

# WHALE AS COSMOS: MULTI-SPECIES ETHNOGRAPHY AND CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS COSMOPOLITICS

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## ABSTRACT

Both Niki Caro's 2002 film *Whale Rider* and Linda Hogan's 2008 novel *People of the Whale* feature children who possess characteristics that associate them with ancient transformational animals and—at the same time—prove them to be modern leaders capable of challenging clichés surrounding the “Ecological Indian.” Both film and novel also feature traditionally-carved canoes linked to the whales considered by the many whaling peoples to be ancestors. This essay explores how events staged around these canoes offer insight into the activities of indigenous, ethnic minority, and civil society groups who are organizing a movement that has recently been described as “indigenous cosmopolitics.” While exploring the relevance of this movement for ecocriticism, the essay also examines how transformational characters might be reread for the ways they suggest new modes of research being referred to as “multi-species ethnography” by scholars who study humans within the “cosmos” of their entanglements with other kinds of living beings.

KEY WORDS: Ethnography, ecocriticism, cosmopolitics, indigenous writing, Niki Caro, Linda Hogan.

## RESUMEN

Tanto la película de 2002, *Whale Rider*, de Niki Caro, como la novela *People of the Whale* de Linda Hogan, publicada en 2008, se caracterizan porque en ellas aparecen niños que poseen características que los relacionan con animales antiguos que se transforman, lo que hace que al mismo tiempo éstos demuestren tener modernas dotes de liderazgo, siendo capaces de pasar por alto los clisés que rodean al “indio ecologista”. Tanto en la novela como en la película aparecen también canoas grabadas de forma tradicional, las cuales se asocian con las ballenas, animales que están considerados como “ancestros” para una buena cantidad de pueblos balleneros. Este ensayo explora la manera en que los eventos que están relacionados con tales canoas ofrecen una perspicaz descripción de las actividades de las minorías étnicas indígenas, así como de los grupos de la sociedad civil que están organizándose en el movimiento que se ha denominado recientemente como el “cosmopolitismo indígena.” Al mismo tiempo que se explora la relevancia que este movimiento tiene dentro de la ecocrítica, se examina también cómo estos personajes que se transforman podrían releerse como sujetos que sugieren nuevos modelos de búsqueda dentro de la “etnografía de múltiples especies,” lo que es muy interesante para los estudiosos de especímenes humanos integrados en un “cosmos” de interrelaciones con otras clases de seres vivos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: etnografía, ecocrítica, cosmopolitismo, literatura indígena, Niki Caro, Linda Hogan.



He would watch [the whale], its great shining side,  
the eye with its old intelligence, the gentleness  
of it in the body covered with barnacle life  
and sea creatures. It was loved by his people.

It was a planet.

Linda Hogan (267)

Both Niki Caro's 2002 film, *Whale Rider*, and Linda Hogan's 2008 novel, *People of the Whale*, feature children chosen by their whaling communities to carry the traditions of their peoples into the future. Both children are linked to canoes associated with the whales considered by many indigenous whaling peoples to be not only companion species but ancestors. In a pivotal scene in Caro's film, twelve year-old Paikea Apirana recites the same family genealogy that is carved into the hull of an unfinished canoe that sits behind her house. "I come from a long line of chiefs stretching all the way back to the original whale rider, also named 'Paikea,'" she declares. According to Maori oral tradition, Paikea rode on the back of a whale from Hawaki (Hawai'i) to Aotearoa (New Zealand) (Cawthorn 1-2). There, he established the Ngati Porou, a sub-group of the Maori who still live in Whangara, a small village on the northeast side of New Zealand's North Island. This is the village where Caro sets the film.

In an authoritative reading of Whiti Itimaera acclaimed 1987 *The Whale Rider*, the novel Caro adapts for her screenplay, Chadwick Allen writes that for the Maori, "whakapapa," or genealogy, is the preeminent form of Maori scholarship and covers the descent of all living things from the gods to the present time (Allen 131). The "relationships encoded in whakapapa serve as a primary terminology—a system of names and a set of coordinates—for the analysis of one's rightful place in the universe" (Allen 131). In each Maori sub-group, "certain members will be selected when they are children to be trained as experts in the genealogy" of the tribe, the cosmos, the gods, the primal genealogies of humankind, and the waka (canoes) that carried the ancestors to Aotearoa (Allen 131). Thus, standing on the stage of her village meeting house, "Pai's" recitation of her whakapapa shows her to be the expert who will carry Ngati Porou knowledge of Maori "spiritual relationships with the earth and cosmo" into the future (Allen 209).

In *People of the Whale*, Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan also puts a child expert at the center of her story of a North American coastal whaling people she calls the "A'atsika." Hogan's novel fictionalizes the controversy set off when the Makah of Washington State hunted and killed a gray whale in 1999. A small tribe of only 2000 people, the Makah were thrust into the harsh glare of the global spotlight when they approached the International Whaling Commission (IWC) for permission to resume hunting whales. During the media frenzy surrounding the hunt, arguments both pro and con pitted members of the Makah tribe, and other coastal whaling peoples around the world, dualistically against environmentalists and reporters who accused them of being "Ecological Indians." This term, coined in anthropologist Shepherd Krech's *The Ecological Indian* in 1999, has come to be associated with the notion



that neither contemporary indigenous groups and nations nor their ancestors were as ecologically sensitive as stereotypes about “people close to nature” have implied.

Major 21st-century field studies of ecocriticism problematize the notion that pre-modern cultures lived in perpetual harmony with nature (Garrard 120-1, 133; Buell 23). To question this notion, both Garrard and Buell reference Krech's work which was groundbreaking and controversial for examining evidence that not all North American Indian tribes hunted animals such as the buffalo “sustainably,” as that term has come to be used in modern contexts. Krech concludes that the dominant image of the Indian in nature is based on assumptions that take for granted that each indigenous person “understands the systemic consequences of his actions, feels deep sympathy with all living forms, and takes steps to conserve so that the earth's harmonies are never imbalanced and resources never in doubt” (Krech 21). He then analyzes evidence that both supports and confronts the image of the “Ecological Indian” thriving in “public culture” today (213). Krech's conclusions about the mixed and contradictory anthropological record has been used by some scholars to imply that species extinctions have not entirely been the fault of Europeans and therefore indigenous peoples should not be held up as models of ecological awareness. However, Krech himself concludes that while not all indigenous groups could be said to be “conservationist,” many “clearly possessed vast knowledge of their environment” and “understood relationships among living things in the environment” (Krech 103, 212).

Greg Garrard's use of Krech's research is notable for picking up on the finer points of the argument. In *Ecocriticism*, he argues that the relationship between Europeans and Americans was based “on destruction and consumption of forests and wildlife so astonishingly voracious that, in places, it amounted to an ‘ecocidal’ campaign to exhaust and refashion whole habitats” (123). Garrard emphasizes Krech's most salient point which is that indigenous resistance movements (from the occupation of Alcatraz Island in the 1970s forward) employ tropes of ecological indigeneity as they organize to resist land appropriation and ecological degradation (Krech 20). This argument is essential for ecocritics to understand, Garrard concludes, since contemporary indigenous writers continue to employ images of the Ecological Indian in strategic ways that provide “some Indians with a source of pride and aspiration for themselves and their societies” (125).

Hogan's novel challenges simplistic arguments about the Ecological Indian by setting her story in a modern context and placing a young indigenous man, Marco, in the lead canoe paddling out to the ocean in search of a whale. The grandson of the A'atsika people's most famous whaler, Marco is born with webbed feet and able to dive in the ocean for long periods of time, suggesting that he is the “incarnation of an ancestor” (Hogan 38). In the context of the oral traditions of many North American indigenous cultures, Hogan's description of Marco implies that he is a transformational being about to take the shape of human or whale. As I explain in an earlier article, transformational characters depicted in indigenous oral traditions, whether human or animal in form or name, are considered to be supernatural but *not* impersonal, universal beings. Instead, they are thought of as supernatural personal beings who are able to transform themselves into other forms for the purpose of



interacting with humans (Adamson, “Why” 41, n. 11). Recognizing Marco as one of these special beings, A’atsika elders teach him traditional whaling practices and place emphasis on how to paddle a traditional cedar canoe. Hogan also writes that before the whale hunt, few A’atsika men know how to paddle a canoe, so it falls to Marco to teach them proper techniques (87).

In Caro’s film, Paikea, or “Pai,” is also linked to a traditional fishing and whaling vessel, or “waka” that sits, unfinished, behind her house.<sup>1</sup> The novel on which the film is based, Witi Ihimaera’s *The Whale Rider*, does not focus on a waka. However, when Ihimaera, who acted as Executive Producer for the film, came together with Caro to collaborate on *Whale Rider*, the canoe became central (See *Te Waka* and *Behind the Scenes*. The choice to feature a waka so prominently can be explained, as I will discuss at more length below, by the fact that “paddling” or the rowing of traditional canoes, is an activity increasingly associated with a loosely networked global indigenous rights movement that is seeking legal and political protections not only for humans but for ecosystems and the interrelated species upon which they depend for survival.

Focus on the waka also allows Caro to transform Ihimaera’s novel into a 100 minute film that concisely conveys a concept, linked to Maori activism, that Chadwick Allen describes as “building the ancestor.” Contemporary Maori, explains Allen, continue to carve elaborate meeting houses in their villages which are considered the “body of the ancestor” (134). This is the reason why the meeting house where Pai gives her genealogical recitation has a wooden carving of the first Paikea sitting over its entrance. Inside these elaborately carved meeting houses, figures of the gods of the Maori cosmos can be read as if they were an ethnography of the Maori cosmos (Allen 125, 134). The “events” that take place in Maori meeting houses—school plays, traveling art exhibits, or protest marches—are often dramatically “staged” in ways that allow Maori groups to draw connections between local land claims and struggles for environmental justice and “a burgeoning international indigenous rights movement” (Allen 7). This movement, as I argue in *American Indian Literature*, began centuries ago, with the first indigenous uprising and slave revolts (Adamson 29, 47). More recently, this movement has created what Allen describes as the collective notion of “indigenous people” without privileging any particular indigenous group. The documents and international meetings emerging out of the movement, Allen observes, might be described as “autoethnographic,” meaning that they often “negotiate a single narrative out of the worldviews, memories, and aspirations of disparate indigenous cultures while also constructing a dialogue between indigenous and nonindigenous understanding of indigenous experience” (Allen 209). These forms and forums participate in “a number of distinct meaning systems simultaneously—those of North American First Nations and American Indians, the Maori, the Sami, the Aboriginal peoples, and Western culture” (Allen 208).

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<sup>1</sup> For more on how a waka is built for the film, see *Te Waka: Building the Canoe*, a special feature documentary included with the *Whale Rider*. DVD.

As I will argue below, the collaborative construction of a waka by Maori wood carvers and Hollywood production crew members, and the launching of the finished canoe at the end of the Caro's film, can be seen as an "event" that offers insight into the "autoethnographic" activities of indigenous and ethnic minority groups organizing a movement that is lately being described as "indigenous cosmopolitics."<sup>2</sup> Hogan also associates her novel with this movement by featuring indigenous Northwest American "paddlers and "paddling Nations" that represent the ways in which whaling cultures are revisioning their relationship to the whale and to the planet (Hogan 303, 267). This essay will examine how notions of "cosmos" are represented in Caro's film and Hogan's novel by transformational characters and explore the relevance for ecocriticism of a cosmopolitical movement that is being articulated in "autoethnographic" legal instruments and documents such as the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the 2010 Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth (UDRME). UDRME, for example, claims for indigenous peoples "a cosmic spirituality linked to nature thousands of years in the making" (See Preamble). This will allow me to explore how Caro and Hogan defy simplistic conclusions about the trope of "the Ecological Indian" and offer, instead, interesting characters and scenarios that can be used to illustrate a new mode of research being referred to as "multi-species ethnography."

#### FROM ANIMALS THAT ARE "GOOD TO THINK" TO SPECIES THAT ARE "GOOD TO LIVE WITH"

In a recent essay, Jonathan Steinwand examines what he terms the "cetacean turn" in environmentalist iconography as it is exemplified by indigenous-authored novels about human relationships to whales (182). Reading Ihimaera's novel, *The Whale Rider*, and Hogan's novel, *People of the Whale*, Steinwand observes that both whales and indigenous peoples are depicted as compelling figures because of their "liminality and ambiguity." While whales constantly negotiate the boundaries between the worlds of air and water, modern indigenous and marginalized ethnic groups of people are "liminal figures negotiating the boundaries of the dominant 'civilization' and wild nature, of traditional premodern and postmodern late capitalist lifestyles" (184). Steinwand's argument builds on Lawrence Buell's analysis in *Writing for an Endangered World* of the relationship between whales and indigenous peoples in contemporary environmentalist iconography. From the publication of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* in 1850 to the present, creative writers have been expanding modern imagination around whales as charismatic megafauna while environmentalists hope concern for these animals will move people to care not only for whales,

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<sup>2</sup> I focus on Caro's film rather than Ihimaera's novel because of its focus on the waka and its association with Maori activist events that represent the "building of the ancestor."



but for ecosystems and other species threatened by pollution, overfishing, and a warming ocean (Buell 201-2).

But more intriguing for the purposes of this essay, *Moby Dick* points towards a mode of research that Buell terms “comparative ethnology.” As illustration, Buell analyzes Ishmael as a literate “outsider” traveling on the Pequod, the notorious industrial whaling ship pursuing the famous White Whale. Ishmael fashions a mental space in which whaling reduces the humanity of people and “whale-beholding” ennobles whales and impels humans to imagine “people and whales as semi-interchangeable” (Buell 212). The “species boundary is perpetually being blurred, and the reader pulled back and forth across it” with dozens of playful personifications, including whales with brows, whales who carry on like “colleagians,” whales who care for their young and for each other, etc. (Buell 207-08). Ishmael, then, is “a lens through which humans and sea creatures become coordinated into an informal comparative ethnology” (Buell 212).

“Comparative ethnology” might also be an apt phrase for describing the work that transformational characters perform in Caro’s film and Hogan’s novel. As anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss articulated it, the oral traditions of various indigenous cultures include animals capable of transforming into other shapes not because they are “good to eat” or “good to prohibit” but because they are “good to think” (Adamson, “Why” 35-36). When included in contemporary indigenous literature, stories about transformation animals—bears, snakes, and frogs—with their quasi-human qualities (their intelligence, their ability shed a skin or walk upright, or to move easily through air and water) teach lessons about the relationship between humans and animals because they reveal the animality of humans and the humanity of animals. As I argue in *American Indian Literature*, novels by Native North American writers as diverse as N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich and Leslie Marmon Silko illustrate that characters with transformational qualities are often employed to address social and environmental injustices by suggesting that “boundaries are permeable” (106). Thus, these novels encourage readers to think about how they might alter “the power relations at the root of social and ecological problems” (Adamson 112).

Early ecocritical work, then, including Buell’s analysis of Ishmael’s “comparative ethnology” and my analysis of transformational characters in indigenous literatures, points to an emerging field whose sensibilities have been gathered by Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, Marisol De la Cadena, and other scholars who study a host of organisms that are not just “good to think” but “good to live with” (Haraway’s formulation). Called “multi-species ethnography,” theorists and practitioners in this field, write S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, have moved well beyond anthropological studies that account for animals and other-than-human species only within the confines of “food,” “taboo,” or “symbol.” They consider humans within a context of their entanglements with other kinds of living selves (Kirksey and Helmreich 546). In her “ethnographically inspired” study of Latin American “indigenous cosmopolitics,” anthropologist Marisol De la Cadena examines the interactions between humans and “earth-beings,” defined as sacred mountains known to demand respect from humans and “other-than-humans” including animals, plants and “lesser beings” recognized as lakes, forests or smaller mountains. De la



Cadena draws from Isabelle Stengers' work to explicate how earth-beings are taking the stage in a political arena coming to be known as "indigenous cosmopolitics."

Stengers extracts from the word "cosmopolitan" its two constituents: cosmos and politics. "Cosmos" refers to the unknown constituted by multiple, divergent worlds and "politics" to the articulation of which "they would eventually be capable" (Stengers 995). In the Andean ethnographic record, "earth beings" with "individual physiognomies more or less known by individuals involved in interactions with them" are enlisted when their material existence and that of the worlds to which they belong is threatened by the siting of a mine, clear-cutting, pollution, erosion, over-fishing, over-hunting, etc. (De la Cadena 341-42). While these beings might be categorized as "things" or "natural resources" within Western politics or science, indigenous activists confront the monopoly of discourses that provincialize "the universe" as a world inhabited by humans who are distanced from "Nature" (De la Cadena 345). For indigenous peoples, "earth-beings" have never been separated from "nature" and have always interacted with humans. Their increasing presence on regional, national and international political and public stages, writes De la Cadena, is extraordinary only because of its recent "public visibility" (348).

Caro's film provides a wonderful illustration of how a geological formation might be recognized as an "earth-being" that could be represented ethnographically through a story or film "staged" to remind humans that "other" species are not just good to think but are entities and agents that are good "to live with" (as Haraway maintains). According to Maori legend, when Paikea arrived on the East Coast of New Zealand one thousand years ago, he had been instructed by his elders never to let the whale on which he rode touch land. But when he arrived in Aotearoa, he was too tired to swim to land, so he coaxed the whale to shore, where it died. In Ihimaera's first iteration of Paikea's story, when the whale touches the sand, it becomes "an island. You can still see it, near Whangara" (qtd. in Allen 134). In Caro's film, this rock formation, seen just off shore from Whangara, provides a visual reminder of the Maori's connection to and responsibility for the whale. The formation becomes, literally, a mnemonic for the entanglement of humans with whales and thus a kind of shorthanded "comparative ethnography."

Caro observes that she welcomed the opportunity to "work collaboratively" with Executive Producer Ihimaera and "collectively" with the villagers of Whangara who played every role in the film except those of the lead actors to portray this complex entanglement (*Behind the Scenes*). Every time the island is featured in the background of a scene, the intimate, thousand year-old relation of the Maori to the whale is reiterated. The Nagati Porou have no pre-European history of maritime whaling since their canoes were more suited to fishing than whaling. However, both before and after the arrival of Europeans, they relied on incidental captures and strandings which were considered a gift from the sea, to be used for meat, fat, oil and bone. Strandings, mnemonically represented by the island, were and still are an "occasion for awe, for sorrow (at the death of a distant relative), and ultimately a cause for elation at the bounty provided" (Cawthorne 3). The mass stranding of whales that occurs in the film, and the sorrow expressed by the villagers who play themselves is powerfully portrayed because they are not simply acting; they are



“there to protect the story” (*Behind the Scenes*). The island itself is also “protecting the story” because it suggests that “living with” a particular species can take many forms, from companion species to food to ancestor, and is a responsibility to be taken seriously. In this way, the film becomes an “activist event,” as Allen defines that term, that draws attention to a the political and artistic ways that the Maori are drawing connections between local issues issues and an international movement working not only for human rights but for the protection of “Mother Earth” as an entire “cosmos” of relations (UDRME, Preamble).

## THE ECOLOGICAL INDIAN AND THE EMERGENCE OF INDIGENOUS COSMOPOLITICS

Recently, Annette Kolodny has shown that indigenous peoples were actively constructing images of the “Ecological Indian” for their own ends much earlier than the 1970s date that Krech avers as the historical moment in which American Indians embraced and strategically began marshalling images of themselves in support of the environmental movement (Krech 20). Kolodny analyzes Penobscot writer Joseph Nicolar’s 1897 text, *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man* to show that the Penobscots of Maine in North America understood “the political usefulness of publicly declaring themselves protectors, conservators, even kin to the worlds they hoped to save as early as the late 1700s” (Kolodny, “Rethinking” 18). For the Penobscots, the world was everywhere alive with the spiritual powers if “kin-beings” (often depicted as transformational characters). These beings taught that the “plants and animals were their helpers and companions, just as the people, in their turn, were to act as kin and companions to the living world around them” (Kolodny “Rethinking” 12). Nicolar’s ethnography is not an expression of desire for a premodern past, but a manifesto declaring the Penobscot to be in active resistance to the illegal appropriations of their land and the decimation of the beings who live there. In 1823, they presented the first of many petitions to the governor of Maine documenting that “in years past the beasts of the forest, Moose and Deer, were very plenty..., [but] in consequence of the white people killing them off merely for the sake of their skins, they have now become nearly extinct” (Kolodny “Rethinking” 5). After Nicolar died, his book became the basis of a successful 1972 land claims lawsuit brought by the Penobscot’s against the US government which resulted in the recovery of 300,000 acres of land for the tribe. Also, from the 1940s to the 1960s, the Penobscots staged Nicolar’s book as a pageant for tourists visiting Maine (Kolodny, “Saving” 95, 96).

The Penobscot were not the only indigenous group to begin staging activist events focused on transformational animals, ancestral migrations, or relationship to “earth-beings” before the 1970s. From the 1950s to the 1970s, many North American tribal groups waged successful land claims suits which resulted in returned territories (Adamson, *American Indian Literature*, 175-176). These lawsuits were energized by the even earlier efforts of other indigenous groups around the world to organize nationally and internationally. In 1923, Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Chief Deskaheh



travelled to Geneva to speak to the League of Nations about incidences of genocide and injustice in North America. In 1925, Maori religious leader T.W. Ratana similarly sought to protest the breaking of the Treaty of Waitangi in New Zealand, which had given the Maori ownership of their lands in 1840. Both of these leaders were turned away by the League of Nations, but indigenous groups did not cease their attempts to petition what would later become the United Nations (“About UNPFII”). Their activities led, by 1982, to the organization of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP), and in May 2002, to the first meeting of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (“About UNPFII”). This organization worked concertedly toward the adoption in 2007 by the United Nations of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). This international legal instrument has drawn attention to the decades-long transnational activities of coalitions of indigenous and non-indigenous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups that have been campaigning for global recognition of indigenous cultural, legal, and environmental rights (“About UNPFII”). In 2010, drawing their authority from UNDRIP, indigenous peoples from around the globe gathered for the World People’s Conference on the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba, Bolivia. In the Declaration that emerged from this gathering, “Mother Earth” is recognized as an “earth-being” that is not female-gendered but, rather, the “Source of Life” (De la Cadena 335, 350). As defined by UDRME, “Source of Life” or “Mother Earth” is understood as “ecosystems, natural communities, species and all other natural entities” (UDRME, Art. 4.1).

In the nearly two centuries leading up to the UNDRIP and UDRME, many “autoethnographic” documents, summits and conferences have emerged out of the indigenous rights movement. These forms and forums, though highly syncretic, are being recognized not only by indigenous peoples themselves but by a “concert of nations” whose attention indigenous and ethnic minority groups have sought to “direct and whose judgment they [endeavor] to persuade” (Allen 197). However, establishing an “authentic indigenous identity” has not been the goal of this activism. Rather, since the 1980s, regional, national and international coalitions of indigenous peoples have consistently rejected clichéd stereotypes of “ethnic purity” or “proximity to nature” as they organize to oppose economic development models that are causing large-scale environmental degradation and displacement among the indigenous and the poor (Adamson, *American* 31-50, 128-179). Indigenous politicians and their allies have recognized that a politics based only on ethnic identity will ultimately fail, since the trade liberalization schemes linked to extractive industries, large-scale development projects and corporate capitalism and agribusiness can be a problem not just for indigenous peoples but for ethnic minorities, the poor, and for the non-indigenous. Thus, indigenous cosmopolitical organizers have moved away from debates about “identity” and towards renewed attention to achieving civil, human, and environmental rights through alliance-making and capacity-building among diverse indigenous and non-indigenous groups who are working together to achieve adoption of international legal instruments or passage of national or regional legislation protecting civil and human rights and the rights of “Mother Earth.”



## REBUILDING THE ANCESTOR AS ACTIVIST EVENT

Ihimaera recalls that he wrote his first story about the whale rider for his own twelve year old daughter to encourage the idea that new generations of Maori people do indeed possess the ability to interpret or reinterpret Maori tradition in contemporary times (*Behind the Scenes*). While living in New York, he looked out his high-rise window and saw, to his amazement, a whale swimming up the Hudson River. This inspired him to write the story of Paikea, but with a twist that is dramatically portrayed in Caro's film. After the death of his wife and baby son, main character Porourangi goes against tradition and names his surviving twin daughter, "Paikea," after the boy whale rider who links the Ngati Porou to the whales that taught them to navigate the Pacific and became the inspiration for the canoes that allowed them to engage in coastal fishing and an occasional whale hunt (Cawthorn 2). Porourangi is hurt by his father's insistence that he marry immediately after his wife's death so that he can produce a male heir. He decides to move to Germany where he can grieve in peace and exhibit his celebrated wood carvings in European art galleries. He leaves Paikea in Whangara to be raised by her grandmother, Nanny Flowers, and her grandfather, Koro Apirana.

Koro believes that tradition dictates that the leader of the Ngate Porou must be a male. He is alarmed that so many young men in the village are engaged in drug and gang activity. He hopes to stem these trends by gathering them in the meeting house and teaching them more about their traditions as he tries to identify who among them should be the next leader. He excludes Pai from his school because she is a girl. However, she takes her future into her own hands by enlisting the aid of her uncle, who secretly teaches her to fight like a warrior, just as Koro is teaching these lessons to the young men. When her grandfather finds out about this breach in tradition, he is enraged. He loses himself in despair when none of the boys prove worthy of the title "koro," or leader. Later, when a pod of whales strand themselves on the beach, Koro believes it is because the people/ancestors/whales have no leader. He admonishes Pai against touching the distressed and dying creatures. But when Koro walks away, Pai lovingly strokes the largest whale's barnacled body and climbs onto its back. Coaxing it to lift itself, she leads the surviving members of the pod back to the ocean and remains on the whale's back as it dives beneath the ocean.

By filming Pai descending under the water, Caro and Executive Producer Ihimaera accomplish two things. Because Pai is a girl, they open stereotypical notions of the "Ecological Indian" and indigenous "tradition" to question. From what time period must legitimate tradition come? Can leadership traditions that no longer make sense in modern contexts change, be adapted or even improved? By showing Pai descending under the water, Caro and Ihimaera also imply that Pai may be a transformational being who illustrates that "boundaries are permeable" and power relations at the root of social and ecological problems can be altered (Adamson *American Indian Literature* 106, 112). This scene also blurs the boundaries between human and animal and engage in a kind of multi-species ethnography, to use the language of Kirksey and Helmreich, that does not seek to "give voice, agency or subjectivity to the nonhuman—to recognize them as other, visible in their differ-



ence” but to advocate a radical rethinking of categories of analysis “as they pertain to all beings” (Kirksey and Helmreich 562-563). Caro and Ihimaera are calling upon the audience not only to rethink indigenous traditions but Linnaean classifications of genus, family, order, class, phylum, kingdom, and domain as these supposedly “natural” categories delineate the differences between male and female and human and “other-than-human.” Pai’s possible transformational qualities question the a hidden ontology which makes “the human” the central reference in any study of “multiple species” and calls upon the audience to rethink all categories in the cosmos including the “natural” ones.

When Pai survives and returns, Koro realizes she is a leader for new times. The film ends as he joins her for a celebratory voyage in Porounga’s beautifully finished and feathered waka which “builds the ancestor” as it literally represents a multi-species ethnography. The voyage is an “activist event” that illustrates a powerful “grandparent-grandchild bond” that has become emblematic in Maori cultural productions of a Maori political renaissance in Aotearoa. As Allen explains, representations of this bond have been “mobilized as a symbol of unity and political power” that has worked to restore Maori pride in their artistry and cultural heritage and assert their legal and political claims to illegally appropriated Maori lands and natural resources (128-130). This bond is strongly represented as Porourangi and a full complement of traditionally-dressed Maori paddlers launch the waka with Paikea and her grandfather sitting in the position where the original whale rider would have sat on the back of a whale. The waka itself is built by a team of traditional Maori wood carvers and Hollywood production crew members (*Te Waka*). Together, they articulate the multi-species genealogy of the Maori cosmos on the hull. Father Sky and Mother Earth are carved on either side and a carving of Paikea sits on the bow. The vessel itself represents the body of the whale. The generations of men and women, in all their modern diversity, are carved along the length of both sides of the canoe. As the waka cuts through the water, humans and figures of Maori gods and ancestor are literally and symbolically interacting with multiple species living in the ocean.

On the beach, a group of multiracial, international people, including Porourangi’s pregnant German wife, can be seen cheering and chanting. This group could be seen to represent over 200 years of activism and collaboration among multiracial groups working for regional, national and international civil, legal and policy protections not only for threatened groups of people, but for multiple species functioning together in a complex cosmos of relations. Porourangi’s children, one unborn and one in the waka, “rebuild the ancestor” as they reclaim a community’s “significant past” as well as “its significant present and possible future” (Allen 147). The waka, in the context of this last scene, reinterprets and resignifies indigenous genealogies and traditions in the context of complex contemporary realities among indigenous, ethnic minority, civil society groups and artistic/cultural producers who are working in coalition to claim the “cosmos” as a dynamic space that includes humans and the whole community of beings that exists in the world. Porourangi’s German wife illustrate how people from around the world, not just indigenous people, are coming together to imagine a politics built not on clichéd notions of the Ecological Indian



but upon regional, national and international laws and policies seeking the “recovery, revalidation, and strengthening of indigenous cosmovisions” (UDRME, Preamble).

## TRANSFORMATIONAL ANIMALS AND SENTIENT EARTH-BEINGS

Multi-species ethnography calls upon humans to radically rethink categories of analysis as they pertain to life at multiple scales. Linda Hogan, a passionate whale activist who was invited by seven Makah women elders to join them in a collaboration that would “revision” Makah relationship to the whale, wrote *People of the Whale*, as a part of that project.<sup>3</sup> She creates Marco, a human/whale being, to represent the relationship between humans and other-than-humans as she calls upon readers to become more aware of evolutionary worlds that exist outside the “measured time” of a single human life (Hogan 17). Hogan represents evolutionary time with the “old intelligence” of a whale’s eye set in a “body covered with barnacle life and sea creatures” that is conceptualized as a “planet in its universe” (267). The whale’s eye calls upon readers to engage in a comparative ethnography that reveals the ways in which multiple species conduct their interrelational lives. The novel shows that for many indigenous peoples, these worlds have never ceased to exist. The whale’s “old intelligence” also helps to explain why the Cochabamba delegates call upon the world to grant all species the “right” to the “time and space” necessary for regeneration of “biocapacity” and “vital cycles” (UDRME, Preamble).

In order to illustrate the concepts of evolutionary time and imperceptible threats to the earth’s “vital cycles,” Hogan creates a multi-species ethnography in which two human characters, Thomas and Ruth, act in relationship to their child, Marco, who is represented as a transformational being. Thomas is a Vietnam War veteran and the grandson of the A’atsika people’s most famed traditional whaler, Whiti. Thomas’ story illustrates how modern indigenous communities must deal with complicated social and economic issues that challenge their relationship to environmentalism. Before he is born, the forests are clear cut and the whales have been over-hunted. The resulting high unemployment at Dark River and lack of economic opportunity compels Thomas, newly married to his childhood sweetheart Ruth, to follow his best friend Dwight to the U.S. army recruitment office and sign up to serve in the Vietnam War. In the jungles of Vietnam, and later, Cambodia, Thomas is ordered to burn the rice paddies of the local indigenous peoples, the Muong. When the fields will not ignite in the dense humidity, Thomas and his unit are ordered to contaminate the fields with chemicals. Hogan writes, “In his world,

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<sup>3</sup> Hogan and her friend, naturalist and writer Brenda Peterson, along with oceanographer, Jean Michel Cousteau, visited the Makah village in the years before the now infamous whale hunt. In turn, the Makah women were invited to go with Hogan, Peterson and Cousteau on a National Geographic mission to trace the migration routes of gray whales from Baja, Mexico, to the Arctic. These collaborations are documented in Peterson and Hogan’s *Sightings*.

his old world, these things were not done, but now he knew worlds overlapped, many of them, as if they were transparent pages in a book” (Hogan 166). Thomas’ cultural world, which is shaped by A’atsika values and reverence for living organisms, overlaps with a modern political world in which crimes take place at both the micro- and macro-scopic scales.

Here, Hogan employs toxins, which operate at levels invisible to the human eye, to suggest comparative multi-species ethnographies operating at multiple scales. The deliberate contamination of rice paddies indicates that Hogan is concerned about how the world’s indigenous, minority, ethnic and poor communities are affected by toxins, released in wars or in agricultural practices, that transgress the boundaries of human and other-than-human bodies at microscopic, imperceptible levels that nevertheless have implications for the continued survival of all life on earth. Although he has no formal education, Thomas’ A’atsika up-bringing has made him aware that his participation, voluntary or involuntary, in the release of toxins has ethical and moral implications for the socionatural worlds crucial to the survival of both humans and other-than-humans living side by side in a state of interdependence.

Ashamed of his wartime crimes, and after many years away from Dark River, Thomas cannot bring himself to return to Ruth or Marco, the son born shortly after he left for Viet Nam.<sup>4</sup> Instead, he takes up residence in San Francisco. When he does finally return home, it is to join Dwight on the whale hunt. Dwight, also a Vietnam veteran, has become a powerful man and successfully persuades the A’atsika tribal council that the village should reclaim their “tradition” by reestablishing the practice of “cultural whaling.” Dwight argues that the hunt will renew the tribe culturally and economically after years of disastrously high rates of unemployment, poverty, alcoholism, domestic violence and drug abuse exacerbated by the economic pressures caused when the tribe voluntarily agreed to stop hunting whales in 1946. However, Dwight fails to base his petition on a complete cultural history of the A’atsika. As feminist ecocritic Greta Gaard explains, in pre-1800s Makah society, only elite, wealthy males, who inherited their status, were allowed to be whale hunters (Gaard 5). Dwight’s petition purposely equates A’atsika cultural identity with only the most famous practice of the tribe’s elite, upper-class male ancestors. Thus, Hogan uses the character of Dwight to acknowledge “indigenous complicity in environmental destruction” and avoid “any suggestion that the local people necessarily have exclusive access to nature” (Steinwand 187).

Thomas’ estranged wife, Ruth, and a group of women elders oppose the whale hunt. They insist that the A’atsika no longer need whale meat to survive and gray whales are not numerous enough to be hunted regularly (Hogan 70). They have also discovered that Dwight is motivated by potential business deals with industrial whaling nations, including Japan and Norway, which are advancing him under-the-

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<sup>4</sup> In the novel, Thomas deserts the US army and spends many years living with a Muong wife and daughter in Cambodia. Because of space, this essay will not address those years.





table bribes he is using to pay for a new addition to his house (Hogan 68, 69).<sup>5</sup> On the day Marco paddles the lead canoe out to the ocean in search of a whale, they stand on the beach to demonstrate their opposition to the notion of a “cultural hunt.”

Ruth’s son, Marco, has been charged by the elders to follow A’atsika traditions in determining whether or not any given whale should be hunted or not. When a young, inquisitive gray whale playfully swims up to the side of the canoe and greets the men, Marco commands the whalers not to kill the juvenile but his orders are ignored. The already drunken crew fire shots from high powered rifles and in the chaos that follows, Marco disappears under the bloody water along with the dying whale. Because his body is never found, Hogan implies that he may be an earth-being, capable of living on. Later Thomas, Marco’s father, who fired the first shot, acknowledges the part he played in the disappearance of his son and the death of the young whale. He thinks about all the whales he has seen over the course of his lifetime. They are covered with barnacles and other sea life. This suggests that whales are not single creatures but a cosmos of life. In killing a whale or a person, Thomas concludes, humans kill “a planet in its universe” (Hogan 267).

After the disastrous hunt, Thomas is so sorrowful and ashamed that he moves across the bay to live with the elders. He spends hours in the ocean, learning to swim and regulate his breath, just as a whale regulates its oxygen when it dives beneath the sea and just as Marco did while Thomas was away in Vietnam. This suggests that Thomas is consciously thinking about his relationship to whale as planet/cosmos. According to De la Cadena, when contemporary indigenous people or politicians put earth-beings at the center of their actions, they see these creatures not as proposals for what “is” or “what ought to be.” Rather, earth-beings provoke thought, or to use Isabelle Stengers’ terms, they “slow down reasoning” and create an opportunity to arouse a slightly different awareness of the problems and situations under analysis (Stengers qtd. in De la Cadena 360-61). Thomas’ long dives invite readers to “slow down reasoning” and to see the world not as “universe” (singular) but as a cosmos of worlds teeming with life spanning multiple scales from the molecules of oxygen Thomas must control to stay under the water to the pulmonary system he must expand to stay alive. Like the body of a whale or any living creature, Thomas’ body is also a “planet in its universe” (Hogan 267).

While thinking and breathing like a whale, Thomas slows down reasoning and comes to understand how his blind faith in traditions that he had not really understood when he left for Vietnam—nationalism, patriotism, patriarchy—“had led him to crimes” (Hogan 95). Yet, there are crimes taking place at a much larger scale—war, deforestation, extractive industries that are destroying socio-natural relationships between humans and other beings. Thomas’ experiences set human-

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<sup>5</sup> Traditional Makah elders who opposed the 1999 hunt discovered that whaling nations like Japan, Norway, and Russia were supporting and encouraging Makah whalers to set a precedent for “cultural whaling,” since this new International Whaling Commission category would then open the way for those countries to file similar petitions (Gaard 23, n. 3; Peterson and Hogan 107-08, 143).

multi-species relationship not in the context of a single “universe” described by Western science as the separation of the “Human” from “Nature” but in a context that contemporary indigenous activists and multi-species ethnographers are describing as a “pluriverse” that does not separate human or “other-than-human beings and the worlds in which they [exist]” (De la Cadena 345). Hogan illustrates the possibility for rethinking human relationship to the pluriverse by showing Thomas moving away from a position supportive of Dwight. Near the end of the novel, Ruth sees Thomas visibly “transformed” from lifeless war veteran to caring member of the whale clan (Hogan 238). This suggests that Hogan holds out hope, to use the words of the UDRME, that humans might rediscover and move to protect not individual charismatic megafauna but an entire cosmos imagined as a “living being with whom [humans] have an indivisible and interdependent relationship” (UDRME, Art. 2).

### A COSMOPOLITICAL PLURIVERSE

Caro and Ihimaera and Hogan create human/whale children that provoke a kind of thinking that might enable humans to undo, or more accurately, unlearn, classificatory social and scientific systems that have separated male from female and human from nature. These children suggest that contemporary people may indeed have something to learn from stories about transformational characters who suggest worlds of multi-species relationships. Ruth prays to earth beings, but she is also a single woman who must provide for herself through her salmon fishing operation. Her need to sustain herself financially illustrates that allowing earth-beings to count in politics does not remove all proposals for economic growth and development from the negotiating table. People—indigenous or not, can still side with a mine or dam, operate a fishing or agricultural business, and chose jobs or money, depending on local needs.

However, Ruth has observed for herself that there are fewer salmon in the ocean (Hogan 70). She sees that her people will need to imagine new ways to support themselves economically in the future. As she and her fellow A’atsika elders “slow down reasoning,” they imagine how they might advocate, as did the Makah women activists upon which their characters are based, the development of a whale watching enterprise that will provide jobs that flow “from the same past of whale hunting” but which are adapting pre-modern traditions to a “new and environmentally fragile world” (Peterson and Hogan 165). After the 1999 whale hunt, the Makah women elders entered into coalition with their Quileute neighbors to the north and began meeting together with the goal of taking both human economic and whale ecological health into account. *New York Times* writer William Yardley has reported that in North America, one of the forms this re-visioned relationship to the whale has taken is the revival of “paddling” or rowing traditional cedar canoes. Since 1998, tribes scattered across coastal regions of Washington State and British Columbia have paddled traditionally designed cedar canoes “as many as 40 miles a day, sometimes more, over two or three weeks, camping at a series of reservations until they converge at the home of a host tribe” (Yardley A9). There, a host tribe welcomes



several thousand people for a week of traditional dancing, singing and celebration staged to “recapture cultural, linguistic and intertribal connections” nearly lost after European settlers and more recently substance abuse and suicide have threatened their survival and continuance as distinct tribal groups (Yarkley A9). Funded by several new tribal enterprises, including casinos, and a small but growing industry that feeds tourists fresh fish and locally-made beers and wines, this re-commenced traditional practice began after an elder studied traditional “seagoing canoes in museum exhibits and even those on display in a Seattle restaurant, because none were left in their village” (Yardley A9).

The tradition of paddling has also been revived among Austronesian-speaking people throughout the Pacific, including the Maori. Just as elders in the American Northwest had to find and study canoes archived in museums because they no longer had any of their own, the Ngati Porou of Whangara did not possess a waka because they are very expensive to build (*Te Waka*). For this reason, the waka in Caro’s film, a fully functioning ceremonial canoe, is given to the people of Whangara after the film wraps as a gift that will allow them to “rebuild the ancestor.” The last scene of the film, Pai and Koro sit in a vessel that represents a true collaboration between the villagers of Whangara and a Hollywood film crew. This is an “event” that brings an indigenous group into coalition with non-indigenous people and suggests something that goes far beyond the “tactical essentialism” described by Krech. Ihimaera, Caro and Hogan are employing film and literature to urge audiences and readers to re-vision the planet as a cosmos of multi-species communities existing in intimate, entangled relations.

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