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On Reading Grace's Potiki

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Eva Rask Knudsen, "On Reading Grace's *Potiki*"
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Abstract: In her article "On Reading Grace's *Potiki*" Eva Rask Knudsen takes as her point of departure the critical impasse of postcolonial analyses of Indigenous literatures and the claim made by some (Indigenous) commentators that non-Indigenous scholars and critics often re-colonize the texts they deem to be "postcolonial" because — in their theoretical concern with issues of marginalization and resistance — they overlook (and so overwrite) the specific indigenous knowledges and ontologies that the literatures draw on. Through an analysis of the 1986 novel *Potiki* by Māori writer Patricia Grace, Rask Knudsen looks in other directions than those catalogued by postcolonial convention. With attention to Māori storytelling procedures and Māori notions of textuality, Rask Knudsen postulates that the non-Indigenous scholar/critic may venture legitimately and purposefully into indigenous territory if the cultural signposts of that territory are acknowledged. As *Potiki* is structured as a narrative told within the context of a Māori meeting house (*whare nui*), a ceremonial site that encourages dialogue and public debate, the novel offers, by extension, a venue also for the scholar's/critic's encounter with indigenous "difference."

Eva RASK KNUDSEN

On Reading Grace's *Potiki*" Erase quotation mark!!!

The relationship between Indigenous literatures and postcolonial critical readings is curiously restrained. Literatures thrive in creative ambivalence and multi-faceted meanings yet much non-Indigenous scholarship and criticism withers inside unproductive paradigms and preconceptions. While Indigenous writers invite us "inside" and offer us glimpses into different worlds, many scholars and critics, enticed into Other Land and eagerly making mental notes for later scrutiny, lose sight of what they are offered by the host and eventually outstay their welcome. Others move tactfully around and watch and listen but would rather not enter into conversation because they fear they could be accused of intruding. This is, stripped of all its associated theoretical jargon, the central discursive dilemma that the production and reception of Indigenous writing still struggle with. What goes on in the translation of what the text says and what the scholar/critic "hears"? As the category "Indigenous literature" is still imbedded in a pervasive politics of culture insistent on opposing the cultural outsider's mistranslations or misappropriations of "ethnic" value, this dilemma is far from being one that posits writer and reader at clearly defined opposite ends of the dissemination process. Irrespective of the complex issue of what qualifies as Indigenous literature, it is relevant to ask the question: on what legitimate grounds may a non-indigenous reader respond critically to it?

In the New Zealand context, in recent years there has been a swing away from the entrenched positions according to which non-indigenous critics, on the one side, stipulate that Māori literature is defined primarily by a writer's ethnicity and the literature's protest against the wider society's marginalization of Māori beliefs while, on the other side, Māori commentators argue that non-indigenous critics are off-limits or should acknowledge their restricted entry in the form of apology when they engage in evaluations of the Māoritanga (Māoriness) of a text. A move has been made towards a more reconciliatory focus on what the scholar/critic should aspire to gain insight into by reading Māori literature. This, of course, confers on the non-Indigenous scholar/critic the task of performing a culturally sensitive reading, of listening intently to the "beat that words … [have]" (Grace, *Potiki* 184) because the postcolonial vocabulary might well be short of adequate words for translating this particular beat. If, however, the scholar/critic is aware of the frequent incompatibility of trained theory and indigenous meaning, a much welcome dialogical relationship between writer and scholar/critic on the vibrant creativity of Māori literature might begin to flourish. Rather than attempt to validate or frame Māori literature, the scholar/critic may take part in the cross-cultural dialogue that the literary text itself has in fact always invited. Perhaps, then, the "difference" of Māori literature could be seen to be further empowered rather than appropriated by the potent capacity of the critic to circulate Māori meaning.

In this article I reflect on the above-mentioned issues by "visiting" Patricia Grace's 1986 novel *Potiki* as a matrix dialogical Māori text from which the scholar/critic may learn about Māoritanga in the process of unlearning distorting postcolonial dogma. I employ the already introduced terms "visitor" and "host" as they signal appropriate roles for the scholar/critic and the writer just as they are in tune with Grace's unique personal and literary sensibilities. Grace perceives herself as a Māori writer addressing local, as well as global audiences. In interviews, she has often resisted marketplace labeling of her work, be that "postcolonial," "feminist," or even "Māori"; the latter because there are so many different ways of being Māori that the wide range of Māori stories in print defy inclusion into a single category, the former because they are terms that she does not feel encompass her creative endeavor: "We don't give these labels to ourselves. Other people do that … analysing and breaking things up into compartments is really not a Maori activity, it doesn't really fit a Maori worldview" (Grace qtd. in Fresno Calleja 5). Grace considers literary criticism "the other side of the communication process … part of discussion" yet maintains that she "would rather people were talking about ideas, language, or themes instead of thinking 'now I have to find out what's postcolonial in here'." As she points out: "I don't write postcolonial literature according to *me*. I am just writing what I know about and bringing creativity to bear on that" (Grace qtd. in Fresno Calleja 5-6). Obviously, Grace refers to her lived experience of Māoritanga which in literature often has to find subtle expression alongside or within a contemporary political agenda because: "When you write about people … whose values are not valued by wider society; people whose status, language, self-esteem, confidence and power have been removed from them; then

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writing will always be political in its own way" ("Patricia Grace" 360). However, while the political stance of Māori literature has always figured as a central and defining quality in scholarship and criticism, its specific cultural properties — the ontological base and the oral noetics — of Māori literature have to a large extent remained obscured by scholars' and critics' lack of familiarity with Māori customs and this may explain Grace's resistance towards the postcolonial label. Too often in the past, unfamiliarity, or ignorance, has been instrumental in the critical colonization of indigenous texts (on this, see further Knudsen 1-67).

In Māori culture, the *wharenui* (meeting house) situated on the *marae* (ceremonial ground) is the most significant site of Māoritanga as it is — and this should inspire the scholar/critic — a prominent site for dialogue and cultural exchange. Since the Māori Renaissance, the *wharenui* has been a central trope in Māori literature, such as in Witi Ihimaera's *The Matriarch* (1986) and in Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* (1984), and prominently so in Grace's collective works ranging from the novel *Tu* (2004) to *Dogside Story* (2001) and *Cousins* (1992) in which the *wharenui* is either inaugurated ceremonially, featured as the animated recording agency of community life, or sanctioned as the final site of communal reconciliation. In addition, makeshift venues like the squatted warehouse in Grace's *The Sky People* (1994), the grandmother's veranda in *Baby No-Eyes* (1998) or the mobile canteen truck, the invincible "Te Rau Aroha" in *Tu* become substitute *marae* venues for Māori characters who for various reasons are without or at distance from their *whānau* (community) and so in dire need of a place in which to share their thoughts and aspirations. In *Potiki*, however, the *wharenui* is more than a trope: it is a structural design, a piece of literary architecture in which all voices hosting within the house come together to address the visiting reader in a way that translates Māori epistemology from voice to print. Thereby, Māori ontology also becomes more than merely symbolic, it is functional and it reverberates from the beat of Grace's words.

As the bulk of critical reviews since the publication of *Potiki* have shown, however, this is not an obvious or even visible point of entry into the novel and its structure and plot. At opposite ends in the postcolonial analysis of *Potiki* one finds two characteristic approaches. The first, the readymade "cut-and-paste" critique, focuses almost entirely on what is visible at a first glance: the factual representation of the Maori-Pakeha conflict over rights to land and cultural integrity. Narrated in storytelling fashion by the members of the Tamihana family, *Potiki* recounts in detail how a small coastal community struggles to fend off unscrupulous land developers who intend to infringe upon their ancestral land and build a resort in the vicinity. The community, however, recuperates successfully from a despondent past and engages actively in sustainable economic and educational projects that will ensure, even in times of hardship, the survival of their cultural base in Māori tradition. Thus, the ready-made approach to the novel safely concludes, after pointing to Pakeha strategies of silencing and marginalization and Māori counter-strategies of vocal defiance, that Grace "having sought previously to soothe her Pakeha readers and to suppress her anger, is now ready to charge them, not with past and irremediable injustices, but with continuing injustices" (Beston 501). In this analysis the novel is forced into shape in order that it may give back what the theory is looking for: a literary discourse of them versus us, an "ethnic" dispossessed margin opposing a hegemonic "white" centre. This dilutes the empowered vision of the novel into a homogenized paradigm of colonizer versus colonized with the result that the transformative power of the novel's "Potiki story" is seen only as symbolic redemption, "a secondary plot, loosely linked to the main plot … and [therefore] not vital to its narrative development" (Beston 502). The translation of the title character, Potiki, into the margins, apart from being misguided, results in a failure to account for the subtle way in which a Māori narrative economy in fact controls the impact of Pakeha capitalism. The analysis remains oblivious to the profundity of Maori systems of meaning, precisely that which qualifies and substantiates Maori "difference" — a "difference," of course, that does not merely translate as "resistance."

The second approach in postcolonial criticism is one that points to the troubling shortcomings of the first. In accounting for the novel's political conflict, it attempts also to investigate the dialectic maneuvering of meaning within and between the two levels of *Potiki*, the factual and the spiritual, and explore the significance of empowering voices that can transcend time and place. The layered narrative web of *Potiki* may be disentangled to disclose its polyphonic pattern of enunciating voices. Yet, rather than attempt to grasp the culturally specific nature of the polyphony such an approach often takes recourse in Western discourse theory. Grace's novel "may seem transparent, but as a cultural production it is opaque" (Fuchs 579) because the writer

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chooses to "conceal [her] subject from an outsider's extended gaze" (583) by signaling that the non-indigenous reader has entered into "forbidden territory" (581). The conclusion of this line of argumentation is that the novel is "almost unanalyzable" (Fuchs 580) where the spiritual voice that the former approach eclipsed sets the novel's realist account of the Māori-Pakeha confrontation with the double effect that Grace both "amplifies the profundity of the [Māori] story [and] draws it further away from the multicultural reader" in a strategy of "culturally coded defamiliarization" (581). Postcolonial analyses of *Potiki* thus range from a focus on the visible conflict and the transparent message of the novel to a focus on the opaque positioning of the controlling Māori narrative voice and the culturally coded message contained by the novel.

I recognize and respect that there may indeed be meanings in *Potiki* understandably inaccessible to the cultural outsider, yet still believe that attempting to decode its Māori meanings is not synonymous with entering forbidden territory. It is characteristic of any literary text that evokes an oral tradition that it wishes to establish lines of communication between speaker and audience (writer and reader) and that oratory, when brought to perform in a translated form on the page, at least favors the partial inclusion rather than the total exclusion of the cultural outsider. As the last two words of the novel, *Ka Huri* (spread the word), ritually extends an invitation to engage in dialogue, it might make a difference to arrive at Grace's novel and its *wharenui* with the expectation that once cultural "difference" is respected and acknowledged, it may also be both enjoyed and debated.

A positive outcome of cultural meanings — whether they take place when the host invites the visitor or when the text meets the reader — depends on a willingness to enter into the situation with an attentive mind. Before speech there must be silence, before statement there must be story, before interpretation there should be inquiry, and, equally important, a curiosity to discover the contents of the form, the form of the contents. In the prologue to *Potiki* Grace introduces us to the rituals associated with carving and she offers us in fact the "master narrative" that her own novel abides by: it will be "as though a child brings about the birth of a parent because that which comes from under the master's hand is older than he is, is already ancient" (8). The prologue, which is introduced by a chant, reads almost like a poem in the original sense of the word as *poesis* (creation). It is the story of living potential, of procreation and process as it pertains to human existence in the Māori world at large, a story of beginnings emerging from the existential realm of *Te Kore* (void), an original nothingness of silence and invisibility. Absence, however, holds the promise of presence as that which is nothing, proceeds beyond its own limits to assume the quality of something (see King 191) and *Te Kore* grew into *Te Po* (night). Through yet another series of eclipses *Te Po* gave birth to Papatuanuku (Earth Mother) and Ranginui (Sky Father), who fostered — in their serene and close embrace in darkness — an offspring of deities who separated their parents to let darkness fulfill its potential and become light. Thus emerged the human environment of *Te Ao Marama* (the world of light). This mythic story is not told in *Potiki*, but is everywhere to be found as a structuring subtext that informs and transforms the plot.

Like the world itself, so a carving and any other text will have emerged from the same spiraling process of maturation as Grace relates about the ancestral figures in the carving of the prologue: "The previous life, the life within the tree womb, was a time of eyelessness, of waiting, swelling, hardening. It was a time of existing, already browed, tongued, shouldered, fingered, sexed, footed, toed, and of waiting to be shown as such. But eyeless" (8). Given "eversight" and a swirling storytelling tongue by the carver, the carving will forever relate its stories to the people. In a carving, where one image overlaps with and spirals into the next, a particular story is attached to each section of the carving and each (body) part of the ancestral image has its own implicit meaning. Carvings hold "the silent language, the talk imparted by good creators to their carved figures" (Thornton 164) — and vice versa one understands having read *Potiki* — and according to Māori cultural conceptions the body parts of a carving may be seen as independent "agents" with their own active lives distinguished by specific patterns and set off by spirals placed on body joints. In carving, the spiral is used to denote the independence — the power "to rotate, to move" (Thornton 147) — as well as the interdependence of separate parts or limbs. This is never made explicit in *Potiki* because Grace allows her visitors to imagine for themselves what is pre-known to Māori people, yet it seems likely that in carving out her own words Grace wanted to compose a Māori Person consisting of various agents. Incidentally, the many individual stories told in *Potiki* are differentiated by the storyteller's own personal mark — in the form of language registers for instance — but brought together by patterns of overlapping and interrelating, indeed

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spiraling, narrative strands. And thus, the noetics of Māoritanga expressed in the prologue's master carving spiral into the main body of the narrative to become, through the interweaving times of past, present and future, a symbol not only of life and death, growth and transition but also, at the textual level, of tradition and renewal. Despite the esoteric meanings of carvings, it is still possible for the visitor to the text to appreciate their function. As Agathe Thornton has argued, carvings are much like a looking glass through which rather than at which one looks: "by their very nature … they underlie, they are deeply seated assumptions which shape what is done and understood" (147). Perhaps this is what many critical reviews lack: the ability (even when it is but an attempt) to look through Grace's text with Maori meaning rather than looking at it for Maori meaning. And perhaps this is why the two levels of the novel, the social realist story of conflict and the spiritual story of integration, are hardly ever seen as two strands constituting one plot

The story of Roimata's return from an alienated life in Pakeha society to her village with its account of how everything seemed "obliterated in intense dark" — "Everything, everyone, gone, as though I had come to nowhere and nothing. At first it seemed like that" (25), the story of Hemi being made redundant during recession and his exclusion from the Pakeha work force resulting in his return to the land — "The time of no work was a time when his real work had begun" (175), the story of little Manu's resistance to the Pakeha schooling system and the family's decision to make their own school — "in this way we were [all] able to find ourselves in the books" (104), the stories about James choosing to become a carver and Tangimoana a social activist and law student, and the all-encompassing story of Toko, the handicapped and talented child, born by Hemi's retarded sister Mary but given to the family as a precious gift from the sea — all these individual stories come together in a distinct narrative pattern apparent when one looks through the text with Māori meaning. Void and darkness, disadvantage and hidden potential, emergent being and light, become the intrinsic pattern through which the *whanau* appears in a distinct form with a new vision that makes us recall from the prologue how the final gift of the artist is always the giving of eyes. In view of this, the Pakeha Mr. Dollarman's grand proposal to the *whanau* of "a million dollar view to be capitalised on" (89) if only they would see the prospects, turns indeed into a myopic proposition and Uncle Stan's reply "We have our eyes … and we can see … It's because we have foresight that we will never, not ever, let the land go" (97) becomes more than a gesture of resistance. When looked at with Maori meaning it is a statement of inherent wisdom which alludes to the temporal complexity of Maori thinking. The "past" in Maori is called *nga ra o mua*, which means "the days in front" (as opposed to the still unknown future "days behind," *kei muri*) and, consequently, to lose sight of what is right in front of you would be the equivalent of cultural blindness.

It is through the lens of the past that in the novel the shifting moments of the present close in on a view to the future and it is in particular through the communal and sacred vantage point of Toko and his narrations that the unity of all times comes into focus: "[His] knowing, [his] own knowingness, is different. It is a before, and a now, and an after knowing, and not like the knowing that other people have. It is a knowing as if everything is now" (52). Toko is both ordinary and ordained, both contemporary and timeless, and thus his stories disregard any artificial distinctions between what is, what was, and what will be. He is the youngest member of the Tamihana family, the Potiki, who despite his physical handicap takes an active part in the community's daily life, yet he is also one of the rare *kihikihi* creatures who are already old when born (48) and therefore his words are veiled in prophecy about events to come. A glance through Toko's stories with Māori meaning, however, shifts the significance of his character considerably; besides his contemporary incarnation as a visionary child and the symbolic quality bestowed upon him as a savior (a Christ-like figure with a mother named Mary and, possibly, a father named Joseph) Toko is reincarnated, after his tragic physical death at the hands of the Pakeha land developers, and recast as a Maui figure. Like Maui, the Polynesian trickster and culture hero, Toko comes into the world of light at the shore, that highly ambivalent space of in-between-ness signifying both dissolution and regeneration, and like Maui, Toko also has a "fish" story, a "fire" story and, ultimately, a "death" story. The story of Toko's fishing trip where he catches his big conger eel and Granny Tamihana tells him that "[his] fish was [him]self to give" (54) becomes, through the novel's silent intertextuality with the founding myth of Maui fishing up the Northern Island of New Zealand (*Te Ika a Maui*) by using a chip of his grandmother's jawbone as a hook, a strong image of the novel's vision of human community and the power of "*koha* and *mana*" (gift and respect) as an alternative to "capitalism and profit." Similarly, Toko's account of how he is

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trapped in the doorway of the firebombed *wharenui* which suddenly becomes "the toothed aperture through which all must pass" (183), recalls the myth of Maui's death in his encounter with the Goddess of Death who had "formidable weapons of vaginal teeth made of obsidian" (Walker 19) and one expects, as this mythical site of death is also a life-giving passageway, that a new life will be given for the one taken. "Death is seeding" and "a coiled spring" (154) as the repeated wisdom of the novel goes. As anticipated by the prologue with the space in the master carving left open for a future figure, and as suggested implicitly in Toko's own storytelling where his privileged "sitting place" during gatherings in the *wharenui* foreshadows his future position (154), the last stories are spoken by the Potiki given other life through living wood and voiced as a poetic stream of community consciousness: "I tell it from the wall, from where yesterday and tomorrow are as one … I tell it from the tree" (181) and "from this place of now, behind, and in, and beyond the tree, from where I have eversight, I watch the people" (183). Toko has become a carving, a representation in living wood of Maori life and living.

While in my opinion it is a misinterpretation to confer on the "Potiki story" the status of "a secondary plot, loosely linked to the main plot" (Beston 502) when the story is an integral part of it and in accordance with the narrative and structural development of the plot, it may also in a less obvious way be to miss an important point to conclude that with the transformation of Toko's voice from personal to communal "the term *there* loses a clear locus and the notion of *here* lose [*sic*] immediacy" (Fuchs 580). Along with the progression of the storytelling in *Potiki* we, the visitors, have indeed become listeners and in the process of transition a thrilling image of passage unfolds in our minds. We have moved with Grace and her storytellers from the outside area of the *whanau* into the sacred sphere of the *wharenui* where "there and here," like the terms "then and now," rather than upset our ontological orientation and epistemological foundation, merge and crystallize in expressions of human existence within the clearest and most immediate locus that may exist at all: the human mind itself. We have entered into sacred time and space, the natural habitat of myth, a space that is timeless even if it does not, however, exist outside a sense of time but rather inside a sense of time that is qualitative and rhythmic (as opposed to linear time which is quantitative and chronological). This is, as in the Potiki's stories, an original space of "real" time because it unfolds in an organic realm of subconscious from where it relies on ritual, such as the ritual of storytelling, to "affirm and reaffirm the roots of human time in presentness" (Birenbaum 63). As Romiata comes to realize: "all time is a now-time, centred in the being [who] simply reaches out in any direction towards the outer circles … being named 'past' and 'future' only for our convenience" (39).

Like Toko, whose complexity as a character is understood ultimately through the novel's intertextuality with Māori myth, so the deeper significance of the other characters should also be found in the relationship between the stories they tell and the myths, the "given stories", of the house within which they are told. The "all-time" of the carvings whose paua-shell eyes "encircle the world of day and the world of dreaming and … the assembled from all places and all ages" (28) gradually becomes the "real" time of the entire novel. Myth mingles with history and the present moment. This is seen most clearly in the storytellers who are contemporary but whose identities are evoked by and patterned on those of mythical characters. As exquisitely as a carver who brings out the hidden form of a piece of wood, Grace carves out from the subjectivities of her characters a unique spiraling conception of evolution and process, of human experience and development. And like the carver, she has the "tools, [the] mind and [the] heart" (7) with which to call her material out and bring her characters into other birth. Toko's last narration is preceded by a cycle of voices simply titled "the stories" where all members of the Tamihana family have shed their individual names and become generic or collective representations. They now appear as "man," "woman," "young man," "young woman," "boy," "old woman," "child woman," and they represent *he tangata* (the people) — Maoritanga in all its versatility. It is as if all storytellers have deposited their voices with the supreme narrative authority of myth, the main function of which is to mediate between the contradictions of human existence. What the characters represent in terms of a Maori consciousness overshadows their individual identities in the sense that diversity is distilled into unity, individual strengths into a collective power. And so, for instance, "a 'woman' tells of sky and earth, pain and love; of how she had been delivered and had 'come there, being flown on the backs of gulls'" (174) to a man of the soil: "In being turned away we have turned to each other, the one looking to the sky the other to the earth — the mother to the father, the father to the mother" (175). "A man" tells of a long time spent looking at the soil, which is not

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turning one's back on the world but "a way of making the pain less … of living through. No reia, tena koutou katoa" (177). "A young man" tells his story of a new person "chiselled into shape," it is "a people story through wood, with people and wood being parented by earth and sky so that the tree and the people are one, people being whanau to the tree" (177). "A young woman" offers her revolutionary poem as a story to hang on the tree, her song is of birth and death becoming new life and it is "painted" in sacred red: "The song before dawn/ Is the soft song of rain/ Anger is the sacred/ Colour/ Salted close to the heart/ Anger is ochre-coloured/ Let some of it remain/ On the tree" (179).

The ambivalence of Toko's character has an impact on all other characters as it allows them to see themselves reflected in the wooden anatomy of the *wharenui*. The social and political reality of contemporary New Zealand life is never absent from the lives of Roimata, Hemi, and their children; it is in fact reinforced by the fact that their personalities also connote the mythic beings of Papatuanuku and Ranginui and their offspring. Roimata and Hemi are very much like this mythical couple who, after their separation, came to realize that "light is a gift … of the sky" but that the dark earth is "a gift also because in the dark there is nurturing" (174). In this imaginative reemployment of gender roles that has the practical Hemi nurture the earth and the imaginative Roimata bring the renewing quality of light into the relationship, they move with their children into the world of light. Like Papatuanuku and Ranginui's offspring, the children of Roimata and Hemi represent different, and often opposing, qualities and temperaments from fervent anger to placid creativity. With the master carving now including Toko's narration about his life and the life of his family, all characters inscribe themselves in that basic "text" that underlies the novel, the *wharenui*, and we may cast yet another glance at its structural significance. In Māori culture, the *wharenui* is not simply a venue, it embodies the spirit of the land and people, it is a *turangawhaewhae* (a place to stand). With its human form (it has a head, backbone, ribcage and limbs) it is conceived as a macrocosm of the people's founding ancestors (body) and as a microcosm of the spiritual world of the people (soul). When entering a *wharenui*, Māori people meet within the wooden anatomy of their ancestors and this is a personified experience as Grace informs us: "The house is a parent, and there was warmth in under the parental backbone, enclosement amongst the patterned ribs" (88). Thus, the house is a corporeal manifestation of culture in which the collective memory of the *whanau* functions as a pulse that keeps it alive. As this magnified Maori Person, the *wharenui* is endowed with sensibilities and a lyrical perceptivity which runs like a vein of creativity through the timbered parts of its body: "There was in the meeting house a wood quiet … a watching quiet … a waiting quiet … But this quiet is an outward quiet only, because within this otherness there is a sounding, a ringing, a beating, a flowing [of] stories to tell. Stories that lace and bind the earthly matters to matters not of the earth" (87) and, we might add, stories that lace and bind the stories of contemporary everyday people to stories of the stories of their ancestors. With the merging of individual titled stories and communal untitled stories in *Potiki* the symbolic anatomy of the *wharenui* and the spiritual meaning inherent in carvings gain further significance for our interpretation of the entire novel. It appears that the carved poles that support the *tahuhu* (backbone) and represent the connection between Ranginui and Papatuanuku as well as the carved panels of figures representing the communal body of people, whose limbs are in(ter)dependent agents with lives and a will of their own even when subjected to the mind of the overall representational figure, have a similar supportive function in the narrative anatomy of Grace's novel. The *whanau* that we have come to know in *Potiki* is in itself a *wharenui* text. Roimata, the female "ever-watcher of the sky" (174) and Hemi, the male caretaker of the earth and "as rooted to the land as a tree is" (175) face each other like the opposite poles of roof and ground in the *wharenui*. They are connected inside a unifying context, "the body of the ancestor," by the carvings, the *pou tokomanavas* (uprights) in particular, in the same way as the children of Roimata and Hemi (Papatuanuku and Ranginui) connect their parents because they are "the sinews binding love" (175). When seen together, they make out one body – they are the magnified Maori Person — and when seen separately they are the independent parts of that body — its active agents. They have stories of their own but to be whole they need to find their place in the over-all structure. "It's land and people that are a person's self, and to give to the land and to give to the people is the best taonga of all," says "a man" (176), and it is precisely in this spiraling expression of reciprocity, found also in the iconography of carving, that the characters in the novel come into being in an ambivalent cultural environment where "the stories were changing" (96), as Toko repeatedly foresees and as his changed shape implies.

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The inevitability of stories changing is also reflected in Māori visual arts. Allan Hanson points to a formal structure termed "bilateral symmetry broken by elements of asymmetry," a visual representation of the shape of Maori reality which communicates the belief that life evolves around "ambivalent tension between identity and difference, attraction and repulsion, union and separation" and it illustrates that "things which are drawn together are also drawn apart. Indeed they may diverge in some ways precisely *because* they merge in others" (Hanson, "Art" 215-16). According to Hanson, the broken bilateral symmetry is homologous with the construction of dilemma in the Maori myth of Papatuanuku and Ranginui ("Art" 219). Union is fertile but also confining and stagnant, whereas separation is dynamic and liberating but also sterile. This existential dilemma is, however, like the formal pattern found in the arts, "followed by mutual attraction and a new union, thus closing the circuit and putting the relationship into a new 'generation'" (Hanson, "When" 79), and Grace may indeed be said to have adopted this pattern to let it inform the narrative rhythm of *Potiki*. At both levels of the novel, stories move back and forth between unity and separation, presence and absence, at the end of which the physical separation of Toko from his family signals, when he becomes the Potiki (the representative of young and future generations), a people's new unity. In the Māori world, the end is always, as in *Potiki*, a new beginning, and no icon visualizes that as profoundly as the spiral which Grace employs as the trope of her own storytelling. In representing the principles of unity and separation, contraction and expansion, the spiral is a symbol of how the Māori people conceptualize their world as revolving. This is both coined in the old proverbial phrase of "the world that moves forward to the place it came from" and seen in *Potiki* where the narrative chronology constantly spirals back on itself. The spiral has no natural beginning and end, rather they [the beginning and end flow into each other as they do indeed in the composition of carvings where one image swirls and loops into the next or in the composition of *Potiki* where one character's story winds into that of another. A spiral denotes the cycles of becoming, the rounds of existence in which "the world materialises and man conceptualises along the same spiral. It is the breathing of cosmos. With the exhalation the spirit contracts, creates, and involves or winds into matter … with the inhalation, matter expands and evolves or unwinds into spirit" (Purce 11). The act and the process of telling one's story work similarly in *Potiki* on a "rhythm of both expelling breath and inhaling" (Sharrad 604). If the *whanau* is to be regarded as a "a living organism" with "its own mauri for the well-being of its inhabitants" (Walker 9), the spiralling mode of *Potiki*, with its rhythm of expansion and contraction, of taking in and giving out, should be seen as symbolic of its social breath — as the mode of cultural respiration which ensures for the *whanau* of the Tamihana family that "good had followed what was not good, on the circle of [their] days" (145). It is precisely because of the interactions between matter and spirit, between the empirical multicultural world of New Zealand and the sacred other world of Māoritanga made manifest in the *wharenui* that the cultural politics of *Potiki* become dynamic and regenerative. It would seem that the culture carries intrinsically in its belief system and the structural manifestations of this system a safeguard against stagnation. Grace's design of a narrative with two co-ordinated plots is interestingly paralleled by Maori iconography and the highly significant double spiral found in carving. The uniqueness of this visual design is that "the duality it creates is not one of adjacent spaces but rather a dual division which intertwines and grows within the *same* space as the two arms of the spiral revolve outward from … a common centre point" (Hanson, "When" 84). No description could be more apt for explaining the world view and the time frame of *Potiki*. The outer spiral represents the time and given stories of "before life and death and remembering," the inner spiral represents the people's "own stories" and so, as Roimata realizes, "the 'now' is a giving and a receiving between the inner and the outer reaches, but the enormous difficulty is to achieve refinement in reciprocity" (39). This refinement, however, is what all protagonists in *Potiki* are searching for and what they come to accomplish through Grace who, in her own tradition, may not be the master of what eventually comes from her hands, but who surely is a master of the skills that bring it out.

Knowing that Māori visual arts always employ a language of form to communicate messages, we discover that as cultural outsiders we need to reconsider our first impressions. An awareness of the contents of the form combined with an examination of the form of the contents will reveal that by extracting the philosophical principles engraved in the *wharenui* and by inscribing them as a nerve of creativity into *Potiki*, Grace has crafted her text, like the artists who construct a *wharenui*, into the meeting place of a community's mind, well-aware that there are certain formal requirements attached to the telling of stories in such a setting. Although we are perhaps not

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supposed to understand the proper meaning of the ritual chant in Māori which ends the novel, we gather from the context and the last words, *Ka Huri*, that, in tune with *marae* protocol and oratory procedures of *whaikorero* (speechmaking), it may be a ceremonial means of turning over the word to another speaker. As the narrative chronology of *Potiki* has now indeed spiraled back upon itself, we sense that the end is really only a (new) beginning — or an invitation to a new reading of the novel. The opening chant of the novel, we now realize, may be the *tauparapara*, a philosophical statement about life and existence, that always precedes *whaikorero* (now the entire content of the novel). Similarly, Roimata's first introduction to herself and her family, which appeared on a first reading to be simply a straightforward, though sometimes poetical, life-time resumé (a courtesy to the reader) now reads like a *whakapapa* (recital of genealogy), the initial address by which speakers at the *marae* make themselves known to their audience. *Potiki* resembles Barry Barclay's description of *whaikorero* as a kind of orature suitable for "both grand and humble occasions," full of "anecdote, reflections, reminders of the past [and the present], and humour" and frequently used in Māori culture because "it is a way of encapsulating thoughts [orally] and presenting those thoughts publicly to the whole people" (61-62). The fusion of the political and the poetical in *Potiki*, the fact that its beat is both outspoken and meditative, suggests that according to the conventions of Māori storytelling there is no tension between these two modes of talking. The lack of contradiction, in turn, suggests that within the context of the *wharenui* there is no real tension between the political and the traditional.

In conclusion, the entire narrative of *Potiki* is told from within and, possibly, by the *wharenui*. One imagines how the recital of stories sounds through an open door into the *marae* ground in front of the house before it swirls into the world at large as spirals of sound and voice. Never just echoing, always distinct and clear. As a place and location, the *wharenui* is important because it is a textual site of Māoritanga. The *marae* — the *wharenui* and the open space in front of it — is known by Māoris as *waahi rangatira tikanga Māori* (the place in which Māori customs are given ultimate expression) and as *whaahi rangatira iwi* (the place that heightens people's identity). Grace translates this context into a vision of a new *Aotearoa* (New Zealand) which is fittingly ambivalent, both new and old, and when the last page is turned the reader is brought back to the beginning with a greater insight into the deeper meanings of Māoritanga. We have not just read a conventional "social realist" account of how a community fights for survival in contemporary New Zealand, nor have we been excluded from beginning to understand the novel's particularly Māori vision of cultural agency. We have been guests at Grace's *wharenui*. Perhaps the scholar/critic approaching the novel, like the visitor approaching the *wharenui*, ought to take cognizance of the fact that although the *maihi* (arms) and the sloping roof sides of the *wharenui* are held out in welcome of visitors, a formal entry into the house is always preceded by a *haka*, the ritual challenge that will ascertain the host about the intentions of the visitor. A constructive dialogue across cultures begins at the moment when this challenge is taken up by the scholar/critic who is willing not to flag the postcolonial banner until it is called for.

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