



AUDACIOUS DANCING: GROWING PASIFIKA LEADERS FOR SOUTH AUCKLAND THROUGH THE PERFORMING ARTS

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Michelle Johansson is a Tongan mother, educator, theatre-maker, and former high school dropout. She serves as Kaitiaki|CEO at [Ako Mātātupu: Teach First NZ](#), growing exceptional people to teach in low-decile schools. She is Kaiwhakahaere at [Māia Centre for Social Justice and Education](#); and the Creative Director of the Black Friars Theatre Company. South Auckland, decile one born and bred, Michelle is committed to re-storying Pasifika in the largest Polynesian city in the world, to activating heritage literacies, and to holding courageous spaces for Pasifika young people to walk tall in both of their worlds.

Abstract: Audacious Dancing is an evolving framework for critically considering indigenous Pasifika art-making, legacy-leaving, education, service and leadership through the lens of social justice. Located at the juncture of the performing arts and education for young Pasifika leaders in South Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, and drawing on indigenous scholarship in the performing arts, Audacious Dancing offers a way to consider what it means to be a 'creative native', learning and leading across generations, cultures and artforms. The four strands - courageous space, indigenous excellence, critical hope and powerful action - weave intergenerational indigenous knowledges with what it means to be growing up Pasifika in the largest Polynesian city in the world.

Keywords: Pasifika; theatre; education; South Auckland, *Southside Rise*

Rotuman scholar, theatre-maker, and dancer, Vilsoni Hereniko, has described his research as a map “to tell other Pacific Islanders interested in travelling the same road to take comfort in the knowledge that one of them has been on it before, and has left a map that they can use, modify, or discard as they choose” (Hereniko, 1995, p.11). Hereniko is well-known for his argument for the power of Indigenous knowledge, and for challenging imperialistic history-keeping that insists on a single version of truth. He draws on his own encounters, his father’s stories, his cultural understandings of ritual, dance and drama, and his experience in learning Western histories to problematise insider-outsider status, and to question whose right it is to tell Pacific stories. Hereniko is a strong example of the way in which Indigenous intergenerational cultural sources and forms might be positioned across creative and research contexts.

Another performer and storyteller, Indigenous Australian change maker, Mark Yettica-Paulson, speaks about the “two dances” we must perform as Indigenous leaders. He describes these as the dances of “us and them” and of “the segment and the whole” (Mark Yettica-Paulson, personal communication, November 21, 2021). The first of the two dances is the one we do internally to and with each other, where we are free to disagree, to spar and to challenge, to *talatalanoa*¹ our ideas until the knots are untied, and the strings are in tune. The other is the dance we do to and with others where we turn to the outside world and present a united face, reading the nuances of others and other peoples, learning to code switch and to dance to other rhythms, other instruments, other voices. One band. One song. The imagery offered by Hereniko and Yettica-Paulson, as academics and creatives, continues to sing to me, and to resonate and echo throughout my own creative research with young Pasifika people in South Auckland.

This article is an attempt to articulate an evolving framework—for Indigenous Pasifika art making, legacy-leaving, education, service and leadership—titled “Audacious Dancing”. Within this framework, I attempt to weave my past and present understandings of what it means to be a *creative native*, learning and leading across generations, cultures and artforms. There are four strands described here, each framed by an essential element of audacious dancing: courageous space, Indigenous excellence, critical hope, and powerful action. The strands include descriptions and reflections on my learning, taught to me by Pacific elders, Pākehā co-conspirators, native sisters, and the young people I seek to serve, all marked by their ongoing resilient resistance in a post-COVID world.

First Positions²

Pacific Peoples³ constitute an estimated 9% of the population of Aotearoa New Zealand.⁴ We are *tagata o le moana* (people of the ocean), closely related—culturally, genealogically, socio-economically, and geographically—to *tangata whenua* (people of the

land, Māori). While we are not indigenous to Aotearoa, we are nonetheless linked by blood ties and diasporic indigeneity to our Māori kin. Moreover, the colonial government of Aotearoa frequently connects Māori and Pacific Peoples through policies, initiatives, strategies, and schemes to address our collective underrepresentation in positive outcomes (education, income, home ownership) and our overrepresentation in negative outcomes (incarceration, widespread underachievement, ill health). The term “Pasifika” itself represents a contested space. Using this term, in this context, is a reclamation of a collective identity, rather than an acquiescence to colonial efforts to homogenise the many diverse peoples of Oceania who call Aotearoa home.

While contemporary Pasifika educators and artists grapple in the space between reform and revolution (Tuck, 2009), it is also our responsibility to prepare our youth to be powerful agents of change. My work exists in the space between Creative Arts and Education, where I attempt to grow and nurture young Pasifika leaders, artists, and activists. Specifically, throughout this article, I will refer to the performance-based research project, *Southside Rise*, facilitated by the Black Friars Theatre Company between 2017 and 2019. Over these three years, through performance-based activism, heritage literacies and polycultural leadership, *Southside Rise* brought together a village of more than a hundred young artists and activists to become a self-sustaining ecosystem for social change.

In and of itself, dance, as a means of Indigenous storytelling, “accomplishes an essential goal of decolonization: moving beyond simply eliminating the power hierarchies and practices of colonization to facilitating the resurgence of indigenous sovereignty by reclaiming epistemology and knowledge that was previously erased” (Samuel & Ortiz, 2021, p. 4). Storytelling, as we know, can function as a powerful counternarrative to colonial thinking,

Stories are about responsibility and action in Indigenous cultures. They have kept us alive, grounded and inspired. They carry the resistance and strength of our ancestors. They hold our truths. And when we tell them on our own terms to an engaged audience, they carry a tremendous responsibility to Transform.” (Simpson, 2014, as cited in Hall, 2019, p. 112)

Thus, collective storytelling, through dance and drama, provides young people with a powerful way of drawing on the strength of their Indigenous heritages, nurturing a collective identity and galvanising action in the community. One young *Southside Rise* leader remarks,

No matter how hard I tried as a student I thought the problem was me. It was as if I had to constantly apologise for coming from a low socioeconomic background, or from South Auckland. Now I embrace my successes and being from the south because ... I see that it is not our students that fail, it's the education system that's failing our students.” (L. Anae, personal correspondence, September 1, 2017)

Through the distance-framing of performance, the young people involved in *Southside Rise* were able to “speak openly about [their] cultures, [their] identities, about race and racism,

gender bias, privilege and power”, of how they underwent the “‘un-learning’ of ideas [they] never knew [they] held”, and of their growing courage and conviction to stand up and be “brave warriors for social change” (Alesana et al., in press).

Courageous Space

Indigenous creative arts practices, like dancing, include relationships and risk-taking as vital components. Part of the Indigenous theatre-maker’s role is to create safe places for communities to take risks, to test ideas, and to safely experience synchronicity and discord. In addition, courageous spaces in Indigenous leadership must be understood as extending backwards and forwards across space and time; therefore, they must encompass the idea of leadership as legacy. This means that Indigenous leaders, creative and otherwise, must be deeply cognisant of their own place in the genealogy of their community. They must be intergenerationally located and connected to the heritage literacies that are their birthright, as well as confident in their ability to lead and learn in a modern (colonial) world.

One of the sayings that the Black Friars Theatre Company lives by is that “we can only see as far as we do because we stand on the shoulders of giants.” Part of the responsibility of the Indigenous creative leader is to understand the history of the dance they are required to lead and how those dance steps have come to be. Wilson-Hokowhitu (2019) argues that “everything we consider a tradition was once an innovation. Traditions come into being when the community finds a practice or a process useful or important enough to replicate, teach, and transmit across generations” (p. vii). Often, as practitioners, we must recognize that the courageous space we occupy, and must hold for our young audacious dancers, was carved by others, and that we are all connected by a long and intergenerational process of storytelling and meaning making. This was first brought home for me in a very surreal way when I met with critically acclaimed Samoan theatre-maker and actor, Nathaniel Lees. He greeted me by saying, “We have been waiting for you to come to us.” The “you” was me—a new, Tongan theatre maker, with a company of upstart young Polynesians working to tell powerful stories through theatre in South Auckland. The “we” referred to the old guard—those long-established actors and directors who fought for Pasifika to have a place on stages in Aotearoa. Understanding my own position and the space that I am responsible for as an Indigenous leader has been integral to my work in Pacific theatre.

The idea of nurturing “safe spaces” is foundational in work with young people; however, one of my wayfinders reminded me recently that it is not enough to be “safe.” The spaces we hold must be *courageous* if we are to make social change. She also reminded me that some of the most powerful moments occur when we have created a space

courageous enough that we might dance together (A. Pele, personal communication, October 20, 2022). As Wendt (2009) argues:

Our ties transcend barriers of culture, race, petty nationalism, and politics. Our writing [dancing] is expressing a revolt against the hypocritical/exploitative aspects of our traditional/commercial and religious hierarchies, colonialism and neo-colonialism, and the degrading values being imposed from outside.” (Wendt as cited in Gaskell, p.136)

The impact of the collective and communal dance is more than the sum of its individual components. In our collective Indigeneity lies our strength to change the space and take the dance into our own hands.

Southside Rise was designed as a courageous space for young people from South Auckland to participate in the stories of their communities. For more than three years, the Black Friars worked with more than a hundred young people to produce three full-scale original theatre shows with full band and original music and dance. These shows engaged over 4,000 audience members, those from the community and beyond. During this project, the leadership team worked to hold courageous spaces for the young people to understand who they were. This took place over multiple fono, including music, dance, writing, and poetry workshops where participants chose to explore different methods of creative storytelling with local experts. *Southside Rise* mentors also held courageous spaces in the schools of the young people, where they led discussions on what it means to be a leader. Through these discussions, participants were able to express their experiences, frustrations, and aspirations for Pacific leadership—both as leaders themselves and in their hopes for their communities. Mentors also presented the opportunity to explore tertiary education safely. We sent buses of participants to three of the major tertiary institutions in Auckland and introduced them to the Pacific villages within those institutions. We wanted the participants to know that there are courageous spaces within these organisations that will help to strengthen their ability to walk in an academic world, while holding their heads high as Pasifika young people, rooted in their Indigenous cultures.

The participants involved in the *Southside Rise* productions have continued to work with us, perform with us, and walk beside us. They have become council members, climate change warriors, parents, nurses, journalists, and teachers. They have signed modelling contracts, joined acting agencies, and represented Aotearoa in international festivals. Many of them formed deep connections and lasting relationships through *Southside Rise*. Most of them have enduring and close contact with at least one of the older Black Friars. Through the *kaupapa*⁵ of performance-based activism, heritage literacies and Polycultural⁶ leadership, *Southside Rise* provided a platform for young people to speak back to the dominant social discourses in which they are often victimised, exoticised or criminalised. This project has helped to re-story South Auckland in the national consciousness.

Indigenous Excellence

Dance is literacy and legacy. Indigenous legacy and leadership should involve the active fostering of Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world. High expectations and strong relationship should result in practised, embodied, rigorous, and deep growth for the whole community, village, tribe, or nation. This is what Professor Russell Bishop might call “leading to the North-East” (R. Bishop, personal correspondence, May 24, 2023).

It is important as dancers to understand Indigenous excellence. Not only is it integral to our holistic development to centre Indigenous ways of knowing and being, but it is vital that we foster excellence in those knowledges. In my own aspirations towards Indigenous excellence as a Pacific leader, I am attempting daily to live two beliefs about leadership. One is a traditional Samoan proverb “o le ala ‘i le pule o le tautua” (the path to leadership is through service). The other has been shared with me by Falefatu and Parehuia Enari, co-principals of Pacific Advance Secondary School, the only Pacific-led secondary school in Aotearoa. Their kaupapa is based on a theory of Resilience–Resistance–Replacement. They teach their students grit and tenacity, they arm them with the skills they need to excel in both Pākehā and Pacific worlds, and they instil in them the critical hope that colonial systems can (and should) be replaced with Indigenous ways of being and knowing in the world that are Pasifika mo Pasifika.

Service is a concept that is understood across the Pacific as a mark of Indigenous excellence, from the Hawaiian concept of Kuleana, through to the Māori whakatauāki by Princess Te Puea Herangi “mahia te mahi, hei painga mo te iwi” (work for the betterment of the people). Thus, it is not enough to simply be Indigenous. We must work to becoming the most excellent versions of ourselves and, like the students at Pacific Advance Secondary School (PASS), we must learn to draw on our polycultural capital for the rigour and tenacity to stand tall in both of our worlds.

The *Southside Rise* movement also allowed participants to share their Indigenous excellence. As part of the experience of *Southside Rise*, they were expected to be leaders, operating to very high standards both in Pacific circles and in wider society. To this end, mentors created leadership experiences for the young people, and supported them to share their experiences in public forums. Examples of this include facilitating workshops, such as at the national conference, INVOLVE, which is focused on youth. At this conference, our young people ran back-to-back workshops for conference attendees. They prepared and presented their own sessions and made strategic decisions about their data sharing and representations. Mentors attended to support them, but the young people had complete autonomy to decide on the content. During the second and third year of *Southside Rise*, participants were invited to speak at multiple fora, including the national Post Primary

Teachers' Association conference, the Principals' gathering at Springboard Trust, strategy days at Ako Mātātupu: Teach First NZ, and in a command performance for Prince Charles held by The Princes Trust. This anonymous student account reflects the impact of the workshops:

Your faith in all of us motivates me. I don't think I would have realised my true worth and purpose if it wasn't for working with the Black Friars", "I'm blessed to have crossed paths with you all!! YOUS LITERALLY SAVED MY LIFE and I will always be grateful for you guys!!! ALWAYS!!! (personal correspondence, November 2018)

The excitement is echoed in the following student account as well:

For paving the way and blessing me with opportunities that I am nowhere near worthy of. I can only see as far as I can because you have allowed me to stand on your shoulders. Grateful to have you as a giant in my crazily insane life. (personal correspondence, November 2018)

These opportunities to share their Indigenous excellence, and to describe the journey that they have been on in their own appreciation of the value of Indigenous knowledges through the arts has been a vital part of their leadership journeys.

Critical Hope

Just as dances should be dynamic, malleable, and moving, adaptive to rhythm and form, so must creative criticality for Indigenous peoples. It will involve social conscience, multiple intelligences, and an understanding of how power and privilege influence the movement. Critical theorist, Duncan-Andrade (2009), argues for the importance of "audacious Hope", which "stares down the painful path; and despite the overwhelming odds against us making it down the path to change, we make the journey again and again. There is no other choice" (p.191). In my education context, it is important for students in our schools, together with their whānau and community to realise (and reify) the inherent power they have to make change, while acknowledging the trauma, pain, and systemic injustice they experience in their day-to-day lives.

Hope is integral to any kind of social change. One of the young wayfinders from the 2018 cohort says it best when she writes:

I was asked what I hope for South Auckland...

I hope that one day people realise

we aren't just window washers and criminals

but a place full of deadline meeters and high achievers.

Communities full of tradition and hope.

And this is where it all begins.

This is how Southside will rise.

Calista Fa'amausili, 17 years old – Tangaroa College Wayfinder

Southside Rise: Heads Held High, 2018

(Black Friars, 2018)

For Pasifika young people living in South Auckland, systemic failure is exacerbated by geography and demographics. While they live in Auckland, the “first city of the Pacific” (Auckland Council, 2018, p.19), their locale is marked by extreme poverty, overcrowding, ill-health, crime, transience, and media representations that position them as both dangerous and endangered (New Zealand Government, 2019, p.12). Policy paints these young people as the nation’s “at risk” “priority learners”. And yet, young leaders, like Calista, do not see themselves as pitiable or inferior. Instead, they require critical hope from their communities, and the determination of those same communities to make real and lasting social change.

Another mantra I live by in my work as a leader is “All the levers. All the time.” This is one answer to Audrey Lorde’s question as to whether the master’s tools can be used to dismantle the master’s house (Lorde, 1984). I increasingly believe in the necessity of linking hands across all sectors, and in using all the tools at our disposal to leverage social change. In their call for Paradigm Warriors, Spiller et al. (2020) argue that

To be a leader, a rangatira, then, is to excel at weaving people together, to encourage or inspire others to go on a journey together, to exercise agency, and to light the way toward a world in which all flourish.” (p. 522)

They argue that “paradigm warriors do not settle for an existing reality if it does not serve the wellbeing of people and planet ... being a paradigm warrior involves doing battle with oneself to fully realize one’s own potential and to help others achieve theirs” (Spiller et. al., 2020, p. 522). These ideas of pushing the boundaries, making change, and doing battle with oneself are fully aligned with Duncan-Andrade’s call for critical hope. Within the framework of Audacious Dancing, critical hope means using all the levers at our disposal simultaneously and allowing for the pain, acceptance, aroha, and healing to occur in tandem, each dependent on the other in our capacity to move forward and dream (dance) a better future for all Aotearoa. In a post-COVID world, where the inequality gap has been even further

exacerbated for Indigenous peoples, it becomes more important to hold onto that critical hope and to draw on Indigenous, intergenerational rhythms to just keep dancing.

Powerful Action

Dancers learn to be deliberate, purposeful and well-timed in their actions. Similarly, Indigenous leaders should equip their communities to punch hard, to have powerful voices, and to exercise self-determination. As Yettica-Paulson alluded, we cannot dance alone (Mark Yettica-Paulson, personal communication, November 21, 2021). One of our two dances must be done to and with others, and this is an important and powerful action. Thus, the idea of co-conspiracy is integral to my understanding of Indigenous leadership, particularly where it leans into Choice Theory (Glasser, 1999). The first proponent of Choice Theory is that “the only person you can change is yourself”, to which I add the following: “but in so doing, you might change the world.”

Co-conspiracy has come to me from my native American sister-in-arms, Josie Green, and the work she does on Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. This is an important element of this leadership framework because it requires all of us to be agents of change and encourages an understanding that while “any talk of racism and historical oppression will inevitably surface feelings of anger, shame, guilt, fragility, blame, and maybe even denial that oppression is a reality in the Western world in the 21st Century”, that “we also understand that those feelings *are not useful here*” (Allnutt & Johansson, 2022, p.31).

Every year a new cohort of teachers-in-training joins my organisation. The composition of each cohort in the last couple of years has been about half Pākehā, half Māori and Pacific. As part of my annual welcome address, I assure them that the best teacher for our young brown scholars is not necessarily another brown face. Instead, it is the person who loves them and who will work urgently to rectify the wrongs continuously perpetuated by an education system that was built for someone else. This is a working example of what we refer to as ‘co-conspiracy’, perhaps best likened to the notion of the “accomplice.” Choosing either the word “co-conspirator” or “accomplice” in place of the word “ally” calls out “artificial declarations of ‘allyship,’” and those who “only offer solidarity on the condition that it doesn’t interfere with the rewards they gain from colonisation & other systems of oppression” (Indigenous Action, 2021). I am increasingly certain that impactful and lasting social change will be most powerful if we all act together, in rhythm with each other.

In Aotearoa there is a critical need for policy that enables powerful action. There is a myriad of policies targeted at Pasifika youth in Aotearoa, issued by the many arms of New Zealand’s colonial government—from the Ministry for Pacific Peoples, where “Pacific

communities are recognised for the diversity they bring, the knowledge they impart and the contribution they make to the uniqueness of Aotearoa” (Sio, 2018, p.5), to Auckland Council, who promise to “celebrate [their] uniqueness and achievements” (Auckland Council, 2020, p. 23). Beyond these broad, sweeping public statements, however, there is also an understanding that “in New Zealand socio-economic disadvantage has a large overlap with ethnicity ... which affects Māori and Pacific students disproportionately” (The Southern Initiative, 2020, p.17). There continue to be “disparities in access to education and health services for Māori and Pacific children and their families; and [a] disproportionate number of Māori and Pacific People in poverty and material hardship” (New Zealand Government, 2019, p.12). This double-messaging promotes the overall perception that, while Aotearoa loves her Pacific Peoples and their cultures, is proud of them and wants them to do well—for some (mysterious) reason they keep popping up at the bottom end of all the statistics. On the one hand, government policies might be understood as the benevolent practice of addressing the problem of an inherently inferior Pacific population. On the other hand, government policies might be better understood as the patronising practice of maintaining power and dominance over a growing portion of the population that the government itself, deliberately, consistently, and systematically fails in each and every way.

Young leaders, like Calista, Lea, and Agnes (mentioned previously) do not see themselves as in need of pity or charity. Instead, these youths require a government committed to powerful action, a government that truly, and with integrity, values Pasifika strengths; rather than policy that patronises their people, while measuring their individual and collective worth solely by their proximity to Whiteness.

In dance, powerful actions are not always huge and sweeping movements. Sometimes powerful actions are the turning of a chin, the lifting of an eyebrow, or the raising of a closed fist. As Roberts (2017) argues,

Action is pivotal to our development as human beings and is an essential element in the process of transformation. To act is to harness the capacities we have as physical, intellectual, and emotional beings. Action, like reflection, sets us in motion. It allows us to test ideas, express our creativity, and become agents of historical change. (2017)

Like the words co-conspiracy and accomplice, Audacious Dancing suggests a fluidity of movement, as well as a sense of mischief, danger, and risk.

Curtain Call⁷

In closing, there is a traditional Hawaiian hula blessing that reads:

May you have grace in your step,

Song in your hand, &
Aloha in your heart.

Dance is well-established as a system of knowledge (Kaepler, 2008, p. 99) where participants in the dance must feel safe enough that they can take risks, test out their own limits, and learn to move in multiple different ways in order to learn, flourish, and make change. Likewise, Audacious Dancing offers a fluid way to navigate systems that privilege other ways of knowing and being. Conceptualising Indigenous theatre-making, legacy, and leadership through the framework of Audacious Dancing allows me to disrupt the confines of rigid, colonial structures. Critical creative practices should be multifaceted and liberating, should equip others to be critical thinkers and to be agentic in raising their voices to impact their worlds. Indigenous leaders should be malleable and should draw on multiple knowledge systems and world views to create spaces, circumstances, and structures for the betterment of their communities, tribes, and nations. Thus, subsequent generations of Pacific Peoples will be able to move through the world dynamically; equipped with multiple steps in their repertoire and armed with the courage and tenacity to dance audaciously with the world, and (perhaps most importantly) with each other.

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ENDNOTES

¹ “Talatalanoa is the iterative and ongoing unfolding of reflections and meaningful engagement, guided by talanoa mālie and māfana” (Fa'avae, Fehoko, Siu'ulua & Tovo, 2021).

² “First positions” is the call made by the Stage Manager, five minutes before a theatre show begins, to ensure that the performers are in place and ready to go on stage. In my world, it often involves many young people, standing still and silent in the wings. The energy is palpable and electric with nerves racing and adrenalin pumping.

³ The terms ‘Pacific Peoples’ and ‘Pasifika’ will be used interchangeably throughout this article.

⁴ 381,642 Pacific Peoples in a population of 5,106,400 (Stats NZ, 2021).

⁵ Topic, policy, matter for discussion, plan, purpose, scheme, proposal, agenda, subject, programme, theme, issue, initiative (Te Aka, 2022).

⁶ The term “polycultural” is used by Dr. Karlo Mila-Schaaf to refer to cultural capital where the term “polycultural capital ... is coined to describe a theoretical construct which describes the potential advantage Pacific second generation (New Zealand born) may experience from on-going exposure to culturally distinctive social spaces” (Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010).

⁷ The curtain call refers to the moment when the performers come out at the end of a theatre show to take their bows. When they do this, they discard the characters they have been playing, and emerge as themselves, becoming part of the audience and community that has come to bear witness.