

Good-Eating:
Ethics and Biculturalism in Reading
"The Bone People"

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THREE "POSTS" CURRENTLY still mark the terrain of academic literary critical practice in Aotearoa New Zealand: poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. They look a bit battered, now we realize in each case that the prefix does not signify a confident move beyond, but only a suspicion of, the term it modifies. Moreover, paradoxically, in certain ways the confluence of these three types of suspicion can reinstall the very modes of humanist reading — universalizing, ahistorical — that they are designed to critique. The post-"posts" suspicion of ethics, for example, in the reading of literary texts, can leave the reader dependent on a kind of *laissez faire* ethical "common-sense" implying judgements based on an entirely humanist mode of identification with the fictional characters¹. Thus, in the case of Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* (1985) — one of the more ethically provocative novels to have emerged from this country in recent decades — the reader's response to the novel can be presumed to operate in precisely these terms: "The language of the novel, for all its word-spinning tendencies, serves ultimately to require us to make moral discriminations about the actions and intentions of the characters as though they were actual humans, not fictional constructs" (Williams 90).

Not long ago, of course, critics insisted that this was indeed the defining function of literature; that, as the Leavisites and I. A. Richards thought, the best creative fiction is designed to give its readers a heightened understanding of the human condition in all its variety, and thereby to create in them a more acute moral sensibility.² This mode of moral reading — an ethical default setting, as it were — continues to operate. The empathy that I, as a reader,

might feel with a certain character, puts me in a dilemma that I might not otherwise encounter (what would I do in this case?). In this sense, the novel becomes an extended version of the narrative mode that occurs within philosophical discourse on ethics — that moment when the philosopher constructs an anecdote in which the reader imagines her or himself the protagonist. Kant, for instance, describes a man plotting a murder who asks you whether his intended victim is at home (Kant 65). Knowing the house is empty, ought you to lie, and thereby prevent the crime? Or ought you to obey the categorical imperative and speak the truth whatever the circumstances? In this way various possible narrative and ethical outcomes are explored.³

It is precisely this kind of narrative, devolving upon the extrapolation of an ethical dilemma, that Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* appears to offer. The reader's primary locus of identification is from the outset the main character, Kerewin Holmes. She develops an odd friendship with a young mute boy, Simon, and through him his adoptive father Joe. She then discovers that the man beats the child severely. Having entered her mind very thoroughly by means of a couple of hundred pages of highly idiosyncratic internal monologue, the reader finds her or himself sharing this dilemma. What should she do? What would you do?⁴

I want to suggest that, in the attempt to read this novel, the ethical encounters the bicultural in a way that poses various kinds of challenge to "legibility" — by which I mean several things: the capacity of the novel to be read, and the ability or competence of a given reader to do so, but also the competence of the author to write this particular novel.

In the aftermath of its publication, many readers — including ones as influential and diverse as C. K. Stead, Merata Mita, and Simon During — called into question the novel's ethical propriety in various ways. During and Mita both suggest that the novel uses Maori culture by absorbing and controlling it within Occidental narrative forms — a suggestion which implies a kind of unethical discursive or generic imperialism on the part of the text, if not the writer herself (During, "Postmodernism or Postcolonialism?" 374; Mita 7). Stead goes further. He wrote an article in response to the novel's winning of the Pegasus award for Maori literature in which,

to begin with, he questioned the ancestry of its author: "Of Keri Hulme's eight great-grandparents one only was Maori." While stopping short of specifying the exact genetic fraction which might constitute a moral right to produce such a novel, and to win such an award, Stead did go on to assert that

some essential Maori elements in her novel are unconvincing. Her uses of Maori language and mythology strike me as willed, self-conscious, not inevitable, not entirely authentic. Insofar as she is an observer of things outside herself, Hulme has observed Maoris and identified with them. (Stead 103-04)

Stead's objection — implicitly here, and later explicitly — is based on ethical grounds: he locates something lacking in the novel's wilfulness, its consciousness, and its authenticity; he also alleges an improper — perhaps a colonialist? — identification by the author with a Maoriness that is "outside herself."

The article concludes with a speculation that what it calls the novel's "bitter aftertaste, something black and negative deeply ingrained in its imaginative fabric," derives from the way it presents extreme violence against a child, while simultaneously demanding understanding for the man who commits it. "In principle such charity is admirable," remarks Stead, but "In fact, the line between charity and imaginative complicity is very fine indeed" (107-08). This is another improper identification, then: this time between the implied reader and the character Joe.

Various critics have responded by defending Hulme's bicultural credentials and by affirming her novel's narrative sophistication and its complication of the boundaries between Maori and Pakeha discursive modes, as well as emphasizing its condemnation of child abuse.⁵ What interests me, however, is that from the outset, the critical reception of the book has been structured by ethical questions. Who has the right to write about bi- or trans-culturalism? How should they do so? From what position ought Maori culture to be addressed and represented? And how should violence in literature be written about and read?

Kerewin's dilemma must be read with all of this in mind. The discovery of the scars of repeated beatings on the body of the child leads her to consider various options, which the reader follows

with her: "Ring up Child Welfare and report the bloody mess he's in" (Hulme 147); "Say nothing to Joe. . . . Tell nobody — let it continue, let the child endure it by himself; . . . tell Joe, but not tell anyone else."

Who else to tell anyway? The fuzz? The Welfare? That means the experts get to wade in, but how does the section in the Crimes Act go? Something about assault on a child, carries a sentence maximum five years, child removed from environment detrimental to physical or mental health and well-being . . . that's no answer.

But just telling Joe wouldn't do any good. . . . I'd have to look out for the child, and that means getting heavy. Getting involved. (149)

Clearly, the novel departs radically from a conventional code of social responsibility: the fuzz, the Welfare, the experts are all dismissed as components in a social mechanism that cannot help in the resolution of this problem. Instead, the novel poses an ethics of narrative determinism. These three characters ought be kept in relationship, because somehow — according to a kind of proair-etic imperative, if for no other reason — the ethics of this situation must continue to be thought out.⁶

The way the novel pursues this choice, however, puts under increasing strain the principles of an ethical humanism, with their basis in the calculation of the subject, or the rationalizing imperatives of an objective ego. The second moment of ethical crisis in the novel occurs when Kerewin, furious at Simon's smashing of her guitar, one of her most treasured of many prized possessions, abuses him over the phone, and authorizes Joe to beat him again. Crucially, our locus of identification for this moment changes. We experience this onslaught from the child's perspective, not Kerewin's or Joe's.

Her voice is strange. It rasps; it grates; it abrades. She can't touch him physically so she is beating him with her voice. . . .

She has finished having anything to do with him.

She hates him.

She loathes every particle of his being. . . .

She hopes his father knocks him sillier than he is now. (307)

Up to this point, Kerewin has obeyed the obligations implied by an ethic that values involvement over distance. What then does the

reader make of this sudden transformation of her engagement into such appalling violence?

I suggest that the reason a humanist ethical reading might find the book, at this moment, illegible — or even immoral — is that the text has actually, all along, been dismantling the subjectivity upon which that ethics is based.

The first part of the novel, I would therefore argue, constructs a portrait of Kerewin as a parody of the Cartesian self-reflecting ego upon which humanist ethics is premised. She is established from the outset as a pathologically self-contained individual:

I am encompassed by a high wall, high and hard and stone, with only my brainy nails to tear it down.

And I cannot do it. (7)

Kerewin represents the ego caught up in solitary contemplation of itself: she addresses herself as “my soul,” or “Holmes”; she writes in a journal that she thinks of as her “paper soul” (96-99, 261, 431-37); her typical night’s entertainment is to get drunk looking at herself in a mirror by the light of a candle (275). These gestures typify the post-Cartesian ego, locked in a fascinated and narcissistic embrace with its own reflections.

The first hint that this hyper-individualist isolation will be interrupted occurs early on, at a moment Hulme borrows from *Robinson Crusoe*: Kerewin, wandering along the beach of her “almost-island,” finds, not a footprint, but a sandal (14). Defoe’s novel, of course, has recently come to be read as a founding document of the discourse of the Western individual subject, and also of that subject as fundamentally constituted by its colonizing relationship over others.⁷ Early in Hulme’s novel, then, this recollection of *Crusoe*’s relationship to Friday shadows Kerewin’s egocentrism with a colonialist tendency to foreclose the place of the other. The intruder in this case, of course, emerges in the person of Simon/Haimona, whose doubled name, along with his obscure and hybrid genealogy, reflect a thoroughgoing cultural ambivalence: lost son of a disowned Irish aristocrat, adoptee of a Maori father.

On meeting the child who has wandered onto her “island,” and into her tower, Kerewin finds her territorial boundaries just as

radically shaken as Crusoe's were. She is forced into an excursion into alien territory, an interaction with the other. In the first place, in order to communicate with this stranger, she has to speak on his behalf, as he is mute: "I'm used to talking to myself, but talking for someone else?" (20). She also starts to see herself, for the first time in many years, through the eyes of another: he puts his chin down on her table and stares at her unnervingly, and she asks herself, "I wonder if I still look peeculear?" (21) — which introduces, in fact, the first physical description the novel offers of its main protagonist, as Kerewin describes her imagined view of herself through the child's eyes.

Thus far, we might still be on familiar ground, revisiting that humanist paradox whereby the soul fulfils itself only by reaching out to others. But that very paradox, of course, constitutes the instability of humanist subjectivity: posing as a self-contained-and-sufficient-identity, it in fact requires the point of view of the other in order to represent itself to itself — a risky transaction, since the other's perspective may prove too radically alienating to be incorporated. The self's identity-to-self can therefore only by re-appropriated, in the end, by repressing the other's perspective.

As Kerewin gradually forms a deep friendship with both Simon and his father Joe, she finds to her discomfort that she has commitments and obligations to these two. In short, she feels the resurgence of an ethics of the other. So when, a hundred and fifty pages into the novel, Kerewin sees the scars of repeated beatings all over the child's body, the discovery actually only binds her more tightly into relationship with Joe and Simon, because she has stayed involved to keep an eye on things and to protect the child physically from Joe. In fact, she invites them away with her, and deliberately precipitates a confrontation so she can intervene.

When Joe loses his temper with Haimona and Kerewin steps between them, the generic mode of the novel departs quite radically from that of realism. Kerewin, in another manifestation of her almost psychotic self-sufficiency, performs as a black-belt martial arts specialist. Her actions occur in glamorized, soft-focus slow-motion: as she fights she "sings . . . to [her]self . . . thinks fondly to herself":

... floating over the barrier of space ...

... she drifts to a stop beside him ...

... her body smoothly assuming a stance of defence ...

... She weaves, seemingly. Her hand flows in between his moving fist and her face somehow creating a vacuum that sucks his head upwards, outward, over her shoulder. (190-01)

How ought the reader to deal with this moment? By celebrating it a post-feminist return of aggression against the aggressor? Or else by condemning this representation of violence in a non-realist mode, clearly indebted to the glamorized cartoon violence of the action flick, as itself unethical?

A comparison of this confrontation between Joe and Kerewin with the narration of the final beating of Haimona by Joe later in the novel demonstrates a certain versatility in the novel's representation of violence. There's no glamour there, and no vicarious pleasure offered to the reader, just a grim and dismaying focus on the physical suffering involved, experienced from Simon's point of view (308-09). As Hulme has commented, "I wanted people in New Zealand to be moved by the plight of children in a similar situation. So I made it as real as I could" (cited in Turcotte 152-53).⁸

So when, during the fight between Kerewin and Joe, the novel adopts a non-realist mode, it produces a quite different effect in the reader from the instances of violence against Haimona. By glamorizing Kerewin's martial artistry, the narrative implicates the reader in the text's dismantling of Pakeha (Western, European) subjectivity and ethics.

On one hand, Kerewin's quite literal stepping into Simon's place, to take and return the blows dealt to him by his father, seems not at all inconsistent with conventional notions of ethical unselfishness. According to either a Kantian categorical imperative, or a Utilitarian calculation of the greatest good for all involved, or a Christian ethics of suffering on behalf of the other, Kerewin does the right thing. And her evident delight in doing so draws us into identification with her righteous punishment of Joe. But this very pleasure implicates the reader as an accessory to this further manifestation of a fantasy of omnipotence. Kerewin's standing in

Simon's place, her decision to step into the violent relationship between father and son, anticipates the next and far more shattering moment of violence, when she participates in the final beating of Haimona that nearly kills him; in this way, the text demands a condemnation of the thrashing of Joe — and of the reader's own complicity in it — as an expression of the imperious power over the other that characterizes humanist (and colonialist) subjectivity.

The transactions between self and other in the novel constitute a mode of intersubjectivity predicated upon a violence that is endemic to representation, to language, to the symbolic order. This symbolic violence, the novel seems to suggest, is in fact one of the conditions of possibility for physical violence — just as Kerewin's beating of Simon with words over the telephone authorizes and implements the child's physical abuse by his father.

In this light, the compassion (suffering with or on-behalf of) that Kerewin initially feels for Haimona therefore anticipates a sadistic and/or masochistic identification with the other. The psychoanalytic vocabulary of contemporary ethical discourse seems to fit here, which is not surprising insofar as post-Lacanian Freudianism also constitutes a critique of Enlightenment humanist subjectivity and ethics. Kerewin's attempt to take the place of Haimona anticipates the two most typical forms of identificatory aggression described by psychoanalytic theory: first, incorporation of the other, swallowing it up, taking it into the self; second, exclusion or annihilation of the other, taking its place.⁹ The logic of this identification anticipates its working out in the vicious beating of Simon by *both* of his devouring "parents" later in the novel.

This same logic structures those moments during which the narrative centers upon Joe's interior monologue, focusing on Simon as a stand-in, a locus of identification, for Joe's sense of moral outrage — at himself, at the world, at the Law itself: ". . . it doesn't even seem like him I'm hitting. His disobedience or something, I don't know" (173). Again, theorists of the ethical might describe such a moment in psychoanalytic terms: John Rajchman suggests that "The sadist has so strong a superego that he identifies with it; he becomes his own superego and finds his ego only outside in his victims" (51).

Such terminology retains validity to the extent that it allows us to challenge the received pieties of reading fiction as an ethical act, as well as to locate and dismantle those components of an Enlightenment subjectivity that the novel's characters encode. Insofar as it takes the reader inside Joe's head, therefore, Hulme's novel does not invite sympathy for his beating of the child; it does not offer the imaginative complicity that Stead alleges. Rather, the narrative demonstrates the extent to which Joe's violence derives from the return of various troubling "others": as he lies in bed, brooding about his abuse of Haimona, he first thinks of Kerewin, and her sexual unavailability — "God, what makes her tick? . . . She's as distant as a stone" (174) — then of his cousin Luce, whose provocative innuendo about Joe's relationship with a man called Taki is projected onto Haimona: "I knew it was wrong, I know it was unnatural, but he was gentle, he was kind, I loved him and it was good" (175). Between them, these figures represent the different types of "other" whose foreclosure is constitutive of adult, heterosexual masculinity: the woman, the homosexual, the child. The anxiety produced by the return of these three repressed others is condensed and displaced onto Haimona, and then beaten out of him.

The physical and verbal abuse of Simon/Haimona by the two main characters therefore represents a violence integral to the Western construction of identity. The fascination of many literary and filmic texts in Aotearoa New Zealand with such acts of sudden and otherwise inexplicable aggression (the novels of Maurice Gee, many of the stories of Frank Sargeson, films such as *Once Were Warriors*, *The Piano*, *Smash Palace*, *Heavenly Creatures*, and so on), keeps in play the two poles of complicity and condemnation described above. These works signify ethically insofar as they oblige the reader or viewer to read for the ways in which modes of colonial and humanist subjectivity are predicated on violence — actual and representational — perpetrated against the other. The ethical bind in which the reader finds her/himself at this point cannot be decisively resolved: to read the novel, to see the film, is simultaneously to judge and to be judged, to speak with and to hear what Jacques Derrida calls "the law that is at once a voice and a court (it hears itself, it is *in us* who are *before it*)" [115].

Hulme's novel offers at least two potential ethical ways forward from the appalling situation described. One involves Kerewin's journey through near-death, toward healing and renewal; this part of the narrative is entirely consistent with very familiar Western narratives of personal redemption. It leads predictably to the end of the novel, in which all three characters are miraculously united in Kerewin's new spiral-shaped house, and she adopts the child in her name in order that they can legally be together — all of which, for many readers, seems like fairytale or wish-fulfilment, an escape from the difficult problems that have been portrayed so unrelentingly until then.¹⁰

Many such responses to the final chapters of the novel, however, remain blind to the alternative narrative offered to the reader in the chapter devoted solely to Joe. While Kerewin goes through her solitary near-death experience, Joe is released from jail and encounters, deep in the bush, a kaumatua who heals him and leads him to the discovery of an ancient mauri that holds the heart of the land. To most critics, Joe is the most problematic of the protagonists, but his chapter, "The Kaumatua and the Broken Man," develops most fully the ethical and postcolonial threads that I am pursuing here.

What kind of approach, then, does Joe's narrative invite? How should a Pakeha read this chapter ethically? Can a pakeha reader "properly" assess a series of events and a collection of signifying elements that derive from another culture? What happens to the various critical modalities that have influenced my reading so far — psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, ethics — when they encounter the novel's Maori content?

These questions demonstrate the necessity of a properly postcolonial ethics of reading. By this I mean (for one thing) a protocol of reading that deconstructs its own ethical and evaluative standpoint, in order to attempt to move into dialogue with the ethics of the other. My reading must therefore acknowledge that it is *partial*, in several senses. It partakes of the (Occidental) discourse of criticism, and of the novel, so it remains only ever a part-reading. Thus it cannot be considered impartial, in the sense of being removed from a range of political, discursive, and institutional investments.

My reading will always already have been replied to by others; the novel itself reads, *in another way*, the ethics of its reader.

Nothing could illustrate the partiality of Western modes of reading more clearly than the ethical fix critics encounter when they read the later chapters of this novel. For example, where Stead, as cited earlier, finds Hulme's use of "essential" Maori elements "unconvincing . . . not entirely authentic," at least one critic accuses the novel of the complete opposite, of essentializing Maori mythology. According to Susie O'Brien, "Kerewin's constructions are sanctioned by an appeal to the Transcendental Signified of the Maori myth of origins" (85). To one reader, the novel's Maoriness is inauthentic, inessential, and the product of colonialism; to another it is essentializing and transcendentalizing, and thereby itself colonialist in its reappropriation of the figure of the mute child.

In an interview with Gerry Turcotte, Hulme hints that the myth she constructs in Joe's chapter is her own synthetic invention:

. . . the *mauri* of the heart of New Zealand (I hasten to add there's not such a thing, at least if there is nobody's told me about it) emphasizes that part of Maori tradition which does continue, which is still alive and very real, and that's the spiritual world. (Turcotte 140)¹¹

"There's not such a thing," and yet it "is still alive and very real." Hulme's paradox — and the mixture of realism and fantasy in her novel, like that which occurs in the marvelous or magic realism of other postcolonial traditions — calls into question those terms which Stead used to criticize the Maoriness of *The Bone People*: authenticity and essence.

Nor, on the other hand, can Hulme's deployment of Maori concepts possibly represent an appeal to a "Transcendental Signified" if, as Simon During has suggested, "Maori legend" — and "Maori writing" in general — is always already "counter-signed"; that is, the writing by/in English of a previously oral body of cultural knowledge produces a hybrid form to which no definitive or transcendent value can be assigned ("What Was the West?" 73).¹²

Insofar as "transcendental signifieds" come into play in reading *The Bone People*, they tend rather to emerge from the critical mode being applied. A number of critics have read the book according to Christian iconography: Shona Smith, for example,

noting that Simon first appears haloed, in a niche in Kerewin's tower, "like some weird saint in a stained gold window" (Hulme 16), sees Simon as a Christlike redemptive figure (Shona Smith 44-49). Hulme herself rejects this altogether: in correspondence with Judith Dale, she has asserted that such a reading is "not on," insisting that "none of his suffering is for anyone else" (cited in Dale 427-28). Presumably Hulme's discomfort with Simon's deification by readers derives from a feeling that to make the violence perpetrated against him into a sacrifice which redeems the others comes too close to complicity in it; that the abuse suffered by a child ought not to be put in the service of a closer union between adults.

On the subject of redemptive sacrifice, Derrida suggests that Western ethical theories "remain profound humanisms *to the extent that they do not sacrifice sacrifice.*" He goes on to describe how any form of ethics structured according to such a sacrificial mode implies what he calls a "carnivorous virility" (Derrida 113). It is precisely this ethical mode that Hulme's novel calls into question. Clearly, the relationship between Joe and Haimona is one of sacrifice, but it appears far from redemptive. Rather, it is the kind of human sacrifice that involves incorporation, the greedy ingestion of the otherness of the child into the subjectivity of the adult. After her fight with Joe, Kerewin watches him tending Haimona's wounds:

Hell, the brat is positively chewed looking. Thick with wales. He'll carry his scars for life. Yet he doesn't seem concerned. He flinches occasionally but not away from his father's ministrations, from the touch of water . . . and the weird thing is, it's Joe who sucks his breath in each time, as though it was him that was hurting.

Bloody mixed up pair, she thinks, fashed in the head and still making it in the heart.

And now I'm embroiled. (198)

Joe's and Simon's subjectivities are "mixed up"; they partake of one another by means of a kind of carnivorous virility. And when in a penitential moment Joe tells the boy

" . . . it's not like I'm hitting you, my son. . . ." Simon moves, and Joe looks down to see what he's saying.

It feels like it is, says Simon wryly.

He closes his hands over the child's small hands.

"Thank you for not holding grudges . . . God knows I deserve your hate . . . but you don't hate," he says wonderingly, "you don't hate."

The boy looks at him, eyes glinting in the firelight, saying nothing. Then he smiles, and leans over, and bites Joe's hand, hard as he can.

"Shit!" the man gasps, hissing with pain, and pulls his hand to his mouth. "Bloody brat, what's that for?"

Aroha, mouths the child, grinning, aroha, and his smile is wickedly broad . . .

"Aroha my arse, utu more like," says Joe ruefully. (171)

The form of aroha that exists between these two, as Anna Smith has pointed out, includes an element of utu as well (Anna Smith 156). Moreover, both aspects, aroha and utu, are figured as forms of incorporation, eating the other.¹³ Simon has earlier appeared to Kerewin as simultaneously edible and potentially cannibalistic: "There is something rather hardboiled about that brat, who can smile as he's bid and wind up looking like he's wondering how you'd taste" (53). Joe's chapter repeats these images of cannibalism. "The Kaumatua and the Broken Man" begins with Joe getting off a bus in "the middle of bloody nowhere":

The bus driver had said,

"Well, you might meet old Jack in there. . . . They call him the last of the cannibals, but I don't think he really is," and he'd laughed.

The sentence joggled in [Joe's] mind.

"I don't think he's really the *last* of the cannibals," or "I don't think he's really a cannibal, but you never know . . ."

He could never imagine his great-grandfather, who had taken part in several feasts of people, as a cannibal. He remembered the old man only as a picture of a silver-haired fiercely dignified chief. He'd always imagined cannibals to be little wizened people, with pointy teeth.

"We're meat, same as anything else," his grandmother had said. (335)

Soon, Joe injures himself and is rescued by the "the last of the cannibals" the old kaumatua, Tiaki Mira, who feeds him and gives him tea, which "flows into him like fresh blood" (346). Joe dreams of

suckling from the breast of his dead wife Hana. Explaining the meaning of the dream, the kaumatua tells him about the death of his own grandmother.

When it came time to bury [her], I was instructed to eat part of the corpse, and let the rest of her decay. I was to clean and oil and ochre the bones, and hide them away. Then, she said, she would rest in peace and not bother me. . . . Well, I got the piece prepared and cooked, but I couldn't eat it. I carried out the rest of her commands, but it hasn't seemed sufficient. She buzzes in the back of my head like a bluebottle sometimes. . . . All that used to give me bad dreams. Now I just wonder what she would have tasted like. (353)

Historically and culturally, no small ambiguity attaches to the practice of kai tangata [people-eating] among Maori. According to the more familiar account, eating the flesh of one's enemy constitutes an extreme form of utu, a revenge through desecration that turns the enemy into cooked food, which is seen as "the lowest thing, the furthest opposite from the sacred" (Alpers 7). But a radically alternative interpretation also exists, whereby to partake of human flesh is to ingest the virtue of the other, to incorporate and appropriate the other's mana.¹⁴

James Cowan, documenting his conversations with Maori about their life and customs prior to European contact, relates how Chief Patara of Waikato told him that

When their father died, the sons divided the corpse amongst them, and cooked and ate it, both as a mark of respect and in order to acquire the inherent sacred virtues and mana of their parent. (241)

To eat one's own kin, then — to partake of one's own flesh — would thus either be a horrifying breach of tapu, or the ultimate act of respect. Patara and his brothers swallow their father's flesh as the ethical act, the incorporation of his "inherent sacred virtues and mana."

Commenting on this account, however, Barry Mitcalfe remarks that "There are few direct references to cannibalism as a means of ingesting virtue. . . . Possibly the all-too-serious Cowan failed to see the twinkle in Patara's eye" (54).¹⁵ Similarly, we overhear Hulme's kaumatua, Tiaki Mira, quarrelling with his grandmother inside his own head:

... you, cackling away there in the back of my mind — o yes! I heard you start when I told him those things you made me do so long ago, for it was your idea of a joke, nei? — very soon I will be in the back of my mind with you, and the thought does not increase my respect. (355)

Again and again, the references to cannibalism in the novel, like those of Patara, Cowan, and Mitcalfe, keep in play a series of oppositions, without attaching definitively to one or the other: virtue and desecration; tapu and noa; love and revenge; aroha and utu; horror and humour. For Tiaki Mira, not eating the Grandmother's flesh has kept her present, while eating her would have rid his mind of her nagging voice. Either way, of course, he could not choose not to partake of his Grandmother; by not obeying her instruction, the old man has merely swallowed her injunctions all the more fully.

This metaphor of cannibalism structures the relationships between the main characters throughout the novel, in which, of course, the eating of all manner of things has been graphically thematized: recipes are an important ingredient in Hulme's generic soup. It is no surprise, then, that the dilemmas raised continue to be worked out according to the ethics of ingestion and incorporation.

Joe's head, like Tiaki's, is full of others. Towards the end of this chapter, he hears Kerewin's voice in his mind as he recalls a note she sent to him:

... speaking of tables, does commensalism appeal to you as an upright vertebrate? Common quarters wherein we circulate like corpuscles in one blood stream, joining (I won't say like clots) for food and drink and discussion and whatever else we feel like. (383)

Kerewin's usage typically incorporates two compatible meanings of the key term. Commonly, in referring to two different species of plant or animal, *commensal* means living in close association without being interdependent; more rarely, referring to people, it relates to the notion eating together, especially at the same table: *commensal pleasures*.

Kerewin's choice of noun therefore nicely balances her obsession with solitude against her new sense of solidarity, and it does so, characteristically, according to the metaphor of a shared meal. However, equally typically, her bloodthirsty simile, "like corpuscles

in one blood stream," immediately returns us to the notion not just of eating together but of being eaten: as though the two of them, as *corpuscles*, little bodies, have already been assimilated into the arteries of some giant carnivore.

This notion of commensalism has been read by critics — usually with some suspicion — as Hulme's idiom for biculturalism,¹⁶ finding its realization and emblem in Kerewin's rebuilt house, "*a regular spiral of rooms expanding around the decapitated Tower . . . privacy, apartness, but all connected and all part of the whole*" (434). Many critics suggest that Kerewin's individualistic *modus operandi* remains unchanged in the final chapters, and that this somewhat subverts her desire for commensalism — or even that, in legally adopting Haimona, she simply reproduces a devouring incorporation, a colonialist assimilation of the otherness of the silent child.¹⁷

But what interests me is the peculiar recalcitrance, the resistance to easy assimilation, of this trope of eating. The same trope has been identified by Derrida as an aspect of his challenge to humanist subjectivity and ethics. Post-structuralism, therefore, at least in his formulation, implies an obligation to "eat well."

The moral question is thus . . . *how* for goodness sake should one *eat well* (*bien manger*)? And what does this imply? What is eating? How is the metonymy of introjection to be regulated? And in what respect does the formulation of these questions in language give us still more food for thought? . . . "One must eat well" does not mean above all taking in and grasping in itself, but *learning* and *giving* to eat, learning-to-give-the-other-to-eat. One never eats entirely on one's own: this constitutes the rule underlying the statement, "One must eat well." It is a rule offering infinite hospitality, . . . respect for the other at the very moment when . . . one must begin to identify with the other, who is to be assimilated. (115)

The question posed by Hulme's novel, with its preoccupation with carnivorous incorporation, thus moves into dialogue with Derrida's: how can we envisage a bicultural or postcolonial mode of "eating well"? Given that the Maori notion of *kai tangata* oscillates between the perpetration of the most degrading possible insult to another, and the expression of the greatest respect for the virtue and *mana* of the other, how are we to manage what Derrida calls the "metonymy of introjection" that structures the relation between a European discourse on ethics and other cultural forms?

What mode of bicultural commensalism can be envisaged according to which “good-eating” will have taken place between Maori and *Tauīwi* [settler cultures]? How can narratives of the postcolonial be read in a way that does not partake of the sacrificial and the carnivorous, and therefore of the colonizing; in a way that shows “respect for the other” at the very moment of identification? How can my reading not make a meal of *The Bone People*?

By practising commensalism, says Hulme’s text. By “offering infinite hospitality,” says Derrida; by “*learning* and *giving* to eat, learning-to-give-the-other-to-eat. One never eats entirely on one’s own.” Such commensalism would impose upon the reader an obligation to avoid easy or too-familiar moments of identification and incorporation; and to look instead for the indigestible kernel within the corpus of the text, for those moments which prove hardest for a reader to swallow: the exchanges between the *kaumatua* and the broken man, the violence, the uncomfortable repeating references to cannibalism.

What is more, it seems likely that such an obligation cannot ever be discharged. The very modalities of reading by which European criticism proceeds still repeat the act of incorporation, as my own text demonstrates: the psychoanalytic determinations of notions such as “incorporation” and “introjection” perpetuate the assimilation of the alterity of Maori concepts and histories (*utu* and *aroha*, *tapu* and *noa*) by the insatiable appetite of the Western theoretical corpus. But *The Bone People* is not easily devoured; it speaks up from within the body of criticism that feeds on it, demanding a mode of reading that might account for its more indigestible elements on their own terms — or at least not just in the terms provided by Pakeha theory. Meanwhile, the drastic bifurcation of positions within the debate over biculturalism — which continues to dominate the cultural politics of Aotearoa New Zealand — has not diminished in the fifteen years since Hulme published her novel; the possibility of a genuine “commensalism” still seems utopian, to say the least.

And so an ethical obligation remains, demanding that a reading that offers hospitality to the otherness within the text, rather than perpetuating the same reheated economies of consumption. Learning not to read voraciously, but rather, learning to read in

order to give the other to eat, requires a commitment — at least for the kind of Pakeha reader I can claim to represent — to the serious, detailed, and ethical examination of the discursive and rhetorical regimes of settler culture, and Western epistemology, as these impact on the writing and reading of a novel such as *The Bone People*. Moreover such an ethics would impose an equal and concomitant obligation to identify the ways in which those aspects of the text deriving from Maori cultural and historical meaning systems, far from being “digestible” by the Pakeha discourse, work to problematize and relativize it from within and without.¹⁸ Read in this way, far from being an “unethical” novel, *The Bone People* demonstrates, albeit in a troubled and provisional fashion, precisely the kind of ethical commitment which has the capacity to produce a Maori and Pakeha writing that constitutes something other than — something more than — another English literature.¹⁹

NOTES

- 1 For a discussion of the poststructuralist suspicion of ethics, and its impact on criticism, see Harpham.
- 2 Nussbaum argues passionately for the reinstatement of precisely this role for literature. She reasserts the view that literature can make a substantial and necessary contribution to modern (presumably Western) society by instilling—both in the ordinary citizen and in judicial and political authorities—an imaginative and ethical sensibility, an insight into and empathy with the lives of others. My own argument, it will become clear, disputes the humanist foundations of this notion of ethical reading, as well as suggesting that such an ethics cannot fulfil its obligations to a bicultural (or, indeed, to a multicultural) society and history.
- 3 J. Hillis Miller examines this passage in Kant and argues that “ethics itself has a peculiar relation to that form of language we call narrative” (3).
- 4 Wayne Booth’s *The Company We Keep* represents probably the best-known discussion of the various ethical relations between reader, author, implied author, implied reader, society, and so on. My argument here is designed to depart from precisely the kinds of “commonsense” (and entirely monocultural) ethical identification Booth describes.
- 5 See in particular discussions of the novel by Judith Dale, Marjory Fee, Mary Ann Hughes, Rod Edmond.
- 6 My notions of the “ethics of narrative determinism” and the “proairetic imperative” bear some similarity to J Hillis Miller’s description, following Paul de Man, of “ethicity” as “a necessary feature of human language” (Hillis Miller 46). According to de Man, a narrative always implies an obligation to perform another reading, insofar as the inherently “allegorical” nature of language demands a supplementary reading in order to recognize the ways in which a prior reading has failed. Both de Man and Hillis Miller, however — along with all other theorists of the ethical

- mentioned so far — fail altogether to account for the possibility of an ethical presence in the text which derives from beyond Western metaphysics. Thus, even when de Man defines the term ethical as “designating the structural interference of two value systems” — a potentially productive definition for the reader interested in postcoloniality and transculturalism — he actually means two European value systems — namely, *pathos* and *ethos* (de Man 206).
- 7 Two of the more interesting postcolonial rewritings of the Crusoe story are, of course, Michel Tournier’s *Vendredi* and J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*. It is moreover of no little significance, in this regard, that Robinson Crusoe was the first novel ever translated into Maori.
 - 8 For a discussion of Hulme’s use of naturalism at this moment in the novel, see Williams (90-92).
 - 9 My account of identificatory aggression relies mainly on two early articles by Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” and “Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis” (Lacan 1-29).
 - 10 See During “Postmodernism or Postcolonialism?”, Ash, and O’Brien.
 - 11 For a detailed account of the significance of the maori, see Williams 99-103.
 - 12 As Mark Williams puts it, “The Maori spiritual material in *The Bone People* is not pure and unmediated, a direct link back to the source. It bears the imprint of the Pakeha reception and interpretation of that material” (100).
 - 13 *Aroha* and *utu* are two Maori concepts, most commonly and reductively translated as, respectively, love (or sympathy) and revenge (or payment): Hulme’s narrative, as I am trying to suggest, demonstrates some of the ways in which both terms involve certain complex modes of reciprocity.
 - 14 Several important notions are at stake in this discussion, all of them again impossible to translate directly. *Tapu* and *noa* are complementary terms: *tapu* is of course usually translated as either “sacred” or “forbidden,” while *noa*, less satisfactorily, is sometimes rendered as “profane,” and at other times simply “ordinary, free from *tapu*” — that is, “permitted.” The notion equivalent to “the furthest opposite from the sacred” (for example, cooked food) would therefore not be *noa* but perhaps instead something of the order of *whakamaa*, “shameful” (literally “made white”); or else *karihika*, “immoral.” The other crucial notion deployed here is that of *mana*, the well-known term for spiritual power and social prestige, or as Cowan puts it — again highlighting the ethical dimension of the term — “sacred virtues.”
 - 15 Accounts of *kai tangata* by Pakeha thus always exemplify what During calls “counter-signing.” It remains altogether unclear what role, if any, cannibalism played in Maori culture prior to European contact, and indeed after it as well. It may even have been produced by contact, either in practice or else primarily as a discursive construct, a mode of threatening display, a response to European fears, or a joke at their expense. See Obeyesekere’s “British Cannibals” for a fascinating discussion of cannibalism as a product of transcultural hybridity.
 - 16 See, for example, Dale 420, Hughes 56-68, Prentice 73-74.
 - 17 See O’Brien 79-91, Ash 123-35.
 - 18 The ethical commitment described above relates to notions of postcolonial hybridity discussed by Homi Bhabha, among others: see for example his article “Signs Taken for Wonders.” Bhabha has been very influential in moving notions of colonial contact away from either a violent dichotomy or a simple syncretism, and towards a mode of trans-cultural dialogism, according to which the metaphysical complacency of European categories and concepts is radically destabilized and re-configured by its articulation in a different place, its embodiment by a different people, or its enunciation in a different accent. The Maori prophetic movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which articulated resistance to Pakeha

colonization in terms provided by Christianity and the European missionaries' Bible, can be seen in these terms. Witi Ihimaera's novel *The Matriarch* focuses on the prophet Te Kooti in a way compatible with this mode of hybridity; moreover, the generic richness of Ihimaera's text (which includes elements of journalism, Parliamentary Hansard, epic mythology, revisionist historiography, and fictionalized autobiography) reflects the kind of epistemological challenge posed by hybridity.

- 19 I am very grateful to Reina Whaitiri, of the Department of English at Auckland University, for reading an initial draft of this article, and for providing me with the references to Patara, Cowan, and Mitcalfe.

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