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# Narrative in Robyn Kahukiwa's *Matatuhi: Culture and Narrative*

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The question of a dominating Western metanarrative in postcolonial societies has particular significance when people write for children in a bi-cultural situation. In a recent study the Maori scholar Jon Battista shows that fictional texts written in English by Maori in a Maori context are structured to project Maori cultural understandings and argues that these cultural beliefs shape the narrative of individual texts (Battista, 2004). I apply her thesis to *Matatuhi*, a picture book by Robyn Kahukiwa, in order to discuss the narrative operation and significance of Maori cultural beliefs and practices identified by Battista.

Children's literature scholarship involving issues of ethnicity and identity has focused on cultural colonisation, on the concept of social context shaping the retelling of stories and on ways of representation and imaging narratives. Clare Bradford, in excavating educational and other texts, encourages the careful reader to develop slipping frames of observation and to pay attention to text from many viewpoints; this latter includes grasping the knowledge which underpins writing from a culture not one's own (Bradford 2001, Bradford 2003). In an entirely different but relevant strand of scholarship John Stephens and Robin McCallum in their work on reversions of folk tale and other literature for children emphasize the extent to which 'social values and attitudes prevailing in the time and place of the retelling' affect the story and it is this emphasis on the current cultural context which underpins my study of a single picture book (Stephens and McCallum 1998, p.7). Stephens' more recent explorations into the nature of narrative in pictorial texts are a third strand of scholarship germane to this reading of Kahukiwa's book in part because he is considering ideas arising from Japanese aesthetics. There is no suggestion that Japanese and Maori aesthetics are (or are not) analogous, but the cultural difference in visual representation between Japanese and 'the West' resonates with Kahukiwa's choices about representing Maori and Maori cultural concepts in a picture book. In his analysis of the competing aesthetics of kinesis and stasis Stephens draws attention to some distinctively Japanese illustrative practices and stresses differences between stasis and kinesis in narrative (Stephens 2000; 2004). As Sirke Happonen notes, 'pictures, because of their facility in expressing intangible feelings and ideas, may be more

effective than the more 'concrete and dry' verbal component of children's texts (Happonen 2005 p.82). Kahukiwa's latest picture book written across cultures is an example of visual meanings asserting dominance over verbal to the extent that the visual holds the narrative significance.

These three strands of scholarship inform a reading of the socio/cultural context framing narratives. It is within this broad framework that Jon Battista delivers a close reading of Maori writer Patricia Grace's fiction. She describes Grace (among other writers) as: 'privileging the stories of her own culture above the texts and pedagogies of other cultures ... [and in doing so averting] the "malignant forces" of ongoing colonial practice' (Battista 2004, p.158). Battista showed that in Patricia Grace's novel, *Potiki*, 'The conceptualization of a culture in transition and a written artefact which claims all stories by privileging a Maori point of view is realised not only in theme but also in terms of *Potiki's* narrative structure' (Battista 2004, Vol 1, p.2). She asserts Grace highlights cultural themes such as a 'thematic preoccupation with the capacity of the past to influence and inform the present future', a 'rhetorical commitment to'... 'figurative expression', (p.60-2) as deliberate Maori ways of story telling, in order to foreground cultural beliefs. Grace's use of Maori language and imagery as integral parts of the text, the emphasis on whakapapa (knowledge of one's forebears central to Maori culture), the binding of past present and future with spirituality, the importance of identity and names in history all affect the narrative structure.

In the New Zealand domain of children's books some Maori writing in English, likewise, privilege the stories of Maori culture. In *Matatuhi* Kahukiwa constructs a specific audience she is addressing: children with a dual Maori/Pakeha ancestry. Other readers may be welcome but are not specifically invited to this text. The author herself is a well established New Zealand and international artist whose central works are strongly political, arguing her position on indigenous status, colonisation, gender and land issues. She is a 'warrior' for Maori rights, and yet, as Jonathan Mane-Wheoki suggests in *The Art of Robyn Kahukiwa* (2005 p.36), in recent visual works she 'floats the possibility of a truly bi-cultural people'. *Matatuhi*, one of several picture books by Kahukiwa, reflects her



concern both for the children of mixed ethnicity and for the maintenance of Maori identity and culture. Kahukiwa's stance of privileging Maori cultural concepts is sourced in a Maori community alert to its increasing ethnic diversity: in 2001 54% of Maori younger than 14 years declared, or had their parents declare, that they affiliated with two or more ethnic groups (Boston et al., 2006). For a culture in such a position there is some urgency in teaching and establishing the value of central Maori cultural concepts.

My first reading of *Matatuhi* evoked a peaceful recognition of things Maori. The narrative relates the story of Matatuhi, a bi-ethnic girl adopted by Pakeha parents (of European ethnicity) who, stimulated by a visit to the museum, discovers her Maori whakapapa. The story is sliced into time frames of the distant past, the present and the future represented by images and dreams rather than defined actions. First, Matatuhi's forebear dreams of her future, strangely coloured, (light skinned) descendant and weaves a special cloak for her. Generations later, Mata, the young protagonist portrayed to this point as interested mainly in shopping, admires a cloaked, wooden figure in the museum which briefly comes to life as Old Matatuhi, and embarks upon a search for her real name, her whanau (family) and her whakapapa. The ancient cloak is eventually replicated by young Matatuhi when she is a mature woman. The implied contemporary readers are shown the young Matatuhi also as a much older woman in her own future. (The back cover depicts the young Matatuhi (Mata) in the Museum in the present.) The unity of time, the emphasis on whanau and whakapapa (knowledge of one's forebears) the whareniui (meeting house) as a safe place and the way in which ideas are enforced symbolically through images, seemed at once familiar and strong. The timelessness of the story is embedded in the choice of illustrations: representations of Matatuhi - past, present and future are inextricably bound by spiritual connections. Kahukiwa ensures that these three time divisions segue into each other as she forces the reader to create a symbolic narrative always looking to the past and the future.

Since the illustrations in *Matatuhi* are the primary channel for the story it is not surprising that pictures function symbolically or that reiterated images are heavily informative. The front cover, in a way peculiarly Maori,

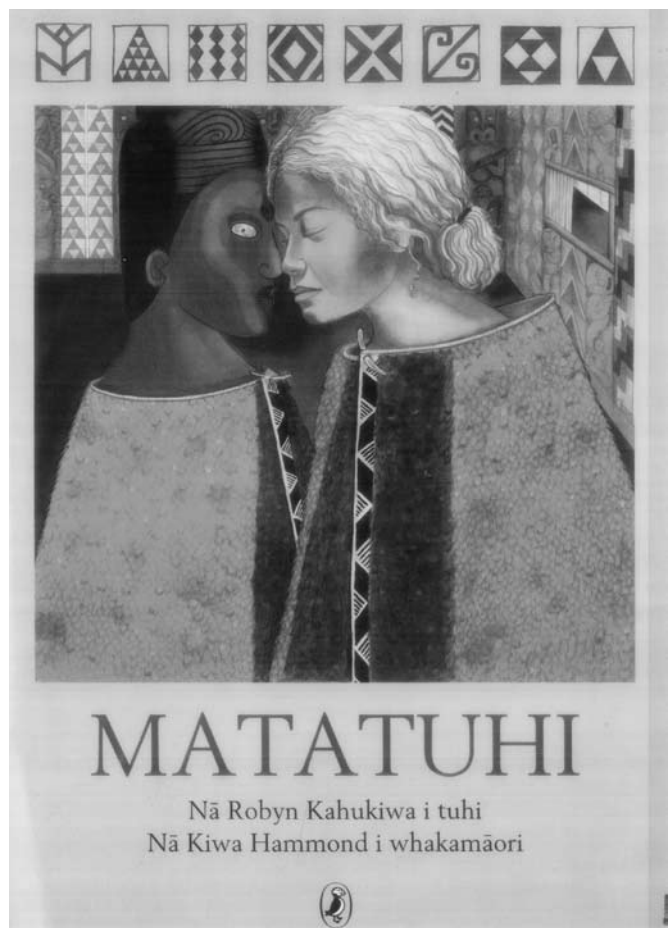


Fig. 1

brings endings and beginnings into question. (Fig 1) The image shows two females in identical woven red cloaks, one a formalized carved figure from the past, the other a young woman who is also the child protagonist in the book; the woman inclines her face forward in a gesture of respect and aroha (love) in the traditional hongi greeting. The overriding emotion is a sense of stillness: the two images fill the page, the woman has her back to the story, facing left, the vertical bands of dark feather and the geometrical woven taniko design on both cloaks contributes to the stasis. Creamy pinks, beige and soft ochre-red sit gently against the brown and red embrace of the meeting house walls. This cover illustration adumbrates over the story; it is also the frontispiece, and an extended painting comprising the end papers. Just as the back of the whare (or house) is traditionally regarded as the way toward the future, so, the picture on the front cover is the true end – not just the end of this story but an indication that the story continues into the future when the young Matatuhi will have become the mature woman we are shown three times and will have woven her own cloak with the distinctive taniko border.

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The painting of two cloaked females encapsulates multiple time sites and raises such questions: as who belongs where? What is the effect on narrative structure of a beginning like this which does not feature the present day protagonist? The reiteration of this image (reproduced twice) preserves the story locus in the past and insists on its future continuation – not resolution. The reader may assume this painting is a dream, but is left uncertain about who may have been the dreamer. This primary image projects well beyond the printed story: its indeterminacy breaches the narrative frame; as it invokes the past and the future it confirms the Maori concept of time and denies a traditional Western resolution to the narrative. The manner in which this cover image is reproduced twice neither confronts the written text nor supports it as we might expect in Western-oriented kinetic pictorial narrative. It does however destabilise any step toward a narrative of movement and progress by forcing readers to slow down; possibly to note the cloak: it indicates a high status, is a taonga (treasure) and also conceals the individual. This is not just the difference between a static and kinetic thrust in a narrative; it is an entirely different way of putting a story together, one which privileges Maori ways of thinking about time and makes the reader behave differently in reading the narrative. The concept of a unified time embodies the parallel idea of the whanau that includes all who have gone and are yet to come and this illustration implies Matatuhi has claimed such an understanding. We are not positioned to focus on plot in this book, rather, on significance and perhaps as Battista reminds us that, ‘Our ancestors will never die for they live on in each of us. E kore e hekeheke he kakano rangatira’ (Battista, Abstract n.p.n.).

Two dreams enclose the vital centre of the story. The first is Old Matatuhi’s dream set in the meeting house. In this dream the light streaming from outside the meeting house acts as a link across generations and thus implies the importance of family ties, a spiritual connection and possibilities of knowledge sharing. The carved figure behind Old Matatuhi links the two dream characters in a gaze of protection and perhaps spiritual certainty. From this point Old Matatuhi determines to weave her finest and last kahu whero (red cloak), the same pattern as that she saw in her dream. In a later dream *young* Matatuhi dreams

of her forebear, signalling her absorption into her Maori whanau and whakapapa.

The visual information is central to Mata’s learning and the reader’s understanding and reveals a ‘thematic preoccupation with the capacity of the past to influence and inform the present and future’ (Battista, p.60). The pictures embody Maori cultural practices and reveal life in pre-contact times. The tukutuku (decorative woven wall panels), the carvings in the interior of the whare, photographs from Mata’s whakapapa Maori, and reiterated images such as the tui (black bird with white tuft at throat) as protector serve to establish the significances of some Maori concepts and practices.

The visual narration also presents the reader with a plethora of distant unengaged gazes as characters look down and beyond each other. The role of individual characters thus seems weakened as the real Old Matatuhi and her carved figure overshadow the story. In the whanau’s welcome to young Matatuhi all but two of her own birth whanau of nine family members look across and out of the picture rather than at the new whanau member.

There is one significant visual representation of Mata’s Pakeha life. After Mata says she is not concerned with her Maori origins and wants to go to the mall the reader is directed to the stark illustration opposite, a reflection of the protagonist and her adoptive mother in a framed mirror. This image poses the central question about mixed ethnicity: differences and assonances in skin colour and hair are underscored as if to say to the reader, this child is ethnically mixed. Here things are definite, nuances are evaporated and the background is one of harsh clear greens and strong lines. The mother’s protective arm on Mata’s shoulder is read within this frame of certainty and containment as a conventional rendering of love but could be interpreted as a limiting gesture. The Pakeha parents love and encourage her, but Mata’s life with these parents is portrayed as a superficial one since nothing in the illustrative text enriches the sparse written text. The narrator/illustrator portrays the Pakeha situation from a Maori point of view; it is a Maori significance. Happonen and Stephens argue that the role of the written text is diminished in some books, and Kahukiwa’s decisions suggest she may see visual

representation not just as able to convey cultural concepts about life as a Maori rather than as a Pakeha, but to imply spirituality and the strength of women. Her text appears less important because the pictures, first, are detailed yet strongly structured and feature reiterated images that the reader is impelled to interpret, and, second, the meagre text allows visual ideas and images to hover and suggest connections between Matatuhi of the past, the present and the future.

Some features of the written text contribute to the Maori metanarrative established by the illustrations. Maori words are used throughout *Matatuhi* without glossing: 'That kahu where (red cloak) shall be my next weaving, she thought. I must begin gathering harakeke and feathers and prepare them for my task'. The kuia (old woman) reflects a non-commercial attitude to her fine weaving commonly associated with Maori spirituality: 'she made these things only for her whanau' (Holt, 2002). On pp.5-6 old Matatuhi, remembering her dream, begins weaving her finest and final cloak which '[s]he imbued ... with karakia to give it a mauri [life force] which would protect the garment from ageing'. Later it is 'unbelievable that this impressive cloak is...in such good condition'; ancient Maori and modern understandings are thus brought together (p.23). Having completed this cloak she dies: 'Her time had come to follow the path Te Rerenga Wairua [the leaping-off place of the spirit]. And so she died' (pp.5-7). Throughout the text some sentences hint at the hieratic. Beginnings include: 'Long ago...', 'And so it was that Mata...' 'And so she died'. Later, two words, 'Mata blinked', effect the slip into the past and bring Old Matatuhi to life. Not all the short sentences of the text function that way; for instance 'They lived in the city', summarises, almost dismisses, Mata's Pakeha life perhaps redolent of the city as a site for mall activity rather than family endeavours. Page 13 begins, 'When Mata turned twelve, she went on a bus trip to the museum with her class from school'. The text stops three lines later leaving a blank page which drives readers to scrutinise the facing meeting house illustration.

In another echo of Grace's themes the place of whanau and the importance of carrying a tipuna (ancestral) name are concepts foregrounded in the written text: balanced rhythmic sentences insist on the importance of the themes.

'From that time on, Mata's life changed', and, 'She claimed her true name, Matatuhi'. The verbal narrator, distant and ostensibly neutral, is knowledgeable about the past and the future, with the Maori expertise to guide the reader in understanding of past Maori ways of behaving. This narrator is not a child, not an ancient voice nor an exclusively modern one, but a formal voice with a tone of authority. The written text indicates that the story continues in the future: 'And one day, after many years, she did', but our lasting response is to the solid third viewing of the two female figures we first saw on the front cover. The end piece painting reveals the mature Matatuhi and her carved tipuna (ancestral figures) and it is indeed 'many years later'. The image of the future Matatuhi yet again projects the rich perspective of valued Maori traditions revolving from the past to the future. The illustrative text fashions a non-Western narrative.

Building Maori cultural concepts into the text affects the narrative structure. Kahukiwa shows time as a coalescent spiritual element and consequently usurps the convention of story development; in valuing the group rather than the individual she denies discrete agency; in introducing the spiritual she shows Matatuhi not so much as a protagonist seeking agency in a search for her mother as she is a person subsumed by her ancestry and absorbed into a group. In a traditional Western narrative she would be a girl seeking her mother; in this book she seeks to know her whakapapa, to assume her tipuna name, to be absorbed by the past and to join her whanau. The Maori significance, continually asserted through the illustrations, evades any Western metanarrative resolution and once again points to both a Maori metaethic and a Maori metanarrative.

Kahukiwa herself is working from within a culture of mixed ethnicity. Her central concern may be of a culture in transition, the child involved may be of mixed ethnicity, but it is a culture deeply embedded in a Maori world. The Maori perspective in *Matatuhi* is one which allows no 'mixture' or hybridity in cultural values – rather it is a choice between whakapapa, a wide whanau and cultural bonding in the Maori world and a rigid, narrower, less spiritual Pakeha world. The question of ethnically blended families in this complex narrative is concentrated by keeping the 'loving Pakeha' family and the history of cross cultural relations

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almost entirely out of the pictorial setting. The spotlight focuses on a text centrally concerned with whanau, naming, heritage, whakapapa and some Maori cultural concepts such as a distinctive view of time and respect for the old. Recognising the multi-ethnic nature of many, indeed most, Maori children, Kahukiwa privileges Maori culture in a Maori story.

One of the questions we ask ourselves when considering a narrative, is who the writer is addressing. This children's picture book is openly didactic and indeed three Pakeha teachers with whom I spoke found the story exclusive, and biased, and one suggested it 'feels like propaganda'. They noted the girl seemed passive, lacked agency, was not a hero and, worst of all, did not find her mother. They are 'unsettled' (see Bradford quote below) and are revealing that they bring to the book what most non-Maori would: an expectation of a Western metanarrative. The quality of whakama, often interpreted as shyness, is a Maori understanding that elevates group identity above individual public recognition and could contribute to the idea of an apparently self-effacing hero. Agency depends on social context, and hence agency in a Maori context in *Matatuhi* is centered in Matatuhi's absorption into the whanau. As Bradford has said of Aboriginal textuality, 'narrative and discursive features have the capacity to unsettle readers accustomed to encountering texts centered in Western culture but I would argue that such a sense of being unsettled is a necessary part of decolonization' (Bradford, 2003 p.209). Kahukiwa makes it clear that she is speaking to children who have some Maori origin even if they do not recognise their connections to Maori society and she is teaching them Maori cultural concepts through a narrative in a Maori context. The issue of a cultural disconnection among children of ethnically mixed parentage has concerned parents for generations: Kahukiwa provides her answer.

In a recent paper on performativity in children's literature, John Stephens discusses the idea that 'children's literature has remained wedded to narratives about individual development' (Stephens 2006, p.6) but that since 2000, in some texts, there is not the necessity to follow 'clear rules or abstract moral values, or other metanarratives' (p.8). In *Matatuhi* it is not an *absence* of rules and values which impel

the story but the existence of an 'other metanarrative', that is, one accessible to Maori children through the cultural setting which privileges Maori attitudes and values. Clare Bradford warns that we should not assume that Western traditions are universal or that 'narratives of indigenous peoples [should be] assimilated into a Western narrative schema', (Bradford 2003, p.101) rather, if we are serious about decolonization, particularly in children's literature, we might try to 'fully understand a set of cultural meanings' not our own and welcome children's books such as Kahukiwa's *Matatuhi*.

Kahukiwa has created an art form for a dual adult and child audience. Perhaps the adult Maori reader will recall Kahukiwa's comment on her painting, *Self Portrait/Ethnicity*, 1999, '...my eyes might be light in colour, my hair might be fair, my skin white but look at my heart and my soul, that is where I am Maori...' (p.13) (Hilliard 2005) and see that this may be the implied goal of the book; that children of mixed Maori/Pakeha descent know and draw strength from their Maori legacy. Kahukiwa, in making this focused cultural response to an entrenched demographic movement, has created a decolonizing text directed particularly to Maori children of mixed ethnicity and those children who work and play with them.



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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Jill’s recent research work has included a focus on adult writers using literature to establish the construction of the child in children’s literature ranging from adult perceptions of the child as a ‘good New Zealander’ in the 1930s and 1980s to writing for children in English by Maori and multi-ethnic writer/illustrators. Inherent in this work is attention to gender, ethnicity and cultural identity portrayal in the narrative.