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AESTHETIC INQUIRY FOR BICULTURAL ARTS EDUCATION IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses an arts-based learning encounter at a marae-based wānanga as a starting point for exploring the potential of aesthetic inquiry to support dynamic and always evolving relationality between people and place. The work of two researchers, Māori writer and scholar Cassandra Barnett and Irish inter-cultural researcher Sharon Todd, is discussed as examples of critical aesthetic inquiries that open new possibilities for relationality between people and place through encounters with artworks. Maxine Greene's definition of aesthetic inquiry, as distinct from an "arts as connoisseurship" approach, is utilised to encourage a greater awareness among arts educators of the limitations and potential risks of liberal multicultural approaches in arts education. With increasing pressures to fast track the decolonising and indigenising of curriculum in New Zealand education, I discuss the importance of mitigating the risks of uncritically transferring indigenous Māori concepts and material into mainstream classrooms. New insights are offered into how aesthetic inquiry in arts based pedagogy and curriculum can support learners to sit with the complexities that come with a settler-indigenous history.

Keywords

Aesthetic education; settler-indigenous relationality; biculturalism, Ngā Toi Māori

Introduction

This paper is offered as a scholarly reflection. It has arisen out of the thinking work done as part of preparation for research about mainstream engagement with Māori-centred arts education contexts. This preparation involved engaging with the aspirations and visions of Māori colleagues who led *noho marae wānanga* (live-in marae-based learning retreats) in the Far North region of Aotearoa New Zealand. Through informal collegial conversations, and participation in noho marae wānanga, unique shared understandings about the potential of aesthetic inquiry to support dynamic relationality across settler-indigenous difference emerged. Further, the reflection offered here is a unique result of navigating the ethics of settler-indigenous engagement and aspiring to design research questions and methodology that is meaningful and purposeful to everyone involved.

"The binding is a bit messy in places," the student said apologetically as they handed over their four-plait braid ready to learn how to attach it to their newly shaped, sanded and oiled koauau. Holding the instrument gently and looking closely at the braiding ready to be wrapped around it, the tutor commented on both the even, consistent areas of braiding (which had been the goal) and the knottier, wobbly bits where the tension had been lost or the pattern jumbled a bit. "Maybe that is where you looked up to laugh at what someone was saying?" Pointing at a knot the tutor continued, "Or perhaps here you were focusing so hard on the pattern that you started pulling it a bit too tight?" The braiding held a story and the tutor was taking the time to attend to it and was encouraging the student to share the story of what had happened as they braided.

This exchange offers a starting point to explore the potential of aesthetic inquiry to open up new possibilities for bicultural relational engagement in arts education. The context of the aesthetic encounter was at a taonga puoro noho marae wānanga in the Far North district of Aotearoa New Zealand: a four-day marae-based learning experience for local high school students and teachers. The wānanga involved local students, most of them Māori, crafting *taonga puoro* (traditional Māori musical

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instruments) and learning from *tohunga* (experts) in *mātauranga* (knowledge) associated with *te ao puoro* (the world of Māori music) and *taonga tākaro* (Māori games and play). I took up an invitation from Māori colleagues to attend this hui wānanga as a non-Māori participant, in the hope of extending my own learning as a music and creative arts teacher and to support my colleagues who had leadership roles in this educational initiative (see Gain et al., 2022) in this issue.

The exchange with the tutor described above was warm and positive, full of care and attention to the participant's work. It wasn't simply a check against set learning objectives i.e., completion of the components of the braid and instrument ready for the next step. The tutor was completely present to the work (despite having worked with many students throughout the day) and critiqued the student's work in a way that encouraged them into dialogue about the successes and the challenges of trying to master something new. The tutor wanted to hear the story of the braiding, the context and conversations that had been a part of its creation and hence the learning. During the exchange the instrument went from being something the student was trying to complete to a certain standard to meet a clearly set objective, to something more relational between student and tutor, and student and their crafted instrument. The tutor guided the student into a deeper aesthetic inquiry of their art-making and learning process in a way that took the learning journey off a linear path. Aesthetic inquiry, as conceptualised by Maxine Greene, sees curriculum as emergent and enabling ongoing relational engagement with provisional thinking. Greene writes: "'Aesthetics' is the term used to single out a particular field in philosophy, one concerned about perception, sensation, imagination, and how they relate to knowing, understanding, and feeling about the world" (Greene, 2001, p. 5).

As the student shared aspects of their braiding story that were tangible and visible in the imperfect plait, they brought into the learning conversation the friend who they had been working with and the outside space they had been sitting in. The instrument-making context had included other students working on their taonga puoro: sanding, oiling, braiding and weaving. The context had included elemental forces, the gusts of wind that had caught the students off guard at times causing them to laugh and tell their friends, who were experimenting with their *pūrerehua* (a musical instrument traditionally used for healing or summoning rain), to stop encouraging Tāwhirimātea. In noticing and responding to the student's work, the tutor was attending to the knowledge the student had gained from the people accompanying them on their learning journey, mātauranga a iwi, and the knowledge coming from the marae space and the outside environment they were learning in, mātauranga a whenua. This went beyond any experiences of what we might call in mainstream education formative assessment or a learning conversation. The exchange connected the student to moments across the four days that had been filled with storytelling, *whakataukī* (proverbs), play, improvisation and sharing of memories and personal stories, all ways that engaged students in learning. One tutor said to a student, who was struggling to correctly recall a whakataukī, "Your tupuna could whakapapa for days, they were agile, quick thinking and had incredible memories." This lifted expectations. While playing a balance game, another tutor responded: "My koro would always win those balance games, even with young men twice his size! He would watch and observe and know how to use his opponent's strength to his advantage." This increased motivation.

Storytelling and sharing memories were things that were woven throughout the wānanga. Through the use of the imagination, one could visualise the characters in some of those stories, the koro reciting *whakapapa* (genealogy) or playing games as if they had been there in person. This facilitated connection to multiple spaces and people, including imagined spaces and people who had been conjured up through storytelling, experienced over the last few days of instrument making. This knowledge from people and place, mātauranga a iwi and mātauranga a whenua, would continue to resonate in the imperfections of the braiding now that the tutor had drawn attention to their tangible effects.

As a *tauiwi* (non-Māori) teacher participant coming into a learning space like this noho marae wānanga, I was acutely aware of the need to carefully consider what my role could be and how I could best support my Māori colleagues who were leading the learning. What could I offer in return for the care and teachings I was given? My Māori colleagues were quick to settle any anxieties I had by keeping me busy with activities and organising tasks. I found myself happy to have the chance to work in the kitchen and provide a helping hand. I was invited into *kōrero* (conversations) and encouraged to reflect and take notes on my experiences. I was also given many opportunities to support the students as an

honorary *whaea* (aunty/teacher) in the space, being there for the students to share what they had learned and to teach me in a reciprocal ako style. I was given the chance to be a learner and to be part of the collective, where teachers and students were happy to move fluidly between teaching, learning, and caring roles. On reflection I can see I was invited into a new space, simply by being open to experiences within a te ao Māori context as they emerged relationally in the moment. As I participated, through heart as well as head, foregrounding the values of *manaakitanga* (generosity and respect) and *aroha* (love and care), the depth of knowledge and history became more visible as part of the learning process and yet increasingly uncapturable.

American arts educator and philosopher Maxine Greene might describe the exchange with the tutor, described at the beginning of this paper, as a "lyrical moment": "moments at which human beings (freed to feel, to know, and to imagine) suddenly understand their own lives in relation to all that surrounds" (Greene, 2001, p. 7). As I was observing the tutor's conversation with the student, I felt freed in the moment from my focus on my own technical precision and task completion. Both the student and I were given the opportunity to slow down and attend in a different way than I had expected; we were invited to draw on our imagination and focus on the relational experiences with people and place.

The learning encounters, and invitations to aesthetic inquiry experienced during the noho marae pushed back against any teacherly desire to collect cultural learnings as artefacts or takeaways to be transferred into mainstream teaching. In professional learning opportunities like these, some teachers find themselves selecting and judging elements which they believe can be effectively carried into our own mainstream teaching contexts to enrich existing pedagogy, curriculum and praxis. Greene describes this as an "arts as connoisseurship" approach (1995, 2001). As arts educators we can find ourselves primed to focus on appreciating the beauty and artistry of Māori language, rituals and metaphors, and the aesthetic dimensions of *ngā toi Māori* (Māori arts and crafts), which are then woven into our teaching as a form of cultural appreciation and cultural responsiveness. Such transfer and capture of indigenous Māori knowledge and material into mainstream teaching is reflective of liberal multicultural approaches to arts education which, in the words of May and Sleeter (2010), views culture as "a set of concrete practices" and reflects a belief within education "that 'other people' have culture out there, and our job is to study it through its artefacts" (p. 5). Such an approach has been highlighted in the last decade of scholarship in multicultural arts education that point out its limitations and potential risks in arts education, including the essentialising of culture and presenting the culture as static and fixed, minimising differences to support a vision of solidarity and transcultural unity, and failing to recognise issues of privilege maintained by dominant mainstream discourses (May & Sleeter, 2010; Acuff, 2014, 2015). This scholarship advocates for increased self-critique in mainstream art education when it comes to engaging with other cultures.

Here in New Zealand, indigenous material offers our mainstream arts education spaces a fillip: new rich ways to frame learning and embed an indigenous perspective. Such a response is further driven by an education context that increasingly requires evidence of decolonising practice and indigenising curriculum in recognition of Treaty of Waitangi obligations. Here in Aotearoa, Hoskins (2010), Yukich and Hoskins (2011), Yukich (2021), Jones (1999, 2001, 2007) and Bell (2014, 2017) have explored the concept of an ethics of respect and care for alterity, and the unknowable difference of the Other. These researchers have explored this concept of alterity, which comes from French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, for its potential in supporting relational engagement between Māori and Pākehā. Bell (2014) writes, "Understanding of the autonomy of indigenous difference depends on settler peoples not fully understanding it, not being able to fully articulate and therefore 'capture' it in their own, western terms" (pp. 20–21). In this form of bicultural relationship settlers must engage and respond without intention and with a willingness to "engage beyond our own understandings and frameworks" (Bell, 2014, p. 22). This means we need to be alert to seeking only to enrich our own understandings within our existing settler-shaped curriculum, pedagogy and praxis. We need to pause and reflect at the ease with which, for example, *karakia* (grace or prayers), *whakataukī* (proverbs) and *waiata* (songs) are currently applied in our arts education teaching without recognising these as distinctly indigenous concepts that are dynamic, fluid and continually evolving beyond our limited understandings and colonially-shaped frames of reference. To resist such a limited approach to bicultural engagement in arts education we can draw on Greene's (and the noho marae tutor's) ideas of aesthetic inquiry as distinct from an "arts as connoisseurship" approach (Greene, 1995, 2001).

When we plan for aesthetic inquiry we are looking for curriculum and pedagogy that teaches for openings and "grounded interpretations possible only to those willing to abandon already constituted reason, willing to feel and to imagine" (Greene, 2001, p. 104). The ethical function of aesthetic inquiry lies in the pursuit of multiplicities, complexities and openings rather than closing down on fixed answers and a shared one-way of looking; where irreducible differences, conflicts, contradictions are upheld, and inquiry resists the forcing of these into translations that carry them uncritically, with loss, into mainstream teaching. Art as aesthetic inquiry, rather than connoisseurship, creates an additional "layer of new relationship to places and ideas" (Foley, 2020). In aesthetic inquiry learners are enabled to come up against perspectives and vantage points that differ from our own lived experiences and throw light on the limitations and provisionality of our thinking. Carefully curated pedagogical encounters with artworks have potential to invite learners as percipients, to rework their always provisional and shifting understandings. As potential gaps and limits of understanding are confronted "there will be a play of differences, inevitably, through which meanings can emerge.' (Greene, 1995, p. 121). The noho marae wānanga experience provided a glimpse into an entirely different system of learning from mainstream education, one grounded in *te ao Māori* (the Māori world), one that you needed to be present to in the moment, but one that highlighted the huge limitations of trying to translate indigenous Māori concepts and frameworks beyond this unique learning context.

Cassandra Barnett is a Māori writer and researcher who has explored the concept of perception in aesthetic experience and arts-based inquiry in a gallery context (Barnett, 2013). Barnett is interested in how we might make visible "the processes of sensation and perception occurring during the encounter with an artwork' (Barnett, 2011, p. 9). Barnett (2013), drawing on social theorist Brian Massumi, might describe the encounter at the beginning of this paper as a "semblance", a thinking-feeling perception where past experiences and future ideas and potentials come together in the present moment at both an affective and analytical level; heart and head; past, present and future resonating as an aesthetic experience. Massumi describes a semblance as having "an immersive thinking-feeling of what it's like to be alive in the perception of lived space" (Massumi 2008, as cited in Barnett 2013, p. 12). As Barnett (2013) might suggest, the exchange resisted any capture: "When we're feeling this unsubdued, irrepressible energy, we're also feeling the excessive, uncapturable, uncolonisable, imperceptible residue in all the lives here represented. We're feeling a Māori cultural force that also escapes all capture" (Barnett, 2013, p. 28). The taonga puoro marae wānanga experience suggested to me the potential of aesthetic experiences to resist being captured in oversimplified or essentialising ways. Barnett (2013), in writing about Lisa Reihana's artwork *Digital marae,* describes how Reihana creates an aesthetic experience that "composes a three-way relation between viewer, space/environment and a whole community of characters … she adds human relational activity into the inhabited space" (p. 28). This describes well what I felt the tutor was offering the student as he discussed the taonga puoro braiding: a complex and layered relational engagement between myself as a non-Māori observer, the students, the teachers, the marae space, and the surrounding natural environment – a semblance achieved through the encounter with the [art]work.

Another researcher who has explored the potential of aesthetic inquiry in relational education is Irish inter-cultural scholar, Sharon Todd. Todd offers a critical reading of an aesthetic encounter with Olafur Eliasson's climate artwork *Ice watch*; an installation of 24 blocks of ice from the Nuup Kangerlua fjord in Greenland relocated to outside the Tate Modern in London in 2018 (Todd, 2020). The artwork invited members of the public to attend to and interact with the ice in any way they wished, inviting a participatory experience of glacial ice melting. She quotes the artist, Eliasson, who described the main concept behind *Ice watch* as being to "arouse feelings of proximity, presence, and relevance" (Todd, 2020, p. 1119). Todd argues that the aesthetic encounter provided a unique opportunity for people to sit with the complexities and difficult emotions of "climate sorrow". Encounters with the artwork opened up new ways of perceiving the complex relationships between people and the environment, potentially new forms of relationality, and a recognition of the "facticity of the multiplicity of living" (Todd, 2020, p. 1118). She reflects on how teachers, as potential curators of such aesthetic encounters in the classroom, might create opportunities for students to engage with living relationships as they unfold between people and place, resisting fixed knowledge and oversimplified understandings of each other and our relationships to place. In this way Todd identifies a crucial shift from working relationally with

others and place, to perceiving and attending to the living and dynamic relational encounters of the world:

> It is this unfolding of perception that suggests we are never in a static 'relation to' something, but in a constant flow of relation, an immersion with a world which is itself vibrant and subject to alteration, differentiation and endless variation. In this sense, our encounters are not merely with the world, but are of the world: moments of contact in the present that open up to the unfolding and shifting reality of the things and lives we meet. (Todd, 2020, p. 1116)

Todd invites teachers to consider not only what we are teaching but the quality of the encounters we curate for our students. She probes, "Do they give time and space to allow students to be with loss?", "do they allow for complexity, openness and uncertainty?" (Todd, 2020, p. 1121), and do the encounters offer "opportunities for sensory exploration in ways that neither dictate nor demand what feelings, sensations and dispositions students 'should' have by the end of a lesson or unit?" (Todd, 2020, p.1123).

Similar to grappling with what Todd describes as "climate sorrow", our teaching history here in New Zealand has potential to bring up feelings of loss, sadness and despair. This creates a need to critically reflect on how pedagogy and curriculum enables students to sit with historical sorrow. A key question for arts educators here in New Zealand is how might any historical sorrow meet with the creativity, innovation and entrepreneurial spirit of indigenous communities today, and how might we best educate in the arts to ensure we relate beyond the facts and knowledge learning? (see Gain et al. 2022) in this issue). As Todd (2020) reflects "living time matters" (p. 1123). The work of education is, she writes,

> to teach in a way that allows students to attend to a mode of being that is not solely defined by factual knowledge (however important that knowledge may be). As such, teaching in the presence of climate sorrow is an aesthetic practice that says living time matters and that recognises that what is difficult to bear can indeed be life enhancing. (Todd, 2020, p. 1123)

To these questions I might add: How might we begin to explore specific local relationships and entanglements between those with settler and indigenous whakapapa and different historical connections to place? Is there space in teaching and learning that allows for children with indigenous whakapapa to sit with loss in a different way to their non-indigenous peers? Greene (1995) expresses the crucial concerns of critical pedagogy as being "to enable children to have a signified and signifying world" (p. 55) where they can hold their "own vantage points, landscapes and intersubjectively lived worlds" (p. 58). The availability of many modes of expression, offered by creative process and artistic expression, is essential to this vision.

Considering the dynamic entanglement of affect, perception, imagination and reason, offered by aesthetic encounters with artworks, we can also reflect on what such pedagogical inquiry can offer emotional education as we grapple with our bicultural, settler-indigenous history. Emotional discourses in education have a history of lingering binary thinking, emotion versus reason, and there is also a current trend in emotional literacy focused on educating for social cohesiveness, efficiency and effectiveness (Boler, 1999). Boler considers emotional literacy and discourses that work as a form of social control, making "outlaw" or undesirable emotions, such as anger, an internal and individual, rather than a collective, problem She also invites consideration of how such emotions are collaboratively and publicly formed. In educating about settler-indigenous history, and for future relational engagement, we can ask: where is the space for the expression of the negative or the outlaw emotions that may arise out of our entangled history? And what as teachers can we do with emotions such as anger, bitterness, guilt, anxiety and sorrow that may emerge from a deep engagement with settler-indigenous relationships, historically and today? The potential of aesthetic encounters, as considered by Barnett (2013) and Todd (2020), have the potential to problematise such binary thinking and bring emotion and reason together educationally in a woven entanglement.

Boler (1999) also explores the risks of eliciting empathy through education that ignores histories of emotional discourse that support existing structures of power and privilege. She warns of the risks of "enabling modes of empathy that permit the reader's exoneration from privilege and complicities through the 'ah-hah" experience'" (p. 157), of shared suffering. Passive empathy, where non-indigenous responses of sorrow or upset are managed at a safe distance and in a way that ignores

complicity in the continuation of structures and orders that still impact indigenous people, is a real risk in liberal multicultural approaches to arts education (Boler, 1999; Ahmed, 2004a; 2004b). Ahmed (2004a), in considering the cultural politics of emotions, considers how emotions are shaped and re-shaped through different forms of contact. She is interested in how emotions "circulate" and how they are repeated over time to fix collective identities. As arts educators we can critically consider whether encounters with artwork and creative processes can effectively mitigate the risks of essentialising cultures and creating a static/fixed indigenous aesthetic. We can also consider how we might, through carefully curated aesthetic inquiries, make visible the repetition and circulation of emotions, including the silencing led by those with greater power, and the historical dismissal of certain emotions and habits of inattention. A further challenge for arts educators here is how can aesthetic inquiry uphold indigenous difference and the recognition of distinct indigenous cultural evolution, while also supporting the opening of new possibilities in working relationally across that difference?

Arts based pedagogy and curriculum, which invite encounters with artworks and creative responses, have the potential to take us beyond lingering binary thinking of emotion vs. reason. Through aesthetic inquiry we invite learners to engage with the complexity of relationships as they are lived in the present. As arts teachers we can consider how we might plan pedagogically for encounters with artworks that invite aesthetic inquiry through a possible "semblance" or "lyrical moment". Further, we can consider how we recognise and respond to the new possibilities that emerge through grounded relational encounters of place. These considerations can potentially support a valuable shift from limited "arts as connoisseurship"/liberal multicultural approaches towards aesthetic inquiry in support of more critical bicultural education.

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