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## Tales of Torment: Death, Nature, and Genre in Keri Hulme's Short Story Collection *Te Kaihau/The Windeater*

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*This article engages in close reading of New Zealand Maori writer Keri Hulme's 1986 short fiction collection. It explores how she borrows from Western literary genres to create a syncretic literature of unease and build a universe where death and destruction are linked to an imbalance in the natural world.*

Published shortly after her novel *the bone people* was declared surprise winner of the Booker Prize in 1985, Keri Hulme's first book of short stories was awaited eagerly by admirers and detractors alike, yet very little criticism actually discussed the collection.<sup>1</sup> One reviewer, however, pointed out that “the vision bleak, the landscape dark and lonely, the characters maimed both physically and spiritually” form the backbone of most of the stories in *Te Kaihau/The Windeater* (Ross 494). Maiming and death are ever present throughout the collection, and Hulme uses a vast array of literary devices and techniques to evoke the corruption of the natural world as a condition for and a consequence of the destruction of the individual.

In a comparative study of Keri Hulme and Native American author Leslie Marmon Silko, Thomas Benediktsson asserts that realism's “claim that it is natural and that it offers the only way to view the world is totalitarian and hegemonic, an esthetic equivalent of colonialism” (131). Therefore, analysing the ways in which postcolonial writers such as Hulme seem to embrace realism then reject it in favour of more subversive genres highlights the author's commitment to the possibility of a literary composite, that is a harmonious combination of genres such as the fantastic, the Gothic, and magical realism. Indeed Eva Rask Knudsen in her comparative study of Australian Aboriginal and Aotearoa/New Zealand Māori literatures advocates the use of the term “composite” to replace the controversial “hybrid” in this context (11).<sup>2</sup>

An exploration of stylistic and thematic elements disturbing realism will therefore show the consistent relationship between natural world and destruction of the individual across several short stories alluding to the death of a character, namely “The Cicadas of Summer,” “Kiteflying at Doctors' Point,” “Unnamed Islands in the Unknown Sea,” “King Bait,” and the eponymous “Te Kaihau/The Windeater.”

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The realist genre defines a certain relationship between art and reality that is based on faithfulness. Yet “this faithfulness [...] depends on the conception of reality distinctive of a certain era” and a certain place (“cette fidélité [...] dépend de la conception de la réalité propre a une époque”; *my*

*translation*; “Réalisme”). “The Cicadas of Summer” appears to be the most realistic piece in the collection to a Western reader, presenting named characters engaged in believable behaviour and a narrative fabric that follows a single strand of plot. This is particularly distinctive against the backdrop of the other stories belonging to *Te Kaihau/The Windeater*.

“The Cicadas of Summer” recounts how a prepubescent girl is raped and murdered by her neighbours’ “Pom” lodger (Hulme 135).<sup>3</sup> Early on, the landlady “Mrs” tells young Gwen she saw the lodger pouring boiling water to kill flax plants, and laments the fact that “the gaudy forest of hollyhocks towers over the sickly flax” (137). New Zealand flax is unrelated to European linen, but it was named “flax” by the colonisers because of its similar usage, and as an indigenous plant destroyed by the imported, omnipresent hollyhocks, it can be read as a foreboding and a metaphor for the English coloniser raping nature and its children.

When Gwen discovers that the cicada nymphs she calls “dreamers” are edible, she makes a game of hunting them out, eating some and letting the rest die, as she finds “a deep and belly-satisfying side to killing” (Hulme 139-141). One is reminded here of the nymphet, a term used by *Lolita*’s narrator Humbert Humbert to justify his predatory sexual drive towards prepubescent girls. He warns the reader of “their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac)” and thus attempts to excuse his crime by asserting that the “nymphet” herself is unnatural and deserves her fate (Nabokov 16). As the consumption of the cicada nymphs foreshadows the consumption of the girl, she becomes the “pupating dreamer” herself, reaped before her time of fullness (Hulme 140).

The unnatural crimes of paedophilia and child murder are made possible by two forms of corruption of nature. The first one is parental neglect and absence: Gwen lives alone with her father whom she calls “Francis” instead of “Dad” and who spends days locked away in his study instead of looking after her, while no mention is made of her mother. When Francis’s neighbour tells him that his daughter has disappeared, it is already too late (Hulme 135). The second one is the unnatural duration of summer which seems endless and barren (137). Both the biological father and the metaphorical mother, the earth or nature, have abandoned their child to the cruelty of men.

Another instance of cruelty against a child is explored from a the point of view of the perpetrator in “Kiteflying at Doctors’ Point,” narrated by a woman institutionalised after the apparently accidental killing of a little girl. The text constantly oscillates between self-exhortations to “write it all down, write it out, put it in writing” and her insistence on lying (Hulme 145). When the narrator says “I am tired of trying to give the lie to my face, to the mask Nature made of my face,” she defines the lie as something she imposes on herself, something unnatural, yet her face is but a mask, a cover-up for the truth (Hulme 147). This statement can be understood in two ways, either pointing towards her face being a mask made by nature, or her face being turned into a mask by nature, here a malevolent accomplice to the woman’s mental distress.

Textual patterns also involve “the personification of the environment, a beach which to the narrator offers a spectacle of death and prompts an extraordinary empathy” (Heim 100). The death of

nature here both causes and results from the narrator's crime. As the story unfolds, her feeling of alienation from the unnatural setting of the beach intensifies: "The sky is painted blue. The hills are fake. The wind comes from a machine" (Hulme 158). Denaturalising the crime scene allows the narrator to distance herself from her destructive actions and to reveal the ambiguity of her own subject position.

Similarly, the narrator's instinctive disgust for the child with a birthmark on her forehead alludes to the woman's sense of what is natural. She points out that the girl "seemed unconscious of this deformity. She did not hide it, or show herself ashamed" (149). The narrator then leaps from this subjective remark to a generalising statement which sounds like an attempt to rationalise her own fears: "I have a theory about deformities. People are either fearful in the company of a monster, or they will worship it" (150). From seeing a child with a birthmark to theorising a general attitude towards monstrosity, the narrator seems to assume an all-knowing position where she pretends to hold truth over nature.

However, towards the end of the retelling of the accident, the narrator is reduced to a thing or a toy: the blue kite she refers to as "look[ing] like a cruel unnatural hawk" (149). When she holds its strings, they seem to be merging together as the narration suggests:

We dip and soar and wheel and skim.

We drive them in a frantic scattering pack.

We sleek over their heads, and they dive screaming joy to the sand. (158)

As the woman and the kite become one, she controls it as much as it controls her, and the resulting effect of reification radically contrasts with her previous attempts at sophistication, including her questioning of nature and theorising of monstrosity.

When the kite falls and kills "the toadstool child," the natural environment reacts, at least from the narrator's point of view:

The sea is holding its breath.

The krill are dying, dying. [...]

The endlessly crying sand. (159)

By becoming the kite, the narrator effectively loses her humanity, which leads to the tragic death of the child and subsequent mourning of nature. The beach setting displays unnatural characteristics both before and after the crime is committed, as if the corruption of nature triggered the crime but in taking on human characteristics regretted it instantly, thus betraying the woman and amplifying her mental distress.

A lot could be said about the layout of the words on the page, the way this story in particular, as opposed to “The Cicadas of Summer,” makes extensive use of line returns as if it was but a list of detached impressions, devoid of the logical links one expects from prose. According to Heim, “the mixing of genres, of factual and fictional frames, the use of montage and multiple endings, the fragmentariness and discontinuity, the sense of excessive and incompatible information” can be seen as elements of postmodernity (105). Keri Hulme has primarily been called a postmodernist by critics questioning her legitimacy as a postcolonial and Indigenous writer (During 374; Mita 7). One could argue that “certainly the stories do exhibit an anxiety about language and experience,” a prominent feature of postmodern fiction, but there is a strong possibility that she uses and subverts postmodern elements to express her cultural and political agenda (Ash 132).

Indeed one of the main problems with such an ethnocentric reading of these elements is that “antirealist representation, parody, auto-referentiality, problematizing of history, etc. are deemed to be postmodern tendencies, regardless of their purpose or origin in non-European traditions of story telling” (Mukherjee 3). Therefore, the reader ignorant about Māori traditions might interpret as postmodern, and subsequently dismiss, features which a more knowledgeable reader would detect as cultural specificities. Mukherjee also rejects the following idea:

[that] antirealist fiction 'denaturalizes' what we had taken to be real and thus warns us against being sucked into the illusionist trap set by realist representation by constantly drawing attention to its process [since] for those of us who never experienced realism as a dominant form, the 'denaturalizing' of metafiction does not affect us in the same way. (4)

Māori traditional forms of orality include the retelling of myths as history, and a definition of “truth” that is not based on scientific objectivity, as has been the standard in the West since the Enlightenment. One should therefore bear in mind that literary categories such as realist and antirealist do not have the same implications for writers from different cultural backgrounds, and that a culturally-informed reading is paramount to responsible scholarship. Moreover, applying Mukherjee's critique to a reading of Hulme's stories allows the reader to separate a descriptive from a prescriptive approach to literature, that is what is real from what feels natural to a certain group, thus

further validating her flexible borrowing from genres that are more strictly kept apart in Western literature, in this case realist and fantastic.

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In *The Fantastic*, Tzvetan Todorov sets the rules of the genre as an unresolved tension experienced by the reader between opting for a supernatural or a rational explanation. The fantastic is by definition a fragile equilibrium difficult to sustain at length, and as soon as it topples over, it ceases to be. Therefore, “the narrator hesitates between two procedures: to break off his narrative (and remain in the fantastic) or to continue (and abandon it)” (Todorov 43). The abrupt endings of most of her stories, including the five texts studied here, highlight Hulme's commitment to keeping her narratives open to interpretations and her reader always on the edge of understanding.

However, “if we move to another level, the one where the implicit reader questions not the nature of the events, but that of the very text which describes them, we find the existence of the fantastic threatened once again” (Todorov 58). The accusation of undermining the validity of the narrative inherent to postmodern fiction is one Hulme has to contend with, for instance in “Unnamed Islands in the Unknown Sea.” Presented like the authentic content of a notebook found in a bottle, it is a first-person narrative written by a stranded character on a desert island to his late companion who died on the island. The story ends with the intervention of a clerk who concludes that the notebook must be a prank, thus casting doubt on and discrediting a rather moving text, and by extension undermining any emotion felt by the reader in a somewhat alienating way.

The notebook describes nature as a ruthless and threatening force, for the sea “is remorseless. There is no humanity in it” (Hulme 163). Similarly, silence is foreshadowing disaster: “sometimes there is an unnatural quiet, a threatening calm, as the wind holds still for an hour, deciding its next quarter” (165). The characters' fear and unease are linked to the perceived unnaturalness of nature, that is in fact their own feeling of alienation from it. The notebook mentions the character pushing his companion's corpse to the sea then breaks off abruptly. There is no further allusion to the dead man's possible ailment, nor to the notebook author's fate. However, the clerk mentions the “Skinned Body,” a skinned corpse found in a cove, which induces a real feeling of unease in the reader. It is worth remembering here that Todorov mentions how “scenes of cruelty, delight in evil, and murder will provoke the same effect [as unresolved tension]. The sentiment of the uncanny originates, then, in certain themes linked to more or less ancient taboos” (48). The notebook recounts leopard seals skinning penguins alive before eating them, thus equating the “Skinned Body” to both a prey to be hunted and food to be consumed, which in certain cultures is reminiscent of the taboo of cannibalism while in others it used to be a culturally-sanctioned practice considered natural.

Broken taboos and scenes of illness and death are also prominent features of the Gothic genre, which is linked to the fantastic by common imagery but also in their unsettling questioning of reality. In *Gothic*, Fred Botting asserts that “the sense of a grotesque, irrational and menacing presence pervading the everyday, and causing its decomposition, emerges in the Gothic fiction produced,

predominately, in the Southern States of America” (160). A similar case can be argued for other settler countries, locating the source of this everyday Gothic in the alien-ness of the colonised landscape and the uncertainty underpinning the legitimacy of the settler nation.

Alison Rudd adds that in regional variations of the Gothic “a violent history is coupled with a subsequent repression of the most traumatic and guilt-inducing aspects of that history” (142). In Aotearoa/New Zealand, this explains the distinction Rudd makes between Pākehā Gothic and Māori Gothic, since colonisers and colonised, even writing in the same language, do not approach the natural world in, nor even on, similar terms.<sup>4</sup> Both forms of the Gothic are relevant here, for Keri Hulme self-identifies as a biracial and bicultural author who takes inspiration from her Ngāi Tahu, Orkney, and Lancashire origins.<sup>5</sup> For Rudd, Pākehā short story writer Katherine Mansfield

illustrates a link between a remote landscape and psychological disturbance caused by the effects of isolation. The refusal or inability to fully articulate this aspect of settler anxiety can be seen as part of an ongoing dysfunction that relates the difficulty in fully occupying the land and contributes to the pathology of Pakeha Gothic. (145)

This effect of detachment from the land, coupled with her remark on the distinctiveness of Māori Gothic and “the way they show, in an understated manner, how the impact of colonialism on the Māori has resulted in a dispossession of place, identity and the past” (167-168), is most visible in the next story discussed, where the greedy, capitalist impulse of one man brings about his death and triggers for other people the fear of the retaliation of nature.

“King Bait” tells the story of how, one night, thousands of whitebait mass to the shore and one fish, much larger than the others, swims through as if escorted by them. The narrator introduces her story thus: “a very strange thing happened yesterday [...]; a strange, a horrible, a holy thing” (Hulme 38). The language of religion is also present in the description of the small fish which “lie there like a sacrifice, and peacefully begin to die,” whereas the big fish is “the spirit of the waters [...] ten or maybe twelve feet of lighted perfection,” and its eyes “show forth pure being. Summation. A complete benign magnificence;” all the while onlookers are “feeling echoes of their massed consuming joy” (40-41). This language of divine love deifies nature, especially the sea and its inhabitants, by turning an unusual event into the coming of a messianic figure, for whom less consequential beings are willing to die.

Not everyone is sensitive to the divine character of the event, however, as one particular fisherman shows. The only man fishing as much as he can, he is “made distant and inhuman by his action [...] swinging his net like an automaton” (Hulme 40). Like the narrator of “Kiteflying at Doctors' Point,” he loses his humanity and becomes a machine because of the unnaturalness of his behaviour and his failure to realise the sacred nature of what is happening. For the onlookers “it's

inevitable, a feeling of disaster growing,” and finally the man, by now less than a man, is “falling with grotesque flailing slowness into the froth of his eyes,” while the audience expresses “just a shared feeling of wonderment, of rightness, and inevitability” (40-41). His death resulting from being crushed by the whitebait he was so eager to harvest for himself is “right” according to a set of morals redefined by the narrator and the onlookers as respectful of the gothic and destructive potential of nature.

This Polynesian nature is harsh and unforgiving, thus breaking with the clichéd Pacific of nineteenth century Western literature and its bountiful, generous landscape of coconut and palm trees. In the twentieth century, the Pacific became a space of neo-colonial experimentations, especially after the USA acquired several islands with large portions of territorial waters. In her article on nuclear testing, Elizabeth DeLoughrey reminds the reader that “Western colonizers had long configured tropical islands into the contained spaces of a laboratory, which is to say a suppression of island history and indigenous presence” (172). In Hulme's short fiction, indigenous culture and the coloniser's language cooperate to foreclose any temptation towards exoticist discourse. Todorov's *On Human Diversity* asserts that “praise without knowledge is precisely what exoticism aspires to be” (265), while Graham Huggan in *The Postcolonial Exotic* defines the term as “commodified hybridity” (90). Therefore, Hulme's refusal to characterise Nature as a single benevolent entity which humans can understand and assume power over disrupts the depiction of the exotic antipodean Nature present in Western escapist fiction. Furthermore, “the refusal of foundational colonial narratives means a refusal of the 'natural' environment, which is then revealed as a colonial fantasy of the garden of Eden, or a myth of the hyperfecundity of the tropics” (Cilano and DeLoughrey 79). The barrenness of the environment and its inhabitants in *Te Kaihau/The Windeater* recreates a threatening, unfathomable, sublime nature deserving of fear and respect, while the use of non-standard language reinforces the distancing, de-familiarising effect. Indeed “the sublime experience is seen to bring home to man the fact of his 'being bound to nature,’” thus cooperating with the author to weave her web around the characters and subject them to the power of nature upon penalty of death (Carroll 177).

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Although most stories in this collection linking death and nature can be assigned to either realist or gothic-related genres, it appears that some elements disrupting realism resist characterisation and only fit in the liminal category of magical realism. In her study of the magical realist genre, Amaryll Chanady asserts that “the text must display coherently developed codes of the natural and the supernatural, the antinomy between these codes must be resolved, and a measure of authorial reticence must facilitate the co-existence and legitimacy of both codes” (qtd. in Warnes 3).<sup>6</sup> It differs from the fantastic in that tension must allow for harmony between conflicting worldviews and the reader must accept the interpretation offered by the author.

As with postmodern elements, realist or magical interpretations depend on knowledge of Māori culture and language. Hulme plays with the linguistic integrity of Māori words such as *kaihau*, which is arguably three words in one. For the non Māori-speaking reader, it is a foreign term. For the

reader who splits the word apart, it is the literal equivalent of the English “windeater,” since *kai* means “food” and *hau* “the wind”. Hulme herself reveals the third meaning in an interview:

[Windeater is] the literal (and wrong) translation of *kaihau*, a woman of rank who eats sacred food to remove *tapu*. [...] And there is a covert, esoteric meaning too. *Kai* is a prefix added to transitive verbs to form nouns denoting an agent – it means somebody who generates or operates. By doing this essentially ordinary ritual act of eating, thus removing the *tapu*, she is actually generating a very powerful force. (Hulme qtd. in Sarti 63)

*Tapu* is a supernatural restriction or condition, so this power is linked with Māori spirituality as well as possibly influenced by postmodern linguistic games. Literally, *kai* and *hau* have respective English-language equivalents, but the combination of the two lexical items has a much more complex meaning. This also applies to the magical realist genre, where a combination of supernatural and natural elements creates something new and original.

The penultimate story of the collection, the eponymous “Te Kaihau/The Windeater,” opens with the following description of the environment: “There is / a sandbank somewhere at the end of Earth where ocean stops and welkin stops and the winds of the world come to rest” (Hulme 207). As Hulme situates her action on the edge, on the periphery of some nondescript centre, the story is firmly anchored in postcolonial writing, but the importance of location also suggests the centrality of the natural setting. The episode with “the Beach Arab” deserves mention as a seemingly unnatural event linked with the natural setting (219). The narrator sees him on the shore, “then his upright ure [penis] wilted and the shining bronze-green feathers tucked themselves down tidily round it” (220). The in-betweenness of this space between land and sea is the perfect setting for magical events to take place within a realist setting, as fellow Māori novelist Patricia Grace remarks that “the shore is a nothing place”: that is to say, rules do not apply here (174). No explanation is given for the feathered penis, but from then on the narrator lives as a recluse and grows mould in her beach house, perhaps as a way of letting nature grow back and re-appropriate its rightful space.

Magical realism seems to slide into the indisputably magical when the narrator finds a strange object in her car, left by a mysterious hitchhiker. As soon as she grabs the rectangular tube, it sticks fast to her hand. However, this unnatural property seems only visible to her: “I tried taking my hand to every doctor and quack under the sun, but they couldn't see anything or feel anything” (Hulme 227). Magical realism gives us the choice here to opt for magical or medical interpretation, for curse or body integrity identity disorder, but the rest of the story goes along with the curse.

Otto Heim argues that the nameless object is “a tube-like object with writerly as well as phallic and explosive connotations” (233). Indeed, along with the writer's pen and the man's penis, another

symbol of authority and power in the 1980s in the Pacific Ocean was the atomic bomb. The explosive connotation is further established by the heading of the antepenultimate part of the story entitled “*If You Can Raise Up Islands, You Can Push Them Down Again*” (Hulme 230). In Māori mythology, the demi-god Māui is responsible for fishing the North Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand from the depths, and among Pacific Islanders twentieth century Western men are responsible for testing the effects of radiation on their people and detonating bombs in their ocean (DeLoughrey 171).<sup>7</sup> The narrator guesses that after immersion of the tube in a geothermal hotpool where she has been instructed to go, “like a good little bomb, it will shed its protective skin and be what it is, a seed of antimatter. And just before the fish shatters into an archipelago, the incandescent cloud will roar helter-skelter over Auckland and boil all the northern sea to a frenzy” (Hulme 230). This concern for the destruction of nature in a nuclear age is consistent with fellow Māori writers' warnings from the 1970s and 1980s (Tuwhare 102).

Yet Hulme goes one step further from asserting the bomb's inherent unnaturalness towards accusing men of being responsible for the corruption of nature and by extension their own misery. The fact that the collection itself bears the same title as the longest story suggests that this is where the author's message is clearer. “*Te Kaihau/The Windeater*”'s explosive ending thus reflects back on the tension which builds up throughout the previous texts and illuminates the possibility of men's responsibility for their mutually deleterious relationship with nature.

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Keri Hulme draws from elements pertaining to realism, the fantastic and the Gothic, and magical realism, to present her composite literature of unease, a term at the crossroads between these genres which expresses the unsettling effect of her writing. Throughout the collection she creates a universe where death and destruction are linked with an imbalance in the relationship between the characters and the natural world. This imbalance is visible in the apparent conspiracy between the hot, dry weather and the lodger in “*The Cicadas of Summer*,” the beach and the woman in “*Kiteflying at Doctors' Point*,” the sea and the author of the notebook in “*Unnamed Islands in the Unknown Sea*,” the fish and the onlookers in “*King Bait*,” and the boiling pool and the hitchhiker in “*Te Kaihau/The Windeater*.”

By asserting that writing itself is “just one of those unnatural drives,” Hulme also questions the very act of creation she is performing (qtd in Sarti 62). Indeed, if “images of alienation dominate over community in Hulme's oeuvre,” alienation is also present at the level of the writing itself, as the narration is often dry and detached, rejecting the idea of *mimesis* yet sometimes producing realist stories (Ash 129; Benediktsson 121).

It is also in *Te Kaihau/The Windeater* that C.K. Stead's remark on Hulme's novel *the bone people* finds even more resonance, when he identifies the reason for his dislike of the novel as “a bitter after-taste, something black and negative deeply ingrained in its imaginative fabric” (344). This

intangible “something” in Hulme's fiction is the dark and ruthless heart of nature itself – at once realist, fantastic, Gothic, and magical – beyond life, death, and literature.

## Notes

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1. Lower case title for the first edition of *the bone people*.
2. Official name of the country. *Aotearoa* means the long white cloud in Māori.
3. Slang term for a British person used in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia.
4. Pākehā meaning white New Zealander.
5. Ngāi Tahu is Keri Hulme's Māori *iwi*, or tribe.
6. Original work was impossible to locate, see Works Cited.
7. The North Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand is known in Māori as *Te Ika a Māui*, or Māui's fish.

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