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“The past does not lie behind us”: Warrior-matriarchs’ retrotopia in Witi Ihimaera’s fiction

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Abstract

Contrary to an apolitical, pessimistic, and non-feminist perception of Witi Ihimaera’s work, this article contends that his early novel *The Matriarch* (1986) and its sequel *The Dream Swimmer* (1997) frame Māori communities as an ancient, patriarchal space in need of revision to accommodate women. Reconsidering the role of tribalism and Māori utopian and cyclical land narratives, this study argues that the confessional male narrator of both novels, Tamatea Mahana, learns to embrace a matrilineal genealogy not only of powerful Māori women leaders of chiefly status, but also of charismatic women in the shadow, like his mother Tiana. Beyond Pākehā imperial democracy and Māori “male utopias of domination”, Tamatea and the exceptional gallery of warrior-matriarchs implement a peculiar and controversial retrotopia — a return to the prematurely buried grand ideas of the past — which, even when dangerously resonating with nostalgia, aims at an open-ended model of democracy through spiral temporality.[1] A predominantly decolonizing theory and methodology is used, drawing on Kaupapa Māori and Mana Wāhine theories.

Keywords

imperial democracy, Kaupapa Māori, Mana Wāhine, nostalgia, retrotopia, spiral temporality, tribalism, utopia, Witi Ihimaera

Towards a decolonizing theory and methodology

Witi Ihimaera is credited with being the first Māori writer to publish a novel and a collection of short stories in English. Together with novelists such as Patricia Grace or Keri Hulme, he was one of the pioneers of the Māori Renaissance, the Indigenous literary and

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political movement in New Zealand that began in the 1970s and 1980s and which, following the cultural nationalism of the 1930s and 1940s, advocated "a separate nationalism within a bicultural nation" (Kennedy, 2016: 277). Even admitting to being "an old essentialist" whose job is "to reinforce the structures of power and meaning for the Māori body politic", Ihimaera concludes that "this is not an either-or situation in New Zealand" thus proposing to go beyond "monocultural structures" (Meklin and Meklin, 2004: 363). Ihimaera's hybridity in literary traditions, which was explicitly addressed in Melissa Kennedy's study *Striding Both Worlds* (2011), is considered a common feature of the Māori Renaissance, particularly in decolonizing existing European forms for Māori purposes. However, according to critics like Suzanne Romaine, the appropriation of Western narrative forms by Indigenous authors reflects "the inherent tensions in telling a story in a language and genre so intertwined with their own oppression" (2004: 34–35). Romaine summarizes the controversial reception of Ihimaera's *The Matriarch* (1986): the novel was seen as historically misleading, lacking in political engagement, and sentimentalizing traditional Māori life (2004: 33–34), while Jacqueline Bardolph refers to its "demotivating" and "fundamentally pessimistic vision" (1990: 134). Contrary to this apolitical and defeatist reception of Ihimaera's work, this article contends that *The Matriarch* (1986) and its sequel *The Dream Swimmer* (1997) explore what critics like Yanwei Tan refer to as "a distinctly indigenous political dimension" (2014: 367). These two novels use the dialogue with Western culture as a fertile ground to revisit a tribal and patriarchal genealogical model that is perishing and in need of reinvention to accommodate women.

The present article aims to accompany the recent decolonizing and re-Indigenizing movements in academia, more specifically in literary studies. Hence, Māori and other trans-Indigenous voices will be prioritized to avoid "inaccuracies and misinterpretations" (Makereti, 2020: 5). As a non-Māori scholar, I embrace the space for non-Indigenous researchers opened by critics like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 17) or Tina Makereti (2020: 5). Although terms like "theory" (Mika et al., 2022: 7–8) and "research" (Smith, 1999: 1–2) are received with suspicion from a decolonizing angle as "inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" (Smith, 1999: 1), in the present study research on Kaupapa Māori theory is prioritized to show "that Indigenous people have theories of their own that have validity and legitimacy" (Mika et al., 2022: 8). As explained by Mika et al., these theories are "embedded within Māori epistemology", founded in te ao Māori (Māori world view), mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), Kaupapa Māori (Māori philosophy), tikanga Māori (Māori values and customs), and tereo Māori (Māori language) (2022: 8).[2]

Likewise, since Māori warrior-matriarchs are the focus of this study, Mana Wāhine will be a central theory.[3] Wāhine is commonly translated as "woman", but Leonie Pihama highlights that the term is more complex because it goes beyond "constructed binaries of female and male" and is related to specific notions of time and space for Māori women (2019: 70); mana, like many Māori words, goes "beyond translation" but is related to notions such as "divine authority" (Marsden, qtd. in Pihama, 2019: 70) and "psychic influence, control, prestige, power, vested and acquired authority and influence" (Pere, qtd. in Pihama, 2019: 69–70).[4] Mana Wāhine, or Mātauranga Wāhine (Māori women's knowledge; Jenkins and Pihama, 2001), proves to be a suitable theoretical field to study the role of Māori warrior-matriarchs, as distinct from Western feminism, which is

perceived as “a fundamental contradiction” in Mana Wāhine for “impos[ing] a foreign way of seeing, and of being” (Pihama, 2019: 62–63). Pihama summarizes this debate around Western feminism (2019: 63)[5] and ultimately discusses Mana Wāhine theory as aligned with Indigenous women’s feminisms (2020: 359).

In this predominantly decolonizing perspective, Western epistemology and particularly Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of retrotopia is a useful addition to the study of Māori women’s leadership. As mentioned, there is an inextricable connection of the term wāhine with specific notions of time and space, and Māori women are perceived as “linking the past with the present and the future” (Mikaere, 2019: 7). Likewise, Kaupapa, like Pasifika talanoa (exchange of ideas), is perceived as “a continuous conversation and narrative, without beginning or end” (Makereti, 2020: 4). Therefore, as a “back-to-the-past turn” or “‘back to the future’ tendency” (2017: 7, 9, 128), Bauman’s retrotopia, a term that will be elaborated upon later, can be placed in dialogue with Mana Wāhine, particularly with Māori spiral temporalities. This dialogue sheds light on the figure of Māori warrior-matriarchs and their alternative tribal model as depicted in Ihimaera’s novels. Bauman’s notion of retrotopia might entail a nostalgic turn to former times to envision utopias in the future that are not disconnected from that past. Nevertheless, it stands as an apt concept that contains past, present, and future in dialogue with Mana Wāhine’s spiral temporality.

Ihimaera’s novels *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer* will serve as a case study. A brief summary of both texts will be provided with a focus on the main thesis of this article; namely, that both novels centre on the patriarchal rejection of matrilinearity. Although the protagonists are women — Artemis Riripeti in *The Matriarch* and Tiana in *The Dream Swimmer* — both stories are narrated by their grandson and son, respectively: Tamatea Mahana. The narrator is presented as the Māori counterpart to Orestes in Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* (*DS* 92–93), who takes readers through the process of rewriting Western mythology to challenge the patriarchal genealogy of the clan and envision a new space for matriarchy, a new opportunity for siblings to reconcile themselves with the demonized mother.[6] Tamatea’s story frames the narrative as he retrieves information about the secret past of his grandmother and the origin of a mate (curse) in the Mahana family, which might have its source in Riripeti’s mysterious past in Venice. This archival process that extends to the mother figure in *The Dream Swimmer* passes through key historical moments, such as Te Matakite o Aoteaora, the 1975 Māori land march led by Whina Cooper that concluded with the creation of the Waitangi Tribunal to ensure a partnership between the British Crown and the Māori. In the novel, Tamatea leads another land march around the same time (1977), which is preceded by a great hui (gathering) in 1949, where his grandmother stands up as a female leader while confronting the Prime Minister and the group of Māori elders.

Riripeti becomes a clan leader after showing supernatural signs at birth and chooses her grandson Tamatea — rather than her own son Te Ariki, Tamatea’s father — as the next leader, as he shares the same signs at birth. However, the matriarch’s husband, Ihaka, tries to replace Tamatea with Toroa, Te Ariki’s allegedly biological son, presumably to regain patriarchal control. Although Tiana is accused of being responsible for the curse in the family — with resonances of Clytemnestra’s and Medea’s violent behaviour with their children — the novel ultimately locates its origin in Riripeti’s husband Ihaka’s

and the clan's support of an illegitimate member, rather than in Tamatea, who accepts a matrilineal bond with Riripeti and supports a female genealogy culminating in Eretra, his cousin Rania's child, who, again, displays the same supernatural signs at birth.

While this study acknowledges Māori tradition as accepting "the tribal, holistic, exponential and organic nature" of Māori narratives where "one story stimulates recollection of another and another and another" (*DS* 313), Tamatea learns to embrace a matrilineal genealogy through Kaupapa Māori, thus opening a new course of action for the clan. Therefore, this study aligns with similar ones by critics like Elizabeth DeLoughrey in "not promoting the glorification of a static or essentialized tradition" (1999: 63), but rather revisiting the past from spiral Māori temporary models that explicitly avoid ahistorical or sentimental nostalgia.

Pākehā imperial democracy and "Māori male utopia of domination"

Hamish Dalley quotes Edward Said, who perceived Ihimaera's historical fiction as aiming to "reclaim, rename and reinhabit" colonized space. Dalley summarizes Ihimaera's anticolonial role in trying "to recover a national past from the misrepresentations of imperialist discourse" (2012: 222–223). Like Alice Te Punga Somerville and other Māori scholars, this study contends that "refus[ing] to recognize this colonial context also takes the heat out of the politics of resistance and decolonisation in which [Māori] communities are involved" (2007: 24). Ihimaera confronts readers with what critics like Chandra Mohanty have theorized as "imperial democracy" (2011: 78), a concept that David Slater explains in relation to three interwoven factors: the geopolitics of invasiveness linked to "accumulation by dispossession"; the imposition of dominant values with the imperative to "democratise" and "globalise" and a project of "nation building or geopolitical guidance" involving the superiority of the imperial culture and the imposition of new rules, codifications, and institutional practices; and processes of penetration and imposition. The result is a paradoxical and asymmetrical model of imperial democracy between "those who 'democratise' and those who are 'democratised'" (2006: 1371–1372, 1382).

Slater's imperial factors are present in Ihimaera's novels discussed here, particularly the unending Māori history of dispossession, the land wars, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi.[7] Ihimaera himself rejects the idea of History: "there is no such thing"; rather, "there are many histories" (1991: 53), and, in *The Matriarch*, Tamatea reflects upon the truth of History to conclude that "[a]ll truth is fiction really" and histories vary "depending on whether you are the conqueror or not" (*M* 403). The blurring of fact and fiction validates a Māori version of nationhood as a counternarrative to Western conventional histories (Romaine, 2014: 36). The source of the Government's "imperialist polices towards the Maori people" (*M* 316) lies in what Bauman calls the "politics of historical memory"; that is, "an arbitrary selection and/or discarding of facts" (2017: 10) that justifies "the entitlement of the group (called 'nation') to territorially delineated political sovereignty" (2017: 62). Indeed, as clarified in Ihimaera's fiction, land "means much more to the Māori people than it does to any other New Zealander" because to them "it has a deep spiritual value" (*M* 235). After "150 years of frustration and anger over the continuing

alienation of their lands", they are "still disappearing into the bottomless pockets of the Pakeha" (*M* 235, 330).

This paradoxical process of democratization, which reveals the three factors detected by Slater — dispossession, false democratization, and imposition — is evinced in Ihimaera's fiction, where the Pākehā world proves to be "the victor" and the Māori "the vanquished" (*M* 439). Behind the imperative to democratize and globalize and the project of nation building and geopolitical guidance, there is an imperial agenda of assimilation that the Māori narrator is quick to perceive: "you were signing your worthless Treaty. *You*, Pakeha, began taking away our culture. You said at the time that we were now one people… What you really meant was that we now belonged to *you*. That was why we went to war" (*M* 74; emphasis in the original). Chandra Mohanty connects imperial democracy with dispossessed Indigenous bodies, "bio-regulated or bio-militarised", which are constructed as "non-citizens, criminals, as 'bare life'" (2011: 78). In this sense, in Ihimaera's novels most of the Māori prophets — Te Kooti, Kara, or Wi Pere — are jailed as part of what Bauman considers the criminalization of ethnic autonomy with leaders being "proclaimed rebels or terrorists" (2001: 91).

Biblical resonances link the Māori with the chosen people of Israel. The Parliament in Wellington with its alleged democracy is compared with "Pharaoh's palace" and described as "a house of intrigue and murder" (*DS* 343). Indeed, the narration insists that there were only four Māori representatives in the Upper House, claiming that "[t]he Government should be guided entirely by the Maoris [sic] in regard to Maori matters" (*M* 326). This fake democracy and the Pākehā hidden agenda are revealed in the Prime Minister's strategy of sending the Minister of Māori Affairs to meet the ope (group of people moving together), rather than meeting them himself. The Māori people understand the Prime Minister's dishonest plan to make them think that this Māori Minister is "a mirror", a reflection of themselves, but they eventually decide to "break the mirror" (*DS* 343). The Pākehā institutionalization of forgetting is completed with the historical indoctrination of children at school, where they are taught about Captain Cook's discovery of New Zealand, but not about the murder of Māori "so that a flag could be raised" (*M* 37). Apart from exposing colonial genocidal policy, the narrator vindicates an alternative Māori history beyond the Pākehā imperial model, one involving "oral history, whakapapa and family records and folklore" as well as "written history to subvert the main historical discourse" (1991: 53).[8] Therefore, he demands the consideration of what is patronizingly read as prehistory (*M* 6). Ihimaera participates in the Indigenous demand for self-determination, since "'it is for the tangata whenua to determine Pakeha status in this land' through 'a process of negotiation' done on Maori terms" (Walker, qtd. in Mikaere, 2004: 19). Ihimaera delves into Treaty jurisprudence — the part of New Zealand law dealing with Māori rights — and like some Māori legal academics, he exposes "the New Zealand legal system for the fraud that it is" (Mikaere, 2011: 2–3).

In contrast to this imperial democracy, what is the alternative model promoted by the Rangatira? If, according to Slater, democracy always remains contested and can take so many different forms — "popular", "liberal", "radical", "social", "associational", and so on (2006: 1380) — which type is implemented in Ihimaera's novels? Critics like Lindsay Peterson (2000), Steve Friedman (2012), or Andraž Teršek (2021) investigate the relationship between democracy and utopia. Regardless of whether, according to Teršek,

we need utopia (2021: 52), Peterson speaks of the "logic of disappointment" to conclude that utopias are "inured to disappointment" (2000: 83). This seems to be the leitmotif in Ihimaera's novels, where Māori history is one of cyclical defeat; all they want is to "have someone to believe in", and they recurrently welcome a new prophet that will lead them to the Promised Land (*DS* 135, 147). The cyclical utopia found among Māori male elders resonates, though, as will be elucidated later, with the "tyranny of perfection" or "utopias of domination" described by Friedman (2017: 7). Friedman warns against "traditional" utopias that "seek to abolish not only difference but change" and whose perfectionism "has obvious authoritarian implications" since "[j]ust about anything can be justified if the goal is the perfect society" (2017: 2, 10).

As Makereti asserts, "what we now think of as traditional is quite often already post-contact or post-colonisation" (2018: 59). There is general consent (see Yates-Smith, 2003: 10) that post-contact Aotearoa led to the invisibilization and powerlessness of Māori women, mainly as a result of the downplay of the roles of atua wāhine (goddesses) in Māori mythology (Yates-Smith, 2003: 10). Ani Mikaere highlights that Māori men retold Māori cosmogony to Pākehā ethnographers with a "shift in emphasis, away from the powerful female influence in the stories and towards the male characters" (2019: 9). This shift has been the focus of Mana Wāhine and its study of the effects of colonization. There is a general tendency in Māori scholarship to consider, as stated by Aroha Yates-Smith (2003: 10) or Leonie Pihama (2020: 355), that this specifically Māori theoretical field is "essential in countering the impact of over 170 years of colonial gendered practices". Critics like Mikaere highlight a Māori model of social organization without a distinction between private and public, where the whole community act as care-givers, thus allowing a certain flexibility for women beyond the nuclear family. This "enabled women to perform a wide range of roles, including leadership roles" (2019: 9). This might explain the rationale for the Māori male utopia of domination under analysis.

The Mahana clan, "ruled by mana, by divine right", is presented as a family "model of autocracy" with royal and mythical aristocratic ascendancy and a power "regulated by spells and portents and by gods" (*DS* 359–360), which recalls divine right in Western absolutism. Although there are occasional Māori women leaders of chiefly status, they are perceived as aberrations in a utopian model based on patriarchal bonds. An ariki (holy person) was "destined to be the medium between the iwi and the gods" (*M* 34). Ariki were educated at the university of the Māori, "one of the most exclusive universities in the world". Women were "not permitted as academic acolytes" and were only allowed to enter "the lower school, the wahre-maire, the house of necromancy, wizardry and shamanism" (*M* 342, 343). This post-contact utopian model where "the power is mainly with the men" (*M* 26) rests on sexism — as when Wi Pere speaks out against the Women's Suffrage Bill and rejects the presence of women in the House (*M* 338) — and communal foundations on incest and rape, for the myths of Tane and Maui (*M* 4, 13) seem to justify incest inside the Mahana family, as does the case of Uncle Pita and his daughter (*M* 20).

In Ihimaera's fiction, tribalism is inextricably linked to a patriarchal model of domination, which he systematically denounces as the actual organization of the clan around a divine-like male leader. He thus revises patriarchal views of tribalism and domination to envision new forms of tribal configuration that are connected with democratic goals

and alternative leadership, particularly that of warrior-matriarchs and their retrotopian model, which will be explained in the next section. Regan, Tamatea's Pākehā wife, complains to him: "I married all of you" (*M* 19). Ihimaera delves into "tribal epistemologies" (Mika et al., 2022: 7) and participates in the debate about Māori tribalism, coinciding with Roger Maaka in trying "to move out of the fog created by the intense politicisation that surrounds definitions and perceptions of the tribe" (2003: iii). Maaka contrasts critics' static conceptualizations of tribalism with different stages in its (re)configuration over the twentieth century.[9]

Ann Sullivan documents the pre-contact Māori tribal model, "a highly sophisticated governing system that emphasized the collective good", which was dynamited by "colonizing powers […] swiftly enact[ing] and enforc[ing] laws that denied tribal and communal ownership of land" (1995: 43). Angela Ballara traces an earlier perception of "static" tribalism (until the 1970s) based on the "superficial observation" by Western settlers (1999: 19). Accordingly, tribes were perceived as "functioning political units" since the times of the founding ancestors, whose people "were believed to be invariably divided into segmented sections or sub-groups […] suggesting a hierarchical and structural subordination to the main political unit, the tribe" (1999: 18). The underlying assumption of this static political model is that it was dismantled after Europeans came, leading to a "bastardised" system, "a combination of European concepts with the surviving remnants of Maori custom" (1999: 21). From the late 1990s, according to Ballara, there is a prevailing perception of tribalism as an ever-changing and dynamic model succumbing to social and political changes both in pre-contact Māori society and after (1999: 19).

Critics like Jeffrey Sissons, in turn, collect the recent call for a radical redefinition of tribalism by alluding to "relocated indigenous identities" or those "Māori who choose to be non-tribal" (2004: 19). In contrast to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its promise in the Māori text of "retaining tribal self-determination" (Kawharu, qtd. in Mika et al., 2022: 8), Sissons refers to John Tamihere (a Labor MP in Auckland) and Roger Maaka as voices looking for a radical redefinition of the tribe: while Tamihere presents tribes as sect-like groups with "impostors who continue to chant and make much ado over the whanau, hapu and iwi mantra as a song in itself so that few can feast in the name of the many", Maaka speaks of the "tribe-cum-nation" as "an aspect of elite ideology" that is "not meaningful to most Maori" (qtd. in Sissons, 2004: 19). As elucidated by Sissons, tribalism is generally perceived by the critical figures covered in his study as being of the past while assimilation is the future (2004: 28).

Murtazashvili takes the idea of *asabiyya*, or group feeling, from the medieval Arab historian Ibn Khaldum's theory of tribal politics, as the key for communal success in opposition to the negative connotation of "blind group loyalty" that is given nowadays (2020: n. p.). In the context of the United States, Andrew Sullivan speaks of the *Über*-tribe as constituting "the nation-state, a megatribe that unites a country around shared national rituals, symbols, music, history, mythology, and events, that forms the core unit of belonging that makes a national democracy possible" (2017: n. p.). In contrast with a tyrannical version of tribalism, Sullivan refers to "healthy tribalism", which he links with "a sense of belonging" that does not destabilize democracy, does not calcify into something bigger "than our smaller, multiple loyalties", and does not turn "rival tribes into

enemies" (2017: n. p.). The previous reference to indoctrination and prophetic figures suggests a tyrannical version of tribalism, which is undoubtedly present in Ihimaera's fiction. Not only do tribal chiefs succeed one another, but often several coetaneous leaders confront rather than cooperate with each other, as is the case with Tamatea, Toroa, and Kara. It is through the retrotopia implemented by warrior-matriarchs, as will be analysed in the next section, that male leaders understand the *Über*-tribe concept. The female retrotopia explored next can be read as Ihimaera's alternative radical redefinition of the tribe beyond the models discussed by Sissons.[10]

The warrior-matriarch: Female retrotopia

Although some critics have not applauded Ihimaera's mythmaking — Atarea Poananga considers *The Matriarch* "a profoundly woman-hating book" with "sexist mythology" and Māori women characters "essentially destructive and evil" (1986: 27; 1987: 28) — Simon Perris acknowledges Ihimaera's feminist postcolonial revision of myth (2015: 93). In *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer*, as contended by Yates-Smith, there are "powerful statements of mana wahine" (2003: 54) and a prevalent feeling that "all men have gone soft" (*M* 25). While Ihaka is described by his son as once "a splendid emperor, autocratic, triumphant" (*M* 206), now the Mahana patriarchs — Ihaka, Te Ariki, and Uncle Alexis — are men with "no virility" and "no sense of the overwhelming maleness [they] had once possessed" (*DS* 24). In this context of emasculation, Māori women leaders of chiefly status like Riria or Riripeti, and even Tiana as a leader in the shadow, might be read as necessary exceptions, mythical women, or "warrior-matriarchs" (Perris, 2005: 104).

These potent Māori women leaders embrace what we might call a controversial model of retrotopia. In his posthumously published volume, *Retrotopia*, Bauman quotes Svetlana Boym as warning against the danger of nostalgia and the lack of critical thinking in current national and nationalist revivals (2017: xiv). Bauman connects this "global epidemic of nostalgia" with "the advent of retrotopian sentiments and practices" (2017: 12) and defines retrotopia as a "back-to-the-past turn" or "'back to the future' tendency" that seeks "genuinely meaningful ideas" by "turn[ing], nostalgically, to the buried (prematurely?) grand ideas of the past" (2017: 7, 9, 128). In the current panorama of political surfeit and epidemic nostalgia, Bauman considers that "positive, boisterous, assertive and self-confident utopia" has been replaced by "diffident, dejected and defeatist retrotopia" (2017: 123) in a liquid modernity that looks to the past for safety. Although Māori women leaders in Ihimaera's fiction seem to portray this nostalgic retrotopia, my contention is that they ultimately adhere to what Pilar Villar calls "liberating" retrotopias (2022: 189), an idea that coexists with utopianism, and with Friedman's democracy as an open-ended utopia. Such a utopia "allows for dissent and difference" and "is open to the prospect of further change", in contrast with traditional and authoritarian utopias (2012: 7).

The danger of nostalgia resides in the Māori women leaders' utter defence of patriarchal whakapapa and their instrumental role in perpetuating this model. Riripeti sees herself as replicating her antecessor Riria's role. When Riria's son, Wi Pere, became a man, his mother changed her strategy as "a black queen on the chessboard" and "removed herself and put him down in the place where she had been […] The time had come to

command those powers, but also to claim those of his father" (*M* 311). Riripeti replicates the same role with Tamatea and both women become "temporal queens" (*M* 208) in this patriarchal chessboard. Riripeti teaches Tamatea the "sexist mythology" criticized by Atarea Poananga, but whose transmission she sees as her "duty" (*M* 15), as part of her fragile entitlement to power as a warrior-matriarch. Indeed, as such, she is conceived as "an inconsistency" and "an aberration" (*M* 105–106). As clarified by Ihimaera, Māori women had cultural but not political power and, regardless of their triumphs, they were "engaged in negotiations within a primarily patriarchal cultural and political framework" (Meklin and Meklin, 2004: 360).

However, just as these women learn to copy the Pākehā as a strategy to then "turn [their] knowledge to his destruction" (*M* 427), in the 1949 ope Riripeti confronts both the Prime Minister and the group of chiefs and elders with a sense of power that resonates with a pre-colonial past when "Māori women occupied very important leadership positions in traditional society, positions of military, spiritual, and political significance' (Mikaere, 2019: 9). When asked about her "unusual name", she mockingly empowers herself through Western mythology to present herself, like Artemis, as an active huntress (*M* 250). We also learn that in 1929 she "verbally attacked" another Prime Minister (*DS* 118). With male elders, she questions ancestral beliefs in a manner that is far from nostalgic. In whakapapa, "symbolically males are tapu or sacred and women are profane or noa", but she destabilizes the group of men by showing her genitals in public as "the worst possible offence," since she "neutralised their sacredness" (*DS* 247). She thus damages their personal tapu through sorcery and public humiliation (Mead, 2003: 46) and enters the sphere of men by symbolically changing her connection from the moon to the sun, "black and awesome" (*M* 92), and by asserting that, in spite of her duty with genealogy, she has "to find her own way" (*M* 426).

What might be perceived as the dangerous politics of memory in warrior-matriarchs like Riripeti or Tiana turns out to be an instrument for communal cohesiveness. Both women take part in the imaginative, mythical, and fictional recreation of their own identities. Riripeti becomes "a legend" (*DS* 29) by turning her life into fiction (*M* 1) and actively participating in the mystification of her persona in line with all other Māori prophets. She thus perceives herself as "the true daughter of Moses […] set to lead the Maori out of bondage from the Pharaoh" (*DS* 18). Likewise, Tiana manufactures her past, so that she becomes "a woman without a history" (*DS* 58). Just like Riripeti, who is linked to superstition, Tiana occupies "a mysterious position in Ngati Porou mythology" as part of the so-called dream swimmers (*DS* 159). The superstitious side of these women places them in tune with retrotopia and allows them to travel back to the past in dreams, to recover a mythical space that has been lost. The taniwha (mythical sea serpent) was seen for the last time in 1914, just before the First World War, which led to the beginning of the world of man (*M* 439). Riripeti, described as a witch (*M* 354), is equated to the sea serpent (*M* 425), a parallel that is highlighted with the comparison of both Riripeti and Tiana with Medusa (*M* 127, 360, 390).

Ihimaera states that the Roman names Artemis and Tiana suggest "the roles of matriarch and mother, one political and the other personal" (Meklin and Meklin, 2004: 360). The political and the personal blend in the extreme power of these warrior-matriarchs: "although man made woman, woman makes man at birth" (M 259). The taniwha

— whose extinction suggests the death of matriarchy — gives way to the spider, a central symbol for Riripeti, not only of power, but also of communal cooperation. During the 1949 hui, Riripeti is known as "the Great Spider Woman of Waituhi" with "her tribe of spiders with her" (*DS* 245–246), which she uses to confront the male elders, particularly Timoti, whom she eats in her fantasies. Spiderwebs are described as "glorious" and "beautiful" and the spider, controlled by Riripeti, is considered "a good omen" (*M* 352). Indeed, after her death, "[s]piders still haven't returned" and the world is described as having "gone into dysfunction. A once prosperous kingdom had become a wasteland" (*DS* 185). The 1977 land march led by Tamatea offers the opportunity for a liberating retrotopia. Rather than the previous obsessive vendetta between Riripeti and Tiana, the latter takes an active part in the former's retrotopian project since she encourages Tamatea to "remember the time of the spider" and "find it again" (*M* 434). When the Māori group is ready for departure, a "black warrior spider" lands on the window of the front bus and "seem[s] to look" at Tama, reminding him of Riripeti's motto that "where there is one there is a thousand" (*DS* 338).

This is the spirit that leaves behind imperial democracy and utopias of domination to embrace a model of democracy. When at the parliament in Wellington, the whole group is organized by Tiana into a gigantic spider, where men are the legs and women the heart and the eyes (*DS* 186). Rather than representing what Dan Silver calls "passive equality", in which people "outside of the structures of decision-making" are "assigned roles as passive objects", this group stands for "everyday makers" that expand "the democratic imagination" as an "open-ended and contestable process" (2018: 162). Together and "[b]y some power of suggestion", they simulate a spider which gives them a "big sense of power" (*DS* 350, 352). This cooperative work takes "the shape of a killing spider" which "fac[es] the glass doors of Parliament" until it "speed[s] up the steps of Parliament, through the glass doors and *in*" (*DS* 354; emphasis in the original). As a result, Tamatea confronts the Prime Minister "as your partner of the Treaty of Waitangi and not as a supplicant" (*DS* 356) and the liberating retrotopia gains force: "Sir, the past does not lie behind us. It is before us, a long line of ancestors to whom we are accountable. Until the past is settled we cannot rest" (*DS* 356–357). The episode concludes with a description of the Parliament as wrapped in a web and the parliamentary security officers as "*vibrating* the webs as they came" (*DS* 357; emphasis in the original). In addition, there is a reconciliation with the group of male elders as Timoti does not stop the ope this time as he tried to do with Riripeti in the past (*DS* 354). This group formation might stand for Sullivan's *Über*-tribe and the "healthy tribalism" previously mentioned. The communal force of the spider and the reference to Te Tiriti o Waitangi seem to remind the Pākehā of their promise regarding tribal self-determination and, far from giving in to individualizing forces — meant by Pākehā law to break tribes into nuclear families and force assimilation — through Tamatea and the spider symbol the female leader envisions a radical new model of tribalism linked with democracy.

This specifically female retrotopia shares Bauman's idea that it is not "a straightforward return to a previously practiced mode of life" but rather "conscious attempts at *iteration*, rather than *reiteration*" which elicit "selective memorizing, intertwined with selective forgetting" (2017: 9). This group of powerful warrior-matriarchs return to the past without neglecting their whakapapa, and, although allegedly embracing nostalgia

and patriarchal genealogy, they actually weave together, through iteration and selective memorizing (and forgetting), a cooperative spiderweb where the matriarch spider is just a beacon to the clan, made up of small spiders that simulate a powerful body. In this figure the matriarch/political and the mother/personal blend in an effective simulation, "an unending spiral going" (*DS* 313) within this tribal culture.

The Māori Orestes: "Healthy" tribalism and Wāhine temporality

Female retrotopia is not limited to women. Tamatea stands for a new generation of male warriors open to explore a matrilineal model and cherish this powerful maternal force. Ihimaera participates in what Elizabeth DeLoughrey considers a significant trend in contemporary fiction that uses "genealogical and spiral temporalities within indigenous claims to sovereignty", thus "disrupt[ing] the linear novel" and "reforming the individualistic narrative into a communal Maori narration of [sacred,] spiral time" (1999: 59, 60). This conception of time, according to DeLoughrey, undermines charges, such as those by Norman Simms (1986) or Simon During (1990), that Māori temporalities are "nostalgic and atavistic" (1999: 61). After accepting his role as leader, Tamatea speaks of the cyclical tribal force as a dynamo: "You just can't go to the dynamo, press the button and everything starts again. You've got to find out what's wrong, why the dynamo stopped in the first place and fix it. I've pressed the button. But the mate is still there" (*DS* 270). Tamatea embraces the previously explained cyclical temporality of Kaupapa and wāhine, which dialogues with Julia Kristeva's "women's time", a temporality that involves "a return journey from the past to the present and back again" (1993: 3). However, rather than a cyclical time, which implies unchanging repetition, in Māori temporalities DeLoughrey advocates a "regenerative, spiral temporality", that is, "repetition with a difference" (1999: 68), the iteration previously explained in warrior-matriarchs. Just like them, Tamatea revises and reinterprets the whakapapa suggesting "a revision of the past", a "unification across spiral time" that can "strengthen the alliances of the future", a sacred time that can be used strategically "to authenticate indigenous sovereignty", which in this model crystallizes in open-ended democracy (DeLoughrey, 1999: 63, 73).

Tamatea eventually learns to embrace this "women's time" as his legitimacy and entitlement to tribal power are questioned just like those of Māori women leaders. As "the eldest son of an eldest son of an eldest son, going right back to the beginning of the world" (*DS* 23), he is part of a "patriarchal line of leadership stretching from Te Kore", thus responding to the patriarchal rule that "men, particularly the first born (mataamua), carry a responsibility of leadership and whanua representation" (Nikora, 2012: 402). However, Tamatea proves to be a different male leader and a catalyst for a matrilineal alternative, even when there is a central resonance of the *Oresteia* and the suggestion that "[o]rder will not be restored" until Orestes "kills his mother" (*DS* 92). Tiana, the Māori Clytemnestra, has not killed her husband, but she is perceived by this Māori Orestes as "a thief and a murderess, for she had stolen my birthright and knifed all the expectations that Riripeti had gifted upon me" (*DS* 362). Tamatea participates in what Perris calls "the unfair treatment suffered by all Māori women" in their "erroneous" association with

death (2015: 93). Tiana is constantly presented in the novel as holding a knife with which she threatens her own children and castrates her foster father, who had abused her (*DS* 165). Both Riripeti and Tiana stand for the mythical figure of the Mother Goddess, which Perris describes as "maleficent *and* maternal" (2015: 86; emphasis in original). Indeed, Tamatea's fear of the mother — whom he considers a "betrayer" (*DS* 362) — is incarnated in scenes where the matriarch shares the Mother Goddess role: "And I would escape again and run through another door. And another. And another. And always there would be a woman standing there who looked like the matriarch but was Tiana, Tiana, Tiana. And the knife kept on slashing into my heart" (*M* 127). Tiana is made responsible for the family mate (*DS* 362) in not allowing her son to develop his birthright through Riripeti due to jealousy (*DS* 204).

Tamatea's anagnorisis comes when, not forgiving Tiana before her death, he finally understands that the only person who attempted to steal his birthright was grandfather Ihaka and, by extension, his own father Te Ariki, as he did not support Tamatea when Ihaka presented Toroa to the marae as Te Ariki's eldest son (*DS* 408). The whole Mahana clan is to blame for the mate, as they did not respect Riripeti's change of will in Tamatea's favour (*DS* 403). Rather than a source of death, then, Tiana is revealed as the protective wife and mother who, as a "dream swimmer", saves Tamatea from death (*DS* 105) and throws a knife to her own husband to defend her son (*M* 21). In addition, Tiana stands for the connection between the Māori atua of death and notions of maternal care in Rarohenga (the underworld). As clarified by Mikaere, this atua descended to Rarohenga "to prepare a place for [her many children] and to care for them in death. She has remained there ever since, known as Hine-nui-te-pō, guardian of the spirits of all her human descendants" (2019: 7). This is how Tiana embraces the maternal engaging in the reconsideration of the role of atua wāhine (Pihama, 2020: 353). Tamatea ultimately detaches from the patriarchal line concluding that he will never forgive his father for blaming the mate on Tiana (*DS* 409). Tamatea's furies and revenge are finally directed to the father (*DS* 408) through a revision of the past that redirects revenge against Agamemnon and not Clytemnestra (*DS* 150). Tamatea's endorsement of a matrilineal bond — "I have grandmother's mana. I need none else" (*M* 411) — makes him share the burden of the mate with women (*DS* 369–370). Toroa's choice as a leader is then read as a patriarchal strategy to avoid Tamatea's matrilineal inclination.

Tamatea shares with Riripeti and Eretra the unquestionable birth sign of leadership and inherits the spider's power, a female force that comes directly from Riripeti (*M* 266). He thus shares the matakite (or visionary) role of women inherited from ancestors (Yates-Smith, 2003: 53). And yet, despite tribal factions, all the male leaders eventually understand the *Über*-tribe concept, which leads to "healthy" tribalism in Tamatea through female retrotopia. Kara concludes: "The one was the same as the other and the other was the same as the one" (*DS* 217), and Toroa tells Tamatea: "Our battle has always been the same", to which the latter replies: "Yes" (*DS* 414). Tamatea, or this Māori Orestes, ends the journey in 1997 visiting Venice — no longer the cursed and forbidden city associated with the matriarch's secret past. In a chapel there is a statue of Artemis that reconciles the matriarch and the mother, the political and the personal, Riripeti and Tiana, past and present. Riripeti's years in Venice, which seemed to be a legend, are finally materialized

when Tamatea brings back the aristocratic sword of Catarina, which "was buried many years in New Zealand" as the matriarch had taken it "by accident" (*DS* 416). Tiana kept it in secret until she died and Tamatea found it in her casket as "the final gift to us" (*DS* 416). Rather than the source of the family mate, as was thought for years, this sword becomes the symbolic union and power of the Mother Goddess, a way to restore the "original chapel" that "was destroyed in the mid-eighteenth century" (*DS* 416).

This Māori Orestes finally confronts his trauma and concludes that Tiana has *always* loved her children (*DS* 423), and the story ends with Tamatea passing the baton to Eretra: "This is our implicit contract, Eretra. The past is not something that lies behind us" (*DS* 418–419). In this story it is not a king who pulls the sword from the stone, but rather there is a woman's sword, Catarina's, and a line of women who preserve it as a secret gift. It does not matter if a man like Tamatea takes the sword, as long as he returns it to the matriarchal chapel, this active, spiral revisitation of the past that leads to the understanding of a female whakapapa. Ultimately, "the claim" to this force "will be negotiated by the runanga, the collective energy of the iwi" (*DS* 417), the open-ended democracy through wāhine temporality, now embraced by Tamatea and promoted by warrior-matriarchs.

Conclusion

Despite the controversial reception of Witi Ihimaera's early fiction as pessimistic, apolitical, and non-feminist, the present study, drawing on Māori methodology and Kaupapa and Mana Wāhine theory, has aimed at elucidating the author's proposal in *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer* of a matrilineal Māori model where women leaders of chiefly status pave the road for open-ended democracy. In contrast with autocratic systems of fake democracy — such as Pākehā imperial democracy and the male utopias of domination promoted by Māori male leaders and their tyrannical versions of tribalism — Māori warrior-matriarchs like Artemis and Pākehā heroines like Tiana embrace retrotopia to revisit patriarchal ancestral projects buried prematurely. Beyond the danger of nostalgia and lack of critical spirit suggested by Boym and Bauman, and by critics like Simms or During, these leaders delve into spiral temporality and fabricate their own female symbols, such as the spider. These female emblems are used collectively to pursue communal cooperation and a model of democracy, where everyday markers rather than passive objects actively participate in the democratic process, as when the clan members form a symbolic spider and take the Parliament together. Rather than the tyranny of perfection or utopias of domination, from which Māori elders exclude women, the retrotopia of Māori women leaders of chiefly status strategically nourishes itself from patriarchal ancestry but welcomes women, thus freshly opening new democratic directions. By making Tamatea the narrator and leader in both novels, Ihimaera opens this female model to men who are ready to rewrite the patriarchal past and adhere to a matrilineal model. As the new Māori Orestes, Tamatea learns to appreciate the mythical figure of the Mother Goddess by openly vindicating the link with Riripeti and exonerating Clytemnestra in Tiana. The male tribal plan to replace Tamatea with his allegedly biological brother Tomoa might respond to a defence mechanism to avoid matrilineal succession. Therefore,

the restoration of Tamatea's leadership — and the final discovery that the family curse is due to patriarchal hidden practice — is the ultimate triumph of democracy and an alternative model of "healthy tribalism" beyond domination and imperial power.

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Notes

1. Pākehā is a Māori term for a New Zealander of European descent.
2. This study will avoid italicizing Māori words following Patricia Grace's idea that italics lead to the treatment of Māori as a foreign language "in its own country" (Makereti, 2020: 14).
3. Simmonds (2011: 13) refers to the term Mana Wāhine as an "exciting development of Kaupapa Māori which explicitly engages with gender relations".
4. This study follows the general assumption in Kaupapa Māori theory that "code-switch to tereo Māori means that elements culturally specific to Māori will be glossed over, whitewashed, deemphasised, trivialised or minimised" (Gildea, qtd. in Makereti, 2020: 15). In order to produce "legitimate critique" (Makereti, 2020: 15), this study will provide more elaborate explanations of central and complex Māori terms since simple translations "end up solidifying something that was never solid" (Makereti, 2018: 59).
5. Pihama traces a genealogy of Māori women's groups and organizations since 1893 (2020: 356).
6. Subsequent references to both novels will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text and using the abbreviations *M* (for *The Matriarch*) and *DS* (for *The Dream Swimmer*).
7. Te Tiriti o Waitangi, known in English as The Treaty of Waitangi, was an agreement made in 1840 between the British Crown and more than 500 Rangatira, the hereditary Māori leaders of the hapū (kinship group). It granted British sovereignty over New Zealand by Lieutenant-Governor William Hobson. According to Claudia Orange, "[a]lthough it was intended to create unity, different understandings of the treaty, and breaches of it, have caused conflict" (2023: n.p.), particularly because the English version is not a direct translation of the Māori one.
8. Whakapapa is commonly translated as "genealogy" but it encompasses "*all* forms of connection and relationship" (Makereti, 2020: 3, 7), "a fundamental attribute and gift of birth" (Mead, 2003: 42), "a cultural template through which we understand our descent and ancestral relationships" (Pihama, 2020: 355).
9. Maaka (2003: iii) mentions conceptualizations such as renaissance (Durie 1998), neo tribalism (Rata 2000), the reification of culture (Hansen 1989, van Meijl 1996), and political struggle (Walker 1990).
10. In his analysis of Ihimaera's *The Uncle's Story*, Yanwei Tan speaks of gay tribalism "with all its connotations of a blend of sexual tolerance and communal unity" that "can be regarded as an attempt to reform Māori tribal tradition in the context of a liberal democratic society" (2014: 376). The warrior-matriarchs' reconceptualization of tribalism can be considered as having a similar reforming direction.

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