

Māori Boys, Michael Jackson Dance Moves, and that 1984 Structure of Feeling

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The period from 1981 to 1985 is remembered as a turbulent one in New Zealand history; a time of significant social unrest set against the backdrop of a much longer phase of economic instability. New Zealand's heavily centralised social democracy did not fare well through the global recession of the 1970s. Simmering conflicts regarding the state's unresolved disputes with Indigenous Māori, tense negotiations over the status of the Treaty of Waitangi, and the concerns of a steadily increasing population of Pacific Island migrants intensified as economic pressures on New Zealand's most vulnerable populations worsened.

In the early 1980s, domestic debates about race and power overlapped with broader concerns regarding regional and global geopolitics. The anti-nuclear movement and protests against New Zealand's continuing relationship with apartheid South Africa, especially in the realm of sport, drew thousands of Pākehā alongside Māori and Pacific activists, though not all were willing to see links between the international anti-racist struggle and support for Māori and Pacific causes at home (Poata-Smith).

Sandwiched between the recession of the mid-1970s and New Zealand's monumental neoliberal economic restructuring in the mid-1980s, the period from 1981–1985 was a time of exciting and sometimes bewildering ferment, recapped nightly on the country's only two (state-owned) television channels. A sampling of major news stories recalls the tenor of the period: from 1981, when the biggest headline generator was the widespread public protest surrounding the New Zealand tour of the Springboks, the national rugby team of what was then apartheid South Africa:

The final day of the Springbok Tour sees a light plane flying inside Eden Park dropping flour bombs and leaflets whilst protesters and police clash violently outside the ground... Businessmen in South Africa offer all expenses paid holidays to NZ policemen in gratitude (Television New Zealand, 6:30 News, 12 September 1981).¹

¹ News items are reprinted as they appear in the catalogue of the New Zealand Film Archive.

Then to 1983, and explosive events elsewhere in the Pacific region:

Mururoa, French explode another nuclear bomb. (Television New Zealand, Eyewitness News, 26 July 1983)

Almost 18 months later, the French were still testing at Mururoa, but the national media is simultaneously consumed with domestic unrest in urban Auckland as thousands of young people clash with police at a public concert by Dave Dobbyn's rock group DD Smash and the Māori/Pacific reggae group Herbs in Aotea Square, in what would later be termed the "1984 Youth Riot":

Auckland City Council meet to discuss the riot in Aotea Square. Police continue to search for perpetrators and deny the charge that they are only arresting Polynesian people. (Television New Zealand, 6:30 News, 9 December 1984)

These were tumultuous times. This article considers the question of what it was like to be young and Māori in New Zealand in those times by reflecting on four instances of Māori boys on film – both still and moving – and tracing relationships between these mediated moments and the contexts that gave rise to them. The first example is a striking black and white 1981 image from an esteemed New Zealand photographer; a photo of direct relevance to the political ferment of that year, and one that provides a sort of pre-history of the images that follow. The second example is a 1984 photograph lifted from the pages of a gushing 1985 text on New Zealand youth culture – an image whose political and historical significance might otherwise be discounted because it centres in its frame people, events, and practices that, unlike the 1981 Springbok Tour protests, have not often been incorporated into state-sanctioned narratives of the nation. Third to be considered is an exuberant 1984 music video for an iconic New Zealand recording; it is largely through this video that popular memory of the activities depicted in the second photo is sustained.

The fourth and final text discussed is Taika Waititi's *Boy* (2010), the New Zealand Film Commission's highest grossing New Zealand production to date, the prompt for this special journal issue, and a film that invites us to reconsider 1984 from the situated vantage point of a pre-adolescent Māori boy on the rural East Coast of Aotearoa New Zealand. In *Boy*, references to the overtly political movements of the time are exceedingly subtle. Songs

from Herbs, whose recordings were anthems of the anti-nuclear, anti-apartheid, and decolonisation movements, contribute to the movie's sonic landscape in two scenes, for example, while elsewhere in the film their visual equivalent can be found in the art department's careful reconstruction of "No Nukes" and "Piss off Pigs" graffiti under a bridge. Such temporal cues are, however, background – evident only to those looking and listening carefully. What the film unmistakably foregrounds instead, are an alternative set of temporal cues drawn from transnational – and particularly US – popular culture; if a viewer could potentially miss the Herbs songs, there is no missing the references to Michael Jackson. Such invocations of Jackson, in a Māori film, in a Māori context, also bespeak of politics, but in ways that may only become clear when *Boy* is set alongside the other historical texts considered here.

These four examples of visual culture each provide a partial frame for considering, seriously, a 1984 *structure of feeling* – one uniquely situated in Aotearoa but with a scope that steadfastly refuses to be conscribed by the nation. Literary theorist Raymond Williams introduced the oft-invoked concept *structures of feeling* as a way to consider emergent social formations that seem characteristically different from those that preceded them, but in ways still actively being worked out (1977). By marrying the comforting Marxist solidity of *structures* with the hazy indeterminacy of *feeling*, Williams offered a way to think about:

Social experience which is still in *process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies. (132, italics in original)

As becomes clear in Williams' discussion, the identifiable "forms and conventions" (133) of structures of feeling are easier to identify in analytical hindsight. The remainder of this essay considers these four examples of Māori boys in visual culture – three from the early-to-mid 1980s and the fourth a warm-hearted 2010 evocation of that era – as part of a conversation regarding the "meanings and values" of 1984 as they were "actively lived and felt" (132) by young people in general, and Māori boys in particular.

MĀORI BOY ON FILM, TAKE 1: AT PLAY IN THE DUSTBIN OF HISTORY



Illustration 1: *Aftermath, Springbok Tour, Wellington, 1981.*

Photograph by Ans Westra, used by permission.

New Zealand readers might recognise this image as the work of Ans Westra, the Dutch-born photographer who for half a century has produced striking black and white images of people, especially Māori, in Aotearoa. While appearing to look directly at the camera, the person pictured did not in fact realise that this picture was taken until it appeared 24 years later in an exhibition that toured New Zealand in conjunction with the release of a book of the photographer's work.² He is Andrew Wright, a Wellington-born Māori of Te Atiawa descent.³ Wright was nine years old here. He is pictured on the streets

² Westra used a top-mounted viewfinder, allowing her to take photographs by looking down at the camera. Because the camera was not held to her face, it was not always obvious to her subjects that they were being photographed (see Beiringa et al., 2004).

³ Unless otherwise attributed, this and all of the following information about Andrew Wright in this essay is taken from a tape-recorded interview conducted with Wright (aka DJ and aerosol artist Kerb1) and Sara Tamati (b girl and aerosol artist SpexOne) at their home in Newtown, Wellington, 2 December 2006.

of Newtown, the Wellington suburb where he was raised and which became a focal point for Springbok Tour protests in 1981 because it was, at the time, home to the stadium where international rugby test matches were held.

In a 2006 interview, Wright described the context surrounding this picture. He had heard that protests would be held in his neighborhood and he and a few friends snuck out to them without their parents' knowledge; his mother only learned of his presence there when she, too, first saw this photograph a quarter century later. Wright remembers that he and his friends did not entirely understand the politics involved. He wondered, "why people would want to shut down the rugby?" until one of his primary school teachers explained that the South African rugby team were "mostly off-duty policemen who beat up black people during the day", at which point his sympathies swayed to the side of the protestors. Mostly, though, Wright stresses that he and his young peers just knew that there would be clashes with the police, that it would be exciting, and that they wanted to be there:

A lot of the actual fighting and violence took place around the rugby field, so they blocked off all the streets leading up so we couldn't get up that far. All the protestors gathered outside Newtown School and filled up that whole intersection. There was hundreds and hundreds of them, and did all their chants – "2, 4, 6, 8, Stop the tour, It's not too late," "1, 2, 3, 4, We don't want your racist tour." Most of the charges against the police happened up closer to the park and they'd cordoned off everything so we couldn't get up there if we tried. But we were around where they rallied, and some of the stuff started to sorta' kick off around there.

Regarding the particular moment this picture was taken, Wright explains:

[The photo was taken] near the end after a lot of it had been dispersed. What the cops were doing was confiscating weapons, shields, helmets, and throwing them into a big bin. But no one was watching the bin, so we climbed in the bin and donned everything on. There was about four of us, running around with shields and stuff. Newspaper reporters were clicking away, and old people were telling us off for supporting the protestors, but we were just playing, really. But yeah, it was real exciting. Everyone was there. We just climbed all the surrounding buildings and just sorta' watched.

Elsewhere in this interview, Wright also emphasises his limited awareness at the time of the anti-nuclear movement, which was strong in Wellington then and which manifested for him

and his peers a hazy fear that a nuclear mishap in their harbour was imminent. Overall, he stresses their general ambivalence towards the social upheaval of the time period.

I say “ambivalence” because, on the one hand, events like the Springbok protests and the anti-nuclear protests were incredibly exciting to a pre-teen Māori boy and his Māori and Samoan friends from Newtown’s Te Ara Hou council housing project. Yet, on the other hand, their status as young people and their incomplete grasp of what was going on positioned them on the margins of the excitement. In this case, Wright’s story about the Westra photograph is illustrative. Most of the real action – the open confrontations between police and protestors – occurred just a kilometre away, outside Athletic Park, but the boys were physically prevented from going there. Instead, they had to be content playing in the confiscated or cast-off trappings of the grown-ups, pilfered from the dustbin. There was a general sense that these events were all very exciting but that he and his friends had no control, no efficacy, over them in the slightest.

MĀORI BOY ON FILM, TAKE 2: DANCING IN THE CENTRE

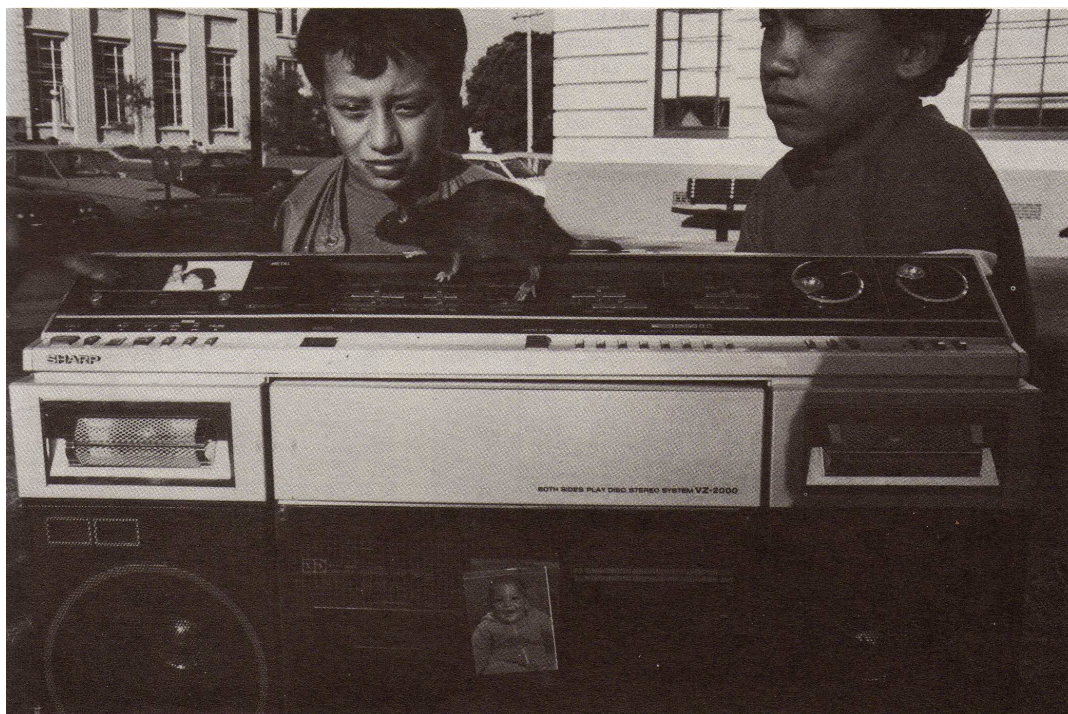


Illustration 2: *Civic Square, Wellington 1984.*

Photograph by Peter Black in Scott (1985), used by permission.

Move forward three years to another photographer's capturing of Andrew Wright in a faded black and white, now stained sepia with age. Peter Black took this second image of Wright (pictured, on the left) in 1984. It appears in Mark Scott's remarkable text *StreetAction Aotearoa*, a book attempting to capture, in candid photography and breathless prose, the vitality and joy that was *bop*. In early-to-mid 1980s New Zealand, bop was the common catch-all term for a variety of American "street dance" practices that had arrived in the country initially via Pacific Islander kin networks⁴ and – later and with more impact – imported US films and television programmes. Scott assures readers that his book is about much more than just "dance tips" however: "STREET-ACTION AOTEAROA tells a tough story" he writes on the acknowledgements page, it "tells what's behind the glue, the 1984 Youth Riot, behind the struggle of our kids to walk tall. It's their pain. It's their story" (i).

By the time this photograph was published, bop had become *the* popular expressive form of Māori and other Pacific youth in Aotearoa, with thousands of active participants across urban and rural New Zealand. It garnered coverage in national news stories, spawned at least two national competitions, prompted the production of a local music video for US artist Irene Cara's song "Breakdance" featuring Wellington and Auckland dancers, formed the subject of doctoral research (Kopytko 1986; 1991), and, of course, prompted Scott's popular book. Corporations also tried to cash in on dance fervour, with a commercial for Kentucky Fried Chicken featuring a young Polynesian male dancer and an enthusiastic voiceover exhorting viewers to "bop on in" and purchase a "Bop Pack" featuring "two delicious pieces of chicken and chips plus the chance to win one of four Sanyo bop blasters!"

According to Scott's text, the widespread uptake of American street dance owed to the particular confluence of media structures and social conditions present in New Zealand at the time. *StreetAction Aotearoa* stresses that up until the mid-1980s, New Zealand's mix of imported and domestic television programming featured predominantly white actors, newscasters, talk show hosts, and commentators. Shows featuring non-whites were rare, and domestic programmes featuring Māori and Pacific Islanders rarer still. Scott argues:

A Polynesian kid watching television in [New Zealand] can be excused for thinking he or she doesn't exist...Not surprisingly, the television image of black America is the one the kids

⁴ For discussion of the role of diasporic Samoan networks, in particular, see Henderson 2006; Kopytko 1986; Scott 1985.

identify with and given everything else it's often the only one they pick up from anywhere. (50)

Images of US street dance, as they began to percolate through this constrained mediascape, had significant impact. Perhaps the most provocative catalyst referenced by Scott is the US television program *That's Incredible* (1983):

[H]alfway through 1983 and by complete accident, television at long last dished up something positive, alive, exciting that a Polynesian kid here could relate to...something that said you can do it, go to it, you're incredible. It happened on a Saturday night about 7:30. In amongst all those people wrestling grizzly bears and water-skiing on their heads, the TV programme *That's Incredible* squeezed in a few minutes on some ghetto gangs who were dancing in the streets instead of fighting, were doing the bop. That five minutes out of a lifetime acted like a trigger – for hundreds of kids that Saturday night was the last they would spend staring blankly at the box. The forgotten kids got something at last. (50)

What Scott's "forgotten kids" received was a short segment featuring two New York City *breaking* crews, Dynamic Rockers and Floormasters, speaking effusively about the transformative social effects of their dancing and then battling each other in a series of complicated dance sets. One after another, crew members flowed seamlessly from vertically-danced *toprocks* to close-to-the-ground footwork and spins, pausing for impact in the freezes that serve in breaking as the emphatic exclamation points of spontaneous kinesthetic one-upmanship. Andrew Wright recalls the segment vividly, especially his impression that the mostly Puerto Rican b boys "looked just like us!" Andrew's older brother, Doug, speaks of this episode as his first visual encounter with what he later understood to be hip hop. In a tone reminiscent of a conversion narrative, he relays:

The feeling I got was something you can't explain; you just knew you had to be a part of it. The vibe that it gave off was something that I had never experienced anywhere else or from doing anything else. (Khmer, 2001a. 29)

In this unexpected televised encounter with New York's breaking culture, Aotearoa's Polynesian young people received more than simply an image of brown bodies on their television screens; it was an image of people who looked like them doing something amazing – something they had fashioned themselves from the bits and scraps of other

cultural forms available to them in the metaphoric dustbins of their crumbling New York neighborhoods. And they were receiving international attention for it. Andrew Wright emphasises, “It sparked off breaking instantly, like the next day people were breaking all over the country” (Khmer 2001b, 37). The day after the episode aired, young people across New Zealand quite literally took to the streets, squares and pedestrian malls and started to dance.

In the photo above, Andrew Wright joins a friend (and the friend’s pet rat) in Civic Square, the central Wellington area just adjacent to the buildings housing municipal government. They are there, as they frequently were in this period, to dance. Rather than playing on the periphery this time, Wright and his friends are at the centre of the action – they *are* the action. *StreetAction Aotearoa* narrates how the newfound sense of confidence that street dance brought to Māori and (other) Pacific young people translated into different modes of inhabiting public space. City squares previously deemed “Pākehā” spaces become arenas for displaying dance prowess. The book documents dance in the centre of the centre of the nation’s largest cities – in Wright’s case, Wellington’s Civic Square or, elsewhere in the book, Auckland’s Aotea Square – but also in tiny towns and rural marae locations throughout the country. Andrew Wright recalls:

You couldn’t go anywhere in the country without being challenged. People would eye you up on the street and you’d have to battle [through dance]. Every town had at least two crews so they could have Friday night battles at the scout hall or whatever.

Reflecting on the period, the Wright brothers emphasise the partial, fleeting nature of their influential early encounters with what later would be called hip hop: a few frames in a movie, a snatch of song, subway graffiti in the background of a photo in an otherwise uninteresting *Life* magazine feature. “We used to sit there in front of the TV for a whole month, just to tape one song”, recalls Māori hip hop artist Tyna Keelan (Neems D3). The Wright brothers, along with their friends and kin, recollect a painstakingly patient process of selection – the slow, careful assemblage of a hundred small bits of information to pad the emergent contours of something that they *felt* before they knew even what to call it.

Such mediated genealogies of cultural transfer meant that, in New Zealand, stylistic distinctions were initially blurred between California-originated dance forms such as *locking*

and *popping*, and the New York form *breaking* (called breakdancing by the media or, by its practitioners, b boying/b girling). All of these were further intermixed in many New Zealand imaginations with the various US artists who incorporated street dancers and other elements of hip hop culture into their videos and live performances. By far the most influential of these was Michael Jackson, whose signature ‘moonwalk’ was the same backslide that his sometimes choreographer and collaborator Timothy (Popin’ Pete) Solomon, of the pioneering popping group Electric Boogaloos, had already debuted on *Soul Train* (1979). Some diligent young dancers in New Zealand, especially those in urban areas with more access to information, worked hard to discern what styles came from where, and how they related to each other.⁵ For many other young people, though – especially those in rural areas – bop remained the general term for the amalgam of US urban dances they were avidly assembling from the scraps of information available.

If their kinesthetic vocabularies were jumbled, however, New Zealand fervour for the introduced dances was indisputably clear. The dedication page of *StreetAction Aotearoa* includes this poetic declaration, excerpted from a bopper’s letter to Māori musician and producer Dalvanus Prime:

THE STREET IS MY MARAE,
MY WALKMAN MY MANA
MY BOP MY BLANKET,
KEEPS ME WARM (1985)

This and many other testimonies of young dancers contained in *StreetAction Aotearoa* underscore the significance they granted to dancing, and the degree of gratification, satisfaction, and self-worth they garnered from it.

MĀORI BOY ON FILM, TAKE 3: BOP IN THE WAKA, POI IN THE CITY

No other example of New Zealand popular culture so ably, or deliberately, exemplifies 1984’s cross-fertilisation of transnational urban street dance practices and local New Zealand – and specifically Māori – culture as the music video for the Pātea Māori Club’s

⁵ For example, Andrew Wright notes that his older brother Doug and Doug’s mentor B boy Tron (Andrew Rua) were “onto it” in terms of distinguishing the New York and Los Angeles dance forms. Doug, a.k.a. B boy Swerv, remains a practicing b boy to this day.

hit song *Poi E* (1983). The video was the result of a collaboration between Māori language advocate Ngoi Pēwhairangi and music producer Dalvanius Prime, whom she approached for advice. *Poi E* was calculatedly designed to convince the swelling numbers of young people growing up in cities that Māori language and culture was fun, hip, and relevant. Ngoi Pēwhairangi crafted the lyrics that the Pātea Māori Club perform in rollicking chorus. A remarkable feature of *Poi E* was that Prime layered this singing over a bouncy and imminently danceable complement of Linn drums and synthesiser, marrying the Māori lyrics and content to what was then the hip hop-influenced trend in US popular music.

The music video created for the song further underscores its deliberate hybridity. It opens with the sound of native birds and a full frame image of Taranaki (later revealed to be a painting – an image of an image). As the prominent physical feature of the Pātea Māori Club’s rural provincial environment, the mountain functions as an ‘establishing shot’ with both geographical and spiritual resonance. The next image, accompanied by both the synthesised drumbeat and kuia calling the opening lines of the song, is of the ancestral carving, the tekoteko, atop the Pātea marae whareniui. After cutting to a close-up of the same kuia singing, the camera pans out from the tekoteko to take in the full Pātea Māori Club performing in front of the whareniui – along with a complement of supporters and audience. The next 1:26 of the video features close-ups on various performers, young and old, in this same location.

The video then cuts to the second main location. This time, the kapa haka is arrayed in front of another structure of ancestral relevance – the concrete monument to the Aotea waka, or ancestral canoe, that sits alongside the main road running through the centre of the Pātea township. Significantly, an additional performer now joins them: Māori teenager Joe Moana dances high above them inside the raised hull of the canoe monument. Rather than kapa haka attire, he is wearing stylish street clothes and two bright, white gloves – the latter most clearly referencing pop icon Michael Jackson. And rather than moving like the kapa haka below him, he performs a series of moves drawn from the US West Coast street dance repertoire: the wrist rolls, *locks* and *Uncle Sam* finger points of locking; the body waves and isolations of popping. The next scene features Moana in the middle of a road popping and locking in the foreground of the frame while the Pātea Māori Club in their kapa haka regalia approach from behind him. Between them, however, an additional layer of

people are added to the scene: young women dressed in street clothes, like Moana dancing in front of them, but swinging poi, like the kapa haka behind them. One poi twirler is even on roller skates. If, in the previous scene, the video framed two separate performative ‘traditions’ alongside each other – and I use the term tradition reservedly, attentive to the ways both contemporary kapa haka and US street dances have dynamic histories of development – here it begins its work of aesthetically blending, visually, what the song has already blended aurally.

Subsequent scenes take this blending further. The video cuts from the rural Pātea township to urban Wellington. Where the previous scenes had featured the urban and transnational – metonymically represented by US street dances – these rural Māori provide the inverse: a succession of young, brown urban dwellers in street clothes swing poi in the central city. Joe Moana, out of the waka now and back in his ‘natural’ city environment amidst the urban Māori and Samoan members of his dance crew, features in these scenes as well. He is the culminating figure in a line of young Polynesian males doing a collective body wave. One of the bodies the wave passes through is that of Doug Wright, the older brother of Andrew Wright from the Westra and Black photographs. When the wave reaches Moana, he breaks away into a backslide (moonwalk) while simultaneously swinging poi.

The final minute of the video cuts between all these various locations, interspliced with others: Moana doing partial *flares* (a gymnastics-inspired breaking move) on a stage in front of the large painting of Taranaki; the Pātea Māori Club performing in front of the same backdrop; a trio of “New Romantics” – two seated Pākehā women and a standing Polynesian male (affectionately dubbed “Poi George” by one recent blogger)⁶ – all with poi in hand and singing the *Poi E* chorus. In the final scene, the Pātea Māori Club wraps up triumphantly in front of the Taranaki backdrop, in front of an enthusiastically applauding multicultural audience in street clothes.

The popular culture phenomenon that was *Poi E* – both the song and its accompanying video – has been repeatedly recalled in the nearly three decades since the song spent 22 weeks on the New Zealand charts, including four weeks at number one. The song and video featured in the 2002 television and radio coverage of the passing of its

⁶ <<http://www.robbyngallagher.com/2010/05/15/golden-moments-from-the-poi-e-video/>>. Web 16 September 2012.

producer Dalvanus Prime, and *Poi E* was subsequently given the title of number one “New Zealand 1 Hit Wonder” in a mid-2000s countdown on music television channel C4. Both song and video also receive regular mention in academic and popular discussions of Aotearoa hip hop history: while not a rap song, *Poi E*'s drumbeat and the dance forms featured in the video were a clear and deliberate accommodation of the musicological and choreographic techniques that hip hop had introduced to US, and subsequently global, popular culture (Mitchell; Zemke-White; Shute).

The special affection for *Poi E* amongst New Zealand hip hop artists was illustrated when chart-topping DJ P-Money orchestrated a special remixed performance of the song at the Australasian Performing Rights Association Silver Scroll Awards in 2006. Accompanied by the Pākehā DJ's dextrous manipulation of the original recording, the performance opened with live popping and breaking from Hamilton-based b boys Spell, Jorel, and Royce - all three wearing white gloves in homage to Joe Moana and the original *Poi E* video. It then featured new rapped verses from Māori MCs Hepaklypz and Koma from the Hamilton-based group 4 Corners, before the hip hop artists were joined onstage by members of the Pātea Māori Club, the women in front twirling poi and the men behind exhorting the delighted audience to clap. Twenty-two years after its initial chart-topping success, *Poi E* was being fondly recalled, and claimed, as part of the intersecting histories of Māori, hip hop, and the New Zealand nation.

While these various moments illustrate enduring affection for *Poi E* and its regular resurgence in national consciousness, its 2010 revival by *Boy* writer/director/actor Taika Waititi is without a doubt its most significant to date. It is to that movie – my fourth and final example of Māori boys on film – that I now turn.

MĀORI BOY ON FILM, TAKE 4: BOY E, OR, “WANNA SEE SOME MICHAEL JACKSON DANCE MOVES?”

Boy is set in late 1984 in Waihou Bay, on the ancestral lands of Te Whānau a -Apanui on the rural East Coast of New Zealand. Much of the film centres on the 11 year old protagonist, the eponymous Boy, working through his desires and aspirations for love and validation – from his long-absent father, from his deceased mother, and from the girl he has a crush on – in a vocabulary inflected by global popular culture in general, and Jackson in

particular. Minutes into the film, for example, Boy attempts to impress the girl he likes: “Hey Chardonnay, wanna see some Michael Jackson dance moves?” he calls out, before attempting an (admittedly poor) approximation of the singer’s signature choreography. It is the second of copious verbal references to the global pop icon that dot the film. These are bolstered visually: drawings and posters of Jackson paper Boy’s bedroom wall, stills of Jackson’s publicity materials accompany Boy’s narration, and at strategic moments, the film’s characters are depicted re-enacting unmistakable elements of Jackson’s music videos and lifestyle.

Such moments play a key part in distinguishing *Boy*’s humorous – or at least humorously bittersweet – tone from previous Māori films. On the surface, *Boy* shares some familiar elements with the film that preceded it as the most successful Māori-directed film of all time, *Once Were Warriors* (1994). Both films feature Māori children navigating a perilous environment of gangs, drugs, alcohol, violence, and questionable parental guidance, but their treatment of the material is quite different. Compare, for instance, the differing depictions of drunken adult violence in both films: at the precise points in *Once Were Warriors* where the low hum of a purerehua sonically indicates the onset of graphic violent realism, *Boy* instead lapses into stylised fantasy sequences based on Jackson videos but set to an innocuously dreamy riff from soundtrack collaborators The Phoenix Foundation. Thus, Boy’s father drunkenly picking fights at a party in the shed morphs, in his son’s glazed eyes, to his father as the lead in Jackson’s *Billy Jean* (1983); Boy watching his father and gang pals being beaten by rival gang members at a pub transmutes to the choreographed faux gang fight sequence from *Beat It* (1983). Such comic interruptions cushion us, the audience, from the violence the scenes imply, but they also suggest the ways Boy’s Jackson-saturated imagination provides a cushion of hope and respite – a coping mechanism – for him as well. While other references to US popular media abound in the film – *The Smurfs* (1981), *Dallas* (1978-91), *Dynasty* (1981-89), *Falcon Crest* (1981-90), *The A-Team* (1983-87), *The Incredible Hulk* (1978-82), and *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979-85) all get a mention, while *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) is thrice invoked – Jackson clearly holds pride of place.

The ubiquity of these US pop culture references attracted negative critical attention in the US. At least one reviewer, it seemed, did *not* want to see Jackson dance moves in a

Māori film: he wanted to see Māori doing “Māori” things – not Māori earnestly, falteringly, trying to moonwalk (Debruge 2010). Such critical desires and demands of the film are ably critiqued elsewhere in this special issue (see, in particular, Jo Smith’s contribution). I will, however, say that the chasm between that read of *Boy* and mine has much to do with one of the most significant points in the film’s popular cultural compass – one that US-based viewers failed to remark on: its use of *Poi E*.

While Jackson is repeatedly invoked, both verbally and visually throughout *Boy*, his music does not actually feature in the movie. Instead, *Poi E* opens and closes the film, providing the ideal aural cue for the temporal moment that *Boy* so carefully and consciously evokes. The film, after all, is not really about Jackson, but it *is* interested in the *idea* of Jackson as processed through the 11 year old mind of a Māori boy in rural Waihou Bay in 1984. What better song, then, to evoke this than that iconic 1984 interpretation of funky American hip hop/pop as processed by Ngoi Pēwhairangi, Dalvanius Prime and the rural Pātea Māori Club? An excerpt of the song plays as the film starts, providing accompaniment as Boy welcomes us to his “interesting world”, while the most substantial use of *Poi E* appears in the film’s lively end credit sequence. This latter scene features the majority of the cast, led by Boy’s father, Alamein (played by Waititi himself), offering an alternative music video interpretation of the original song, paying equal parts homage to the original video and the videos for Jackson’s *Thriller* (1984) and *Beat It* – Waititi also featured *Poi E* heavily in the promotional material leading up to the release of the film. The song formed the soundtrack to nearly the entire original theatrical trailer and featured prominently, also, in the longer trailer devised for international audiences (Waititi 2010b; 2010c). Further, an alternative edit of the end credit sequence aired on television and was quickly loaded to YouTube. Billed as “Taika Waititi’s new video for *Poi E*,” this longer video included excerpts of the original with footage of Joe Moana both in Pātea and Wellington, Doug Wright and the rest of his crew, interspersed with additional scenes from the film such as the Jackson fantasy sequences (Waititi 2010d).

In addition to these instances of direct incorporation into the film itself and its accompanying publicity materials, Waititi also launched a widely publicised campaign to make *Poi E* number one again on the New Zealand music charts, 26 years after its original success. In support of Waititi’s campaign, Māori Television organised a 2010 reunion

performance of the song in their studio, bringing together both the Pātea Māori Club and Joe Moana.⁷ Re-broadcasting the performance later on TV3's current affairs programme *Campbell Live*, host John Campbell introduced it thus:

Courtesy of the movie [*Boy*], *Poi E* is making a *dramatic* comeback after nearly three decades. Thanks to our friends at Māori Television, here's Taika Waiti's new music video and the original Pātea Māori Club. Look out for the bopper in the waka – he's back too for this musical reunion.⁸

The broadcast of the performance featured occasional 'then and now' split screens, with some performers, including Joe Moana, appearing alongside their earlier incarnations in segments of the original *Poi E* video. Thanks to Taika Waititi's film – and the director himself – the New Zealand public received their most significant encouragement, to date, to collectively remember the specific temporal and spatial moment that *Poi E* so evocatively represents.

THAT 1984 STRUCTURE OF FEELING

Waititi's *Boy* could potentially be read as just a local manifestation of the wider current popular culture obsession with the 1980s – a sort of nostalgic revelry in rehash by those of a certain age – but this would be a limited read of the film. Instead, I propose that at least one of the important aspects of *Boy* is that it offers a reflection on a 1984 *structure of feeling*, assembled from the memories and creative imagination of someone who was a Māori boy at that time. And yet, *Boy* is only a partial picture. A viewer could potentially wade through its litter of pop culture references – its deliberate, repetitive invocation of forms and conventions of the period – without ever consciously considering the structures that informed and shaped their production, circulation, and consumption. For this reason, in this essay I place three other textual examples alongside *Boy* in hopes of asking: how do these texts from the past help us to know *Boy*? How does *Boy* remind us of these texts, and the past that produced them?

⁷ Incidentally, Moana's appearance in this broadcast finally put to rest a rumour – a sort of homegrown urban legend that had persistently swirled for years – that he had died as a result of breaking a tapu by dancing in the waka in the original video.

⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AidMM_wNgCO>. Web 5 September 2012.

Boy invites us to consider 1984 from the situated vantage of an 11 year old Māori boy in rural Waihou Bay. For *Boy*, the city is a far-off, almost mythical place – a place he imagines his similarly-mythologised father might take him someday to “see Michael Jackson – LIVE!” However, the three other texts remind us that young people in the city had their own struggles. Mark Scott’s *StreetAction Aotearoa* broadens our frame for understanding relationships between those small town Māori adolescent experiences of 1984 that occurred in places like Waihou, Pātea, or Murupara, and their urban Māori counterparts in Auckland or Wellington. Scott championed the power of dance and graffiti art to reconnect the “forgotten kids” across all these places to the *wairua* and *mana*, the life-force and efficacy, he feared they were in danger of losing. In the Pātea Māori Club’s *Poi E*, Dalvanius Prime deliberately utilised elements of imported US popular culture to connect rural and urban locations to each other, and to Māori language and culture, and to convince young people in all these places that being Māori was cool. Both *StreetAction Aotearoa* and *Poi E* demonstrated that the bopper’s journey might be a spiral: embracing introduced popular culture could also be part of a return to valuing te ao Māori. Meanwhile, Ans Westra’s evocative photo of Andrew Wright, playing amidst the protests of the 1981 Springbok Tour, serves as a potent reminder of the immediate pre-history of the bop era – the politicised ground in which street dance took root.

Drafting *StreetAction Aotearoa* in 1984, Scott wrote, “This book is about more than bop or breakdance; it’s about all the forgotten kids of Aotearoa and their fight for a place in the Polynesia of the 80s. Bop is their fight, it’s a fight for a new future” (4). Reflecting back on the heady prose of Scott’s bop era manifesto – the journalist’s gushing testament to what bop was giving to all “the forgotten kids of Aotearoa” – Andrew Wright considers his words carefully. “At the time [when the book was published] I was like, ‘What’s he on about?’ But when I look back on it now, what he was saying is spot on”.

The 1980s enthusiasm of Māori and other Pacific youth for US street dance forms was characterised by some at the time simply as “Michael Jackson dance moves” but is recognisable in hindsight as the nascent seeds of an emergent local hip hop culture. This emergent culture must, however, be understood within its structuring context: a backdrop of political and economic turmoil, decades of rural-to-urban migration by both indigenous Māori and Pacific migrants, erosions of the blue-collar manufacturing base on which both

those populations relied, the implicit and explicit racisms of mainstream society, and the conservative deployments of culture sometimes wielded by Māori and other Pacific elders. Amidst these structuring forces, youth grasped onto aspects of US popular culture as an alternative space where their concerns and experiences could be foregrounded. Those that dismissively viewed boppers as simply US mimics in 1984 missed the mark, just as some film critics have in their reviews of Taika Waititi's 2010 evocation of that era. Dancing was not the same as protest marching or land occupying, but Ngoi Pēwhairangi, Dalvanus Prime and the Pātea Māori Club, Joe Moana and the rest of the boppers, and yes, even Michael Jackson, played their own parts in inspiring Māori boys to place themselves and their experiences at the centre of representation.

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