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Imag(in)ing the Nation through Maori Eyes/I's

Paloma Fresno Calleja

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Imag(in)ing the Nation through Maori Eyes/I's

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Abstract

This article focuses on the contribution of Maori writers to the reconstruction of New Zealand's national profile, with special reference to Patricia Grace's novel *Baby No-Eyes*. This process has been articulated around the need to destroy colonial images and preconceptions and has allowed them to gain visibility in a society which for a long time had remained blind to Maori cultural specificity. But whereas gaining visibility constitutes an essential part in their process of cultural recovery, the article also focuses on the simultaneous need to destroy the preeminence of visual material as the main constituent the country's national identity and stresses the capacity of these writers to delineate their ethnicity through a double process of imag(in)ation more in agreement with contemporary needs, as Grace's works particularly reveal.

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In an illustration by Victoria Roberts ([note 1](#)) a member of an unidentified tribe is pictured confronting a female anthropologist, well-clad in safari wear and apparently ready to start off her fieldwork; a face-to-face look and a blunt “I’m already *seeing* an anthropologist” (my emphasis) is his answer for what the reader assumes has been her request for information. The caption under this illustration plays with the polysemy of the verb “to see” extending its most basic meaning to the process of cultural intrusion which the anthropologist intends to exert on the native person, by looking into his culture, and the subsequent passive acceptance of that study if the man agrees to be seen, hence scrutinised. But the verb is also applied to the native’s capacity to reverse the power of the anthropological gaze and to exert his own process of interpretation on what he sees, which is not merely the physical presence standing in front of him, but the deeper meaning of the anthropologist’s intentions.

In a study of Maori literature published in 1989, Peter Beatson signalled that among the main tasks confronting contemporary Maori writers was that of shattering the mirror historically set by Pakeha (of European descent) observers and the subsequent reversal of the power of their gaze:

Until recently it has been the Maori who has been the victim of the Pakeha stare. [...] Wishing to be well regarded, they did not return the gaze and saw only their own distorted reflections. [...] It is now Pakeha who are being watched through Maori eyes. And what the eyes perceive, the tongue speaks and the pen records (1989: 36-37).

The development of Maori writing in the last four decades has indeed proved the ability of these authors to create alternative representations, articulating what is perceived by different eyes/I's. However, this articulation should not be described as the consequence of a sudden capacity to see, as if Maori authors had come out of a long period of blindness. Their contribution to the process of imag(in)ing the nation has derived from their political, social and discursive advance which has allowed them to gain visibility in a society which for a long time had remained blind to Maori cultural specificity. My aim here is to illustrate the power of Maori *imagination* and their capacity to *imag(in)e* the *nation*, with special regard to Patricia Grace's *Baby No-Eyes* (1998). With the term "imag(in)e" I am simultaneously referring to the search for alternative images and visual representations of Maori culture, as valid material to shape Aotearoa/New Zealand's national profile, and to the imaginative process which has allowed these authors to articulate their identity, both managing and escaping the con-

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straints of the visual field, traditionally employed as a method of colonial classification and scrutiny.

Several theorists have dwelt extensively on the process of ethnographic research, of cultural re/construction, and of the consolidation of traditions or national identities as acts of imagination, in numerous works which belong to what Turner (1997) defines as “invention-of-tradition-literature”. **(note 2)** Many others have reacted vehemently against those views, partly because terms like “invention” or “imagination” conjure up connotations of falsity or improvisation, radically opposed to the original motivations of these cultural projects. This point has proved especially controversial in the South Pacific region, where debates on the authenticity of traditions and the politicisation of culture have engaged local and foreign scholars in endless exchanges. **(note 3)** My concerns here are not to reflect upon what otherwise seem to be irresolvable questions concerning the accuracy and value of contemporary cultural acts or the possibility of recovering precolonial practices in present-day contexts. I concur with James Clifford’s statement in this respect when he says that “a lot of what is referred to as invention could be rethought of in terms of the politics of articulation, bypassing the whole question of authenticity” (Borofsky, 2000: 97), since it is precisely the emphasis on the

possibility of articulation that seems to be of importance when it comes to the representation of one's culture. With the notion of "articulated indigeneity" Clifford avoids the pitfalls of both utopian and dangerous essentialist approaches and vague claims to indigenous identities forged exclusively according to contemporary needs, while he recognises the diverse character of each of these identities and therefore supports their political stance (2001: 472).

My emphasis here is placed on a similar capacity on the part of Maori authors to articulate contemporary Maori identity, practising imaginative acts of cultural re/creation, which do not necessarily imply the invention of fictive pasts but the creation of a dynamic and renewed perception of that past to suit present needs as well as their acknowledgment of different cultural sources as valid material to shape their contemporary identity. When I refer to these writers as the agents of an imaginative process I want to emphasise their capacity to become the *agents* rather than the passive victims of colonial views, in particular with regard to their ability to create their own images, thus completing the *image* of the bicultural *nation* through their power of *imagination*, which denies the colonial capacity to exert power through the gaze and turns it into a postcolonial attempt to reverse that power and deny

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the privilege of the visual as the main instrument of cultural classification.

Ocularcentrism (Grimshaw 2001), the causative relation between vision and knowledge, and the preponderance of visual information as the means to know and describe the world constituted one of the main instruments in the process of colonisation. The power to locate and define the object of vision was used as a classificatory, descriptive and evaluative method. The dominant colonial gaze attached certain values to the object observed, according to the assumption that vision and knowledge were related sequentially, an association which in turn privileged and legitimated the power of that gaze and its authority over the observed object, waiting passively to be defined through words or images. Until postmodern trends came to dominate the field, visual evidence constituted the incontestable instrument of ethnographic description, both its means and its end, “a methodological strategy [and] a metaphor for knowledge” (Grimshaw, 2001: 7); however, with the advent of postmodernism those sights came to be understood as projections of ideas and theories articulated *a priori*, so that what was seen and classified was not so much the result of an objective physical perception but depended on epistemological frameworks which shaped the outside world

as a material corroboration of what was already known in advance. Imagined visions of “the other” gained corporeality on paper or canvas, just as landscape paintings helped to delineate the imagined contours of places seen for the first time, but reproduced according to well-known European conventions, (note 4) a process which forms part of what Said has referred to as “imaginary geography” (1978). The impact of these ideas helped to contest the traditional relation between vision and knowledge and served to understand that contextual knowledge determined the way things were seen and by extension how cultures were interpreted and represented. Knowing was not the consequence of seeing, but rather its cause:

We are taught to see, so that what is known is mediated through a series of cultural filters -social, political and academic - which refract reality and condition or pre-condition what we see. The result is that sight and knowledge, perception and conception are interwoven and determined by the value- or belief-system into which we are born, spend our formative years and to which we subsequently subscribe. Thus, in Goethe’s words, we can only see what we know (Pocock, 1981: 386).

It is precisely this confrontation of ethnocentric perceptions shaped *a priori* as responsible for cultural misunderstandings and conflicts that Patricia Grace addresses in precise terms when she affirms that “[p]eople see through their own cultural

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eyes and hear what their own culture has taught them to hear” (McRae, 1992: 293), making use of the term “cultural eyes” to express that perceptions are not the result of physical capacities, but rather cultural constructs imposed on Maori people. At the same time, Grace manages to “reverse the mirror”, to go back to Beatson’s words, and to make non-Maori readers see through different eyes/l’s, amplifying the meaning of physical vision and transcending its limitations so that we gain insight, rather than mere sight, of relevant notions of Maori cultural identity.

Despite the shift away from ocularcentrism, and the assumption that language shapes images rather than the opposite, postcolonial tensions still need to be partly resolved in the terrain of the visual, in a world in which an image is still said to be worth more than a thousand words. The relationship between the imposition of colonial imagination on the land and its inhabitants and the capacity of Maori authors to re/imagine Aotearoa according to this visual information constitutes a relevant concern in Grace’s works. As I will show in the first section of this article, in some of her early novels and short stories Grace deals with the possibility of recovering vision and fulfilling the need that Maori culture is included as a visible part of the nation. To pursue this goal she engages

her characters in an active position as *seers*, which in turn allows them to modify how they are *seen* by outsiders. There are, however, many ramifications behind the idea of vision, as I explain in the second section with specific reference to her more recent novel, *Baby No-Eyes*. Here Grace extends the meaning of seeing to deeper and more spiritual ways of knowledge, intuition and perception: the visual is substituted by other discursive processes equally useful in the representation of culture and the shift is placed on a capacity of insight in which it is the *I*, rather than the *eye* that is emphasised.

1. “We too can see”: The Recovery of the Maori Gaze

The first stage in the process of imagination is undertaken in conventional visual terms: Grace places her characters in a position which allows them to revert the Pakeha gaze and, paradoxically, fight their blindness to issues of cultural difference. A case in point is found in “Parade”, the piece which closes her first collection of short stories, *Waiariki* (1975). Matewai returns to her village to participate in the yearly carnival after two years of absence in the city where she attends university. While helping her family to prepare the carriage on which they are to perform their dances, she is confronted for the first time with a different view on their actions and their significance:

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[D]uring my time away from here my vision and understanding had expanded. I was able now to see myself and other members of my race as others see us. And this new understanding left me as abandoned and dry as an emptied pod of flax that rattles and rattles into the wind. [...] I could see the enjoyment on the upturned faces and yet it occurred to me again and again that many people enjoyed zoos. [...] Or museums. Stuffed birds, rows of shells under glass, the wing span of an albatross, preserved bodies, shrunken heads. Empty gourds, and meeting houses where no one met any more (1975: 84).

As a member of the whanau Matewai is part of the performance. However, she is simultaneously placed as an outsider, and hence allowed to narrate on a parallel level, reversing her focus of vision. The comparison between the Maori performers and the caged animals of a zoo or the lifeless pieces of a museum collection serves Grace to condemn the appropriation of Maori material culture, its tourist commercialisation and the use of Maori motifs to consolidate the indigenous profile of New Zealand. In this way she condemns the light version of biculturalism, which Ihimaera has called “the version that does not come wrapped in politics -the Walt Disney version” (1998: 198), which incidentally places the trust on *visible* signs of difference like haka -a traditional war dance- greenstone and bone carvings, among other mass-produced

objects assumed to be part of New Zealand culture, but detached from their real meanings.

Many Pakeha characters who inhabit Grace's works act like tourists in their own country, not only directing a neo-colonial gaze to Maori people, but also bearing a tourist gaze, the shaped, systematised, constructed mode of looking at the world according to certain conventions (Urry, 1990: 1), behaving as passive observers but becoming the active interpreters, "semioticians, reading the landscape for signifiers of certain pre-established notions of signs derived from various discourses of travel and tourism" (Urry, 1990: 12). Just as the ancient explorers and travellers applied their predetermined notions to what they saw and the modern-day tourist takes after that legacy of visual domination, the Pakeha characters in "Parade" act like New Zealanders inhabiting a touristic Aotearoa, Maori in terms of objects, images and icons but predominantly Pakeha in pragmatic terms. In this sense they prove that "while tourists' gazes are instruments of vision, they may also function as screening devices that restrict or impair vision" (Huggan, 2001: 180). The Pakeha observers do not see beyond what a restrictive monocultural environment or an improvised biculturalism has taught them to see.

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Matewai's feelings with regard to her role as performer of what seems to her an artificial pantomime of her traditions become stronger as she chooses to step aside and not to continue with the show when the group gathers later on in the day to resume their activities. In this way she becomes an observer, in a metaphor of the position she now occupies as a visitor to the village. However, when Matewai later on voices her concerns to her grandmother she -and by extension both Maori and Pakeha readers- comes to realise that the act of observing and performing is always part of an irresolvable paradox, those who are observed also have the capacity to observe, a point made clear by her grandmother's words: "No one can take your eyes from you" (1975: 88), a comment which enlarges the mere observation into a deeper understanding.

Rather than the mere abandonment of her "outsider's eyes" and the subsequent adoption of an insider's perspective (Tawake 2000: 159), Matewai is endowed with what several authors have called the capacity of "double vision" (Rika-Heke 1996: 155; Whaitiri 1999: 313). Her double understanding allows Matewai to view the performance with the eyes of an outsider but also to perceive it from the inside. It is in the end that she comes to understand that hers is a necessary part in a communal task which, in the words of one of the characters,

is “[t]o show others who we are” (1975: 88). Performing does not merely imply an act targeting the outsiders’ acknowledgment, but rather one very useful way to reinforce the insiders’ perception of their identity through the repetition and contextualisation of their customs in contemporary settings. *Matewai* is placed in the juncture of a world in which Maori and Pakeha visions seem to be irreconcilable: where Maori characters project a certainty about their identity which exemplifies their active cultural role, while the Pakeha observers consume the spectacle in a passive way.

In Grace’s second novel, *Potiki*, the power of the Maori gaze as an answer to Pakeha perceptions is reinforced in the confrontation between the community and the developers who are trying to turn their land into a tourist attraction. In the novel it is Toko, the youngest child, who enjoys the capacity of double vision, except that in his case this faculty is placed on a diachronic as well as on a synchronic paradigm. By turning him into a quasi-mythological figure -he is a rewriting of the Maori trickster Maui- and a child born and brought up in special circumstances, Toko is gifted with the capacity of *foresight*. This allows Grace to create a pattern of causality simultaneously informed by mythical, historical, contemporary and prophetic temporalities. This temporal construction, going back and for-

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wards into material taken from the past and events foreseen before they actually take place, spirals out and into a vortex which opens up a myriad of perceptions and subverts the linearity of western chronology. (note 5) Toko is a rewriting of a mythological character, a child of his time, and a symbolic figure who stands for the cultural loss affecting the community; his discourse occupies a level which does not depend on mere visual material translated into words but on a legacy of stories and traditions carried out at successive stages of their history. Toko does not behave as a conventional child, but adopts the infantile perspective at times to project an innocent and detached image of his world. According to this perspective he is but a victim of the developers who threaten to take and destroy their lands. However, as a child to whom old age has been granted in advance, he is allowed to speak on the marae (ceremonial house and meeting grounds) as if he were an adult, and develops an almost fraternal relationship with his biological mother. In this way he voices what seems to be the opinions of an adult based on a child's perception.

An example of Toko's capacity of double vision is the scene in which he gains temporary insight into the thoughts of Mr. Dollman, the man in charge of convincing them to sell their lands. Toko transmits what he sees, apparently appropriating

a value judgement derived from colonial perceptions on Maori people, just as Matewai does when she condemns neo-colonial perceptions of contemporary Maori culture:

I pulled myself up on my sticks. At the same time I looked up, and my eyes met the man's eyes as he looked back. [...]

Right then I saw what the man saw as he turned and looked at the three of us and as my eyes met his eyes. I saw what he saw. What he saw was brokenness, a broken race. He saw in my Granny, my Mary, and me, a whole people, decrepit, deranged and deformed. That was what I knew (1986: 102).

This triptych constitutes an example of the scrutiny to which the colonial gaze subjected Maori people. Granny Tamihana, Toko's mother, and Toko himself serve as the archetypal images of Maori which Europeans brought with them to Aotearoa. In Mr. Dollman's eyes, the grandmother represents the Maori seen as the recipients of fatal impact theories, the last representatives of a dying race of noble savages. Toko stands out as representative of their defencelessness and ignorance, as children in need of education and religion, and his physical deficiencies corroborate the deformed state of their bodies, perceived as culturally, physically and mentally "crippled". Finally, Mary, whose body is abused by Billy-Joe, remains the victim of a male-biased colonial gaze, according to which the passive and submissive female body stands as a metonymy

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for the appropriation of their lands. However, despite the emphasis on passivity and resignation which is transmitted in this fragment, Toko expresses the colonial views through his eyes, and hence submits them to a defamiliarisation process. By the time he describes the man's attitude to the community, we are already aware of their active stance taken against the developers and their own views on what is happening and hence we understand the deeper implications of his apparently objective visual description. Toko's special perception allows the rest of the characters to look ahead as well as back into the history of dispossession suffered by the community, partaking into his capacity of double vision:

Our Uncle Stan spoke about foresight. 'We have our eyes,' he said, 'We have our eyes, and after years of trying to please others we're going on our own, and we can see. There's no lack of foresight [...] It's because we have foresight that we will not ever, not ever, let the land go (1986: 97).

Potiki is constructed as a polyphonic novel, all the characters become "tellers, listeners, readers, writers, teachers and learners together" (1986: 39) and show the possibility to see reality through different angles, as well as their capacity to make individual visions and interpretations coexist in a non-hierarchical spectrum of stories. This simultaneity can be observed in Roimata's role as teacher and the improvised class-

room she builds at home for Manu, but to whose syllabus her other children also contribute when they come home from school. Roimata allows each of them to bring in what they have learnt, but presents those school stories as mere pieces in a collage where diverse materials are included. The way Grace describes the ideas derived from the geography, history or literary lessons of the official curriculum is once again a defamiliarised version of non-Maori views of the world, accepted but never taken as teleological explanations:

This school earth was divided by lines -latitude, longitude and equator. The people of this school earth lived in countries which were in continents, oceans and hemispheres. Some of the people in some of the school countries lived in eggshells on paper snow, some lived in matchstick villages by a paint sea crowded with dot-eyed fish. Others sat by cellophane fires with silver chocolate-wrap feathers in their hair, and others had cardboard homes behind a paper wall that could not be climbed by the sea.

This school earth was an orange tilted, and squeezed top and bottom -which took a whole day to turn, and a whole year to circumnavigate the tennis-ball sun. And it slotted into a universe which could be viewed through a peep-hole in a cardboard box, paper planets dangling from threads against navy-blue space, and light coming in through the cellophane cut out in the box's lid (1986: 39-40).

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Roimata provides a very visual description to define the school earth, its countries and its people. Her perception of western scientific knowledge is based on a reversal of the type of observation to which Maori people were subjected when presented as the inhabitants of scale models, reproduced endlessly in ethnographic exhibitions and museums. Her attitude to the land and the sea could not be more different from this aseptic view of the earth presented at school as if observed from a long distance, rather than as the space they inhabit in holistic communion and to which they belong, as they also try to explain to the developers.

Roimata's communal act of cultural preservation and transmission can also be compared with the art of carving, a traditional activity which relies primarily on the visual, but whose figures are presented as seers more than as mere artistic objects observed by the beholder. In the prologue Grace narrates the life of a carver, in charge of visualising the tribal traditions into figures. Eyes are given to them as the final touch and this final gift eventually allows them to acquire the capacity to see:

The previous life, the life within the tree womb, was a time of eyelessness, of waiting, swelling, hardening. It was a time of existing, already browed, tongued, shouldered, fingered, sexed, footed, toed, and of waiting to be shown as such. But eyeless. The spin-

ning, dancing eyes are the final gift from the carver, but the eyes are also a gift from the sea.

When all is finished the people have their ancestors. They sleep at their feet, listen to their stories, call them by name, put them in songs and dances, joke with them, become their children, their slaves, their enemies, their friends (1986: 8).

The ancestors to which the carver now grants the eyes also have an essential role in observing and therefore guiding the community and their actions in the novel. They are the embodiment of their past, a past which in Maori (*nga ra o mua*) is understood as the time in front (Metge, 1976: 70), the only seen and known testimony of their identity in the present and the basis for their future actions. Each member of the community observes the past through the carved figures, but is equally observed and guided by those who are represented inside the *wharehau* -meeting house- and speak for the future generations. In this way, Grace refers to a reciprocal visual relation in which both the carver and his carving have an active role and create each other by mutual observation: “[b]uild something, and it builds you” (1986: 144), introducing thus a specific Maori artistic ethos.

There seems to be in *Potiki* an insistence on the process of the recovery of the eyes. In a scene of the novel which describes a visit to the cemetery, Tangimoana explains the status of mis-

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carried babies as if they were wood carvings in the making: "They are only wood without eyes and haven't had a chance. Not yet. But they are waiting... for something... their eyes to get put. And then... they'll pop up. Out of the ground. Or, out of the sea... yes, out the sea" (1986: 123-24). This relates the process of eye-giving to different pro/creative acts. The carver procreates in wood, deleting the separation between artistic creation and biological procreation, and Roimata carves her children's eyes, not only by welcoming them into the world of light, but by showing them the existence of other views about it, in a parallel effort to that undertaken by the community, which tries to imprint some of these views on the developers' pragmatic minds. The interrelation between both pro/creative acts also applies to Mary, who is in charge of looking after the carvings in the meeting house. While dusting one of the figures -that of the Loving-man representing Toko's father-Mary notices that one of its eyes is missing and decides to replace it with "a little black stone which fitted into the socket where the eye had been" (1986: 22), a physical feature which Toko inherits when he is born: one of his eyes is blue, the other green. This cyclical visual asymmetry allows both the carvings and Toko to share their capacity of double vision as they manage to gain knowledge of both worlds through observation. This, as Grace remarks, is an essential part of Maori

culture and cannot be understood as a process of passive acceptance, but rather as an active way of learning:

In our meeting houses the eyes of the carvings are very strong and very noticeable. [...] I think that you learn a lot from peoples eyes, the movements of the eyes. I suppose I have always been an observer, also a participator, but basically an observer. I never used to talk a lot, I used to watch and in a way that is a learning pattern too. People learn by watching. (note 6)

2. “I’ll have you to be my eyes”: Alter/Native Ways of Seeing

Once Grace has proved her characters’ capacity of double vision, as well as the importance of visualising the world through different eyes, in *Baby No-Eyes* she takes a step further and subverts the relation between vision and knowledge. Although Grace’s attempts in this novel cannot be detached from her previous works, since she focuses on the importance of sight restoration, she moves forward -from the eye to the I- engaging in the construction of the individual, familiar and communal identity through alternative articulations which exclude the visual. In this multiple quest Grace takes her readers along in a journey of self-discovery blinding them first, so that the quest undertaken by the characters is shared in all its stages. Sight is eventually restored, but by the end of the novel Grace

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has managed to show how seeing is more than a mere correlation between the physical object and a particular visual perception. In a world in which some things which are seen cannot often be explained and where the invisible gains sense within a different epistemology, Grace extends the meaning of the verb “to see” towards new limits: the seeing is believing is hence turned around.

The main plot of the novel, around which the rest of the stories evolve, is based on a real event which took place in a New Zealand hospital in 1991, where the deceased body of a baby was returned to their family without her eyes, due to some unspecified genetic experiments undertaken by the hospital staff without their consent. In the novel Te Paania suffers a car accident in which she loses her first baby, who is submitted to similar treatment in hospital and whose spirit lingers with the family in the form of an eyeless girl unable either to see or be seen, except by her brother, but whose presence is perceived by other members of the family. This incident develops into intermingling narratives dealing with a series of cultural conflicts which take the overall process of sight restoration to different levels.

Baby has been deprived of her eyes, hence of her capacity to see, but also of her right to be seen and, therefore, acknowl-

edged by others, since she remains only in spirit. The deprivation of sight infringed physically upon the youngest member of the family allows Grace to tackle issues which affect indigenous communities worldwide: the dangers and excesses of genetic engineering, the violation of cultural rights, and the need to protect intellectual property, issues which constitute some of the newest forms of intercultural conflict in New Zealand. At the point in which this novel was written Grace's narrative had already reflected widely issues related to Maori health, especially those related to the tangible sides of her characters' disabilities and the role of those disabled characters within their community. Both Toko in *Potiki* or Te Rua in her last work, *Dogside Story* (2001), struggle with the barriers imposed on them as a result of their physical condition in addition to those they are made to endure due to their ethnicity, both of which are perceived as varieties of "disability".

In *Baby No-Eyes*, Baby's blindness triggers a series of narratives which focus on multiple deprivations but which transcend their mere physical consequences. The young victim, from then on called Baby No-Eyes, according to the Maori custom of naming children after events surrounding their births, is made to endure her physical disability as a trade mark, a real blindness which is extended to the rest of the family mem-

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bers, who in turn are confronted with different types of what might be called “cultural blindness”.

Gran Kura is the first to undertake the task of restoration, not only by recovering the body of her granddaughter so that it can be returned to the land of her ancestors and the tangi - funeral- can be celebrated accordingly, but also by deciding to unravel the layers of a past unknown to her family but responsible for Baby's father's rage and ultimately the recklessness which caused the fatal car accident. While the unwrapping of genealogical layers takes place, Baby's body is recovered and her eyes are wrapped around her belly, a gesture which derives from the Maori belief that knowledge is stored in one's stomach: “It's a strange place for eyes to be, but they seemed safe there. And it's true, isn't it, that our stomachs give us sight. It's true that it's through our insides that we know what we know” (1998: 73). This gesture serves Grace to dismantle the privileged role of the eye in the process of interpretation; Baby's eyes do not act as filters of information coming from the outside world, but project her inner knowledge, which derives from her ancestors who send her back to the family “only on loan because Mum needed me” (1998: 251). In this way Grace turns the novel into a communal reconstruction in which Kura's stories unfold the unknown secrets of their

whakapapa - genealogy- and build up into an alternative history of colonial Aotearoa and a stable point of departure for future generations:

There is a little ball inside me, a core. Round it are layers and layers, like bandages, that I've wrapped it in over the years so that it would remain. Now, because of the children's children, and because my mouth has been opened, I must unwrap the little ball, find it, let the secrets free (1998: 66).

Kura's stories serve to redeem her family of what she calls the "half-shut eye", the metaphorical blindness adopted by one of her ancestors as the protective method which forced him to keep "one eye unseeing, [...] lips sealed in order to survive" (1998: 108). Although the half-shut eye, the historical correlative of Baby's blindness, is a conscious choice, its effects are equally painful. Kura's narrative now serve a double purpose, allowing her family to look back to their past, to keep their eyes open to the future and to speak out against historical and contemporary injustices as they manage to articulate their identity in present-day Aotearoa:

[Shane] could never shut an eye or keep his mouth silent. [He] didn't know what to do about this goodness that kept hounding him. In the end he had to smash it at my feet in order to make my eyes spring open; in order to prise my lips apart; in order that I could be cured of my thieving ways and this goodness; in order

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that I could begin to unravel the sticky, twining cloths that kept wildness, like hidden treasure, trapped within (1998: 107).

Gran Kura's help in offering her family a clearer vision of their past gains sense in relation to the role played by the rest of the characters in the novel. Te Paania's individual search for "a family, stories and languages" (1998: 11), away from the constraining blindness imposed in a monocultural rural environment in which she grew up and which she recalls throughout the novel, is partially fulfilled when she decides to choose a father for her second son and start a life as a solo mother in the city. Te Paania is thus portrayed in the line of Grace's previous strong female characters, such as Makareta in *Cousins* or Roimata in *Potiki*, and gets involved in politics, helping the family friend and lawyer Mahaki in the land claims of his grandfather's tribe and researching the legal and moral consequences of biopiracy. Incidentally, Mahaki and his partner Dave, the first gay characters in Grace's fiction, allow her to introduce issues of sexual identity and the blindness to their needs as a minority within a minority. (note 7)

But it is in the relation between Tawera and Baby where the foundations of the visual world are shaken and the meaning of sight restoration is particularly subverted. Grace posits thus the new question of what is left when the capacity to control

the outside world through the gaze disappears, and what is more, when language has to account for material which is no longer perceived with the eyes, but through alternative and often subordinated senses. One side of the process, as seen in her previous works, is constituted by their attempt to recover their capacity to see and therefore reject how they are seen by others, projecting Maori images true to their cultural specificity. In this novel Grace also engages her characters in the task of diversifying the images of the nation, but escapes the exclusively visual paradigm allowing her characters to resort to their imagination, a process of articulation in which words acquire independent meaning.

James Clifford has noted the tendency of postmodern ethnographic theories to deconstruct the visual as a privileged instrument of cultural description, as mentioned above. In the line of his interpretation of cultures as ethnographic inventions, composed as an imaginative exercise, with all the contextual, rhetorical, generic, political, institutional and historical characteristics of a literary text (1986: 6), it is obvious, he affirms, that when the “innocent” eye/I ceases to exist, alternative perceptions are given priority:

Once cultures are no longer prefigured visually -as objects, theaters, texts, it becomes possible to think of a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances. In a discursive

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rather than a visual paradigm, the dominant metaphors for ethnography shift away from the observing eye and toward expressive speech (and gesture) (Clifford, 1986: 12).

Baby No-Eyes is written partly on this premise, and from the beginning of the novel Grace defies the causative relation between vision and knowledge. The prologue, for example, is narrated by Tawera, still unborn, but in no way blind to the images of the outside world, which he describes in detail from his mother's womb, thus breaking a physical barrier which in normal circumstances would impede vision. This early episode constitutes a clear memory in his life, as it happens with the narration of his own birth when, regardless of his age, he appears once again as an articulate character offering a prolific visual description. In order to be able to see her son while she is in labour, Te Paania places a mirror under her legs and so observes Tawera's arrival just as he manages to see her when he is welcomed into the world of light:

There was a head at both ends like on those reversible dolls. One doll is a dark dancer in a red flouncy dress, big gold rings in her ears, bright red lips and large black eyes which roll sideways. On her head is a wonderful turban decorated with red fruit and bright flowers. Flip this doll, and the underside of the dancing dress becomes a sparkling ball gown for the blonde-haired, blue-eyed doll who has a demure looks and diamonds in her hair. Between the

two of them there are four arms but there are no legs. They are each other's legs. However we weren't reversible dolls. We were my mother and me. [...] There were two arms her end. And her two legs, that could've been my arms for the time being, were spreading, spreading (1998: 17-18).

From the very beginning of the novel, Grace introduces the still unknown and unseen presence of "someone else" (1998: 7), which Tawera cannot quite account for but of whose existence he is aware even before he is born. The identity of that someone is revealed to Tawera hours after his birth and from that moment he clearly perceives the image of Baby, whose changing clothes and physical appearance he describes several times throughout the novel:

When we woke up my mother sat up and looked into my face. Her first words following my special appearance were, 'I want you to know that you're not an only child.'

'I knew there was someone,' I said.

'You have a sister four years and five days older than you.'

'Now I see her,' I said, 'Shot. Two holes in her head.'

'You mean she has no eyes,' my mother said. 'You mean her eyes were stolen.' (1998: 19).

From the moment Tawera sees Baby he tacitly becomes her visual guardian, while Baby fulfils the simultaneous roles of older sister, game companion and *invisible* friend. The rela-

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tion between Baby and Tawera seems to reverse the Maori notion of *tuakana teina*, the obligation of the older children to look after their younger siblings, or rather unfolds this role into a complementary relation in which Tawera guides his older sister through images and colours, while Baby serves as her guide in *unseen* matters. This complementation, which had already linked the characters of Manu and Toko in *Potiki*, as well as Missy and her unborn twin in *Cousins*, allows the children to develop complementary roles, in a new extension of the communal process of cultural recovery.

For Tawera, however, the task is never simple. Unlike the ease with which a child's invisible friend adapts to his invented games in what is after all a made to measure world, Baby is outspoken and protests when Tawera forgets about her or uses words about objects she does not know about. In some of the dialogues between both children we witness the reconstruction of a world from its foundations. Baby starts by asking Tawera about the most obvious piece of information:

'See?' she said. 'What's see?'

'See is looking at something with your eyes and knowing what it is.'

'I can look at you talking,' she said. 'And know what it is.'

'That's not see, that's hear.'

'Explain hear.'

'Hear is listening to something with your ears and knowing what it is.' [...]

'I don't need to see,' she said. 'I have you to be my eyes.' (1998: 75).

Later on, while Tawera and Baby play outside, he makes the "mistake" of introducing the world of colours when describing the tree: "If you touch here you can feel the size of the leaves and how smooth they are. The bark is grey like elephant skin. The leaves are green like January's eyes" (1998: 135). Baby's protests do not wait: "Grey, green, the colour of elephants, the colour of January's eyes? What's that supposed to mean? [...]. Why is it that you never tell me properly about the colours?" (1998: 135). At this point Grace's technique has become so efficient that even as readers we are uncomfortable with Tawera's use of colours and join in with Baby's complaints. From that moment Tawera realises that a conventional description will escape his sister's grasp and comes to terms with this lack with a complete feeling of freedom:

I [...] thought about how it was all up to me to think of words and sentences for colours. It was a good feeling to know that these words and sentences could be any that I wanted them to be. Here I was, in charge of all the colours of the world. 'Grey', I said, is like putting your tongue out and licking a window, starting from the bottom and going right up to the top.' (1998: 135).

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The realisation that words relate arbitrarily to colours, and hence to the rest of the notions on which the outside world is constructed, grants him a freedom which he imprints on his language. As a child Tawera has limited experience and knowledge, but Grace converts this limitation into boundless possibilities, as she subverts the concept of Maori people as children in need of guidance and education. Tawera manages to detach the visual information from the messages associated with it, hence has the capacity to add new meanings to the words he uses or define them according to a different scale of values; he speaks of feelings, rather than shapes, of perceptions, rather than colours. Baby works in the novel as Tawera's conscience, obliging him to question the bases of a world where meaning is in no way stable. She becomes part of his conscience, and the novel evolves gradually as Tawera learns to turn the loud explanations into quiet mind-talking, which keeps him out of trouble at school and makes Baby feel part of his brother's life as a "normal" child: "I'll talk to you in my mind [...] We'll have friends together [...] and when we play soccer, you can think what to do and I'll do the actions. You can be the brains" (1998: 137).

In this way, Grace proves that the eyes are not only an instrument which allows a better understanding of the world, the

eyes can also be a restrictive and painful weapon, a thought that the protagonist of her short story “Letters From Whetu” expresses when she says: “If I walked round the world I’d wear two holes in my face in place of eyes and let everything pour in” (1980: 41). The sockets in Baby’s face serve the same purpose, and her stomach-eyes become the reminders of cultural loss and intercultural misunderstandings, while acquiring a deeper meaning, since they stand for cultural insight, rather than for mere physical sight. Grace teaches thus a double lesson, as she shows that seeing is not always equal to believing, and by extension of understanding, since eyes can truly deceive the seer. It is rather a question of believing first in order to eventually be able to see. This makes the reader question his or her own cultural assumptions and portrays cultural identity as something which cannot be explained, making us partake in the “implicit awareness of the general *invisibility* of this [maori] experience” (Heim 1998: 167, my emphasis), a thought superbly summarised in a fragment of *Cousins*:

[C]ulture is deep. It is deep. Even the remnants or the memories of it are deep. It is not something that can be adequately explained to those of another culture, but neither should it need to be explained, I think. It only needs, at least, to be allowed, to be let be, to be trusted (1992: 209).

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Grace's communities survive because they are invariably built as examples of cooperation, a collaboration which Keri Hulme has summarised as a process in which "your ancestors look through your eyes and you hear with their ears" (Alley 1992: 143). Seeing, as well as talking, acquires a communal meaning, hence individual blindness or any other type of disability is ameliorated by a communal healing process; Baby does not need to see, but when she does, Tawera is there to act as her eyes and he makes sure Baby understands his willingness to help her: "I always mean we even if I say I" (1998: 79).

The process of cultural restoration linked in the novel to historical, political or personal perspectives, is also grounded on the mythical. The theme of sight restoration is related to the Tawhaki, the hero Tawera is chosen to perform in his school play. In the mythical episodes, Tawhaki undertakes a series of heroic acts with his brother, the most important of which is to go in search of their mother, captured by the Poniaturi, mythological sea creatures hypersensitive to solar light. The hero saves his mother by becoming invisible and exposing them to daylight, **(note 8)** a deed repeated by Tawera and Baby who come together in the hope of helping their mother, who needs to restore her genealogical ties and overcome the pain caused by her daughter's death. In the school play Taw-

era is chosen to represent this scene, but he has to make his responsibilities as leading actor coexist with his position as visual guardian as well as placating Baby's protests because she has been excluded from the performance. As a modern trickster, Tawera skilfully solves the problem resorting to a clever manoeuvre in which, as in the mythical episode, blindness becomes an enabling weapon, rather than an impediment:

'Tawhaki Unseen,' I said to my sister.

'How come?'

'There are two Tawhakis?'

'That's not what I heard.'

'Two. Seen and Unseen. They have incantations to make themselves invisible and back again to visible.' [...]

'We'll be together,' I said. 'Journeying together, singing together, dancing together. But when it's time for Tawhaki to be unseen, the Tawhaki Visible disappears and the people see Tawhaki Invisible instead.' (1998: 193).

In this way, Tawera hides offstage, maintaining invisibility as part of the script, while allowing his alter ego to come on stage and play her part. Baby starts acting precisely when in the story Tawhaki becomes invisible:

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There was the light, sweeping and swirling.

There was the dark flash and the cymbal crash that vanished me behind the curtain.

And there, for everyone to see, was Tawhaki Invisible. The people clapped and cheered for her as she danced and danced in the sweeping, swirling light until the sun went down (1998: 196-97).

Further on in the novel, and acting like a trickster herself, Grace takes the readers back to the world of the visual through Tawera's paintings. In his struggle to become an artist later in his life, Tawera has to translate what he has learnt from Baby into visual material painted on the canvas. His artistic search becomes another extension of the existential search for the I. While studying history at university, he becomes gradually aware of the gaps in his past, questions answered partly by Kura's and Te Paania's stories, but which he now needs to confront by himself exploring "between the lines of history, seeking out its missing pages" (1998: 291).

The epilogue presents Tawera locked up in his room, an enclosed space which reminds us of the prologue narrated from his mother's womb. He has displayed the pictures of his childhood on the wall so that they serve him as points of reference, like the carvings in the meeting house: "I need these [drawings] there looking at me, reminding me of what I could do" (1998: 291). He is not only capable of observing but in a

reciprocal relationship of being observed by the eyes of his drawings, and yet Tawera's problem seems to be a lack of inspiration. His unfinished paintings lie piled up because he cannot manage to reduce the diversity of the world to limited images:

[I]n the evenings when I go to my room intending to work, all I can do is stare at absence. I take up a pencil and put it down; take up a brush, lift a daub of paint on to the tip of it, and for long moments stand poised -like a dancer, perhaps a dart thrower, unable to invade, unable to bring my brush across those pure places. I don't know what to do (1998: 292).

While as a child his perception of the world had allowed him to create complete and precise pictures -“no spaces, nothing clean, no voids or chasms, no white paper” (1998: 291)- and to reflect a world which he had managed to control as the guardian of colours and the master of words, when he grows up he is confronted with a multitude of visions of the world, and finds it difficult to enclose those within the margins of the paper. This realisation forces him to change his tactics:

[I]nstead of trying to shrink the egg of space, I begin to enlarge it. Instead of ending with that little unbreachable gap I begin with it, embrace it, let it be there, make it be there, pushing my drawing further and further to the outskirts. I persist with this, night after night, until one night everything's gone, fallen from the edges of

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the paper. [...] I can sleep then because I know I've been given my incantations Ōto make visible what was invisible (1998: 293).

Making the visible invisible had been the technique used to help his sister, now on the contrary he is made to undertake his part in the genealogical reconstruction turning the invisible into visible material, so that the rest of the world can grasp at least a minimal part of it. His ambition as an artist is to use "my own tag, own break out, own rulz [sic]" (1998: 293) and subvert previous pictorial and cultural representations, just as he used to do with Baby in their childhood games. As a matter of fact, Grace has talked about her own creative process in similar terms to those used by Tawera:

You attempt to push out the edges of what you know and understand. [...] It's as though the pushing outward allows understanding to drop down -as though you've given words, ideas, sometimes conventions, a really good shake. Then you look to see what's happened. [I push the edges] through using language in some different way, through trying different structures, through experimenting and trying to break the rules (Hereniko, 1999: 76-77).

The novel proves to be the result of overcoming the limits imposed by blindness and portrays a world in which the capacity to exert power through the visual is undermined or disappears altogether. The inability to see only proves limiting for those who place their trust on the exclusivity of visual information,

whereas it turns out to be enriching for those who manage to develop alternative sources of communication. In this way Grace demonstrates the subjective value of the visual while allowing the once passive objects of the colonial gaze to reject visual classification and develop linguistic agency instead. Grace immerses the reader in a imagined world where seeing holds a radically different meaning, a tactic which results in a shift away from the static quality of visual images and towards a more dynamic world, which in turn provides them with new perceptions of their own cultural identity necessary to redefine the cultural identity of New Zealand as a bicultural nation.

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1. Reproduced in Micaela di Leonardo (1998): 58.
2. See, for example, Anderson (1983); Bell (1996); Clifford and Marcus (1986); Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983); Sollors (1986); Wagner (1975).
3. See, for example, the exchange between Roger Keesing (1989) and Haunani-Kay Trask (1991) with reference to the Hawai'ian context, or the controversy aroused in New Zealand by Allan Hanson's work (1989). The South Pacific region to which I am referring is understood as being comprised by six different literary areas, as divided by Subramani (1985). According to this division, Maori and Aboriginal literatures form one of these areas, included within a large region formed by the countries traditionally compartmentalised within the Polynesian, Micronesian and Melanesian divisions.
4. See Pound (1983).
5. The Spiral pattern which is commonly used in Maori carving and painting has been adopted by several authors as an alternative way of representing time in Maori terms. For further treatment of the temporal structure of the novel see Deloughrey (1999).
6. See Fresno Calleja, 2003.
7. These issues have been dealt with by Witi Ihimaera in *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* (1995) and, especially, in *The Uncle's Story* (2000).
8. For different versions of this mythical episode see Clark (1993) or Reed (1946).