

## **A choreopoetics of Te Pō**

### **Tru Paraha**

Tangata whenua concepts of Te Pō inspire an Aotearoan choreopoetics of dark unknowing. An exploration of these cosmo-genealogies feels timely given the burgeoning influx of indigenous and transcultural theory-practices flowing into and out of artistic inquiry. Under the darklight of such a project, I draw on (w)haka-papa, kōrero o neherā, and New Zealand historiographies as examined by a range of iwi and tau-iwi researchers.

Conventionally translated as both *to place in layers* and *genealogy*, haka-papa reveals the significance of pō concepts as they consistently arise out of iwi-sourced archives and customary narratives across regions. Of import is the testimony within these haka-papa of how tangata whenua have encountered and theorised Te Pō from ancient Hawaiiki to contemporary Aotearoa. It is worth mentioning that haka-papa, while commonly concerned with humanity, is not limited to the theorising of human lineages. It is expressly employed within this essay to unravel notions of Darkness Perpetual as critically relevant to choreopoetic practice. Te Pō poses a culturally specific way of attending to darkness that will largely remain – despite all inquiry – unknowable. It will remain so, because it engages an epistemology of the Unknown from a tangata whenua consciousness - not one grounded in the centuries of recorded European and/or Asian philosophies of unknowing.

Pūkenga Ngāpuhi Hone Sadler claims that in Aotearoa New Zealand, ‘all phenomena whether or not they stem from a Māori or non-Māori base can be explained, interpreted, and given theoretical understanding’ through haka-papa (Sadler 2007: 36). This argument will be met by some with contention, or a degree of intellectual distancing. Two reasons are identified from the outset: firstly, the apparent audacity of the claim, and secondly, colonialist assumptions held within and beyond the academy that would negate the rigor and/or relevance of indigenous epistemologies. Sadler’s argument is audacious because it presumes that there is nothing in contemporary Aotearoa that is outside the purview of haka-papa. Considering this country’s increasing multiculturalism, it can be seen to assert historical and political magnitude – crucial to indigenous articulations and decolonial discourses. The main barrier to accepting haka-papa as a generic tool of analysis, however, is well surmised by

historian Dame Anne Salmond:

*Eminent New Zealanders assure their fellows that Māori were "lucky" to be colonised by Europeans, that te reo Māori is worthless, that tikanga Māori have nothing to teach us. Others simply assume ancestral legacies from Europe are superior to those from the Pacific — in the law, science, social and cultural life.*

Salmond (2019: n.pag.)

This paper proposes a theory-practice of Pō consciousness toward choreographic and poetic texts despite such ubiquitous prejudices held in this country regarding mātauranga Māori. Mātauranga is employed as a measure toward unpacking tangata whenua concepts within appropriate frameworks. Part of the challenge of such work is to advance interpretations of Te Pō through artistic research strategies, imaginative writing, and live art practices. While doing so, it is stimulating to discover a range of literature contributing to this emerging performance philosophy of darkness, and to attempt a comparative study drawing on regional and international documents of the past hundred or so years.

Advanced by our Polynesian forebears who voyaged across Te Moana Nui ā Kiwa to Aotearoa, haka-papa has been continuously applied as a way of analysing phenomena and adapting to new experiences encountered on this whenua. Philosopher Carl Mika probes some of the intricacies of haka-papa beyond definitions of human pedigree or physical layering upon Papa ‘in terms of its focus on fixed strata, their interstices, and the potential for thinking both of the layers themselves and the dark, mysterious spaces between them’ (Mika 2015: 104). Considering the numerous designations for darkness recounted from oral records, there is much to be gleaned from these dark interstices along with their influence on an Aotearoan choreopoetics.

Commonly applied to describe tangata whenua ways of knowing, learning and educating, mātauranga Māori has continued to evolve since its arrival in Aotearoa. This period of occupation recorded by Māori heritage sources begins around a thousand years ago. It is of note that up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century mātauranga was the dominant human knowledge tradition in the country and can be differentiated from Kaupapa Māori theories that have developed over the last twenty-odd years. Since Linda Tuhiwai-Smith’s seminal text of 1999 *Decolonising Methodologies* (since revised in 2012), Kaupapa Māori has been distinguished within the academy as a Māori-responsive approach to theoretical inquiry and research. It privileges the aspirations of indigenous New Zealanders while remaining entirely accessible to tau-iwi.

Mātauranga Māori and its broad application across disciplines continues to be incorporated within current arts practice taking account of both ‘inherited Māori knowledge and contemporary Māori

knowledge of the world, including research methods’ (Nepia 2012: 127). These general and specialist knowledges are prevalent outside of academia and have informed writers and practitioners of diverse nationalities since early settler collaboration. They are no longer exclusive to tangata whenua, or even te reo Māori speakers. This essay, while addressing some of the imbalances in choreopoetic discourse where Aotearoan knowledge is concerned, is primarily driven by a fascination with the dark subject matter at hand. One need not be of tangata whenua descent to pursue such interests, as several authors cited within this discussion clearly evidence.

*I think of a myth – a male god  
whose sperm is the stars in the sky  
(of an ever expanding universe!)  
and then of another – the female who gathers  
one from the many, the many on one,  
back to the blackness of a beginning...*

Kārena-Holmes (2002: 72)

The accounts of Te Pō under review attend to the phase preceding Te Ao Mārama. This would be a period of cosmological animation anterior to terrestrial life. Māori artist Robert Jahnke addresses this domain in his doctoral studies on whakairo in a section entitled Nga Tataitanga Po: *the interface of darkness and enlightenment*:

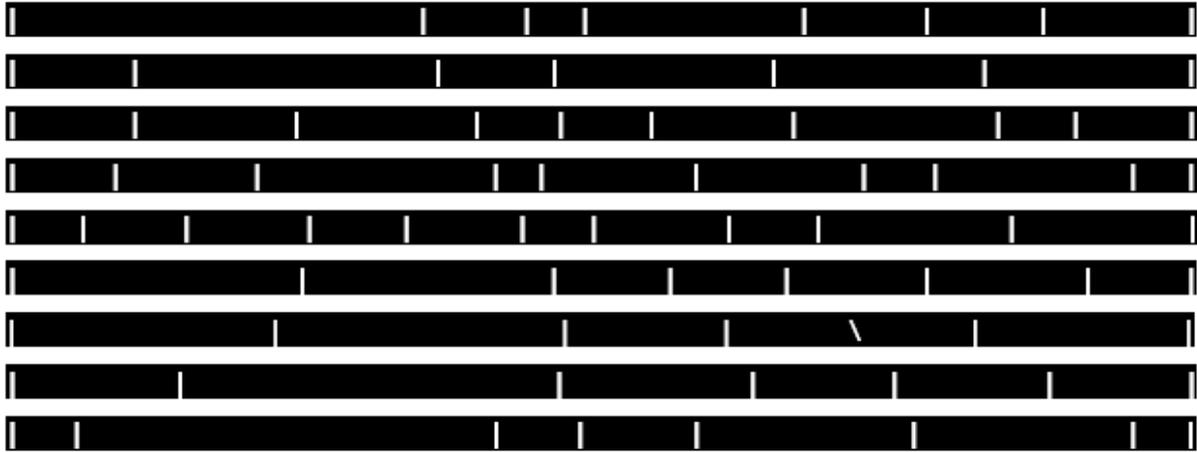
*In most cosmo-genealogical narratives, Te Pō (the realm of deity-darkness) and Te Kore (the realm of psychic manifestation – void of primal negation) are located as primary evolutionary states that precede the emergence of humankind in Te Aomarama (the world of human existence).*

Jahnke (2006: 59)

Intriguingly, these narratives announce a series of astronomical events of darkness for which there can be no human witness or authoritative corroborator. This is key to my position of uncertainty and why a speculative approach to Te Pō and its perplexing darkneses seems applicable. I can only ruminate on how our tūpuna came to analyse, name, experience and give interpretation to the phenomena of Darkness Perpetual. Te Pō concepts are comprised of iwi-based or tohunga-specific sequences of the deep darkneses emerging out of (or in some contested accounts preceding) Te Kore – commonly translated in English as the Void, nothingness, absolute potential.

As a performance-oriented artist working with multiple bodies in the hovering gloom, I am stimulated to engage this pervasive ‘interface of darkness and enlightenment’ – Te Pō and Te Ao – and its





Paraha (2018: 50)

Having endured European imperialism and systemic colonial violence such as the Tohunga Suppression Act 1907, little remains of the sacred doctrine surrounding these primordial darknesses. There are, however, salvaged accounts of the evocative aliases of Te Pō. Bausch's study echoes similar sentiments where she bemoans 'The po-concepts had dimensions which to my great regret cannot be fully reconstructed because of a lack of adequate material' (Bausch 1978: 174). Furthermore, by nature of their esoteric location within mātauranga Māori and the limited access accorded to what were traditionally tohunga eruditions, Te Pō cosmo-genealogies are best analysed through a mixture of close readings by licensed translators and experts of te reo Māori – and wild speculation.

<i>Nā Te Anu ko:</i>	<i>(The Cold begat:)</i>
<i>Te Pō</i>	<i>(The Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-nui</i>	<i>(The Great Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-roa</i>	<i>(The Long Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-papakina</i>	<i>(The Striking Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-ki-tua</i>	<i>(The Darkness Beyond)</i>
<i>Te Pō-ki-roto</i>	<i>(The Internal Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-tawhito</i>	<i>(The Aged Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-ruru</i>	<i>(The Inclement Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-aio</i>	<i>(The Peaceful Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-mā</i>	<i>(The White Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-mangu</i>	<i>(The Black Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-whakaruru</i>	<i>(The Sheltered Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-kumea</i>	<i>(The Pulling Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-hakarite</i>	<i>(The Arranged Darkness)</i>

<i>Te Pō-punga</i>	<i>(The Hindering Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-raro</i>	<i>(The Darkness Below)</i>
<i>Te Pō-matau</i>	<i>(The Right-handed Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-maui</i>	<i>(The Left-handed Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-kerekere</i>	<i>(The Dark Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-uriuri</i>	<i>(The Gloomy Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-i-pepeke</i>	<i>(The Jumping Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-i-tuturi</i>	<i>(The Kneeling Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-whāwhā</i>	<i>(The Groping Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-tangotango</i>	<i>(The Intense Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-tahuri-atu</i>	<i>(The Turning Away Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-tahuri-mai</i>	<i>(The Turning Toward Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-tiwhatiwha</i>	<i>(The Dismal Darkness)</i>
<i>Te Pō-namunamu-ki-te wheiao</i>	<i>(The Diminutive Darkness-to-the confusion)</i>

Sadler (2007: 37–38)

This hakaapa chart was given to Sadler by tohunga Ngāpuhi Maori Marsden and offers one of the more comprehensive renderings of Te Pō cosmology available to interested researchers of this century. In the extended version of this tātai, Te Pō does not philosophically pre-exist in isolation, but morphs into becoming through unfathomable eons of Kore (Void), Kōwhao (Abyss), Anu (Cold), and ultimately heralds the world of light. This specific sequence of Te Pō is not commonly found among other written accounts. One is confounded by the attributes accorded to these darknesses along with their stirring interpretations; interpretations which are especially fascinating as poetic images written in English. Aligning with post-positivist organisations of knowledge, this chart extends a cryptic logic. The obscure classification system and whakaaro huna or hidden thought expressed is both enigmatic and exact. Most of the designations of Te Pō are peculiar to this northern hakaapa while some commonalities are noted across other tribal accounts, such as the introductory phases: Te Pō (The Darkness), Te Pō-nui (The Great Darkness) and Te Pō-roa (The Long Darkness).

Like others in the public domain, the foregrounded cosmo-genealogy is translingual in its contemporary format. Transmitted across generations through oral accounts in te reo Ngāpuhi, it has then been transcribed to written text across languages. Despite appearances, such charts are nonbinary, and compel a reading that does not guarantee instant comprehension or familiarity irrespective of which language/s one is fluent in.

A textual analysis alone will not suffice in penetrating the profundity of these darknesses. And while there is no exclusive authority on the origins of each Pō state, the primary sources remain protected

within iwi archives.

Iwi has a generic interpretation as *tribe*, yet also translates as *bones*, evoking spaces of innate preservation within the foundational structural system of the body. Yet beyond the storing of knowledge within collective skeletal memories, choreopoetic practices permit the residing intelligences held within one's 'bones' an eerie afterlife. Somatic archives can only perform in and as real-time negation – the unknowing that is part of these cultural archives' treasures. Embodied knowledge differs in register from both literate and oral archives: choreographic strategies, while temporal, transmit a future reading through the hidden and explicit movements of its performing bodies.

The reader is invited to give dark attention to the hakaapa presented within this paper and to deepen into strata of kupu Māori, allowing for states of ambiguity. Such uncertainty may feel counterintuitive to conventions of Western scholarship and the relentless imperative for individuals to grasp, define, and concretise what constitutes knowledge (Mika 2017). Uncertainty, as mentioned previously, is a state that the threshold of darkness enables, even insists upon, and a praxis that must also be invited to its readership.

Through a close reading of Te Pō recounted within Percy Smith's early twentieth-century text *Lore of the Whare Wananga*, Jahnke remarks:

*The sequence of Po and Kore are realigned under the cosmological construction of Io as the Supreme Being. Thus, Te Pō is re-configured as the dilemma faced by the offspring of Ranginui (the sky father) and Papatuanuku (the earth mother). Should their parents be killed, separated and by whom? Hence, the various pō are quantified with adjectives that describe the intensity of the dilemma faced by the children of the primal parents.*

Jahnke (2006: 59)

Jahnke goes on to untangle the abstruse adjectives accorded to Te Pō. He notes a curious inclusion of terms not usually associated with this realm that attune to the exertions and struggles of the entrapped ātua within a dark, primeval embrace. Throughout his thesis he employs a tātaitanga reo analysis, which is a culturally distinctive linguistic method:

*This linguistic method concurs with Kaupapa Maori as research strategy where language is perceived as a site of struggle, not only for the Maori language, but also for Maori as a people. Ideologically, tātaitanga reo is employed to cover form,*

*content, style, language and cultural relativity within a framework of Maori consciousness. (8)*

Unraveling the spectra of Te Pō Jahnke suggests, ‘The darkness, the debate, the quarrel are not black and white but fluctuate in intensity as the dispute between the children wavers between death, separation and revolt’ (60). Alternatively, these darknesses are considered more likely to construe a primal search for, and origins of, consciousness.

*Ka noho te whanau nei, koia tera ta ratou noho i kii ake nei. Ko te ingoa o nga Pó i noho ai ratou koia enei:*

- |                            |                          |                           |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. <i>Te Pó-kauru</i>      | 2. <i>Te Pó-uriuri</i>   | 3. <i>Te Pó-kakarauri</i> |
| 4. <i>Te Pó-aoao-nui</i>   | 5. <i>Te Pó-kerekere</i> | 6. <i>Te Pó-tamaku</i>    |
| 7. <i>Te Pó-tiwhatiwha</i> |                          |                           |

cited in Jahnke (2006: 59)

Historian Te Rangi Hiroa questions some of the accounts of Te Pō held within Smith and Elsdon Best’s versions. He limns significant terms within Best’s iteration, however, evincing ‘the period when the progeny of Papa were groping in the dark for some way out of their confinement’.

*Te Po-whawha—the night of feeling [with the hands]*

*Te Po-namunamu-ki-taiao—the night of the narrow passage to the outer world*

*Te Po-tahuri-atu—the night of turning away*

*Te Po-tahuri-mai-ki-taiao—the night of turning towards the outer world*

*The above terms are not divisions of the Po, but they describe what was happening.*

*Thoughts of the outer world of light (taiao) had begun to stir in the minds of those confined in utter darkness.*

Hiroa (1950: 437)

Te Pō envisioned as both divisions of dark space and the furtive activity of ātua steers a compulsion to unearth layers of movement and text. Te reo Māori is the oral and inscribed language of these cosmogenealogies, but what of the body’s hidden language/s? Amongst the strata of darkness there are embodied interstices of bl ckn ss. These, too, might activate ‘the deep rift in thinking that occurs when one realizes the extent and mystery of other worlds in which one is not located’ (Mika 2014: 57). Drawing on Martin Heidegger's Fourfold of Earth, Sky, Divinities, and Mortals, Mika extends his whakaaro toward divinities such as ātua, and entities that are not directly accessible to humans. This

would also include the mysterious elements of those realities that can be perceived. Unlike Quentin Meillassoux (2008) who, in his critique of correlationism, would call attention to noumena or the primary characteristics of things in themselves, Mika posits the unknowable, concealed nature of the universe as equally enmeshed with indigenous notions of selfhood. Te Pō, in this sense, can be conceived as a cosmic force that also, through relations of haka-papa, directly affects human consciousness.

*And what was time, anyway? Black intensities  
of black on black on black feeding on itself?  
Something immense? Immeasureless?*

Tūwhare (1993: 158)

Hone Tūwhare's poem 'We, who live in darkness' offers an example of how poetic composition has found an explicit entanglement with primordial notions of Te Pō. Tūwhare recounts a tangata whenua narrative as examined by Jahnke, Hiroa and others, where the offspring of Ranginui and Papatūānuku are trapped within a perpetual embrace.

Considering contemporary human events, such histories are most notably enacted within the customary practice of pōhiri that has been retained across centuries of volatile and amicable interactions between hapū, iwi and tau-iwi. The term pōhiri, in translation, denotes a gathering in and through darkness.

This communal activity ushers people through ceremonial states of encounter and is commonly performed as a socially improvised or formal welcome ceremony involving two parties. A symbolic journeying across tā-vā (a Moanan concept of time and space) summons a tangata whenua creation concept whereby the Unknown (darkness) must be traversed before entering the 'knowing' (light) world of humanity. Analogously, the gestational period from the spark of human conception to birth is perceived as a passage through stages of embryonic dark space in symbiosis with the gestational darkneses of Te Pō.

Nuanced translations feature within the records surveyed, and conjure images of an inexplicable, infinite expanse. Te Pō is described by ethnologist David Simmons as the 'Second State or mode of becoming' and a 'state of duality' between the parent-less Ranginui and Papatūānuku. Drawing on Best, Simmons reiterates these pō states as 'the nights of pregnancy'.

*Te Ponui* (the great night)  
*Te Poroa* (the long night)

<i>Te Pouriuri</i>	<i>(the black night)</i>
<i>Te Pokarekare</i>	<i>(the dark night)</i>

Then the following nights of labour

<i>Te Po te kitea</i>	<i>(the unseen night)</i>
<i>Te Po tangotango</i>	<i>(the very dark night)</i>
<i>Te Po whawha</i>	<i>(the night of feeling)</i>
<i>Te Po namunamu ki taiao</i>	<i>(the night leading to the world)</i>
<i>Te Po tahuri atu</i>	<i>(the night of turning)</i>
<i>Te Po tahuri mai ki taiao</i>	<i>(the night of turning to this world)</i>

Simmons (1986: 10)

Comparably, Hiroa describes Te Pō as ‘The second phase’, but his whakaaro attends to more psychic dimensions of obfuscation and ignorance.

*Qualifying terms were added to express various attributes of Te Po. The extent (nui) in space was expressed by Te Po-nui and its length (roa) in time by Te Po-roa. The negative use of te appears in the name Te Po-te-kitea (The Night-in-which-nothing-could-be-seen), which applied to both visual and mental darkness. The intensity of the darkness was expressed by such classical terms as Te Po-uriuri, Te Po-kerekere, and Te Po-tango-tango, each with fine shades of meaning for which there are no satisfactory equivalents in English. The length of Te Po was also stressed by a numerical sequence of ten Po from Te Po-tuatahi (Po-the-first) to Te Po-tuangahuru (Po-the-tenth).*

Hiroa (1950: 434)

The numerical sequence totaling in ten Pō in this account, like many hakaapa analyses, differs between iwi. Referring to Marsden’s tātai reiterated by Sadler, the propensity for Te Pō to appear in diverse manifestations of nonhuman phenomena becomes apparent.

<i>Nā Te Kore</i>	<i>(From Io to The Void)</i>
<i>Nā Te Kore ko Te Kōwhao</i>	<i>(From The Void to The Abyss)</i>
<i>Nā Te Kōwhao ko Te Anu</i>	<i>(From The Abyss to The Cold)</i>
<i>Nā Te Anu ko Te Pō</i>	<i>(From The Cold to The Darkness)</i>
<i>Nā Te Pō ko Te Mauri</i>	<i>(From The Darkness to The Life Force)</i>
<i>Nā Te Mauri ko Te Pū</i>	<i>(From the Life Force to the Source, (origin))</i>

<i>Nā Te Pū ko Te Weu</i>	<i>(From the Source to the Strand [of hair])</i>
<i>Nā Te Weu ko Te More</i>	<i>(From the strand of hair to the Tap root)</i>
<i>Nā Te More ko Te Aka</i>	<i>(From the Tap root to the Vine)</i>
<i>Nā Te Aka ko Te Rea</i>	<i>(From the Vine to the Springing forth, to grow, to multiply)</i>

Sadler (2007: 39)

Here, The Darkness begets The Life Force, which denotes the beginnings of exponential growth toward the not-yet-human world. In a dark movement that is responsive to Te Pō enumeration/exponentiality, when a dancer moves the joints of their fingers, elbows and shoulder blades in an imperceptible movement choreographed to be unseen in darkness, they ‘count’ on each joint an arising-descending Pō configuration that is both demonstrated and kept tapu in the context of the dance. This choreopoetic movement becomes urgent, searching and productive, with potential for further growth through the somatic receptivity of its attending bodies.

Te Pō can be dimensionally realised in this way: as a space of dark vitality that need not be reduced in its contemporary representation to impressions of sorrow or psychological confusion. Its implications for choreopoetic works are considerably more complex when drawing on tātaītanga reo interpretations across texts. Jahnke concludes:

*Te Po as a concept is alternatively applied to an epochal period of evolution preceding the primeval parents, Ranginui and Papatuanuku, a period when Ranginui and Papatuanuku mated and produced deity, a period of debate between the offspring of the primal pair, the underworld and night. With the exception of po as night what is common to all these dimensions of po is their location in a realm beyond the material world. They are synonymous with the realm in which deity evolve and exist in contradistinction to the realm in which humankind is manifest in material form.*

Jahnke (2006: 60)

The multiple and confounding ways in which Te Pō can be perceived correspond with the dark aesthetics and movements that choreopoetic text expound. Dwelling upon the dimension of pō as ‘night,’ we are reminded that this darkness can be observed within the material world and is a ubiquitous phenomenon. The im)material and meta)physical manifest and can be accessed via unknowing; they become conduits for each other in a choreopoetic darkening. Nocturnal darkness (pō) as experienced on Earth can be differentiated from, even while it remains intrinsic to, the celestial realm designated as Te Pō that exists beyond human access.

This would suggest that atua dimensions and realms of the supernatural are not removed from supposed ‘real life,’ but become a weird realism, that is, an intensification of the nonhuman into amplified realms of correlative attention. This intensification of corresponding realities - from pō to Te Pō - is clarified by Hiroa through a semantic analysis:

*It appears certain that the genealogical method was followed in creating a list of proper names by converting common names, such as kore (nothing) and po (night, darkness), into proper names by prefixing the definite article te (the) and so creating Te Kore (The Void) and Te Po (The Unknown).*

Hiroa (1950: 434)

Te Pō, intensified in both meaning and semantic form, is characterised by Hiroa, Bausch, and others as *The Unknown*. It orients choreopoetic practices, toward a dark unknowing experienced both during the night (te pō), and in contemplation of atua dimensions - referred to by Jahnke as the realm of deity (Te Pō). This delineation extracted through the definite article ‘te’ is significant in its emphasis on both nocturnal art practices, *and* the conceptualising of Darkness Perpetual. The hakaapa based ancestry of Te Pō-namunamu-ki-te-wheiao, for example, might be distinguished from more widely theorised notions of darkness whose negative connotations can be received with resistance.

Te Pō is not only ancestral in Meillassoux’s sense, by way of its location within a time anterior to human consciousness – thus, confounding speculative thought - but is also nonhuman ancestor and one of many predecessors. Hence, the omnipresence of Te Pō in tangata whenua speculative thought, and within the acuties of an Aotearoan choreopoetics cannot be underestimated. If one assumes descent from Te Pō or would claim that darkness is where we all came from in a hakaapa sense, then it can be reasoned that I correspondingly constitute, or might comport toward, the living embodiment of this same dark matter today. A single definition of Te Pō pronounces ‘the cosmic darkness out of which all forms of life were afterwards evolved or procreated’, which has deep psychic, physiological and cultural ramifications.

Conversely, a palpable sense of foreboding can be discerned regarding the ominous sphere known as pō reinga or Rarohenga. Te Pō, in this context, is comparable with Hades: what Bausch refers to as ‘netherworld’, or Jahnke as ‘underworld’. Pō reinga is the tapu domain of death, which as Salmond reminds us, ‘in the Maori cosmos is an ultimate defeat, expressed in images of crashing trees and shattered canoes’ (Salmond 1978: 7). Again, how we observe, absorb and decode these concepts is vital. What cannot be comprehended through ordinary lived experience, can be artistically probed and reconstructed in evocations with darkunknowing.

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