

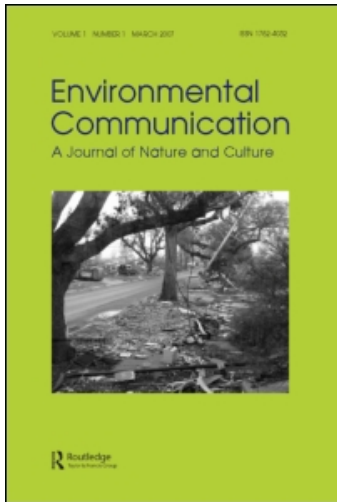
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Dancing Stories: A Community Dance Residency in a Hospice in New Zealand

Petra Koppers

Canoes forging through cold waters, mountains rising from the sea, a heart beating under a mountain lake, an albatross sailing toward the Antarctic: these were the story-images of Coastal Mappings, a large-scale community project set in and around Dunedin, New Zealand. In the Coastal Mappings performance project, people in the last months of their lives joined cancer survivors, family members and other interested people in explorations of Pakeha myths (by European-settler descendents) and Maori myths (by descendents of the crews of the first canoes, first inhabitants of New Zealand). Together, we created personal landscapes through movement, storytelling, photography and video. In this essay, I discuss some of the opportunities, challenges and experiences of leading a community dance project in an intercultural social environment, and with people whose relationship to their environment is different from mine.

Keywords: Community Performance; Hospice; New Zealand; Dance; Interconnection

In 2005, I had the honor to be the first Caroline Plummer Fellow in Community Dance at the University of Otago, New Zealand. The fellowship is open to applicants from around the world every year, definitions of “community dance” are broad, and research processes are encouraged. So I engaged in research: how to challenge myself, change my practice, find new ways of honoring people’s creativity, their connections to their land, and to each other.

During my six-month tenure, I facilitated a community dance project that centered on a Dunedin hospice, and moved out from that location into libraries, schools, beaches, parks, Maori *marae* (meeting houses) and galleries. I chose the hospice as my project location for many reasons: Caroline Plummer, the young dancer who founded the fellowship with her dance tutors, family and friend network had died at this hospice, and many remembered her well. I also wanted to challenge myself and my understanding of community arts. My first challenge was being parachuted into a

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foreign land. I usually initiate community performance projects in the communities within which I live, and Olimpias Performance Research Projects (the name we operate under) usually last at least a year, often longer, and people come together to explore, to grow, to build disability culture. I also knew I would be tested by the short (for me) six-month working process. At the hospice I could experiment with this different timeframe.

As a German woman who comes from a European dance tradition in which storytelling features strongly, I am particularly fascinated by issues of movement and storytelling, by the transmission of stories, and by the transmutations they go through as different groups find ways of connecting to the land they inhabit. I am excited by fractured storytelling: by processes that mark modernity, that are aware of the different pressures contemporary communities experience, and that question any sense of “original” stories, habitation practices or holy heritages. Many of the people I work with identify as I do, as a disabled woman, and we are aware that our form of embodiment has traditionally kept us outside of some folk practices. So while we use circle forms, rituals and other elements that link back to older art practices, we do so with a twist, not so much ironically, but with an awareness of the struggles we had to go through to come to these appropriations and citations. This awareness of the political charge that our forms of embodiment present to mainstream and folk culture nourishes Olimpias politics. In New Zealand, my focus wasn’t so much with disability activism, but with learning about other ways in which negotiation and change mark our artful collaborations.

Land Stories

A right to stories and words and an ownership of stories is by no means a given, in particular in post-colonial environments. In Coastal Mappings, we were working with different kinds of cultural contact—contact between the living and the dead, different human habitants, and the connections between non-human and human dwellers. Honoring the multiple carriers and transmitters of stories was part of our agenda. Many of the Maori myths and stories that intertwine so deeply with the places of New Zealand weren’t told to and known to the predominantly *Pakeha* (white European-heritage) hospice participants when they were children, at least not to the older ones who didn’t receive bicultural schooling. When we were creating sense memories of home places and of the stories we associated with them, many stories they shared were private and personal. This essay does not share these stories: my art practice involves the keeping of secrets, the creation of beautiful containers, vessels, embodied and artifactual, that do not give up their story, but burn with the intensity and urgency of communication.

The hospice users spoke about growing up without strong storytelling practices, quite alienated from Celtic and other storytelling traditions their Irish, Scottish and Welsh parents or ancestors grew up with. And so they made up their own stories about the land. And even though they didn’t know the full stories and legends that Maori have long told about the places these European immigrants now called home,

the private stories they did tell and worked with often involved Maori place names, and the fantasies these *Pakeha* children built around the (vaguely remembered) translations of these names: A river called “lazy lizard” in the English translation of an older Maori word led one of the participants as a child to imagine stories about lizards living in the sea—different and yet related to the *Taniwha* (water demon) stories Maoris have about the same place. We explored these echoes, bringing private stories and memories in contact with the rich story and song tradition of Maori habitation of the land. In our workshops at the hospice, we used these memories to build up a map of living in the locality, honoring the networks of habitation and home.

Photography became an important component of our work, as it allowed us to share with people outside the hospice something of what we were doing. What we shared was beautiful—but not illustrative. We held our stories close, and our hands offer up the act of telling, not the content. Together, we constructed witnessing photos: images created with a small digital camera, easily handled by participants, which captured in some form part of our experiences. In these sessions, we begun by working with regional myths and moved toward thinking about places and spaces where we’ve felt comfort, that we called home, that were important to us and acted as reservoirs of memory. Over time, we mapped parts of our life experiences onto specific landscapes, or memories of these landscapes, using movement as a way to access memory. We worked with materials I brought in response to stories told to me and places mentioned (stones, bark, wood, shells . . .), and we used small movements, gestures and caresses to respond to them and their energies. Many people had said good-bye to their favorite places, and mourned their loss. Holding a shell from a specific beach, a leaf gathered on a path described in our session, became part of the gifting and memory work we created for ourselves.

Another kind of cultural contact emerged around issues of death and life: the animation of nature, including trees and stones, had a strong impact on workshop participants as they negotiated the imminence of their own deaths. Many of the hospice participants worked with this beautiful and careful attention to the breath of life in nature, expressed in small tender gestures and movements.

Photographing Performance

In order to capture what we were doing, and to share it with the wider community, we took photos of our hands, with the camera circulating amongst us. We looked at every image together, building up further layers of impressions, stories and emotions around them. In between my weekly visits, I manipulated the images’ colors, responding to suggestions and echoing some of the content with which participants imbued the specific movement or moment captured.

When I came back with these re-colored images, we discussed these alterations, rejecting some changes and working further with others, and continued to build narrative around them, making them deep reservoirs of individuality and traces of being in the world. The photos grew, became layered with poetry and many

meanings, some of which I am allowed to share, and some of which are private. At the end of our process, many participants gave the final witnessing image to their loved ones.

Finding Images: The Heart in the Lake

The first story that began our workshops, and that returned again and again, was a Maori story about the creation of a lake in New Zealand's Southern Alps, not far from the Dunedin location of the hospice. I had been given this story by a friend before coming to New Zealand. The part of the story we focused on talks about a giant who desired a Maori princess, abducted her, but was hunted down by the woman's lover, a warrior who slew the giant and burned his body. Where his body burned away, water rushed in to form Lake Wakatipu. At the bottom of the lake, the giant's heart is still beating—and in response, the lake breathes, heaving slowly up and down.

The story had many connotations for participants: love surviving, a heart still beating after many destructive experiences, a strange biology deep inside familiar tissue. And so the heart found its way multiple times into our photographs, as did water creatures and sea life.

One of the images is called "Josephine's Un-broken Ring." She created the pose in response to the giant story, and also in order to show the ring that was broken during her chemotherapy, when her fingers swelled. Josephine saw no point in repairing the ring, and in all important ways, the ring she has worn for over 30 years is still unbroken. "The other creature"—the cancer—is how she talked about the cells taking over her life, and the final image is shaded in blues and greens to capture the *Taniwha*, the water creature, a figure that she remembered from legends and from the private stories she made up as a child. The ring area remains gold: Through color, the break in the ring is mended. To me, German tales intertwined into these blues and golds: the gold of the Nibelungen saga, and the *Taniwha* became for my internal eye part of the water creatures of the Rhine, the water of my childhood. Josephine and I talked about these different stories, their richness, and how we can find shapes for unfamiliar landscapes through the stories we tell ourselves.

Josephine's fingers form the shape of an anatomical heart, and she wanted to emphasize the motion of sheltering—a gesture she used to create the next image, in which she holds a piece of tree bark tenderly, expressing what she felt as its loneliness, and its need for tenderness.

Another patient's image is called "Harriet's Peninsula," and it responds in coloring and shape to Harriet's stories about the place she has chosen for her burial: a wind-swept old graveyard far out on the Otago Peninsula with its muted greens and yellows. When I visited her bedside, Harriet spoke about her love for this countryside, and of her many memories of walking on its beaches as a child, listening to stories and legends about natural features and local inhabitants her storyteller uncle shared with her. She also worked with the story of the giant, picking up a *Paua* shell for its textures and colors, and likening it to the heart.

Harriet not only gave me permission to talk and write about some of the things she shared with me, she also felt strongly about the digital photo's status as witness and memorial to her. Most people who worked with me participated actively in shaping their images, filling them with meanings (and all images were only released once participants found them finished and gave permission). In constructing the images and stories, the outdoors and the many natural beauties of specific locations in and around Dunedin came to life in the landscapes of our bodies, filled with energy and emotion.

The photographs share a new and unfamiliar image of the hospice, of people on the edge of life, and specifically of people with terminal cancer diagnoses, with the wider Dunedin and Otago communities. In these images, end-of-life periods and the hospice emerge as times and spaces of beauty and dignity, deeply connected with their environment.

Translation and Intimacy

Sometimes, it can be hard to translate private and intimate experiences in community arts projects outside the workshops themselves, and to connect these intensities with wider audiences. Telling these stories in publications like this one is one of the ways in which we expanded the circle of our audience.

Exploring the potential for these connections was part of my research process in Dunedin. The stories and images created in the hospice journeyed outwards, and initiated other movements: in Dance with a Difference sessions at the University of Otago Physical Education Department, people who experience pain or stiffness as well as others who were interested in issues of movement and storytelling came together. We created choreographies in responses to the small gestures, movements and images from the hospice. Many of the Dance with a Difference participants came from the local cancer societies, whom I had visited to invite members, and many knew participants in the hospice, creating strong connections across the different project elements.

Outreach Dance

The dances moved on in turn. From the over-heated rooms of the hospice to my gathering of shells on beaches, from the memories of child- and adult-hood walks in the lands surrounding us to the mythical stories of ancient heroes, from the benches outside the public library to the rarified space of the main Otago gallery—in different ways, the stories and movements generated by our project traveled across the spaces of Dunedin. In a sharing at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, the choreographies of the Dance with a Difference group, captured in a dance video (videographer Nancy Higgins), and the witnessing images and poems from the hospice provided the material for a performance installation. Members of the public (including family members and friends of people from the hospice) who visited the gallery that weekend were greeted by the haunting voices of Maori *taonga* (cultural treasures), a

putorino and a *koauau*—traditional musical instruments, played by another honored caretaker of stories and traditions. Our musician, Hone Makateha, is a cultural therapist at Moana House, a residential bicultural therapeutic community that caters for male offenders and rehabilitates through an emphasis on Maori values and *wairua* (spirituality). Music issuing from a carved albatross bone spoke of connections to the sea, and to the wide spaces of the Antarctic, beyond Dunedin (and the Otago peninsula is the only mainland nesting colonies of Royal Albatrosses).

People moving into the Gallery saw large video projections of dances, and heard poetic fragments that held keys to the stories of the witnessing images. The poem stories were not fully present: they were veiled, half-formed, open to interpretation and yet evocative. They spoke of the mutual labor involved in storytelling, the labor of speaker and witness. But the gifts we were giving audiences demanded a sharing back in response, and people found themselves becoming performers themselves.

The audience was invited into a sharing circle. Up to 30 people (in four separate performance slots, plus one longer workshop session) joined hands, some rather bewildered about being asked to dance themselves rather than watching dance. But the gentle flow of movement, images and sound that surrounded us seemed to help people to enter into public movement, and all were game. In the circle, we acknowledged that there were many absent presences: people (from the hospice, from the wider history of Maori and *Pakeha*, and also Caroline Plummer herself) who had joined and left the circle. And then we danced. We improvised together movements based each time on a different story, one of the stories that had emerged from the hospice work, and that had informed the choreographies in the DwaD sessions: the Moeraki Boulders, the Giant under Lake Wakatipu, the Taniwha in Dunedin's harbor, the creation of Aoraki/Mount Cook.

One participant writes in her comments about the strength of taking community arts work into the “mainstream” cultural spaces: “I loved the fact that you got people dancing in the gallery. I liked the fact that you took local people's stories into the main gallery, which was very powerful.” Another participant focused on the nature of the dance we engaged in: “It is about participation of ordinary people, making dancing accessible to everybody, bringing it back to storytelling, claiming dance back for everybody.”

And another comment brought out the *waka* (the canoe) as a transport mechanism, as a means to bring people together:

This visual representation, I believe, demonstrates how imagery, music, sound and movement can transport the observer on an imaginary *waka*. The project was able to bring different cultures and people together and boundaries between them were smoothly crossed. *Pakeha* women were dancing to Maori flutes and Maori words. Young Maori male musicians and singers, just out of prison in a community programme, were sharing their culture and *aroha* (roughly translated as love or respect) with Hospice clients. A diverse Dunedin community has had a wonderful opportunity to share their experiences and creativity together through the Coastal Mappings project.

The Coastal Mappings project had many more components, many dance workshops in small local public libraries, where we discussed alternative, embodied modes of storytelling, and moved amongst books, sessions at the main Dunedin Public Library, where we set up Story/Movement exchanges, where people received a dance movement in exchange for a story, and where these movements and stories were collected in dances that snaked in and out of the levels of the library and into the surrounding shopping area. One other component was particularly powerful to me, the German foreigner: I was invited to run one of my dance/storytelling workshops at a four-day Moana House Hui at the Otaku Marae, with 50 participants who created dance improvisations, each with a *mehi* (formal introduction), a *karakia* (form of prayer) and a *waiata* (a song).

The final Coastal Mappings sharing took place at the hospice. There, we had a hand-over ceremony, gifting copies of the witnessing images to the hospice, and we showed the dance video we created out of the stories from hospice participants. A beautiful performance framed these events: Hone Makatea had brought his men from Moana House to the hospice. They sang *waiata* (songs) for us, and shared themselves with the people in the hospice who were moved, and deeply appreciative. Powerful songs echoing through the corridor of the hospice and beyond, up the mountains and down the stream closed the circle of our project, reminding us of our shared connections to the land.

Note

Shorter versions of the material in this article have been shared in various ways: as part of an article on community arts on the Community Arts Network, in a report on dance for *Animated*, the UK community dance publication, and, interspersed with exercises and how-to ideas, in my community performance toolbox, *Community Performance: An Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007.