

★ Caretaking across cultures

Choreographer and founding member of Atamira Dance Company, Jack Gray reflects on the influences on his career journey as a Māori artist in Aotearoa New Zealand and in the international context.



In the area of Māori and Indigenous performing arts, I have sought to manage ways in which artistic and creative practices of any community (local and global) can be a source of innovation that imbue tikanga conscious methodologies across intercultural and interdisciplinary frames.

The past four years, I have developed a unique trajectory towards the sustaining of work and employment opportunities as a dancer, teacher, choreographer, writer and facilitator. The desire to bring Māori contemporary dance practices into conversation and dialogue with other First Nations, Native American and Indigenous communities was the initial goal, and one that has accelerated into more cultural consultancy that addresses areas of access making for minority and underrepresented peoples, and achieved a measure of infiltration by drawing upon bi-cultural frames that are inclusive also of non Indigenous peoples and organisations.

I have made progress into the field through the development and enhancement of cultural values such as Manaakitanga or Reciprocity, in fact co-writing several articles with a collaborating writer, Indigenous Dance researcher and Chair of Dance at the University of California, Riverside, Jacqueline Shea Murphy, where the process and outcomes of a community based and culturally engaged dance work called "Mitimiti" (produced by Atamira Dance Company at Tempo Dance Festival 2015) were able to deal with issues common to Māori, stemming from urban displacement, loss of language and traditions, alienation from a sense of self recognition and respect through these forced and intergenerational removals. These themes were quick to find resonance in the U.S context and mirrored many of the same injustices faced as colonial impacts by Native American tribes, who have become more marginalised, invisibilised and disempowered as time goes on.

The work that dance and Māori epistemologies brings to the forefront has been via a wave of cultural advocacy where the challenges of Native American tribal representation is most felt, within the mainstream culture and perception of day to day institutional and organisational ignorance and bias towards non inclusion backed up by Federal Government non recognition. My solution for these perpetuations has always been to rely on the strength of the bi-cultural identity that Aotearoa brings to the table, through increased vigilance in education and private sectors, who are asked to uphold the integrity of the virtues guaranteed to its Treaty partners. The ability for me to cite the importance, relevance and ability for co-operative and collective power structures within the American context has deeply affected my approaches and given several new opportunities to give back to Aotearoa.

Back home I have been developing relationships outside of the dance world, constrained by its own limitations of funding sources, artistic competition, lack of resources and a business

oriented focus towards meeting policy demands. My work with Nga Aho, a national network of Māori design professionals, has primarily been in the facilitation of embodied practices circumnavigating the spiritual and intellectual properties of Mauri, active life force, that concentrates on ways in which better ecological and cultural responses towards city and urban planning, can be felt and then translated into tangible discourse and more insightful relations with stakeholders, both customary and investors. This has also been part of deeper cultural frames that engage community development with Atamira Dance Company, who oscillate as a conceptual space for reconnecting practitioners and community (local and global) to the whakapapa of working in a specifically located way (my work has come in the form of wānanga - Open Space Wananga, Wananga:#TranscribingSpaces, Mitimiti Forum).

In the United States, I have developed the wānanga (space/time, gathering, purpose) as a facilitation of the sacred thresholds and it has seen many iterations (Cultural Informance Lab, Lenapehoking Transformance Lab, Bay Area Transformance Lab, Tongva:#TranscribingSpaces) that bring Native and non Native, Indigenous, artists, scholars, practitioners and public into convergence together relearning ways of moving in harmony together, sharing ways of introducing complex and convoluted histories, restoring and revitalising research and approaches towards enacting together.

Throughout all of these events, runs a theme of Kaitiakitanga, a type of protection and guardianship, a form of leadership where the core values are instilled and affirmed, where the strands of a type of embodied giving can happen through uniting curatorial, custodian and aspirational qualities, and embedding this as a form of living exchange and shared breath.

★ Jack Gray - Ngati Porou, Ngapuhi, Te Rarawa, Ngati Kahungunu, choreographer, contemporary dance artist and cultural facilitator.

Biography:

Born and raised in Auckland, New Zealand (Aotearoa), Jack is a choreographer, contemporary dance artist and cultural facilitator.

A founding member of Atamira Dance Company, a Māori contemporary dance theatre since 2000, Jack completed a five year international research project, premiering a full-length work, Mitimiti, at Tempo Dance Festival 2015.

Since 2012, Jack has worked in the United States evolving an intercultural network of practitioners, activating cultural awareness and strategies for indigenous empowerment and artistic provocation.

Jack was an artist in residence at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in 2013 and created a multi disciplinary cultural performance called Te Reinga for the Grand Opening of Pacific Hall.

Jack has been a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of California, Riverside, and Visiting Scholar at University of California, Berkeley and New York University.

Jack evolves creative expressions of art, acknowledging the value of indigenous perception embedded within language, text or physical embodiments, to advance collective knowledge-making in new and transformative ways.