The Octopus Against a Sharp White Background

by Amit Noy

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Caleb Heke in Atamira Dance Company, *Te Wheke*. Photo: Jinki Cambronero.



Dana Moore-Mudgway in Atamira Dance Company, *Te Wheke*. Photo: Jinki Cambronero.



Caleb Heke in Atamira Dance Company, *Te Wheke*. Photo: Jinki Cambronero.



Nancy Wijohn dancing an excerpt from *Mauri* by Kelly Nash in Atamira Dance Company's *Te Wheke* at the Joyce Theatre, 29 March - 2 April 2023. Photo: Steven Pisano.



Oli Mathiesen dancing an excerpt from *Mana Ake* by Jack Gray in Atamira Dance Company, Te Wheke. Photo: Jinki Cambronero.



Atamira Dance Company, *Te Wheke*, the Joyce Theatre, 29 March - 2 April 2023. Photo: Steven Pisano.



Abbie Rogers in Atamira Dance Company, *Te Wheke*. Photo: Jinki Cambronero.

In March and April 2023, Aotearoa New Zealand's Atamira Dance Company toured Hawai'i and Turtle Island North America with their celebration of Māori choreographic legacy, Te Wheke. *While visiting Lenape territory, Amit Noy went to see their performance at New York's Joyce Theater and writes below about* Te Wheke*'s engagement with the complexities of Indigenous contemporaneity.*

We roll up to Manahatta, the Lenape island of many hills, 414 years after the savage colonisers arrived. One of the first, shocking days of spring is souring: warm rain dropping down, thunder somewhere close. The weather batters my shoddy umbrella as I walk from the train station to the theatre. In the neighbourhood of Chelsea—historically a centre of Queer liberation and now a flagpole of gentrified homonormativity—Atamira Dance Company is performing at The Joyce Theater.

Established in 2000, Atamira Dance Company self-describes as "a platform to cultivate dance practice defined by tikanga Māori and whakapapa."[01] In te reo Māori—a language where words are more portals than taxonomies—the elastic fullness of a word's meaning is often gutted in translation.[02] A manuhiri (visitor) of ten years in Aotearoa, I arrive at the meaning of Atamira through artistic

director Jack Gray's translation as "where the bones rest."[03] It's indicative of the proscenium theatre's[04] stark whiteness that when searching for a te reo Māori word for "stage," Atamira's co-founders discovered no direct translation.[05] Over the past 23 years, the company has continuously sought to establish a Māori contemporary dance practice in Aotearoa. They've challenged the narrow raft of lauded innovators in the field, navigating an Indigenous canoe through overwhelmingly white waters.

Racialised politics are an insidious undercurrent in contemporary dance, a medium that frequently avoids ethico-political responsibility through recourse to the idea of a universal body—one that is pure, organic, authentic, pre-social, universal, abstract or primal. It's an ironically disembodied notion of embodiment that seems to float above the mould of everyday life. As well as bearing uncomfortable resemblances to eugenicist or Gauguin-esque perspectives, the pure-body discourse begs the question: Who are we talking about when we're talking about this body? All of our bodies are radically distinct, so the idea of a universal body is a fallacy, and a violent one at that: The body that contemporary dance takes as universal is most often white, able-bodied, intensely athletic, conventionally attractive, and abundant with springy youth. Within Aotearoa, Atamira belongs to a coterie of institutions—including Touch Compass and Okareka Dance Company—making important interventions into this conceptual mire. These companies propose that if we depart from the idea of a universal body, we can better pay attention to the particularities of each person's embodied reality. In some ways, this is what dance does best—it lets us see people, as they are.

Walking as manuhiri through Aotearoa, I have learnt that in te ao Māori (the Māori world), people are seen in relation to whakapapa (ancestral legacy)—to past, present and future. In *Te Wheke*, the performance Atamira presented in New York City this spring, much of the work comes from this pluri-temporal and pluri-spatial idea of relation. Yes, the performers are working in relationship to the soundscore, the theatre and the audience, but they are also working in relationship to mauri (life principle), atua (supernatural ancestral beings), te ao wairua (the spirit world) and tūpuna (ancestors). The scale of each performance reaches beyond the

theatre, into spiritual geographies that you just can't buy a ticket to.

Atamira's *Te Wheke*—the octopus—reflects that creature's eight appendages in the physiology of the dance. Eight performers each dance a solo created for them by one of eight different choreographers. Between each solo, excerpts from previous works by Atamira are danced by different configurations of the ensemble. All of this is sewn together by artistic director Jack Gray alongside co-directors Kelly Nash and Taane Mete. If this sounds like a lot, well, it is. *Te Wheke*'s multiplicity is both boon and bathos. At times, the shift from one choreographer's work to another's is like a fresh breeze blowing in. At other moments, similarities between solos left me with an unfortunate sensation of déjà vu.

The piece opens with an excerpt from *Ngāi Tahu 32* by Louise Pōtiki Bryant, danced by Madi Tumataroa and Sean MacDonald. The duet begins with conventional ballroom partnering before veering askew, as the dancers begin to suppress each movement's resolution. Set to a Euro-classical 1940s melody sung in te reo Māori, the duet reads as an allegory for the attempted murder of the Māori language in the first half of the 20th century. Here and elsewhere, Sean MacDonald dances with a radical openness: Each gesture feels like a generous proffering. There is a tendency in contemporary dance to fetishise largesse—as in other capitalist structures, "the bigger the better" is an oft-heard refrain. In contrast, it's a joy to witness MacDonald, who understands anatomic limitation. He does not try to obliterate physical boundaries; nor does he treat them as an impediment to good dancing.

The partnership of Tumataroa and MacDonald—the youngest and eldest members of the ensemble, respectively—is emblematic of the work's wider commitment to intergenerationality. Conceived by Artistic Director Jack Gray (Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāpuhi, Te Rarawa) and produced by Executive Director Marama Lloyd (Ngāti Kahu, Te Rarawa), *Te Wheke* honours the company's 20th anniversary with a creative team that embodies the multiple generations of Atamira's past story and present life. The eight choreographers—Kelly Nash (Ngāpuhi), Dolina Wehipeihana (Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Tukorehe), Gabrielle Thomas (Kāi Tahu, Te

Ātiawa te Tau Ihu), Bianca Hyslop (Te Arawa, Ngāti Whakaue), Louise Pōtiki Bryant (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, Waitaha), Jack Gray (Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāpuhi, Te Rarawa), Kura Te Ua (Te Rarawa, Te Aupōuri, Te Aitanga a Māhaki, Te Whakatōhea, Tūhoe) and Taane Mete (Ngāti Kahungunu)—each harken to different eras of Atamira's history. Likewise, the eight performers —Sean MacDonald (Ngāti Kahungunu, Rangitāne, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Tūwharetoa), Cory-Toalei Roycroft (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Kauwhata), Dana Moore-Mudgway (Te Ātiawa, Rangitāne, Ngāti Apa, Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Mutunga), Oli Mathiesen (Ngāti Hine, Ngāpuhi), Abbie Rogers (Ngāi Tahu, Te Arawa), Caleb Heke (Ngāpuhi), Nancy Wijohn (Te Rarawa, Tūhoe, Ngāti Whaoa and Ngāi Tahu) and Madi Tumataroa (Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Pāhauwera)—each carry with them a smaller or larger suitcase of experience. This tuakana–teina entanglement is a boon for dance in Aotearoa, where generations rarely cross, and funding and curatorial systems remain consistently ageist.[06]

While each choreographer–performer pairing explores different ground, there is a shared embodiment that envelops the entirety of *Te Wheke*. Much of the dancing seems to blur the partitions separating human, object, animal and spirit—each time you recognise a performer as human, they seem to sweep the anthro-ground from beneath your idle feet. Head cocked, Oli Mathiesen flits across the space as if from tree to tree, buoyant with the force of a bird, or sprite. Abbie Rogers' kinaesthetic precision is fascinatingly machinic—an arm cuts air; a pivot is a sudden and total reorientation. With each movement, Nancy Wijohn musters a geologic power. The sinew of her dance is bound tight—nothing collapses or escapes. All of the performers move in nimbleness, as if alert to things we cannot see or know. They sustain a tempo of inexorable pulsation that never really slows down. Like its namesake, *Te Wheke* is a shapeshifter.



Oli Mathieson in Atamira Dance Company, *Te Wheke*. Photo: Jinki Cambronero.



Sean Macdonald in Atamira Dance Company, *Te Wheke*. Photo: Jinki Cambronero.



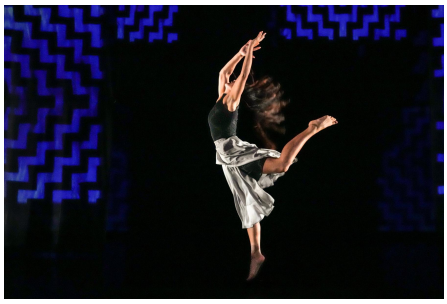
Cory-Toalei Roycroft dancing an excerpt from *Whatumanawa* by Bianca Hyslop in Atamira Dance Company, *Te Wheke*. Photo: Jinki Cambronero.



Abbie Rogers in Atamira Dance Company, *Te Wheke*. Photo: Jinki Cambronero.



Atamira Dance Company, *Te Wheke*. Photo: Jinki Cambronero.



Atamira Dance Company, *Te Wheke*, the Joyce Theatre, 29 March - 2 April 2023. Photo: Steven Pisano.

From the soup of movement, I recall twitches, fluttering jumps, a head circumnavigating the neck, sweeping rushes to the floor, and groups ambulating like waves. Embodiment practices from haka Māori (Māori dance forms) are frequent, including wiri,[07] pūkana,[08] whetero ārero[09] and mau rākau.[10] Rooted in the earth, these movements exist within a larger dance vocabulary that also draws liberally on the European techniques of ballet and modern dance. Their amalgamation is a fascinating demonstration of the raciality of form. *Te Wheke* happens inside of a four-hundred-year project that bestows ethical and moral dimension to our physical orientation. At least since the Enlightenment, this violent project has shaped how we are in our bodies: Verticality has been privileged as the domain of rationality and heroism (read, whiteness), whilst other relationships to ground and gravity have been named sick, savage or perverse. Haka Māori and Euro-contemporary technique have different relationships to weight, gravity and even posture. To see the same person access both practices within the space of a single breath perplexes the centuries-old logic of racist physiology.

The performers of *Te Wheke* are bilingual in more than one sense: they speak both European and Māori physical languages, and their dual fluency is a fuck-you to colonialism's segregationist agenda. "Why shouldn't we now claim a language, once thrust upon us, as our own?" the dancers seem to say. The work's refusal to inhabit just one ground is politically salient, yet it also results in a murkier choreographic field.

In fact, there is much that clouds the viewing experience in this production. Louise Pōtiki Bryant's projection design—a continually shifting downpour of colour and geometry—makes it hard to focus on the dance. The generic score by composer Paddy Free does not help *Te Wheke* carve out its individuality. John Verryt's set establishes a grand aesthetic scale that is at odds with the choreography's intricacy, and Vanda Karolczak's lighting is too diffuse; it doesn't provide a keen frame.

It's frustratingly common for a dance's specific force to be diluted by non-specific production design. Nonetheless, pockets of the morass delight. In an excerpt of *Aroha* titled *Whare* by Jack Gray, the dancers stage a stop-motion cabaret of Aotearoa curio, pulling scarves, hats and other objects out of a giant basket. The self-effacing humour and bizarre logic of this sequence is a tonic amongst the mostly serious *Te Wheke*. Set to a Māori waiata (song), it's also a moment where the takatāpui performers are able to revel in flamboyance and queer affect.[11] A flashed shimmy, an exaggerated wink, an impish look at the audience: Intimations of shared knowing are the ground of queer relation. It's moving to see takatāpui identity being foregrounded in this way.



(From L to R) Abbie Rogers, Sean MacDonald, Madi Tumataroa, Caleb Heke, Nancy Wijohn, and Oli Mathiesen in Atamira Dance Company, Te Wheke, Joyce Theatre, 29 March - 2 April 2023. Photo: Steven Pisano.



Atamira Dance Company, *Te Wheke*, the Joyce Theatre, 29 March - 2 April 2023. Photo: Steven Pisano.

Māori scholar Tangaroa Paora says that "colonisation had a significant role in facilitating the shift from traditional to contemporary attitudes towards takatāpui."[12] Paora speaks of "compelling evidence that takatāpui were a normal part of traditional Māori society" until being violently suppressed by the homophobic British.[13] *Te Wheke* continually challenges non-Indigenous viewers to expand their colonially stifled understanding of Māoridom by foregrounding many registers and perspectives of Māori experience. Each of the eight solos explores one tentacle of Tūhoe, Ngāti Ruapani and Ngāti Kahungunu scholar Rose Pere's eight-part, kaupapa Māori health model (a model with Māori foundations), also known as Te Wheke.[14] In *Man a Ake*, Oli Mathiesen shreds the air to music by Māori metal band Alien Weaponry. Mathieson's dancing matches the music's viciousness as every part of his body seems to become playfully enraged. Choreographed by Jack Gray, *Mana Ake* resists the cohering of Māori identity into something tidy and straight (pun somewhat intended). In contrast, *Whatumanawa*, choreographed by Bianca Hyslop and performed by Cory-Toalei Roycroft, blurs personhood by distillation to a concentrated movement language. Meaning "all-seeing eye of the heart," *Whatumanawa* is the solo that most explicitly engages with the show's namesake.[15] Rippling across the milky black floor, Roycroft ascends and descends as if subject to the movements of the ocean. Like an octopus, they are quick: as soon as their chest touches the floor, it is carried up by the movement of another limb. Bianca Hyslop speaks of the word whatumanawa as a reminder that "we are more than our physical form."[16] Riding the choreography like a wave, Roycroft accesses a

more-than-human physicality. Refreshingly, they do not demonstrate their execution of the movement, but simply get busy doing it.

Structurally, Te Wheke is inexorable and constant, like walking across a flat plain on foot. Much like a pōwhiri (ritual of encounter) disrupts productive time, this piece slits the fabric of ordinary rhythms. There are few climaxes, and almost no moments to rest and renew your attention. The structure is a smoothly flowing river. It takes you somewhere, and you don't know how long you've been there, or how to get back upstream. Choreographically, *Te Wheke* favours a register of muscular athleticism which seems designed to shock and awe. It's as if to say, "Others could never do what we are doing." The raising of an arm is executed as one might read a sonnet, and the ensemble stares us down almost confrontationally. It creates a curiously non-empathic affectual field.

The dancers' investment in performance-as-confrontation could be read as a carriage of haka pōwhiri practice into the proscenium space. Indeed, the transposition of physical concepts from te ao Māori into *Te Wheke* serves to highlight the narrow range of precepts Western culture holds around how to behave on the stage, and what it means to be there. To borrow a thought tool from Donna Haraway, you could say that *Te Wheke* exposes the theatre as a form decidedly situated in white ontologies. Next time you enter one, ask yourself: Who performs, and who watches? Who is rendered silent, and who is expected to explain themselves?

The Anglo-European tradition has long relegated its intentional practice of affectual relation to the space of the theatre or the church. Te ao Māori holds a much more integrated understanding of what is referred to as ihi (essential force), wehi (a response of dread and awe) and wana (fervour, exhilaration). Tui Matapira Ransfield once described this dynamic to me as "a gnawing or biting of my skin."[17] It's the energetic exchange that happens most famously on the marae (ancestral gathering place) in haka pōwhiri—intended to determine whether a stranger is friend or foe—yet tikanga Māori (the customary system of values and practices) exercises this force as an important relational tool in diplomatic, political and everyday life. So when practices born from

the specific sphere of the marae, such as haka pōwhiri, or from te ao Māori at large, such as karakia (incantation), are situated on a stage, they throw the whiteness of the proscenium into pungent relief. As Zora Neale Hurston wrote: "I feel most coloured when I am thrown against a sharp white background."[18] Like Hurston, *Te Wheke* inherently enacts a brutal critique of the exclusions and limitations of theatrical performance. It begs the question: How is the field of performance engaging with the proscenium as an instrument of whiteness? At times, I wished *Te Wheke* had engaged more critically and creatively with this line of thought.

Performance scholars, affect theorists and dance pundits in Western traditions are only now discovering the sort of language that mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) has incorporated into daily life for generations. The first solo in *Te Wheke* is *Mauri*, choreographed by Kelly Nash and danced at The Joyce by Nancy Wijohn. *Mauri* blows through the theatre like a tempest. Wearing a thick, plaited rope as a necklace—or noose—Wijohn whips circles in the air. She screams, the air crackles, and I think: This is mauri.

Footnotes

01. Jack Gray, "Introduction," in Atamira Dance Company, *Te Wheke* (Auckland: Atamira Dance Company, 2023), 1.

02. Te reo Māori is the Indigenous language of Aotearoa New Zealand.

03. Gray, "Introduction," 1.

04. A proscenium theatre has a vertical arch or frame separating the space between stage and audience.

05. Gray, "Introduction," 1.

06. Though directly translating to elder–junior relatives, tuakana–teina is a term often used to describe relationships of reciprocal exchange between more- and less-experienced individuals. Unlike Eurocentric pedagogical models, the exchange of learning is acknowledged as going both ways.

07. A trembling of the hands.

08. To stare wildly and dilate the eyes.

09. Extension of the tongue.

10. To wield weapons.

11. “Since the early 1980s, Māori who are whakawāhine, tangata ira tāne, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex or queer have increasingly adopted the identity of ‘takatāpui’ - a traditional Māori term meaning ‘intimate companion of the same sex’.” Dr Elizabeth Kerekere, “Part of the Whānau: The Emergence of Takatāpui Identity—He Whāriki Takatāpui” (doctoral thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2017), Abstract.

12. Tangaroa Paora, “He ia anō ta te Takatāpui i te Ao Māori:Takatāpui; Being of the Māori World” (master’s thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2019), 76.

13. Ibid.

14. Dr Ragimarie Rose Pere, *Te Wheke: A Celebration of Infinite Wisdom* (Gisbourne: Ako Ako Global Learning, 1991).

15. Bianca Hyslop, “Whatumanwa,” in Atamira Dance Company, *Te Wheke* (Auckland: Atamira Dance Company, 2023), 12.

16. Ibid.

17. Author’s notes from a wānanga with Tui Matapira Ransfield, June 2021.

18. Zora Neale Hurston, *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* (New York: World Tomorrow, 1928), 1.

Biographies

Atamira Dance Company is the leading creator and presenter of Māori contemporary dance theatre from Aotearoa New Zealand. The work embodies a unique artistic landscape shaped by the cultural identity of our people and their stories. As a dance collective, we offer a rich and diverse programme guided by high calibre choreographers. Our research-based practice keeps us at the forefront of cultural and technical innovation, a process of deep collaboration and genuine openness to risk-taking and experimentation. Single choreographic dance works are the heartbeat of the company, which we perform at international arts festivals across the globe. Audiences have experienced unforgettable performances by dancers driven by a strong vision. We are here to celebrate and share our Māori culture through the arts, and to grow the arts through cultural innovation. As well as single dance works, we have created a number of important large-scale performances in collaboration with other arts organisations.



Amit Noy is a choreographer and writer. He grew up as a visitor in Kailua, Hawai‘i and Te Whanganui-a-Tara to Latine and Israeli parents. In 2022, Amit received the Pina Bausch Fellowship for Dance and Choreography, and he was recently named a 2023 Springboard Awardee by Te Tumu Toi: The Arts Foundation of New Zealand. In Hebrew, ‘Amit’ means good friend.