



# Indigenous Stories Reaching Out to the World

## New Zealand Maori & Native American Cinemas

*Andrew Horton*

*What future on this little corner of land, once enough to support many but now in these days merely a worry and a trouble.*  
—Patricia Grace, “Transition,” *Waiariki and Other Stories*

**F**ade in: a mother is rushed into the delivery room and gives birth to twins, a son and a daughter, but the mother and the son die, leaving the daughter to a grieving father and grandmother and a disappointed grandfather. The family is Maori, and the scene opens the popular Oscar-nominated New Zealand film, Niki Caro’s *Whale Rider* (2002), based on the short novel by the Maori poet and author Witi Ihimaera.

But return to the “disappointed grandfather.” What is his story? Simple but complex. He is the Maori chief of his town’s tribe, and he had hoped for a grandson to pass on the tribal leadership to. Now he is cursed with a granddaughter instead of a grandson. The novel and the film, however, are told through the girl’s—Pai’s—point of view. Played by then twelve-year-old Keisha Castle-Hughes (who was nominated for an Oscar for her

performance), Pai narrates her struggle to grow up without a mother and her effort to win her grandfather’s acceptance. She narrates to us, the viewers, in voiceover, building her story into the oral mythology of her Maori culture, thus the title “whale rider.” A contemporary Maori story thus unfolds, combined with Maori mythology as we see the images of the sea, whales, and the mother’s childbirth and her death and Pai’s brother’s death while we listen to Pai relating her story:

In the old days a man felt a great emptiness that was waiting, waiting to be filled up. Waiting for someone to love it. Waiting for a leader, and he came on the back of a whale, a man to lead a new people, our ancestor, Paikea, but now we were waiting for the firstborn of the new gen-

eration, for the descendant of the Whale Rider, for the boy who would be Chief.

And as we see her father crying and holding Pai's dead mother, we hear her final voiceover words to us for the opening of the film: "There was no gladness when I was born. My twin brother died and took his mother with him." The film then moves to Pai as a twelve-year-old and follows through her story.

@@@

Storytelling is so much a part of every culture and its literature, but this is especially true of indigenous peoples for whom the oral tradition has thrived through the centuries and continues today in many parts of the world, including within Maori culture in New Zealand and the many Native American cultures within the United States. Focusing on both of these cultures, I wish to suggest that there is also a strong link between their literary and cinematic traditions that we do not see so clearly in considering American literature and Hollywood filmmaking.

Take, for instance, the top-ten box-office American films of all time as of January 2009: *Titanic* (1997), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Star Wars* (1977), *Shrek 2* (2004), *E.T.* (1982), *Star Wars: Episode 1* (1999), *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (2006), *Spider Man* (2002), *Star Wars: Episode III* (2005), and *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* (2003). Do we note any Ernest Hemingway, Sherman Alexie, Ralph Ellison, Joyce Carol Oates, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, or Willa Cather in this list? Similarly, is there a single film about American life and culture, past or present? "None" in either case!

Thus we begin with the reality that what is treasured in American literature is very different from what movie viewers line up to see in the multiplex cinemas. And what about any Native American films in the top, say, 250 selling American films? Once again, the answer is zero.

In contrast, New Zealand is not only a different country, but one with a fascinating popular and award-winning indigenous tradition in both

literature and cinema. The quality and number of films made by and about Maoris in New Zealand is impressive, and three of these films are in the top-ten box-office New Zealand movies of all time, each coming from a popular and respected work of published Maori prose fiction. I have already started, of course, with *Whale Rider*. But we must also mention Ian Mune's *What Becomes of the Broken Hearted?* (1999), with a script by Maori novelist Alan Duff from his own novel, and Lee Tamahori's *Once Were Warriors* (1994), based on Alan Duff's novel. (Note that *The Lord of the Rings* films are not officially "New Zealand films" since they are Hollywood produced and owned.) Each of these three films is also about contemporary Maori society and life in New Zealand, without aliens from other worlds invading or animated special effects taking place in imaginary worlds as in many of the top Hollywood films.

And yet there is a lively and growing "First Nation" (the Canadian term for "Native") film tradition in the United States that does build on its own indigenous storytelling roots. Two more film scenes will take us further in this exploration of these two indigenous countries and their cinemas.

In the first scene we see a quiet country field and sky as we hear a Native American storyteller speak a story in his language with subtitles in English provided:

I was once told by my grandmother a long time ago that Rabbit ate Bear whole. She said that Rabbit told Bear that he had a belly full of honey. This made Bear curious so he went into Rabbit's mouth and down his throat into his belly. This made Rabbit full for years to come!

As the story ends, we see a young man pulling the corpse of an older man along that same country road, and we soon learn the young man is an Oklahoma Seminole Indian who has come back to his father's small country home one morning to find him dead from self-inflicted chemicals. But his father left a note for his son asking him to bury him in the tribal tradition. And so the son drags his father from the house across a road and

field and into a lake where he anchors his father at the bottom of the lake before leaving. We, as audience members, are already pulled into a “real” story dealing with Native traditions, suicide, and a young man coming of age, but with a storyteller, “speaking” to us also, we are curious to find a connection between what we *see* and *hear*: how does a Rabbit full of Bear tie in with a father’s suicide in small-town Oklahoma?

In our second scene, a white-haired Maori father is seated in his kitchen in Wellington, New Zealand, when his young nephew from the South Island of New Zealand comes in the room and starts speaking hesitantly. The young fellow finally gets his story out: one of the father’s sons died in a car crash that evening. We await the father’s reaction. He pauses, smiles, but the smile collapses into near panic as he then looks up to his nephew and says, “Do you want a cup of tea?” The nephew hasn’t even had time yet to explain they had been doing drugs and a white youth was actually the driver. Thus begins a tale of a contemporary Maori family in New Zealand that must deal with loss, love, friendships, and new beginnings. Once more, we experience no animated creatures from outer space or pirates in the Caribbean or Pacific Oceans.

These scenes are our entry point into the impressive current “First Nation” film traditions currently developing in New Zealand through Maori stories, actors, and filmmakers and in the United States through various indigenous filmmakers across the country, particularly encouraged by the Sundance Film Festival workshop and seminar programs.

Our first scene is from the opening scene of *Four Sheets to the Wind*, which was the first feature film written and directed by Oklahoma Seminole filmmaker and former University of Oklahoma

film student Sterlin Harjo. The film did well at the 2006 Sundance Film Fest and went on to play at festivals around the world, including New Zealand, with limited theatrical release and current DVD availability. As I write this piece, Harjo’s second feature film, *Barking Water* (2009), has been accepted at Sundance and already invited to numerous additional festivals. This film, like *Four Sheets*, is also an Oklahoma First Nation story, made independent of Hollywood production companies.

The Maori scene is from a 2007 first feature film, written by Andrea Bosshard and directed by Bosshard and Shane Loader, entitled *Taking the Waewae Express* and starring the well-known Maori actor Rangimoana Taylor as the grieving father. What unites both projects and many others from New Zealand and the United States is that we are not just speaking of specialized cinemas in these countries but of the larger traditions of “indigenous storytelling,” which clearly unites published storytellers such as Patricia Grace and Maori filmmakers in the same way that Seminole filmmaker

The truth that we know speaks to all great literature and cinema: cultural details may differ from nation to nation, but human relationships have much in common around the world.

Sterlin Harjo as a storyteller ties into Native traditions shared by such writers as Joy Harjo, Sherman Alexie, and N. Scott Momaday.

Sherman Alexie, for instance, who is a Spokane/Coeur d’Alene Native, certainly represents an American indigenous writer who, similar to Alan Duff in New Zealand, can publish popular and award-winning poetry and fiction and also write and even direct respected feature films. More specifically, he has published ten books of poetry, seven novels, and short-story collections, including *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007). The popular film *Smoke Signals* (1998) was based on one of his stories, “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona.” In 2002 Alexie wrote and directed the contemporary feature film

*The Business of Fancydancing*, which is a complex drama with comic moments as old friends reunite at a friend's funeral and work on their own lives to follow.

Clearly there have been other strongly crafted Native films made, including Jonathan Wacks's *Powwow Highway* (1989) and Randy Redroad's *The Doe Boy* (2001). And Hollywood has taken on "Indian" stories in box-office hits such as Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and Michael Mann's *Last of the Mohicans* (1992), but these are not indigenous films in terms of the filmmakers and even, truly, in the storytelling traditions we are discussing. But none of these works has reached the wider and larger home audiences that the Maori films have.

Why not? More specifically, how has the Maori tradition become so strong in New Zealand in film and in literature, reaching large and appreciative audiences of whites (Pakehas) as well? An answer begins with the cultural differences between the United States and New Zealand. Start with the fact that Maoris represent about 15 percent of the New Zealand population compared to the United States in which First Nations people make up less than 1 percent. Add to this fact that New Zealand has embraced indigenous culture even to the level of teaching the Maori language in many schools as part of learning about New Zealand culture. Can we Americans imagine a time when at least one First Nation language of the more than five hundred that exist in the United States would be offered, even only a few words or sentences, as part of an elementary or high school curriculum? I find it important, for instance, that not all of Patricia Grace's books have a glossary for Maori words used in them.

Add, too, that elements of Maori culture appear everywhere in New Zealand life, including, for instance, the opening of each rugby match played by the famous New Zealand All Blacks who act out a fierce *haka* (war dance) complete with facial expressions and menacing stretched stares and body movements. Thus there is a general familiarity that the New Zealand population has with Maori culture that simply no longer exists in the United States. For instance, I have asked many



friends in Oklahoma if they have ever attended a powwow, and the answer is usually "no"!

But even taking all this into consideration, how is it possible that films such as *Whale Rider* and *Once Were Warriors* have done so well critically and in terms of viewing audiences outside of New Zealand? One Cape Town, South Africa, film reviewer, for instance, in writing about *Once Were Warriors* when it came out in 1994, described it as the best South African film ever made! He went on to say



that he knew the film was from New Zealand but that the social, racial, familial, gender, political, and personal issues brought up in the film absolutely spoke to the realities of South African cultures.

Therein is the truth that we know speaks to all great literature and cinema: cultural details may differ from nation to nation, but human relationships have much in common around the world. *Once Were Warriors* can speak to Americans about poor Latino or African American neighborhoods in Los Angeles, New York, or elsewhere, just as this New Zealand film focuses on poor Maori families living in the ghettos of New Zealand's largest city, Auckland. With unforgettable performances by Rena Owen as an abused Maori wife and mother and Temuera Morrison as Jake, an alcoholic, unemployed husband/father, the stories that unfold embrace family violence, rape, incest, and suicide but, finally, cultural ceremony (the funeral) complete with a non-Hollywood ending, for they do not live happily ever after as the sequel, *What Becomes of the Broken Hearted?*, details.

@@@

**F**ade out on the ending of *Whale Rider*. Pai (who is named Kahu in the novel) is finally accepted by her grandfather, Koro Apirana, and we have a large community-centered ending by the sea as the whole Maori tribe and their friends and Pakeha loved ones show up to launch the Maori hand-carved battle canoe into the sea, with Maori songs and war chants accompanying all. Pai's personal story and Maori legend come together at last as the

canoe with dozens onboard strokes into the ocean with the men, including her father, paddling and chanting. Pai is sitting with her grandfather who smiles and hugs her, and we hear Pai in voiceover one last time: "My name is Paikea Apirana, and I come from a long line of chiefs stretching all the way back to the Whale Rider. I'm not a prophet, but I know our people will keep moving forward . . . all together . . . with all of our strength." *Fade out* as the Maori canoe moves swiftly and steadily in the distance of the ocean.

*Fade out* also with appreciation for organizations such as *World Literature Today*, the Sundance Film Festival, and the New Zealand film festivals including the Wairoa Maori & Indigenous Film Festival ([www.manawairoa.com](http://www.manawairoa.com)), which have encouraged the production and celebration of indigenous storytelling in book and cinematic forms. "Once upon a time" as told in whatever indigenous language continues to be an important part of being human for all of us, no matter what race, creed, or country we belong to.

So what finally happened to Rabbit, who ate Bear? Well, to finish the story you must watch Sterlin Harjo's *Four Sheets to the Wind*! In fact let us close with "storytelling" words from Harjo in an interview on a Native American website with the question to Harjo: How do you define success as a filmmaker, and what are your personal goals as a filmmaker? His answer says all that we have been suggesting here:

I tell stories from a place and about people that mainstream audiences rarely hear about. I didn't make any money off the sale of my last film, *Four Sheets to the Wind*, but it was great to hear how popular it was in Indian communities in Oklahoma. I had people that I would run into on the street tell me that their whole family loved it and would burn each other copies and wear copies out because they watched it so much. That felt good. That gave me great pride because I knew that some of these communities, especially Seminole and Creek communities, were seeing themselves for the first time on screen. That's success to me. Of course now as I get older I want to make money as well! ([www.indiewire.com](http://www.indiewire.com))

*University of Oklahoma*

**Andrew Horton** is the Jeanne H. Smith Professor of Film & Video Studies at the University of Oklahoma. He is the author of twenty books on film, screenwriting, literature, and culture and an award-winning screenwriter whose credits include the script for Brad Pitt's first feature film, *Dark Side of the Sun*. He co-wrote a New Zealand jazz / sheep farm comedy, *Make a Joyful Noise*, which is currently in development in Wellington.