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Site-Specific Performance Rituals in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

In this creative practice PhD, I investigated site-specific performance rituals in the Anthropocene. Driven by the urge to respond to the challenges of the current time, I examined how different seasonal rituals might be expressed in specific sites in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Furthermore, including participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, and carrying an awareness of the complexities of colonialism, I analysed insights from key ritual experts to enhance my understanding of ritual practices within the specific socio-cultural and environmental context of Aotearoa. Inspired by critical posthumanist philosophies, I viewed ritual practices through a lens that considered the interconnectedness of technology, culture, and nature, moving beyond essentialist and dualistic tendencies. Inspired by (Haraway, 2007) and Braidotti (2019), I embraced a perspective of 'staying with the trouble' and 'radical hope' as a strategy to inspire commitments to safeguarding life on Earth amid increasing societal divisions, and environmental disasters.

Working at the intersection of various disciplines, I crafted a qualitative research design that embraced multiple ways of knowing through creative practice research. I gathered insights from four ritual experts grounded in mātauranga Māori or neo-Paganism through in-depth interviews, to comprehend multifaceted and culturally sensitive approaches to ritual practices in Aotearoa. Moreover, the creative investigation of four seasonal performance rituals served as the primary mode of inquiry (Niedderer & Roworth-Stokes, 2007; Skains, 2018). The methods used for these rituals included contemporary performance practices, eco-somatic movement, improvisation, site-specific dance, audience participation, and others.

The rich knowledge gained throughout these investigations is conveyed through the documentation of four seasonal rituals, presented in video works alongside this thesis. The findings are articulated in two empirical chapters, one focusing on the findings and analysis of the expert interviews and the other on the findings and analysis of four performance rituals, revealing nuanced and complex insights into the creation of site-specific performance rituals in the Anthropocene. Navigating site-specific performance practices as an immigrant necessitated continuous critical self-reflection on biases and assumptions, leading to intricate explorations of embodiment, identity, culture, nature, and the more-than-human world within a posthuman context. Operating in the liminal space of this tension alongside performer participants, ritual experts, and audience members yielded the articulation of my findings: a ritual score capable of accommodating the complexities of the Anthropocene.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Site-specific performance rituals in the Anthropocene were the focus of this investigation. Informed by different ritual experts grounded in mātauranga Māori and neo-Paganism, along with my creative practice influenced by posthumanist philosophy, I examined how different seasonal rituals might be expressed in specific sites in Aotearoa, and how the insights of key ritual experts might inform the understanding of site-specific performance rituals. This chapter provides an overview of the socio-cultural and spiritual contexts of Aotearoa, the Anthropocene, my diasporic positioning, and the overarching research aims.

Socio-Cultural Contexts of Aotearoa

Aotearoa New Zealand is a country located in the Pacific Ocean, consisting of two main landmasses, the North Island, and the South Island, as well as numerous smaller islands (Neall & Trewick, 2008). The inhabitation of the islands commenced around 1200 CE when Polynesian voyagers migrated from the Pacific, leading to the establishment of Māori settlements in the region (Howe, 2003). James Cook's arrival in 1769 marked the beginning of European exploration, paving the way for British colonisation with settlers from Britain and Ireland populating the country (Belich, 2001; Murphy, 2003; Orange, 2021). By 1840, Great Britain was seeking sovereignty, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi was signed with many local chiefs and representatives of the British Crown (Orange, 2021). However, the existence of two versions, one in English language and one in te reo Māori (Indigenous language), led to a discrepancy in content and implications, which resulted in a rapid decline in Māori sovereignty¹ (Pool, 2015).

Despite the formal recognition of Māori within the British Crown's jurisdiction, they were systematically marginalised and experienced a devastating population decline² (Durie, 1999), a consequence of government policies and the rapid influx of European settlers. Factors such as the Native Land Act in 1865, led to immense dispossession of ancestral lands; English replacing Māori in schools from the 1890s, and the imposition of Christianity starting from 1814 heavily contributed to the disruption of social structures³, erosion of cultural identity and decline in Māori sovereignty (Mikaere, 2013). Though Māori resistance took various forms, with Māori insistently fighting for the Crown to act in accordance with the commitments it had

¹ The Māori version highlighted the importance of Māori authority over land and resources, also emphasising British governance against any foreign power (Orange, 2021). However, this interpretation diverged from the English version, which required Māori to surrender their right to exercise power and authority. Additionally, it specified that the British Crown would assume absolute control over all land transactions and establish a land fund dedicated to the administration and development of the country and further settlement efforts (Orange, 2021).

² Durie (1999) stresses that "1896 the census had estimated the total Maori, population to be around 42 000, a reduction of 75% over the previous 100 years" (pp. 5-7).

³ The urban migration and the disintegration of the whānau network during the mid-twentieth century resulted in Māori women being pressured into fulfilling the role of a subservient housewife and mother within the confines of the nuclear family structure. Furthermore, female figures in cosmogonic accounts were not only reimagined as submissive to male figures, but Christian morality also imposed restrictions on the sexual autonomy of Māori women (Mikaere, 2013).

made in the treaty, it took over a century for more substantial systemic change to occur (Orange, 2021).

Meanwhile, imperialist supremacy and racialised thinking continued to influence New Zealand's immigration policies, as exemplified by the recruitment of labourers from Pacific nations like Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji for low-paying manufacturing jobs in the 1960s (Rocha, 2012; Spoonley, 2015). However, the end of the economic boom around 1966 coincided with a period marked by global rights movements and increased political activism within the Māori and Pacific communities, ultimately resulting in the passing of the Treaty of Waitangi Act⁴ in October 1975 (Orange, 2021). In addition to the Māori, European settler, and Pacific Islands populations, in the 1980s New Zealand experienced a rapid diversification due to more recent immigration from Asia and other countries, leading to the identification of over 230 ethnic groups in the 2013 Census (Tapaleao, 2014). Furthermore, according to Spoonley (2015), the 1980s and 1990s, characterised by declining bonds with the United Kingdom and a Māori cultural and political revitalisation (Broman, 2021), have led to an increase in the visibility of Māori representatives across various sectors, including law, health, education, sports, media, and culture (Calude et al., 2018). These efforts have further contributed to challenging dominant narratives of colonialist supremacy, prompting critical self-reflection amongst New Zealanders of European descent to confront their dominance in New Zealand and its historical origins (Mikaere, 2013).

The word Pākehā is a Māori colloquialism for people of European descent in Aotearoa and is sometimes adopted to express a relationship towards Māori as “someone who supports biculturalism as a way of moving forward and the need to offer reparations for historical wrongs” (Spoonley, 2007, p. 11). By embracing this terminology, individuals of European descent endeavour to demonstrate their commitment to supporting the principles outlined in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, alongside recognising their obligations to stand against institutional racism (Spoonley, 2007). According to Mikaere (2013), critical reflection on historical narratives of colonialism and vigorous actions aimed at transforming the perpetuation of white privilege within economic and political domains are required. This urgency is further heightened in the prevailing climate of neo-liberalism and the escalating global trend of white nationalist far-right movements (Broman, 2021). In conjunction with this recognition and its relevance for this PhD, the next section contains a brief overview of the diverse religions and belief systems that exist within the cultural structure of contemporary New Zealand.

⁴ The Treaty of Waitangi Act established the Waitangi Tribunal as a judicial commission, responsible for addressing and resolving claims made by Māori individuals and groups regarding breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi. It is a crucial formal platform for Māori to assert their rights and seek justice for past injustices, playing a significant role in the ongoing process of reconciliation between the Crown and Māori to address historical grievances and to ensure a more equitable relationship between Māori and the government of New Zealand (Orange, 2021).

Spiritual Contexts of Aotearoa

Since Polynesian migration from the Pacific region and the later arrival of the first Christian missionaries, the religious fabric of Aotearoa has undergone a series of significant changes (Hardy & Zalipour, 2023). The combined efforts of Methodist and Anglican missionaries, spreading the word of a single God led to systemic Christianisation, which culminated in the enactment of the Tohunga Suppression Act of 1907⁵, prohibiting traditional Māori customs, and further receding visibility of Māori spiritual practices⁶ (Mikaere, 2013; Salmond, 2017). Subsequently, the hegemonic religious narrative of New Zealand for most of the 20th century became predominantly Christian, from which a syncretic blend of new religious movements was formed by Māori, such as Pai Marire, Ringatū and Ratana religions (see for instance Elsmore, 2000; Newman, 2010). Today New Zealand is a country that is legally defined as secular, allowing for multiple beliefs and ritual practices to co-exist. New Zealand is often described as ‘multicultural’⁷ to present an inclusive nation that actively integrates cultural and spiritual traditions from diverse ethnic communities.

Migration from the Pacific Islands, as well as people arriving from all over the world, have added to the Christian landscape the beliefs of Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, and others (Statistics NZ 2018 on religious identification). Additionally, there is a network of alternative spiritual practitioners from the United States and Europe who have brought neo-Paganism and neo-shamanism to the shores of New Zealand (Sanson, 2017). These spiritual activities have grown rapidly in the last decade, especially the New Age movement as an alternative to the Christian religions (Heelas, 2008), which has evolved in distinct ways, adapting to the specific socio-cultural milieu of Aotearoa. According to Juliet Batten (2005) and Kathryn Rountree (2017), the New Age movement, encompassing diverse traditions such as Wicca, Druidry, Goddess spirituality, and Western shamanism, offers distinct and alternative ways for individuals to connect with nature and form unique identities (see Rountree, 2017).

Furthermore, over the past three decades, there has been a renaissance in the scientific study of Māori astronomy. This has resulted in a growing development of intercultural celebrations led by the Māori community, particularly the public celebration of the rising and setting of Matariki (Hakaraia, 2006, 2008; Hardy 2012; Matamua 2017a, 2017b). The Matariki star cluster, also known as the Pleiades, re-gained a significant place in the cultural and societal landscape of Aotearoa since the turn of the millennium (Hardy, 2012) and has been established as a new public holiday in 2022. The revival of Māori cosmology relates to the

⁵ A tohunga knows the “philosophy behind the ceremony, knowledge of cosmology, navigation, astronomy, medicine, history, genealogies, the environment, and the nature of the relationship of people to the Gods” (Mead, 2006, p. 108). A trained tohunga is a highly educated person in the art of healing and teaching who provides spiritual guidance (Mead, 2006).

⁶ The spiritual basis of Māori healing was marginalised by the dominance of Western scientific methods, relegating the traditional role of tohunga in health matters. Furthermore, institutionalised healthcare superseded the traditional practices of whanau care (Durie, 1986).

⁷ McAllister (2011) stresses that the value placed on multiculturalism in New Zealand appears to be conditional, as long as it does not challenge established values and maintains power within the dominant sector of society.

efforts of astronomer and academic Rangi Matamua, Hokianga astronomer Rereata Makiha, musician and scholar Te Akuharamaū Charles Royal, and numerous others whose educational programmes and lectures have brought awareness across the country of how mātauranga Māori (Māori epistemologies) can re-connect people to the physical environment of Aotearoa (see Hardy & Whaanga, 2019; Whaanga, Harris, & Matamua, 2020). According to Matamua (2017), it is a return to 'environmentally-focused' traditions that are embedded in the seasonal phenomena of this whenua, which seems vital in a time where "the natural environment is under strain from population, climate and consequent economic and social pressures" (cited in Hardy & Whaanga, 2019, p. 1). The premise is that through reconnecting people to practices that are anchored in place-specific knowledge systems and based on an understanding that humans are part of an interrelated network, a paradigm shift may happen towards more sustainable practices (Whaanga, Harris, & Matamua, 2020). This perspective resonates with neo-Paganists like Batten who engages in ritual practices focused on fostering environmental consciousness by celebrating seasonal markers.

The relevance of spirituality and its influence on people's ecological awareness relates to this PhD insofar that it investigates how site-specific performance rituals may be expressed in the time of the Anthropocene. By examining the intersection of site-specific dance, ritual, performance, and environmental consciousness, my research sheds light on how human-environment relationships can be expressed in a time of climate change, mass extinction, increased individualisation, and societal division. Considering the socio-cultural and spiritual milieu of Aotearoa, as a German researcher, I recognise the importance of understanding the complex interplay between my cultural heritage and the context of Aotearoa, where my research is situated. Therefore, in the subsequent section, I will briefly outline my research positioning.

Research Positioning in Diaspora

As a researcher, I adopt a non-essentialist perspective on identity. This means that I acknowledge that identity is not an "essential unity, primordial oneness, indivisibility and sameness" (Hall, 1999, p. 3), but rather a dynamic process that continuously evolves and transforms over time in response to the intricate nature of societal norms (Bauman, 2004; Hall, 1990; Verschueren, 2008). Thus, I aspire to engage in nuanced reflections regarding the diverse and sometimes contradicting ways that individuals construct their identities and navigate cultural affiliations. Furthermore, by paying attention to the subtle distinctions that exist within people and various communities, I aim to resist essentialising any social group. Moreover, drawing inspiration from the words of Blundell (2011), who stresses that "in order to have a voice, you have to be aware of where you fit into the larger picture" (p. 32), I acknowledge the importance of situating myself within the discourse surrounding Pākehā

identity. Through this reflection, I have come to realise that Pākehā does not align as an identifier for me. Rather, I find resonance with the term tauīwi (non-Māori). This inclination stems from recognising that my family history is not directly linked to British colonialism but, instead, is connected to Germany's complex past. This historical context entails specific responsibilities and has played a significant role in shaping my sense of identity.

Furthermore, during my research, I have observed that my understanding of identity has undergone continuous transformations. These shifts have been shaped by my interactions with others and have been influenced by Donna Haraway (1991) and the promises of situated knowledge, leading me to critically reflect upon prevailing Eurocentric perspectives. The experience of migrating to Aotearoa compelled me to deconstruct the complex relationships between British and German colonialism, bringing into sharp focus how German prosperity links to its imperialistic past (Bergan, 2017; Wempe, 2019). The evident disparities between my privileged upbringing in Germany (characterised by myself below as a near fairytale-like existence), and the experiences of those who have borne the consequences of colonialism served as a catalyst for positioning myself as an ally⁸. As part of this responsibility, I recognised the need to interrogate my own inherent biases and limitations, while deconstructing prevailing dominant narratives and power structures that uphold and perpetuate inequality. Part of this process was to comprehend the privileges I was born with.

My parents who had witnessed the difficulties and domestic violence stemming from the World War II trauma, wholeheartedly dedicated themselves to providing my siblings and me with what they believed was the best possible upbringing. I was raised in the outskirts of Stuttgart in Germany, I played the violin, I was trained in Ballet, and I sang on the stage of the Stuttgart Opera House. My playground was a finely manicured garden where an orchard of apple trees invited me to climb, and where rose beds, cherry trees, and strawberry bushes seduced me with their scents and juices. Surrounded by mushrooms, and ferns, I enacted stories of the Grimm Brothers inspired by the Black Forest region. Furthermore, remnants of pre-Christian heritage, preserved in German seasonal festivities, sparked an early curiosity in mysticism and motivated me to trace back my connections to the Celts linked to my home the Black Forest region, where my father's ancestors came from. The Black Forest is a large mountain range in the state of Baden-Württemberg in southwest Germany. It is bounded by the Rhine Valley to the west and south with the mountain Feldberg as its highest peak. In ancient times, the Black Forest was named after the Celtic deity, Abnoba. For several centuries Romans came from the north and the east to settle among the Celts. The

⁸ According to Land (2015), being an ally to indigenous peoples entails engaging in active listening, comprehending one's own privileges, critically examining and contesting colonisation, and undertaking self-reflection to facilitate the process of dismantling one's own racist tendencies.

intermarried people eventually came to be known as Schwaben (Swabians). Today the native forest has mostly disappeared, and timber monocultures have replaced the ancient trees of the original mixed forest. Through my mother's lineage, I am also connected to Bodensee (Lake Constance), which borders Austria, and Switzerland. Formed by the Rhine Glacier during the last ice age, it was home to the Celts and my mother's ancestors for many generations. This connection has inspired me to anchor myself in a reconstructed narrative of a matriarchal Celtic society that potentially flourished prior to Roman colonisation. However, although I draw inspiration from neo-Pagan European practices, I do not identify myself as a neo-Pagan. Instead, I align with Buddhism, which is the spiritual path followed by my grandmother and was introduced to me when I was twenty years old.

Further adding to the eclectic collection of my identity, as an artist, I describe myself as a domesticated sapiens and kinaesthetic thinker who explores the world from a perspective of nature-culture continuum (Braidotti, 2019). Thus, as part of this research, I deliberately redirected my attention away from human-made concepts such as culture and identity and instead engaged in processes of de-centralising my anthropocentric thinking patterns through eco-somatic movement improvisations. Shedding light on the contradictions of our current time in the Anthropocene, I explored methods to cultivate receptivity towards the ecological interconnectedness surrounding me. Furthermore, negotiating my dancing body in a country where I am a migrant, I turned to site-dance scholars such as Karen Barbour, Carol Brown, Alison East, and others whose publications and methodologies influenced my approach to understanding and adapting to the intricate ecological, political, cultural, social, and economic landscapes of Aotearoa. As part of this process, I embarked on a journey to expose my domesticated body to the unpredictable conditions of Whāingaroa/Raglan where I live. My walks became opportunities for little site dances, where the surrounding landscape, animals, and plants served as my teachers, guiding me through processes of un-doing and un-thinking so that I could experience temporary moments of taking part. These explorations were guided by the question of how close I could bring myself to experiencing a sense of kinship with the more-than-human world; a kinship based on respect and curiosity. Like every friendship this asked of me to try and understand species and culture-specific virtues. I could not invade, I needed to be invited and for that, I had to prove myself trustworthy, caring, mindful, and most importantly ready to give something back. Based on an understanding that the environment possesses agency (Braidotti, 2018), I immersed myself in the ecological complexities while at the same time utilising my embodiment as a conduit, inviting the environment to engage with me. This reciprocal exchange allowed for a dynamic interplay where both my human nature and the ecosystem started to unfold unique ways of knowing and sense-making.

In addition, I sought the guidance of tangata whenua (people of the land) and ritual experts, who shared their knowledge, enabling me to deepen my understanding of both Māori ritual practices and local stories tied to specific places. I pursued support from experts in neo-Pagan traditions, further enriching my comprehension of diverse spiritual practices present here in Aotearoa. Furthermore, the notion of diaspora has offered me valuable insights. Avtar Brah (1996) points out that the word 'diaspora' means both emplacement and displacement from home. It entails multiple journeys in which "complex identities and multiple emotional identifications are constructed, imagined, narrated, and remembered" (p. 148). This has provided me with a lens through which I could learn to embrace my German heritage while being curious about the diverse cultures that have converged in this part of the world. In the context of Aotearoa, this also involved navigating tensions between honouring familiar Eurocentric traditions and challenging the legacies of colonialism. Making sense of the realities I encountered my practices of homing became a dance between familiarisation and failure:

I desire to belong, but I feel scattered and displaced

*With micro gestures of acclimatisation,
I branch out into unknown terrain*

*..... And my feet grow tiny roots
And my ears attune to the sounds of native birds
And my lungs inhale the winds of the Pacific Ocean
And my belly digests local grown food
And in my songs, I sing Te Reo
And in my dreams, I speak colonial English
And in moments of despair, I return to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach.*

(Journal entry, Johanna Claus)

Building upon the socio-cultural and spiritual context outlined earlier, the upcoming section will delve into the contextual background of this geological epoch. The Anthropocene forms the central context of this thesis to which the creative practice responded.

The Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is a new epoch in Earth's geological history, in which the human species, because of its expansion at the expense of other life forms, has become accountable for climate change and mass extinction (Scranton, 2015). Elizabeth Kolbert (2015) discusses what she describes as the sixth extinction and how the "improvement" of human living conditions has led to the alteration of the planet and a set of multiple disadvantages for the non-human world. Paul J. Crutzen and Hans Günter Brauch et al. (2016) explain that increased "anthropogenic emissions of carbon dioxide" (p. 211) have heavily contributed to global warming, forcing the climate outside the range of natural behaviour (Crutzen, Brauch, et al., 2016). Consequently, a net effect has been activated, causing extreme weather,

desertification, and mass extinction of non-human species. The stable conditions that existed during the Holocene have become obsolete and humans as well as animals are forced to migrate to places that are still habitable. According to research documenting the geologic record of the Earth, mass extinction is not a new phenomenon for life on Earth (Kolbert, 2015). Different climate changes and ice ages have been occurring throughout the history of our planet. However, researchers such as Will Steffen (2007) explain that for the first time, a mass extinction might not be caused by a geophysical force but by the human species itself. That is why in August 2016, the International Commission on Stratigraphy approved the designation “Anthropocene”, first proposed by Crutzen in the early 2000s, for the current “human-dominated, geological epoch, supplementing the Holocene” (Crutzen & Brauch, 2016, p. 211). The Anthropocene, as described by Crutzen and Brauch (2016), is an epoch of environmental destruction and transformation that will leave an ineradicable imprint in the rock strata, which will be detectable by future geologists.

The term Anthropocene, since its first appearance in the early 2000s, has sparked interdisciplinary conversations within the fields of geographical, ecological, anthropological, economic, and cultural studies. However, while it has been widely accepted that we are living in an epoch in which “humans and our societies have become a global geophysical force” (Steffen et al., 2007, p. 614), there are debates on what date should be designated as the beginning of the geological age of the Anthropocene. The debate concerns whether it is the Industrial Revolution, when humans first began digging into the ground to mine coal (Klein, 2014), or the year 1945, when the first atomic blast happened in the desert in New Mexico and when its radioactive pollution alongside other tests and bombs used in the war left their footprint in the earth’s geologic record. Others say it is the end of WWII and the bombings of Hiroshima. Geoscientists under the name of the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) proposed to assign the beginning of the Anthropocene to around the middle of the twentieth century, during the time of the ‘Great Acceleration’. Here, several factors such as the growth of population, and globalisation led to the increase of a capitalist, fossil-fuel-based economy with its affiliated overconsumption and waste, especially non-biodegradable materials, that altered the dynamics and functioning of the Earth system (Steffen et al., 2007).

However, trying to define a worldwide starting date for the Anthropocene is problematic. Nigel Clark and Kathryn Yusoff (2017) assert that the experience of the climate crisis is “fractured, multiple, non-unitary” (p. 18), highlighting the importance of considering specific historical and ecological contexts. Adopting a non-unified perspective becomes

especially vital as the Global North's higher greenhouse gas emissions⁹ contrast sharply with the Global South, which disproportionately experiences the consequences of rising sea levels, flooding, and cyclones. This is further emphasised by Woroniecki et al. (2022), who highlight a widening gap between requirements for climate change adaptation and the actual measures taken, particularly in the Global South. Considering that the environmental degradation associated with the Anthropocene has occurred at varied times and intensities across different societies, researchers should refrain from making generalisations about humanity as a homogeneous group. Anna Tsing (2017) emphasises that certain communities have already faced ecological collapse, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration well before the Western scientific concept of the Anthropocene was coined. The impact of colonialism, whether through environmental destruction, land confiscations, or forced replacement, has broken Indigenous peoples' "local relationships to thousands of plants, animals, insects and entire ecosystems" (Whyte, 2018, p. 226). Donna Haraway (2016) contends that the term Anthropocene is primarily meaningful to a group of privileged intellectuals, and might overlook existing knowledge systems and practices, particularly those of Indigenous peoples. Being aware of the universalist tendency of the concept of the Anthropocene, Rosi Braidotti (2018) warns that the term 'Anthropos' is not neutral but connotes "a normative category that indexes access to privileges and entitlements" (p. 35). Considering its ethical challenges, the concept of the Anthropocene needs to be read against the backdrop of the devastating impacts of colonialism. By further illuminating the interconnectedness between the impacts of colonialism and the Anthropocene narrative, this research acknowledged the complexities of historical influences within the context of site-specific performance rituals.

Research Aims

In this PhD research, I investigated creative and experiential ways of examining how site-specific performance rituals might be expressed in the Anthropocene. Employing a qualitative research approach, I sought to illuminate the multifaceted dynamics and interdependencies that exist within human-environment relationships. The inquiry was centred on creative practice as research in the domain of site-specific performance studies, where the creative practice in the form of four seasonal performance rituals served as the primary mode of inquiry (Niedderer & Roworth-Stokes, 2007; Skains, 2018). The methods used for the facilitation of

⁹ Crutzen and Brauch (2016), point out that historically fossil fuel usage and resulting carbon dioxide emissions leading to global warming were primarily dominated by North America and Europe. However, Asia has been rapidly catching up in recent times.

these rituals included a range of approaches such as ritual making, authentic performance practice, eco-somatic movement, improvisation, site-specific dance, audience participation, and others. The integration of these strategies was driven by the objective of fostering connections between self, environment, and fellow humans, provoking critical reflections on seasonal rituals. This was accomplished by investigating the specific sub-question:

- How might different seasonal rituals be expressed in specific sites in Aotearoa?

Furthermore, involving participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, and carrying an awareness of the complexities of colonialism, this PhD also investigated the question:

- How might the insights of key ritual experts inform the understanding of site-specific performance rituals?

Utilising qualitative research methods, the perspectives and insights of Māori and Pākehā ritual experts were gathered through in-depth interviews and later analysed through thematic analysis (as discussed in the methodology chapter).

The upcoming chapter focuses on academic literature related to Western perspectives of ritual and performance-making, offering discussions of different artists, philosophers, and environmental humanists of the 21st century who propose rethinking human/nonhuman binaries. Their perspectives about alternatives to dominant worldviews will be reviewed, and concepts of the interrelatedness of humans with other life forms will be discussed. My literature review begins with 'Spiritualities of Life', a concept coined by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2000), investigating the counter-spiritual movements of the 1960s and their influences on contemporary performance practices. Following that, aspects of dance and performance as part of ritual will be analysed. In addition, literature about somatics and site dance will be reviewed, illustrating potential pathways for reconnecting one's own body with the wider planetary body. Subsequently, in Chapter Three, the philosophical and theoretical framework will be introduced, describing critical posthumanism, neo-Paganism, and mātauranga Māori to investigate the suitability of different epistemologies for this research. In Chapter Four the methodology will be presented with discussions of the methods and procedures used to conduct the research. Chapter Five will offer an in-depth analysis and discussion of the ritual experts who were interviewed for this study. Chapter Six will delve into analysis and discussion of the creative practice research, with a specific focus on examining the four site-specific performance rituals. Finally, Chapter Seven will provide a comprehensive conclusion, discussing the limitations of the research and highlighting valuable contributions to the field of site-specific performance ritual studies.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, the discussion revolves around reviewing various bodies of literature concerning the research topic of site-specific performance rituals in the Anthropocene. While I acknowledge the extensive body of scholarship by Indigenous researchers in Aotearoa and the Pacific, this chapter will deliberately focus on Western literature. The rationale for this choice will be thoroughly elaborated in Chapter Three, where relevant Māori literature will be discussed in greater depth. The focal point of the first section is the shifting landscape of spirituality, discussing how in certain areas of the globe, there has been a transition from the dogma of traditional religions towards self-guided spirituality, also known as ‘Spiritualities of Life’ (Woodhead & Heelas, 2000). While acknowledging the coexistence of numerous belief systems in different parts of the world, including prevailing trends towards ‘Religions of Difference’¹⁰ (Woodhead & Heelas, 2000), in this research I focus on practices closer to the Spiritualities of Life spectrum. This emphasis derives from its potential alignment with site-specific performance rituals within the context of Aotearoa, coupled with its congruence with my spiritual practice. While the first part of this chapter is about the influences on practices of contemporary ritual making, the second half focuses on discussing issues of performance as relevant to my research. This entails a discussion about contemporary performance practices, including site dance, somatic movement, and improvisation.

Spiritualities of Life

A growing desire in the Western world for individual liberty, and the criticism of “dualistic and reductionistic tendencies” in Christianity and the institution of the church (Hanegraaff, 1996, p. 517), has led to an increased interest in the philosophies of the East. Buddhism, Zen, and Hinduism as well as “esotericism, Marxism, egalitarianism, collective and communitarian lifestyles” (Van Otterloo et al., 2012, p. 244) offer alternative perspectives to dualistic thinking in Western societies and have especially gained popularity since the counter-movement of the 1960s. The trend in Western countries since the 1960s is a growing emphasis on unity between body, mind, and spirit, and a person’s subjective experience of one’s “‘authentic’ truth; the value of self-expression and creativity” (Heelas, 2008, p. 30). These insights have led to innovative ways of accessing and expressing spirituality that are relevant today.

Amongst a range of possibilities for religious and spiritual worldviews, Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas (2000) also use the term Spiritualities of Life to conceptualise the manifold aspects of New Age spiritualities that have shaped contemporary religion and

¹⁰ religions of difference operate within hierarchical structures and believe that humans are saved by a God external to themselves, emphasising the importance of connecting with this external deity for salvation rather than seeking it within oneself (Woodhead & Heelas, 2000).

spiritualities. They identify that in *Spiritualities of Life*, the divine is understood as life itself, which can be described as “the ‘life-force’ or ‘energy’ which flows through all human life and much else besides, which sustains life, and which, when experienced, brings all of life ‘alive’” (Heelas, 2008, p. 27). The ‘life-force’ relates to a person’s core self through which the “essence or existential nature of an individual” (Gall et al., 2011, p. 165) interacts with the spiritual world. It is a spiritual practice connected to the commitment to cultivate a higher self, a “path to self-knowledge, personal transformation and growth” (Gall, Malette & Guirguis-Younger, 2011, p. 165), which can eventually lead to a state of transcendence. The term transcendence has its origin in the Latin word ‘transire’, a “temporary intermediate state, or the crossing between two perceptions of reality” (Alho, 2023, p. 2023). Such changes in people’s awareness are distinguished by Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann (1983) into different levels of transformative experiences. Recognising that transcendent and transformative experiences are integral to human perception in everyday life and not limited to a spiritual context, Luckman and Schutz (1983) further elaborate on this concept with their model of ‘little’, ‘intermediate’, and ‘great’ transcendences.

Luckmann (1990) explains that ‘little’ or ‘small’ (low-level) transcendences happen whenever something goes beyond the ordinary perception of a person, but still exists within an everyday time and space framework. This realisation links to the phenomenon that people can experience things that are currently beyond their immediate grasp through the passage of time and physical movement, since “we must turn around to see what is behind us” (Luckmann, 1990, p. 129). In Schutz and Luckmann’s view one of the main characteristics of small transcendences is that they can be experienced directly in the physical world, while ‘intermediate’ transcendences concern aspects related to consciousness, the inner emotional life, experiences of the higher self, and so forth. During intermediate transcendences, people may experience transformative moments on a physical, mental, and emotional level during deep engagements with nature, music, dance, or meditation, leading to temporary transformations. Intermediate transcendence also includes an experience of being a member of a group and people having their consciousness altered by that. Although these encounters may bring about increased awareness and deeper understanding, their impact on individuals’ lives tends to be temporary. This stands in contrast to ‘great’ transcendence, which is associated with profound personal and spiritual transformations. Such transformations often involve experiences leading to the dissolution of self, connection to higher beings, nature, humanity, or the “one force that connects all life, that is all life” (Goodman, 1998, p. 216), also described as enlightenment.

There are different techniques used to guide people through states of transcendences, ranging from meditation, trance, hypnosis, repetitive music, and dance, to psychedelics, which

have been recognised in the fields of trans-personal psychology. This builds upon the theories of Carl G. Jung, (1960b [1934]), who explored altered states of consciousness and mystical experiences as part of psychotherapy.

These ideas also entered the fields of theatre, and ritual studies (Govan, Nicholson & Normington, 2007), with Victor Turner (1969) as one of the key figures who studied different states of transcendence within ritual practices. He coined the concepts of 'liminal' and 'liminoid', which was further developed by Richard Schechner (2006). Schechner elaborates that while liminal refers to rituals that mark significant life transitions, such as initiation ceremonies or weddings, liminoid links to experiences during a theatre or music event, where individuals are provided with temporary moments of transformation. In such settings, people can find themselves swept away by overwhelming awe, an experience that can be connected to Luckman's (1990) notion of intermediate transcendence.

The upcoming section discusses how different rituals can be organised and experienced. I will offer a brief definition of ritual, which will lead into discussing the ritual structures based on Arnold Van Gennep's pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal, alongside rituals that follow the seven stages as outlined by Batten. Furthermore, I will refer to the concepts of 'communitas' and 'anti-structure'.

Ritual

According to Schechner (2006) rituals can vary from "religious rituals to the rituals of everyday life, from the rituals of life roles to the rituals of each profession, from the rituals of politics and the judicial system to the rituals of business or home life" (p. 52). No matter the purpose or context, ritualised events usually provide a platform to express and reinforce values, beliefs, or cultural norms since they act as "the very mechanism or medium through which thought and action are integrated" (Bell, 2009, p. 23). Here, the integration of thought and action positions ritual as an embodied experience, whereby people align their mental and emotional processes, their beliefs, and intentions with their physical behaviours through engaging in specific ceremonial activities. Catherine Bell (1997) further observes that these ritualised actions include "one gesture among a multitude of gestures both sacred and profane" (p. 171), ranging from making offerings, singing songs, chanting prayers, performing dances to, shaking hands, or cutting a cake. The continuity of mundane and spiritual actions as part of a ritual can be seen in the example of a Western wedding, where the sacred union of a couple under the name of God, is often followed by a banquet and a party.

Activities in a ritual usually follow an organised structure which is communicated through specific codes of conduct, symbolism, words, and performance (Bell, 2009; van Eijnatten, 2013; Stewart & Strathern, 2021). Anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport (1999) describes such a set of activities as a “performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances” (p. 24), by which he means standardised behaviours through which people can establish and reinforce shared meanings. However, rituals can be more than symbolised actions and words to foster cultural and social “ways of being and belonging” (see Levitt & Schiller, 2004). They are also processes of becoming (cited in Grønseth, 2021), where individuals can have transformational experiences. Bruce Kapferer (2004) describes rituals as simulated or “virtual spaces” that can provide new formations of complex and multiple social realities beyond what is imagined or projected. It is in these virtual or constructed spaces, separate from everyday life, where individuals can explore new possibilities, roles, and identities. Scholars such as Van Gennep (1960), Turner (1969), and Schechner (2006) have emphasised the significance of these spaces for personal growth, transformative experiences, and navigating life transitions. Van Gennep (1960), in his study ‘Rites of Passage’ highlighted the transformative nature of rituals and their role in marking transitions or passages in individual or collective lives. He proposed that rites of passage consist of the three different stages of ‘pre-liminal’, ‘liminal’, and ‘post-liminal’ to highlight the importance of preparation, transition, and integration in rituals that mark significant life transitions such as marriage, and in celebrating societal events.

Ritual Structure: Pre-Liminal, Liminal, and Post-Liminal Stages

Van Gennep (1960) categorises rituals into three main stages: ‘pre-liminal’ for the phase of separation from previous environments, ‘liminal’ for the transitional threshold phase within the ritual, and ‘post-liminal’ for the phase of reintegration back into normal life. These stages signify the main transitions that individuals undergo during a ritualistic process. According to his viewpoint, rituals start with a ‘preparation for union’, which constitutes some form of ‘purification’ such as washing and cleansing, leading to the liminal part of the ritual, which refers to a phase when people are “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law” (Turner, 1969, p. 95). The liminal phase represents a chaotic and transformative space beyond the confines of societal norms, marked by ‘anti-structural’ attributes that foster “equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential, relationships” (Turner, 1974, p. 274). Here, established power structures may dissolve, prompting individuals to shift from recognising each other through status and rank to engaging, “nakedly, in the face-to-face intimate encounter” (Schechner, 2006, p. 70). Liminality is also described as a moment of heightened potential where individuals are in a state of vulnerability, and thus receptive to reimagining and redefining themselves (Schechner, 2006).

Furthermore, the liminal phase can serve as a conduit to experiences of intermediate transcendence, wherein people can have experiences of being “swept away, taken over” (Schechner, 2006, p. 70) by a powerful force, accompanied by a feeling of liberation from the challenges and responsibilities of everyday life. Turner (1982) elaborates that in this state, personal and social conflicts are often set aside, fostering a sense of unity among participants who feel supported in their ability to face life’s challenges and solve problems. This unifying process, referred to by Turner (1982) as ‘communitas’ is further highlighted by replacing formal titles with terms such as ‘sisters’, ‘brother’, ‘comrade’, ‘companions’, or others. However, while it may cultivate a feeling of unity with the notion of “we are all in this together” (Schechner, 2006, p. 71), this does not imply a complete assimilation into sameness. Instead, individuals are encouraged to uphold their “uniqueness in the very act of realizing their commonness” (Turner, 1974, p. 274).

There exist diverse avenues through which such transformative processes can be pursued. Depending on the cultural or ceremonial framework and the specific community involved, rituals take shape in a myriad of ways. Some individuals opt to make solemn vows, “learn lore, dress in new clothes, perform special actions, be scarred, circumcised, or tattooed” (Schechner, 2006, p. 66). Schechner (2006) concludes that at the closure of the liminal phase, people use actions and objects as a symbol to mark the transformation that has taken place. For example, the vows and ring exchange at a wedding are finalised through a kiss to signify ritual closure. Other examples that act as representative indicators of change are the throwing of earth on the coffin at a funeral, or the receiving of a diploma at a graduation (Schechner, 2006). This leads to the post-liminal phase, which is a time of reflection where participants integrate the transformations, the new status, or the perspective they achieved during the liminal phase. This stage is characterised by a sense of stability, renewed purpose, and a reconnection with the larger community or social group.

Based on Van Gennep’s three liminal phases and other ritual studies, Batten (1988, 2005, 2010) has conceptualised a feminist model of ritual in the context of Aotearoa. Batten draws inspiration from neo-Paganism and other traditions. Although her ritual framework consistently adheres to a fixed structure of ‘Seven Stages’, she intentionally incorporates creative and symbolic expressions that dynamically adapt to accommodate the evolving seasons and circumstances of those involved. The model she has developed is structured into the seven stages of (a) purification, (b) centering, (c) orientation, (d), enactment (construction), (e) absorption (deepening), (f) closing, and (g) re-integration as discussed in the subsequent section. Batten recognises the significance of seasonal changes in influencing physical and emotional states. Consequently, she proposes distinct variations in ritualistic practices tailored

to different weather conditions and shifts in the behaviours of plants, animals, and humans across autumn, winter, spring, and summer.

Seven Stages of Ritual

The Seven Stages of Ritual offered by Batten (1988, 2005, 2010) are a framework for ritualistic activities that offer a comprehensive understanding of the social, emotional, environmental, physical, and spiritual experiences inherent in ritual practices. The framework integrates group processes and psychological insights to explore diverse transcendental states, making it applicable across cultures and accessible to individuals from various backgrounds. Moreover, it allows for facilitating improvisation and creativity, which makes it suitable for conducting research in site-specific performance rituals. I outline the Seven Stages below.

1. Purification: For Batten (1988), the threshold into ritual is marked by a specific protocol of purification, such as the washing of hands, becoming silent, and the invitation to go within. This process corresponds to Schechner's and Turner's description of the pre-liminal phase, identified as a period marked by preparation and a "clearing away time" (Batten, 1988, p. 10). For Batten, this moment presents an opportunity for participants to "put aside what's on top" (p. 10), and to dispel any distracting thoughts or emotions that could impede their ability to be fully present. According to Turner, customs on how to enter sacred space establish a sense of *communitas* even before the initiation of the ritual (as cited in Schechner, 2006).

2. Centering / Casting the circle: Once everyone is emotionally 'cleansed', Batten suggests bringing focus to connecting with the group, the purpose of gathering, and the specific topic of the ritual. For her, a method to accomplish this involves linking hands, closing the eyes, and centering oneself through mindful breathing and meditation. This entails tuning into one's own breath while concurrently attending to the breath of others and the ambient sounds in the environment. This goes hand in hand with contemplating additional factors, including the time of the year, the phase of the moon, star constellations, one's personal inner cycles, paying tribute to neo-Pagan festivities, as well as Māori cultural practices related to the specific season of that time. Part of this process is what Batten (1988) calls 'casting the circle', a "gesture of unification that marks the enclosure of sacred space" (p. 12), which has similarities to creating *communitas* in the sense that it creates unity amongst the participating individuals. Batten observes that, once the process of centering has taken place, participants usually feel more open and connected with others in the group and the ritual activities.

3. Orientation: According to Batten, this step locates people in time and space by invoking the four directions of east, west, south, and north. In neo-Pagan traditions they are related to the four elements of water, fire, earth, and air, which are represented in the form of symbols, and can be activated through performing actions, accompanied by songs, sounds, or

movement. Batten, who has adapted neo-Pagan practices to the Southern Hemisphere, evokes water in the west, fire in the north, air in the east, and earth in the south. Depending on the participants' backgrounds, the naming may differ from ritual to ritual. It may include acknowledging Māori naming of mountains, rivers, or deities, to indicate respect for tangata whenua, and the unseen world as understood in Te Ao Māori.

4. Enactment: This constitutes the core of the ritual, the locus wherein the purpose is enacted, and where transformative processes may transpire. This stage can also be characterised as the liminal phase and is linked to what Turner (1974) referred to as anti-structure. Batten (1988) explains that this phase can induce states of heightened awareness, achieved through techniques such as repetitive dancing, chanting, drumming, or similar practices, which can lead to experiences of intermediate transcendences. Other methods employed in facilitating the process of transformation, are objects and symbolised actions, intended to “evoke a state within us to aid the process of change” (Batten, 1988, p. 14). This is often followed by an “identification of what needs to be sacrificed in order to make way for the new” (p. 16), followed by an acknowledgement of the insights that were gained. Various activities can be employed to achieve this objective, including actions like burning a written sentence on paper, burying an object, or openly acknowledging a sacrifice in front of the group, all aimed at deepening the overall experience (Batten, 1988).

5. Absorption/deepening: Following the experience of the core of the ritual, this phase is often marked by an atmosphere of tranquillity and absorption. Participants may recognise that “an inner shift has taken place, maybe tears have been shed, laughter has broken forth” (p. 15), as the body and psyche gradually ease into a state of relaxation. For Batten (1988), this is also a place where either a new structure is established, or the old order is restored. In the context of a political ritual, this is the moment for commitment to action. Batten suggests honouring this transformation through an affirmative chant related to marking change.

6. Closing: The closing marks the transition into what van Gennep (1960) has termed the post-liminal phase. Here, the circle that was cast at the beginning will be opened and the formal part of the ritual is completed. This can be marked with a blessing, or the blowing out of a candle.

7. Re-integration: The re-integration, just like the purification, is a threshold between the sacred and the mundane worlds. This stage involves offering a grounding experience on a physical and social level through the sharing of food. By encouraging conversation and laughter, participants are deliberately brought back into their everyday awareness.

Batten's ritual structure, along with the literature, suggests that ritual dynamics have a distinct yet nuanced framework. Similarly, Bell (1997) asserts that ritual traditions exist only in their "flexible embodiment in memory and in current cultural life" (p. 203), emphasising their influence by historical, social, and cultural factors. Rather than being fixed, rituals are seen as "dynamic, encompassing change and generating creativity" (Stewart & Strathern, 2021, p. 1), ensuring their continued relevance today. Schechner (2006) and Turner (1982) expand this view by recognising the transformative potential of performances, enriching Western ritual performance studies. The next section will discuss how contemporary performance artists draw inspiration from various ritual practices.

Contemporary Performance Practices

The integration of ritual-like elements offers diverse opportunities for the exploration of human experiences within the context of artistic expression. Contemporary performance practices draw from a wide range of interdisciplinary approaches and perspectives, including the concepts of trans-psychology, discussed insights about transcendence, the liminal/liminoid distinction, different somatic practices, improvisation, and more (Govan, Nicholson & Normington, 2007). The development of new performance methods links to the innovations of the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s as part of the counter-cultural movement with its performance art (Bürger, 1984) and was closely related to the emergent field of new-age spirituality. Here, freedom of expression and self-exploration (as described in the section about Spiritualities of Life) were important components. Performance makers sought to "liberate individuals through unleashing their 'natural' creativity in rehearsal and devising processes" (Govan, Nicholson & Normington, 2007, p. 16), which led to practices where performers started to use their own social, physical, psychological, and spiritual experiences to create work. Performance practices were interrogated on the grounds of authenticity and the desire to reconnect art and life (Govan, Nicholson & Normington, 2007). Today, under the umbrella term contemporary performance practice there are multiple performance models that artists can draw from: George Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy, Turner's (1982) performance anthropology, Schechner's (2006, 2013) social theatre, Augusto Boal's (1985) theatre of the oppressed, Meredith Monk's (2009) site-specific performances, Jerzy Grotowski's (1975) carnal prayer, Anna Halprin's (1995) live/Art processes and others. These practices had a significant impact on the field, inspiring numerous artists, and performers to explore new ways of creating and experiencing performance-making. The following text will trace these different lineages, starting with authentic performance practices, leading to somatic and eco-somatic movement, site dance, and improvisation, and ending with a discussion of works that refer to performance rituals and the Anthropocene.

Authentic Performance Practice

The Russian director Konstantin Sergejewitsch Stanislavski, working at the end of the nineteenth century, was among the first who highlighted the significance of the actor's authentic self in performance-making and who acknowledged the link between psychological thought and theatre (Auslander, 1997). Further developing the methods of Stanislavsky, one of the most influential figures of authentic performance practice was Polish director Grotowski (1959-1999). Grotowski's (1975) work offers an important understanding of how to incorporate life and art through methods of self-exploration and physical training, which are understood as acts of sacrifice. He explains:

If the actor, by setting himself a challenge publicly challenges others, and through excess, profanation and outrageous sacrifice reveals himself by casting off his everyday mask, he makes it possible for the spectator to undertake a similar process of self-penetration. (Grotowski, 1975, p. 34)

Grotowski suggests that the act of publicly unveiling oneself can set into motion processes of self-reflection amongst the people who witness it, stating that through "peeling off the life mask", theatre would enable each person to 'struggle with one's own truth' (Grotowski, 1975, p. 21). For Grotowski, such revelation is a 'total act', a "complete stripping down" and a "laying bare of one's own intimacy" (Grotowski, 2012, p. 16, cited in Salata, 2020). This approach contrasts with theatrical concepts of mimic expressions and emotional imitations and instead provokes revealing the veiled. Grotowski suggests that the performer shouldn't pretend, but instead "penetrate the territories of his own experience, as if analysing them with his body and voice" (Salata, 2020, p. 24). Grotowski further developed his understanding of public sacrifice into a prayer of the senses, which he has termed 'carnal prayer'.

For Grotowski (2012), a carnal prayer is a process where a performer "makes a total gift of himself" (cited in Salata, 2020, p. 16) and thus becomes a 'holy actor'. He understands this 'total gift' as a self-realisation through the act of somatic "confession", a medium through which a performer can experience 'wholeness'. Salata (2020) elaborates that in this process "the body is neither subject nor destination, but rather the participant in a larger, total process, and as such, simultaneously shows itself and vanishes – shows itself not as subject but rather as a medium that serves the emergence of truth" (p. 24). The simultaneous awareness of self in the presence of others as a means to uncover hidden aspects also plays a crucial role in the method of Authentic Movement as founded by Mary Starks Whitehouse in the 1950s and further developed by Janet Adler, which I will discuss in the next section.

Authentic Movement Practice

Adler (2002) explains that 'authentic movement' is based on three aspects of movement practice: the mover (a person who moves), the witness (a person who observes and gives testimony to the mover), and the relationship that develops within and between the two people. At the core of this practice, developed by Starks-Whitehouse and Adler, lies the experience of seeing and being seen with a non-judgmental attentive presence of the outer and inner witness. Andrea Olsen (2014) describes that in authentic movement, moving and being moved goes hand in hand. Furthermore, as a mover you listen to "what the body initiates rather than to what you want to have happen in the presence of a witness" (p. 68). Such techniques are not only valuable resources for gaining choreographic insights during the process of performance making but are also understood as tools for a dancer to connect with self and others during the act of performing. This approach has similarities with Grotowski's carnal prayer where performers reveal their authentic selves and the emergence of truth in front of spectators.

However, while terms like 'authentic' and 'emergence of truth' align with the Spiritualities of Life framework, such practices have faced criticism for portraying an essentialist worldview (Magnat, 2014). Thus, contemporary performance practitioners like Deborah Hay (2000), purposefully distance their practices from essentialist associations and instead embrace the complexity of consciousness and bodily knowing. Hay engages in an (impossible) dialogue with all fifty-three trillion cells of her body through attentive listening, stating: "Millions of voices speak from my body at once - no one voice more dominant - a deliberate exercise to outwit the need to encapsulate" (Hay, 2000, p. 20). Hay imagines the existence of an external observer who is watching her exploration of cellular cognisance, while projecting a second observer who watches the first. In other words, "Hay's moving body is watching itself moving and watching itself watching itself" (Foster, 2000, p. xviii). Fraleigh (2015) replaces the words authentic with "holding presence" to describe a relational dialogue of suspended listening and moving. She explains: "We can be present to the dances of others as a witness through responsive dance" (Fraleigh, 2015, p. 63), enabling the mover to yield to deeper levels of somatic, psychological, social, and spiritual experiences. Olsen (2014) emphasises the reciprocal nature of witnessing and being witnessed as a crucial aspect of performance, suggesting that "I am holding the witness role as dancer, the audience is the mover, and I am supporting their journey" (p. 187). For Olsen (2014), this is an experience where "the collective mind of the audience supports the surrender of the performer to unconscious energies, but soon the audience surrenders its awareness of self and goes with the performer toward transformation as well" (p. 187). This transformative experience can be described as a process of intermediate transcendence and links to Schechner's (2006)

articulation of the liminoid. Fraleigh (1987) describes such moments of suspended listening as an act where “we dance our sentient, embodied existence” (p. xvii), an experience of becoming whole.

‘Becoming whole’ is often referred to as a moment of deep immersion and focus, also known as ‘flow state’. According to Schechner (2006), a flow state describes the moment where the boundary between the “interior psychological self and the performed activity dissolves” (p. 97), and where the dancer becomes one with the dance. In Olsen’s (2014) experience such a state can occur in dance improvisation, a “form of investigation that connects you to an underlying current of possibilities, an ongoing flow” (p. 68). Similarly, William Parker (2015) describes improvisation as a “kinetic flow that allows us to reach for limitless landscapes of possibility using the known and unknown” (p. 451). One method to enter a flow-like state is improvisation (Govan, Nicholson & Normington, 2007), as I will describe in the next section.

Improvisation

Contemporary performance makers use improvisation across diverse contexts and disciplines, ranging from solo to ensemble work and from highly organised to completely free structures (Govan, Nicholson, & Normington, 2007). In her performance practice, Halprin (2015) distinguishes between ‘exploration’ and ‘improvisation’. While the former refers to a closed score study with a focus on detailed research of a particular theme, including investigating movement material for choreographic works, the latter refers to a free movement score (cited in Buckwalter, 2010). Foster (2003) describes a score as a “set of overarching structural rules that delimit the improvising body’s choices” (p. 4), and thus provide guiding parameters for dancers in their relation to each other and the world. Barbour (2011) observes that a highly structured improvisation can involve the incorporation of pre-learned movement patterns as an anchor for a dancer to play with. Here, dancers can draw from a “shared body of movement or set of tools that form the basis around which the performance hinges” (Barbour, 2011, p. 135). Foster (2003) explains that in this process the “improvising dancer tacks back and forth between the known and the unknown, between the familiar/reliable and the unanticipated/unpredictable” (p. 3). This situates a score as a set of guideposts that support performers in embracing the unexpected, finding creative solutions, and fostering a sense of connection and collaboration.

In this sense, an improvisation score may be useful for the context of a ritual to guide and structure the pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal phases as discussed by Schechner (2006) and Turner (1974). Overlapping principles between a highly structured improvisation and a ritual framework can also be found in Batten’s (1988) Seven Stages of Ritual. Similar to

a performance score, Batten's ritual form offers interaction guidelines, combining set elements like prayers, dances, songs, and symbolic actions with opportunities for spontaneous engagement. This provides participants with both a sense of orientation and stability, along with space for improvisation.

Barbour (2011) expresses that it is often the unexpected, seemingly coincidental, moments where the magic happens, and thus responsiveness is key. For New Zealand improviser Kristian Larsen (2003), unplanned 'real time' events have an extraordinary power, because "it doesn't matter what you are doing, the unexpected event will take precedence in the eye of the audience" (p. 141). Depending on the underlying belief system such 'random' events can be interpreted as a coincidence or as a sign (guidance from a higher being) communicating with people. In improvisation and ritual, practitioners may intentionally create conditions where such coincidences or signs can occur. Improvisation with 'real time' information in the moment of performance, also plays an important role in site-specific dance, with the weather, ground texture, other creatures, and fluctuations in light and acoustics serving as co-creative elements (Snowber, 2022). In a site dance context, a score may include instructions like walking toward the ocean with rotating hips, stamping the rhythm of a bird call into the sand with your feet, and changing direction and speed in response to motor noise. This type of score acknowledges improvisation as a collaborative decision-making process, involving influences from various human and non-human participants.

For Parker, (2015), "improvisation is acceptance of the mystery not ownership" (p. 451), suggesting that artists may give voice to something bigger, beyond themselves. Similarly, Alison East (2011) expresses that "in performance improvisation, we might understand a little more when we actually sense everything working together suddenly in the moment ... You understand what integration means, or what that whole idea of mind/body/spirit means" (cited in Barbour, 2011, p. 91). This suggests that by paying attention to the manifold internal and external information, dancers participate in improvisational dialogues with plants, animals, clouds, cars, audience members, and perhaps even with the spiritual world. This requires improvising dancers to maintain a simultaneous presence, along with an awareness of their corporeal sensations and responsiveness to stimuli from the surrounding environment (Fraleigh, 2015; Hay, 2000). Being present with one's own soma is also a key component in the method of somatic movement, which I will further discuss in the next section.

Somatic Movement

In the 1970s American philosophy professor and movement theorist Thomas Hanna coined the term 'somatics'. The Greek word 'soma' means "the living body in its wholeness" (Eddy, 2016, p. 6), which Hanna (1993) interpreted as "the body of life". At the core of somatics lies the understanding that the "living body is able to be aware of itself" (Eddy, 2016, p. 6), "always engaging in a process of self-regulation" (Hanna, 1979, p. 344). The premise is that by focusing on proprioception (perception of one's own body) and kinaesthesia (perception of one's own movement) a person can learn how to move consciously. By studying automatic aspects of movement patterns, registering muscular tension, and consciously changing habitual ways of using the body, individuals can improve their physical health and prevent injuries (Eddy, 2016). Somatics, originating with a focus on physical therapy for pain reduction and improved movement efficacy, has evolved into different knowledge systems. Eddy (2016) identifies various branches of somatics such as: "Somatic psychology, somatic bodywork, and somatic movement" (p. 33), with additional sub-genres like 'eco-somatics', exploring the connection between the body and the environment. A common focus amongst these diverse somatic practices is their engagement in non-judgemental investigations that include "self-directed or improvisational movement with time for sensing what the person senses, feels and wants to express" (Eddy, 2016, p. 141). Participants are invited to let go of preconceived notions about how their movements might be perceived by others and are encouraged to embark on curious explorations without needing to achieve a specific product. Influenced by practitioners like Halprin, Fraleigh, Olsen, and others, somatics has extended to encompass emotions, socio-cultural factors, ecological awareness, creativity, improvisation, and spirituality (Eddy, 2016). Within this broader perspective, aspects of somatic bodywork and somatic psychology have become an integral part of dance education and intersect with contemporary performance practices (Eddy, 2016).

However, while the insights of these scholars have gained recognition, it is important to notice that their practices draw from a rich history of diverse movement and meditation techniques that have long emphasised breath and movement before the term somatics became popular. It is a contemporary concept used in the context of Western movement practices that link back to much older knowledge systems outside European traditions. Sangeet Duchane (2016) points out that influences of Eastern cultures can be seen in many examples such as the breathing techniques from "yoga practice (as in the work of Ida Rolf), the grounding in tai chi and chi kung (as in the work of Irmgard Bartenieff), the reflexive responses of judo (as in the work of Feldenkrais), and the autonomic responses in Katsugen Undo (as in the work of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen)" (cited in Eddy, 2016, p. 85). Thus,

acknowledging cross-cultural influences from diverse traditions in somatics is crucial for paying respect to the varied knowledge systems that shape present-day practices.

Furthermore, when engaging in somatics, one must be aware that “each body’s mode of attention is culturally, socially and intersubjectively informed” (Rothfield, 2019, p. 85). Critical voices highlight that somatics can give the impression of holding the “key to universal awareness and health” (De Giorgi, 2015, p. 69), with some practitioners “implying that all humans operate according to the same patterns” (Ginot, 2010, p. 15). The criticism points out a tendency to promote a single, standardised idea of ‘natural’ body movement and thus oversimplifies the complex socio-cultural contexts that shape individual experiences. Ann Cooper Albright, (2017) further stresses that body ideals are often based on Western or Euro-American understandings of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ movement, where releasing muscular tension is seen as a return to a ‘natural’ state of sufficient movement. In contrast, forceful movements have a negative tone that is connoted with tightness, tension, and inefficacy and therefore bad. The adoption of such a perspective not only reinforces stereotypes but also fails to acknowledge the diverse and multifaceted methods of sense-making within different cultural contexts.

Therefore, many somatic practitioners aim to shift paradigms from ‘universalist’ or ‘natural’ body images to pathways that value difference. They encourage individuals to prioritise personal awareness of their unique bodily experiences over conforming to societal norms. Ginot (2010) stresses that these are the discussions needed to move somatics away from essentialist ideologies formed by Euro-American narratives and towards practices that provide strategies to access self-regulating processes that include diverse bodies and respond to different socio-cultural contexts. This is especially relevant in the current time as many individuals find themselves in environments where spaces for quiet are increasingly unaffordable or inaccessible. It is important for somatics to acknowledge and reflect the unique physical and emotional challenges that people face when living in conditions of chaos and instability. Some of these issues have been raised in what has been termed ‘social somatics’ to articulate bodily practices that adapt and respond to socio-political inequalities, cultural differences, postcolonialism, racism, and gender diversity in the somatic discourse (Eddy, 2016). This may involve emphasising techniques that can be practiced in small, confined spaces, or outdoors as seen in eco-somatic dance, as I will explain next.

Eco-Somatic Dance

Eco-somatics is a movement practice that involves experiencing a deeper embodied awareness of the interconnected relationship between humans and the more-than-human world (Barbour, 2024). Eco-somatics uses improvisational dance investigations conducted in

natural settings, parks, beaches, forests, and other ecological environments. The term first emerged around 2008 in connection with the work of Halprin's Circle the Earth in the context of "eco-listening to describe using 'natural intelligence' and other perceptual paradigms that are used in ecology within the context of dance pedagogy" (Eddy, 2016, p. 258). Eco-somatics can be understood as a counter movement, to what was criticised by Fortin (2008) as "ego-somatic", an anthropocentric 'navel gazing' of people using somatics to improve their own well-being. Instead, eco-somatics prompts participants to focus on their own bodies as a conduit for connecting with the broader ecological body to nurture "sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us" (Abram, 1996, p. 69). Insights into empathic entanglements with nature, where the self-regulation processes of Earth systems are intricately linked with one's own health, have given rise to diverse practices that nurture inter-species relationships as seen in the works of Karen Barbour (2024), Robert Bingham (2018), Alison East (2021), Sondra Fraleigh (2018), Halprin (1995), Celeste Snowber (2022), Andrea Olsen (2014) and others. They employ human environment analogies to highlight the reciprocal relationships between their dancing selves and other sentient beings. Olsen (2014) explains "we are co-evolved with the rest of our planet - we are not separate or superior" (p. 17). Snowber (2022) adds: "Our bodies are the earth. We walk upon the earth and we are the earth. When we hurt the earth, we hurt ourselves" (p. 21).

Keeney (2005) expresses that the purpose of utilising body-earth metaphors is to create an experience that "touches, awakens, and deepens our connection with one another [carrying us] inside the mind of nature – an ecology that holds diverse ways of knowing and being" (p. 39). Similarly, Fraleigh (2018) expresses that "as we move our senses out towards the world, and a sense of the world returns to us, there is folding reciprocal play in consciousness" (p. 7). In such a mutual dialogue United Kingdom-based scholar Victoria Hunter (2019) explains that it is important to consider how the environment 'listens back', and how a plant, or animal might observe and respond to human activity in place. Several New Zealand scholars have greatly contributed to the eco-somatic field, as discussed below.

Eco-Somatic Dance in Aotearoa

The significance of dance artists realising themselves as part of their ecological environments also plays an important role for New Zealand somatic practitioners like Ali East (2021), Karen Barbour (2019), Miriam Marler (2015), Becca Wood (2015), and others. In their dancing, they use a range of disciplines such as "ecology, environmental science, plant physiology, perception psychology, cognitive science and anatomy" (East, 2021, p. 251) to explore somasensory responses. With methods such as "slow meditative walks and attending closely to sensation" (Barbour, 2019, p. 58) they offer tools to 'acclimatise' to the conditions of different environments. Wood (2015) expresses that such "a process of slowing holds the possibility

for attunement: as the senses ‘tune inwards’, perceptual openings might occur” (p. 11). Here, embodied presence and enhanced somatic reception are key for a person to become present with what surrounds them. East (2021) describes it as a “state of highly conscious total awareness – a kind of presence that is, simultaneously internally focused and outwardly oriented involving an attitude of merging, participating with the world as one egoless empathic self to another” (p. 221). Another technique used to access such focused attention is described by East as ‘weta eye view’ (cited in Barbour, 2021). Here, a dancer takes a position that is right up close to the ground level to experience a place from the perspective of an insect. By bringing focus to the microcosmos of a specific environment, dancers are invited to expand their sense of self towards other beings co-dwelling on a specific site. Such a position can also remind dancers of their evolution, leading them to explore new movement patterns that adapt to the unusual conditions they find themselves in. Further exploring interconnected phenomena, East (2021) investigates what she has termed Plant Body Being. She uses imagery such as plant breathing to suggest “subtle, barely visible and yet vibrantly green or alive stillness” (East, 2021, p. 251). Here, the complex communication systems observed in forests, such as tree roots interconnected through fungal organisms (Devlin, 2018) function as metaphors for illustrating inter-species entanglements with different life forms.

The examples discussed above emphasise eco-somatics as a tool to de-centralise human-environment encounters. However, Marler (2015) points out that it is also closely linked to identity and “how we belong here as dancers and as human beings” (Marler, 2015, p. 38). In Aotearoa, eco-somatic processes of belonging also involve navigating and finding one’s cultural positioning within a socio-political fabric that has been shaped by colonisation. There is a growing awareness of eco-somatic practices of its “White settler appropriation of Indigenous practices, a bit New Agey, a bit old ritual” (Kuppers, 2022, p. 1), which has urged practitioners such as Marler (2015), East (2015), Barbour (2019) and others to engage in critical self-reflection to address these ethical issues. This requires sensitivity to Māori understandings of interrelatedness between land and people and being mindful of contested places with histories of colonialist violence (Barbour, 2019).

Another criticism pointed towards eco-somatics is its tendency to present human-nature relations as harmonious and idyllic connections, overlooking the harsh realities of the climate change crisis and environmental degradation. The following section discusses how eco-somatics may engage with disrupted environments, addressing emotional and physical pain amid mass extinction and ecosystem loss. This includes a discussion of how eco-somatics may be practiced in a world where natural environments are becoming increasingly limited and are interconnected with political and ecological spaces of injustice.

Adapting Eco-Somatics to Modified Environments

Snowber (2022) suggests “to take up residence or residence with our full beings wherever we are” (p. 88). No matter whether natural, urban, pristine, or modified, in her work she encourages individuals to get somatically attuned with the ever the changing realities of their immediate environments. One example of using eco-somatics in an urban context is expressed by Victoria Hunter (2021) who explores how the complex systems of cities are interconnected with the human body, considering which urban areas might constitute the heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, eyes, guts, or brain of a city. Her cartographic mappings investigate the anatomical connections between bodies and locations, ranging from exploring the flow of bodily fluids in conjunction with water systems to locating the potential location of the city’s heart. By prompting participants to contemplate their embodied perceptions and associative experiences with locations, she aims to engage them in a dialogue “in which it becomes difficult to separate the dancer or moving body from the conditions, materials, atmospheres and affects they are dancing or moving with” (p. 84). By utilising soma-city analogies, she deliberately challenges the distinctions between nature and culture, human and object, organic and manufactured, and the boundaries between human and non-human. This connection is rooted in the theories of critical posthumanism (Braidotti, 2019), wherein agency encompasses various elements within the broader ecological fabric, including constructed or altered spaces.

Other ways to shift the perception of eco-somatics away from romanticised notions can be seen in the works of Fraleigh (2018), Robert Bingham (2018) East (2021), Barbour (2019), and others who use eco-somatic strategies for enhancing corporeal sensibility to raise planetary awareness and to inspire for climate activism through the art of dance. Although different in their approaches, they share a common emphasis on fully engaging in the present moment, including acknowledging challenging or painful aspects, as a starting point for transformation. In her work, Fraleigh (2016) links somatic movement to aspects that point to “hidden discomforts of disability, disease, death, darkness, weakness, emaciation and suffering” (p. 66) to allow experiences of pain to be somatically expressed through movement. The dancing she describes does not resist painful experiences; instead, it embraces and engages with the pain, grief, and loss inherent in the somatic experience, through which she finds pathways toward healing and growth. This process relates to feminist theorist Judith Butler (2004) who expresses that “we develop a point of identification with suffering itself” (p. 30), which goes beyond attending to one’s personal processes of grief and sorrow and includes somatic empathy with other beings such as plants and animals.

In an eco-somatic context, dancers may practically engage by tuning into the presence of other entities, adopting a perspective from the view of a weta, while being mindful of how the environment might listen back. This approach resonates with Fraleigh's concept of 'holding presence' a method that encourages an experience of being seen and seeing, with the witness extending beyond humans to include entities like trees, lizards, birds, and different objects. Incorporating practices that underscore the co-existence of humans with other entities, disrupted places, and constructed sites has the potential to steer somatics away from romanticised approaches, bringing them into closer alignment with discussions in environmental activism and social justice, as exemplified in the realm of site dance.

Site Dance

The link between eco-somatics and site dance lies in the emphasis on body-environment relationships. However, while site dance practitioners may work with somatic principles, they are two distinct fields with different areas of focus. Site dance originated in the 1960s in the United States, where artists in different fields broke free from the constraints of conventional Western performance practices through blurring the "boundaries between art and everyday life" (Kloetzel, & Pavlik, 2011, p. 8). Influenced by the Judson Dance Theatre, choreographers such as Meredith Monk, Trisha Brown, Halprin, Merce Cunningham, and others, extricated dance from the boundaries of traditional theatre venues and featured it in a variety of different topographies and environments (Kloetzel & Pavlik, 2011). Here, environments such as shopping centres, industrial buildings, or meadows in a forest, were integrated into the choreography, turning ordinary locations into performance spaces (Hunter, 2015). By moving dance beyond traditional theatres, choreographers not only directed attention to unconventional sites but also encouraged a dialogue between the dancer, the audience, the environment, the local community, and the history of the place (Barbour, 2019). Responding to diverse socio-cultural, political, ecological, economic, and historic contexts (Barbour, Hunter & Kloetzel, 2019), today's site dance has diversified into a myriad of distinct approaches such as site-specific dance, and place-responsive dance, as reviewed below.

Site-Specific Dance

Site-specific dance refers to a practice where work is created and performed in response to a specific site and thus cannot be replicated anywhere else without losing its integrity or core meaning (Barbour, Hunter, Kloetzel, 2019; Hunter 2000; Koplowitz, 2011, Kloetzel & Pavlik, 2009). This makes site-specific work a unique art form in which each aspect of the work is inspired by the characteristics of the environment. The choreography, movement vocabulary, and interactions are only developed once the choreographer or dancer has visited and

engaged with the multiple layers of the place (Koplowitz, 2011). For Monk (2019a) this involved “begin[ning] the process by spending time [at the site] and listening to what the space has to say” (p. 34). Listening means paying attention through observation, familiarisation, and acculturation (Barbour, 2010; East, 2012; Hunter, 2015). Such practice includes learning about the site’s history, socio-political context, topography, climate, current use, text, objects, actions, cultural perspectives, ecology, and more (Kloetzel & Pavlik, 2009). These insights influence the dancer’s sensory perception and corporal interpretations, which in turn informs the choice of the choreographic repertoire used for performances.

Site-dance practitioners intentionally tune into their senses, aiming to perceive “the rhythm of one’s own breathing in relation to all things” (Snowber, 2022, p. 28). Barbour (2020) uses the technique of slow walking to broaden her perception of the visual, kinaesthetic, and olfactory information of a place, generating rich experiences from which movement improvisations and ideas for site-specific dances emerge. Similarly, Snowber (2022) expresses that “in walking, I slow down, listen, and begin to attend fully in heart, mind, body, soul - through fingers and feet, and the gait of my walk” (p. 14). Every turn along the path presents opportunities for exploring movement vocabulary in response to tactile sensations, visual and auditory cues, scents, and weather inspiring the creation of choreographic material. While this method encourages spontaneous responses, Alessandro Carboni (2019) employs a systematic approach organised in a step-by-step framework termed ‘Embodied Map’ (EM).

Carboni’s (2019) method of ‘urban mapping’ involves four key phases: observation, capture, repetition, and composition, with dancers physically archiving details of a particular location such as the geometry, scales, boundaries, limitations, configurations, shapes, patterns, and materiality. Here, the body becomes a cartographic tool, a three-dimensional embodied representation of space, that generates movement repertoire which later informs the compositions of dance choreographies. While this approach to site-specific dance focuses more on the architectural design and visual representations of a specific place, in her work Snowber (2022) underscores the importance of also “respond[ing] on energetic levels - feeling, sensing, perceiving, and expressing the seen and unseen nuances (p. 17). Similarly, Barbour (2014) consciously invites dancers to come into intimate resonance with the ambiance of a specific place and to be receptive to emotional responses. The progression of such investigations into a public performance then produces a relationship in which the embodied, emotional, and sensory experiences of those present are engaged with the atmospheres of place, “the design, organic and structural features, as well as the social and cultural histories of the site” (Barbour & Hitchmough, 2014, p.5). Through revealing these deeper layers, audience members can witness historical and socio-cultural dynamics, which may shed light on ecological issues and may empower communities to express environmental trauma.

Place-Responsive Dance

Place-responsive dance is a term used by Carol Brown (2015) and Barbour (2019, 2016) in Aotearoa to highlight people's complex relationships with place and to demonstrate a political awareness of Māori associations with land. In Brown's (2015) view the word 'site' lacks the depth that is needed to engage in critical practices of de-colonisation and respond to post-Treaty discussions. Thus, she proposes that performance-making in a specific place must involve careful "negotiation with the resonances of both a pre-European and colonial past" (Brown, 2015, p. 205). As such, scholars like Brown and Tia Reihana-Morunga (2020), Barbour (2019), and East (2011), consider historical events, ancestral lineages, and spiritual connections when creating dance works in outdoor places. Their engagements often involve being guided by local iwi (tribe) to gain a deeper understanding of Māori narratives and potential traumatic events preceding European colonisation (Brown, 2015). One method that Brown (2015) advocates is to listen and become a learner through walking and talking the land with a kaumātua (Māori elder) and engaging with the local community. In her perspective, such an approach may uncover that a public park may have been a Papakainga (home environment) before land confiscations, and a residential area could have served as a former urupā (burial grounds). Since in Māori culture, memories of place continue to resonate as mauri (life force) in the land, these factors need to be considered when activating a place through performance work.

Barbour (2020) further stresses that in the context of site-specific works "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" (p. 69). As a response to the complex relationships to land with multiple and often conflicting worldviews of Māori and Pākehā, Brown (2015), and Barbour (2020) point out the importance of engaging in critical self-reflection and respecting the integrity of Māori traditions. Such an approach involves examining one's biases, privileges, and power dynamics, understanding the historical and socio-cultural context, and avoiding incorporating Māori cultural elements unless it is a collaborative work that involves Māori artists. This highlights the fine line for non-Māori site dance artists between acknowledging mātauranga Māori (Māori epistemologies) and appropriating its cultural practices.

Thus, rigorous reflexivity is needed to give voice to people's many diverse experiences of place, which also entails navigating the tension between a wish to feel a sense of belonging and addressing complex dynamics related to post-colonial conflicts. In Barbour's (2020) experience "knowing and feeling one belongs to a place, [is] a desire arguably embedded in the experiences of some Pākehā, and some more recent immigrants" (p. 70). By recognising and addressing these complexities, site-specific artists can work towards fostering genuine

connections “where they may practice “a healthy co-existence within diversity as human beings and dancers, inter-relational with the rest of the planet” (East, 2020, p. 34). Encouraging a reciprocal exchange can involve inviting community engagement and enabling audience participants to voice their concerns and perspectives. The subsequent section offers potential ways audience engagement and participation can be incorporated into site dance and other performance practices.

Audience Participation in Performance

For Schechner (2006), performance “takes place as action, interaction, and relation” (p. 30). This situates performance as an event where there is no passive observer and instead highlights the importance of a direct exchange among all involved individuals. The idea of creating a synergistic connection between performers and audiences is actively embraced by several performance artists, including Boal and his ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’. He effectively breaks down the boundaries between performers and audience, creating a dialogue between stage and audience that is “totally transitive” (Boal, 1995, p. 42). Boal aims to disrupt the established hierarchies within theatre, advocating for a concept he terms “collective protagonism” (Boal, 2019, p. 1), in which he urges the audience to actively engage in shaping the experience, openly expressing their emotions, and participating in critical thinking throughout the entire performance process (Boal, 2015). Boal achieves this by constructing a scene that escalates to a pivotal moment where the central issue reaches a crisis and subsequently encourages the spectators to suggest solutions. Boal (2015) clarifies that “while the audience ‘writes’ the work, the actors perform it simultaneously” (p. 80), leading to immediate improvisation based on suggested ideas and a keen responsiveness to corrections and instructions from the audience. This approach exemplifies audience participation, wherein “spectators are transformed into protagonists, resistance to oppression is enacted, turning fiction into real life” (Boal, 1995, p. 42). Boal conveys that by ‘real life’, he means his theatre extends beyond a theatrical exploration of spectators’ thoughts and feelings, instead inviting them to actively engage in acts of resistance against neoliberal politics and injustice. Norman Denzin (2018) explains that Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed is a shared space dedicated to emancipatory community action that works towards social change, which can be described as “Critical pedagogy in action, a politics of liberation, inquiry and theatre for justice” (Denzin, 2018, p. 264). For Boal, theatre is also a practice of hope, a moral and ethical platform where artists seek “reconciliation, healing, not shaming or punishment, or harm to the other, yet we stand up for the rights of the oppressed” (Denzin, 2018, p. 245).

Another example of audience participation can be found in the work of performance duo Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle (2021), who engage with topics of climate change, and political injustice through the ritual format of eco-weddings. Their playful take on performance

rituals incorporates the tragic realities of ecological destruction and climate catastrophes infused with comedy, chaos, and sexy celebrations of love, highlighting humans' destructive behaviour towards a planet that sustains them. In their performance 'Green Wedding to the Earth' they illustrate how playfulness, absurdity, eroticism, and environmentalism can be embedded within the context of a sacred performance ritual. Stephens and Sprinkle's practice is inspired by critical posthumanism and the work of Haraway's advocacy for hybrid communities that are "knit together by kinship and affinities" (Stephens & Sprinkle, 2021, p. 20). Influenced by Haraway (2016), who proposes that "perhaps it is precisely in the realm of play, outside the dictates of teleology, settled categories, and function, that serious worldliness and recuperation become possible" (pp. 23-24), they playfully anthropomorphise the Earth as their lover. Vital to their interspecies modes of performance rituals are what Kelly Oliver (2009) has termed an "ethics of response-ability" (p. 77), a call for individuals to actively and ethically engage with the world based on mutual care and respect. Lauran Whitworth (2019) is aware that such ritual performances may not offer an exit plan for climate catastrophes but may provoke a "stirring and unsettling array of responses apropos to these unsettling times" (p. 74). It may also provide "a mode of thinking and being that demonstrates a certain openness to the world" (Whitworth, 2019, p. 88), which may inspire people to look after their environments and to live in a manner that Haraway (2008) calls a "knot of species co-shaping one another" (p. 42).

In this chapter, I examined different literature on ritual and contemporary performance practices, spanning themes like embodied knowledge, spirituality, environmentalism, and improvisation to better understand how performance practices may address challenges in the Anthropocene, and foster connections among individuals and communities. The subsequent chapter will further discuss how the insights from this literature align with the philosophical frameworks, theories, and worldviews employed in this thesis.

Chapter Three: Philosophical Framework, Theory, and Worldview

In this chapter, I discuss my philosophical framework (paradigm), relevant theories, and worldviews that shape how I investigate site-specific performance rituals in the Anthropocene. As stated previously, my research questions concern how different seasonal rituals might be expressed in specific sites in Aotearoa, and how the insights of key ritual experts might inform the understanding of site-specific performance rituals. A qualitative research design is appropriate to seek insights and understand embodied experiences, as I will discuss in the methodology and methods sections of the following chapter.

Initially, I begin this chapter by clarifying the role of paradigms in research, ontology (understanding of reality), and epistemology (how knowledge is acquired or ways of knowing) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). Paradigms are constructed philosophical frameworks that shape how individuals view and understand the world (Denzin, 2010; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As highlighted by Pirkko Markula and Michael Silk (2011), embracing a particular paradigmatic framework is significant within research, as it guides researchers in their approach to generating knowledge. As a qualitative researcher, I perceive knowledge production as a constructed process, wherein “individuals make multiple meanings” (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 47). Such an epistemological stance is rooted in an ontology that rejects the existence of a singular truth and instead embraces cultural pluralism, diverse experiences, and distinct realities that form non-heterogeneous patchworks (Deleuze & Guattari, in Adkins, 2015). Furthermore, just as there is no singular truth, there is no unchanging true self. Instead, identities are understood as fluid and constantly constructed in relation to a specific socio-cultural context, environmental conditions, and power relations (Markula & Silk, 2011). My philosophical framework is thus broadly constructivist, in which reality is understood as constructed by people and ways of knowing are multiple and contextual, as common within postmodern theories such as poststructuralism and influential in the emergence of posthumanism.

Of the postmodern theories, poststructuralism tended to focus on linguistic textual analysis at the expense of the matter of the body and lived experiences (Markula & Silk, 2011), and has faced criticism from feminist researchers such as Braidotti (2019, 2021). Although scholars like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) have shown how poststructuralist theories can be applied to understand the significance of the body and its role in transforming power structures in physical culture (Markula & Silk, 2011), in the context of my research, embodied experience in site-specific performance rituals is crucial. Thus, I intentionally bring

embodied experiences in relation to wider socio-cultural and historical influences, and environmental conditions, particularly the complexities of the Anthropocene.

As I will discuss in more depth in this chapter, critical posthumanism is the theoretical approach I engaged in this research project. Braidotti argues that “The relevance of posthuman critical theory is enhanced by the contextual urgency of the Anthropocene condition, which...becomes an environmental, social-economical, as well as affective and psychical phenomenon of unprecedented proportions” (Braidotti in Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2019, p. 339). Drawing inspiration from posthumanist scholars like Braidotti (2019) and her ‘affirmative ethics of becoming’, as well as Haraway (2016) with her ‘ethics of kinship’ and the concept of ‘staying with the trouble’ this research paradigm seeks to foster ‘alliances’ (p. 207) across cultures and species. Based on the notion of “response-ability” (Haraway, 2016, p. 12), my investigations are based on values that promote a cooperative methodology, aiming to “make-with – become-with, compose-with” (Haraway, 2016, p. 102). However, in such a relational research design, it is crucial to embrace ‘otherness’ in affirmative ways, incorporating nuanced differentiation and fostering critical reflexivity (Braidotti, 2021). According to Braidotti (2021), this also necessitates countering “representational regimes that particularly scrutinizes the prevalent notion of thought as emanating from a white, masculine, adult, heterosexual, urban-dwelling, property-owning subject” (p. 42).

As discussed in Chapter One, I am researching site-specific performance rituals in the Anthropocene in (post)-colonial Aotearoa. Thus, as a researcher, I needed to be reflexive about how my life experiences may produce biases and how power dynamics may impact my decisions and perspectives (Markula & Silk, 2011). Guided by Haraway (1991), Braidotti (2019), Hall (2019), Smith (1999, 2021), and others, I undertook a critical examination of the impact of Western¹¹ thinking on my philosophical framework and understanding of theories and worldviews. It was of great importance to me to understand the socio-cultural, historical, and environmental influences of colonialism on Indigenous Māori, as well as the experiences of tauwi (non-Māori) of Aotearoa. I sought to understand some of “the ways that particular groups of people have historically and continually been denied access to sites of power and have been systematically disenfranchised” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 174). According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021), a critical evaluation of which views about human nature, space and time, gender and race are valid is important, along with resisting “imperialist nostalgia” (cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 1105), and challenging notions of an “innocent yearning” (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 108) for otherness without reflecting upon the effects of privilege. Such

¹¹ Hall (2019) points out that the ‘West’ consists of multiple knowledge systems, complex stories, ideas, historical events, different nations, and social relationships, and thus needs to be understood as a “historical, not a geographical, construct” (p. 142). Henceforth, when I use the term ‘Western’, I am alluding to systems of representation associated with the European Enlightenment model and specific societal characteristics such as “industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern” (Hall, 2019, p. 142), which have become the standards by which other (non-Western) societies have historically been evaluated.

critical reflection was particularly relevant for me because, my research was situated on islands of Indigenous Māori, and in my attempts as tauīwi to respectfully engage in site-specific performance rituals in Aotearoa, I was seeking engagement with ritual experts, two of whom were Māori. Thus, to appropriately respect and engage with the knowledge they chose to share, I aimed to critically reflect on my own worldviews, biases, and surrounding power dynamics.

However, doing research at the interface of different ways of knowing and worldviews, and within my Western constructivist research paradigm is challenging. There is concern about incompatibility expressed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 2021) and others who highlight that Indigenous research is rooted in the respective Indigenous worldviews and place-specificity, and not readily accessible to non-Indigenous researchers. Māori scholars Bishop (1998, 2008), and Smith (1999, 2021), explicitly highlight that Indigenous research is done by Indigenous scholars on, for, and with Indigenous communities. This perspective is significant to prevent the exploitation and appropriation of Indigenous peoples, the commodification of cultural heritage (Battiste, 2008; Smith, 1999), and avoiding Indigenous knowledge being simply used as a complement to Western ways of knowing (Houde, 2007; Shackeroff & Campbell, 2007). I aimed to both develop a beginning appreciation of mātauranga Māori (Māori Indigenous worldviews and practices) and to articulate more clearly aspects of my own cultural background through reference to neo-Paganist worldviews and practices.

Given the challenges for me in this qualitative, constructivist research which I undertook with critical posthumanist theory, I found myself in a liminal space - an (im)possible patchwork of neighbouring practices involving “contradictions and complicities, attempts at reconciliation and well-trodden retreats behind a Western gaze” (Kovach, 2018, p. 388). I dared to embrace the possibility of failure and, inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), refrained from questioning which worldview of reality was true, and instead, investigated how distinct belief systems could shape different processes, emotions, embodiment, and engagement with the world. My intention was to accentuate the relationalities of embodiment and environment as active and influential factors in the generation of knowledge. Embracing such a perspective aligns with critical posthumanist philosophy, highlighting the “need to reinstate movement at the heart of thought by actualizing a nonunitary vision of the thinking subject” (Braidotti, 2021, p. 42).

In the next sections of this chapter, I discuss relevant theories of embodiment before delving into critical posthumanism and then offering my understandings of the worldviews of mātauranga Māori and neo-Paganism.

Embodiment

Emphasising the significant role of embodiment in understanding and interpreting the world, scholars such as Barbour (2004, 2018b), Grosz (1994), Sheets-Johnstone (2015), Alaimo and Hekman (2008), Alexander and Knowles (2005), and others deliberately challenge Enlightenment-derived divisions such as “subject-object, fact-value, or material-spiritual dualisms” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 142). Barbour (2018) adopts the expression ‘embodied ways of knowing’, and underlines that acquiring knowledge is not solely a cognitive or intellectual process, but includes “a person’s biological (somatic), intellectual, emotional, bodily, artistic and spiritual experience, within their cultural and geographical location” (p. 220). As such, embodied researchers contest prevailing notions of ‘somatophobia’ (Grosz, 1994) as they engage in a “view from a body” in contrast to the abstract and authoritative “view from above” (Haraway, 1991, p. 196). Such a perspective includes recognising that “bodies as objects of knowledge are material semiotic generative nodes” (Haraway, 1992, p. 298), where meanings or symbols associated with them interact and influence each other (Spry, 2011). The interconnected nature of corporeality and symbolism underscores the significance of cultural influences in shaping how individuals interpret and make sense of their embodied experiences, which are “always thoroughly interwoven with the dynamics of power” (Spatz, 2015, p. 33). Thus, centering embodiment needs to be done with “a political commitment to work across differences without collapsing that difference” (Goltz & Perez, 2011, p. 173). This necessitates a standpoint of reflexive relationality where sociocultural particularities, biases, privileges, and oppression are acknowledged (Conquergood, 2013).

This approach was especially important as I used embodiment as an epistemic stance, advocating against ‘somatophobia’, and as a vehicle for capturing and interpreting the rich and diverse experiences and perspectives shared by the participants of this study. In this context, the centering of embodiment was also my approach to actively involve and respect the spiritual dimensions that were shared with me by others. For Batacharya and Wong (2018) who express that “we experience ourselves and the world around us in terms of material and discursive aspects of mind-body-spirit and social relations of power” (p. 3), the integration of spiritual elements into discussions about embodiment is intimately linked to dismantling ingrained colonial tendencies within academic discourse. Similarly, Guillermo Gómez-Peña (2011) stresses that “by decolonizing and then re-politicizing our bodies they become sites for activism and embodied theory” (p. 11). Since I engaged with ritual experts grounded in mātauranga Māori and neo-Paganism, while also creating site-specific performance rituals across various contexts in Aotearoa, I intentionally incorporated my own decolonisation strategies into my understanding of embodiment. This meant that I also paid attention to the sentient-social environmental-emotional experience in the research.

Moving Beyond Human Concerns

The work of feminist scholars such as Butler (1990, 2004), Haraway (1991), Sara Ahmed (2008), and Braidotti (2019) helped me broaden the scope of my inquiry beyond the confines of human-centric concerns and to include issues of justice and equity concerning the environment, animals, various animate and inanimate forms of life, and the Earth itself (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Considering that this research was situated within the Anthropocene, to comprehend experiences that encompass both human and non-human elements, it appeared most fitting to adopt critical posthumanism as a philosophical lens to view and analyse experiences that transpired among individuals, environments, and technologies during site-specific performance rituals. As Jasmine Ulmer (2017) expresses, “critical inquiries work against marginalization, oppression, and inequity; posthuman research expands these same objectives on a planetary scale” (p. 1).

Furthermore, the posthuman inclination to challenge dominant paradigms, recognising the agency and interconnectedness of diverse entities, and promote more just worldviews (Braidotti, 2019) appeared to be in sympathy with decolonising practices. However, while it may be tempting to draw parallels between the concepts of ecological relationality and non-human agency in critical posthumanism and certain aspects of alternative knowledge systems such as mātauranga Māori, it was important to approach such comparisons with caution. Myra Hird et al. (2022) strongly advocate for the decolonisation of critical posthumanism. In the context of this PhD research, this involved avoiding essentialising aspects of Māori, neo-Pagan, and Western knowledge systems, and instead accepting possible incommensurability, as proposed by Tuck and Yang (2012). Hence, I made the deliberate choice to employ three distinct perspectives: Mātauranga Māori for examining the knowledge of the Māori rituals experts, neo-Paganism for examining the insights of the Pākehā ritual experts, and critical posthumanism for guiding my own creative practice. Although these frameworks occasionally intersected and dialogued with one another, influencing how I approached site-specific performance rituals on this land, I remained committed to framing my own creative practice within this liminal space. This process entailed a continuous negotiation between my sincere interest in Māori worldviews and practices and a heightened awareness of the boundaries and the necessity for respectful engagement with a cultural heritage to which I had no ancestral connections.

To fulfil the objective of engaging sincerely, I, situated my ritual practice within the context of neo-Paganism, drawing inspiration from the European indigeneity of the Celts, rooted in my own ancestral lineage. Thus, I introduce neo-Paganism as my cultural grounding and to dialogue with mātauranga Māori. These messy entanglements of cultures and

scholarships underscore the interdisciplinary nature of knowing (Braidotti, 2019; Crist, 2013; Bastian et al., 2017) and offer a foundation for exploring my research questions:

- How might the insights of key ritual experts inform the understanding of site-specific performance rituals?
- How might different seasonal rituals be expressed in specific sites in Aotearoa?

The first research question aimed at generating nuanced insights into the diverse perspectives of ritual experts on ritual making and exploring how these insights might relate to my creative practice. The findings of the first informed how I approached the second question, which involved exploring embodied experiences of sites by the performer participants (including myself) and the creation of four site-specific performance rituals. To comprehensively investigate the intricate socio-cultural and ecological dynamics of site-specific performance rituals, I employed creative practice methods. Thus, I chose the methodology of creative practice as research in dance (Barbour, 2019; Phillips et al., 2008). Undertaking creative practice research, I purposefully committed myself to embodied ways of knowing and to becoming fully entangled within lived experiences of seasonal ritual practices. As exemplified in the figure below, I treated the interviews with the ritual experts and the creative practice as distinct yet interconnected elements, each demanding unique modes of consideration.



Figure 1: Philosophical Framework, Methodology and Methods

In the following sections, I provide an in-depth discussion of the different aspects of my research framework, including critical posthumanism, mātauranga Māori and neo-Paganism. The following chapter will outline my research methods and address the ethical considerations that arose during the research process. However, before delving into a more detailed discussion of the various components of my research outline, it is important to acknowledge that this research is firmly rooted in a particular time and place, viewed through the limited perspective of a German immigrant investigating site-specific performance rituals within Aotearoa during the Anthropocene. Consequently, the design of this research is not readily transferable or replicable to other contexts.

Critical Posthumanism

Posthumanism is a term that has been circulating in academia since the early 1990s and intersects with various disciplines, such as cultural studies, geography, science studies, gender studies, theology, media studies, the arts, and others (Badmington, 2003). According to Herbrechter et al. (2022), the word 'critical' stands for a critique of humanism, especially the "white, Western, colonial, patriarchal structures that underpin it" (p. 3). Posthumanist philosophers question traditional Western ways of sense-making and redefine what it means to be human in the Anthropocene (Lemm, 2022). Critical posthumanism derives from the lineage of thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jaques Derrida, Deleuze, and Guattari, who have inspired Western feminist scholars such as Haraway (2008) and Braidotti (2019) to promote ethical and political accountability for the problems we face in the time of the Anthropocene. Braidotti (2019) describes critical posthumanism as a "theoretically-powered cartographic tool" (p. 34) that can be used to deconstruct "humanism's anthropocentrism, essentialism, exceptionalism, and speciesism" (Herbrechter et al., 2022, pp. 1-2). Thus, posthumanism can be described as a paradigm shift away from industrialisation and colonial exploitation, towards emphasising "entanglement, co-implication, hybridity, and interdependence (Herbrechter, et al., 2022, p. 6). As such, "posthumanism is not only a critical theory but always also an affirmative project of liberation with practical, ethical, and political implications" (Lemm, 2022, p. 2).

To be affirmative in this context means that critical posthumanism upholds a non-dystopian worldview, where embodied interspecies relationality is theorised through "affirmative politics grounded on immanent inter-connections and generative differences: a transversal composition of multiple assemblages of active minoritarian subjects, of many 'people' who are no longer missing" (Braidotti, 2018, p. 22). It offers a map to help researchers critically reflect on their research strategies, underlying doctrines, and power structures while

encouraging them to be creative at the same time (Ulmer, 2017). Brian Massumi (1987) inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's, *A Thousand Plateaus*, writes:

The question is not: Is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make possible to think? What new emotions does it make possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body? (p. xv)

Throughout the writings of posthumanist scholars such questions are investigated in various ways. In the following section, I outline the fundamental concepts of posthuman research that shaped this PhD: the notions of 'human-nature, body-mind continuum' and 'situated and partial knowledge'.

Human-Nature and Body-Mind Continuum

Within critical posthumanism, life is a continuum of different forms and formations that cannot be hierarchised or classified into separate and autonomous species because all life (animate and inanimate) possesses 'radical immanence' (Braidotti, 2019). The word immanence, as explained by Thomas (2008), stands for "remaining within" (p. 239), which means that all matter or substance is intelligent and self-organising and is, therefore, an active participant in the world's becoming (Braidotti, 2019). Nature is not a passive container but an intelligent organism with an agency that is "driven by the ontological desire for the expression of its innermost freedom" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 4). Agency means "the power of a given body to act" (Deleuze, 1990, p. 93). It is the capacity of a body to affect and be affected. Recognising other life forms as active agents that interact with their environments has prompted some researchers to shift away from human supremacy towards an acknowledgment that other "forms/ things/ objects/ beings/ phenomenon" can acquire and express knowledge as well (Ulmer, 2017, p. 834). This has moved some Western understandings towards becoming "relational embodied and embedded, affective and accountable" agents (Braidotti, 2019, p. 31). Such an approach challenges the idea that humans "are "exceptional" and radically different from (other) animals" (Herbrechter et al., 2022, p. 5) and instead advocates for a position of a continuum between subject and object, human and nature.

The recognition that humans are nature too, evolving from the same genetic material, has led Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder (2016) to call for a "return to our natural belonging," for cultivating and establishing "another manner of existing and coexisting" (p. 100). This interrelatedness is described by Haraway (2016) as 'naturecultural' and by Braidotti as 'humanimal transversal bonding' (Braidotti, 2019, p. 31), which describes a space of interspecies hospitality where human's interactions shift from a human-centric perspective towards a capacity to respond, and to be response-able (Barad, 2003). According to Haraway

(2016), this involves skills like attentiveness, empathy, noticing, listening, sensory observation, and direct experience of the environment, which play an important role in acquiring knowledge. Highlighting the importance of researching from a position of body-mind continuum, Braidotti (2019) calls for a “manifestation of embodied and embedded carnal empiricism” (p. 34), which she has termed “the embrainment of the body and embodiment of the mind” (p. 31). Researching from a philosophical standpoint of body-mind and human-nature continuum seems appropriate for an investigation into site-specific performance rituals in the Anthropocene. This also includes addressing the cultural implications of human activities and recognising that knowledge is historically and culturally situated, which I will discuss in the next section.

Situated and Partial Knowledge

For Braidotti (2019), a crucial element of critical posthumanism is drawn from the feminist politics of location (Rich, 1986), also articulated as situated knowledge (Harding, 1986, 1991; Haraway, 1991). Through acknowledging situated knowledge, feminist researchers have found new ways to give voice to their situated perspectives, to disrupt the authority of conventional research paradigms, and to challenge claims of universal knowledge. Furthermore, knowledge is not perceived as neutral because the researcher’s “positionality, reflexivity, voice, and power” (Ulmer, 2017, p. 836) have a great influence on the research outcome. Thus, Braidotti, (2019) encourages researchers to ask questions such as: “What kind of knowing subjects are we in the process of becoming, and what discourses underscore the process?” (p. 32). Braidotti (2019) argues that this includes the dimension of political and cultural subjectivity, which accounts for “one’s locations in terms both of space (geo-political or ecological dimension) and time (historical memory or genealogical dimension)” (p. 34). According to Foucault (1984), whose contributions were foundational for posthumanist thinking, this demands a critical examination of one’s own historical background, its underlying power structures, and the ways in which knowledge is acquired (Herbrechter et al., 2022). The premise is that by examining one’s conditioned understandings of reality, a researcher is offered pathways to translate experiences “among very different - and power - differentiated - communities” (Haraway, 1988, p. 580). This is the starting point for becoming an ally in strengthening possibilities for counter-memories and alternative histories of marginalised voices.

Such an approach seemed especially relevant given that I was researching site-specific rituals from the position of a migrant in a socio-cultural context that was different from my home in the Black Forest in southern Germany. Understanding the importance of situated knowledge brought me to investigate spiritual practices that are embedded in pre-Christian

traditions of my own culture. I was inspired by New Zealand scholars Batten (2005) and Rountree (2017), who investigate ritual through the framework of neo-Pagan European spiritualities with the aim of supporting Pākehā to engage in non-Christian practices and inspire rituals that relate to the seasonal cycles of this land and cultures. Therefore, in this PhD, neo-Paganism, although not classified as a philosophical or theoretical framework, was used as a conduit through which critical posthumanist practices of partial and situated knowledge were applied. Underlying this approach was the premise that I needed to ground myself in my own re-invested narratives of cultural and spiritual heritage and this act might support sincere engagement with alternative knowledge systems such as mātauranga Māori.

Neo-Paganism

In the present time characterised by religious diversity, neo-Paganism has become a popular expression of spirituality (Rountree, 2017). Using a range of eclectic strategies and practices, neo-Pagans draw on 'nature-centred spiritualities' (Harvey, 2000) of pre-Christian spiritual traditions from Europe such as Celtic spirituality, Western shamanism (Woodhead & Heelas, 2000), Wicca, Pagan Druidry, or Goddess spirituality (Rountree, 2017). According to Rountree (2012) at the heart of neo-Paganism lie "love for and kinship with nature" (p. 305), and values that recognise the importance of embracing women's bodies and sexuality as part of spiritual life. She further explains that people's desire to engage in neo-Paganism often stems from a deep wish to be rooted in what is perceived as heritage, and from which some have become detached. This is often linked with a longing for more connected relationships with the natural world, and with women's efforts to reclaim the celebration of the female body. However, since few records of pre-Christian traditions exist, neo-Pagans need to incorporate a good deal of imagination to fill the gaps (Rountree, 2017).

One creative narrative is that women in old Europe had a strong position in society before patriarchy was overthrown by Christianity. While some like John Mackenzie et. al, (2005) debate whether patriarchy really existed in Celtic societies, Naomi Goldenberg (2004) proposes that feminist engagement with pre-Christian practices is not about historical accuracy, but more about women using "imagination about the deep past to fuel their political goals in the present" (p. 208). The focus here is liberation from patriarchal (and other) systems of oppression and to free "female sexuality from its association with sin and celebrating the erotic feminine in all its forms" (Rountree, 2004, p. 54). The idea of patriarchy offers rhetorical strategies to liberate women from the "legacy of a religious and cultural tradition which invokes a conflict between the spirit and the flesh and tells people, especially women, that their bodies are dirty and sinful" (Rountree, 2004, p. 54). However, while personifications such as the

'Goddess' may empower women to re-claim their sexuality as sacred, 'She' is not to be understood as an all-encompassing fertile 'superwoman', but rather a representation of the Earth body as a non-gendered site of knowing (Alaimo, 2019a, 2019b). She stands for the "entire web of life, incorporating masculine and feminine and all apparent dualisms, contradictions, and paradoxes" (Rountree, 2004, p. 66). The Goddess functions as a metaphor through which the "infinite, eternally dynamic interconnections of matter and energy, which constitute our universe, are sacralized" (Rountree, 2005, p. 160). Acknowledging that the Earth's nurturing properties are accessible to everyone regardless of gender, enables diverse people to establish meaningful connections and kinships with others, as explained next.

Networks of Kinship

At the core of neo-Paganism lies a pantheistic worldview, in which humans and supernatural beings are closely entangled with the natural world (Rountree, 2012). It is an understanding of nature that articulates the experience of participating in a living system marked by "relationships among constituents which are dialogic and sensual and by bonds which are physical, emotional, social, and spiritual" (Rountree, 2012, p. 316). Here, the human family is one kind of species alongside trees, birds, lakes, and sentient beings connected through "genealogical connections stretching into the mythic past and with innumerable horizontal relationships in the present" (Rountree, 2012, p. 308). Rountree, (2012) further suggests that a neo-Pagan worldview can serve as an "ideological and motivational model for humans to respond to urgent contemporary ecological challenges" (p. 305). There are overlaps between neo-Paganism and critical posthumanism in the sense that both recognise that humans exist in an "interspecies relationship" (Tsing, 2012, p. 144) with other living beings as a pathway to meet the challenges of our current time. However, although neo-Paganism offers strategies of hope that inspire action through ecologically aware attitudes and practices, it can be criticised for portraying a dualist worldview (Blain, 2002), of nature versus technology, tradition versus progress, and wilderness versus domesticity. Furthermore, Paul Heelas (1996) points out that neo-Pagans' re-enactments of pre-Christian European traditions tend to portray a romanticised ideal of ancient times as a simpler, healthier, and more connected way of life. This romanticised ideal is being challenged in the context of the Anthropocene.

Critical Neo-Paganism

For Haraway (2016) and Braidotti (2019), the underlying problem of the romanticism evident in neo-Paganism is the dualistic construction of the self via terms such as 'good' and 'bad' 'primitive' and 'cultivated' 'natural' and 'artificial', 'animal' and 'human', 'body' and 'mind', 'female' and "male". As discussed earlier, this has led to the articulation of a nature-culture continuum, including a range of kinds of nature such as human nature, artificial nature, or

abandoned nature (Haraway, 2016). Here, seemingly contradictory aspects of life such as technological enhancements and natural wonders are understood as entangled instead of opposed to each other. Thus, neo-Pagans navigating a globalised, Internet-driven world where a 'back to the roots' lifestyle is only partially applicable (Rountree, 2012) might reconsider dualisms between tradition and progress, as well as nature and technology. Including 'non-natural' aspects in the re-enactment of a neo-Pagan lifestyle, may inspire a model of kinship that goes beyond romantic ideals and towards an inclusion of the many contradictions that exist in our contemporary times. This necessitates a nuanced approach that embraces the knowledge of the past, and the advancements of the present while articulating innovative pathways to move forward. Such a reading of critical posthumanism might motivate neo-Pagans to creatively experiment with different forms of engagement, whereby the old and the new may create transversal assemblages of new knowledge.

Moreover, as a researcher of European descent myself, it is important to approach the investigation of pre-Christian traditions with cultural sensitivity and respect for the unique heritage and histories associated with each culture. While it may be tempting to equate neo-Paganism with knowledge systems from other Earth cultures, critical posthumanism reminds me that the "mental habit of universalism is a way of acknowledging the partial nature of visions of the human that were produced by European culture" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 14). Being sensitive about cultural appropriation, Pākehā scholars note that neo-Pagans in Aotearoa need to be "self-reflexive and resistant to imperialism [and] to not co-opt Māori traditions" (Rountree, 2009, p. 253). Considering these factors, as a researcher influenced by neo-Paganism and grounded in my cultural background, I engaged in critical self-reflection intending to acknowledge and respect Māori worldviews. Thus, I perceived neo-Paganism and Māori worldviews as distinct knowledge systems, situated in different socio-political and cultural contexts. Inspired by Braidotti (2019), I also adopted a perspective that recognises an "internally differentiated and grounded notion of being human" (p. 14), whereby highlighting cultural differences demonstrate respect towards the complex facets of cultural practices. Consequently, the next section about mātauranga Māori offers a partial introduction to a discrete knowledge system, from an initial level of understanding.

Mātauranga Māori

Commonly, mātauranga Māori is understood as an epistemology that encompasses an understanding of traditional knowledge as well as the methods and ethics through which this knowledge is generated and transmitted (Mead, 2016). Here, worldview, values, and behaviour are closely intertwined, creating the basis upon which Māori cultural customs are

developed and enacted (Royal, 2007). However, Māori cultural understandings are not fixed, but rather dynamic knowledge systems that have adapted to the constant changes of life in Aotearoa (Royal, 2007) with variations depending on the region, iwi (tribe), and hapū (subtribe) (Karakā-Clarke et al., 2022). Given the complexity of the topic, the following discussion does not represent a comprehensive study but rather represents fragments that specifically relate to my research topic. It is my hope that focusing on the aspects of 'whakapapa' (genealogy), 'mana' (non-ordinary essence, energy, and presence) 'tapu' (sacredness), and 'mauri' (life force) will provide a better understanding of Māori worldviews and how they are enacted through values such as 'kaitiakitanga' (guardianship). Whilst I present these concepts and practices, I acknowledge they exist in complex entanglements with each other and other knowledge systems that cannot be separated.

Mana, Tapu and Mauri

According to Bishop (1995), Marsden (1975), Royal (2007), and others, all aspects of Māori worldviews are based around the concepts of mana (spiritual authority), tapu (sacredness), and mauri (life force), recognising the existence of a non-ordinary dimension that continuously exchanges information with the material world (Royal, 2007). Cleve Barlow (1991) explains that mana refers to an everlasting energy that he describes as “‘the fire of the gods’, one that cannot be extinguished and ‘no one can wash it out’” (cited in Royal, 2007, p. 60). It can also be understood as “consciousness that comes from beyond this world, from another reality, and flows into this world” (Royal, 2007, p. 45) physically manifesting itself in trees, rivers, and other objects. Here the presence of mauri (life energy) is crucial for mana to flow into these objects, while tapu relates to the sacred nature of these objects once they are infused with mana (Royal, 2007).

Distinctions can be made between 'mana atua' and 'mana whenua' (Durie 1998; Warren et al., 2017). The former relates to the spiritual dimension connected to atua (deities) and the latter refers to the power derived from ancestral landscapes (Warren et al., 2017). Furthermore, mana can also be applied to humans, to describe “the non-ordinary features of an exceptional person” (Royal, 2007, p. 47), often translated as authority and power. Bishop (1995) further points out that “each story, if handed on from an ancestor, will carry the mana of that ancestor” (p. 45). Given that in mātauranga Māori all fields of knowledge are perceived as taonga (treasures) that possess mana, guarded by a kaitiaki who protects them (Waitangi Tribunal report, 2011), a researcher must ensure that the documentation of Māori knowledge is done “appropriately, respectfully, and in agreeance with those who shared that wisdom, so as to not perpetuate colonising practices” (Smith 2012; Macfarlane et al., 2015; Macfarlane 2018, cited in Wilkinson et al., 2022, p. 371). This involves incorporating an understanding of whakapapa into the practice.

Whakapapa

Whakapapa is pivotal for Māori understandings of the universe. According to Bishop (1995), everything that is alive or dead, animate or inanimate links to genealogy through which people relate to “each other, to other living creatures and to the world we all inhabit” (p. 4). Similarly, Mc Breen (2019) describes whakapapa as “the web of relationships that connects us to all of creation” (p. 187). All creation, in this context, means that every aspect of the environment is united “through a web of common descent, which has its origins in the primordial parents Ranginui (the sky) and Papa-tu-ā-nuku (the earth)” (Waitangi Tribunal, 2011, p. 23). How humans and the environment are connected through whakapapa is also expressed through the word ‘whenua’, which can be translated as both placenta and land (Mead, 2016). Māori bury the umbilical cord and placenta of their children in the ground, as a literal expression of how people and land are bound together (Mead 2016). This is also expressed through the term tāngata whenua, which means people who belong in a particular place (Salmond, 2017, 2020).

Equally important to the ancestral bonds with Papa-tu-ā-nuku are the linkages to Ranginui (the sky) and the celestial movements through which the behaviours of various plants, and animals are understood (Hardy & Whaanga, 2019). Rituals and karakia (prayers) performed by tohunga (experts) during significant seasonal markers further emphasise the intricate connection between the stars and ecological phenomena, supporting the practices of planting and harvesting food (Hardy & Whaanga, 2019). Bishop (1995) explains that when “we learn our whakapapa, we learn of our total integration, connectedness and commitment to the world and the need to let go of the focus on self” (p. 230). This means that whakapapa and kaitiakitanga (performing kinship responsibilities) are intricately intertwined, because “when whakapapa is absent within day-to-day activities then connections to ancestors and the environment weaken” (Forster, 2019, p. 4).

Kaitiakitanga

According to one of the Waitangi Tribunal government reports, kaitiakitanga is the duty, “arising from the kin relationship to nurture or care for a person or thing” (p. 23). Clare Wilkinson, Angus Macfarlane, Daniel Hikuroa et al. (2022) state that “kaitiakitanga shows that flourishing is mutual: if people take care of the land, the land will take care of the people” (p. 368). One of the important lessons that can be learned from kaitiakitanga is that “land is our first teacher” (Smith, Tuck et al., 2019, p. 1) speaking “through and into human consciousness” (Royal, 2007, p. 81). This means that as kaitiaki, people have the responsibility to safeguard the environment and to take political actions (Kawharu, 2009; Roberts et al., 1995). A recent success of kaitiakitanga was the decision of the New Zealand Government to grant all the rights, powers, duties, and liabilities of a legal person to several natural features (see also

Ruru, 2018). Legal status has been given to the former Te Urewera National Park, The Whanganui River (Te Awa Tupua Whanganui River Claims Settlement), and will soon be given to Maunga Taranaki. Furthermore, kaitiakitanga goes beyond human care for the wellbeing of the environment and encompasses spiritual guardians of places such as taniwha, which are supernatural beings protecting specific places (Jones, et al., 2022). The understanding that spiritual guardians known as kaitiaki are imbued within every forest, wetland, bay, and reef, as well as every tribe and village (Waitangi Tribunal's Government report) sits in contrast to capitalist systems that treat land as a commodity that can be exploited.

It might be tempting to equate the Māori concept of kinship and whakapapa with neo-Paganist and critical posthumanist understandings. While some like Ulmer (2017) argue that a posthumanist standpoint might offer departure points to work toward bridging the “rift between the new materialisms and Indigenous research by more carefully highlighting the roots of new materialist concepts in Indigenous thinking alongside their shared aims” (Ulmer, 2017, p. 843), others like Hird, et al, (2022) argue against merging Indigenous and posthuman knowledge systems. Since there is no such a thing as a singular ‘Indigenous worldview’ because they are complex bodies of knowledge that are closely intertwined with the specific environments they have originated from (Smith, 2021), they cannot be essentialised into one category of indigeneity and consequently even less integrated as a singular narrative into other bodies of knowledge such as critical posthumanism, or neo-Paganism. While scholars such as Tuhiwai Smith (2015) acknowledge commonalities amongst Indigenous cultures, she articulates that “Kaupapa Māori is an approach to research by Māori, for Māori and with Māori” (p. 52), situating the knowledge of her people in the context of Aotearoa and the immense efforts that were needed to “regain, reconnect and re-centre what it means to be Māori” (Smith, 2015, p. 50).

In the next section, I will discuss approaches to navigating different cultural epistemologies.

Potential Meeting Points and Incommensurabilities

A research position of being a “relational embodied and embedded, affective and accountable entity” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 31) is one approach to moving in and out of relationships with different knowledge systems, acknowledging contingent, messy, challenging, and unpredictable experiences. During this research process, I aimed to avoid essentialising the knowledge shared by the Māori and neo-Pagan ritual experts into homogenised and generalised notions, such as ‘Earth cultural wisdom’. Refraining from merging other religious traditions into sameness or trying to “fix the world in a singular logic” (Cooper, 2017, p. 125),

I also hoped to acknowledge and highlight the distinctiveness of each tradition and cultural context. This demanded of me to resist producing “objective” and “scientific” truths of humans and their cultures” (Herbrechter et al., 2022, p. 6) and to hold “simultaneously in our minds potentially contradictory ideas” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 38). Inspired by Haraway’s (1988) situated knowledge, I consciously attempted to dismantle my colonising gaze and critically reflect on my own position as a white European researcher. This remains an ongoing process of critical reflection, wherein I carefully examine the historical and cultural implications of my German upbringing and what impact the ‘Age of Reason’ might have in subconsciously prioritising logical reasoning over spiritual and embodied modes of sensemaking. Such rigorous self-reflection was needed to re-think the questions of what is real and who has the right to know (Herbrechter et al., 2022) and to refrain from blending otherwise incommensurable differences between culturally distinctive world views while acknowledging meeting points for genuine engagement.

One way to find a common ground without compromising the foundations of knowledge systems (Durie, 1998) is to specifically relate to understandings directly connected to the situated knowledge shared in the research and to engage in a citation practice where Māori scholars are not used to credit posthumanist epistemologies or vice versa. For my own study, this also meant resisting combining neo-Pagan worldviews with mātauranga Māori. By doing so, I aimed to attain an understanding that avoids merging incommensurable framework propositions, but instead inspires processes of genuine engagement where different epistemologies can meet in the liminal space of potential overlaps (Evans & Kingsbury, 2022).

In the next chapter, I will outline how the philosophical framework of critical posthumanism, alongside neo-Paganism, and mātauranga Māori was applied to the methodology of creative practice as research in dance. I will discuss the research design, including methods I applied in my creative practice and thesis writing. This is followed by a description of the processes I used to analyse the findings. Finally, I offer ethical considerations that arose in designing and undertaking this research.

Chapter 4: Methodology and Methods

In this chapter, I outline the methodology I have crafted for researching site-specific performance rituals in the Anthropocene. I demonstrate how critical posthumanism interweaves with qualitative and creative practice methods to investigate human-environment interactions. While common qualitative research methods typically involve collecting and analysing data through interview transcripts, ethnographic field notes, and coding (Creswell, 2013; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Seale et al., 2004), posthumanist scholars incorporate images, sounds, movements, and dreams (MacLure et al., 2010; Mazzei, 2010; Nordstrom, 2013; Reinertsen & Otterstad, 2013; St. Pierre, 2014; Swirski, 2013). Departing from conventional approaches, they also reconsider the researcher's position of being "at arm's length from the data, exercising interpretive dominion over them" (Koro-Ljungberg, MacLure, & Ulmer, 2018, p. 816), towards a perspective of co-creation. According to Koro-Ljungberg et al. (2018), data is not passive but is considered "lively, agentic, and infused with affect" (p. 816). As such, Deleuze (2004) perceives engagement with data as events, that "are actualized within us, waiting for us and inviting us in" (p. 169). Alternatively, this interaction can lead to an experience in which knowledge "exceeds our frames of reference" (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. xvi). According to Deleuze (2000), in this process material entities and language are intricately intertwined in dynamic 'assemblages', encompassing "states of things, bodies, various combinations of bodies, hodgepodes" as well as linguistic components such as "utterances, modes of expression, and whole regimes of signs" (p. 177).

Recognising the interconnectivity between language and materiality, I crafted an entangled methodology, where posthuman theory was actualised through practical applications, allowing me to fluidly move between different modes of encounter. These involved semi-structured interviews, guided discussions (focus groups), and written feedback via email, alongside creative practice methods such as ritual performance-making, workshops, creative journaling, sound recording, and filmmaking. In this chapter I first discuss the qualitative methods of interviewing four ritual experts, guided discussions (focus groups) with seven performer participants, and audience feedback. Then, I introduce the creative practice methods employed for both creating and analysing four site-specific performance rituals.

Qualitative Research Methods

As discussed in Chapter Three, a qualitative research design is appropriate to seek insights and understand embodied experiences of site-specific performance rituals in the Anthropocene. In this qualitative, constructivist research informed by critical posthumanist theory, I interviewed four key experts to seek insights and consider how these insights might

inform my understanding of site-specific performance rituals. I also aimed to understand how different seasonal rituals might be expressed in specific sites in Aotearoa by working creatively with seven performer participants in making four seasonal rituals over one year. Alongside the creative workshops, I utilised the qualitative methods of guided discussions (focus groups) with performer participants and invited audience feedback. Discussing the qualitative methods first, I then focus on creative practice research methods.

Key Expert Interviews

Interviews are a common qualitative research method in the field of human research (Roulston, 2010). Denzin (2001) describes interviews as “dialogic and performative processes that have the goal of bringing new kinds of people and new worlds into being” (p. 1013). According to Markula and Silk (2011), the format of semi-structured interviews is generally employed when researchers aim to gather in-depth knowledge of people’s diverse experiences, typically lasting one to three hours. This approach differs from standardised interviews which tend to have more fixed and predetermined questions and response options. Interviews enable the researcher to address additional information and emerging topics, while also permitting them to share their own experiences and viewpoints (Markula & Silk, 2011). This participant-driven dialogue allows the interviewee to elaborate at some length on the topics discussed, revealing unexpected information and interpretations that could not have been anticipated in advance (Markula & Silk, 2011).

In this research methodology, the informal semi-structured interview approach entailed conducting initial interviews with four ritual experts. The first interview took place before the spring equinox ritual, while subsequent interviews occurred after the summer solstice, with follow-up discussions throughout the thesis. The interview findings significantly influenced my approach to workshopping and the conceptualisation of the rituals. The interviewing methods with experts expanded from the informal semi-structured interview techniques and involved embodied sense-making methods, as elaborated in this chapter. Different interpretations and knowledge from each of the four experts about seasonal rituals offered valuable insights on how to sensitively facilitate site-specific performance rituals in the socio-cultural context of Aotearoa. I met each ritual expert at a location of their preference to learn about their different perspectives and practices. Before these interviews, each expert was provided with a list of questions in advance so they could prepare themselves (see Appendix for interview questions). It is important to note that while the format of semi-structured interviews tends to be primarily guided by the interviewer, I deliberately emphasised an ‘informal’ approach. In this informal approach, questions were formulated in an open-ended fashion, affording interviewees greater flexibility to lead the directions of the conversations (Roulston & Choi, 2017). The primary emphasis was placed on granting the experts the freedom to elaborate on

questions that personally resonated with them, frequently prompting them to share experiences and discuss topics that proved to be far more engaging than the initial questions I had prepared.

In my role as the interviewer, I made a deliberate effort to adopt a multifaceted approach to listening that extended beyond relying solely on oral and visual cues. This encompassed an attentiveness to my bodily responses, involving a keen awareness of physiological signals such as breathing patterns and muscular tension. Jennifer Leigh (2018) describes such an embodied participation of the researcher as an important part because it allows for collecting sensorial information that “feed[s] into a reflective and reflexive process of understanding myself, the world that surrounds me and others that move within the world” (p. 154). Challenging the idea that human understanding of the world is solely shaped by words and language, I included sensory experiences as part of the interview process. By embracing embodied methods of sense-making, I gained a better understanding of how specific insights elicited heightened reactions in me, both in terms of resistance and acceptance. Immediate bodily responses to certain insights such as changes in breath or muscle tone, served as indicators of emotional comfort or discomfort, prompting me to reflect on potential disagreement and biases in my role as an interviewer. Additionally, in my approach to embodiment, I embraced receptiveness to the environment throughout the interview process. This involved actively observing behaviours of birds, patterns of wind and sunlight to establish potential connections between the shared content and the more-than-human world. With this approach, I also sought to recognise the Māori practice of acknowledging *tohu* (signs) as a spiritual dimension contributing to the creation of meaning. Inviting the voices of the more-than-human world to join the interview process was especially relevant, as certain experts invited me to partake in activities like bush walks, and planting *Hine Pū Te Hue* (gourds), to highlight the interconnectedness between the material and immaterial realms as part of knowledge production. These tangible and ephemeral experiences allowed me to comprehend the information on a deeper level, often unfolding gradually over time, in dreams or unexpected encounters.

Following each interview, I dedicated time to transcribing as well as recording observations about my sensory experiences, moments of silence, facial expressions, and any emotions that surfaced for both the experts and me during our dialogues. Additionally, I sent an email with transcripts and asked any questions that may have been prompted while transcribing. This ongoing dialogue led to additional feedback and offered me important insights on how to implement suggested changes. Furthermore, I invited all experts to attend the public ritual performances to gain feedback from a specialist audience perspective (although only one was able to attend). Instead, conducting a brief follow-up interview and

sharing the video content with those who could not attend, prompted written responses. Furthermore, after analysing the insights provided by the experts, I shared the chapter with them to engage in a conversation about how their knowledge had been represented and integrated into the overall discussion. This process was vital in my interpretations. Through engaging in conversations with ritual experts, acknowledging their diverse worldviews, and researching with care, I felt supported in culturally sensitive ways of ritual-making in a country that was not my place of birth and to which I was not yet accustomed.

Guided Discussions (Focus Groups)

In this research, I utilised guided discussions, an adapted form of focus groups, which is a qualitative research method employing group discussions to collect findings (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018). In this way, participants had the opportunity to share a range of perspectives and experiences contributing to my research question of how different seasonal rituals may be expressed in specific sites in Aotearoa (interview questions see Appendix). According to Bosco and Herman (2018), focus groups are a useful way to “interrogate the multiple meanings that people attribute to relationships and to places” (p. 2). Rather than seeing focus groups as merely a quick way to collect group data, for Bosco and Herman (2018), participants can “actively engage with some of the theories, concepts, and main ideas using different kinds of language” (p. 16), and thus collaborate in the production and application of academic knowledge. Furthermore, according to James Kneale (2001), such an in-depth way of collecting data has the potential to “shift the balance of power away from the researcher toward the participants and allow for supportive and reflexive encounters” (p. 2).

The three guided discussions (focus groups) I conducted across the site-specific performance rituals during the year-long study were integrated into the workshop process involving seven performer participants and began in the first workshop. Another occurred during the mid-year, and the last after the last performance ritual. The primary aim of the guided discussions was to provide an opportunity for the performer participants to elucidate a range of experiential, cognitive, embodied, and critical facets associated with their engagement in site-specific performance rituals. How these facets manifested will be discussed later in the creative practice section. The objective was to prompt participants to reflect on their past ritual experiences, and to encourage collaboration in the development of new conceptualisations that could then be integrated into the process of crafting the subsequent workshops and site-specific performance rituals. This process happened in a “circular, iterative” manner (Hennink, 2014, p. 98), where participants could get actively involved in “co-constructing understandings and analyses of dancing experiences together and with the researcher” (Barbour, 2019, p. 8).

Throughout these guided discussions, I actively worked to cultivate a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere. This entailed offering food and beverages, intending to promote the participants' comfort and encourage their active participation in the discussions. Central to my approach was the commitment to maintaining an open dialogue, ensuring that I, as the researcher, refrained from assuming any hierarchical behaviour. Throughout the interview process, my attention was directed toward capturing not only the participant's explicit verbal expressions but also their implicit non-verbal elements. This encompassed sensory experiences, conversational pauses, facial expressions, bodily tensions, breathing, and emotional nuances, thereby offering distinct insights into their intricate lived experiences beyond the limitations of words. Following each guided discussion, I proceeded to transcribe the conversations in detail. Subsequently, I distributed a summary of the transcripts to the participants via email. Along with the transcripts, participants were invited to clarify or pose any questions regarding the content or context of the discussions. This step was taken to ensure transparency and collaboration in the representation of their contributions. The last stage involved a thematic analysis (further elaboration available in the analysis section), followed by the integration of these insights and findings into the discussion within the creative practice chapter.

Feedback from Audience Members at Performance Rituals

After the public performance rituals, I verbally invited adult audience members present during the rituals to offer feedback via email within two weeks after the performance rituals (see Appendix for questions). I provided a brief written invitation to each audience member containing information about the research, my contact details, and brief open questions. Audience members could answer as they felt most comfortable and could choose to respond or not. This written feedback via email was then integrated into my analysis of the ritual performances. After the summer solstice, I received a substantial amount of feedback, while for the autumn equinox, the feedback was less, primarily because of the smaller audience. The spring equinox and winter solstice did not involve audience feedback, because they were not public performance rituals.

Creative Practice As Research in Dance

The term 'creative practice' encompasses a diverse range of activities spanning art, design, film, performance (theatre, dance, and music), and writing, among others (Oliver, 2018). While these artistic representations have their own validity (Latour, 1999), standing as "pieces of art in their own right" (Leigh, 2018, p. 167), Barrett and Bolt (2010) suggest that "artistic practice be viewed as the production of knowledge or philosophy in action" (p. 1). In their perspectives as researchers, art practices assume a significant role in the production of "personally situated

knowledge and new ways of modelling and externalising such knowledge” (Barrett & Bolt, 2010, p. 2). Barbour (2011) expresses that creative practice methodologies not only recognise the creative processes of artistic practice but also allow for new arts-specific methods and findings. The significance of the research resides in the “innovation in the given artistic practice” (Skains, 2018, p. 85); and a comprehensive examination of how these innovations relate to broader philosophical, social, and cultural contexts (Oliver, 2018).

According to Skains (2018), the major phase of such a methodology is led by the creative practice, where the researcher engages in all aspects of the embodied, creative, and intellectual process. To accomplish this, creative practice researchers employ methodological principles that encompass the articulation of an ontological perspective, the selection of an appropriate epistemological approach, and the strategic planning of the methodology (Niedderer & Roworth-Stokes, 2007; Skains, 2018; Barbour, 2011). All these factors need to align coherently with the research approach and the specific research question at hand. While this method can be referred to in different terms such as: “arts-based research”, “practice-based research”, “practice-led research” (Niedderer & Roworth-Stokes, 2007, p. 7), I used the variant practice-as-research in dance (Phillips et al., 2008). It is a methodology that recognises the embodied knowledge of a dancer who participates in a research inquiry, as well as the researcher’s own experiences (Barbour, 2019). In this view, dances are the embodiment of thought in action, making the act of dancing itself the core methodology (Vincs, 2010). In such a process, the “distinctions between theory and practice dissolve as haptic explorations generate theoretical insights and philosophical provocations extend how dancers understand their work” (Longley, 2016, p. 230). Here, both the act of dancing (to create findings), as well as the act of communicating the findings (through artistic work) are part of the creative research method revealing valuable contributions to knowledge (Barbour, 2011; Foster, 1998; Fraleigh & Hanstein, 1999; Phillips et al., 2008; Vincs, 2010). Thus, creative practice as research in dance not only provides a valuable methodology engaging with reflexive embodied experiences but also offers useful methods for performative and written presentations of the research findings (Barbour, 2019).

Skains (2018) further elaborates that to explore the main research question, the researcher designs a creative project that will “foster insights into the process of composition, and that will permit a uniquely practice-based perspective on the question at hand” (p. 95). The creative project in my PhD revolved around seeking new knowledge in the field of site-specific performance rituals in the Anthropocene through the process of facilitating workshops for a group of performer participants, leading to four site-specific performance ritual events. Knowing that full comprehension of the research topic could only be accomplished through

the inclusion of the creative outcome (Skains, 2018), I situated the different site-specific performance rituals as creative practice components within my overall PhD thesis. This also included a critical discussion of the insights that arose in response to the research questions. According to Barrett and Bolt (2010), creative practice can be a messy phase of the research that “cannot always be pre-determined, and “out-comes” of artistic research are necessarily unpredictable” (p. 3). Navigating the intersection of theory and the dynamic requirements of the creative process, I responded to emerging themes and shifting circumstances while maintaining a practice of journaling and recording the observation throughout. Furthermore, I incorporated the methods of guided discussions (focus groups) and audience feedback, alongside experimental approaches of somatic inquiry, improvisation, performance-ritual making, journal writing, sound recording, and film-making, as discussed next.



Figure 2: Creative Practice Timeline

Performance Ritual Making

As discussed, in the field of creative practice as research, dance-making and/or choreography is a recognised method (Barbour, 2019). Like other arts-based research, significance lies in the creative process (Skains, 2018). Thus, the creative process of dance-making and/ or choreography is valued as the output from the generated knowledge, allowing for the embodied experience of creative engagement as well as the creation of performances (Barbour, 2011; Vincs, 2010). I have adapted this method from the research model of ‘dance

making', where the creative process of a dancer is regarded as a valued way of inquiry (Barbour, 2011; Foster, 1998; Fraleigh & Hanstein, 1999; Pakes, 2009; Stinson, 2006). The method of dance-making, according to Barbour (2019), usually starts with the researcher's initial idea and research question/s, leading into the dance-making process and creative practice methodologies. Aspects of dance making, or performance/ritual making include the creative process of generating movement, leading into choreographic sequences.

In adapting this method for researching site-specific performance rituals, I included somatic movement improvisation tasks, vocal experimentations, explorations of the environment, and site-specific dance practices. These methods involved creating new knowledge in the field of performance rituals, as well as the embodiment of the findings in the form of performing four seasonal site-specific performance rituals. The significance of my findings is represented in the videos of site-specific performance rituals, as well as discussed in the written text. In the next section. I will introduce the methods of the workshops.

Workshops: Performance Ritual Experimentations

Matthews (2012) describes a workshop as a place of knowledge transfer where participants creatively engage in a "relationship between action and togetherness" (p. 360). Alys Longley (2016) uses the words 'creative, embodied, relational laboratories' to describe a workshop-like setting, where "dance practitioners hone their skills of improvising and feeling in feedback loops where theory is practiced and practice generates theory" (p. 230). In the context of this PhD, I understood 'workshops' as a creative platform, a time and space for experimenting, improvising, stimulating imagination, inspiring critical reflection, and collaboratively creating different modes of site-specific performance ritual practices. To actualise these experiments into four site-specific performance ritual events, I implemented a devising methodology. As the researcher, I assumed the role of a 'facilitating choreographer' (Butterworth, 2004). My transition in performance practice toward devised methodologies was influenced by Grotowski (2012), Halprin (1996), Hay (2000), Barbour (2011), Longley (2016), and others. Their redefinition of the creative performer's role and promotion of non-hierarchical structures served as a significant source of inspiration. Butterworth, who further translated devising methods into a dance framework, asserts that:

Through an interactive, discursive approach, the choreography evolves (much like ensemble work in theatre) through the active participation of the dancers in content creation (improvisation and responding to tasks), problem-solving, and negotiation" (Butterworth, 2004, p. 60).

Through the utilisation of this methodology, the performer participants were encouraged to take an active role in the process. They contributed to the performance ritual content,

conceptualised formats, embodied expressions, critically reflected on their actions, and drew upon their personal experiences during improvisational sessions and discussions. However, while the performer participants actively engaged in generating new knowledge and crafting ritual performances, I, as the researcher, retained the responsibility for upholding the initial intention and concept. Thus, closer to the date of the performance events, I transitioned into a more directive role. In this capacity, I carefully guided the participants in structuring their movement discoveries for the performance rituals.

The workshops I facilitated for a year were situated around the seasonal markers of spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Each workshop series had a slightly different focus and engaged with different themes and methods. What remained consistent was that each of them served as a vessel for experiencing the interconnectedness between bodies, cultures, and environments. Inspired by scholars such as Olsen, Barbour, East, Hay, Carboni, and others, we explored creative ways of seasonal ritual practices in different sites in Aotearoa through eco-somatic movement tasks and site-specific performances. Moreover, I employed ritualistic processes as a method, ensuring that each workshop commenced with an activity of attuning to participants' emotional and physical states. This was followed by an exploration of a particular theme and finalised with an acknowledgment of what we had initiated. Over the year-long study, these sessions continuously evolved in response to insights from interviews with the ritual experts, academic literature, and feedback from the performer participants. Each workshop took two hours, which developed into daylong rehearsals closer to the date of the public performances.

The first workshop was held at the eco-retreat at Solscape. It started with a welcome, leading into an opening circle for establishing relationships between the participants and myself. With this process, I aimed to provide participants with an "experience of belonging and being valued" (Amans, 2008, p. XI), fostering the "ability to trust and be trusted" (p. XI), and cultivating care for one another. As a framework for community building, I was guided by the Human Research Ethics of the University of Waikato, as well as the ethics of dance-making. As I was working with participants from different cultural backgrounds (Slovenia, Iran, France, Italy, England, and New Zealand), I facilitated an introduction that invited everyone to share a song, poem, prayer, or a few words in their own language. Thereafter, each workshop began with an agreed process of ritual/relationship building, followed by a body warm-up, a focus on the theme of the workshop, incorporating diverse movement tasks that involved personal sensations and environmental awareness. In addition, I guided participants on walks in various environments, prompting reflection and subsequent journal discussions, concluding each session with a closing circle. In the further development of the workshops, I also started to integrate the Seven Stages of Ritual by Batten (1988) as a framework.

In the upcoming section, I will provide a more detailed discussion of how the specific methods I employed became apparent through an ongoing dialogue with each respective site, highlighting the necessity of tailoring the methodology to the unique characteristics of each setting.

Working in Response to Different Sites

To gain a greater understanding of how somatic dance practices could activate more-than-human awareness, the workshop participants and I engaged in a series of movement explorations in the bush, in the gardens of Solscape, in an industrial area in Kirikiriroa (Hamilton), in supermarkets in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland), and Whāingaroa (Raglan). Additionally, I independently conducted a series of workshops in my backyard and on the nearby beach as a response to the global pandemic (restrictions of local movement and a lockdown). Olsen's Body and Earth programme, a guide that uses somatics and imagery as the main sources for knowledge creation and more-than-human interaction, was the primary method for the movement experiments in the spring workshop series.

For the summer solstice workshop series, I used Carboni's (2019) Embodied Map (EM) as a guide for urban mapping and sense-making. This cartographic method prompted ways of capturing the geometry, scales, boundaries, limitations, configurations, shapes, patterns, materiality, and happenings of an industrial area in Kirikiriroa. This systematic approach to generating movement material appeared most fitting for translating the built environment into choreographic sequences, which were then performed during the summer solstice performance ritual. Another method included eco-somatic practices designed to attune to the nearby bush and cultivate presence with the more-than-human world.

The Autumn Equinox had a different focus. In this ritual, I deliberately used the Seven Stages of Ritual by Batten (1988) as a framework (see literature review). However, as the interrogation of established ritual structures was a crucial element of my creative practice research within the Anthropocene context, I moved beyond mere repetition and, instead, infused my practices with posthumanist philosophy. Thus, the final Winter Solstice shopping ritual was an experiment, where I took Batten's Seven Stages into a supermarket context.

In addition to crafting performance and ritual content for the various events, another dimension involved the creation of soundscapes designed as audio tracks to be played on these occasions, as discussed next.

Creation of Soundscapes

The study of sound has become a discipline for researchers specialising in sound, and for those who include a sonic element in their studies (Bull, 2018). Given that non-human voices played a crucial role in my site-specific performance rituals, the method of environmental sound recording seemed appropriate. According to Bianchi and Manzo (2016), the term 'environmental sound' does not refer to a specific kind of sound, or environment, but rather to sound that is "defined by its environmental context" (p. x). This includes sounds of animals, plants, wind, and urban noises. Studying and documenting sonic impressions of the more-than-human world in this PhD involved being in a specific location while practicing focused listening and recording the environment. These experiences brought awareness to various voices that co-existed in a specific site, shaping the performer's physical expressions and choreographic thinking. How sound and embodiment are intertwined is explained by Eduardo Brantes (2021), who states that sonic attunement is "not confined to the ear; the whole body is an engaged (and engaging) vibratory system of agency and resonant permeability" (p. 31).

Paying attention to the sonic impressions of a specific site stimulated the creation of different sound scores that I composed for the soundtrack of the different site-specific performance rituals. Here, the summer solstice and winter solstice were inspired by the format of an audio walk, combining elements of "aural scenography, embodied dramaturgy and sound design" to highlight intersections of self and environment (Abrantes, 2021, p. 31). In this context, the life sounds of the place and the pre-recorded soundtrack played through speakers (summer solstice) and headphones (winter solstice) were entangled in dynamic ways. Ranging from blending into each other to creating juxtapositions, I played with "affect atmosphere, immersivity and performativity" (Brantes, 2021, p. 31). In addition to incorporating natural sounds, I also integrated recordings of Taonga Pūoro through a collaboration with Māori artists¹², whose contributions of oro (sound) were interwoven into the soundtrack. Furthermore, I recorded vocal instructions, bringing attention to different aspects of self and site to encourage audience members to engage in meaningful actions.

For the spring equinox and autumn equinox, I undertook a different sound approach. Here, the performer participants danced with the live sounds of the environment using their own voices, singing songs, reciting chants and spoken words, and making music with natural elements such as stones and sticks. During the autumn equinox celebration, pre-existing songs were incorporated, and live instructions were provided by one of the co-facilitators. These various sonic and visual elements converged into four video works, translating the immersive auditory and visual experiences of the live events into a virtual medium.

¹² Komako Aroha Silver and Alejandra Jensen

Audio-Visual Documentation of the Performance Rituals

In discussing the significance of performance documentation, some scholars such as Peggy Phelan see a distinction between the live event and its documentation. For Phelan (1993), “performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance (p. 146). However, Philip Auslander (2023) argues that documentation is moving beyond the idea that there is a strict division between the material (live performance) and immaterial (documentation). Similarly, Claire Read (2014) argues against a dual perspective, proposing a cyclical relationship where the “live performance does not end with the documents or archives of live performance, but that these documents are themselves performances anew” (p. 68). Susanne Franco (2023) describes documentation as “fragmentary evidence” and the “performance afterlife”, asserting that the primary value of representation resides in its capacity to engage viewers with the performance and convey its main intent and purpose. Inspired by these scholars, my primary objective was not to merely produce a video documentary capturing the live performance rituals. Rather, I aspired to create a visual representation of the analysis, guided discussions (focus groups), expert interviews, audience feedback, journal entries, and critical theoretical perspectives to accentuate the most pertinent insights, thereby offering a complementary visual representation to accompany the written thesis. To achieve this, I implemented several filming, audio recording, and editing methods, as discussed next.

Filming of the Performance Rituals

Dianne Reid (2010) suggests that transitioning dance into a screen-based medium demands developing methods for creating a sense of emotional connection between the performer, the material, and the camera. In her view, to foster a dynamic and expressive interaction among the dancers, the camera operator, the movement material, and the environment, the choreography of the camera needs to become “a facilitation of an interpersonal exchange” (Reid, 2010, p. 54). This requires building trust between the performers and the videographer and cultivating an environment where everyone involved feels comfortable to become vulnerable. In this way, moments of self-consciousness, triggered by the presence of an external observer, can transform into states of flow where the camera is seen as an integral part of the experience (Warshaw, 1982). The importance of establishing this intimate connection between the camera and the dancers became further apparent in the filming of the spring equinox ritual. Initially, I considered engaging an external videographer; however, due to the private nature of the ritual, it became evident that this would have disrupted the atmosphere among the participants. Thus, I opted to film the ritual myself to ensure a more immersive and intimate experience for everyone involved. My insider perspective enabled a

more nuanced comprehension of the dancers' subtleties, vulnerabilities, and their relationships and interactions with the site. Capturing these reciprocal relationships became crucial to further highlight the environment as a mutual protagonist, rather than merely a background for the dancers' activities, as indicated by Kloetzel (2016).

This was especially important because site dance events commonly invite audience members to experience the details of a place with all senses, while screen dance "relies heavily on the visual and aural to convey an idea, unable to access the other senses through its virtual medium" (Kloetzel, 2016, p. 22). Thus, in screen dance, there is often a deliberate effort to emphasise sensory experiences through visual cues. However, one of the challenges in this PhD was to work with footage from performance rituals that originated from a live event. Here, choreographic choices and framing of scenes were arranged to guide the attention of the performers and audience participants, and not created for a screen dance. Consequently, the videographer needed to spontaneously respond to the quality and experiences of the live events and allow live encounters to influence the choice of filming. This was an open process where each site-specific ritual followed different filming methods suitable for the event being filmed. The filming involved making spontaneous decisions, such as choosing camera angles and deciding between close-ups or long shots.

In contrast to the spring equinox, the summer solstice was public and was filmed by a videographer¹³ who followed the pathways of the site-specific ritual. Furthermore, in editing the footage of the video, I included some pictures that were taken by an external photographer also focusing on the environment as well as the participating people. For the autumn equinox, the external videographer¹⁴ used a smartphone for close-ups of performer participants. Additionally, two cameras on tripods captured stills, documenting the overall activity of the audience participants. For the winter solstice, the videographer used his smartphone to capture close-ups and long shots, while another camera was fixed on one of the shopping trolleys that was manipulated by one of the dancers. The low-angle camera captured footage from a non-human perspective, recording unpredicted images directed through the object-body relationship in motion. According to Kloetzel (2015), such a de-hierarchical camera setup can reveal a hidden world and intimacy with place.

Sound Recording of the Performance Rituals

Not all sounds represented in the video originated from the live event itself but, also included edited components. The rationale behind this choice was multifaceted; for instance, during the spring equinox ritual, an unplanned incident occurred where the microphone connected to the

¹³ Nina Reed

¹⁴ Marek Kaniewski

camera was accidentally detached, resulting in the loss of audio for a significant portion of the experience. Consequently, during post-production, I revisited the location to capture the environmental sounds, which were subsequently incorporated into the soundscape. Furthermore, I recorded some of the somatic instructions that were originally given live by the performer participants to provide the context needed to convey the experience. These examples show that producing a site-specific ritual soundscape for a film is not straightforward. Instead, it happens in unpredictable ways that demand moving back and forth between the live and the electronic, the past and the present. In this sense, the soundtrack of the video work has undergone several metamorphoses, combining the pre-composed soundtrack with sonic information that originated from the actual life experience of the ritual. Furthermore, through the editing process of the video, the soundtrack was altered again. Here, I added illustrative elements to comment on the performer participant's experiences, amplifying important factors that were shared with me during the guided discussions (focus groups) and follow-up interviews. The viewer of the videos experiences a soundscape that spans a timeframe from before and after the actual ritual event.

Much like the challenge of translating live performances to the screen, I encountered the difficulty of documenting the movements, sounds, images, textures, gestures, kinaesthetic experiences, and actions in a written text. In the following section, I outline the methodology used to translate the lived experiences of the creative practice research onto the page.

Textual Documentation of the Performance Rituals

The task of capturing the four site-specific performance rituals in written form proved to be a multifaceted challenge that necessitated "finding an appropriate approach to the page, identifying the words, syntax, grammar" (Longley, 2011, p. 9). In my case, this difficulty was further amplified because I was writing in a language that was not my native tongue, often resulting in frustration that the English words did not seem to convey precisely what I intended to say. Acknowledging this challenge, I adopted a viewpoint where writing was a fluid transition between language and "sensuous, tactile presences remade by the mark of the body" (Simon, 2006, p. 3). Influenced by Barbour's method of 'dancing across the page' (2014), I incorporated writing as a form of embodied exploration, allowing me to move back and forth between cognitive analysis, embodiment, performance-making, and theory. Further expanding the conventional confines of written representations found in academia, I chose a writing style characterised by Stinson (1995) as a "sensory-rich" approach. Inspired by Fraleigh (1987, 2015), Barbour (2011), Bingham (2015), Longley (2011, 2013), Snowber (2022), and other dance scholars, I combined a descriptive voice with embodied poetics when describing the performance events. Furthermore, I employed an analytical third-person voice when engaging in theory and integrating the embodied knowledge into academic discourse.

Another research method I utilised to entangle my writing with my movement was the practice of creative journaling. The creative journal is not a diary, but rather a method for personal reflection, where creative processes can be articulated (Janesick, 1999; Longley, 2013; Veal, 2016). In my journal entries, I archived notes, drawings, and poetic texts, all informing my creative practice and thesis writing. I also employed Longley's (2013) technique of movement-initiated writing "to translate the felt affects of movement to a performance on the page" (p. 76). Such embodied documentation prompted the expression of "unexpected, illogical, random, poetic and incoherent streams of text and drawing" (Longley, 2013, p. 56). This method, mirroring the different nuances and dynamics of embodied ways of knowing, was similarly employed to encourage the performer participants to translate their experiences onto paper. The participants were asked to write in their journals, gifted to them on the first workshop day, at specific times during the workshop sessions. This practice yielded a diverse collection of creative poetry and reflections, providing multifaceted inspiration for the creative process. Furthermore, these journal entries were subsequently explored as an additional set of empirical materials alongside the insights gathered from guided discussions and video recordings. While these methods assisted in representing human experiences, I faced the challenge of effectively documenting the voices of non-human entities in written form.

Writing the More-Than-Human World

One of the difficulties when engaging with the more-than-human world is the task of reaching beyond human exceptionalism. This became especially apparent in the written part of this PhD, as "language is often thought of as the key marker of humanity's difference from other species" (Pyke, 2019, p. 1). Although all animals and plants have their unique forms of communication, humans are the only ones who can read or write. Therefore, humans are usually the subjects, and the more-than-humans are the objects we write about. However, when engaging with posthuman theory, different methods are needed when archiving the experiences of others. Thus, moving beyond an anthropocentric viewpoint in my writing, I drew inspiration from scholars such as Danielle Celermajer, Hayley Singer (2021), Deleuze and Guattari (1997). According to Celermajer (2021), a relational writing practice involves tuning into the realities of a living being to better understand that they are active participants in their own stories (Pyke, 2019). Celermajer (2021) applies the technique of 'getting right up close' which motivated me to get entangled with the 'subjects' documented in my journal entries, thesis writing, film editing, and analysis.

One way I did this was through reconnecting to the natural world and becoming still. In those moments of quietly lying on the ground with my face downwards, breathing in the soil, and listening to the sounds, I became intertwined with the more-than-human world. Here, thought processes about literature and theories started to interact with my body, and I engaged

in a process that Braidotti (2019) has termed 'embrainment' of the body and 'embodiment of the mind'. At times, I entered a flow-like state akin to intermediate transcendences, where reality became nebulous, and my imagination took flight. In this synthesis, I became creative and imagined fables that informed my creative practice and choreographic thinking. After I had finished such embodiments of the mind and spirit, I used pen and paper and engaged in movement-initiated writing. These strategies helped me to overcome some of the divisions between humans and non-humans, further shaping the language used for the audio and written thesis.

In navigating this process, my engagement as a creative researcher continually shifted between content creation, reflection, analysis, text, film, and sound editing in ongoing ways. This multifaceted approach contributed to the development of four site-specific performance rituals and a written thesis, highlighting the iterative nature of creative practice as research. Rather than following a linear progression, it demanded an interweaving of multiple modes of engagement, moving back and forth between the analysis of the video footage, journal entries, guided discussions, expert interviews, and choreographic material, constantly processed through embodied and cognitive methods of sense-making. The specific methods of analysis, I employed are further articulated in the next section.

Methods of Analysis

Given the complexity of my creative practice research, I needed to craft analysis methods that allowed me to engage with the generated knowledge through, with, and in relation to each other in iterative ways. Inspired by post-qualitative scholars such as Nordstrom (2013); Maggie MacLure (2013); Lisa Mazzei (2014); Anne Reinertsen and Ann Otterstad (2013), who emphasise that "there is more to data analysis than a reduction of research narratives to a series of thematic groupings" (Mazzei, 2014, p. 242), I embraced approaches that allowed for the emergence of embodied insights through messy and non-linear processes. This echoed MacLure (2013) who stresses that "coding misses – movement, difference, singularity, emergence, and the entanglements of matter and language" (p. 170). Addressing the limitations of coding, I integrated conventional thematic analysis methods with creative processes and embodied forms of knowing derived from posthumanist approaches. This method appeared most suitable for interpreting the nuanced experiences of participants documented in interview transcripts, creative journals, video footage, pictures, and soundscapes. This was a cyclical process, where I revisited my findings throughout the creative process of ritual making all the way through to writing my thesis. Each iteration offered the possibility to re-access the gathered material, allowing me to respond to insights.

Thematic Analysis with a Posthuman Twist

Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as an “accessible and theoretically-flexible approach to analysing qualitative data” (p. 2). According to Breen (2006), it is a useful tool to find commonalities such as “most important themes; the most noteworthy quotes; [and] any unexpected findings” (p. 472). Braun and Clarke (2006) further point out that it is important to clarify what counts as a pattern or theme, taking into account “whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question” (p. 10). For the identification of themes for this research, I applied an inductive “bottom-up” approach (Frith & Gleeson, 2004), allowing themes to emerge in ways that I had not initially anticipated.

My process of thematic analysis began with a search for common patterns and noteworthy differences, with sub-themes emerging over time. Reading transcripts, reviewing video content, analysing the movement expressions and facial cues of both performer and audience participants, writing reflections, and searching for connections beyond words (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I constantly shifted between different modes of engagement. Bringing different types of documentation into dialogue, resulted in a cross-weaving, where theoretical insights directly influenced practical applications in workshops and performances and vice versa. Specifically, the analysis of transcripts from ritual experts informed my workshops and the content of diverse site-specific performance rituals. This, in turn, prompted inquiries for subsequent follow-up questions. Furthermore, the analysis of the guided discussions provided insights and themes related to ritual and dance practice, supporting the choice of content and movement activities for the workshops. Additionally, the constant evaluation of the creative journal entries aided in articulating spoken words for the soundscape that I used in the performances. Simultaneously, the video editing process elicited valuable insights for the analysis of the performance rituals.

As mentioned earlier, my thematic analysis approach was intertwined with aspects of post-humanist methods to allow for embodied experiences and paranormal insights to be recognised and represented. MacLure (2013) writes that more than cognitive analysis techniques are needed to comprehend insights that “refuse to submit to the discipline of coding since those occasions might be the ones that open onto wonder” (p. 181). For her, wonder is something “simultaneously out there in the world and inside the body, as sensation, and therefore is distributed across the boundary between person and world” (MacLure, 2013, p. 181). From her perspective, including such wondrous aspects requires an interpretation of data “not for the meanings they convey but for the unanticipated connections that they afford” (MacLure, 2021). Therefore, rather than focusing solely on apparent aspects, a researcher should address the “hidden potentials of the data event”, that may occur as “disrupting (and connecting) intensities of affect”, indicating significant findings (MacLure, 2013, p. 170).

An instance of hidden data in this research manifested as a wasp sting. As detailed in the analysis of the autumn equinox, I experienced a wasp sting during this event, initially giving it little consideration. However, a year later, in the same location, I was stung again. The painful recurrence prompted me to recognise that I had overlooked the voices of the more-than-human world, emphasising the need to shift my analytical focus more prominently beyond human-centric concerns. MacLure (2013) describes such an approach as an ongoing process of inquiry that enables “bodily intensities to surge up into thought and decision making” (p. 172), underscoring the importance of interconnectedness among self, objects, ideas, and agency. Inspired by these perspectives, I closely observed cues from the environment, alongside my bodily responses and intuitive insights while analysing empirical material, a method I termed ‘movement meditation as analysis’.

Movement Meditation as Analysis

As discussed elsewhere, within this research I acknowledged humans’ presence in the world as embodied. Dance scholars such as Barbour (2004), East (2015), Fraleigh (2015), Brown (2020), Kloetzel (2011), Hunter (2021), Leigh, (2018), Snowber (2022), and others, agree that the researcher’s body is a key instrument for knowing, sensing, feeling, and relating to others and self. Therefore, a researcher must get entangled with the objective of their research and analyse findings from a position of ‘body-mind continuum’ (Braidotti, 2019). This has prompted me to constantly switch between different research modalities allowing for ‘movement-initiated thinking’ and ‘thinking-initiated movement’. For Boyd (2019), such embodied ways of sensemaking are valuable strategies that “extend an artist’s conscious awareness” (p. 3), leading to the creation of something “different, something generative, and something wildly imaginative” (Ulmer, 2017, p. 839). The imaginative component was crucial in my creative practice research, leaving space for wonder and an openness to the possibility that there is “more to the world than what we can consciously know, calculate, analyse, categorise or even represent in language” (Boyd, 2019, p. 3).

To access and comprehend content that remained concealed (MacLure, 2013, 2021), I employed the practice of movement meditation, considering how the acquired knowledge from ritual experts, performer participants, and audience members would evoke affective responses. No matter the different modality of data, be it images, soundscapes, video material, journal notes, pictures, philosophical theory, or recordings of ritual experts, I used the strategy of movement meditation to make sense of the shared content. I often started by lying on the ground, paying attention to my breath, then focused on the theme that I wanted to inquire about. I paid close attention to intensities, moments of resistance, muscular release, accessing my body archive to aid the process of sense-making. I moved my thinking until I reached a kind of flow state, a dance of suspended attentiveness. Sometimes, it was an intensive

physical process that felt like being in labour, followed by moments of relaxation, where my nervous system had calmed down, and my busy brain had curled up around my spine. In these moments answers to my questions became more apparent. By simultaneously embracing the cognitive and the corporeal, the imaginative and the rational, the ephemeral and the material, with the creative and the reflective, the findings of this research started to reveal themselves.

Video-Editing as Analysis

The screen version of the four performance rituals represents the creative outcome of the research, a distinctive piece of contemporary ritual performance art. Furthermore, it also served as an analytical tool, during the creative practice and thesis writing stages, providing insights for subsequent interview questions, the development of performance rituals, and the articulation of my findings. This was an iterative process where each stage influenced the next, contributing to the ongoing refinement of the research and editing of the video. Kloetzel (2016) notes that in site-dance films, there is a notable absence of sensory experiences like touch and smell, along with the viewer's inability for real-time interactions with others and the environment. Given the constraints of kinaesthetic encounters on a two-dimensional screen, alongside other challenges presented by the "flatness of the video image" (Barnes, 2016, p. 245), dance filmmakers employ various methods to enhance recorded movement. Arendell (2016) describes techniques for manipulating raw footage, enabling dancers to be "multiplied, divided, enhanced, sped up or slowed down" (p. 8), while Kassel (2016) emphasises how the rhythm of cuts can alter the dynamics of the dances.

Taking such considerations into account, I made the deliberate choice to apply editing techniques, fully cognisant that the alteration of video footage would shift the creative output of this PhD project. The rationale behind altering the data was to highlight certain aspects based on the feedback from participants on how they experienced the performance rituals. In pursuing this approach, I aimed to craft a video that offered an immersive experience of the live event for the viewer, while also presenting a screen representation in alignment with my research question of how different seasonal rituals might be expressed in different sites in Aotearoa. Thus, during the editing process, I highlighted specific key features that emerged as significant findings. I employed diverse editing techniques, including distortion, dissolving images, colour adjustments, speed variations, and specific cut rhythms, to accentuate the physical details of a site, enhance the portrayal of emotional states, and capture the overall atmosphere of the event, aligning with insights derived from the analysis. This process involved continuous transitions between video editing, performance creation, and thematic analysis, further honing my discussion chapter and articulating my findings.

According to Skains (2018), such non-linear processes are common in creative practice research, allowing a comprehensive weaving of different modes of sensemaking, revealing unforeseen possibilities and unexpected connections. I found the combination of thematic analysis with aspects of posthumanist approaches alongside embodied forms of analysis a suitable method to structure the messy strands of knowledge generated through creative practice. Having provided a detailed discussion of the specific research methodologies, I next discuss ethical considerations underlying my practice.

Ethical Considerations

Acknowledging potential ethical complexities arising from relationships with research participants, Virginia Olesen (2011) considers the concept of 'relational ethics'. This involves embodying values such as "mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work" (Ellis, 2008, p. 308). While my goal was to establish an atmosphere based on mutual respect, I was aware of uneven power dynamics that might surface between participants and my researcher self, as underscored by Bogner et al. (2018). Acknowledging the potential positions of power I may hold as an experienced performance artist, and my associations with academia, I took active steps to dismantle these barriers by practicing reflexivity, transparency, care, and confidentiality (Toombs et al., 2017). Reflexivity, according to Etherington (2004), allows us to "notice our responses to the world around us, other people and events and use that knowledge to inform our actions, communications, understandings" (p. 19). Thus, I continually scrutinised my intentions and actions to ensure I maintained caring, open, and reciprocal relationships. This involved intentionally disrupting any hierarchical distances that could exist between the participants and myself. Moreover, I adopted a co-learner role and admitted limitations and insecurities instead of projecting an image of an expert. In doing so, I sought to create an environment where participants felt encouraged to attend to their needs, engage in ways that aligned with their comfort levels, and think critically. These ethical considerations became particularly crucial given that the research was conducted amid a global pandemic. Consequently, I was dedicated to conscientiously navigating the intricacies of individuals' unique experiences, offering support to participants contending with challenges throughout the research process.

Moreover, in delving into the topic of the Anthropocene and employing an embodied posthumanist research approach, often described as "inevitably messy, as it echoes the messiness of life" (Leigh, 2018, p. 168), I was aware of potential emotional complexities that could arise. Consequently, it became imperative to contemplate my preparedness to assist participants to address the unfiltered, and painful emotions that these approaches might evoke

(Leigh, 2018). To meet this challenge, I increased my meditation practice and sought guidance on how to facilitate discussions on uncomfortable topics, prioritising the well-being of all participants, including myself. These considerations were inspired by the ethical paradigm of dialogical relationships and care as outlined by Smith et al. (2009). Moreover, I found clarity in my research position through the utilisation of Butterworth's (2009) framework for dance-making and devising performance methods.

In my study, I expanded the relational ethics as described above and I considered an ethic of respect that included the more-than-human world (Haraway, 2008). Thus, when visiting a site, I made sure to be mindful of potential other living beings co-inhabiting that place and to practice sustainable behaviours. Further, I also carefully considered the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, as applying to all people in Aotearoa: "Partnership, participation, and protection" (Hudson & Russell, 2009, p. 61). Thus, I took care to engage in the process of obtaining informed consent and to negotiate thoughtfully within the performance ritual-making process with all participants. Given that two of the four experts were of Māori descent, I carried an awareness of both research practice ethics and tikanga Māori (Mead, 2006). Therefore, as described in my methodology, I acknowledged the principles of mātauranga Māori, employed ethics of dialogical relationships (Smith et al., 2009), and handled the shared information with care, reflexivity, and confidentiality. This also involved careful consideration of how people's contributions were being used so that their mana was protected through following "processes, procedures and consultation" (Mead, 2006, p. 445). I also enrolled in a beginner course in te reo Māori (Māori language) to gain deeper insight into how to interact with greater cultural sensitivity. Furthermore, I shared my work with the participants for consultation and feedback to demonstrate respect and care for each person involved.

Establishing and nurturing compassionate, transparent, and reciprocal relationships was vital in this research, leading to the formation of meaningful connections and the sharing of a rich tapestry of knowledge as documented in this thesis. The next chapter will discuss the experiences of four ritual experts and their nuanced perspectives on ritual practices.

Chapter Five: Ritual Expert Interviews and Analysis

This chapter focuses on the interviews undertaken with the four experts in ritual practices from Aotearoa. I initially introduce the experts by using their full names, and subsequently, I refer to them by their surnames. Furthermore, to distinguish between interview-based content and quotes extracted from published articles, I include the respective publication year in brackets. The analysis reveals each expert's responses to different questions investigating how the insights of key ritual experts might inform the understanding of site-specific performance rituals. Their insights anchored my research here on this land, giving a glimpse into rituals that are situated in this specific context and by no means intended to represent the vast landscape of ritual practices.

As described in my literature review, within the wider field of ritual theory there are many possibilities for ritual practices ranging from those practiced in authoritative 'Religions of Difference', operating in hierarchical structures where humans are saved by a God "outside rather than within" (Woodhead & Heelas, 2000, p. 27), to 'Spiritualities of Life' where people communicate with their conception of the divine directly, without an institution or God as a mediator. In my choice of four ritual experts to interview, I have prioritised those closer to the approach of 'Spiritualities of Life', who situated their practice within a pantheistic or Indigenous worldview, in which there is no single God in the centre, and in which humans have no dominance over the earth but see themselves as part of it. Furthermore, in relation to my research question, it was relevant to interview scholars who connect their rituals to seasonal cycles and the wider ecology. Also, it seemed appropriate to interview experts who were experienced in doing rituals on this whenua (land) and who understood the spiritual and socio-cultural complexity of ritual practices in Aotearoa. While some of the experts were also involved in political rituals such as Waitangi Day, the specific focus of the interview was not so much on state-level rituals but rather on how seasonal rituals within local communities may contribute to raising environmental awareness.

Another important aspect in my considerations was whether each expert's practice was suggestive instead of dogmatic so that it could inspire a diverse group of people to participate from their own cultural positionings and spiritual backgrounds. Therefore, I endeavoured to interview ritual practitioners who demonstrated an openness to operating outside traditional structures and hierarchies, and who engaged in the exploration of various ideas, beliefs, and techniques without rigid boundaries. However, although the practice of the ritual experts could be associated with 'Spiritualities of Life', there were distinct differences in their interpretations. Their complex relationships to place and cultural heritage manifested in diverse ways and often led to hybrid ritualistic encounters. While two of the experts, Pita Turei

and Ngaronoa Renata, have Māori whakapapa, Kathryn Rountree and Juliet Batten traced their spiritual practice back to Pagan traditions from their English, Scottish, or Irish lineages, orienting themselves towards Wicca (modern Pagan witchcraft), the Goddess Movement, or a broader neo-Paganism.

I recognise the significance of incorporating investigations into how ritual intersects with power dynamics during the Anthropocene. However, although my creative practice addressed these dynamics as part of a broader context, my work did not specifically revolve around political rituals or climate change activism. However, as mentioned in my literature review, I carried an awareness that public rituals in Aotearoa/ New Zealand have complex socio-political, environmental, and colonial undercurrents and I therefore incorporated critical theories into my discussion, while being guided by a beginner understanding of mātauranga Māori, and theory about neo-Paganism. This involved identifying the colonising gaze and critically reflecting on my own partial position as a white European researcher while avoiding the amalgamation of distinct cultural approaches and ensuring that I upheld the statements of ritual experts without favouring one knowledge framework over another.

I begin this chapter by introducing the experts, sharing relevant details about their cultural and spiritual associations and types of rituals. This is followed by a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, in which I present the findings of the interviews by grouping excerpts from the transcripts in response to specific questions and themes (Braun, Clarke, et al., 2019). At the end of the chapter, I present a discussion of my findings.

Introducing the Ritual Experts

Ngaronoa Renata (Ngāti Pakahi, Ngāti Kahu, Ngāti Uru, Ngāpuhi)

Ritual practices were introduced to Renata from an early age. No matter whether it was to bless the food, or light a fire, prayers played a crucial part in her daily life, which provided her with a sense of safety and gave her a clear understanding of what is considered tapu (sacred) and what is noa (profane). However, the prayers used in her childhood were Christian and only later as a young adult she invested in the re-vitalisation of mātauranga Māori as part of her spiritual pathway. This included learning about tikanga¹⁵, Te Ataarangi Rākau (Māori language method), traditional stories of Atua (Māori deities), and Mirimiri (Māori bodywork). Another aspect that weaves into her practice is her passion for planting in alignment with te

¹⁵ According to Mead (2006) tikanga Māori can be described as “Māori philosophy in practice and as the practical face of Māori knowledge” (p. 19). Mead explains that “tikanga” means ‘to be right’ and thus tikanga Māori focuses on the correct way of doing something. These guidelines of appropriate behaviour in daily life influence interactions, group dynamics, communication, and personal identities.

Maramataka (Māori lunar calendar), to study Rongoā (Māori plant medicine), and to grow gourds for Taonga Pūoro (sacred sound). For many years she worked as a kaiako (teacher) at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa and continues to generously share her knowledge with members of her Whāingaroa community. While grounded in mātauranga Māori, Renata's practice is influenced by different traditions and the belief that all the world's religious traditions share a common metaphysical core from which their knowledge and doctrine have originated. She studies different forms of Eastern and Western spirituality through the 'Foundation for Higher Learning' founded by Imre Vallyon. Renata explains that "Māori is a different lens, and I can take the glasses off and I see it differently. I know how to do that, and I don't become confused about that". Renata's spiritual practice cross-weaves different traditions in an ever-evolving manner while being a humble student of her foremost teacher: Papatūānuku (Earth mother).

Pita Turei (Ngai Tai Ki Tāmaki, Ngāti Pāoa, Ngā Rauru Kiitahi)

Turei is a storyteller and orator who is interested in connecting people with pre-colonial histories of place. Like numerous Indigenous children in colonised countries, he was separated from his biological family at a young age. He explains: "I had the experience of being a ward of the state looking for my family and it took fifteen years". The desire to reconnect with his family was the driving force behind investigating the history of Aotearoa and learning about Māori rituals, stating:

My first reason for wanting to discover the history of the land is because I wanted to find my mother. I was starting to tell the stories because I needed to make sense of them. I needed to dismantle them beyond the sanitisation so I could find the core of them again, beyond the notion of mythology. (Pita Turei)

The quote highlights the importance for Turei of moving beyond Christian perspectives and upholding traditional narratives for intergenerational knowledge transfer, as an "anchor of our traditional perceptions and ways of relating to our world, to the spiritual realms and to our communities". Turei's stories are also influenced by researching ritual practices of other Earth cultures and his examinations of the Bible, which allow him to understand "what Christianity has done to our history, our cosmology, and our theology". As part of the de-Christianising process, Turei also allows sexuality to be brought back into the ritual narratives.

In the past thirty years, he invested in bringing back traditional Māori rituals into the public consciousness in Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland, contributing to the revitalisation of Māori customary practices and their recognition as part of contemporary New Zealand life. Besides his ritual practices, Turei is a performer who toured both nationally and internationally. He has extensive experience in various creative industries, serving as a director, actor, and

photographer. Furthermore, he works on exhibitions at different museums that include mātauranga Māori in the context of science and how it might be presented to a new generation.

Juliet Batten

Batten studied at Auckland University, graduating with a PhD in English. After some years of university teaching, she spent a decade as a full-time artist before training as a psychotherapist at the Institute of Psychosynthesis (NZ) and becoming a qualified healer (Cert. Healing, SRMHC, UK). She has been meditating since 1983, explaining that: "In my meditation practice, which is from one of the wisdom traditions of India, we do a lot of chanting, and the essence of that chanting is repetition". Since 1984 she has been co-creating seasonal rituals with a group of women and has published eleven books on creativity and spirituality, inspiring people to create personalised rituals for important life transitions.

In her book *Celebrating the Southern Seasons: Rituals for Aotearoa* (Batten, 1995), Batten explicitly writes about the issue of diverse rituals and beliefs in the context of the spiritual landscape of Aotearoa / New Zealand. Her goal is to address the impact of colonialism, particularly concerning the adoption of the Roman calendar without considering Aotearoa's Southern Hemisphere location in the Pacific Ocean (Batten, 2005). By inquiring into different knowledge around the seasonal cycle, she brings together information about traditions from ancient Māori, Pagan Europe (especially Celtic), and Christian Europe. She seeks to find common ground among diverse cultural practices, based on a shared reverence for the Earth, and for one another, explaining: "I am always looking for the dialogue, that connection with other traditions. Without appropriating it but just bringing in that awareness". In this process of finding shared meanings, Batten is not seeking validation from Māori, but instead encouraging Pākehā to find their own ways, explaining: "I am sensitive about not asking Māori to come and do this work for us, which is what Pākehā tend to do".

Kathryn Rountree

Rountree is a retired Professor of Social Anthropology. She has published widely on aspects of feminist witchcraft, Goddess spirituality, neo-shamanism, and the wider neo-Pagan movement. Rountree, growing up in a Christian family, with an uncle who was a Canon in the Anglican Church, was deeply involved in church activities until her early 20s. However, as a young adult, studying Anthropology, she departed from Christianity as she realised:

There's no way in the world I could say, or believe, that I happened to have the one right way of believing and doing the sacred. I couldn't accept that divinity is located in one all-powerful, all-knowing male. Respect and equality are so important. (Kathryn Rountree)

The Christian doctrine of Rountree's childhood did not align with the feminist worldview she developed as an adult. Having experienced years without any religious affiliation, she discovered a new spiritual pathway while doing her PhD about feminist witches and ritual-makers in New Zealand. For her "a new world opened up, which was about a greater world than what we see – or perhaps making sacred the world that we see-, but also participating in a much bigger story of seen and unseen worlds". Today Rountree participates in two different ritual groups, one based in Aotearoa, and the other in Malta, stating: "When I am with my Pagan friends in Malta, the cycle is inverted. For instance, when we are celebrating Samhain here in Aotearoa, I am also online doing Beltane in Malta. I'm participating in multiple cycles", revealing a practice where virtual and physical connections are intertwined.

The different biographies and spiritual influences of the four ritual experts suggest that the facilitation of rituals in the post-colonial milieu of Aotearoa, with increasing cross-cultural mobilisation of Indigenous seasonal markers and rituals, has multiple layers and complexities. In the next section, I will further investigate the research question of how the insights of key ritual experts inform understandings of site-specific performance rituals. This inquiry begins with an examination of how rituals can potentially address environmental concerns.

Ritual and Environmental Concerns

Rituals can bring attention to climate change issues and can increase people's awareness of the environmental concerns of their communities. In speaking with the four ritual experts, each person expressed how ritual can create opportunities to connect with the environment and bring about a sense of community and cohesion. When reflecting on the environmental concerns of her community in Whāingaroa/Raglan, Renata expresses: "I was involved in the rituals to do with the Māui dolphin. It was another ritual practice that we put in the community in the form of dance" to highlight the importance of marine conservation. Her example suggests that incorporating ritualistic activities and artistic performances into an annual community event can educate and emotionally engage participants, and thus enable them to convey important messages about environmental issues. For Turei, a ritual can offer "an anchor for the perception of our environment", that "enhances our capacity to perceive what's happening with our environment". Batten expresses that "when people are connecting with the earth and the seasons; they are much more likely to care for the earth and take the actions they need". Batten explains that she accomplishes this objective by deliberately selecting activities that encourage participants to activate their various sensory perceptions and to "experience their sacred connection with the land or water", thereby fostering deeper bonds that might inspire individuals to take action to protect what they love. While Renata also advocates for rituals as a significant avenue for strengthening people's connection to the

Earth, she at the same time acknowledges that the relationship between rituals and their impact on individuals' connection to the environment is complex and does not always translate into concrete environmental actions:

I don't know what people take from the ritual. Did they leave with a feeling that when things come up, I am going to be there? Or did they just walk away thinking: Oh, that was amazing. (Ngaronoa Renata)

Similarly, Turei raises doubts about a ritual's ability to effectively address climate change issues, stating: "I don't think a ritual gives us the tools to change it, but it might enhance the will to change ourselves. And what our actions are doing to contribute to the destruction of our environment". Rountree expresses: "You might not be able to fix the earth, but maybe the ritual will fix you and then you will be different".

According to the experts' statements, rituals can enhance mindfulness practices and prompt individuals to contemplate their values and actions. This, in turn, may reinforce their connections to the natural world and nurture a sense of stewardship, compelling them to safeguard what holds significance to them. In a similar vein, Turner (1988) suggests that rituals encourage individuals to "reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, code, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules, and other socio-cultural components which make up their public selves" (p. 24). Furthermore, the experts' statements suggest that while rituals themselves may not solve large-scale global environmental problems, they can still play a valuable role in fostering communal bonds. Renata explains: "Ritual can bring our attention to those issues if they are conducted with the intention of bringing cohesion to a community", which can, in turn, lead to the establishment of a shared understanding where people can collectively acknowledge that "climate change is a significant issue".

This is especially relevant in the current time of the Anthropocene, where disinformation via algorithms spread on platforms such as social media has led to increased polarisation and distrust, making it difficult to reach informed and collaborative decisions (Fasce, 2020). Being aware of these challenges Renata poses the question "Can we all agree that it is real, and do we have ritual practices to address that?" According to Ann Hardy and Hēmi Whaanga (2019), the celebration of Matariki could be seen as one example of how a ritual can bring diverse people together to raise ecological consciousness and create a sense of cohesion at a national level. With its focus on reconnection to location-specific knowledge systems grounded in Māori epistemologies (Whaanga, Harris, & Matamua, 2020), this festival is a communal event open to participation by all New Zealanders (Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori, 2005). Matariki rituals and celebrations, rooted in Māori worldviews, have evolved to

include contemporary spirituality and gained relevance in secular domains like education, entertainment, and community engagement while linking to political issues like environmental preservation (Hardy, 2012; Hardy & Whaanga, 2019). Whereas some people prioritise its spiritual aspects “highlighting the manner in which it reinforces respect for the land and helps sacralise relationships between people” (Hardy, 2012, p. 114), others enjoy it as “multicultural community gatherings, often involving bonfires, processions with candles, and storytelling” (Hardy & Whaanga, 2019, p. 7). It can be argued that these rituals, a container for diverse forms and interpretations, have the potential to serve as a unifying force for a nation, fostering a shared focus on environmental consciousness and nurturing a sense of community. In the time of the Anthropocene, where conflicts, societal divisions, and environmental disasters are pressing issues, there is an urgent need for strengthening counter-narratives of hope and “learning Indigenous understandings of ideal modes of interaction between human beings and the other entities in an animated or vital environment” (Hardy & Whaanga, 2019, p. 6). In this sense, nationwide revitalisations of location-specific epistemological and nature-based rituals may encourage communities to promote broader social and environmental causes. Mc Allister (2012) suggests that the formal character of state rituals can prompt individuals to take the themes and values presented in these rituals more seriously and thus may have a bigger impact on everyday behaviours and political decision-making.

This resonates with the ritual experts’ statements that performing a ritual alone is not enough, as subsequent political actions are needed to make a significant impact on a broader scale. Such an understanding is shared by environmental advocate David Orr (1992), who developed the model ‘head, heart, and hand’ to demonstrate the different components involved in human processes of transformative learning. According to Orr the ‘head’ relates to the cognitive domain to do with self-awareness and critical reflection of our belief systems and actions. The ‘heart’ represents the emotional aspect connected to empathy and relational understanding, helping humans recognise themselves as integral components of the Earth’s ecosystems. The ‘hand’ symbolises a commitment to integrating sustainability into daily life and participating in environmental and political activism to actively support environmental causes. In this sense, ritual can be seen as part of the process of change, and a step towards paying attention to the ecological crisis we are facing.

The comments made by the ritual experts revealed that taking action against climate change may begin with individuals forming a deep connection with the Earth. This personal transformation can prompt individuals to implement sustainable practices into daily life and participate in climate activism. Furthermore, rituals can have an impact that goes beyond the private spheres if it is embedded in a political setting that may bring a nation together and ignite a shared commitment to environmental action and community building. If ritual has a

role to play, it is physically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually engaging people in a world as it appears right now. By doing so, these rituals might make individuals more aware of their environments and inspire hope that their actions can bring about positive outcomes. Consequently, people may not only become more dedicated to environmental activism but also actively lobby political systems to revise policies in support of environmental sustainability.

Following this initial discussion of how rituals may address environmental concerns, the subsequent section discusses the diverse components encompassed in a ritual process, as viewed through the perspectives of the four ritual experts.

Preparation and Ritual

When facilitating a ritual, the task of preparation plays an important role. Batten states: “Without preparation, in a way, you have no ritual”. In speaking with four ritual experts, each person shared information about different considerations and practices that often take place weeks before the ritual event. The way they prepare depends on the purpose of the ritual, where it takes place (inside or outside), and their personal preferences. The preparations involve practical tasks such as gathering materials, arranging the physical space, and spiritual aspects like communicating with energies or deities, alongside decisions about the ritual’s activities and methods, including finding the right place.

Finding the Right Place

According to experts, holding a public ritual in Aotearoa is a dynamic process that involves more than just practical considerations like site accessibility, safety, and permits. It also includes understanding the cultural, political, and pre-colonial associations to place, recognising spiritual connections and ancestral lineages, and consulting with the local iwi. This necessitates mindfulness around different and often “conflicting worldviews of ngā iwi Māori, Pākehā, colonial and immigrant peoples” (Barbour, 2020, p. 54) and navigating the diverse relationships people have with the land. Considering its complexity, various factors influence the ritual experts’ decision-making process when selecting a location for their rituals.

According to Turei, his initial step involves seeking out a place that has ritualistic significance for Māori. As part of his ongoing investigations into Aotearoa’s history, he conducts research by looking for environmental clues in the form of place names that allude to pre-colonial narratives such as ‘Te Rangi Matariki’, or ‘Rangi Matarau’, or ‘Matai Whetu’. Such place names, referring to celestial constellations, give him an indication of where to best observe the celestial bodies and how to connect to the ancestral stories such as the important

star cluster Matariki. This includes both skyward contemplation and ground-level examination to discern how his ancestors may have signified this location. Turei explains: “Whether it is Stonehenge, or pyramids, or just rocks, or a wall, or a line, or the seed raising beds made from stones” they are all reference points for people to recognise places of potential ritual practices, determining which places are best suited for different seasons and purposes. For him, this is a process that cannot be learned from a book; it must be personally experienced. Therefore, he frequently spends nights at a location, as this is when the land unveils its stories. It becomes apparent that Turei’s approach of selecting a suitable location for his rituals involves a multifaceted approach, wherein place-based orientations, embodied ways of knowing and researching history are intricately interconnected.

Given the importance of Māori history and culture-specific practices of place, it is important for Pākehā to consult with the local iwi as part of their ritual preparation. Batten describes how she navigated such a process when doing a series of rituals in Te Henga, a cave accessible to the public, with ancestral significance to the iwi Te Kawerau ā Maki:

We were explaining our intention that we would like to honour the solstice, that we would keep it clean and look after it, and respect it and make sacred space and light a fire inside and they were very happy with it. And we felt that we wanted to honour them in some way so every year we sent a koha to them as our gratitude for using the cave.

For Batten paying respect to Māori ancestral connections, and recognising historical implications are crucial components when choosing a ritual site, because past events are stored as memories in the land. She states that “there are certain sites that are very contested, and they have very painful associations for people”. This suggests that a specific environment can affect a person’s emotional, physical, and spiritual state and thus needs to be incorporated into the decision-making process when choosing a site for ritual. The upcoming section will discuss how the experts engage in an ‘energetic’ reading of a particular place and establish communication with the spiritual world to seek guidance.

Energies and Atmospheres of Place

By paying close attention to the subtle vibrations of the environment and how her body reacts, Batten knows intuitively where to go and whether it is an appropriate place for ritual. She states:

I am very sensitive to energies. I can sense energies, especially on the land. And I know instinctively places to go and places not to go. I get that information through my body luckily. (Juliet Batten)

For Batten, 'energy' is a dynamic force that exists somehow out in the world as well as an experiential phenomenon that can be internally felt through her body. Similarly, in the context of Spiritualities of Life, energy is described as a dynamic force (Woodhead, & Heelas, 2000; Cunningham, 2022), that regulates and maintains life processes. In Batten's experience, the energy of a person or place can be positively influenced through practices like meditation or energetic clearings, but it can also be negatively affected by traumatic experiences or violence. When Batten visited a particular site, she had an intuitive sense that something about the place was unsettling. She elaborates stating, "I consulted different people and it seems that there was a very traumatised Māori history on the lower slopes of that mountain". For Batten having a highly sensitive awareness of energies is a gift and a curse at the same time, but she learnt to trust her intuition. Batten adds: "You can never really prove those things, it is very subtle, but you can cultivate that. I think if you are in a place that is very disturbed eventually you get to feel that". While for Batten such physical responses influence the choice of site for her seasonal rituals, Turei has a different approach:

In my practice, positive or negative energy and atmosphere are irrelevant to whether a ritual should or shouldn't take place. Rather this would define the nature of how the ritual is delivered as the ritual is as much for the land as it is for us and through ritual, negative energies can be shifted. (Pita Turei)

Turei's choice of ritual setting is not so much defined by whether a site has a disturbed or peaceful atmosphere. He rather perceives such information as helpful indicators to better understand what purpose and what content is asked of him to be addressed. This suggests a responsive approach where the intention of the ritual is not decided in advance but instead reveals itself through the interaction with his surroundings. He elaborates that it is about "being aware of the affirmation you get and to see what is happening around you and taking cues from that". For him serving the occurring situatedness of the event is a multi-directional experience of sense-making, where the atmosphere of place, emotional responses, extra-sensory insights, and cultural knowledge work together towards defining what kind of ritual action needs to take place. The examples revealed how the energy of a specific place can be positively or negatively influenced through human behaviour, and how this for Turei defines the nature of the ritual activity and for Batten indicates whether a site is the right place or not. However, while human imprints on the land are important factors when choosing a place for ritual, the experts point out that certain atmospheres can also be the workings of environmental phenomena, or spiritual activity.

Supernatural Beings and Spirits of Place

Turei, Rountree, and Batten all discuss supernatural beings and spirits of place, each guided by their cultural worldview. For Turei, from a Māori perspective, and for Rountree and Batten with a neo-Pagan worldview, the spiritual world is understood as an active participant, ready to interact and communicate with humans if they allow themselves to become receptive. Turei states that spirits sometimes appear in his dreams to guide him, explaining that:

If you get some things in your dreams, it is usually to help guide you in your pathway in the waking world. You certainly feel the spirits. And you get sometimes quite significant tohu. (Pita Turei)

For Turei, spirits are active participants, guiding him in the physical world. Thus, he prefers to go to a place early in the morning to experience: “the dawn, that stillness, that getting rid of your own clutter and finding that calm place”. In these moments, Turei connects to different ancestors that continue to resonate as mauri (life force, energy), “the binding force between the physical and spiritual aspects of entities within the ecosystem” (Morgan, 2009, cited in McKinley & Smith, 2019, p. 1217).

The belief that the environment is ensouled and en-spirited also plays an important role for Batten and Rountree whose practices are inspired by a neo-Pagan worldview. Thus, as part of scoping a site for ritual, they practice receptivity to extrasensory insights that might inform them about the activity of immaterial entities. To receive messages from nature, Batten and Rountree meditate at a certain site and ask for guidance. Rountree explains that you go to “consult the site and ask the site what it feels needs to happen [...]. You go there, you sit quietly, you wait and listen”. One way to listen is through meditation and through entering a different state of consciousness. It is during the period of such an experience, that Rountree receives guidance. She states:

If you're prepared to spend time with it and you're genuinely open to whatever comes back to you, then you trust that what comes back to you is what the land wishes to bring. (Kathryn Rountree)

Here, the land is perceived as a living entity that is ‘ensouled’ and ‘enspirited’ (Rountree, 2012), endowed with agency, intelligence, feelings, and needs that can be experienced by humans. In other words: “consciousness is within all life, whatever its form” (Cunningham, 2022, p. 8). This is profoundly different from Cartesian understandings, where everything in the natural world “is soulless and lacks any potentiality of mind and consciousness” (von Stuckrad, 2022, p. 7). Rountree emphasises that when one brings genuine offerings to the spirit of a place and trusts in what returns, one can receive valuable guidance on how to

proceed. Batten suggests to “just go there and feel the land through the soles of your feet and ask may we come here with this intention? We really want to honour you”. Such a practice may invite people to become more aware of their bodily sensations and emotional processes to better understand whether it is the right place for ritual activity. Batten explains: “At first you don’t feel anything. There is a shamanic teacher who says nature is very slow and we are very fast, and we expect quick results”. This suggests that coming into resonance with the land and potential spiritual phenomena necessitates a deliberate practice of slowing down and attentively listening. The information received through such a practice can be transmitted through a multitude of forms, spanning visual imagery, visionary experiences, physical sensory perceptions, and emotional reactions, or signs as Turei describes.

When Turei goes into the forest, he looks out for *tohu* (signs) to take directions from Tane Mahuta. He states: “I get affirmations from birds, I always look out for them, and I always acknowledge them. [...] Tane Mahuta sends messengers and Tangaroa sends messengers”. The way they communicate is through phenomena. Thus, Turei observes what the clouds do, what the rain does, and how the birds, insects, and eels behave. In his spiritual practice, Turei extends traditional customs and adjusts their principles to align with the urbanised landscape of 21st-century Aotearoa, where native forests have given way to cities and farmlands and introduced species have reshaped the ecology. Furthermore, while recognising that human comprehension of paranormal phenomena is met with scepticism due to the era of reason, he consciously upholds practices of acknowledging *taniwha*. For him, they are fundamental to the maintenance of genealogical cognisance with the land. He explains:

Taniwhā exist by virtue of our belief system. [...] They are metaphysical entities that exist in the realm of continued ritual and recognition. They communicate with phenomena and reveal their messages through tohu (signs) that often appear in the form of birds, spiders, lizards, eels, and insects. [...] They only exist if we believe in them. And if we conduct ourselves according to them, it gives us a conscious or subconscious reference to our own behaviour. (Pita Turei)

Here, the belief in the existence of supernatural beings such as *taniwhā* is understood as a tool through which interconnectedness between self and environment can be communicated and experienced. It is a practice that serves the purpose of bringing awareness to the intrinsic value of all life, to promote kinship and human responsibility to look after the environment. In their role as guardians, *taniwhā* “remind the living about customary and natural lore, the boundaries between the known and the unknown, and the interconnectedness between humans and nature” (King, Manawatu, & Shaw, 2020, p. 49). This includes an awareness that

everything animate and inanimate has a life force (mauri) and possesses agency. Mere Roberts (2013) explains that mauri “acts as the guardian protecting the tapu and mana of the whakapapa of organisms (and non-living things). In this sense taniwhā, protecting the mauri of a place also functions as environmental hazard warnings to ensure that people respect the restrictions imposed by tapu (sacredness). Therefore, people need to be mindful not to upset them through our presence, because they can exercise “uncanny powers” if disrespected (Salmond, 2014, p. 294).

The above examples suggest that scoping a site for ritual in Aotearoa is an active process that involves multi-directional ways of sense-making for these experts. It incorporates paying close attention to spiritual connections, ancestral lineages, and supernatural forces that may animate an environment. This demands a ritual facilitator to become permeable, slowing down, becoming still, and allowing the outside world in. As the experts have proposed, one way to do this is through their embodied perception, paying attention to their kinaesthetic awareness, emotional responses, and messages from the immaterial world.

Some of the characteristics have similarities to site-specific dance, where embodied, emotional, and sensory connections are explored through kinaesthetic listening, slow walking, observation, and physical mappings of a site (Barbour, 2014; East, 2014; Hunter, 2015), through which a dancer can experience “a synergistic relationship between place and individual selfhood” (East, 2014, p. 104). Similar to the ritual experts’ approach, site dance practitioners place great emphasis on researching the history of a place. They also frequently engage with questions of how the atmosphere of a site affects a dancer’s mood and how that affects their movement qualities. However, discussions on spiritual aspects and the potential protection of a site by supernatural forces are uncommon in Western literature on site dance.

Content Preparation of Ritual

Another preparation step for the ritual involves defining the theme and content to be enacted, which includes exploring appropriate activities, songs, prayers, meditations, dances, symbols, music, and others. Turei’s observation rituals also encompass comprehensive research into the historical practice of this ritual across various cultures. He expresses:

Our rituals come from an earth culture and come from a theology based on an earth culture. So, I will look to whatever reference I can find from other earth cultures and what they might have done. (Pita Turei)

This is a crucial part of Turei’s preparation, so he can anchor his practice beyond the content and meaning of Christian influences. In doing so, he can “recognise how our colonisation and especially our Christianisation have sanitised all our rituals to not offend Christians”.

Therefore, he consciously dismantles pre-Christian traditions to understand what values they might have in terms of “empowering us to understand our world, our geophysical environment, our spiritual connection to it and our understanding of each other and ourselves”. This gives Turei an anchor for his thoughts and an insight into how they have been “corrupted through colonisation”. By this, he means the way in which the colonisation has de-evaluated Māori ways of knowing through: “romanticising or demonising the natives. And then trivialising our cosmology, which becomes mythology and so we lose any context of science”.

Moving beyond Christian practices and identifying overarching principles amongst different cultures plays an important role in Batten’s, Rountree’s, and Renata’s practices, in specific ways. Batten explains that the content of her rituals reveals itself to her through “studying the different traditions and what they did”, she then chooses activities, songs, instruments, and symbolic objects to bring the theme of gathering across. She states: “If I am going to be using symbols in the ritual, I will prepare them very carefully”. The process includes testing collected elements like sticks, flowers, and stones before integrating them into the ritual. Additionally, there is a focus on practicing and memorising songs, chants, and prayers. Thorough familiarisation with the content is also a crucial component in Renata’s practice, stating: “If you practice it a hundred times, then you will completely master it”. Here, content preparation has similarities to a rehearsal for a performance piece, where an actor or dancer practices their lines and choreographies in advance of the event to become fluid.

For Batten, part of the content preparation is also to carefully plan the flow of the dramaturgy explaining: “I always time everything”, because for a big group smooth transitions from one activity to the next are crucial so the ritual does not drag along. Batten explains that this especially applies to a “very large group ritual, where you have to have processes that move very quickly otherwise, they go on for hours and everyone gets very fatigued, and the ritual dies on you”. For Rountree, the content preparation differs from the others in the sense that it is always the same group that meets in a private setting, taking turns to prepare for the ritual, with two people planning each ritual together a few weeks before it takes place. She states:

We discuss the theme, the mood, the place, how we will create sacred space, invoke the elements and the four directions, do the purification, what we will do for the enactment, and who is going to lead a guided meditation. (Kathryn Rountree)

The people of the group always pursue the same routine, following Batten’s Seven Stages Ritual, which was introduced to Rountree 30 years ago. Although the procedure is fixed, the enactment of the content is always different. This is mainly because whoever “is doing the

facilitation determines how her gifts will be manifested in our group”. Here, people’s characters and personal preferences come through.

The analysis reveals that content preparation comprises both theoretical aspects (gathering information on pre-Christian and pre-colonial ritual practices) and practical components (designing experiential activities based on these teachings). The practical part entails rehearsals to ensure the facilitator has mastery over songs, chants, movements, and speeches, as well as testing materials and timing various activities. This highlights the multifaceted and creative nature of content creation for rituals, with facilitators assuming roles such as researcher, composer, director, designer, interpreter, and performer.

Inner Preparation

Possible preparation activities discussed by all of the four ritual experts involved undertaking personal inner preparation. This inner preparation was regarded as crucial in their ritual work, equipping them with the necessary tools to prepare for the responsibility of facilitating a ritual for other people. In listening to the different experts, it became apparent that there were various ways and methods to come to an appropriate physical, mental, and spiritual mindset to be ready for rituals. This varied according to the different belief systems of each ritual expert and their personal preferences. Words such as centring, grounding, purifying, and becoming present expressed the intention of inner preparation.

For Batten, meditation in the days prior to the ritual allowed her to ensure she was centred and grounded, and it also provided an opportunity to access the divine power within her to seek assistance. She explains: “Calling on this power brings me into a state of grace and inner expansion. This is the heightened state out of which guidance emerges spontaneously”. Renata described purification through disciplined physical and emotional practices following the way of the ‘Māori Spiritual Warrior School’, engaging in movement and meditation to become clear in her consciousness. She explained the aim is to go “inside your inner being to become free from any darkness, any negativity that must be dismissed from your body”. In her practice, she identifies any mental, emotional, or physical blockages, releases them from her system, and invokes the energy of ‘light’ through which her understanding of self extends beyond the limits of the ego.

Turei commented that inner preparation was about becoming present with the physical and mental state he finds himself in and to genuinely work from there, explaining “It will be right if I am authentic and if I am there.” Instead of following a defined meditation practice, he responds to what might work at the very moment he finds himself. He may prepare by restoring his sense of inner balance through discharging strong feelings in sexual expression and physical activity, consciously re-connecting his body and spirit, viewing them as a continuum

rather than separate entities. This also includes practicing self-regulation in moments of conflict, aimed at “getting rid of my armour and standing there without instead of being ready for a fight. But clearly not ready to accept an imposed value system”. Given the challenges posed by post-colonial conflicts, climate change, and other contemporary disruptions, his inner preparation must equip him to navigate the realities of the present era. Turei expresses: “We are in chaos, and we need to learn how to behave in chaos. We cannot just save our rituals for a nice day. We must be able to operate in fire and chaos”. The skills needed to be able to operate in chaos don’t come from “meditating in the forest or just being on my own. I get that from engaging as often as I can in the discussion”. This suggests that Turei’s inner preparation does not happen in isolation. Instead, what qualifies Turei to facilitate a safe space for others is his training on how to access a peaceful state of mind in moments of escalation, a practice that highlights lived experiences and rigorous self-reflection.

In contrast, Rountree who mostly engages in rituals with a familiar group of women in a more private setting, engages in inner preparation through her conscious connection with others and with the season. Her co-created rituals had a relaxed atmosphere, in part because “we know how to do things because we’ve been doing it this way for a long time”, and also because the responsibility of preparation and facilitation is not on her shoulders alone. Rountree described: “Although I might occasionally feel lacking in energy, once we start talking together, the ideas start sparking... because you’ve talked about the ritual, and that puts you in the mood. You are already experiencing the consciousness and magic of the season”.

All the participants’ practices of inner preparation indicate a sense of responsibility and recognition that facilitating a ritual is not a task to be taken lightly. Inner preparation was also directly intertwined with the site and whether the ritual was a private or public event. The ritual experts discussed how inner preparation allowed them to respond to the challenges of facilitating rituals. For Turei, Batten, and Renata who are often in the role of the main facilitator of rituals, engaging with people whose backgrounds they do not necessarily know demands an increased dedication to inner work. Turei commented that he must “be able to deal with conflict on the way through the door, when I get in the door, and then resolving it at the end if need be” and Renata acknowledges that ritual participants “will bring many things, they will bring emotional trauma”. The ritual expert may need to hold space for participants without judgment, requiring skill and experience. For Renata, this entails “rising above what they call the consciousness of the people that will come” and refraining from succumbing to negative emotional states or self-centred cognitive patterns. Being aware of the complexities of ritual experiences, she states “You can’t just lead if you are a beginner”. Given that the inner readiness of a facilitator was seen as vital for the ritual experience, critical reflectivity by the expert about their own capabilities and limitations was important in an ongoing way. The ways

in which the experts undertook inner preparation were, however, dependent on their individual belief systems and their different spiritual practices.

In the literature, terms such as 'grounding' and 'centring' are common in New Age practices, referring to techniques to reach "internally focused, evenly suspended attention within the context of a body awareness situated in the here-and-now that can give rise to an experience of inner calm and peace" (Walsh, 1977, p. 145, cited in Cunningham, 2022). Such practices can result in feelings of "awareness, insight, concentration, equanimity, and love (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993, pp. 52–53). The ritual experts practiced focusing attention on the ritual through inner preparation. Inner preparation allowed them to engage in the practice described as 'holding space', which commonly refers to a state of open attentiveness that involves "the practice of listening with the whole body, mind and spirit" (Blainey, 2014, p. 82). This requires a multi-directional awareness in which the facilitator reads the physical, emotional, and spiritual presence of the participants without getting entangled in personal issues of ego or triggered by negativity, but instead creates a sense of cohesion and connection. Arguably, underlying these practices of inner preparation was trust in "the ability of individuals and organizations to transcend the limited sphere of mind associated with the ego" (McMullin, 2017, p. 2). In the Spiritualities of Life framework discussed in the literature review, the sense of responsibility extended into a call to action to create change: "To use the inner light of an expanded self-awareness and put our ideals into action to heal a wounded world and the current human-made crises of our times that threaten the survival of our planet and our species" (Cunningham, 2022, p. 265). Inner preparation was thus considered important.

The analysis has revealed that the ritual experts use those tools that best align with their beliefs, personalities, and the socio-cultural context they are working. This also means that one's own inner readiness qualifies for different types of rituals. While someone like Turei is prepared to navigate conflict, others choose to work in more harmonious settings. Thus, a facilitator must reflect on what kind of ritual they are ready to take responsibility for. Renata's statement suggests that not everyone is trained enough to deal with the trauma that might be revealed as part of the ritual. Given that the inner readiness of a facilitator is vital for the ritual experience, critical reflectivity of one's own capabilities and limitations is important. Having previously examined the preparation process each ritual expert follows, I will now analyse the various activities and states they experience during the actual ritual event.

Ritual Possibilities

In my conversations with the experts, I discovered that the choice of activities in a ritual can vary widely as they depend on factors such as the experts' specific practices and belief systems as well as the objectives of the gathering. The following analysis does not intend to merge the experts' various practices into a single framework. Instead, it recognises these practices as different perspectives that explore the dynamic processes of physical, psychological, social, and spiritual principles underlying rituals.

For Batten, understanding the function of a certain activity and what effect it has on people is the basis upon which she designs the structure of her rituals, explaining "In a ritual you are moving energy, and you need to understand how energy works". Here, energies refer to the forces and dynamics within individuals and groups, while moving energy signifies transformative processes during the practice of a ritual. For Batten, for such experiences to happen, a facilitator needs to have a deeper understanding of how the proposed activities affect the participating people on different levels. Thus, she encourages facilitators of a ritual to "get the principles as a structure, a form, or flow", which are the base upon which they can become creative and can start playing with different variations.

Entering the Ritual Space

For Renata, ritual practices are based around the concept of tapu (sacred) and noa (profane), explaining that "when you enter a ritual, you go into a state of tapu, where you do not chatter, letting everything in your mind going to become quiet and pay attention to the experience". This indicates that at the start of a ritual, people need to be given an activity that signals a shift away from the ordinary and invites participants to leave secular matters behind. Drawing inspiration from neo-Pagan traditions, Batten employs techniques of purification, providing individuals with "a sense of emptiness as they enter the ritual space" and allowing them to shed the concerns of their daily lives. For instance, she may ask participants to symbolically cleanse themselves by "touching water to their hands into their forehead and let go of the day and open to something new". Another way to signal people that they have entered a ritual space is through fire. Turei expresses: "The smoke binds us when we are around that fire. Smoke somehow helps the spirits come in. It gives them a place to come and dance with us". For Turei, fire serves as a bridge to the spiritual world, alongside encouraging self-reflection as people watch the flames. Turei further elaborates that at the start of a ritual, "we acknowledge the ancestors, we acknowledge the spirits, we ask for their help, we invite their inclusion, and we ask for the purpose we have that we are all committed to". He further elaborates that the inclusion of the spiritual world and their participation in the ritual experience may lead to unforeseen incidents, expressing: "We lit the fire, did the karakia, acknowledged

everyone, and then a tui came in and brushed my ear with its wings, and flew into the circle, and swept out of it". Such unexpected, seemingly coincidental moments are valuable opportunities for him to bring attention to the mystical realm. Thus, he intentionally creates conditions where such signs can occur and uses his improvisation skills to embed them into the ritual activity.

Another important aspect that may support people to become receptive to the ritual is expressed by Rountree who stresses that she consciously chooses activities that help "turn everyone into a participant rather than turning them into an audience". One way to do this is through interactive tasks such as purifying each other with a leaf. She explains: "We just brushed each other's auras for us to release any pre-occupations, or anxiety or other thoughts". Here, the leaf was used to clear the atmosphere surrounding a person's body, a practice shared by different new-age practitioners who often describe aura as an electromagnetic field that can be sensed in the form of vibrations as a reflection of one's emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual state (Cunningham, 2022).

Although different in their cultural frameworks, their approaches share a common thread – they awaken people's senses. Whether it is the touch of water, the gentle caress of a leaf, the dance of flames, or the fragrant embrace of smoke, these sensory encounters serve as guides into a heightened state of presence. Furthermore, these actions are designed to facilitate the opening to potential spiritual experiences while simultaneously building a strong foundation of support, trust, and community among participants as a foundation for individuals to fully immerse themselves in the ritual experience.

Forming Connections with Self and Others

When talking to the experts, it became apparent that once people have settled into the ritual space, an activity takes place through which people find ways to connect with themselves. One way for Batten to do this is by inviting everyone to join a meditation, explaining that it is about: "Bringing the awareness into their body, breathing out distractions, making space in the heart, breathing into the heart". For Turei, a way to connect to breath and to open the heart is through chanting or singing, explaining that "it does not matter what waiata [song] but if we can put all our voices together then we are participant on a sonic level or an acoustic level, or on a resonance level". Turei elaborates: "We all breathe together and commit our breath for giving voice to a song together at the same time. There is a cosmic resonance in that". This may refer to a feeling of spaciousness that people may sense when they practice conscious breathing and voice activation. On a more spiritual level, it may represent a deepening of one's heart space and a profound sense of being connected to and at one with the universe and all its inhabitants.

In addition to fostering a connection with oneself, another pivotal element is anchoring individuals within a communal context. Batten uses the method of 'casting the circle', a "gesture of unification that marks the enclosure of sacred space" (Batten, 1988, p. 12). It is about creating a sense of unity amongst the participating individuals by giving space for people to introduce themselves and where they are from. Participating in chanting, singing, or voicing one's name within the circle can evoke empowering self-affirmation, and a sense of acceptance by the group. Turei evokes a process of establishing relationships to create a sense of community. He states it is important to "whakawhanau, make like a family", which is grounded in the Māori practice of whanaungatanga where groups "are constituted as if they were a whanau, that is, an extended family" (Bishop et al., 2014, p. 189). For Bishop, Ladwig and Berryman (2014) this practice is also linked to establishing a series of rights and responsibilities such as aroha (love in the broadest sense, including mutuality), awhi (helpfulness), manaaki (hospitality), and tiaki (guidance). Whakawhanau holds significance not only in helping participants establish a sense of familiarity with the others present but also in enabling Turei as a facilitator to gather valuable insights about the group and how to proceed.

The diverse methods employed by the experts, aimed at fostering a sense of connection, highlight the role of breath as a bridge between one's inner self and the outside world. In addition, connecting with the group also involved acknowledging individual relationships and the cultural legacies they carried to nurture a sense of community that allowed participants to engage with trust and care. The ritual experts adapted this process depending on their belief systems, the purpose of gathering, and the group size.

Connection with the Environment

Batten expresses the importance of letting people "know where they are so they can experience a feeling of being physically centred". When talking to the experts, it became apparent that there are different ways to guide participants through a process of environmental orientation. This differs depending on the purpose of the ritual, the underlying belief system, and whether a ritual takes place inside or outdoors. From a neo-Pagan practice, based on Wiccan traditions, one way of doing this is by pointing out the four directions, north, south, east, and west, and associating them with different symbols, qualities, and the four elements. These can be emotions, natural phenomena, sounds, or movements that are physically expressed by the participants. Batten describes that she likes to invoke the four elements: air for lightness and imagination, fire for love and passion, water for emotional depth and fluency, and earth for grounding and patience. In the centre, she emphasises a sense of wholeness, and connection with spirit, ancestors, and future generations. Rountree, who uses a similar method describes one of her Lammas rituals, where they decorated an altar with a fertility

Goddess that had a bowl filled with water. Rountree explains that in the Western part of the circle, a participant invoked water, and everyone shared their associations with it, ranging from memories of swimming in the ocean to various emotional connections.

While Batten and Rountree's evocation of the four directions links to the four elements in a metaphorical sense, Turei puts great emphasis on being place-specific. For him, if there are no visible bodies of water such as oceans, lakes, or rivers in the surroundings, he refrains from linking the Westward direction with the presence of water. He perceives such practices as disconnected and not grounded in the geographical context of Aotearoa. Batten and Rountree, who understand the significance of not merely transplanting neo-Pagan practices from the northern hemisphere, carefully adapt their rituals in response to the unique features and qualities of the specific place they find themselves in. Illustrations of such adjustments can be seen in their practice of aligning the evocations of the four directions to the orientation of the sun in the southern hemisphere. Batten explains: "In the northern hemisphere, the sun is in the south and earth in the north. In the southern hemisphere, the sun is in the north and earth in the south". Furthermore, they also incorporate local plants, animals, and place-specific narratives to orient people in the cycles of the season and the wider ecological network of this land. Rountree states:

If it's a religion of the earth, why not invoke the animals from the earth where you are? Why take it from a religion on the other side of the world when you haven't got these animals here? (Kathryn Rountree)

Rountree makes a stance for an orientation that is place-specific and relatable. According to the experts, this practice requires a thorough understanding of the environment, encompassing knowledge of animal and plant life, celestial patterns, weather, seasons, and other phenomena.

Turei elaborates that his ritual narratives are developed in response to these observations, explaining "I relate the stories of the land, and part of it is to connect people to the land. He imparts this understanding by sharing ancestral stories of place to "identify significant ancestors of place and cultural narratives that articulate principles and concepts of relationships between physical, metaphysical and spiritual". Turei's aim is to establish a connection between individuals and the Earth, offering tools "how we practice kaitiakitanga", by which he alludes to "the guiding principle of maintaining intergenerational balance between the needs of people and those of the earth, air and waters" (Hikuroa, et al., 2018, p. 645). A strong commitment to kaitiakitanga can also be observed in Renata's practice. For her, the acknowledgment of the land is crucial, expressing: "Papatūānuku is my teacher. I always take my cues from her. The people are not what I sense need the ceremony it is the earth that

needs the ceremony”. Renata’s priority is the wellbeing of the land, with the intention of helping participants recognise that they can assume a role of serving nature, rather than expecting nature to cater to their needs and well-being, thus inspiring them to contribute their efforts to the betterment of the Earth as part of the ritual.

The experts highlighted the multifaceted nature of the connection between individuals, their inner selves, and the ritual’s surroundings. Depending on their spiritual and cultural tradition, this included defining the four directions using unique symbols, associated emotions, and the four elements, or by referencing visible landmarks in connection with ancestral stories tied to the land. For Turei and Renata it is also linked to orienting people in their moral obligations as kaitiaki (guardians) of place and to make sure participants treat the environment with respect and care during and after the ritual process. Furthermore, it became apparent that it is important to be place-specific and to do an orientation that creates relationships with this whenua (land) instead of simply transplanting practices from the northern hemisphere. This requires a profound dedication to acquiring knowledge about the unique environmental characteristics, ongoing communication with both the land and tangata whenua, and an openness to adapt to the ever-changing contexts.

Liminal Phase of Ritual

Once the different forms of connection have taken place, people are more open to being able to dedicate their attention to the purpose of gathering. For Batten, this is the core of the ritual, where the theme of the ritual is enacted through a set of guided activities that have symbolic meaning aiding the process of transformation. Rountree explains:

The things you do and the things you use, have to mean more than what they obviously are on the surface. If it doesn’t point to something beyond, if it’s not representing something bigger, it’s not a ritual. (Kathryn Rountree)

For Rountree, a common use of symbolic actions in ritual often involves inviting something new into people’s life by some form of sacrifice “that might be burning something, burying something or throwing something away”. Rountree remembers one ritual she did with Batten, where she had to choose three different colours of twine that symbolised three qualities she wanted to weave into her life, and how this physical act, has etched a lasting memory. She states: “I sat there with all those women in the circle, and we plaited our cords over the space of half an hour together”. Here, the symbolic object (material), the intention (inviting positive qualities), and the collective action (weaving) created a container for a transformational experience. Rountree explains that “it was the link between the material, the intent, the desire, the will and the physical, embodied action, which wove into our physical/spiritual being”. This

suggests that the act of weaving served both as a symbolic representation of the participants' inner journeys and as a bridge to the spiritual realm.

A similar combination of symbolic object, intention, and collective action can be observed in Turei's enactment during one of his Matariki rituals. It involved the task of throwing a stick into the fire to acknowledge the dead and the grief people might be carrying in their hearts. For him, such a gesture offers "another anchor of commitment to ritual and connection to each other", because: "As soon as people acknowledge things, and people they love who aren't there anymore, they are taken deeper, and they take that fire deeper into the darkness beyond fear because it is with love of someone who is not there". It is through the collective moment of sharing pain and grief, in combination with a communal action that opens for new pathways of transformation. Batten designed a similar enactment activity for one of her winter solstice rituals, using dried twigs, symbolising inner obstacles. She explains: "I asked them what they needed to release, so they can open to the reunion with what has been missing". Participants infused the sticks with the energy of their inner obstacles and then broke them as a symbolic act of breaking their old patterns. Batten observed that this process was a transformative moment for participants as "some people had very strong experiences and usually an energy shift, which is what a good ritual would give. An energy shift into freedom".

The given examples can be described as moments of heightened awareness, where emotions could be released and where transformation could take place. Luckmann (1990) terms such a change of consciousness as an experience of intermediate transcendence, where ordinary life and previous understandings of self and others lose their significance. Katarina Mårtensson Blom (2022) links transcendence to transpersonal experiences which she describes as a "possibility to transcend or cross borders between different mental spaces within and between us" (p. 13). This implies that transformation not only takes place in the consciousness of an individual but that it also traverses outwards and influences other people in the group. It is a phenomenon also described as 'affect', where participants experience the same type of emotion, such as joy, pride, fear, sadness, and others. Salmela (2012) explains that affective perception describes a moment where people's individual physiological processes and subjective feelings are synchronised in a collective affective experience. This perspective is shared by Rountree who explains how a group activity can create an "inter-subjective connection that happens when one person is going into another space and probably others will too because the conditions have been set up for that to happen". Mitchell (2000), Stern (2004), and Stolorow (1994) explain that "intersubjectivity is the shared mental field emerging from sharing and regulating of lived experience in terms of attentions, intentions and affectivity" (cited in Mårtensson Blom, 2011, p. 188).

This means that people's shared presence directed towards a common intention can generate an interactive space between self and others whereby we affect each other on a physical and mental level. Rountree describes such an intersubjective experience as "something that is acting upon you rather than you just doing it. Something that happens to you, something is done to you". Mårtenson Blom (2011) explains that it is in such moments of being fully present with self and others that we find ways to "surrender in relation to something "third", something beyond the self and/or the other, or to something greater" (p. 198). This suggests that in a transpersonal process, an intersubjective field is activated, which is a third space between self and others, wherein transformation can take place. For Schechner (2006), it is a liminal phase, a process where a person detaches from previous identification of self and becomes temporarily nothing "not-this-not-that, neither here nor there" (p. 66). Mårtenson Blom, (2011) explains that such a process is "often followed by feelings of awe, dread and, death and/ or clarity and salvation/redemption, even ecstasy" (p. 200). Emmanuel Ghent (1990/2003) observes that in the moment of surrender, a person discovers "one's identity, one's sense of self, one's sense of wholeness, even one's sense of unity with other living beings" (p. 216). Surrender in this sense is not a capitulation but rather a detachment from perceptions of our human exceptionalism (ego) and a recognition of our smallness in the vast network of life.

Renata uses the word 'light' to describe the intersubjective third space, which for her is an energetic field that "disperses, and it touches because it is an infinite light, it is a boundless light". The magic of light can be translated with a state of being, where participants feel a sense of unity, love, and embeddedness in the greater workings of the universe. Bringing that component of light into a ritual space is important for Renata who consciously works with the light energy during the ritual process. The quote also reveals that she has faith and trust that the activated 'light' will work for the people in whatever ways they are ready to receive and engage. She explains: "The light that you bring to the ceremony, that infuses into the ceremony people will be given that blessing".

It becomes apparent that part of the liminal phase of a ritual is to surrender to the unknown, which applies to participants and facilitators alike. Rountree explains: "You really leave the rest of it to the universe. You do your bit, and then just be prepared and open for whatever happens". This suggests that personal and transpersonal processes in a ritual have their own unpredictable outcomes that cannot necessarily be controlled by the facilitator. This perspective is shared by Renata who states: "You yourself as the initiator don't have expectations. You are always aware that it has a bigger life than you". Rountree adds: "There are times I could never have predicted what would happen. Things always happen that I wouldn't expect. And they were always surprising and interesting and helpful and wonderful".

The analysis has revealed that the use of symbolic objects, the statement of intention, and the collective action create fertile conditions for different transcendent experiences to happen, both on an individual and collective level. The experiences of the experts suggest that being fully present with the intentionality of actions within a group setting can create transpersonal effects, where people can have similar experiences of heightened awareness and transformation, collectively creating a 'third space'. This intersubjective field wherein such transformations can take place is known by different names such as liminality, nothingness, darkness, chaos, light, betwixt and between, and others. What is common despite the different names, is that to access this dimension, facilitators and participants alike need to surrender to the unknown and let go of control mechanism.

Settling and Completion

After the main purpose of the ritual has been performed and transformation has taken place, some form of settling is needed to deepen the experience. For Batten, this "is important so people absorb what has happened. It is to make space for the ritual to go deeper". To facilitate the integration of the experience and to acknowledge the shifts that have occurred, practitioners often turn to meditation, song, or chant. Batten further emphasises the importance of creating an atmosphere that elevates and rejuvenates the spirits, describing one of her ritual activities:

I gave them time to meditate on hope and be with the magic for quite a long time. And we finished with a spiral dance that I led, and I carried the paper lantern. (Juliet Batten)

Individuals are consciously drawn away from their personal processes by engaging in a group activity designed to evoke a sense of light-heartedness. Another aspect of deepening the experience involves recognising what has transpired by providing individuals with the opportunity to verbalise their inner transformations in a sharing circle at the conclusion of the event. Renata explains that "Reflection is a very special part of going forward. You also need to be careful of the reflection so that it does not become a burden to people [...]. They can talk about emotional experiences and that can be very big for everybody". This suggests that although reflection is an important component for the experience to sink deeper, a facilitator needs to be aware that it might contain painful content. Thus, they need to make sure to frame the ending in a way that people aren't left with an unsettled mood, but instead, feel elevated and uplifted. One way to do this is by bringing in humour, as articulated by Turei:

Once we've cried all those tears and now, we need to laugh. The tools need to be for the whole thing to bring you back to stepping off the bus, going to work, picking up the kids. (Pita Turei)

This suggests that humour is a useful tool to help people regulate themselves after potentially being in a troubled space. Batten explains: “Just as the transition into a ritual is important, the transition out of a ritual is important because people have to return to their normal life”.

The experts emphasised that allowing room for deepening the experience is a crucial element in making sense of the enacted rituals. In addition to practices like meditation and music, sharing personal insights and learnings with others is a valuable approach. However, to ensure that this sharing does not become overwhelming, it was seen as crucial to cultivate a state of light-heartedness to give participants the opportunity to regulate themselves emotionally before engaging in discussions with others. These considerations highlight the importance of comprehending psychological processes and transpersonal dynamics, ensuring that facilitators guide the group towards a state of positive emotional disposition before their departure. Consequently, significant attention is given to achieving closure in these rituals, allowing for a gradual integration that affords participants to return to the mundane world.

Return

In talking with the ritual experts, I learned that the re-integration is commonly facilitated through the communal act of food sharing. Rountree states:

It is something about taking the material gifts of the earth and sharing them with one another. It changes how you feel, doesn't it? Eating and drinking together... every culture seems to do it at the conclusion of rituals. (Kathryn Rountree)

Turei and Renata explain that from a Māori perspective, the transition to a state of ‘noa’ is accomplished through ‘whakanoa’. In Turei’s understanding, the most profane element is cooked food, which belongs to the world of the living, whereas tapu relates to the world of the spirits. He expresses: “The way we are doing that is to lift the tapu off by sharing cooked food. Whether that is a cup of coffee, which is cooked coffee beans made into a drink. It does not matter what it is. It could be bread”. Renata adds that the shared meal marks the closure of the ritual, stating “Once we have taken food then it’s complete. That’s the whakanoa”.

Another important aspect regarding the closure of a ritual is expressed by Renata, who explains that, as the facilitator, she may decide to stay in a sacred space even after the official part of the ritual has finished. She states: “The high priestess, she may not lose it at all. She may continue to keep on after food and the activities”. While the others may go home and return to their daily activities, “the high priestess may choose to stay in ceremony for a long time because there are other things that are given during that time”. Renata is aware that some insights may be revealed only after the ritual. Therefore, she pays close attention to the follow-up processes. Furthermore, Renata’s understanding of ritual time does not work by the

clock, stating: “I think the timing how long ceremonies are held for is to suit the Western paradigm of time”. In her experience, some rituals take much longer than anticipated. Batten elaborates that “some may have dreams in the night or nights following the ritual”. Here, ritualistic activity and everyday life intersect and become a continuum. Turei adds another interesting component, explaining that concluding a ritual through whakanoa is not the only part. He states: “When I was trying to dismantle the missionary record, I have found those references to our sexual practices in ritual”. According to Turei, the inclusion of physical intimacy with one’s partner as part of the ritual’s conclusion has been forsaken due to the influence of Christianity on Māori practices.

The analysis indicates that the act of sharing food serves as an effective means of reintegrating individuals into the secular realm. Moreover, it unveiled that ritual engagement occurs in a non-linear temporal framework, with individuals’ personal journeys not necessarily adhering to the prescribed sequence of a structured ritual plan. Some individuals may remain in a ritual state even after the communal meal, while others may only attain closure after the intimate act of lovemaking. For some, life is an ongoing sequence of ceremonial acts that seamlessly interweave with the everyday.

Summary and Conclusion: Ritual Possibilities

The ritual experts have revealed that the different activities that make up their rituals offer room for dynamic processes wherein physical, emotional, socio-cultural, and spiritual engagement with a specific theme can unfold. Furthermore, it suggests that their flow of ritual activities balanced tasks that provoked internal focus (connection with self) and engagements with others (connection with the group and the environment). This included an awareness of which activities have a calming effect and which activities provoke stimulation. The analysis has uncovered that a balanced ritual framework offers both; sequences that provoke an outward directed energy and moments of retreat into self. Furthermore, the analysis implies that one important aspect of a ritual framework is to provide a sense of safety so people know they will come out the other end safely. Here, symbolic markers can offer individuals a clear orientation, indicating which phase of the ritual they are currently in. Marking the threshold into a ritual in the form of purification and sharing food at the end are all such tools of communication. Explaining the structure at the beginning of the ritual and giving people a clear codex on how to interact is especially relevant if the ritual format is not commonly known.

Furthermore, having a shared understanding of an activity, and following a clear structure creates a sense of cohesion within the group. The analysis also revealed that the facilitators not only drew on a basket of knowledge with a vast variety of pre-arranged songs, prayers, and activities but also presented an openness to spontaneously respond to the

situatedness of the moment, and to take cues from the environment and the group. Especially in the liminal phase, a crucial aspect involved embracing a willingness to surrender to the unknown, recognising that ritual processes may unfold with inherently unpredictable outcomes beyond the facilitator's control.

Overall Findings

In spending time with four ritual experts from Aotearoa, I gained deeper insights into the diverse ritual practices of others. Their knowledge not only stimulated critical reflections on my own work but also contributed to new realisations in the field of ritual studies in the time of the Anthropocene. The analysis of the expert interviews suggests that conducting a public ritual in Aotearoa is an active process that involves multi-directional ways of sense-making that are embodied and embedded in place. It incorporates a thorough preparation process, where scoping a site, the careful preparation of the content, and an inner preparation are all important aspects that take place before the actual ritual begins. Furthermore, to gain valuable insights into a specific location, one must slow down and be attentive to subtle, often intuitive physical, emotional, and spiritual responses. This process may encompass diverse methods, including physical exploration, historical research, and meditation, all aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the atmosphere, mood, spiritual significance, and socio-political context of a location. By taking these diverse aspects into account, a ritual facilitator can gather important information to decide what kind of ritual would be most appropriate for that particular place.

However, in the Anthropocene, the very notion of what makes an appropriate ritual site is being challenged due to the declining availability of serene locations, prompting an adaptation of rituals, capable of operating amid the unpredictability and complexity of life. Braidotti (2022) expresses that living in the current time necessitates “a political praxis of taking in the pain and damages of the world” (p. 8). Underlying this assertion is the premise that “confrontation with negativity and processing the pain are the means by which we achieve adequate knowledge about the condition we wish to overturn or modify” (Braidotti, 2022, p. 10). Translated to rituals, this prompts a paradigm shift away from merely creating a feel-good atmosphere towards revealing environmental and social challenges, so participants can collectively transform negative feelings. This way, rituals may become platforms for “a shared collective passion that extracts hope from the ruins of disenchantment (Braidotti, 2022, p. 12).

This does not imply that seasonal rituals should avoid beautiful settings in natural environments. Quite the opposite, the analysis underscored that connecting with the natural world is a crucial motivator for individuals to actively engage in addressing climate change issues. The experts emphasised that those who have emotional connections with the outdoors

are more inclined to take measures to protect and preserve it. However, access to eco-retreats and outdoor activities can be difficult for people who live in urban areas and face constraints in terms of both time and financial resources. Consequently, rituals in the time of the Anthropocene may incorporate “counter-actualisations’, or affirmative alternatives” (Braidotti, 2022, p. 9) to encourage practices that are feasible within one’s backyard and immediate environment. Such an approach might foster empathic relationships with the more-than-human world wherever we are and may promote the formation of supportive communities, capable of countering the spread of misinformation and climate change denial.

Furthermore, the analysis has revealed that the experts’ ritual activities are based on informed understandings of trans-psychological processes, group dynamics, and energy work to guide participants through processes of transformation. This knowledge informs the progression of their rituals, leading participants through various experiences, facilitating transitions between self and others, inner and outer realms, group cohesion, and individuality. It entails a continuous process of adjustment, where facilitators and participants navigate between the known and the unknown, the anticipated and the spontaneous, tension and harmony. To accommodate these evolving dynamics, their ritual frameworks are flexible enough to adjust to the unique circumstances of the moment, allowing for the different activities to be shifted around if needed. In this sense, a seasonal ritual can be seen as an ongoing process of becoming, with facilitators adapting to various moods, people, locations, and the influence of non-human elements. This dynamic nature is particularly evident in outdoor rituals, where the need for flexibility arises due to the ever-changing environmental conditions.

While these reflections may inspire facilitators to experiment with different settings and ritual practices, care, and critical reflectivity are needed when holding space for others. As the analysis has revealed, rituals can provoke strong emotions which are not to be trifled with. Thus, a facilitator must understand their own capabilities and limitations when tapping into fields of conflict and trauma. This suggests that one must be honest with oneself about what kind of ritual one feels qualified and ready to take responsibility for.

Chapter Six: Analysis of Site-Specific Performance Rituals

In this chapter, I will present findings from empirical material gathered through the creative process during the site-specific performance rituals, including writings offered by performer participants, transcripts of the focus group interview content, and follow-up feedback from audience members. This discussion complements the video representations of the rituals, with links provided for each performance ritual. I recommend viewing the videos first and referring back to them while reading this chapter for a more comprehensive understanding. In this analysis, I will focus on specific insights that stood out as key learnings from the rituals. Furthermore, I will incorporate relevant findings from the ritual experts' interviews, along with theories about contemporary performance, ritual practice, and critical posthumanism, to discuss findings related to how different seasonal rituals might be expressed in specific sites in Aotearoa. I will begin my analysis with the first ritual, taking place in the native bush in Whāingaroa for the spring equinox, followed by a summer solstice ritual in Kirikiriroa in an industrial area and urban forest, leading into an autumn ritual at the eco-retreat Solscape, and ending with a shopping ritual in a supermarket for the winter solstice. Within the year-long process of creating these four seasonal rituals, the participants and my understanding of site-specific performance rituals grew and deepened. Emerging themes and issues arising from each ritual informed the creation of the subsequent one.

Outline of Site-Specific Performance Rituals

My initial focus was on researching how site-specific performance rituals may be expressed in the time of the Anthropocene. For this investigation, I invited seven performer participants over the age of 18 who were able to commit to a research project from August 2020 until the end of June 2021. I was interested in finding people from different cultures, with different understandings of ritual, including performers who had not previously engaged in specific ritualistic practices. I aimed for us to meet two months before the date of each ritual for workshops once a week for two hours. These sessions were designed as platforms for experimentation, aimed at collaboratively developing a specific practice of seasonal performance rituals related to spring equinox, summer solstice, autumn equinox, and winter solstice. The goal was to facilitate events to re-connect people with specific local environments. Within the framework of the workshops, I also planned to conduct three focus groups, one at the beginning, in the middle, and one at the end of the year. The performer participants who committed to taking part in my study were a culturally diverse group of women from France, Slovenia, Iran, the United Kingdom, Italy, and New Zealand, including myself from Germany. Each participant is featured in this research in the videos, through their quoted comments, through photographs and in some case their drawings. On the first inclusion of

each performer participant in this chapter, I provide their full name and nationality. Thereafter, I refer to each performer by their first name. The performance rituals were planned to take place in different locations in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton City and Whāingaroa/Raglan, which I will introduce as part of this analysis.

Whāingaroa/Raglan

Whāingaroa, translated as “long pursuit”, referring to the lengthy journey of the Tainui waka from Hawaiki to Aotearoa, is nestled along the West Coast of the central North Island (Ritchie, 2016). Guarded by the majestic Maunga (mount) Karioi, also known as the sleeping lady (Te Ara, 2011), this coastal town captivates with its breath-taking scenery and pristine beaches, offering an escape from the busy city life (Ritchie, 2016). The area gained popularity in the 1960s as a world-class surfing spot, drawing international travellers who now make up a notable portion of its inhabitants (Corner, 2008). Predominantly hailing from Europe, North America, and South America, these residents bring a cosmopolitan ambiance to what would otherwise be a remote, small coastal town (Ritchie, 2016). Due to its geographical isolation, at the ‘end of the road’ (Ritchie, 2016), Whāingaroa is often described as an incubator for creativity, attracting individuals with a shared interest in a lifestyle linked to nature, encompassing surfing, yoga, meditation, dance, music, fine arts, and sustainable living (Scott, 2012). This mix is especially noticeable at Solscape, a centre for sustainability and spirituality (Scott, 2012), which is now the family property of one of the performer participants of this research project. However, in Whāingaroa, the existence of hippy culture, Spiritualities of Life, and environmental activism, is closely intertwined with the pronounced socio-economic undercurrents of neo-liberal capitalism, globalisation, and post-colonial conflict.

These underlying dynamics relate to the conversion of Tainui Āwhiro land and the notable event in 1941, where the government took 88 acres as an emergency airfield during World War II, displacing Māori families and destroying their homes (Greensill, 2018). As noted by Māori academics Angelina Greensill and Hineitimoana Greensill (2018), the confiscation of this land served as a catalyst for Māori land activism led by Tuaiwa Rickard, also known as Eva Rickard, who was an influential figure in the Māori land rights movement from the 1970s to the 1990s. While her efforts culminated in the return of the land and its endowment into the Te Kōpua Trust in 1991, other parts of Whāingaroa have been sold and developed into residential areas. Today, an increase in Airbnb and an influx of international investors has led to a process of gentrification and the displacement of long-standing residents, including members of the local iwi.

However, despite the town’s conflicting sociocultural and political dynamics, clashing interests, and growing economic disparities, Rickard’s legacy lives in the memories of her

descendants, and other community members such as ritual expert Renata. Efforts in raising social consciousness, confronting colonial narratives, fostering community engagement, and environmental activism manifest in various ways such as the annual festivities of Maui Dolphin Day, Matariki, and ongoing activism against proposed seabed mining by corporate interests (Ritchie, 2016). Alongside regular farmers' markets, kōhanga reo classes, and graphic arts courses taking place in Te Whare Toi o Te Kura Tawhito o Whāingaroa/ Raglan Old School Arts Centre (rescued by Rickard from being demolished), these events provide valuable opportunities for creating a sense of cohesion and reinforcing shared values among the town's inhabitants despite their non-hegemonic narratives.

As an immigrant, having arrived in Whāingaroa just over a year before facilitating the first ritual, I was only just beginning to understand the historical and socio-cultural complexities of the place. As I was still settling into my cultural positioning and refining my research practices, I decided to begin my research design with a ritual framework centred on fostering relationships among the participants and their connection with the surrounding ecology. The emphasis of the spring ritual was to provide an experiential framework for exploring eco-somatic movement and fostering a collective understanding of ritual practices, relevant to the specific group of people I was working with. In this choice and with a focus on subjective experiences, I paid less attention to the broader context of environmental devastation, socio-cultural aspects of location, and political injustices concerning the Anthropocene. Instead, based on the ritual expert's emphasis on inner preparation, this approach aimed to strengthen interpersonal connections among the participants to establish a shared ritual culture as a solid foundation for the year-long research endeavour. It was my aspiration that this foundation would then provide the participants and me with the necessary skills and methods for navigating the complex stories of the Anthropocene.

Spring Equinox Ritual - Native Bush, Solstice in Whāingaroa

The spring equinox ritual was conducted in the native bush near the eco retreat Solstice in Whāingaroa/Raglan in 2020 on the 21st of September. The site provided a sanctuary of natural vegetation, presenting an abundance of native birds, diverse plants, and a stream flowing from the nearby Maunga Karioi. This more-than-human world, pulsating with vitality, resonating with lively sounds, colours, and invigorating scents, offered unique chances for participants to engage in moments of heightened bodily awareness - a state articulated by Celeste Snowber (2022) as "a practice of wandering into wonder" (p. 29). The open platforms allowed for dancing, while mossy patches beneath tree canopies provided moments of rest, and the clear water of the stream invited for swimming. The environment exemplified the

enduring allure of the natural world, serving as a poignant reminder of why it is important to actively contribute to its conservation and protection.

Overall, the ritual comprised a journey through the bush, originating from a designated point atop a circular platform. Participants followed diverse sequences, leading them deeper into the wonders of the ecological world, culminating at a small river for a cleansing ritual. The journey progressed from dancing around a bonfire close to its starting point and concluded with participants eating dyed eggs and planting seeds of native plants. The ritual's content had been developed over a comprehensive two-month devised workshop process, during which the participants explored different eco-somatic practices. In these sessions, they also crafted their distinct roles as guardians, representing the elements of earth, fire, water, air, animals, plants, and wholeness. These roles were assigned to participants based on the qualities and characteristics each individual felt a strong resonance with and were then continued to be explored in various settings and contexts during subsequent rituals. Notably, these workshops also provided a platform for each participant to investigate their individual movement prayers with inspiration drawn from their diverse cultural backgrounds. Subsequently, the participants' refined eco-somatic practices, elemental roles, and movement prayers were shared during the ritual, as an invitation for collective participation. Furthermore, the group's early stage of establishing their unique ritual performance practice led to the collective decision to keep this spring ritual private and limit participation to the initial seven performer participants who had attended the workshops, including myself.

It was like the flowering of new beginnings for us as a group. That's why we decided to do something just for ourselves, just exploring us as a group and then once this had been birthed, we were like "Sweet, we can do this". (Vanessa Mateja)

At the beginning of the research, it was important for me to start the investigation without providing a clear definition of ritual practice to encourage a more open and exploratory approach with the performer participants. Thus, I engaged the performer participants in a focus group discussion at the beginning of the workshop to investigate what ritual meant to them and what kind of ritual culture they envisioned as a group. Their responses informed the unfolding of the specific ritual performance practices used throughout the research.

The spring equinox ritual video remains private due to its sensitive content. Based on the literature reviewed and the interviews with the key experts, I particularly focus on discussing the following key possibilities: (a) establishing a shared ritual culture, (b) co-facilitating ritualistic explorations, (c) de-centralising anthropocentric movement and thinking

patterns, (d) transcendence: a dynamic interplay of nature-culture continuum, (e) experiencing intermediate transcendence, liminality, and pleasurable embodiment.



Image1: Spring Equinox Ritual. Neža Jamnikar (Slovenia); Maryam Bagheri Nesami (Iran); Vanessa Mateja (New Zealand); Monica Evans (New Zealand); Ruth Hare, (United Kingdom); Hanna Allouard (France/Reunion Island); Gabriel Baker (New Zealand). Video still: J. Claus, Whāingaroa, September 2020.

Establishing a Shared Ritual Culture

Our initial focus group discussion about ritual allowed us to establish shared understandings for the subsequent year together. One significant insight that emerged early during this focus group was that our rituals should be inclusive. Monica, born and raised in Aotearoa, expressed that for her to feel welcomed into a ritual space, it should not “feel cultic or religious”. This quote implies that she feels a ritual should be open to different personal practices, beliefs, worldviews, and spiritual interpretations, rather than adhering to a dogmatic framework. Monica furthermore pointed out the importance of “being transparent about what we are doing”, to avoid superficial imitation of actions driven solely by their perceived sacredness or aesthetic appeal. Monica took a clear stance against what she described as the practices of some “new age people, who have appropriated some stuff, and now have to be all sacred about it”. Responding to Monica’s criticism, Ruth posed the question as to how we create rituals “without taking from other cultures”.

One way this question was approached in the spring equinox ritual was by inviting participants to investigate the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the cultural identities they associate with and to consciously weave these influences into their practices. However, sharing aspects of one’s cultural tapestry was not straightforward, especially for participants who had immigrated to Aotearoa from other parts of the world and felt disconnected from what might be considered the cultural traditions of their homelands. For example, Ruth expressed a feeling of detachment from her childhood home in the United Kingdom and the ritual practices of her family. This feeling resulted in her wish to “create a new ritual from some of our cultures that I would like to be part of because I don’t have that in my recent background”. Similarly, Hanna, growing up in a Catholic environment in France with ancestral lineages tracing back to Reunion Island, India, and Africa, articulated: “I can’t think of any potential ritual that I do now as an adult. Maybe because I am far from home and my family”.

The feedback from the participants underscores the complexity they faced in establishing a cultural positioning and deciding which ritual practices to adopt. The process involved reconstructing elements of traditions they regarded as familiar while dealing with uncertainty about which threads from the past they wished to bring into the present context. This navigation also revealed a shift in emphasis away from the idea of trying to “return to the authentic original culture” (Hall, 2019, pp.138-139) of their homelands, toward embracing ongoing negotiations of cultural reformations, where “Culture is not a matter of ontology, of being, but of becoming” (Hall, 2019, p. 222). For some participants, including myself, who had immigrated from other countries, articulating ritual practices was intricately linked with the exploration of one’s diasporic sense of belonging. This included a desire of wanting to cultivate more profound affiliations within the socio-cultural context of Aotearoa. Maryam described that

sharing aspects of her Persian culture with the ritual group was “a practice of homing”, as “the easiest and most affordable way to feel at home is being able to use your own language and being able to import a cultural practice into a space”. This suggests that by incorporating elements of her own cultural connections into the ritual, Maryam could cultivate a sense of ‘groundedness’ (Bradley, 2009), from which meaningful interactions with others could unfold.

The different processes of expressing cultural identities were represented in the ritual through the vignettes of solo performances. In these moments, each participant shared a personal movement prayer, which for Vanessa was like “shining our little lights on who we were”. Her movement prayer reflected a sense of being deeply connected to Maunga Karioi, the mountain overlooking the native bush close to her family home Solscape.

*I hear my ancestors calling
Guiding me to my highest mountain
Navigated by the eyes of my sisters*
(Vanessa Mateja)

Vanessa’s poem suggests a pre-existing connection to the site, the home of her family where she had spent many hours immersing herself in studying the native plant world. Her interactions exuded a sense of familiarity, especially when she assumed the role of welcoming the performer participants into the space. Neža’s movement prayer differed in the way that it expressed a sense of dislocation and melancholia:

*Displaced images
Running from the womb of a different mountain
Where in my form are you?
I shake you green and blue
You fill me completely
When I scream you deep
Cold drops on my face
I try to enrage you on the surface of my hands
Palms of my structure hold directions of unchangeable pasts
Revealing to the sun: I am a mountain*
(Neža Jamnikar)

This poem illustrates that creating a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar context can be intertwined with sadness and nostalgia. Neža’s desire for homing resulted in tears dripping down her face, followed by the realisation that she carries the strength of a mountain within.

When considering the different movement prayers, it becomes apparent that each participant’s process of localising their ritual practice was a distinct and personal encounter influenced by their unique life experiences and personal reflections, highlighting the complexity and fluidity of cultural identities as they intersect, entangle and change depending on the context. It became apparent that establishing a relational space between oneself and

others required both self-reflexivity and openness to uncover layers of one's own identity in the presence of others. The conditions for this process to unfold required the cultivation of an atmosphere of hospitality and care.

Co-Facilitating Ritualistic Explorations

For Maryam, sharing aspects of her cultural identities was intertwined with the practice of hospitality, stating that she as a visitor brought "something as a gift to the space and environment of others". This was similarly experienced by Neža, expressing: "We came with all those elements and offered it to nature. And then nature started to open up like okay you may enter; you may connect with me". Snowber (2022) describes this process of suspended presence as a "reciprocal relationship with the earth; call and response with the natural world" (p. 1). Recognising the importance of expanding reciprocity beyond human interactions prompted an approach of co-facilitation, where the environment was regarded as an active participant and co-facilitator. Based on a ritual score, individuals took turns orchestrating ritual sequences in dialogue with the environment. Each participant facilitated an eco-somatic movement journey, aligning with their specific roles such as guardians of water, air, fire, earth, the plant world, animals, and the concept of wholeness. What stood out for Vanessa "was the reference to our outer and inner worlds being within each other in all the elements". Neža remembered: "We were all giving and receiving equally in that group", a process described by Vanessa as: "Oscillating between doing and watching but being held within a vessel the whole time". The feedback suggests that the ritual structure allowed for a flexible interchange between observing performances and engaging collectively in ceremonial acts, achieving a balance between pre-set elements and opportunities for improvisation. This in turn enabled participants to spontaneously interact with one another, including the ecology of the forest.

This immersive format of co-facilitation resulted in an experience of feeling a sense of belonging. Maryam expressed that "the ritual was an exercise to find temporary balance and in that second of balance, I was feeling integrity and I was feeling at home". Instances of feeling at peace and a sense of being in the right place can be associated with Turner's (1974) conceptualisation of *communitas*. It is a state in which a group encounters moments of maintaining their "uniqueness in the very act of realizing their commonness" (Turner, 1974, p. 274). Similarly, Neža felt: "We were all experiencing the same things, but then our perspective on that experience obviously was different", highlighting the importance of upholding one's sense of self during a common activity. Homi Bhabha (1994) describes such a moment of togetherness as a relationality that "entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (p. 5). Maryam remembers: "We did not say directly what is okay and what is not, but we were in the active listening to each other. Respecting it and trusting that this is the

ethics". The participants' experiences aligned with Delanty's (2006) articulation of a third space wherein "new relations of self, other and world develop in the moments of openness" (p. 33).

Examining the feedback from the participants, it becomes clear that encouraging a range of possible activities in our rituals promoted spontaneous interactions, and co-facilitation. Moreover, the responses indicate that when rituals are co-facilitated with a focus on mutual respect and equal participation, individuals from diverse backgrounds are offered pathways to embrace their personal expressions while uncovering moments of temporary cohesion. As a result of establishing these practices, a sense of integrity and belonging could be nurtured among the participants, supporting the emergence of a unique ritual culture that could encompass people from various cultural backgrounds. In the feedback from performer participants, an effective approach to creating moments of cohesion was highlighted by Vanessa, who emphasised the importance of "paying attention to what's flowering, what's coming into the season, and acknowledging all the senses". Broadening one's attention from personal questions of identity to the immediate environment facilitated connections that could extend beyond cultural interpretations. It led to moments of taking part in more-than-human realities, as elaborated in the following discussion.

De-Centralising Anthropocentric Movement and Thinking Patterns

As the ritual unfolded, Gabriel (in her role as the guardian of the plant world) facilitated an eco-somatic experience aimed at sensing togetherness within the expansive network of the native bush. She encouraged other participants to get close to the ground, observe the soil, and tune into the feeling of being: "a tiny sprout reaching upwards towards the sky, [while being] anchored deeper into the darkness of the sediment strata". Such imagery, evoking plant-like sensing (East, 2021) brought awareness towards establishing a state of somatic interconnection. Participants began to realise that they could inhabit their own soma, while simultaneously experiencing a dissolution of their pre-conceived identities. For Neža, this led to an experience of "roots vibrating in my learned thinking, sprouting determined to an ever-expanding being". This kind of imagery, where neural pathways appear to be repatterned by complex networks of rhizomes, is described by East (2021) as a "physical sharing through a trans-conscious awareness as plantbodybeing" (p. 253).

Engaging in tasks aimed at transcending human-centred perspectives, Monica came to realise "the dullness of brain-centric dance", asking: "How many more ways can we move?" Monica's statement alludes to her longing, perhaps even an 'impossible' wish to transcend her ingrained human movement habits, seeking to reach beyond conditioned norms and hoping to access unconditioned forms of expression. Similarly, Neža asked: "How does my being in this world change when I, for a moment, shift out of the anthropocentric existence?"

Neža expressed her desire to change her perception away from distinct individualisation and towards entangled interactions with other species. The participants continued to embark on their explorative journeys, seeking to connect their heritage to the origins of Homo sapiens. During this process, they drew inspiration from Olsen's (2002, 2014) publications about de-evolutionary experiences, which they had studied and cultivated throughout the two-month workshop period. Maryam, assuming the role of the guardian of animals, documented observations of her animalistic self, including potential mating behaviours, reproductive patterns, and movement trajectories through drawings in her journal.

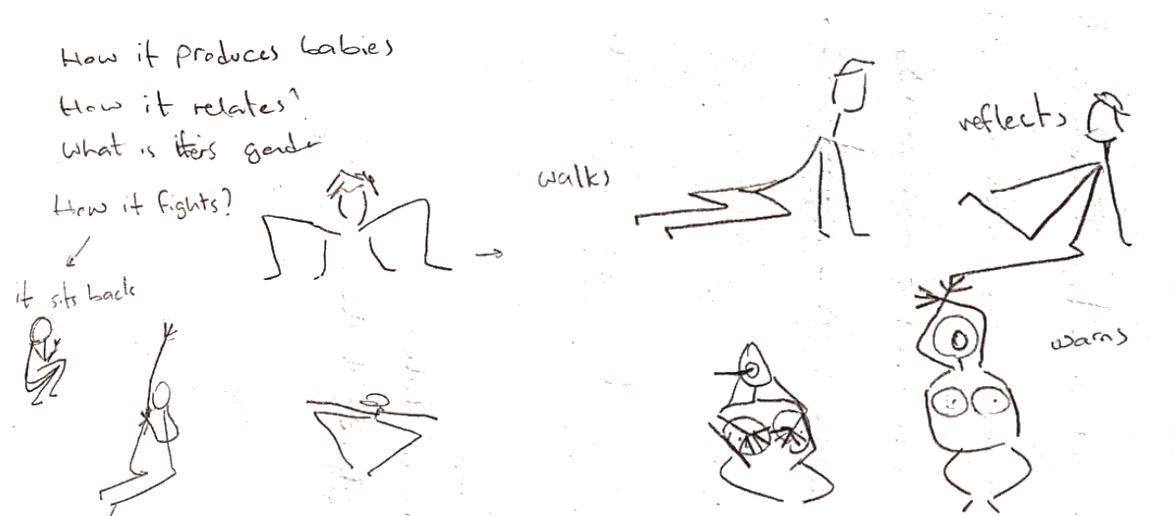


Figure 3: Animal somatics (journal entry, Maryam Bagheri Nesami)

The feedback suggests that as they delved into the exploration of human-plant and human-animal relations, they were able to transcend conventional understandings of self and experience deeper connections with other beings as kin. Furthermore, their embodied participation in the reproductive cycles of nature, especially during the lively season of spring, manifested itself quite literally as two of the participants became pregnant around that time. This occurrence added an intriguing layer of symbolism to the exploration of seasonal rituals.

Transcendence: A Dynamic Interplay of Nature-Culture Continuum

The previous section revealed that exploring concepts of the nature-culture continuum through eco-somatic movement could temporarily shift participants' understandings beyond cultural references. However, although participants might have momentarily experienced an 'egoless' sense of togetherness within the expansive network of the native bush, the perception of that experience was still "culturally, socially and intersubjectively formed" (Rothfield, 2019, p. 85). The profound influence of their cultural conditionings, shaping their interactions with a specific place, became particularly evident in the sequence down by the river. Here, Gabriel was reminded of "how many cultural references there are to bathe in the river". This reflection was provoked by another participant who had the spontaneous impulse to sing the gospel hymn

“O sisters, let’s go down to the river to pray”. Gabriel’s realisation indicates that the environment cannot be considered a ‘neutral’ backdrop. Instead, every aspect, be it natural or otherwise, carries cultural associations, or symbolic meaning. This understanding emphasises the myriad ways in which culture surfaces during eco-somatic ritual practices. It underscores the complex interplay between culture and nature as they co-shape human expressions and experiences. For Gabriel the river evoked imagery reminiscent of baptism, she explains:

I thought this was because of my family background as Catholic, but I think it goes back to my Gallic ancestry. Before Christianity was brought to Britain, people would pray, meditate, and talk to the spirit world while standing in rivers. (Gabriel Baker)

Gabriel brings attention to the significant role of cultural influences, such as ancestral traditions and heritage, in shaping how individuals interpret their experiences and situate themselves in the (natural) world. The sequence by the river served as a catalyst, unveiling the presence of ingrained or imagined cultural practices that surfaced as part of the expressive repertoire of the ritual participants. The heightened intensity observed in this activity was also attributed to the diverse tapestry of cultural traditions encompassing the expression of sensuality and the honouring of the naked female body. This will be further examined in the next section, with a specific focus on how the river sequence generated experiences of intermediate transcendence and liminality through pleasurable embodiment.

Intermediate Transcendence, Liminality and Pleasurable Embodiments

Upon analysing the responses of the participants, it became evident that for the majority of them, the core of the ritual was the sequence by the river. Hanna described:

The most outstanding moment was when we were all getting undressed. It was cold, and we tried to cheer ourselves up by making animalistic noises. It was a nice feeling, going into the cold water, dropping into that level of energy, and then coming up like new. (Hanna Allouard)

This suggests that baring herself to others, feeling the support of sisterhood, and immersing in the river, contributed to an increased state of awareness, bringing about transformational change. This experience can be linked to Luckmann’s (1990) articulation of intermediate transcendence, a phase in which people undergo temporarily changes on physical, mental, and emotional levels, leading to new insights about themselves and the surrounding world. It can also be connected to Turner’s (1969) conceptualisation of liminality, a phase when people are “betwixt and between” the positions assigned by society, cultural norms, or rules and meet each other “directly, “nakedly” in the face-to-face intimate encounter” (Schechner, 2006, p. 70). It furthermore emphasises the interconnectedness of the body and the natural world,

where physical sensations and sensory perceptions are celebrated as integral aspects of spiritual encounters. Maryam had a similar experience stating:

I remember bare bodies, nakedness that gave me a sense of depth. I think it was the deepest and darkest part of the ritual. Darkness not in a gloomy way but dark in the sense of mysterious and unknown. [...] I felt everything was paused and the time was still. I felt a different density in time and space. (Maryam Bagheri Irani)

For Maryam nudity played a significant role in enhancing her experience, leading to a heightened sense of presence, and transcending the familiar and comprehensible (mysterious). Snowber (2022) expresses that “attentiveness to sensual knowledge of the natural world births gestures, movements, voice, and poetics and provides an entrance to connect to embodied presence” (p. 7). Here, sensuous ways of knowing and visceral intimacy are not perceived as distinct from spiritual encounters. Instead, they are considered interconnected components, with the body serving as “a portal to the ineffable and the wisdom” (Snowber, 2022, p. 94). Similarly, Neža described the water immersion as an experience characterised by a thinning of the veil between the tangible and immaterial world:

*Outside a fog has lifted
Creating a soft border between seen and unseen
Colours are intensified as well as my pulsation
as I spin my form into a liquid sensation.
(Neža Jamnikar)*

By connecting to her “watery soma source” (Fraleigh, 2009, p. xiii) and bringing her fluid form into motion (spinning with liquid sensation) it seems as if Neža could unlock an experience of intermediate transcendence, where her perception changed, and her pulse surged. She further explained I was “vibrating on a higher level. It almost felt like a trance to me”.

These examples illustrate how the ritualistic act of immersing oneself in a river can create sensory stimulation, leading to heightened awareness and a deeper connection to the present moment. Moreover, this state of heightened presence can be interpreted as experiences of intermediate transcendence (Luckmann, 1990), where the boundaries between the known and the mysterious became blurred, leaving participants with a deeper sense of unity with themselves and the world. Furthermore, the responses suggest that the significance of this moment was heightened by the inner challenges participants had to overcome, such as embracing sensual expression in the presence of others. Rather than perpetuating a dichotomy between spirituality and embodiment, it served as a platform for participants to free their bodies from the potential stigma associated with sensuality and encouraged them to wholeheartedly embrace the various expressions of femininity in all their manifestations (Rountree, 2004).

Key Findings Spring Equinox Ritual

The analysis revealed that utilising a range of potential ritual activities encouraged spontaneous interactions and co-facilitation. By co-facilitating rituals based on mutual respect and equal participation, individuals from diverse backgrounds could embrace their various cultural expressions while finding moments of cohesion. Furthermore, it became evident that the participant's relationships with the natural world were dynamic processes within a nature-culture continuum. While their multiple cultural perspectives influenced how they interacted with and perceived themselves and the world, the specific environment of the native bush influenced and made space for new understandings and engagements to emerge. This reciprocal relationship between culture and nature led to the emergence of a ritual culture specific to this occasion that was co-created and shared among the participants who had engaged in the experience. In this context, the atmosphere of the native bush, the welcoming milieu surrounding Solscape, and the focus on eco-somatics rather than site-specific practices played a crucial part in shaping that experience. Here, an important factor was the secluded nature of that site and ritual approach. The privacy of the bush, hidden from the public gaze, the focus on the participants' personal backgrounds instead of engagement with local socio-political dynamics, and the decision to refrain from inviting others added to the specific expression of the spring equinox ritual. These circumstances created an atmosphere that enhanced personal freedom and group immersion, allowing participants to engage in activities characterised by a heightened sensitivity towards self and other living beings. It offered opportunities for experiencing moments of intermediate transcendence, experimenting with temporary dissolutions of human-culture boundaries, and enhancing new forms of embodied expressions. In this process, the collaborative approach and incorporating the participants' unique cultural narratives was crucial to co-create a shared ritual experience.

Since this research was situated in the Anthropocene, it was necessary to depart from the incubator environment of Solscape and to consider the complex interplay between socio-cultural politics of location. Thus the next ritual was intended to be a public event, with a heightened focus on site-specific performance practices and environmental concerns. This endeavour raised a critical inquiry into determining appropriate forms of aesthetics, language, and cultural representation that could be employed. The exploration of these considerations was vital in the pursuit of creating the summer solstice ritual, which I will analyse next.

Performance Ritual

21st of December 8.30pm-10.00pm

Entrance fee: suggested koha \$10 and/or
bring an offering in form of a native plant seedling

Private event / RSVP : Johanna_claus@web.de

Summer Solstice

This summer solstice ritual brings people together to pay attention to the environmental concerns of our current time

With movement and music this summer solstice ritual weaves environmental concerns with contemporary art forms, seeking to activate a relationship between people and the more-than-human world. The project is inspired by the work of the Riverlea Environment Society Incorporated (RESI) who organise activities around Hammond Bush (Te Mauri o Ngā Tūpuna o Neherā) to advocate for native species and plant life.

The performance ritual addresses the question of how a summer solstice performance ritual might allow diverse participants to connect with this specific local environment as a way to creatively respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is a concept that describes our current time in which human actions have led to the exploitation of the planet's resources and contributed to significant climate change and the extinction of many species.

Hammond Bush and the proposed Amberfield housing development across the Waikato River in the Peacocks Road area raise such environmental concerns as there are about 60 critically endangered long-tailed bats (pekapeka) living there. Human demand for new housing challenges their habitats and without our support the bats may become extinct.

The performance ritual is designed to invite audience members to actively participate in a guided performance tour and has a maximum of 50 participants. The tour will start at the industrial area at Riverlea Road, and will go through Hammond Bush. Audience members will follow existing paths for the whole tour but the surfaces may be rough and there will be low light. Therefore you will need to bring a torch and wear proper outdoor footwear. Any potential disruption for the bats will be reduced. This includes no torches in their living area, and no loud noises.

The project has an intercultural framework where communication with tangata whenua has generated a research practice that acknowledges Māori protocol and allows western ideas to co-exist. This is a practice-based research investigation that aims to cultivate ecological understanding through somatic movement, ritual and site-specific performance in relation to landscape and tangata whenua.

HEALTH AND SAFETY: There are no toilet facilities, no smoking, no dogs in the park.

COVID 19 protocol: Signing in at the beginning of the performance is required to keep a record, hand sanitizer will be provided, stay home if you're unwell.

A Project towards a PhD with creative practice by Johanna Claus, Waikato University

Start: 123 Riverlea Road, Hamilton 3216
End: Te Mauri o Ngā Tūpuna o Neherā, Kirikiriroa

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Concept and artistic director: Johanna Claus (PhD candidate)

Performance artists: Vanessa Mateja, Monica Evans, Hanna Allouard, Veronica Butturini, Gabriel Baker, Ruthita Hare, Neža Jamnikar

Sound artists: Komako Silver, Alejandra Jensen, Oliver Stewart

Light artist: Peter Vospser / Video artist: Nina Rogue

Figure 4: Invitation Summer Solstice Ritual (Design: J, Claus, 2020)

Summer Solstice Ritual - Riverlea Road to Te Ngahere o Ngā Tūpuna o Neherā

The summer solstice ritual took place on the 21st of December 2020 on the eastern bank of the Waikato River in Kirikiriroa/ Hamilton, at an industrial area of Riverlea Road which borders on Te Ngahere o Ngā Tūpuna o Neherā, also known as Hammond Bush. The performance unfolded in the final 400 meters at the end of a kilometre-long cul-de-sac, surrounded by diverse business establishments. Notable among them were a livestock genetics company providing artificial insemination for the Waikato region, TreeScape specialising in tree removal, Waikato Steel Fabricators working with major construction companies, Ruakura Tractor Parts catering to the farming community, Core Refrigeration offering air conditioning and refrigeration services, and others. Collectively, these enterprises illustrated ongoing environmental modifications in the Waikato, highlighting the human impacts within the Anthropocene.

Juxtaposing the industrial part, the neighbouring bush, home to more than 145 species of native rākau (plants) and birds (Macdonald et al., 2017), served as a poignant reminder of the natural world that once thrived throughout the entire region. Te Ngahere o Ngā Tūpuna o Neherā, situated on the banks of the Waikato River, had been a fertile site of Māori food gardens, overlooked by the fortified village Te Pā o Ruamutu, home of Ngāti Wairere people, which has witnessed numerous inter-tribal conflicts (Macdonald et al., 2017). Notably, the renowned battle fought in the 1700s between Hānui and Ngāti Wairere, where Chief Ruamutu was killed, led to Hānui and his people claiming mana whenua over the Pā and its associated lands (Macdonald et al., 2017). However, the most devastating effect upon the people of Ngāti Wairere and Tainui was the Waikato Land Wars (1863 -1864), with the Crown forcibly confiscating thousands of acres of Waikato Tainui tribal lands, claiming the lives of hundreds of Māori and Pākehā (Macdonald et al., 2017). The forced displacement of their ancestral homes, now repurposed for commercial and industrial use, alongside an affluent residential suburb (predominantly owned by Pākehā), has left lasting feelings of pain among tangata whenua (Macdonald et al., 2017). Similar narratives exist in most places in present-day Aotearoa, often overlooked amid the historical amnesia of non-Māori New Zealanders (Bell, 2006). In developing this ritual, I recognised the need to acknowledge the histories and contested narratives of location, while also maintaining a focus on the broader ecological context of the more-than-human world and the Anthropocene.

Initially, my attention was drawn to that place because of the presence of Pekapeka (long-tailed bats) near this industrial area, one of two terrestrial mammals native to New Zealand (O'Donnell, 2005), which are at risk of extinction (O'Donnell et al., 2018). Learning about the environmental concerns of the local community and the threat to the bats' survival compelled me to raise awareness of them through a performance ritual. The performance was planned within a collaborative approach, involving participants from the spring equinox, two of whom were now pregnant, and with Veronica Butturini from Italy joining as an additional member to fill in for Maryam, who couldn't participate this time. As performers, aiming to host a public event on land with wāhi tūpuna status (sites of significance to iwi), we were guests. Thus, dialogue and collaboration were crucial in conceptualising a ritual performance that sensitively acknowledged the complex history of the site. Highlighting the importance of Māori presence on the land, this ritual process also featured Taonga Pūoro artists Komako Silver and Alejandra Jensen whose sounds were recorded by Oliver Stewart and incorporated into the soundtrack. Other advisors were the Riverlea Environment Society Incorporated (RESI), including Tania Macdonald (Ngāti Mahanga, Ngāti Ngamurikaitaua, Ngāti Ruru, Ngāti Koura, Ngāti Tahinga, Waikato/ Tainui), from the local iwi, whose guidance on the ecological

background and historical knowledge of colonial conflicts profoundly influenced the conceptualisation of the performance ritual.

This Summer Solstice ritual was developed as a site-specific performance that was advertised to the community. It involved performers leading audience members through the industrial area of Riverlea at sunset during Summer Solstice, accompanied by a pre-recorded sound score. As dark approached, the performers led the audience quietly down a pathway into the bush, ultimately ending in a clearing surrounded by trees inhabited by bats. In this distinctive location, the coexistence of industrial structures with remnants of the native bush presented a dynamic interplay. Barbour (2019) expresses that “site dance making encompasses a breadth of intimate embodied experiences, ecological and environmental understandings and sociocultural histories of people and place” (p. 58). Acknowledging the intricacies of relationships was crucial in our capacity as guests, especially because the group of performer participants and I had the responsibility of hosting a site-specific ritual for a public audience with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Considering the challenge of operating in an in-between space of being a host and guest at the same time, I drew on critical posthumanism as a guiding framework. It offered me avenues to navigate the complexity of unresolved frictions, contradictions, entanglements, co-implications, hybridity, and interdependence (Braidotti, 2019).

Thus, rather than forcing a linear account, the subsequent text holds together fragmented situations, realisations, and tensions that arose from the diverse array of realities. Furthermore, connecting the summer solstice ritual event with several insights that emerged from the ritual expert’s analysis, literature about contemporary performance practice, and critical posthumanism, prompted careful examinations of prevailing power dynamics. It offered me pathways to cultivate a sensitivity to uphold the principles of being an ally to Māori, and to acknowledge the legacies of the location. Simultaneously, I sought to shine a light on the environments in the Anthropocene, engaging with romanticised notions of ritual, reimagining embodied interspecies relationships, and emphasising principles of care, hope, and creativity.

The summer solstice ritual is represented in the following video (password: Johanna)
<https://vimeo.com/620454698>

These are the key possibilities I explored: (a) finding the right place for site-specific performance rituals, (b) orientation in the ruins of the natural world, (c) fire-electricity continuum: re-thinking ritual practice, (d) threshold into ritual: eco-somatic bush walk, (e) core of the ritual: disturbance and settling, (f) importance of a ritual structure, (g) finding ritualistic presence within site-specific performance.

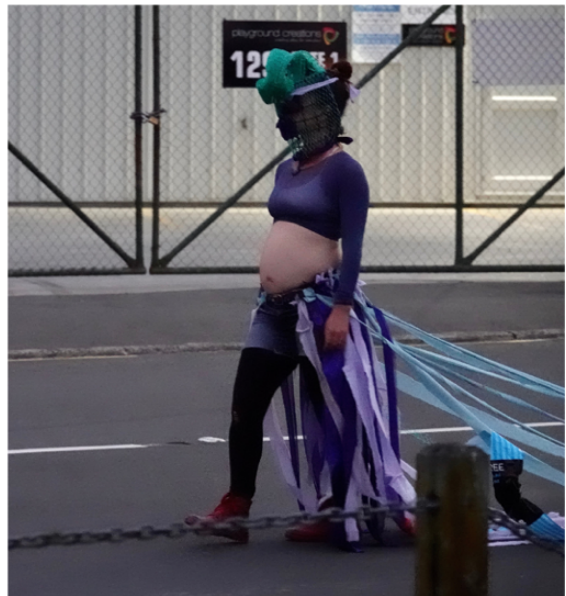


Image 2: Summer Solstice Ritual. Neža Jamnikar, all performers, Veronika Butturini, Monica Evans. Photo: Marek Kaniewski, Kirikiriroa, September 2020.



Image 3: Summer Solstice Ritual. Ruth Hare, ritual participants, performance group, Vanessa Mateja. Photo: Marek Kaniewski, Kirikiriroa, September 2020.

Finding the Right Place for Site-Specific Performance Rituals

The multi-layered historical imprints of the site had a major influence on the methodology chosen for the summer solstice, leading to a re-evaluation of the ritual practice the performer participants and I had established during the spring equinox. While we had developed a ritual practice and understandings of the nature-culture continuum as a group in a private setting, we were faced with the challenge of how to connect with this specific environment and create a ritual for a public audience. Ruth expressed that our intention “originally was to pay attention to the bats but that got all lost on the journey when we realised the history of the land”, which left her with a sense of cautiousness about how to engage. This was similarly felt by performer participant Neža:

I reflected upon my own connection to the land, and I got sad at some point because I could not comprehend that in some way, although I always see nature as my home, in that instance I felt extremely disconnected from it. (Neža Jamnikar)

The ways in which human actions and societal dynamics have impacted the environment around the native bush, shifted the performer participants' relationship with nature from a feeling of belonging (as experienced in the spring equinox) towards a sense of alienation. The coexistence of an industrial landscape and culturally significant land prompted a reconsideration of how cultural practices interact with and impact each other. This led to a more nuanced understanding of the nature-culture continuum, as Monica expressed:

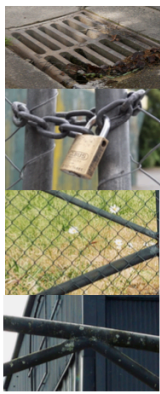
It made me realise the naivety with which we can go into a public space but as soon as we start doing anything that goes deeper or is more ritualistic, we must engage with all the other energies that are somewhere. (Monica Evans)

Underscoring the intricate interplay between individuals and the evolving narratives of a location, Monica brought into focus that nature is not a 'neutral' backdrop for human activity, but an active participant that holds memories of past encounters.

Thus, I sought guidance from tangata whenua and was advised that a mihi whakatu (welcome) would be offered to the bush area. For this reason, we performer participants focused our initial work in the Riverlea Road industrial area, adopting a choreographic approach inspired by Carboni's guide for urban mapping (2019). This approach comprised four distinct phases: observation, capture, repetition, and composition, aimed at engaging participants in a thorough examination of the site, embodying movements, and subsequently crafting a choreographic score. The decision to choose the method of urban mapping was driven by the intention to embody the manufactured environment of the industrial area and to highlight narratives of the Anthropocene environment. On the other hand, the sequence in the bush drew inspiration from eco-somatic practices, serving as a method to highlight people's interconnectedness with ecology and the more-than-human world. Balancing these various factors and remaining mindful of socio-political considerations significantly influenced the organisation, presentation, expression, and overall dramaturgy of the ritual event.


1. OBSERVE

- Walk around and notice places where nature pushes against concrete surfaces, where industry and wilderness meet.
- Allow yourself to be captured by the events, situations, objects, and anything around you.
- Listening to the sounds of the city and how they morph between fabricated mechanistic and natural sounds.
- Explore the properties and options to interact and embody the urban complexity.
- When something captures your attention exclude anything else, focusing only on what you are observing.
- Ask yourself what are its properties? What possibilities do you have to interact with and embody those properties?
- What is its colour? What is its shape? What is its sound? What is it? What is it for?




2. CAPTURE

- How do the site's / object's dimensions and proportions resonate with the dimensions of your body?
- Explore measuring it through the body and allow a dialogue to develop.
- Create a posture, and action in response to the properties and take position next to the object, the event, or situation, you have identified with your action.
- Have you succeeded in capturing the properties of the object now try to memorise the posture of your body.
- If you are with someone you can ask them to capture the picture (it will later help you to remember the posture).
- Keep walking and collect 5 different captures as possible.



3. REPEAT

- Partner up with another person. One of you lays down with eyes closed.
- Choose one image that belongs to the person in front of you and manipulate her body into that shape.
- How can you position her passive ligaments into the shape of the original object she embodied a few weeks ago on the site?
- As the passive person, pay close attention to the shifts in your body and try to remember the postures
- Repeat the task until all images are embodied.
- Create an archive of embodied, memorised, repeatable movements.
- Once all the pictures are embodied, observe your partner how she transitions from one posture to another without your help.
- When finished, show her the sequence of the images and swap roles.



4. COMPOSE

- Organise and reconfigure the postures in a choreographic score.
- Create a movement composition starting from the capture of postures that you have performed outdoors.
- Organise the order/timing of the sequence to develop your body map.
- Peer up with another person and explore the various combinations and permutations of the posture, the endurance, persistence and proxemics between the bodies.
- Consider your audience, the space where you will be performing and the duration.
- Repeat your sequence a few times
- Where on the site can you dance your choreography, and how does the site changes it?




Figure 5: Site-Mapping for Summer Solstice (Photos: N, Reed; J, Claus, 2020).

Industrial Area: Orientation in the Ruins of the Natural World

During the summer solstice ritual, the performers guided the audience to different sites within the industrial area orienting them in time and space through activating the elements of water, fire, air, and earth in response to the road and features of the industrial environment. This process of orientation was not determined in relation to the four directions as described by Batten and Rountree, but instead focused on the Anthropocene environment. As described in the spring ritual, participants assumed the roles of elemental guardians of air, water, fire, earth, plants, animals, and wholeness. For the industrial context of the summer solstice, they adapted these roles to reflect the impact of industrialisation on the elements they represented. I attempted to create hybrid aesthetics where fire, water, air, and earth intertwine with elements such as electricity, plastic bottles, sewage systems, air conditioning, tarmac, petrol, and technology. Highlighting the inherent entanglement between more traditional symbolic ritual representations (such as the four elements) and their contemporary modifications, I sought to provoke reflection on the complex relationships between nature and human-made systems. Performer participant Monica recalled her embodiment as a water goddess during this ritual as being confronting:

The disgust about the drain and the water in those plastic bottles. Water just really takes on whatever is around it and kind of doesn't has a choice about absorbing everything. (Monica Evans)

Monica, who was pregnant at that time, found it challenging to establish a physical connection with the polluted water in the drainage system beneath the street. Audience members expressed similar reactions, noting that observing the dancers' enactments of the devastated conditions of the natural world led them to contemplate their self-centred and destructive behaviours. Ritual expert Renata, who attended as an audience member, recalled: "I was feeling how tough it was what we were producing", interpreting the industrial area as a reflection of a society that prioritises economic growth at the expense of others. Another audience participant described that it represented:

the displacement of nature and the means to dominate (and destroy) myriads of natural processes that have evolved on this planet over billions of years. But it also facilitates and enables our modern consciousness and ability to undertake many new pathways, constructive and destructive. It represents our comfort and convenience, at the expense of the world that has gone before us. (Audience member)

The quote underscores the inherent contradictions in human behaviour, where individuals participate in environmental activism, while simultaneously engaging in routine activities that contribute to global destruction. Emphasising the presence of such contradictions, Braidotti (2017) proposes thinking of the posthuman present as both the record of what "We are ceasing to be (the present as the record of the past) and that which we are in the process of becoming (the present as the unfolding of the virtual/the future)" (p. 15). In the summer solstice, I employed critical posthumanism to design an experience that acknowledged the presence of the ruins of the natural world while also embracing a sense of radical hope. The purpose of this approach was to address and simultaneously exceed the immediate challenges and limitations of the current era. To tackle the coexistence of what is fading away and what is in the process of becoming, I explored the dynamic interplay between nature and industry beyond binary perspectives, which I will elaborate on in the subsequent discussion.

Fire-Electricity Continuum: Re-Thinking Ritual Practice

Within the industrial area, there were a number of smaller 'sites', including an electricity pole. Inspired by Kloetzel's (2017) approach to site-adaptive performance, I used the choreographic material developed for a dance around a fire from the spring equinox and juxtaposed it with the industrial environment. I intended to explore how dancing around an electricity pole might catalyse ritualistic experiences. Vanessa expressed:

The electricity poles are such an integral part of our environment, but I never gave them much thought. Engaging with them like we did, made them so much more present in my everyday movements. (Vanessa Mateja)

Vanessa's response suggests that introducing ritualistic movements into an urban context resulted in a shift from taking electricity's benefits for granted to recognising and appreciating its intrinsic value. This was similarly experienced by an audience member who explained: "Now I will never walk here without remembering the joyful emotional interaction with the industrial site". This implies that witnessing ritualistic actions around mundane objects allowed individuals to perceive their surroundings with a renewed sense of reverence, leading to a re-evaluation of pre-existing interactions with technology. Neža expressed:

Dancing around the electricity pole felt very ritualistic. We were all executing the same movements at the same time, with the same intensity. (Neža Jamnikar)

By collectively directing attention to an 'ordinary' object through repeated actions and shared purpose, Neža felt as though she was participating in ritualised behaviour. This indicates that dance has the potential to serve as a medium for imbuing the profane world with symbolic significance, thereby leading to a change in how people perceive and understand it. Turner (1988) suggests that through using symbolic expression, people are offered opportunities to "reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, code, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules" (p. 24). It can be concluded that the symbolism not only fostered self-reflection but also broadened individuals' perspectives beyond traditional forms of worship (like dancing around a fire), thus adapting ritual practices to an environment significantly altered by human activities.

I argue that challenging traditional notions of worship is pivotal for seasonal rituals in the Anthropocene. Thinking with Haraway (2007), I suggest moving beyond polarised views (e.g., technology is profane, and nature is sacred) towards embracing an understanding where diverse technological and ecological entities "shape companion species" (p. 281) partaking in a "dance of world-making encounters" (p. 249). Such a perspective aligns with Haraway's (2016) conceptualisation of staying present with the trouble. This involves recognising that technological progress and the preservation of the Earth's resources are not inherently contradictory but that we need to find new ways to become "response-able" for the realities we have created. This shift in perspective may lead to a realisation that sacredness can exist in everyday urban environments, and even within technological objects. Rethinking sacredness within a model proposing that nature and technology are on a continuum might inspire the creation of alternative assemblages of electricity and fire, technology, and nature.

Such rituals may encourage responsible stewardship of both natural and human-made resources. However, experimenting with posthumanist theory informing ritual practices can also evoke a sense of disorientation, as was experienced in the summer solstice ritual:

My expectation was that the solstice ritual would be interactive and focused on the relationship between the sun, the earth, and the living beings on the earth. I did not expect the solstice ritual to have such a focus on electricity from other sources.
(Audience member)

This reveals that the ritual's emphasis on the evolving relationship between humans, technology, and their environments challenged the audience member's perception of what a summer solstice celebration should be. Renata had a similar reaction:

People's expectations of a summer solstice ritual were being really challenged. If you had tucked away in your mind a crystallised view of a ritual, you would go "this is not a ritual". (Ngaronoa Renata)

These comments highlight the challenge of understanding and practicing rituals in new ways such as through applying a posthumanist perspective. Alongside the challenge of grasping an unusual ritual format, another aspect that proved difficult for certain participants was the emphasis on performance. One audience member stated: "I found most of the moments to be performative rather than ritualistic". This comment highlights the significance of striking a balance between passive observation and active participation to create a sense of genuine engagement in the ritual for this participant. Nevertheless, another participant, viewing the entire event as a "fusion of ritual and performance", emphasised that the experience in the native bush segment was closely associated with ritual. This observation indicates that the boundaries separating performances from rituals are not necessarily rigid but exist along a continuum that allows for fluid interpretations.

Such a non-binary perspective links to Schechner (2006), who suggests that "instead of thinking of the oppositional binary "ritual or art," one should think of a spectrum or a dynamic braid" (p. 87). This phenomenon of coexisting characteristics within the same event was exemplified during the summer solstice. Here, performative and ritualistic elements intertwined, at times overlapping and at other times diverging, offering participants diverse experiences along the performance-ritual continuum. The audience feedback on the part in the industrial area indicates that within this section, participants did not attain a state of intermediate transcendence as defined by Luckmann (1990). Instead, this moment exposed attributes associated with the 'liminoid' a concept proposed by Turner (1974), involving ritual-like actions occurring within "the leisure genres of art" (p. 86). These experiences resemble

rituals that include social critiques “exposing the injustices, inefficiencies, and immoralities of the mainstream economic and political structures and organizations” (Turner, 1974, p. 86). In the context of the summer solstice, the site-specific performances acted as a conduit, facilitating liminoid experiences by temporarily transporting audience members into different intellectual and emotional states. The performative sequences staged across the street prompted introspection, contemplating environmental challenges in the Anthropocene. In contrast, the bush segment exhibited a closer alignment with Turner’s (1974) description of liminality, a transitional phase in rituals, where individuals experience temporary liberation from normative constraints, creating a moment of potentiality that facilitates the emergence of new patterns and fosters sociocultural growth. As the analysis revealed, it was specifically in that sequence of the event that some performer participants and audience members experienced heightened states of awareness, deeper connection with ecology, and increased empathy for the non-human environment. This will be discussed in the subsequent section.

Threshold into Ritual: Eco-Somatic Bush Walk

The transition between the industrial area and the native bush, happening at dusk, posed significant challenges due to its role as a physical threshold onto Māori land of cultural significance. It also marked a shift from daytime to night-time and a transformation in the ritual, moving away from site-specific performances toward eco-somatic practices. On the day of the ritual, we learned that Tania Macdonald, a member of the local iwi, would not be able to participate because of the spiritual sensitivity associated with the evening time in her cultural practice. As discussed by the ritual experts, the spiritual world is experienced as an active participant and as night falls, the boundaries between the physical world and the spiritual realm become more permeable. In the absence of mana whenua, the performer participants took on the responsibility of welcoming people into the bush. However, as a group of guests, we grappled with the dilemma of how to approach this task. Ruth, who led that sequence faced the question of how to establish a genuine connection that could acknowledge the diverse cultural backgrounds of the other participants. Under my direction, she chanted various spiritual names such as “Papatūānuku, Gaya, Mother Earth, Pachamama” to evoke a sense of reverence for the Earth as the participants entered the darkness of the bush. However, our approach was seen by some audience members as problematic, leading them to express discontent or choose not to continue participating. The decision to merge different names of mother nature archetypes into a unified chant was criticised for oversimplifying intricate practices within specific cultural knowledge systems, thus overlooking their unique ways of knowing and place-specificity (Smith, 1999). This incident prompted a reassessment of cultural appropriation in our ritual practice, urging a critical reflection on power dynamics, and colonisation.

While some participants desired more cultural reflexivity, others experienced the incident as less contentious. An audience member recalled that entering the bush and immersing themselves in an atmosphere of darkness “enveloped by trees increasingly distant from human lights, static noise, and factories” brought a sense of relief and calmness. Much like the spring equinox ritual, the natural environment of the bush in the summer solstice was a co-facilitator, actively shaping the ritual experience. Snowber (2022) emphasises that “being in relation to the natural world is always an act of reciprocity” (p. 3), where humans form intimate interaction across species through attentive listening and responsive engagement. Mindful of entering a realm inhabited by other sentient beings, including the (unseen) pekapeka, the performer participants and I intentionally shifted our focus away from site-specific performance towards guiding an eco-somatic experience. Neža recalls:

I needed to connect with all those people who were observers up to that point. I quickly had to read how they felt. As soon as they went into the forest, they were invited to share this experience. (Neža Jamnikar)

Neža led this section of the ritual, continuing the practice of sharing the process amongst the performers. The improvised prompts she provided were aimed at enhancing people’s awareness of their senses to bring attention to the ecology of the forest. The rough terrain and difficulty of navigating in the darkness required audience members to switch from being an observer to becoming fully aware of their bodies and surroundings. Another audience participant noticed: “I have been walking here by myself and it is really interesting to be here at night with a big group and not alone during the day”. This suggests that when individuals move together as a group, especially when the environment becomes unfamiliar (such as moving through a forest at night), it can foster a deeper sense of connection. Sandra Reeve (2011) proposes that walking with somatic awareness can enhance moments of reciprocity, stating that “as an ecological body engaged in ecological movement, I am aware of the effect that my movement is having on others and on the environment itself” (Reeve, 2011, p. 50). According to Hunter (2021), such tasks often produce a form of “durational practice” (p. 228), where people’s sense of time and space exceeds ordinary understandings, evoking a heightened presence in the moment. Snowber (2022) describes walking as a ceremony where “each turn of the path becomes a site of endless discovery and aliveness” (p. 14).

In the final stage of this ritual, participants were beckoned to form a circle within a clearing, enveloped by trees that housed bats, and to engage in a period of silence. One participant shared how the moment of lying down in the forest made them realise the constant flux of life and the inherent limitations of human understanding.

My focus was on the moon shining through a constantly changing and evolving break in the clouds. It reminded me that nothing stays the same, for better or worse, and that as humans we only have a narrow, indistinct, partial window into the universe. (Audience participant)

This observation also exposed that in paying attention to the more-than-human world, individuals may realise that they are a fragment amidst the vast cosmic landscape, leaving them with a deeper sense of reverence and humbleness. Simone Weil (1952) writes, “humility is above all one of the qualities of attention” (p. 351), while for Mary Oliver (2016) “attention is the beginning of devotion” (p. 13). In this sense, paying attention to the night sky and collectively breathing the silence of the forest could be described as a moment where participants became aware of their reciprocal relationship with the environment, leaving them with a sense of calmness and togetherness as described by Neža:

I observed the stars and appreciated the presence of all those beautiful human beings and the non-human world. It calmed me down, and it brought me to a place of more attentive and respectful listening without a need to say anything. (Neža Jamnikar)

As discussed in the previous chapter analysing the ritual experts’ interviews, such moments of connectivity and receptivity may ignite a desire within individuals to safeguard what they cherish. Renata experienced:

I wanted them to be able to fly freely and it troubled me that they couldn’t. I also felt a deep sadness for my own humaneness of how I destroy the world. That is why I just put my hands down and said: I’m so sorry that the forest is diminished. Then I needed to sleep. (Ngaronoa Renata)

Confronted by human’s destructive tendencies and their inability to protect the life of the forest, she was filled with sorrow. Seeking forgiveness, Renata chose to rest quietly, entering a dream-like state. During this time, she gleaned insights from the environment. This interspecies dialogue, with non-humans taking part as co-facilitators, informed the core of the ritual, as described next.

The Core of the Ritual: Disturbance and Settling

During this phase of the ritual, participants sat in a circle and were invited to share their personal experiences of the ritual. It seemed that most individuals experienced a stronger sense of connectivity during the forest activity in the dark. An audience participant remembered:

Many expressed their own responses when given the opportunity in the circle, mostly around feeling sensitised, connected and positive. There was also a challenge by one person to some of the things that were done as being culturally inappropriate. (Audience member)

A few participants experienced some discontent throughout the ritual, and this resulted in critical remarks during the sharing circle about cultural appropriation attributed to the methods of ritual and performance practice. Some tension in the atmosphere prompted some people to protect themselves from the prevailing negativity. An audience participant said: “The vibe that night wasn’t quite right for me and being with strangers and feeling their energy made me cautious and protective of my own”. While most of the people were lying or sitting silently on the grass, disruptive sounds were generated by another audience member who walked outside the circle, sliding their shoes on the gravel of the path. As a ritual expert and member of the audience, Renata felt the urge to respond. A few weeks later in a follow-up discussion, she reflected on her experiences at this time, expressing:

I was searching for union, and it came to me through the waiata. I could feel the trees singing: You must not always carry the tears of our story. Let us make peace. Let the divine shine on all of life. Settle and be present and let us bring peace. So, I can leave peacefully, and not drop my human anger or bitterness. (Ngaronoa Renata)

While asleep, Renata sensed the existence of a non-ordinary dimension, the mauri of the forest (life force), that exchanged valuable information with her. Guided by kaitiakitanga (guardianship) principles, where “land is our first teacher” (Smith, Tuck, et al.; 2019, p. 1), speaking “through and into human consciousness” (Royal, 2007), she chose to sing a song of peace. As a response to the disruptive actions and words of discontent expressed by some participants, she decided to ‘infuse the light’ as her conscious attempt to transcend personal emotions and to take actions to restore balance. However, as the analysis revealed, achieving cohesion among individuals with differing agendas represents a complex and multifaceted undertaking. Renata reflected:

One of our greatest failings is that we have the hugest ego. We have little humility. We practice dominance, rather than receptivity. So, when we go into a ritual situation, we are given an opportunity to dissolve our ego and become one. (Ngaronoa Renata)

During the bush sequence, such principles associated with the dedication to cultivating a higher self, a practice described in *Spiritualities of Life* as a “path to self-knowledge, personal transformation, and growth” (Gall, Malette & Guirguis-Younger, 2011, p. 165), were exemplified by Renata through her words and actions. After she had shared her song, she

spoke to the ritual participants about the importance of adapting to the ever-changing needs of different societal and cultural environments. Emphasising that culture and ritual can be dynamic rather than fixed, she skilfully navigated the tensions surrounding cultural appropriation. Moreover, by redirecting the focus away from solely human-centred perspectives and encouraging individuals to connect with their higher selves and nature, she drew attention to the necessity for collective action in preserving the remaining ecology of the native bush. The value of acknowledging uncomfortable truths and collectively turning these experiences into opportunities for growth is underscored by Braidotti (2017). She observes that affirmative ethics “consists not in denying negativity but in reworking it outside the dialectical oppositions because negative passions diminish our relational competence and deny our vital interdependence on others (p. 25). In this sense, Renata’s action, reaching beyond conflicting viewpoints, actualised a positive force that effectively elevated the spirits of some of the participants. As Vanessa remembered later during the guided discussion: “Something magical was happening. Her words had been so poignant and fitting”. This shift from experiencing conflict and discomfort to building affirmative modes of connection with fellow humans and the more-than-human world can be described as a moment of intermediate transcendence. This suggests that in contrast to the industrial area, the experience in the bush provoked notable progression towards personal growth and ecological awareness for some participants. However, as the analysis of the summer solstice suggested, attaining cohesion among all participants was neither desirable nor feasible for everyone.

This situation illustrates the significance of re-evaluating ingrained biases and assumptions within ritual performance practices. Among these assumptions was my belief that participants would collectively pursue the goal of achieving unity. However, thinking with critical posthumanism, underscoring diverse embodied experiences, I came to understand that creating a collective sense of togetherness is a complex task. Reflecting on Braidotti (2017), who proposes that “we are in this together, but this togetherness is not given, it has to be constructed”, I learned that bringing individuals together in a meaningful way demands thoughtful consideration. A common way to approach the pursuit of togetherness with a group of people may be achieved by providing sufficient information about the ritual content to allow participants to make informed decisions about attending. By doing so, individuals can assess whether it aligns with their interests, beliefs, and comfort levels. This in turn may ensure that only those genuinely interested and willing to engage in the experience choose to attend. However, while such an approach may generate a more harmonious experience of togetherness, it also presents the risk of establishing “cultural cocoons” of like-minded individuals who circle their pre-existing beliefs and values (Shafak, 2010). This would diverge from critical posthumanism, embracing complexity and highlighting the importance of

defamiliarization as a vital opportunity for critiquing dominant narratives and ingrained thought patterns (Braidotti, 2022).

Thus, reflecting on this summer solstice ritual and my own assumption that unity was a goal of rituals, I now see the value of emphasising the importance of paradoxes, multiple identities, and experiences within collective responses and actions (Braidotti, 2018). Therefore, I propose a shift in perspective away from making unity the ultimate objective of rituals. Rather than expecting individuals to achieve an idealistic notion of togetherness, it may be more realistic to emphasise staying attentive to the nuanced shifts that arise from ongoing negotiations. This involves understanding that participants might constantly move between modes of resistance and acceptance, temporary states of varying interconnectedness and individuality. Such an approach to ritual practice might accommodate relationships among different individuals that move beyond the confines of sameness and otherness and instead might reveal relationalities based on “affirmative otherness” (Braidotti, 2017, p. 26). This may not necessarily culminate in achieving unity or the synthesis of divergences but instead may encourage “a mode of sustaining conflict in politically productive ways” (Butler, 1997, p. 269). This conceptualisation aligns with Haraway’s staying with the trouble, a space of messy, challenging, and unpredictable experiences, wherein the question of what entails a “relational embodied and embedded, affective and accountable entity” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 31) is crucial.

As exemplified by Renata, who attended as a tautoko (mentor) and spontaneously intervened, the facilitation of ritual necessitates an attitude characterised by empathy and compassion, rather than being swayed by immediate and emotional reactions. This links to the viewpoints of the other ritual experts that creating a safe ‘container’ requires skill and experience, a responsibility not to be taken lightly, as one must be prepared for differing responses when inviting participation and reflection. Given the intricate nature of navigating ritual complexities, I contend that acknowledging personal limitations and capabilities in safely facilitating a ritual for others is pivotal, particularly when embracing the inherent risks of venturing into uncharted territories. In reflecting on the summer solstice over a longer period of time, I came to understand the importance of collaboration and the value of co-facilitation, whereby experienced ritual facilitators may offer their assistance in navigating complex socio-cultural dynamics. In this case, Renata’s presence was a significant support for our group in modelling a way to transform discomfort and tension into an opportunity for learning and growth, ultimately setting the foundation for a more positive completion of the ritual.

As the analysis revealed, another vital learning was the importance of supplying initial information within the structure of the ritual framework to establish the guidelines for how individuals with diverse perspectives can negotiate their engagements.

Importance of a Ritual Structure:

As was revealed in the previous chapter, the ritual experts emphasised that the presence of a ritual framework including various possibilities for 'entering the ritual space', 'forming connections with self, others, and environment', 'liminal phase of ritual', 'settling, completion and return' is crucial in safeguarding the well-being of participants throughout a ritual journey. However, it was evident that the summer solstice ritual lacked a clear framework and consideration of the relevant possibilities in setting up the ritual and within the experience. Consequently, some members of the audience felt disconnected from each other and confused about how to interact:

I felt isolated during this performance to my own world and my relationship to the natural world around us. Partly because of my inability to participate in any meaningful way in the performance, other than let it wash over my consciousness. I did not interact with others after descending from Riverlea Road. (Audience participant)

This suggests that instead of actively contributing, the participant was merely observing the performance in the industrial area without feeling empowered to engage. This implies that some people witnessed a performance event and that they did not have avenues or resources to engage that allowed them to contribute to the unfolding experience. The comment raised the question of whether implementing a re-integration process at the end, involving communal sharing of food would have altered the audience members' experience of departing in isolation. Thus, during the focus group that followed the summer solstice, the participants and I re-assessed the purpose and significance of each element within a ritual. We discussed why having a clear welcome at the beginning and a re-integration process at the end, are important steps for building a cohesive experience. Having experienced a sense of disorientation in certain parts of the summer solstice ritual, Monica prompted the question:

What is the purpose of each of these elements of ritual that are in a powhiri, or mihi whakatau? Are there different kinds of rituals that we could develop that have a similar purpose but be our own ones? (Monica Evans)

Further investigating how a collective of Pākehā and immigrants could interact with these components in a culturally sensitive manner, led us to re-examine Batten's Seven Stages. This process enhanced our comprehension of the underlying principles embedded within the various phases of ritual. Another learning coming out of the summer solstice was the need to shift site-specific performance practice towards a more improvisational and participatory approach to engage audience participants beyond mere observation, as discussed in the next section.

Finding Ritualistic Presence Within Site-Specific Performance

Carboni's urban mapping used as a strategy for the site-specific choreographies proved effective in directing attention toward the industrial area and eliciting initial environmental reflections amongst audience members. However, this approach seemed to evoke a spectatorship experience, with some individuals perceiving it as watching a performance rather than actively participating in a ritual. This feedback brought the performers to reflect on their performance practice:

To me, it feels often counterintuitive to have a choreography that is very strict in its structure or rhythm. I felt more connected to different ideas and images, people, and the land in all those moments in between. (Neža Jamnikar)

This suggests that set dance sequences might hinder performers from forming meaningful bonds with others, while improvisation may evoke a deeper sense of presence and interactions with the site and fellow humans. Similarly, Vanessa described: "I was watching others for cues, but I was on my own journey with no connection to the audience". For her, this lack of connection with others was perceived as unusual for a ritual performance and seemed to be intertwined with the pressure "to get the choreography right, who cares if you are feeling like shit, I need to be in time"! The feedback illustrates conflicting dynamics between adherence to choreographed movements and the desire to establish meaningful relationships. It also reveals that the expectations associated with a public performance led to a shift away from a vitalising practice towards the pursuit of perfection. For Ruth, "There is a difference between performing and holding space for a ritual". While the former centres around presenting a spectacle for others to watch, the latter involves an attentive state of listening to those who are present (Blainey, 2014). For Neža, improvisation is a way to overcome a rigid line between these two modes of engagement, as it allows a performer to still be "attentive and open enough to receive other people's movements and feelings, and then respond to it accordingly". This standpoint aligns with Fraleigh's (2015) notion of "holding presence and connecting with self and others in presentation and performance" (p. 77). The participants' desire to craft experiences in which both performers and the audience engage in a mutual exchange of giving and receiving led to a re-evaluation of our understanding of performance practice. It raised the question:

How much do you rehearse because you want it to be good? Or should we never bring all the pieces together until we do the ritual? Because that is where the magic can happen". (Monica Evans)

The different responses highlight the vast landscape of contemporary performance practice, emphasising the necessity for nuanced approaches when working with a varied group of

performers with differing levels of experience and backgrounds. The performers' challenge in cultivating genuine presence during the act of performance was influenced by factors like adhering to choreographies and pursuing perfection, as well as limitations such as insufficient rehearsal time and diverse interpretations of performance concepts. This prompted fruitful discussions in the following focus group, shifting our performance practice more strongly towards exploring Grotowski's concept of "coming forth unveiled". It also sparked a redefinition of site-specific performances and the necessity to include improvisation within a ritual structure to foster deeper connections between the audience, performers, and place.

Key Findings Summer Solstice

The analysis revealed that the site of the summer solstice ritual, set within an industrial area and a native bush, with particular significance for Māori, exerted a substantial influence on the expression and experience of the performance ritual. The interplay of politics of place, industrial elements, and eco-system played a crucial role in shaping a distinctive performance practice. Furthermore, conducting a performance ritual in an unconventional setting, located within an industrial area, challenged pre-conceived perceptions associated with a summer solstice celebration, offering creative avenues for cultivating enhanced reverence for transformed spaces. This in return encouraged certain individuals toward a more nuanced reflection of the interconnections that exist between nature and technology. I conclude that reconsidering rigid distinctions between ritual and performance, liminal and liminoid, the sacred and the everyday, and embracing a more fluid approach along a continuum offers meaningful ritual practices in the Anthropocene. However, this approach can also lead to confusion and disorientation.

This realisation has brought to light the importance of providing participants with more explicit instructions and guidance to enable meaningful engagement, especially when faced with unconventional ritual performance methods. The analysis revealed that the development of a ritual structure, including a clear welcome (with instructions) would offer greater clarity for audience participants. Thus, as a guiding framework to bridge between the familiar and the unconventional, the incorporation of Batten's Seven Stages might offer a guideline for a more seamless integration of performative and participatory elements. The lack of opportunities for participation was a main critique, giving rise to the question of how to effectively intertwine ritualistic and performative aspects. This necessitates a re-thinking of the roles of performers and participants, incorporating improvisational scores, and transitioning from performed choreographies to an exploration of Grotowski's ideas of "coming forth unveiled".

The summer solstice ritual further emphasised the importance of nature in evoking a sense of tranquillity and regeneration in the Anthropocene. However, unlike the spring equinox

experience, in which the eco-somatic bush walk fostered deeper human-environment connections, encouraging inter-species dialogues was more complex in the summer solstice ritual. As the analysis uncovered, the natural environment prompted a feeling of calmness, yet embracing its revitalising properties and becoming present with the ecosphere was not accessible for all individuals in the same way. While some participants experienced moments of feeling calm and connected with self and ecology, even encountering intermediate states of transcendence, others found it difficult to immerse themselves as they navigated friction and disagreement. This phenomenon exemplified that the extent to which individuals can fully engage in a ritual depends on their capacity to relate and build trust. These insights provided important information about achievable goals, effective methods, and suitable ethics for performance rituals in the time of the Anthropocene.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed the importance of articulating a ritual practice that embraces different cultural expressions without appropriating them. Simultaneously, it underscored the need to move beyond fixed ideas about cultures and rituals, allowing flexibility in responding to the ever-changing circumstances and participants involved. This necessitates a framework capable of navigating potential overlaps among varied cultural practices while simultaneously recognising the fundamental incommensurability among them. The analysis uncovered the importance of a ritual facilitator consistently reassessing their own inherent biases. In my case, this involved questioning oversimplified aims for togetherness that I initially held. Accordingly, as a potential avenue for progression, I suggest an ontological departure from pursuing unity toward “affirmative otherness” (Braidotti, 2017), coupled with embracing nuances of resistance inherent in individual experiences and expressions. I suggest that ritual performance intending to foster participation be grounded in a sincere acknowledgment of differences and positive affirmations. Embracing this conceptual shift became the objective for the autumn ritual, intending to foster a more immersive experience for both performers and the audience. This involved exploring smoother transitions between their roles as elemental guardians, facilitators, and active participants to create a more immersive and co-creative experience.

Findings For Future Rituals

A potential strategy for holding space for a diverse group of people might involve further investigation into the interplay between individualism and unity so that participants have permission to “move otherwise” (Lepecki, 2013). While rituals commonly highlight the value of cohesion, there needs to be room for autonomy for both performers and audience members. Thinking with Lepecki (2013), this means that instead of choreographing a crowd of obedient bodies, we may refrain from uniformity and instead support participants to exercise freedom in their decision-making. Such an approach underlies an understanding of the singularity-

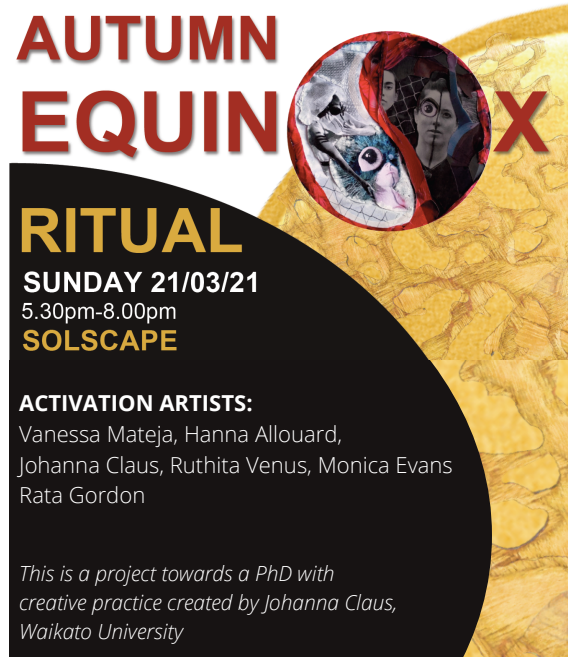
plurality continuum, where participants can experience a sense of “doing things together separately” (Van Eikel, 2012, p. 8). This includes establishing a ritual culture that encourages participants to stay present even with distressing emotions, alongside providing strategies for self-regulation, so these emotions are handled with a response-ability towards self and others. Furthermore, shifting the focus toward varying degrees of presence, instead of aiming for intermediate transcendence, might support participants in navigating relationality in their unique ways. Such an approach may inspire alternative ritual practices where resistance and moments of full immersion can co-exist. This aligns with Braidotti (2019) who stresses that in the time of the Anthropocene, we need to embrace “complexity, embodied and embedded diversity and multiple becomings” (p. 37). Establishing ritual practices from a position that “‘we-are-(all)-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same’ kind of subject” (Braidotti, 2019), might create a ritual approach that is open to paradoxes and multiple experiences. Putting this approach into practice involves re-evaluating applied methodological and ethical principles.

A key learning coming out of the summer solstice was the importance of establishing guidelines based on ethics of response-ability before the start of the ritual to imbue participants with a heightened sense of mindfulness. As a result, participants might experience a greater sense of ownership, openness to trust, and degree of engagement. Furthermore, as the analysis revealed, when catering to the diverse needs of individuals from varied cultural backgrounds, prompts for engagement need to be presented in a relatively general manner. If the aesthetics, language, or actions strongly connect to a specific cultural narrative, people might be reluctant to agree with it. Thus, one possible way to implement these principles, may be by inviting participants to use their unique contemplative practices based on their personal choices. Another important aspect is to provide a ritual structure that enables individuals to move between activities that balance outward-directed energy, promoting a sense of togetherness within the group, as well as moments of introspection. Responding to the findings of the analysis, I suggest that a ritual for a public site-specific performance ritual in the Anthropocene may revolve around freedom of choice and response-ability to allow individuals with differing worldviews to navigate temporary moments of trust and relationality. As suggested by the ritual experts, a possible structural framework that could effectively accommodate these principles consists of phases such as welcome, enactment of purpose, and reintegration. Recognising the significance of these established parameters prompted me to apply Batten’s Seven Stages to the autumn equinox ritual, as discussed next.

Autumn Equinox: Eco-Retreat Solscape in Whāingaroa/Raglan



The autumn equinox ritual took place on the 21st of March 2021 at the eco-retreat Solscape in Whāingaroa. The choice of location was a response to the advanced pregnancy of two performer participants, leading to an approach that would be less challenging. Furthermore, in contrast to the summer solstice, engaging with historical, political, and architectural imprints of place, the autumn ritual had a broader orientation towards the interplay of light and darkness within the natural setting during autumn. Unlike the technique of cartographic mapping (Carboni, 2019), the emphasis was



more on dance improvisations in response to emotional, physical, and environmental aspects experienced by participants in autumn. I applied the contemporary performance methods of carnal prayer, authentic movement, and improvisation, alongside Batten's (2010) conceptualisation of trans-psychological processes linked to the different seasons. These aspects were integrated into the overall structure defined by Batten's (1988) Seven Stages during the workshop sessions before the event.

Solscape, with a panoramic ocean view, a vast open lawn, and surrounding permaculture gardens seemed an ideal site for a ritual celebrating the balance of light and darkness. The event itself incorporated a combination of familiar practices, including a circle, a fire, and an altar, alongside more experimental elements such as improvisational site dance sequences, and participation in eco-somatic movement. Through this fusion, I initially aimed to merge the boundaries between the roles of participants and performers, fostering a sense of co-creation within the ritual space. The ritual was a public event, featuring four performer participants, along with Rata Gordon as the DJ and myself as a performer and co-facilitator. The audience members received invitations via the Raglan Facebook group and personal invitations to individuals from outside Whāingaroa. The invitations were provided with a clear explanation of the event's content to create a more cohesive experience.

The autumn equinox ritual is represented in the following video (password: Johanna)
<https://vimeo.com/890122746>

Figure 6: Invitation Autumn Equinox (Design: J. Claus, 2021).

In this specific ritual, I explored the following key possibilities: (a) inner preparation, (b) entanglements of singularity and plurality, (c) authentic performance practice (d) audience participation through implementing Batten's Seven Stages, (e) improvisational framework for responsive performance rituals.



Image 3: Autumn Equinox Ritual. Ruth Hare, Hanna Allouard, audience participant, Monica Evans, audience participants with Vanessa Mateja. Photos: Marek Kaniewski, Whāingaroa, March 2021.



Image 4: Autumn Equinox Ritual. Johanna Claus, Hanna Allouard, Ruth Hare, all participants.
Photos: Marek Kaniewski, Whāingaroa, March 2021.

Inner Preparation: Facing Darkness

The ritual experts highlighted the importance of inner preparation to support facilitating a ritual and to navigate potential challenges presented by participants with emotional responses. The significance of inner preparation became more evident in the autumn equinox when most of the performers arrived at the site with personal difficulties, feeling unprepared to hold space for others. I myself had a severe infection in my foot, resulting from a wasp sting during the rehearsal on the day before, putting the event at risk of cancellation. The occurrence of a tragic event on the neighbouring land further highlighted the simultaneous existence of contrasting realities. Considering the circumstances transpiring during the preparation process on the day of the ritual, Monica expressed: “It brought out the rawness of our actual lives not our idealised, or crystallised lives. Real and challenging”. The occurrences before the public event not only emphasised the struggles of the performer participants, but also shed light on broader matters of social injustice, deprivation, and mental health present in Whāingaroa and often deeply connected to the colonial history of the place (Ritchie, 2016; Walker, 2004). These events provided insights into a more nuanced understanding of Whāingaroa and Solscape, moving beyond shallow assumptions of simply being a sanctuary for well-being, sustainability, and creativity. It also prompted valuable discussions regarding appropriate circumstances for conducting a ritual for the performer participants. While some might interpret the occurrences prior to the ritual as signs advising against continuing, others might argue for the integration of rituals into the various challenges and complexities of life. Ruth remembered:

We all said how we were feeling and our apprehensions because of what had gone on for us individually and the land. [...] I was thinking from the perspective of a producer that you're giving a lot of allowance to that. (Ruth Hare)

For Ruth, the ability to openly express apprehensions and consider the possibility of cancelling the production was an empowering experience. This suggests that, unlike the previous solstice event, performers could acknowledge their discomfort rather than suppressing it for the sake of maintaining a professional attitude. This revealed a significant difference between inner preparation within a ritual framework and running a dress rehearsal in a performance production. Monica expressed:

It felt really present and responding to the psychological environment and the social environment. Embracing all the seasons, is also about embracing all the different phases of us. (Monica Evans)

Recognising the correlation between nature's cyclical rhythm and her hormonal fluctuations, Monica emphasised the value of regenerative practices that align more closely with these natural cycles. This was especially important considering that Monica was in the advanced

stages of pregnancy, and another member of the performing group was also expecting. These factors, contributing to an increased sense of emotional and physical vulnerability, shaped the unfolding of the performance ritual event. This approach aligned with Turei's viewpoint, as shared in the ritual expert's analysis, underscoring the potential for rituals to act as a valuable means to navigate through life's hardships. Rather than reserving rituals for a nice day, he advocates for integrating them into the wide array of challenges and complexities that life brings forth. For him, a disturbed atmosphere does not prevent ritual activity but rather influences the purpose and content of the gathering. This suggests a responsive ritual practice that adapts to emerging insights and progresses in a way that aligns with the changing understandings and needs of the participants.

Entanglements of Singularity and Plurality

Recognising the crucial role of the facilitator's emotional and mental readiness in shaping the ritual experience, I guided the performers through a process of inner preparation in the form of movement meditation. The effectiveness of attending to bodily sensations as a technique for restoring balance was experienced by Monica, who voiced: "Having that intimate time to feel into helped me to be like: "I am definitely in the right place doing the right thing". Scholars widely acknowledge that dance can assist in transitioning individuals from the fight-flight-freeze of the sympathetic nervous system to a state of parasympathetic ease (Eddy, 2016). The transformative work of each performer, before the arrival of the audience participants, played a vital role in altering the atmosphere within the group, ultimately leading to the decision to facilitate a ritual for others. Furthermore, the transfer of emotions through embodied experiences (Plie, 2009) amplified a sense of 'communitas' (Turner, 1982). Vanessa stated:

We decided to move forward, and that was what brought up the light. I felt this sense of pride in us as a group that we were able to flow through this dark time together.
(Vanessa Mateja)

For Vanessa, the effort of collectively working through a challenging process resulted in a strengthened bond within the group. However, while such an experience may reinforce a sense of "we are all in this together" (Schechner, 2006, p. 71), the preparation phase of the autumn equinox also revealed the importance of listening to one's own distinctive sensations. Hanna remembered: "I followed my feeling and I walked out to chop firewood. It was great to leave when I felt it was not comfortable for me anymore". This exemplifies the uniqueness of embodiment and the importance of honouring individual strategies for processing emotions. This was similarly expressed by Monica who experienced that "the letting go thing in a ritual is something that needs to be optional because I experienced, being pregnant, that I don't want to let things go right now". Acknowledging diverse forms of expressions, Ginot (2010)

articulates the need “to resituate the complexity that is engaged in each time that something changes in the relation of a subject to its physical, symbolic, social, economic, and political environment” (pp. 23-24). Translated to the autumn equinox ritual this meant to embrace the multiplicity and heterogeneity of bodily knowing and emotional sense-making. It also meant to resist idealised aims of cohesion (Malabou, 2008) and to refrain from attaching a negative connotation when performers or audience participants choose individuality over homogeneity.

The insights gained before the public event had a substantial impact on how the performers and I approached our roles as elemental guardians and interacted with the audience participants. However, there was a contrast between the behind-the-scenes experiences and the impressions formed by the wider audience, of whom the majority remained unaware of the intricate complexities the performers faced. This paradox became noticeable when examining the recorded video and the feedback received from the audience, who tended to portray the ritual as a harmonious participatory seasonal gathering that revolves around the theme of light and darkness. How the implementation of Batten’s Seven Stages influenced this expression will be elaborated in the subsequent section.

Audience Participation: Implementing Batten’s Seven Stages

An important insight gained from the summer solstice ritual was the need to establish an environment that encouraged active participation. This included communicating the purpose of the ritual, what it would involve, how it would be carried out, and what guidelines should be followed. In addition to incorporating these elements into the welcoming process, ritual expert Rountree also highlighted the need to use recognisable symbols that individuals can relate to and interpret. A commonly known symbolic practice that was incorporated in the autumn equinox was the invitation for people to bring their harvest offerings to the altar. An audience participant expressed that through “bringing the food, I was actually bringing part of myself as an offering to the ritual”. This implies that the task prompted engagement and also motivated the audience participant to infuse their actions with a greater sense of meaning, making them feel taking part in a ritual. Another audience participant voiced:

The welcoming at the start, bringing food and laying that on the altar, creating a circle, the element of connection. Honouring the corners, honouring the elements. We sang together, we danced together, and we ate together. I felt like I was part of a ritual, not just watching the ritual. (Audience member)

This suggests that in contrast to the summer solstice, the overall structure and activities of the autumn equinox allowed audience members to comprehend the ritual and to participate rather than passively observe. This was also witnessed by Monica, who stated: “There is a safety in that structure. I have the options to go a bit deeper knowing that I’m not going to be left here

and we are going to move to the other stages”. This confirms that incorporating the stages of a ritual framework instilled a sense of security in performer participants, and audience members, allowing them to embark on their ritual journey with the assurance of knowing what comes next and how it is going to end. In addition to the use of symbolic objects and the implementation of a transparent ritual structure, another way to build connections among the people was through clear articulation of the purpose of the gathering. Vanessa described:

There was a clear intention behind the ritual. We were taking the journey together. Even though everybody's experience with that journey was different, the intention was held by the collective. (Vanessa Mateja)

This indicates that the guidance provided by the facilitators helped maintain a common focus (intention) yet offering individuals the freedom to explore their unique modes of engagement was helpful. This coexistence of individuality and community played a vital role in embracing diverse experiences and in fostering opportunities for transformation, as expressed by an audience participant: “I was processing quite a lot of heavy emotions at that time, and it provided me with the opportunity to dance through them”. This was echoed by Monica: “The space that we gave to all the different kinds of darkness meant that there was a genuine appreciation of the light moments as well”. Ghent (1990/2003) observes that in the moment of surrender, a person discovers “one’s identity, one’s sense of self, one’s sense of wholeness, even one’s sense of unity with other living beings” (p. 216). This sense of connectedness was evident in the heartfelt embraces shared among the different people at the end of the ritual. Vanessa expressed: “It brought a lot of lightness for a lot of people”. These responses from audience members and performer participants were notably different in comparison to the summer solstice. Upon comparing the two events, I can identify several factors contributing to this difference. Firstly, in the autumn equinox participants were given clear instructions as part of the invitation and at the beginning of the ritual. While the information provided in the invite attracted individuals who were genuinely intrigued by the event, another pivotal factor was the establishment of guidelines around response-ability and individual agency. This approach cultivated a sense of independence and confidence right from the start of the ritual and encouraged participants to engage in their own distinctive ways. In this context, prompts such as reassuring participants to disengage if they desired or to spend the entire event observing the ocean if they preferred, played a significant role in creating an atmosphere of heightened comfort and voluntary engagement.

Another factor contributing to the overall experience could be attributed to my own enhanced comprehension of orchestrating group dynamics and the complex influences that shape human interactions within a collective context. After the summer solstice, the guidance

I received from the ritual experts, particularly their emphasis on understanding the dynamics of energies, prompted me to actively integrate these principles into the dramaturgical framework of the autumn equinox ritual. This inspired me to intentionally design activities aimed at fostering introspection and observation, along with interactive phases that engaged others, ultimately leading to a more balanced overall dynamic. Furthermore, by shifting my belief in needing to create cohesion and instead embracing the diversity of expression spanning from resistance to active engagement, I gained the ability to navigate uncomfortable moments of tension with a sense of acceptance and presence. This shift in perspective especially impacted my approach to performance practice, as I will discuss next.

Authentic Performance Practice

The performers pointed out that the exposure of the turmoil within them, breaking out so strongly during the ritual preparation process, brought forth an authenticity that was different from the summer solstice. Monica expressed:

I had no option but to show my vulnerability. It was so different from how I normally come and do performances, putting on my game face and pushing the emotions down. Instead, it ended up real and it came out of complete authenticity. (Monica Evans)

For Monica, shifting away from the desire to appear presentable and instead revealing her authentic self (Salata, 2020), the role of the water guardian became a genuine task of confronting her inner struggles. While sprinkling water droplets onto people's hands, Monica seemed to be engaged in a process of emotional purification. When analysing her performance, it could be argued that instead of pretending as if, using theatrical concepts of imitation, she laid bare her true self and showed her vulnerability. It was an improvisation with 'real time' information (Barbour, 2011), where kinaesthetic impressions, emotional sensations, and cues from the outer environment inspired her movements in that very moment. In this sense, she not only seemed to be engaged in a practice that Fraleigh (2015) has described as "holding presence and connecting with self and others in presentation and performance" (p. 77), but also dedicated her whole self towards transformation. To me, her dance possessed an urgency that moved it beyond an eco-somatic improvisation and linked it to what Grotowski (2002), has described as a 'carnal prayer'. Symbolically, this experience was embodied in her prayer-like gesture of holding a kawakawa branch. Her repetitive movements of immersing the leaves in the water and swirling them into the air seemed to intentionally catalyse an energetic shift within herself and the surrounding environment. According to Grotowski, such a 'carnal act' has the potential to unveil hidden aspects that can deeply resonate with experiences of those who witness it. In the case of the autumn ritual, it shed light on people's challenges in navigating moments of disturbance. Vanessa observed:

The light and the darkness showed up so strongly on that day and we were right on the precipice of it. It felt appropriate in the fact that we were all able to acknowledge the darkness that was going on in our own personal lives. (Vanessa Mateja)

This implies that for Vanessa, the theme of the autumn equinox, a time when the balance between light and darkness begins to shift, is intricately connected to confronting one's own shadows. According to Batten (2010), autumn presents an opportunity for introspection on the cycles of life and death, as well as a period of transformation from the external to the internal. Underlying such an understanding lies a perspective that seasonal cycles can impact a person's physical, emotional, and social conditions, illustrating the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. To visually depict these interactions between seasonal changes, and human experiences, the performer participants utilised improvisation as a method, guided by an improvisational score.

Improvisational Framework for Responsive Performances

The improvisational framework used in the autumn equinox fostered an environment where performers were encouraged to respond and adapt spontaneously to the emerging dynamics within themselves and their surroundings. Monica expressed "The better we know the phases and the more that we know the intention, the easier it would be to slip into that kind of embodied improvisation". By utilising methods of improvisation, Monica disrupted habitual modes of engagement, leading to a heightened sense of presence and responsiveness. This allowed her to establish deeper connections between self, the audience, and the environment. Bernsen (2022) confirms that improvisation demands a performer "being open to the unknown (p. 430). Embracing such an approach, inspired performers to genuine expressions and interactions. Ruth expressed "I felt like I was in the ritual in the actual event we facilitated for the people. I could still curl like a ball if I wanted to". This indicates that adopting a structured improvisation approach, as opposed to choreographies, enabled Ruth more seamless transitions between the roles of co-facilitator, performer, and ritual participant.

Upon scrutinising the autumn equinox event, it became evident that integrating improvisations across Batten's Seven Stages generated room for spontaneity, enabling performers to transition more fluidly between performative aspects and the act of holding space. This approach to ritual not only fostered interactions between self and other participants but also offered moments of connection to the time of autumn. However, it revealed limited responsiveness to the evolving narratives related to the site, like the nearby tragedy and the wasp sting. These incidents were not openly interwoven into the narrative of the ritual and were not effectively conveyed to the audience. In reflection I can see how this focus on our immediate concerns might be criticised for encouraging practices of

anthropocentric 'navel gazing' (Eddy, 2016), where people use meditation and embodiment within a ritual framework to improve their own well-being. In the autumn equinox this approach may have led to an unintentional ignorance of the wider socio-cultural contexts of the site, and critical reflection on broader environmental issues, which I will discuss in the subsequent section.

Non-Human Agency and Eco-Somatics

My experience of the wasp sting served as a reminder to move beyond self-centred modes of introspection and expand the scope of attention towards other species inhabiting Solstice. Furthermore, experiencing the wasp's painful communication and its impact on my mobility made me understand that co-existence with others does not always lead to feelings of comfort, kinship, and empathy. However, it effectively highlighted that the non-human world holds agency as well, capable of substantially influencing a performer's experiences. Bruno Latour (2005) perceives non-human entities as active contributors because "anything that brings about change in a situation by making a difference is an actor... or actant" (p. 71). During the ritual itself, my focus was consumed by the pain stemming from the infection in my foot, causing difficulties in my ability to perform. However, upon later reflection, I understood how the wasp incident related to Butler's (2004) proposal that "we must attend to it, even abide by it, as we begin to think about what politics might be implied by staying with the thought of 'corporeal vulnerability itself' (p. 29). Translated to the autumn ritual this suggests that instead of concealing my pain from the audience, simply proceeding as if nothing had transpired, I could have used it as an opportunity to bring attention to the interdependencies and "relationships with those countless others being driven over the edge of extinction" (Haraway, 2016, p. 38). This links to Fraleigh's (2015) perspective, wherein she emphasises that somatic movement offers opportunities "to engage with the experience of pain in a personal and constructive manner" (p. 22). This also relates to Braidotti, (2017), who proposes that "moving beyond the pain does not mean denying the pain, but rather activating it, working it through, beyond the dialectics of recognition and the politics of resentment" (p. 25).

In the context of the autumn ritual, a constructive approach to work through the pain could have involved translating the experience with the wasp into a responsive improvisation to convey deeper meanings about vulnerability and interdependencies. This might have prompted audience participants to pay greater attention to other species co-inhabiting the environment, leading them to contemplate the implications of human dominance and inattentiveness. Such a responsive performance approach might have allowed for a multispecies storytelling "of living and dying, of becoming-with and unbecoming-with, of sympoiesis" (Haraway, 2016, p. 35). However, at the time of the ritual performance, I found that I could not access these strategies. In retrospect, I realise that attaining an elevated level

of responsiveness involves being attentive, embracing improvisation, and being willing to let go of pre-arranged structures. This might be better achieved by placing greater emphasis on spontaneity within the overall design of the ritual structure and intentionally incorporating moments where nothing is pre-planned, thereby inviting performers into real-time responses.

Considering the above analysis, I conclude that although the format of the autumn equinox successfully encouraged overcoming personal difficulties, fostering a sense of togetherness among participants, and creating a positive ambiance, it brought less attention to broader environmental issues. The focus on transpersonal experiences and narratives centred around human concerns may have shifted attention away from critical issues of the Anthropocene, such as species extinction and human dominance over other life forms. Consequently, I suggest that seasonal performance rituals need to balance between focusing on participants' emotional processes and creating connections with the more-than-human world, thereby fostering alliances across species. I propose that effectively addressing the intricate environmental challenges within a seasonal ritual necessitates placing greater emphasis on site-specific strategies, while embracing a critical post-humanist perspective.

Key Findings Autumn Equinox

In the autumn equinox ritual, the choice to put a stronger focus on improvisation and authentic movement brought forth a transformative performance practice. The emotional rawness experienced on that day expanded the performer participants' perceptions of what a moving and facilitating body should look like, towards revealing a sense of honesty that was experienced as liberating. These practices and methods effectively supported people in navigating personal challenges and turned them into opportunities for growth. The analysis further emphasised that the overall design of the ritual was valuable in creating a sense of security and active involvement among participants. This was achieved by utilising Batten's framework, articulating the ethics and methods, and blending performance sequences with immersive activities, contributing to an overall atmosphere of a participatory performance ritual.

However, the analysis also underscored that the ritual unintentionally led participants to focus on personal issues rather than expanding their perspectives to address environmental concerns and broader socio-cultural matters that had surfaced within the Whāingaroa community. While rituals are pivotal in transforming negativity, equally vital is steering individuals' newfound emotional capacity toward fostering positive relations with both humans and nonhumans (Braidotti, 2017). If a ritual does not link personal transformations to broader environmental and societal causes, it might prevent people from turning their experiences into creating meaningful change. Braidotti (2022) suggests that actualising more just and

sustainable practices requires “activating both critique and creation as well as resistance and vision” (p. 6). In order to foster resilient individuals, capable of addressing Anthropocene challenges, rituals require a delicate balance of staying with the troubles of the world while upholding rejuvenation and hope. Thus, I suggest integrating ritual activities in a way that is closely connected to the actual environmental and social characteristics of the specific location where these rituals are performed.

This necessitates engagement with place-specific narratives, alongside on-going dialogue with local residents and tangata whenua to design rituals in dialogue with the needs of the community and to foster caring networks. However, putting this aspiration into practice requires fully accepting the complexities within these relationships and broadening one’s understanding of interconnectedness beyond an overly idealised perspective that only emphasises its positive and uplifting aspects. Instead, one must be prepared to acknowledge both the nurturing and the challenging elements. These factors are crucial in navigating the intricate challenges of the Anthropocene and cultivating interactions that are respectful, empathetic, and sustainable with both people and the environments we engage with.

Such an expanded perspective also demands critical self-reflection of how ingrained biases and unexamined privileges shape the design of a ritual framework and a person’s interactions with a particular environment. In my case, the decision to not fully engage with the socio-cultural implications of the place and its relationship with the neighbouring communities brought to light a lack of awareness. Although I had been advised by the ritual experts about the importance of comprehending the historical context as part of ritual preparation, I found myself influenced by the misconception that gaining permission from the landowners would suffice. In this situation, it became evident that there was a significant bias in decision-making, influenced by colonial concepts of land ownership. This bias led to the belief that isolating a specific location and disregarding its broader context was viable. However, this perspective failed to consider the interconnected nature of places and people. The tragic event on the neighbouring land prompted reconsideration of the importance of building relationships across the fence as part of a ritual process. This encompasses the deliberate endeavour of aligning the conceptual framework for a ritual more closely with the foundational principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi to demonstrate commitment as an ally.

As the ritual experts have advised, a practical approach to implementing this role is by engaging in dialogues with tangata whenua, during the preparatory stages even when the ritual is held on a private estate. Additionally, I argue that rituals need to be constructed in a way that allows unplanned ‘real time’ events (Larsen, 2003) to be incorporated into its fabric to amplify narratives that span across different species, and across, for example, property

fences. Such a responsive approach demands attentiveness, sensitivity, and experience to balance spontaneous changes while ensuring that the integrity of the ritual's intended purpose remains intact. Additionally, this approach involves considering cultural sensitivities and being respectful of concealed information and appropriate responses. This consideration might broaden people's comprehension of rituals beyond human-centred or privileged viewpoints and encourage a wider sense of social responsibility and connection with the more-than-human world. This way rituals may become platforms for learning how to remain compassionate and caring amidst corporeal, environmental, and emotional vulnerability. This balance is important to prevent seasonal rituals from becoming mere repetitions of existing practices and to ensure that they stay relevant in the changing context of Aotearoa within the time of the Anthropocene. The incorporation of embodiment and contemplative practice was further investigated in the winter solstice ritual, taking place within the confines of a supermarket, which will be further analysed in the following section.

Winter Solstice Shopping Ritual

The last ritual created for this PhD took place on the 20th of June 2021 at the supermarket Super Value in Raglan during normal opening hours. The ritual did not include a preparatory workshop and was instead a pop-up event, with participants simply arriving at the designated time and location. The decision to choose this site was driven by the intention to shift the ritual performance more strongly towards activism and to explore the winter solstice theme within a capitalist context. The ritual also worked with aspects of David Orr's (1992) model of 'head' (self-awareness and critical reflection on one's beliefs and actions), 'heart' (empathy to understand one's interconnectedness with the Earth's ecosystem), and 'hand' (practical commitment to sustainability practices in daily life and participation in environmental activism). By implementing these elements, my goal was to steer the focus of the ritual toward advocating for environmental change.

WINTER SOLSTICE SHOPPING RITUAL

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

SUNDAY, 20TH OF JUNE 2021
@SUPER VALUE RAGLAN FROM 4.30PM-6.30PM

A PROJECT TOWARDS A PHD WITH CREATIVE PRACTICE BY JOHANNA CLAU, WAIKATO UNIVERSITY

WITH A SOMATIC SOUNDTRACK THIS RITUALISTIC SHOPPING TOUR INVITES YOU TO EXPERIENCE A SUPER MARKET ENVIRONMENT THROUGH A DIFFERENT LENS.

THE TOUR STARTS WITH AN ORIENTATION AT THE CAR PARK AND ENDS WITH THE SHARING OF SOUP.

RESERVATIONS ARE ESSENTIAL!!!!
JOHANNA_CLAU@WEB.DE

WHAT YOU NEED:
\$15 TO BUY SOME PRODUCTS AS PART OF THE RITUAL (VOLUNTARY)
FACE MASK, HEADPHONES, SOUNDTRACK ON YOUR PHONE
BOWL FOR SOUP AND SPOON

***THE LINK TO THE SOUNDTRACK WILL BE SHARED A DAY BEFORE THE EVENT AND NEEDS TO BE DOWNLOADED ON A SMARTPHONE IN ADVANCE.**

Figure 7: Invitation Winter Solstice Ritual (Design: J. Claus, 2021).

Another objective was further interrogating Batten’s stages to explore their applicability in an urban setting. To achieve this, I used the format of an audio walk: “an immersive soundscape composition that is anchored in an exploratory embodied perspective and created for an audience that listens while moving and interacting with a specific environment” (Abrantes, 2021, p. 35). Participants received a soundtrack with prompts on how to interact, in advance to download on their phones. Guided by the soundtrack using headphones, they moved from the supermarket carpark, through the supermarket, and then outside to re-group at the end. The ritual had elements that referred to the historic practices of ‘Happenings’, a series of actions enacted within a specific site that create a “liminal realm/space wherein an everyday place suddenly transforms into an artistic stage” (Walker, 2013, p. 128). This ritual was public, featuring only four of the former performers, myself included, selected audience participants who were invited via email, and shoppers who happened to be present at that time. One participant had recently given birth, and both she and her new-born baby attended. The other participant, who was still pregnant, joined the event as an observer.

The winter solstice ritual is represented in the following video (password: Johanna) <https://vimeo.com/778619384>

In this ritual, I especially explored the following key possibilities: (a) anchoring within self and the group with choreo-political implications, (b) entering the threshold into a choreo-policed environment, (c) expressions of resistance, (d) core of the ritual: mourning for sliced corpses, (e) official and personal completion.

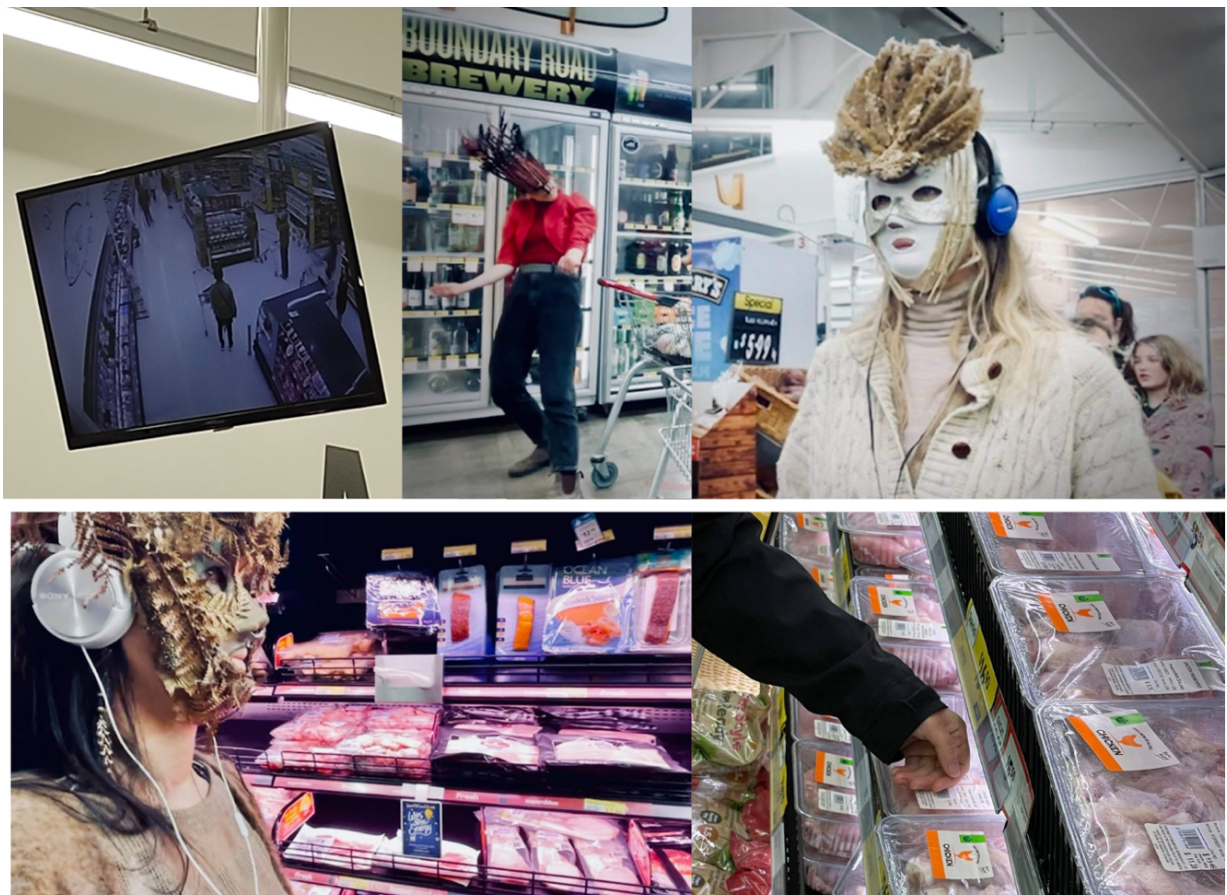


Image 5: Winter Solstice Ritual. Johanna Claus, Vanessa Mateja Ruth Hare. Video still, J. Claus, Whāingaroa, June 2021.



Image 6: Winter Solstice Ritual. Monica Evans with baby and audience participant. Video still, J. Claus, Whāingaroa, June 2021.

Anchoring Within Self and the Group with Choreo-Political Implications

The supermarket as a public space was heavily “shaped by rules, unwritten principles, inscribed norms, and established habits” (Klein, 2017, p. 137), which prompted a re-conceptualisation of Batten’s Seven Stages of ritual. Instead of starting with the customary ‘purification’ stage, the emphasis was placed on ‘centring’ at the carpark. Participants gathered at the sign ‘assembly point’, squeezed in between metal fences, cars, and other commercial buildings, forming a circle, and closing their eyes. Participants were provided with two plain cards and a pen to complete tasks during the shopping ritual. The group of people followed the instructions of the voice of the audio, which contrasted with the on-site motor sounds of cars parking beside them. Although permission had been gained from the supermarket management, the feeling of unease was visible in the participants’ body language as their actions represented an alternative to the conventional order of the public. Their somatically motivated movements with ritualistic intentions, not only re-defined spatial and habitual norms of the space but also showed a political dimension. A performer participant expressed:

We were having a consciousness about the ethics and what is legitimated and what is not. At what pace we should walk, and what should be our distance? (Performer participant)

The statement suggests that the participant was aware that her sensory-rich engagement within a supermarket challenged established norms and could potentially cause conflict for the public observing. A performer participant said in the focus group interview afterward: “It was winter. It was cold. We were worried to be seen. Every second someone could come and stop us”. The recognisable code of conduct was similarly felt by another participant who

commented: “The degree of our mindfulness was higher in the supermarket. We became more considered about the laws, the rules, and the regulations than in nature”. This for her resulted in turning inwards, expressing herself through minimal gestures that could not be detected by others, such as consciously pressing her weight against the structure of the supermarket trolley and exploring its materiality. Another participant remembered that she had the feeling of surveillance, which resulted in “caring about subtlety”.

The feedback indicates that the participants perceived constraints on their ability to express themselves freely, as they engaged in a constant process of evaluating how their actions could potentially be interpreted by others. This sense of self-censorship, causing participants to be cautious in their expressions was less evident in the other public rituals, possibly because those events were more overtly framed as performances. A participant articulated: “I was oversensitive about how to touch things and how to navigate the trolley”. Nevertheless, despite the recognition of perceived constraints, the participants’ feedback indicates an inclination towards navigating within these constraints, as they actively pursued opportunities to explore alternative actions.

Entering the Threshold into a Choreo-Policed Environment

When the bell rang, signifying the start of the shopping experience, the participants pushed their trolleys toward the entrance of the building. However, their progress was abruptly halted by a security swing door strategically positioned to control the flow of the public. The presence of the turnstile barrier, interrupting the participants’ progress toward the entrance, served as a symbolic representation of a “highly effective movement-inducing machine” (Lepecki, 2017, p. 151). In the context of the supermarket ritual, the turnstile barrier was a powerful tool that not only governed the speed and direction of the participants but also symbolised a threshold because it bound them to commit. The apparatus is designed in a way that it only opens in one direction, preventing participants from turning back and thus reinforcing their commitment to the shopping ritual. This was enhanced through the invitation via headphones to open their palms and let hand sanitizer be sprinkled over their hands, an invitation to let go of the day and to open to something new. One by one, participants interpreted Batten’s stage of purification in their own ways. While some complied with the hygienic measures, others showed resistance against this public health and safety mandate and modified the instructions.

With their eyes to the ground, the participants pushed their trolleys through the gateway, entering an atmosphere that was perceived by a performer participant as “nonreactive, bland, flat, and anonymous”. Another participant noticed: “There was not a nice or warm embrace from the supermarket. It was chilly, passing by the fridges. I think there was a degree of brutality in the supermarket”. To escape the sterile and unfriendly environment, a

participant expressed: “I turned inwards to be closer with the voice of the audio, which disassociated me from the outside”. In this context the audio provided anonymity which was perceived as “a safe space, an invisible border”. This suggests a degree of autonomy, as participants could consciously redirect their attention and retreat into their own somas and imaginations. By making choices to either narrow or widen their perception, participants were able to exercise a sense of independence within the regulated environment. Lepecki (2015) explains that in a place of ‘sensual censorship’, kinetic expression of freedom is left to the realms of fantasy. He defines imagination as a choreopolitical strategy for bypassing the internalisation of restrictions prevalent in societies of control. Lepecki (2013) uses the term ‘choreopolicing’, to describe a de-mobilisation through “implementing a certain kind of movement that prevents any formation and expression of the political” (p. 20). Similarly, participants in the supermarket adapted their behaviours to conform to the hegemonic body language as soon as they sensed public scrutiny. One performer participant expressed: “When people were looking, I changed from an attentive mode of encounter to a casual pose”. This exemplifies a “forced ontological fitting between pre-given movements, bodies in conformity, and pre-assigned places for circulation” (Lepecki, 2013, p. 20). These entrenched norms that regulated the movements, behaviours, and spatial presence of the participants, links to Boal’s (1990) expression the ‘cop is in the head’. It describes how individuals adopt internalised societal norms and maintain modes of self-regulation even without obvious external enforcement. The different mechanisms employed by the participants to confront the intricate influences of societal norms, counter self-censorship, and express self-determination, will be examined in the following section.

Expressions of Resistance

At a specific moment within the ritual, guided by the soundscape, participants stopped pushing their trolleys and entered a state of stillness, gradually sinking toward the floor. They assumed a seated position, planting themselves on the cold surface of the supermarket floor. A participant described:

I was present with my physical awareness. How I related to others opened. It heightened my awareness to the objects, the space, and other people. (Performer participant)

Through becoming still and tuning into her own soma, the participant could experience a heightened sense of presence within herself, enabling her to establish a deeper connection of how she related to others. Another participant explained: “I enjoyed the silence; I can’t imagine that would have happened on an ordinary shopping tour”. However, becoming more permeable in a supermarket also meant to become more exposed. Another participant

observed: “It was a contradicting experience of feeling empowered and vulnerable at the same time”. The ambiguous experience of feeling empowered yet vulnerable arose from the perception that taking a moment to sit down contradicted the customary norms of supermarket behaviour. In an environment where efficiency and quick transactions are expected, pausing, sitting, and dedicating time for contemplation disrupt established routines.

The reactions of other customers made it clear that the act of sitting in the aisle stirred up conflict. This was particularly apparent in the response of a woman who loudly exclaimed, “What the fuck are you doing? What is this shit?”, guiding her child to manoeuvre through the displaced bodies. The response suggests that the participants’ actions, contradicting the typical no ‘loitering’ protocol, could be seen as having a socio-political dimension. Drawing upon the insights of Klein (2017), the act of sitting in public spaces carries symbolic weight, encompassing a dimension that serves as a means of protest. By intentionally engaging in this seemingly mundane act within the confines of a commercial setting, participants challenged the established norms and power dynamics, thereby expressing their criticism of consumerism. This was further expressed by the act of mourning, as analysed next.

Heart of the Ritual: Mourning for Sliced Corpses

The theme of the ritual also centred around the winter season, especially its inherent topics of mortality and transition. Thus, one of the objectives of the ritual was to explore an acknowledgement of death within the unconventional environment of the supermarket. To accomplish this, the participants were guided by the audio to move toward the refrigerators in slow motion, directing their attention inward, focusing on their heartbeat, and observing the shifting temperature upon their skin. A participant experienced: “By the fridge, I thought about dying, about pain, about dead bodies”. Another person expressed: “it reminded me of the morgue in a hospital the mourning of the silenced animals”. This suggests that approaching the fridge, focusing on temperature, textiles, and tactile information in combination with the mourning music, made participants perceive the products in the fridge differently. A participant explained that it “altered my attitude towards navigating a sense of reference and acknowledging things”. The reflections suggest that some participants experienced a perceptual shift from being mere customers towards engaging in critical reflection regarding their consumption. Seeing the meat with empathy and feeling into the realities of the animals was a confronting experience, which made participants question their choices of “eating meat or not eating meat” and whether to become vegetarian.

The audio further prompted participants to reflect on their own vulnerability and to bring attention to the unjust treatment of animals labelled and sold as meat. Thus, as part of the ritual, participants were instructed to place their hands inside the refrigerator and express their

reverence. This directive to keep their hands inside the refrigerator rather than simply grabbing the product, generated a feeling of discomfort, leaving participants uncertain about the appropriate way to grieve for a piece of meat. A performer participant observed: "I am not allowed to touch the flesh of the corpse. I feel visible because the camera was capturing". The plastic package and the surveillance made it difficult to express gestures of mourning. Furthermore, the bodies had been modified to such an extent that they no longer exhibited any visible indications of their previous connection to a living being. Thinking with Butler (2004), one could argue that in a supermarket, where animals are objectified as "unliveable", they have undergone a process of "de-realization" and consequently become categorised as "ungrievable". This suggests that not all deaths hold equal significance, leading to the impression that some lives are more valuable than others. Furthermore, as Butler (2004) argues, categorising certain lives as unmournable not only devalues their worth but also normalises violence perpetrated against them. Such dissociations allow individuals to separate themselves from the consequences of their actions and the cruelty caused by the meat industry. The desire to numb one's own empathic impulses to 'function' in an environment of denial was vividly experienced by a participant:

I was in front of a shelf with Panadol. When I turned around, there were corpses of chickens. It reminded me of the pain and how it must feel to be a sliced corpse. We can numb our pain but there are pains we cannot escape. (Performer participant)

The experiences discussed above suggest that the supermarket environment brought to the surface people's tendencies to disassociate from the natural environment and animal life. It seemed as if the sterile atmosphere, where life was packed away in plastic, branded, and labelled, made it harder to build empathic connections. A participant expressed: "Living at the expense of nature was the experience I felt in the supermarket. But in nature I had the sense of living with". This insight underscores how environments like supermarkets exemplify an anthropocentric society, where profit-driven systems have noticeably disrupted people's recognition of their interdependence with the natural world.

Completion: Returning from Anonymity to Community

The participants returned to the assembly point outside the supermarket with their trolleys, forming a circle to light candles. They worked collectively to overcome the challenge of igniting the flames to complete the ritual in the face of the sudden increase in wind. A participant noticed: "We were helping each other to burn it. It had an urgency and a kindness". The participants' sense of immediacy and perseverance grew stronger in response to the weather conditions and the awareness of possible intervention by authorities. Moreover, this was the first time they actively cooperated and solved problems together, breaking free from their

isolated audio-somatic experiences. The feeling of genuine connection was further heightened as the participants discarded their masks and headphones, and burned their cards, which symbolised a shift from anonymity to a stronger sense of communal bonding. A performer participant noticed: “We became transformed the moment we burned our cards”.

Another participant noted: “Somehow in the ritualistic experience I became open to access the connection to finding the magical points of life and honouring them”. This suggests that the framework of ritual allowed her to appreciate moments of connection and community that unfolded despite the limitations and impersonal nature of the supermarket environment. By intentionally engaging in somatic modes of sense-making, she could open herself for the wondrous facets of human existence that are often overshadowed in a society driven by materialism and profit. Another participant expressed: “It was rich, deep, and relaxing. Shopping is stressful and limited by time. It became a meditative experience”. Another participant expressed that “the ritual invited awareness and deeper appreciation”. The feedback indicates that the ritual managed to temporarily transform a profit-driven, and choreo-policed environment into a space of compassion, reflective thought, embodiment, and empathetic interaction. In this counter-reality, participants were able to sense a recognition of their interdependence with the natural world, despite the environment’s sterile ambiance. This suggests that altering the rhythm of daily routines and participating in peaceful forms of activism through embodied and contemplative methods can open new pathways to imbue ordinary doings with deeper meanings and value. This aspect holds particular importance in preserving a state of balance and reverence within transformed environments during the time of the Anthropocene.

Key Findings Winter Solstice

The winter ritual effectively amplified the exploitative socio-economic systems that are particularly prominent in consumer cultures, where the disconnection between nature and animal life is palpable. By integrating critical posthumanist perspectives, somatics, and peaceful forms of activism, the ritual successfully fostered small changes on a personal and on communal level. It prompted participants to break free from their ‘auto-pilot’ consumer behaviour, instigating a shift in their perceptions towards reflection and potentially more environmentally conscious and socially just decisions. As the analysis revealed, redirecting attention towards one’s own soma is a useful strategy to engage individuals in subtle acts of resistance, granting them moments of temporary freedom in decision-making, even in situations where they feel under surveillance.

Thinking with Lepecki (2016), I assert that combining imaginative thinking with embodied ways of knowing is crucial for deconstructing self-policing behaviours. Such an

embodied and embedded approach links to Braidotti's (2017) notion of 'ontological pacifism', where critique and creativity are crucial aspects for envisioning new ways of thinking and doing. Thus, I contend that reconnecting with bodily knowing and the imaginative realm through mindful ritualistic actions within everyday spaces holds the potential for responsively navigating the "techno-natural-cultural continuum in which we now live" (Braidotti, 2017, p. 10). Looking at ritual activities through this lens can be a strategic approach to cultivating reverence in environments of the Anthropocene, providing a container for critical self-reflection and a means to challenge exploitative systems and injustices. However, to accomplish this, retreating into one's internal and imaginative worlds alone is insufficient, because in the face of the Anthropocene, it is crucial to cultivate a mindset and bodily practice that is capable of action and resilience, adaptability, and unwavering determination. Ginot (2010) suggests: "we must ask how to value perceptive modes of low intensity, control, tranquillity, and detachment, without renouncing a frenzied uncontrollable warrior body" (p. 26). This highlights the importance of balancing the ability to act against injustice and environmental destruction, as well as maintaining a sense of calm and centredness to stay "confident about the world, but critical of its injustices and negativity" (Braidotti, 2017, p. 21). This realisation is achievable through collaboration with others, involving practical engagement and active participation in the real world. While rituals might not directly solve issues like the ecological crisis or bring about significant political and environmental changes on their own, they offer methods to encourage people to be more response-able, accountable, and connected. They also promote hope and empathy, important qualities to have during times of crisis. Even though the rituals might not be the sole cause of immediate and necessary transformations, these qualities can help change how people see the world and interact with each other.

Across a year-long process of investigating how different seasonal rituals might be expressed in specific sites in Aotearoa within the Anthropocene context, several key findings emerged, which I will briefly summarise before I articulate my conclusion.

Summary Key Findings of Four Site-Specific Rituals

Spring: This ritual focused on the possibilities of (a) establishing a shared ritual culture, (b) co-facilitating ritualistic explorations, (c) de-centralising anthropocentric movement and thinking patterns, (d) transcendence: a dynamic interplay of nature-culture continuum, (e) experiences of intermediate transcendence, liminality, and pleasurable embodiments. The analysis underscored that establishing a shared sense of ritual culture with participants from diverse backgrounds can be achieved by actively involving performer participants as co-facilitators in ritualistic explorations of nature-culture-continuum (Braidotti, 2019). This approach, embedded in eco-somatic movement practices, can lead to moments of heightened presence

and suspended listening (Fraleigh, 2015; Hay, 2000), akin to a 'flow state' (Schechner, 2006; Olsen, 2014; Parker, 2015), or intermediate transcendences (Luckmann, 1990).

Summer: This ritual focused on the possibilities of (a) finding the right place for site-specific performance rituals, (b) orientation in the ruins of the natural world, (c) fire-electricity continuum: re-thinking ritual practice, (d) threshold into ritual: eco-somatic bush walk, (e) core of the ritual: disturbance and settling, (f) importance of a ritual structure, (g) finding ritualistic presence within site-specific performance. The summer solstice highlighted the complexity of creating a sense of *communitas* (Schechner, 2006) during a public ritual on a site with socio-cultural complexities, requiring careful engagements with different communities. Further, employing posthumanist philosophy and site-specific performance methods necessitate transcending nature-technology dichotomies, and moving beyond essentialist cultural perspectives. It involves conceptualising ritual within a performance-ritual continuum, allowing for the coexistence of 'liminoid' and 'liminal', where critical reflection and intermediate states of transcendence unfold within the same event. Recognising the potential for strong emotional responses and supporting participants to depart the event uplifted requires a framework that can effectively establish respect for otherness in affirmative ways (Braidotti, 2017), while encouraging participants to take responsibility for their emotional reactions during ritual experiences. These steps are crucial for maintaining a collective focus on environmental stewardship and fostering supportive relationships with humans and more-than-human others.

Autumn: This ritual focused on the possibilities of (a) inner preparation, (b) entanglements of singularity and plurality, (c) authentic performance practice, (d) audience participation through implementing Batten's Seven Stages, (e) improvisational framework for responsive performance rituals. During the autumn equinox, the significance of inner preparation for holding space became evident. Framed within Batten's Seven Stages, this event facilitated responsive engagements, with performers embracing Grotowski's concept of "coming forth unveiled", allowing participants to "hold presence and connect with self and others in presentation and performance" (Fraleigh, 2015, p. 77). Implementing improvisation further enhanced smooth transitions between performing, holding space, and participating, responding to real-time information from kinaesthetic impressions, emotional sensations, and environmental cues. However, while the ritual effectively transformed people's emotional states, creating a sense of *communitas* it fell short of orienting people towards broader environmental and societal issues. This highlights the importance of integrating activities in close alignment with the actual environmental and socio-political characteristics of the specific location where these rituals take place.

Winter: This ritual focused on the possibilities of (a) anchoring within self and the group with choreo-political implications, (b) entering the threshold into a choreo-policed environment, (c) expressions of resistance, (d) core of the ritual: mourning for sliced corpses, (e) official and personal completion. Utilising Braidotti's (2017) concept of 'ontological pacifism', the winter solstice event, located in a 'choreo-policed' supermarket environment, engaged participants in subtle forms of activism. This was achieved by redirecting people's focus toward embodied ways of knowing and imaginative thinking, thus encouraging small acts of resistance, and prompting temporary freedom in decision-making. The winter solstice event revealed that implementing mindful ritualistic actions in everyday spaces of the Anthropocene has the potential to infuse sterile and profit-oriented environments with empathy and reverence, highlighting the importance of adjusting to new realities while "staying critical of its injustices and negativity" (Braidotti, 2017, p. 21).

Chapter Seven: Conclusions

In this chapter, I offer my conclusions as to how site-specific performance rituals might be expressed in the time of the Anthropocene. I outline my methodological trajectory, encapsulate key findings in response to my research questions, and articulate limitations and future directions.

Research Reflections

In this qualitative, constructivist research, employing critical posthumanist theory, I often found myself situated in a complex patchwork of conflicting elements, fractured connections, and failed attempts to find harmony. This navigation encompassed a desire to amplify viewpoints that deviated from the prevailing narratives of the European Enlightenment and its associated features, such as “industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern” (Hall, 2019, p. 142). Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), I aimed to resist debating the truth of diverse worldviews or seeking universalities among various practices. Instead, I focused on investigating how distinct belief systems could impact processes, emotions, embodiment, and engagement with the world. Throughout this process,

*I discovered the potential of existing in a liminal space
Blending in and out of environments like a shapeshifter
Tuning into the rhythms of breath, the elasticity of muscles,
The resilience of bones, the sensitivity of organisms and organs,
Making kin with technology and ecology.*

*I embraced new perspectives, worldviews, and ways of knowing
Confronted naïve yearnings for otherness, and the responsibility of privilege
I exposed ‘policed’ behaviour, resistance, acceptance, conformity, and individualism.*

This was a constant practise of shedding layers of identity and decomposing my ego. Letting go of self-surveillance tendencies, I experienced temporary moments of reciprocity, where my nervous system regulated, and my heart became filled with joy and hope. Partaking in a dance where cells co-vibrate with seeds, where electricity is sacralised, and where humans entangle with environments, I was reminded of life’s regenerative processes amidst the challenges of the Anthropocene. Furthermore, throughout my research, I understood the significance of honouring differences with affirmative ethics of care. Here, ongoing conversations with the ritual experts, performer participants, and audience members played a crucial role in uncovering various ways in which rituals may contribute to fostering connections among people and the more-than-human world to advance environmental stewardship. Drawing from their insights and collaborative exploration of performing rituals across diverse settings, contexts, methods, and contents, I was able to articulate a ritual practice suitable of navigating the complexities of the Anthropocene.

Referring to findings in Chapter Five, I now return to my research question of how the insights of key ritual experts informed understandings of site-specific performance rituals. The range of key possibilities expressed by the experts offered me pathways to negotiate ritual practices in unfamiliar socio-cultural contexts, providing important insights into colonial matters related to access to power and systematic marginalisation. Their contributions broadened my beginner's understanding of mātauranga Māori and offered deeper insight into neo-Paganist perspectives. This, in turn, assisted me in articulating my cultural standpoint, creating a research framework at the intersection of diverse ways of knowing, and responding to the complex socio-cultural context of Aotearoa. My creative practice attained considerable depth through the interviews with these experts, providing insights concerning ritual methodologies, the underlying reasons for specific actions, and strategies for engaging with various aspects such as place, participants, and potential spiritual components. The analyses uncovered a range of topics, including addressing environmental concerns within rituals, processes of inner preparation, selection of suitable locations, and content preparation. Additionally, they offered diverse possibilities within rituals, encompassing aspects such as entering the ritual space, establishing connections with oneself, others, and the environment, exploration of the liminal phase of rituals, settling and completion procedures, and process of transitioning back to the mundane world.

All these components contributed to the development and expression of this creative practice PhD, along with a diverse range of contemporary performance practices, theories about ritual and spirituality, and critical posthumanist philosophy. Additionally, the ritual experts' generosity in engaging in follow-up dialogues was influential in reflecting on my creative processes, understanding failures, and learning ways to progress. Their consistent focus on the broader picture of how seasonal rituals could connect people with themselves, fellow humans, and the environment, always directing attention towards the larger goal of collective guardianship, was crucial in the articulation of this thesis.

In Chapter Six I discussed findings related to the research question of how different seasonal rituals might be expressed in specific sites in Aotearoa. In response to the findings emerging from the facilitation of four site-specific performance rituals, I now present my concluding thoughts on the diverse nature of seasonal ritual practices. These reflections consider how these practices respond to unique socio-cultural and environmental factors within different contexts in Aotearoa in the time of the Anthropocene. These factors also include engagement with the dynamics of disrupted sites, escalating environmental crisis, post-colonial conflict, societal inequalities, and growing societal division. As revealed in this research, tackling these intricate challenges requires ritual frameworks that can hold the

complexities of 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway, 2007) and offering 'radical hope' (Braidotti, 2019), to foster deeper connections with the self, the environment, and other fellow humans. However, cultivating caring networks of kinship spanning both human and non-human entities, amid increasing societal divisions and environmental disasters necessitates nuanced approaches. My analysis has uncovered that for rituals to respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene, they might create a balance between confrontation with the harsh realities of our current time, prompting self-reflection on values and actions, while providing rejuvenation and hope, reminding people of the beauty of the earth and why it is important to protect it. Furthermore, to engage a broader audience beyond the already environmentally conscious circle of like-minded people, rituals may accommodate and include individuals with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and differing perspectives.

This necessitates a paradigmatic shift away from rigid ritual structures towards composing rituals based on an understanding that "we-are-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same" (Braidotti, 2017, p. 47). As the analysis has revealed, embracing "differential togetherness", or "affirmative otherness" (Braidotti, 2017) is a pathway toward facilitating site-specific performance rituals within complex societies and contexts. As exemplified in the summer solstice, bringing attention to a collective purpose of safeguarding life on Earth within a ritual context involves embracing tensions, and diverse perspectives inherent in societal dynamics. Cultivating relationships beyond differences includes sustaining moments of conflict in constructive ways, with facilitators playing a crucial role in providing guidelines for response-able interactions (Oliver, 2009, p. 77). This is crucial to transform rituals into experiences where participants actively pursue "reconciliation, healing, avoiding shaming or punishment, or causing harm to others" (Boal in Denzin, 2018, p. 245). It involves providing participants with strategies to shift their mindset away from the "poison of negative passions such as resentment, envy, hatred, despair, but also sheer tedium" (Braidotti, 2017, p. 21). Engaging in this inner work is vital to transcend notions of self-centeredness and cultivate an awareness that we are a "knot of species co-shaping one another" (Haraway, 2008, p. 42), reminding us of our duty to look after each other and the planet we call our home. The natural environment, with its rejuvenating and calming qualities, plays a pivotal role in guiding and enhancing such empathic relationships among diverse participants.

However, the analysis also indicated that for rituals to effectively engage with the complex issues of the "natural-cultural multispecies trouble on earth", a change in the selection of ritual locations is crucial. This entails transitioning from secure and protected spaces to also including locations that convey vulnerability, devastation, and political tension. It also involves integrating posthumanist considerations that go beyond dialectical binaries of built versus

natural, contested versus pristine, and sacred versus profane. Implementing a more nuanced understanding of the interconnections between “all living matter and self-organizing technological network” (Braidotti, 2017, p. 22), is important for rituals to adjust to the time of the Anthropocene. Such an approach supports practices of reverence within settings characterised by human dominance, surveillance, and ecological degradation. I argue that in the context of the Anthropocene, a ritual may foster deeper appreciation of the wonders of the natural world while also addressing the harsh realities of human-centric behaviours. This balance is vital for rituals to function as experiences for individuals to process emotions of loss and sadness associated with what is left behind, while also encouraging them to trust in their capabilities to positively influence what is in the process of becoming (Braidotti, 2019).

This necessitates ritual activities that provide tools to transform challenging emotional states, like overwhelm, numbness, guilt, or anger, into positive emotions that encourage affirmative actions. This may include offering meditative strategies of self-regulation to support participants in accessing deeper connections with self, community, and the environment as part of the ritual process. However, in a public ritual involving a diverse group of people, it is crucial to consider the uniqueness of each participant’s practices and approaches. Therefore, prompts for participation must allow space for individual interpretation, encouraging curious and attentive interactions rather than adhering to specific esoteric or cultural doctrines. As the spring ritual has revealed, moving away from a single ‘master of ceremony’ towards inviting co-facilitation offers possible pathways to create a shared sense of ritual culture for participants from diverse backgrounds. Actively involving participants as co-creators may encourage collaborative meaning-making through improvisation, transforming hierarchical structures into opportunities for exploring diverse interpretations and meanings. Haraway (2016) proposes that it is perhaps “outside the dictates of teleology, settled categories, and function, that serious worldliness and recuperation become possible” (pp. 23-24).

While departing from the familiar and convenient is necessary to adjust ritual practices to the demands of the Anthropocene, it holds equal significance to respect and integrate the invaluable wisdom enshrined in enduring knowledge systems as shared by the ritual experts. Within the spectrum of the experts’ practices, one of particular significance entails providing a sense of guidance, ensuring that individuals feel sufficiently anchored to wholeheartedly immerse themselves in the ritual experience. To achieve this, it is necessary that the person entrusted with the facilitation of a ritual fully comprehends the responsibilities associated with their role. Moreover, this involves an acute sensitivity towards the intricate interplay of group dynamics, which includes developing an awareness of the flow of a ritual so that chaos and conflict might be brought back into calmness and resolution. This also entails understanding

when to give attention to heavy emotions and when to help uplift people's moods. It is a constant process of shifting back and forth between allowing for free experimentation and play to happen and redirecting the focus back to centredness. Considering that rituals involve ongoing navigating between the known and the unfamiliar, the expected and the spontaneous, rhythms of nature, and the dynamics of the group, activities need to be designed in a manner that can adequately accommodate these diverse experiences.

Thus, neither a tightly structured ritual framework nor a completely free improvisation is ideal. To allow for different dynamics, ranging from calmness to action, security to chaos, regeneration to upheaval, a ritual framework needs to have sequences that invite orientation as well as spontaneity, centring as well as chaos, cohesion as well as individualism. This means that pre-arranged sequences and choreographed movements need to be carefully balanced with spontaneous interactions and freedom for improvisation. Without this balance, the ritual's structure can become restrictive and unresponsive to real-time interactions. Hence, I propose organising a ritual akin to a score as used in improvisation, where a group of participants is led through a set of ritual possibilities with specific anchors to play. This approach has proven most useful to these site-specific performance rituals to respond to the complexities of the Anthropocene. Such a score may offer greater flexibility, enabling adjustments if necessary or the option to omit specific activities. Embracing spontaneity and unpredictability holds particular significance for site-specific performance rituals, where flexible structures become necessary to accommodate the ever-present changes brought about by pandemics, floods, and other disasters. With these findings in mind, I conclude that site-specific performance rituals in the time of the Anthropocene may be expressed through the use of a ritual score that allows secular seasonal rituals to grow and be adapted specifically to unique sites in Aotearoa. The ritual score consists of a collection of possibilities as identified throughout the thesis, inspiring for response-able interactions with the human- and more than human world, as illustrated in the following graphic.

Performance Ritual Score



Figure 8: Ritual Score (Design: J. Claus, 2023).



Figure 9: Ritual Score Explained (Design: J. Claus, 2023).

The design of a ritual score may be created in a way that offers participants and performers a variety of experiences that lie along a performance-ritual continuum. Rather than strict divisions between performative sequences and ritual activities, these aspects may be intricately connected, sometimes overlapping, and sometimes diverging from each other. In this context, concepts such as 'liminoid' and 'liminal' (Turner, 1974) are ritual possibilities that can co-exist within the same event, alongside different phases of transcendence and extended periods of attentive presence. Integrating these various modes of engagement involves using artistic expression to elevate the realities of our current time, thereby prompting critical reflection. Simultaneously, it includes offering contemplative activities that facilitate full

immersion and active participation. By allowing participants to fluidly transition between states of observance, intellectual involvement, complete immersion, and personal embodiment, they are offered possibilities for the emergence of new patterns and engagements.

In the context of performance practice, this requires a shift from theatrical actions to delving into Grotowski's notion of "coming forth unveiled", encompassing the ability to "hold presence and connect with self and others in presentation and performance" (Fraleigh, 2015, p. 77). This forms the foundation for individuals to smoothly transition between performing, holding space, and participating, constantly responding to 'real-time' information (Barbour, 2011) of kinaesthetic impressions, emotional sensations, and cues from the environment. Embracing contemporary performance practices inspired by improvisation, eco-somatics, and authentic movement offers pathways for transformative experiences during the act of performance and holding space, fostering meaningful interactions between self, others, and the natural world.

As the analysis has revealed, responding adequately to these complex issues, and crafting rituals that resonate with the distinct environmental, historical, cultural, and societal characteristics of places and communities, a collaborative approach is key. This necessitates an all-encompassing preparatory process, and conversations with Indigenous knowledge holders and community members. It also involves embracing contradictions and multiple realities while undertaking a critical examination of one's biases. It requires continuous efforts to establish caring connections with self, others, and the environment by intentionally slowing down and dedicating time for attentive listening. Furthermore, incorporating various preparatory practices, such as site-specific dance, improvisation, meditation, eco-somatic movement, and devised workshops, provide additional avenues to connect with, understand, and capture the complexities of a particular place. These methods provide valuable insights that contribute to shaping the content, structure, and purpose of the ritual gathering.

This creative practice PhD conducted a thorough exploration of site-specific performance rituals in the Anthropocene, motivated by a commitment to address challenges such as climate change, societal division, and increased individualisation, with the aim of discovering pathways to safeguard life on Earth. Facilitating four seasonal rituals in specific locations in Aotearoa, with participants from varied cultural backgrounds and a critical engagement with the complexities of colonialism, the study examined diverse approaches to fostering connections among individuals and their environments. By incorporating the perspectives of ritual practitioners in mātauranga Māori and neo-Paganism, this PhD is grounded in the socio-cultural and environmental context of Aotearoa, articulating a nuanced and culturally sensitive approach to ritual practices. The notable contribution of this research

is the articulation of a ritual score suitable for navigating the complexities of the Anthropocene, providing strategies to inspire commitments toward safeguarding life on Earth amidst societal divisions and environmental crises. It serves as a practical and adaptable tool for addressing contemporary challenges, offering individuals strategies to cultivate their “inner light of an expanded self-awareness and put [their] ideals into action to heal a wounded world and the current human-made crises of our times that threaten the survival of our planet and our species” (Cunningham, 2022, p. 265). This necessitates fostering radical hope and staying with troubles so we can “make our home in a world that is booming and busting at the same time” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 46).

Limitations and Future Directions

The limitations of this research stem from its contextual nature, confined to the unique setting of Aotearoa, a seemingly pristine and relatively peaceful environment. While this island nation is not immune to the impacts of climate change, including floods and storms that have disrupted the livelihoods of many citizens, along with contending with the global pandemic and the enduring impacts of colonialism, certain demographic groups may still maintain the illusion that disasters primarily occur elsewhere. Being far away from the immediate repercussions of ongoing conflicts, wars, and substantial migration of refugees, it is crucial to acknowledge that the findings of this study are specific to its context. Furthermore, the rituals facilitated in this PhD primarily involved a group of individuals who possessed certain privileges, with relatively limited outreach to a broader (marginalised) public. Consequently, the claims and applicability of the research findings necessitate further exploration in environments facing greater environmental devastation, violence, and societal disruption. Thus, in future endeavors, researchers might further broaden their practices across various contexts. The adaptability of the ritual score, extending beyond its original application in seasonal rituals, positions it as a valuable tool for prompting reconnections among individuals and their environment regardless of location and context. Whether constructed or natural, marked by conflict or tranquility, involving humans or non-human participants, the practice of anchoring within oneself, the environment, and other fellow beings through eco-somatic practices and site-specific approaches may prompt new ways of seeing, listening, perceiving, and responding. This, in turn, may instill the much-needed hope for affirmative alternatives to the current Anthropocene crisis and actualising counter narratives to the portrayed dystopian future.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Recruitment Letter

Theatre Studies and Dance, School of Arts
Division of Arts, Law, Psychology and Social Sciences

HUMAN ETHICS RESEARCH



Winter Solstice 2020, Foto: Johanna Claus

PERFORMER PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title of the Project: Site-specific performance rituals in the Anthropocene

Details on the Study

I am looking for participants who are able to commit for a research project from August 2020 until end of March 2021. Alongside a group of performing artists you will be investigating site-specific performance rituals, researching how it might allow diverse participants to connect with specific local environments. In particular, you will explore how such practices of site-specific performance rituals can empower participants to creatively respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene, and how specific locations in Aotearoa and Switzerland support the expression of different seasonal rituals. The Anthropocene is a concept that describes our current time, where human-centred paradigms have resulted in the exploitation of the planets resources and have contributed to the challenges of climate change and mass extinction.

You will be part of a performance team of seven artists from different performance backgrounds who are over the age of 18. I am interested in finding people who are specialised in different artistic fields and who are engaging with a wide range of performance practices, this may include contemporary dance, music, drama, or others. It is important to me to invite people from different cultural backgrounds, with different understandings of ritual, and people who usually don't engage in any kind of ritualistic practice. Participants don't need to be professional dancers, musicians, or actors. If you have experience in performing for more than 6 years, your contribution to this research is appreciated.

Your involvement

As a performance participant, you will be part of a team creating three different concepts of site-specific performance rituals related to the seasons, particularly the spring equinox, summer solstice, and autumn equinox. Specifically, I will be asking you to meet two months before the date of the ritual for workshops once a week for 2 hours. In those sessions, we will develop a specific practice of seasonal performance rituals to reconnect people with specific local environments. We will investigate rituals that are designed in a way to invite people from different socio-cultural backgrounds, (including people who usually do not engage in any kind of ritualistic practice), and to be inclusive of other beings already present within the site (such as birds and plants) so that all may be acknowledged within the performance ritual. These site-specific performance rituals will focus on seasonal rituals, starting with the spring equinox in Aotearoa, continuing with the summer solstice, and autumn equinox, and ending with the winter solstice in Aotearoa. The performances will take place in different locations, including urban settings in Hamilton City and Karioi in Whāingaroa, Raglan. Within the framework of the workshops, I will be also conducting three focus groups, one at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end of the year, where all performance participants have the opportunity to communicate their personal experiences within ritual practice. A commitment from August 2020 until the end of March 2021 sounds like a lot, but please note that the actual time you will commit to this study is no more than 6 months (see dates below).

I will also provide each participant with a journal where ritualistic, or seasonal experiences can be documented. As a participant it is entirely your choice how to use the journal, you can document in the form of drawings, poems, songs, writings, or any other forms. Besides that, I encourage the participants to record sounds of nature with their smartphones and share them with the group. In this way, the voices of the more-than-human- world can be heard and reflected. The journals and smartphones for sound recordings will be brought to each workshop to use as a notebook/sound scape. You will be asked to share with the group some of your notes/ recordings that you feel comfortable with, but you are also free to keep them entirely for yourself.

As a thank you for the time that you dedicated to this study, I will be hosting a potluck event as part of the focus groups to enjoy conversations and social time.

Dates for the different workshops and rituals are:

1. **Spring equinox:** Once a week for 2 hours from 01/8/2020 - 22/09/2020 (Aotearoa)
 2. **Summer solstice:** Once a week for 2 hours, 01/11/2020 – 21/12/2020 (Aotearoa)
 3. **Autumn equinox:** Once a week for 2 hours from 01/02/2021 – 20/03/2021 (Aotearoa)
 4. **Winter Solstice:** Flash mob 20/06/2021 (Aotearoa)
-

Of course, there will be opportunities for you to offer more time, especially when it comes closer to the performance date, but this will be entirely your decision.

Confidentiality

As a performer participant, you will be performing publicly and therefore you will be identifiable in the performance and in photos or video, I will use to document the performances. I therefore will give you the option to be identified in the research by using your name or to choose a pseudonym. You will be given a chance to give your consent prior to the publication of the study. The gained knowledge from this study will be used to do my doctoral research and will be made accessible to the public on different academic platforms online.

Consent

You will be asked to give your consent for taking part in the workshops, focus groups, and performances at least three weeks before the start of the first research activity. In case I film some of the movements, or record some of the music scores, I will ask your permission before using the audio-recorder, or camera equipment. To make sure you feel safe and comfortable with the process, I will negotiate thoroughly and prior to the performance, and I also intend to stay open and sensitive to how you are feeling so that I can adjust and edit the performance aspects accordingly.

You will be given a chance to give your consent prior to the publication of the study. The transcripts of the focus groups and journal entries will be sent to you for review and they will be edited as negotiated. Besides that, you have the right to withdraw up to three weeks after receiving the transcripts via mail. In the workshop process of gathering empirical and creative material, you can withdraw from the whole research project at any moment.

Findings

I hope to gain new knowledge about site-specific performance rituals and how they might be expressed in the time of the Anthropocene, and particularly to understand how seasonal rituals might connect people with specific local environments. I expect the developed methods to be used for different seasonal rituals in the future, so it is established for future practice in different communities. Besides that, I hope to present the knowledge at different conferences and to publish it in different articles.

Records

All documentation in the form of journals, video recordings, and sound recordings, will be kept confidential. According to Waikato Human Research Ethics Regulations, the records will be archived for five years. During the course of this study, all generated knowledge will be treated with strict confidence and all material will only be used once you have given your consent.

I am looking forward to hearing back from you

Johanna Claus

Email: johanna_claus@web.de / Phone: 02108775178

Appendix 2: Performer Participant Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
DIVISION of ARTS, LAW, PSYCHOLOGY & SOCIAL SCIENCES

PERFORMANCE PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

[A completed copy of this form should be retained by both the researcher and the participant]

Name of person interviewed: _____

I have received a copy of the Information Sheet describing the research project. Any questions that I have, relating to the research, have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions about the research at any time during my participation, and that I can withdraw my participation in the workshop and performance at any time *[up to three weeks]* after I have received transcripts of the focus groups, or journal entries.

During any workshop activity, or focus groups, I understand that I do not have to participate, or answer questions unless I am happy to do so. I can stop the activities, or focus groups at any time, and I can ask to have the recording, or video camera device turned off at any time.

When I sign this consent form, I will retain ownership of my own artistic contributions, comments in the focus groups, and journal entries, but I give consent for the researcher to use the material for the purposes of the research outlined in the Information Sheet.

Please complete the following checklist. Tick [✓] the appropriate box for each point.	YES	NO
<i>[I wish to view the transcript of the focus group interview.]</i>		
<i>[I wish to receive a link to view the findings.]</i>		
<i>[Other?]</i>		

Participant :	Researcher :
Signature : _____	Signature : _____
Date : _____	Date : _____
Contact Details : _____	Contact Details : _____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Appendix 3: Ritual Experts Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
DIVISION of ARTS, LAW, PSYCHOLOGY & SOCIAL SCIENCES

CONSENT FORM FOR KEY RITUAL EXPERTS

[A completed copy of this form should be retained by both the researcher and the participant]

Name of person interviewed: _____

I have received a copy of the Information Sheet describing the research project. Any questions that I have, relating to the research, have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions about the research at any time during my participation, and that I can withdraw my participation at any time *[up to three weeks]* after the interview.

During the interview, I understand that I do not have to answer questions unless I am happy to talk about the topic. I can stop the interview at any time, and I can ask to have the recording device turned off at any time.

When I sign this consent form, I will retain ownership of my own comments in the interview, but I give consent for the researcher to use the interview for the purposes of the research outlined in the Information Sheet.

Please complete the following checklist. Tick [✓] the appropriate box for each point.	YES	NO
<i>[I wish to view the transcript of the interview.]</i>		
<i>[I wish to receive a link to view the findings.]</i>		
<i>[I wish to use a pseudonym and that my identity remains confidential.]</i>		

Participant :	_____	Researcher :	_____
Signature :	_____	Signature :	_____
Date :	_____	Date :	_____
Contact Details :	_____	Contact Details :	_____
	_____		_____
	_____		_____

Appendix 4: Ethics Approval

Division of Arts, Law, Psychology & Social Sciences

The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton 3240
New Zealand

Te Piringa – Faculty of Law
Dr Nathan John Cooper
Tel: +64 7 838 4463
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www.waikato.ac.nz



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Johanna Claus
Karen Barbour
Ann Hardy
Declan Patrick

Arts (THST)

1 May 2020

Dear Johanna

Re: FS2020-14: Site-specific performance rituals in the Anthropocene

Thank you for submitting your revised application to the ALPSS Human Research Ethics Committee. We have reviewed the final version of your application and the Committee is now pleased to offer formal approval for your research activities as described therein. However, in light of the current constraints around social distancing and other measures to combat COVID-19, it will be necessary to revisit your proposed calendar of workshop activities (page 12 of your revised application). We encourage you to liaise closely with your supervisors regarding this, and the Committee can also provide advice as required.

We encourage you to contact the Committee should issues arise during your data collection, or should you wish to add further research activities or make changes to your project as it unfolds. We wish you all the best with your research. Thank-you for engaging with the process of ethical review.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'N. Cooper'.

Nathan Cooper, Chair
Division of Arts, Law, Psychology & Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix 5: Semi-Structured Interview Questions with Ritual Experts

University of Waikato
Division of Arts, Law, Psychology & Social Sciences

Questions for semi-structured interviews with key ritual experts

- Please reflect and describe a particular ritual experience you have been involved in
 - Thinking about rituals you have facilitated yourself, what are important considerations for you in preparing for the ritual? In facilitating the ritual with others.
 - Of those you have mentioned, how are they connected to a specific culture or spiritual tradition?
- One type of ritual I am interested in developing myself is seasonal rituals. Have you attended or facilitated any seasonal rituals and if so, can you describe this ritual?
- Thinking about a recent ritual you attended or facilitated, can you comment on whether the ritual affected your own life more broadly? Are you aware of whether the ritual affected others who attended the ritual and if so, in what ways do you think the ritual affected them?
- How could a ritual address issues of climate change?
 - What are the most environmental concerns for your community?
- Have you attended rituals from other cultures?
 - What were the similarities /differences?

Appendix 6: Interview Questions for Guided Discussions (Focus Groups)

Sample questions for guided discussions (focus groups) with creative practice practitioners

First workshop day:

- Thinking about a ritual you have experienced in the past, what is your clearest memory?
- Why did it stand out for you?
- How do you understand ritual yourself?
- If you think about a seasonal ritual what kind of activities would you incorporate?
 - Why are they important?
- What moments in a ritual can you recall where you felt connected to your environment?
 - How did this connection happen?
- If you think about different people you know, do you think they would participate in the kinds of rituals we are developing?
 - What might make them feel more or less comfortable with participating in a ritual?

Half way through the workshop process:

- Thinking about the last few months, has your understandings of rituals changed?
 - If so, can you describe how?
- Has participating in these rituals allowed you to connect with the local environment and if so, in what ways?
- Has participating in these rituals allowed you to connect with the seasons and if so, in what ways?
- If you think about a seasonal ritual now what kind of activities would you incorporate?
 - Has your point of view changed from last time, if so, what has changed?
- If you think about your experiences within the project so far, what has been your clearest embodied experience?
- What was the biggest challenge?

End of the research process:

- Thinking about the different rituals you have participated in, what has been your most outstanding embodied experience?
 - How would you describe this (what did you see, feel, smell, taste, sense)?
- Thinking about your engagement in the first and the last ritual do you realise any differences?
 - If so, what has changed for you over time?
 - About yourself?
 - The community?
 - The environment?
 - About ritual

Appendix 7: Questions for Follow-Up Feedback with Audience Members

Questions for follow-up interviews with audience members

- Describe a moment in the site-specific performance ritual that stood out most for you (can be in the form of a picture, poem, writing, or any other form you wish to send me via email).