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Our Side of the Fence

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing (MCW)

Massey University
28 June, 2021

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Exegesis

Chapter One - Te Po

To write, for me at least, has been a calling. I set out to communicate a story that creates empathy, understanding, reflects cultural diversity, and demonstrates Indigenous stigmatisation. Not as a way to be controversial, or political, or to create an intensified sense of pity for the underdog that in this case is a Maori family; but instead to write about two absolutely ordinary families, nothing extraordinary, yet both entirely human. To do this, I chose to pen a play that uses an episodic structure and polyvocal writing techniques. Through these methods, in which there is no single protagonist facing a single antagonist - no hero or villain, no right or wrong - but a circle of episodes that gradually enlarge our view, I hoped to tell a story of diverse human beings, each facing their challenges. It is in our humanness that differences are celebrated.[1]

Whenever I have introduced myself publicly I have always done so with my mountain, Hikurangi, and my ancestral river, Waiapu, with the iwi from which I descend, Ngati Porou, by my hapu or subtribe, Te Aitanga a Mate, by the marae from which I belong, Hiruharama, and then of course by my name, Rawinia Parata. This whakapapa or genealogy is where I am from, who I am, and how I identify. In *Tihe Mauri Ora*, Ranginui Walker describes this practice as both customary and continuing; despite its traditional origins it is still present and relevant in modern Maori society.

> Once territorial and hence tribal origins have been established it is relatively easy to identify the person. This convention is one of the powerful myth-messages of Maori society because it persists to the present day. In an urban situation where young Maori from different tribes meet each other for the first time, they respond to the social imperative embedded in the Maui myth. They begin to fraternise not by asking each other's names, but by the question 'Hey

[1] Macrons have been left off the Maori words intentionally. They are not used in Ngati Porou as they are considered western grammatical inclusions. Our tribal body, Te Runanganui o Ngati Porou does not include the macron in any of their publications.

> boy, where you from?' Once tribal origins are established then they search for mutual relatives. This done, the bond is formed. (Walker 23)

Even today, Maori seek connection to each other and to our land, and even this form of introduction is embedded in storytelling.

When I was asked to think deeply about the focus of my research, I realised that I was unable to split the part of me that is Maori from the part that is a writer. For me, they are one and the same. But what makes a Maori story? What makes it authentic and in fact not just for Maori but for Indigenous peoples more broadly? What makes it one of 'our stories'? Dr Tina Makereti wrote an article entitled, *Maori Writing: Speaking with Two Mouths*, in which she articulated many of the concepts and struggles I have, in terms of identifying myself as being a Maori woman and a writer. Makereti describes the Maori story of creation as starting with nothingness, "Te Kore", and with the "esoteric states of Te Kore," (Makereti 57) moving to introduce the roles of our sky father and earth mother and then eventually to "Te Ao Marama," or the world of light. She draws parallels between the Maori story of creation and that of the western world's big bang. She says:

> This is both creation story and karakia (prayer), whakapapa and invocation. You will hear this invocation over and over in many different forms almost anywhere you find Maori people gathered. It is the way we connect ourselves to the world and to each other. (Makereti 57)

Makereti is right: when I look at my own life, I have heard the stories of creation many times and in many and varied forms. Now I have started sharing them through song and practice to my own children. These stories form the base of our value system as Maori and it is important we proactively share them with our children: "One way of looking at mythology is to read the mirror image of a culture. Myths reflect the philosophy, ideals and norms of the people who adhere to them as legitimising charters" (Walker 20). Our way of storytelling legitimises and provides context for our values as a culture and ensures that it is passed on through generations.

In Pistacchi's thesis *Spiralling Subversions: The Politics of Maori Cultural Survivance in the Recent Critical Fictions of Patricia Grace, Paula Morris and Kelly Ana Morey* she argues that acts of Maori cultural survivance are manifested both internally in terms of the written narrative, characters, and plots of Maori creative works, but also by the authors themselves in terms of their right to self-define and identify. Pistacchi's thesis provides critical analysis and close readings of three New Zealand Maori writers and their texts, arguing that,

> Grace, Morris, and Morey depict the creative, generative, and 'healthy' aspects of Maori cultural survivance as taking place in both real and imagined communities which they live in and write about. Their texts offer hope for the ongoing survival - and survivance - of Maori culture in the twenty-first century (Pistacchi ii).

In the beginning of my research process I had intentionally asked myself 'what is a Maori story?' and 'how do I find one that is worth telling?' This is not a question widely addressed in the scholarship on literature in Aotearoa, but in Pistacchi's thesis I found some engagement with this same issue:

> Teachers, students and critics of contemporary Maori fiction need to become more aware, as Reina Whaitiri and Robert Sullivan are, that 'contemporary Maori literature, like the forest of Tane Mahuta, has large trees that shelter a host of smaller plants and saplings, each of them adding to a richly varied continuum. (Pistacchi 3, see also Whaitiri and Sullivan 76)

It is not simply that there are many stories worthy of being told, although there are, but also that each story contributes to the active and ever-changing narrative of Maori, constituting a rich tradition to draw upon and be inspired by. In the abstract of her doctoral thesis, Makereti says "By presenting alternative content and allowing for Indigenous views and voices, these texts unearth discontinuities, anomalies and multiple possibilities-ultimately creating space for the authors to open up previously constricted or single-sided views of history and identity" (Dahlberg-Makereti 4). Maori stories create diversity in the narrative of

what it means to be Maori, in the past, present and potential future. She goes on to describe the importance of the symbolism in Maori wharenui architecture and, in her particular metaphor, its connection to the atua, or god, Tanemahuta. The prevalence of these recurring and significant stories enriches the emergence of Maori identity through connection to the past.

I wanted to tell stories to contribute to the survivance of Maori culture in twenty-first century Aotearoa, so it was helpful to my methodology to look at those 'larger trees' and discover what I could learn from them. I therefore began my studies with close analysis of three works from Maori writers whom I, and others, respect as giants in the forest, and who could provide a rich grounding for my own work to both spring and depart from. These works are one novel (*Queen of Beauty* by Paula Morris), and two plays (*And What Remains* by Miria George and *Hui* by Mitch Tawhi Thomas). Analysis of these texts, including the ways they informed or challenged my own writing, is provided below, in Chapter Two of this exegesis. They are very different works, and they helped me to understand that there is no 'one way' to tell a 'Maori story'.

Critically acclaimed Aotearoa / New Zealand writer, Patricia Grace, has herself acknowledged the need for a more diverse approach to Maori storytelling. She notes that Maori are not a homogeneous culture, that we, as Maori, have vast and differing backgrounds, experiences, and varying degrees of connection with our culture. She urges that all stories must be told and that they too add to the depth of what it means to be Maori.

> We need Maori writers from every sort of background, writers who are from a more traditional background, or from urban backgrounds; writers who know a lot about their Maori heritage, some who don't, some who've felt the loss of that; some who know where their turangawaewae is, some who don't; and all the various experiences of being Maori need to come through in our literature for a large picture to be available of what being Maori is. Otherwise you get into stereotypes again if there aren't enough writers - stereotyping was the thing that I abhorred so much when we were only being written about by non-

> Maori writers. If we are not careful, that can come about again by not having enough Maori writers. (Grace, qtd in Pistacchi 3)

Diversity in Maori and Indigenous texts is essential as an act of survivance, as described in Pistacchi's thesis. As important as it is to have the stories of deep colonising pain and trauma, so too is it important to have an equally rich plethora of stories that include cultural wealth, happiness, and stable family life.

> Literature emerging from marginalised groups that is only a chronicle of pain can easily act to keep in place the existing structures of domination, and it is therefore crucial to identify acts of cultural literary survivance in Maori fiction in those aspects of the literature that look forward - into te ao marama, the world of light- instead of those that look only backwards in response to a colonial past. (Pistacchi 11)

In my own creative practice, Te Ao Marama, the world of light - which is also reflected in Makereti's discussion (57) - offers enlightenment beyond the historical suffering of Maoridom and reinforces that survivance can be found in the diversity of that narrative. For me it resonates that Te Ao Marama, much like Te Po and Te Kore, are the spaces in which creation exists (Makereti 61). In a 2017 article in *E-Tangata* titled "Stories Can Save Your Life", Makereti uses the metaphor of a whare tipuna to compare and contrast the representation of Maori literature, English literature and the desperate need for diversity in the New Zealand literary sphere. She also discusses the importance of creative representation for Maori literature to our culture, and to our survivance going forward. "We need creativity. To remember who we are. To imagine who we might be. To create our worlds afresh. To save us." (Makereti, "Stories can," 14) Using metaphors that have a deep cultural significance is representative of Makereti's unique standpoint, and in this case pertinent to her analysis.

Naturally, this is where I start, and where I have always started. In the creation of who we are as people, and the parallels that connect us to each other and to the world we live in. So, for the purposes of my research project I have been asking myself, what is an Indigenous story? And more specifically what is a Maori story? How are good stories developed and

how does form, in this case a play, enhance that story? How do I write a story that embodies the most sacred Maori values about connection, family, and responsibility?

What are we beyond the violence, and alcoholism, beyond the Treaty of Waitangi and beyond the piupiu? What stories do we have to tell and how can the form of those stories contribute to their authenticity? How can we embrace stories that feel like our own without falling into the trap of colonising understandings of authenticity that reify Indigenous cultures and stories into an unchanging past? In Maree Mills' article "*Pou Rewa The Liquid Post, Maori Go Digital*," she discusses Maori approaches to multimedia and emerging technologies in digital art. As part of that discussion Mills looks at the way that cultural art is developed and interpreted in modern day society. She suggests that Maori are evolving and so too are our methods in the arts, particularly the use of non-traditional art as a way not only to express but to resist being typecast.

> It could be suggested that a strategy of resistance to cultural reductionism had prompted the uptake of visual technologies. By 'cultural reductionism' I mean a retreat from the tools and techniques introduced by Pakeha (Europeans) to New Zealand, towards a purist return to traditions that in the process risk becoming museum pieces, preserved against their natural evolution. (Mills 245)

Mills' article exposes the issues around perceived authenticity, questioning whether Maori art and Maori stories can only be told one way, and cannot develop or evolve without being questioned as being less. Mills notes:

> Indigenous cultural reductionism can take the form of a refusal to use non-traditional media as a mode of resistance to colonisation. But the meaning of traditional art that results arises specifically from the way it appears as the binary opposite of Western modernity. In this sense resistance is dependent on what it resists. (245)

Mills presents the idea that Indigenous art has no bounds, that restricting methods of storytelling is cultural reductionism and that the diversity of the art made by Maori in this case is what makes it real or authentic.

For me as a writer, from this discussion about multiplicity and storytelling arose questions as to how multiple views and voices might develop depth and insight in a story and whether that could contribute to engagement from diverse audiences, particularly in a bicultural context. I asked myself, 'What is my motivation for doing this? What do I want to achieve?' In "Standpoint and Creativity," Miriam Solomon defines the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations for not only being creative, but for leaping into action:

> Intrinsic motivation could be anything from the sublimation of unconscious drives (as Freud claimed), to the desire to understand the workings of the universe, to the desire to relieve suffering, to the desire to bring about justice. (Solomon 231)

I found myself intrinsically motivated to write my play, through a desire to create a space of mutual understanding for the benefit of both Maori and Pakeha audiences. Solomon discusses how motivation to create arises out of our standpoint or identity, and for me the logical story that reflected my standpoint would be one that engaged both with biculturalism broadly and with my experiences as a Maori woman specifically.

Makereti describes the duality of being a Maori writer but writing in English. She discusses what that means for the story and notes the complexity of that 'translation' (59). As many have before her, she wrote about the impact that colonisation has had on culture, but also the ways in which culture and traditions are ever changing and responsive to the time, environment, and people practicing and interpreting them. She notes that her "writing practice is always concerned with duality, contradiction, cultural fluidity and paradox" (Makereti 59). Similarly, in her article about Theatre Marae, playwright Helen Pearse-Otene writes of being influenced by both Western and Maori performance traditions in her theatre work, and of finding complementary ways in which the traditions of Western theatre and tikanga Maori can be held in tension, yet enrich each other. These statements resonated

deeply with me and my own duality, my sense of how I am being perceived by others but also how I perceive myself; how my stories are told, but also why I tell them.

From these readings about the struggles that other writers have also felt when engaging with questions of form, biculturalism, authenticity, and Maori identity, I took a sense that to write an 'authentic' Maori play did not mean being restricted to particular traditional forms of storytelling. Rather, these 'forest giants' helped me to feel that a wide range of forms—mixing old with new, Maori with non-Maori influences, English language with te reo Maori language, Maori characters' views with Pakeha characters' views—were legitimately available to me to use to convey the truth of my own and my people's experiences, which are, likewise, growing, changing, dual, and diverse, and that to do so was an important part of my own and others' cultural survivance.

Chapter Two - Te Ao Marama

When enrolling for the Master of Creative Writing I was asked to identify a genre of writing. While I knew I would be writing a play, I did not come into it with an idea or a story ready to tell. Instead I sought out a story. I listened to the people around me talk, took notes of their mannerisms, costumes, quirks, and peculiarities. I also researched ideas of form - what would the container for my story look like? Though admittedly it did little in actually sparking a story, *The American Play and Other Works* by Black American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks helped me understand the importance of making deliberate choices about form. She says, "A playwright, as any other artist, should accept the bald fact that content determines form, and form determines content; that form and content are interdependent" (Parks 6). Parks makes an excellent point: both the content and the form are connected; the form is an '"integral" (6) part of the story itself. I recognised that not only should I consider what I would write, but also how it should manifest in the form of a play.

Louis E. Catron defines a play as:

> a structured and unified story, comic or dramatic, complete in itself with a beginning, middle and end, that expresses the playwright's passion and vision of life, shows unfolding conflict that builds to a climax, and deals with dimensional lifelike humans who have strong emotions, needs and objectives that motivate them to take action. It is constructed with a plausible and probable series of events, written to be performed and therefore told with speeches and actions plus silences and inactions, projected by actors from a stage to an audience that is made to believe the events are happening as they watch (18).

Catron's definition provides a road map, pointing to significant aspects that make a whole play and essentially key factors to consider when approaching my own work. However, his is a European (Aristotelian) model of playwriting, which he assumes is universal. Inspired by

Makereti's observation that different cultures use different storytelling forms, I was also open to identifying non-Aristotelian structures.

It was at that stage of the creative process that I needed to find the inspiration to create my own story. Catron, in *What Makes a Play?* gave me some direction, "continued experience writing plays, plus reading and seeing other playwrights' works, will help you establish personal concepts of what makes a play, especially what makes a good play" (17). I engaged with a range of creative readings in order to decide for myself what makes a good play. I began with readings about Indigenous perspectives, about writing techniques, and playwriting theory. I also looked in depth at two plays and a novel. All are written by Maori, but all have a different message and different approach.

Queen of Beauty, a novel by Paula Morris, played with time and sequencing using a circular, episodic storytelling structure as opposed to linear. The novel itself is not set with any one protagonist driving the action, in any one place, or in any chronological time order, instead the primary focus that pushes the narrative forward is the story itself and ideas about the value of stories.

Morris has mixed Ngati Wai, Ngati Whatua and Ngati Manuhiri (Pakeha) descent. She has written novels, essays and short stories. According to the New Zealand Academy of Literature (n.d.), she was born in Auckland, but has spent much of her adult life working in the UK or the US. The character with whom the novel spends the most time (although perhaps still not an agentic protagonist as such), Virginia Ngatea Seton, is similarly of Maori/ Pakeha inheritance and born in Auckland but living in New Orleans. Virginia works as a researcher for a famous novelist collecting stories to be adapted and included in her new novel, *Queen of Beauty*. The story follows Virginia home to New Zealand to her sister's wedding where she begins to uncover the importance of history, family and the value of a story. Morris' *Queen of Beauty* splits into chapters that jump between times and places; Virginia in New Orleans, then 1969 at her grandparents' home in Glasgow Street, then present-day New Zealand, then Whakatangi in 1922. Morris uses a polyvocal structure with a multiple protagonist cast within each chapter. *Queen of Beauty* deals with some major issues regarding racism, stereotypes, culture, and family structures.

I found a conversation that toddler Virginia was having with her grandfather to be particularly relevant to my own creative thinking and processes. He was recounting the Maori myth of Tane and the three baskets of knowledge. It is an extension of our story of creation and the separation of Ranginui and Papatuanuku. Tane ascended the 12 heavens and returned with three baskets of knowledge which we now know as Nga Kete o Te Wananga.

> Our friend Tane, god of the forest, father of all the trees and plants and birds. You'll see flashes in the sky every now and then, and that's Tawhaki showing off. But Tane is everywhere all the time, all around us, in the roof beams and the floorboards. . . Maybe he dropped that fourth basket of knowledge, or hid it somewhere. . . no need to know everything. (Morris 93)

The importance of this scene is the transfer of traditional matauranga Maori through the generations. Morris has captured a tender moment between a grandfather and his granddaughter in a way that feels to me resonant of Maori families I have known.

I was inspired by the ways that Morris includes the intricacies of Maori family life so seamlessly into the narrative, particularly within the family's banter and discussions.

> Pourua's daughter had too many boys, snot-nosed little ruffians-not bad kids, not at all. Too many for Pourua to deal with, but she swooped in nonetheless (hair wild, dressed in a grubby smock, fatter than all of Shirl's spindly children rolled together) and carried them off to her thin little house (potatoes growing through the floorboards) and smacked them and fed them and made them help with the cows. (Morris 94)

Whangai is a concept that is widely accepted in the Maori world, children being raised by family members and not their parents. Morris does not explain this - she just relates the concept through the story and shows it as normal. This is a concept that I find particularly

special about being Maori and being part of a Maori family, and something I intended to include in my own creative piece.

Morris uses her characters to explore racism and stereotypes in a way that is interestingly balanced. Virginia's family are both Maori and Pakeha, and both have a strong perspective of the other, complicating and diversifying the dynamics of the family. There seems to be no great animosity between characters when these stereotypes are discussed and they are done so openly, much like the dialogue of a play, but it is clear that Morris is showing the stereotypes through unreliable narrators, rather than endorsing them. For instance: "They'll all arrive on motorbikes. They'll have facial tattoos and hand-carved blue lettering on every knuckle. Wear grubby black clothes and necklaces made out of bone. Drink beer from a bottle. Come from the country" (Morris 162). It isn't just Maori and Pakeha but other races as well which demonstrates the level of pervasiveness of stereotypes. "Asians are the new Polynesians, but worse. That's what people think. You know, at least the Polynesians are sort of like Maoris. Brown and affable and overweight. They like playing cricket and rugby, picnics at the beach, that kind of thing. But Asians - they're completely alien. Who knows what they're up to" (Morris 179). The narrators of these snippets of conversation are unreliable in the sense that they are misguided-when the characters arrive, they are nothing like the stereotypes. This has the effect of showing the multiplicity of stories and viewpoints, undercutting the idea of one story as 'the truth' and showing how different people will interpret stories differently (Greene 2020), a technique which is key to the main themes of Morris' book: stories are multiple, cultural, and personal, and can be changed. Stories reflect assumptions: when a Pakeha character comments, "You know - Maori families are all alike, but each Pakeha family is Pakeha in its own way" (Morris 163), it illuminates the pervasive stereotype, visible more widely in Aotearoa culture today, that Maori are representative of the entire collective, and Pakeha only represent themselves as an individual. The action of the book shows this to be false: the Maori families are widely divergent in their Maoritanga. In this and other ways, such as playing with time and sequence, Morris uses multiplicity and polyvocal storytelling to create a complex understanding of the value of story, of family, of the characters and their place within that family structure.

I have also applied my academic analysis to two plays written by Maori playwrights; *And What Remains* by Miria George and *Hui* by Mitch Tawhi Thomas. My process was slow, digesting what I read, analysing it and keeping the overall intention for the play in my mind while doing so. This section of the exegesis is a road map of how these works helped inform my own creative process to develop and pen my own play, called *Our Side of the Fence*.

I was 19 years old when I saw *And What Remains* at Victoria University in Wellington. I had never seen theatre before. It was also the first time I ever felt truly moved by a Maori story told on stage. It has stayed with me long after I saw it and when I needed inspiration, I found the playscript and read it. Reading *And What Remains* helped me to further develop my ideas about symbolism, metaphor, and particularly about multiplicity and polyvocal stories. George approaches the conversation about mana motuhake and aligns it with basic human rights. She addresses the importance of intergenerational knowledge and the longevity of Maori as a people, including confronting topics of sterilisation and exile. Many of these conversations happen through the eyes of outsiders. These views create depth to the story. The narrative unfolds in a way that is both intensely personal and voices the thoughts and opinions of many.

George (Te Arawa; Ngati Awa; Rarotonga & Atiu, Cook Islands) is a poet, producer, playwright, and co-founder of Tawata Productions and Tawata Press (Fulbright NZ). *And What Remains* is a story based in the international departure lounge of Wellington airport. The characters share parts of their lives, all deciding if they are staying or going, whether or not they can afford the cost morally, ethically, financially, and spiritually. The story unfolds through the eyes, perceptions, and views of the characters who are on the periphery of the main message. Eventually, the character who says the least, Mary, becomes the most important as the issues surrounding Maori in New Zealand come to light. Young Maori women are being sterilised or given the choice to leave New Zealand permanently as a solution to socioeconomic deprivation and crime statistics. The political move was supported by many New Zealanders and conducted in stealth. Young Mary is at the airport making her choice. The moral dilemma was what struck me the most and I found myself asking, “what would I do, given the same choice?” Part of this thought is what helped me to

develop *Our Side of The Fence*: the moral dilemma I addressed being "if I thought children were at risk would I say anything?"

And What Remains has many layers that make it complex and compelling. Part of that comes from the characters, their backgrounds, motivations and the eventual reveal of the true intention of the play. To me, it captures the essence of what it is to be Maori and our very real connection to land and home and challenges the audience to consider human rights and systemic racism.

As I started to consider my own play I realised that in order to captivate the audience's attention for the duration I would need to use a similar technique. What else is there beyond the issues surrounding prejudice? Is that the fundamental issue facing Maori and New Zealand as a whole? George's play features a multicultural cast from different backgrounds, classes, histories, and family dynamics. At times the audience is challenged to not only hear what is being said in terms of the dialogue but also what is not being said, the underlying messages. Nothing is what it seems.

In the foreword of George's book, David O'Donnell, Programme Director, Theatre, Victoria University of Wellington, writes about the play's critical reception. I was both surprised and not to find that it wasn't well received by all. O'Donnell quotes Laurie Atkinson of the *Dominion Post* who said "the ethnically cleansed New Zealand is still impossible to swallow and … the notion that a government would forcibly sterilise all Maori women is to stretch credibility to breaking point" (qtd in George viii). But in 2021 it is a conversation that arises and continues to arise when we begin to approach issues around intergenerational welfare dependency, incarceration statistics, and child abuse rates. Being a Maori woman myself I have fought these discussions and debates since adolescence, and it doesn't at all seem far-fetched to me that a government could dictate reproduction.

O'Donnell's analysis of the play echoes my own thoughts about the voices of the characters and how they add value and depth to the narrative of the overall play. "Yet while the characters in the play are clearly symbolic, so too are the complexities and flaws in each character. Together the characters present a microcosm of New Zealand's multicultural

society" (qtd in George ix). The characters include Peter, Solomon, Illa, Anna, and Mary, all from different backgrounds, races, classes and most importantly all with a different relationship to New Zealand.

I found Anna to be a thought-provoking character as she appeared to simply mirror other characters back to themselves in a confronting yet almost innocent and non-threatening kind of way. She repeats questions: "do you work for your money?" (George 8) and makes it clear when she doesn't understand, "no, I don't know what you mean" (George 8) forcing each character to truly reflect on the intention and delivery of what they're saying. Illa is a well-travelled, upper-class woman from a dysfunctional and disconnected family. Though her worldliness allows her a global perspective on the implementation of the birth control program, she and Solomon debate the policy and its disregard for basic human rights. Solomon voices what I imagine is the opinion of the mainstream majority, "These programmes are successful for communities that are violent, that are riddled with unemployment, teenage pregnancy, child abuse" (George 36). What strikes me is how common it is that these themes recur when talking about Maori, Maori families, and Maori communities. Solomon later goes on to say, "The Liberals were addressing the issues of a problem people! The figures reflected the success of the Programme" (George 71). George has used her play as a cautionary tale, of what could potentially happen if we are not careful about the ways in which we label people, and of how extremes can become the voice of the majority and result in action.

Mary eloquently describes the reality of being Maori and of collective consciousness and representation, "I keep losing. I lose things that others have, that I should have. But I don't have because I am. . because I am. I am one person and I am everyone. When I fall, or when I make one mistake, my family and I will be judged by one mistake. We are all judged by the mistake of one person" (George 50). In the beginning of this exegesis I described the same thing, that my identity is defined by my ancestors, by this history, by our sites of significance but also by my people. I am them and they are me. Because of this, I am also tarred with the same stereotypes as are all who identify as Maori. We are all made to answer for the crimes of a few and those crimes are thought to speak for us all. It's also important to say that I read this play with a clear and undeniable bias: I am Maori, a connected, engaged,

educated, te reo-speaking, marae-going, rural New Zealand-living, Maori. That I did not find George's play to be "inconceivable" as critic John Smythe did (qtd in George viii), nor did I agree that "the play does not and cannot, work either politically or theatrically because it takes an absurd premise to an absurd conclusion" (qtd in George viii) reflects my very different standpoint from Pakeha critics. I did not find it at all absurd or implausible because these are discussions we have had at the dinner table since I was old enough to form an opinion.

Mary again verbalises what many Maori who see themselves as 'tangata whenua' feel: "I drag myself, from this earth. I drag myself, with my future in my heart. My blood is in the dirt beneath me" (George 76). I found this piece of dialogue to be deeply profound, because "my blood is in the dirt beneath me". I returned to Ruatoria after ten years in Wellington, studying and progressing my career. I felt the pull to come home, and in the four years since I have returned to my turangawaewae, plagued with troubles as it is, I am home. Underneath my ancestral mountain Hikurangi, bathing in my ancestral river Waiapu, and raising my children on our home soil, being called to the marae every weekend, a place where karakia, waiata, and whanau are all things that are practiced at its true essence, where I hear my native tongue spoken freely each and every day. Yes, my blood is in the soil and I feel it calls to me.

And What Remains had a profound impact that has lasted long after I read the play and every time I read it, I feel new things, see new things and am triggered by new things. What strikes me is the timelessness of it. George wrote this play in 2007 and set it in her near future, 2010. It is now 2021 - 14 years have passed - yet these conversations are more prevalent than ever. I knew then that not only must a Maori story be diverse and come from many different places, it must ring true to who I am as a Maori. George told her truth in this play, and to me this provides a fundamental answer to the question I asked at the beginning of my creative journey: that in order for a play to be authentic, Maori or otherwise, the message must come from somewhere real.

In his discussion of what makes theatre theatrical, Sam Smiley writes that:

> The brilliance of a work of dramatic art depends not just on literary skill, philosophic penetration, or superb acting, but on all three. Although sayings and doings are essential ingredients, the intuitive and direct experience of a living image is the thing. The total work surpasses all the parts. Thus, a playwright should be more than a writer of words. Working with others, the writer creates a total, complete and live image stream of human existence (Smiley 255).

In her play, George is more than a writer of words, she is a creator of worlds and she provides an intimate showing of human existence. Smiley calls upon the various elements of theatre plays to work in harmony, that the playwright must not simply be able to write but be able to connect, to see, to have something to say and show, to weave these elements together to create a moment of human existence to expose the "totality of that universe thus connecting with and to" an audience (Smiley 256). I found this to be something George does confidently and that I hoped to emulate.

I see the search for authenticity as not just about what to write, but why I write. The 'why' is important to the legitimacy and power of a play. Smiley addresses authenticity from the perspective of the 'world of the play' in which he suggests that a play is an imitation of the world that the playwright has experienced.

> A play's world is an imitation, neither in the sense of a photographic replica nor in the sense of being a copy of some other play, but as a world, selected, delimited, and organised by an author and shown in all the elements of the play. The world of a play is a creatively constructed world. (Smiley 257)

It's important here to note that a playwright constructs the world. It does not reflect reality exactly as it is, it is an intentional development by the playwright to create the rules of that universe in a way that is symbolic so that the audience can not only interpret which part of the human experience is being exposed but also why. It is the writer's unique vision that adorns the stage and creates meaning and depth in the play itself. The controversy surrounding *And What Remains* is as relevant to its meaning as is George's right to write it.

While my thoughts and inspirations about the creative component of my thesis were still developing it seemed wise to engage in other creative works by Maori writers about Maori issues so that I might see how concepts like whanau, tikanga, and values are portrayed. *Hui* written by Mitch Tawhi Thomas engaged deeply with these concepts in a way I had never experienced before. Tawhi Thomas (Ngāti Maniapoto) is a multi-award-winning playwright and *Hui* received the Adam NZ Play Award in 2012 (Playmarket, 2021).

My initial thoughts about *Hui* were how confrontational it is. The dialogue, the setting, and the issues facing each sibling as they navigate the tragic passing of their father are presented uncompromisingly. Unlike Miria George's play, *Hui* is brazen and 'in your face' from the outset. I liked the way that the characters challenged some Maori practices and the undertone of the entire play seemed like a struggle between tikanga, the wishes of the deceased, and the feelings of disempowerment that the immediate family - or in Maori terms the whanau pani - were experiencing. In the play itself a character named George relays the last wishes of his father to his siblings, "Na. No tangi, just do the drive and then burn. (*Talking like Bob*) I don't want any of that Maori shit. No fucken tangi. No way" (Tawhi Thomas 34). He is met with confusion and anxiety, "Maori shit? But Dad is Maori! We are Maori. We gotta do what we gotta do. . .what are we going to do?" (Tawhi Thomas 34) This is a family that is clearly shown to be not 'all Maori in the same way'.

Hui wrestles with gender transition, identify, gang life, drugs, mental capacity, denial, family dynamics, violence, suicide, and urbanisation. The characters are forced into a situation that none of them feels ready or capable to handle. Each lashes out in their own way and their confrontations with each other and within themselves are what drives the play forward.

Some of my initial reservations about my own creative piece were whether or not I could write a story that was authentically Maori as well as bringing in viewpoints that are not Maori, for comparison and contrast with the Maori viewpoints. To do this, I was interested in trying to write in a way that, like Morris' novel, was episodic in structure and polyvocal, rather than linear and single-protagonist-centred. In the theatre, episodic structure links script elements "by theme, characters, locations, or parallel situations rather than by a

unifying plot. An episodic play is often a series of stories or chapters that do not need to be offered in a linear arrangement of cause and effect" (French & Bennett 1). Characters may be "less tightly bound to one another" than in an Aristotelian causal action sequence, and the plot "might use contrasts (private with public scenes, longer with short scenes, one group to an opposing or related group, comic with serious scenes" rather than a narrative arc (French & Bennett 1). Polyvocal stories likewise tend to avoid a clear answer to the question 'Whose story is this?' by showing not only that multiple characters can narrate the same situation differently, but that the identity and view of individual characters can also shift. Characters are "contingent, liminal, and complex" (Tompkins 502). They can perform multiple functions in the story and those functions can conflict and evolve. To try to understand what this meant in practice, I looked further at plays by Maori writers that used elements of either episodic or polyvocal structure. While *Hui* is not fully episodic (it does unfold chronologically), it is polyvocal. There is no protagonist, each character plays their part in revealing the narrative of the story, each has a truth to share and that complexity is what creates the authenticity of this Maori story. I particularly admired Tawhi Thomas' character development. Each character felt like a whole and distinct person, not one-dimensional. Each spoke differently, each had a history, triumphs, and challenges and each relationship in the play was distinct. This added to the spectacle of the play and its rhythm.

The recurring theme in *Hui* is grief and how that grief is manifested in each of the characters throughout the play. At the play's opening, Bob, the patriarch of the family, is already dead. None of his children have seen each other for a great many years. As they arrive at the family home, they are confronted with Bob's corpse sitting upright in his favourite chair as well as being confronted with each other and how much things have changed in the years that have passed. "Why have you got him just sitting up there like that?" (Tawhi Thomas 11). Nobody has changed more than Tane who returns to his homestead as Tina. The tension between Tina and ex gang member Pita causes considerable drama and eventually violence. Much of the family's history is revealed by their interactions though none of it is clear leaving much unsaid and causing the audience to fill in the gaps.

> And you're telling me to grow up? (*pause*) Let me tell you something, hey! I'm no fucken stranger to these walls and to this place and you have got no right to

treat me with such bullshit you. . you fucken idiot! I was just thirteen! I was here doing everything when Mum died. She was gone! Dad was useless...I worked like a slave around here and practically raised that boy there (*points to George*) and the one in the wharepaku crying and licking out his bag of dope. . .and this man right here? He is my father.. . our father. . . and he is just as much a part of me. . this. . these (*she grabs her tits and her crotch*) as you are. So get fucked. We are all in this together" (Tawhi Thomas 25).

I found that gap to be incredibly intriguing, with only a suggestion as to what may have happened earlier, and what is causing the tension with no apology or clarification offered. This is what I had hoped to achieve in my own creative piece, a space where the audience is not only needed but essential to creating the meaning of the play.

Funeral customs are arguably some of the most precious and spiritual of the Maori world. *Hui* directly challenges and defies all tikanga and that is raised in the play itself. Bob, the deceased father, leaves very specific instructions to his son, George, that he will stay at the house, then be taken on a drive to places of significance to him, then be cremated. There will be no tangi and the assets are to be divided specifically to each sibling. Maori have strict rules around how we not only manage our dead but how people are contacted, decisions made, and how to keep ourselves safe spiritually. These rules create structure and order so that the focus can be on the grief. *Hui* follows none of these processes and chaos occurs as the siblings deal with this change and their own feelings about their father's passing. There are many times when the older siblings attempt to show leadership. Tina and Pita grapple with the issues around tikanga and finally conclude that they will follow protocol, contact the elders in their family and decisions around the tangi will be out of their control. This defies the wishes of the deceased and causes distress to everybody but none more so than George, who reacts radically by dousing himself and his deceased father in gasoline and lighting a match, which is where the play abruptly ends. There is no denouement in the Aristotelian style (Tierno 36): instead, what happens next and, therefore, how the story should ultimately be understood to have ended, is left open. This was a device that I saw as a powerful way to avoid reducing stories down to singular viewpoints, leaving multiple interpretations open - again, something I was interested in doing in my own work.

Hui is, undeniably, a Maori story. The whole narrative brings to light the issues surrounding whanau who are disconnected, not only from each other but from the culture itself. In a time of great sorrow and stress they are alone and unsure of what to do next. They all turn to violence, alcohol and for one, drugs. All this is conveyed as the result of shared childhood trauma and of their grief. Colonisation is ever-present, without needing exposition. The characters are strong and vulnerable simultaneously and the story is not resolved into clear 'heroes' and 'villains' but leaves the audience with a sense of multiple possibilities, ambivalence, and, at the end, what Tompkins calls a "strategic silence" (502).

Udel's article *The Intersection of Literature and Activism in Contemporary Native Women's Writing* presented an interesting idea around the authenticity of an Indigenous writer, particularly relating to the intention of the writer and what action the audience or reader should take after experiencing the work itself. Udel was speaking specifically about Native American writers but suggested many principles that can apply to Indigenous peoples globally. "Native authors overtly seek to educate the non-Native reader uninformed of such history while also confirming experiences known to Native readers" (62). This idea resonated with me as a Maori woman writer and particularly with my creative piece as it seeks to do exactly that; educate or enlighten non-Maori to the experiences of a modern Maori family and to further affirm and acknowledge these day-to-day experiences for Maori. Native literature seeks to not only educate but to share, to have control of the story, its themes and which parts of the culture are portrayed.

> Through examples of contemporary Native life that include violence, poverty, and broken family units, along with the loss of traditional lifeways of language, spirituality and artistry, Native authors expose the reader to ongoing problems that continue to erode Native nations' ability to survive modern America. (Udel 62)

These themes create understanding, the Native American parallel to modern Maori is uncanny and a product of colonisation. Many Maori families suffer a loss of language,

stigma over traditional practices and much of our culture has been severed, the effects of which are intergenerational and long lasting.

Udel poses an important question: “What do contemporary Native writers demand of their readers who are both Native and non-Native?” (63). I asked myself the same question, what is it that I want from audiences who are both Maori and non-Maori? The intention of *Our Side of the Fence* was on the one hand simply to create compassion. I ask both demographics for empathy and to perhaps see the humanness in both families, the flaws in both, the issues facing both, and find a common understanding. The hope is that going forward the play will be remembered and applied to the audience’s own lives, so that they will reflect on their own assumptions. If that occurs, as I hope it will, it will contribute to healing the effects of colonisation and creating a nation where mutual respect starts with empathy, understanding, and tolerance. Udel writes that “The authors’ demands on the reader are reformative; their works model a superior Native reality, with the hope of producing an educated reader/ activist who, upon finishing the text will work to improve the lives of contemporary Native Americans” (Udel 63). Having an intended outcome or action for the audience or reader to implement is motivation to write in the first place, particularly as a Maori writer who is writing about a Maori family in this context.

I also wanted, in my own work, to think about conveying strength and resilience. Udel defined a new term, “Indigenisim” as a “liberation movement and worldview that offers an ideology that integrates life with nature” (63). This is largely also a Maori concept - that we are deeply connected to our environment and that the land is as much a part of our identity as our name. The word ‘Maori’ means natural, normal, and belonging. “The concept of Indigenisim presupposes several assumptions: that Indigenous people worldwide share a common experience of colonisation and subsumption into a capitalist and hegemonic nation state, a shared investment in the attainment of sovereign nationhood, and fundamentally non disruptive, integrative relationship with the natural habitat.” (Udel 63) The Maori experience of colonisation has been well documented, and its effects are still present in modern day society. All iwi authorities have a strategic language plan which is necessary as a direct result of colonisation.

From Udel's encouragement that Indigenous writers should think of their creative work as part of a political process for "Native identity and survival in the modern world," and should consider "the role or responsibility of the writer [in] the ongoing struggle for Native Sovereignty," (Udel 66) I came to see that my work would be inescapably ideological, in both content and in form. These thoughts then led to the intention of my own work and how my own experiences might shape it. I wanted to create a story that would demonstrate the strengths I see in my culture and my people, while showing how much and how often these strengths are ignored or overlooked.

Chapter Three - Nga Kete o Te Wananga

While searching for my story a common theme reoccurred: it was the feeling of being consistently misunderstood. That no matter what you did, or did not do, how you responded or didn't respond, that feeling of being misunderstood remained. I decided that I wanted to tell a story largely based on misconceptions; how we are seen by others and how that perception can alter the way we then see ourselves. I used my social media platform to ask the question - how do you feel misunderstood? - and had a multitude of responses. People told me about a time that they were the victim of gossip or inflated truths, some told a story of a lifetime of being judged, and others shared their experiences of purposefully being influenced to lie or speak negatively about another. Everybody was both a perpetrator and a victim at one point or another, and all expressed a desire to be better and to do better.

This wealth of first-hand accounts started to create an idea. I then spoke at length with arguably the most infamous, 'talked about' character in my small town of Ruatoria. She spoke candidly, being both a victim and at times intentional perpetrator and gossip. She talked about her teenage years and how those closest to her had betrayed her and humiliated her publicly, how despite telling the truth she'd been tarred with suspicion and lies and eventually how she had decided to live up to those rumours. She talked about infidelity, about falling in and out of love, the realities of postnatal depression and ultimately the decision not to raise her children but to love them from afar. It was a story of pain and one which she shared with great vulnerability. With her permission, I recorded our conversation as part of my gathering of creative resources and inspirations, and have heard it back many times. What stood out to me was her awareness of what people thought of her, how her reputation had developed, and how in turn it influenced her decisions well into adulthood.

It made me think then of who should tell the story. If I had been so influenced to judge this woman I barely knew, and so many had stories to tell of her, I then realised the power that is in what an outsider can see. I later discovered the term multiplicity and began playing

with ideas about polyvocal story telling. In Paul Castagno's introduction to *Collaborative Playwriting: Polyvocal Approaches from the EU Collective Plays Project*, he defines key terms for multiplicity and polyvocality:

> Polyvocality resists the notion of the single authorial and character voice in favour of disparate voices, language strategies, media and dramaturgies. Polyvocality breaks down hegemonies that privilege the single playwright's voice and hierarchical tags 'like whose play is it?' Found texts can be integrated with created texts. Polyvocality forms the basis of the hybrid play. (12 Castagno)

Castagno is speaking about multiple authors writing the same play collaboratively, but the principles of polyvocality still stand for a single story told through multiple character viewpoints. Therefore, when considering the polyvocality of my own play, I felt the need to resist playing into one specific character, and to avoid elevating one character above any others. I related to the idea of a hybrid play whereby the plurality of stories is most important, not the voice of the individual, and that even a single story may be told by many voices in many ways - as I had seen Morris do in *Queen of Beauty*. Interestingly, Castagno identifies the disestablishment of hegemony as a primary function of polyvocality, a natural progression from looking for a Maori story and considering Pistacchi's theory about cultural survivance.

Castagno also refers to 'hybrid' as a clashing and mix of genres in a play. "Structure is created through juxtaposition of genre or mixing dramaturgies; characters interacting from different periods; diverse performative styles" (12). Castagno indicates here that polyvocality is represented in the amalgamation of voice, tone, and timeline to be true to the thematic plurality of a story and not to a single protagonist's view. This was my intention for *Our Side of the Fence*, that the characters, location, dialogue, and dramaturgy would feed the complexity of the story, rather than reduce it.

I knew that my play needed to have conflicting and opposing views in accordance with Castagno's theories about polyvocal storytelling. The play would need to contrast themes

against each other so that the audience could decipher for themselves their level of truth within the narrative as the third viewpoint. Narrators could be unreliable, with subsequent information contradicting them. I would need to write the play in a way that was intentionally suggestive, that would cause the audience to not only witness but also judge based only on what they could see at the time. Characters' views could turn out to be wrong (prejudiced, ignorant or simply misinformed), with subsequent information contradicting them, but I wanted the audience to first be drawn in - to be tempted by the allure of easy assumptions and only later to realise that they had bought into a single viewpoint.

In *Units and Building Block*s from *New Playwriting Strategies* Castagno presents a key concept regarding the way in which a play is constructed. His concept of dialogic beats refers to the way in which the play's dialogue creates units of meaning in the script (145). He essentially describes a play as a 'dialogic system', in which "Beats constitute the smallest identifiable units of language, action or thought in a play. They represent the fundamental building blocks of the play script. In traditional playwriting, beats should cohere to form an overall unity of intention in a play" (145 Castagno). I have interpreted this to mean that the beats represent the literal elements of the play's construction. Each element represents a beat, and each beat needs to work cohesively towards the play's meaning or underlying message. Castagno goes on to say that "The beat becomes the site of innovation, shifting the direction of the character or play and by doing so, contradicting the expected or conventional" (145).

When applying this theory to my own playwriting I realised that who is speaking is just as important as what they are saying. In an early draft I imagined the best way to tell a story is from the individual who experiences what happens as predictable, however Castagno's theory about dialogic beats challenged that thought and instead I was able to strengthen my play by making one of the key characters a white woman looking over the fence and showing her rather contradictory experiences of what she sees. She is not well-informed about Maori culture, in fact she has no idea what is going on, and it was this decision to begin with the views of an uninformed character that ultimately was able to create much of the dissonance, irony, and even some of the humour in the play.

Smiley's concept of spectacle also helped to set the scene for 'why write a play' and the essential need for a play to create visual variety, a reason to watch and keep watching. Smiley says that "The theatre is a seeing place" (253). Calling into focus the senses, a play must fulfil not just the hearing, and more than a visual, but it must be seen and have a message worth being seen. "A theatre then, is a place where people are involved in the human activity of seeing a spectacle and speculating about it" (Smiley 253). It was primarily this concept that had me considering the nature of my own work during the unfolding moments of being staged—its theatricality—and what I would like a live audience to consider, think about and react to.

Feral and Bermingham look at the theory of theatricality and attempt to define its differences and similarities across genres and particularly how it can be distinguished from other types of spectacle. They write that "theatricality seems to stem from the spectator's awareness of the theatrical intention addressed to" them (Feral and Bermingham 96). This suggests that the audience's attention and focus are what creates theatricality and in turn appreciation for spectacle. The stage and set itself are elements of theatricality and therefore must be considered by the playwright, whether or not there is action currently taking place. In my own play I had to consider how I might engage the audience for the entirety of the play.

Drawing the awareness of the audience and indeed perhaps addressing them directly may be a strategy to incorporate not just theatricality but also create spectacle. In the first scene I wrote, I had Susan, a pregnant married woman, look directly over the fence and into the audience thus directing her suspicions and judgements at them. The intention here is to include the audience as an extended part of the cast, drawing in Smiley's theory of spectacle and Feral and Bermingham's approach to theatricality as "a process that recognizes subjects in process; it is a process of looking at or being looked at" (Feral and Bermingham 98). The woman I had spoken to in my community particularly conveyed her experiences of being scrutinised, of feeling watched and judged. From the first scene of the play I attempted to replicate this feeling for the audience.

Feral and Bermingham also consider that theatricality bridges multiple spaces: the quotidian or everyday space of the audience sitting in the theatre, and then the spaces of the play, which the spectator's gaze draws them into, yet they do not occupy (97). This theory applies to my creative process, in that my intention was to both evoke a space that represents what some audience members might recognise from daily life, while concurrently presenting an alternative quotidian space where other parts of the audience are unfamiliar. It is for this reason that the story is told through the eyes of two families. The audience should be able to see themselves represented on at least one side of the fence making the other a foreign space. There is always something unfamiliar to look at, thus creating sustainable theatricality for the duration of the play. It should act as a juxtaposition as the parallel stories play out. My play, *Our Side of the Fence* attempts to create two distinct spaces, rather than offer Aristotelian unity of setting, for this reason.

These ideas were the foundation of what would eventually become the creative portion of my research. *Our Side of the Fence* came out of a need to show and share, to connect and separate, to expose the challenges that are cultural and those that are human. Catron wrote: "you are driven by a compulsion to use your art to make connections between what others know and see, and an invisible unknown that only you envision" (18).

I finally had a concept of what I wanted my play to do, how I wanted it to feel, and the statement I hoped it would make. I also had an idea of the structure and form it would take. I wanted my play to not only highlight the differences in culture and the assumptions people make about each other but also about the shared human experiences that connect us simply as humans.

A primary component of my creative piece focuses on motherhood and the ways in which sleep deprivation and a lack of compassion and support can have a detrimental effect on the health of a woman. Every mother will be able to recall a time when the depths of depression, loneliness and the gruelling and often painful task of keeping an infant alive would feel like the death of them. I gave birth to my son in my home without a midwife during level four lockdown. In the weeks and months that passed after his arrival, I was left, along with my partner, our two-year-old and our new-born infant, to navigate sleeplessness,

exhaustion, fear, and frustration. We dealt with this on our own, in our bubble of pandemic isolation, whilst trying to maintain a sense of order and normalcy.

It was within my own experiences that I found compassion for Susan and who she might be, what she might be struggling with and why she might be externalising her anger, paranoia, and attention to another family. Susan is certainly an unreliable narrator − she "presents inaccurate interpretations of events as objective truth" (Greene par. 8) − but that is not her only purpose. She is also "part of the interplay among the author, the work, and the reader" (Greene, para 9), or in this case, the audience. She is "an implicit means through which the author challenges the reader [audience] to think critically about the narrator and the world he or she inhabits," (para 10), and she is at the same time an object of pity. She is both victimiser and victim, demonstrating the problems of judging people from only one viewpoint. She is an example of what Castagno calls the "equivocal character" - a shifting representation of subjectivity that moves through different phases so as to "target inherent theatricality and foregrounding techniques over dramatic arcs or through-lines" (Castagno 12).

When applying this theory to my own creative work I found a need to approach the themes of family, motherhood, social differences, and cultural dynamics through the characters and their shifting experiences and interpretations of those experiences. I wanted to show not only that one character may approach a situation entirely differently to another but that our understanding of the meaning inherent in their behaviour can transform completely as what is said or revealed, and what isn't, shifts from one space to another.

In my own journey of motherhood, I found myself unable to ask for help, even when I needed it most. It often felt as though nobody understood my struggle, least of all my partner and our toddler. I was alone with my son who needed all of me to survive. I imbued this experience into both Steven and Susan. I wanted to convey the disconnect that often happens when a new-born arrives, the miscommunication, the worry and how that affects the entire family unit. In this script, Susan may be judgemental and rude, but she is also the most vulnerable character and although it appears she has support, love and concern, it is fleeting. This experience of motherhood was something that I wanted to use to transcend

the differences between the two families and show the points of connection between them as humans.

The second shared human experience is adolescence. It is a challenging time no matter what nationality, race, or culture you identify with and that is reflected in *Our Side of the Fence*. There is a shared understanding between Rehia and Katie; both are in situations they do not control, both are affected by the behaviours, decision making, and parenting styles in their homes. Though their differences are perhaps typical of their cultures, particularly with Rehia, they can also connect. Rehia is raised in a strong Maori family who actively participate in traditional practices, are bilingual and multi-faceted, living with their whangai brother as are many Maori families.

There is a distinctive difference in the maturity of the teens and that was intentional to demonstrate the differences in parenting style but also differences between a collectivist culture and an individualistic one. Though both Rehia and Katie are the same age, Rehia seems older as her understanding of her world and her responsibilities within her family have started to induct her into adulthood. During the course of the play, this influences Katie and we see her begin to assert herself and take small steps to support her family and show initiative.

It was important to me to portray the connectedness of the Maori family to their culture and their tikanga. I was raised in a Maori family that continues to practice matauranga Maori and I, in turn, am passing that down to my children as our way of life. Royal's *Creativity and Matauranga Maori: Towards Tools for Innovation* was written for Te Hui Taumata and looks specifically at economic development from a Maori context, particularly from traditional Maori knowledge, systems and patterns of thought. Although these aspects were not directly relevant to my creative process, I found strong relevance to my own work in a series of existential questions Royal poses around matauranga Maori and how it may be applied creatively (8).

Royal wrote that, "In many settings matauranga Maori is a term used to advance or promote distinctive Maori contributions to a range of activities and enterprises such as the

Maori way" (11). This statement defines matauranga Maori for the purposes of this conversation in this context. It is important to note that there are multiple definitions of matauranga Maori when applied to various topics. Further to that, Royal goes on to say that "matauranga Maori is also used to signal and suggest a distinctive Maori outcome, goal or product" (11). In this case, *Our Side of the Fence*, was developed to show the deeply embedded teachings and systems that exist within a typically Maori family in order to live in a distinctly Maori way.

Royal goes on to list examples of what might be considered matauranga Maori, identifying Maori arts, significant cultural events, and more importantly "distinctive processes utilising certain tikanga (e.g powhiri, baptisms, wedding ceremonies, uhunga and so on" (11). I take this to include maara kai, whangai, te reo and the importance of naming children all of which feature subtly in my creative piece. However, Royal also talks about some of this knowledge needing to be confined within te Ao Maori. Some of the things I have characters talk about in my play, for example the 'fighting sticks', I do not explain or define. Some things are there for Maori audiences to understand alone, and perhaps enjoy a shared chuckle at Susan's misunderstandings. Not all of the audience will get the joke - and therein lies the particular theatricality of the polyvocal play.

Royal describes what he calls the 'Maori worldview' (11) which is influenced in large part by iwi, hapu and of course whanau. He lists some key principles that arguably define this worldview by its values. Namely:

> -Mana and manaakitanga, the influencing nature of relationships between humans and humans in the natural world
> -Whanaungatanga which recognises the interconnectedness of all things
> -Tohungatanga, the way in which an individual is taught and knowledge is passed from one person to another
> -Ukaipo, empowerment or disempowerment and puts importance on places, experiences in which healing and renewal takes place, such as the home.
> -Rangatiratanga, that meaningful action takes place when motivated individuals work together in meaningful and powerful ways.

- Kotahitanga the embodiment of ‘oneness’

While Royal describes this as matauranga Maori, for those of us who practice it, these are the values with which we raise our families, the ways in which we see the world and our place in it and the normal expectations for how we conduct ourselves in a collectivist culture. This is a prominent theme in *Our Side of the Fence* in the ways in which Mihi interacts with her daughter, how she teaches and guides her and even how she disciplines her. Mihi supports Susan in a way that is mana enhancing, in a way that acknowledges kotahitanga and whanaungatanga, that as people, we are all connected. Susan tries to reciprocate that in her own way: her reaching out to Child Services is an attempt to help Mihi and her children which, though undoubtedly misguided, was not intentionally malicious.

During the development of the first four scenes of the play I found myself questioning the authenticity of the characters. In early drafts I found that I was unsure of what the character would say, why they would say it, and how. Catron urges the playwright to “focus on what characters say and refuse to say, plus actions they do and do not take - all communications to the audience” (Catron 19). It is the subtlety of a character that makes them both whole and believable. This demonstrated a need for a deeper understanding of each character as an individual beyond the play and as a wider person. I therefore developed extended profiles for each character, writing about their background stories, individual preferences and dislikes, stories about how they met, where they lived and even their jobs. Not all of it made it into the play, some personality traits and nuances did, but these go unexplained as simply part of that character’s whole being. Catron suggests:

> You represent all characters-one way of writing plays is to ‘become’ each character while he or she is speaking and reacting-and you seek to show each character’s individual attitudes, emotions, goals, hopes and dreams (21).

After my characters’ backstories had been developed, I used the information in their profiles to ‘become’ my characters and refined the dialogue accordingly, thus relieving my anxiety about my characters and their authenticity.

I chose not to give Steven and Susan's baby a name. It was an intentional move on my part to shift the focus from the infant to the dynamic of the household and the complications within the family unit. Not giving the baby a name takes away his identity; essentially he could be anyone, he could be any woman's baby. Susan's experience with postnatal depression whilst personal to her could happen to anybody, and not giving the baby his own identity was an effort to focus more on Susan's struggle. My intention was that the audience's compassion in this instance should rightly be focused on the mother, and that perhaps if we as a society approached all new mothers with care, kindness, and support, the care and raising of infants in this country would be better, no matter your race and background.

Susan's struggle with post-natal depression becomes the primary focus in the Benson household. Katie and Steven both allude to this being an ongoing issue for Susan. It was important for me here to show that people suffering from mental illness come in all colours and they can also be wealthy and live in nice homes in a cul-de-sac. Mental illness doesn't discriminate, unlike Susan in her hostility towards her neighbours. I wrote Susan as an unlikeable character, eccentric and highly strung, slightly self-centred, at times neglectful, and yet all through her characterisation her mental illness is ever-present as a reason to also feel compassion for her. It would be easy to dismiss her, as both Steven and Katie do often throughout the play, as society does to people who suffer with mental illnesses, but underneath all of that Susan is expressing genuine concern for her neighbours. Time and time again she is dismissed, particularly by Steven, and that causes her paranoia and distress, and fuels her assumptions about the family next door. Nobody in the Benson family listens, and equally nobody, including Susan, attempts to understand the culture and dynamics of the Maori family next door. The theme of needing to listen and connect to understand what is going on 'behind the fence,' applies not just literally but figuratively, too, to the prickly defences that Susan erects around herself.

There is a clear and distinct difference between Mihi and Susan. I found this difference eloquently theorised by Solomon in her discussion of standpoint theory: "those who are politically disadvantaged are in a position to know more, and thus have epistemic advantage

over others in the same society who are politically advantaged" (232). That is the main difference between the two women, that Mihi is a Maori woman and is aware of the political differences between the two women, as Susan is entirely oblivious as to the power of being born into the privileged majority.

> Standpoint is something that knowers do, actively, rather than something knowers have, that describes their (passive) epistemic situation. What they do involves group political awareness, in particular, awareness of the power relationships between their social group and other social groups (Solomon 232).

It is this awareness that acknowledges the power between the two ethnic groups that are represented in *Our Side of the Fence.* Solomon goes on to say that, "people with standpoint have a different perspective from those in the mainstream. This different perspective is constituted by different experiences and different domains of expertise" (233). Mihi not only has a different perspective of motherhood, family, and culture, but also a different approach to connecting. Mihi falls back on her own experiences and cultural values, and this leads her to help Susan, who is in desperate need, despite the fact that Mihi can feel her discrimination.

It is also essential to acknowledge that, as a writer, my standpoint allows me to have critical ability to see the world from multiple points of view. In embracing my own standpoint I am better able to write multiple perspectives particularly culturally and socially which in and of itself is an act of political activism. Solomon calls this ability intrapersonal intelligence. "This kind of intrapersonal intelligence is facilitated in those who have standpoint because they have learned to see the world from more than one point of view, whether that point of view is their own or the dominant point of view" (Solomon 234).

It was important to me that this play is reflective of a believable Maori family. Many Maori households are bilingual. People converse easily between the two languages as the level of comprehension for both English and Maori in the household is the same. The choice to have Matiu introduced speaking entirely in Maori was an intentional one, partially to

demonstrate his connectedness to his culture but also to relay the deep personal trauma that this issue around their whangai son was not only causing him but also his wife. This was a trauma that felt most comfortably expressed in te reo Maori. I have used language to demonstrate intimacy-- he was attempting to connect with her through their native tongue--but also to build connections with those in the audience who will understand. I wrote Mihi responding in English as a way not only to act as a kind of contextual translator for non-reo-speaking audience members, but also to show her defiance and unwillingness to relent or connect and compromise. Bakhtin describes the concept of heteroglossia, how a single language may have many meanings and interpretations, and that within that language there are levels of socio-ideological co-existence and contradictions between the past and present (Bakhtin 291).

Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia draws attention to the distinctions inside the language itself, but in *Our Side of the Fence* I am using two languages in order to distinguish the subtleties of pain, anguish, and principles of family and of love. Within both languages, Maori and English, the intersection of meaning as described by Bakhtin occurs. Lilicherie McGregor's doctoral thesis, *The Praxis of Postcolonial Intercultural Theatre in Aotearoa New Zealand* outlines the theory of heteroglossia, "Heteroglossia assumes that languages do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways" (McGregor 34). It is this intersection that I wanted to make present in *Our Side of the Fence.*

McGregor goes on to analyse the heteroglot between English and Maori particularly in her examination of the Treaty of Waitangi and its translation.

> This crossing of genres is in itself an example of Bakhtin's term heteroglossia, firstly by being a mix of languages both English and te reo Maori, and secondly, a mix of the forms of the languages between the religious and the legal government jargon which in itself would have created another level of meaning for Maori who were familiar with the bible, as many were (McGregor 57).

Much like *Our Side of the Fence*, the Treaty of Waitangi is both in English and in Maori, written for two different audiences, and engaging with two different realities. The parallels

that I'm drawing here are within the theory of heteroglossia and the interpretation of language. Particularly in the scenes of Matiu and Mihi where the conversation is bilingual, the non-Maori-speaking audience will have to infer the context of the dialogue by the parts that they can understand. Intentionally distancing or engaging different sections of the audience further adds to the theatricality of the play and reinforces the third viewpoint, but it is also a thematic way to reinforce that not everything from one cultural context should be considered available to other cultural contexts. The audience is plunged in a theatrical experience of 'not knowing'. This reinforces the themes of the piece as a whole: at the end, neither family knows what has happened on the other side of the fence. Even the audience does not know whether Susan's actions impacted on the removal of Mihi and Matiu's whangai or whether that was already irrevocably in train. The sequencing is not clearly causal: it is deliberately left open to interpretation, perhaps to stimulate conversations and reflections later among the audience to debate what happened and attempt to 'fill the gap' of uncertainty left by the play.

There are, however, many values which the play does communicate clearly through its use of te reo Maori. McGregor's thesis discusses the values of Maori culture and how that is present in the language itself.

> For Maori there are some dominant values, which are difficult to take out of their context in the whole, but which are helpful for Pakeha to understand. The word Whanaungatanga, which is made up of the world for family (whanau) and extends out to include the tribe (iwi) and relationships between iwi. Kotahitanga relates to discussion and consensus. Manaakitanga concerns the importance of caring for others and the giving of hospitality. Wairuatanga implies the spiritual dimension (McGregor 89).

These terms and values are present in *Our Side of the Fence* and provide a foundation which moves the play forward and progresses the narrative and develops the characters. The concept of family, the conflict between Matiu and Mihi about their son, and Mihi's approach to the Benson family are all represented in the bilingual dialogue and interactions between characters on both sides of the fence.

Carl Mika and Birgetta Sarah-Jane Tiakiwai, in “Tawhiao’s Unstated Heteroglossia: Conversations with Bakhtin,” also apply Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia to te reo Maori and to Maori audiences.

> Bakhtin tends to think of the poetic register as engaging with just one type of language, but for the Maori writer or reader, the one is never alone despite appearing to be. On the contrary, it is always attended at once by all other voices and is thus forever heteroglot (855).

Here they acknowledge both the intention of the writer and the interpretation of the reader, that hearing both languages simultaneously does not necessarily separate meaning by language. It is also worth noting that Mika and Tiakiwai are also referring to the heteroglossia present within te reo Maori, that each word, sentence, and utterance carries more meaning than its intended context. Thus its presence in my creative piece is in and of itself polyvocal and multifaceted.

I set out to explore Maori storytelling using episodic structure and polyvocal writing techniques in order to create my own creative piece, *Our Side of the Fence*. My research and analysis found a desperate need for more diversity in stories about Maori, written by Maori, and that the expansion in narrative, theme, structure and style is what will have the most impact in the New Zealand literary sphere and in the experience of Maori readers. I found that polyvocal storytelling is a useful vehicle to elevate ideas of the multiplicity of story, in this case a hybrid play using two languages, a mixture of European and Maori storytelling styles, and a range of conflicting viewpoints that are never quite resolved. I found that an episodic structure was useful to allow the audience to concentrate on both families at once, “without being overly drawn to one character” (Stapleton-Bergeron, 1) and to explore a pervasive sense of miscommunication and misunderstanding, through parallel narratives. I also found that understanding my own standpoint is essential when attempting to create a story that is multivocal. Being true to my own experiences brought fairness and believability to the storytelling. These aspects aside, all plays must abide by the key fundamentals of spectacle, theatricality, character development, and play progression.

I'd like to end the critical component of this thesis the way it began. I am a Maori woman from Ngati Porou, and a writer, and that alone gives me the right to tell my story. The theories applied to my creative piece start at Te Po, the place of both nothingness and unlimited potential, the body of the idea sits within Te Ao Marama, our world of enlightenment, of research, analysis and technique, the creative portion is grown within Nga Kete o Te Wananga, the three baskets of applied knowledge.

Ko Hikurangi te maunga
Ko Waiapu te awa
Ko Ngati Porou te iwi
This is who I am.

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Creative Work

Our Side of the Fence

Rawinia Parata

Synopsis: There are two sides of a story, just as there are two sides of a fence.

Setting: *Suburban Gisborne, in a quiet cul-de-sac*

Characters:

SUSAN – *a late-20s, heavily pregnant white woman*

STEVEN – *Susan's husband, early 30s white man*

MIHI – *middle aged Māori woman*

MATIU – *tall, broad Māori middle-aged man with visible Māori tattoos on his neck up towards his ears*

KRISTEN – *a mid-20s Muslim woman, a Child Services Officer, wearing a headscarf*

REHIA – *Mihi and Matiu's fourteen-year-old daughter*

KATIE – *Susan and Steven's fourteen-year-old daughter*

BABY – *Susan and Steven's baby*

Our Side of the Fence

Scene 1

SUSAN peers over the fence towards the audience, gardening gloves in one hand and a round straw hat atop her head.

Her eyes widen and she slams her hand over her mouth in horror.

She looks back and motions to her husband STEVEN to come over to the fence. He ignores her and straightens his newspaper and lifts it higher. Loud bang, and a shriek off stage.

SUSAN

Hushed tone

Steven! Steven did you hear that? Oh my god Steven! I heard a scream.

STEVEN

Not looking up from his paper

Get away from that fence.

SUSAN

No, somebody needs my help. Did you not hear that voice? That is the shout of terror, Steven.

STEVEN

Again, ignoring her

Ah ha.

SUSAN

Should I go over? I think I should.

She rubs her belly.

STEVEN

Get away from that fence and mind your own business. You're going to stress the baby.

SUSAN

I would hope if I screamed like that somebody would help me.

STEVEN

Looking up from his paper and folding it to look at her.

Darling, if you made any sound at all I would come running to you immediately.

SUSAN

Stop it, Steven, I'm being serious. They've only been here a week and I have seen all manner of strange behaviour. I think they are part of a gang, Steven! On our street. Gang members! Can you believe it?

STEVEN

Rolls his eyes and picks up his paper.

Even more reason for you to put your nose back on our side of the fence. Don't you have washing to hang out?

SUSAN

I saw a man out there. He was wearing leather and digging a hole. A big hole in their backyard. And then I heard that scream. Aren't you the least bit concerned that a murder could be happening less than 10 feet away and you're too busy catching up on the latest All Blacks' score to notice? I can see it now, Steven. Woman slaughtered in her new home by gang member, next-door neighbours suspected and did absolutely nothing. That is a 20/20 headline, Steven.

STEVEN

I do love it when you're hysterical. Must be the hormones.

Susan moves away from the fence and sits in the empty chair next to Steven and pours herself a cup of tea. She takes a sip out of her floral china and glares at the fence while rubbing her belly protectively.

SUSAN

Did you watch that documentary, the one about gangs in New Zealand? The one that mentioned a rogue 'warrior gene'? The man I saw, he looked wild, completely off his face. I saw his side profile, Steve. He's got the markings of the gang on his face.

STEVEN

You don't say. What else did you see?

SUSAN

I am sure that there are no light bulbs in the house. It's completely dark over there. You know what that means don't you? It means (*whispers).* . . Steven, it means. . Meth!

STEVEN

For Christ's sake Susie. Meth? Gangs? Murders? We're in Gisborne, not the ghetto of Chicago with drive-bys and home invasions. You sound like a lunatic.

Exit STEVEN. Loud childlike scream. Susan stares horrified.

SUSAN

Steve! Steve! Did you hear that, Steve? Something truly sinister is happening and I'll be damned if I'll have another Nia Glassie story right at my doorstep. Steve!

End scene.

Scene 2

SUSAN sits on the couch knitting and peering out the window towards the audience. She shakes her head and looks back at her knitting.

KATIE, hair in a French braid, flops down on the couch next to her, with headphones in her ears.

SUSAN

Did you see the neighbours' kids?

KATIE can't hear her through the headphones. SUSAN taps her politely. KATIE reluctantly removes the headphones.

SUSAN

I said, did you see the neighbours' kids, Katie?

KATIE

What do you mean did I see them, Mum?

SUSAN

They were playing in the street. Without shoes even!

KATIE

Mum, we live in a cul-de-sac. It's not like they were playing on the state highway.

SUSAN

Who told you we live in a cul-de-sac?

KATIE

Shrugs

Dad.

SUSAN

I never let you play in the street. That's why we have a backyard. I mean, their kids could play in the backyard if they weren't out there digging huge holes.

KATIE

What holes? . . . You know what, never mind. Dad said we need to mind our own business. Especially you.

SUSAN

I know you and Dad think I'm nosey, but it is genuine concern. I'm worried for their wellbeing and their safety. I heard some very suspicious noises this morning and I haven't stopped thinking about it all day.

KATIE

Worried? About what, Mum? Did you see something bad?

Susan puts her knitting down and looks seriously at Katie.

SUSAN

I think that the man who lives there is in a gang. There are always people coming and going and the other day he had them lined up outside fighting each other with sticks.

KATIE

Oh my god, Mum. Are you serious?

KATIE leans intently towards Susan

SUSAN

Yes! With sticks! It was no ordinary fighting, it was like they were training soldiers. He had commands, in Maowry. They were out there for hours, Katie. It was very strange. Why would he be teaching them to fight with weapons?

KATIE

I don't know Mum. Was he hitting them?

SUSAN

Not that I saw but maybe I didn’t watch long enough. But don’t you worry.

KATIE

What are you going to do?

SUSAN

I’m not sure yet. But I am keeping a close eye.

KATIE

Oh Mum! When I got home from school yesterday, they waved out to me. They seem like nice kids Mum. We can’t let them be mistreated. We just can’t.

SUSAN

I know darling. I will keep a watchful eye. For now, sweets, maybe keep your distance. I don’t want you getting caught up with them.

KATIE

It’s so scary, Mum. What if they hurt us?

SUSAN

Dad and I will not let that happen.

Enter STEVEN.

STEVEN

Let what happen?

KATIE

Mum says the people from next door are training their kids to be soldiers.

STEVEN

What the fuck, Susan?

SUSAN

Steven! Language!

STEVEN

Susan, look at what you're doing. You're scaring our daughter for nothing. Those people have done nothing but mind their own business and here you are making up stories.

SUSAN

I'm not making it up. That's what I saw. Did you not hear about the Urewera Militia? It's my job to protect us. This is terrorism in our backyard, Steve.

STEVEN

No, it's my job, so let me do it. Turn on the TV and stop looking over the fence. Katie, this is a safe neighbourhood, it has been your whole life and it still is. I will speak to you about this later, Susan.

STEVEN storms off. SUSAN lays her hand reassuringly on Katie's leg.

SUSAN

Everything is alright Katie. It's all going to be okay. I promise.

Exit STEVEN. End scene.

Scene 3

Mihi sits on her knees, bare feet sticking out from under a long, scrunched dress. Her eyes are covered by a frayed straw hat and she wears cheap gypsy earrings.

MIHI

Rehia! Bubbah! (*She sings*)

MIHI

(*Beat*) Bring the seeds.

Mihi leans over to get her watering can and her small garden tools. Enter REHIA.

REHIA

Here, Mum.

MIHI

Perfect! Last night the moon was in Ohua. Today is a good day to plant.

REHIA

What kind of seeds are they Mum?

MIHI

Kumara.

REHIA

Get them for $4 for a kilo at the diary.

MIHI

Get them for free in the garden.

Big bang and a brief crying noise followed by raucous laughter.

MIHI

What are the boys doing?

REHIA

Jumping off the top bunk onto the mattress.

Mihi nods, unsurprised.

REHIA

Also, Aunty Nettie dropped Tihi off. He was jumping off the top rail when I came out. She's gone to work but will pick him and the boys up after. She said they can all stay with her for the weekend. Uncle Pati is gunna take them eeling. He said Dad can borrow the fishing line and knives.

Mihi nods again and smiles.

MIHI

Kia koe hoki te kawekawe koreo! (*Laughs*)

REHIA

Don't shoot the messenger. (*Laughs*)

MIHI

Help me push these seeds in. Send good whakaaro into each and every one.

Loud bang, quiet crying and shushing.

MIHI

Water them when you're done, Bubbah. I better see what's going on, I bet you they pushed little Tihi. I'll put the boil up pot on, so come in soon for lunch.

REHIA nods. Exit MIHI. End scene.

<u>Scene 4</u>

KATIE holds the baby on the couch. The baby is hysterical and Katie looks as though she's struggling to hold him up.

SUSAN stares out towards the audience and mindlessly stirs her tea.

KATIE

Mum? Mum? I think he needs you.

SUSAN continues staring out and stirring her tea.

KATIE

Mum? He's crying. I don't know what to do.

SUSAN

To herself.

Don't know what to do.

KATIE

Did you say something Mum? He doesn't want me. Mum?

Enter STEVEN. Steven rushes over to take the baby from Katie.

STEVEN

Susie, the baby is crying.

SUSAN

Blankly.

Babies cry.

STEVEN

Susie, he's hysterical.

SUSAN

So?

STEVEN

Christ, Susan. What's wrong with you?

STEVEN shushes the baby and quickly looks overwhelmed.

STEVEN

Katie, go and clean your room. It's a pigsty. Go and do it now.

KATIE

The whole house is a mess, why should I?

STEVEN

Get down there and clean it now. Move!

KATIE drops her lip and stamps her feet out. Exit KATIE.

STEVEN

The baby is hungry.

SUSAN

Then feed him.

STEVEN

With what?

SUSAN

The formula on the bench next to the bottles and the jug, Steve.

STEVEN

Formula? Since when? I thought we decided to breastfeed exclusively.

SUSAN

It’s too hard.

STEVEN

What’s hard about it? Pull your tit out and feed him. Christ, Suse, he’s your son. Come and be a mother to him.

Steven pushes the baby into her arms. As she turns, it’s apparent that her clothes are dirty and milk-stained, the circles under her eyes are dark and her hair is in a messy bun on top of her head.

STEVEN

Wow! When was the last time you showered?

SUSAN

Huh? Yesterday, I think.

STEVEN

You are really letting yourself go. . .

SUSAN

(*Beat)* I didn’t have time.

STEVEN

You didn’t have time to wash your face and put on clean clothes?

SUSAN

They were clean this morning.

STEVEN

Okay, whatever. Can you please just feed him? When you’re done, I’ll wind him if you go and take a shower. Deal?

Susan nods. She sits on the couch, goes to latch the baby, and winces with pain. She grits her teeth while the baby feeds noisily.

Steven sits opposite her, face in his hands.

STEVEN

Softly.

You are not yourself. What can I do? We can’t do this again.

SUSAN

To herself.

What can you do?

STEVEN

I don’t know how to help you. Do you need a doctor?

SUSAN

To herself.

Help me.

STEVEN

What is this, Suse? Are you tired? Depressed? Psychotic? I don’t know. Give me a clue? I just don’t know. I don’t want to just assume.

SUSAN

I don’t know.

STEVEN

Well when you figure it out, let me know. I’m not a mind reader. I’m going to check on Katie.

Exit STEVEN. SUSAN sits on the couch, breastfeeding and staring blankly out at the audience. She turns to look at her cup of tea on the bench. End scene.

Scene 5

REHIA is sitting at the kitchen table almost hanging her head outside the window. Enter MIHI.

MIHI

You looking for spiders or something?

REHIA is swinging back on her chair to get further out the window. MIHI kicks her chair.

MIHI

When you pay for the furniture in this house you can do as you please. But while Dad and I pay for it, you will respect it. Ka pai?

REHIA

Mum, that baby next door has been crying for ages.

MIHI

What do you mean 'ages'?

REHIA

Like, it's getting worse not better.

MIHI

Sometimes babies cry. Could be wind?

REHIA

I know, Mum. But it sort of sounds like nobody is home with baby.

MIHI

What?

REHIA

I was trying to look in the window to see if I could see anybody. I can’t.

MIHI

That doesn’t mean no one is home.

REHIA

I’m just saying, that baby has been crying hardout.

MIHI sticks her head out of the window, frowns, looks at Rehia and motions her to follow.

MIHI

Boys, I’m going next door, won’t be long.

Exit MIHI and REHIA. End scene.

Scene 6

SUSAN stares blankly out towards the audience. A baby is wrapped up on the couch away from her crying hysterically. She doesn't register it, she doesn't move.

There is washing everywhere, and the house is a mess. Knock at the door.

MIHI

Kia ora.

SUSAN doesn't move.

MIHI

Missus Benson? Are you in there?

More knocking. (pause) Door handle moves. MIHI pops her head around the corner.

MIHI

Ah kia ora Missus Benson.

SUSAN doesn't look at her or even register her presence. MIHI looks at the baby and walks back out of the door. SUSAN does not move, just sits.

Enter MIHI and REHIA, who is carrying a Tupperware of food.

MIHI

Bubbah, flick the jug and make Missus Benson a cup of tea.

REHIA

Whispers.

Why Mum? She doesn't even like us.

MIHI reaches out to hold the baby. SUSAN is still not responding at all. MIHI walks to the kitchen.

MIHI

Make a cup of tea, Bubbah. Do it now.

REHIA

Would she do it for us though, Mum?

MIHI

Oh hoh! Look at you all grown and answering back. How many children have you raised Rehia?

REHIA looks down ashamed.

MIHI

That's right. Not a single one. So make the cup of tea and dish that kai up on a plate and you can pick that lip up off the floor. (*Beat*) Zap that kai in the microwave so it's hot.

MIHI shushes the baby calmly. REHIA brings the tea and puts the plate of food and cutlery down on the coffee table.

SUSAN looks at it and then looks away.

MIHI

Go home, Bubbah. Tell Dad the tide is at 2pm and to bring me a kahawai. Tell him to gut and clean it before you bring it over. You like fish Missus Benson? I make a mean fish curry. (*Beat*) Bubbah, I will be home later. Oh, and tell those boys to keep it down. I can hear them from all the way over here.

REHIA looks like she wants to protest but nods and closes the door behind her. MIHI puts the sleeping baby down comfortably and pats him twice for good measure and moves over to SUSAN.

MIHI

Missus Benson? If it's okay with you I'll stay for a few hours. Just help out a bit. Drink your cup of tea while it's hot.

SUSAN stares off into space.

SUSAN

Why?

MIHI

Why what?

SUSAN

Sobs quietly.

Why are you here?

MIHI

Everybody needs help Missus Benson. There's no shame in needing a little help.

SUSAN

I don't want your help.

MIHI

And I didn't want the help when it was forced on me either. But I needed it and my whanau were there to give it.

SUSAN

You aren't my family.

MIHI

But I'm here to help anyway.

Susan drinks her tea shakily and Mihi starts collecting the washing.

SUSAN

I'm embarrassed.

MIHI

Don’t be. My house and kids have seen worse. Everybody has their off days. When you’re finished eating, lie down and sleep. I’ll stay and watch baby while you rest.

SUSAN nods quietly and cries while drinking her tea. End scene.

Scene 7

REHIA sits on the doorstep of her house, guitar in hand. She occasionally picks up her notebook and jots down her thoughts before picking the guitar up again.

Enter KATIE, earphones in, kicks rocks as she walks. She notices REHIA and stares uncomfortably.

REHIA

What are you looking at?

KATIE takes a step back but continues staring.

REHIA (cont.)

You got an eye problem?

KATIE

Ah, yes. I have an eye problem.

REHIA

What?

KATIE

I have an eye problem. That's why I have to wear glasses when I read.

REHIA

But is that why you're staring at me?

KATIE

No. But you asked if I have an eye problem and I do.

REHIA looks back confused.

REHIA

Man, white kids are weird.

KATIE

I could say the same about you.

REHIA

I'm sure you do.

KATIE

Where did you learn to play the guitar?

REHIA

I just watch and then practise.

KATIE

Do you have lessons?

REHIA

Nobody learns to play guitar from lessons.

KATIE

I play the piano.

REHIA

Let me guess, lessons?

KATIE nods.

REHIA

Are you any good? Or are your lessons a waste of money?

KATIE

I have short fingers. So no, not very good. My tutor says I'll get better.

REHIA looks back at her notepad and writes something. She hums a note and plays a chord.

REHIA

Waste of money.

KATIE

Are you writing a song?

REHIA

What's it to you?

KATIE

I've never written a song.

REHIA

What's the point of learning piano then?

KATIE

So I can play other people's songs.

REHIA

Oh yeah. I do that too. But mostly so I can learn chords to do my own.

KATIE

Are they any good?

REHIA

What's it to you?

KATIE

What's your problem?

REHIA

You think I don't know you sit behind that fence and listen to what my whanau are saying and doing? You think I don't see your fat nose poking out behind the curtain watching my brothers play? And you clearly don't realise that I see you shake your head and I've seen you snob them as you walk home from school. And that's all cool. We don't need to be mates, but don't walk over here and suss me out.

KATIE

But you came to my house.

REHIA

My Mum made me come.

KATIE

You came inside though.

REHIA

That don't mean we're friends.

KATIE looks sad.

KATIE

My Mum is sad. I think.

REHIA

That's not what my Mum said. Mum said she's tired. She just needs rest.

KATIE

She never goes anywhere. Just stays in the house with the baby.

REHIA

Are you deaf? I said she needs rest. Staying at home with the baby is not rest. Maybe instead of watching her you can help.

KATIE

The baby cries when I hold him.

REHIA

Then clean the house, hang the washing out, cook tea.

KATIE

What?

REHIA

Slowly.

Cook tea.

KATIE

I don’t know how.

REHIA

Unbelievable.

KATIE

Mum cries a lot.

REHIA

I know. Sometimes I can hear her.

KATIE

Dad pretends he can’t hear.

REHIA

What do you do?

KATIE

I don’t know what to do.

REHIA

Mum will go over after work and help with baby. She just needs rest. She’ll come right.

KATIE

I didn’t know your Mum works.

REHIA

That’s because you don’t know us.

KATIE

Can I hear your song?

REHIA starts playing a few chords. End scene.

Scene 8

MIHI sits on the back step and inhales a cigarette slowly.

REHIA calls from offstage.

REHIA

Mum! . . .Mum!

MIHI leans back a little and stretches her legs out into the sun.

REHIA calls again from offstage.

REHIA

Mum!

MIHI smiles to herself and flicks her long hair over to one side.
Enter REHIA in a mood.

REHIA

Mum. Hone is wearing my hoodie and he won't take it off.

MIHI

And what would you like me to do that you can't do yourself?

REHIA

It's my hoodie, Mum. I don't want him wearing it.

MIHI

Well girl, go in there and sort it out. I shouldn't have to ref all your disagreements.

REHIA

It's not fair, Mum.

MIHI

Bubbah, there are a lot of unfair things in this world. Letting your brother wear your jersey is the least of them.

REHIA

Well I'm going to tax his rugby shorts when they come off the line.

MIHI

Spite is an ugly quality, my girl. Speaking of washing coming off the line, don't forget to get them off.

REHIA sits in front of her mother and leans back. MIHI runs her fingers through Rehia's hair mindlessly.

REHIA

Mum, why don't we grow flowers in our yard?

MIHI

Because we're using that space to grow kai.

REHIA

Nobody else is growing kumara and kamokamo in their garden.

MIHI

How do you know what people do in their homes?

REHIA

We were made to draw a picture of our homes for school. I drew our maara kai and the kids in my class laughed.

MIHI

Bubbah, we don't grow flowers because you can't eat them. Back home everybody has a maara kai. Everybody grows fruit and spinach and we collect watercress and puha when we can. Don't be ashamed.

REHIA

Other people get their kai from the shop Mum!

MIHI

And even that kai comes from a garden.

REHIA

My teacher can’t even say my name. People call me Ray now. Ray? Like an old man. Ray, Mum! That’s what they call me.

MIHI

Honey, there are worse things they could be calling you, trust me. But secondly, I named you after my grandmother who I loved dearly. Every time I say your name, I think of her. Take the time to correct them and be proud of what your name means to us. Might also help if you stop answering to old man, Ray.

REHIA

Grey clouds are coming, Mum.

MIHI

Better get that washing down then.

REHIA rolls her eyes, kisses her Mum on the cheek and walks off. MIHI wraps her arms around herself and takes a deep breath. End scene.

Scene 9

KATIE sits with her back against the bathroom door, she pulls her knees up against her and knocks against the door softly.

KATIE

Softly.

Mum? Open the door. (*Beat)* Mum, are you okay?

KATIE

Mum? You've been in there for ages. Is there something you need?

Muffled sounds from inside the bathroom.

KATIE

Come on, Mum. I'll make you a cup of tea and some toast if you like.

Sound of front door closing, enter STEVEN in a hurry. He bends down next to Katie and kisses her gently on the forehead.

STEVEN

Whispers.

How long?

KATIE

Shrugs.

An hour? Maybe two?

STEVEN

Honey? You okay in there.

Beat.

STEVEN

Can I come in?

STEVEN

Whispers to KATIE

What happened?

KATIE

I don’t know. She’s upset.

STEVEN

What do you mean ‘upset’?

KATIE

You know how she gets.

STEVEN

And then what happened?

KATIE

What do you mean?

STEVEN

What happened?

KATIE

I don’t know. She just walked around, stared out the window for a while and then locked herself in the bathroom.

STEVEN

Do you think she’s having another episode?

KATIE

How am I supposed to know?

STEVEN

You’re right. You’re right. Wait! Where is the baby?

KATIE

He’s asleep.

STEVEN

Suse? Just say something so we know you’re alright. (*Beat*)

SUSAN

I’m fine. Just leave me alone.

KATIE

I thought you were going to take the lock off the bathroom.

STEVEN

I forgot.

Katie rolls her eyes and takes a deep breath.

KATIE

Well you’ll have to do it now.

STEVEN

Suse, if you don’t unlock the door I’ll take the entire thing off.

SUSAN

Just leave me alone!

STEVEN

Right, I’m going to get my tools.

Exit STEVEN. End scene.

Scene 10

MIHI sits at her kitchen table shakily trying to drink a mug of coffee. There's a picture of Rehia and her brothers on the side of the mug, she smiles tiredly at the photo and takes another sip.

ENTER REHIA.

REHIA

What can I do Mum?

MIHI shakes her head, puts her mug down and reaches for Rehia's hands. She holds them in hers for a moment.

REHIA

Tell me how I can help Mum.

MIHI

Oh Bubbah, you help me so much already.

REHIA

I can do more, Mum.

MIHI

I don't want you to do more, Bubbah.

MIHI puts her hands in her face and leans forward.

REHIA

Whatever you need Mum.

Front door opens and closes.

REHIA

Dad's home.

MIHI

Check up on the boys, Bubbah. Then shower, wash your hair, make sure you dry it properly and go to bed. Don't forget to karakia before you sleep.

REHIA

Always, Mum.

MIHI

Po marie my baby.

REHIA

Po marie Mum.

Exit REHIA after kissing her mother on the cheek tenderly.

Enter MATIU. He rubs his face and looks sadly at Mihi. He takes off his leather jacket. Underneath he's wearing a white pressed collared shirt. He undoes the buttons exposing the top of his chest, more tattoos.

MATIU

Taku tau.

MIHI

My darling.

MIHI begins to sob quietly.

MATIU

E kore e taea te pehea.

MIHI

We haven't even tried. You didn't even try.

MATIU

Me aha au?

MATIU sits opposite Mihi and takes her hand in his. She lets him and she raises her eyes as tears spill out.

MIHI

Tell her no, Matiu. Tell her that we are a family. He whanau tatou. We will not be broken.

MATIU

I've tried. I have honestly tried.

MIHI

You aren't trying hard enough. I would walk through fire for us and you are allowing her to come between us.

MATIU

We knew this could happen.

MIHI

Years ago, maybe. But not now. Why now?

MATIU

I don't know.

MIHI

You let this happen. You are letting it happen. Fight for us Matiu.

MATIU

I am fighting for us.

MIHI

Fight harder.

MATIU

He whanau tatou ahakoa te aha.

MIHI

I don’t want to be a broken family.

MIHI snatches her hands back and flicks her empty mug on to the floor. MATIU picks it up, leans back into his chair. He looks exhausted, he rubs the back of neck and shakes his head. He sits for a long while. Lights fade to darkness. End scene.

<u>Scene 11</u>

SUSAN walks across the sitting room with the baby wrapped in her arms. She is the picture of a doting mother. She wears a pencil skirt and floral blouse, hair in a tight bun with pearl earrings. KRISTEN sits on the couch taking notes and smiling at them occasionally.

KRISTEN

Tell me again what it is that you saw Mrs Benson.

SUSAN

Please call me Susan.

Kristen smiles genuinely.

KRISTEN

Okay, Susan. Tell me what you saw. I just want to make sure that I have it recorded accurately.

SUSAN

It’s not that I’ve seen instances of physical abuse. More that I’ve heard suspicious noises. I suspect there may be domestic violence in the house and the children are most definitely neglected.

KRISTEN

And the noises you heard, what did they sound like?

SUSAN

Loud crashing sounds, shrieks, sometimes I hear yelling. And I saw the man in the backyard digging a grave. I hear the woman crying.

KRISTEN

A grave?! Have you called the police?

SUSAN

Well I couldn’t. There are gang members next door, you know. I have my own family to think of.

KRISTEN

Well yes, this is serious. Tell me about the children.

SUSAN

They’re often out in the street unattended, without shoes. Their father trains the boys military-style in the backyard with sticks. I don’t know what he is training them for, but they look combat ready.

KRISTEN

Combat ready, you say?

SUSAN

Yes, they could be part of that terrorist group from up North.

KRISTEN

That’s quite a leap but I’ll note it.

SUSAN

Of course you’d say that. You know, being Muslim and all.

KRISTEN smiles politely and patiently puts down her pen.

KRISTEN

Mrs Benson I can assure you that your concerns are being recorded. My faith will not influence your account.

SUSAN

My name is Susan.

KRISTEN

Susan.

SUSAN

Well as I was saying, the mother seems like a nice enough woman.

SUSAN rocks baby and kisses him gently.

SUSAN (cont.)

She may be the true victim in all of this. I just want to help her if I can. You know?

KRISTEN

Absolutely. If there is cause for concern you have done the right thing and we can get her and her children help if she needs it.

SUSAN

I see people coming and going from their home day and night. Some of them wear leather bike jackets.

KRISTEN

Is that why you suspect gang activity?

SUSAN

And the aggressive shouting. I've never seen any drugs, but I believe that they're selling narcotics. Why else would they have so many people coming in and out of their home every day?

KRISTEN

That is an issue for the police. Our main role is to assess the safety of the children in the home, but I will relay your concerns to the Community Constable.

SUSAN

Will they know it was me who made the call?

KRISTEN

No, Mrs Benson. This is completely confidential.

SUSAN nods and offers Kristen a biscuit from her best china. KRISTEN politely declines and takes notes. End scene.

Scene 12

MIHI sits outside on the step shakily having a cigarette holding her coffee mug. She hugs herself and looks sad. Enter MATIU. He looks tired. He wears old league shorts and a drop singlet exposing his extensive tattoos.

MATIU

E aha ana koe, e te tau?

MIHI

Just getting some air.

MATIU

Hoki mai ki ro whare, he makariri a waho.

(*He leans down to rub heat into her arms*)

MIHI

I'm not cold.

MATIU sits next to her and puts his arm around her. She resists at first but he is gently persistent and she leans against him.

MATIU

Me aha au kia hiki ai te pouri?

MIHI

Tell your sister we want to keep our son.

MATIU

E kore e taea tena. Me whakahoki tana tama.

MIHI

Well then nothing.

MATIU kisses the top of her head and holds her close.

MATIU

Do you remember the night we got him?

MIHI

How could I forget?

MATIU

Four weeks old, tiny and wrinkly and pink, like a mole rat. Remember?

MIHI

Don’t call my son a mole rat!

MATIU

Ki oku mahara, you were the one that said that!

MIHI

Ssh! He will hear you!

MATIU

Well, didn’t take long for him to grow into his looks.

MIHI

The earliest of our kids to sleep through the night.

MATIU

Ae! Na to patipati i a ia. Easy to sleep all night when you’re sleeping in the king bed right next to your mother.

MIHI

That didn’t last long though aye?

MATIU

Long enough to put an indent of my body in the couch. (*Beat)* I suppose that's what happens for the last of the babies. The big two were out before they turned three. And honey, I am told three is long.

MIHI

Na wai i ki?

MATIU

Oh some fallas at work reckon their babies sleep in their own rooms from 6 months onwards.

MIHI

(*Look of horror*)

Pepi tonu?

MATIU

Sleep training they called it.

MIHI

Not for mine.

MATIU

I should be home early tonight. I'll cook us a big kai. Ka aha koe?

MIHI

Help my son pack and cuddle him for as long as he will let me.

MATIU

Pehea te paraoa parai?

MIHI

Auff, yes. I'll make the fry bread.

MATIU

An angel you are my darling.

MIHI

Tiro kia koe, patipati ma ki ahau.

MATIU

Happy wife, happy life my dear.

MATIU gets up, kisses her affectionately on the head. Disappears inside and returns outside with a blanket. MIHI holds his hand against her shoulder for a moment and lets it go with a sigh.
Exit MATIU. End scene.

Scene 13

Upbeat music is playing in the Benson house. SUSAN is in a loose linen dress, her hair rolls down her back and shakes as she dances in front of the stove while cooking. She uses the wooden spoon as a microphone and throws back a cheeky smile and a wink at STEVEN who is watching her lovingly and rocking baby in his arms.

He approaches her and kisses her gently on the mouth. They smile at each other. She offers him a taste of what she's cooking from her wooden spoon and wipes the side of his mouth with her thumb.

Enter KATIE.

KATIE

Ew, whats going on in here?

SUSAN

Cooking dinner.

KATIE looking back and forward at her parents confused.

KATIE

Well anyway, can you smell that?

SUSAN

It's paprika.

KATIE

Not the paprika Mum. I can smell something burning.

SUSAN

I doubt it. I've been watching it simmer and stirring.

STEVEN

(*Sniffing)*

Actually, yes. I can smell that.

(beat)

STEVEN (cont.)

Katie take baby.

STEVEN starts looking around and exits.

SUSAN

What's going on?

STEVEN (*From off stage*)

Ring the fire brigade!

SUSAN turns off the stove and picks up her phone. Enter STEVEN.

STEVEN

Katie get the pram and go across the road with baby.

Exit KATIE.

SUSAN

Where's the fire Steve? They want to know.

STEVEN

It's next door.

STEVEN runs out the door.

SUSAN

Where are you going?

STEVEN (*Off stage*)

To help! Go across the road!

SUSAN

Yes, 72 Kauwri Road. Ah K.A.U.R.I Road. Yes, that's what I said. I don't know what started the fire, probably from all the cigarettes they smoke. My husband has gone to help. A lady, her partner, a teenager and two or three little boys I think. I can't be sure. They always have people there. Oh my god! I can see the flames! Will you be long? Okay I need to go. Yes, yes, I need to go!

Exit SUSAN. End scene.

Scene 14

MIHI and REHIA are standing out the front of their house in tears. SUSAN approaches with two glasses of water and hands them over. Faint noise of sirens and water hose in the background.

STEVEN joins them, he is ashy and dirty.

MIHI

Tearfully.

Thank you for trying to help.

STEVEN

Of course! (*Beat)* Where are your boys?

MIHI

They're in the ambulance being checked over.

SUSAN

You didn't want to go with them?

REHIA

Our aunty is the paramedic!

MIHI puts a steady hand on her daughter.

MIHI

I felt like I needed to be here for my husband.

SUSAN

Oh of course. (*She looks confused)*

MIHI lights a cigarette and steps away from everybody.

REHIA

I'm going to check the boys.

MIHI nods, exit REHIA.

SUSAN

(*Gestures to Mihi)*

Is that what caused the fire?

MIHI

Excuse me?

SUSAN

The cigarette?

MIHI

Not that it is any of your business and not at all that I care what you think, but no. Grease fire.

SUSAN

No need to be rude.

MIHI

You've been nothing but rude to us since we got here.

STEVEN

Come on Suse.

(*He tries to lead her away*)

SUSAN

I have tried to be neighbourly. But surely you can understand it's frightening to have gang members in our street.

MIHI

What gang members? We don't know any gang members?

Enter FIREFIGHTER. With a full suit and covered helmet.

FIREFIGHTER

It's all out. We confined most of the fire to the kitchen.

STEVEN

What started it?

FIREFIGHTER

(*Lifts helmet to reveal it's MATIU. He holds his hand out to STEVE*)

I don't believe we've met. I'm Matiu.

MIHI

Mea mai enei tokorua he mema kenge koe?

MATIU

Gang? Me? (*He turns to his wife*) Auare ake. People will think what they like.

(MATIU s*hakes Steve's hand again*)

Thank you for helping with the fire.

SUSAN

I am so sorry. I just assumed. (*she becomes tongue tied)* If you and your family need a place to stay for a while, our doors are open to you. . . If you want.

MIHI

Thank you, we're sorted.

MATIU

Me haere taua. Kei te kohi taku tungane i ta maua tama.

MIHI

Right now? She's coming right now?

MATIU

There won't ever be a good time.

SUSAN

Who is coming? Is there anything I can do?

MIHI

Our son is being taken to live in Palmerston North.

SUSAN

Oh my goodness! It's all my fault!

MIHI looks confused and looks at Matiu. He shrugs and they walk away hand in hand. SUSAN moves over to Steve.
Enter KATIE with Baby in the pram. They watch the chaos for a moment.

SUSAN

What a terrible thing to happen to good people.

Curtain.