

*Contested Visions of History in  
Aotearoa New Zealand Literature:  
Witi Ihimaera's The Matriarch*

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The novel as a genre constitutes a strategic site in the discourse of national identity. In discussing the ways in which nations may be brought into being through narration, scholars such as Benedict Anderson (1991) and Homi Bhabha (1990) have attested to the critical role of written literature, and in particular the novel, in the service of empire and nation. Novels provide the fictional glue, the convergence of “a heroic past, great men, glory,” the stuff that historian Ernest Renan called the “social capital” on which the idea of nation is based (1990, 19).

Critical commentaries on the literary works of indigenous authors of the Pacific region have raised crucial questions about history, literature, truth, fiction, authenticity, national identity, and the relationships among them. Competing perspectives on these matters constitute the contested ground I discuss in this article, with particular reference to the point of view presented in Witi Ihimaera's historical novel *The Matriarch* (1986). I argue that this work can lay a strong claim to being *the* novel of modern Aotearoa New Zealand, but that it also presents a new vision that challenges traditional constructs of that country's literature and history as articulated primarily by Pākehā (white) male authors and historians.

Literary critic Mark Williams wrote that the question of national identity has been a continual problem to New Zealand writers since the middle of the nineteenth century (1990, 9–10). One indication of a maturing national self-consciousness was the emergence of a New Zealand literature, that is, writing about New Zealand by Pākehā New Zealanders, characterized by a strong sense of pride in what pioneers and settlers had

achieved in a strange and hostile land. Familiar themes in histories as well as literature revolved around the distinctive landscape and nostalgic reflections on an empty land with a “dying [Māori] race,” but at the same time there was a sense of optimism about progress toward a modern nation-state.

In novels of the 1970s and 1980s, however, Williams detected a “deep-seated unease” about the country’s cultural situation. He claimed that at no time since the 1930s has fiction in New Zealand been so directly involved with crucial and unresolved questions of national self-definition and evaluation as in the late 1980s. The flourishing of Māori artistic, cultural, and political expression that began in the 1970s has since become known as the Māori Renaissance. During this time a significant body of fiction written in English by Māori novelists such as Patricia Grace, Keri Hulme, and Witi Ihimaera began to emerge. The appearance of these works heralded a significant shift in New Zealand’s literary tradition, from its Eurocentric foundations to a postcolonial perspective that privileges the “insider” or indigenous point of view (see, eg, Grace 1978, in which she argued for a national literature in English that includes the Māori point of view). This transformation is part of a much wider movement throughout the Pacific and beyond.

I have selected *The Matriarch* as a focus of this article for several reasons. First, Ihimaera is a significant voice because he was the first Māori author to publish in English a collection of short stories (*Pounamu, Pounamu* [1972]) and a novel (*Tangi* [1973]). Both *Tangi* and *The Matriarch* won the Wattie Book of the Year award (see Robinson and Wattie’s biography of Ihimaera for further details [1998b]). Second, as a historical novel, *The Matriarch* probes from a Māori perspective the causes of Māori alienation and dispossession from their land, in the belief that past historical injustices must be acknowledged before they can be resolved. Yet in traditional Pākehā histories this past is nonexistent, forgotten, or written over. So the past, like the land, constitutes contested ground. Third, Ihimaera’s works have themselves been contested ground, a focal point of criticism from Māori and Pākehā scholars alike.

#### THE WORKS OF WITI IHIMAERA AS CONTESTED GROUND

Williams wrote that *The Matriarch* is a “vast, ambitious, although flawed, attempt to stretch the novel form to accommodate the Maori world view, Maori mythology and Maori history” (1990, 18). He and other commen-

tators have also criticized *The Matriarch* along with other novels and stories for being “overwritten,” but I am not sure exactly what they mean. Certainly, this novel constitutes a writing *over*, as I argue later. Williams also said that Ihimaera’s “overblown prose” overwhelms the realist and humanist tendencies that characterize his most compelling work (1990, 121). Renowned literary critic and author C K Stead castigated Ihimaera for “picking over old wounds and ancient evils,” saying that the author should instead have presented “a more truthful image” (1986, 22). In a similar vein, critic Norman Simms set as a prerequisite for the development of a distinctive Māori literature via the medium of English the existence of a writer who could transform the “clutter of sociological detail” into “sharp and moving images of truth, of the truth of the Maori experience in the modern world” (1978, 338). He claimed that Ihimaera’s first novel *Tangi* had failed to meet this test. Likewise, Stead judged *The Matriarch* a failure, calling it historically misleading. Given his prominence in New Zealand as well as metropolitan intellectual circles (eg, as a regular contributor to the *London Review of Books*, and editor of *The Faber Book of Contemporary South Pacific Stories* [1994]), Stead’s criticisms have commanded a great deal of attention. In their biography of Stead, Roger Robinson and Nelson Wattie observed that he is known for his “outspoken criticism of liberal positions in education and literary affairs” (1998a, 512). In addition, they noted that his critiques of feminism and the Māori rights movements in the 1980s and 1990s “aroused such heated feelings in New Zealand . . . that cool appraisal of his work has been lacking” (1998a, 512). Although it would be easy to dismiss Stead’s criticisms as reactionary responses to contemporary cultural politics, that would underestimate the fundamental issues the criticisms raised (see, eg, Fee’s 1989 remarks on Stead’s 1985 review of Māori novelist Keri Hulme).

Meanwhile, Ihimaera has met with a controversial reception among Māori scholars as well. Activists such as Atareta Poananga, who believe that Māori writing should advance the Māori cause, have criticized him for simply sentimentalizing traditional Māori life (see Poananga 1986–1987). Ihimaera has attempted to defuse this reaction to his earlier work by admitting that it lacked a necessary anger and political engagement. He himself characterized his early stories dealing with the rural village life of Waituhi as “tender, unabashedly lyrical evocations of a world that once was” (1981, 50). He admitted they were out of touch with the harsh political realities of contemporary urban Māori life. Critics such as Umelo Ojinmah (1993) have noted the radical turn in mood evident in his later

work, *The Matriarch*, which was published following a decade during which Ihimaera had deliberately stopped writing out of concern that his work might be considered the definitive portrayal of the Māori world, despite his own view that it was “tragically out of date” (Robinson and Wattie 1998b, 254). While Ihimaera has drawn fire from both Māori and Pākehā for not being “truthful” enough to the contemporary Māori realities, Māori elders meanwhile have criticized him for revealing in print, to the profane gaze of Pākehā readers, too much of sacred oral Māori culture.

As I show in this article, some of the critical evaluations of Ihimaera’s work are tied to the difficulties faced by indigenous Pacific writers in integrating oral historical traditions into western modes of narration in a distinctive way, while remaining faithful to the cultural values that give meaning to these traditions. Indigenous writers leave themselves open to evaluation by western critical standards when they write in a metropolitan language such as English, using genres like the novel, which originated in western literate traditions. I do not mean to imply that works of indigenous authors must not be criticized harshly or that western critical standards must not be used. If, however, these standards are used, we must be fully conscious of their development against particular ideological assumptions, rather than take them as neutral, objective, and universally valid (see the discussion in Mudrooroo 1990).

In this sampling of critical reaction to the works of one author we can see some recurrent themes. Significantly, critics from both sides have singled out the importance of “truth.” Yet how is one to know when an account is “true,” and who has a claim on presenting “truth”? Ihimaera has also been accused of plagiarism with respect to his reliance on and restructuring of traditional Pākehā historical accounts in *The Matriarch*. Although space does not permit a full treatment of that issue here, plagiarism is also ultimately about truth, more specifically truthfulness to one’s sources, as much as it is about ownership of texts. The charge of plagiarism may be defused to some extent by pointing out that Ihimaera has made no pretense of offering an “objective” historical account, and that the book is a literary rather than historical work. But the issue is indeed more complex, including problems of narrative conventions associated with the historical novel, and the dual audience of Pākehā and young Māori whom Ihimaera seeks to address in his work. As Williams noted, one of the distinguishing hallmarks of the Māori Renaissance has been its attempt to colonize and recolonize existing European forms, such as the

novel, and to turn them to Māori purposes. The narrative forms employed by many indigenous authors reflect the inherent tensions in telling a story in a language and genre so intertwined with their own oppression.

Anthropologists, historians, philosophers, and literary authorities have engaged in much discussion on matters of truth and history, the connections between literature and history, and so on. What I will call the hard-line, uncompromising view on the issue of truth and history was summed up very well by Samuel Johnson, who wrote: “the historian tells us either what is false or what is true: in the former case he is no historian; in the latter he has no opportunities for displaying his abilities: for truth is one; and all who tell the truth must tell it alike” (quoted in Macaulay 1956, 75).

Contrast with this Samoan historian Malama Maleiseā's claim that “if there *were* a truth, there would be no histories” (at the Pacific Studies Conference, Auckland University, 1985, quoted in Binney 1987, 28). In *The Matriarch*, Ihimaera's narrator comments: “All truth is fiction really, for the teller tells it as he sees it, and it might be different from some other teller. This is why histories often vary, depending on whether you are the conqueror or not” (403). Ihimaera's view is similar to that of Michel Foucault (1980), who claimed that definitions of truth are regimented by the interests of powerful institutions in society and the individuals associated with them. For Foucault, however, even more important than truth are the criteria by which truth is determined. Controlling the criteria for truth, which the literary establishment does through decisions about what gets published and how it is critically received, becomes an even more effective way of determining what is true than simply controlling the truth.

If we accept the hard-line view that history is truth, and the novel, fiction, the term “historical novel” would be an oxymoron. The fact that it is not, however, reflects a curious and largely tacit assumption that the genre is well defined. Avrom Fleishman, for instance, noted that “everyone knows what a historical novel is; perhaps that is why few have volunteered to define it in print” (1971, 3). Because the historical novel straddles two genres, however, it does mingle our expectation that history is “true” with our understanding that the novel is fiction.

Yet the Māori interpretation of historical events, the “truth” as Ihimaera sees it, threatens the very foundation and continuation of Pākehā rule in New Zealand. Naturally, Pākehā critics such as Stead would wish for a different version of the truth. Renan has said that a kind of forgetfulness is also a necessary factor in the creation of a nation (1990, 8). Jonathan Lamb has identified as a recurring Pākehā cultural nightmare the possi-

bility that “the past might be forgotten or that it might have to be confronted” (1986, 352). This suggests that recovery of the past may be incompatible with recovery *from* it. Ihimaera wants the Pākehā to remember what they want to forget in order to maintain the nationhood of New Zealand (see Reilly 1995). Stead, on the other hand, while acknowledging that “the past does not have to be forgotten,” has insisted that “its rights and wrongs belong to those who lived them, not to us” (1986, 22).

Finally, I argue that Ihimaera’s aim in writing *The Matriarch* is to validate a Māori version of nationhood that will serve as a counternarrative to conventional histories written from a European point of view. The frame of the narrative is the life of the narrator, Tama(tea) Mahana, as he seeks more information from older family members about his grandmother, the matriarch, who is actually the protagonist, representing Aotearoa and the Māori vision of nation. The time is the mid-1970s, and the pivotal event of that time was the Land March from the north to Parliament steps in Wellington by Matakite o Aotearoa under the leadership of Dame Whina Cooper. The year 1975 marked the creation of the Waitangi Tribunal to consider Māori grievances over breaches of the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi. Within this underlying frame are numerous flashbacks to Tama’s childhood and memories of his grandmother, who played a major role in raising him. The key event during his grandmother’s time was a great hui (gathering), held in 1949 and widely attended by Māori people as well as the prime minister. Other historical personages whose lives have an important place in the novel are Te Kooti, leader of a rebellion in the Land Wars, and Wi Pere Halbert, a Māori member of Parliament (and the matriarch’s great-uncle), who pressed for recognition of Māori land rights.

#### AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND: RECONSTRUCTING A NEW PAST FOR A LAND WITHOUT A PAST

It was a commonplace of early New Zealand history and literature that the country had no past before Europeans arrived. In 1898 one of New Zealand’s earliest historians, William Pember Reeves, wrote a poem in which an Englishman writing to a colonist described New Zealand as “a land without a past” (1997, 497). While the colonist denies this, many historical accounts of New Zealand pay no more than lip service to the time before European discovery and settlement, or to what happened to its indigenous inhabitants as the modern nation-state was founded. W Hugh

Ross presented the stereotype of the timeless native when he wrote that “the Maori had no sense of time in the years before Europeans arrived” (1966, 192). Similarly, the Reverend W Rowse wrote in 1899, “We have no history running back into past ages. The Maoris left no cities or monuments, not even a carved stone temple” (quoted in Sinclair 1986, 55).

Even though Reeves set out to provide New Zealand with a past (1898), he wrote his history in England and aimed it at educated British readers, because New Zealand was too small a commercial target. Remaining on sale until the 1950s, his book became the traditional interpretation of the country's history. Although Reeves was respectful of the Māori, and believed they were skillful navigators (despite then prevailing views that Polynesian discovery and settlement had occurred by accident rather than design), he did not mention Kupe or the fleet of canoes that figure prominently in Māori oral tradition.

Even Sinclair's preface to the *Oxford Illustrated History of New Zealand* opens with the apparently evenhanded remark that New Zealand was “settled by two sea-faring peoples, Polynesian and British, after crossing immense oceans in small vessels” (1990, vii). While several chapters deal with Māori issues, the history of New Zealand is presented from a predominantly Pākehā standpoint.

Pākehā accounts of New Zealand history usually begin with Captain James Cook's “discovery.” But as Ihimaera wrote, “what the schoolchildren are not told is that Cook's first landing was marked by the killing of a Maori called Te Maro, shot through the heart by a musket bullet, Monday 9 October, 1769. . . . The glorious birth of the nation has the taste of bitter almonds when one remembers that six Maori died so that a flag could be raised” (*The Matriarch*, 36–37). In taking a Māori perspective on the issue of first contact, Ihimaera challenged prevailing views of Pākehā historians who, by omitting Māori deaths, implied that early encounters were peaceful and harmonious. This is a good example of the inverting effect of Ihimaera's writing-over of history.

Moreover, Ihimaera has been concerned to point out that before New Zealand was “discovered” by early Dutch and British explorers, Māori people had inhabited it for nearly a thousand years. Thus, the matriarch tells her grandson:

“We are the tangata whenua, the people of the land. How we came to be here, nobody knows. Perhaps we have always been here—Ancients descended from the Time of Gods. But at the same time, later Maori voyagers came here also, like Kupe around 700 AD, and Toi and Whatonga a few centuries later. Then

in tribal histories we are told of the arrival of legendary canoes from Hawaiki  
 . . . .

“I must tell you of your canoe, the *Takitimu*, and point out the land which is yours through me by birthright. . . .

“E mokopuna, we ruled here for over a thousand years. This was our land. This was our life. It is your life and land now. . . .

“Then came the Pakeha.” (*The Matriarch*, 4, 5, 6)

Similarly, in his short story “Tent on the Home Ground” (1977), Ihimaera’s character Api refutes the claim made by a Pākehā that Abel Tasman discovered New Zealand. In doing so, Ihimaera juxtaposed differing conceptions of the notion of history.

Long before Abel Tasman got here, Kupe discovered this country. But you’ve probably never heard of him, have you. After all, he was only a Maori.

Peter reddened with anger.

—Kupe? He’s just a legend.

—Your second proof [of racism], Api answered. Anything that happened to us you call myth or legend. Anything that happened to you is called history. (1977, 149–150)

This incident is actually a literary reworking of Ihimaera’s basic reason for writing: “Ask who discovered New Zealand and you will be told Abel Tasman. But the answer, as given by Maori history, is Kupe. And that, quite simply, is why I began to write. To make New Zealanders aware of their ‘other,’ Maori, heritage” (1975, 117).

The dismissal of Māori accounts of discovery through labeling them “myth” or “prehistory” illustrates how issues of knowledge and power are relevant to notions of history. A disjunction between indigenous forms of historical knowledge and traditional western definitions of “history” derives at least in part from western assumptions about the fundamental role that writing plays in validating history. The use of the term “prehistory” to refer to a period before writing attests to the significance of the written record as a defining component of “history” in the western sense. Jacques Derrida maintained that writing constituted the condition of emergence of all forms of historicity; “historicity itself is tied to the possibility of writing” (1976, 27). Similarly, classical historical materialism conceptualized certain peoples as “historyless” (see, eg, Herod 1976, and Wolf 1982 for discussion).

Just as Hegel gave short shrift to Africa as “no historical part of the world” (1899, 99), Marx wrote off India when he claimed in 1853, “Indian

society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history is but the history of its successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society. . . . England had to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating—the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of western society in Asia” (2000, 217).

Primitive peoples, with their timeless cultures, myths, and magic, became objects of study for anthropologists, while the sophisticated peoples with historical civilizations and scientific knowledge were the subjects of historians and sociologists. As Paul Gilroy pointed out, racism rests on the ability to contain blacks in the present, to repress, and to deny the past (1987, 12). One way to deny the past is to rename certain key events; another is to forget them altogether. Tasman's visit was responsible for the fact that the world knows New Zealand by the name he gave it rather than the name given to it by the Māori. By renaming the landscape, Europeans wrote over its Māori past, as if erasing a slate. In naming and mapping the territories they “discovered,” explorers like Cook claimed them for their sovereigns: finders, keepers.<sup>1</sup>

While western accounts of discovery and exploration stressed European notions of chronology with their view of history as progress, in societies without writing, “history” lies in remembered oral traditions constantly reshaped by retelling. As Albert Wendt put it, “We are what we remember” (at the Pacific History Conference in Suva, 1985, quoted in Binney 1987, 16). The first chapter (“The Discovery of New Zealand”) of Te Rangi Hiroa's book *The Coming of the Maori* begins with the statement, “New Zealand was fished up out of the ocean depths by Maui, the youngest of a family of five brothers” (1950, 4). In terms of its social and historical significance, Hiroa likened the coming of the canoe fleet in the Great Migration from Hawaiki, from which all Māori tribes trace their aristocratic lineages, to the Norman Conquest of English history (1950, 36). While archaeologists and historians continue to argue about the details and time scale of the migration (see Sutton 1994), these so-called “legends” of the Great Migration must be true in some sense, because New Zealand was settled from eastern Polynesia by people who could only have arrived there in canoes. The citing of the story of Māui, passed down by word of mouth for a thousand years in similar fashion all over Polynesia, testifies to the ability of Islanders to commit to memory detailed information about their origins and preserve it over centuries. While the historical accuracy of the genealogies can be disputed, it cannot be disproved. These

oral genealogies still constitute the primary source of Māori historical tradition, even though they now exist alongside a body of written material (see McRae 1991).

In telling the child his whakapapa (genealogy), the matriarch's linkage of mythic time to present, ruptured by Pākehā "discovery," raises the question of different views of origin, and where history begins. Even more importantly, who decides where it begins? How long does one have to be in a place to be "truly" indigenous? Were the Māori the first? According to Te Rangi Hiroa, "The Kupe tradition as told by Te Matorohanga states definitely that there were no human inhabitants in New Zealand at the time of his visit" (1950, 9), while a west coast tradition from the Tainui area says that Kupe saw people in the west digging up fern root.

There are parallels here with the reconstruction of Aboriginal history in Australia. Mudrooroo, for example, wrote that according to oral tradition Aboriginal people have always been there (1990, 5). Thus, they were first possessors of the continent, and later arrivals landed to find the country inhabited. This history is contested by scientific theories claiming that the first settlers accidentally wandered across from Indonesia when the seas froze during last Ice Age. If these theories are correct, the political implication is that Aboriginal people are immigrants and therefore just like other people who arrived later. Here we see how different versions of the past can be mobilized for political gain and are contested because they support different views on land rights.

The fact that Māori and other indigenous languages of the Pacific had no conventional written form but only oral traditions made it easier for Europeans to dismiss them as "primitive" languages and their speakers as "peoples without history." Narrow European understandings of literacy gave no meaning to indigenous acts of oral narration such as the Māori whakapapa or Aboriginal Australian ways of "writing the country," which were accomplished through the naming of places, or through the painting and carving of designs on wood, stone, and bodies. In New Zealand, the custom of moko (tattoo), now being revived, and elaborate wood carvings in meetinghouses were other ways of inscribing history. When missionary Samuel Marsden bought two hundred acres of land in 1814 to set up the first mission station at Rangihoua, he drew up a deed which he had the local Māori chief "sign" by drawing a copy of his moko (McKenzie 1985, 10). According to Hiroa, the general design of Māori tattoos was a combination of motifs taken from carvings and painting (1950, 322–325). Male facial tattoos were full and consisted of various motifs

assigned to particular parts of the face, with each motif having a specific name (Hiroa 1950, 299). In his discussion of carved meetinghouses, Hiroa also pointed out that the front and back ridge posts as well as the side wall posts were carved with human forms named after ancestors (1950, 12, 312–313), and rakau whakapapa (genealogical sticks) used knobs to keep track of generations. Thus, Māori meetinghouses are in effect tribal histories, and Ihimaera's elaborately decorated family meetinghouse at Rongopai plays a central role in *The Matriarch*.

Ihimaera's renaming of key events in the Land Wars, such as calling the Te Kooti Rebellion/Matawhero Massacre "the Matawhero Retaliation," illustrates another disjunction between Māori and Pākehā versions of history: "when [John Lawrence] refers to the 'Matawhero massacre' what he is really referring to is Te Kooti Rikirangi's *retaliation* against a whole history of Pakeha abuse of Maori people, custom and land. . . . the Matawhero incident is surely no more horrifying than the atrocities committed on the Maori people in the name of civilisation. Of course, the difference is that *white* people were killed at Matawhero. The blood of a white man, woman or child, spilt by natives, is called an atrocity. The blood of a native man, woman or child, spilt by a white man, is called an act of self-defence" (*The Matriarch*, 71; italics in original).

Ihimaera deliberately foregrounded the killing of white settlers, particularly military men and their families, by giving gory details of their deaths. In an interview he admitted that a primary motive for writing *The Matriarch* was to seek revenge on Europeans: "If you want them to hurt, you don't write about the massacre of Maori people, you write about the massacre of European people. . . . My business is to make European people cry" (Murphy 1987, 13). Ihimaera's reply is interesting in the light of Edward Said's observation, "Who writes? For whom is the writing being done? In what circumstances? These are the questions whose answers provide us with ingredients for a politics of interpretation" (1982, 7). At the same time, however, Ihimaera is also writing for a generation of young Māori who, along with increasing numbers of indigenous Pacific peoples, learn their traditions from books written in European languages rather than by oral instruction from their elders in their native tongues. The matriarch laments that she cannot teach her grandson according to the old ways because their houses of learning have been destroyed by the Pākehā and their religion.

I think we can also see the basis for Stead's accusation about "the picking over of old wounds" when Ihimaera writes:

[In Matawhero settlement,] nobody likes to talk about the Matawhero Retaliation. Maori people appear to be embarrassed about it as a sign of the old bloodlust and paganism and anyway, the past is past and they are now getting on very happily with the Pakeha, thank you very much. They should not be so riddled with guilt; they were victims too; there were over thirty Maoris killed during the raid, just as many as the European dead. When you ask Pakeha people they, also, begin to shift from the left foot to the right foot. It's almost as if, in the asking, you are challenging their right to be there *and they know it*; you are making them remember that once not very long ago there *was* a "massacre," whether they like to admit it or not. . . .

Perhaps the reason for being tight-lipped is that Poverty Bay citizens now pride themselves on their good record of race relations, and rightly so. But they need to be told the truth. The Matawahero Retaliation was part of a religious war which the Pakeha himself began. (*The Matriarch*, 159; italics in original)

The early stirrings of nationalism among the Pākehā settlers coincided with the demographic shift in favor of the European population. The 1886 census revealed that for the first time the New Zealand-born population outnumbered immigrants. The passing of the pioneer generation awakened a feeling that there should be a national (and not just an immigrant) literature. Such a literature would stake a claim to what was distinctive about New Zealand culture, not just vis-à-vis the parent country, but also with respect to its much larger sister settler colony, Australia, in whose shadow New Zealanders felt the need to assert their own country's specialness as a land settled by a better sort of people embarked on an experiment in social democracy. Suddenly, New Zealand had a past worth setting down in print. *The New Zealand Illustrated Magazine* noted in 1901: "Here in New Zealand we have infinite advantages over Australia in the way of material for a national literature. . . . Our country has a history; Australia has none—at any rate none that can equal our own in all those stirring elements which invest the past with a halo of romance and make food for the poet, the painter and the novelist" (quoted in Sinclair 1986, 50).

In conceiving a national literature Pākehā would use the printed word to stake a claim on both the past and the land.

#### THE SHADOW AND SUBSTANCE: LAND AS CONTESTED GROUND

The land is literally contested ground throughout the Pacific, but especially so in settler colonies such as Hawai'i, New Zealand, Australia, and New

Caledonia.<sup>2</sup> In their political struggles indigenous peoples such as the Australian Aborigines and the Māori emphasize the antiquity of their habitation of the land, citing archaeological findings, ancestral genealogies, and so on. Notions of Aboriginality and Māoritanga (Māoriness) become mobilizing forces for political action. Tribal histories locate individuals in relation to ancestors and land. Much of Māori spirituality is manifested in land, which for Māori people is life itself, but for Pākehā remains essentially an economic concept. The land belongs to the Māori by mythical communion, which no form of state intervention can alter. Yet, the Pākehā invasion politicized the land. The soil was made into land by a foreign legal system, communal property transformed to individual ownership through the printed word. In this way the substance of the land was alienated.

The massive shift of Māori people to the cities in the 1950s and 1960s took place during Ihimaera's lifetime. It ruptured the continuity of traditional rural Māori life, depicted in the village of Waituhi in his earlier novels and stories and evoked in *The Matriarch* by narrator Tama's childhood. When as a young adult Tama attends a University of Auckland geography field trip, a lecturer points out "the typically Maori ghetto dweller in his typically Maori home" and concludes: "No matter what opportunities one gives Maoris, one will always find them in homes like these." Tama's first reaction is "to ask what was wrong with being brought up in a typically Maori home; [his] second reaction [is] to say, in a loud voice, that "What one is seeing is the result of when one is an oppressor and the other is oppressed" (*The Matriarch*, 105). Here Tama apes the speech mannerisms of the Pākehā lecturer whose use of the pronoun "one" impersonalizes the predicament of landless Māori urban dwellers in "broken-down houses filled with broken-down dreams" (105) and distances himself from it at the same time as he blames the Māori for their predicament by making them "Others."

Ihimaera is not alone in thinking that the loss of the land is at the root of Māori anger and many of the problems of contemporary Māori society (see Awatere 1984; Hohepa 1978). In *The Matriarch*, Tama thinks to himself: "there must be many of us, in many houses like this, who feel the desolation of being landless and colonised in our own land. Yes, it is true—the land has been taken and where there is no land the people must leave and find new livelihood in the cities to the north and to the south. Gone, gone, they have gone, the iwi from the land" (50).

Tama's historian friend, John Lawrence, tells him that his grandmother

had been one of the old people who saw how important it was to bring the land back into Māori hands so that they would not leave it.

*The land, always the land.* The Maori people possessed it, but the white man has always lusted for it. From the very beginning of organised Pakeha colonisation in 1840, many Maori tribes had opposed the sale of land. There were rumours that the government intended to confiscate all Maori land. Let's admit it: the Land Wars began when the Maori lost the upper hand in Aotearoa, and particularly around 1858 when the census revealed that in a small space of thirty years there were already more white settlers than indigenous dwellers. The views of Maori and Pakeha about the future of the country were absolutely incompatible. The government attempted to buy more and more land, urgently needed by the Pakeha settlers; the Maori people considered these attempts to be against their express wish to retain the land. So the long wearying war began, which the Maori people appropriately called "the white man's quarrel" . . .

But the war was lost, the war over the body of Papatuanuku, and the Maori throughout the land tasted bitterness. He had to endure confiscation and to become no more than a black slave in the new antipodean white South (*The Matriarch*, 238–239; italics in original).

The novel *The Matriarch* emphasizes the deep spiritual value the land has for the Māori: "For not only do we lose everything if we lose our land. We also become nothing" (236). The matriarch herself, however, challenges the interpretation of Māori defeat by declaring through the words of Verdi: "*A costoro schiava non sono . . . della mia patria degna sarò. I am not a slave . . . I will be worthy of my native land*" (*The Matriarch*, 13; italics in original).

Again we see Ihimaera's renaming of what historians generally call the Land Wars as "te riri Pākehā" (the Pākehā battles). While most historians downplay the wars of 1845–1872 and suggest that the Māori people had no comprehensive or coordinated strategy of resistance, James Belich has argued that they were a watershed in New Zealand's history and crucial in the development of race relations (1986). Māori successes were generally underestimated and British victories overestimated. Historiographically speaking, in the absence of counternarratives to Pākehā victories, the British won the war hands down. But Belich's account bears testimony to the remarkable Māori resistance, particularly given their numerical and technological disadvantages, terming it "one of the most efficient and effective resistance efforts ever mounted by a tribal people against European expansion" (1986, 299).

Nevertheless, the Māori defeat accelerated the loss of land because the government took the opportunity to confiscate land in retribution for Māori uprising. While the intention was to alienate only land belonging to rebels, loyalist chiefs were asked to voluntarily hand over land representing the land interests of the rebels. By 1890 the Crown and Pākehā colonists had acquired some 22 million of the 26 million hectares of New Zealand, with most of the remaining Māori land lying in the more rugged and remote parts of the country.

Against these facts we can set traditional Pākehā historical accounts, which gloss over this dispossession by declaring that “by 1893 it [New Zealand] was the most democratic state in the world, or that had ever existed,” and hailing the country as “the social laboratory of the world” (Sinclair 1990, vii). In the half-century between the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) and 1893, certainly there were major social, political, and economic developments. For one thing, the demographic balance of the country was altered as the European population grew from an estimated 2,000 in 1839 to approximately 59,000 in 1858, outnumbering the Māori population of 56,000. By 1872 the European population had swelled to 256,000, while the Māori people totaled less than one fifth as many. Further immigration raised the European population to 489,933 in 1881, by which time the Māori population had declined to 46,141 due to the introduction of European diseases, such as a measles epidemic in 1875–1876 and a whooping cough epidemic in 1877–1880. While New Zealand was the first country to give the vote to women in 1893, its society was far from egalitarian, not even for women, and certainly not for Māori. When the Old Age Pensions Act of 1898 was passed, pensions for Māori were set at a lower level than for whites (see Sinclair 2000, 278–283; 329).

Looking at more recent statistics, while New Zealand as a whole experienced a period of economic prosperity through the 1960s into the early 1970s, very little of it was manifested in the Māori sector. In 1961 the average income of Māori males was still 10 percent lower than that of Pākehā males, and 17 percent lower by 1981. Māori people tend to be concentrated in the unskilled sector of the labor force, in 1981 only 3 percent of Māori held professional, technical, or managerial positions, though they represented 16.5 percent of the total New Zealand population. Māori people also continue to have higher unemployment rates; in 1981, Māori unemployment stood at 14 percent, compared to 3.7 percent for whites. Māori unemployment has risen since that time, particularly among young people between 15 and 19 years of age: in 1986 the overall rate was 30

percent, double that for non-Māori. Rates of home ownership and housing standards are also lower among Māori people, and despite an increase in the number of Māori obtaining secondary and tertiary educational qualifications, the rise has failed to keep pace with a corresponding increase among the Pākehā population. Since 1979 Māori people have comprised more than 50 percent of the prison population (Sorrenson 1990, 345). Life expectancy for Māori is lower than for Pākehā. By virtually every statistic Māori people are worse off than Pākehā. Are these the “clutter of sociological detail” that Simms would have the Māori writer turn into “sharp and moving images of truth, of the truth of the Maori experience in the modern world” (1978, 338)?

Yet how could one present *the* truth of the Māori experience in the modern world as if there were only one? The Māori world is not monolithic any more than the Pākehā world is. The Māori world, at least as it is portrayed in *The Matriarch*, encompasses several worlds, and the tension between them is part of the novel’s problematic. This novel explores what Ihimaera has elsewhere referred to as the “fault line [that] had suddenly developed in our history—on one side was a people with some cultural assurance, on the other was a generation removed from its roots” (1982, 48).

*The Matriarch* also points out both the physical and spiritual clash between the two cultures in citing Christianity as an aggravating factor in Pākehā–Māori relations. Symptomatic of the conversion process was the rite of baptism, the object of which “was to have the Maori name suppressed and to receive a new name” (*The Matriarch*, 72). The conflict was not just over the land, however; it was about winning over the spirit as well. “It wasn’t good enough just to take away our lands. Oh no, the Pakeha had to take away our souls too! Not only did we have to give up our physical world; we had to give up our spiritual world as well” (*The Matriarch*, 71).

The basis for Pākehā political sovereignty is grounded not just in bibles and muskets, but also in presumed spiritual superiority, conceiving the Māori as uncivilized primitive savages. This too is contested in *The Matriarch*. The character John Lawrence, Tama’s historian friend, notes that “it was intolerable that Christian ministers could equate your people with savagery and paganism and therefore quite blithely establish a religion that was just as savage and just as pagan” (69). The late Te Kani Te Ua is quoted as saying that “while the Maori people might be called a barbaric and savage race his knowledge and conception of the spirit world show a

high plane of thought similar to the philosophical speculations of the earliest Greek philosophers" (252).

Claims to political sovereignty rested as much on the assumption that savages had no land rights as on the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, which was "the instrument by which the British decided to extend their sovereignty to New Zealand" (*The Matriarch*, 73). While historians generally claim that "Maori assent to the treaty became the substantive ground of British sovereignty over New Zealand," Donald McKenzie acknowledged at the same time a coexisting view, that the treaty had no effect; sovereignty arose, as it were, not *de jure* from the treaty, but *de facto* from "the occupation and settlement of lands inhabited by uncivilized native peoples" (1985, 9). In any event, although in 1839 New Zealand was officially acknowledged as a sovereign and independent state, the Colonial Office had plans to make it a British colony to accommodate the foreseen inevitability of further European settlement and to protect the already considerable investment of British capital and labor.

To this end, William Hobson was made lieutenant governor and given instructions to set up a colony by negotiating a transfer of sovereignty to the Crown by seeking the "free and intelligent consent" of the Māori people. At this stage it was clear that the Crown was contemplating not a Māori New Zealand, in which "settlers had somehow to be accommodated, but a settler New Zealand in which a place had to be kept for the Maori" (Orange 1990, 43). To the chiefs who signed at Waitangi, Hobson claimed, "He iwi tahi tatou" (We are now one people). The Waitangi Day Act of 1960 established a day of commemoration to give thanks for the signing of the treaty, and in 1973 it was made a national public holiday. It thus became a focus for nationhood defined in settler terms.

Countering this, however, the character Tama states in *The Matriarch* that "the Treaty has never had any status in domestic or international law. The Pakeha signed it knowing it was worthless" (73). He goes on to say that the Māori point of view is different:

The British Crown has consistently broken its contract (and all you Pakeha lawyers can argue until the cows come home that the Treaty wasn't a legal document but *we* believe it is). Maori tribal lands from the very beginning, even before the ink was dry on the document, have been illegally taken, granted, sold, leased and wrongly withheld, misused and misplaced. There have been losses of forestry rights, mineral rights, fishing rights and Maori tribal cultural rights. . . .

For most assuredly *you*, Pakeha, began taking the land from us as you were

signing your worthless Treaty. *You*, Pakeha, began taking away our culture. You said at the time that we were now one people, *he iwi kotahi tatou*. What you really meant was that we now belonged to *you*. That was why we went to war. (*The Matriarch*, 73–74; italics in original)

Numerous complicating factors surrounding the Treaty of Waitangi make its interpretation and legal status fraught with difficulties (see, eg, Kawharu 1989 and Orange 1987). Some of these were dealt with by McKenzie (1985), who pointed out that there are many different English versions of the treaty, some of which differ in critical respects. Moreover, “the extant Maori version, the actual treaty as signed by the chiefs on 6 February, is not a translation of any of these five English versions [sent abroad], nor is any of the English ones a translation from the Maori” (McKenzie 1985, 33). At least one implication of this is that the extant Māori version signed by most of the chiefs is the real Treaty of Waitangi. Yet, even before all the versions in circulation had been signed and returned to him, Archdeacon Henry Williams of the Church Missionary Society proclaimed sovereignty, over North Island by virtue of cession, and over South Island by right of discovery (Orange 1990, 47).

McKenzie also noted, however, that even the Māori language was used against the Māori, because Williams, who hastily translated the treaty into Māori, presumed much of the detail of the English draft to be inexpressible in Māori (1985, 35). Moreover, the forms of Māori used to communicate certain key English concepts were conveyed through missionary Māori rather than indigenous Māori words. Williams chose not to use terms like “mana” and “rangatiratanga” to indicate what the Māori would exchange in return for “all the rights and privileges of British subjects.” The archdeacon also coined new words such as “kawanatanga” (a transliteration of “government”) to indicate what the chiefs would cede. The treaty guaranteed them “te tino rangatiratanga,” the full authority of chiefs over their lands and other valued treasures (ratou taonga katoa). Māori nationalists and historians such as Donna Awatere (1984) and Joseph Pere (1991) have interpreted this as a guarantee rather than cession of Māori sovereignty and have pressed land claims as well as support for the Māori language as being among the treasures that the Crown undertook to preserve. McKenzie concluded that “on any reasonable reading of the Māori version, it surrenders less and guarantees more than any of the English versions” (1985, 44).

McKenzie also drew attention to the fact that at the time Māori chiefs

“signed” the treaty, literacy had been introduced only twenty-five years earlier. In arguing that both missionaries and historians vastly overestimated the evidence for the spread of literacy among Māori people, he questioned what significance the act of “signing” the treaty held for the Māori chiefs. Yet it was largely through similar literacy events, in which land claims were registered by writing them down on paper, that many Pacific Islanders became acquainted with the power of the written word in European culture (Romaine 1992).

Historians such as Claudia Orange have held that the most decisive factor in persuading the chiefs to sign the treaty was missionary advice that Māori welfare would thereby be best preserved (1990, 47). But instead, as a Māori saying goes, “We looked up to heaven and before we knew where we were there was no land left . . . all gone” (*The Matriarch*, 73). Archdeacon Williams himself had a vested interest in retaining 11,000 acres of land he had bought. In answer to accusations of having taken Māori land, he replied that “the missionaries had done sterling services in New Zealand, they had laboured long hours in the service of others, that he himself had a family to support—eleven children in all—and, why, surely the land he had was not excessive given the fact that it would have to be divided eleven ways on his death?” (*The Matriarch*, 72).

The matriarch instructs her grandson that he must have knowledge of the land where he was born and to which he has rights, “because without this knowledge you are lost. Without it, you do not possess the land. You become a person without a homeland. You become a man who will never know aroha ki to iwi, love for your people and for the land. If you do not know this love then you cannot fight. Someday, you may need to know so as to challenge any person who might wish to take this land from you” (*The Matriarch*, 95).

#### IHIMAERA'S MATRIARCH: THE NOVEL OF AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND?

I turn now to my claim that *The Matriarch* represents *the* novel of modern Aotearoa New Zealand, an epic that validates a Māori version of nationhood, a vision of the Māori past and future. The matriarch herself is Aotearoa, she who “must live forever”: “Ah, e mokopuna, the world may change but I will go on forever and ever, for how can I die when nobody knows when I was born? And this place of the willows, it too will

live on and on because it is *me* and it is a place where spirits of fire and air, of water and earth, have haven” (*The Matriarch*, 425; italics in original). The matriarch epitomizes Māoritanga. As a child Tama plays a game with his grandmother in which they try to run away from the rest of the family. She is too old to move very fast, and tells the child to run ahead, but he always runs back to her. She exclaims: “I knew you would not leave me. I knew you would not desert your grandmother” (*The Matriarch*, 17). Just as one cannot flee from the past, one cannot desert one’s Māoritanga.

The matriarch, too, was once tempted to remain in Italy and not to return to her destiny in her homeland. The matriarch’s link with Italy and her singing of Verdi’s operatic arias is also symbolic of a new nationhood being forged, as during the Italian Risorgimento, the movement for the liberation and political unification of Italy (1750 to 1870). Indeed, the novel is structured as an opera, divided into acts. The matriarch’s Italian sojourn ended in 1911, when she returned home with Wi Pere, her great-uncle. As she alighted from the ship, one of the pearls threaded in her hair fell into the mud. “When she bent to retrieve it, bystanders saw that her face was clustered with pearls which were, in fact, tears. In an affecting gesture she touched her fingers to her lips and transferred the kiss to the ground” (*The Matriarch*, 436).

The choice of the persona of the matriarch to symbolize Māori nationhood is significant at a number of levels. Within Māori cosmology the female primal parent is Papa-tū-ā-nuku, the Earth Mother, the spirit of the land. Although she is fruitful and life giving, she is at the same time profane (noa). Similarly, in Pākehā national symbolism, the female figure, Zealandia, Britannia’s daughter, has been portrayed as an icon of emerging nationhood, appearing on postage stamps, for instance, from the turn of the twentieth century. Until 1911 New Zealand used the British coat of arms; thereafter it was replaced by a distinctively New Zealand coat of arms depicting a crown and shield flanked on one side by a Māori warrior with a taiaha (long club) and on the other by Zealandia with a flag.

Other symbolic evocations of nationhood in the novel focus on sightings of taniwha, the sea serpents that escorted the “holy ark of the iwi Maori . . . from Hawaiki to Aotearoa,” that is, the canoe called *Takitimu* (*The Matriarch*, 252). The narrator tells us that the matriarch stands astride both worlds as “a taniwha to both Pakeha and Maori” (27). Importantly, a taniwha appears twice in the novel, once in a flashback to August 1891, a time when “although the Pakeha was firmly established in

New Zealand, the world of the Māori, of communion between gods and men, the fabulous with the real, still manifested itself in apparitions of immense power” (340). While some explained the sighting as the result of an earthquake at Hawke’s Bay that had wrenched a tree trunk from the ocean bed, for Māori people it was an omen. “It was Arai te Uru one of the two taniwhas which had accompanied the *Takitimu* canoe on its voyage to the fish of Maui. The sea serpent was a reminder of the past, ripping through the fabric of the real world and bringing with it the remnants of fantastic dreams” (340–341). Significantly, this particular taniwha is described as having a black back and a white underbelly.

Shortly after the matriarch returned to her homeland, “the last of the fantastic sea serpents made its appearance in a proud gesture which was both a homage to the past and an acknowledgement of the passing of the time of man’s communion with the creatures which had shared his existence since the world’s creation. . . . *And its appearance was as portrayed in the painted Rongopai*” (*The Matriarch*, 437; italics in original). This taniwha, however, was disfigured by “a large cancerous growth, so deeply rooted into the brain that it must have been causing incredible pain to the beast,” and its left eye had been severely gashed, “as if by the propellers of some huge battleship. . . . the priests could see the wounds of the ages upon it. They saw that the tongue had been sliced half away so that it was no longer able to eat. They saw that two fingers of its right hand were missing, and the remaining finger was crippled beyond use. The scaly covering was blotched and discoloured from the pollution of the waters, and raw flesh showed through on the left breast where the scales had been dissolved away in some encounter with lethal acid seas” (438).

The sea serpent identified itself as Ruamano, the other of the two sea serpents which accompanied the *Takitimu* to Aotearoa. “*Look upon me for you will never see my like again. I am Ruamano, the mighty, who with Arai te uru, my companion, brought you here to this place. And he who came after me has now gone before me along the path that all must travel. My time is ended here*” (*The Matriarch*, 438; italics in original).

The following year, 1914, marked the beginning of the Great War, and the end of the communion between people and gods. From that time forward there is silence. The blinded eye is a recurrent sign in the novel; at the matriarch’s birth, the midwife saw one eye swimming in blood staring out from mother’s vagina. The slashed tongue is symbolic of language taken away, as well as the removal of means of nourishment. “The sighting of the sea serpent coincided with the beginning of great changes for

the iwi Maori. The Pakeha world had proved the victor and the Maori has been the vanquished, and the disillusionment of defeat was like a cancer in the blood" (*The Matriarch*, 439).

## CONCLUSION

National identity is not a permanent or static possession. It has to be continually reinvented. Similarly, a national literature is continually in the making, being remade in accordance with the political issues of the day. In this article I have explored how competing visions of the past constitute contested historical ground in Aotearoa New Zealand. The early self-appointed makers of a national literature in New Zealand sought to validate a distinctive identity vested not in colonial origin but in native features of culture and landscape. As Mark Williams pointed out, however, to claim that one has come "home" by turning away from what is of European origin in order to discover the uniqueness of indigenous culture is in the "interests of the claimants more than it is in those of the native peoples themselves" (1990, 13; 213). It is patronizing to Māori people, who are made to serve the decolonizing interests of their dispossessors just as they were once made to serve their colonizing interests. It is a further act of appropriation through which European New Zealanders have the prospect of remaking themselves by deliberately forgetting their own history.

Yet it is not just the visions of the past that are contested, but also the imaginings of the future. In *The Matriarch* the narrator prays "that the strength to recreate the Maori nation has come again" (195). The meetinghouse, Rongopai, originally built as a tribute to Te Kooti's struggle against Pākehā domination, is a symbol for the strength of the younger members of the present Māori nation who "had faith in Rongopai as a symbol of their Maoritanga at a time when this was being slowly snuffed out by the ways of the Pakeha. They dreamt dreams of pride in self and in the iwi. Rongopai was their political statement. This is us. This is our mana" (*The Matriarch*, 194). It is fitting that Ihimaera's vision of nationhood and family should end with this image of the ornate meetinghouse, because Rongopai is the Pere family's marae in Waituhi, and the family meetinghouse embodies the Māori sense and vision of the world. The meetinghouse itself is the body of an ancestor, signifying the continuing presence of the ancestors in community life.

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## Notes

1 This is a truncated version of the English proverbial saying, "Finders keepers, losers weepers." This aphorism sums up well the prevailing assumption of early explorers that they were entitled to lay claim to the new territories they "discovered."

2 The subtitle for this section is taken from the preface to *The Shadow of the Land* (Wards 1968), where the words of Nopera Pana Kareao in May 1840 ("The shadow of the land goes to Queen Victoria, but the substance remains to us") are contrasted with his statement in January 1841, nearly a year after the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi ("The substance of the land goes to the Europeans, the shadow only will be our portion").

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### *Abstract*

Competing visions of the past constitute contested historical ground in Aotearoa New Zealand. The novel as a genre constitutes a strategic site in constructing national identity. This article illustrates how Witi Ihimaera's historical novel *The Matriarch* (1986) presents a new vision that seeks to displace Pākehā discourse from its privileged position in articulating the country's history and national identity. This transformation from outsider to insider perspective is part of a much wider movement throughout the Pacific and beyond. As a narrative that validates a Māori version of nationhood, Ihimaera's novel can lay a strong claim to be the novel of modern Aotearoa New Zealand. Nevertheless, the novel has received mixed reaction among both Māori and non-Māori commentators, especially within influential critical literary circles. These reactions constitute another sort of contested ground as they raise issues concerning notions of history, literature, truth, and fiction, and the relationships among them.

KEYWORDS: Aotearoa, New Zealand, Witi Ihimaera, Pacific literature, nationhood, identity, narration