Asserting Feminist Claims within Māori Culture: *Whale Rider* (Niki Caro, 2002)[1]

Alistair Fox

Abstract *Despite the popularity of "Whale Rider" (2002) with audiences, some Māori found Niki Caro's cinematic adaptation of Witi Ihimaera's novel culturally offensive. They objected to the film as promoting a paternalistic narrative that ignored the role of Pākehā in the oppression of Māori and denounced the misrepresentation of various tribal traditions. The result, these critics claimed, was merely a simulacrum of Māori culture that distorted the original story. This essay identifies ways in which Caro and her producer deliberately reworked Ihimaera's source story so as to make the film of "Whale Rider" appeal universally across cross cultures with an international audience in mind. In particular, it traces how Caro applied her own personal feminist vision to Ihimaera's original, converting it from a narrative that was culturally specific into a conventional coming-of-age genre film with international box-office appeal.*

Keywords *New Zealand cinema; Witi Ihimaera; Niki Caro; coming-of-age film; Māori culture*

The most important New Zealand movie of 2003, Niki Caro's *Whale Rider*, first shown at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2002, where it was voted *People's Choice*, and released elsewhere the following year, was one of the most successful fiction films made in this country, winning 29 international awards. Apart from being highly successful in New Zealand, with ticket sales of 752,941 (Pivac 2011, 297), making it the fourth most popular locally-made movie to date, even more significantly, it was a huge hit internationally, with foreign box office earnings of $20,662,227.[2] In addition, it was the first feature-length film to be adapted from a novel by Witi Ihimaera, the most prominent Māori writer of fiction, inaugurating several other adaptations based on his works, including *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*

1 This essay was originally published in Alistair Fox, *Coming of Age in New Zealand: Genre, Gender and Adaptation in New Zealand Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017) ISBN 978–1474429443.

2 This figure is taken from Box Office Mojo, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&country=NZ&id=whalerider.htm, accessed 17 July 2016.

(Katie Wolfe 2010),[3] a coming-out drama, and *Mahana* (Lee Tamahori 2016), based on the novel *Bulibasha: King of the Gypsies*, with further plans under way to film his major novel, *The Matriarch*.

Despite *Whale Rider's* popularity with audiences, however, within New Zealand its reception was mixed. In particular, some Māori found the film culturally offensive, and objected to the fact that a Pākehā director had presumed to make it. The scholar Brendan Hokowhitu, for example, saw *Whale Rider* as "a problematic and even dangerous film for the project of Māori decolonization," on the grounds that "Pākehā have embraced this movie because it promotes a conscious paternalistic narrative of nurturing a savage culture while repressing the role of Pākehā in the oppression of Māori" (Hokowhitu 2008, 128, 132). In similar vein, Tania Ka'ai denounced the film as misrepresenting various tribal traditions, arguing that "the patriarchy/feminism division operates very differently in the Ngāti Porou tribe, where *Whale Rider* is based, than it does either in the film or in Eurocentric feminisms" (Ka'ai 2005, 1–15).

What such criticisms point toward is the fact that Caro and her producer, John Barnett of South Pacific Pictures, deliberately reworked the source story of *Whale Rider* for the sake of making the film appeal to an international audience. Barnett, who optioned the book 14 years before the film was actually made, became interested in the story because he felt

> . . . that 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. (Welch 2003)

For Barnett, in other words, cultural specificity is unimportant compared with the potential for the story to have universal appeal, no matter what society in the world a spectator comes from.

For her part, Niki Caro was attracted to the project because she saw "a coming-of-age story in a young girl that wasn't about a sexual awakening, but was a spiritual awakening, and I thought that was really new, very compelling for me" (Caro 2003). She also opined, however, that "although the book is beautiful it doesn't present itself immediately as an adaptation"; consequently, when presented with the treatment that had already been prepared by the producers, Caro asked whether she could write her own draft that would apply her vision to the film (Kehr 2003).

3 The title of this film for its American release was *Kawa*.

We are confronted, then, with a film that was purposefully directed away from the source story as it was in order to be converted into a film that would appeal universally across cultures – in other words, a recognisable genre film – and a film that would also serve as a vehicle through which the filmmaker could project her own personal "vision." This is precisely the trend that is evident in Christine Jeffs's *Rain* (2001) when compared with the source novel *Rain* (1995) by Kirsty Gunn upon which it is based, and it reflects both the advent of an increasingly strong commercial imperative in New Zealand filmmaking from the 1990s onward, as well as the growing influence of a globalised international culture. The end result was a cinematic version of Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* that presented, in Hokowhitu's words, a "simulacrum" of Māori culture and the original story (2008, 125–126), while transubstantiating its inner meaning in the course of converting the source into a conventional coming-of-age genre film.

Ihimaera's Novel: Mode and Meaning

In terms of certain aspects of its cultural content and manner of presentation, Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* displays a close resemblance to Merata Mita's *Mauri* as an authentically indigenous work – that is, one that views the world from a Māori perspective and invests it with attitudes that derive from a Māori value-system and belief-system. At the heart of Ihimaera's story is the same importance that the character Kara in *Mauri* attributes to the transmission of knowledge through generations, as well as a strong awareness of the line of descent from ancestors. There is also the same sense of time as a spiral, reflected in the frequent return of episodes from the past into the narrative of the present, and the close connection Māori have with the natural environment and its creatures. Above all, in both Mita's film and Ihimaera's novel, there is the same sense of a union between the natural and the supernatural, and a belief in the importance of respecting *tapu* (prohibitions) and the *mana* (prestige, status, spiritual power) of others.

The omnipresence of these values in Ihimaera's story is conveyed through a variety of means. At the beginning of the book, the arrival of the gigantic *tipua* (supernatural being) in the form of a whale is accompanied by magic realism as Paikea, the man who is riding him, "began to fling small spears of mauri seaward and landward": "Some of the mauri in mid flight turned into pigeons which flew into the forests. Others on landing in the sea changed into eels. And the song in the sea drenched the air with ageless music and land and sea opened themselves to him, the gift long waited for: tangata, man." (Ihimaera 1987, 6) When the ancient whale returns near the end of the book, there is "a dull booming from beneath the water, like a giant door opening a thousand years ago," and "streaks of blue lightning came shooting out of the sea like missiles" (92–93). Such eruptions of magic realism are not simply dec-

orative: they serve to intimate the presence of a spiritual, supernatural dimension inherent in the nature of things.

The union of the natural and the supernatural and the communion of Māori with the natural world is also seen on the occasion when Kahu, the girl (named Paikea in Caro's film), dives into the sea to retrieve the carved stone her grandfather Koro has thrown there as a test to identify the boy who is destined to carry on the leadership of his people in the new generation. As Kahu is searching the reef for the stone, "white shapes came speeding out of the dark towards her." They are dolphins who "seemed to be talking to her," and speed her to another area of the reef, where she finds the stone and returns it to the surface (74). Later, near the end of the book, after Kahu has ridden the great whale, when she is found unconscious, "floating in a nest of dark lustrous kelp in the middle of the ocean," dolphins are guarding her, keeping her safe until she is rescued (117).

Equally present is an overarching sense of the importance of *whanaungatanga*, or the kinship network that binds the members of the tribe into a larger unit, rather than placing the primary emphasis on the individual and the nuclear family, as occurs in Pākehā culture (Ka'ai 2005, 5). The existence of this larger network, which encompasses both past and present, and extends over distance and time, is reflected in the inclusion of many plot strands concerning a variety of characters. It is also apparent in the comings and goings of those who are part of the *whanau* (family group), including the great whale himself, to Whangara as the home-place of the tribe. This is not just Kahu's story; it is also the story of Rawiri, the narrator of the story, who is aged 24 – a bikie who leaves home to live in Australia for four years, and then two years in New Guinea, with Jeff, his white flatmate (who foreshadows Jason, the white lover of Michael, the narrator in Ihimaera's *The Uncle's Story*), during which he grows into an understanding of himself as a Māori, not least as a result of encountering the racism of Jeff's parents. It is also the story of Koro, who is described as "like an old whale stranded in an alien present," as he struggles to find a way to understand his role in a changing world (Ihimaera 2000, 59). Not least, it is the story of the "handsome and virile" bull whale himself, who loves the human who became his master, suffers heartache at being separated from him when, having been taken by the whale to Aotearoa, his "golden master had met a woman and had married her." Thereafter, the bull whale yearns to be reunited with his handsome young master in "the dangerous islands to the south-west," being unable to dislodge him from his thoughts (10, 80, 11). The homoerotic overtones in the passages describing the relation between the bull whale and Paikea provide a reminder that, for Ihimaera, this is a very personal novel: it was written for his daughters, Jessica and Olivia, and embodies personal projections, some of them relating to his experience as a gay man, and some of them displaced into the story of Kahu herself, as he intimates in an interview. Despite being someone who has inherited all the expectations of leadership, he says, "I have been able to live a life away from the iwi [tribal kinship group] somewhat in-

consistent with that normally ascribed to any successor: I married a Pākehā woman, I am now a gay man, I have had daughters (not sons), and I don't live with the iwi." (Meklin and Meklin 2004, 358–366, here 363) Thus, just as in the novel Kahu disappoints traditional expectations by being the eldest child of an eldest son, but born a girl, Ihimaera in real life, by being a gay man in a culture that one of his characters describes as "among the most homophobic in the world . . . [in which] I am not supposed to exist," (Ihimaera 2000, 22) similarly contravenes the expectations of the kind of man a leader should be. Ihimaera's main purpose in the novel, therefore, was to open up a space within Māori culture for those who are not recognised within its patriarchal structures. In the case of *The Whale Rider*, this space involves acceptance of females as being equal in worth to males, but behind the claim for recognition of this right, one suspects, was the further claim for acceptance of gay males that Ihimaera would go on to assert in several of his later novels. The underlying thought – merely obliquely hinted at in the yearning of the bull whale for his golden master – is summed up by Sam's recollection of the hierarchical values of Māori society in *The Uncle's Story*, written a little over a decade after *The Whale Rider*: "The male was high and sanctified. Woman was low and common. How much lower were men who loved men ––." (219) Within the structures of *whanaungatanga* (sense of family connection) and *manaaki* (caring for others), these are the values that Ihimaera, through the fiction of *The Whale Rider*, is seeking to change. The point I would emphasise, though, is that in Ihimaera's version of the story, this is a space that he wants to see opened up *within* a Māori tribal perspective, not created by the superimposition of alien values imported from a different culture and imposed upon the Māori one from without. That is the fault that many Māori saw as vitiating Caro's cinematic adaptation of what, in Ihimaera's version, is quintessentially a Māori work.

Caro's Conversion of the Source Story into a Genre Film

In the course of adapting Ihimaera's novel for the screen, Caro, even though, as she rightly claims, "the most important events in the film are very faithful to the book," (Caro 2004) transformed it utterly. In accordance with her view that the most appealing aspect of Ihimaera's story was a coming-of-age element involving a "spiritual awakening," she stripped out any material that did not directly contribute to the depiction of the girl's coming-of-age. Hence, the observing presence of Rawiri is eliminated in order to substitute Paikea (Keisha Castle-Hughes) as the narrator through her intermittent voiceovers. Similarly, the whole story involving Rawiri's sojourn overseas and his relationship with Jeff is suppressed, and his role as the one who leaves the *iwi* is given to Porourangi (Cliff Curtis), Koro's eldest son, thus investing Porourangi with similar issues to those of Paikea, given that he is an artist with a German wife, and hence also contravenes the traditional expectations of his

culture of origin. In Ihimaera's version, to the contrary, Porourangi does not rebel against expectations in this way; instead, he dutifully remarries a Māori woman, Ana, after Kahu's mother has died, and begets another child, which Koro also hopes will be a son. The acceptability of Porourangi in the novel is reflected in the way Koro identifies him as "the one" in his generation to carry on the leadership of the people, unlike his namesake in the film, whom Caro's Koro (Rawiri Paratene) regards as a disappointment (Ihimaera 1987, 58). In Caro's version, a character called "Uncle Rawiri" (Grant Roa) still remains, but he is given an entirely different character, being presented as the stereotype of a fat and lazy Māori, lying outdoors on a couch in the sun with his marijuana pipe, so that he can be set up as a foil for Paikea to reform and rehabilitate in her role as incipient leader.

Just as Caro leaves out the major plot strand involving Rawiri in the novel, so too does she omit any allusions to the bull whale's yearning for his master, or the whale's grief at their separation and desire to be reunited with him. In the film, the whales are literally whales, and nothing more – neither *tipua* nor *taniwha* – which is consistent with a general moving of the story toward a mode of literal realism, with the episodes of magic realism in the novel being almost entirely eliminated from the film, apart from a vague intimation that somehow Paikea can communicate empathically with the whales, as when she says, after the whales are beached, "I called them and they came, but it wasn't right, they were dying."

Along with the disappearance of Ihimaera's magic realism, Caro also omits anything that suggests the presence of the supernatural. Hence, there are no dolphins to guide Paikea to the *rei puta* (whale-tooth ornament) at the bottom of the sea as there are to guide Kahu to the carved stone in the novel, and neither does a female consort persuade the bull whale to return Paikea to the surface as happens to Kahu; instead, Caro's Paikea simply lets go of the whale and floats naturalistically to the surface. In the absence of these magical elements, the whole sense of a numinous world in which human beings are in communion with the ancestors and the creatures of the natural world virtually disappears, to be replaced by a literalised form of realism that represents a different world view altogether.

This is not to say that the film does not seek to depict Māori life in its cultural specificity; indeed, the movie is full of scrupulous care in that regard, showing a range of cultural practices, such as several instances of a *waiata tangi* (song of mourning) and *karakia* (prayer), a *pōwhiri* (welcome ceremony), a *haka* (posture dance), and the launching of a *toiere* (war canoe with carved stem and stern) – all rendered with realistic detail. Despite this attention to external verisimilitude, which is filmed with exceptional beauty by Leon Narbey, the cinematographer, the Māori sensibility with which the novel is so pervasively imbued is absent. One only need compare this film with Merata Mita's *Mauri* to detect the difference. Take, for example, the music, for which Mita uses traditional Māori instruments – the *kōauau* (cross-blown flute), the *pūtorinō* (large traditional flute), and the *pūtātara* (conch shell trumpet) – to suggest

the presence of the ancestors at significant moments. In *Whale Rider*, Caro aims for a similar effect in the music that accompanies each shot of whales swimming, declaring her satisfaction that the composer, Lisa Gerrard, had been able to find "indigenous Māori sounds within her equipment" (Caro 2004). In the absence of a sense of a living connection with the ancestors, however, and of the past in the present, together with an unbroken continuity of values, such as imbues the whole texture of *Mauri*, these simulated "indigenous sounds" lack the full signifying function that they have in the earlier film, serving more as an emotive mood-setting device. There is a certain symbolic pertinence in the fact that the "indigenous" music of *Whale Rider* was made on an electronic synthesiser, bearing the same relationship to the authentic instruments used by Mita as the Māori world presented in Caro's film does to Māori culture in the real world.

The end result of these major omissions – leaving aside for the time being the numerous new scenes that Caro added – is to focus attention almost exclusively on Paikea's coming-of-age experience, turning the film into a classic genre film in the process, albeit one that uses Māori life and customs as a colorful, exotic backdrop.

A Feminist Vision in a Cross-Cultural Context

Caro has been open about her desire to apply her own vision to a girl's coming-of-age story that involves "a spiritual awakening." What does the film show to be the nature of this vision, and what kind of "spiritual awakening" does it imply? It is in this respect that, as several commentators have recognised, Caro implants into the story a feminist vision of female emancipation drawn from globalised western culture at large.

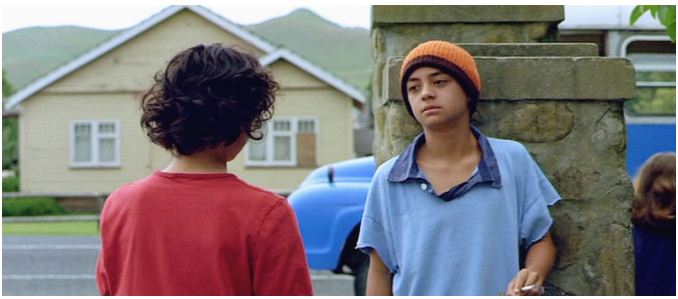
To some extent, this assertion of the right of females to be accorded equality with males in Māori culture was already present in Ihimaera's novel, in the idea that it should make no difference whether the first-born child in the line of succession to lead the tribe is a boy or a girl. This is what Koro himself comes to understand at the end of the novel when he tells Kahu to take her "rightful place" among her people: "You're the best mokopuna in the whole wide world," he said. "Boy or girl, it doesn't matter." Caro, however, pushes this notion a whole lot further, presenting Paikea not simply as a female who deserves to have her place acknowledged, but as a reformer who is prepared to defy and challenge the whole Māori cultural system.

Paikea, in Caro's vision, has a leader's mission and competence from the outset, as her name reflects. In Ihimaera's version, Kahu only becomes "Paikea" when she rides the whale, just as Kahutia Te Rangi, the ancestor after whom she is named, was given another name, Paikea (humpback whale), to commemorate his voyage to Aotearoa; in other words, it was a name that was earned by the performance of a heroic deed (Ihimaera 1987, 27). In contrast, Caro's heroine in the film is called

"Paikea" from the beginning, suggesting that in the filmmaker's conception she already has those outstanding qualities.

This reformulated conception is reflected in a series of new episodes that Caro invented to show Paikea's leadership in action. On several occasions, she is seen chastising members of the tribe for smoking (a health issue among the Māori population), as when she rebukes her grandmother, Nanny Flowers (Vicky Haughton), and two of her older women friends for smoking, or when she upbraids Hemi (Mana Taumaunu) for the same misdeed, having caught him smoking outside their school (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Paikea (Keisha Castle-Hughes) reproaches Hemi (Mana Taumaunu) for smoking in "Whale Rider".



Source: *Whale Rider*, dir. Niki Caro, 2002

She also shames Rawiri, who has become "fat and ugly" through indolence, into jogging to regain his health, and performs the role of a comforter to her own father when she explains why Koro regards him (and her) with disapproval.

Furthermore, Caro's Paikea is given additional exceptional competencies that illustrate her superior qualifications for assuming leadership of the tribe. In one new episode, for example, when Koro is trying to get an outboard motor to start and the starter-cord breaks, Paikea uses her ingenuity to join it together again and succeeds in starting the engine (Fig. 2). The symbolism of this scene is obvious: whereas her grandfather cannot start the motor that will propel his people forward, his granddaughter, with her superior skills, is able to do precisely that.

This use of a boat as symbolising the tribe itself is duplicated in the central symbol of the whole film, a half-built canoe that has been left abandoned and unfinished, stranded, like the whales will be, high and dry, unable to travel. Caro explains that she invented the *waka* (canoe) to serve "as an image to speak for a community, for a people, for a culture that were without constant sustenance, which is still magnificent, but runs the risk of falling into decay" (Caro 2004).

Fig. 2: Paikea (Keisha Castle-Hughes) fixes her grandfather's outboard motor in "Whale Rider".

Source: *Whale Rider*, dir. Niki Caro, 2002

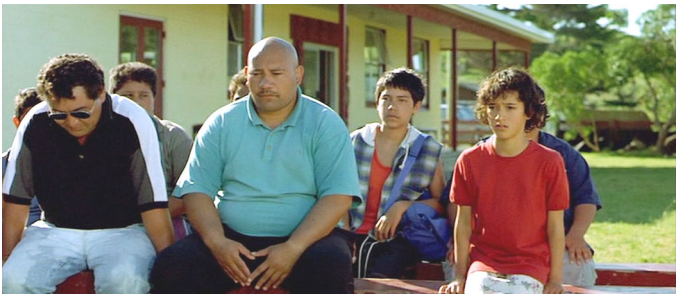
The logic of using the canoe as a symbol of the tribe and its future requires that Paikea, as leader, take control of it and, indeed, at regular intervals through the movie she is shown standing in the middle of the *waka*. On one of these occasions, as Caro points out, "Pai's blanket, when she is standing in the waka, chanting, starts to look like a *korowai*, the cloak of a leader; she is starting to feel literally like the chief she is becoming" (ibid.). Finally, at the end of the film, once the *waka* has been completed and is "reborn, flying," we see Paikea "in what is known as the *rangatira* position – the chief's position, the most prestigious position" as the boat heads boldly into the future on a new journey of discovery (ibid.).

As satisfying as Paikea's occupation of Caro's invented *waka* might be in terms of the feminist ideology of the filmmaker's vision, in real life to have the girl trespass into the space of the canoe, let alone assume the chief's position, amounted to a breach of *tapu* in terms of Māori spirituality. Caro herself was highly aware of this, as she explains in her commentary: "women traditionally should not be in these canoes, and we had to have a *tapu*-lifting ceremony to make it safe for her to be in there, for me to be in there" (ibid.). Caro's willingness to breach *tapu* in this way, in a manner that Ihimaera scrupulously avoids in his version of the story, attests to the zeal with which she promotes a distinctly Europeanised feminist agenda in the film – the personal "vision" that she declared she wanted to "apply."

It is small wonder, then, that many Māori were offended by the movie, especially as the strict rules of *tapu* were repeatedly breached in a number of the new scenes Caro invented to augment Ihimaera's fable in order to convert it to her purpose. Regarding a new scene early in the film, in which children present a pantomime version of the story of the whale's arrival at Whangara, Caro notes: "There was some discussion about how appropriate it was in this sacred place [Whitireia, the meeting house] to have the whale farting, but as we know, farts are funny" (ibid.). *Tapu* is further breached twice during the scene of the *pōwhiri* to welcome the boys: first,

when, at her grandmother's instigation, Paikea leads the boys on to the *marae* (the open area in front of the meeting house), which is a man's role; and, second, when she takes a seat on the *paepae* (orators' bench), the front row of seats occupied by the visitors (Fig. 3). Again, Caro was aware of how culturally provocative this addition was: "When you watch the film with a Māori audience and she sits down there, you can hear an audible gasp – it's so transgressive, what she does" (ibid.).

Fig. 3: Paikea (Keisha Castle-Hughes) breaches tapu by sitting on the paepae, reserved for men, at a pōwhiri in "Whale Rider".



Source: *Whale Rider*, dir. Niki Caro, 2002

Similarly, she adds several scenes showing Paikea's determination to learn how to fight with a *taiaha* (long wooden weapon), and depicts her defeating Hemi in a confrontation, prompting the angry Koro, who has been instructing his *wānanga* (school) of boys in the art of the *taiaha*, to exclaim: "What have you done? You have broken the *tapu* of this school!" (ibid.).

The insistent provocativeness with which Caro challenges Māori customs in the furtherance of a white feminist agenda explains the indignation expressed by a Māori woman scholar such as Tania Ka'ai. For Ka'ai, the depiction of Māori culture in *Whale Rider* was a travesty that reflected misunderstanding of certain assumptions and practices that diverged from Pākehā ones. She particularly objected to the scene showing Paikea delivering the *karanga* (call), traditionally executed only by a *kuia* (elderly woman) during the *pōwhiri*:

> This is simply inconceivable in Māori society, for her grandmother was exposing her to the risk of *kanga* [curses]. Regardless of Paikea's inherited status, she is vulnerable because she has not yet reached puberty and therefore a prime candidate for such practices. Furthermore, Paikea behaved as if she was a child brought up by her father in Germany, with no knowledge of Māori culture, when she sat on the front pew with the men. A child raised by her grandparents would simply not be-

> have in this way. This is an example of the Eurocentric feminist belief that women can challenge a supposed male hegemonic practice that appears to discriminate against Māori women and, therefore, relegates them to lesser positions in Māori society. The disregard for the cultural significance of the *marae* and the protection of women is masked by this Eurocentric feminist challenge, thus portraying Māori as a 'barbaric' people who have no respect for women. (Ka'ai 2005, 8)

Ka'ai also took exception at the way Caro showed Hemi striking Koro on the back during a *taiaha* lesson: "it is simply inconceivable that a child, male or female, would beat an elder let alone a tribal leader with their *taiaha* (a weapon and oratory staff). To do so would be to commit a *hara* (a cultural offence of the worst order)" (11). In the light of Ka'ai's objections, therefore, one can see that, as fervent and committed as the film was, Caro, in the course of altering her source to fit the agenda of her personal vision, whether wittingly or unwittingly, transposed the story from being a Māori one, to one that is seen through Pākehā eyes, and not without a degree of condescension.

This difference of vision is reflected in a radical contrast that exists between the respective endings of the novel and the film. Ihimaera's Koro finally accords Kahu the acceptance that she has always craved, in spite of her gender, by telling her that, "Boy or girl, it doesn't matter." This prompts Kahu, in return, to reciprocate by saying that he is "the best koro in the whole wide world," (Ihimaera 1987, 122) Caro's Koro, in contrast, is punished for his patriarchal assumptions by being humbled – a diminution of status that is reflected in his last words addressed to Paikea: "Wise leader, forgive me. I am just a fledgling new to flight," which imparts a different message altogether by elevating Paikea to a status above her grandfather. The difference is highly significant. In Ihimaera's version, Kahu, in order to receive the acknowledgment she longs for, needs to pass a test that demonstrates her connection to the *mauri*, or life force, in the natural world; this is what will equip her to lead her people. In contrast, Caro's Paikea already has superior leadership qualities, and the test is transferred to Koro, for whom passing the test amounts to conceding that his granddaughter has those qualities, and hence can supersede him as a "wise [for which read 'wiser'] leader" whose feminist enlightenment is superior to his benighted patriarchal blindness. Caro thus passes a boundary of disrespect that Ihimaera was not prepared to transgress.

One further aspect of the cinematic version needs to be noted. As film scholar Bruce Babington astutely observes, the historical markers in the novel that evoke the history of Māori race relations with Pākehā, such as Koro's involvement in politics and references to Waitangi Tribunal settlements have been completely erased from the film, which makes the issues presented in the film non-specific and hence readable "in terms of both the indigenous community and the larger society, thus catering not only to national desires, but also international ones" (Babington 2007,

228–229). The only presence of Pākehā in the movie occurs in the fleeting glimpse we get in the final sequence of Porourangi's German wife, which implicitly suggests, as Māori scholars like Hokowhitu have argued, that the film sees the future for Māori as one in which Māori cultural distinctiveness is assimilated into a merging of the races under an "enlightened" Eurocentric set of values. While this erasure of difference between the races through the elimination of historical makers of the relationship between Māori and Pākehā may have made the film palatable to Pākehā and overseas audiences, commensurately, it made it less than satisfying to Māori. As the Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay wryly observed, to the extent that *Whale Rider* is a Māori film at all, it is an "indigenous film for beginners" (Calder 2003).

Māori Films after *Whale Rider*

Although Caro stepped well beyond where Ihimaera had felt he wanted to go in claiming the right to equality of women in Māori culture, crossing boundaries with respect to *tapu* that his fiction shows him as having been careful to observe, she was not alone in seeing a need for Māori culture to change. Indeed, Ihimaera himself would soon go on to write subsequent novels that would challenge the traditional culture even more aggressively, especially in *Bulibasha: King of the Gypsies* (1994), and *The Uncle's Story* (2000). In these two later novels he would depict protagonists who stand up to the patriarchal tyranny and bullying of a grandfather and a father, respectively, who are far more despotical than Koro is presented as being in *The Whale Rider*. Ihimaera's challenge to traditional Māori culture in these later novels is direct and explicit: in *The Uncle's Story*, for instance, he would also assert the right for a Māori man to be both Māori and gay, without relinquishing "the mana, the tapu, the ihi or life force and the wehi or dread that the dynamic of being a man depended on" (Ihimaera 2000, 156). Both of these themes – the rejection of patriarchal authoritarianism, and the right to be gay without loss of mana or sacredness – would in turn be developed in subsequent films adapted from Ihimaera's works – in *Mahana* (2016) and *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* (2010) – suggesting a move away from the ideal of a "Fourth Cinema" embodying traditional Māori values, as exemplified in *Mauri*.

At the same time, subsequent films by Māori, on Māori subjects, display the same trend towards international genre cinema that is evident in Caro's *Whale Rider*. This tendency, which is particularly apparent in the two coming-of-age smash hits directed by Taika Waititi, *Boy* (2010) and *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (2016) attests to two forces that would influence Māori filmmaking in the future: the incursion of globalised popular culture on one hand, and the effects of the development in New Zealand of biculturalism as a state-sponsored policy on the other. Whereas the former would supply a whole banquet of tropes from a variety of genres that filmmakers

could draw upon, the latter would license the incorporation of certain Pākehā practices and values. Both encouraged the evolution of new forms of cultural hybridity as a dominant characteristic of coming-of-age films in the second decade of the new millennium.

References

Babington, Bruce. *A History of the New Zealand Fiction Feature Film*. Manchester University Press, 2007.

Calder, Peter. "Riding High on 'Whale' Tale World Report: New Zealand Success of Whale Rider Promotes New Zealand Film Industry." *Variety* 393:5, 2003, A2.

Director's Commentary. Niki Caro, Buena Vista Home Entertainment, DVD, 2004.

Hokowhitu, Brendan. "The Death of Koro Paka: 'Traditional' Māori Patriarchy." *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2008, pp. 115–141.

Ihimaera, Witi. *The Uncle's Story*. Penguin, 2000.

Ihimaera, Witi. *The Whale Rider*. Heinemann, 1987.

Ka'ai, Tania M. "*Te Kauae Mārō o Muri-ranga-whenua* (The Jawbone of Muri- ranga-whenua): Globalising Local Indigenous Culture – Māori Leadership, Gender and Cultural Knowledge Transmission as Represented in the Film *Whale Rider*." *Portal: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2005, pp. 1–15, https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/portal/article/view/92/59, accessed 11 April 2025.

Kehr, Dave. "At the Movies." *The New York Times*, Section E, 6 June 2003, p. 23.

Meklin, Margaret, and Andrew Meklin. "This Magnificent Accident: An Interview with Witi Ihimaera." *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2004, pp. 358–366.

[Niki Caro]. "Interview with Niki Caro, Writer/Director of *Whale Rider*." *The Movie Show*, Episode 12, 11 May 2003.

Pivac, Diane, Frank Stark, and Lawrence McDonald. *New Zealand Film: An Illustrated History*. Te Papa Press, 2011.

"Whale Rider." *Box Office Mojo*, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&country=NZ&id=whalerider.htm, accessed 11 April 2025.

Welch, Dennis. "The Producer." *New Zealand Listener*, vol. 189, no. 3295, 2003, pp. 20–24.