Witi Ihimaera as Translator: Reading *The Whale Rider* as Indigenous-led Translation

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Abstract *This contribution focuses on the writer Witi Ihimaera as translator. It discusses the translation strategies employed in "The Whale Rider" (1987) as well as other writings and argues that translating is the process of continuously mending relations. A reading of Ihimaera's more recently published short-story "Der Traum" (2022) reveals a vision of Māori-German cooperation different from the one depicted in the film adaptation by Niki Caro (2002). Ihimaera's storytelling is a problem-constructing policy-making, "requiring attention to content and performance, to technical analysis and political articulation" (Fischer and Forester 1993, 6). A technical analysis of how translations of "The Whale Rider" for the European market continued or discontinued Ihimaera's practice of problem construction leads toward the closing thought of this chapter, namely that decolonial political articulation requires that we allow translation to unfold into plurivocal reciprocity.*

Keywords *Indigenous-led translation; policy-making; Der Traum; decolonisation; global reciprocity*

The writer as translator

Witi Ihimaera has described himself as a writer who is "living in two worlds": the Pākehā (New Zealander of European decent) world of success and the world of Māori resistance against Pākehā.[1] In other words, he positions himself in the field of translatorial operations. The location of translating is neither 'here' or 'there', nor confined by the post-structuralist, post-colonialist theories that still end up pointing to a "'romantic' 'elsewhere', an implausible 'in/between' space" (Aji 2022, 168). Translation necessarily takes sides because it is a means of transformation. It makes specific content and performance choices in order to alter a conversation between two or more parties stuck in dysfunctional communication patterns.

1 "Interview with Witi Ihimaera", n.p.

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Ihimaera successfully transformed the New Zealand literary landscape, as is documented by the many literary awards and prizes he won. Notably, as an early literary member of the so-called Māori renaissance, he introduced te reo Māori (Māori language) to a national and international audience, and he did so by using linguistic translation strategies. In *The Whale Rider* (1987) his translations often materialise in a particular form of paraphrasing, for example, in passages like this one:

> Suddenly the sea was filled with awesome singing, a song with eternity in it, a karanga to the land:
> *You have called and I have come,*
> *bearing the gift of the Gods.*
> The dark shape rising, rising again. A taniwha, gigantic. A tipua. (2003 [1987], 12)

Ihimaera's paraphrasing is not simply a form of rewording the Māori expressions in the English language to achieve clarity, nor does the author "paraphrase using a related word" or "paraphrase using unrelated words" (Baker 2018, 38–40)[2]. Instead, his way of paraphrasing decentres equivalence in favour of creating a somatic language experience. 'Karanga' gains a sonic quality, as the meaning of the word extends from it into both directions of the flanking text, 'singing' and 'song' on one side and the two lines formatted in italics, indicating that these are the lyrics of the song, on the other side. In contrast, 'Taniwha' and 'tipua' are anticipated by the words 'awesome', 'eternity' and 'called', which not only qualify the particular type of the song that is mentioned here, but also the relationship between the singer, the song and the figure emerging from the ocean. The calling of the 'dark shape' becomes apparent as an ancient practice of infinite length, as indicated by the words 'rising, rising again', lending the event a cyclo-rhythmic quality as well as temporal depth. The descriptor 'gigantic' furthermore imparts material significance to the experience of time. Two Māori words frame the adjective, which adds size to the use of Māori, and to the sensation that both *taniwha* and *tipua* are "uncanny thing[s]" (Gudgeon 1909, 29). The last fragment, "A tipua.", ending on an open front unrounded vowel, supports the sense of witnessing an apparition in awe.

Ihimaera's paraphrasing is essentially a performative translation, as it focuses on producing an experiential encounter with te reo Māori as a means of understanding it. Recent experiential and experimental translation scholarship has begun to theorise performative translation acts (Lee 2022; Robert-Foley 2023; Grass 2023). They shift away from the customary focus on values and norms, behaviour and job-

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2 Mona Baker distinguishes between these two forms of paraphrase strategy. They are two of many translation strategies that she discusses trying to address ethical challenges in pragmatic terms.

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performance in favour of exploring the systems of relations in which translation is embedded. They also decentre equivalence and address linguistic and cultural idiosyncrasies in productive ways rather than seeing them as an obstacle to perfect translations:

> [A]n ever-changing geopolitical landscape driven by post-truth economic imperatives and climate change crises on a global scale, increasingly point to the need to understand how the embodied, co-creational intersemiotic process of experiential translation can contribute to glocal [sic] understanding and communication through socially-situated practice. (Campbell and Vidal 2024, 1)

Explorations of situatedness emphasise the fact that translation can never be neutral or completed. Moreover, they point out that diversity in language is not dictated by interlinguistic encounters. Translatorial meaning-making is always a work in progress negotiating a number of historical, cultural and material contexts within and across languages.

Mending relations, revision by revision

Another way of describing Ihimaera's writing in translatorial terms is through Lawrence Venuti's ambivalent pair of concepts, "foreignization" and "domestication". Lawrence Venuti ([1995] 2017) coined the term 'foreignization' to describe such linguistic insertions as, for example, leaving *foreign* terms untranslated. The counter-term to 'foreignization' is 'domestication' which is the act of rendering a translation void of foreign elements or the act of removing them. This also occurred with *The Whale Rider*, when the so-called 'global' edition was released after the novel's adaptation to film. A lot of the te reo Māori was removed.

Venuti's concepts have been at the centre of much discussion about translation in postcolonial contexts, favouring the practice that "assumes an ethics of foreignization" in terms of "locating the alien in a cultural other, pursuing cultural diversity, signalling linguistic and cultural differences and unsettling the hierarchies in the translating language" (Venuti 2017, 266). They are, however, very limited in terms of reflecting real-life translation practice. This is due to the fact that the translator cannot fully anticipate their readership: "[R]eaders are always plural in their levels of knowledge, whether in connection with the source or target text." (Anderson 2021, 255) For whom, for example, is te reo Māori foreign? Contemporary publications in Aotearoa, New Zealand, no longer italicise Māori to honour the fact that Māori is one of the three official national languages – the others are English and Signing –

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and should not be treated in the same way as "unfamiliar foreign terms"[3]. Therefore, the merit of Venuti's terms lies in complicating traditional linguistic views, which value original over translation, text over other modes of translation (such as gesture, movement, setting, sound, design, emotion), and the commodifiable product over the particulars of socially situated meaning-making.

When it first came out, Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* negotiated its way as a foreign book into the literary market in New Zealand, just like his earlier books. In a review of the recently revised novel *Tangi* ([1973] 2023), Emma Hislop relates how Ihimaera described the pressures when he first started writing in a radio interview he gave in 2009:

> Everything was on Pākehā terms. When he was asked by his publisher who he was writing for, Ihimaera was told, "Māori don't read." Reviewers still complained, "we lose so much because we don't know the language." (*The Spin Off* n.p.)

When Ihimaera removed much of the Māori from *The Whale Rider* fifteen years later, he negotiated a global market, and the measure should not be how much he removed but how much he retained. Other writers, negotiating between major languages, such as French and English have shown far less interest in unsettling the hierarchies in the translating language (Kölling 2015).

Meanwhile, Ihimaera has found plenty of other avenues for troubling traditional views on translation. Re-reading and comparing the original 1973 and the edited 2023 version of *Tangi*, Hislop points out the re-inscription of the violence of the colonial past, that is not past:

> Original
> "Before Dad bought the farm at Waituhi we lived in a small wooden house on the other side of this town. It was old even before we moved in; but to my small boy's eyes it was a palace."
>
> Revised
> "My father, Rongo, was born in Waituhi on tribal land that provided only enough to put houses on. The rest belonged to Pākehā owners, confiscated and balloted to British soldiers who had come from overseas to fight the local rebel tribes of the district, including ours." (n.p.)

Hislop is a Māori writer herself and a witness to the fact that decolonisation is a "mammoth task" that engenders "getting used to the feeling like I'm getting

3 "How should I treat foreign terms in MLA style?" Ask the MLA, The MLA Style Center, accessed 8 November 2019. To honour this fact, Māori terms are not italicised in this contribution.

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nowhere" (n.p.). She identifies both the stylistic and the ethical elements of the new edition as signs of decolonising the text and the writer:

> To me these revisions are an example of art-making that comes from a place of freedom, but more importantly, decolonisation. There are few public figures who model revision – of one's work and one's life – as openly and honestly as Ihimaera. (n.p.)

Although decolonisation is very local and personal, Ihimaera's model revisions are not reducible to his own biography or national Māori-Pākehā biculturality. This is particularly obvious through his decision to prioritise the publishing of anthologies of Māori writings, and such anthologies as *Black Marks on a White Page* (2017) and *A Kind of Shelter: Whakaruru-Taha* (2023) that bring together national and international artists reading our world in the first and second decade of this century. They look at decolonisation, indigeneity, climate change, digital entrepreneurship and other 'glocal' topics, which makes these works particularly open to intersectional discourse. The same is true for short stories and poems written by Ihimaera that have been selected for other anthologies, for example, the short story, *Der Traum*, which was first published in the online journal *newsroom* (2019) and three years later included in the volume *Indigenous Pacific Islander Eco-Literatures* (2022) and, in revised and updated form, in *Hiwa: Contemporary Māori Short Stories* (2023)[4].

Harakeke-dreaming as policy-making

Der Traum is a metafictional[5] narrative about the symbolic, social and material value of harakeke, a plant and fabric that has deep historical and contemporary significance for Indigenous Pacific cultures, which is set in Berlin:

> I need to explain a particular circumstance that makes the man's dream somewhat unusual.
> The man was in Berlin when he had the dream. He had flown seventeen hours from Auckland to Dubai and then six hours to Germany, with two stopovers of three hours each. [...]
> [...] as anybody who visits Berlin frequently would tell you, the city at any time was an utterly fragmenting experience: it forced you into personal encounters with a history characterised by constant reinvention. On previous visits, for instance, the man had considered the city to be in self-denial about its past, especially its Nazi

4 All quotations of *Der Traum* in this contribution are taken from the version in *Indigenous Pacific Islander Eco-Literatures.*

5 See Waugh 1984, 2.

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> history and division into East and West Germany. But now he admired Berlin because, ever since the wall had fallen, it had gained great momentum. The most obliterated country of World War II was now the undoubted leader of the EU. (194)

Harakeke, which is translated as "flax" or "the New Zealand flax", immediately invokes iconic images of "Aotearoa New Zealand" nature and traditional cultural art and artefacts: placemats, clothes, baskets, and so on. These items are generally not part of German cultural practices and would find their way into German households only by way of leisurely travel and/or shopping. Connotations of the exotic are thus impending, but by giving his readers a European place and context for the story's setting, Ihimaera accentuates that harakeke also lives in two worlds. For the German reader in particular, the Berlin setting resists the exoticisation that might otherwise inform the reception of the subject matter.

Gabriele Dürbeck (2007, 2017) uses the term "Ozeanismus" (Oceanism), echoing Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1987), to describe the particular imaginary of the South Pacific, "die Südsee", represented in German culture and literature:

> [A] persistent system of ideas about Oceania, which are to a large extent informed by stereotypes reproduced over long periods of time and, in the light of new and dissonant experience, become reorganised and rearranged at best but not revised.[6]

It is almost as if Ihimaera entitled his short story *Der Traum* in response to "Ozeanismus", to oppose those views that see Pacific Island nations and its inhabitants as remote, isolated, underdeveloped places:

> Coming from islands of Oceania did not secure their safety; they were not immune to what was happening in the rest of the world. Their world was the international world. The global story was their story, the international marketplace their reality. (197)

In the story, Ihimaera creates a genealogy of words that interweaves German and Māori, translating 'Traum' first as 'dream', then as 'trauma', and further as an international political programme for a utopian vision. In its first appearance it is the dream of the narrator, the man. Then, as the man is awake, it serves as a concept for philosophical musing:

6 Original: Der Begriff Ozeanismus bezeichnet, dass sich in der deutschen Kultur und Literatur ein dauerhaftes System von Aussagen über Ozeanien rekonstruieren lässt, welches in hohem Maße durch Stereotype geprägt ist, die über lange Zeiträume hin reproduziert und im Lichte neuer, dissonanter Erfahrungen allenfalls re-organisiert und re-arrangiert, aber nicht revidiert wurden. (205–207, the English translation is mine)

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> It was clear that the existential crisis had had a trickle-down effect, even to the man's dream world; moemoea had always been the place where he could figure out where he and – by extension – indigenous people existed in an international political, economic, and environmental bubble over which they had little control. (179)

In the dream, 'the man' intervenes in a disagreement between a weaver and a vendor that occurs at a metropolitan market. They quarrel over the "market price", until the weaver is taken into custody by the manager of the market.

> *She has offended us,* the manager said. *She asked if she could purchase our harakeke and is now objecting to the price. If you wish to have her freed so that she can rejoin you, it will cost 98 dollars.*
> The man looked at the tour director, expecting her to take charge of the situation. Instead, the young woman looked at him. At that point, not sure if he wanted to take responsibility, he had decided to wake up. (194)

The narrator could remain in the realm of the personal of his *traum*. Instead, Ihimaera chooses to graft a political analysis onto it, accentuating again that his living in two worlds is a conscious choice:

> After decades of promoting cooperation, the globalists were losing. And when they lost, so would indigenous [sic] people lose, for once the gates started to close again, they could be shut out of the political and economic endgame.
> Was this why the man had dreamt what the Germans would call his *traum*? (197)

Like Epeli Hau'ofa (1994) once used the "the hole in the doughnut"-metaphor (158) to advocate the Oceanian political narrative for the Pacific, Ihimaera's narrator uses *traum* and trauma to cast a utopian vision, a dream. This is a dream for an alliance which proposes that Germany, "[t]he most obliterated country of World War II [that] was now the undoubted leader of the EU", will stand with Pacific Indigenous peoples against those for whom "[i]n the place of shared approaches to societal problems – whether trade disputes, security or climate change – national interests had become primary." (197)

Ihimaera's implicit appeal to Germany echoes Tuvalu's explicit appeal for support that was recorded in an interview conducted between Anja Wehler-Schöck (AWS) and special envoy and former UN-Ambassador for Tuvalu (2017–2022), Samuelu Laloniu (SL):

> AWS: What can we do here (in Germany)?
> SL: We urgently need legal protection. The original maritime boundaries must be maintained according to the geographical coordinates in order to give countries

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> like Tuvalu a certain planning security and perspective. Many countries are already supporting us in this initiative, and we hope that Germany will join us.[7]

Laloniu's appeal for legal protection refers to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea that was adopted in 1982.[8] The agreement did not anticipate the extent to which climate change would affect the maritime borders, which are calculated in relation to the coastline. Theoretically, if the insular land territories of Tuvalu were to be completely submerged by water, the state might lose sovereignty or any rights over the maritime areas it currently holds. In other words, by doing nothing to protect Tuvaluan rights, member states agree to the implicit 'ocean grabbing'.

I would add that, apart from supporting legal protection, what we can do here in Germany is to quit the "sinking islands" narrative that skews information coverage about the Pacific Island States, which is another instalment of *Ozeanismus* and reinvokes the hyperbolic rhetoric of the colonisers' fantasy of 'the disappearing native peoples' which led to the "salvage colonialism" and "salvage ethnography" (Steinmetz 2004, 264–265). Pacific Island Studies scholars have highlighted the negative consequences of such coverage for over a decade now. They have pointed out the discrepancies between narrative reality and practical reality of documentaries fabricated by the West (Farbotko 2005, 2010; Stratford et al. 2023) and that the canary in the coalmine approach has no real impact on how politicians or people in general understand climate change (Kench, Ford and Owen 2018). If natural erosion of the land, surface temperatures of the ocean rising, growing pollution, and increase in strength of storms and changes in other weather phenomena are the signs for living on disappearing territory, then we are all living on sinking islands.

At the same time that he offers a utopian vision, Ihimaera also questions the dystopian 'other' defined as (political) self-interest, which finds expression in the populist political theories such as 'America First':

> First, must all negotiations be based on political considerations, particularly self-interest – on notions of, say, America First, which is really Trump First? Or, second, on economic considerations – the trade deals, say, which have seen self-interest prevail, as witness Mr. Trump bypassing the World Trade Organisation (he calls the organisation a "disaster") with tariffs here and there? (198)

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7 Original: AWS: Was kann hier [in Deutschland] getan werden? SL: Wir brauchen dringend rechtlichen Bestandsschutz. Die ursprünglichen Seegrenzen müssen nach den geografischen Koordinaten beibehalten werden, um Ländern wie Tuvalu eine gewisse Planungssicherheit und Perspektive zu geben. Viele Länder unterstützen uns bereits bei dieser Initiative und wir hoffen, dass Deutschland sich anschließt. (Wehler-Schöck, n.p., the English translation is mine)

8 See United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (imo.org).

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Directing the German reader's view across the Atlantic, draws attention to the fact that every nation can become a character in somebody else's political story. In particular, this evokes previous narrations of "Berlin dreams", transposed in speeches such as, John F. Kennedy's "I am a Berliner" or songs such as David Hasselhoff's "I've been looking for freedom"[9].

The globalised *Whalerider*

The underlying issue of the "sinking islands" narrative and *Ozeanismus* is, that we hear more stories about the Pacific Islands than from Pacific Islanders (Haag 2013, 80). Although Witi Ihimaera is one of New Zealand's most celebrated prolific writers and editors, only two of his books have been published in German, *Zauberhaftes Neuseeland* (1998) and *The Whalerider: die magische Geschichte vom Mädchen, das den Wal ritt* (2003). Apart from this, only excerpts from his award-winning debut novel *Tangi* (1973) and his second book *Whanau* (1974) appeared in the short-story collection *Aroha: Maori Geschichten aus dem Jadeland* (1999) (Haag 2013, 83 and 84).

Oliver Haag's (2013) statistical evaluation suggests that there are a number of correlating factors that contribute to whether Oceanian literature is translated for the European market or not: "funding policies, the production of films, the awarding of literary prizes and European literary festivals, as well as a nexus between publishing policies, broader international events and the increasing visibility of Indigenous people in European media" (87; Haag 2017, 22; Prentice 2020). Particularly interesting is the role of broader international events, even those which do not have a literary focus. In the case of Māori and Pacific Island writers with connections to New Zealand publishing houses, such events include New Zealand hosting the America's Cup in 2003, the release of the *Lord of the Rings* film in 2003, and, more recently, New Zealand's "While you were sleeping – Bevor es bei Euch hell wird" presentation at the 2012 Frankfurt Book Fair as 'guest of honour' (Haag 2013, 85–86).

Although the book fair is a literature-specific event, it was marked by a strong emphasis on selling Aotearoa New Zealand as an experience[10] rather than selling books (Kölling 2014). While the event culture that is "selling" Aotearoa New Zealand

9 The former probably needs no explanation, but the latter is a song written by German music producer Jack White, originally released in 1978 by German singer Marc Seaberg, which was covered by David Hasselhoff in 1989 and became deeply associated with the pro-German unification movement.

10 A representation of this experience is still available through a film: "While you were sleeping – New Zealand Pavilion Frankfurt Book Fair 2012." Vimeo. Accessed 20 June 2024, https://vimeo.com/59695403.

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to the world is heavily spiked with easily identifiable national markers, such as a silver fern logo[11] or a harakeke pattern, it "favours a distance from national branding" (Wilson 2020, 255) in terms of the literature itself. This distancing also became a feature of the global *Whale Rider* edition:

> [The *Whale Rider*'s] adaptation to a global market lay not only in repackaging to reflect the visual economy of the film, nor solely even in the removal of much of the Māori language, but also in removing those cultural referents and idioms that situated the original work in relation to an earlier rural society and agricultural economy. (Prentice 2020, 244)

The removal of some socio-economic markers supported a more metropolitan reading of the novel, which can also be read as a form of decolonisation because it overwrites the nostalgic imagery and tropes that dominated early Māori literature of the 'renaissance' period (Evans 2006, 16) with co-temporal ones constructed, for example, "out of the flotsam and jetsam of a consumer culture" (29).

The fact that Niki Caro's film adaptation *Whale Rider* (2002) prompted the publishing of a global edition of the book demonstrates that translation and publishing are embedded in other historical and current infrastructures, which causes continuous modular increments of mutual change and transformation (Kölling in print). Several scholars have pointed out that academia contributes in important and sustainable ways to these transformations. Janet Wilson (2020), for example, who describes the global status and reach of the Aotearoa New Zealand short story, argues that the boost of 'global capital' of the genre is due to the contributions made by leading Pacific writers and editors who are also university teachers and researchers:

> Of greatest influence on New Zealand writing over several decades has been Bill Manhire's creative writing MA at Victoria University of Wellington, known since 2000 as the International Institute of Modern Letters. Teachers include distinguished fiction writers: Damien Wilkins, Emily Perkins, Fiona Kidman and John Cranna. There is also the MA in creative writing at the University of Auckland, previously run by Witi Ihimaera and Albert Wendt, and now by Paula Morris and Pasifika poet Selina Tusitala Marsh, and the publishing programmes at Whitireia where writers like Tim Jones and Anna Taylor teach the short story. (Wilson 2020, 226)

The fact that volumes, such as *Black Marks on the White Page* (2017), edited by Witi Ihimaera and Tina Makereti, build on the globalised US models of creative writ-

11 See Wilson's discussion of the marketing of a Spanish anthology of translated New Zealand short stories. Next to the fern, the harakeke is one of the symbols that is often featured as recognisable national icon.

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ing workshops of universities and higher educational institutes has been met with both criticism and praise (Wilson 2020, 226–227). Such criticism inflects traditional notions of authenticity as being disinterested in material wealth; despite the fact that scholars benefit from focussing on big literary brands (Koegler 2018). Indigenous writers, who are globally successful, very often face additional layers of accusations from their communities, such as being opportunists and traitors. Selina Tusitala Marsh articulated this in her Graphic Novel *Mophead Tu: The Queen's Poem* (2020), which draws out the trickster wayfaring that living in two or more postcolonial worlds entails: "[...] when a colleague calls her a 'sellout', Selina starts doubting herself. Can she stand with her people who struggled against the Queen ... and still serve the Queen?" (text from book cover).

Dieter Riemenschneider (2020), who investigated which mechanisms influence the translation of Indigenous literature from New Zealand for the German market specifically, also stresses the role of academia:

> A comparison of the discourse about the commercial and cultural effect of the Frankfurt Book Fair on New Zealand in 2012 with the reception of the country's culture and literature in German academia over a brief period suggests that the latter has contributed to a more active and long-lasting intercultural exchange than marketing and selling the country's books even when highlighted and promoted at the Book Fair. (257)

This intercultural exchange based on recent scholarship[12], which grew out of the ethnology, ethnography and cultural anthropology dating back to the late 18th century, "is often combined with keen observation of cultural-political resistance movements in many parts of the world and of African American, Māori, Indigenous Australians, and Canadian First Nation communities" (Riemenschneider 2020, 255). Other supranational developments that influenced this exchange are the international movement of Indigenous peoples – also reflected in the term Indigenism (Niezen 2003) – and the growing alignment of academic infrastructures with broader socio-political trends such as environmentalism.

12 Riemenschneider refers in particular to the years between 2002 and 2012 drawing on data listed in ACOLIT, the ASNEL newsletter. ASNEL stands for German Association for the Study of the New English Literatures and Culture, which today is GAPS, the German Association for Postcolonial Studies. Haag's quantitative analysis, which refers to a corpus of Indigenous New Zealand literature translated between 1907 and 2009, reveals that from the mid-1980s translations for the European market have been continuous and systematic (84). This may also be due to academic influence but warrants further research.

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All our future relations

The "Fridays for Future"-movement gave Germany's sensitisation for colonial and postcolonial environmental injustice another major push, evident in the establishment of the *Zukunftsmodul* and *Voices for Climate* lecture series[13] at the University of Mainz, and, of course, the contributions to the "Eine Uni – Ein Buch: *The Whale Rider*" lecture series compiled in this volume. With Pasifikafuturism[14] growing into a strong literary movement in Aotearoa New Zealand (Cole 2020), future intercultural hermeneutics might develop a stronger relationship with Critical Code Studies and Digital Literacy Studies. I anticipate interesting and fresh conversations between Indigenous scholars who call for resistance against treating the digital space as "Terra Nullius 4.0" (Whaanga and Mato 2020) and Western scholars who have begun to "trouble the myth of the digital native" (Sander, Vogel and Kölling 2025, Kölling in print). Recent agendas of inquiry are also moving from interdiscursive to more interdisciplinary scholarship due to the fact that resistance 'literature' in the digital realm can readily take multimodal forms, mixing language with drawing and music, blending dance with landscape and plants, and focussing on how nonhuman animate and inanimate become 'subjects of agency'. But even with those fresh efforts to push epistemological boundaries and consequently the decolonisation of Translation Studies further, problems remain: Who owns the knowledge travelling through translation?

In the lecture at CUNY Graduate Center that celebrated the 15th anniversary of her seminal work *Decolonising Methodology* (1999), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2013) identified translation as one site for "the struggle over the sense of ownership of knowledge":

> Interestingly, our universities feel they own the term legally: "University". That they feel that they own that term. Te Whare Wananga o Awanuiārangi […] call themselves indigenous-university. It's in lower case, and there's a dash, indigenous dash university, and most people would think, oh yeah, they're an indigenous university. Not the universities of New Zealand. The universities in New Zealand are appalled, in a sense, that this institution would want to use a term that they think they own. And it seems to me that captures most of what I'm talking about. That they own the term and that an indigenous institution, which works internationally, has to come up with another term. If you translate the word Te Whare

13 In particular, the conversation between Constantin Wagner and Lian Gogali as part of the "Bildung fängt mit Wandel an: Gemeinsam handeln!" (Education begins with change: acting together!).

14 Recent volumes edited by Ihimaera also reflect Pasifikafuturism including, for example, David Geary's "Rarohenga and the Reformation" in *Pūrākau* and and Nic Low's "Facebook Redux" in *Black Marks*.

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> Wānanga o Awanuiārangi, it actually means the University of Awanuiarangi. Why, because if you translate my university, which is, our Māori name Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato, it means the University of Waikato. So, what that means is that that universities can use Māori terminology and translate themselves from English into Māori. But the Māori institution is not allowed to translate itself into English. (Smith 2013, 1:05:48–1:07:54)

These uneven rights, which Indigenous and non-Indigenous institutions possess with regard to translating themselves into Māori and English, respectively, signal "that the business of decolonisation is not over, that it just shifts ground" (Smith 2013, 1:08:05). Translation is always an indicator for where infrastructure negotiates power.

Another example of this is the Treaty Principles Bill, that intends "to enshrine what the Treaty [Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi] means into law" (Hanly 2024, n.n.) in order to limit its influence in terms of New Zealand's long-standing bi-cultural policy-making: "The [ACT[15]] party has long argued the original articles [of Te Tiriti] have been interpreted by the courts, the Waitangi Tribunal and successive governments—over decades—in a way that has amplified their significance and influence beyond the original intent" (Hanly 2024, n.n.). Unsurprisingly, the bill triggered opposition by various groups, "including lawyers, historians, translators and churches" (Hanly 2024, n.n.).

As Germany is "the undoubted leader of the EU", as Ihimaera writes, translations into the German language are an important factor in the decolonising process. Translations from 'peripheral' languages into 'central' languages of the supranational language and translation "poly-system" (Even-Zohar 1990) are a means of actively unsettling the translation power-imbalances: a) because a translation from Māori into German decentres English, b) because German is a language peripheral to the governing home poly-system in Aotearoa New Zealand. Meaning, Māori can to some extent dictate the terms of translation: "the very principles of selecting the works to be translated are determined by the situation governing the (home) poly-system: the texts are chosen according to their compatibility with the new approaches and the supposedly innovatory role they may assume within the target literature" (Even-Zohar 1990, 47). Moreover, the translation into German shifts the grounds for the decolonisation from the national to the supranational stage, and, in the majority of cases, from the Southern to the Northern Hemisphere, where most of the arenas for trade agreements, climate change agreements and national sovereignty are based.

15 The ACT Party is a conservative right-wing party, often expressing classical liberal or right-libertarian views.

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Translating is honouring plurivocal reciprocity

Indigenous-led translations, that is, translations that honour the political articulations of Indigenous peoples, in return aid in decolonising postcolonial studies in Germany and elsewhere. German imperial and colonial presences in the Pacific and their consequences are still an understudied area as a result of traditional disciplinary language boundaries and disciplinary cultural boundaries that still govern the German academic system. Transpacific Studies, for example, does not nearly hold as much academic currency as Transatlantic Studies in Germany.[16] And while aware of, for example, the atrocities German imperial forces have committed in Africa, many are still completely unaware of the fact that Germany held territories in the Pacific because Anglophone (postcolonial) studies dominate the Pacific Studies discourse. Without translations, postcolonial studies continue the myth of the monolingual coloniser and the myth that decolonisation is only a national matter.

Translations of Māori and Pasifika literatures into German present particular linguistic and cultural problems: "All readers of translations potentially contribute to indigenous people regaining their voice, but only if these readers can decipher the messages in the original actions and discourses as they are transmitted into the target language" (Wohlfart 2018, 265). Oliver Haag and Danica Čerče (2015) compare the Dutch translation by Elise Spanjaard (2003) and the German translation by Sabine Schulte (2003) of *The Whale Rider*:

> [B]oth translators have produced stylistic and syntagmatic equivalence of the source text and original sentences have been reproduced as a whole without division into several different sentences. From a linguistic perspective, the target texts are indeed very fluent and professional. (258)

To illustrate the high quality of the translations, they read a passage from quite early in the book. At the same time that they appreciate the quality of these translations, they point out that they follow the original 1987 edition and the 'global' 2003 edition of *The Whale Rider* unevenly. This is the passage in question in the two English versions:

> In the old days, in the years that have gone before us, the land and sea felt a great emptiness, a yearning. The mountains were like the poutama, the stairway

16 However, the conference "Transcending Boundaries: Interdisciplinary Insights in Transpacific Studies" (https://www.obama-institute.com/feb-9-11-conference-transcending-boundaries-interdisciplinary-insights-in-transpacific-studies/) organised by the Transpacific Studies Network (TPSN) at the Johannes Gutenberg University in February 2024 indicates that transpacific studies are gaining traction.

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> to heaven, and the lush green rainforest was a rippling kakahu of many colours. (Ihimaera 1987, 4)

> In the old days, in the years that have gone before us, the land and sea felt a great emptiness, a yearning. The mountains were like a stairway to heaven, and the lush green rainforest was a rippling cloak of many colors. (Ihimaera 2003, 3)

Haag and Čerče find that both translators use a mix of foreignising and domesticating strategies. In particular, they deal very differently with the Māori words in their respective translations of above passage. It becomes apparent that both Schulte and Spanjaard had different ideas about how the "translated text functions against the background of the target language and culture" (Haag and Čerče 2015, 252). While Spanjaard follows the 2003 edition by removing the Māori words 'poutama' and 'kakahu', Schulte retained them for the German translation:

> Heel vroeger, in de jaren die aan onze tijd voorafgingen, voelden het land en de zee een grote leegte, een verlangen. de bergen waren als een trap naar de hemel en het weelderige, groene regenwoud was een golvende mantel vol kleurschakeringen. (Spanjaard 11, as cited in Haag and Čerče 258)

> Long ago, in the years leading up to our time, the land and sea felt a great emptiness, a yearning. The mountains were like a stairway to heaven and the lush green rainforest was a rippled cloak full of color shading. (backtranslation Haag and Čerče 258)

> In alter Zeit, in den Jahren vor unserer Zeitrechnung, verspürten Land und Meer eine große Leere, eine Sehnsucht. Die Berge glichen damals einer *poutama*, einer Leiter, die den Himmel hinaufragte, und der üppige grüne Regenwald war ein wogender *kakahu*, ein farbenprächtiger Mantel. (Schulte 11, as cited in Haag and Čerče 259)

> In old times, in the years before our era, the land and sea felt a great emptiness, a yearning. The mountains then resembled a *poutama*, a ladder that towered up to the heaven and the green lush rainforest was a rippling *kakahu*, a colourful cloak. (Haag and Čerče 259)

Haag and Čerče argue that "given the lack of contextualization" (261), which is the result of using Māori "without providing an explanation for German-speaking readers" (260) the German translation exoticises the foreign language and fails to communicate "the claims to indigenous sovereignty" (261). I would argue to the contrary that such explanations deny Ihimaera 'Indigenous sovereignty' by overwriting the creative autonomy that is expressed in his experiential translatorial writing. Not

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only "readers are always plural" as Anderson writes, but scholars also divert in "levels of knowledge", or rather focus, "whether in connection with the source or target text" (2021, 255).

In some instances, Haag and Čerče's interpretation of the German translation strategies is not only different from mine but wrong. They claim that the German translation does not provide an equivalent for the English explanations of Māori phrases to be found in the original text (261), and, specifically, that Schulte does not translate the words "*Hui e, haumi e, taiki e*", which appear at the end of several chapters (Haag and Čerče 261). The rhythmic Māori phrase is indeed followed four times by the German phrase "So soll es geschehen" (Schulte 15, 50, 147, 138). Only for the variant phrase, "*Haumi e, hui e, taiki e*.", Schulte does not provide the paraphrase (Schulte 65, 81, 104, 113, 153), except once (97). Schulte's translation thereby follows Ihimaera's immersive language learning approach. The rhythm of the phrase makes it easy to memorise it. By dispersing the paraphrase, the writing forces the readers to produce or retrieve the translation themselves. Both rhyme and omission are ancient and commonly used didactic devises for active language learning. In *The Whale Rider*, this technique allows the readers not only to learn this phrase (by heart), however, it also allows them eventually to attain a sense of community. They are the final words of *The Whale Rider*, and, in the same way that the song at the beginning, which calls the taniwha, qualifies the relationship between the singer, the song and the figure emerging from the ocean, the rhythmic phrase at the end qualifies the relationship between the narrator, the whales, and the reader:

> Mit leuchtenden Augen blickt Kahu Koro Apirana an.
> «Oh, Paka, hörst du sie nicht? Ich höre ihnen jetzt schon seit Ewigkeiten zu. Oh, Paka, und die Wale singen immer noch», sagte sie.
> *Haumi e, hui e, taiki e.* (153)
>
> Bright-eyed, Kahu looks at Koro Apirana.
> «Oh, Paka, can't you hear them? I've been listening to them for ages now. Oh, Paka, and the whales are still singing», she said.
> Haumi e, hui e, taiki e. (153, back-translation mine)

When the readers come to the end of the book and recognise the phrase and its meaning, they will belong to those who can hear the sacred ancestors, the whales, singing.

Further analysis shows that Haag and Čerče's criticism of Schulte's glossary is limited by the parameters they set for their reading, which is solely based on consulting the printed texts. They claim that by omitting certain terms, such as *Hawaiki* from the glossary, Schulte does not give enough cultural context to support an adequate culturally informed reading of the book: "The Dutch Glossary, reflecting Span-

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jaard's less foreignizing strategy, includes more culturally relevant information, as when *Hawaiki* is explicated as 'the original home of the Māori people' (*traditioneel thuisland van het Maori-volk*)" (261).

Paraphrasing *Hawaiki* as the "original home of the Māori", however, could also be read as marking Māori as immigrants, not much different from Pākehā, and as an overwriting of the thousands of years of Māori guardianship of Aotearoa. The Dutch phrase in fact also uses the term 'traditioneel thuisland', which literally translates as 'traditional homeland' and thus includes the politically contested term 'traditional', which in critical Indigenous studies has been identified as a marker for when colonising forces attempt to authenticate and police Indigenous identities (Hokowhitu 2008, Lyons 2010).

The narrative context in which *Hawaiki* appears in *The Whale Rider*, supports a critical reading against Spanjaard's explanation in the glossary. At the beginning of chapter nine, the narrator shares the story of Paikea's transition from whale rider and founder of the family to *Tekoteko* figure carved out of wood sitting on the top of the gable of the *Marae*. Here (Schulte 63–65), we learn that the pod of whales abandoned their usual travelling route through the deep-see trench because of the nuclear testing in Moruroa: "Er [der Leitwal] hatte Angst vor der Kontamination, die sich von Moruroa her ausbreitete." (The contamination that spread from Moruroa scared him [the leading whale], back-translation mine.) Hawaiki is mentioned at the beginning of the section that describes the location of the pod of whales at the time: "*Der Tiefseegraben bei Hawaiki. Der Sitz der Götter. Die Heimat der Alten. Wie eine Flotte majestätischer Luftschiffe schwebte die Walherde in der vergoldeten See.*" (Schulte 63, italics in the original). In back-translation (mine) this section reads: "The deep-sea trench near Hawaiki. Seat of the gods. Homeland of the elders. The pod of whales hovered in the golden see like a fleet of majestic airships." From the passage itself it becomes clear that *Hawaiki* is a location identified in relation to the whale's genealogy, "der Ort, der paradoxerweise einst der Schoß der Welt gewesen war. [...] Hier hatte er seine Kindheit verbracht, und hier war er mit seinem goldenen Meister zusammen gewesen." (*the place that, paradoxically, was once the womb of the world. [...] Here he had spent his childhood, and here he had been with his golden master*, back-translation mine.) A glossary entry that suggests an authenticated geographical and anthropocentric reading of *Hawaiki* is inappropriate in this context in my view.

Overall, therefore, I disagree with Haag and Čerče who conclude that the inclusion of Māori language solely serves to authenticate the target text:

> The mere inclusion of Māori language does not achieve greater engagement with Māori culture through translated Māori literature. Instead, because of its non-translation and particularly the lacking contextualization, it hinders any such engagement. (266)

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Schulte, however, not merely included Māori but honoured the original translatorial strategies employed by Ihimaera. I am confident in my reading also because of how Schulte describes her cooperation with Ihimaera. In the interview, I conducted with her as part of our "Eine Uni – Ein Buch" events in 2023, she explains that she consulted the author with regard to the inclusions of *te reo Māori* in the book. The glossary was also produced in close collaboration with Ihimaera, which she admits contains a number of contradictions: "Da gibt es berufene Menschen, die das vielleicht eines Tages mal auseinanderdröseln. Ich weiß nicht. Aber wahrscheinlich gibt es keine Neuauflage." (*There are qualified people who might one day resolve this. I don't know. But there probably won't be a new edition*, translation mine, 20:58–20:21)[17]. The crucial point is, however, that Schulte identifies Ihimaera as the translator whom she followed:

> In diesem Fall hatte ich den Eindruck, dass Witi Ihimaera selbst der Vermittler dieses kulturellen Hintergrundes ist. Und insofern hatte ich nicht viel Arbeit. Ich konnte ihm einfach folgen, indem ich das Buch übersetzte. (23:36–23:56)
>
> In this case, I had the impression that Witi Ihimaera himself was the mediator of this cultural background. And in that respect, I didn't have much work to do. I could just follow him by translating the book.

Twenty years ago, the author as cultural translator was an invaluable resource, in comparison to today (or even in 2015) when a lot of background research can be conducted online: "Heute guckt man ins Internet, das ist natürlich sehr komfortabel" (*Today we look up things on the Internet, which is of course very convenient*, translation mine, 27:22–27:24). And yet no translation or internet search can ever fully render a perfect linguistic or cultural translation. *The Whale Rider* is part of a complex global nexus of political friction that is and will be ongoing. Therefore, projects such as our communal "Eine Uni – Ein Buch" (re)reading of Witi Ihimaera's book are all the more important: a text should never just render one Indigenous voice but many, never just tell one version of colonial history for all time, but all the ones needed to keep the process of decolonisation going.

17 Schulte had been a translator for Rowohlt, the German publisher, for some time before she was commissioned with *The Whale Rider*. Thus, she was already quite familiar then with the publisher's norms and with negotiating the production of a translation under time-pressure, for which, she remembers, she was paid 1€ "Eilzuschlag" (express supplement) per page: "Es drängte." (It was urgent, translation mine, 18:59–19:04). Of course it was urgent, the translation had to be available in close temporal proximity to the film release to maximise possible event-based sales. Thus, many decisions were made in accordance with the American edition to save time.

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As a *tauiwi* scholar my knowledge of Māori onto-epistemology is inherently limited. I don't consider the space from which I speak as authorial, nor do I want my results to be deemed as definitive. I hope that the flaws in my personal interpretations will be judged by the future conversations and research they might stimulate.

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