

## The interplay of the local and the global in Witi Ihimaera's revisions

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### Abstract

In this paper, I use Witi Ihimaera's reputation as a pioneer of Maori literature to analyze his negotiation of global and local influences on his writing in view of the claims of posterity and the obligation to the past. Ihimaera's changing attitude is most discernible in his rewriting of his earliest novels, *Tangi* and *Whanau*, in *The Rope of Man* and *Whanau II*. Significant is the trope of the trauma by which Ihimaera conceptualizes the historical impact of the world on Maori communities and on his writing, and its counterpart, the image of the rope of man, which he develops in order to indicate a path from conflict to reconciliation. Noting that Ihimaera risks a seemingly uncritical endorsement of globalization in his rewritings, I suggest a way of reading them with reference to a local Maori tradition, emblemized by the meeting house, Rongopai; I argue that their model of transformative imagination enables readers to envisage a locally shared world.

The blurbs of Witi Ihimaera's recent books, *Whanau II* (2004) and *The Rope of Man* (2005), identify him as "a pioneer in world indigenous literature", thus placing him squarely at the intersection of the global and the local. The location is ambivalent because "world indigenous" may suggest both the globalization of the distinctly local and also a distinctly localized interpretation of globalization. The figure of the pioneer seems to offer guidance to such ambivalence, yet its application to Ihimaera in the context of his latest novels seems no less ambiguous since these are in fact explicit revisions of his first two: *Whanau II* is a substantially expanded rewriting of *Whanau* (1974), while *The Rope of Man* comprises two novels, a rewritten version of *Tangi* (1973) and a sequel, *The Return*, set in 2005. If such self-revision confirms his role as a pioneer of world indigenous literature, it also reveals the reinterpretation of the past as an important aspect of the interplay between the local and the global. Ihimaera's engagement with his pioneering role indeed allows us to examine how he negotiates the

tension between global assimilation and local appropriation and thus more generally to investigate the question of the readability of indigenous literature in a globalized context.

Readers familiar with Ihimaera's literary career may be surprised that he now apparently accepts a role from which he earlier had disassociated himself. Although his first books, *Pounamu Pounamu* (1972) and *Tangi* (1973), were hailed as "the first collection of short stories" and "the first novel written by a Maori to be published",<sup>1</sup> he famously ceased writing for ten years after his fourth book, *The New Net Goes Fishing* (1977), in frustration at the way his early works seemed to confirm colonial stereotypes.<sup>2</sup> Yet his renewed recognition, now explicitly as a pioneer writer, in the context of the "Anniversary Collection" celebrating his thirty-year partnership with Reed Publishing,<sup>3</sup> appears to reinscribe him uncannily within the framework of a colonial imagination.

Coinciding with Ihimaera's acceptance of a knighthood on the occasion of the Queen's birthday in 2004 (Watkin), acceptance of his literary pioneer status suggests willing submission to the code of canonization that already anticipated his earliest publications in a way that, by his own account, then caused him considerable discomfort. Thus the blurbs of his latest books, confirming his significance for a global age, recall the pressure of assimilation that already accompanied his first literary efforts in view of their anticipated reception. Ihimaera was writing in response to the widespread expectation in the late 1960s, that a Maori novelist would emerge, thereby submitting to what he now rejects as "Pakeha-style biculturalism" (Evans 11) and unwittingly reproducing a colonial code of recognition that anticipated a place for Maori writing complementary to Pakeha writing within the tradition of the New Zealand novel.<sup>4</sup> Yet his assumption of a pioneering role in the conventional sense of an early colonist or settler made itself felt as pressure, amounting, as he has recently revealed, to a

presentiment of an early death and a determination to “hav[e] a novel published before [his thirtieth] birthday” (Watkin).

Such pressure forms part of the interplay between the local and the global as it orients the writer towards past and present. The local here refers to a writer’s grounding in a historically specific context of action in which, as an utterance, the writing represents an intervention in an ongoing social process. The global, by contrast, refers to the writer’s, however conscious, selective assimilation of the world as the range of possibility within the horizon of textuality. While the writing’s local grounding ties it to the present of social action, its global orientation situates it in a virtual (as yet vacant) space of posterity from which it looks back upon the world as a textual universe. The text therefore emerges as the place of an encounter between the present (the local as the site of that which is being made) and the past (the global as the site of that which is already given, the world). Emphasizing the continuity of past and present and expressing a retrospective viewpoint even when it is anticipatory, the designation of the writer as a pioneer can thus be seen to orient the act of writing toward its global dimension, reading the local scene of writing within the continuity of reception or assimilation.

Yet in this interplay, the pressure of posterity is answered by a sense of opportunity and this in turn enhances the significance of Ihimaera’s designation as a pioneer in the context of the works republished in the “Anniversary Collection”. For, accepting the label “opportunistic” as a compliment (“New Zealand Dreams”), he has grasped this occasion in order to rewrite his early books with a view to unsettling the textual foundation that indeed underpinned his celebrated emergence as the first Maori novelist. Thus, if his early works inscribed themselves harmoniously in a Pakeha view of the world by way of apparently unconscious repetition, his recent works can be seen

to deploy the very form of repetition in a deliberate and ongoing effort to resituate the scene of writing in relation to a world that bears the imprint of colonialism. In revealing him as a pioneer, both as an “early settler” and an “underminer”, his revisions can thus be read as efforts to enlist the discourse of globalization in the interests of cultural empowerment and the vision of a locally shared world.

In order to thus resituate his writing, Ihimaera famously had to secure for himself something like a posthumous position, of someone who has metaphorically outlived his own death. Ever since his rebirth as an author with the publication of *The Matriarch* in 1986, however, his writing has simultaneously responded to local concerns and engaged with its textual foundation globally. Thus he has consistently returned to the world of his early fiction, but on each occasion revisiting it as a site of inscription, as already textualized, so successive novels have been sequels, supplements, and most recently, explicit revisions.<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly the motif of the trauma has emerged as the privileged trope by which the legacy of colonization is engaged as an unassimilated cultural injury, implicitly shaping his early books according to a European sense of continuity and more explicitly motivating his recent work as a confrontation of the disruption of Maori lines of succession. In most novels since the early 1990s trauma functions as the pivotal organizing element and catalyses their narratives by the disclosure of a secret; equally it underpins the rewriting of *Whanau* and *Tangi* in *Whanau II* and *The Rope of Man*.

The most significant change in the new versions is the inscription of traumatic incidents that darken the pastoral of the original stories and foreground the need for reconciliation among the central characters. In *Whanau II*, this involves moving two formerly peripheral characters, Mattie Jones and Miro Matanui, to the centre of the story, where the secret murder of Mattie’s deformed child by Miro, which compromises

her political and spiritual leadership and entails her loss of some of her powers to Mattie, becomes symbolic of a number of betrayals that beset the village community. In *The Rope of Man*, the traumatic incident introduced in the rewriting of *Tangi* is the rape of Tama's mother, which he witnesses, leading to the secret birth of an unacknowledged half-brother, whose existence is revealed to the family forty years later in *Tangi's* sequel, *The Return*. Here too, the violence and its consequence typify the impact of colonization as an unassimilated event that calls for acknowledgment and responsible action. The call is emblematically addressed to Tama, whose brilliant yet reckless career as a jet-setting anchorman is readable in terms of after-effects of childhood trauma, avoidance and an unacknowledged sense of guilt.

These revisions of *Whanau* and *Tangi* in terms of the effect of trauma also point to other changes Ihimaera made in reworking his two early novels. Most obvious is the new novels' use of the narrative mode of telling rather than the earlier mode of showing, and a decisive setting of the stories in the past. In *Whanau II* this is achieved by using the past tense in preference to the present and in *The Rope of Man* by retelling significant parts of *Tangi* in *The Return*, set in 2005. The effect of these changes is a temporal distancing of events and a more continuous narrative line, which reorient the narrative discourse from subjective perception and memory towards objective history. What characterized the narratives of the original *Whanau* and *Tangi*, and underpinned their lyrical appeal, was the absence of a strongly drawn narrative line; for both texts were organized in sequences of brief scenes and fragments of memory, so that reading them became an act of filling in the gaps between them. In *Whanau II* and *The Rope of Man*, these gaps are reinterpreted as signs of secrets, sites of submerged, elusive or unexpected facts that must be brought to light. Consequently, the structure of recognition that underpinned the reading of the early novels has been recast as a

structure of avoidance, thus linking it to the impact of a historical trauma. Ihimaera's rewriting thus both comments on the cognitive fabric that held his early work together as unwittingly perpetuating the cultural impact of colonial displacement and solicits an active confrontation with this impact when revisiting the original narratives.

At the core of this vexing history is of course the territorial dispossession of the Maori under colonization, which forms the principal focus of Ihimaera's act of textual excavation in rewriting his early novels. In *Tangi* and *Whanau*, the historical circumstances of this dispossession were shrouded in vagueness, showing the villagers at Waituhi as apparently oblivious. At the same time, the ancestral bond with the land was relegated to a mythical time, an insecurely glimpsed "dreamtime" (*Whanau* 16), and transformed into a primarily affective and emotional attachment, chiefly embodied in Rongo Mahana's loving relationship with the Earth Mother and his mystical attunement to the "rhythm of the land" (54). In the new novels, the historical circumstances are made fully explicit, notably in detailed "essay chapters" (Watkin) in *Whanau II*, and the characters now have longer memories and a political awareness of the obligation to continue the fight to regain their ancestral lands. Thus while vagueness and an emphasis on emotion in the early novels facilitated a sympathetic identification between reader and story that avoided painful historical issues, the new versions imply that any such identification must acknowledge these issues as the true and binding core of a shared history. The figurative organization of the new novels indeed appears designed to assist such an acknowledgment; for while at the level of plot, the Maori characters must face up to traumatic incidents within their family histories, at the level of the narrative transaction, the readers inhabiting a postcolonial world must confront unwelcome truths belonging to the history of the nation.

The image of the rope of man (*te taura tangata*) is Ihimaera's principal metaphor for such a bond based on mutual acknowledgment. Extending the concept of *whakapapa* (tribal genealogies) into a universal bond of kinship that explicitly encompasses difference, conflict and wrongdoing, it provides a nexus within which historical grievances can be resolved at every level. As an expression of Maori cosmology (finding the universal in the particular), it also serves as a metaphor for a localized, Maori, interpretation of the interplay between the present and the past which characterises the relationship between the local and the global. In this view, we move backwards into the future while the past stretches out in front of us in what Maori cosmology refers to as the world of light (*te ao marama*), textually articulated in an expanding universe of genealogies, myths, stories and other records of life. The rope of man thus serves as a tribally-based, temporal image of gradual emergence, revealing ever-changing and increasingly intricate bonds and relations. This image appears to have provided Ihimaera with an alternative structure of recognition, redressing the damage inflicted on Maori self-perception by colonization, that facilitated his literary comeback in 1986. In an interview with Jane Wilkinson in 1984, Ihimaera invoked the concept of the rope of man as something like a prism, focusing a more radical, even aggressive, vindication of a distinct Maori vision with a global orientation that he announced he would pursue "in all of [his] work from now on" (Interview 108). And indeed, his subsequent writing, increasingly incorporating global trends of representation in its swirling movement, seems dedicated to the effort of imaginatively making the world a Maori place.

Ihimaera's alignment of his writing with such a structure of recognition, metaphorically articulated in the rope of man, has effectively, though not without considerable risk, reoriented his work from resistance toward reconciliation, a

commitment to the prospect of a shared world. The risk lies in the very consistency of this alignment, which tends to cast the imaginative effort of reconciliation into an image of facile acceptance; for a metaphor, programmatically and repetitively deployed tends to crystallize an imaginative gesture into an abstraction, as a mould that lends its assimilating shape to the imagination of posterity. As such, the metaphor enters the horizon of possibility that the act of writing takes for granted in its global orientation. Ihimaera's ambivalent status as a pioneer reemerges here; for as one of the first to extract the figure of the rope of man from a Maori tradition that he once referred to as "the largest underground movement ever known in New Zealand" ("Maori Life" 48),<sup>6</sup> he has secured this figure so that it now apparently lends itself to the country's restorative celebration of its history.

Ihimaera's latest books make it disturbingly easy to conclude that he has accepted this risk too lightly. The discomfort accompanying the involuntary submission to the assimilating pressure of posterity seems to have yielded to a cheerful acceptance of the world as it is known, so that resistance paradoxically expresses itself in the form of self-correction and the text engages with the world in an apparently uncritical celebration of globalization. In rewriting *Tangi* and *Whanau* with the benefit of hindsight, Ihimaera has acted on his earlier assessment that they represent "a serious mismatch with the reality of the times" ("Maori Life" 50), reaffirming on the publication of *Whanau II* that "[he] was a colonised person when [he] wrote those books" (Watkin). *Whanau II* and *The Rope of Man* seek to correct this mismatch by inscribing their predecessors in a sweeping historical narrative, thus realigning their stories with a non-fictional discourse that has emerged over the last thirty years in the wake of the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal.<sup>7</sup> The stories and characters of the early 1970s are made to address posterity more directly in the past tense, representing



the world as seen from the textual vantage point of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the process, resistance has quite literally been written into the past and to that extent removed from the act of writing itself, which appears to seek to harmonize itself with the discursive environment in which it locates itself. As such, Ihimaera's act of rewriting appears incapable of realizing the element of resistance that was embedded in his previous writing precisely in the form of what could be perceived as "a mismatch with the reality of the times."<sup>8</sup>

It is indeed characteristic that this harmonizing inscription of resistance in an already textualized world should occur in stories that assume globalization as their setting, where Ihimaera's attitude to history is figuratively enacted. Following the trend of his recent fiction to feature increasingly cosmopolitan protagonists, *The Rope of Man* represents his most pronounced endorsement of globalization to date, reproducing with remarkable precision the two features of globalization that Stuart Hall identified in 1991: a defensive affirmation of nationalism in the form of revitalized ethnic experience and a celebration of difference through global mass culture supported by a multinational consumer industry, found for example in satellite television, Hollywood movies and global cuisine (Hall 26-67). The sequel to *Tangi*, *The Return*, brings this emblematically into view in its first chapter, by introducing the jet-setting celebrity anchorman, Tama, and his French movie producer girlfriend as they spontaneously join a group of yuppie New Zealanders celebrating a birthday in a Spanish restaurant in London. Explaining to his girlfriend "why it is that we [New Zealanders] immediately become friends" (179), Tama quotes several lines from R.A.K. Mason's famous "Sonnet of Brotherhood", speaking of the bond that unites New Zealanders in the face of a hostile fate. In his felicitous recollection of the poem, the pathos of alienation, struggle and futility expressed by the Pakeha poet becomes a cliché evoking the Maori narrator's sense of

effortless harmony. What the poem presents as an object of strife is claimed as a gift to posterity by virtue of its place of birth. One New Zealander's birthday thus quite fittingly becomes the occasion of a celebration to which all New Zealanders are naturally invited.

In this sense, the scene in the restaurant resonates with another birthday party that is recalled both in *Tangi* and its sequel, *The Return*. In the original *Tangi*, Tama includes among the "bitter times" (77) the memory of the tenth birthday party of a Pakeha friend from which he was excluded because the boy's mother was embarrassed to have a Maori boy present. In the version of *Tangi* in *The Rope of Man*, the scene has been rewritten as a memory of defiance rather than rejection; interracial conflict is reinterpreted as intergenerational conflict as Tama's friend speaks out in protest against his mother. In *The Return*, when Tama catches up with his old friend almost forty years later, their renewed recollection of the birthday serves to illustrate the distancing and habituating effects of time, which facilitate both interracial and intergenerational reconciliation as well as resolution of other conflicts. Tama's friend's assessment echoes Tama's interpretation of Mason's poem. Pointing out that his "mother never forgave herself", he explains:

It wasn't her fault. In her day, New Zealand was a nasty, racist, homophobic, sexist, miserable bloody society. Now, of course, we have a burgeoning of Maori identity, women are running the bloody country, gay people don't have to live secret and miserable lives, and this new generation has everything to look forward to. (*Rope of Man* 215)

Again the changed emotional inflection of the epithet “bloody”, an expression of anger and resentment yielding to understated approval, suggests a polarized relationship being converted into a shared identity. Within the space of a generation, identities formed by exclusion and resistance have become signs of a thriving society; what began in struggle and hostility has become part of the environment and formerly antagonistic positions have become exchangeable and susceptible to further recombination. Considering the change, Tama recognizes in it the agency of the rope of man:

The lives of two peoples [Maori and Pakeha] had become inextricably entangled and it was predicted that within a generation every New Zealander would have some Maori blood or at least a Maori relative within the new New Zealand family. [...] The times of puzzling dichotomies were gradually receding. Maori and Pakeha were trying to work out the crucial issues of Waitangi, notably possession and contested spaces, as we tried to redefine the ways of living together. (215)

The blurring of fiction and non-fiction in these passages also obscures the negotiation between the local and the global that occurs through the image of the rope of man precisely in these two readings. In a non-fictional reading, the image of the rope of man offers a perspective on the past and the world as being organized according to providential principles. In a fictional reading, by contrast, the image functions as an imaginative tool in working out specific conflicts in the present and the invention of a shared world. In both cases, the image facilitates the resolution of conflict, but its symbolic agency is not the same. In the global assimilation of a non-fictional reading, the rope of man appears effortlessly to neutralize any sense of difference that underpins historical conflict, whereas in the local grounding of a fictional reading it projects an

almost utopian view of the world and encourages the imaginative effort of making it real.

In both readings, the image of the rope of man is chiefly embodied in Tama as protagonist and narrator, but the non-fictional reading comes more easily and tends to occlude the demands of the harder fictional reading. This is disturbing because in the non-fictional reading the agency of the rope of man is indistinguishable from the assimilating effect of globalization, making it difficult to summarize the novel without falsifying it as a satire. The ease with which Tama inserts himself into the script of a globalizing news industry – moving from *The Gisborne Herald* to World Wide News in London, via stints at News Corp in Sydney and CNN’s Hong Kong office – lends him an allegorical dimension that is reinforced by the way difference is harmoniously incorporated in his family, notably in his two children, one of whom is a Wall Street banker, the other a campaigner with Greenpeace. As a TV anchorman, Tama plays the role of a global purveyor of clichés, turning plight and strife wherever he can find them, into occasions for his audience’s affective identification. His activity in this role culminates in yet another birthday party, the tenth anniversary of his news program, *Spaceship Earth*, broadcast from New Zealand at the end of the novel, with a report on the new pope, a sound bite from Nelson Mandela, and a five-minute appearance by the seven women occupying the most powerful positions in New Zealand politics and business – all mobilized to support Tama’s tear-jerking appeal to “try harder” to “put poverty on notice” (309).

Tama’s television role blends with his role in his extended family, where he facilitates his half-brother’s spiritual rebirth as a member of the tribe and his family’s healing in a dramatic homecoming during which the formerly unacknowledged sibling is mystically enveloped by the rope of man, a “strand of [which], like a plant’s tendril,

reache[s] out to wrap itself around him and [catches] him as he [falls]” (313). And as in this climactic scene, everywhere in Tama’s life story potentially challenging differences are effortlessly incorporated and neutralized by being assumed as clichés; his eleven-year stint in Hong Kong, for instance, is little more than images of “stallkeepers in the teeming markets” and “fishermen on the busy harbour” (273). In this way Tama’s role as messenger of the rope of man is indistinguishable from the agency of global capital, as Stuart Hall has described it, bent on incorporating as much difference as it can neutralize and converting it into a source of pleasure, with the effect that “the differences [in fact] do not matter” (Hall 33). This is nowhere more apparent than in the novel’s conspicuous inaccuracies or lapses, such as when President Bush is said in 2005 “to attend celebrations marking fifty years since the end of World War II” (305) or the 1989 student protests in Tiananmen square are identified as “pro-democracy rallies against the ‘Gang of Four’ who governed the People’s Republic of China” (269).

Testing a reader’s willingness to take the text seriously, such blatant inaccuracies and clichés raise questions about the author’s method and his fictional design. While Ihimaera’s editors might have been expected to correct his errors of fact in an edition of his work designed for a global market, his nonchalance towards details of global affairs indicates that his true concerns in writing are to be located elsewhere. The question then becomes: Do Ihimaera’s superficial treatment of globalization and his seemingly undemanding translation of Maori cultural concepts only present, as Simone Drichel suggests, “an easily digestible Maori-lite version rather than challenging the non-Maori reader to leave behind their own linguistic and cultural comfort zone” (7)? Or can this lack of concern be read as a sign of his commitment to what Patrick Evans calls “as literature of tino rangatiratanga”, articulating a distinctive tradition that is “meaningful primarily to Maori readers” (25) and “in relation to which Pakeha are not

so much excluded as simply irrelevant” (23)? Such a reading would reaffirm Ihimaera’s literary pioneer role as someone who willingly accepts the risk of being misunderstood in the interest of tapping imaginative resources whose recognition might prove to be relevant to Maori and non-Maori readers alike.

A useful parallel can be drawn here with Wilson Harris, whose commitment to the imaginative effort of reconciliation has produced more immediately challenging books than Ihimaera’s. In “Literacy and the Imagination” Harris indeed introduces a perspective that sheds light on Ihimaera’s revisionist project by describing his method of writing as a process of revision that brings to light clues that were embedded in the writing as if “planted by another hand” (80):

It is as if when one writes, one puts things into the draft which one was not conscious of placing there, and then when one comes back and scans the draft closely, suddenly one is aware of these clues. They become important and one revises through these, concentrating very closely on the ramifications of that image. (80)

These clues disrupt the apparent clarity of the textual frame and of authorial intention and make them “susceptible to a tradition which one has apparently lost” (82). Referring to the title of one of his novels, Harris likens this process to an “infinite rehearsal” in the sense that “there is no final performance” (81) that would securely frame these intuitive clues once and for all. Writing, in this view, engages a “complex dialogue” (83), attending to the otherness within and thereby articulating an interpretive or creative frame by approximation in the form of an imaginative attitude of reconciliation.

Harris’s notion of an infinite rehearsal indeed seems an apt image for Ihimaera’s persistent rewriting of his narratives and his reluctance to definitively close any of his

books. His increasingly rapid writing and rewriting, producing six books from 2003 to 2005, seems calculated to activate unconscious, intuitive meanings, in keeping with his intention, expressed in the author's note to *Whanau II*, "to write a physical, emotional and psychic text" (230). And his dedication to articulate a "covert history [that is accessible only as] a secret inventory, carried within the village mnemonic" (61), resonates with Harris's commitment to tap "a tradition which one has apparently lost" (82). From this point of view, Ihimaera's flaunting disregard for widely recognized standards of literary excellence, challenging the assumption of a work's integrity, timelessness and originality, can be read as indicators to what he appears to be willing to give up and perhaps a challenge to his readers to confront a local creative tradition that questions assumptions of a work's transcendence of time and aesthetic originality.

The most conspicuous place to which Ihimaera's fiction leads us back insistently in its attempt to tap this tradition is the meeting house, Rongopai, of his childhood village Waituhi. Indeed, the prominence of the meeting house in the body of his fiction is emblematic of his commitment to a notion of the local as not just a place of origin but more importantly as a place where things and people come together, repeatedly and in ever-changing circumstances. Ihimaera's persistent return to Rongopai indicates that the meeting house is a clue to the tradition that has nourished his writing from the beginning, the implications and ramifications of which he seeks to explore by repeatedly revisiting and revising his earlier descriptions. By building his narratives around this motif of the return to Rongopai, Ihimaera exemplifies Stuart Hall's claim that the ethnic, or in this case the indigenous, manifests itself in a globalized world in the form of a return. This may express itself in nostalgia but is equally prone to reveal the local, the place of origin, as the product of a history to be learned, a history that

exposes the local to the impact of the outside world and in turn establishes it as a place from which to assume and address the world (Hall 38).

In Ihimaera's returns both aspects appear. On the one hand, the narrator of *Whanau II* and *The Rope of Man* acknowledges Waituhi and Rongopai as his Eden a place that on his latest return makes him "sentimental and emotional" (*Rope of Man* 76, 313) and that represents an image of his heart (*Whanau II* 177). On the other hand, the meeting house in particular has also been increasingly historicized in successive revisions and its interpretation changed radically in the process, to the point that in *Whanau II* the representation of the house in *Whanau* and *Tangi* is explicitly rejected as expressing the perception of "a colonised mind" (176). In the early novels, the house, distinctive for its blending of Maori and Pakeha imagery, appeared as a symbol of a past in need of revitalization and of the "twilight years of the Maori" (*Tangi* 116, *Whanau* 124), because of its departure from orthodox practices of carving. The revisions, by contrast, celebrate the meeting house as a symbol of confidence and cultural resilience, precisely because of the way it incorporates history and culture contact in its pictorial scheme.

In *Whanau II* and *The Rope of Man*, Ihimaera gives us the most extensive descriptions of Rongopai and the most detailed accounts of its construction, so tracing a local Maori tradition that underpins the fictional scheme of his latest novels. This tradition is associated with Te Kooti Arikirangi, the founder of the Ringatu faith, for whom the house was built in anticipation of his return to his native East Coast district in 1888.<sup>9</sup> It thus stands as a testimony to the local people's response to Te Kooti's message of peaceful resistance, often expressed in cryptic parables and predictions, calling for interpretation in action and narratives that verify his words. By literalizing Te Kooti's figurative pronouncements, these narratives, as Judith Binney points out, can



“appear [to outsiders] as the inner exile of the powerless and the dispossessed” (346). To those within, however, the narratives not only transmit “the promise of divine fulfilment” (346), but also provide a framework which brings this fulfillment into the realm of proper action. In other words, while speaking of the exiles’ hope for the restoration of the Promised Land, the narratives also express an imaginative attitude which transforms the land of exile itself into the Promised Land by inspiring action that seeks to approximate the prophecy (368-69).

The building of Rongopai, as retold in *Whanau II* (170-72), is an example of such interpretive action, as the district elders whom Te Kooti told to “go home and build the Gospel on charity and love” (171) had four meeting houses built, one of which was named Rongopai, meaning Gospel.<sup>10</sup> Of the four houses, “[o]nly Rongopai has been left unchanged,” as Rocher Neich points out, “remaining tapu for many years (until 1963) because of its strange paintings” (189-90).<sup>11</sup> The house was decorated according to a tradition initiated by Te Kooti in deliberate departure from the conventions of the classical carved meeting house, including the use of “polychrome commercial paint on carvings” and the incorporation of figurative painting in the traditional architectural composition of the house (Neich 116). The application of European materials and iconographic codes thus explicitly articulated the expression of a Maori identity with the history of cultural contact, told by paintings that stood “in contrast with the timeless presence of the ancestors in a traditional house” (Binney 377).

According to Neich, this departure from tradition prevented houses like Rongopai from being recognized, by Pakeha and Maori alike, as authentic representations of Maori culture (4), and in the context of the promotion of Maori art under a developing tourism industry at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these houses tended to be neglected and sometimes modified in line with an archaizing return to a strictly

codified Maori art that emphasized its distinction from European art forms (28). By virtue of its *tapu* status, Rongopai thus almost accidentally became a monument to what could be called “a tradition which one has apparently lost” (Harris 82). The most salient features of this local tradition are the optimism expressed in the whimsical joyfulness of its paintings and the emphasis on the value of land. The striking prominence of floral imagery in the decorative scheme of the house, as Neich suggests, is “symbolic of the land and all that it entail[s] in terms of produce, timber, prosperity, mana and turangawaewae” (191). As such, it may be reminiscent of Te Kooti’s “strong stand against the selling of Maori tribal lands” (191), but its articulation in a material and style derived from Europe implicitly also express a vision of a shared world, something that Ihimaera seems to allude to in his descriptions of the paintings in *Whanau II* (174) and *The Rope of Man* (77) as representations of an Edenic world and the “millennial dreams of the iwi”.

In conclusion, this local tradition, emblemized by the meeting house Rongopai, suggestively marks the place where the contradictory strands of Ihimaera’s revisions can be brought together. By inscribing his early novels, *Tangi* and *Whanau*, into a more explicit historical narrative, he has dissociated his writing from a concept of Maoriness that emphasizes its timeless otherness, exemplified, for instance, in *Tangi*’s attempt to recreate the structure of a traditional ritual of mourning or in *Whanau*’s lyrical evocation of the aroha that binds the extended family. His revisions of these novels in *Whanau II* and *The Rope of Man* express his recognition that such a representation of Maoriness fails to engage with the ways in which it has been shaped by its encounter with the world, specifically its exposure to the commodifying processes of colonialism and globalization. By resituating his writing in a concrete Maori tradition that developed in the context of 19th-century colonial conflict, he subscribes to a concept of Maoriness

to which cultural contact not only presents a threat but also an opportunity to thrive. In this respect, Ihimaera's optimistic assumption of the discourse of globalization mirrors and extends the confidence of the artists of Rongopai in their assumption of European materials, concepts and techniques. By sending us back to the original novels, the revisions also allow us to discover clues to this particular tradition in the early texts, in the form of peripheral or seemingly spurious references to Ringatu principles and practices, such as the upraised hand mentioned on the last pages of *Tangi* (190, 207) or Nanny Paora's ability to relive the past in his dreams in *Whanau*. In *Whanau II* and *The Rope of Man*, Ihimaera can be seen to have tapped this tradition to far greater depth, giving center stage to formerly peripheral characters like Miro Matanui, who now appear as guardians of a prophetic tradition that allows them to see the present as a renewal of the past and thus to provide guidance for proper action in the future (cf. Binney 346-47).

In the process, Ihimaera appears to have recast his narratives in the mould of the oral traditions of the Ringatu community. The two readings, non-fictional and fictional, that I have suggested for his recent novels can thus be understood to correspond to the oral narratives' appeal to outsiders and insiders respectively. While to outsiders the literalization of these narratives may appear naïve and indicative of a mind trapped in superstition, to insiders their significance lies in the imaginative attitude that is sustained by the materialization of metaphor in everyday life. Similarly, from this point of view, Ihimaera's apparent disregard for details of global history may serve as a reminder that for the prospect of a shared world the assumption of a full knowledge of the other may ultimately be of less importance than the availability of an imaginative attitude that allows one to acknowledge the other as one's kin. This idea finally returns us to the contradictory representation of the encounter with history in Ihimaera's recent

novels in the form of trauma and the image of the rope of man. While they represent opposites in terms of the affective response they elicit, the two images are related in that they both acknowledge history as something that happens to us before we know it. These alternative images, then, indicate the range that is open to the imagination in responding to the impact of the world on our lives at the threshold between past and present. By engaging with the historical pressures on his own writing in his revisions in a way that persistently seeks to convert a sense of injury into a sense of opportunity, Ihimaera at his best offers us an example of transformative imagination. Assuming the role and risks of a pioneer in the two senses I have suggested, what he excavates within the monumental foundations of posterity in the form of unwelcome surprises in this light appear as crystallized opportunities for renewing our sense of kinship with the other.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from the prefatory note and the blurb of *Pounamu Pounamu* and *Tangi* respectively.

<sup>2</sup> See Ihimaera's Turnbull lecture, "Maori Life and Literature: A Sensory Perception" (1981).

<sup>3</sup> The Anniversary Collection includes republications of Ihimaera's first three books, *Pounamu Pounamu*, *Tangi* and *Whanau*, as well as *The Whale Rider* and a collection entitled *Ihimaera: His Best Stories*. All of these have been revised for an international audience, but *Tangi* and *Whanau* have been most extensively rewritten, *Tangi* coupled with a sequel, *The Return*, in *The Rope of Man* and *Whanau II*.

<sup>4</sup> The original blurb of *Pounamu Pounamu* states that "Witi felt compelled to write after reading Bill Pearson's [1968] essay ['The Maori and Literature']", which noted the absence of a Maori novelist and predicted the emergence of an emotionally distinctive Maori literature.

<sup>5</sup> The groundbreaking text was *The Matriarch*, mingling Pakeha historiography, Maori myth narratives and the fictional discourse of magic realism. *The Whale Rider* (1987) and *Dear Miss Mansfield* (1989) confirmed the new direction of Ihimaera's writing. Subsequent novels, featuring increasingly cosmopolitan protagonists, return to the same textualized world of Waituhi, also the stage of *Whanau II* and *The Rope of Man*, where the stories of *The Matriarch* and its sequel, *The Dream Swimmer*, *Bulibasha* and *The Uncle's Story* are all revisited.

<sup>6</sup> Ihimaera's identification of the principle of the rope of man is best seen in relation to historical research, in particular Judith Binney's work on the narrative traditions of the Ringatu faith. Referring to an essay by Bernie Kernot (1983), Binney observes: "In traditional Maori thought there is a continuing dialogue between the past and the present. An individual is thought of as facing the past, which lies before him – *ngā rā o mua* 'the days in front' – and history is 'an unfolding series of generational stages' [...], each one a renewal of an earlier time" (346).

<sup>7</sup> In the preface and "author's note" to *Whanau II*, Ihimaera indicates work undertaken for a submission to the Waitangi Tribunal on behalf of Te Whanau a Kai in 2002 as one of the sources of the project of rewriting *Whanau*.

<sup>8</sup> In her review of *Whanau II*, Simone Drichel indicates the element of resistance discernable in the original novel's refusal to spell out Maori concepts and values is lost in the rewritten version's more explicit narration, with the effect of turning her "into a resistant reader" (7).

<sup>9</sup> Famous for his role in the New Zealand wars of the 1860 and 70s, Te Kooti's lasting significance lies less in his military genius than in his conversion from the cause of war to a commitment to peace after settling in the territory of his former opponent, King Tawhiao, from whom he declared "he had learned the message of peace" (Binney 367). On Te Kooti's military career, see Belich 216-34, 258-67, 275-88.

<sup>10</sup> See Binney 375-6, for the story, as told to her by John Ruru.

<sup>11</sup> See Binney 392, n76. Margaret Orbell notes that "when the elders entered the house at its opening, they were profoundly shocked to see how far the young men, in decorating it, had departed from the traditional designs" (32), that "they prophesied that because of this desecration Te Kooti would never enter the house" (33), thus declaring Rongopai *tapu*. Having followed Orbell's account in *Tangi* (115-16) and *Whanau* (123-24), in *Whanau II* Ihimaera disputes these claims and points out that "[a]ny *tapu* that was on Rongopai [...] was lifted in 1952" (176). Neich, like Orbell, notes that it was lifted in 1963, also observing that despite the *tapu*, "the house continued to function as a Ringatu church, giving many people the opportunity to see and absorb the lessons of this new art" (192-3).

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