

**STORIES ARE THE CENTRE: THE PLACE OF FICTION IN
CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDINGS AND
EXPRESSIONS OF INDIGENEITY**

BY

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mo ngā uri o Rongomaiwhenua
for the descendants of Rongomaiwhenua

ABSTRACT

Fiction written by indigenous people is an important tool for the reclamation of histories and identities, and for the imagining of alternative possibilities. *Baby No-Eyes* by Patricia Grace and *Benang* by Kim Scott are novels that address historical and contemporary experiences from indigenous points of view and therefore call into question previously known and accepted histories. By presenting alternative content and allowing for indigenous views and voices, these texts unearth discontinuities, anomalies and multiple possibilities – ultimately creating space for the authors to open up previously constricted or single-sided views of history and identity. These texts operate like historiographic metafiction, but go further than Linda Hutcheon’s *Poetics of Postmodernism*. Each novel culminates in new forms of creativity, signalling evolution beyond the position of ‘talking back’ and beyond reacting to the past in a colonial / postcolonial loop. In these novels, the gap left by postmodern deconstruction is filled by uniquely and fiercely indigenous (Māori, Nyoongar) contemporary solutions. Invariably these solutions contain some reclamation of traditional values, but the presence of new forms of creativity and marban/matakite abilities in *Baby No Eyes* and *Benang* in particular, suggest that contemporary solutions lie in going further and creating new understandings and ways of being. The creative component of this thesis is a novel, *Rēkohu Story*, which consists of three intertwined narratives: a young woman of Moriori, Māori and Pākehā descent seeks her family’s origins; a Moriori slave and his Ngāti Mutunga mistress run away together in 1882; the spirit of a man who died during the invasion of the Chatham Islands (Rēkohu) in 1835 watches over his descendants. The impetus for this novel was the author’s own mixed cultural heritage and concern that erroneous versions of the history of Rēkohu still persist. Both the critical and creative components assert that fiction can deepen understandings and expressions of history and Indigeneity. *This digitally accessible version consists of the critical component of the thesis only.*

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CONTENTS

Abstract	4
Acknowledgements	6
Introduction	10
Methodology	19
Structure	25
Part One – Critical Component	28
Grappling with Space: Going Beyond Historiographic Metafiction in <i>Baby No-Eyes</i> and <i>Benang (from the Heart)</i>	
Chapter One – Indigenous Voices Change Things	30
The Unseen and Seen: <i>Baby No-Eyes</i>	31
Corresponding Bodies: the Sanctity of Family, Identity and Genetic Material	33
Frogs, Gods and Wild Women: Character in <i>Baby No-Eyes</i>	39
White-men-born and the Search for Identity: <i>Benang</i>	56
Chapter Two – Representing History	62
Written on the Hand: Written on the Land – <i>Benang</i>	62
Self-consciousness / Self-reflexivity	64
Refusing / Re-using the Archives	67
‘Native Cunning’	72
Written on the Skin	75
Written on the Land	79
Let’s Tell Everything: <i>Baby No-Eyes</i>	84
1. Beyond the Borders of the Page	86
2. He Whāriki	88
3. Our Stories Could Kill You	89

Chapter Three – Plurality, Multiplicity, Possibility and the Wondrous	92
The Artist as Seer: <i>Baby No-Eyes</i>	92
Te Kore – Spaze: the Nothing and the Everything	92
Pulling down the House and Floating Above it – the Wondrous Singer: <i>Benang</i>	97
Art, Fiction and Vision	104
Exquisite Creations – the Role of Art Forms and Practices in <i>Benang, Baby No-Eyes</i> and Other Works of Historiographic, Situational Metafiction	107
Conclusion	116
Works Cited	120

This digitally accessible version consists of the critical component of the thesis only.

INTRODUCTION

Our literature is not whole, it is not showing fully who we are in this country

– Patricia Grace (*Calleja*)

*In my creative work, I'm looking back to understand and possibly heal and possibly rewrite history, so that I feel better about it really – Kim Scott (*Thurlow*)*

This thesis consists of two parts. Part One is the critical component, called ‘Grappling with Space: Going Beyond Historiographic Metafiction in *Baby No-Eyes* and *Benang (From the Heart)*’. Part Two is the creative component, which consists of a novel, *Rēkohu Story*. According to the International Institute of Modern Letters PhD Creative Writing description, the critical component of this thesis is ‘an academic/scholarly study contextualising the creative component.’ In addition, the ‘primary value of the PhD is for those who wish to write creatively, and at the same time to think in focussed and original ways about the contexts of their writing’ (Letters 2012). The critical component of this thesis explores one aspect of the context within which I wrote the creative component. My work in this thesis addresses questions I had about how to write a novel that both reveals a history that has not been well understood or represented in the past, and also explores the complexity of contemporary Indigenous cultural identity. Conducting a close reading of specific texts by two Indigenous writers, *Baby No Eyes* (1999) by Patricia Grace, and *Benang* (2002) by Kim Scott, using the characteristics of historiographic metafiction as a frame, provides greater insight into how these texts operate as fiction and explore wider issues around cultural/historical identities. How I selected these two texts is addressed later in this introduction.

This thesis engages three possible audiences: writers; Indigenous People (engaged in the project of cultural reclamation / decolonisation); literary scholars (with an interest in Indigenous or historiographic metafictional literature). Of course these groups are not necessarily distinct and are best envisaged as overlapping spheres. To varying extents I am situated within all three groups. In addition, as a New Zealander of Māori¹, Pākehā and Moriori descent, I had questions about why

¹ All references to Māori in this thesis refer to New Zealand Māori rather than Cook Island Māori.

certain histories in New Zealand had been misrepresented over long periods of time, and why, even after these representations were revealed to be erroneous, they still continued to hold precedence. For example, I contend that despite comprehensive historical writing and work by the Moriori people², Michael King³, The Waitangi Tribunal⁴ and others, distorted understandings of the history of Rēkohu (Chatham Islands) persist. Evidence for this can be found in many letters to the editor pages of national newspapers, continuing into the last decade⁵. An unfortunate reference to the invasion of Rēkohu made in an essay by Peter Wells in *Metro* magazine April 2012 echoed the tenor of these letters. The promising subject of the essay was Pākehā cultural pride and, conversely, guilt. However, this theme quickly became muddled by recourse to the tired old argument that Māori society was/is not so great either. Wells' (unsubstantiated) evidence was that Ngāti Mutunga forced Moriori to defecate on their ancestors' graves, but he used much more explicit language than this, which made the reference particularly lurid. Wells suggested that this was one aspect of 'Māori colonisation', which also included selling off tattooed heads (mokomōkai) 'for some highly desirable piece of Western merchandise' (107). Ironically, despite having pointed out that it was the Western economy that created the demand for mokomōkai, Wells failed to acknowledge the influence of colonial contact and expansion on Māori society, including the massive gun trade that was the backdrop to invasions such as

² Several different initiatives informed this thesis. The Hokotehi Moriori Trust Board have been engaged in an extensive program of education and outreach in recent years, via news media, social networking and informational websites (www.moriori.co.nz). The exhibition *The Moriori of Rēkohu: T'chakat Henu – People of the Land* created by Hokotehi in association with The Pataka Museum of Arts and Culture in Porirua celebrated the lives of contemporary Moriori and provided education about the historical, environmental and cultural landscape of Rēkohu. That exhibition has since travelled to both the Canterbury and Otago Museums. I hesitate to use a more specific description than 'the Moriori People' because it is important to acknowledge all who have told their story in many different ways and places. However, people who have directly assisted this project include Maui Solomon & Susan Thorpe, Shirley King, Tom Lanauze, and Lorraine Norris (for a more comprehensive list see the acknowledgements).

³ King's book *Moriori: A People Rediscovered* (1989, 2000), a comprehensive source of Moriori historical and cultural information, was one of the main sources for the creative component of this thesis.

⁴ *Rekohu: a Report on Moriori and Ngati Mutunga Claims in the Chatham Islands (Wai 64)*. Wellington: Legislation Direct, 2001.

⁵ The following article describes myths still prevalent: <http://www.stuff.co.nz/archived-stuff-sections/archived-national-sections/korero/498166/Moriori-revival> as does this article that describes the necessity of producing new school journals to refute the inaccuracies expounded in older editions: <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/4789044/Rewriting-the-history-of-Moriori>. Wikipedia discussions between the informed and less informed reveal the scope of common arguments <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk%3AMoriori>. Dr Scott Hamilton, on his studious blog *Reading the Maps*, has written several long pieces on the myths that persist, including: <http://readingthemap.blogspot.co.nz/2009/04/myth-that-wont-go-away.html>, <http://readingthemap.blogspot.co.nz/2008/06/pseudo-history-in-onehunga.html>

the one that occurred on Rēkohu. As exemplified by Wells, commentators seem comfortable appropriating historical stories about Moriori without due consideration of contemporary Moriori responses and perspectives, usually to make a point about Pākehā guilt (that it is not necessary) or British colonisation (that it was necessary, or at least the lesser of evils).

The myths that persist are many and varied. In her thesis ‘Imagining Moriori: a history of ideas of a people in the twentieth century’ (2007), Jacinta Blank describes her own understanding of Moriori history before studying the topic. As a child she learnt that Moriori were moa hunters on the main islands of New Zealand who were killed or driven away by Māori. As an adult at Teachers College she learnt Moriori did not exist – that they had been invented by Pākehā to discredit Māori (9). My own childhood understanding is similar, with added cannibalism and a good helping of something along the lines of ‘it’s a good thing the British came along when they did to civilise the situation.’ My Pākehā parent, who was simply repeating what his mid-twentieth century New Zealand education had taught him, made a connection between the noble and doomed Moriori and the British, who arrived just in time to save them, or their remnants at least. I do wonder if our family version deliberately conflated the colonial activities of the British with the peaceful outlook of Moriori. I don’t remember any mention of the Chatham Islands.

An older and darker story predates these versions – in this one, first argued by Elsdon Best, and repeated in *New Zealand School Journals*⁶, Moriori were Melanesian, darker and not as clever as the later and lighter Māori who came to vanquish them. The few that survived ended up on the Chatham Islands, barely surviving. While the Melanesian origin story has been disputed fairly successfully by a number of historians, beginning with H.D. Skinner in 1923, other elements of this story persist. In his book *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Species* (1999), Jared Diamond describes Moriori as ‘lacking in strong leadership or organisation’ (54) and living in small isolated hunter-gatherer groups with only the simplest technology. By comparison, Māori had advanced technology as farmers, and more advanced weaponry as well as strong leadership. When the two met, Diamond suggests, the outcome was inevitable. The cultural bias in such an argument is evident. Technology and strong organisation will win every time. Thus, British

⁶ See <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/4789044/Rewriting-the-history-of-Moriiori>.

colonial expansion is not only explained, but a natural course of events. But wait – Moriori lacked strong leadership? In 1835 when young Moriori men, confronted with the imminent slaughter of their families, argued that they should take up arms and fight the invading tribes, what stopped them? The story⁷ goes that the point was argued for three days at Te Awapātiki, and that in the end the words of the elders, immersed as they were in the traditions of the ancestors, prevailed. They would not transgress their covenant of peace. The young men would return to their homes and offer friendship rather than war. They knew what the consequences might be, watched as slaughter and slavery became their destiny, and still did not fight. The word of their leaders was that strong.

Of course other assumptions by Diamond can be challenged just as simply – is farming really a more advanced approach to sustenance than fishing and sealing for an island-based economy like Rēkohu’s? Does lack of stratified tribal organisation including slavery really indicate a less evolved culture? Refuting these assumptions is not the subject of this thesis, but Scott Hamilton (2008) provides a succinct analysis of the point of these theories:

The political uses of the Moriori myth are not hard to discern [...] According to the mythmakers, Maori were destined to supplant the primitive, lazy Moriori, before being themselves overwhelmed by the even more advanced and industrious European race. Even if the notion of more and less advanced races has lost some of its appeal today, the Moriori myth still allows talkback radio callers and right-wing bloggers to insist that the Maori are not the tangata whenua of New Zealand, and were in some way deserving of the dispossession they experienced at the hands of Pakeha. (“Treasures of the Tchakat Henu”)

The ‘Moriori myth’ as Hamilton calls it (I hesitate to use that phrase for fear of misinterpretation and misuse) continues to be a useful tool for the purpose of legitimising the colonial system upon which the nation state of New Zealand is founded. This goes some way towards explaining why, despite the work of te imi Moriori⁸ and prominent historians alike, the myth persists. It is also the underlying context of this thesis, which began by questioning why these erroneous versions of history persist, and also, what we might do to change that.

⁷ See King (1989, 2000). There is also a dramatic retelling of the story: ‘Three Days at Awapatiki’ by Kiwa Hammond in the *New Zealand School Journal*, Part 4, Number 3, 2010.

⁸ Te imi Moriori: the Moriori people. Te re Moriori (Moriori language) will be used whenever appropriate when referring to Moriori people or Rēkohu.

This thesis approaches the second question by examining the potential of fiction to challenge and enrich understandings of history and self (personally, culturally and nationally). The creation of stories that investigate history from different points of view and different time periods allows for Indigenous perspectives to continue to gain new cultural and societal life and replace long held national myths. The aim of the critical component of this thesis is to investigate whether and how this is possible by considering the mechanics of *Baby No-Eyes* and *Benang*. These novels question and deconstruct prior historical/colonial narratives that define Indigenous identities within narrow, racist confines, in order to make room for the excavation and reclamation of earlier oral/tribal stories. In addition, these novels and others like them often culminate in an artistic project that both reflects the writer's work and symbolically represents the role of creativity in articulating identity. It seems significant that in both of the novels studied, multiple possibilities and interpretations of identity are represented by one character who engages an art form to transcend the limitations imposed by colonialism. These novels not only seek reclamation of earlier stories, but open the way for the development/creation of new stories of identity. Fictional narratives allow for new visions, understandings and expressions of culture and self. Hence the title of the thesis: *Stories are the Centre: the place of fiction in contemporary understandings and expressions of Indigeneity*.

In 2011, two-thirds of the way through this study, I attended the Nga Kupu Ora Māori Book Awards. I had been asked to give a speech about some of the impetus behind and development of *Once Upon a Time in Aotearoa*, my first book of fiction. The awards were held at Massey University, where I had completed my undergraduate and some postgraduate study and had worked for several years. What could I tell my ex-colleagues, teachers and professors about why I had moved from a promising beginning in social science to writing fiction? I began by describing what I'd learnt at Massey as an undergraduate student about my culture and identity. These teachings resurfaced when I began writing fiction, as did an enduring interest in the mythological⁹ stories I read alongside Māori history and social anthropology. I described the experience thus:

⁹ As Abrams points out 'A reader needs to be alert to the bewildering variety of applications of the term "myth" in contemporary criticism' (123) I prefer a positive, open definition of mythology, from the original Greek 'mythos', meaning 'any story or plot, whether true or invented.' (Abrams 121) In

The writing taught me what is fundamental to my identity. Diversity. Culture. History. A belief that our traditions and myths still offer us a way of understanding our contemporary challenges. That some of my characters are obviously Māori and some indefinable is important. And there are things that are not pretty to look at, but hopefully when we do look at them we can do so with humour and an ear for the wisdom that is still available to us.

I had discovered, in writing, that everything that mattered, and sat very deep within my being, found ways to come out. There is nothing new in this discovery. I am sure every writer or artist realises the same thing. Writing allowed me to bypass the analytical part of my brain that inevitably knows far less than it thinks it does. It felt like I had accessed something akin to wisdom – not personal wisdom, but something beyond individuality. What was the place of fiction in the context of a Māori celebration of scholarship and writing? It seemed to me that it was important that this kind of creative activity be undertaken more frequently by more Māori. After all, it was the third year of the awards, but only the first year they had been able to make an award for a work of fiction. I attempted to address these thoughts:

As a Māori, it is tempting to think that my voice would be more effective in social sciences or other forms of nonfiction research. But I found that those disciplines alone could not address the full complexity of my reality. Fiction gave me permission to explore issues in a way that was non-didactic. That is, fiction does not come up with theories or definitions, it simply allows you to explore what is – to go deep into the paradox that is all of us – to suggest that a being can be more than one thing, that an idea or action can be both bad and good.

I then referred to my current project: this thesis. Fiction, I asserted, can give us a more direct and visceral relationship with historical and contemporary challenges, and deepen our understanding of issues that affect us. Further, it offers others versions of our stories that speak directly to the heart and imagination, thus creating a bridge between cultures. These are my highest hopes and beliefs about the purposes and outcomes of fictional writing, though I am sure there are others (many not so earnest perhaps). I further argued that Māori might find it difficult to prioritise creative writing, when there is such urgency in other areas. Publisher Geoff Walker noted in

this context, I do not use the term to question the truth or worth of any stories. However, when I use the phrase ‘national myths’ I am questioning the veracity of nationally held beliefs.

1997 that potential Māori writers may prioritise iwi and community development, studying subjects like law ‘rather than spending a year or two writing a novel’ (Heiss 192). Creative writing, no matter how I describe it, can seem like a frivolous exercise when health, education and poverty are real and present issues. Conversely, it may be that we won’t be able to fully resolve those primary survival issues without also creating visions of new outcomes through the creation of new stories.

This morning, as I turned on my computer to continue work on this introduction, I found myself reading instead the words of Margaret Mahy from her wonderful essay ‘A Dissolving Ghost’ (1991). As I read, I was thinking how I should really be working on this introduction, but then I stopped thinking that, because of what Margaret was saying. She wrote of a ‘marvellous code’ – something present in all our lives, so deep-set and omnipotent that it informs everything we do and cannot be dismantled. ‘Broken into bits,’ she suggests, ‘it starts to reassemble itself like the Iron Man described by Ted Hughes, and creeps back into our lives patient but inexorable.’ Her subject was, surprisingly and also inevitably, the subject of this thesis: ‘I am referring to *story*, something we encounter in childhood and live with all our lives. Without the ability, to tell or live prescribed stories we lose the ability to make sense of our lives.’ (7) This serendipitous passage seemed to my superstitious heart to mean that now that she was on the ‘other side’, Mahy could send all of us the words we needed to read *in that moment*, but what it really meant was that it was likely that many if not most writers had tried to express similar sentiments at one time or another. On any particular morning I might stumble upon a number of passages that make similar claims.

And so I realised, once again, that the thing I am trying to say about story is already well-known. ‘The truth about stories is that they are all we are,’ says Thomas King in his book *The Truth About Stories* (2003)¹⁰. In his essay ‘Why Indigenous Literatures Matter’ (2012), Daniel Heath Justice outlines seven broad qualities Indigenous literatures express and embody, the first six of which are listed here¹¹: they ‘offer an important corrective’ by representing the diversity of experience in Indigenous communities; the beauty of the art form shows ‘the full, rich depths of Indigenous humanity and creative spirit’; Indigenous literature empowers Indigenous

¹⁰ This book comprises the 2003 Massey Lectures broadcast as part of CBC Radio’s Ideas series, Canada.

¹¹ To read in full, see: <http://www.firstpeoplesnewdirections.org/blog/?p=5631>

people to affirm their complexity, strength, continuing presence and ‘storied significance’; the possibility for empathy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is extended; a legacy that extends beyond ‘alphabetic texts printed on paper in English’ is built on; a sense of continuity is affirmed by writing, reading and discussing Indigenous texts because, as Jace Weaver suggests, they prepare ‘the ground for recovery, and even re-creation of Indian identity and culture’. The seventh quality Justice names is possibility. Literature can be transformative, he argues, though it can also be deforming. In the context of this thesis, the widely held national myths about Moriori are an example of the potential of stories to deform. But literature offers the possibility ‘of imagining otherwise, of considering different ways of abiding in and with the world that are about Indigenous presence, not absence, Indigenous wholeness, not fragmentation, indigenous complexity, not one-dimensionality.’ Here Justice espouses the need for more Indigenous literature, stories that ‘affirm Indigenous humanity in all its complicated, contradictory, and wild and wounded wonder.’ A wide range of Indigenous stories is required to ‘offer an important sense of our diversity and depth.’

Albert Wendt wrote of similar ideas in 1976 in his much quoted and reprinted essay ‘Towards a New Oceania’, in which he describes the multiple crimes of colonisation and neo-colonisation (or internal colonisation), and promotes the arts as part of the remedy. ‘Oceania deserves more than an attempt at mundane fact; only the imagination in free flight can hope – if not to contain her – to grasp some of her shape, plumage, and pain,’ he wrote, ‘In the final instance, our countries, cultures, nations, planets are what we imagine them to be. One human being’s reality is another’s fiction.’ (9) Later he suggests: ‘Our quest should not be for a revival of our past cultures but for the creation of new cultures which are free of the taint of colonialism and based firmly on our own pasts. The quest should be for a new Oceania.’ (12) Towards the end of his essay Wendt lists the many artists, writers and performers working throughout Aotearoa, and celebrates the flourishing of South Pacific written literature including Alistair Campbell, Hone Tuwhare, Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace and himself. He concludes:

This artistic renaissance is enriching our cultures further, reinforcing our identities / self-respect / and pride, and taking us through a genuine decolonisation; it is also acting as a unifying force in our region. In their individual journeys into the Void, these artists, through their work, are

explaining us to ourselves and creating a new Oceania. (19)

It is concerning that the situations and sentiments expressed by Wendt throughout the 1976 essay still apply. Novels like *Benang* and *Baby No Eyes* have been written, so that is cause for continued celebration, but when Kim Scott was lauded as the first Indigenous Australian to win the Commonwealth Writers Prize for South-East Asia and the Pacific in 2011 for *That Deadman Dance* (2010), he expressed sadness: ‘It bothers me a bit because it says what a history of disadvantage we’ve had when Indigenous Australians have always been storytellers. It’s really sad. What happened to our shared culture?’ (Wyndham). His ambivalence is understandable – if he were to look around, if Patricia Grace were to look around, would they see many writers from similar backgrounds to them? To put it another way, would they see enough diversity in fiction? Grace expressed her opinion in an interview with Paloma Fresno Calleja: ‘We wouldn’t know that we are a multicultural society by looking at our literature. Maori writing has gained much more focus now than it had previously, but there is still a lot missing’ (115). Grace went on to point out that people of other backgrounds are not well represented in New Zealand literature either.

So what new space am I opening up with this thesis? I am asserting that there is still much more room for expressions and understandings of contemporary Indigenous experience through fiction than are currently being produced, and that it is vital that we, whoever we are, strive to ensure that a healthy Indigenous literature of Aotearoa New Zealand is sustained. There are several indications that, as Robert Sullivan showed in 2005, ‘there are a lot of missing voices’ in New Zealand’s literature (9). That the Nga Kupu Ora Māori Book Awards Committee did not allocate a fiction award in its first two years of existence is evidence of the problem. Our literature does not, as discussed by Sullivan, represent our ethnic population proportionately. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* produces a comprehensive bibliography of New Zealand publications by year. In 2007, the total number of fiction publications was 96, including six books by Māori. In 2008, the total number of fiction publications was 121, including two books by Māori. In 2009, the total number of fiction publications was 72, including three books by Māori¹². Assuming

¹² This includes work by individual authors only, and excludes reprints. Unfortunately this is a very subjective analysis, including only those that I recognise to be Māori. It is possible that there were other authors in these numbers who had Māori affiliations, though the number would be extremely small. As an interesting aside, dramatic works published in book form have quite dramatically different and very encouraging outcomes: 5/7, 2/7, and 2/6 respectively were written by Māori.

the 2006 census demographic of 15% Māori population in New Zealand¹³, these figures should be closer to fourteen, eighteen and ten respectively to reflect the Māori population. It is not that Māori writing is absent from our national literature, but that the position of Indigenous literature is still precarious and dependent on a small number of practitioners. However, the work that is being produced must be acknowledged and celebrated, as Paula Morris' *Rangatira* (2011) was at this year's New Zealand Post Book Awards.

Perhaps numbers are not the best way to make this argument. A more salient point for me is that so many Indigenous stories remain unwritten, that Indigenous realities and aspirations and innovative ideas are not being expressed to the extent they could be. Examples close to this project include the stories of Moriori and Rēkohu, which are full of drama, conflict and inspiration. They are certainly difficult stories to tell, but I am constantly surprised there have been so few attempts to write them as fiction. In this context of silence – or at least quietness – one of my concerns about *Rēkohu Story* is that it may end up representing far more than it should, in the absence of other stories that give differing points of view. As Chimamanda Adichie (2009) says: 'it is impossible to engage properly with a place or person without engaging with all of the stories of that place or that person.' This thesis is my response and contribution to the conversation about Indigenous literature that writers and scholars like Grace, King, Justice, Scott, Sullivan and Wendt are engaged in. I hope to show how fiction has the potential to increase imaginative engagement of the problems caused by colonisation, to increase possibilities, and to encourage the ability of, particularly Indigenous, people to contain and synthesise the realities and imaginative solutions of living in this contradictory postcolonial¹⁴ world.

Methodology

'The past really did exist. The question is: *how* can we know that past today – and *what* can we know of it?' (Hutcheon 92)

When I began reading for this thesis, my objective was to find novels that reimagined accepted historical stories or national myths. I was particularly interested in novels that revealed a counter-history or the interior perspective of people who had not been,

¹³ Rounded from 14.6%. ("Demographics of New Zealand")

¹⁴ My use of the term postcolonial suggests only that we have passed the period of first colonial contact, not that we have ceased to encounter the results of colonial systems in our lives.

or had rarely been, widely represented. I did not have a tight focus on Indigenous writing, though I did want to include at least one Indigenous writer. I was interested in African American writing, and migrant writing, as they were the kinds of texts I had always found expanded my understanding of the world.

The Known World (2002) by Edward P. Jones was an early choice, due to the fact it takes as its subject a black slave master, and therefore deals with some of the issues I thought I might encounter as I wrote about Māori slave owning. I found this novel to be completely original and audacious in its approach, but the chapter I wrote about it didn't really work. I hadn't found my critical focus at that early stage, nor had I figured out how to write about Jones' novel in relation to the other texts I was reading. In the latter stages of writing the thesis, *The Known World* was increasingly left to the side. It is such a big novel in so many different ways, that it could have several theses written about it. However, the other two books I finally chose had begun a conversation that *The Known World* would largely be left out of – it was a conversation about Indigeneity, and while there are definite correlations between African American experiences and the experiences of Indigenous Peoples, the focus of this thesis tightened around specifically Indigenous themes. I had also read several of Michael Ondaatje's works, and felt that both *In the Skin of the Lion* (1987) and *Anil's Ghost* (2000) had relevance to my subject matter. In the early stages of this thesis, I was very interested in how all these authors do similar work in terms of representing alternative points of view about particular historical and political moments and contemporary postcolonial identities, even though they engage completely different styles and consider completely different places. At the suggestion of one of my supervisors, however, I considered choosing another Indigenous or Pacific author to consider alongside my first choice, Patricia Grace.

Potiki (1986) and *Baby No-Eyes* (1999) were some of the first texts I read in relation to this topic. In addition I read the more recent novels *Dogside Story* (2001) and *Tu* (2004). I chose to concentrate on more contemporary writing and on novels rather than short stories, since my own creative work would be a novel. Of these, *Baby No-Eyes* stood out as a novel that was technically experimental and multi-voiced, and addressed multiple aspects of contemporary Māori culture, history and politics. I hadn't yet begun writing the critical component when in 2011 I was asked to read all of Kim Scott's work in order to chair a writers session with him at the New Zealand International Festival of the Arts 2012. *That Deadman Dance* (2010),

Kayang and Me (2005) and *Benang* (2002) were all immediately fascinating in the context of this study, and I took the opportunity to include them in the scope of my search. It also became evident that a very close reading, guided by the characteristics of metafictional historiography as a frame, was the best way to approach the critical component. The two books that lent themselves most completely to this framework were *Baby No-Eyes* and *Benang*.

In the research proposal for this thesis, I argued that I would take a Kaupapa Māori approach to my research, starting from the basis that ‘Kaupapa Maori¹⁵ approaches to research are based on the assumption that research that involves Maori people, as individuals or as communities, should set out to make a positive difference for the researched.’ (Tuhiwai Smith 191). In the context of the creative portion of this thesis, my approach has become Kaupapa Moriori¹⁶, and ‘making a positive difference’ has been one of my main preoccupations, resulting in extensive consultation with Moriori individuals and visits to Rēkohu. What this has meant in practical terms is that while writing *Rēkohu Story* I found that I was engaged with at least three different world views: Moriori, Māori and Pākehā. In fact, it was even more complicated – the Māori characters within the novel might be Ngāti Mutunga, Ngāti Tama, or a combination of other tribes, and for the contemporary characters I imagined an urban ‘pan-Māori’ (and mixed ethnicity) point of view because they had not been brought up close to their tribal connections. How the contemporary figures respond to and express their cultural backgrounds is part of the subject matter of the novel. However, while attempting to convey cultural complexity and multiple points of view within the story, it is of paramount importance to me that the Moriori point of view is central – the poutokomanawa or centre (heart) post that everything else is connected to. I thought a great deal about the Moriori experience of history, and how I might convey that in a way that told their story, and privilege their point of view. This meant studying and experiencing as much Moriori culture as possible, because it is fundamentally different from many Māori tribal cultures in many ways. At the same time I did not want to vilify other groups involved in this history, but if a decision had to be made about whose point of view should take precedence, I chose Moriori. I have

¹⁵ Following the conventions of Te Taura Whiri – The Māori Language Commission, macrons will be used to denote long vowels in written Māori throughout this thesis, excepting quoted Māori, for which I will record the spelling of the original text.

¹⁶ Since Moriori are the ‘other’ Indigenous people of Aotearoa, I assume a fairly direct transition can be made here. The title of Tuhiwai Smith’s book, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999) suggests she intended her ideas to be applicable to other Indigenous groups.

a very strong commitment to do no wrong to te imi Moriori in the writing of this thesis, as they have endured far too much negative and erroneous research and writing already, as described earlier in this introduction.

While my own Moriori heritage remains tentative¹⁷, in that I have good reason to believe my family have a Moriori ancestor but am unable to confirm that link by way of documentation and have not been able to identify our Moriori hokopapa, this thesis represents a movement towards distinctive Kaupapa Moriori research. Moriori are in the early stages of reclaiming and reaffirming their identity, so any definition of these concepts may evolve. However, even a tenuous position can be one of strength, and it is hoped that my attempts to define elements of Kaupapa Moriori for the purposes of this thesis will become part of a wider conversation regarding what Kaupapa Moriori is. There are people in the community far more qualified than I to understand and express what a Moriori point of view might be, but there is also a paucity of academic studies in this area. To shy away from offering a definition would be a missed opportunity.

The objectives of Te Keke Tura Moriori Identity Trust¹⁸ state the main purpose of the Trust is to ensure that Moriori identity, as a separate and distinct indigenous culture of Aotearoa New Zealand, is not lost and that the covenant of peace that was observed by Moriori is honoured and preserved for future generations. The Trust aims to apply the wisdom and values of their karapuna (ancestors) to ensure the physical and spiritual nourishment of present and future generations of Moriori. It is from this main purpose that I derive the following principles of Kaupapa Moriori, as well as from my own observations and participation at Kōpinga Marae.

It cannot be denied that Moriori and Māori culture share many features: manaakitanga, kaitiakitanga, reverence for elders and ancestors. However, the centre of any understanding of Moriori culture as distinct from Māori culture is their commitment to the covenant of peace that has been observed for several hundred years. This pacifism should not be mistaken for weakness, as it took enormous

¹⁷ As a descendant of all three groups, it is my hope that the novel conveys empathy for the complexity of all three positions. Part of the research for the novel was to trace my own whakapapa/hokopapa in an attempt to locate the origins of my karapuna or Moriori ancestor, Haimona. Though I managed to trace several generations back via other genealogical lines for his children and grandchildren, I have not yet found who Haimona's people were. Maui Solomon suggested to me in conversation that this is a common outcome of the purposeful forgetting and shame that occurred post-invasion and enslavement.

¹⁸ From "Te Keke Tura Moriori Ethical Approval Form for External Research Projects (form 2)" Hokotehi Moriori Trustboard

strength of character and integrity to refuse to fight the invasion by warrior tribes from Aotearoa. Continuing into the present day, Moriori maintain their commitment to this kaupapa, and demonstrate it in a number of ways. In 2011, the Peace Covenant was renewed through a Tohinga Rongo and communal affirmation at Kōpinga Marae. Moriori continue to practice openness and inclusivity by welcoming any people of any place interested in their culture, and by continuing to invite other tribes to Kōpinga, including those who may have had conflicts with them in the past. This all sounds very serious, but at the centre of the culture there is also a strong sense of joviality or *joie de vivre* – a lightness and joy in life. Evidence of this can be observed in the kōpi groves where the rakau momori are carved with their wide smiles, or at any marae gathering.

In writing this thesis, I have attempted to operate according to principles that align with Kaupapa Moriori in terms of their commitment to peace, inclusivity, strength of conviction and joviality. It is hoped that these principles are particularly evident in the novel. This means that while this work does have a distinctive point of view, it allows for a multiplicity of perspectives and accounts for a plurality of characters with differing positions throughout history. The fiction searches for the humanity of each position. Sometimes, humour allows engagement with darker subject matter. This thesis engages elements of both Kaupapa Moriori and Kaupapa Māori where relevant.

My critical research utilises a close reading and analysis within a framework of postmodern historiographic metafiction as theorised by Linda Hutcheon and employed by countless others. While this is not an obviously Kaupapa Māori approach, there is room for integration of multiple methods within Tuhiwai Smith's expansion of her definition:

Kaupapa Maori research is a social project; it weaves in and out of Maori cultural beliefs and values, Western ways of knowing, Maori histories and experiences under colonialism, Western forms of education, Maori aspirations and socio-economic needs, and Western economics and global politics. Kaupapa Maori is concerned with sites and terrains. Each of these sites has also been claimed by others as 'their' turf (190-191).

Māori and Moriori research does not exist in some sort of traditional vacuum, and Indigenous researchers will employ contemporary approaches to research questions.

While recognition of traditions and cultural perspectives and models are crucial, this does not mean they are the only tools available to the Indigenous researcher.

In this study, I found that the basic characteristics of historiographic metafiction addressed the kaupapa (subjects, themes) that I wanted to examine. In addition, since I began from a place that was not centred on Māori or even Indigenous writing, but was concerned with literature from different cultural backgrounds written in English, this seemed like an appropriate framework. The characteristics of historiographic metafiction also allowed me to engage one of the other important aspects of Kaupapa Māori described by Leonie Pihama:

Intrinsic to KM theory is an analysis of existing power structures and societal inequalities... exposing underlying assumptions that serve to conceal the power relations that exist within society and the ways in which dominant groups construct concepts of 'commonsense' and 'facts' to provide ad hoc justifications for the maintenance of inequalities and the continued oppression of Maori (qtd in Te Punga Somerville 7).

Historiographic metafiction is not an overarching theory or endpoint in this study, but a set of tools with which I might analyse how *Baby No-Eyes* and *Benang* go about 'exposing underlying assumptions' and 'analysing existing power structures'.

A key scholarly text about historiographic metafiction is *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) by Linda Hutcheon. However, while searching for scholarship on *The Known World* I also came across Susan Donaldson's article 'Telling the Forgotten Stories of Slavery in the Postmodern South' (2008) and her succinct description of historiographic metafiction was particularly useful. She summarises the characteristics of historiographic metafiction from the work of Hutcheon and Brian McHale. Derived from these, the chapters of this thesis are structured as follows: 'Chapter One – Indigenous Voices Change Things' discusses how each text problematises history by unearthing discontinuities, anomalies and multiple possibilities and by posing alternative content and alternative forms; 'Chapter Two – Representing History' examines how each author brings attention to and questions their own literary operations; 'Chapter Three – Plurality' investigates recognition of difference, multiplicities and the potential of new possibilities in the novels.

While Hutcheon's work is illuminating, it was troubling within the context of Indigenous writing. Specifically, Hutcheon suggests such texts operate in a closed system: 'One of the lessons of the doubleness of postmodernism is that you cannot

step outside that which you contest, that you are always implicated in the value, you *choose* to challenge.’ (223); ‘for [postmodernism] always works *within* conventions in order to subvert them’ (5). I would argue that the books I examine most certainly do this, but they also go *beyond* the boundaries of these conventions and propose something new. While Hutcheon argues that these types of books operate within and react against one cultural tradition, Indigenous writers operate from both within and without the Western literary tradition, and as such formulate a literature that is not confined to one cultural point of view, however much they also react against it. I soon found evidence of this, and other scholars who recognised the limitations of Hutcheon’s *Poetics of Postmodernism*, such as Mark Anderson (2009). As I will illustrate in Chapter Three, the creative flourishing that features at the conclusion of each of the novels I studied expands the literature and opens up space for new forms generated by the creative energy born out of ‘talking back’ combined with the reclamation of earlier (pre-Western literary) understandings and expressions of Indigeneity.

Structure

‘Chapter One – Indigenous Voices Change Things’ examines how choice of subject matter and character problematise history. It considers how *Baby No-Eyes* and *Benang* pose alternative versions of history and therefore call into question previously known and accepted histories. This chapter interrogates the issues raised by the novels themselves regarding how histories are created, and who controls the stories that are told. Hutcheon’s theory that discontinuities and anomalies are revealed when more than one version of events is allowed for is explored.

‘Chapter Two – Representing History’ investigates how Grace and Scott bring attention to and question their own literary operations. Self-consciousness and reflexivity are strong features of *Benang*, and *Baby No-Eyes* also contains moments where narrators directly address the reader and call their own actions into question. This self-awareness is a prominent feature of historiographic metafiction as presented by Hutcheon. Both Grace and Scott, using diverse methods, direct attention at how their fiction is constructed, and how the English language defines, or is not allowed to define, the characters and texts of the books themselves. However, in Indigenous writing, there is a definite return to understandings of history that pre-date colonial

impact. This is where Indigenous writing begins to part ways with Hutcheon's theories.

The final chapter – 'Plurality, Multiplicity, Possibility and the Wondrous' explores the elements of multiplicity, possibility and the wondrous represented in these novels and others like them. In this chapter, the flourishing of creativity that occurs near the conclusion of each novel is considered for its symbolism and structural purpose. I assert that it is in these creative manifestations that Indigenous fiction goes beyond historiographic metafiction. The Indigenous project does present assertions about the correctness or otherwise of historical stories (rather than questioning the possibility of any historical knowledge at all). In both novels, multiple possibilities and interpretations of identity are represented by one character who engages an art form to transcend the limitations imposed by colonialism. Indigenous fiction becomes a site where Indigenous imaginations can enhance creative engagement of postcolonial issues.

Chapter one of this thesis is weighted more heavily towards Grace's work, while chapter two gives more consideration to Scott's. This is predicated on character being the basis and starting point for Grace's stories, and language being the inciting feature for *Benang*. Chapter three examines both novels and a number of others. A conclusion follows this. Part two begins with the introduction to the creative component, which can be read before or after the novel, *Rēkohu Story*.

PART ONE

GRAPPLING WITH SPACE: GOING BEYOND HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION IN *BABY NO-EYES AND BENANG (FROM THE HEART)*

ONE

INDIGENOUS VOICES CHANGE THINGS

Is it legitimate to consider fiction a useful way to address history? Debate around this question has been extensive¹⁹ and many novelists would not make claims about historical accuracy in their fictional writing. So what are novelists up to when they write about historical matters? By deliberately presenting alternative versions, do they therefore call into question official histories? And if we accept this, do they not also question who has the right to write history at all? This chapter proposes that both of the books examined – *Baby No-Eyes* (1998), *Benang*²⁰ (1999) – pose alternative versions of history and therefore call into question previously known and accepted histories. I will examine how the authors' choice of subject matter (kaupapa), as well as the development of characters who might have wider symbolic resonances, problematise dominant versions of history. By presenting alternative content, these texts unearth discontinuities and anomalies in previous historical narratives, and allow for Indigenous²¹ views and voices, ultimately creating space for the authors to open up previously constricted or single-sided views of history and identity. In this way they may be viewed as historiographic metafiction, but with the underlying kaupapa of exploring and foregrounding Indigenous identities and traditions. This chapter focuses more intently on Grace's book, while chapter two gives more attention to Scott's.

¹⁹ see Amanda Johnson 'Archival Salvage: History's Reef and the Wreck of the Historical Novel' (2011) for one example.

²⁰ While *Benang* has a subtitle: 'From the Heart', the cover only shows a one word title – 'Benang'. Following the convention of other scholars, I will refer to the book by its singular main title.

²¹ A comprehensive discussion of the term Indigenous can be found in Te Punga Somerville 182-261, among other texts. In this case I am using the term to include the very different cultural backgrounds of the authors, who nonetheless share the experience of being first peoples of lands that were subsequently colonised by Great Britain. For the sake of clarity, it is important to recognise that Kim Scott is Noongar (Aboriginal Australian), and Patricia Grace is Ngati Toa, Ngati Raukawa and Te Ati Awa (Māori).

The settings of *Baby No-Eyes* and *Benang* are contemporary as well as historical. The main characters explore and revisit history and circle back to their current lives in a rhythm of perpetual circling and interweaving. Critics have used various metaphors to describe these structures, such as spiral²² or dot painting²³. The constancy of history's presence in the lives of the characters is a strong feature of both books, and each novel is preoccupied with the meaning and consequences of historical choices. However, Pistacchi suggests that *Baby No-Eyes* is not a strictly historical text, because it is written about events in recent memory ("Revealing"). My view is that in dealing with historical matters from both living memory and the distant past of Gran Kura and Mahaki's grandfather's stories, *Baby No-Eyes* defies conventional Western categorisations of what is historical or not. In fact, it could be said that one of the points of the novel is that these historical matters are part of the contemporary narrative, and vice versa. Therefore, strict definitions of what signifies historical fiction according to Western understandings of linear time may not apply to books with Indigenous outlooks. Both novels, derived as they are from at least two different cultural traditions, disregard definition within strict boundaries. By so closely aligning the experience of history with the experience of contemporary living, *Baby No-Eyes* and *Benang* collapse any separation between the two. We are our histories, they suggest, we live them. Recourse to traditional Māori interpretations of history confirms this point of view: the past is described as 'i ngā ra ō mua' or the days in front of us. Confrontation of history, for the Indigenous writer or reader, is inevitable. This chapter will investigate how these novels challenge underlying assumptions about history.

The Unseen and Seen: *Baby No-Eyes*

Grace's novels and short stories all share common concerns and themes: the power and necessity of story, the need for historical and cultural grounding, the normality and centring of Māori points of view and ways of speaking, the primacy of familial relationships and human bonds, and our relationship to earth and sea. Of all the ways that Grace has approached these concerns, *Baby No-Eyes* has been chosen as the subject for this project because of the mechanics of the novel, that is, how it is

²² See Knudsen, Eva, *The Circle and the Spiral: A Study of Australian Aboriginal and New Zealand Māori Literature* (2004) & articles by Sandra Tawake, among others, for more on this.

²³ Guest, Dorothy. "Magic Realism and Writing Place: A Novel and Exegesis" (2005).

structured, the language used, and the unique and multiple points of view it contains, that traverse even the boundaries of life/death. In retrospect, *Baby No-Eyes* might represent a sort of peak in terms of experimentation in style and subject matter, continuing on, perhaps, from the similar concerns of *Potiki* (1986), yet reaching further and addressing more contemporary issues such as urbanisation and non-traditional family structures. Later novels, *Dogside Story* (2001) and *Tu* (2004), while continuing to address the themes noted above, signal a return to a more conventional (though not necessarily less complex) linear narrative style.

I also chose *Baby No-Eyes* because I like it. This seems a rather non-academic thing to say in the course of a doctoral thesis, but it is important for a couple of reasons. First, until making this study, I had no idea some people find *Baby No-Eyes* a difficult read. Says Reina Whaitiri at the beginning of a comprehensive and otherwise positive review: ‘This novel may bewilder, confuse, and perhaps even irritate some readers. Those familiar with Patricia Grace’s previous two novels *Potiki* and *Cousins* will find *Baby No-Eyes* a very different and challenging work. On a first reading it is difficult to follow the narrative shifts.’ (554) None of which was my experience. I would have dismissed this as a single opinion had I not heard very similar ideas expressed by two people who work in the publishing industry, who also used the word didactic²⁴. Because Grace named each chapter according to the narrator speaking, it is evident that she had considered the possibility of confusion, and therefore left a clear trail for readers to negotiate narrative switches. Even so, the seeming fragmentation, the strange linguistic turns, and more foregrounded political conflict are perhaps challenging for some readers. Yet these are the things that intrigued me, and made me want to read on, and therefore made the work ‘easy’ to get into. This seems important to state, since the other thing that has become fully evident during this study is that critical and popular attention for Grace’s work still appears to centre on the ‘less difficult’ early work, particularly *Potiki* (Pistacchi “Spiralling Subversions” (4), Te Punga Somerville)²⁵. The final reason I thought I should make this statement is that, because this is a PhD in Creative Writing, my preference for a text that is perhaps

²⁴ Whether or not a book is didactic is perhaps dependent on the reader. I mention it here because it signals how difficult it can be to produce a book that addresses history and political themes from an Indigenous perspective without some readers finding it confronting and ‘didactic’.

²⁵ To be fair, *Baby No Eyes* followed closely on from *Potiki* and the short stories in terms of amount of critical analysis available. Ann Pistacchi’s 2009 PhD Thesis ‘Spiralling subversions : the politics of Māori cultural survivance in the recent critical fictions of Patricia Grace, Paula Morris and Kelly Ana Morey’ begins to address the question of why this may be so.

more structurally or linguistically or politically challenging could be seen to be reflected in my own creative writing for the thesis, and indeed, there are some stylistic similarities between my novel and this one.

So what is so challenging about *Baby No-Eyes*? It is useful to structure this discussion around two aspects: choice of subject matter and characterisation. While *Baby No-Eyes* could be seen as an overtly political novel, I would characterise it as predominantly concerned with family, identity, relationships of all kinds, the sanctity of human bodies and spirituality, and physical and cultural survival. Each of these subjects is addressed below in more detail. I would argue that political action in the book springs from these primary concerns. In terms of whether this novel is primarily a political vehicle or not, Patricia Grace's own words, of course, are particularly relevant here:

Well, I never knew the word 'political' when I first started out writing. But people tell me if I am writing about ordinary people and ordinary lives, but those lives are of a disempowered people, that makes my writing political. Commentators saw *Potiki* as a very political novel. I believed I was just writing about ordinary people. The issues that I brought out are only there because they are part of Maori ordinary daily life: the concern about land and the different issues to do with it, the concern about language and the different issues to do with it. (Della Valle "Wider Family"138)

In addition, Grace maintains 'I think in a way that all our writing is political... if you are writing about those people in their powerlessness, whether you do it deliberately or not, the writing is political.' (Calleja 113) So, while the writer did not set out to make far-reaching historical/political statements, her choice of subject matter is political, in the same way that all choices are. Problematizing history is an essentially political act.

Corresponding Bodies: the Sanctity of Family, Identity & Genetic Material

Writing about family and domestic concerns is not often viewed as a subversive act, but in Grace's work the family is the jumping off point for all things. The families and relationships in *Baby No-Eyes* are challenging partly because they are presented as so ordinary, and yet are not configured according to conventional Māori or Pākehā familial systems. The book opens with the birth of Tawera, as different characters (partners Dave & Mahaki, Te Paania their friend, Tawera her living son, Baby her spirit daughter, and Kura who is Baby's grandmother and Te Paania's grandfather's

cousin) gather to form an urban whānau, transferring and transforming traditional Māori kinship relationships to their new home. The normality of the extended family unit based on place and relationship rather than biological kinship is presented as natural almost to the point of being taken for granted. At one point during Tawera's childhood, he complains of Dave and Mahaki to his mother: 'I thought they were meant to be my fathers. How can they be my fathers if they're out all the time?' (79) In the same chapter, Gran Kura returns from attending Grandparents Day 'because our friend Kawea, who is already five, didn't have his own grandparent to take to school.' (78) In this urban setting, characters maintain and spread traditional kinship systems to include community members who are not genetically related. When Tawera looks through the door of his bedroom, he can see the wall where all the family's photos are pinned. There are so many that they overlap and leave no space. On this family picture wall is a mix of Te Paania's, Tawera's, Mahaki's, Dave's and Gran Kura's biological relations and friends all mixed together (80). All of these people are part of their inclusive concept of whānau.

However, Pistacchi identifies the family structure here as 'post Nuclear' and therefore non-traditional ("Revealing" 52). I agree that the whānau has the outward appearance of being non-traditional, and 'chosen' rather than entirely kinship-related. But I also recognise the inclusive and extended structure of this family to be completely traditional, like kohanga reo and kura kaupapa²⁶ for example, who commonly describe their students and families as whānau, as do a number of other kaupapa Māori institutions, based on a sense of shared purpose and common experience rather than kinship. These mainly urban whānau can be in a state of flux as members come and go, but they originate in traditional Māori kinship systems. Likewise, the common Māori custom to greet every person of one's parents' age as aunty or uncle, or every person of one's grandparents' age as kui or koro, regardless of relationship, exemplifies the inclination for Māori to extend kinship relationships beyond those defined by genetics. The fluidity with which these characters assume whānau roles without underlying biological connections signals the fluidity with which Māori adapt and remodel contemporary Western society to their needs. The simplicity of this representation should not deceive the reader – this is a deeply

²⁶ Total immersion Māori language pre-schools and schools.

culturally customary mode of operation applied to a postcolonial setting. It underlies and mirrors the other action of the novel.

The whānau is unconventional in other ways as well. Dave and Mahaki are a couple, and this is not remarked upon as unusual at all until Shane calls their food ‘typical queer-boy kai’ in chapter three²⁷. Te Paania, Tawera and Gran Kura do not question the queer relationship at any time, and, apart from this one remark, Shane does not object to living on their property or to Te Paania’s closeness to them. It is Mahaki that has questions about his sexuality, but only so much as anyone has questions about their identity when their family are reticent and they are not seen to fit societal norms: ‘Years coming to terms. Years discovering himself, discovering the world. But it was really when he’d started living with Dave that he’d begun to understand real rejection – by friends and family, including Mum and Sis at first.’ (170) Just as there is very little questioning of Dave and Mahaki’s relationship²⁸, and Kura’s arrival and rapid integration in the household is accepted as a matter of course, there is rarely any challenge to Te Paania and Tawera’s intense relationship with the unseen Baby. After playing naked with his spirit sister, Tawera goes to show his mother:

“We’re elephants,” I said.

“Put your clothes on.”

“She’s got hers off too.”

“Both of you. Put your clothes on, it’s bloody freezing.” (77)

Later, Dave helps them out of the bath: ‘He helped us dry the walls and the floor with a towel, helped us get our pjs on...’ (80) There is no suggestion that the adults in the house don’t see Baby as well.

Thus, traditional systems of kinship, including whāngai, whānaungatanga, kaumatuatanga, tuakana/teina and wairuatanga form the heart of the book. They problematise history because they represent an alternative worldview that is presented, in Grace’s own words, as ‘ordinary’: ‘Te Paania valued the family structure. She did not want to be a single parent living in the city on her own. She also didn’t want to go back to her home place. So she created a family in an urban

²⁷ Even this could be considered not exclusively a comment on their sexuality, but on their food choices, which are ‘queer’ in a different way, i.e. strange to Shane, possibly vegetarian/vegan/international.

²⁸ See Te Awēkotuku, *Mana Wahine Maori: Selected Writings on Maori Womens Art, Culture and Politics* (1991) for a discussion of traditionally inclusive Māori attitudes to gay/lesbian family members.

situation. She created that family because she needed it for her child. It is not uncommon in reality...’ (Della Valle “Wider Family” 132) For anyone who does *not* take the ordinariness of these scenes for granted, or quite possibly had no idea these *tikanga* (ways of being) existed, questions are raised. Why does it seem unusual? If this is the worldview of the novel, then what of the dominant worldview that is generally taken for granted as the default position for all? Perhaps what we have known, regarded as truth, and learnt from history is not the only story? According to Pistacchi, the invitation for Baby to stay amongst the living and have a childhood with her family is where ‘some of Grace’s most critical social subversions can be found. Her insistence that it is absolutely normal and rational for Te Paania to be able to keep her spirit child with her is a simple but direct subversion of the Western concept of reality. [This] makes a strong case for normalizing the Maori belief system.’ (“Revealing” 70) It is not just Te Paania that insists Baby be acknowledged and kept alive, the entire family makes space for the spirit child, both physically and figuratively. There is communal affirmation that she deserves a life, and unwavering acceptance of Tawera’s experience of reality with his unseen sister at his side.

Of course at the centre of each character’s story is the kaupapa of identity. Each character follows a narrative arc towards some kind of liberation. For Te Paania, it is finding something beyond the awkward froggy image she has of herself, in her wildness and motherhood and the work she does with Mahaki and Gran Kura. She transforms what seems a negative identity at the beginning, ‘not bad for a frog’ (89), into a powerful identity and voice: ‘[...] I would be part of it, part of the voice. I’d have my croak to add.’ (208). For Mahaki, it is stepping fully into the role bestowed on him by his grandfather – using his mainstream education and skills as a lawyer to work towards saving the mountain, and finding faith in his own ability to help his people, despite the feelings of inadequacy brought on by the Pākehā education and the unconventional relationship. For Tawera, it is finding a sense of individuality after being twinned with his spirit sister for so long. He carries the heaviest burden in the book because he ‘carries’ Baby and all that she stands for (as discussed pages 41-46). It is his journey to selfhood that becomes the most precarious in the end.

Gran Kura faces the most explicit confrontation with history in the book, though the entire whānau faces this with her as she weaves her narrative, and because they *are* a whānau, and therefore their concerns and fates are intertwined. Just as families are woven together in life, Grace has woven them together in the structure of

the book, and these identity narratives inform and influence each other. In this case, the problematising of history is explicit, for each character struggles with the chasm between what they have been told, or the reality they have accepted, and the possibility that they have been deceived in some way. In particular, Gran questions what she has always believed to be ‘bad’ or ‘good’, and realising that the ‘good’ has been used to subjugate her people, and literally kill her teina (little sister/cousin) and steal Baby’s eyes, she makes the subversive decision to switch the meanings of these words:

It took the two of them to stop me being this woman of evil patience and goodness, to stop me waiting there doing what I was told, to stop me sitting frightened of white coats, to stop me listening to people who gave themselves their own authority[...]

It’s not easy to learn that you are evil when you thought yourself good, to learn you’re stupid when you thought yourself knowledgeable [...] (65)

Gran Kura decides to be evil, because in a colonised world, what is good for her people is evil to the coloniser, and vice versa. Gran Kura’s transformation and role as storyteller is explored later in this chapter (see 33-35).

I have somehow left the main kaupapa of the book until last, perhaps because it branches into and connects with the other things I have named as subject matter, perhaps because it consists of many Very Big Things. In part, I wanted to begin with the assertion that this differently configured family is central to other aspects of the story, because I think that idea is as radical and important as the other subjects of the novel (though less obviously so). The clue to this ‘main kaupapa’ is in the name of the book – *Baby No-Eyes*, and all that represents – a baby dies due to a car accident and when the family go to collect her they are continually made to wait and the baby is spoken about in dehumanising terms. When the baby is finally returned, they are told she had been found in a wastecare bin, and her eyes are missing. Another search is made, and the eyes are returned in a supermarket bag, therefore being treated like food – a devastating insult²⁹. From the outset, due to the author’s note, we are aware that this story is based on true events.

²⁹ Even writing this, I am aware that not all readers will understand the full ramifications of ‘being treated as food’ for Māori, particularly concerning anything of or from the head. Although it’s beyond the scope of this study to explain such things here, Grace suggests the full extent of the transgression in the book. However, it always strikes me when reading this passage that the experience might be very different for readers of different backgrounds. I’d guess that for Pākehā in general, it is Baby being put

The family is changed forever. Gran Kura begins the lengthy and difficult process of excavating her past, sharing it and seeing it with ‘fresh eyes,’³⁰ Te Paania begins to carry with her the child she thought she had lost, unable to let her go because of what was done, and when Tawera is born he begins to carry this responsibility for her. Mahaki and Dave are involved as whānau, but when Mahaki’s grandfather asks him to address issues concerning land where ancestral remains need protection, the story begins to come full circle. Beginning with Baby and moving backward and outward to other characters and history, the subject matter of this book is therefore: physical and cultural survival, the sanctity of human bodies and spirituality, and culture and land at risk of colonial encroachment. Into the mix we can add the ethics of genetic engineering, the dynamics of protest and occupation (based on actual events at Moutua Gardens), and finally the liberating potential of different artforms.

It is evident, describing these kaupapa, that they are all deeply related to each other – family, identity, and physical well-being are all interlinked. Transgressions against one will result in problems for the other. Therefore the journey towards wellbeing for the family consists of each individual’s personal search for identity, as well as the family’s tribal and historical motivation to protect physical and spiritual sites and remains. By writing about the concerns of ordinary people from her point of view, Grace immediately poses alternative content, thus unearthing discontinuities or anomalies in the dominant stories of Aotearoa. Through her choice of subject matter as a writer who is Māori and not from the dominant culture of English language fiction in New Zealand, and through her ability to show her readers the world through the eyes of her characters and empathise, Grace expands societal and cultural understandings of Indigeneity and New Zealand’s cultural milieu. It is precisely her assumption that what she does is so ordinary that presents the greatest challenge to stereotypical points of view. And while her work responds to the impact of colonisation on all of her characters, she is doing more than ‘writing back’. She is

in a wastecare bin that is the most horrifying, but for Gran Kura and her family, and later Te Paania, it is the moment of learning what happened to the eyes that brings the most pain and is the catalyst for action.

³⁰ No pun intended – but it is interesting how the loss of Baby’s eyes changes the way Gran Kura sees everything: her life, the way the world works, what is good/evil.

more than a post-something outsider³¹. Grace firmly situates her work in a distinctly Māori worldview (in all its diversity), for the reader to immerse in.

Frogs, Gods and Wild Women: character in *Baby No-Eyes*

My focus is on characters. The story happens because of what happens to the character. Everything belongs to that person. The environments and circumstances all belong to the character. – Patricia Grace (Hereniko 81)

Character is another powerful tool with which Grace incites the reader to reconsider assumptions about history and identity. Each of the main characters seems to carry the weight of more than a singular identity, and could be seen to have archetypal or symbolic resonances indicative of contemporary character types within Māori society. While the idea of an archetype might go further and deeper than these character-types in *Baby No-Eyes*, Najid, with reference to Parameswaran, suggests that, in establishing a strong Māori literature, ‘Maori writers need to introduce and establish archetypes and cultural allusions out of their own historical experiences, and make them part of the literary culture.’ (77) As this chapter demonstrates, I would argue that Grace has already gone some way towards achieving this.

Gran Kura is the kuia or grandmother of the whānau. The wise old woman is an archetype that has a long and varied history in many different cultures over millennia. But here Grace twists conventional expectations of what a wise old woman represents. Gran Kura does not represent a pure, untarnished Māori wisdom. Her stories are full of her guilt at her own complicity with the colonising forces, her realisation that she herself has aided in the stealing of culture. This realisation comes to her first in the hospital as they wait for Baby to be returned: ‘How evil it is to be so good. I should’ve screamed and cried, but I prayed myself into a deep, deep patience which stopped the cry in my throat [...]’ (63) Gran Kura displays behaviour that is evidently deeply ingrained and habitual. The story of Riripeti reveals when this deep patience was born, or at least when Gran Kura decided that it was Māori culture and language that caused her family so much pain. But the scene in the hospital is the

³¹ ‘Because “postcolonial” does not mean anything to me, really... I don’t write postcolonial literature according to me. I am just writing what I know and bringing creativity to bear on that.’ (Grace qtd. in Calleja 114) Chapter Two explores Grace’s position with regard to ‘writing back’ to dominant culture in more detail.

moment she recognises that her silence makes her complicit with the forces that have hurt her family, in the past and present:

It's not easy to learn you are evil when you thought yourself good, to learn you're stupid when you thought yourself knowledgeable, to learn those you thought were crazy were not – and you killed them [...] 'You can't steal from us anymore Gran Kura,' Niecy said to me. 'Otherwise why did Shane die?' She was calling me a thief. (63-65)

Grace upturns conventional definitions of the *kuia*, the upholder of culture and, since early contact, Christianity. As Gran Kura tells her stories, she reveals where this false goodness came into the family, with the 'birdnosed one', son of a highborn woman and a whaler, her grandfather Tumanako (107). Describing the picture of her Grandfather with a half-shut eye, Kura says:

[...] as I was growing up I came to understand the meaning of that half-shut eye. Yes, he was warning us that following generations would have to keep one eye unseeing, keep lips sealed in order to survive. That was his message, which I know came from goodness, love for us – but also from uncertainty because the world had changed forever. (108)

Only through going back to these ancestral stories can Kura find the origins of her own behaviour. 'It was after Tumanako's death that goodness and obedience turned us against ourselves,' (116) she says, noting how alcohol, the church, bad food and welfare all kept her people 'good'. Grace complicates history by suggesting that things that were done in the name of love, goodness or survival were actually damaging to the people they were supposed to protect. Thus she shows how colonisation becomes internalised. In order to decolonise herself Gran Kura decides to 'never speak English again' so that she might 'be again who [she] was born to be' (66). In addition, the recitation of stories is like an excavation, making room for new perceptions of who she should or could have been to flourish. This is a communal activity Gran Kura is engaged in. As she tells her stories to the family, she frees them from the limitations that silence and goodness have imposed on her life. As Ratheiser puts it: 'Although her Maori culture has always given her roots, her adjustment to Western norms prevented her from perceiving herself as part of a tradition and as part of a story, which she only becomes by taking the stories into her own hands and thus acquiring a voice.' (264)

Kura is the damaged *kuia*, the teller of stories, and thus the healer. Although many things have been stolen from her via 'goodness', she maintains enough

traditional knowledge to excavate culture and language. Hence, at the end of the book, she knows what must be done for Tawera (239), and acts as a conduit for Baby's return to the afterlife. In many ways she is the archetypal wise woman known across cultures, and yet her story has been complicated by the imposition of a colonial history. She might be seen as representative of her generation of men and women – the ones who were punished for speaking te reo at school, and taught to turn away from their own culture so that they might survive or do better than the generations before. Finally, 'Kura's narratives are of special importance, as they connect the present situation of Maori society with events in the past.' (Ratheiser 262)

Gran Kura's struggle with goodness is contrasted with the 'wild' streak in her ancestor Pirinoa, which is suppressed more and more over generations but makes a return in Te Paania's narrative. Some of the most extraordinary imagery in the book is engaged to tell Te Paania's story: she continuously describes herself as a frog – an image that takes some narrative time to fully develop. At first, the image of a frog is given in relation to Te Paania's appearance: 'wide, freckled face; frog mouth; eyes magnetised under double-glazed glasses; body short and wide' (9), and this is the image we carry through the first half of the book. Likening a woman to a frog has a strange effect – it's as if she has been born out of place, it suggests she is unconventional, that she doesn't fit in, that there is something marked in her appearance. The freckles suggest a mixed ethnic background, so perhaps the frogginess has something to do with walking between worlds. Once Te Paania begins to tell her story – her life at school and how she came to do the work she does – the reader begins to understand the significance of her bugged out eyes and wide frog mouth. She is outspoken, and she can't help but see the prejudices of others in their actions:

It wasn't [the teacher's] examination papers that I ripped up, swearing. It was the papers of some of the more pleasant, less sarcastic teachers, who spent hour after hour dictating notes without giving out any information, without assisting us to unlock any doors.

The smiling thieves...

Finally, it was end to end, crossways, whichways, all ways. I heard myself mouthing. I had a ripping time.

Froggy out on the road.

Froggy on the way home.

Froggy fifteen years old. (90)

Te Paania leaves school in frustration with the lack of engagement by her teachers, and the frog becomes a symbol of not only outspokenness, but transformation too. If there is anything awkward about being a frog, Grace suggests that going to the city and finding out that the clothes you wear and the way you walk and sit are ‘wrong’ may have something to do with it. Te Paania observes: ‘I thought it might be a typing course that I was being sent to do, but instead it was a deruralisation course, an attempt at making a country frog into a city frog, an attempt at making a native frog exotic (101)³². When she shows an aptitude for new technology in her workplace, no one listens to Te Paania at first because she ‘was too native, too froggy, too scary’ (103) There is something about this frog nature that unsettles and disturbs, something that people avoid letting into their field of vision. As a representation of a younger generation of more outspoken Māori, Te Paania represents the propensity to see clearly and speak out, disturbing status quo understandings of history and society/culture. Though her presence disturbs, through persistence she makes a place for herself in the new city setting. She opens up space, making herself adaptable but also forcing her environment to adapt to her presence. This then signifies the space the writer is opening up by writing this story, in this way, in English. By extension the fictional text corresponds with the space Indigenous individuals and groups open up by operating on their own terms in a postcolonial environment.

The meanings of frog symbolism are extended towards the centre of the novel: ‘Beyond Frog? It’s wildness that makes my eyes bug out. It’s my bugging out eyes that enable me to see wildly, according to Gran Kura.’ (143) Te Paania’s frogginess is linked to her ancestor’s wildness, the only thing that can save them from Gran Kura’s ‘evil goodness.’ The contrast between these two characters is emphasised here. When talking about the work clothes required to go out ‘to work for bosses’ Gran Kura suggests that Te Paania doesn’t change underneath:

She was talking about the froggy camouflage – which is a ripple on water, stalks of criss-crossed grass, patterns on wood and stone, raindrops on mud, imprints of old leaves and flowers on the ground, eyes sitting, as floating bubbles, on the pond’s surface. It was something keeping its true self underneath, yet the ‘not hidden’ is true also. (147)

The switch between generations is signalled in this passage, suggesting that there has been a fundamental change in the way the characters view themselves. For Gran

³² There are additional resonances here with the European storytelling tradition: transforming frogs, country and city mice.

Kura's generation, makeup was something they used to hide their appearance, because they 'didn't want to be these bad, ugly people, speaking this heathen language.' (147) They imitated the other and suppressed the true self. For Te Paania, both the true self and the camouflage are part of her nature, to be used to her advantage. While maintaining an essentially Māori point of view, Te Paania skillfully employs the tools of Pākehā culture to advance. That is, the camouflage is a skilful trick to protect and promote the true self.

Finally, as Te Paania begins to understand how her story connects with the larger story at the centre of her work with Mahaki, she realises the full transformative powers and voice of the frog:

But there's hibernation and a time beyond hibernation. There's a time beyond survival, a time beyond the taking of eyes.

Sometimes it is your own being, who you are, that causes your life to change – when suddenly, but not from choice, you must breathe in air instead of water. (207)

Frog in a horror movie.

What would I do?

All I could do was croak.

Not croak as in die, croak as in croak – open mouth, make sound.

Froggy to the rescue, didah didah didah. Well, hardly that, but I would be part of it, part of the voice. I'd have my croak to add. (208)

At the beginning of this section I suggested that each of the characters represents something larger than themselves, and therefore might be seen as archetypal. In her ability to adapt and transform, her dexterity at working and living in different worlds, and her strength of vision and voice, Te Paania represents a much younger and more adaptable generation than Gran Kura. She still faces prejudice and difficulty because she is Māori, but unlike Gran, she rejects the imposition of outside judgements and mores and instead carries her own perspective into the world, thus forcing the world around her to be inclusive of people like her. As Mahaki's contemporary, she is a modern warrior of sorts, using all of the froggy skills at her disposal to incite change. She is constantly pushing the boundaries, creating space for herself and her family. Since it is her job to question the past, Te Paania (with the others) actively performs the function of problematising history in *Baby No-Eyes*, yet her very existence as a character also does this. Her strange amphibiousness immediately calls into question assumptions and represents an alternative perspective. In constantly responding to her

environment³³ and working around and through the constrictions dominant society places on her, Te Paania reveals discontinuities and anomalies which, particularly in this book, are derived from history.

Following on from his mother, Tawera represents an evolution to a new level in terms of comfort with his self and the multiplicity of his world. Because of Gran Kura, Te Paania, Mahaki and Dave's own formative experiences, Tawera is privileged to have an open, nurturing, bilingual, inclusive upbringing, where his needs and sensitivities are prioritised. This is demonstrated by the lengths his family go to when finding a school: ' "We've come to ask what your school has to offer our child," I said to Annabelle... Mahaki and Dave had taken the afternoon off work so that they could come with Gran and me to find the answer to this and other questions[...]' (144). When asked what they need and expect from Tawera's schooling, they reply that they want him to be okay, be taken into account, to be happy and to have access to 'the World' (145). The whānau have an expansive view of what education can and should offer their child – access to not just local but global knowledge. The collectivity of their approach to the school demonstrates their approach to child-rearing, which is both contemporary and reconnects with older forms of collective nurturing and teaching for children. In this way, Grace makes claims that whānau can be all of these things simultaneously: traditional and local, contemporary and global. There is no authentic whānau frozen in time – history informs and teaches but should not define or limit.

The outcome for Tawera is that he is comfortable in his own skin, and proud of his heritage, as evidenced in his enthusiastic portrayal of Tawhaki in the school play and his implicit understanding of te reo. He is unafraid to ask for the stories because by the time he comes along Gran Kura has found her voice: 'Now because of the children's children, and because my mouth has opened, I must unwrap the little ball, find it, let the secrets free' (66) In fact, he sits at the centre of the whānau and continuously requires the recitation of stories, in order to make sense of the past, which in turn is a way of making sense of the present. His voice is direct, and compelling: 'All right Mum and Gran Kura and all of us, let's tell everything. Tell

³³ Pistacchi presents an interesting analysis of the frog trope, referencing scientific analyses that liken frogs to the 'canary in the mine' in terms of their propensity to reveal how healthy an environment is. (2003) In addition, in some First Nation North American cultures, the frog is revered for its transformative power.

about ourselves, and about this sister without eyes who's already four years old. I know there's plenty of time but let's get cracking.' (20) By playing this role, Tawera is an inciting figure for the primacy of narrative in the family's understandings and expressions of themselves. Gran Kura, Te Paania and Mahaki give the stories, but it is Tawera that requests and interprets them so that his sister can have 'a family and a childhood' (251, 269). The process and implications of storytelling within the novel will be examined in more depth in Chapter Two.

Tawera cannot be read, of course, without reference to Baby, for while he is given the most inclusive upbringing his whānau can provide, he soon realises that the presence of an invisible spirit sister marks him as different:

'Yes, who do you talk to Tawera?' the kids said when the teacher had gone... the kids kept staring. 'Tell us who.'

'Nobody,' I said. I shouldn't have said that, what a dig I received.

[from Baby]

'I didn't mean it,' I said.

And the kids said 'Errrrr?' in a funny way, their voices starting low down, rising until they were sitting on the tops of pins. They looked out of the sides of their eyes at each other. (137)

While his family is open to Baby's presence, Tawera is forced to hide his conversations and interactions with his sister at school. But her voice is just as insistent as his need to appear normal, and he must find ways to appease her while trying to engage with other children and adults. Later when Baby acts out her frustration by bullying and bruising her brother, Te Paania questions the wisdom of keeping Baby 'alive' in the family: 'Have I done this to you? Have I given you this misery?' (210) Despite the best efforts of his whānau, Tawera continues to carry the burden of colonisation through his sister. The weight of explanation and interpretation is placed on him – "'I don't need to see,' she said. 'I don't need eyes. I have you to be my eyes.'" (75) While this seems a fun game at first, it becomes tiring:

All that sideways looking. All that thinking and planning and having to remember to talk in my head. All that being pinched and poked and shoved and squeezed. It wasn't fair at all. I had to blame someone. 'What do you care, Mum,' I said. 'You didn't even have a very good reason for making me. It was only so I could babysit my big sister, keep her off your back, out of your hair, out of your eyes, your head, your ears.' (141)

The double speak Tawera is forced to use and his sense of being burdened with a responsibility that isn't his is reminiscent of the kinds of responses and coping

mechanisms that are needed to deal with colonisation and racism. Later, physical manifestations of the burden begin to show (bruises and falls), and the family realises something must be done. But it is Tawera that must speak to make change occur, and despite the burden his sister has become, he is reluctant to do so. When she finally leaves he feels her absence keenly, unable to operate in a world with so much 'spaze'.

A fuller description of what I've called 'the burden of colonisation' represented by Baby is given below (pages 41-46) where I address her character, but it is important here to discuss further the wider significance of this dynamic. There is both personal and cultural/societal significance in the incredibly vivid presence of Baby in Tawera's life. On one level, we can consider this a literal 'ghost story' and, for the most part, it is possible to read it that way. But if we see Baby as a more symbolic or figurative character in the novel, it may be that Te Paania has transferred to her son her own grief and need to see her first child experience a childhood. Though that might be a Western psychological view to take, considering that Grace has stated her own motive was simply to give a baby 'a life' (Della Valle "Wider Family" 138). The wider significance of Baby's presence is that through the violation of the sanctity of her body – the removal of her eyes and disregard of her body, as well as the insinuation that she is nothing but food – she represents a very deep and on-going violence towards Māori culture and values, as well as physical wellbeing. That Tawera carries her throughout the book suggests that at some level, it does not matter what his family or school does to protect and uplift him, he will also have to confront the impact of colonisation on his people.

How is he going to cope with this burden? At the conclusion of the novel, Tawera finds a way to express his grief, confusion and remembrance through his paintbrush. His artwork has been a thread throughout the book, but it is in the triumphant discovery and expansion of spaze/te kore on his canvas that he makes a connection between the seen and unseen. He has, of course, been doing this all his life, but without Baby's visceral presence he has to find a way to do it independently. Thus, creative expression is represented as one way to deal with the impacts and pressures of both personal pain and history, as well as the loneliness of the contemporary world.

While Tawera's upbringing represents advancement from Te Paania and Gran Kura's, he also grapples with a world that seems more complex and precarious. By demonstrating generational differences, Grace shows how life becomes paradoxically

both easier and more difficult with the progression of time. As each generation strips away the issues and pretences of their own time, they expose deeper and more insidious problems. Tawera's world is incredibly complex, and while most of us don't have a ghostly sister to contend with, his character could be seen as representative of the recent generations of Māori who contend with the outcomes of previous colonial policies, as well as the continuation of cultural prejudice and institutional racism in more modern forms. Intergenerational ghosts of colonisation abound, whether they come in the form of unresolved grief, untold stories or unearthed discrepancies. Tawera is the chief excavator of stories in *Baby No-Eyes* – the catalyst for action on many levels. Finally, as an artist and seer, he presents multiple possibilities and alternative ways of being. The final few chapters of the novel culminate in Tawera's triumphant exploration of these roles, as will be discussed in chapter three of this thesis.

We encounter Baby only through the others, primarily Tawera and Te Paania, and because she is also a spirit, it is tempting to see her largely as a symbolic figure, but she is also an individual character in her own right. In her typically empathetic style, Grace renders Baby as a rather normal infant and sibling – despite her death – with the addition of a disability. Te Paania and Tawera see, smell, and hear her: 'I'd hold her over the water, washing her face, working my fingers in the facecloth to clean the fatty creases and the curls of her ears. I'd squeeze water from the cloth to wet her head, then soap my hand to rub through her hair' (125). Tawera describes typical sibling conflicts: 'She complains that I forget her, that I won't move over in the bed or make room on my chair for her. She doesn't like me to play with other kids, or talk to others. She gets me into trouble' (133). Even for a more skeptical reader, it is easy to imagine that Baby is very real, if only to Tawera and his mother, and that if others cannot see her, they are at least willing to believe that Tawera and Te Paania can. In addition, when searching for a word to describe what Baby is, 'ghost' and even 'spirit' seem inadequate or demeaning to her status as a full character who demands to be taken into account. Says Pistacchi: 'Baby's presence as a "solid" spirit, one who interacts with her family and grows older each year just as a living child would, subverts the European connotation of the word 'ghost.' Baby is not haunting the family; she is living with them' ("Revealing" 70). I am suggesting that although Baby performs a symbolic function in the story, it is important to note that she can

also be read literally as a baby who was given the chance to experience childhood by her family even after her death. In fact, given Grace's own comments about *Baby No Eyes*, it is just as important to recognise the very human motivations of the story: 'The story of what happened to the baby in the pathology department of the hospital was a true story and was the reason I wrote the book. My idea was to give that baby a life.' (Della Valle "Wider Family" 138)

Cultural logic is provided for why Baby lingers after her death. As Te Paania's grandfather says:

'She got to hang around for a while so we know she's a mokopuna, not a rubbish, not a kai. How do we know she not a fish if she don't hang around for a while – or a blind eel or old newspaper or rat shit. Huh. You don't expect her to go away, join her ancestors, foof, just like that,' and he threw his hands up. 'Not after all that business.' (83)

While she might not have hung around if it had have been a simple accidental death, this passage suggests that the transgressions against Baby's body are the cause of her return. She has been treated in such a way that she cannot be sure that anyone recognised her as fully human. Pistacchi makes some important observations regarding cultural precedents for Baby's continued presence.

The unquestioned acceptance of Baby's spirit as a real and natural part of their lives, and Grace's unwillingness as a writer to intimate that there might be any other reasonable response to Baby's presence (such as disbelief, fright, or revulsion) makes a strong case for normalizing the Maori belief system. She does not explain Baby's presence in the novel because within her culture the presence of a spirit child does not need explaining. ("Revealing" 70)

Read this way, it is a story of reconciliation and redemption, though there are strong underlying claims being made about the normalcy of a distinctly Māori world view.

Of course, delving deeper into the representative potential of a character like Baby does not change the redemptive and reconciling aspects of the story, though perhaps we are adding another layer regarding what is being reconciled. While recognising that Baby's role 'invites a variety of interpretations', Michelle Keown seems determined to read Baby from a Western psychological point of view, primarily as an 'imaginary friend' or internalised figure with which Tawera 'purge[s] his guilty feelings' ("Postcolonial" 154), and enacts a 'Freudo-Lacanian Oedipal moment' (153). I would question the usefulness of interpreting a character according to parameters and definitions outside of the cultural context from whence the

character has sprung³⁴, but I do agree with Keown's more open explanation in which she allows for multiple interpretations: "[...] throughout the narrative she appears variously as a figment of Tawera's imagination, a literary device, and a palpable spiritual entity that inhabits Tawera's body. She functions as a floating signifier, shifting chameleon-like between different roles as the text progresses" (153). Baby defies singular interpretation. She cannot be limited to one point of view or idea about who or what she is. In this way she mirrors both Tawera and Scott's Harley (as discussed in chapter three) – a shimmering multiplicity, uncontainable and therefore challenging to simplistic or stereotypical understandings of history and Indigeneity. The most obvious symbolic association for Baby is that what is taken from her – her eyes and her life – 'become emblematic in the novel of the many things that Pakeha settlers have stolen from the Maori people throughout the history of colonial and post-colonial New Zealand' (Pistacchi "Revealing" 82).

Baby is also a symbol of the many battles being fought in the novel: the battle for the rights inherent in the Treaty of Waitangi to be recognized by medical health practitioners, the battle for the Maori people's voices to be heard and recognized in the public spaces of New Zealand, the battle for ancestral lands to be returned... to keep bio-pirates from plundering the genes of the ancient ancestors, and, most importantly, the battle to have Maori stories, told in their own words, become a recognised and respected part of the reality depicted in Aotearoa. (Pistacchi "Revealing" 115)

Those are pretty big claims and a pretty heavy load for one character to carry. Of course this load is both literal and figurative, so Baby (and more specifically her eyes) can be seen to represent physical things that were taken, like land, and non-physical properties like self-determination, pride and self-worth. If we briefly survey phrases that describe what happened to Baby, it is easy to see how they could be applied to how Māori culture has been treated at various (mostly historical) times. She was mutilated, treated as less than human (122), treated like rubbish, thrown out. In a review of Michelle Keown's book *Postcolonial Pacific Writing*, Paul Lyons notes that Pacific writers, including Grace, have made Pacific bodies in their writing 'a locus from which to examine the wounds of colonialism' (462). In symbolic terms, Baby's body is certainly that.

This symbolism does not occur in isolation – Gran Kura, Te Paania and Mahaki's stories run parallel and give it substance and specificity. As Te Paania notes

³⁴ In his review of *Postcolonial Pacific Writing* (2006), Paul Lyons expresses similar doubts.

at various times in the latter part of the novel, the new business and the old business are all the same business. So when Mahaki delves deeper into the threat of biopiracy and Te Paania starts transcribing the tapes of his grandfather telling of their concerns about stolen ancestral remains and body parts, a direct link is made with what was stolen from Baby, though that link is also hinted at from the beginning: ‘ “They think they can experiment on us brown people” ’ (84)

Perhaps this is where some readers will detect a more forceful political tone and the word didactic might be used. Grace does not use forceful language, but shows very clearly an authorial point of view via the different narrators, and while it is evident that this point of view is motivated by entirely human concerns, the occupation of Te Ra Park, court action and engagement of media in the novel show that sometimes political action is warranted. None of that is at issue here, but I do want to continue to edge away from viewing Baby as only symbolic of what she loses or lacks, and therefore what Māori have lost. In fact, from the time of her death, the family are engaged in a continual movement towards personal and political recovery. And while some of the family are engaged in political action to rectify historical and contemporary wrongs, others are engaged in a parallel transformation and decolonisation on a personal, spiritual and emotional level. In fact, as an integrated unit, their efforts in both public and private spheres support each other, so that the family experience a holistic recovery. The multiple associations that can be derived from a character like Baby are well put by Janet Wilson:

Baby’s dismemberment and odd ghostly reconstruction with Tawera [...] symbolically embody the repressed past which Granny Kura must disinter, the dislocated and fragmented culture of the tribal society that she then pieces back together. Baby’s transience refers to the evanescence of memories and oral history, for her return to the mortal world implies that these fragments can momentarily be recovered. (434)

As stated earlier, there are obvious connotations for Baby’s character and what is physically done to her – what the hospital does, but also how she died in the first place – as a result of Shane’s rage because of the stories and culture that had been stolen from him. But the less confronting and more important thread here is the story of recovery. If *Baby No-Eyes* is about giving Baby a childhood and sight through her brother, then it is also about giving Māori back their ‘eyes’ – their stories and their self-understanding and therefore their pride. As Pistacchi notes: ‘Searching for eyes and figuratively returning Baby’s eyes to her therefore become major themes in the

novel. In one of Te Paania's many dreams, she has a vision of a baby who says to her, "you have to find them for me" (72)' ("Revealing" 83).

Some parallels between Grace's *Baby* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* may be noted by some readers – both dead baby girls that somehow return to their families and continue to grow up – but in any comparison of the two, it would be the marked difference in tone and outcome that is most evident. *Beloved* is a much darker book and, with reference to the earlier quote, contains a haunting in the real gothic sense. I only bring it up here to emphasise the contrast in tone and hint at what a different book *Baby No-Eyes* could have been had Grace decided to imbue *Baby* with all the malevolence that her symbolic status might suggest (all the pain and unresolved anguish of colonisation). As it is, she does express a malicious streak (though any parent will not find this out of the ordinary), but does not embody the rage of, for example, her father. However, as Keown does point out that a further similarity with *Beloved* that is striking and relevant here is that in both books '[...] mutilation symbolizes the circumscription of her entire culture [...]' ("Postcolonial Pacific" 151).

Like her brother, *Baby* sits at the centre of the family and acts as a motivator for actions taken. There is a sense that, in providing a protected yet open childhood for *Tawera*, the family is also doing the same for *Baby*. Perhaps the term *utu* has some relevance. Frequently interpreted as revenge, *utu* is more accurately a term that connotes reciprocal payment or even restorative justice³⁵. By recognising that *Baby* deserves a family and a childhood, the family are rectifying the wrongs that have been done to her. What is particularly interesting here is that, while they are acting outside the direct family unit to protect *wahi tapu* and deal with wider issues, within the family they take complete responsibility for any restorative measures that need to be taken for *Baby*. As Pistacchi writes: 'Baby's pain [is] Kura's pain, Te Paania's pain, and Mahaki's pain. She is part of them; her loss of eyes is a tragedy that gouges the

³⁵ From the Māori Dictionary Online entry on *utu*: '2. (noun) revenge, cost, price, wage, fee, payment, salary, reciprocity - an important concept concerned with the maintenance of balance and harmony in relationships between individuals and groups and order within Māori society, whether through gift exchange or as a result of hostilities between groups. It is closely linked to *mana* and includes reciprocation of kind deeds as well as revenge. While particular actions required a response, it was not necessary to apply *utu* immediately. The general principles that underlie *utu* are the obligations that exist between individuals and groups. If social relations are disturbed, *utu* is a means of restoring balance... Any deleterious external influence could weaken the psychological state of the individual or group, but *utu* could reassert control over the influences and restore self-esteem and social standing.'

light from all of their lives. This is perhaps why Grace's novel turns out to be more the story of the whānau's healing and recovery from Baby's mutilation than a story about Baby herself ("Revealing" 114). In this way, the novel suggests that while colonisation is imposed from the outside, and policies that continue the inequities of colonial impact must be dealt with in a fair and public way, once these inequities have been internalised, it is up to the individual and the whānau to take responsibility for their personal decolonisation and any restoration. Therefore, we witness Gran Kura's decision to unbind her stories and speak *te reo* only, we see Te Paania decide that she cannot let Baby go until she gives her her birthright, and we watch Tawera take on the huge responsibility for being his sister's eyes, despite his innocence in what has gone before.

For Grace, true empowerment over the internalised shame of colonisation comes from claiming personal agency over personal stories. Therefore, her characters do not seek justice for Baby through disciplinary action against the hospital. By claiming responsibility for their own healing it truly becomes theirs. Baby is not an active agent in this. She simply incites this action in others. She is a catalyst figure, constantly requiring recognition of her existence. However, towards the conclusion of her story, something shifts. Just after Gran Kura and Te Paania begin to notice 'it goes on too long and it goes too far' (239), Baby suddenly releases her grip. She knows she has had 'a family and a childhood' (251) and that restoration has been made. Going any further would create imbalance again. But convincing Tawera is not so easy, so she begins a gentle nudging to get him to let her go. (248) This is the most conscious moment in the book for Baby, where she is fully cognisant of what she really is and where she really belongs.

So just as much as Baby and her life-death represent what was taken via the process of colonisation, she also represents a path for reconciliation and restoration. Childhood, family, innocence, learning, vision, understanding, protection, culture, home – these are the things Baby lost and these are the things the determination and love of her family restore to her, and in the process, themselves. In Grace's writing, the existence of characters like Baby disrupt conventional Western perspectives regarding, at the deepest level, the nature of reality, or cultural world view. In more obvious ways she represents historical crimes perpetuated against Māori, but rather than being a reinforcement of stereotypical blaming and victimisation, Baby is the catalyst for the family to actively participate in their own decolonisation and

liberation from the constrictions of the past. In this way Grace's characterisation of Baby represents multiple possibilities and poses alternative forms of response to colonisation.

As a lawyer, Mahaki represents a highly educated minority at the time the novel is set, and is constantly shown at the service of his people in attempts to regain land and cultural rights. The tasks Mahaki undertakes at the behest of his grandfather and hapū represent, as a parallel to Te Paania, contemporary ways of addressing historical problems. As a moderate, well-educated, young, gay Māori lawyer, who obviously has a strong sense of his people's rights but also the best way to work around or through the system, Mahaki already does not fit into any conventional box. For his hapū he represents Pākehā knowledge, and at times has to be careful not to appear as if he is too closely aligned to the Pākehā system:

It was at that point that Abe stood up and said, ' You sound just like a bloody lawyer. Talk, talk, talk. All talk. [...] Who's [sic] side are you on, anyway?'

Boot on the other foot. He, who was regarded as a stirrer round the courts, a pain in the backside among law authorities because of the work he did amongst his own people, and because he was constantly holding the Treaty of Waitangi under establishment noses, was now getting rubbished by his own relations. (166-7)

For Pākehā, Mahaki does not fit stereotypes or preconceptions of what Māori should be, except as a stirrer. He does not fit either world's expectations, and therefore straddles both, much like Te Paania, thus giving life to the new archetype of Māori who are comfortable and adept with both cultures³⁶. By his very existence, and by his actions, Mahaki presents alternative ways of approaching what have traditionally been divisive issues.

There are two notable aspects to the way Mahaki is presented in the novel. He does not appear very often until almost half-way through the book, and he is narrated in third person, rather than first like the other narrators. This different approach to Mahaki seems to cement him as an observer and explainer of events that happen outside the inner circle of whānau. He has a complicated task: connecting the wider events and themes like bio-piracy and land rights, to intimate family events like the mutilation of Baby and looking after Tawera. As he grieves for Baby, Mahaki finds

³⁶ For the most part, Mahaki does display self-doubts in both realms, owing to the difficulties of satisfying the needs of his hapū while manipulating Western systems of communication, justice and governance.

he has to put away his work: ‘Hadn’t been able to face the stuff – body parts, genes, buying and selling and theft. He’d felt as though he was looking at two containers full of pages on which the story of their own disfigured baby was being told.’ (121) But he also provides a commentary, an analysis of the forces at work:

It was as though they were not quite people, and therefore their lives didn’t matter, as if they were not capable of suffering, had no right to suffer, no cause to feel distressed.

There was human error that was part of being human, but there were attitudes that he could only think of as being less than human.

And there you were – each group seeing the other as having something missing from being human. (122)

As an intellectually and politically active character, Mahaki is often given the task of making these wider-ranging philosophical and political observations. He operates astutely between two worlds, juggling the necessities of both. As Grace says: ‘In Maoridom there are plenty of characters like [...] Mahaki [...] People in a position of having to be bicultural for their own survival. So all Maori are bicultural to a certain degree’ (Calleja 115).

In many ways, the character Mahaki provides an expert witness to the events that occur during the protest and attempts to have Anapuke returned. He provides those contemporary aspects of the story, and, via the recital of stories from his grandfather, a connection to how the past continues to speak to contemporary Māori. He represents intellectual passion and drive – the modern warrior using the tools of the Pākehā³⁷ to fight for ancient rights. Like all the characters in *Baby No-Eyes*, he occupies an in-between space that defies simple stereotyping.

Conversely, Shane is emblematic of the damaged victims of unhealed colonisation. His name becomes a repeated refrain in the first part of the book, a mourning cry that

³⁷ Reminiscent of Apirana Ngata’s famous whakatauki:

E tipu, e rea mō ngā rā o tou ao
Ko ō ringa ki te rākau a te Pākehā
Hei ora mō tō tinana
Ko tō ngākau ki ngā taonga a ō tīpuna
Hei tikitiki mō tō mahunga
Ko tō wairua ki Te Atua
Nāna nei ngā mea katoa.

Grow up and thrive for the days destined to you
Your hands to the tools of the Pākehā to provide physical sustenance
Your heart to the treasures of your ancestors to provide a diadem for your brow
Your soul to God to whom all things belong

gains attention even though we don't know what happens to him yet. Like his daughter, Shane is also a catalyst for personal change in *Baby No-Eyes*, although his influence is via the pain he inflicts with his uncontrollable drinking and physical violence. Gran Kura describes the effect his behaviour has on her: 'If I had not been jolted by what Shane stepped up onto my verandah and said, the little ball inside me would not have cracked. Words from it would not have escaped into my throat, remaining there until the tide had been swept out and in' (15). Shane represents those who are left behind by the colonial process. Perhaps, if statistics are to be believed, Shane represents a too-high proportion of contemporary Māori. His anger centres around the dispossession of his birthright: a proper name, his language, his stories:

In the afternoon, out from under the drinking tree and up onto Grandmother Kura's verandah, wearing a pair of shorts but shirtless, came long-legged, grasshopper Shane, stumbling drunk. 'You old grannies are a load of shit praise the Lord,' he shouted to Gran Kura.

'Watch it Shane,' his brother said.

'They got my stuff, I want it.'

'Want a sock in the face more like.'

'Where's our stuff?'

'You're all too soft for it,' said Gran Kura.

'What stuff?' Niecy asked.

'Our names, our secrets, our stories...'

'Our stories could kill you,' Gran Kura said. (26)

Of course it is not the stories that kill Shane, but the lack of them. When Kura finally opens her mouth to tell her story, Shane is ill prepared to deal with what he learns. Alcohol and a lifetime of deprivation – 'How can I be Maori without... without... without what? Don't even know without what. Without what?' (27) – have rendered Shane incapable of processing the stories in a healthy way. After hearing how love for their children stopped up the mouths of his elders and caused them to keep secrets, Shane begins to sing a hymn, loudly and sarcastically. He therefore places some of the blame for what has been stolen from him squarely at the feet of Christianity. He then drives Te Paania wildly and drunkenly home, crashing their car, killing himself, and creating Baby as we come to know her. Shane both represents the worst of the things that occur in our families (violence, death) and also sets things in action for family healing to begin. We return, then, to the connotative associations described with reference to Baby: here is an opportunity to heal wrapped in tragedy, a challenge presented by a violent and damaging event.

As discussed above (pages 27-30), Mahaki and Dave represent a different kind of family, and the general acceptance of their relationship signifies what I consider to be a traditional approach to whānau transmitted to an urban setting. They represent a different and more open definition of masculinity and even the warrior archetype. Dave is a silent presence in *Baby No-Eyes*, the only character in the whānau other than Baby to have no narrative voice. Yet he is important as representative of the quiet background supporters in families: he works, supports the family, and is a constant and consistent source of nurturing for Tawera. In fact his faithfulness is rewarded near the conclusion of the book when Tawera says: ‘Nothing’s changed about Dave. We put on our music, we talk about everything, we clean the van, go to the movies if we want to. There’s time for all that. He warns me about life and looks after me... I know I’m fortunate to have something, someone, unchanged, even though I expect I myself will change.’ (284) Everyone else in the family is distracted from the domestic sphere by their important work. Dave, even in his relationship with Mahaki which is more harmonious and sustained than Te Paania’s relationships, represents stability. By signalling Dave’s importance in Tawera’s life, Grace suggests that his position is just as important as those who work in the community, and adds emphasis to the implicit suggestion that the homosexual relationship is just as sustaining and important for the whānau as a heterosexual marriage would be.

Viewed together, the characters that make up the central whānau unit present a diverse, multi-generational, complex picture of who Māori are. They represent alternatives from stereotypical understandings of Māori that dominate media and popular understandings of history. Character is central to Grace’s representation of the world – she invites the reader to experience history through the understandings and experiences of contemporary figures. By presenting these ‘ordinary’ people, Grace reveals anomalies, upsets expectations and opens up a discourse in which multiple forms of the expression of Indigeneity are possible.

White-men-born and the search for identity: *Benang*

I have argued that choice of subject matter in Patricia Grace’s work problematises history by offering alternative versions. I will argue the same of Kim Scott’s work,

but at this juncture it strikes me that the assumption that choice of subject matter itself is subversive in these works might need qualification. To begin with, there is an extensive historical and social context for this assumption, and a full exploration of this would be beyond the capacity of this thesis. However, it is necessary to allude again to the paucity of Indigenous writers in proportion to Caucasian Western writers who originate from the majority culture of their country. It is well-known and accepted that Indigenous peoples are over-represented in negative social statistics (jails, unemployment, ill-health) and under-represented in many areas of achievement (higher education and employment, wealth). And it is generally accepted that the origin of these problems is located in the colonial process. Lack of Western education and income pose particular challenges to the potential writer of English texts who is Indigenous, as a certain amount of both are pre-requisites to the inception of a writing life.

The outcome of this is that Indigenous stories are under-represented too. By producing the overwhelming majority of all texts, writers from the dominant culture maintain control over the stories and versions of history that are produced. I am not suggesting that contemporary 'white' writers are motivated by this domination or even consciously aware of their role in it. In fact, I'd like to think the majority would be happy if things were different. Sadly, it's an institutionalised dominance that finds its source in the violently proactive use of language and words that were employed alongside more physical acts of domination during active British colonial expansion. And this, of course, is where Kim Scott's *Benang* comes in. Before I address *Benang* directly, however, I should complete my original point. Writers from the dominant culture can often, with regard to the above issues, afford complacency. They may not choose to be complacent, and may be highly critical of the dynamic I'm attempting to describe, but I would assert they have that option. Indigenous writers do not. This is not to say that they all constantly write about the process and outcomes of colonisation, and the possibilities presented by their own cultural version of things, but it is quite difficult to avoid doing so when writing from an Indigenous position. And each novel, each story, each oral history, each counter-history, each contribution from outside of the dominant discourse subverts and problematises the dominant version of events.

I was able to put related questions to Kim Scott, in terms of urgency and motivation, at a recent writer's festival. He said 'I sometimes think enviously that it'd

be nice to just have the aesthetics or something. But that's the way it is.' It is almost as if, and I hope I'm not overreaching here, there really isn't any other option but to write as he does:

[The] urgency is that deep-felt sort of urgency to strengthen up one's connection to our pre-colonial heritage and carry it forward in ways that can be inclusive of the now and of my mixed cultural background [...] There are new ways of being and they're all about who I am now. They're all about identity. (Makereti "That Deadman Dance")

And I think part of my interest in writing in this sort of space is not so much to offer an alternative truth or a counter-truth to an existing story, but it's because what I'm being offered does not fit some sort of non-verbal sense of self. And so I feel the need to offer a different sort of story in which I seem to fit better [...] and to offer that to others. (Makereti "Social and Political")

In other words, Scott writes what he does because he does not see stories about people like him when he reads the fiction of Australia. He does not find his story mirrored back to him in his national literature, so he finds it necessary to write his own stories. One of these stories is *Benang*. At nearly 500 pages, it might be a kind of postmodern historical saga, though like *Baby No-Eyes* there is significant contemporary content. Like *Baby No-Eyes* too, this book does not follow a linear timeline, and circles back on itself frequently. It is also concerned with reclamation of identity through storytelling, and confronts the often violent actions of colonising forces. Unlike *Baby No-Eyes*, there is a singular point of view maintained throughout the novel – the 'I' of Harley, who relates all the stories of the other characters in a manner that slips and shimmers (a favoured word of Scott) between completely self-conscious narration and almost third person historical narration.

Perhaps the biggest difference from *Baby No-Eyes*, however, is the raw and painful confrontation of textual, physical and sexual violence in *Benang*. While Grace is certainly writing in very similar territory, her twentieth century Aotearoa does not contain quite the same level of overt exterminationist policies as Scott's twentieth century Western Australia, thus *Baby No-Eyes* (though sometimes confronting) seems a gentler book. Scott takes his cues from the writings of the real historical character, A. O. Neville, who promoted eugenicist policies in his role as Protector of the Aborigines 1915 – 1940. Just how Scott cleverly subverts and transforms these texts will be explored extensively in chapter two. *Benang* centres around Harley, the narrator, and his grandfather, Ernest Solomon Scat, a devotee of Neville's theories. Harley discovers that he is the result of his grandfather's plans to breed out the colour

from Harley's Nyoongar ancestors, that he is, in fact, Ern's creation: the 'first white man born.' As the book progresses, Harley gradually comes to know the Nyoongar members of his family, his ancestors, and the kinds of lives they lived. At the same time he learns more of Ern's abhorrent history, and must come to terms with himself as a descendent of a man who perpetuated often painful and violent control over generations of his Nyoongar family. Harley moves from learning of his family history exclusively through Ern's papers, to becoming acquainted with their realities and histories by travelling the land and listening to his uncles' stories. Eventually he begins to know them through his own abilities, which include some otherworldly talents.

Neville's assimilationist ideas are not seen as extreme in an environment where shooting is seen as an acceptable way to deal with the Aboriginal population (494). This is one of the most chilling aspects of the book – the routine perpetuation of degradation and violence on the Nyoongar people, who are murdered, raped, used for labour and starved with impunity. In this environment, the suggestion that Aboriginal Australians be gently bred out of existence sounds like a kindness, though of course the practice would necessitate more rape and forced removals of children. At one time, the eugenicist and rapist Scat even gathers 'a reputation as something of a soft-hearted expert.' (114) By taking on the racism, assimilationist policies, and forced displacements that occurred in Australia at this time with such a quietly outraged voice, Scott writes a 'different sort of a story' and poses an alternative version of events, thus highlighting the anomalies and discontinuities in previous versions of local history.

By the end of the novel, the focus has shifted – Harley is still central, as narrator and protagonist, but the subject matter, the eye, and the heart of the novel have transferred just as Harley's understandings of his family history have changed. The story focuses more and more on the Nyoongar ancestor Fanny and her supposedly white husband, Sandy One. Harley's active effort to 're-write' his own family and cultural history is rewarded and reflected by the novel's movement towards a different centre of narrative and cultural power – the memories, voices and stories of his Nyoongar ancestors, rather than the cold black and white paper texts and photos collected by his white grandfather Ern.

Crucially, Scott makes language and the power of narrative one of the central subjects of the novel. In his own words:

Benang was very much a strong polemical reaction to all the existing histories that I'd read that were talking to some extent about who I was and what my history was. I wanted to use that very language and turn it back on itself. It's hard to do that in a way other than being polemical. And I was really cranky about the incredible arrogance, the enormous blind spots, and that that could be offered as a history of the place I live, and that that was all that was offered to me about who I might be – a success in those terms. Uplifted and elevated in the terms of ones political masters (Makereti "Social and Political"). Scott recognises that such subject matter is inevitably political, but he is more concerned with 'the possibilities of intimacy and enchantment and emotional engagement'. Perhaps these objectives are more evident on the surface of Scott's most recent novel, *That Deadman Dance* (2010), which takes us back even further to Noongar³⁸ interactions with the first white newcomers to Western Australia. Much has been said about the positivity and possibilities presented by *That Deadman Dance*, and while not following this tangent too far, I can't help but see the two books as almost inversions of each other. *Benang* is harsh and confronting on the face of things, though a certain amount of intimacy and emotional engagement is created by the author's constant undermining of dominant discourse with dark irony, humour and the fantastic. *That Deadman Dance* contains a more pleasant world to be immersed in and enchanted by – the landscape and culture of Noongar country just as white people are first becoming established. At this point in history, Noongar are a free and proud people, who the white newcomers sometimes approach for assistance and advice. These ancestral antecedents enthusiastically explore the new culture that has reached their shores, and yet, the entire historical world that *Benang* recreates is like a shadow in the foreground of their lives. The reader knows what will happen to them, and to read the book without some sense of foreboding and injustice would be to read the novel blind.

One of Scott's objectives is to create between writer and reader 'that special relationship, the complexity of it,' which:

[...] can't be reduced to politics or a power game. And also through doing that you can provoke people to decide their own position politically, or to go and find out more about the history of a certain situation [...] To unpack and sort that kind of energy, and that motivation, not knowing where you'd end up, or who you might or might not appease, that's what interests me. (Makereti

³⁸ In *Benang*, Scott uses the spelling Nyoongar, and in *Deadman Dance* he uses the spelling Noongar. I have tried to follow the evolution of this spelling by using Nyoongar when referring to *Benang* and Noongar for more contemporary references. As is noted in the final pages of *Benang*, there are many ways to express these identities.

“Social and Political”)

This, then, can be seen as underlying the subject matter of the stories he tells, a very deliberate representation of ‘alternative’ histories and content in order to provoke readers to recognise inconsistencies in previous accounts or singular perspectives. Books like *Benang* are disquieting and uncomfortable to read for a reason. Scott incites readers to reconsider their own knowledge and experience of both history and the ‘other’ (as mentioned in the above interview, he is aware that the majority of his readers will not be Noongar). But he also wants to engage the reader in a complex interaction that is non-didactic, that is, that does not tell them what to think.

Both *Baby No-Eyes and Benang* perform the function of problematising history that has been described by Hutcheon, Donaldson and others as a feature of historiographic metafiction. By posing alternative versions of history, the novels immediately provoke the question ‘alternative to what?’ and draw forth further questions regarding where and how histories are created, and who controls production or perpetuation of dominant versions of history. In fact, simply by presenting alternative content, these novels highlight that histories are manufactured. That is, they are created in a subjective manner, with a certain collection of beliefs and mores attached to them. I am not claiming that this is anything new to the field of history, but gesturing to the contribution fiction can make to a more general understanding that history, like fiction, is constructed. This opens up the possibility for multiple versions, multiple stories, and plural understandings of history. In particular, fiction offers Indigenous writers like Grace and Scott the opportunity and freedom to write complex stories that grasp a sense of wider issues without entering debates around historical ‘facts’.

TWO

REPRESENTING HISTORY

The act of writing fiction about history can make claims about history and/or call into question the entire field of representation. If we define certain books as metafictional historiography, we immediately suggest that they call into question not only the production of history itself, but also their own modes and methods of telling stories about history. Sometimes this questioning is gentle, and tucked quietly between the pages of riveting narrative. Sometimes this questioning is overt, direct, and forms the basis of the narrative itself.

Written on the Hand: Written on the Land - *Benang*

'Language after all is a magic construct,' Mudrooroo wrote. 'And to try and gain truth from it is a dubious undertaking.' (Guest 126)

If there is one characteristic which is immediately and continuously evident in *Benang*, it is the concern with language and communication. Three epigraphs appear on the first page of the novel, indicating the subject matter it will concern itself with. Quotations then appear regularly throughout the text, and are integrated into it via characters and circumstances. These are referenced by Scott in detail in the acknowledgements. Added to this, from the moment we encounter *Benang*'s narrator, Harley, he is at pains to point out the difficulties and anxieties he has with regard to communicating his story: 'it is far, far easier for me to sing than write, because this language troubles me [...]' (8). As Harley sets out his intention to write 'a simple family history', his narrative is already imbued with the smell of decay, a corpse both historically literal and contemporarily metaphorical: 'when I began this project, I too breathed in the scent of something discarded, something cast away and let drift and

only now washed up. It was the smell of anxiety, of anger and betrayal' (9). It could also be, he says, the smell of his grandfather.

This is fiction as family history, and/or vice versa. One senses that Harley's anxieties mimic the author's anxieties, and Scott's 2005 family memoir, *Kayang and Me*, confirms that the subject matter of the novel in some way mimics Scott's own family history. Which is not to claim any sort of historical veracity for *Benang*. It is a novel, and as such it allows Scott to do something different than a book like *Kayang and Me* – a '[not so] simple family history' – can do. Just to be sure that we make no mistakes about this, Scott gives his narrator a personal characteristic that emphasises the fictionality of the book – he gives Harley the propensity to float. But this is more than a mere trick to make the reader question the story and wonder. As he bequeaths Harley this strange little characteristic, Scott also has a laugh at the expense of A. O. Neville, whose quote leads the second chapter: 'As I see it, what we have to do is uplift and elevate these people to our own plane...' (11). That is what Scott does to his narrator, literally. Uplifts and elevates him. And in this ironic, darkly humorous moment the author reveals his hand.

Benang is dense with techniques that bring attention to and question its own literary operations: continuous intertextuality, both set apart in quotations and integrated within the narrative; sharp irony and humour that continuously plays on the language used by Neville and his contemporaries; a self-conscious, floating narrator. Later the very nature of writing and storying is called into question: flesh becomes the narrator's medium to write on; land becomes the source and inspiration for stories told orally rather than written; one after another the white grandfathers of the tale lose their ability to speak. And yet Harley continues to write, transforming both his grandfather's research and his uncles' stories into an integrated, albeit complex and conflicted, narrative of identity. He stories himself into being. Not as his grandfather's creation or a weightless misfit, but as someone who is connected to his ancestral past and place and multifaceted present.

In this chapter I will show how Scott plays out a kind of purposeful self-conscious/self-reflexive uncertainty through the character of Harley, at the same time engaging dark, ironic, humorous language play that both interrogates and undermines the colonial texts that are the catalysts for much of the novel's action. Slater states that 'Scott has composed an uncertain narrator to portray the intersubjectivity and intertextuality of the self and to limit imaginative desire' ("Uncertainty" 149). But I

will argue that while displaying uncertainty outwardly, Harley actually moves towards a deep self assurance by turning (English) language in on itself. His acute sensitivity to, and ability to transform, the language of people like Neville and his grandfather gives the text an underlying certainty. As the author proceeds to eviscerate the brutal, ignorant theories and proclamations of the eugenicist assimilationists, the reader becomes witness to a very powerful re-interpretation of Western Australia's history. Slater argues that despite Harley's indeterminate identity 'being initially self-alienating, his position as an "unhealthy" postcolonial subject is a weapon that can be deployed against colonial history and mythology, by unsettling the logic of white, western supremacy that continues to dominate our present.' ("Uncertainty" 150) This alienating, unsettling self-assurance comes from other types of texts too – those that are 'written' on the land, in song, in the voices of kin. This chapter will also look to those elements. The final feat of self-assurance – the ability to elevate, and control that gift, will be examined more closely in chapter three.

Self-consciousness / self-reflexivity

Abrams defines the self-conscious narrator as one who 'shatters any illusion that he or she is telling something that has actually happened by revealing to the reader that the narration is a work of fictional art, or by flaunting the discrepancies between its patent fictionality and the reality it seems to represent.' (168). The self-reflexive novel, he says, 'incorporates into its narration reference to the process of composing the fictional story itself.' (168) *Benang* does both of these things. Harley is a completely self-aware, self-conscious, self-reflexive family history writer, but he himself, and the family history he is constructing, are fictional inventions. The novel plays at this postmodern point of view, pretends at transparency and self-questioning, and though the sentiments expressed have a ring of authenticity about them, it is all a skilful fictional illusion with which to engage the reader's attention and own questions. The 'patent fictionality' of Harley's tendency to levitate contrasts the claims to true events and history that he makes. Indeed, his own questioning of that history and how little he knows also emphasises the impossibility of the narrative ever being the 'simple family history' that he claims to want to write. As Lisa Slater writes: 'the questions that Harley raises regarding what it is he is writing parallel Scott's concerns with problems of style, genre and frame.' ("Uncertainty" 147).

In *Benang*, the author engages all the aspects of historiographic metafiction for the same reasons readers of this form might expect: to disarm the reader, to interrogate and question the way history has traditionally been represented, to cause the reader to question even the operations of the novel at hand. The idea of an illusory distance between narrator and reader is disregarded early in the text: ‘I appreciate your concern, and that you remain with this shifty, snaking narrative. I am grateful; more grateful than you know, believe me.’ (22); ‘Tap tap. Fingers on the keyboard now. Long after then.’ (25) Not simply a witness to the novel, the reader is forced to become part of the story – the direct address, *I appreciate your concern*, is aimed at the reader, whoever that may be. The author sets up an emotional link to his audience: *I am grateful: more grateful than you know*. And the mechanics of the fiction are laid bare for the reader. Witness again the careful self-observation of the narrator: ‘Sergeant Hall was himself an unusual man, as I realised when I tried on his prose style.’ (71) And ‘So I must slide away a little, and come at it from some other way to build up momentum.’ (367) In these passages, the narrator shows the utterly powerful position he is in: ‘And now I pluck Ernest Solomon Scat from my memories of his insecure dotage, and plant him with his arm inserted in the filing system, up to the elbow in the documents of the very respectable Auber Neville’s office.’ (37) He can pluck his characters from one moment and place them in another on their timeline, and he can represent historical moments as he wishes, in the order he prefers. He can even represent a character, supposedly real, by writing in his ‘style’. And because he shows his hand in all of this, he unwraps the illusion that anything being represented is done so ‘objectively’ or in any way other than through the eye and hand of the teller of the tale. In this case, repetition of the point indicates just how the worlds of Aboriginal people, specifically Nyoongar in this instance, were constructed by whoever wielded the pens that defined them in written reports and law and propaganda.

Further, the narrator witnesses and illuminates the relationships between himself and his characters, living and dead: ‘Yes, my grandfather was a shrewd man. A rat-cunning mind, dear reader, mark my words. (And here I must interrupt myself to record my grandfather’s response to having such words read to him [...])’ (43). ‘Yet again I stood in a doorway, listening, trying to understand. Or rather, what I mean to say is that the child, my father, Tommy Scat, stood in the doorway and listened to Ern dealing with Topsy, his mother.’ (157). In his awareness of positioning, the narrator

also makes readers aware of their position as witnesses of him seeing his Grandfather's reaction to his writing, or him/his father watching his grandfather's ill-treatment of his grandmother. The reader's privilege to witness such events is emphasised by this careful production of layers of mediation, suggesting both the limitations offered by conventional histories, which don't produce quite such an intimate encounter with characters, and the multiple people and points of view any story must pass through to be conveyed.

Especially in the early chapters of *Benang*, the narrator constantly reveals and questions the literary operations of his text. As Slater notes:

He indicates that the stories he has to tell cannot be told within established writing styles [...] Scott suggests that it is impossible to write in a unified and coherent style and still generate a narrative that is inclusive of the plurality of perspectives of the historical players. A closed and certain composition endeavours to deny the multiplicity of voices, the plurality of relations, and the open-ended present (Bakhtin 7). That is, Scott's text exposes the vulnerabilities, uncertainties and fluidity of subjectivity. ("Uncertainty" 153)

But Scott offers something further than unanswered questions and deconstruction of what we think we know. He offers a different tone than Patricia Grace's gentle questioning, takes a slightly different route than her espousing of a distinctly Māori world view through her characters. He engages an astute and cutting irony that informs almost everything in the novel. And this irony suggests a very knowing author – one who is absolutely sure of where he stands in relation to the material he has his narrator rifle through and rewrite. 'Of course it is impossible to completely retrace the process. A hundred years is a hundred years...' writes Harley, 'Following my grandfather's dictum, as with such an inheritance I am bound to, I will provide documents where I can. Let me assure you that I have been diligent.' (28) When he mentions this inheritance he is bound to, his assurance of diligence, his grandfather's dictum, the reader can almost hear the distaste in his voice – he'll provide the documents diligently, but not in the way his grandfather intended at all. I offer separate subtitles below to order information, but as we shall see, the ironic undercurrent cannot be separated from the many different parts that comprise the mechanics of *Benang*. In particular, Scott's attention to the archives, that is, the intertextual elements of the novel, are a continual source of ironic and dark humour.

Refusing/Re-using the Archives

When I write like this – of railways, and fences, and of extensive pages of notes – I give a nod to my grandfather; to his lines and his discipline, to his schemes and his rigour. And I further acknowledge, and nod to, the demands of Historical Fiction. And I nod with the resentment which those I will call my people felt, still feel. Nod, nod, nod.

I hope you are not falling asleep. (323)

As we approach the heart of the book, the narrative maintains its immersion in the historical story of Harley's ancestors for longer and longer periods, only occasionally returning to the present as he travels with his uncles and grandfather. But Scott doesn't allow reticence for long – he does not allow the constructed nature of what he is doing to go unnoticed. In fact, he emphatically questions the operations of historical fiction, while producing a document that could be defined as such. The above passage displays both his deep scepticism of the form and his acknowledgement that it is the form most useful to him in telling his story. In this passage the reader can imagine the author surrounded by his own stacks of documents, giving a nod to the irony of the situation. While enjoying the joke (he carries his nodding throughout the chapter as a kind of internal jest) Scott does not let himself off lightly. 'I hope you are not falling asleep', Harley says, then follows with a paragraph that is interrupted continuously by Ern's bracketed snoring.

As Attewell notes, Harley compulsively cites texts. They have an ambivalent role for him, being both the source of information and the sources of control and deception:

Still, if Harley's narrative is an attempt to "repopulate his family history," Harley must come to terms with the fact that "my family, at the end of which I dangled, learnt to read and write very early on" (425) In *Benang*, writing – and here I'm thinking both of the writing Harley reads and of the writing he produces – is a medium through which to reconnect with family, to reunite community [however...] reading engenders a closeness that is not always pleasant, and often overwhelming. (5)

Archives and texts, real and imagined, are used or refused by Scott in several different ways: to tell the story; to examine the past, and expose characters' historical actions; to reveal how language was used to control Nyoongar; to be deconstructed in order that new space is opened up for Nyoongar-centred definitions of self. In essence, it is necessary to take these texts apart as Scott says, 'to foreground and expose that sort of language – to show the psyche behind writing like that' (Makereti "That Deadman

Dance”) Sometimes the most effective way to do this is simply to show the documents in near-original format, sometimes to display reconstructed correspondence between governing agents, sometimes to apply ironic, sarcastic or even enraged comment (though this last is rare). Slater captures Scott’s methods:

Scott ensnares Neville and his contemporaries in the traps they set for Indigenous people. By inserting A.O. Neville into his novel, Scott is not only introducing the readers to a key historical figure in the abuse of Nyoongar people, he is also mimicking Neville’s colonial discursive strategy of catching and containing Indigenous people – committing them to paper and reducing them to part of a textual economy in which the complexity of their lives goes unacknowledged. Scott assimilates the real A.O. Neville’s texts into his novel and deploys them for his own intentions. (“Histories” 56-7)

This textual game is both a form of ‘talking back’ and reclaiming power from the colonists. I do not think this is all that Scott does – his fiction goes much further as I will discuss in chapter three – but in this instance he is very much involved in a textual game of restoration. There is a wry sense of getting his own back on colonists like Neville, if only because he can, and because it’s entertaining, and because it shows how easy it is to manipulate words in a way that define people very narrowly.

There are several chapters in *Benang* that consist only of quoted or reconstructed letters, and some that contain extensive quoted correspondence: ‘what reason’ (62), ‘ern to close’ (103), which contains letters referring to Fanny, or Dinah, and how the authorities decide the fate of her and her children, and ‘to the chief protector of aborigines’ (227), which consists of another letter about Dinah concerning her healthcare when she almost died. The fates of Kathleen, Jack and Harriette are determined by letters that make up the entirety of ‘post marked kathleen’ (334), ‘and salmon fishing too’ (360), and ‘police report’ (377), respectively. Cumulatively, these chapters emphasise the extent to which the lives of Aboriginal people were controlled by police, courts, and the ‘Protector of Aborigines’ (the built-in irony of that job title is perhaps greater than even a fiction writer could attempt). Harriette’s entire life is reduced to a short police report which is mainly concerned with how much white blood she has and whether she can remain in town since her white husband is dead. The insinuation is that her grandson and her land could be taken from her. Each of the other chapters demonstrates the extent to which each individual is judged, and placed, according to how well they can assimilate into white society.

Dates, language, and official titles encourage readers to interpret these documents as, to some extent, true. That is, even if they are fictional, the letters that make up these chapters are presented as imitations of the kinds of letters that would have been written. Indeed, at least one of the chapters (concerning Kathleen) is entirely composed from ‘internal correspondence of the then Aborigines Department, and particularly A O Neville’s correspondence with the first superintendent of Carrolup Native Settlement, Mr Fryer.’ (497). Scott’s extensive acknowledgements set out exactly how many texts have been quoted and where. The wide range of quotes from actual documents encourages the reader to believe the imitation texts have a strong basis in similar documents. This is not to suggest that Scott is claiming that what he presents is anything other than one fictional representation of events in a specific fictional family. He makes truth claims and interrogates the entire process at the same time (as we have seen in the quote which began this section). Scott seems to be saying he needs the reader to see for themselves the texts he reveals, but also to remember he is using the same tricks and tools as people like A O Neville to expose this information. As Slater asserts, ‘Scott suggests that language does not reflect but creates the world’ (“Uncertainty” 157)

When Scott quotes directly, or imitates similar documentation, he rarely needs to comment further. The point of view and inhumane language are aberrations to any contemporary eye. For example, this ‘[...] from a speech A O Neville made at Parliament House, Canberra, in 1937 (497)’:

Our policy is to send them out into the white community, and if the girl comes back pregnant our rule is to keep her for two years. The child is then taken away from the mother and sometimes never sees her again. Thus these children grow up as whites, knowing nothing of their environment. At the expiration of the period of two years the mother goes back into service. So that it doesn’t really matter if she has half a dozen children. (157)

Thus the world created is one where Indigenous Australians are treated like farm animals to be bred and their offspring taken at the first opportunity. Nowhere in this passage is there an indication that the narrator is aware that any feeling is warranted about the action suggested. The inhumanity is most shocking in the phrase: ‘so that it doesn’t really matter...’ And these words are not Scott’s, they are taken from a parliamentary speech. Scott does not, however, rely on these texts to convey the whole story. In order to create the kind of intimacy with the material he desires the

reader to experience, he demonstrates the policy 'in action' – in the chapter that follows Tommy witnesses Ern impregnating servant girls with impunity.

Scott does not condemn all the archives he draws from completely. Even when he takes issue with a text or document, he also allows for the text to transcend its original use. He acknowledges texts as sources of information for which there may be no other information left. At one point, he describes his ancestors' wedding certificates:

Just the two certificates which, almost a century later, I studied so carefully, again and again, before letting them fall to where many other leaves lay. I sank into all that paper, and it rustled like snake skins, like cicada shells, like the feathers and parchment wings of long dead things. I thought of all those the papers named, and of how little the ink could tell (347).

There is an ambivalence expressed in Harley's relationship with his grandfather's archives and the words he must use to excavate his understanding of where he comes from. He appears to reject them, at the same time employing quite beautiful language and imagery to investigate their properties. In the end it may not be obliteration of the texts, but their transformation that he seeks: 'And it was there, in a dry and hostile environment, in that litter of paper, cards, files and photographs that I began to settle and make myself substantial. A sterile landscape, but I have grown from that fraction of life which fell' (28). His grandfather sexually abuses him, which becomes a symbolic insemination when he relates it to his project of writing family history from his grandfather's archives: 'My births took longer, were different; not something he could discard and forget. I gave birth to all these words; these boasts. Grandfather, they spew you out. Me and you both, transformed too' (159). Harley's submersion in all those unsettling, disturbing archives is important in other ways. 'By conceiving of an uncertain narrator, Scott suggests that one can author their world, but that their text is always incomplete and entangled in a plurality of relations.' (Slater, "Uncertainty" 151)

Scott also interrogates the language his predecessors used, relating their choice of words to their world view:

Starr's customers had words; *darkness, shadow, savage* ... and they made sharper ones, harmless to their own ears. *Boong. Coon. Nigger*. Just the launching of them gave satisfaction, inflicted pain [...]

Once you shared this tongue, you could taste it. Evolution. Light out of darkness. Pyramids and pinnacles. With such a language, it is hard not to accept such concepts. (312)

Scott links the racist language to a certain way of evolutionary thinking – the belief that all things including humanity move from a state of simplicity to sophistication (as defined in European terms). Such theories implicitly place Indigenous Australians at the bottom of human evolution, an idea that has long been popular in anthropology but is deeply Eurocentric. Scott doesn't attack this idea directly but plays with the words themselves, recognises their seductiveness, and how slang insults and biased adjectives go hand in hand with things that are considered elements of 'high' culture or science. Witness the pseudo-science in this next passage – to attack it straight on would only give weight to the 'mathematical' words – so Scott takes another route to undermine their power. He quietly satirises the notion of an equation:

Captions to the photographs; full-blood, half-caste (first cross), quadroon, octoroon. There was a page of various fractions, possible permutations growing more and more convoluted. Of course, in the language of such mathematics it is simple; from the whole to the partial and back again. This much was clear; I was a fraction of what I might have been. (26)

Scott's dark humour punctuates this last sentence, demonstrating that in such a harsh world, defined by straight, constricting lines that can separate a person from their family simply on the basis of shades of skin and meaning, taking the piss might be one of the few responses available to undermine oppressive history and reinstate personal and cultural strength. Is this humour cultural? Perhaps that is the subject for a different thesis³⁹, but in terms of this book, the author continually marries his outrage with mockery of the systems and individuals that enforce oppression. There is a moment where Sandy Two openly and cheekily makes fun of Constable Hall by sending his handwriting for analysis, the results of which evidently suggest Sandy to be destined for greater things than the white policeman (248). This trick centres around writing and reading – another implicit attack on the form the novel takes.

There are other places where the novel directly examines the effects and significance of reading and writing. In one scene, Harley likens reading to looking in 'my grandfather's various mirrors', trying to see what others see because his people are defined by the words of others. (158) In another scene, Chatalong writes the word 'black' in white chalk on a black board, 'It looked like nothing, and a lie.' (306) He then smudges the words by wiping them, struggling to come to terms with the insidious nature of language, specifically written English. Fanny works close by, and:

³⁹ Humour, clowning, satire, trickster figures are present in many Indigenous narratives. Sherman Alexie's writing comes to mind as a good example.

‘She moved, solid and secure, and although the pale clothing swayed and danced around her, she stayed in her place. Chatalong rubbed at the letters until they were completely gone.’ (306) Chatalong observes that his grandmother has a realness to her, an unbreakable connection to place, that words cannot offer.

The act of writing is investigated again and again in the *Benang*. In some cases, the deceit of words is revealed via scenes in which one character uses the hand of an older, disabled character to write to authorities, or simply to emphasise their helplessness:

‘[...] Sandy One, paralysed and probably imbecilic – wrote Fanny’s letters for her, for all of them. It reminded me of my own actions, with Sandy One in my grandfather’s place, and Jack Chatalong in mine. But there was nothing noble or dignified in what I wrote, in my grandfather’s hand, as it were [...]

Ern Solomon Scat:

has failed

fucks chooks

fucks his children

fucked all our family before him. (304)

The hand being used is that of the white grandfather, while the person controlling the hand is Nyoongar. Paradoxically, the act symbolically recalls how Aboriginal people and culture have been misrepresented – their story controlled by white hands. Scott returns power to the Aboriginal characters: they take control of the white hand, and while they still need that hand in order to access the powers it controls, they are the ones directing it. Attewell proposes that: ‘the scene of ghostwriting is also a scene of extraordinary (physical) intimacy, in which agency isn’t so much dispersed as muddled, contested, fused, shared.’ (24) A reclamation is implicit in these scenes, but it isn’t a simple return to the way things were or should have been. The fusion suggested by Attewell means new forms are represented, combining the contested agency of both peoples.

‘Native Cunning’⁴⁰

Despite the richness of all these examples of authorial self-reflexivity, it is the humour and ironic word play that are most prominent in terms of promoting the narrator’s perspective. A O Neville’s epigraph about uplifting and elevating Aboriginal people begins chapter two – ‘the first white man born’ – and from there

⁴⁰ *Benang* 14

Scott is relentless in his scathing attention to the idea. As Ern suffers his stroke, after the true nature of his ‘investigations’ have been revealed, we learn that Harley:

picked [his] way among the sprawling books, softly slowly stepped through the rustling pages, so sharp-edged and so pale.

Uplift a despised race.

‘Well, old man, fuck me white.’ (27)

Which, of course, Ern has attempted to do with generations of Harley’s family. After this, any mention of uplifting and elevating can be treated as suspicious: ‘Ern considered the yard from his vantage point as a newly elevated and self-employed carpenter.’ (52); ‘They spoke of breeding and uplifting. These two hairy angels [...] scratching their groins. Belching. Drinking Beer’ (75) Ern’s sexually abusive behaviour is a constant thread in the novel, and is closely connected to his pseudo-scientific eugenicist interests: ‘whatever rationalisations Ern played with, the truth is that his loins were tingling, and – especially when alone in the evenings – he played with more than computations’ (76). I would argue that the disturbing lack of agency that women and children display when confronted with his predatory nature is purposeful in order to highlight the disturbing reality of sexual abuse endured by that community. However, Scott doesn’t allow Ern to leave the narrative unscathed. It is the English language, the novel suggests, that gave people like Ern the authority to perpetuate their cruelty. And it is the English language that Scott and Harley use to diminish his power: ‘This was the beginning of Ern’s entry into our family, the first of many entries, I might say’ (42). Just as the abuse of Nyoongar throughout the novel (and by implication, throughout recent history) is relentless, so too is Scott’s ironic undermining, sarcasm and mockery of Ern and his counterparts’ actions and motives.

In the passage below, symbolism contributes to the word play, just as it does when Harley begins to dismantle the house⁴¹:

Granddad wrote: *Cut down the tree. Burn it, dig out its roots.* He might also have written: *Displace, disperse, dismiss...* My friends, you recognise the language [...I was] pleased to see his reaction when I carried him outside, and he realised I had trimmed only those limbs which could be seen from the window, and left others intact. The tree still lived; it would grow again. (108)

Thus, Scott ties the language Ern uses in his instructions for the tree to the language he uses around eradicating Harley’s people. But this becomes an opportunity for a joke on Ern – Harley never misses the chance to turn his words back on him, in the

⁴¹ For more on this, see chapter three, pages 94-95.

process reclaiming some dignity for himself: 'The tree still lived; it would grow again' is a powerful statement of revitalisation.

Scott demonstrates thoroughly, by several different channels, the shaky ground we are on if we don't examine and deconstruct the colonial texts that have, in the past, made up the history of Australia, or by extension, any colonial nation. Sometimes the narrative takes on older Western traditions that celebrate whiteness, while still managing to cast a cynical eye on the warped relationship instigated by Ern:

The mirror, that mirror mirror...

Who's the fairest of them all? Well, it was me. Obviously. Though my father, Tommy, was fair also. Ern discarded all the others. And only he and I remained to see, with appropriate rigour, his experiment through to the end (158).

In the quotes I have isolated above, Scott casts a critical eye on the whole of Western thought and scholarship: evolution, science, mathematics, literature (fairy tale) – he is questioning an entire world view. This is not to say that this world view is wrong, but to point out that it shouldn't be taken for granted and enforced as right, particularly when it is used to subjugate another people with a different world view. Scott's ironic undermining of the archives and texts and theories of A O Neville and his contemporaries suggests that although Harley is unsure of his own cultural identity and place, he is absolutely sure how he feels about his grandfather's philosophy and methods. Slater contends:

Scott's textual strategy reveals that his counterhistory is not dictated by Western logic, but rather he gains authority from a (continuing) world that is beyond colonial reason.

In *Benang*, Scott forces the monologue of eugenicist discourse to answer to, and enter into dialogue with, Indigenous people [...] Scott's appropriation and annexation of colonial records into his textual topography exposes their genocidal and racist agenda. His speech is concealed behind and within the plurality of this multi-voiced text. ("Histories" 52)

By dismantling his grandfather's archives, literally and figuratively, Harley makes room for a different definition of self. He in fact demonstrates authorial certainty and a definite point of view around how correct the documented history is, and therefore moves toward, as I will show later, a recovery and re-creation of family history and cultural identity.

In his thesis 'Pioneer or Invader? Situational Metafiction in the Settler Nations', Mark Anderson discusses fiction that goes beyond Hutcheon's definition of

historiographic metafiction, because ‘Inserting ideology into historiographic metafiction is a postmodern move unanticipated by Hutcheon’s theory.’ (29):

Hutcheon writes that “historiographic metafiction is not ‘ideological novels’... they do not ‘seek, through the vehicle of fiction, to persuade their readers of the correctness of a particular way of interpreting the world.’ Instead they make their readers question their own (and by implication others’) interpretations” (Poetics 180). Such an overstatement represents the crux of my argument with Hutcheon [...] (30)

All of the novels he studied, including *Benang*, Anderson continues, do seek to persuade the reader of a certain point of view, in contrast to Hutcheon’s statement. As explored in this thesis, *Benang* does do all the things Hutcheon’s theory suggests, but does not stop at questioning ‘a particular way of interpreting the world’. Indigenous fictions, I suggest, also set about imagining new ways of incorporating pre and post colonial history and formulating new understandings of Indigeneity, as will be explored in more depth in chapter three. Anderson goes on to promote Attwell’s theory of situational metafiction, which refers to each writers’ particular positional nationalism. What is important here is to note that ‘Hutcheon’s theory need not be abandoned, if it can admit to variations and moral/political bias (what I will call positionality) in some examples of her postmodern aesthetic.’ (31) To put it another way, Indigenous writing as exemplified by *Baby No-Eyes and Benang* is not just postmodern but postcolonial too – not just calling history and writing into question but providing alternative, distinctly Indigenous-centred, models. With regard to Anderson and Attwell’s definition of situational metafiction and Hutcheon’s definition of historiographic metafiction, it may be useful to consider Indigenous historiographic metafiction to be a separate, yet related, type of writing that makes the very urgent concerns of different Indigenous communities its subject.

Written on the Skin

Briefly, before moving on to look at how written text, once dismantled, becomes replaced by other kinds of texts, I will examine the way language is physically embodied in *Benang*, which I think is related to the other ways Scott dismantles language. In this novel, language is often physically wounding. The wounds of colonisation inflicted on Aboriginal people⁴² are figuratively mirrored by the disabled

⁴² In *Benang*, these physical wounds are graphically enacted: rape, disease, starvation and thirst, skin burning bleachings, beatings, binding, and shooting. Ultimately, in many cases, death. Mental and

bodies of the white grandfathers in the novel. Sandy One, Daniel and Ern all eventually succumb to incapacitation and muteness – and it is their ability to communicate that is the centre of their physical ailments⁴³. Whatever the symbolic reasons for their silencing, the prevalence of speech issues within this text reiterates the problematic nature of the colonial discourse by which these men founded their homes in Nyoongar territory. By extension this brings the attention of the reader again to the question of who speaks and how. Speaking, in the world of this novel, is not a gift that can be taken for granted. For example, just as he discovers and mines gold, Sandy notices ‘His words, his stories were going; now it was his tongue’ (272). Fanny’s peoples’ bones have been found in the same area as the gold mine, but Sandy has chosen to seek success on white terms rather than respect Nyoongar culture and human remains.

Eventually, all three white grandfathers⁴⁴ can barely move, and two of them must be carried and dressed and fed. They become completely dependent on their Nyoongar families, invalids who are carried from place to place, and/or fed and dressed. This physical encumbrance is also suggestive of the spiritual, psychological and emotional burden white settlers have imposed on Aboriginal people from their arrival, as well as the dysfunctional interdependence between groups that had already developed by this stage in history. However, in the case of Sandy One and Ern, a new understanding of place and association with memories is formed as they are taken on journeys throughout Nyoongar territory. The men are for the most part silent, but show emotion through tears or facial expressions of remorse, shame, guilt, or self-pity (possibly even love in the case of Sandy). Harley’s family continue to carry the men, as they always have – seemingly necessary burdens associated with a great deal of ambivalence, but treated with kindness they may or may not have earned.

Paul Newman (2005) suggests these men are silenced and crippled due to their public violation of the prohibition against miscegenation, whilst Slater suggests almost the opposite – that they are suffering because of their racism. Perhaps there is some truth in both theories, for these men all marry Aboriginal women and also act in

emotional wounds are more subtle but also represented – often revealed symbolically when Harley’s Nyoongar family look into mirrors.

⁴³ Sandy One has cancer of the tongue, while Daniel has cancer of the lip. Ern suffers a stroke, but does so at the precise moment he finds Harley examining his research – he falls paralysed and silent among his own papers.

⁴⁴ Sandy One is not entirely white, but is assumed to be so until the end of the novel. This indeterminacy of cultural identity undermines the racial subtext of white versus black or vice versa. It is not blood or skin colour, but the choices he makes that define Sandy’s ethnicity.

ways that perpetuate racial inequality. Scott further complicates his text by representing the complexity of the position of such characters. Newman makes a further, crucial observation, however. That ‘the more powerful aphasia is reserved for Ern Scat [...] This debilitation is an infliction necessary to ensure a witnessing role for Scat, a role otherwise unavailable to the figure whose ongoing denial of basic human rights locates him outside the reconciliation imperative.’ (92) Further, Anderson asserts, Ern as unwilling witness is a metaphor for white Australia.

For Harley, this vision of decrepitude is not enough for him to take pity on his grandfather. Ern’s crimes are too great. He ‘wanted to scar and shape him with my words because his had so disfigured me.’ (287) The form of torture he inflicts is uniquely relevant to this discussion:

It used to please me, when my grandfather and I lived in a crumbling house, to carve words into his skin. My blade drew letters with a fine white line, but in an instant all precision would be lost in gushing blood. I bandaged his wounds to conceal what I wrote and, bathing them, considered how they grew, how they altered and elaborated on what I intended. (286)

Eventually he pours ink and ash into the wounds to make them more permanent. One can’t help but see the author reflecting on his own work in this passage: how words take on a shape of their own in the writing of a novel. These passages are interesting for a number of reasons. First, Harley chooses language as one of the tools with which he will harm his grandfather. In a book that so thoroughly calls into question the interpretation and power of language, this further highlights the central concern of the novel. Second, as he bathes the wounds in salt water, they ‘grew, and in unforeseen ways. Letters I’d taken so much trouble with changed shape, and the words became hard to decipher’ (78). Finally, he plays with the wounds, the words he has carved. He is not content to leave them alone, but watches, fascinated as they ‘elaborated and altered what I intended’ (286). Written words cannot be trusted. They hurt, pollute, transform, take on meanings that weren’t intended, or mutate meanings that were intended. In other words, permanent manifestations of English language have insidious and uncontrollable properties. A novel like *Benang*, as a permanent manifestation of English language, also holds these properties and should be treated with caution.

However, there are also further meanings that can be applied to a passage so rich with symbolism. Newman posits that this action represents ‘the inability of words

(and actions) to be controlled [...] – the stroke and the mutilation – ensures [Ern] is no longer an individuated, unexamined or indivisible status.’ (93) A parallel is found in Quentin Tarantino’s postmodern film *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). In an historiographic metafictional rewriting of World War Two history, Jewish-American Nazi hunters carve swastikas into the foreheads of any Nazis they allow to go free. As well as indulging a revenge fantasy, this physical maiming with letters/symbols marks perpetrators of racial violence and forces them to be defined by their skin, just as they defined others. However, it is interesting to note that Harley at first marks his own skin with words, just as his father had tattooed himself, before moving on to mark his grandfather. His first attempts were to define himself with his grandfather’s language, but he soon shifts emphasis and turns the corrupted language back on its perpetrator.

A simple declaration that the words of people like A O Neville were ignorant, incorrect, or inhuman would not have been as effective as getting inside the language, as Scott has, in order to tear it down from the inside. The use of ironic undermining, satire and humour represents an indirect and more subtle response to the overwhelmingly racist texts – rather than going for the jugular, attacking head on, Scott chooses a more quiet, though nonetheless pointed, method of exposure:

You argue back within the parameters of the discourse this fella’s set up and how do I shape my emotional reaction to reading that. So *Benang* is a lot about: this is the language of our shared history, and about trying to foreground and expose that sort of language to show the psyche behind writing like that – a rationalisation of conquest and of power. *And trying to leak from behind the lines some other possibility or some other sense.*
(Makereti “That Deadman Dance”: my emphasis)

There is another reason this less direct approach is effective. For the reader it is easier to absorb something which does not operate in completely antagonistic terms. Irony and humour allow a discourse to remain open. In this case, in a book full of painful reminders of terrible historical events, making fun of the language of people like Neville allows all readers to participate. In Scott’s words: ‘You want to create a space in which us and them is less obvious – a world of words in which we might benefit [...] it’s trying to remodel a sense of self, a sense of community, and in doing that to remodel the world.’ (“Social and Political”)

As has been shown in this chapter, Scott’s narrator is at times painfully self-conscious, confused, and dismayed by the heritage bestowed upon him by his grandfather. At the same time he displays a ferocious rejection of his grandfather’s

archives, exemplified in his actions as well as his constant mockery of the language Ern has attempted to define his world with. As he rejects this version of events, he opens space for a new world view to enter his consciousness. At the same time, the many levels of self-awareness, mediation and exposure in the text allow the author to show the mechanics of this literary endeavour – to create a story which sidesteps claims of reality, yet still manages to indicate some intuitive, empathetic, and sometimes documented, truth.

Written on the Land

The land, not the book or the English language, becomes the site from which all life is generated. (Slater, "Histories" 52)

To be writing about landscape, especially in a post-colonial society like Australia, is to be writing about a whole range of other things as well—about perspective, cultural inheritance, ownership, appropriation, delusion, conflict, history. All valid ideas to be explored through fiction. And most importantly, once we learn how to read it, landscape is about people. It's a living record of past lives that has its own stories to tell. (Davison qtd. in Guest 60)

Having thoroughly dismantled and called into question the use, meaning, veracity and power of written English – what does Scott do? He has created a self-doubting narrator in a book that relies on the medium he so distrusts. It is just as Harley is performing another symbolic act – dismantling his grandfather's house – that his Nyoongar uncles arrive and change the game plan. Harley is in fully destructive mode until Jack and Will make him stop and start taking him and his grandfather on journeys. In his 2009 thesis, Anderson focuses extensively on the role of Jack, demonstrating that he is a key figure who 'represents a middle road. A balanced look at where his people have come from and where they have gone. He wants to be clear about the past, but feels revenge is not a way forward.' (263-4) Jack, with Will, propels Harley forward, questioning the worth of Ern's papers and offering an alternative route to knowledge. It is Jack that recognises Harley's floating as both a special gift and a manifestation of sickness – something that needs grounding and mediation. He prescribes a new form of education: 'Uncle Jack wanted to take us all driving. He wanted to show me some places. We could drive, and camp [...]' (*Benang* 164-5) They would follow a traditional run, shown to the white people by Nyoongar, and made into roads. 'We showed all these white folks' says Jack, and tells Harley how the knowledge was passed down through the women. For the first time, Harley

encounters an alternative, empowering vision of his Nyoongar female ancestor's stories. The uncles 'share stories of births and deaths, rapes and massacres, school and work, inspired by the country through which they move,' states Attewell, and:

[...] a knowledge of (family) history that emerges from out of the interactions of the three men with each other and with country, as if coded in the land itself. Arguably, then, the novel charts a turn away from the archive of texts and towards forms of knowing that are embodied, intersubjective, and place-based, such as the uncles' yarning or Harley's singing. (18)

'It disturbs my clumsy narrative even more, of course, this sudden and contemporary journey' Harley tells his readers (165). He is not content to let this shift pass unnoticed – it is important, because this is the moment that suggests that much of the narrative, even that which has already passed, is actually derived from these journeys. Scott also centralises the importance of oral storytelling to the rest of the novel: 'I listened to the story Uncle Jack told many times over, around the campfires and – later – the kitchen tables of people to whom he was slowly introducing me.' (304) Reclamation and reformation of identity begins on these journeys, though there is no return to a pristine culture. Rather, Harley's state of being is already problematised by colonisation: 'Oral tradition is an important part of Harley's and Jack's project of reclamation, it is not storytellers and didgeridoos around the fire but modern aboriginals telling stories – stories that are considered to be true.' (Anderson 272)

It is in travelling the land that both the uncles and Harley, and even old Ern, tune into the stories that are held there. This is signalled or foreshadowed early in the book: the smell that emanates from the town as Harley begins his research, the way Ern's arrival in Australia as a young man sets up resonances: 'and those resonances, admittedly diminishing all the time, were picked up by the railway and ran all the way to where a very last vibration rolled in the sand [...] but the land holds all things – even such trivial events as my grandfather's first footfall – from which we may later select, amplify, and consider the resonances.' (43). It is these resonances that are traced throughout the remainder of the book. Scott dismantles the written history while demonstrating Harley's continuing discovery of Nyoongar centred history – a history that is shared by his uncles around campfires as they take multiple journeys further and further into their territory. The chapter titled 'registering romance' demonstrates vividly the contrast between the two different world views, as Fanny and Sandy One travel the country on the way to register their child's birth. Ironically,

they undertake this journey in order to seek the protection of the written (white) word, but it is while travelling that Sandy comes to understand and love his wife, her land and culture. It is here that we come closest to something I imagine is an evocation of a pre-colonial Nyoongar point of view – the land is rich, abundant, and fertile. ‘Sandy thought of all the books he’d read, yet understood that it was people and fire had made this parkland’ (179). It is filled with different kinds of food, sweet tastes and softness. Most of all, it is Fanny’s territory, where she is active and powerful, and Sandy is passive and cared for: ‘She penetrated him with the golden-downed stalks and he sucked at the honey he tasted there’(180).

This story is not present in any of Ern’s research, in official texts or archives. In fact, there is a sense that this story may not have been completely told by the uncles either. As Guest explains: ‘the book is essentially about stories—about how Aboriginal history and mythology are intertwined and how these are embedded in the landscape: the landscape as keeper of the history’ (116). It is the land that is the text in this instance – Harley can access the facts or events from his uncle’s stories, but his closeness to the sensations of these moments is evidently drawn from other resonances, and from his ability to perceive:

Coming down, emerging, they looked out over the tops of great and ancient trees. Fanny and Sandy called to one another, their voices echoing, again, again. Many times. The child listened, eyes wide mouth open. And so the parents felt compelled to shout pleasant things at one another, because offering, because the voices repeated so.

As they may do still. If only I had the ears, the memory...
A tongue to speak. (182)

This is a very evocative moment, in which Scott signals an ancestral/spiritual connection to past events, an echo passed through the generations, or through the land. As Newman puts it, ‘Harley performs a narrative re-creation of his ancestors’ lives’ (86). Perhaps this is storytelling bolstered by imagination, but one senses in this moment that it doesn’t matter where the information comes from, only that the connection has been made – the ancestors, and their story, have been revived. However, Scott is not one to let us bask in this moment of comfort for long. Immediately following this scene, Ern brings Harley down by reminding him he doesn’t have the Nyoongar language, and that this means there are things he will never know. Ultimately, there is only so much that will ever be reclaimed from the past – the stories still represent an incomplete picture. While this reminder is bitter, it

is important in terms of avoiding the assumption that there is some sort of ‘authentic’ Nyoongar culture that Harley can now reclaim. There is only so much he can access, though this is important in terms of the events I will discuss in chapter three.

Scott demonstrates often how the land speaks, sometimes quite directly. Even those who are supposedly insensitive to such things hear it. Soon after Sandy One starts mining the land where Fanny’s ancestor’s bones are buried he asks: ‘But what made him think a land could be lonely? As if it felt, or thought, or dreamed. Where did such a thought come from?’ (272). This next passage evokes the land as written text with markings and lines:

there are in fact many paths; some only ever marked by feet, some which became wheel worn and linked water to water, others were traced by telegraph lines. All are linked by the very oldest of stories, although many of these have been broken by the laying down of lines of steel, or have been sealed with black tar [...] There are many trails. (356-7)

Scott represents the land as an entity that can teach the dispossessed even as they work to overlay it with modern structures. Tommy knows little of his people before he goes to work for the Main Roads Department, which:

took him along what we recognise as familiar paths, similar paths to the premier Man all those years ago, similar paths to those trodden forever, paths still there and clear. And even though he was breaking up the crust of the ground, and even though he was resealing it so that it might be travelled as quickly as possible, still it taught him. That place, and some of the men he worked with, taught him. The country taught him, even as it diminished under the exhortation that a million acres be cleared each year. (366)

Even Ern is forced to return to traditional land to try and save Topsy. These representations of the land as a powerful, teaching entity – a text – acknowledge Aboriginal relationships with place but do not overreach in terms of personifying or imbuing the land with mystical qualities. As Pablo Armellino notes:

By organizing the development of the story according to Harley’s spatial movement around his traditional land, Scott challenges white chronology and proves it to be just another fiction. Harley’s trips with his uncles are all planned around visits to the most significant places in the history of the family and thus allow the stories related to each site to flow back into the present (12).

The land holds, Scott suggests, the stories that successive generations of cultural use and recognition have bestowed upon it. Those with the ability recognise the signs: ‘Harley’s growing sense of belonging finds its roots in the locations where blood has

encrusted the land, where amniotic liquid has seeped into it, or where tears of desperation have been spilled' (Armellino 17). When a new culture arrives they superimpose their narratives over earlier stories, but still those resonances remain. The land is like a palimpsest, a text written and rewritten with generations of stories. If there is any certainty to be found, it is there. Scott suggests that the stories told around campfires and evoked by different physical sites are more real than those 'sealed in an envelope' – written in English on paper. In his words: 'Speaking from the heart, I tell you I am part of a much older story, one of a perpetual billowing from the sea, with its rhythm of return, return, and remain.' (495) It is from this relationship with the land and sea that Harley draws his sureness that the uncertainty incited by the written texts and English language can be transformed.

Though I have suggested in this chapter that Harley moves from uncertainty towards certainty, it is important to recognise that he is never, even at the end of the book, a completely healed and grounded being: 'Pale, burnt and shrivelled, I hover in the campfire smoke and sing as best I can.' (495) While the book measures a movement towards the restoration of cultural identity, as a 'postcolonial' subject, Harley still carries the pain he and his ancestors have endured. Says Slater, Scott 'refuses to appease his readers by offering them a healthy subject, a protagonist who has worked through his pain.' ("Uncertainty" 157) The rhythms of destruction and reconstruction literally and metaphorically shape the novel, but as Anderson suggests, in the end Scott claims a different history, rather than simply questioning 'the possibility of historical knowledge, as Hutcheon's theory would have [him] do' (16):

Ironically, Harley is using "ink" to reclaim the history obscured by ink. This certainly fits with a Hutcheonian "problematizing of historical knowledge," but the history that replaces the old one [...] is meant to have some historical weight. History is not "problematized" to the point where there are no solid referents, as it is within Hutcheon's theorized anti-totalizing ideology of historiographic metafiction. (271)

In fact, Harley reaches into the past as best he can, taking his cues from oral storytelling and the land, and even what he can gather from between the lines of the written record. As Anderson asserts, not all history is problematised, in fact, some of it is claimed as correct because 'There seems to be a need of some common denominator on which to build a new cultural identity from the scattered remains of a culture literally laid waste by colonization' (268). However, Scott, and Grace do not

rely entirely on these reclaimed histories for their protagonists' regeneration of cultural identity, as the next chapter will show.

Let's Tell Everything: *Baby No-Eyes*

The power of language to silence or rewrite cultural identity is never more evident than in the work of Māori writers... (Wevers 285)

Patricia Grace's work uses storytelling and addresses the importance of stories in important and innovative ways. I use the word innovative here to refer to her work in the context of Western literature, because in Māori terms I'd suggest her storytelling has recognisably traditional characteristics. Perhaps with respect to Māori culture, the innovation is that Grace writes in English and still manages to convey a Māori world view. Pistacchi presents a survey of the role of storytelling in Grace's work:

The importance of storytelling cannot be overstated in a review of Grace's fiction... In *Potiki*, Roimata says, "We needed just to live our lives, seek out our stories and share them with each other" (*Potiki* 38), and in *Cousins*, Makareta talks of the need for Maori to tell their stories because "our truth does not appear on pages of books unless it is there between the lines. Our truths need to be revealed." (*Cousins* 215). In all of these novels the Maori people gain strength and power from storytelling, and it is the reason, as Mark Williams has noted, that "the chief method Grace employs to dramatize the narrative of resistance is by way of storytelling... In relearning their old stories and combining them with the new stories the characters in the novel recreate a world in which story telling exists at the center of cultural life" (42).

These characteristics – seeking, retelling and creating stories as an act of resistance and source of strength – are key to the kaupapa of *Baby No-Eyes* surveyed in chapter one of this thesis. Every other subject or theme is addressed through the continual flow of stories from each character. Since this aspect of Grace's work has been recognised and well covered by other critics⁴⁵, I will not dwell on Grace's use of story in ways that have been covered in other work. It is worth noting, however, how the use of story and storytelling works in *Baby No-Eyes* both to bring attention to and question not just the story being told, but the impact of stories on identity.

Baby No-Eyes is not only a novel about the importance of telling stories, it is also about the impact of suppressing them. While all novels obviously contain a story or

⁴⁵ See, for example, Keown, Najid, Pistacchi, Ratheiser; in fact, most close observers of Grace's work have something to say on the topic

stories, Grace's work makes story itself the subject of her writing. In *Baby No-Eyes*, she addresses this kaupapa in three important ways:

1. Explicitly: characters speak directly about their need for stories, and how the stories should be told. While not fully self-conscious narrators, they edge towards this territory in these passages.
2. Through structure: which contains multiple separate viewpoints, with each character narrating their own story (in not-necessarily-chronological order). Each of these is interwoven with the others, sometimes telling about the same moments from different points of view.
3. Within each story: The importance of stories is exemplified in the events that occur inside the stories of each character.

Because *Baby No-Eyes* contains these multiple ways of drawing attention to the importance of story, Grace also draws attention to her own literary operations, that is, the construction of this novel. By exemplifying a non-linear, non-individual and non-typical format for a novel in English, Grace gently questions modes and methods of novelistic writing that rely on singular cultural points of view and chronological time. As Ratheiser notes, 'the function of storytelling itself forms an act of emancipation, both in the text and in the narrative structure.' (263)

However, rather than just 'talking back' or reacting to Western modes of storytelling, I would posit that Grace is in fact simply presenting a different way of doing things, an approach developed from her own world view. 'Wilson points out that Maori authors are not writing back to Europe' notes Najid, 'Ihimaera also addresses this point: "[W]hat we're in fact trying to do is use European formats to reveal ourselves to a wider audience [...]" (Wilkinson 1995:99)' (74). Ratheiser makes similar comment: 'Thus the writing of Maori authors today is not so much a writing back to the imperial centre as a writing back to the dominant settler culture and, eventually, *a writing forward to its own roots.*' (254) (my emphasis). This is where Indigenous literature might part ways with other forms of historiographic metafiction, for the project here could be said to be a continuation from traditional modes of storytelling into new forms that integrate the techniques of fiction writing in English. If anything there is a reaction against dominant ways of representing history and culture, rather than the literary modes of storytelling themselves. Instead of reacting to the mechanics of contemporary fiction, Grace is primarily offering a glimpse of voices that are missing, and she is using fiction in English as a tool to

bring attention to this lack. ‘So, the minority writer has no other choice but to claim a space within the centre and, as a result, changing [sic] the power play that exists between margin and centre’ (Najid 77). It is inevitable that Indigenous writers will find themselves ‘writing back’ or responding to the colonial culture in which they have been immersed – this is an important aspect of making space for other ways of being to be written about or enacted, and it is crucial to recognise the continued presence of colonial systems in order to critique or deconstruct them. However, the emphasis here is that this is not all these texts do – they are not limited to reacting and responding to the dominant culture because aspects of Indigenous cultures outside of that system remain available to them, thus informing the expression of different perspectives. In the following sections I will expand on the three points above, and put forward examples of how Grace uses these methods of representation to ultimately comment on the representation of history and identity itself.

1. Beyond the Borders of the Page

There’s a way the older people have of telling a story, a way where the beginning is not the beginning, the end is not the end. It starts from a centre and moves away from there in such widening circles that you don’t know how you will finally arrive at the point of understanding, which becomes itself another core, a new centre [...]

Or sometimes there is a story that has no words at all, a story that has been lived by a whole generation but that has never been worded (28).

While the above passage is attributed to Te Paania, there is a strong authorial presence in the narration. This could almost be viewed as an author’s statement: a key to reading the text and the uniting, underlying purpose of the plural narratives. Right from the prologue, the importance of stories is underlined. As she arrives at Mahaki and Dave’s place before she gives birth to Tawera, Te Paania announces: ‘...children need a great chance in life – need a family, stories and languages...’ (11) At the end of the second chapter, another strong statement about stories is made, this time through dialogue between the just-born Tawera and his mother:

‘All right Mum,’ I said, ‘tell us about yourself and about this sister of mine who has no eyes. Stolen? How come?’

‘She died in an accident,’ Mum said. ‘If we’re going to tell about the accident we have to tell about everything.’

‘We?’

‘Gran Kura and me, and all of us in our different ways. You too, you’ll have to do your part. It could take years.’

‘All right Mum and Gran Kura and all of us, let’s tell everything. Tell about ourselves, and about this sister without eyes who’s already four years old. I know there’s plenty of time but let’s get cracking.’ (19-20)

Tawera’s life begins with the necessity for story. In this dialogue are encoded several characteristics of how the novel will be storied as well: it will be communal; it will take effort from everyone; one part cannot be separated from the others; it will be a long process, during which years will elapse (Tawera will grow up while the story is being told). Because this dialogue occurs when Tawera is preverbal, the reader can assume that it takes place via a metaphysical channel between mother and child, that this agreement occurs in the same liminal space that Baby occupies. In this way, it might be viewed as outside the physical boundaries of the novel, and edges towards metafictional self-consciousness. We know this is dialogue between two characters, and yet we know that spoken dialogue is impossible for these two at this point in Tawera’s life. What is the purpose of the dialogue here then? Can it be read as giving clues to the reader as to how to read the text? Instructing the reader what lies beneath the stories in the novel and how they are structured? I think this passage does perform these functions, even though this purpose is not overt.

The metafictional elements in *Baby No-Eyes* never over-reach or become too self-conscious, but occasionally do interrupt the text. Therefore, towards the centre of the book, when we are deep in the story, Tawera reminds us of the references to story at the beginning, and how each of the characters have been tasked with a storytelling mission: ‘Then I sat up. “Mum, you’re right up with the telling of it now,” I said. “You’ve caught up to me – that boulevard, bumping along, those aliens, those reversible dancers. I know the rest. But tell us about this work you do [...]”’ (142). There is always a sense in lines like these that the reader is included in the audience: *tell us*, Tawera says, as if aware of the people listening beyond the borders of the page. Tawera’s final chapters (the final chapters of the book) seem particularly given to explaining to an audience beyond the page the final events in Gran Kura’s and Baby’s lives, as well as how he deals with their absence. Here he is, preparing the final words of the novel, and speaking directly to his audience as he does so. He is conscious of himself as a narrator, and even conscious that his mother is no longer a storyteller, at least to this audience, and that he must finish things:

Last words?

Last words.

It's been three years and I haven't told anyone about those last words...

I'll tell all about it later.

Because there are other words you know, even though they may not be so final. There's catching up to be done. You can't just leave everything dangling, and Mum's not much help lately.

Let's see. (272)

Te Paania does make an appearance at the end of this chapter, but only to encourage her son:

I was going to say 'not bad for a frog' but that's her line.

'Come on, Mum, you say it, come on it's your turn to tell.'

'No, keep it up son, you've got your eye on things. You're doing a great job. Also, you haven't finished. Remember what you said about later, later.'

Geez. (281)

There is a very real sense that the characters are acting out this storytelling debate for a wider audience. Who should tell, and how should the story be told? As Tawake (49) notes, by allowing her characters to speak directly and self-consciously on these questions, Grace calls attention to her own modes of storytelling and therefore the literary operations of novelistic writing itself.

2. He Whāriki

Vilsoni Hereniko How do you push the edges, as you put it? Do you do it through language?

Patricia Grace Through using language in some different way, through trying different structures, through experimenting and trying to break the rules.

Vilsoni Hereniko Do the language and style, used differently, challenge mainstream conventions?

Patricia Grace I hope so. (*Hereniko* 77)

It is widely noted that Grace engages innovative techniques to structure her novels, and that these structures are recognisably Māori. A quick survey of recent commentary unearths a common thread. Says Najid: 'Credited for her use of polyphony and realistic voices in fiction, Grace's novels and short stories also stand out for their storytelling techniques that derive from Maori tradition and intertwine several storylines, usually told by different characters in the same way that stories would be told in the Indigenous community.' (138) Susan Tawake invokes the spiral

as a metaphor for Grace's narrative structure ("Bilinguals" 51), and Keown likens it to *whaikōrero* or speechmaking ("Postcolonial" 152)

What is the effect of these approaches? As noted above, the structure of *Baby No-Eyes* gives prominence to certain aspects of a traditionally Māori storytelling style: communality, taking time, giving voice to all concerned. But it also forces the reader to notice the operations of the storytelling itself – as each chapter closes and opens, we are forced to re-orient ourselves to a new narrator (or a familiar one that we haven't heard from for some pages). We must also re-orient ourselves in time and space. The reader encounters a different level of discomfort and awareness when faced with this style. The 'illusion' of the novelistic world so carefully constructed in fiction writing in English is broken more frequently. Thus the reader is challenged to question the nature of the writing itself, expectations of narrative, and the conventional construction of other styles of writing.

The polyphonic structure of *Baby No-Eyes* implicitly questions how, and by whom, stories are told and by extension how and by whom history is represented. While Grace's method has been described as a spiral structure (Knudsen, Tawake), I think another metaphor is also apt – as each story is told, the characters weave their threads together. Each thread moves under or over the others, just as time moves forward and back, connecting each thread to the others. Chris Prentice observes: 'Their stories thread through each other in an evocation of *raranga* (weaving), as a traditional practice associated with storytelling, as the content of respective narrators' stories wind back, reach forward, and overlap' (338). Representing the underlying structure of the novel, this weaving of story could be visualised as a *whāriki* – an intricate mat upon which the other aspects of the narrative rest.

3. Our Stories Could Kill You

The final aspect of narrative mentioned above is the action within the stories told by each of the different narrators. In particular, Gran Kura gives ample examples of how the suppression or loss of stories has resulted in suffering for her people. Shane's death is foreshadowed by Gran Kura's warning 'Our stories could kill you' (26), and the story of Riripeti. Gran Kura has read things wrong, of course, and the narrative that follows shows how she has internalised the colonising point of view. Riripeti does not die because of their 'evil language' (37) but because of a system that made no room for her way of being in the world (culture); Shane does not die because of the

story Gran Kura tells him, but because of all the stories he has been denied – stories that would have given him a strong sense of self. As Tawake notes, both Riripeti and Shane ‘die because they are forced to live apart from their own identities, from their life force, their Maori heritage’ (“Bilinguals” 49).

Upon realising this, the family that evolves around Te Paania and Tawera work hard to tell all the stories, in order to ensure the same thing does not happen again. These stories take them further back, and deeper into, the issues that surrounded Baby’s death and mutilation, than they could have predicted. Thus stories from Gran Kura or Mahaki’s grandfather provide links and meanings for the issues they are facing in terms of contemporary land and sacred sites. By allowing these characters to confront history directly, Grace allows for explicit as well as implicit critique of the colonial process. But no story is wasted or separate from the main action and contemporary events of the book. Finally, Baby is given a fully imagined life because ‘There had to be a family and a childhood.’ (251) In other words, she needed her own story. Once this need is fulfilled, she is able to ask Tawera to let her go. Whether the reader believes this to be appeasement of a spirit or appeasement of guilt and grief, the result is the same: healing.

By bringing attention to her own literary operations and storytelling as a communal activity in which each member holds a separate yet interlinked strand, Grace brings attention to the inability of single versions of history, as promoted by governing, colonising powers for instance, to contain the entire truth of a situation. No single story is whole, *Baby No-Eyes* suggests. No one person or culture or point of view holds the ultimate version of what happened. Only by giving equal attention and time to differing points of view can a full picture, with its details and depth and layers of colour, be attained.

THREE

PLURALITY

Multiplicity, Possibility and the Wondrous

The Artist as Seer

In chapter one I investigated how, in *Baby No-Eyes*, Grace problematises history via her choice of subject matter and engagement of characters. In chapter two I discussed how Grace's storytelling techniques question mainstream literary operations by bringing attention to her own alternative modes and methods of storytelling. In this chapter, I will focus on one aspect of plurality in Grace's work, that is, the recognition of difference and multiple possibilities in Tawera's artistic practice, which allows for plurality in the widest sense. I will also discuss Tawera's role as seer, or matakite, with a view to understanding how the entire novel makes clarity of vision one of its central themes.

Subsequently, this chapter will examine Harley's marban abilities and singing performance in *Benang*, which is an artistic practice that parallels Tawera's, and exemplifies a common theme of creative flourishing that occurs at the end of other works of historiographic, situational metafiction. Other examples will be juxtaposed with these two main works to reveal how they extend beyond the boundary of historiographic metafiction and postmodernism, making room for new understandings and expressions of Indigeneity.

Te Kore – Spaze: the Nothing and the Everything

Baby No-Eyes extends many of the themes and concerns first addressed by Grace in *Potiki*. Issues of physical, intellectual and spiritual property rights that *Potiki* tackled in a traditional, rural community are faced in an urban, contemporary context, in *Baby No-Eyes* are taken to their furthest manifestation in the form of a threat to genetic

material – the very stuff of life itself. Likewise, some of the ways of facing and engaging with the issues are familiar, but updated and given a more contemporary context. Specifically, artistic expression is seen as a primary method for making sense of events, much like storytelling. As Keown notes: ‘Grace’s skilful interweaving of Māori linguistic and mythical codes into the narrative structure of *Baby No-Eyes* therefore enacts the artistic process as described in the prologue of *Potiki*; however, Grace moves beyond the pre-European context[...]

 (‘Postcolonial’ 167) This might be linked to the function of the writer herself:

Grace’s novel [*Potiki*] suggests that the weavers and the carver metaphorically represent the role of the Maori writer, who also becomes a spokesperson for his/her culture and weaves together various cultural strands to create new structures and meanings [...]. In *Baby No-Eyes*, Tawera performs a similar role [...] (‘Sister Seen’ 90)

Here, Tawera the painter takes the place of the traditional Māori carver, performing the function of making sense of human experience and contextualising it within a wider cosmological genealogy. In addition Grace’s own writing practice, which performs the same function, is embodied.

Tawera is an artist, even as a child. He draws throughout the book, and finds innovative ways to explain what he sees to his sister, connecting things like colour to other sensory experiences. His role as interpreter of the seen for the unseen (his sister), and the unseen for the seen (his family) establishes his role as matakite (seer), or mediator between the earthly and spiritual realm. At the end of his sister’s and Gran Kura’s lives on earth, he must act as final arbiter of Baby’s decision to leave the family and return to her place in the spirit world. He is reluctant about this responsibility, but soon realises it is necessary for him to make the choice (289). Allowing Baby to leave creates ‘great mountains of quiet, great mountains of time, great mountains of space to deal with.’ (274). Tawera no longer has any ‘double-talking to do’ (275). And yet he is still a character for whom the world beyond the physical is very real, very present, and suddenly, very empty. He still walks between and negotiates two realities. Tawera conceptualises the emptiness he encounters as ‘Spaze’ (275).

Tawera’s attempt to deal with this spaze forms the conclusion of the novel. But before we explore how he confronts this void in his life, it is valid to take a moment longer to examine the state of in-betweenness he finds himself in after Baby

leaves. In multiple ways, at this stage of the novel Tawera exists in a heightened state of liminality – a kind of paradoxical or indefinable point of view is signaled at several junctures: ‘Off we went on this eerie day that was moving but not breathing [...] Up above, the sky was like a flat, grey lid the colour of cement, and completely unmoving. It could crack. It could open.’ (276-7); ‘In love? Plenty of times. All the time. With cousins like January, with teachers, with friends who are girls, friends who are boys, always in love with someone’ (282); ‘At those times it’s as though happiness and unhappiness are one and the same, and as though satisfaction and dissatisfaction are the same too’ (282); ‘There’s this gory horror face looking out and you feel sick with happiness and unhappiness, satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Along with all that is a sense of both guilt and achievement that makes you want to laugh and cry.’ (282-3) Obviously, Tawera is a teenager. The flat, breathless sky is a perfect description of the sense of waiting for the world to burst wide open that comes with the state of teenage-hood – when one is not a child anymore, nor an adult either. His occupation of a space between worlds is emphasised by his age, as well as his open sexuality. The paradoxical feelings that spring from this position are understandable – he experiences both positive and negative emotions at the same time. However, by emphasising his in-betweenness, Grace indicates that Tawera will never fit any tidily defined position, even after his spirit-sister has moved on. Again there are echoes of *Potiki* and her character Toko here – both are powerful children who do not fit limitations imposed by narrow definitions identity, and who ultimately demonstrate alternative ways of being. As Tawera moves towards adulthood, he represents plurality in the multiplicity of choices and possibilities he contains.

In the epilogue, we meet Tawera at university, where he studies ‘between the lines of history, seeking out its missing pages, believing this may be one of the journeys that will help [him] be an artist.’ (291). There is no simple position for Tawera, he must seek out his truth ‘between lines’ and in ‘missing pages’. However, Tawera is not the artist he once was – there is something missing now. He, and his work, are incomplete. On every one of his artworks there is:

[...]a patch that is dark and trembling, the size and shape of an egg.

Little egg.

Inner space. It aches inside me, and in the evenings when I go to my room intending to work, all I can do is stare at the absence. I take up a pencil and put it down; take up a brush, lift a daub of paint on to the tip of it, and for long moments stand poised – like a dancer, perhaps a dart thrower, unable to

invade, unable to bring my brush across those pure places. I don't know what to do. (292)

That Tawera envisages the use of his brush as an invasion across 'pure places' seems like a reaction against what has been done to his sister and his people – an unconscious refusal to be an active definer of the space in front of him. There is an unspoken desire to leave things as they are, to not be active, possibly because action can cause pain. Or perhaps to allow all potential options to remain open, for 'spaze' relates to Te Kore, and:

As Ranginui Walker observes, although Te Kore 'signified space', it also 'contained in its vastness the seeds of the universe and was therefore a site of potential' (1990:11). Te Kore is thus a paradoxical state. Representing both lifelessness or lack, and also the potential for life and growth (Pistacchi "Revealing" 156).

Tawera is paralysed by the possibilities before him. He must find a way to mediate this potential, to be whole and yet still maintain his ability to access the paradoxical creative energy of Te Kore. Inaction is just as dangerous as action. His sister may not exist in the world anymore, but Tawera must.

At first he attempts to traverse this chasm between himself and the definable world by reading more, but he is looking for the 'unsaid matters of history' (as is the entire novel), and so he 'does not find what [he's] looking for' (292). Then one day he sees a sign, literally, which says '*Try Opposite.*' Of course, how apt. Tawera must try the opposite approach to his artwork and to his sister. Another resonance may be found in his oppositional position to mainstream culture or singular definitions of who he can be:

[...] instead of trying to shrink the egg of space, I begin to enlarge it. Instead of ending with that little unbreachable gap I begin with it, embrace it, let it be there, make it be there, pushing my drawing further and further to the outskirts. I persist with this, night after night, until one night everything's gone, fallen from the edges of the paper.

Spaze.

Te Kore. (293)

Tawera fully embraces the void, and thus makes room for the invisible, the potential that lies within Te Kore. It is only by opening to the chaos, the indefinable, that Tawera can make room for his own defining acts of creation. Keown explains: 'In his moment of enlightenment, Tawera realizes that 'spaze' is not, after all, a breach in nature which must be filled. Instead it is an all-encompassing space which embraces

the realms of life and death, terra firma and the underworld' ("Postcolonial" 157). As a response to all other events and issues that occur throughout the novel, this is the moment when Tawera finally claims his own ability to define his identity. He has all the narratives, all the stories from his mother and grandmother, he has the written matters of history and the story he narrated about his own life with his sister. Armed with these stories, he can face Te Kore, and draw from it the things he needs to move forward.

And so he begins to 'make visible who was invisible' (294). As his final act of the book, Tawera makes his 'first incantation of visibility' and creates an image of his sister, showing her face, the gashes of the invasion, and spirit figures from a wailing mouth. Considering the multiple symbolic resonances Baby carries, as described in chapter one of this thesis, this painting could be seen as symbolic of making other sorts of colonial invasions visible. Through the image that he creates, Tawera is making visible the unseen and unspoken moments of history: land and body occupations and invasions, cultural and historic misunderstandings. Just as Edward P. Jones' Alice Night brings back the dead in her magnificent artwork at the conclusion of *The Known World*, so Tawera both honours the dead and ensures that their stories will not be forgotten.

In a final gesture towards potentiality and plurality, Grace brings the book back to its origins. 'Feet at the beginning of a road' is the last sentence, suggesting that even after all the stories have been heard, after the injustices and misrepresentations have been faced, after people have found their place in the world or a way to define themselves, even after all this, Tawera is still only at the beginning. All of the narratives and points of view were needed simply to set him at the start of his adult life. Tawera, unlike Shane, now has all the stories he needs to make choices. Ultimately, the act of reclaiming narratives opens up a plural world containing a multitude of potential. In this context, the place of the artist is to maintain that openness while allowing for defining statements or representations to be made – a paradoxical role, as befits a mediator of the realm of Te Kore. In her article 'From Visibility to Visuality: Patricia Grace's Baby No-Eyes and the Cultural Politics of Decolonization', Prentice reflects:

[...] art's political efficacy is much less determinable or tangible. Perhaps, though, this is the point, especially in a context of overwhelmingly instrumental evocations of culture. I suggest that art—in the most general

sense of cultural practice that takes its distance from and challenges the orthodoxies of identity, truth and the social—institutes or enacts a radical ambivalence of the (visual or verbal) image [...] In its irreducibility to the sphere of political economy, art is uncontainable, unconstrainable, and noncompliant. (343)

In many ways, visual representation and the ability to see clearly are the underlying preoccupations of *Baby No-Eyes*. So, as Tawera brings his sister into the visible world he enacts the clarity of vision that is necessary for each of the characters to thrive. From the beginning, Baby's loss of sight interacts with and represents greater losses for her family and culture. The inciting events of her death and mutilation stimulate Gran Kura and the whānau to take another 'look' at the history and stories they have lived by, which they soon find false. The inability to see clearly in the colonial past, particularly when Māori cultural perspectives are usurped by Western ones, is symbolically represented by Grandfather Tumanako's half closed eye. It is only with the recitation of stories and the renewed clarity of vision that the family, and ultimately, Baby, are liberated. Tawera's visionary display as artist who sees what is unseen and translates it onto canvas for his audience positions him as the 'opposite' of his sister: her reflection or inverse. In the end, Tawera is the visionary – the one who sees, not only as his sister couldn't, but in a way that can transform the unseen, unspoken matters of history.

Pulling down the house and floating above it – the wondrous singer: *Benang*

Fanny led her family through a terrain in which she recognised the trace of her own ancestors, and looked for her people. She brought them back. I would like to think that I do a similar thing. But I found myself among paper, and words not formed by an intention corresponding to my own, and I read a world weak in its creative spirit (Benang 472).

Like Tawera near the end of *Baby No Eyes*, Harley becomes increasingly comfortable with his liminal status and its creative expression in several ways, though due to the structure of *Benang*, which has been described as similar to a dot painting⁴⁶, he reveals himself as he is at the end point of his story right from the beginning. To clarify, from the first chapter of *Benang*, we encounter Harley floating above the fire and singing, though it is evident as the text continues that this is, in fact, the end point of his story. Indeed, at the end the story does come full circle as he hovers above the

⁴⁶ Guest 12

fires again, and one understands throughout the text that he is telling the story in retrospect and from this point of view. This is important, because I will be asserting several observations about creativity and the role of artistic practice in this chapter, particularly that a kind of creative flourishing occurs at the end of these novels and others like them. Though *Benang* is written in a non-linear way, Harley becomes more comfortable and adept in his abilities as a floating singer after he learns of his grandfather's eugenicist project and begins to seek his Nyoongar stories and identity. His propensity to float only appears after the car accident that kills his father and renders him weak and impotent. Though Scott shows us Harley's talents from the beginning, I will be discussing them in relation to their chronological development as he moves from one cultural understanding of himself (white) to another (Nyoongar)⁴⁷.

In chapter two of this thesis, I examined how Scott, via Harley, comprehensively undermined the policies and proselytising of characters like AO Neville and found alternative stories and understandings of being Nyoongar. However, one aspect of Harley's experience in reclaiming his heritage required further discussion in its own space. Like Tawera, Harley has a gift. He levitates, and not only does he levitate, but he sings as well. The text also implies that while engaged in storytelling/singing, Harley sees through his ancestor's eyes, that is, he has a visceral experience of the events of the past. At one point, as Harley finishes a story, he sees 'my two uncles staring up at me, open-mouthed [saying] 'How did you do that? How did you know that?' (187) His imaginative / creative power reaches further than even their memories. As the novel progresses, Harley combines these abilities in a sort of performance above campfires, a performance he eventually begins to share with others, whom he knows he makes uncomfortable, embarrassing 'even those who come to hear me sing' (7). I will trace the development and ramifications of this gift, before placing it, alongside Tawera's painting, in the wider context of other novels that also culminate in artistic projects that highlight the role of fiction in contemporary understandings and expressions of Indigeneity.

To begin with, what is this talent that Scott's protagonist manifests? I'd like to pause here to look at the language Scott uses to describe this thing Harley does.

⁴⁷ With apologies to Scott for ignoring, at this juncture and for the purpose of this analysis, his purposefully non-linear structure. Imposing a chronological point of view of the development of Harley's character and story is useful for this study in order to show how it aligns with other similar stories, but I am aware that doing so also forces it into a linear development Scott did not intend.

[...] I rise from the ground and, hovering in the campfire smoke, slowly turn to consider this small circle of which I am the centre [...] no cynicism remains once I begin to sing.

Sing? Perhaps that is not the right word, because it is not really singing. And it is not really me who sings, for although I touch the earth only once in my performance – leaving a single footprint in white sand and ash – through me we hear the rhythm of many feet pounding the earth, and the strong pulse of countless hearts beating. Together, we listen to the creak and rustle of various plants in various winds, the countless beatings of different wings, the many strange and musical calls of animals that have come from this place right here.(7)

This statement occurs right at the beginning of the book, though as already discussed, it pinpoints a later time in Harley's life, after he has lived through the story he is about to tell. He 'rises' at the 'centre of a small circle'. But he is not really singing, it is not even him – so what is happening here? Through Harley the audience hears the sound of 'many feet', 'countless hearts'. This is a strong statement of plurality, multiplicity – the feet and hearts could be those of ancestors, of others who have had the same experiences, even of those yet born. But they are not at the margins, or the edges of the circle – they are at the very centre, and this coming together to witness and listen is an affirmation ritual. They hear both the sounds of the land and the sounds of their people. These are statements of community and identity made in a particular, uniquely Nyoongar way. Whatever we call Harley's creative gift, it has the effect of bringing people together in cultural communion.

Slater, among others, provides us with an Aboriginal term for Harley's abilities: 'He becomes Marban⁴⁸. He not only hears the stories of his great, great grandmother Fanny (long dead before he was born), but is able to witness the events of her life and write them into his history.' ("Histories" 53) He makes statements of multiplicity in other ways too. As he looks in the mirror just as he is discovering his propensity to float, he sees many versions of himself: 'And then I saw myself poised with a boomerang, saw myself throwing it out to where the sky bends, saw it arcing back again but now it was my tiny, cartwheeling mirror image which was returning, growing, merging with the other crowding, jostling selves into one shimmering, ascending me.' (*Benang* 12-13) He recognises the multiple possibilities, pasts and cultural selves that went before him, in a way making space for these 'jostling selves'

⁴⁸ 'Marban is a clever or magical person who has the ability to change shape and/or form, perhaps becoming a bird or animal, and travel through different temporal zones.' ("Histories" 66). This term was first coined by Mudrooroo, though I am not sure from which Aboriginal language it originates.

as well as those of the present and future. But Harley is still an unhealthy subject, and all this magic and plurality is not an easy thing to grapple with. Like Grace's Tawera, he occupies a liminal space – impotent, pale but not 'white' like his grandfather, displaced, orphaned. At times, he begins to float away, unhinged, uncontrolled. He displays ambivalence about his gifts, sometimes allowing himself to float just a little too far: 'there I was, uplifted and spread out to the wind, which whistled through me, and in and out of orifices, singing some spiteful tune.' (146-7) The floating is both gift and curse. It originates in Ern's project to make him white (uplift him) and yet it goes further than Ern intended. Harley must learn how to harness his abilities.

He begins to learn this from his uncle Jack. As he starts to float away, he realises the need for narrative, 'any sort of story' to bring him back to Earth, but can't concentrate. His uncle Will tries to help, but is also carried away. Only Jack can help 'And for some reason, which I could not comprehend at the time, he was able to get hold of Will, and was both weighty and strong enough to pull the two of us in like spent fish.' (147) Only Jack has the physical and metaphorical weight to bring the uplifted Harley and Will down to the ground. Will chose to pass for white whenever he could throughout his life. At this stage, Harley remains lost and damaged by Ern's eugenics. Only the more traditionally brought up Jack has the substance and the cultural strength to ground them both. However, and somewhat paradoxically, Harley's healing also lies in continuing to write: 'It apparently helped knot and tie me down' (147). Here Scott refrains from suggesting that Harley can solve his problems by going back to some idea of pristine traditions. At least part of the solution, for an in between, insubstantial figure such as Harley, is to be found by harnessing the language and culture that formed him (that is, white Australian written language). He cannot avoid this culture, and there can be no pretence at returning to an authentic Aboriginality that no longer exists. He is of mixed ethnicity, but also lives in a postcolonial world, where even if he were as dark-skinned as his great ancestor Fanny, he would not be able to make things exactly as they once were.

Harley's gift parallels a more destructive tendency. In the early stages of his marban development, he is as destructive as he is magical – he tortures his grandfather by carving his skin, and he also dismantles his grandfather's house piece by piece: 'Tap tap. I began chipping the render from the stone walls of the old house. I hesitate to mention it; in the context of this story it may seem so dreadfully *symbolic*.' (24) Of course it does seem symbolic, and the narrator's insistence on

cynically pointing this out makes it more so. Harley dismantles the house just as he dismantles his grandfather's and Neville's doctrines. As usual, however, Scott's language and imagery offers so much more than a simplistic equation:

The walls were strong, despite my continued picking and probing. The timbers of the ceiling sat strong upon them. I had peeled back the roof above some of the rooms, and there the joists showed like ribs against the stars.

Nyoongar language. Culture . . . I thought of all the things I did not have. Unsettled, not belonging – the first white man born – I let myself drift. I gave up, and drifted [...] I thought it was just me – a solitary full stop.

Or a seed. I know now there are many of us, rising. Like seeds, we move across and dot the daytime sky. More and more of us, like stars we make the night sky complete.

But back then I felt only silence, and saw how the roof joists made yet another grid (109).

Harley picks and probes at the house, just as he picks and probes at the language in his grandfather's notes. The symbolism of the house may also refer to something more basic: simple genetics. He is of his grandfather's house, his grandfather's legacy, and no matter how he attempts to dismantle the relationship, he is in some way still contained by this basic frame of inheritance. Even so, he lays the beams of the house bare, thus revealing how sturdy it really is, the underlying structure of it. Likewise, even though he attempts to dismantle the eugenicist project that has enclosed him all his life, and even though he is somewhat successful, the basic structure of that project remains a part of his reality, a part of Australia's reality, a frame within which, or against which, Australians of all origins are forced to operate. All that is left, once the roof is peeled back (exposing the inner workings) are the timbers 'like ribs against the stars' or like 'a grid' – one thinks of the bars of a jail. And so Harley gives up, considers himself a full-stop: a black dot: the end of something. However, it doesn't end there. Harley has this other ability, born of both his grandfather's project and the invisible Nyoongar heritage he carries: he floats up – he transcends the cage-like structure of his grandfather's physical and metaphorical house. Without missing a beat, his ending becomes a beginning, Harley becomes 'a seed' of which there are many, and his experience is immediately transformed. Like seeds drifting along in the wind, like stars in the night sky. The multitudes. Can any reader think of seeds and stars without considering endless potential, infinite numbers, light, connection to the wider universe and the enduring mystery of the heavens? I am reminded of the whakatauaki or Māori proverb: E kore au e ngaro he kakano i ruia

mai i Rangiātea: ‘I will never be lost, the seed which was sown from Rangiātea (the origin place of Māori)’

In *Benang*, Scott often reveals wonders, only to quickly sweep them back under a mat woven from the harsh fibres of realism. He ends this passage by reminding the reader that at that time he ‘felt only silence’ within a jail-like structure. The text constantly dances between these expressions of freedom and confinement – contrasting the narrowness of Ern’s imposed world view with the limitless scope of Harley’s potential ability to define and express himself (an ability that certainly takes its cues from traditional Nyoongar ways, but is not limited to them). In this instance, Harley’s uncles rescue him and his grandfather from his destructive tendencies: ‘They kept looking at me, with curiosity, with sympathy. With some sort of respect even, for the strange way I sometimes drifted, and the way I shimmered and trembled and sang in the evenings.’ (110) Jack even begins to get angry at Harley, for misusing what he views as a gift, at one point saying: ‘I tell you you gotta go right back, you got something special there coming out. I can see where you come from all right [. . .]’ (164) While the fantastic abilities centre around Harley, he is nothing without the community (his uncles and the others they introduce him to) to anchor him.

The obvious question, at this point, is what the floating protagonist means. I have already described some of the associated meanings, and there are further interpretations that will be offered in the course of this chapter, but what was Scott up to? I had the opportunity to suggest to Scott in an interview, that in a book heavy with harsh realities, Harley’s propensity to float brought some of the lightest and most humorous moments to the text. He replied:

And that’s a way of leaping out of that discourse if you’re trapped in there. I saw it as partly making fun of it, give myself a bit of a laugh, initially, and then in the course of the narrative it moved to other things. On the last page of *Benang*, the narrator who has this propensity for elevation, who floats away off the ground a lot – what brings him down is recounting stories as best he can – family history, and of making these sounds of place. That settles him. Which is a metaphor for Indigenous language. So on the last page he is hovering above a campfire. He’s pale, burnt and shrivelled. People are wondering who’s this fella? What’s going on? And that’s his own extended family, who don’t yet know him. He makes these sounds and suddenly he belongs here, he’s the man. There’s no question. It’s an identity affirmation in community. (Makereti “That Deadman Dance”)

But there is ambivalence even in this connection to a sense of belonging. Very late in the book, Harley describes a mysterious membrane above his head, something that kept him from hearing and understanding other people's words as a child, and vice versa. This is connected to his near-drowning, the drowning of a boy in his care, domestic abuses, fishing illegally – the sense of always being outside of what might be considered legitimate or safe. The house of his pre-Ern childhood is a mirror of the house he creates once Ern is incapacitated – full of gaps and holes and bared timbers. Harley is always in a state of incompleteness, a boy who has been stripped of colour (physically and figuratively) and culture. This is the liminality I have referred to, and the further he looks back into his past, the more evident it becomes that this was always what he was, and that his future talents – the odd floating and 'singing' – might be inevitable manifestations of an incomplete and in-between being finding some space at which he is the centre. 'The floating trope is used as a comment on the plight of the Aboriginal people caught between two worlds and anchored in neither' suggests Dorothy Guest (132) of Harley's talents. Slater concurs: 'He deploys his floating, a consequence of Ern's project, to offer him new perspectives.' (Uncertainty 152). That is, he transforms the damage that Ern has inflicted by 'uplifting' him and his people, into a tool that is useful in re-visioning and re-claiming alternative understandings of who he is, grounded in the land he can see from his new, uplifted vantage point. In a different article, Slater further describes the transformation that occurs via Harley's singing and levitating:

Scott's readers witness Harley's transformation from being a floating, disembodied, "first white man born", with a poor memory, to becoming Marban—a highly heterogeneous, self-differentiating trickster character, who has the ability to shape-change. Scott dispenses with Ern's idealised white body, for a porous, polymorphous body, which is unclassifiable within Western taxonomy.' ("Monstrous" 71)

Slater insistently recognises how pain and uncertainty continue to punctuate Harley's experience, right to the end of the book. 'He does not present the reader with the authentic voice of Indigeneity; instead an ambiguous, barely human form rises from the ground, insisting on his otherness, yet demanding dialogue.' (Uncertainty 157). As the next section demonstrates the dialogue that this dynamic demands is crucial to *Benang* and this thesis, and finds parallels in many other novels.

Art, Fiction and Vision

I have described Grace's Tawera as a seer, or matakite, and Scott's Harley has been described as marban, which connotes similar meanings. Both characters engage in a creative process with which to mediate and give life to their visions and understandings of their place in the world, which have been shown to be outside easy definition, and outside the binary of settler/indigene. These creative processes are elementally different but have the same function of self-expression (indeed, self-preservation: both characters *need* their creative process to mediate inner conflict and emotion), as well as communication with others. I don't think it matters too much what we call these abilities – after all these characters fall outside of easy definition for a reason. It probably is important, however, to place a proviso on the following discussion.

Many readings of *Benang* use the terms 'magic realism' and 'marban realism' – these discussions are useful, and I quote some of them below, but I don't want to rely heavily on those labels, for the following reasons. A chapter of the recently published *A Made Up Place: New Zealand in Young Adult Fiction* (2012) examines the idea of Māori Gothic, and refers to the work of Patricia Grace, among others. Karen Healey, one of the other subjects of the chapter, summarised it thus: "Māori Gothic" doesn't work, as Miles ably unwinds in this chapter, because in traditional Māori culture, the supernatural is natural. It's part of the world. It's not uncanny or out of place; it belongs.' Similar statements were made about the incorporation of the character of Baby in chapter one of this thesis. Magic realism is not Māori (or Indigenous) Gothic, and many of the readings of magic realism in relation to *Benang* are relevant, so I wouldn't want to leave them out. But I do find myself wary of the term, partly for the reasons summarised above. I'm wary of the word magic in relation to Aboriginal/Nyoongar forms of self-expression, but then, I'm also wary of suggesting that it couldn't possibly be magic realism. Perhaps it is useful to suggest that there are elements of magic realism or the Gothic in some texts, but refrain from defining them by those terms. Slater and Guest use the term marban realism, and though I agree this might be more accurate, I am not knowledgeable enough in Australian Aboriginal cultures and languages to know the proper origin and meaning of this word in relation to Nyoongar, or specifically in relation to the character of Harley. Therefore, I use these terms with caution, and with the suggestion, again, that we don't rely too heavily on the jargon, which may be of limited accuracy and use.

What is interesting about the idea of magic realism is the possibility of displacing the reader. Guest quotes Brooks' suggestion that 'by making our own country strange, it can make us strangers in our own country, seeing with the hypersensitive eyes of strangers...' (6). Later, she quotes Brooks again: 'Magical realism is a released language—a vocabulary involving ways of seeing and writing—that can negotiate the differences between colonised and coloniser, bringing them to a cultural space in which both are strangers and contributors alike' (Guest 57). This seems to be a vitally important outcome of historiographic metafiction – that they cause some purposeful discomfort by consistently reminding the reader of the meaning producing activity that they are engaged in. Scott did express at the 2012 Writers and Readers Week in Wellington some interest in defamiliarising the world, making it uncomfortable for readers who engaged with the novel, but then described how he soon realised that this was the opposite of what should be his aim, which is to bring readers closer to the worlds of his characters rather than alienating them from it. In *Benang* there is some sense of both things happening, and if I were to make a guess it is the humour and the strangeness of Harley's abilities that allow readers to come closer, since the 'realism' is so confronting⁴⁹. Either way, Guest points out that until *Benang*, most Aboriginal texts were completely realist. This movement into a new stylistic territory does seem to have achieved the objective of bringing coloniser and colonised into the same space, at least within the text itself. To expand:

There is 'a particularly magical realist thread in Harley's floating. This happens when Harley cannot cope with his fragmentation between black and white families nor with his lack of knowledge of his ancestors. He is not grounded in either culture so he floats over both. These are moments that fit the Ted Hughes/Beverly Farmer description of magical realism, as being of "unendurable intensity": human passion in extremis—passion where it combusts, or levitates, or mutates into an experience of the supernatural' (Hughes 1997:ix)' (Guest 131)

Where comfort in neither cultural space is possible, creation of a new space is necessary, and since this space is outside of norms and known places⁵⁰, it might be considered magical or marban. This is reminiscent of Tawera's engagement with Te

⁴⁹ In fact the opposite could be true for the reader entranced by gritty realism.

⁵⁰ Interesting that both Tawera and Harley actively confront 'space' and what it means in their lives. Eventually, Tawera begins to represent space on his canvas, and Harley must continuously contend with the literal space he occupies whilst floating.

Kore or 'Spaze' – the idea that he must enter the place of existential chaos (expanding it in his painting) before he can create something new and solid (his sister's image).

Slater's analysis corresponds to Guest's. Harley's abilities, which, whatever we name them, fall outside what is generally accepted as physically possible, draw attention to both his in-between and out of place strangeness, and to the possibilities he represents for new ways of being: 'As his body hovers and turns above the campfire, and the people stare in wonder, Harley produces new understandings of the body and identity. Indeed, he creates new bodies.' ("Monstrous" 72). While performing in this way, Harley himself begins to comprehend his position and the expansiveness of the possibilities open to him: 'Harley begins to understand that he has the capacity to inhabit multiple realities and that he is a being between life and death – "djanak or djangha".' ("Histories" 63). He is, in the final analysis, a self-creating being:

Harley's indeterminacy becomes a site of empowerment. Declaring his identity to be provisional enables him to contest colonialism's essentialised racial identity constructs. Furthermore, self-invention demands that one be recognised on one's own terms and as a desiring subject. ("Uncertainty" 151)

Thus Harley's literal grappling with space is also a figurative or metaphorical grappling with the space he occupies as a person of indeterminate status. He puts himself outside societal pressures to be defined as one or the other, and therefore also makes space in which he can define himself. That the floating space he occupies is so uncomfortable for his audience signals that he will never quite fit expectations, and thus, by his simple existence, he expands ideas of what and how a person can be.

A. Timothy Spaulding writes about postmodern slave narratives in *Re-forming the Past: history, the fantastic, and the postmodern slave narrative* (2005), but his arguments seem very applicable to this discussion. He suggests that through 'the narrative freedom of imaginative or speculative fiction' texts such as these 'blur the lines between historical subject and contemporary author, between the past history of slavery and its current legacy in contemporary culture, between historical and fictional reconstructions of the past.' Indeed, this is exactly what Scott does. By using a non-linear structure, the 'dot-painting' chronology asserted by Guest; through an indefinable, un-pin-downable, shifting and shimmering protagonist like Harley; through language and textual irony and self-awareness that suggests the author's voice behind his characters, 'Readers are left with an undetermined space in the place

of history.’ (Spaulding 18). And that indeterminacy both allows readers to empathise with Harley and his liminal position, and to read the world of the novel ‘afresh’ from an uncertain and hesitant position. This is important, particularly for the reading of an Indigenous text which seeks to question the position of coloniser and colonised. One might assume, as Scott does⁵¹, that the majority of his readers originate in the dominant, colonising culture. To make such a reader unsure of him/herself in the context of history makes space for new understandings of colonial history to become part of society/culture. At the very least, this strategy might cause doubt in the reader regarding what s/he considered to be established and accepted history, again opening space for dialogue to occur.

Exquisite Creations – the Role of Art Forms and Practices in *Benang*, *Baby No Eyes* and Other Works of Historiographic, Situational Metafiction.

In the act of endlessly creating oneself, one is not a slave to history (“Uncertainty” 151).

As described in the introduction to this thesis, when I began reading I surveyed a number of texts, with a slightly different objective. In those early stages of research I made a surprising discovery that has remained important and relevant, despite my shift in focus. As I reached the conclusion of almost all the novels I’d chosen, I was surprised to find that one kind of motif was repeated throughout them all (remembering that I chose these texts because they addressed similar subject matter to that which I was attempting: to write of historical matters not well-known or expressed in a fictional way). Each novel closed with expressions of creativity and artistic practice. In this chapter, I have already described in detail this phenomenon with reference to *Baby No-Eyes and Benang*. But I first noticed a similar thing happening in other novels – *Potiki* and *The Known World*, as well as Ondaatje’s work. In these expressions of creative flourishing near the conclusion of each novel, each author suggests that the creation of new ways of thinking and being are required. This is where the critical component of this thesis finds its centre, for all of these creative acts also symbolise the act of writing fiction. Each reflects the job of the writer her/himself in recreating the world via the artform of words on a page. Each writer has had to write the particular worlds of their novels into being, and in so doing they

⁵¹ Makereti “Social and Political”

not only recreate the worlds they themselves come from, but go beyond the act of re-making into the realm of possibilities, that is, new creation.

I wasn't looking for this thread of artistic expression, but these writers from different countries and different cultural traditions spontaneously echoed one another. A lot of creative forms are drawn on in this process of finding meaning and form in postcolonial writing in English. As Wendt suggests in 'Towards a New Oceania': 'only the imagination in free flight can hope – if not to contain her – to grasp some of her shape, plumage, and pain' (9). That is, new forms of expression are required to grasp these new forms of living informed by both colonial and pre-colonial cultures. While I can't conclude that all historiographic / situational / Indigenous metafictional novels will close with creative expressions like those I've observed in the examples below, what I am claiming is that in these novels the ability to go beyond the closed system of Hutcheon's metafictional historiography is exemplified by these bursts of creativity, in whatever form they take. These novels tend to follow a pattern of casting a critical eye on the society and language from which they spring⁵² (that is, the Indigenous author examines his/her English writing tools), of grappling with questions about history and identity and making space, and finally, of looking for ways to gesture towards something unconstrained by the cultural origins and form of English narrative.

Potiki, for example, concludes with a house carved – Toko depicted on one of the pou 'with all his stories entwined about him'. His head is 'alive with fire, had been widened and drawn down on one side. On that side of it was a small, shelled ear that listened to the soft whisperings, the lullabies, the quiet lamentations, while on the other side the ear was large and cupped to hear the wisdom of the world [...]' (189) In this, Toko's matakite visionary abilities are represented, but in the carving of his 'wide mouth that had at its corners the magic swirls, and that had the talking, storytelling tongue whirling out and down to where the heart began' (189) a representation of a different artistic tradition and symbolic system is embodied. The marrying of two different ways of telling a story, perhaps three, is signified: writing in English, oral narrative and carving.

The Known World concludes with a completely new art form, 'part tapestry, part painting, and part clay sculpture – all in one exquisite Creation', which hangs

⁵² In this way Indigenous fictional writing performs both creative and critical functions.

‘silent and yet songful’ (384). The creation seems to Calvin, who writes to his sister about it, to be what God sees when he looks down at the world, ‘a map of life made with every kind of art man has ever thought to represent himself.’ This corresponds with Jones’ eye of God narration in the novel, and the deeply empathetic, democratic way each character’s story is developed. Calvin then notices on the opposite wall another Creation that ‘may well be even more miraculous than the one of the County.’ In this one:

Each person’s face, including yours, is raised up as though to look in the very eyes of God [...] The dead in the cemetery have risen from there and they, too, stand at the cabins where they once lived. So the slave cemetery is just plain ground now, grass and nothing else. It is empty, even of the tiniest infants, who rest alive and well in their mothers’ arms. (*The Known World* 385)

The God whose point of view is represented here has performed the miraculous feat of raising the dead, giving life back to those who had it taken from them, an historiographic metafictional reincarnation and re-embodiment for those who had their lives taken from them by the institution of slavery. Jones’ wondrous tapestry is an extraordinary statement of communality, restoration, memorialisation and reanimation. And it is not some unreachable God that the people of the Creation look at, but the viewer, Calvin (and the reader), who must come to terms with his family’s legacy of slavery.

In Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), Ananda the artist is involved in two artistic projects at the conclusion of the novel. In one, he helps reconstruct a buddha statue that has been damaged by fighting. In the other, he paints the eyes of a new statue. The description is evocative of the sadness, devastation and poignant reconstruction of post-civil war lives. The statue is not complete until the eyes are painted, and when they are they ‘would always look north. As would the great scarred face half a mile away, which he had helped knit together from damaged stone, a statue that was no longer a god, that no longer had its graceful line but only the sad glance Ananda had found’ (307). Thus Ondaatje expresses both the need for reconstruction of damaged culture, and the recognition that it would never be what it once was, that any illusion of infallibility is gone, that what is left is a sadder version of its original self. At the same time, a new statue is created – new creation also occurs, though this, of course does not carry the history of its predecessor, and is born from war.

Scott's *That Deadman Dance* (2010), like *Benang*, concludes with a performance. Here 'Bobby Wabalanginy knew that he could sing and dance the spirit of this place, had shown he could sing and dance the spirit of any gathering of people, show them what we gathered together here really are [...]' (393), but the outcome is different than Bobby expects. Bobby's audience is not as ready to see and understand as he gives them credit for. As well as dancing and singing all he understands and feels, Bobby sees his people, the white newcomers, and those that have passed away watching. His dance reaffirms his people's place on the land 'Because you need to be inside the sound and the spirit of it, to live here properly. And how can that be, without we people who have been here for all time?' (394) Despite the realisation, right at the end, that Bobby's message is lost on much of his audience, it is this original form of narrative that the author chooses to encompass his main character's expression of identity and belonging.

In *Benang*, Harley's campside performances are a kind of mutation from those his ancestors would have performed. But they encompass all the historical, colonial and cultural forces that have created him, so that they are inclusive of all the forms of story he draws from:

Even now we gather, on chilly evenings, sometimes only a very few of us, sometimes more. We gather our strength in this way. From the heart of all of us. Pale, burnt, shrivelled, I hover in the campfire smoke and sing as best I can. I am not alone.

I acknowledge there are many stories here, in the ashes below my feet – even my grandfather's. (495)

Finally, as we have already seen in *Baby No-Eyes*, Tawera's art practice is stunted until he encounters and transcends 'Spaze. Te Kore, the nothing' (293). He must encompass the expansive place of potentiality that is also negative space. He then is able to make his 'Sister Seen' thus showing the invasion, and her wailing 'in the form of the spirit figures – taniwha and marakihau – and her arms will reach out to something as untouchable as a receding dream. [...]' (294) In this way, Tawera gives form to his sister's story.

These passages share several characteristics. Each is about creative expression of some kind, and each occurs near the end of the book. Further, they all evoke the dead. In *Potiki*, *Baby No-Eyes* and *The Known World* the dead are represented by the artwork itself; in *Anil's Ghost*, *That Deadman Dance* and *Benang*, the dead are seen or thought about while the artist works. This conveys a sense of reanimation and

rebirth, since each creative moment follows conflict or oppressive circumstances that either caused or contributed to those deaths. In other words, these creations memorialise or give new life to those that have passed on. Many of them do almost literally bring the dead back to life. The similarities between texts is uncanny. Each book closes with carving, painting, weaving, the knitting together of broken statues, or the re-embodiment of characters who have died. This imagery expresses unity without insisting on homogeneity. It symbolises, in the broadest sense, reclamation of that which is lost, reassertion of power, remembrance, and expansiveness. Though the imagery each uses is very local and specific to their source cultures, they all represent new forms of expression that go beyond the traditional, suggesting that societies/cultures should go beyond the limited expectations they have historically been defined by. Each of the novels listed grapples with cultural and political oppression to the point where the humanity and survival of some of the characters are in jeopardy. They don't have tidy, happy endings, and they don't present easy answers, but what these endings do carry is a tenor of hope. They also contain potential – the spark that each expression of creativity carries is that new forms of understanding and creation are endlessly possible. They gesture towards the boundless human capacity to respond to destruction with creation. Uhlmann describes it thus:

One of the most powerful capacities of a work of literary fiction is, as Medvedev and Bakhtin have shown, to reflect an ideological horizon, an overview of a world as it is experienced, which does not present us with formulas and completed theories but with the representation of the processes through which ideologies are generated and reformed. The characteristic of the artistic structure is its inclusiveness. (50)

This is where these texts thoroughly surpass the bounds of Hutcheon's poetics of postmodernism, as Anderson posits, extending beyond the realms of historiographic metafiction, grasping something new and more solid. Anderson writes of the novels in his study (and I would add the novels I've cited above to this list) that they: 'self-consciously employ the questioning of authority, the self-reflexivity, the intertextuality, and the ironic use of historical referents that are the defining points of Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction. These novels do indeed represent history in order to highlight the limitations of representation.' But also according to Anderson, these novels 'in contrast to Hutcheon "seek, through the vehicle of fiction, to persuade [the] reader of the 'correctness' of a particular way of interpreting the world"' (180).

The correctness they tend to assert is culturally and situationally specific: 'They do not question the "possibility of historical knowledge," but challenge the historical knowledge of the imperial grand narratives or settler narratives from an oppositional and specific position, re-inscribing another version of the contested history.' (35) The expressions of creativity I have identified are one way these novels offer alternatives to the settler narratives, and go further than even Anderson's analysis. Here, they not only offer another version of history, but they signal an ability to create a new present and future from both historical knowledge and a creative response to the imperial settler narratives that were previously imposed.

An alternative way of approaching the subject was put forward by Edward Docx in his *Prospect* article, 'Postmodernism is dead.' Docx surveys the rise and fall of postmodernism, suggesting 'postmodernism is becoming "just" another one of the colours we might use.' This argument fits nicely with Anderson's postulations, in that Docx suggests that a new form might be coming into effect, 'Because we are all becoming more comfortable with the idea of holding two irreconcilable ideas in our heads: that no system of meaning can have a monopoly on the truth, but that we still have to render the truth through our chosen system of meaning.' (Docx) Postmodernism, Docx suggests, attacks everything, and causes a mood of confusion and uncertainty to become ubiquitous. In the absence of any other aesthetic criteria, profit becomes the value system by default. The de-privileging of all philosophical positions allows an 'odd species of inert conservatism' to thrive.

Postmodernism has flourished but doesn't provide an adequate response to the world we live in. Docx asserts that humanity has responded with a growing desire for authenticity. Unfortunately, authenticity is a tricky term, but Docx's argument certainly equates somewhat with the novels I examine here – they contain a certain amount of deconstruction of the colonial system and language, but they do not end there. Values and systems of knowledge, both reclaimed from the past and inspired by contemporary experience, are foremost in each novel's engagement with the issues they tackle. Historiographic metafiction is not a solution, but simply one of the tools that can be used along the path to decolonisation. The gap that any postmodern deconstruction leaves will be filled by uniquely and fiercely Indigenous (Māori, Nyoongar) contemporary solutions. Invariably these solutions contain some reclamation of traditional values, but the presence of new creations and marban/matakite abilities in *Benang* and *Baby No Eyes* in particular, suggests that

contemporary solutions lie in going further and creating new understandings and ways of being.

During the writing of this thesis I began to make a list, at first simply to remind myself, of the ‘re-’ words I had been encountering and using. This list became longer and longer, and at the time of writing, I’m still adding to it. I’ve used many of these words to describe what Grace, Scott and the other writers I’ve named are doing when they write what has been described as metafictional or situational historiography: react, re-adapt, re-assert, re-centre, reclaim, recognise, re-form, reinvent, remake, reply, re-situate, restore, re-surface, return, revive, re-vision, re-write. It’s pertinent that the list became so extensive and informative, but all ‘re-’ words suggest going back to something. To illustrate, some layering of experience applies to any re-word: Re-creation can only exist after creation has first been destroyed or ruptured, reformation can only occur when the original formation is destroyed or ruptured.

This is important for Indigenous people – the return to earlier forms. As Anderson suggests: ‘Aboriginal cosmology is asserted as a remedy for colonization and its ills [...] There seems to be a need of some common denominator on which to build a new cultural identity from the scattered remains of a culture literally laid waste by colonization.’ (268) But I don’t think it ends there. Re-words by their very nature tell the story of colonial imposition on Indigenous cultures. If we agree that the formula I’ve postulated above applies, every re-word has at its source an original action or meaning that was destroyed before being returned to. Hutcheon describes the phenomena with reference to other prefixes: ‘we hear of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentring, indeterminacy, and antitotalization. What all of these words literally do (precisely by their disavowing prefixes – *dis*, *de*, *in*, *anti*) is incorporate that which they aim to contest – as does, I suppose, the term *postmodernism* itself’ (3). Every re-word is reactionary to a certain extent. They all embody the activity of ‘talking back’ discussed in earlier chapters, meaning that Indigenous people, forever reacting to the past, are caught in a colonial/postcolonial loop. However, this thesis suggests that fiction is not compelled to simply return to something so much as create something new (as we see in the creative flourishing at the conclusion of these novels). This applies to artistic endeavour of all kinds, which is why these fictions often look to other art forms to embody the inherently creative forces at play. They are certainly influenced by older narratives and landscapes (physical/metaphorical),

but the endpoint (or beginning perhaps) is the incorporation of a new reality. Thus they do not so much reply, or talk back to the dominant culture, as create new conversations with new stories at the centre. The ‘re-’ stage was and is necessary in order to deal with the imposition of colonial impact, but these novels signal the next stage which involves new forms generated by the creative energy born out of ‘talking back’ combined with the reclamation of earlier understandings of Indigenous being.

Is there any proof that the phenomenon I have described has any practical effect? In an essay that examines the place of translation in law and fiction, Uhlmann suggests that ‘art can potentially intervene, altering the translation process by affecting individuals and re-imagining and redirecting the understanding of what has occurred. That is, if law affects life, it might be argued that understandings of life have also always had the potential to in turn affect the law.’ (42) By envisaging possible creative progressions from and solutions to current concerns, I believe Indigenous fiction does affect real world outcomes. This would be difficult to prove since any results can’t be divorced from those produced by other creative and practical responses, but the contribution of this artform to changing understandings of society and culture is indisputable. Consider Patricia Grace and her contemporaries’ contribution to changing understandings of Māori culture in the nineteen seventies (as exemplified by the popular response to *Pōtiki*). Perhaps the final word should go to a practitioner of this form. Kim Scott, describing Harley’s hovering and singing during the last pages of his book, says:

What I was doing in that last page fictionally was in some ways sort of hoping and wishing for something that has started to happen in the years since then. The language programme for instance – we get a pretty nice bunch of people. We share ancestral country and we reconnect through the sounds of place – that’s the sort of thing I was hoping to have. Retrospectively it’s easy to see that sort of development. It was never a strategic plan or anything, but sometimes I like to think we can get somewhere with stories – literary stories about expanding our sense of the world. (Makereti “Social and Political”)

As Albert Wendt stated in 1976: ‘these artists, through their work, are explaining us to ourselves’ (19) Indigenous Writers do not only explain us as we are, but as we might become.

CONCLUSION

Stories have a unique ability to change a person's point of view. Scholars are discovering evidence that stories shape culture and that much of what we believe about life comes not from fact but from fiction. (Wise)

The objective of this thesis is to demonstrate the potential of fiction to increase the imaginative engagement with Indigeneity in all its forms. However we define what Indigeneity is, however we express it, diversity is central to understanding the Indigenous world. It is difficult to attain a truly diverse view when the production of Indigenous creativity, specifically writing in this case, is limited, as argued in the introduction to this thesis. Books like *Baby No-Eyes and Benang* not only add to the affirmation of Indigenous wholeness, complexity, contradiction and wonder espoused by Justice (see pages 12-13), they also call for more creative expression by demonstrating the capacity of all kinds of creativity to take us beyond limited perceptions.

Chapter One of this thesis asserts that simply by representing Indigenous voices, subjects and characters, Indigenous writers have the capacity to change awareness or problematise history. Even at the level of structure, Grace and Scott do not represent a Western linear definition of what 'historical fiction' means, and therefore call into question assumptions regarding the relevance and relationship of history to the present. Grace further upsets conventional understandings of both nuclear family and whānau structures, by depicting a family unit that goes beyond commonly held ideas about both. Crucially, it is the depiction of Te Paania's family's acceptance of the spirit child Baby that represents the most obvious subversion. The author's insistence that she is simply representing that which is ordinary to her (Della Valle "Wider Family") immediately calls into question assumptions about ordinariness for disconcerted readers. Like Grace, Scott writes partially as an antidote to the dilemma of not seeing stories about people like him represented in his national literature. Like Grace as well, he investigates history by making it his subject matter. In Scott's case it is the very real figure of A. O. Neville and his manipulation of language that is interrogated, as well as a family history not too dissimilar to his own.

Both authors bring attention to their own literary operations by engaging multiple voices and self-conscious narrators, but it is in Scott's work that this self-reflexivity is taken to extremes, as discussed in Chapter Two. His narrator, Harley, speaks directly to the reader, involving the audience in his quest to write a family history that gets to the heart of the story by questioning his grandfather's eugenicist archives and seeking a deeper version of events. Scott's interrogation of texts in English includes integrating the words of assimilationist policy makers directly into the novel, as well as borrowing their tone for the voices of his characters. In a personal, family and tribal history so thoroughly shaped by colonial oppression, it is by dark humour and ironic undermining of imperialist language, as well as his propensity to transcend all by floating, that Harley moves past the defining potential of his grandfather's words. Scott presents so many ways of getting past, through or over colonial mind-sets and definitions that it almost makes the harsh realities of Nyoongar lives more bearable reading. Later in the novel it is the Nyoongar stories and landscapes that shape the narrative, so that *Benang* demonstrates ways of responding to colonisation and reclaiming earlier forms of Indigeneity. Grace too offers this opportunity to investigate understandings of collective identity through the medium of story. By demonstrating how stories are important through characters' explicit statements, novel structure and the events of the stories themselves, Grace shows the necessity of story to understandings and expressions of Indigeneity.

In Chapter Three I consider how plurality and multiple possibilities are highlighted and expanded in both books by the climactic manifestation of a creative practice: Tawera's painting in *Baby No-Eyes* and Harley's singing floating performance in *Benang*. This flowering of creativity is evident in other novels, and signifies the ability of Indigenous creativity to contain and synthesise the realities of postcolonial existence and suggest new expressions and understandings of Indigeneity. In this way the texts go beyond the limitations of Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, demonstrating the potential of Indigenous writing to offer something new to writing in English. Derived from at least two storytelling traditions, Indigenous writing in English gestures towards Indigenous understandings of the importance of story, and therefore, fiction.

This thesis has noted that fiction by Māori is under represented in New Zealand's literature. This reality should be seen in the context of the overall struggles of Indigenous peoples to restore both physical and non-physical possessions usurped

and damaged by colonial impact. The goal is to create fresh, whole communities by connecting the process of decolonisation to creative engagement with contemporary realities. I assert that fiction is a necessary aspect of reaching that goal. It is only one of a string of creative responses that might be made, though each connects to and supports the others. This thesis also demonstrates how *Baby No-Eyes and Benang* are able to transform received interpretations of history and present challenges to readers of literature and history. Such a small sample does not make possible a definitive analysis of Indigenous literature itself, but this thesis does demonstrate the potential of fiction to generate new expressions, understandings and creative solutions.

As these chapters have shown, it is vitally important that more space is made for Indigenous fiction, and this also means that further critical studies are necessary. I had not intended to focus solely on Indigenous literature when I began this doctoral research, however, as the study progressed it became more evident that there are significant gaps in the study of Māori literature (Pistacchi “Spiralling Subversions”, Te Punga Somerville) particularly by New Zealanders. Many of the theses, books and articles available are by European or American writers (Della Valle, Heim, Knudsen, Pistacchi,⁵³), who have quite often visited Aotearoa but do not live in New Zealand. Māori critics of Māori literature are particularly rare. Pistacchi states that her PhD thesis was inspired by a conversation with a New Zealand teacher who had no resources with which to teach contemporary Māori literature to her students (“Spiralling Subversions” 4). The interest and contribution of international commentators should not be underestimated, but Māori literatures should be read and discussed by Māori and Pākehā readers more often. A small example of differences in the resultant interpretations is exemplified in the difference between Pistacchi’s and my own reading of the family/whānau of *Baby No-Eyes* (Pistacchi: post-nuclear; me: traditional urban, see chapter one, page 28). Māori readers will invariably offer a different perspective about the meanings of Māori literatures. The feelings Kim Scott

⁵³ A quick re-search for critical writing about Māori literature has led me to a new publication: *Narrating indigenous modernities : transcultural dimensions in contemporary Māori literature* (2011) by Michaela Moura-Koçoğlu. I am not sure why several earlier searches did not reveal this text though I note that new work is being published and added to library collections continuously. Further investigation reveals Moura-Koçoğlu has published quite extensively on Māori literature. I find myself disheartened that firstly, her work did not appear in my earlier searches (not sure whether this is due to problematic search terms or the overseas publication of her work), and secondly, that this kind of research is taking place so far from the writers and prospective main audience for this work. I find this sad only because it starkly contrasts the paucity of research on Māori literature written in New Zealand by Māori and other New Zealanders.

expressed about winning the regional Commonwealth Writers Prize suggest the situation is very similar in Australia. As mentioned in the introduction (page 14), he expressed sadness that this was a first for his people, when Aboriginal storytelling should have been recognised long ago. At the International Arts Festival in Wellington 2012, he recognised that most of his readers would be white. It is perhaps not too much of a stretch to assert that Aboriginal Australians face the same absence of writers and commentators that originate within their communities. So this thesis, in the final analysis, joins the call for both more Indigenous fiction *and* more Indigenous commentators and critics for our own literatures. It is difficult to be more specific than this when the field appears to be wide open. Only when we have prolific Indigenous literatures can we begin to see the full diversity of our experiences and realities. It is at that point that all the multiplicity and possibility envisaged by books like *Baby No-Eyes and Benang* will find fruition.

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