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Say Your Right Words:

The Extrasensory Experiences of Māori Storytelling and 'Re-storying' Contemporary Performance Methodologies

Say your right words, and you will be free!
—Jim Henson, *Labyrinth*

I must ~~not~~ tell stories.

I have always said 'sorry' for taking conversations wildly off-track; 'sorry' for wasting critical and creative time on disconnected topics; 'sorry' for leading serious scholarly discussions into whole other tangential realms. Sometimes I even say 'sorry' before I even begin to speak — to mitigate any offense or annoyance I will inevitably cause through never quite sticking to the right words. Yet I recently discovered that what have often been characterised pejoratively as my 'digressions' were actually merely the Māori in me just using my ancestral tools to make meaning of and in the world. Stories *are* my critical and creative methodology. So — aroha mai, sorry — I am not going to apologise for telling stories anymore.

Māori storytelling is a performance form of remembrance. Like many Indigenous cultures, Māori tell stories to re-imagine ourselves out of the damaging constructions of colonial fictions. Stories are a means of reclamation — or maybe of *re-claymation* where we re-form and reanimate ourselves from the whenua, the clay and dirt of our ancestral homelands: Tihei mauri ora!

It is no great revelation to claim that storytelling is important to global Indigenous identity; one might even say that storytelling has become a metonym for, or even the most cliched signifier of, indigeneity. First People storytellers have often been misrepresented in mainstream culture: problematically depicted as the wizened magical seer, or the Yoda-esque character who sees all through ancient cataracts and speaks only in rhetorical proverbs. These tropes keep us in the pre-digital darkness. They falsely posit us as relics of a dying race who see into a future we will not survive. Rather than depicting us weeping with a single tear whilst searching wistfully into a blurry distance,

I want to stress how storytelling is actually vital to understanding *contemporary* Indigenous epistemologies, to our lived realities and in foreseeing our vibrant futures. Citing Margaret Kovach, Biripi scholar Liza-Mare Syron asserts:

> [For] First Nations peoples, story is a method of knowledge production and connection. That the relationship between story, belonging, and knowing is inseparable, and that stories inextricably unite us relationally to our world. (2021, 57)

Likewise, Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen writer, Deborah A. Miranda, writes: "Story is everything we are: human beings are made of words and the patterns we construct out of words" (2013, 193). Miranda speaks of story *as* culture (2013, xvi); stories are crucial for the survival, nurturing and continuance of Indigenous cultures:

> [C]ulture is ultimately lost when we stop telling the stories of who we are, where we have been, how we arrived here, what we once knew, what we wished we knew' when we stop retelling of the past, our imagining of our future, and the long, long task of inventing an identity every single second of our lives. (2013, xiv)

Like Scheherazade, storytelling is the act that keeps us alive, that continues our existence. Stories are our life force and yet also vital for Indigenous liberation. Our stories are all connected in some way to whānau and whenua: our families, and our landscapes *as* our histories. For Māori, storytelling is bringing ourselves into reality, bringing memory into being.

This article describes the extra-sensory role of Māori storytelling methodologies as a way into contemporary performance practices. It explores ideas of untangling stories from colonisation, re-asserting the right to tell stories as wāhine (women), and decolonising directing practice through Indigenous storywork. In this discussion, I tell stories which journey me from the ocean voyages of my ancestors onto this page today. I describe ways that Indigenous storytelling functions as activated embodied experiences and how stories, or pūrākau, contribute to invigorating Māori-led performance praxes. I evoke stories from my own past to demonstrate how my whakapapa, or genealogy, of storytelling relates to the ways I experience, and direct, performance. I then link these ideas to my work in a project working with Māori actors in motion capture performance, where pūrākau from Māori cosmogeny were adopted as a framework for representing emotion states, but storytelling was also holistically applied as a methodology to get into these emotional spaces.

What follows is a collection of stories about storytelling – specifically, stories which show how it *feels* to create embodied narrative from a Māori perspective. As a kind of method, I apply the concepts of both synaesthesia and sunaisthēsis as they might be considered in Māori storytelling throughout, to capture the sensation of pūrākau.

Sensing Stories

In Western terms, synaesthesia is described as a rare condition in which a stimulus elicits an unconventional experience, or additional response, from another sense — for example, words might have a specific taste, or numbers connote certain colours. The stimulus is considered to be an "inducer", while the experience itself is a "concurrent" (Ward 2013, 49). However, in te ao Māori (the Māori world), the senses are not delineated, but are denoted by a single term, rongo, meaning to hear, feel, smell, taste and perceive. Yet these are not our only senses. As Nathan Matamua, Te Rā Moriarty and Natasha Tassell-Matamua state, rongo also includes "senses emanating from hinengaro (mind), puku (stomach), ngakau (heart), manawa (pulse), wairua (spirit) and whatumanawa (the inner eye)" (2023, 90). Drawing on Dell and Smith, they speak to the concept of "the whole body listening,"

> where our sensors take in external information as events occurring outside the body, which we then interpret and ascribe meaning to. Such embodied sense-making extends western understandings, which are postulated as brain or mind-centred of how knowledge can be produced, to include ngakau-centred (heart-centred) understandings […] that evoke the whole body to 'listen.' (2023, 90)

This notion of the multiplicity or simultaneity of extra-sensorial experiences means that something like storytelling is understood to be more than a simple transaction between the teller and the told; where I talk, and you listen. It is an experience felt in the body and the soul.

These experiences are similar to what storyteller Apirana Taylor (Ngāti Porou, Te Whānau-ā-Apanui and Ngāti Ruanui) expresses in his poem, 'Haka':

> when i hear the haka
> i feel it in my bones
> and in my wairua
> the call of my tipuna
> flashes like lightning
> up and down my spine
> it makes my eyes roll
> and my tongue flick
> it is the dance
> of earth and sky
> the rising sun
> and the earth shaking
> it is the first breath of life
> eeeee aaa ha haaa
>
> (2009, 78)

Haka induces a multiplicity of concurrent sensations – it is a powerful exchange between those passed, those present, and those yet-to-be. Haka also conjures senses beyond the haptic, aural, oral, olfactory and visual. Haka invokes the tripartite energies of te ihi, te wehi, te wana, where the performer's powerful presence — manifesting as ihi — creates a feeling of awe in the audience, wehi, which produces the collective vitality of wana. Likewise, Māori storytelling is a five-dimensional encounter which induces a range of unconventional cross-sensorial (and extra sensorial) responses, concurrently.

The word synaesthesis was coined from the classical term, 'sunaisthēsis' which was used by Aristotle to describe "the joint perception of one's friend, the good, and oneself and one's friend beholding the good" (in von Heyking 2008, 181). April Flakne further defines sunaisthēsis as "the encounter with another sensing being that activates and attunes multiple sensibilities and orients their creative capacities" (2007, 48). In other words, sunaisthēsis is the pleasure you get from experiencing something exhilarating, being aware of your friend being present with you, and being aware that your friend is also experiencing the same exhilarating event at the same time – an effect which ultimately strengthens the friendship. Storytelling is both of these experiences for Māori: an extra-sensorial embodied encounter which brings enlightenment through the energy of experiencing (and re-experiencing) the event, collectively.

Synaesthesia and sunaisthēsis are placeholders in this context. They are utilised here to help understand concepts from te ao Māori which have existed since our *own* antiquity. I am trying to capture the feeling of a story and the way it is told and held within our tinana (our bodies) to facilitate invigorated culturally informed collective creative practices. An alternative explanation, which is perhaps a little less palatable, is speaking of an all-encompassing seventh sense. If, as film director M. Night Shyamalan suggests, the sixth sense is 'seeing dead people', then the *seventh sense* is conjuring them up as a kind of non-chemical performance enhancement: Ancestor Power. We have words for this as well.

But that's a story for another time.

Stories from the closet

The epitaph of this article quotes a scene from one of my most favourite — and perhaps *most feared* — children's movies from the 1980s: Jim Henson's *Labyrinth.* These are spoken by the goblins hidden in the closet of the young heroine's bedroom, willing her to call on their help - to "say the right words" to conjure the Goblin King. This is how I imagine our ancestors, guiding us in the everyday, willing us to speak truth to power. Except these ancestors are not hidden inside a dark closet, they are inside of *us*, in our very bones. To be very clear, our tīpuna (ancestors) are *nothing* like these grotesque Henson workshop creatures poking around inside our skin cupboards. In fact, in te reo Māori, the word for goblin, tipua, also translates as 'foreigner'. In other words: the real monsters in the closet are the colonisers.

The villains in our stories are all thieves**.**

First Nations Stó:lō and St'at'imc scholar Jo-ann Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem writes of the "story takers": "Colonial research of our traditional stories and research stories of our people were used to define, destroy, and deter the valuing of Indigenous knowledge, people and practices" (2019, 5). Archibald states that "this research was an intellectual, cultural, and spiritual invasion that cast Indigenous characters in particular roles, framed from the vantage of the hunter" (2019, 5). In Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori Law educator Ani Mikaere (Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Porou) speaks of this story stealing in relation to the representation of Māori women:

> The reinterpretation of Māori cosmogony by Pākehā ethnographers such as Elsdon Best and Percy Smith recast the powerful female figures such as Papatūānuku and Hineahuone into passive roles, while simultaneously inflating the significance of the male characters […] The female figures in Māori cosmogony were not the only target for missionary zeal and redefinition at the hands of the settlers. Their paternalism also coloured their perceptions of the Māori women they found around them. (2013, 209)

Archibald coined the term "Indigenous storywork" to emphasise the vitality of storytelling within decolonial scholarship, "so that storytellers, story listeners/learners, researchers, and educators can pay better attention to and engage with Indigenous stories for meaningful education and research" (Archibald, Lee-Morgan and De Santolo 2019, 1). Similar to how Matamua et.al articulate "the whole body listening," (2023, 90) storywork allows for the tohu, or signs, present in the stories to be connected with the feelings conjured in the energy exchange between storyteller and audience, and researcher and reader:

> Engaging in holistic meaning-making involves using the heart (emotions), mind (intellect), body (physical actions), and spirit (spirituality), as well as recognizing the relationships of these realms to oneself, family, community, land/environment, and wider society. Telling stories in a research context provides time and space for the research participant to tell the story that is pertinent to the situation. The meaning-making process continues when the researcher searches for ideas, seeking an interrelated understanding of historical, political, cultural, social, or other contextual impacts upon Indigenous Peoples, their stories, and their communities. Developing, sharing, and representing these storied understandings requires a synergistic action on the part of the researcher to use applicable Indigenous storywork principles.
> (Archibald, Lee-Morgan and De Santolo 2019, 3)

It is a pretty provocative act of decolonisation to steal back our own stories, but also to recognise the academic power that resides in these stories. From my own position, as a wahine Māori, this also means trying to come to terms with internalised misogyny which insinuates that I do not have the right to speak at all. In some ways, this discussion is about releasing my stories from the closet, through the collective conduits of my tīpuna.

Deborah Miranda writes: “My ancestors, collectively, are the story-bridge that allows me to be here. I’m honoured to be one of the bridges back to them, to their words and experiences” (2013, xx).

The Story of a story

In te ao Māori, one of the kupu or words for story is pūrākau, particularly those associated with tribal origin narratives. Influential to my own research into pūrākau has been the work of Māori Education scholar Jenny Bol Jun Lee-Morgan (Waikato, Ngāti Mahuta, Te Ahiwaru). Lee-Morgan utilises pūrākau as a cross-disciplinary research methodology. As Lee-Morgan reminds us, the term ‘pūrākau’ is a composite of te pū o te rākau, or ‘the core of the tree’. Lee-Morgan connects this to the narratives of the guardian of all flora and fauna, the god, Tānemahuta:

> There are numerous pūrākau about Tāne’s memorable feats, including the story of separating his parents from their tight embrace so there would be space and light for their descendants to develop – the trees, the shrubs, the ferns, and eventually all living things […] At its simplest level, the pūrākau of Tāne Mahuta tell us that we are the trees, and the trees are us. (2019, 155)

These narratives align te rākau, the tree, with the ecocentrism central to te ao Māori. All things in the world are living, all life is connected – I am the trees and the trees are me. Stories, then, are like the beating heart of existence, the energy loop which keeps all things active, activated and continuous. The term whakapapa means both genealogy and the layers of papa which form earth itself. As such, whakapapa is the foundation from which our stories grow.

In contrast, colonisation can be seen as cutting down our stories — a useful metaphor for deforestation — but also, citing Ocean Mercier (Ngāti Porou) colonisation can be seen as the “weeds” (2020, 43-44): an invasive introduced species which threatens the balance of our complex ecologies. Yet the roots of our rākau are deep, and deeply intertwined.

Storytelling is a forest and we are the trees.

Storytelling allows us to connect to the nowness, the contemporary, popular, and relevant realities of Indigenous experiences. And while many pūrākau are characterised as ‘myth’, the very notion of myth as false or distinct from historical narratives is contested here. Many stories stretch facts to maximise awe, but as Jenny Lee-Morgan asserts, at the heart of pūrākau “is not the “truth,” but how people feel about their story, and how the story makes them feel at that point in time” (Lee-Morgan 2019,157). Stories are acts of re-creation and re-generation, where the wairua, and mauri of all things resonates through our bodies, carried through the hau, the wind, of our words, into the heart of the listener.

This is how my whakapapa is storied.

Over Land, over Sea

In the Southern Hawke's Bay region of the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand, near the settlement of Pōrangahau, lies a hill which narrates a colourful story through its very name: Taumata-whakatangihanga-koauau-o-Tamatea-turi-puka-kapiki-maunga-horo-nuku-pokai-whenua-ki-tana-tahu, or, 'The summit where Tamatea, the man with the big knees, the slider, climber of mountains, the land-swallower who travelled about, played his flute to his loved one.' The man with the big knees was Tamatea-pōkai-whenua-pōkai-moana, or 'Tamatea who travelled over land, over sea'. Tamatea-pōkai-whenua was a renowned adventurer who circumnavigated Aotearoa many eons before Captain Cook 'discovered' it. He was the grandson of Tamatea Arikinui, one of the captains of the Tākitimu waka which travelled to Aotearoa from our ancient homes in Hawaiiki. The descendants of Tamatea pōkai-whenua and his second wife, Kahukare, founded one of my iwi, Ngāti Hauiti, near Hunterville in the Rangitikei region of the lower North Island.

Tamatea pōkai-whenua, my ancestor, is also the namesake of my Koro, or paternal grandfather: the adventurer, Tamatea Bernard Hyland.

My Koro had so many stories.

Story-weaving my Koro's tales is a synaesthetic revival or retrieval of my childhood. When I think of these stories, I breathe in the frayed edges of the fabric of the 1970s gingham orange and brown tablecloth on a vast oak table in her warm syrup fat milk kitchen. I feel the sleek rind of cold mutton, the snotty sludge of piccalilli chutney, the pine-orange Raro cordial in the maroon plastic-tasting Tupperware tumblers. I can smell-taste the chit-chit twist in the wooden grooves of the salt grinder, the sticky burn on the backs of my legs from the vinyl squab, the hot smoke scent of the flyscreen, the jaunty wobble of the fulsome kererū perched in the sweet-sour loquat tree outside.

I recall the cockeyed line of sweat-flecked, not-yet, men at the Defence Department office, the morning after Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage formally announced that New Zealand would follow the United Kingdom's declaration of war, saying "Where she goes, we go; where she stands, we stand." I see my staunch-as 28-year-old Koro, ground-deep, swarthy with scrub and masking exhaustion from an overnight journey which began with a scythe thrown to the ground and a damp-horse ride from deep up the Parapara road, down to Whanganui. I see the little gingery chap in the line in front of my Koro, puffed up before a rigorous physical assessment, then red-shame-faced at being declared medically unfit to fight based on the state of his teeth, with the final punch line always: "I wasn't going to *eat* the bastards."

I remember the fantastical Golden Hollywood Epic narrative of my Koro's time in Europe, buried under a truckload of heady Allied corpses, watching open heart surgery on the sunburnt roof of a Greek Hospital, breathing in the peaty embers of the campfire hide-

out of a band of surly-churlish Polish partisans, following the frantic chase symphony as he is smuggled out of a Russian Dungeon to a ship bound for Scotland.

Or the story of his heroic return from war, where he marched out into the paddock where his tremendous horse stood — frozen, trembling, statue-still in the morning steam — my Koro saddling him up after no one had even been able to go near him for five years.

Or the story of my five-foot-nothing, soon-to-be grandmother, who, having heard relentless tales of this famous Māori warrior from all the Pā kids in her primary school class, biked eleven dusty kilometres on the gravel road up to Kaiwhaiki marae to introduce herself.

My Koro's storytelling abilities were very much tied to his mana**.** He had the ability to hold a room, just as he had the ability to strike fear in a seventeen-hand stallion. The meaning of mana is complex — in many ways eluding definition — but here is an attempt in Te Aka Māori Dictionary:

> [M]ana is a supernatural force in a person, place or object. Mana goes hand in hand with tapu, one affecting the other. The more prestigious the event, person or object, the more it is surrounded by tapu and mana. Mana is the enduring, indestructible power of the atua and is inherited at birth, the more senior the descent, the greater the mana. (Moorefield)

Mana is also important in forming relationships – it is at the heart of manaakitanga, making folks feel welcomed into your home, or making them feel at home. Mana makes you a Māori super host. Manaakitanga is also akin to the experience of suniasthēsis. To enjoy the flourishing of another alongside your own. Manaakitanga is also critical to storytelling, just as it is in theatre.

Not your words to tell

Long ago, in the late 1980s…

I was either perched, with blistering hands, on the top of those A-Frame climbing rope contraptions that kids broke their collar bones on at least once a week or folded inside a concrete tunnel maze which smelt like Dettol and urine, when my (so-called) best friend announced, in an accusatory tone: "You are *always* telling stories." Behold my anagnorisis in this moment of playground shame! My stories were annoying. I talked too much about things that no one cared about. And No One Was Listening. I didn't know then that this impediment was the Māori in me who refused to shut up.

Growing up, everyone told me, "You are just like your father," and I was always, like, *Not Even.* My Dad is an ethnically ambiguous amateur Elvis impersonator and professional trickster. My Dad can hold a crowd better than any charismatic lecturer I've encountered. My Dad once told me that he was the lead singer of Dire Straits; that once he technically died after choking on a jet-plane lolly in the bath; that once, when he was fishing, he was

scored by a giant fish hook that left a deep scar resembling a belly button; that once he fell asleep inside a giant wine barrel at a monastery and they made a new variety of unholy cabernet from him. My Dad has so many stories.

And so, as it turned out, this thing was hereditary - which was a problem, for me.

In the lore of Māori rules made up since colonisation, I could not be an orator, because I cannot speak on the paepae of a marae because I identify as a wahine. This 'rule' is not wholly correct, of course, especially if you are from Ngāti Kahungungu or Ngāti Porou. In 2022, the late visionary Māori leader Moana Jackson (Ngāti Kahungunu, Rongomaiwahine, and Ngāti Porou), requested as his ōhaki, or dying wish, that women be able to speak on the pae at his tangihanga, or funeral (Sherman 2022), opening up a space to confront the ambivalence towards wāhine Māori leadership in Aotearoa, a conversation which continues today. Nevertheless, I grew up thinking that Māori women did not have the right, or the ability, to tell stories because that's only what the 'chosen men' do.

Yet we used to.

Ani Mikaere writes:

> Prior to contact with Western literacy, Māori relied exclusively on oral means of transferring knowledge [...] That women played an important role in the maintenance and transmission of iwi history and knowledge is clear from the numbers of waiata tawhito that have been composed by women. Ngā Mōteatea is full of such waiata written by women, some of whom were prolific composers. It seems entirely logical that those responsible for the physical survival and continuance of the iwi should also play a significant role in the survival of its history and therefore its identity. (2013, 109)

Ngāhuia Te Awekotuku (Te Arawa, Tūhoe, Waikato) writes about the vital storytelling role of wahine through the composition of Ngā Mōteatea, our song-poetry:

> [I]t was a medium in which creative women excelled and asserted their enduring authority by the weaving of words, the provision of a cloak of knowledge for those generations yet to come. This cloak is not only about information; it may also be about joy, about remembrance, about triumph and disaster, about survival, as the feathers and fibre of stories entwine with new texture and experience. (2020, 11-12)

I used to think that my ancestors in my closet were playing a fun trick on me because the stories just wouldn't stop. And they're always about my family, my whakapapa, about things that happened yesterday and 100 years ago and they reaffirm my place and my relationships with my children, my parents, my grandparents, my 200 times great ocean navigating grandmothers. And who knew that I was just doing my job?

Sharing oral histories is not just an alternative way of presenting the past without paper. When I discovered that we have words to describe the feeling when a performance makes you literally buzz, even when you don't understand the words being spoken or the meaning of the actions — te ihi, te wehi, te wana — then I started to recognise the power of the performance of story itself. Story tells us. Recalling stories feels like a hot molten-metal rod humming from deep within me, a heavy stone weight pushing on my shoulders, nylon-thin threads pulling, bird-like, from the top of my skull, hot smoke and dirt in my mouth, leaves and iron in my nostrils, a tearing and burning and ultimately soothing liquid honey catharsis.

My ancestors whispering inside me: Say your right words!

Tukua tō reo kia rere - Let your language flow.

Stories in Space

Stories have helped me find the Māori in me in the most unexpected places; in this next story, they have led me through a whole new digital world.

The Wiri Project is a three-year project funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. It is an interdisciplinary collaboration co-led by academics from Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington - Areito Echevarria (Design), (Hedwig Eisenbarth (Psychology), and myself (Theatre and Performance), alongside a team of postgraduate students and associate researchers. The project investigates the possibilities of enhancing the representation of human emotion in video gaming. Despite having no prior knowledge of game development or emotion psychology, I was invited to join this project because of my experience as a theatre director and performance academic, but also specifically because I locate both practice and theory in te ao Māori. This has been a transformative research experience and gratifying in the myriad ways that in various stages each discipline filled lacunae for the others – to essentially 'fill the gaps' between our fields.

The project is named for the wiri which represents the origin of all performance, invoking a primordial origin story from te ao Māori. The wiri stands for the dance of Tanerore, the son of Tamanui-te-Ra, the atua of the sun. While Tamanui-te-Ra is away with his winter wife, Hinetakurua, Tanerore performs a haka for his mother, Hineraumati. This dance forms as the shimmering heat haze which appears after rainfall on a sunny day, the steam rising from the hot earth manifesting Hineraumati herself. In our bodies, the wiri is represented by the quivering of hands, a movement common in all pre-colonial or 'traditional' Māori performance.

The practice of working with motion capture performers can be translated as Tōku Tinana-ā-Mariko – 'myself in virtual' or 'virtual embodiment'. This ties together the idea of the body (tinana), as something real, with the notion of the 'unreal' (mariko), or a phantom or illusory version of a performer – as distinct from being *not real*. This takes into consideration a te ao Māori perspective where the virtual self contains the mana

and mauri of the actor. We consider movement and energy to be the ihi or lifeforce/essence of a person, while their skeleton, or kōiwi, connects the idea of selfhood or spirit as being within our very bones. The relationship between the performer and their avatar is similar to something like puppets (or Henson's goblins), where the host body is responsible for making the character the way they are, for their essence, even when they are not visible. A relationship is formed between real and unreal – the performing body and the presented body are distinct but deeply interconnected.

Embodying pūrākau

While the Wiri project is informed by Matauranga Māori, pūrākau was not explicitly part of the original proposal. For the first six months, the team were mostly trying to develop a common language. We planned two studies which focused on how emotion is expressed through movement with the development of seven locomotive 'dance cards' (like a human dressage course) which produced the range of movements required for game characters. The performances were thus devoid of story, requiring more generic representations of feeling through action.

The performance scholars and students working in the project were challenged to convince our peers that realism was not the only way to produce effective emotion in performance. In order to show how emotions can be represented through non-realist forms, we offered examples from Western and Indigenous clowning, neutral mask work, absurdism, dance and physical theatre. We played with a technique developed by French physical theatre expert Jacques Lecoq via his disciples in Théâtre de Complicité: the 'Seven States (or Levels) of Tension.' This is an exercise where performers replicate states which build on degrees of tension in the body:

> **Everyday states:**
>
> 1. Jellyfish (exhausted): No tension
> 2. Californian (relaxed): Cool casual swagger (soap opera)
> 3. Neutral (present): Economical in the moment (contemporary dance)
> 4. Alert (curious): Indecisive (farce)
>
> **Heightened states:**
>
> 5. Get out of my face (suspense): Tension, intake of breath (melodrama)
> 6. Passionate (emotion): Tension explodes high levels of joy, fear, despair (opera)
> 7. Paralysis (petrified): Solid tension (tragic)
>
> (in O'Brien 2024, 229-230)

We encouraged everyone in the team (as (in)voluntary actors) to demonstrate how it feels to embody a range of physical possibilities, connecting each level's specific 'tension' with various stylistic forms from melodrama to tragedy etc, as well as exemplars from the gaming world. This really resonated with the group, who were keen to test this in our first study.

But this did not feel quite right to me.

One night, in a semi-dream state of ideation, I thought through a new model, inspired by Lecoq, but drawing on Māori epistemologies, specifically pūrākau: Te Kaupae Whitu o Whakatinanatanga – the Seven Levels of Embodiment (see Figure 1).

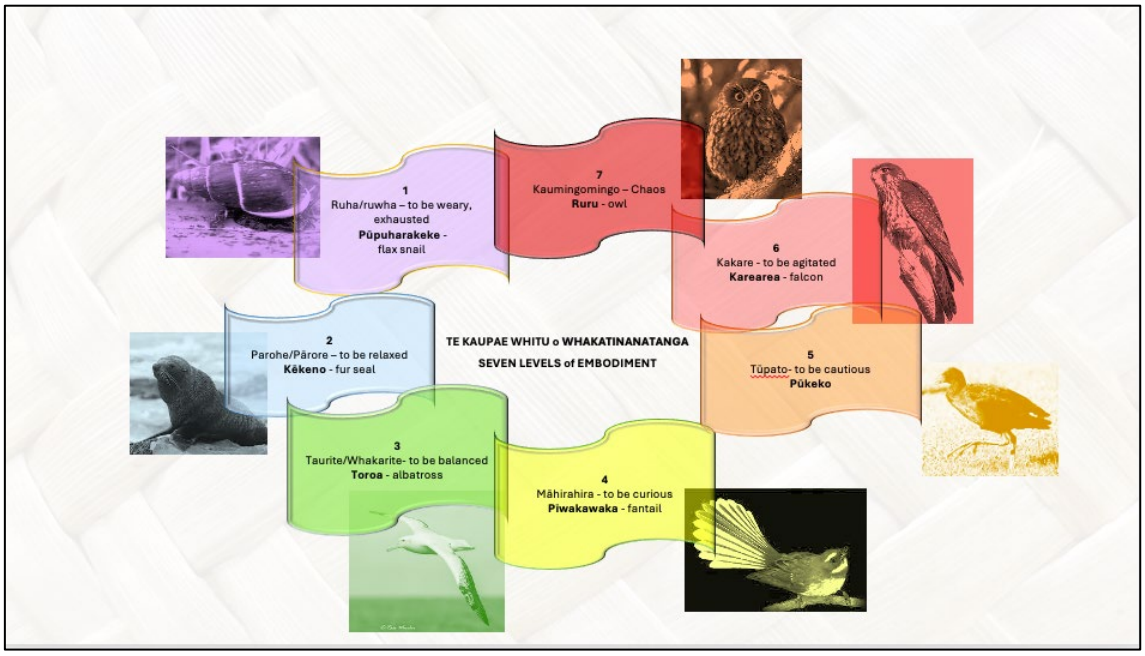

Figure 1. Te Kaupe Whitu o Whakatinanatanga – The Seven Levels of Embodiment.

My frustration with the Seven Levels of Tension model had always been about the coded points of reference for each level, which ultimately pointed to Western performative exemplars. I wanted to frame whakatinanatanga, or embodiment, through a Māori lens. So, for example, rather than using the term 'neutral', I translated this level to whakarite or taurite, which means 'balance' but also to be oppositional. I felt that the only way we could unhitch our collaborators' belief that authentic emotion was only possible with realism would be to take it away from humans altogether. I wanted to connect instead with Māori performance modes which are always informed by the natural environment: the body as sign of all things in the natural world. Rather than being hierarchical, this model is cyclical - representing the transition of day through night.

Each kaupae is also incarnated by a different living non-human entity with a distinct physicality. These entities each possess a specific story or set of stories which make them tohu, or important symbols, within te ao Māori. For example, for the level 'māhirahira' or curiosity, the obvious tohu was the pīwakawaka, the fantail – recognised

by their fidgety dancing movement. But pīwakawaka are also the chief scout for the god of the forest, Tānemahuta, notably utilised in thwarting the trickster Māui and leading to his death crushed by the obsidian vulva of Hine-nui-te-pō, ensuring the mortality of humanity. For tūpato, or caution, the pūkeko was chosen for stories of their 'bold scheming and stubbornness' but also their connection with the wero/challenge in a pōwhiri, where a warrior approaches the visitors to ascertain if they are friend or foe. The leg flick used in this ceremony is a distinctive gesture inspired by the pūkeko gait. I wanted to use these motifs as provocations for the kinds of physical expressions each level contains; we were not asking performers to *be* these creatures, but to think about the qualities of moving/being that are conjured up when we observe them.

The whakatinanatanga framework was very effective as it allowed the two motion-capture performers we were working with, Allan Henry and Emma Katene - who are both Māori - to connect with the *multisensorial* experience of a level based around the ways these creatures moved in space and how their origin stories determined their motivations. Like whakapapa, the two performers were able to build on layers of meanings combining story and feeling. Allan and Emma would enact dance card sequences, adding the layer of one of five distinct emotion categories informed by terms in te reo Māori to the tohu of each kaupae:

1. **Riri:** to be angry, annoyed, enraged, furious, incensed, indignant, infuriated, irate, outraged, riled.
2. **Koa:** to be glad, joyful, happy, elated, euphoric, delighted
3. **Pōuri:** to be dark, sad, disheartened, mournful, sorry, remorseful, misery, heart-rending.
4. **Uruwehi:** to fear, dread, be afraid, be scared of, be frightened of. [to enter a state of awe/fear]
5. **Whakarihariha:** to be disgusted, appalled, dismayed, reviled, aghast, revolted, shocked.

It was in the process of working with Allan and Emma that the pūrākau embedded in the model infused or inspired our 'storied' approach to performance creation. This aligns with Liza-Mare Syron's work in First Nation rehearsal spaces, where she recalls:

> In watching and listening to the Indigenous women playwrights I came to understand very early on, and continuing throughout the rehearsal process, that storytelling was very much central to their practice of theatre making. That the playwrights' practice was to weave real life stories with the imagined in ways that situated their play narratives in the intricate landscapes of their own lives, cultures, and histories, and epistemologies. (2021, 58)

What I discovered was that we were all using story to create an experience that was not tied to a specific physical memory, or became jumbled up between the telling, the hearing, the showing and the knowing. So, when one of the actors talked about walking along the river with their grandmother, I could smell the water and feel the sun on their

Nanny's face as if it was my own. Or when dancing in a disco themed nightclub, I could taste the sticky film on the bar counter. And vice versa; I shared stories as a means to explain how I wanted the scene to *feel*, rather than directing them how to act in it: stories about my dad lifting up the hangi on Christmas Day, my uncles ripping off chunks of steaming meat and earthy pumpkin on the back of a truck; or stories about the chaos of getting my children out the door to school in the morning.

These stories were the foundation of our working relationship — manaakitanga, sharing ourselves, or suniasthēsis in action — as much as they were creative tools. Operating in a liminal terrain, none of the stories we told seemed to directly align with what we were doing, but as director and performer, we knew the intention of what was being said or heard without having to explicitly frame the performance task. The performances had power, without heavy prescription. So, one of us would be telling a story and the stage manager would talk about needing to get on with the process and we would have to say, "this *is* the process."

There was *a lot* of laughing - something which is also really prevalent in Brown creative spaces. This seems quite ironic when, for example, we might spend three days of intense work on embodying sadness or fear or anger. But humour is also a critical yardstick for feeling and knowing in te ao Māori; the word for humour or comedy, pukuhohe, literally translates as 'gut reaction'. Laughing from deep in our puku meant we were on the right track.

Anger is the emotion that came most easily for us all. As Indigenous people, our paths are paved in pain, and we hold this pain in our inherited bodies. Yet rather than connecting anger from historical and more recent traumas, we connected to the cues which already exist in our language, where emotions are tied to very specific feelings in our bodies. For instance, riri is the core word for anger. There is 'taka riri', where taka denotes to prepare, to range, or roam: so takariri is 'pre-anger' or the anger which makes you walk away. There is 'ririhau', where hau can mean both breath/wind: thus, ririhau is anger which causes heavy breathing.

One of the specific tools which connected us all was that we see and feel through soundscapes. Rather than building scenarios for their characters when completing a level, we would conjure story through playing music or sound effects; some traditional, some more contemporary. For example, in one level of pupuharakeke, the flax snail, we layered the sounds of the ngahere/forest with that of the playing of the shell of the pupuharakeke which is a taonga puoro or traditional Māori instrument. For the sixth level of riri, anger, we played Rage Against the Machine. This meant our stories became multi-dimensional and extra-sensorial, transcending worlds.

While none of us are fluent in te reo Māori, our stories and story-sharing represented specifically Māori ways of being/feeling; the actors would respond in ways that showed they could feel what I was saying. For Emma, this meant exploring the physicality of atua wahine, the female models residing in our own pūrakau such as the warrior wahine toa, the prophetess matakite, and the all-powerful Hine-nui-te-pō. This was a vital learning

moment for me: to be able to direct something of the mana of our female ancestors, to pull from our whare tangata, the womb of all humanity. However, being culturally responsive means there is also the burden of cultural responsibility; the actors struggled when I was not personally working with them, as Emma described it, “When you're not here, there's an extra layer of communication needed”. Importantly, the actors both spoke about how this methodology felt much more culturally safe than using emotion memory; Emma said it was really nice to not have to use personal trauma to access emotions in a role.

As part of the psychology research in the study, the actors and I were fitted with heart rate monitors and skin conductors, answering questions after each performance about where they felt certain emotions in their body with visual mapping. The data may give us some idea about kinaesthetic empathy: how it literally ‘looks to feel’ someone observing someone else performing an emotion, specifically as a director. This may also offer insights about synaesthesia and suniasthēsis.

What is really compelling for me is thinking about how Emma and Allan are literally the archives within the Wiri Project; we built a model based on their specific embodied experiences, informed by being and acting Māori. As such, the Indigenous Body becomes the default here: the model from which the data is generated (see Figure 2). Imagine if Indigenous bodies were the status rather than a minority quota in *real life*?! Imagine if our stories were considered as important as the canon!

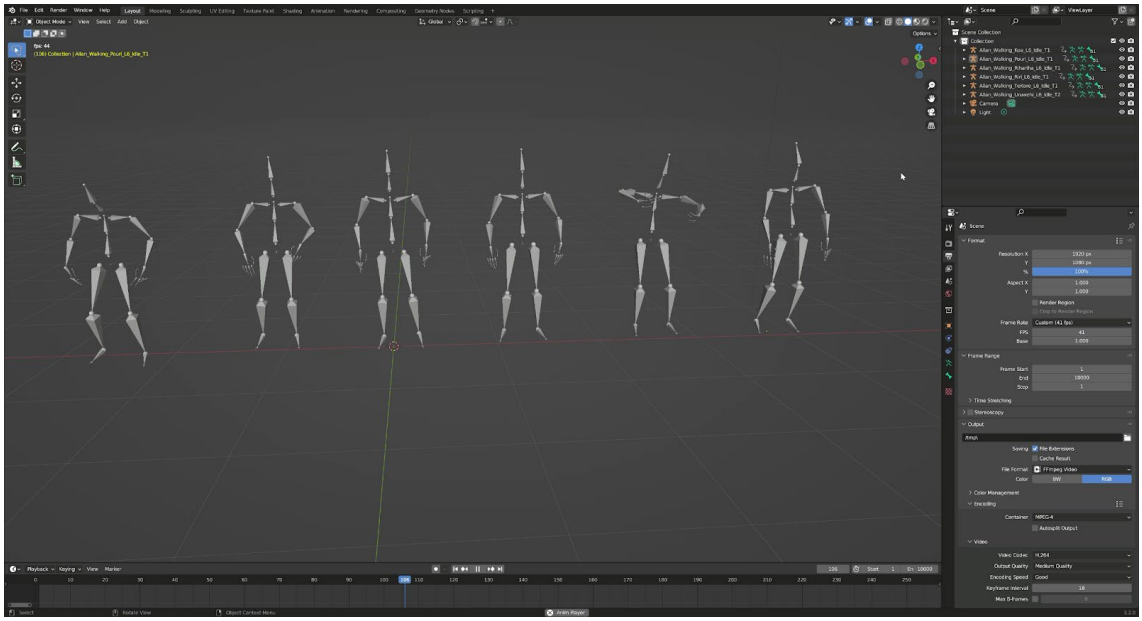

Figure 2. Study One Performer in Idle Mode: Riri/Anger, Rihariha/Disgust, Te Kore/Potential, Koa/Joy, Uruwehi/Fear, Pouri/Sadness.

The story is unfinished

Jenny Lee-Morgan writes of the precolonial storytelling traditions of pre-colonial Aotearoa:

> The portrayal of pūrākau was important, to enlist an audience that would continue to think about the story long after it was finished. In some cases, this may mean providing lots of detail and emotion, and in others it might be short, swift, and matter-of-fact, depending on the circumstances and pedagogical intent of the storyteller. One of the groups that understood the importance of the portrayal of pūrākau as part of Māori tradition was Māori artists. (2019, 159)

For many contemporary Indigenous creatives, our visual and embodied practices are the manifestations of the stories we hold in our bodies. The reo Māori word for creative talent is pūmanawa, which translates as the origin/root of the heart. Sharing creativity and sharing stories are expressions of love, of manaakitanga. Storytelling is an act of generosity which invites you to meet me and my ancestors, through our own words, in our own world, together.

In the last two decades of his life, my grandfather developed Alzheimer's disease, which eventually rendered him unable to recognise his own family; he became incredibly suspicious of "white people stealing his things" – especially petrol, walnuts and land – and he often reverted to speaking in reo Māori, his first language. Before he lost his words altogether, he still told stories, even if he didn't remember who he was telling them to, or that he'd told the same story over and over again. This was how I learned, word-for-word, the tale of the man declared unfit to fight in the war on account of his bad teeth, or the one I haven't told about how he lost his toes to a vicious cat shrouded at the end of his bed. My Koro's history has not been lost; his stories are our re-membering.

My final story is from my second child, Cassius – or Cash. I have known that Cash is the next storyteller since he was pre-verbal; he is so very much like his Koro, my father, and like his great grandfather, who he never met. Cash is a compulsive world-builder, a creator of boldly imaginative characters and impossible narratives. I share his story today as an example of storywork in action, as Archibald, Lee-Morgan and De Santolo state: "We have a responsibility to share these storied understandings with others, to keep these embers alive in our heart, mind, body, and spirit, so that the future generations, especially Indigenous children and youth, have opportunities to learn and live Indigenous storywork" (2019, 4).

This is Cash's story.

> There was once this guy called The Pacific and he was from every single country in the Pacific. So he was the muscliest and the most athletic and he could like jump the highest and run the fastest and he could wrestle the Hulk. Except this was like a long time ago before Captain Cook (the

> white dude) came. So, once, lots of people went into this cave and none came back. So The Pacific went to this cave and it was a time-travel cave. He got time travelled to lots of times in the future. He travelled to the time of the pirates and to the time of World War II. In World War II they were shooting at him, but he was so strong and muscley that he just grabbed the missiles and threw them back at them. He got teleported to the time of the future where there was like technology and dudes just watching TV and doing nothing so he showed them who was boss with his tremendous muscles and brains. And they asked him why he was there and he said:
>
> "Cos I'm Māori. I'm everywhere."

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