

Of Water and Spirit: Locating Dance Epistemologies in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Senegal

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Abstract

Using memoirs of dance, land, and music, this paper is an ethnographic investigation into two diverse dance cultures and identifies the cultural knowledge that is embodied in movement. This dance ethnography examines contemporary expressions of Maori dance as done by the Atamira Dance Collective in Auckland, Aotearoa/NZ; in addition, Wolof *sabar* dancer Tacko Sissoko, a dancer/teacher extraordinaire in Dakar, Senegal is also considered. The portraits provide a window into the epistemologies embedded and disseminated within the unique movement literacies. Using decolonizing theory and practice as well as auto-ethnographical experiences of dancing with these communities, I explore the links between dance, water, music and identity. The research and analysis reflects my striving to highlight the intersections between the fields of Anthropology, Indigenous Studies, Dance Studies, and African Studies.

KEYWORDS: dance anthropology, ethnography, epistemology, dance practice, cultural knowledge

Introduction

Speaking about a Maori performance approach, Te Ahuharamū Charles Royal (2010) borrowed the idea from Bert Van Dijk and stated that dance is about ‘becoming sensorily alive in the moment’. Called the language of the soul by the late Ugandan oral historian Moses Sserwada (2002), dance is an expression of identity and the human spirit made visible. Using memoirs of dance, land, and music, this paper is an ethnographic investigation into two diverse dance cultures and identifies the cultural knowledge that is embodied in movement. This dance ethnography examines contemporary expressions of Maori dance as done by the Atamira Dance Collective in Auckland, Aotearoa/NZ; in addition, Wolof *sabar* dancer Tacko Sissoko, a dancer/teacher extraordinaire in Dakar, Senegal is also considered. The portraits provide a window into the epistemologies embedded and disseminated within the unique movement literacies. Using decolonizing theory/practice and auto ethnographical experiences of dancing with these communities, I explore the links between dance, water, music and identity. The research and analysis strives to highlight

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the intersections between the fields of Anthropology, Indigenous Studies, Dance Studies, and African Studies.

Understanding the nature of dance knowledge is about ‘clarifying the concept of bodily knowledge-knowing in and through the body’ (Parvianen 2002: 11). Other scholars addressing the epistemological questions of dance say that the answers to this investigation are implicated in an examination of movement practice, the creative process, and choreographic production (Pakes 2003; Risner 2000). Dance research challenges existing notions of the ‘conditions of knowledge’ (Scheffler 1965). Making sense of the worlds dancers encounter is complicated, because dance is a multisensory practice. Describing the sensuous experience is relevant to dance interpretation, and involves a synthesis of the ‘interdisciplinarity of the senses’.

Borrowing from sensuous anthropologists of the senses such as Paul Stoller, David Howes and Nadia Seremtakis, van Ede (2009) states we need to reevaluate the importance of the senses for situating more critical research positions. Using sensual awareness for perceiving our research should move us beyond participation-observation that tends to be ocularcentric. The dance studies featured in this paper focus on kinaesthetic sensibilities embedded in other sensibilities such as hearing, remembering, empathy, and feeling. The felt dimension of a movement experience is shown to be linked to spiritual, environmental and music sensibilities. The dance portraits pay close attention to indigenous perspectives on the nature of dance knowledge from Aotearoa/New Zealand (South Pacific) to Senegal (West Africa).

Dance epistemologies and decolonizing our notions of dance

The question of dance epistemology is relevant to dance ethnography since the primary concern of the method is to conceptualize dance as cultural knowledge. The following questions emerge from a literature review on this topic: What is dance knowledge? How do individuals and communities perceive dance? What does teaching and learning dance tell us about dance knowledge? How does ‘dance knowing’ challenge existing academic research traditions?

Parvianen (2002) explores the nature of dance knowledge by identifying the contrasts and correlations it has with classical Western epistemology models and feminist theories. She states that traditional (Western) epistemology focuses on epistemic justification and the feminist paradigm considers the way subjectivity, ethical and political agendas factor into the construction of knowledge. Dance is not just the acquisition of bodily skills, but ‘knowledge is gained through the constant practicing of dance’ (Parvianen 2002: 21). Using scholars such as Maxine Sheet Jones, Sondra Fraleigh, Edmund Husserl, Michael Polanyi and Michael O’Donovan Anderson, Parvianen discusses different standpoints relevant to dance knowledge, stating:

Nevertheless, epistemology of dance is neither a specification of a dancer’s way of knowing nor simply the articulation of dancing subjectivity. The epistemology of dance consists rather in attention to epistemological concerns about the nature of dance knowledge and our means of attaining and communicating it (2002: 23).

The complexities of the dance epistemology raised by Parvianen are implicated in our approaches to dance research; particularly to choices in theoretical framework, and interpretation. As Chatterjea (2010) reminds us, dance is often journeys of being and becoming that are implicated in a historical, discursive and cultural processes.

Risner (2000) writes about the epistemology of the choreographic process in a university dance education context in the United States. He uses a narrative research methodology to examine dancers' experience of rehearsals. The following questions were posed: what is your experience of dance; and how do you learn choreography? Significant themes arising from the students' voices were interpersonal relationships, learning by doing, body memory and music. He argues that listening to students' voices is important in gaining artistic and pedagogical insights that counter singular, universal explanations of dance knowledge; Risner encourages inquiry into more pluralistic understandings of dance.

Pakes (2003) examines how universities in the UK context have started to consider artistic practices of dance as a form of research and how this has raised complicated epistemological contradictions. Using aesthetic and educational philosophy theory, she discusses the challenges that face doctoral research that includes an artistic/dance practice. Pakes points out that practice-based research 'stands up against the fixed set of paradigms in traditional research' (Picinni in Pakes 2003: 129). She concludes by saying creative and artistic endeavours as academic output gives us a 'valuable opportunity to reflect on principles underwriting higher level of study' (Pakes 2003: 144). This involves a rethinking of our definitions of knowledge and scholarship.

The above research all indicate that conceiving dance as knowledge is a direct challenge to Eurocentric, Western epistemic assumptions that champion empirical, proof-based, objective knowledge. While Parvianen, Risner and Pakes' research is still grounded in Western ideologies and contexts, they do show that definitions of epistemology are in a state of flux, constantly being contested and shifting. The scholars show that the epistemology of dance is relevant to our research processes and teaching, and has in fact led to a complicated paradigm shift in academic conventions. Most importantly, the research indicates that there are new clarifications of dance knowledge underway.

However, there is a colonizing vein in this discourse. Perhaps it is an issue of semantics, but it seems important to signal that there is no one epistemology of dance. Instead, we have dance epistemologies, that are culturally, individually, and environmentally specific. Risner (2000) warns of universal dance explanations; and this issue needs to be emphasized. Critical and indigenous approaches to research, for example, assume the nature of knowledge to be diverse and produced by multiple epistemologies (Denzin, Lincoln & Tuhiwai Smith 2008). The master narratives of the West can often preoccupy our thinking and research practices. Decolonizing our thinking involves considering the narratives that originate from indigenous concepts and understanding (Bargh 2007; Hau'ofa 2008; Henderson 2004). Decolonizing our dance epistemologies recovers stories and practices that link us to people, our own spiritualities, and to the landscapes we live and travel through. This process should engage us in multicultural conversations that help us to the unique experiences of dance.

What this research area would benefit from is more qualitative research for grounding our notions of dance knowledge in the real world, not just through theoretical abstraction; notions of dance from diverse cultural perspectives are vital to comprehending the intercultural complexities of dance. The studies featured in the paper explore dance epistemologies grounded in indigenous perspectives and a decolonizing politics. The dance portraits describe a journey into a cultural and spiritual worldview. They are stories of sharing space, enlivening hope, family, community and a collective memory.

Methodology: exploring multisensory sensibilities through dance ethnography

The dance ethnography, a methodology of dance anthropology was employed for the studies featured in this paper. Seminal dance anthropologist, Katherine Dunham (1947; 2005) emphasised that understanding how a given community perceives their dance is of the most importance. She also argued that to learn the dance well provides more license and literacy for investigating the social and religious life. Gertrude Kurath, another pioneer, stated that it is about ‘eliciting the places of dance in human life (1960: 250). Sklar (1991) states this method is a distinctive approach to ethnography, because it involved looking at the body’s experiences as opposed to just texts, cultural objects or abstractions (Forsh 1999; Martin 1995; Ness 2004). What I want to highlight is that dance ethnography assumes dance to be an embodiment of cultural knowledge and values experiential knowledge, and the learning and performing of movement techniques and vocabulary. Hence, this research in particular investigates the dance epistemologies located and understood through practice.

The multisensory practice of dance can be difficult to explain; it can entail moving between modes of thinking and being. In these studies, I strive to analyze somatic knowledge constructed by movement literacies and qualities. The quality of movement is dependent upon the alignment of body and mind; ‘if the mind is the wind, and the body is the sand, you look to the sand to see how the wind is blowing’ (Bainbridge Cohen 1995: 1). In other words, bodily expression is a mirror of mental and spiritual states of being. Adding to this, I would say the anatomy of movement is also determined by the cultural context, the landscape/urbanscape, the social psychology of a place, personality of a dance and music (if relevant to the culture). Dance is a complicated mixing of the aesthetics and can induce particular creative physic spaces that are experienced on cognitive, embodied, and heartfelt levels. As Amkpa (2010) has stated, dance performance and practice can take you into another temporal space. My own dance practice has been essential to archiving, and synthesizing the dance knowledge produced in the research settings.

Data collection occurred through the weaving of information obtained through participant observation, formal and informal interviews, personal dance study, field notes, video recordings, photography and archival research. The Aotearoa/New Zealand research is ongoing and began in October 2008. The analysis of this paper focuses on Atamira’s Dance Collective’s February 2009 rehearsal season; for two weeks, I observed and participated in some of their choreographic practices. I also participated in most of the company classes. Over the last two years, I have also attended multiple dance concerts that showcase

the companies' work, and conducted interviews and informal conversations with selected company members. I have also collaborated and participated in a variety of other dance related workshops that involve Atamira members.

The *sabar* dance research is also ongoing and commenced in January 2009. The analysis of this paper focuses on first fieldwork phase in Dakar, Senegal that took place December 2009–February 2010. At this time, I engaged personal dance study through private dance classes, and attended family parties where dance is a central activity. I also had an informal conversation with Tacko Sissoko, my primary teacher and her brother Kissima Diabete, a respected musician; other dance experts in Dakar were also interviewed.

The two dance portraits are paralleled to exemplify diverse somatic practices with distinct sensuous nuances. Through an exploration of different somatic paradigms, dance epistemologies are conceptualized. The memoirs challenge Eurocentric dance constructs and depict very different somatic approaches to dance. The studies seek to locate intercultural insights of dance epistemology by describing the sensibilities, and qualities embedded in the movement vocabulary. Cultural context, social relationships, and the sources of creative inspiration are considered.

Maori Contemporary Dance Theater (Aotearoa): Choreographing Whakapapa in Aotearoa

The Atamira Dance Collective is a Maori Contemporary Dance Theatre, based in Auckland, New Zealand. The company was established in 2000. Their mission statement reads,

We are passionate about sharing our stories, and asserting the unique and important voice Maori have in New Zealand. We create dance work that reflects these values, and contributes to the collective voice of contemporary Maori art. Founded in 2000 as a platform for Maori choreographers and dancers, Atamira is a project-based contemporary dance company. Atamira strives for innovation and experimentation in contemporary dance and choreography, whilst respecting our cultural heritage. We actively incorporate other art forms into our choreographic work, and collaborate with many artists on all of our dance projects. The literal meaning of the word *Atamira* is 'stage', a deeper meaning behind *Atamira* relates traditionally to the platform for the dead body, and the process of caring for those who have died (Atamira Dance Collective 2010).

This study focuses on the company's creative process in the development of the dance work *Taonga: Dust, Water, Wind*, a dance set in the 1936, choreographed Louise Potiki Bryant, which premiered in the 2009 Auckland Festival. Company dancers included in this performance were Jack Gray, Dolina Wehipeihana, Nancy Wijohn, Taiaroa Royal, Moss Patterson, Pare Randell, and Bianca Hyslop. This piece is based on the childhood memoirs of Bryant's Auntie Rona Williamson that also includes the story of landscape, the South Island's beloved Kaka Point, a place located along the Southern Pacific Ocean and bush-clad hills.

The performance also included a contribution from Paddy Free, a well-known Aotearoan electronic music composer, and live music provided by the renowned ethnomu-

sicologist Richard Nunn, an expert in *taonga puoro* (Maori traditional instruments). Potiki Bryant's collaboration with Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal (the director of Orotokare: Art, Story and Motion Trust, based in Wellington) also informed *Taonga*. For several years, Potiki Bryant and Royal have been working to revitalize the *whare tapare*, ancient Maori traditions in order to access knowledge and inspiration for evolving Maori performing arts. In particular, they have developed an approach based on the qualities of *Hineruhi* and *Taneroa*, 'mythical paragons of dance' (Royal 2010). Potiki Bryant teaches workshops called 'Maori Contemporary Dance' all over the country, based on *Hineruhi* and *Taneroa*; the company also includes these techniques into their training.

Atamira's premiere rehearsal season for *Taonga* took place in Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand at the UNITEC tertiary performing arts school, in a large, square-shaped and spacious studio with natural light beaming in through the windows located at the top of the wall directly opposite to the main entrance. Most of the members of the dance company graduated from this dance school. In February 2009, I spent two weeks witnessing their creative process and participating in some of the exercises. I also had informal discussions with the dancers about their journeys toward becoming dancers and how they perceive the work of their company. The typical day started at 9:30 in the morning and finished around 5:00 in the evening. Every day started with a company dance class.

On Mondays, they did ballet with Elizabeth Kurt; contemporary dance was on Tuesdays with Taane Mete, Maori contemporary dance was on Wednesdays with Louise Potiki Bryant, and on Thursdays and Fridays Daniel Cooper, the rehearsal director taught contemporary dance. Following the morning class, there would be a short morning tea break outside near the puriri tree, and then they would go into choreographic study. Dancers often worked independently and with partners. Potiki Bryant was often quiet and focused on observing the dancers. She stated she favoured more process-oriented approaches to developing choreography.

For example, she and Richard Nunn facilitated an exercise with gourds, which was material developed for the performance. We sat in a circle on the floor with Nunn. As he said 'the gourd is a holder of water', of sacred *karakia*/prayer and associated with the sun and moon, she handed a gourd to each of us. Not an Aotearoa native, the gourd is from South America and Africa but significant to *taonga puoro*. He introduced us to the different ways of making sound with the gourd. 'With breath and touch' he said. If you place your mouth on the hole and hug your lips and breath into to the gourd in a certain way a whispery flute sound is made. Your whole body had to be engaged to get this sound and the breath had to come from a deep inhalation. You can also make sound by touching the gourd with your fingertips and tapping it against your body.

Potiki Bryant said to the dancers, I want to you create choreography inspired by the shape and texture. 'Take some time to study the gourd', she stated. The dancers went away and worked independently. They spent about 20 to 30 minutes working with the gourd and creating phrases. Maintaining contact with the gourd, they produced unique ocean wave movement qualities, with lots of over curves and under curves. The dancers floated, rippled, angulated as a sudden strong tide, became still and then moved across the

space. While they worked, Nunn reminded them to ‘be careful with the gourd’. Their arms stretched, backs lengthened on the floor, turning onto their sides, hands pressed into the floor, they rose to their knees and sometimes all the way up to standing. They blew into the gourd, tapped it with their fingers, against their thighs, balanced it on bellies, scratched it with their nails and held it up to the ears to listen to the *karakia* inside. They treated the gourd as an instrument. The taps and whistles became music of the choreography; and the gourd an extension of their own bodies.

When they finished developing their gourd dance, Potiki Bryant video-recorded each dancer’s work. The next day, they revisited the work. They viewed the video, reviewed their movement and then taught one another their movement phrases. They collected all their gourd dance work and developed a unison phrase. Inspired by the memoirs of Rona Williamson, the company created this movement to recount the stories she shared with Potiki Bryant. In the concert program was written, ‘One bright moonlit night, Rona was sent to fetch water from the stream with her gourd.[...] I used to like getting the kelp with Mum. I’d cut the kelp with her, or she’d be cutting it and I’d be there helping her take it ashore. Or if we cut it on the beach, I’d help her carry it home’. Potiki Bryant dedicated *Taonga* to her aunty Rona.

She described the choreography as three dance poems about the magical joy of childhood, and cultural adaption and change. The dance work conceptualizes the cycles of the moon into the dance story. *Whakamaitai*, the controller of the tides, is seen as a participating element in the family story. Moonlit spreading itself across the water and land, the smell of the sea, the sound of the stream, and walks under the infinite opium blue sky all part of the *whakapapa*. The dance is a memoriam of the genealogy. *Whaka* means to become, to create and *papa* means rock, mother earth,¹ the dance synthesizes the memories of landscape with precious family memories. Atamira’s work chronicles the way in which the past is always present. *Taonga* is symbolic of a collective memory and displays what Marsden (2003) called ‘the woven universe’. As Moss Patterson (2009) stated, ‘even though this dance is directly related to Lou’s genealogy, it is a window into the Maori past, present, and future story. I am curious how Lou will make this relevant to who we are today’. *Taonga* is a dance about reliving the *whakapapa*.

Atamira often took breaks from the *Taonga* focus and engaged in lighter, playful dance assignments. These intermissions were used for relaxing and having fun. They also were about tuning into elements of natural environment; and embodying the unseen energies, *wheiao* in the space. This work explored dance elements such as movement quality and focus.

In one exercise, Potiki Bryant asked us to work with the qualities of *Taneroa*, which are embodied and demonstrated through ‘the rising of heat, and energy going through the body’ (Royal 2010); and it is personified through the trembling of the hands and energy coming through the legs and out of the head (Royal 2009). Working with the quality of *Taneroa* felt like an eclipse of opposites, this movement felt explosive and restrained.

¹ From Potiki Bryant’s dance work *Ngai Tahu* 32. Spoken word text.

In a partner exercise, I worked with Tai Royal and we created a short duet exploring *Taneroa* qualities that we informally performed for the company. Working with no music, we followed our movement stream of consciousness. Royal suggested we begin with a fiery big jump. Facing each other, our arms impulsively reach above our head and at the top of the jump we vocalized a guttural sound, ‘Hah’! Our voices vibrated and sounded like a sudden release of hot steam. As if there was an invisible energy restricting our body, we tensely kicked out our right leg and balanced. We rolled to the floor, one knee bent and the other leg extended, parallel to our shoulders, hands and feet pushing into the floor, simultaneously slid the extended foot back, a *pas de cheval*, and undulated from the crown of the head down through the neck, shoulders, and torso. Then we kicked over the long leg over to the other side of the body and spiraled up to standing. We make our way to a wide second position stance, knees bent, we forcefully slapped our thighs. Consciously trying to control the momentum, we did a *chaines*’ (a turn) and stopped, and another and stopped. Maintaining a wide legged position, looking down to the ground, our hands begin to tremble, *wiri*.

The short co-constructed dances we all developed were good-humoured and a recharge to the creative spirit. Based on the *Taneroa* exercise and the gourd choreographic development, one can see that improvisation and individual dancers’ creative contribution is an important part of the *Atamira* choreographic process and production. As Dolina Wehipeihana (2009) has said, collaboration between the dancers is important, and we value a cooperative exploration of ideas.

Sabar Dance: Embodying Music in Senegal

Tacko Demba Sissoko is a former member of the National Ballet of Senegal. She joined the company in 1974 and travelled all over the world as a principal dancer. She is a very well-known dancer and dance teacher, based in Dakar, Senegal. In the 1990s, she formed a company and school with family members called ‘La Compagnie Sirandou’.

This study focuses on my experiences of learning *sabar* with Madame Sissoko. She was born in Senegal, but her family originally comes from Mali. She is a Bambara woman and griot (*jaliya* or *jali* in the Malinke language). This is someone who serves society as an oral historian, musician, dancer, storyteller, and/or singer. She is a known master dancer of *sabar*, traditionally a dance for woman, but everyone likes to dance it; the dance is an integral part of Wolof culture and popular Senegalese social life (Castaldi 2004; Tang 2007). *Sabar* is a dance that embodies celebration, fun and mischief; and a central activity for many social contexts such as neighbourhood dances, women’s association meetings, weddings, baptisms, Muslim holidays, political meetings, and wrestling matches (Tang 2007). Women organize *sabar* events and they hire drummers to play the standard rhythms such as *Kaolack*, *Baar Mbaye*, and *Ceebu Jen*. When the drummers arrive, the crowd form a circular spatial formation and – once the drummers warm-up and the sound is good – people dance mostly one by one. The drums vary in height, size and shape and are made out of a trunk of a *dimb* wood, mahogany tree (from the Casamance region) and goat skin, and held together with pegs. The names of the four main drums are

the *nder*, *chol*, *mbëng mbëng*, *lamb*, and *tungune*. A proficient *sabar* dancer is someone familiar the rhythmic parts played by these drums. For my dance classes with Sissoko, she employed her relatives: Khalia Ababacar Toure, Moussa Ndao, Kissima Drame to play the rhythms.

Tacko Sissoko called her home 'la maison des artistes' (the house of artistes). The Sissoko family is of the *griots*, the *jali* caste and their home is a well-known cultural centre for international visitors interested in learning the drum and dance traditions of *djembe* and *sabar*. Several members of the family live abroad in places like the United States, Switzerland, Holland and Japan, and they often return with students from other countries who are interested in learning Senegalese music and dance. The same week I began classes with Sissoko, her well-known musician brother Kissima Diabete, who is also a former member of the National Ballet of Senegal, living most of the year in New York, came home for a long visit.

Sissoko lives in one of Dakar's most hustling and bustling suburbs. The streets are full of people, informal vendors and markets, and congested with automobiles. There is a mosque located in the heart of the neighbourhood; during the calls to prayer, Sissoko would call short breaks from the music and dancing. A part of the sub-Saharan desert, Dakar is sandy. Dispersed around the savannah landscape and Atlantic coast there are few kapok, baobab, and acacia trees.

The Sissoko school and home are connected to a massive block of concrete of other three story apartment homes. When you walk through the door, there is a compound area where the cooking takes place. There were also two bedrooms to the right and another two to the left. On this floor there is also TV and family room. Upstairs on the second floor were more bedrooms and the designated dance space: square, with a white tile floor; we danced near the balcony, where you can see other homes and a view of the horizon. I had private lessons with Sissoko in the late afternoon and often as we finished, a sunset of orange, fluorescent pink sunset spread across the sky.

When I arrived for the first class, Sissoko welcomed me to go upstairs to change my clothes. I did and starting warming up. She came up about ten minutes later. She started to warm-up and I followed her. Small children would frequently come up, grab Sissoko's leg for a cuddle and often dance with us. When we finished the warm-up, she said, 'OK, we do *kaolack*'; she started dancing and I followed. A well-known *sabar* dance, *Kaolack* (also known as *mbalax and ndec*) is the name of the rhythm and dance from the Wolof people, who live in the *kaolack* region of Senegal, not far from the Atlantic coast. Based on oral histories, *kaolack* is said to be the birthplace of *sabar*. Sissoko said, 'there are old and new *kaolack* movement; all dance changes, but the music stays the same'. The percussion rhythms go back many generations and are linked to family genealogies (Tang 2007). The dance is very popular and commonly played for ceremonies such as weddings.

In the private dance classes with Sissoko, we started the first 30 minutes without music. We reviewed the choreography, and she would give me feedback through mostly demonstrations. She would show me what I was doing wrong and say 'that's too hard'. In other words, I needed to work on the movement quality. Sometimes I would execute

a particular action wrong, and for example, she said, *sabar* is not flat footed, it's a dance on a slight *releve*. In one class I would repeat the *kaolack* choreography about four and to five times and then she called the drummers in; they all were relatives of Sissoko. After the music got going, family members would often gather around and watch. Sometimes chatting among amongst themselves; they would chill out, and look entertained and smile. They often got excited by the music and even sometimes stood up to dance. Sissoko and others would sometimes yell out, 'waw waw' (yes, yes) an affirmation that the music and/or the dance is good.

Once the *kaolack* choreography became familiar, learning the dance on the next level was about precisely matching the steps with the rhythmic timing of the *sabar* percussion. In particular, the footwork has to match the rhythm. Toure stated, 'Kaolack is the richest rhythm of all *sabar*... *kaolack* makes the people dance... all musicians must play *kaolack*' (in Tang 2007: 109). The virtuosity of the polyrhythmic *sabar* percussion is captivating. It is characterized by sharp, slap like, and high pitch sounds. The steady beat is played by the drum sticks that make clicking sounds. The *sabar* rhythms have quite short patterns but are played at a very fast tempo. While there is a clear beat, this is not always externally obvious to those outside the culture. The lead drummer is responsible for soloing, improvising and inspiring the dancer (Tang 2007).

Learning the *sabar* dance is about learning *bakks* or musical phrases and footwork that synchronizes with the beats. In class, I danced facing the drummers, they all looked directly at me, and my eyes focused on the lead drummer, who played the drum breaks that signalled the changes in the choreography. This dance is polyrhythmic, as is the music. The torso lifts tall and the right arm is often predominant and fully extended; it swings down and up- back behind and over the head. This action is initiated by the hips and feet that mark the steady beat of the rhythm. The knees have to stay bent, soft, released and alert for pressing off the floor for a jump or to gain momentum to make a full turn. The knees lift high and turn out quickly. There are lots of nuanced *pliés* and *développés*. The movement is performed at a very fast tempo.

During my private lessons with Sissoko, I made classic mistakes, because I did not feel or understand the rhythm. She would say, 'You are moving too fast'. She pointed to the second drum, the *mbëng mbëng*, which plays the accompaniment and a steady beat. I continued to make this mistake, and frequently, she would stop me and say 'Too fast'. Sometimes I would think I was in perfect time and Sissoko would shake her head. 'Hold on to the second drum', Kissima once said to me. After about the fourth or fifth lesson, the rhythm of *kaolack* began to sink in, I could feel that I was embodying it. I still made mistakes but my confidence and feel for the music had improved. Sissoko noticed this, too, and told the drummers to pick up the tempo. She said, 'Now that you have the steps, take it up-more power'. She was encouraging me to personalize the movement, be more expressive and playful. Likewise, others dance experts in Dakar I have worked with advised me to put a feminine, sassy flare into my dancing; and let the magic of the music guide the movement (Gueye 2010; Tamba 2010).

Research implications and conclusion

In these studies, dance epistemology is discerned through the act of moving and a sensory intelligence. In both of the dance cultures studied, the aesthetics and qualities of touch, listening and feeling were imperative to the sensory orientation of the dance realities and evolving practices. Exploring dance epistemology through practice enriches our understandings with embodied knowledge. Entering a dance world requires that the soma is receptive and vulnerable. Retrieving dance knowledge requires an open heart and digesting a collage of sensory experiences.

In terms of the dance ethnography implications, the process of ‘doing’ the dance epistemologies interrupts at least some of patterns of cultural empiricism and selective perception that reflect research biases. Dance immersion can inform our portrayals of other social worlds with sensuous memoirs of embodiment that enable abstracting theory from movement practice. This is important for enhancing the ethnographic text with more vivid, accessible, honest descriptions of human life (Stoller, 1989). Dance ethnography should chronicle the journeys that dance can set in motion. Dancing into the research has enriched my life with cross cultural movement literacies for being in my body, and has granted me spiritual, intellectual and creative capital.

In the Atamira Dance Collective portrait, I found dance knowledge to be cultivated from a creative process grounded in exploring Maori *whakapapa*. In the Tacko Sissoko and *sabar* dance, I found dance knowledge to be linked to expressions of femininity and ancient Senegalese music repertoires. In both contexts, dance epistemologies are tied to family traditions and stories; the studies provide indigenous viewpoints for advancing the discourses and practices of dance epistemologies and creativities. Arts such as dance in postcolonial contexts are significant to cultural survival says wa Thiongo (1993). Dance is a product of a people’s history; it is a carrier of aesthetic and ethical principles. In these studies, dance signals an expression of cultural vitality important to keeping genealogy alive.

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POVZETEK

Pričujoči članek predstavlja etnografsko analizo dveh različnih plesnih kultur prek uporabe spominov plesa, zemlje in glasbe, na način, da opredeljuje kulturno znanje, ki je vpisano v gibanje. S plesno etnografijo avtorica proučuje sodobne izraze maorskega plesa, ki ga izvaja Atamira Dance Collective iz Aucklanda na Novi Zelandiji, poleg tega pa pod drobnogled vzame tudi Wolof sabar plesalko Tacko Sissoko, učiteljico plesa iz Dakarja v Senegalu. Ti portreti ji priskrbijo vpogled v epistemologije, ki so vgrajene v specifično gibanje in prek njega tudi razširjane. Z uporabo dekolonizacijskih teorij in praks ter avto-etnografske izkušnje plesanja v teh skupnostih, avtorica razišče povezave med plesom, vodo, glasbo in identiteto. Ta raziskava odraža avtoričina prizadevanja, da bi vzpostavila presečišča med področji antropologije, študijami staroselcev, študij plesa in afriških študij.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: antropologija plesa, etnografija, epistemologija, plesne prakse, kulturna znanja

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