

## A Cultural-Historical Reading of Patricia Grace's Cousins.

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*Preamble: Criticism of Māori Literature*

In the Māori world, an artist traditionally guides a work of art into being, whether a carving, painting, poem or novel. Artists draw on the energies of te whitua, active space -- ancient, mysterious forces to which they have access. The work of art is viewed with reverence. It has its own mauri -- its own distinctive, defining qualities.

Erenora Puketapu-Hetet, a weaver, describes the place of the artist in accordance with tradition that Māori brought from Polynesia (1989: 2):

The ancient Polynesian belief is that the artist is a vehicle through whom the gods can create. Art is sacred and interrelated with the concepts of mauri, mana and tapu.<sup>1</sup>

Given the spiritual significance of Māori art, any disciplined, systematic measurement could be considered culturally insensitive. A further difficulty is that criteria used in the assessment of western literature may fail to access some of the most significant aspects of a work of Māori literature. Jane McRae identifies the problem (1995: 191):

we cannot talk of a (published) Māori criticism or even something different. There has been objection to assessment of new indigenous literatures using the criteria applied to criticism of English literature.

The difficulty relates not only to Māori literature, but to all indigenous literatures. According to Paula Gunn Allen, a Native American writer, Westerners bring their own thinking and values to their reading of indigenous writing, overlooking the fact that very different attitudes and cultural beliefs may inform those literary works (1996: 241):

The study of non-Western literature poses a problem for Western readers, who naturally tend to see alien literature in

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<sup>1</sup> "mauri": inner spirit and defining quality within people and all aspects of nature; "mana": dignity, power, inherited or earned prestige; "tapu": sacred, separate, forbidden.

terms that are familiar to them, however irrelevant those terms may be to the literature under consideration.

Arun Mukherjee's book, *Postcolonialism: My Living*, questions the recurrent application of postcolonial theory to indigenous literatures. At the time of publication, she held a position at York University, Toronto, which required that she teach postcolonial theory, relating it to writing from India, Canada, the Caribbean, Australia, New Zealand, and a range of African countries. Out of respect for the indigenous authors from so many countries and cultures, she has recommended a cultural-historical approach.

The typical postcolonial reading involves a process of comparison and contrast that refers back to the conventions and traditions of the European novel. European influences are noted, together with the use of subversiveness as a reaction against values and requirements shaped by British literary traditions. A postcolonial reading directs attention to cultural differences – differences, that is, from the culture of the European 'centre'. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan writer, has objected to this focus in *Decolonising the Mind*. He asks, "Why can't African literature be at the centre so that we can view other cultures in relationship to it?" (1981: 89).

When Witi Ihimaera was asked if he was happy to have terms like 'postcolonial' applied to his work, he replied, "They're international constructs. They're part of a need to look at a work from the outside. What matters to me is the view from the inside out" (Ellis, 1999: 176). It is inferred that postcolonial readings address peripheral matters, rather than coming to grips with the essence of a work.

When indigenous literature is written in English, the assumption has often been made that any English speaking critic would be able to appraise the work. This is not necessarily the case. To appreciate the subtleties of a work by Māori from "the inside out", readers need an in-depth knowledge of Māori culture. The following aspects, vital to Māori literature, have to date received little attention from critics: mythology and its influence on Māori thought; symbolism derived from ancient oral traditions; spiritual and metaphysical beliefs; protocols, cultural values, obligations; and history as perceived by Māori, predating and following colonisation .

Without a thorough understanding of these key components of literary works by Māori, critics are ill-equipped to offer a critical appraisal. What is required is an approach or literary theory that is sensitive to the cultural and historical resonances of language, opening the way to appreciation of the aesthetic nature of a novel, play, story or poem.

One option could be to apply selected aspects of the new historicism to the reading of Māori literature. This many-faceted theory is underpinned by two

fundamental precepts: first, that a literary text has a social, cultural and historical context or setting; secondly, that a source of vitality in a literary work is the ‘social energy’ encoded in its language.

Characterised by huge curiosity and relentless questioning, the theory was devised in the 1980s by Stephen Greenblatt at the University of California, Berkeley. Analysis includes the careful decoding of culturally loaded terms and historical references; the significance of rhetoric is “social and historical”. Greenblatt proposes paying attention to “formal and linguistic designs”, as well as to “what can only be glimpsed, as it were, at the margins of the text”. He advocates investigation “into the half-hidden cultural transactions through which great works of art are empowered” (1988: 5, 4).

Mythological beliefs, religious protocols and traditional symbolism can create intense reader involvement. Energy-bearing images, metaphors, allusions and signifiers need to be identified, if readers are to perceive how power can be invested in and released through the language. So-called “thick description” (Kaes, 1990: 62) advocated by new historicism, penetrates significant terms or expressions. Such an approach could surely be applied to disclose the cultural subtleties of motivation and causation that non-Māori readers may fail to notice, limiting appreciation of works such as *Potiki* or *Cousins*.

This essay on *Cousins* by Patricia Grace offers a cultural-historical reading, bearing certain new historicist principles in mind. For example, the novel’s structure will be discussed in relation to Māori art, symbols and mythology, thus placing the text in its cultural context. The influence of New Zealand’s colonial and social history on the characters will be considered, together with the way values, protocols and the metaphysical are encoded in language.

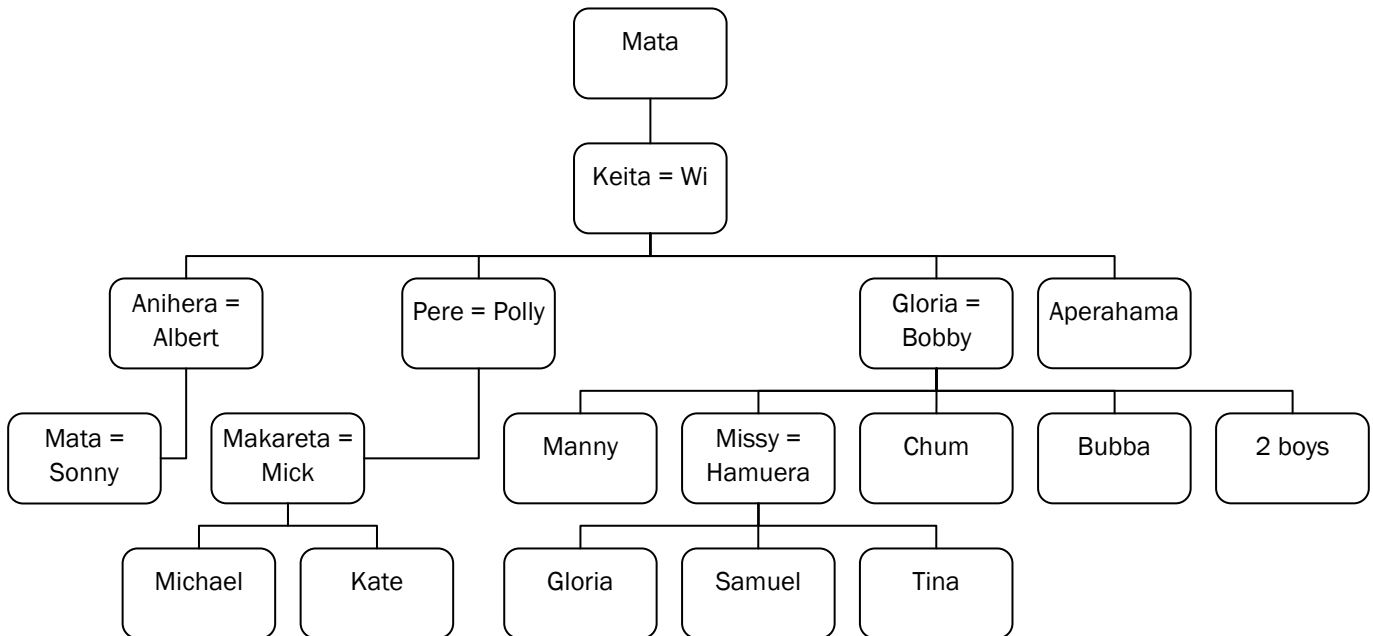
The investigation into *Cousins* will examine the novel from a number of related perspectives: how its structure is related to Māori art and mythology; its spiritual dimension; its “social energy,” seen in terms of its cultural context, and the issues of reciprocation, genealogy and the need for land; the effects of New Zealand’s colonial history on families and individuals; and how the language of *Cousins* reflects history and culture.

### *Cousins: Introduction*

Three cousins, whose childhood experiences differ in the extreme, are the central characters in Patricia Grace’s third novel. *Cousins* explores the effects of cultural and emotional deprivation, of material deprivation and of privilege. Mata, raised in an orphanage, is cut off from her family and culture. Missy is brought up within her Māori whānau (extended family), with caring parents, but in poor living conditions. Makareta is well educated and

advantaged in preparation for a taumau (an arranged marriage). The contrasting lives of the cousins are viewed in relation to immediate family and forebears and are linked to mythical genealogies.

The family tree or section of whakapapa may help readers to locate the characters:



*Structure: Symbols, Mythology and Māori Art*

Grace's structuring of the novel calls to mind the Māori art of whiri or plaiting, wherein patterns employ two, three, four, eight or ten strands. In *Cousins*, three strands come close together and overlap intermittently, before moving apart. However, the regular repetitive pattern of plaiting is not followed. Lives are certainly interwoven in a novel that moves back and forth in time. Five narrators in addition to the authorial narrator provide six different points of view that confirm and reinforce one another, strengthening the fabric of the fiction.

The book's six sections present the cousins in the following order: Mata, Makareta, Missy, Makareta, Missy, Mata. Third-person narration opens the novel. In the second section, Makareta's mother Polly, and Makareta through letters to her mother, are the narrators; there is also one third-person chapter. The third section provides a truly remarkable perspective. The first-person narrator is Missy's unborn twin brother. Great-aunt Kui Hinemate helps with Missy's delivery. She would have examined the placenta and noted signs of the brother's brief existence. Not only does he offer unique insight into his sister's life, but it can also be inferred that this spirit within her adds to Missy's resilience and energy: "there's a spritish trace of me that has curled itself in to you." (p. 159) His presence is in keeping with Māori belief in the enduring influence of the spirits of those who have died. In sections four, five and six, first-person narrations by each of the three cousins in turn extend the range of viewpoints.

What is essential to the structure of *Cousins* is a three-way contrast, with each of the trio differing markedly from the other two. Three-way contrast is found in the Māori art of kōwhaiwhai, which features on the rafters of many meetinghouses, using the traditional colours red, white and black.

Contrast in the novel is given emphasis through symbols, which help to define and characterise each cousin. Hair is of particular significance. Mata and Makareta, much the same age, have similar facial features and body shape. In terms of natural endowment, it is likely that their hair is also similar, but the way it is regarded by others differs dramatically.

Polly, noticing Mata in a school playground, comments on the cousins' physical likeness and their contrasting demeanour (1992: 131).

It was when I was going to visit Alma at the hospital one day that I saw Mata from the window of the tram, sitting in a school playground. It could have been Makareta I was seeing. It was Makareta's large frame and dark, plump face. The stillness was Makareta's as the girl sat, watching other children play, but Makareta does not have awkwardness and is not bereft. She

has a river of hair that falls, touching the back of her knees.  
Every strand of it has been touched and cared for.

Having newly arrived at a Māori girls' boarding school, Makareta has trouble with her long hair. She writes to her mother complaining, "I had never once in my life done my own hair." (138) Kui Hinemate takes half an hour to brush the hair and arrange it. It is an essential part of Makareta's identity.

Mata, on the other hand, knows herself to have "bad" hair.

She brushed her hair, pressing the springy curls down as best she could -- bad curls had to be cut, cut, cut, Matron snapping with the scissors, pulling down hard with the comb. Bad. She had to flatten her hair down with water every morning and slide her two long clips in to try to stop it from springing. (...)

When Matron had finished cutting her hair she would tell her to get the pan and brush and clean up the mess, so she'd sweep up all the bad curls and carry them down to the incinerator. One day James, the caretaker, had been down at the incinerator when she'd taken her hair to burn.

"Been shearing the black sheep, have they?" he'd asked. (30-31)

Such cutting and burning inflicts humiliation. In the Māori world the head is sacred. Any tending of hair or the head should be carried out respectfully, as it has been for Makareta throughout her childhood.

In many works of Māori art, the part represents the whole.<sup>2</sup> The care lavished on Makareta's hair adds to her mana (prestige), whereas the assault on Mata's hair reflects an assault on her entire person. By defining the response of people toward one feature of each cousin, Grace provides evidence of contrasting attitudes toward two individuals.

In mythology, hair can hold magical power, forming a link between the human and the spiritual realm. Taranga, mother of the demi-god Maui, believed her baby to be stillborn. Robyn Kahukiwa tells the story in *Wahine Toa* (1984: 72)

After Taranga had given birth to Maui-potiki (Maui the last-born), she believed him to be dead, so she cut off her top-knot, wrapped the baby in it and set the child and the hair afloat on the sea. The topknot, already a tapu part of the body, had extra magical powers, for it protected Maui while he was in the sea.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in John Bevan Ford's painting "Te Niho o te Taniwha", triangles represent the teeth of taniwha, and the teeth represent the whole taniwha, suggesting the presence of a mythical monster or his ancient, mysterious energies. See Panny 2004: 3-4.

As an adult, Makareta says she has "plaits that wound round my head three times." (203) Since her hair becomes comparable to Taranga's topknot, Makareta, too, may have extraordinary powers.

Hair is also significant in relation to Missy, the third cousin. Her ginger stripy head of hair links her to an ancient ancestress, Hine-ahu-one, the first woman, who was shaped from red earth by the god Tāne. However, the hair on Missy's head is not, symbolically, the most important hair on her body.

As Missy's home has no bathroom, the family washes in a basin by the tank-stand or in a nearby stream. Missy, at the age of fifteen, tucks her dress up under the armpits and stands in a bowl washing herself. She looks down.

Hair there like mama's, fluffy, curly. You squeezed the cloth against your stomach and watched the water run, slicking the little curls then running down your legs. Legs blotched from old sores, ugly. But you had a pretty place between your legs... (182)

The image of pubic hair anticipates Missy's role as procreator. It announces her heritage, reaching back to Papatūānuku, the Earth Mother. When Tane sought the female element, the uha, he could find it only in "the fertile red soil on the pubic area of his mother Papatūānuku." This is depicted in Robyn Kahukiwa's painting in *Wahine Toa*, wherein each fern frond is ready to open as progeny. A new generation is unfurling toward the future. "The ferns are part of the pubis of Papa" (1984: 69).

Key symbols carry the novel's main ideas and underpin the structure of *Cousins*. A marble symbolises to Mata "a new little world".

It was a big glass marble with blue, yellow, red and green ribbons swirling inside it. There were some mauve, smoky patches in it as well and some gold-brown speckles. It was as though there was a new little world right there inside the marble, and as though she was holding the new coloured world in her hand. (48)

After having found the marble while holidaying with the whānau, Mata gives it to her cousin Manny. The gift, in its wider connotations of a world that is subsequently withheld from Mata for several decades, is metaphorically returned to her at the novel's conclusion. The end of Mata's years of isolation, despair and waiting is anticipated by Makareta, who says, "Gifts are meant to be given, and one day returned. It must be her turn, again, to hold the coloured marble." (218) The novel concludes in the meetinghouse, with Mata

“taken by Missy to sit on the mattresses, she on one side of Makareta, I on the other. / There we were the three of us.” (255)

The final image of harmony is in sharp contrast to the novel’s opening image of a solitary woman walking with no destination in mind: “she knew now that there were no answers, unless the answers were ‘Nowhere’ ‘No reason’ ‘Nothing’ ‘No one’.” (14) Traditionally, Māori regard the solitary person as lost and adrift. For so long, Mata was “Unowned. Nothing owned nothing owed.” (11) The need to belong to whānau, hapū, iwi, and the cultural imperative to reciprocate do not involve her, until she is guided out of a mental and emotional void, comparable to Te Kore -- the nothing and the not-nothing.

Using reiterated negatives (thirty-seven in the first chapter) Grace evokes Te Kore, which can be infinitely distant in time, yet continuously present. The mythical Te Kore is the source of all genealogy and the potential from which new life originates; it is the condition from which creativity and regeneration develop.

The novel’s structure includes more than one pattern of progression. Each of the cousins brings into focus a phase in an ever-emerging spiral demonstrating potential, then new life, then death. The opening locates Mata in Te Kore; Missy’s first section, placed centrally in the novel, emphasises procreation; the death of Makareta is significant in the concluding section.

Also contributing to the novel’s coherent structure is Mata’s journey from Te Kore, the nothing, to Tē Kore, the not nothing (the “undark dark”, 13 and 24), through to a secure place within the whānau at the conclusion. Ancient metaphysical energies are involved in her symbolic transition from Te Kore’s gradations of darkness into the world of light, warmth and family.

### *The Spiritual Dimension*

Awareness of a spiritual dimension is integral to the Māori worldview. In *Cousins*, the spiritual affects motivation and behaviour. For Māori, spirits of the dead are not simply conjured up in works of fiction, like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, in which the ghost of the King appears. On the contrary, in the Māori world, spirits maintain a continuous presence among the living. Because many readers may be unfamiliar with the coexistence of the spiritual and the tangible, Grace uses discretion in alluding to the supernatural. Both rational and metaphysical interpretations of a key event are sometimes available.

When Makareta departs without warning, unwilling to agree to an arranged marriage, the bridegroom-to-be and his whānau are waiting to be called on to the marae. Missy saves the honour of her family by stepping forward.

"I want it to be me." (...)



"I want to be the one", and remained standing with no more words to say, knowing you must not sit down even though our mother's hand had reached to sit you. (...) Behind you were the pale face, the flickering eyes of the ancestress." (195)

Missy may have been guided by the ancestress with "the flickering eyes", but love for her mother Gloria provides a clear and logical reason for her action. Care of her mother has always been Missy's responsibility. She saves her mother from further blame for Makareta's absence. "You did this" (194) were Keita's first words addressed to Gloria, when she learns that Makareta has left. Furthermore, by offering to be the one, Missy is able to put right her mother's refusal in her youth to participate in a *taumau*.

Missy's father Bobby may have had an intimation some twenty years earlier of the significance of a child of his. When he is badly wounded during the war on Crete near Maleme, his friend Rere calls to him and searches for him. Bobby is prepared to die, thinking Rere might not survive if he were to carry his mate back to base, but he changes his mind and allows Rere to find him. Bobby tells the story to Gloria, immediately after the birth of Missy. Gloria asks why he should speak of the war at such a time.

"In the middle of it I think of a baby, that's why," he said. "I was laying there thinking it was nothing to die, blacking out, coming to. But in the middle of it there's a baby, like in a dream. It's a little new baby (...) like this new little missy we got. My own baby it is. Like telling me, don't die." (158)

It is certainly the belief of Keita, grandmother to the three cousins, that Missy's role in bringing the genealogy of two families together and in strengthening the mana and economic wellbeing of the *whānau* was preordained. Keita tells Missy later, "If you're not the one meant it wouldn't have been you standing in the house without a doubt in your heart." (229)

Keita's belief is reinforced by allusions to mythology, which link Missy to several of the earliest ancestresses. In the novel's central section, most chapters begin with italicised references to genealogy, "The mists of morning sighs/Rise" (193). By means of the mist, the Earth Mother Papatūānuku reaches up to the Sky Father Rangī. The image offers a reminder that genealogy began with the love of Rangī and Papatūānuku. Missy and Hamuera will extend the genealogy. In another reference to procreation, Chapter thirty-three begins, "One who lives in the moon/Controls the blood's flow". (169) Rona, the mythical woman in the moon, controls menstruation and, thereby, the fertility of women. Hine-tītama, described in *Wahine Toa* as

"the mother of mankind" (1984: 70), introduces Chapter thirty-eight: "Titama, Titama". The daughter of Hine-ahu-one, Hine- tītama eventually descends to the underworld to become Hine-nui-te-pō, the great lady of the night. Missy plays a part that contributes to the cycle of life, birth and death.

While there is a rational as well as a supernatural explanation for Missy's action in stepping forward to fulfil her destiny, emphasis on the spiritual is greater in relation to Mata and Makareta. Makareta's son Michael is able to see the forms of those who have died. He asks his mother,

"Who's that with the old face?"

"That's Kui Hinemate," she says. "She used to take care of me when I was a girl." (246)

In her nursing career, whenever Makareta must deal with situations that are difficult in a cultural sense, such as preparing a bed for a new patient after the previous patient has died in the same room, she would ask the spirit of Kui Hinemate for guidance and would hear her voice, but not see her. Sometimes, she explains to Mata, she would feel Kui Hinemate alongside her.

Readers unfamiliar with this thinking may choose to identify with Mata who says, "I thought Makareta was a little strange from some of things she said." (246) Grace, with her authorial skill in ensuring her character's credibility, is preparing the way for Mata's later matter-of-fact observation that Makareta is surrounded by shadowy ancestral figures, including Kui Hinemate, immediately after her death. "Nothing about that night or morning seemed strange to me at the time." (248) Mata finds that she, like Michael, is able to see the forms of the dead. One meaning of her name is 'medium; communicating with spirits'. In being given the name of her great-grandmother ("my daughter ... gave her daughter my first mother's name," 45), Mata is gifted with the mana and talent of her ancestress.

A recurrent motif is the photograph of Mata's mother Anihera, who dies when Mata is seven. Mata holds the photograph close and speaks of the ache drawn out of her through her mother's eyes (95). The photograph represents the person; it is all the fifty-year-old Mata takes with her when she leaves her house and allows her feet to take her in any direction.

Twelve hours or more and perhaps twenty-five kilometres later, with no knowledge that her cousin lives in Wellington, Mata finds herself in Makareta's street, with Makareta waiting for her at the gate to take her indoors. Mata allows herself to be led, though she is not aware of this. Ancestral spirits, the spirit of Kui Hinemate or perhaps the spirit of her mother, guide Mata through the suburbs of Wellington to find the person who can help in the recovery of her life and identity by bringing her home.

At Makareta's tangi, Mata again sees Kui Hinemate walking with her hand on the casket as it is carried across the marae. She then sees the forms of other ancestors as well, including that of her own mother Anihera.

Seeing the spirits of ancestors is an ability with which Missy is familiar.

I know that the old ones see the ancestors in different ways and in different places, and that they often see them in the young. This house is a place where the tipuna are seen by the ones who have the gift of seeing. (221-222)

Belief in this gift is widely held among Māori. In the 2003 publication *Tohunga: Hohepa Kereopa*, by Paul Moon, the tohunga describes his own experience (2003: 110):

One time, I heard someone behind me, and I saw an old lady wearing a cardigan over her shoulders, and she said that everything was all right. (...) It was one of my aunties. And that afternoon, I got the phone call. She had passed away. You don't see the full person, but you see an image that will remind you of that person.

The ancestors are part of a present reality. The 'ahistoric present' names the belief that the present moment encompasses past, present and future. The future resides in all that has gone before. In the words of Erenora Puketapu-Hetet, "The Māori have a different time concept, which means we cannot separate ourselves from our ancestors or the generations in front of us" (1989: 5). Genealogy is at the very heart of Māori culture.

### *Social Energy*

#### *(a) The Cultural Context*

In the meetinghouse -- the wharenuī or whare tīpuna of their own people -- spirits of the ancestors gather to listen and to guide the whānau. The wharenuī itself symbolises an ancestor, with a backbone, ribs, and arms outstretched in welcome. It is the venue for gatherings, for celebrations and for the tangihanga.

Before every hui or meeting, manuhiri (visitors) are welcomed and speeches exchanged, establishing whakapapa links. This prepares the way for the social discourse, which will take place once everyone gathers in the dining hall after the formalities. Sir Hugh Kawharu speaks of one "rationale for Māori social life, the ethic of kinship: an ethic offering constraints and

opportunities, rewards and penalties now, as ever in the past” (Barlow, 1991: vii).

In a talk at the Teachers’ Resource Centre (Christchurch, 1984), Grace explained that the Māori way of life is defined by certain cultural values (cited in Panny, 1997: 4).

"I'm not talking about the Māori language which I never heard. I'm not talking about waiata and poi and haka, which, however, I did learn something of. I'm not talking about Māori myths and legends or arts and crafts either.

I'm talking about values, which I think are the essential part of the culture.

I'm talking about

aroha (love in the highest sense)

manaakitanga (hospitality)

whānaungatanga (relationships and loyalty in the family)

ngā tīpuna (the ancestors)

te tangata (the importance of people)

te whenua (relationship to the land)

te moana (relationship to the sea)

I'm talking about te mauri -- the life spirit of every person."

Reciprocation is fundamental to all Māori values. The sense of responsibility to the whānau, implied and understood by its members, is 'encoded' within the terms naming the different cultural values. Characters' motivation is also encoded and invoked by these values, which would traditionally guide their lives. Missy's personal hopes, like the dream of becoming a singer in the city, are inconsequential beside the needs of the family.

"Te whenua" names the land. The placenta, also "te whenua", could be said to symbolise a person's relationship to the land. When Polly wants to take Makareta to Wellington to live, Keita says, "Our son's child stays here. (...) Makareta's whenua is buried up there ..." (100-101) When the whenua is buried in the earth, a contract is established. The earth will protect and succour the child and the child will take responsibility for the earth. The land adjacent to the burial place of the whenua is forever 'home' to the child.

When Missy gives birth to children in a hospital, she worries that the whenua is disposed of instead of being buried on the family land with aroha and correct protocol. She and Makareta link the lives of those drifting aimlessly in the city with the failure of so many young people to have strong connections with the land. Missy comments, "The old people say their confusion [that of the young people] is because their whenua have gone down

the slush hole with all the tutae and the rubbish, instead of being buried in the ancestral places where they belong." (235)

*(b) Reciprocation, Genealogy and Land*

Missy has a significant part to play in relation to genealogy, mana and land. To ensure a viable future for the generations to come, Keita considers it essential to bring two families together in marriage to open up land that had been lying idle and inaccessible without the liaison. Following the marriage of Missy and Hamuera, the land supports, not only the couple, but also Makareta's son Michael, who joins Missy's brother Manny in a hydroponic venture. Given a viable economic base, employment is assured for family members. Furthermore, income can ensure that young people from the next generation receive an education to the benefit of everyone. Keita is committed to preserving and extending the whānau's ownership of land to protect the livelihood and the mana of future generations. Mana can be maintained only if the family has land.

As a young woman, Keita herself exercised responsibility by agreeing to an arranged marriage with Wi. Keita tells Missy, "What you have to remember is that your marriage is for the people, like mine was. When I married your grandfather we had seen each other just once, but we had been promised since we were children." (229) She expects similar dedication to family interests from others. Keita is concerned with whakapapa, with preserving the genealogical lines. She tries unsuccessfully to persuade the widowed Polly to marry Aperehama, her younger son, so that "the whakapapa is not upset." (102) Makareta and any brothers and sisters of the new union could thereby share the same ancestry. Polly escapes to Wellington.

Defying Keita carries consequences. When Gloria marries Bobby instead of someone of Keita's choice, Gloria, her husband and six children are left to live in a two-roomed shack. Certainly, Bobby describes himself as "a drunk, shot-up bastard" (197), his health having been ruined by war injuries. But the fact that Bobby heads for the pub on payday is not the major reason for the family's poor living conditions. When Missy fulfils Keita's hopes at last, her mother is forgiven and a new house is built immediately for the family.

Keita controls access to family land and to the money associated with land ownership. At times she is an adjudicator. Keita ruefully explains that she has an ancestral entitlement to land, power and obligations, because she was the one to "survive the wars, the hard times, the flu epidemic." (142) Keita's inheritance can be contrasted with Polly's. Keita says,

"We know your family. It's a very good family, from a strong line, a family strong in the customs, but, Polly, they've got no land. Through no fault of theirs, they've got no land." (102)

Authority requires a double inheritance: land and prestigious genealogy.

Grace uses to good effect the tension and energy generated as characters comply with, or resist, cultural obligations to family, ancestors or descendants. At the same time, the novel demonstrates a conflict between traditional expectations and the goals of an independent, well-educated woman like Makareta, who fulfils a responsibility toward the wider Māori community in her own way. Her refusal to comply with Keita's plans allows Grace to demonstrate how a person with Makareta's advantages -- well-versed in Māoritanga and with educational qualifications -- can excel in the Pakeha world. She is in a position to guide and encourage Māori everywhere to "shape their own destinies" (215).

### *Colonial History*

Makareta becomes involved in social problems of the 1970s and 1980s, for which there is a factual, historical basis. She is spurred by the 1975 Land March, in which Whina Cooper led Māori and their supporters from the far north of Aotearoa to Parliament Buildings in Wellington, protesting against loss of Māori land to colonisers, marching "under the slogan of 'Not one acre more of Māori land'" (Walker, 2004: 214).

After 1975, Makareta journeys throughout the country, working for the wellbeing of Māori. She speaks of the statistics revealing Māori poverty, poor health, under-achievement. She speaks of glue sniffing, neglected children, violence toward women. Makareta does not hold Pākehā solely to blame for destitute, demoralised people. "None of us could be unaffected by them and no one was blameless." (208) It is implied that Māori have not cared for or supported one another well enough in the cities. Makareta is especially concerned for "the hollowed-out of our people, the rawakore, the truly disinherited (...) where there was no memory, where the void had been defiled by an inrushing of anger and weeping." (208) Within Te Kore, the void, resides the potential for regeneration; the defiling of the void implies damage beyond repair.

Grace does not explain the detail of Makareta's work apart from saying that, "There were issues of land, language, health and welfare, money, work, education, customs and culture to be discussed, promoted and worked on." (208-209) At that time in New Zealand's history, such activities were, in fact, taking place in response to very real situations of disadvantage among Māori.

Margaret McClure's book, *A Civilised Community*, offers the following information. In 1984, in a report entitled "Institutional Racism in the Department of Social Welfare", a Ministerial Advisory Committee found that Social Welfare "reinforced the superiority of a Pākehā culture and the inferior economic position of Māori in several fields: in legislation, in the delivery of benefits, in staffing practices and in the treatment of young people in its social work" (1998: 223-224). The committee visited thirty-eight marae and community venues around New Zealand. Chaired and led by Tūhoe elder John Rangihau, it is the kind of committee and the kind of work with which Makareta could have been associated at that time.

Also historically accurate is the establishment of the Kōhanga Reo movement in the early 1980s. Polly, with Makareta's help, establishes a Kōhanga Reo at her home.

It was an exciting time with these kohanga springing up all over the country, and people having renewed hope that our language, through our own initiatives and via the little children, would revive and survive after having been suppressed for so long. (210-211)

New awareness of what Māori had lost through "massive robbery" (215) was a feature of these years. The Waitangi Tribunal began its work in 1975 and was able to extend its terms of reference in 1985. Makareta describes the Treaty as follows:

The Treaty of Waitangi is a covenant that must reside as the base on which our society builds if there is to be a just society. I heard about the Treaty as a child, and knew it to be a treasured thing in the minds of those who spoke of it, an agreement on which the people, in spite of treachery, still based their hopes. (216)

Makareta's words indicate the reverence with which the Treaty is viewed. Its enduring mana in the eyes of Māori has led E. T. J. Durie, former Chairman of the Waitangi Tribunal and subsequently Judge of the High Court, to consider the Treaty to be an ever-speaking document (1989: 28-33).

In *Cousins*, the impact of colonisation on Māori families and individuals reflects a reality that has been recorded by historians and sociologists. Part of the novel is played against a background of World War II. Makareta's father dies in Egypt. His friend Bobby returns on board a hospital ship. Colonisation and New Zealand's ties with Britain were responsible for involvement in the war, but Grace also makes it clear that the men wanted to

go. To them, the tour of duty heralded excitement, adventure and fulfilment of ideals associated with their strength as warriors. The Māori Battalion, sent to Crete, to Egypt and later to Italy comprised volunteers. More than 1,700 Māori enlisted between 1939 and 1945.

The departure of the Māori Battalion from Wellington Harbour in 1940 has been well documented. Grace's description of the event in *Cousins* is in accord with the report in *The Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War* by J. F. Cody:

On arrival, the train with shuttered windows and guarded doors, passed on to Aotea Quay, which was then closed against the crowd that had gathered there in the hope of a last few words with the troops. (2001: 188)

History also confirms a tuberculosis epidemic in New Zealand in the 1940s. Mata's mother and Polly's sister Cissie die of the illness. *The Silent Migration* reports that, in Wellington, Ewart Hospital was "the chest hospital. There were three floors all packed with TB patients in those days" (2001: 183). TB is a disease related to socio-economic conditions and to poor quality housing; Māori in the cities were discriminated against.

When Polly takes Makareta to Wellington, it is difficult for her to find a suitable place to live. Landlords do not want a Māori tenant.

Makareta and I went together in answer to 'To Let' advertisements only to find ourselves turned away. Sometimes doors would be slammed on us before I'd had time to speak. At other times we were shown sheds, cold basements, or leaking rooms without heat or water. (117)

Attitudes of this kind are not fictional. Mihipeka Edwards, in *The Silent Migration*, speaks of her efforts to find accommodation in Wellington about 1940 (2001: 46):

It was very hard, very embarrassing, trying to get a place to stay. Because I was a Maori they just looked at me and shut the door. They said they were full up (while the vacancy sign still was in the window). You could have the very best job but still no one wanted you to live in their house. (...) After a while I found a place to stay and moved in. (...) Actually it was terrible. I woke up in the morning with little black things hopping around in the sheets.

Difficulties faced by Māori seeking accommodation arose from racism. *The Six Colonies of New Zealand* written by William Fox, four times New Zealand



Prime Minister between 1851 and 1873, provides examples of the attitudes brought to New Zealand by colonisers. Such ideas, passed from parents to children, are not easily eradicated, even over a period of one hundred and fifty years. In his scornful 1851 observations, Fox judges Māori and their culture to be barbaric (1971 (1851): 69):

How little they are removed from barbarism may be judged by the fact, that the fence of the pah, at Waikanae (where a missionary and a resident magistrate have resided for several years), continues to this day disfigured by a series of colossal statues, carved in wood, of the most obscene and disgusting designs.

Ranginui Walker identifies that British sense of cultural superiority in *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou*:

Although colonisation was driven by economic forces, + ... its implementation was underpinned by assumptions of cultural superiority. Colonial domination was justified by the 'civilising' mission of the coloniser. (1990: 146)

The mindset of Mata's English father Albert embraces such racist views toward Māori. According to his sister-in-law Gloria, Albert wants a wife as a slave and hopes to gain access to land. When those goals become unattainable, he places Mata in an orphanage and vests authority over her with a Pākehā guardian. It is intended that she be brought up as a European with no knowledge of Māori culture.

In the orphanage, Mata is regarded as "bad and strange – where she had a dirty skin and the kids called her dirty. (...) At school she was called names that made her feel ashamed." (94) Mata also encounters racism at the home of a child from her class. The child invites her to play after school.

Then the mother came and chased you out because you weren't allowed. Betty wasn't allowed to bring dirty, black children into the house to make bangles or necklaces for dolls. Or Home kids. Betty was a naughty, naughty girl. (17)

Patricia Grace's concern at the residual racism in New Zealand is indicated in an interview with Jane McRae:

There are messages everywhere that can give kids the idea that who they are is not a good thing to be. It's to do with who the stories are about, how they're told and who tells them. It's to do with media presentation, advertising, statistics and what are

values in our society. It's a lot for Māori kids to contend with.  
(1992: 47)

### *Language*

An obvious effect of colonisation on Māori is the imposition of the English language. As a primary school child, Makareta becomes agitated when Kui Himemata speaks Māori in the hearing of others or as they approach the gate of the primary school, where only English is permitted. From the time the European education system was implemented during the second half of the nineteenth century, it became usual for the younger generations to learn little or no Māori.

In *Cousins* the way characters speak reflects their educational and language background. The range of styles contributes to the novel's vitality. It defines the different characters and sharpens the contrasts between them. Language patterns contribute to the authenticity of the characterisation.

English variants are spoken by Missy's siblings and father, by Mata's elderly aunts and by Missy's friend Tuahine. Bobby and his children typify those brought up hearing distinctive forms of English in Māori households. Māori were never taught 'English as a second language'; they have developed their own idiom. Bobby and Gloria's children call out using their own lively and effective patterns of language:

"Mine's is a eel, mine's is a eel."  
"Uncle Nonny we got a chogalafish." (40)

Missy's cousin Tuahine dances up to her on the day of her agreement to marry Hamuera and asks,

"How about you?" she said. "Supposed to come to Wellington, you. Who's going to room with me now? Jeez, have to find me a man." (197)

"Supposed to come to Wellington, you" reflects the word order of Māori language. The descriptive or qualifying phrase comes first, then comes the pronoun (or noun).

Mata, who knows only a standard form of English, is unable to understand the elderly aunts who speak English in an unfamiliar way. Their first language would be Māori. Makareta and Mata, who both use received English, differ in their range of language facility and in the confidence with which they speak. Makareta's self-confidence and sense of identity is enhanced by her excellent

education in both English and Māori. She speaks of her own language, Māori: “that security, that sound base allowed me to reach out and know that I could do anything else in the world that I wanted to.” (211)

As a student nurse, Makareta tops her classes and it is clear that she could have entered and succeeded in any career of her choice. In the 70s and 80s, as a worker for the good of Māori, she commands respect everywhere. She moves with grace and confidence. “She was well known all over the country, as well as in other parts of the world for (...) the advice, the help, the knowledge that she was able to give.” (236)

Makareta first meets Mata when both are ten years old. Makareta, at a loss to know how to reach out to Mata, is puzzled and troubled to see her “standing there without moving, looking nowhere and not saying a word...” (127) The encounter persuades Makareta that she should go to boarding school to learn to socialise with a wider range of people: “I would be living with people of my own age for a few years. I might learn something – because I found it very difficult to talk to someone like Mata.” (132)

Mata’s behaviour affects Makareta, motivating her to take a particular course of action. In fact, Mata’s inability to participate in social interaction creates an energy of its own, when the words and responses people expect to hear are not produced. This inadequacy prompts others to act, to assist her during the time of mourning for friend and workmate Ada, and to guide her during the tangi for Makareta.

Damage to her self-esteem renders Mata almost silent. During the single childhood holiday with her grandparents and whānau, she is often frightened and confused. She cannot decode signifiers that other Māori understand. Even her name has been taken from her. She knows herself as May Palmer, yet the name on her suitcase reads May Parker, a careless error made back at the orphanage, probably because her guardian is Mrs Parkinson. As a child she is taunted by other school children and called “Homey, Homey. Blackie, Blackie.” (18) In the course of the one holiday with her whānau, she learns her actual name: Mata Pairama.

Here is a character, almost wordless and socially inept, who is vividly characterised by Grace. She brings the reader so close to Mata's way of seeing the world that the third-person narration is scarcely distinguishable from a first-person narration. Mata describes Manny outside,

pissing in the grass. Piss was a bad word, you were supposed to say wee. Manny was doing a wee, fast and noisy -- sounded more like pissing. God could read your thoughts and knew everything that was in your heart. He was everywhere, even in the spider lavatory. (30)

The reader shares Mata's listening and interpreting. She is afraid even to think certain words, let alone say them. Having been brought up in the Home with the fear of God's eye everywhere, she has become inhibited, so that she sees the nakedness of her young cousins washing themselves in the stream and then running naked as 'rude' behaviour. At the Home, she is taught Victorian style modesty. It is no surprise to discover that, when she marries, "she didn't like to do what men and women do." (84)

Fear or inability to speak freely and with confidence usually implies powerlessness. A word out of place at the Home results in punishment.

Stinken is a bad word and if kids were heard saying it at the Home Matron would put soap in their mouths, or they'd have to bend over with their bottoms bare and get whacked with the cane. At meal-time they'd have to read the Bible while the others had tea. While on holiday she wasn't to forget to read the Lord's word, to pray night and morning and to do the Lord's will always. (15)

The Home's extreme religious teaching, part of the imperial legacy, contributes to Mata's submissiveness and her repression.

Mata's extended family is silenced in response to the power of the Pakeha world. There is no discussion with her mother's whānau concerning Mata's future. Keita sends letters to the orphanage. An initial answer states that authority over Mata has been lodged with a legal guardian. There is only one further reply to a letter, when Keita hints that Mata might be in a position to inherit land. When it is subsequently made clear that Mata cannot receive land and, at the same time, remain under the control of Mrs Parkinson and the orphanage, there is no further communication.

Grace's language is, of course, the vehicle by which the novel's social energy is effectively transmitted. It bears the silence of Mata, the composure and dignity of Makareta, the resilience of Missy. Not only do these three characters speak convincingly, with distinctive thoughts or voices, but so do Kui Hinemate, Bobby, Gloria, Keita, Makareta's school friends and Missy's brothers and sister.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Cousins* provides a unique literary experience for readers who can appreciate the historical veracity and cultural resonances of a tightly woven, aesthetically satisfying work. The symbolic and the spiritual are fundamental to its texture and development. The work includes an unborn twin brother among the

narrators, while giving credible form to experience and offering fundamental truths of thought, feeling and motivation. Appreciation of this highly original novel can be enhanced, if readers understand its Māori cultural context and have knowledge of the history of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

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