Understanding Whangara: *Whale Rider* as Simulacrum

Brendan Hokowhitu

For those with neither pen nor sword, the movie camera has proven a mighty instrument. For centuries, colonized aboriginal people depended upon oral tradition to preserve their language and creation stories – the pith and marrow of every culture – but with the advent of the 20th century and documentary films like Robert Flaherty's 'Nanook of the North' and 'Moana', a new medium emerged to champion their cause. Now filmmakers are turning from the documentary depiction of these indigenous cultures to their languages and creation myths, furthering a cinematic tradition and exploring an entirely new genre (Garcia 2003a: 16)

Ulrich Koch's 1998 film *The Saltmen of Tibet*, which ethnographically chronicled the spiritual journey re-enacted each year by Tibetan nomads "marked a turning point" (Garcia 2003a: 16) in film production because of its anthropological intent. That is, the film attempted to explain in a text understandable to a western audience, the complexities, mores and customs of an-'other' culture. Many films with similar ethnographic underpinnings followed, such as Zacharias Kunuk's (2001) *Atanarjuat* (The Fast Runner), Phillip Noyce's (2002) *Rabbit Proof Fence* and Niki Caro's (2003) *Whale Rider*, to the extent that these films and others of the same ilk have clustered to form an increasingly popular genre. The growing attention and curiosity of the global film audience with the indigenous subject is, thus, a phenomenon worthy of investigation.

Often indigenous films are referred to as sites of resistance, where indigenous groups are able to maintain their autonomy in the age of globalisation. To some degree, this reasoning explains why many Māori champion films such as *Whale Rider* and *Once Were Warriors*, for at least they give recognition to their social existence and consciousness against a modernity and colonial era that has denied them a historical and political presence. It is possible, then, that the indigenous film denies the meta-narratives of the Enlightenment and interrupts modernity's secularisation and progress, allowing for other ways of knowing the world and alternative forms of culture to be foregrounded and legitimated. Yet, the mere centring of indigenous and alternative subjectivities does not guarantee a subaltern voice. We should not merely accept *Whale Rider*, described by one film-reviewer as "a gorgeous fable from New Zealand about the balance between the old and new worlds, tradition and

progress, superstition and faith", on face-value (Cline 2003). Conversely, I would align with Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay's assessment of the film as an "indigenous film for beginners" (cited in Calder 2003: A2), meaning that *Whale Rider* lacked both the depth and complexity needed to examine an alternative knowledge system and, basically, presented an immature text that will ultimately be more harmful to Māori culture than good.

There is also the unnerving possibility that the popular consumption of indigenous culture through film reflects a hark back to the nineteenth century when popular European culture included the gradual emergence of "exhibitions of exotic people… as spectacles on a mass scale for mass audiences, and the financing of exhibitions became a question of selling tickets in their thousands rather than seeking funding from a single monarch" (Andreassen 2003: 4). Today, rather than seeking funding from the government to produce a low-budget, obscure arthouse indigenous film produced for small interested audiences, 'exotic' cultures on the Hollywood screen have again become marketable for mass-consumption. Is the popularity of *Whale Rider*, then, due to the film enabling the global audience to comfortably transform into cultural anthropologists for two hours, to view societies apparently less civilised than their own? Following the success of *Whale Rider*, *New Zealand Listener* columnist Phillip Matthews describes the recipe for the success of the pseudo-indigenous film:

> *The art circuit need not mean small business. 'Whale Rider' could expect to be a moderate hit of the scale of the Australian film 'Rabbit Proof Fence': it's indigenous yet accessible, exotic yet in English, arthouse yet conventionally told… The theory is that, just as tourists look for unspoilt and the far flung in a crowded and homogeneous world, so the indigenous story is a respite from an increasingly cautious Hollywood (Matthews 2003: 24).*

This description is disturbing because it reminds me of the way early anthropologists simplified indigenous cultures to align with their hierarchical notions of civilisation. The market logic described here demands production of humanistic films that simplify and misrepresent indigenous culture by reproducing a perverse version of the western Self with an exotic aroma. Therefore, although the market logic encourages the production of 'indigenous' films for mass-consumption and, rationally, an alterity of thought, ironically such films further subjugate different ways of viewing the world. The market logic also privileges the western gaze as the perspective that has to be satiated. Consequently, not content to just accept *Whale Rider* as a site of indigenous empowerment, as it has so often been described, this article examines popular discourses to provide a critical reading of the film as a producer

of 'local' knowledge within a globalised film industry that accommodates popularised transnational concepts through 'authentic' indigenous settings such as the 'fantasyland' that is Whangara, and 'bona fide' indigenous communities and cultures.

Understanding *Whale Rider's* Popularity

Given the inherent dangers of representing indigenous cultures in a mode that is understandable to and fashionable with a western audience, how are we to critically understand the popularity of *Whale Rider*? Although unsubstantiated, it appears that *Whale Rider* was driven by to satisfy the consumption of a global audience and, even if this is not true, it did. The culture *Whale Rider* portrayed did not come from an alternative worldview (which would have been largely incomprehensible to the western viewer); it was not local indigenous culture, but rather a 'third culture' oriented beyond national boundaries and made instantly recognisable to a western audience. Hence, *Whale Rider* is a transnational film because its central theme of a subservient subject overcoming insurmountable odds and cultural oppression, crosses and transgresses national boundaries. This is similar to the case where global commodities, such as McDonalds, are no longer identified with a single place of origin, rather they become 'localised'. Using the commodity analogy, a third culture is developed or controlled by market demand and the 'factories' are indigenous localities that reproduce it for consumption. John Barnett, the producer of *Whale Rider* and head of South Pacific Pictures, confirms how in the film the local was produced for the global:

> *What it encourages you to do is make a product that people want to go and see.*
> *Some people will say that New Zealand films are too specific to New Zealand, but I*
> *think we've proved with 'Whale Rider' that you can make it as specific as you want*
> *and people will go and see it anywhere (cited Welch 2003: 23-4)*

Or, in other words, "unlike more traditional conquerors, we are not content merely to subdue others: We insist that they be like us" (Watson 1997: 223).

The third culture described here comes in the form of a young heroine triumphing over adversity, as one film critic pertinently describes the triumph of Paikea, the central character, over supposed traditional Māori patriarchy:

> *Grrl Power, Kiwi style: A sweet-smart new film that's been dazzling hard-to-please*
> *festival crowds with an age-old underdog tale… like most crowd-pleasers and sleeper*

hits, from 'Rocky' to 'Bend It Like Beckham', ['Whale Rider' is] the story of an underdog overcoming apparently insurmountable odds (Ansen 2003: 59).

This example of 'Grrl Power, Kiwi style' is highlighted when the Māori patriarch, Koro, finally realises the leadership potential of the young heroine when she rides the head of a pod of beached whales to safety, emulating the feat of her eponymous ancestor. As one reviewer explains: "By the time Koro bows down to the young 'elder', you'll be wiping away the tears from your eyes feeling vindicated" (Aoun 2005: 173).

Producer John Barnett further clarifies that there were a number of transnational themes manufactured within a local setting to satisfy a global audience:

This is a universal story, that these themes of inherited power and the clash between the contemporary and the traditional, the familial love and the obligations that Koro the chief has that get in his way of exercising that familial love, the role of a woman in society – those were things that it didn't matter where you came from in the world, you were familiar with these things. I really saw it as a story that people would understand wherever they were (cited Welch 2003: 21).

Whale Rider then, according to the dominant discourse, is a 'coming of age' film, not only for both Paikea and Koro, but also more importantly for a localised 'primitive' culture not yet liberalised into globally enlightened norms. For the western audience, *Whale Rider* provides a nostalgic revisit to the pre-enlightenment period. The people of Whangara represent images of the primitive Self going through the process of enlightenment; or the process of arriving out of pre-historical conditions and into modernity. If we define the enlightenment as being underpinned by the political demand for the right to question everything, where enlightenment thinkers dared to imagine a better world and made practical proposals for its accomplishment, *Whale Rider* then describes supposed traditional Māori culture as unenlightened. Thus, the film's attractiveness to western audiences in part stems from their recognition of a third culture in the form of the omnipresent modernist theme of overcoming adult cultural constrictions through the persistence of childlike innocence.

It is the claim of this paper then, that *Whale Rider* satisfied the global audience, not because of its depiction of an alternative indigenous culture, but rather because it bastardised Māori culture to resemble the universal language of a transnational third culture, complicit with the 'deterritorialisation' of popular culture (Watson 1997: 226). Through its unique landscape,

indigenous mythology and brown people, *Whale Rider* gives the appearance of being a foreign indigenous film, but in reality its themes merely rehash western clichés. Such a representation is more about producing the local as a site of neo-colonialism as opposed to liberation; a site where alternative knowledges are homogenised to reflect western conventions with an exotic flavour. In contrast to the empowering rhetoric that director Niki Caro effortlessly fell into following the film's release, the local as represented within the global film industry in general, and *Whale Rider* in particular, is a place from which an indigenous subject will struggle to find a voice that does not have to be understandable to a western audience, does not have to speak to a universal human nature, and/or does not come off looking like an indigenous picture postcard.

Whangara Disneyland

On a bright summer Sunday in 1901, more than 18,000 people visited Denmark's Copenhagen Zoo. They had not come to view the animals, but to see a group of 'brown exotic' people who had just arrived from India. Twenty-five Indians - men, women and children - were on display together with exotic animals like elephants, snakes and performing bears. The Indians' daily life was shown, and they performed as themselves by cooking food, taking care of their children, doing artisan work and other activities in a so-called Indian village, which consisted of huts made out of palm tree leaves, constructed in the middle of the zoo. This Indian village marked the culmination of exhibitions of 'exotic' people in Denmark (Andreassen 2003: 1).

Whangara is an actual town located in the tribal area of Ngäti Porou (North Island, middle east coast) but, in accordance with the transnational third culture and ethnographic intent described above, the Whangara in *Whale Rider* is an imagined borderland where the 'sea' of homogenised western culture approaches the 'shores' of a fictional local traditional Māori village. Whangara is an imagined landscape, a primitive fantasyland, consciously or inadvertently created by director Caro to avoid the colonial reality. *Whale Rider* provides the illusion of spatial isolation allowing the viewer, like the anthropologist, to focus upon the rich particularity of local traditions, and to escape into a world where images of themselves are not present. The isolation of Whangara also serves to signify it as a borderland, a place at the margins of the global world, just as the community is on the margins between the primitive and modern. Its unenlightened characters are as "restless as the sea… the beach is its iconic point of entry and departure, a place where people are abandoned or disappear forever, a place where things wash up" (Morris 2003: 18). The film's setting on the beach

connotes the vastness of the world as represented by the sea which lays beyond Whangara, and the insular nature of the small community hemmed in by landscape and tradition.

The *terra nullius* construct, conceptualised by John Locke, suggested that if land was inactive, that is, not under human control (i.e., not cultivated or employed for profit) then it was 'empty' or uninhabited and, therefore, free to be usurped. The emptiness and simplicity of Whangara's physical and social landscape enables the neo-colonial gaze to consume the passive Other. The many wide-angled shots that define the beautiful emptiness of the landscape that embraces the Whangara community, coupled with signs of physical and social stagnancy, such as decrepit buildings, rusting cars, alcoholism and drug dependency, enables the neo-colonial gaze to marvel at the beauty of the New Zealand landscape, yet also sneer at the torpid ignorance of the Māori community oblivious to the splendour and potential that surrounds them. The Whangara community is portrayed as dysfunctionally organic and insular. Whangara assumes many of the Disneyland characteristics – a frozen, childlike world, free from the hegemony of the powerful adult (i.e., free of the colonist), but also ignorant of adult potentiality.

Importantly, to paraphrase Benedict Anderson, it is not the falsity/genuineness of communities that should be distinguished, but rather the style in which they are imagined (1981: 6). The notion of a small, insular and self-determining Māori community coming to terms with the suppression of their people by their own primitive traditions, serves to mask the actual oppressor: colonial imperialism. In this imagined community, a traditional Māori nation is reinvented and enlightened through a neo-colonial gaze, which serves to create a simulacrum that justifies continued suppression. The notion of 'simulacra' stems from the work of Jean Baudrillard, who saw no differentiation between reality and simulation in the post-modern world. Baudrillard makes specific reference to Disneyland and television pointing out that, rather than merely simulating a version of reality, they had become reality. In this sense, *Whale Rider* as an ethnographic text, rather than just being a film that simulates Māori culture, has the power to socially construct Māori cultural reality. The causation of signs of stagnation and depression by the tradition of Mäori culture itself, suggests "that such signs refer to something real and solid outside the system, this is an illusion. What is being generated is a 'simulacrum', which, although the product of the system, also acts as the external referent by which it justifies its function" (Sim 2001: 358). As one film reviewer explains, "Whangara is a community frozen in time, waiting to be saved…*Whale Rider* gives us clear-eyed glimpses of rural Māori society, from the old women smoking and playing cards, to the local kids in their American-branded T-shirts, kicking their heels until they're old

enough to leave" (Morris 2003: 18). The most disturbing aspect of this analysis is the notion of witnessing a community 'frozen in time'. Similar to how early anthropologists interpreted indigenous cultures as pre-modern versions of the Self, fixed in time by their encumbering traditions, this reviewer picks up on how the film oppresses the dynamic nature of Māori culture. The following reviewer also describes the film ethnographically, demonstrating how audiences can misinterpret the film as an authentic reflection of Māori village life: "Director Niki Caro… shows a genuine sympathy for the traditions of the conservative patriarchal society her film describes… we come to appreciate the rhythms of village life" (Cunneen 2003: 19).

Whangara as a locale, then, takes the shape of an authentic indigenous site, complete with a rigid culture and, in particular, a suppressive patriarchy. Here, 'local' aligns with the "notion of a particular bounded space with its set of close-knit social relationships based upon strong kinship ties and length of residence… which turns the location of their day-to-day interactions from a physical space into a 'place.'" (Featherstone 1996: 47). The physical and cultural space *Whale Rider* depicts contains signifiers which inform global audiences that they are, indeed, interpreting an authentic primitive place. As Kuper argues:

> *The most primitive societies were ordered on the basis of kinship relations… based on descent groups… Like extinct species, these primeval institutions were preserved in fossil form, ceremonies and kinship terminologies bearing witness to long-dead practices including totemism where certain species of animals or plants were sacred to particular social groups (Kuper 1988: 7, 234-5).*

Commensurate with Kuper's inventory of a primitive society, it is made clear to *Whale Rider's* western audience that they are viewing a pre-modern culture. Whales are adopted by the Whangara community as symbols of hope and prosperity. The importance of genealogy is illustrated through Koro's obsession with finding a leader from the eldest male-line, while Paikea is a direct descendent of the tribe's founding forefather and bears his name. Whangara is an imagined nation bonded through shared myths, memories and traditions accompanied by empirical and cultural referents such as the marae, backward traditions and the whales themselves. The familial social constructions in *Whale Rider* then, manifest Whangara as a primitive place; establishing its reality and authenticity for the western audience.

In the quote below, Caro parallels Whangara the fantasyland with the actual Whangara community, adding credence to the argument that the simulacrum is reality: "There are

many Maori communities there [on the East Coast], and it's like going back to the 1950s and 1960s sometimes. Children are still going to school on horses. It's wonderful" (cited in Garcia 2003a: 17). The reading by Caro of a non-fictional Māori community as somehow enabling her to go backward in time to visit an idealistic generation where 'children still went to school on horses' speaks volumes of how she intended to portray the Whangara community in her film: as antiquated and preserved. The amalgamation of the real Whangara community with the imagined enunciates how Caro's simplistic notions of the reality of a Māori community authenticates that reality so that, eventually, her narration becomes truth. Moreover, the acceptance by western audiences of the imagined Whangara as an authentic place speaks to the naturalisation of myths surrounding indigenous cultures and ignores the vested interests of the producers of such myths.

Caro's Whangara is established as inherently typical of an indigenous community and, as an oppressive simulacrum, is consistent with the exhibitions of indigenous people in the nineteenth century:

> *Exhibiting exotic people contributed to maintaining and preserving a European white world order. The presentation of 'exotic' people in 'primitive' villages, carrying out simple chores, confirmed the stereotypes of non-whites as backward, living in a state of nature and less civilised than the European audience, whose superiority the exhibitions thus confirmed (Andreassen 2003: 4).*

Yet, the film does not simply align with the notion of western superiority. Allegorically, *Whale Rider* acknowledges what modernity has forsaken (i.e., a connection with the spiritual and natural world). Thus, the imagined Whangara engenders ambivalence in the western audience because it enables a nostalgic return to a simplistic life prior to the callousness of industrialisation, whilst its backwardness, depression, dysfunction and despotic patriarchy is abhorrent.

Importantly, the ambivalence of the western audience towards the primitive culture who are moving from a state of pre-modernity to modernity is accentuated by the film's nostalgic amnesia. That is, the film encourages the audience to believe that the history of Māori oppression occurred without Pākehā influence; the film portrays the results of colonisation without engendering colonial guilt in the audience. The presence of Pākehā in the film would have disrupted the idea that what the audience was witnessing was Māoridom in an authentic traditional sense. As in nineteenth century savage exhibitions, "the demand for

authenticity directly influenced the choice of people who were being exhibited" (Andreassen 2003: 18). Like a colonial painter, Caro rids the backdrop of the colonial reality and, in so doing, she purges Pākehā and other westerners of any responsibility for the oppression of indigenous peoples. To add complexity and to avoid this suppressive function, Caro could have inserted a political backdrop that at least acknowledges the contestations currently occurring between Māori and Pākehā, so that Māori oppression was not insulated as a Māori problem alone, but she does not. The production of Whangara as a simulacrum persuades the western audience to recognise a ubiquitous culture within an exotic locale, but it does so in such a way as to conceal the colonial process that produced the subjugation of Māori in the first place. This idea is highlighted in the scene where Porourangi (Paikea's father and Koro's son, who leaves the community because of his overbearing traditionalist father) attempts to show his family slides of his artwork. An old sheet is draped on the wall in the confined and dark space of the traditional homestead, as the whānau huddles around to watch the show, the light from the slide projector interrupting the darkness of the room. The show turns into a debacle when Koro admonishes the avant-garde nature of his son's work as inauthentic. Here the enlightened modernity of a global world is contrasted against the dank, insulated dark space of the traditional pre-modern world, and accordingly, the teleology of Māori depression is located in their superstitious traditions, *irregardless of 150 years of colonial oppression.*

The lack of Pākehā in the film also suggests that the self-determination of Māori is entirely within their own grasp. That is, regardless of colonial encumbrances, by finding an enlightened leader the tribe will then be able to paddle off into an enlightened state. In truth, the violent cultural disrupt caused by colonisation has had profound effects on the self-determination and social consciousness of Māori. Pākehā presence in the film would have at least made the western audience self-conscious of their own presence in the dysfunctional space. The natural question, thus, is would *Whale Rider* have been such a success if it forced the western audience to consider their role in the oppression of Māori people or other indigenous groups? I would suggest not because, as Nandy argues:

It is easy to leave other cultures to their own devices in the name of cultural relativism, particularly if the visions of these other cultures have already been cannibalized by the worldview of one's own. It is less easy to live with an alien culture's estimate of oneself, to integrate it within one's selfhood and to live with that self-induced tension. It is even more difficult to live with the inner dialogue within one's own culture, which is triggered off by the dialogue with other cultures because, then, the carefully built

cultural defences against disturbing dialogues – and against the threatening insights
emerging from the dialogues – begin to crumble (Nandy 1987: 16-19)

From the above analysis it is unsurprising that Pākehā took ownership of this movie because it reinforces their colonial privilege based on a mythic history of the paternal nurturing of a savage culture. Caro admits the film's appeal to Pākehā: "They're [Pākehā] going to the film in droves and they're coming away saying, 'That's us. That's who we are. That's what we're proud of'" (cited Garcia 2003a: 18). For Māori, *Whale Rider* reaffirms that we are 'lucky' to be enlightened through colonisation; for those Pākehā complicit with the suppression of Māori rights, the movie realises their tokenistic bicultural fantasies. As writer Paula Morris uncompromisingly asserts: "Maoritanga is like the British royal family: it has sentimental appeal, but it's more a tourist draw than a potent social force" (Morris 2003:18); for both groups the film serves to placate ongoing tensions and points to a bicultural future premised on falsehoods. The quote below, also from Morris, suggests that the film enables an ignorant Pākehā public to understand the visions of Māori culture they often see but do not fully understand. In actuality, *Whale Rider* is more concerned with viewing that abets further misunderstanding; the dots being joined further enmesh colonial misinterpretations of Māori culture:

When Koro explains the motivation for a warrior's bulging eyes and unfurled tongue
to his class of sullen adolescents, it's not just a sop to a wide-eyed foreign market:
he's joining the dots for generations of New Zealanders familiar with the sight but
ignorant of the symbolism… It issues a challenge to all New Zealanders, for whom
history begins with Abel Tasman or Captain Cook, to find inspiration in the precolonial
past and, implicitly, a way forward as a distinctive nation. 'Whale Rider' asks New
Zealanders to embrace what is theirs alone (Morris 2003:18)

Enlightening Whangara: Lineage, Patriarchy and Feminism

The imagined 'primitive nation' has been key to narrating justifications for usurpation. Incorporated into this narration was the notion of primitive society being ruled by a despotic patriarchy based on genealogy. Henry Maine's Ancient Law (1863),

embellished a classic notion of the original human condition… assum[ing] that man
was originally a member of a corporate family group ruled by a despotic patriarchy.
Later, patriarchal power provided the basis for larger associations… Ultimately,

societies based on kinship were replaced by societies based upon the state (Kuper 1988: 5).

Whale Rider's alignment with these myths of primitive society privileges a certain brand of knowledge by misrepresenting Māori culture as patriarchal, sexist, and based on encumbering traditions. In so doing, it serves to reinforce the myth that colonisation was an 'enlightenment' project. The readiness of the western audience to accept these misrepresentations is not surprising, given the falsifications are consistent with a dominant discourse surrounding Māori culture and indigenous cultures in general. Film reviewers seemed keen to affirm the myths:

Whale Rider immediately places us within a family of chieftains at the end of its tether. We quickly learn that the fate of a disintegrating community rides on the question of succession and ancestry… The Ngāti Konohi line is traditionally the preserve of patrimony, and extends as far back into the time when forefather Paikea was saved (and resettled) by a whale on a sea journey (Aoun 2005: 173).

The stylised figure of Koro aligns with the western misperception that primitive societies were ruled by despotic patriarchy. Koro is the pre-modern or pre-historical leader who is largely a symptom of the collective/tribal definition. For example, the tribe's obedience to Koro's obsession with male hierarchical leadership, manifest through 'traditional' schools and manhood rites, and the exclusion of Paikea from those schools of knowledge, not only determines Koro as pre-modern but also the society that he heads. For Cline, Koro "blatantly (and traditionally) prefers boys to girls" and is "blinded" by "traditional sexism" (webpage 2003). Likewise Stukin proposes, "the movie reveals a sexist Maori culture in which knowledge and lineage are passed down only along the male line" (2003: 46). And clearly, Caro herself believes that Māori patriarchy is endemic: "This young girl is fighting over a 1000 years of patriarchal tradition" (cited E-News Extra – Entertainment Channel 2003).

Paikea is the modern subject, innocently free of the encumbering notions of tradition and a symbol of critical modernism. In her prize winning recital, Paikea urges, "If the knowledge is given to everyone, then we can have lots of leaders and soon everyone can be strong, not just the ones who have been chosen." Through centralising the pre-pubescent Paikea, Caro symbolises the transcendence of a primitive culture to an enlightened one. Kylie Message suggests "the preadolescent girl is a paradoxical character because despite being young,

she is wiser and more knowing than the adult characters who share her screen-space"
(Message 2003: 91-92). Paikea, as the modern subject, is inherently more sagacious than
her pre-modern ancestors. As Caro herself outlines:

> Pai is suffering tremendous opposition from her grandfather who she loves the most,
> and she's the one person in the film who won't criticise him. She looks for other ways
> to love him and make him see. She empowers everybody around her. She gets so
> deeply hurt but never loses sight of who she is. That is real leadership, the kind of
> leadership that is appropriate for our time (Garcia 2003:a 19).

Paikea's hybridity, however, locates her in a boundary space, both geographically and
physiologically, as a member of the tribe and as a prepubescent character fluctuating
between childhood and adulthood. Only the wise innocence of the preadolescent enables
the leap of faith needed to enter into the enlightened adult world: "Pai's actions are those
of an enlightened being, of a person who knows her place in the world. For Pai, power is
a thing to be shared. She smashes hierarchies, just as she shatters the classic notions of
leadership" (Garcia 2003: 45). Without Paikea and without liberalised western norms, Māori
culture, like the unfinished *waka*, remains dormant.

The depiction of Other cultures as in possession of a male hegemony that needs to be
'smashed' by the righteous west confirms the misdeeds of the west against Other cultures
and, in particular, Islamic societies. Male hegemony is a common contemporary signifier that
an-Other culture is unevolved or, at least, unenlightened. Yet, the liberal western discourse
surrounding gender is a ruse that enables the white male to retain power, for it buffers the
notion that the western structure, as opposed to other systems of governance, allows women
an equal chance to succeed. The western mainstream media's attack on the oppression of
Islamic women in Arab countries, for example, is less about the fate of Islamic women, and
more about the depiction of Arab nations as dysfunctional. Indeed, in talking of the film, Witi
Ihimaera regrettably makes this very connection: "It matters and it doesn't matter that it's in
a Maori setting. I would love to be in an audience of Arabic women wearing their fabulous
masked gear watching that movie, and hoping that they find some sense of liberation in it"
(cited Matthews 2003: 21). Hyperreality is used by Jean Baudrillard to indicate the "loss
of the real, where distinctions between surface and depth, the real and the imaginary no
longer exist. The world of the hyperreal is where image and reality implode" (Sim 2001:
281). Similarly, the image of primitive patriarchy in *Whale Rider* implodes with the hybridised
form of Māori patriarchy to create the hyperreal notion of traditional Māori patriarchy, which

exists to mask the fact that western society itself is still patriarchal, "just as prisons exist to mask the fact that society itself is one" (Sim 2001: 281). Māori patriarchy in the film placates the western audience by reasserting that, allegorically speaking, their system of morality (including western feminism) is supreme.

Accordingly, *Whale Rider* and its director have gained kudos for bridging "the ancient world of Maori myth and the contemporary world of gender politics" (Ansen 2003: 59). Caro has been hailed as the creator of an emancipatory film: "Confident, perspicuous and unflappable, Caro talks easily about how the subtext of her film – the rise of a new consciousness, of a peculiarly feminine perspective – is supremely important to her as an artist" (Garcia 2003a: 19). Caro "has put feminist inspiration into the movie showing the girls and boys what leadership is made of" (Stukin 2003: 46). Besides the continuance of a false discourse, such interpretations clearly fail to notice that what Caro has created is not a western feminist film at all. I would go as far as to say that *Whale Rider* is an anti-western feminist construction, given the premises of western feminism, which maintain that men do not have a monopoly on power simply because they were born men. Yet, the film inadvertently defends this position by privileging Paikea's right to leadership, irrespective of gender, through her being a direct descendant of her forefather and namesake Paikea, thus suggesting leadership can be genetically predetermined. Inherently, this position undermines the underpinnings of western feminism. Paikea seemingly does not even possess her own empowerment let alone acting as an agent who symbolises female determination; she is purely answering a larger spiritual and genealogical calling and, thus, her will is not her own.

Bicultural Theatre

Whale Rider has also been hailed as an important emancipatory film for Māori to realise and overcome their supposed traditional genealogical patriarchy. In this emancipatory rhetoric, Caro is portrayed as the liberating mouthpiece: "*Whale Rider*, a film by Niki Caro, a white New Zealander, represents a fledgling reclamation of [Māori] heritage, a chance for the Ngāti Kanohi and other indigenous New Zealanders to speak in their own voices" (Garcia 2003: 43). Again, as an oppressive simulacrum, the film provides the illusion that Māori self-determination is being asserted on screen, and that it is an authentic Māori voice portrayed. The quote below also subscribes to the idea that the film is emancipatory in that it points to a way forward for Māori to realise the constraints of their own backward culture in overcoming their depression. However, as far as I can see, the only emancipation occurring here is the freeing of Pākehā from their colonial guilt:

'Whale Rider' contains a lesson. It shows how drastic action is necessary to achieve social change, how the responsibility lies with both the individual and the community. Just as Pai is delivered back to her family by the sea, Maori society needs to be reborn – fresh-faced, determined, and informed… Its final scene, in which Porourangi's waka strikes out to sea, Pai and Koro sitting side by side, suggests the beginning of a journey as great as the Pacific voyages of old. The purpose this time isn't to find new land, but to create a new world in the place where they live (Morris 2003:18).

Coterminous with the emancipatory rhetoric espoused by both the film makers and film critics, *Whale Rider* is framed as bicultural theatre and as residual of bicultural negotiations. It is true that local Māori were consulted, as Caro readily points out: "They gave the work their blessing and the production was very collaborative… Maori have responded overwhelmingly to *Whale Rider*, and they have really taken ownership of it. They say they are strong and proud like the Maori in the film" (Garcia 2003a: 17, 18). For that reason and "because of this attention to local community and resourcing, *Whale Rider* embodies a new wave of national New Zealand cinema… that is regarded as being both bicultural and significant in both local and international contexts" (Message 2003: 88). Witi Ihimaera agrees: "Why I say that *Whale Rider* is a Maori film is that it comes from a specific, regional myth. It deals with a specific people who are in a specific location, in such a way that it can only be a Whangara film. If the director happens to be blue-eyed, then so are a lot of Maori. The people of Ngāti Konohi [the local iwi] are the arbiters and they have owned it" (cited Matthews 2003: 23). Riding the new wave of political correctness that veils neo-colonisation, Caro has been heaped with plaudits: "Writer-director Caro lived with and respects the beliefs of the Maori Ngäti Kanohi people" (cited in New Internationalist 2003: 31, author unknown); "Caro is a liberal pakeha, a white New Zealander sympathetic to the Maori cause, and reaction to her film from the native community has been unequivocal" (Garcia 2003a: 18). While I acknowledge a collaborative process did occur, I would suggest *Whale Rider* is hardly bicultural. Biculturalism demands equal decision making capability at all levels of production and direction. The biculturalism espoused above is typical of the manner that many Pākehā conceive of this notion. That is, as an extension of generosity to the trembling hands of the native, who is eager for any morsel of recognition. I wonder if there is such a thing as a 'bicultural bank balance'? That is, who benefits from the reproduction of the Whangara community culture? What did the Whangara community receive for the representation of their culture and place? I would suggest that, similar to the pilfering of African American blues music by white 'rock-n-roll' musicians, the Whangara community has received very little for the commodification of their

cultural icons: "Elvis made a bundle, while we remained poor… while we remain poor" (MC Lyte, 'Jammin'1999 [audio recording]).

Conclusion: Consuming the Local

In *Whale Rider*, the reproduction of Europe's evolution from the pre-modern to the modern is allegorically depicted through a non-western culture, signifying the stagnation of 'primitive' non-western local cultures and, as a result, the illusion of western liberality and freedom from gender-based discrimination. It is one thing to consider another's perspective (if one ever can) through film, it is subversive, however, to reproduce one's own culture and then portray it as another's. Indeed, *Whale Rider* continues the western tradition of understanding oneself through the Other. This *New Zealand Listener* columnist recognises that as a "heroic quest story" *Whale Rider* is " flexible enough for all to see their own lives reflected in the central story of triumph over adversity – it's a feast of analogy and metaphor" (Matthews 2003: 23). As the analysis above has demonstrated, *Whale Rider* had such an immense impact on the global western audience because it re-imagined the process of European enlightenment through the medium of a pre-modern culture. However, the film also points out what has been forsaken in becoming 'modern', that is, the loss of a sense of community, place, spirituality and mythology through a connection with the natural world. The film, then, leads to a sense of nostalgic ambivalence for a modernity project partially gone wrong. The mix of the modern and nostalgia for the pre-modern leads to a post-modern sense of ambiguity and ambivalence. Indeed, the film begins with simultaneous birth and death. Nostalgia for a lost simplistic communal life is a potent sentiment in the post-modern world, where pining for the familial ties of one's childhood has become a powerful transnational third culture for a disenfranchised western audience. The post-industrial audience enter the fictional Māori community through a retrospective gaze, aching for the simplicity and naivety of the pre-industrial state, whilst celebrating their modern subjectivity. In the penultimate sequence, in particular, where the whales become stranded and the leadership qualities of Paikea are finally realised, the communal myths of belonging, warmth and togetherness and the security of a childhood long relinquished is intermixed with the symbolic death of childhood and the coming of age of a culture.

Unsurprisingly, in the clear light of day, the final sequence depicts Māori culture paddling 'forward' and away from Whangara into the sea of global cultural homogenisation. As a local site, Whangara represents an unenlightened, socially diseased and anti-progressive place that must sooner or later implode upon itself to realise the natural collapse of primitive cultures

and the uptake of liberal western norms. In this way, *Whale Rider* justifies the suppression of local Māori culture in the name of the general and universal. Porourangi's return home in the film is symbiotic with the homogenisation of culture. That is, he will only return home if Māori culture changes to enlightened globalised norms. Whilst the prepubescent child, Paikea, can claim martyrdom status in the name of the modernity project, it is clear that the tribe's post-modern fate lies with the hybrid baby lying in its German mother's womb. Menacingly, the hybrid child symbolises the tribe's sealed destiny of becoming an indigenous flavoured component of global culture; of becoming merely a stroke within the pastiche of global theatre. The baby's blurred genealogical lines symbolise the post-industrial transnational agenda of blurring national and cultural boundaries: "Think globally, act locally. The terms capture cogently the simultaneous homogenisation and fragmentation that is at work in the world economy" (Dirlik 1996: 31).

References

Anderson Benedict (1981) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* Verso New York

Andreassen Rikke (2003) The "Exotic" as Mass Entertainment: Denmark 1878-1909 *Race and Class* 45 (2) 1-39

Ansen David (2003) Grrl Power, Kiwi Style: A Sweet-Smart New Film that's been Dazzling Hard-to-please Festival Crowds with an Age-old Underdog Tale. *Whale Rider* Movie Review *Newsweek* (9th of June) 59

Aoun Steven (2005) *Whale Rider* Video Recording Review *Metro Magazine* 143 (Winter) 173

Baudrillard Jean (1981) *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign.* Translated by Charles Levin Telos Press St. Louis

Calder Peter (2003) Riding High on 'Whale' Tale World report: New Zealand Success of *Whale Rider* Promotes New Zealand Film Industry *Variety* 393 (5) A2

Caro Niki (2003) *Whale Rider* [video recording] South Pacific Pictures

Cline Rich (2003) *Whale Rider* Movie Review http://www.shadowsonthewall.co.uk/03/whalride.htm

Cunneen Joseph (2003) Youthful Tales: Maori Girl, Animated Fish Enliven Summer *National Catholic Reporter* 39 (34) 18

Dirlik Arif (1996) *The Global in the Local* In Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (eds) *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* Duke University Press Durham 21-45

E-News Extra (2003) *Whale Rider* Movie Review Sky Entertainment Channel.

Featherstone Mike (1996) Localism, Globalism and Cultural Identity. In Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (eds) *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* edited by 46-77 Duke University Press Durham

Garcia Maria (2003) *Whale Rider* Buying & Booking Guide Movie Review *Film Journal International* 106 (6) 43

Garcia Marcia (2003a) Whale tale: New Zealand's Niki Caro brings Maori legend to life. *Film Journal International* 106 (6) 16

Koch Ulrich (1998) *The Saltmen of Tibet* [videorecording] Zeitgeist Films Ltd

Kunuk Zacharias (2001) *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* [videorecording] Optimum Releasing

Kuper Adam (1988) *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* Routledge London

Lyte MC (1999) Jammin' (audio recording) *Bob Marley Chant Down Babylon* (CD) The Island Def Jam Music Group

Maine Henry (1863) *Ancient Law: It's Connection with the Early History of Society, and it's Relation to Modern Ideas* J Murray London

Matthews Phillip (2003) Myth Making *New Zealand Listener* 187 (no' 3273) 18-24

Message Kylie (2003) *Whale Rider* and the politics of location *Metro Magazine* 136 (Spring) 86

Morris Paula (2003) *Whale Rider* Movie Review *Cineaste* 29 (1) 18

Nandy Ashis (1987) *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* Oxford University Press Delhi

New Internationalist (2003) *Whale Rider* Movie Review *New Internationalist* 359 (August) 31

Noyce Phillip, Garimara Doris & Doyle Christopher (2002) *Rabbit Proof Fence* [videorecording] Australian Film Finance Corporation

Sim Stuart (2001) *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* Routledge London

Stukin Stacie (2003) Niki Caro *Ms. Magazine* 13 (4) 46

Watson James (1997) Transnationalism, Localization, and Fast Foods in East Asia. In James Watson (ed) *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia* Stanford University Press Stanford

Welch Denis (2003) The Producer *New Zealand Listener* 189 (no. 3295) 20-24

Acknowledgements