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Racism and “Inclusivity”

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*“How do you experience racism in your own country, and community, and in the Dance community?
Can you shine a light?”*

Racism in Aotearoa New Zealand is a painful and polarising issue, and deeply entwined with the story of settlement and race-relations between Māori, the indigenous (first nations) people of these islands, and Pākehā (a Māori word for non- Māori people used by Māori to denote “everyone else”, referring to European people, specifically). Before one can speak about the experience of racism, one must understand the past.

Over hundreds of years the Māori population developed prosperous and sophisticated tribal societies. And then came European explorers and British settlers. These newcomers brought muskets, disease, and the insatiable demand for arable land. Starting in 1835, Māori land ownership was taken away through a combination of private and Government purchases, outright confiscation, and Native Land Court practices. The cumulative effect was that Māori owned land now only accounts for 4.8% of New Zealand's total land area¹. Meanwhile the population of Māori fell from 80,000 in 1840 to 42,000 within 50 years¹. However, during the 20th century, it has grown to 600,000 and now comprises 16.5% of the 5 million total NZ population². These losses and other impacts brought by colonisation occurred against a backdrop of a treaty, known as the Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 between the British Crown and Tribal Chiefs, that promised protection and sovereignty for Māori.

Being a cultural minority, subjected to systematic assimilation policies for over 150 years and a constant betrayal of the Treaty, Māori have suffered economically, spiritually, culturally, and physically. While not enslaved or confined to reservations, the fortunes of Māori have been hampered by limited and inequitable access to resources, education, housing, health services and status (including professional employment).

An uprising of Māori identity and cultural resurgence has built momentum since the 1960's. More recently, a special court was established to assess tribal claims under the Treaty of Waitangi and successive Governments have made restitution with Tribal groups through the return of land or substantial financial payments. However, the pain and inequity of colonisation continues, and Māori are forever on-guard against Pākehā self-interest with an ongoing need for political and social action to advance the rights and cause of Māori sovereignty and empowerment.

It is against this background that we speak about racism in Aotearoa New Zealand. As a 4th generation male “Kiwi” of European decent, I do not myself experience what Māori tell me are daily “micro aggressions” and expressions of everyday racism. I do not doubt they occur. From the police pulling a vehicle over for no other reason than it is being driven by a person reasonably assumed to be Māori (a person of colour), youths being stopped and questioned by police on the same basis of suspicion, prosecutions and court sentences more likely to be taken against defendants of Māori decent (50% of the prison population is Māori, while only 16% of the national population is Māori)³, teachers responding more critically toward a Māori student’s misbehaviour, the Social Services department failing to advise Māori clients of all their rights or entitlements, Māori babies and children more likely to be removed from homes where adults have addiction or domestic violence issues, doctors less likely to prescribe medications to Māori clients due to the perception that they will fail to adhere to dosage regimens, and Māori parents instructing their kids to keep their hands in their pockets when in shops ... the list is long.

The New Zealand Dances of Universal Peace (DUP) community consists of predominantly white, European folk. People of Māori descent and reflections of the broader spectrum of diversity that constitutes today’s population of Aotearoa are rarely seen in our circles. This may suggest the spirituality of DUP reflects a European interest in global spirituality while many Māori relate more to an earth- and place-based, grounded spiritual connection rooted in a unique cultural identity.

As a dance leader, I grapple with concerns about cultural appropriation when offering sacred mantras and dances that are not of my own Christian/European background. More so, when Māori dances are the topic. Māori have had so much “taken” from them, including their language (3.7% of New Zealand total population can speak Māori)⁴. For a non-Māori to lead a Māori-inspired dance risks cultural appropriation and inadvertently derogating Māori language and spiritual concepts that cannot be fully understood or appreciated by non-Māori. This concern haunts me in regard to other sacred traditions within DUP also, but knowing the harm Māori have suffered due to cultural appropriation and how much Māori have lost to non-Māori, it seems more pressing and distressing to me. The leading of mantras and dances from sacred traditions other to one’s own is a big topic and one I will continue to grapple with.

That said, Māori dances have been created for the dance community and their gifting to the community has been blessed and sanctioned by Māori elders. In doing this, the DUP community has been invited to bring them to our dance circles, and many dancers experience them as powerful medicine. In the spirit of our reflection for those of us who dwell in the privilege of being born “white”, I wish to suggest that non-Māori dance leaders need to take great care to hold these dances with humility (as guardians, “kaitiaki” is the Māori term for this), out of respect for Māori Rangatiratanga (self-determination) and Mana Kotahitanga (partnership).

1. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/104100739/treaty-of-waitangi-what-was-lost>
2. <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/2018-census-totals-by-topic-national-highlights-updated>
3. <https://interactives.stuff.co.nz/2018/05/prisons/crime.html#/>
4. [http://socialreport.msd.govt.nz/cultural-identity/maori-language-speakers.html#:~:text=Of%20the%20148%2C400%20people%20\(or,84.5%20percent%20identified%20as%20M%4%81ori.](http://socialreport.msd.govt.nz/cultural-identity/maori-language-speakers.html#:~:text=Of%20the%20148%2C400%20people%20(or,84.5%20percent%20identified%20as%20M%4%81ori.)