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# Exclusion and Revolt in Witi Ihimaera's *Whale Rider*

This paper takes as its theoretical perspective Julia Kristeva's reading of the Freudian myth of origin to explore the themes of exclusion and revolt in Witi Ihimaera's emancipatory narrative. In Kristeva's reading, exclusion and revolt are human mechanisms that inevitably occur in social situations of hierarchy and tradition. This paper explores these mechanisms in Ihimaera's re-creation of the myth of Paikea in the film *Whale Rider* and dramatises the particular ways in which exclusion and revolt function in a Maori community. Ihimaera's rendering of his *whiwhi*'s myth of origin suggests a renewed understanding of past traditions, and presents a vision of present-day reconciliation and future survival.

**W**iti Ihimaera's novel *The Whale Rider* was well received by critics and readers after its publication in 1987, and it became a popular success after its story was made into the film *Whale Rider* in 2002. The success of the film, which motivated publishers to reissue the novel, was substantial; *Whale Rider* won the People's Choice Award 2002 at the Toronto International Film Festival and, in the following year, the World Cinema Audience Reward at the Sundance Film Festival and the Canal+ Audience Award at the International Film Festival Rotterdam. Young leading actress Keisha Castle-Hughes was nominated for the 2004 Academy Award for best actress. Directed by Niki Caro, with Ihimaera's cooperation on the screenwriting, the film was shot by Caro and her cinematographer Leon Narby on the New Zealand East Coast, the land of Ihimaera's own Whangara community. The film's narrative itself is easily summarised: a young Maori girl named Paikea is excluded from the position of the leader of her tribe by her inflexible grandfather on grounds of gender, but proves herself worthy by rescuing and riding an ancient whale, as did her mythic ancestor Paikea, and she is eventually installed as leader, thereby changing not only the grandfather's entrenched ideas of leadership, but also the course of tradition.

In this paper, I wish to explore how the feminist revolt enacted in the film derives its force and impact from the underlying mechanisms of power that are intrinsic to human history and have been narrated in all cultures in the form of myths.<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva's lucid explanation of the mechanisms of revolt, based on

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<sup>1</sup> Psychoanalytic approaches in literary criticism have generally taken myths (and related genres such as fairy tales and folktales) as their primary subject, since myths are, as Michael Bell states, "supremely significant" foundational stories (1). Myths fictionalise the psychological experiences and social conflicts that are in a sense the timeless human problems of existence (Freud used the word *zeitlos* in this respect). It is for this reason,

her reading of Freud's myth of origin, provides the theoretical perspective for this paper. Myth, in this paper, is not to be defined as fantasy, regression or unreliable fiction, as common usage has it, but is here considered the fictional representation of human social experience; as primarily "a way of describing the foundations of social behaviour" (Righter 10). My focus, then, will not be on the specifically psychoanalytic aspects of Kristeva's reading, but on what is in fact the primary purpose of her project in the two-volume publication entitled *The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis* (translated eds. 2000 and 2002), which is to consider myth as a carrier of social and historic truth; as a narrative of human power struggles and their underlying mechanisms of exclusion and revolt.<sup>2</sup>

In Julia Kristeva's reading of the Freudian myth of origin, exclusion and revolt are human mechanisms of change that are intrinsic in social hierarchical situations. In his contemporary mythopoetic rendering of the story of Paikea the whale rider, building on his own tribal myth of origin, Ihimaera offers a renewed understanding of past traditions, and adds to the ancient themes of exclusion and revolt a new vision of present-day reconciliation and future survival. My purpose in this paper is to explore Ihimaera's use of myth in *Whale Rider*, in particular its elements of exclusion and revolt, for its innovative and liberating perspective on the dilemmas raised by Kristeva's reading of the Freudian myth. Ihimaera's narrative, I would suggest, belongs to the recuperative tradition of ancient mythic wisdom which offers viable alternatives for the violence that seems an intrinsic part of human societies.

### Myths of origin

Legend has it that Paikea is the ancestor of the Maori Ngati Porou and Ngai Tahu tribes, but he also appears as an ancestor figure in stories of the Cook Islands and the Society Islands. Originally named Kahutia-te-rangi, Paikea received his name when he rode from Hawaiki, the likewise legendary land of origin, to Whangara, the East Coast of Aotearoa/New Zealand, on the back of a *paikea* (whale).<sup>3</sup> His defining traits are strength and endurance. In most Polynesian myths of Paikea, he is primarily associated with endurance at sea,

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too, that Isidore Okpehwo in his book *African Oral Literature* (1992) deems Western psychoanalytic literary theory useful for the analysis of folktales and myths in African literature (171-72).

<sup>2</sup> In this project, Kristeva brings together psychoanalytic theory and cultural criticism, as well as literature and politics. Starting from her reading of the Freudian foundation myth to theorise the central role of violence (in exclusion and revolt) at the origin of society, Kristeva explores these mechanisms in theories by Sartre, Barthes and Aragon, in order to interpret the present culture in Europe, which she sees as lacking the experience of revolt.

<sup>3</sup> Ihimaera used both names in the two versions of his tale; in the novel the girl's name is Kahu, and in the film it is Pai(kea). For a discussion of the various versions of the mythical Paikea's story, and for a genealogy table and an old haka (war dance) about Paikea, see <http://folksong.org.nz/paikea/index.html>.

taking his name not only from the whales, but also from the tenacious crabs, the tiny animals that survive storms and hurricanes by clinging to driftwood. Patient endurance is also a major characteristic of the girl Paikea in Ihimaera's tale, who endures her grandfather's hostile opposition and eventually survives that "hurricane" to bring new leadership to the community.

In *Whale Rider*, Ihimaera interweaves the Paikea myth with the story of Koro and his granddaughter Paikea, set in Whangara about the year 2000. In the novel, Ihimaera elaborates on the tribal myth by relating the present-day experiences and emotions of the ancient bull whale that long ago carried the "golden man" Paikea. Using the perspective of this ancient creature with his following of wives and warrior whales, Ihimaera's novel connects the story of the mythological ancestor Paikea to the contemporary reality of ocean pollution and of related ecological dangers, such as the nuclear testing that threatens the natural habitat of the whales. Presenting us with the thoughts of the old bull whale, and with his experiences of past and present, Ihimaera humanises the big fish, as is the practice in mythological stories. The film presents a different narrative perspective, leaving out the mythic narrative of the bull whale. In its use of Paikea's voice, however, it retains a strong focus on the narrative's central theme: the hope of survival and renewal. Ihimaera has explained that it was his intention to make a Maori myth come alive in a contemporary setting, continuing the ancient Maori tradition of myth-making, and that the book was written at great speed (in only eighteen days), in combination with his duties as New Zealand consul in New York, as a special gift to his two daughters (Meklin and Meklin 360). In this mythopoetic writing process, an element of magic was present, as Ihimaera has said in an interview, which he felt was impressive, and even "frightening" (O'Brien 95).

As a start to the analysis of the central elements of exclusion and revolt in Ihimaera's narrative, let us consider two foundation myths: the Maori myth of origin, and the Freudian myth in Kristeva's reading. The Maori myth of origin is traditionally named "the narrative of the ancestors of humankind from the beginning" (Alpers).<sup>4</sup> In the beginning, Rangi the Sky Father and Papa the Earth Mother were one, the Sky lying upon the earth in a loving embrace, and the land was therefore dark and unfruitful, and so their sons, wanting light and freedom of movement, got together and conspired against their parents. Counselling by Tu, the fierce warrior god, they first considered killing the parents, but then decided instead to separate them forcibly, following the advice of another brother, Tane. And so Rangi and Papa were forced apart in a mighty struggle. But mark that already the seed of further conflict was sown, for one son, Tawhiri, the father of winds and storms, disagreed with the joint decision of the other five sons.

Exclusion, violent revolt and profound intergenerational conflict are also at the heart of the Freudian foundation myth. Summarised from Kristeva's reading

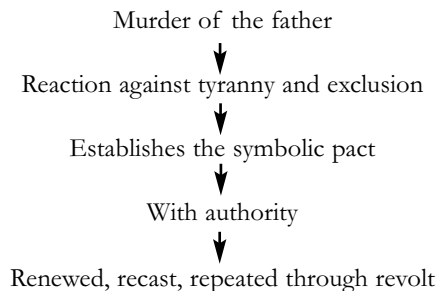
<sup>4</sup> What follows is a summary of the myth as re-told by Alpers (15-27); there are many variants.

of this tale, as presented in *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, the Freudian narrative is as follows. At its origin, human society was a group of people dominated by a male leader who demanded total obedience from his sons and prohibited them access to women. One day, the sons plotted a conspiracy and revolted against the father: they killed him and ate him. After this primary ceremony of humanity, they identified with the father, replacing the dead father with the image of the father, which was the symbol of power, the figure of the ancestor. From then on, guilt and repentance strengthened the social pact among the sons; the brothers felt guilty and banded together as a result of this guilt. The impulse of affection – which existed simultaneously with the impulse of hatred – was transformed into repentance and thus appeared the religious link, through which guilt could be expressed in ceremonies and rituals such as sacrifice (*Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* 12).

In Julia Kristeva's reading of the Freudian myth of origin, then, revolt, exclusion of the feminine, guilt and sacrifice are human mechanisms that occur in social power structures. As mechanisms of change they are inevitable. As Kristeva emphasises repeatedly, in fact revolt (rebellion, revolution) is necessary to foster a developing, living culture. In the Maori founding myth, revolt is a central element as well, as are guilt and the exclusion of the feminine. For, to continue the mythic narrative, when Tane, the god of forests, whose name means "male," created the first woman, named Hine ahu one, they had a daughter, Hine titama (the Dawn Maid). When Tane had intercourse with their daughter, the first human beings were born. However, when the girl found out that her husband was also her father, she was overwhelmed with shame and resolved to live in exile in Te Po, the underworld, thus creating the path of death. Here, too, then, the exclusion of the feminine, even if self-willed, is connected with male violence and guilt.

Both myths of origin are tales of unity and harmony ended violently by conspiracy and revolt, so that out of the disruption a new social order may begin. The pattern of revolt is recurrent: revolt leads to exclusion and this produces revenge and guilt, and thus violence continues, for guilt is a hidden, consuming violence that will seek an outlet in sacrifice. In *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* Kristeva presents the pattern in a diagram (22):

**Diagram 1**



### **Guilt and sacrifice**

Turning now to Ihimaera's mythopoetic story in *Whale Rider*, we see the same cycle of revolt and exclusion. Koro, Paikea's grandfather and leader of the community, identifies with the ancestors and embodies tradition; he has established the symbolic pact with authority. As a chief, Koro is a hard ruler, and many of his acts are instances of "tyranny and exclusion": he excludes Paikea from the communal ground, the marae; forbids her entrance to his school; orders her to take a back seat at the communal gathering and commands her to leave when she refuses; he teaches the boys the sacred chants under threats ("if you forget, your dicks will drop off") and so forth. Significantly, Koro excludes his sons and wife from his concerns and responsibilities as chief, maintaining an icy distance, which may be interpreted as a symbolic re-enactment of the mythic brothers' act of "denying themselves the women" in Kristeva's reading of the Freudian myth; the brothers renounce the feminine, by which is meant not only the feminine of women (as objects of desire), but also the brothers' own "feminine" in the sense of their love and affection (*Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* 13).

Koro's identification with the ancestors (the symbolic pact) is perhaps more intense, and his need for a successor to continue the symbolic pact perhaps more urgent due to his community's problematic social situation. Kristeva poses that a sense of exclusion is produced "by economic crisis or the condition of foreignness, ethnic or otherwise" (*Sense* 23). The film suggests the seriousness of the community's economic and social problems in a few episodes referring to criminality (Hemi's father and his friends) and to unemployment and substance abuse (Rawiri and his friends).

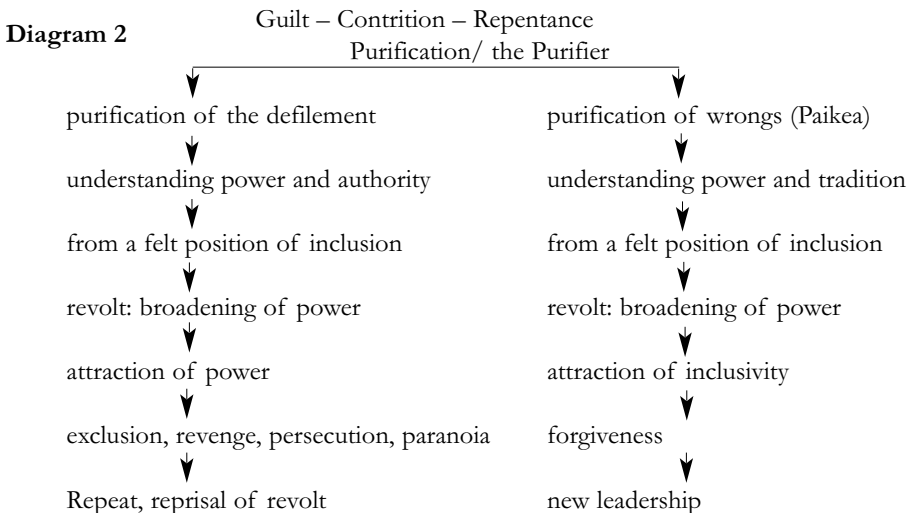
Koro's failure to recognise a new leader among the boys brings to the surface the ever-present sense of guilt. Failure and guilt demand sacrifice; and indeed we see that Koro sacrifices his love for his grandchild, and blames her for the community's misfortune. Projecting his guilt onto Paikea, Koro demands her contrition: yet when she says she is sorry, and she is made to repeat her apology several times, without receiving forgiveness. Contrition, then, does not suffice to end guilt. Guilt and sacrifice are closely connected. In Kristeva's reading, sacrifice is part of the mechanism of exclusion (*Sense* 15). Koro's rejection of his granddaughter, as well as his rejection of his wife and sons, and his retreat into depression may be regarded in this light. In refusing the love and support of his family, Koro sacrifices what is of great value to him; a sacrifice demanded by his sense of guilt and enacted, again, by exclusion: here, too the mechanism is cyclical.

A central incident in the narrative, the episode with the broken rope, clearly demonstrates the strong connection between the symbolic pact (with tradition/authority) and the need for exclusion of the feminine. Koro, at work on the outboard motor, shows Paikea a frayed rope and tells her that the

interwoven strands are like the generations and must be kept strong for future survival; telling her in Maori to “weave together the threads of Paikea so that our line remains strong. Each thread is one of your ancestors.” After this, Koro uses the rope to start the boat’s engine; the rope breaks; he curses it for a “useless bloody rope” and stalks off to find a replacement. With Koro gone, Paikea mends the rope, twisting the strands tightly together, and starts the engine. Koro’s reaction is to scold her and to forbid her from ever doing such a thing again. This scene is emblematic for the recurring pattern in their relationship; the overt symbolism of Paikea’s actions displaying her chiefly qualities and Koro’s immediate rejection of these qualities. The cycle of exclusion, guilt and sacrifice seems firmly in place.

The crucial element of Ihimaera’s narrative, I would argue, is that Paikea does know how to break this cycle, and in fact succeeds in doing so. This accounts for much of the film’s impact, in my view, and it is more than the feminist triumph of a young girl overcoming the constraints imposed on her by her grandfather and gaining a position of power. Rather, it is no less than a transformation of the deep-seated human mechanism of exclusion and revolt.

While Paikea’s rebellion is of a completely different nature than the primal murderous rebellion, it is undeniably revolt following exclusion. This is Kristeva’s “coded revolt,” the second meaning of revolt as she defines it in her project in *The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*. Revolt, in its first meaning, denotes the transgression of a prohibition (and we have several examples of Paikea’s transgressions of Koro’s rules), but it also means repetition, working-through, working-out (as in psychoanalysis). This “coded” revolt is not necessarily violent or destructive; the word is polyvalent; it has plasticity and can be used to denote reversal, transformation, abjuration, recovery, reconstruction of the past and of meaning (*Intimate Revolt* 5-12). This is closely connected to Kristeva’s notions of purification and the purifier, which are set out in diagram 2 (on the left-hand side) together with Ihimaera’s fictional purification and purifier (on the right-hand side).



### The purifier

Kristeva centrally posits the notion of a “pure and absolute subject – call him the purifier”; who knows and understands the archaic human feelings of guilt, contrition, and repentance and seeks to purify them; to take away the defilement. According to Kristeva, this purification aspect is of “capital importance” (*Sense* 20). What then, is to be understood by the purifier? The purifier recognises authority, the law, but he claims that power must be broadened, to be shared by more people than just the leader, and so he rebels against a restricted power in order to include a greater number of the “brothers.” This “revolt” may be accompanied by contrition, in the sense of “alas, I have had to rebel against the father” (as, for instance, Paikea is contrite whenever she has had to disobey Koro).

In her discussion of the purifier, Kristeva emphasises the corrupting influence of power. The purifier wants to break the cycle of violence by opening up the power structure to include a greater number of people, which is an evolution in the access of power, but, as Kristeva states, “most often the attraction that authority and law represent impose on the purifier a paranoid spiral of persecution and revenge” (*Sense* 23). In the identification with power lies danger; this is the attraction of the use of violence to expand power, and of exclusion (for example, of those that are seen as threatening to harm the purifier) and further violence. With this, the symbolic pact is in place again, and so Kristeva’s cycle continues: the purifier eventually becomes paranoid and spiteful, and as we see in diagram 2, consequently there is a return to the mechanism set out in diagram I. It is clear that Kristeva’s reading of the Freudian mechanism of exclusion and revolt is circular, and very much a violent vicious circle.

In Ihimaera’s narrative, however, this vicious circle is broken. Here, Paikea is the purifier, Kristeva’s “pure and absolute subject” (*Sense* 24). Paikea understands tradition; though a child, she teaches it to others, for example, as the leader of the school’s Maori Culture Club. From early childhood on, she has understood the pain of exclusion, of guilt, and knows how these are related to power. Significantly, she has not interiorised any feelings of guilt; even though she is constantly made to feel her guilt by Koro, Paikea refuses to identify with it. At the school concert, Paikea tells the audience, “by being born I broke the line with the ancient ones. It wasn’t anybody’s fault.”

Paikea’s performance at the school concert is very likely the film’s most emotional scene. Its force is not only due to the girl’s sadness at Koro’s empty seat in the audience while she delivers the formal speech (*waikorero*) that is dedicated to him, but also, arguably, in the formality of the occasion, and in the strength of Paikea’s declaration. In Maori tradition, the *marae* is the place for formal ceremony and celebration; it is the place to make a stand, and to claim one’s rights. It is Maori belief, however, as Te Awekotuku explains, that “wherever Maori people gather for Maori purposes and with the appropriate



Maori protocol, a *marae* is formed at that time, for that time, unless it is contested.” When a *marae* is formed in such a manner, the place is filled with *mauri*, “the essential spirit or metaphysical sense of being part of the community and of the land” (Te Awekotuku 35). Seen from this perspective, Paikea at the school concert is in fact speaking on the *marae*, already claiming her leadership from a strong sense of *mauri*, yet filled at sadness at the “coded revolt” that is necessary to construct a way forward.

It is clear that Paikea seeks to purify; to remedy the ills of the present situation. She does this in the manner of a purifier as Kristeva describes it, confronting authority from a sense of belonging (a “felt position of inclusion,” *Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* 22), for Paikea never doubts her chiefly qualities and rightful place as leader. This inclusivity enables an expansion of authority, as is demonstrated by Paikea’s speech: “If the knowledge is given to everyone, then we can have lots of leaders and soon everyone can be strong, not just the ones who have been chosen.” Expressed in the words of a child, this is Kristeva’s “coded revolt”: revolt as replacement, healing, working-through. Its inclusivity stands in stark contrast to Koro’s ideas of leadership, as demonstrated, for instance, when he tells the firstborn boys of the village that they must compete because “there can only be one leader.”

Paikea, then, identifies with power from a felt sense of inclusion. In Kristeva’s discussion of this element of identification-with-power, a central aspect is the corrupting influence of power: identification with authority leads to renewed exclusion and guilt. Yet, while Paikea has clearly identified with leadership and power from earliest childhood on (seen, for example, in her attitude towards the children at school and towards her grandmother and her lady friends), she shows not the slightest inclination to any symbolic or real-life forms of exclusion. Paikea is part of the archaic pattern of the mechanism of tyranny and exclusion enacted by her grandfather, but is not “corrupted” by it. How then does she break this cycle? Inclusiveness is her “coded revolt,” as we have seen, and it is actualised, made concrete, through acts of forgiveness. Forgiveness, as demonstrated by Paikea’s characteristic unconditional forgiveness of Koro, enables freedom from guilt and thus the breaking of the cycle of violence, sacrifice and exclusion. In fact, then, this is effective and genuine purification, because wrongs are effectively remedied and a reprise of the violence of exclusion and sacrifice is precluded by the creation of new leadership (see diagram 2). Thus, diagram 2 ends with a new element, and its next step is not given, but open to the future.

Kristeva herself does not theorise a form of purification that knows forgiveness and annuls guilt. She is very much interested in forgiveness, devoting the second chapter of her book *Intimate Revolt* to a discussion of various theological and philosophical notions of forgiveness, but, as she explains here, the problem with Freudianism is that it has no place for forgiveness; “forgiveness is not a psychoanalytical concept” (*Intimate Revolt* 14). In this

respect, then, the title of her project in *The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis* is aptly chosen. Ihimaera's narrative, however, does allow a central place for forgiveness. Paikea, Ihimaera's purifier, brings into play a very powerful psychological instrument: the human capacity for generosity and forgiveness. Since Paikea harbours no resentment, despite the constant harsh rejection by her grandfather, she is able to maintain her "felt sense of inclusion," expanding it to embrace her grandparents and all of the community ("we can have lots of leaders and soon everyone can be strong"). This in fact makes forgiveness superfluous, but nevertheless, her forgiveness is formally asked and given (in the hospital scene) after it has become clear to all that she is Koro's successor and the community's next chief. Koro's contrition is expressed in his formal plea in Maori, translated as: "Wise leader, forgive me. I am just a fledgling new to flight." This ceremonial asking and receiving of forgiveness marks the end to guilt and sacrifice. Koro's enactment of the theme of forgiveness further reinforces the narrative's alternative to the solution to the vicious cycle of exclusion, guilt, purification and violence as delineated by Kristeva.

Purification, then, is possible as a crucial way out of the cycle of exclusion and violent revolt. As diagram 2 shows, purification derives from a felt sense of inclusivity, expresses itself in an expansion of authority and is implemented through forgiveness. In the film this is dramatised in the last scene, which is tremendously festive. This is a vibrant scene in which a ceremony takes place that traditionally excluded women, but now embraces them: a war canoe (*waka*) is launched, whose paddlers – traditionally all male – are now men and women, led by two leaders, Koro and Paikea; male and female, old and young. War canoes are Maori symbols of enduring strength and purpose (Starzecka 68). The festive launching of this *waka*, whose building was long left unfinished, is a particularly meaningful event, marking a strengthening and empowerment of the community through communal effort. In the *waka*, Paikea is seen to wear Koro's whale tooth pendant, the Maori symbol of leadership, thus sharing in the vital essence that this *tapu* (sacred) object carries according to Maori tradition (Te Awekotuku 27). This final ceremonial ritual of the launching of the *waka* counters the impact of the previous scenes depicting tribal ritual and ceremony, in which Paikea was aggressively denied the right to participate by Koro. Rituals are "repeated forms", as Cluckhorn states, which are performed to strengthen the link with preceding generations, and to keep this connection strong, indigenous societies are often wary of change and spontaneity (41-44). In Koro's attitude, this fear of change and spontaneity is evident throughout the film, and its transformation into trust and shared responsibility is therefore all the more significant.

Among the people on the beach are Koro's eldest son Porourangi and his German partner Ana, who are evidently expecting a child. Ana, part of the celebratory circle on the beach, was previously rejected as a family member by Koro. Her presence during the ritual ceremony therefore symbolically reinforces

the sense of a profound transformation of the community, which, like Koro, had so far been caught up in the ancient cycle of exclusion, guilt, sacrifice and revolt. Paikea's voice-over ends the film, emphasizing, once more, communal effort, endurance and strength: "My name is Paikea Apirana... I'm not a prophet, but I know our people will keep going forward with all of our strength." These words proclaim a new form of leadership, based on inclusivity and communal sharing of responsibility. Thus, Paikea's revolt against the power of authority and patriarchal tradition, embodied by Koro, takes a new, non-violent form, which is similar to Kristeva's "coded" revolt that, as she defines it, underlies purity and is "revealed beneath purity," acted out not through violence, but in a "new, symbolic form" (*Sense* 24).

The experience of revolt, as Kristeva argues, is not only beneficial and life-enhancing to the individual, but also necessary, and even urgent, to human societies, for without revolt, a culture is stagnating and moribund (*Intimate Revolt* 7). Revolt in indigenous cultures such as the Maori community of the *Whale Rider* often takes the form of the forceful breaking of taboos (Knudsen 63). Paikea, too, must perform the revolt necessary to overturn the dominance of existing power structures, and consequently must break many taboos, such as taking a front seat during a ceremonial gathering, and learning to use the *taiaba* (ceremonial wooden weapon). Yet there is no anger or spite in her motivation, but, rather, a regret at having to go against chief Koro's wishes. In *Whale Rider*, then, the experience of revolt is dramatically and movingly fictionalised in the non-violent acts of resistance performed by Paikea. Her peaceful and compassionate "coded revolt" against her grandfather's authority enable a new structure of leadership for the community, which does not constitute a radical break with tradition and ritual, but rather re-connects the traditions and rituals of the past with a new structure of authority, characterised by inclusivity and shared leadership. Taboos are lifted without struggle and strife once the leadership position is opened to include Paikea (symbolising the end of the exclusion of the feminine), as demonstrated by the presence of women in the war canoe.<sup>5</sup> Read from the perspective enabled by Kristeva's reading of the Freudian foundation myth, Ihimaera's mythopoetic narrative is a striking revision of the ancient human mechanisms of exclusion and revolt: here we are enabled to envisage a world in which the feminine is no longer excluded, in which guilt and the need for sacrifice are erased, and in which the circularity of violence is broken by forgiveness.

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<sup>5</sup> Roger Neich, in his discussion of the Maori concepts of *mana* (sacred power) and *tapu* (similar in meaning to taboo) emphasises that traditionally, "no women were ever allowed in the war canoe" to protect the community's *mana* (98).

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