
The film ends, the credits roll, and the elderly male in front of me is crying. He is in a row of friends, the men obviously dragged there by their wives. The one who had in the beginning asked disparagingly what the film was about (“Whale watching?”) is now awed into silence. The preteen boy beside me, who had at first watched the film while annoyingly munching on his popcorn and then lying down, jumps up and applauds. As does his mother. As do the teenage employees who come rushing in to clean the theater. Outside, two girls cling to each other in a hug. We all look at each other with benevolence.

Whale Rider opened in Honolulu on 27 June 2003 and stayed through November, past the point when it had been released on DVD. It did not open in an art house or the theater known for showing “independent” films, but instead at the largest cineplex on the largest screen—a place reserved only for commercially viable, mainstream movies. It stayed in Honolulu theaters well beyond the run of all other movies this year. This fact belies the common wisdom that to be successful, a movie must have Hollywood movie stars, avoid complicated subject matter, and stay away from particularity of story, language, or culture—and if it is a story about people of color, it must be told (ie, interpreted for the audience) from the perspective of a white person. Instead, Whale Rider’s opening narration begins: “In the old days the land felt a great emptiness. It was waiting for someone to love it, waiting for a leader, and he came on the back of a whale, a man to lead a new people, our ancestor Paikea.”

The film Whale Rider was written and directed by Niki Caro. It is based on the novel The Whale Rider by Witi Ihimaera, which in turn is based on an ancestral story of the Whangara people of the east coast of Aotearoa New Zealand. The film is a story about deep losses, relationships, and healing. The film begins with simultaneous birth and death: the death of a woman and her son, and the birth of a daughter Paikea, who narrates: “There was no gladness when I was born—everyone was waiting for the firstborn boy to lead, but he died, and I didn’t.” Paikea’s grandfather, the chief Koro, comes into the hospital room where his son Porourangi is mourning the loss of his wife and baby son and demands, “Where is the boy?” As Porourangi retracts in horror, Koro simply states, “What is done is done, come home, start again.”

Before fleeing his father, Porourangi defies Koro and names his newborn daughter Paikea, signifying her direct line to the foundational ancestor, and establishing her chiefly mana. Chanting over the dead grandson, Koro orders his wife, Nancy Flowers,
to take the infant Paikea away, but she refuses and insists, “No. You’ll hold her. You will acknowledge your granddaughter.” It is the first of many moments of resistance by his wife. Paikea narrates: “My Koro wished in his heart that I’d never been born, but he changed his mind.” And the next time we see them again they are tangled together in love, as at the age of twelve, Paikea rides on the bar of Koro’s bicycle—the way he fetches her from school every day. As they ride, she holds onto the carved whale’s tooth he wears around his neck marking the fact that he is chief—the position she would inherit if she were a boy.

_Whale Rider_ is a story that combines the deep enduring power of myth—of eternal connections—with very contemporary details. Through repeated visual and aural motifs we breathe in the ancestors—in the forms of whales, the ocean, land, and carvings in the marae—their ever-watchful, waiting presence. And through well-crafted, often funny dialogue, attention to visual detail, and subtly evolving action, we are drawn into the lives of a struggling community dealing with the by-products of genocide, colonialism, and modernity. It is a film with high production values and is very strongly cast, directed, and acted.

_Whale Rider_ asks profound questions about the individual’s role in history, the nature of human agency, leadership, patriarchy, and social justice. In the contemporary world of Aotearoa, tension exists between an individual definition of self and a collective tribal definition. When Porourangi, as the eldest son, confronts his father and accuses him of not seeing or knowing who he really is, Koro retorts, “I know who you’re meant to be, who you were born to be!” Porourangi leaves his daughter Paikea with his parents and flees into exile from the expectations and responsibilities he can’t live up to (he drives a Ford Escape!). Koro accuses him of liking the privileges without the responsibilities. Resisting the callous notion that his duty, at all costs, is to produce a male heir, Porourangi moves to Europe where he and his art are celebrated. He considers his art “work” and maintains, “I’m not here shoveling shit, but I’m doing my share.” But Koro scoffs at Porourangi’s notion of work and calls his art “souvenirs.” He accuses Porourangi of avoiding the real work, of leaving his waka (canoe) to rot and abandoning the young men of the community who need to learn from him.

Koro is driven by his genealogical duty to make right what has gone wrong, to teach the next leader all he needs to know, “to lead our people out of the darkness and make everything okay again.” But Koro is heartbroken by his inability to make things right, and so keeps trying to find the reason for his failure. He targets his granddaughter Paikea as the one to blame. And despite his devotion to her, and his successful training of her in Māori knowledge and values—and no matter how clearly she demonstrates her knowledge and leadership capabilities—he cannot recognize her as a leader. When Paikea asks Koro about the history of their ancestors
and how the first ancestor arrived on the back of a whale, Koro shows her a frayed rope and explains that the interwoven strands are like the layers of generations and must be kept strong: “Weave together the threads of Paikea so that our line remains strong—each thread is one of your ancestors.” When he uses the rope to start his boat’s engine, it breaks, and he curses it: “Useless bloody rope.” Paikea mends the rope and starts the engine. Instead of celebrating her achievement, he scolds her and tells her never to do that again. The moment, later in the film, when he is finally able to see Paikea for who she is, is a moment of immense tenderness and humility. He says to her in Māori: “Wise leader, forgive me. I am just a fledgling new to flight.”

One of the most wrenching scenes in the film comes when Paikea recites her prize-winning composition to an audience that holds two empty chairs—one for her absent father and one for her absent grandfather, to whom she has dedicated the composition. In her speech, she gives her philosophy of leadership. “If the knowledge is given to everyone, then we can have lots of leaders and soon everyone can be strong, not just the ones who have been chosen, because sometimes even if you’re the leader and need to be strong, you can get tired.” This contrasts with Koro’s view. When he trains the firstborn boys of the village for leadership, he praises them all but explains that there can only be one leader, the one who successfully completes the final test. Koro also tells his boys that the qualities of a chief are strength, courage, intelligence, and leadership. These are all qualities that Paikea demonstrates in abundance.

These are qualities that others also demonstrate. Nanny Flowers continually performs interpersonal interventions that have profound implications. The second son, Rawiri, once ignored and left to underachieve, shows nurturing leadership at a time of heart-breaking crisis. The schoolteacher, Miss Parata, faithfully trains her students in Māori language and culture, and makes a daily difference in the quality of their lives. Paikea’s vision of leadership is one where all can be recognized and contribute; where leadership can be linked to genealogy but must not be predetermined by it; where a promising but uncared-for boy child like Hemi can grow with imagination instead of being denied his potential. Within the abused—the land, the people—are still very alive the possibilities for coherent action, healing, and redemption.

Paikea claims her name, and her genealogical right as chief, but goes on to extend that strength of continuity, belonging, and leadership to everyone: “My name is Paikea Api-rani and I come from a long line of chiefs stretching all the way back to the whale rider. I’m not a prophet, but I know our people will keep going forward all together with all our strengths.” Unlike the film Once Were Warriors, which replaced that novel’s collectivity-celebrating ending with a typical-Hollywood individual-centered conclusion, Whale Rider gives us a utopian, collective, Māori resolution. In a time of enduring pain and struggle against overwhelming odds, it is an ending of great beauty.
and hope that leaves one with an abiding sense of satisfaction.

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EDITOR’S NOTE: See interview with
The Whale Rider author Witi Ihimaera in this issue, 358–366.

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There is a moment in The Māori Merchant of Venice when the oppression experienced by the Jewish and the Māori people is shown to overlap in a way that explains in part why this movie was made. It occurs in the scene where Shylock gets Antonio to pledge a pound of his own flesh as collateral against a loan from the Jewish moneylender. The setting for this scene is an art gallery, part of the Venetian marketplace as filmed in Auckland, and the paintings on the walls present images of “the sacking and burning of the Māori Parihaka community by the government in the 19th century” (film website media kit, 41). All the paintings are by the contemporary artist Selwyn Muru, and as the scene ends the camera reveals the artist himself working on a large canvas across which is scrawled the word “holocaust.” The nineteenth-century decimation of the Māori people is likened in this moment to the Nazi slaughter of the Jews, and for New Zealand audiences that very comparison occasioned a recent controversy when a politician, Tariana Turia, applied the word “holocaust” to what happened to the Māori people (Rapata Wiri, pers comm, Oct and Nov 2002). This moment in the film reveals Shylock’s motivations in his bond with the Christian merchant. He wants justice, compensation, a restoration of mana for personal and collective suffering. In a 2001 editorial in the Shakespeare Quarterly (52, vi), Michael Neill says that this Māori translation of The Merchant of Venice differs from Shakespeare’s play “not just in its linguistic medium but in the fact that it presupposes an audience that will sympathize with the Jew as representative of an oppressed minority.” According to Rapata Wiri, by as early as 1868 the Māori people had already likened themselves to the Jews who were exiled in Egypt and trying to regain their promised land (pers comm, Nov 2002). While post–World War II productions of The Merchant of Venice have often elicited more sympathy for Shylock than ever before, this production is different: it is performed by Māori actors entirely in the Māori language (with subtitles in contemporary English); was shot in Aotearoa New Zealand; and incorporates elements of Māori culture into all of its scenes, especially those set in Portia’s home, Belmont, which becomes an imaginary Māori king-