‘by giving it to them the way they want to hear it, not the way you want to teach them.’ And that’s how ‘Poi E’ was born” (2003). “Poi E” was deliberately designed as an intervention into a social and cultural problem. As an outcome of colonization and “urban drift” (migration from rural to urban areas), many Māori were disconnected from their language, culture, and extended *whanau* (Hill 2012). Through musical pursuits that took him around the world, Dalvanius had himself experienced a form of disconnection from his language. Noting the impact of Michael Jackson’s 1979 song “Don’t Stop Till You Get Enough” on Māori youth, he said “we gotta do that, replace Michael Jackson. Because, if we don’t give them an alternative, they’re going to be totally inundated with Black urban influences” (Hill 2012). It is ironic that “Poi E” was partly born out of Dalvanius’s desire to “replace Michael Jackson,” yet Jackson’s dance moves have become indelibly associated with the song and video. In 1982, Dalvanius could see the magnetism of American Black music for young Māori, many of whom were becoming disconnected from their culture. This gave him the impetus to devise a song that would incite young city dwellers to experience Māori culture and language as “fun, hip and relevant” (Henderson 2012: 87).

He started by writing English lyrics that beckoned young people to embrace their culture. The lyrics can be interpreted as a message, sent from an elder to a teenager who is about to leave home.<sup>3</sup> The elder tells the child to go out into the world with vigor, to dance with the joy of a fantail, and to do so while keeping their culture close; to embrace and be proud of their culture, not to lose their identity, and to remember the strong bond of love they have with their whanau. This interpretation of the lyrics has a strong bearing on Dalvanius's own experience of having travelled the world with his musical career, but being disconnected from his culture until he returned home and reconnected with his culture, which included learning *te reo Māori*, with the tutelage of Pēwhairangi.

Dalvanius collaborated with Pēwhairangi to turn his lyrics into a catchy song that young people would want to sing along to in *te reo Māori* (Folksong 2002). Several weeks of song-writing resulted in a simple tape recording of "Poi E," which was made in Pēwhairangi's kitchen on April 12, 1982, with three vocalists and a ukulele.<sup>4</sup> The next step for Dalvanius was to seek his elder's approval for "Poi E" to be sung by the Pātea Māori Club, of which he was a member. After much fundraising and wrangling amongst the local community, "Poi E," sung by the Pātea Māori Club, was recorded and released as a single in 1983 (Kara 2010). But this process was not without resistance. Although sung completely in *te reo Māori*, this was layered "over a bouncy and imminently danceable complement of Linn drums and synthesiser, marrying the Māori lyrics and content to what was then the hip hop-influenced trend in US popular music" (Henderson 2012: 87). Dalvanius recalled that some of his elders did not perceive this to be Māori music:

"Poi E" broke down a lot of racism, amongst my people first. And I call it tribal racism. Ngoi rang me up, she says "all the Māori elders are jumping up and down about, that's not Māori music." I said, "hey we all got sacked from the Pātea Freezing Works. If you can't put your hob-nail boots to this music, it ain't gonna work." And that's exactly what we did. So for the four minutes it was number one, the whole nation was exposed to the Māori language, and without compromise.

(2003)

The point Dalvanius makes about being sacked from the Freezing Works is significant. A large proportion of his town relied on the Pātea Freezing Works for a livelihood. Its closure in September 1982 caused significant social issues for the community, with many families forced to relocate to urban centers, thus adding to urban migration and intensifying the problems associated with

cultural dislocation. Referring to the impact of the freezing works closure, a member of the Pātea Māori Club explained that “Poi E” “came at a time when we needed something to hold on to, to give us some hope. And Dalvanius was the person that did that for us as a community and for us as a *ropu*, as a club” (Te Karere 2015). For Maryanne Broughton, another member of the Club, the most significant impact of the song was its role in reconnecting children with *te reo Māori*:

The release of “Poi E” was a huge milestone for Māori music and was an extended dream of Dals’ and Aunty Ngoi’s to get our language back out there, to encourage young Māori to be proud of being Māori. It actually wasn’t popular with the older generation as it was not the traditional way of singing our songs but it was released at just the right moment, when young kids were learning and relating to *te reo Māori* via *Te Kohanga Reo*, and our teenagers were jumping on the break dancing craze. Singing “Poi E” meant the kids were using our language every day.

(2021)

In Aotearoa, “Poi E” topped the charts for four weeks and outsold all international recording artists during 1984, including Michael Jackson’s song “Thriller,” which also dominated the New Zealand pop charts that year (Digitalus: n.p.). It reached number one in the charts in each of the following decades and reappeared in the charts in 2010. Although released without a video in 1983, it was not until its release in March 1984 *with the video*, that the song became a cult hit in Aotearoa. While the song has cultural significance and anthemic qualities in its own right, it is the music video that provided the vehicle for the song to travel across time and space. With significant direction and vision provided by Dalvanius, the video for “Poi E” was directed by Paul Carvell and cinematographer Waka Attewell.

### “Poi E”—The Music Video

Firmly locating the video in Aotearoa from the outset, the song opens with the sound of native birds accompanying a painting of Mt. Taranaki. This image has historical and spiritual significance in Aotearoa, due to its association with the 1881 invasion of the pacifist settlement of Parihaka, based at the foot of Mt. Taranaki (NZ History). The people of Pātea *whakapapa* to Taranaki *maunga*, meaning they pay reverence to this mountain, which signifies spiritual presence, home, and connectedness to the land.



**Figure 2.1** A locating shot of the *tekoteko* (ancestral carving) at the apex of the Taiporohenui *wharehenui* (meeting house). “Poi E” (Paul Carvell and Waka Attewell, performed by Dalvanius and the Pātea Māori Club, 1984).

Over the top of a synthesized drum beat, *kuia* Hui Kahu belts out the opening lyrics.<sup>5</sup> This powerful call to action is accompanied by a close-up of the *tekoteko* (ancestral carving) which sits at the apex of the Taiporohenui *wharehenui* (meeting house) located at Pāriroa Pa Marae (Figure 2.1). While this shot locates the song as affiliated to the Ngāti Ruanui *iwi* (tribe), it also establishes the ancestors as present in the video from the outset. Typically named after an ancestor of an *iwi* or *hapu* (sub-tribe), the *wharehenui* structure is an embodiment of an eponymous ancestor (Trinick et al. 2017: 242). While the *tekoteko* represents the head of the ancestor, “the *tāhuhu* (ridge beam) represents the backbone, the *heke* (rafters) the ribs and the *maihi* (barge boards) the arms. The front window is seen as the *matapihi* (eye), and the interior of the meeting house is the *poho* (chest) of the ancestor” (Trinick et al. 2017). These images of the *wharehenui* are the first of several signifiers of ancestral presence within this video. While ancestors and elders are situated as present and significant, many of the shots either are from the perspective of a child, or invite the audience to identify with a child’s

experience of the performance. These shots are all part of a conscious move to reinforce the song’s message of the value of intergenerational connectedness, with significance placed on the connection between children, their elders, and their ancestors. The camera zooms out to reveal the Pātea Māori Club singing in front of the *wharenuī*, with children kneeling on the grass in front of them. The occasional low-angle shot provides a child’s perspective of the performance, which is shot with a mixture of mid-shots and close-ups of children carefully studying the *poi* actions of their elders.

Although the performers knew they were being filmed for the video, the footage has a *vérité* feel. We see shots of Dalvanius’s *Chihuhua* running across the grass and a member of the group playing up to the camera by performing the *wherero* (protruding tongue) along with the *pukuna* (glaring eyes). These gestures are complex cultural signifiers that are performed in various contexts to impart different meanings. Once enacted as a form of intimidation at times of challenge and warfare, their use in contemporary art, popular culture, and sporting events is often performative. While these gestures may be enacted to communicate a facet of a character or story, they may also be performed in ritual, jest, or parody. Such gestures have become publicly visible through the gestural repertoire of the *haka*, which is customarily performed by the All Blacks and the Black Ferns rugby teams as a pre-game challenge. In the context of this video, these gestures may signify the presence of ancestors, while at times appearing as spontaneous moments of performative jest.

Although all of the performers in the video exude a sense of pride and joy, the camera zones in on one young boy who holds salience within the group. He looks like he is about to explode with pride as he puffs his chest out and performs the actions with a huge smile (Figure 2.2). The boy’s expression of pride and joy portrays the **shamanistic** aspect of *kapa haka*, where the mind and body express a connection to the spirit world. These expressions of unadulterated joy add to the *vérité* feel of the video. The sense of watching a documentary is reinforced by the image of a cattle truck driving past the group as they are posed for the camera on the other side of the road. A pink car drives past with Dalvanius at the window, waving and playfully enacting the *wherero*. The footage looks grainy and random, as though it has been shot on a home video camera. This adds to the video’s feeling of carefree spontaneity, and the sense of watching documentary footage of events unfolding in front of the camera. Despite this apparent spontaneity, the shots of moving vehicles may have been carefully planned. Not only does the empty cattle truck provide a subtle reference to the

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**Figure 2.2** A young boy exudes pride as he performs *kapa haka* dance moves. “Poi E” (1984).

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impact of the closure of the 1982 Freezing Works, the moving vehicles transition into the next setting, where we see the Pātea Māori Club performing in front of the town memorial, the Aotea Waka (ancestral canoe).<sup>6</sup> The memorial’s centrality in the video is deliberate, since the *waka* serves as a mnemonic, constantly reminding the community of the *pūrākau* (legend) that has been passed down through generations (Rameka 2017: 387). As inscribed on a plaque on the pillar of the waka, the *pūrākau* tells the story of the Ngāti Ruanui ancestors Turi and Rongorongo, who travelled via the Aotea Waka from Hawaiki to Aotearoa, eventually settling in the Aotea Harbour and Pātea, between 1250 and 1300 AD.

While filming the Pātea Māori Club performing in traditional costume in front of the monument, the camera seems, by chance, to come across an unusual image. As though spotting an alien figure breaching *tikanga* (protocol) by dancing upon a *tapu* (sacred) memorial, the camera zooms in, and we see teenage Joe Moana dancing on the raised hull of the waka monument. Situated above and behind the performers, Moana looks out-of-place in street clothes and white gloves, an obvious reference to Michael Jackson.

White gloves are a complex cultural signifier that has travelled across time, space, and cultures.<sup>7</sup> The mid-1980s white-glove-wearing phenomenon developed cult status after it was initiated in May 1983 by Jackson’s wearing of a single white glove while revealing his newly minted “moonwalk” during the performance of “Billie Jean” at Motown’s twenty-fifth anniversary TV special (Le Bigmac 2017). Moana’s glove wearing may also have been partly inspired by David Bowie’s video “Let’s Dance” (1983), where white gloves signify the power and control exerted by colonizers (Perrott 2023). Both hugely influential in New Zealand in 1983, these videos may have stoked the cult of the white glove as it manifested **amongst** some indigenous and colonized communities.<sup>8</sup>

A shot taken from one end of the monument depicts Moana dancing in the foreground, watched by a descending line of concrete ancestors seated in the *waka* (Figure 2.3). Rather than joining in with the *kapa haka* moves of the group below him, Moana “performs a series of moves drawn from the US West Coast street dance repertoire: the wrist rolls, *locks* and *Uncle Sam* finger points

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**Figure 2.3** A shot taken from one end of the *Aotea Waka* depicts Joe Moana “popping” and “locking” in the foreground, watched by a descending line of concrete ancestors seated in the *waka*. **“Poi E”** (1984).

of locking; the body waves and isolations of popping” (Henderson 2012: 87). This amalgam of US-inspired dance styles, known collectively as “bop,” had been embraced by many young New Zealanders during the early-to-mid-1980s (Henderson 2012: 85–6). As April Henderson explains, “bopping” was taken up with fervor by many young Māori, who identified with previously unseen images of non-white street dancers on New Zealand television screens:

Such mediated genealogies of cultural transfer meant that, in New Zealand, stylistic distinctions were initially blurred between California-originated dance forms such as *locking* and *popping*, and the New York form *breaking* (called break-dancing by the media or, by its practitioners, b boying/b girling). All of these were further intermixed in many New Zealand imaginations with the various US artists who incorporated street dancers and other elements of hip hop culture into their videos and live performances. By far the most influential of these was Michael Jackson, [with his] signature “moonwalk.”

(Henderson 2012)

“Poi E” is remarkable for the way in which this trans-cultural mixture of dance moves is hybridized with those of *kapa haka*. Examining “Poi E” in the context of a “1984 Structure of Feeling,” Henderson remarks that “no other example of New Zealand popular culture so ably, or deliberately, exemplifies 1984’s cross-fertilization of transnational urban street dance practices” (Henderson 2012: 86).

The next scene is located in the middle of a Pātea street. While Moana is bopping in the foreground, the mid-ground is occupied by teenagers in streetwear along with a poi twirler on roller-skates, another popular form of movement and sub-cultural identity amongst New Zealand youth in the mid-eighties. With the Pātea Māori Club performing in the background, this stratified image blends visually “what the song has already blended aurally” (Henderson 2012: 88). This audio-visual fusion of cultures, generations, and dance moves continues throughout the video. If the layers of on-foot transit depicted in this street scene offers a visual metaphor for the generational stratification brought about by “urban drift,” the following scene visually references the song’s call for generational closeness and kinship, which Dalvanius directed at youths who have migrated from rural towns to urban cities. Shifting the location from Pātea to Wellington, this scene includes *vérité* style footage of poi swinging urban youth of Polynesian descent. Although juxtaposed with the prior scene of rural communal harmony, continuity is provided by Joe Moana, who is “the culminating figure in a line of young Polynesian males doing a collective *body wave*”; a visual and kinetic analogue for the unity of kinship advocated by the

lyrics. And, to reinforce the lyrics’ exhortation to retain one’s culture whilst moonwalking, “when the wave reaches Moana, he breaks away into a *backslide* (moonwalk) while simultaneously swinging poi” (Henderson 2012).

The following sequence of intercut street shots segue to an internal stage scene: “Moana doing partial *flares* (a gymnastic inspired breaking move)” on the street are match-cut on action with the same move on stage, in front of the painted backdrop of Mount Taranaki (Henderson 2012). Moana is then replaced on stage with the Pātea Māori Club, who perform the “Poi E” chorus to a zealous multicultural audience. Adding to its complex hybridization of cultures, dance moves and gestures, the video cuts from a shot of a *wherero* being enacted by one of the performers, to a trio of poi-swinging “New Romantics,” one of whom was “affectionally dubbed ‘poi George’” by a blogger (Henderson 2012). Against the backdrop of Mount Taranaki, the video concludes with Hui Kahu’s finale call, followed by Dalvanius’s brother enacting the *wherero*. While the young people are celebrating their culture with vigor, they do so alongside their elders, with their ancestors ever present.

Just as the Aotea Waka is the vehicle that transports the ancestors into the heart of this video, the video itself serves as a metonym of the Aotea Waka. It is the vessel that enabled the song to travel across time, cultures, and around the world. Due to the public exposure brought about by the video, the Pātea Māori Club embarked on an international tour in 1984, performing at the London Palladium and the Edinburgh Festival, as well as appearances on British television. After performing at the Midem music fair in Cannes, members of the group played a part in the opening of the *Te Maori* exhibition in New York (1985) and were the supporting act for a Violent Femmes concert at the Irving Plaza. By invitation from the Queen, the group returned to the UK in 1985 to give a Royal Command Performance (Bourke 2016).

More significant than these international ventures, the video has had an empowering and resounding impact in Aotearoa, instilling a strong sense of pride and identity amongst Māori and non-Māori. “Poi E’s” anthemic status is partly a result of its capacity to engender pride and unity across the multicultural spectrum of Aotearoa. As suggested by YouTube commenter Carwyn Henigan, a sense of unity is incited by the video’s hybridization of sonic, visual, and kinetic signifiers:

It brought all us Kiwi kids together. The message here is not all about Māori. Us *Pākehā* kids were into our breakdance and BOP too. Big time. What this song did was connected us with dance. It was an iconic Kiwi electronic dance song,

and we broke, headspun, backspun and hurricaned it together [...] in mixed *Māori/Pākehā* breakdance groups! When you got on that stage to make your breaks and show your shit to this song [...] pride came through. Who we are together.

(2011)

As exemplified here, even when heard without its original visual accompaniment, the song is indelibly etched with the signification imparted by the video. For those who are old enough to recall the video's prominence on television in 1984, the visual images are permanently imprinted. But many younger New Zealanders who have grown up with YouTube have strong visual and kinetic associations to the song, which is partly due to the numerous ways in which the video has been re-imagined and reworked across four decades. The first prominent example of this is Taika Waititi's reworking of the video in his 2010 film *Boy*.

## **Boy**

Opening and closing with "Poi E," the film *Boy* (2010) is firmly located in Aotearoa 1984. The film shows how, during the early eighties, "Poi E," along with Michael Jackson's music, dance moves, and costume played an important role in the identification and imagination of young Māori. As a nine-year-old boy with Māori/Russian heritage and living between the rural East Coast and urban Wellington, Waititi identified strongly with Jackson, primarily by way of his music video "Thriller" (1983). Waititi's identification with Jackson was entangled with his embodiment of "Poi E," an intersection that manifested in a mash-up of cultural signifiers, movements and aesthetics in the form of a dance sequence choreographed by Dolina Wehipeihana (Briggs 2014). Set to "Poi E," this dance sequence accompanies the credits to *Boy*. Upon the international success of *Boy* in 2010, this dance sequence went viral on YouTube and is now widely viewed, not as a trailer for the film, but as a stand-alone mash-up music video referred to as the "Thriller Haka" (Robati 2010).

Set to the song "Poi E," the "Thriller Haka" palimpsestuously adds further layers to the video's fusion of cultures, movements, and aesthetics. Despite the centrality of "Poi E" as a source of inspiration, Waititi does not attempt a close reworking of the video. Rather than the Pātea Māori Club performing, the actors from *Boy* appear in formation, much like the dancers in "Thriller." Dressed in a replica of Jackson's red and black costume, Waititi leads the formation. Starting the dance by cocking their heads to the side like zombies, the actor's play out

an over-the-top parody of the zombie-themed dance repertoire performed in “Thriller.” With its uncanny merging of music video aesthetics, Jackson’s dance moves and references to zombies, “Thriller” has triggered performative dances, such as the YouTube video of the 2007 CPDRC *Thriller* dance routine by prison inmates in the Philippines (Mangaoang 2019). Waititi generated a further layer of uncanny by fusing distinctively “Thriller” dance movements with specific elements of the *haka*, including rhythmic body slaps, foot stamping, the *wherero*, the *pukana* and the *wiri* (fluttering hand movement). The girls swirl poi as they move to the front of the formation, and two of the adult actors attempt a collective body wave. Although poorly executed for comedic effect, this move triggers an instant flashback to the break-dancing moves of 1984, while further establishing this mash-up’s lineage to the video for “Poi E.”

## Video Mashups, Remixes, and Performances

In May 2010, two months after *Boy* was released, a video edited by Waititi appeared on YouTube titled “New Poi E Music Video 2010 – Boy Movie Remix” (Fox 2010). Functioning as an unofficial promotional trailer for *Boy*, the video serves as a re-edit of “Poi E.” Set to the song, the video intercuts selected moments and out-takes from *Boy* with extracts from “Poi E.” Using the match-cut editing technique, Waititi created a sense of continuity by linking gestures such as the *wherero* in “Poi E” with the character Boy playfully poking out his tongue. Boy’s swirling of the sparkler is match-cut with poi-swirling in “Poi E” and the body wave in “Poi E” is match-cut to its emulation in *Boy*’s “Thriller Haka.” Waititi’s video concludes with a sequence of humorous out-takes followed by “Poi E’s” final shot of the Pātea Māori Club being applauded.

Waititi’s remixed video triggered further mashups of “Poi E,” such as the video uploaded to YouTube three days later by Hoterene1 (2010), which intercuts clips from *Boy* with extracts from “Poi E.” In Hoterene1’s video, the split-screen technique is used to compare clips from the original video with shots of the same people filmed twenty-six years later, for a 2010 performance by the Pātea Māori Club. This includes split-screen shots of the proud boy who featured prominently in the first section of “Poi E,” showing him performing to the same song in his thirties. Joe Moana is also presented in split screen, still performing a similar repertoire of moves in 2010 (Rodger 2016). These mashup videos produce a strong sense of nostalgia and an awareness of how the song

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and video (along with its protagonists and dance moves), have travelled through time, accruing further signification along the way.

Partly inspired by Waititi's "Thriller Haka," a flashmob performance of "Poi E" took place in 2015 at Cuba Dupa, central Wellington, the "urban" location featured in "Poi E." The event was organized by City Gallery to celebrate the opening of Candice Breitz's video exhibition *A Portrait of Michael Jackson* (2015). The public were invited to "join us at the DANZ dance zone to learn the moves to the cultural mash-up of Poi E and Thriller from Taika Waititi's hit film *Boy*" (2015). Hundreds of people took part in the flash-mob, enthusiastically learning and performing the dance moves from both "Poi E" and the "Thriller Haka." A similar "Poi E / Thriller flashmob" took place in November 2015 in Wellington's Civic Square, memorializing the Square's function as a stage for bopping and break-dancing during the eighties. Two years later, a YouTube video titled "zombie cops dance to Poi E" appeared featuring members of the Wellington Police force performing dance moves from "Thriller Haka" to "Poi E" (1News 2017). Apparently done as a Halloween stunt rather than a tribute to the song, the video might be viewed as a bad-taste example of cultural appropriation.

From a vastly different point on Aotearoa's cultural-political spectrum, Joshua Edwards (2022) uploaded his "Poi E remix" to YouTube. A stripped-back electronic version of "Poi E" is the sonic foundation over which Edwards raps his own lyrics, partly in *te reo Māori*. While the music traverses genres, his lyrics communicate some of the key messages imparted by "Poi E":

I'm here to encourage and tell all my people that we are *ātaahua* (beautiful), ain't nobody getting rid of us [...] to the ancestors that have passed by, I pray that you find peace in the next life [...] and to my people of Pātea, let's rise [...] as the old saying goes, home is where the heart is [...] my heart's where my home is.

(2022)

Extending upon the *Kaupapa* (intention) of "Poi E," Edwards's lyrics include references to Dalvanius's mentor, Prince Tui Teke, along with past and present Māori activists Rua Kēnana and Hone Harawira. The activist spirit of the lyrics is also emphasized in the visual images, which refer directly to those who lost their jobs through the 1983 closure of the Pātea Freezing Works. The video serves as an appropriate tribute to the community of Pātea, since most of the rapping and bopping sequences are shot inside a butcher factory. Rather than Moana's white gloves, "freezing workers" wear blue latex gloves as they perform the popping and locking moves from "Poi E," alongside large animal carcasses. Edwards pays

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Aotearoa's  
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spectrum'

Ibid  
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tribute to the Pātea Māori Club, Dalvanius and Waititi by punctuating his rap with extracts from “Poi E” and the “Thriller Haka.”

There are many more examples of remixes, mashups, and performances inspired by “Poi E,” which spread virally on YouTube and TikTok. These include a re-edited video comprised of found footage of the HZ Ghana Dancing Pallbearers (AP Archive). Adorned with white gloves and Michael Jackson-esque shoes, the pallbearers conjure Jackson’s “Billy Jean” look. Providing another uncanny interpretation of the song, the video is edited to look as though the pallbearers are dancing to “Poi E” while holding a coffin on their shoulders (Genevieve 2020). YouTube’s repository of “Poi E” videos also includes a choreographed dance to “Poi E” by the South Korean boy-band BTS (Sian 2017), a trap music remix (Jstar 2012), an army dance-on mass (O’Connor 2022) and a drag queen stage performance (Jonsin 2010). The song and video continue to feature prominently through many rituals associated with the cultural fabric of Aotearoa. Seemingly permanently attached to the song, dance moves from the 1984 video were performed in 2013 by Atamira dance company for their show *Kaha* (Briggs 2014), and by the Pātea Māori Club at the 2022 Rugby World Cup, complete with youths performing “Thriller Haka” moves and an opening by Waititi (NotNBAGamingboy 2022). These examples portray the significance of the video as a vessel for the song to travel across time, geographical and cultural space. They also show that while the song is indelibly marked by the visual and kinetic signifiers transmitted by the original video, these signifiers have been reinterpreted in imaginative ways.

## Documentary

Apart from the *verité* style footage appearing in the video, “Poi E” has converged with the documentary genre in other ways. In 1985 the “Poi E” video featured in the opening sequence of the documentary *Te Maori: A Celebration of the People and Their Art* (1985), about the Te Māori exhibition at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art (annloevering 2011). In 1994, Dalvanius’s touring stage show *Poi E: The Musical* (1994) was documented in *Pātea: the Survivors* (1994). And “Poi E” again featured in the documentary *Dalvanius* (2002). While each of these examples portray the story of the song and video unfolding across time, media, and genres, this story is told with the fullest context in the documentary film *Poi E: The Story of Our Song* (2016), directed by 21-year-old Tearepa Kahi (Kahi 2016).

Opening with dawn-lit shots of the painted concrete ancestors seated inside the Aotea Waka monument, Kahi pays respect to the ancestors of Ngāti Ruanui while firmly locating the documentary in rural Pātea. These establishing shots are followed by shots of the Pātea Museum and cattle trucks driving past the memorial. This present day footage cuts back to 1984, with shaky Super 8 footage that had been shot during the filming of “Poi E.” While the caption tells us this was “ages ago,” this is implied by the curved corners of the frame and the grainy footage, which provides a nostalgic flashback of Joe Moana dancing atop the waka. There’s a haunting conflation of presence and absence in this flashback: while the ancestors are saliently present, the grainy footage is devoid of the song it belongs to—the song that is now *so* present in the national psyche of Aotearoa.

While telling the story of the making of “Poi E,” the documentary situates this in relation to the social and economic upheaval brought about by the closing of the Pātea Freezing Works, along with the “urban drift” and cultural disconnection associated with its closure. Kahi tells this story by intuitively stitching together a mixture of archival materials such as found footage, photographs, audio recordings, and home movies. These are curated and intercut with candid interviews and recreations. Located in the middle of the documentary is a time-travelling gem that (although edited in 2015) could be viewed as “Poi E’s” forebear music video. The very first audio recording of “Poi E,” made at the moment of the song’s inception in 1982, is “published” here for the first time, accompanied with home video footage shot at Pēwhairangi’s home in Tokomaru Bay. The raw vocals and dainty sounding ukulele are brought to life by close-ups of wrinkled hands jotting down lyrics and tapping out the beat. These *verité* style images transition to speed-blurred shots depicting Dalvanius’s road journey from this recording session back to his home in Pātea. The sense of time travel evoked by this documentary not only accentuates the ancestral presence underpinning the original “Poi E” video, but also appropriately situates the story of “Poi E” in relation to the concept of *whakapapa*, by connecting the individual to the past, present, and future.

### “I Walk Backwards into the Future with My Eyes Fixed on My Past.”

The *whakatauki* opening this chapter perfectly encapsulates the intent of “Poi E,” which was to connect youth with their past while embracing the cultural hybridity of their present and future lives. Much like this *whakatauki*, “Poi E”

has also been passed down through several generations, in the process accruing new meanings according to various contexts. From the ancestors Turi and Rongorongo (seated in the Aotea Waka), to Pēwhairangi and Dalvanius, the Pātea Māori Club, Hui Kahu and Joe Moana, the youths performing in the *Poi E* rock musical, the young actors in “Thriller Haka,” the Pātea residents and descendants interviewed in Tearepa Kahi’s documentary, Hoterene1’s video mashup, Joshua Edwards’s activist remix video, and the young people performing “Poi E” at the 2022 Rugby World Cup. Each of these protagonists have played a part in carrying the lyrical, sonic, visual, and kinetic signifiers of “Poi E” across multiple generations.

This transit across mediums, genres, and performance modes also illustrates Jirsa’s and Korsgaard’s definition of music video as a “hybrid audiovisual configuration,” since the textual descendants of “Poi E” mark out “an intertextual space of perpetual remediations where one medium transforms the other” (2019: 117). While each text and medium contributes new affordances, when examining these intertexts from a holistic perspective, “Poi E” appears as a mobile palimpsest undergoing constant transformation. When we consider the travels of “Poi E” across time, space, cultures, mediums, and genres, it becomes clear that the video is propelled by a particular approach to time travel. The video exists both in the past and the present, and just like the monument it features, if we look deeply inside this *waka*, we find ancestors, passing on their *whakatauki* to the younger generations, via song and dance. Through its manifestations in song, music video, film, mash-ups, and documentary, “Poi E” has had resounding success in beckoning young people to moonwalk backwards into their future with their eyes fixed on the past.

## Notes

- 1 Watch the YouTube playlist for this chapter at ladygrinningsoul (2022): <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLLCG3jQCuBhz-z3YBWleJBC8YQz4hpDJu>.
- 2 For a translation of *te reo Māori* words used in this chapter, see the glossary here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/17i-qtFrAthSAImiD6vEp2RuUUS85VX1O/view?usp=sharing>. A *poi* is a light ball on a string, which is swung or twirled rhythmically during a waiata (song). The ball was traditionally made of raupō leaves. A complete list of references used in this chapter can be located here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1pS7ZdlQzfkMnryKMXQP6cTXDDwTFCNSg/view?usp=sharing>.

- 3 “Poi E” lyrics, translated from *te reo Māori* into English, as presented in *Poi E: The Story of Our Song* (2016), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1CTd7hWpocO-McYfCrW6SGVkaAorQmQqk/view?usp=sharing>.
- 4 This first 1982 recording of “Poi E” is included in the documentary film *Poi E: The Story of Our Song* (2016).
- 5 For more on Hui Kahu’s role in the video, see: Adam Ray (2012) and Korina Kahu-Luke (2022).
- 6 For more on this, see: Aotea Utanganui (2020) and Pātea Historical Society (2022).
- 7 In Europe, white gloves were once symbols of wealth, land ownership and high fashion and status. Traditionally worn by high-ranking clergy of the Christian faith, by the Freemasons and by Royalty, this tradition has endured. In America, white gloves have a complex history related to slavery, racism and the control of women. The white gloves worn by cartoon characters such as Micky Mouse and Felix the Cat indicate how early American cartoons were inextricably linked with blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville performance, a historical trajectory that is *détourned* in JZ’s music video “The Story of OJ” (2017).
- 8 As was Jackson, Bowie and “Let’s Dance” were popular in New Zealand in 1983/84, due in part to the video’s statement about colonial oppression and racism. For more on this, see: Perrott (2023) and RNZ Music (2008).

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