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Reconfiguring Ocean Life by Thinking with Oceans and Whales
Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* and Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller*

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Abstract Whales are stranded along the Atlantic Ocean in North America, the press spread the news in February 2023. Witi Ihimaera's novel *The Whale Rider* (1987) frames a similar episode: "Two hundred whales, lifeless on the beach and in the water" (1987, 85). Stranded whales are protagonists in Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* (2005), too. Here, a whale is the pretext to explore gender issues, role models in traditional indigenous societies, capitalist economy and tourism, the perception of chieftainship, shamans and spirituality. Making use of acoustic ecology (Carson 1955; Shafer 1994), whales 'speak' of relations between humans, non-humans (Huggan 2021) and oceans (Regazzoni 2022).

Keywords Southern Ocean. Whales. South Africa. New Zealand Environmental Humanities.

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1 Introduction

I was still writing and revising the present contribution, while the international press was launching news about the "mysterious strandings of whales along the North American East coast" (*La Stampa*, February 7, 2023, 16-17). The local newspaper article also referred, by way of comparison, to a massive stranding of 477 pilot whales in New Zealand, which occurred last October, and the photograph at the bottom of the page testified to that obscene quantity. Such a tragic scenario was also portrayed in an archival colour photograph, in Whitehead and Rendell's volume, showing a mass stranding of long-finned pilot whales, Chatham Island, New Zealand (2015, 248). This fact reported in the contemporary press eerily resembles and seems to echo a passage in Witi Ihimaera's New Zealand novel "By evening, all the whales had died. Two hundred whales, lifeless on the beach and in the water" (1987, 85).

According to the article, one possible cause for this new wave of casualties among the cetaceans in North America might be the noise provoked by the construction of a wind farm offshore. Apart from disorientation or "madness" caused by noise, the whales – under autopsy – also show injuries by collisions with ships. While at Lido Beach, New York, in 2016 only one dead cetacean was recorded, against 5 whales beached in 2019 around the same area, the number in January 2023 is already 4. Perhaps few of us remember that Rachel Carson back in the fifties and sixties had written about submarine soundscapes. With her *Ocean Trilogy* (1941, 1950, 1955), Carson taught us to think not only about the ocean, but also with the ocean: "knowing when to watch, when to listen, and when to touch" (Mentz 2024, 32). Carson somehow personified the animals she was describing with individual names, also using personal pronouns. Moreover, Amitav Ghosh advocates Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), defining it as an awareness created and sustained by songs and stories.

> The planet will never come alive for you unless your songs and stories give life to all the beings, seen and unseen, that inhabit a living Earth – Gaia. (Ghosh 2021, 84)

As a consequence, non-human animals will be addressed here with personal pronouns, believing that otherwise there might not be a paradigm change from man's suprematism and speciesism, also paying respect to Witi Ihimaera's guiding authorial choices, in tune with neo materialists' views on human vs nonhuman relationships (see Wadham 2020).

Thus, the object of this contribution is to demonstrate how the two literary works here analysed constitute a lesson on the practice of 'thinking with water' and, among other things, they pivot around

acoustic ecology. I will analyse Witi Ihimahera's *The Whale Rider* (1987) set in the village of Whangara, in Aotearoa-New Zealand and Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* (2005), set in the village of Hermanus, in South Africa, both of which are centred around the subject matter of stranded whales.

The two novels, both by writers from the Global South, an Aotearoa-New Zealand Maori and a South African originally from the Cape, meet Sidney Dobrin's belief that it is necessary to distance oneself from canonical Eurocentric texts (Dobrin 2021, 15).

Furthermore, these two literary works together open "new whale roads", so to speak, for didactic and pedagogical experiences, echoing the words of the poet Craig Santos Perez, quoted by the scholar Steve Mentz (2024, 33). Moreover, they diverge from "the urtext of the human encounter with the global ocean": *Moby Dick* (Mentz 2024, xvii), which remains an unavoidable, conscious or unconscious archetypal reference also for the two authors discussed here.

Thinking with the ocean means to try to establish kinship and partnership with elementary and elemental matter. It means thinking of water and with water through western science and through indigenous knowledge. Moreover, "Environmental humanities approaches are not intended to replace scientific ones of course, but rather to complement them, to work across disciplines" (Huggan 2018, x). It is within this framework that the present piece of work presents "thinking with water" as a practice in Blue Ecology:

> an ecological philosophy, which emerged from interweaving First Nations and Western thought, that acknowledges water's (i.e. fresh and salt) essential rhythmical life-spirit and central functional role in generating, sustaining, and ultimately unifying life on Earth Mother. No dichotomy between the living and the elemental exists in Blue Ecology: Earth Mother is an inter-connected whole. The vision of Blue Ecology is to: embrace a water-first approach to planning human interventions in the environment. (Blackstock 2009, 308-9)

Blue ecology, thinking with the ocean, and a water-oriented approach are attained in the two novels here analysed first and foremost through the binding notions of "soundscape" and "aural" sensitivity: in one word, through "acoustic ecology". Secondly, the two novels stage Southern oceans, thus decentering Atlantic thinking and turning toward the Pacific and Oceania, as suggested by Steve Mentz: "This aspect of ocean-thinking has not always been visible for those of us trained in European scholarly modes" (2024, 39). Mentz's "Blue Humanities" differs from Blackstock's water rights claims, insofar as it concentrates not only on oceans and oceanic thinking, based on literary "water texts" (xii) and ecocriticism, but also on "multiple

forms of planetary water" (xii), both salty and fresh. As a way to define "blue humanities", Mentz defines it as "a poetics of planetary water [which] aims to clarify the relationships between humans and water in all its forms and phases" (2). Serpil Oppermann, while retracing the history of the term, echoes this definition, by saying: "As a truly transdisciplinary field, the blue humanities studies planetary waters from sociocultural, literary, historical, aesthetic, ethical, and multiple other perspectives, and lays bare the broader social implications of hydrologic sciences" (2023, 1).

Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* and Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* both stage southern Oceans and oceanic life as ancestral, indigenous ecosystems. These ecosystems now also become a temporary meeting ground – the shore, a liminal space of encounters (Mentz 2024, 120-2) – for human beings and whales, made up of an exchange of sounds and based on vocal and auditory skills.

While representations of whales have been thoroughly analysed from a postcolonial ecocritical point of view by Graham Huggan, among others, in his study *Colonialism, Culture, Whales. The Cetacean Quartet* (Huggan 2018), what I would like to stress here is the presence of whales as harbingers, first of all, of oceanic soundscapes and oceanic ecologies, to which the two novels give voice.

Listening to the ocean is also the first act that Simone Regazzoni practices in his philosophical approach to the ocean:

> I listen to it while I tune my breathing to its might, immersed up to my waist in the lagoon waters which are stirred by the wind of which I am the natural extension: the evolution of a creature who lived in the late Devonian, around 375 million years ago, named *Tiktaalik roseae*, "a splendid hybrid, half fish half terrestrial creature" who keeps living in me. (Regazzoni 2022, 11; Author's translation)

Canadian composer and scholar Raymond Murray Shafer also opens his study on acoustics and sound ecology with a tribute to ocean thinking. "What is the first sound heard?" – he asks, and the answer is:

> It was the caress of waters. … The Greek myths tell how man arose from the sea: "Some say that all gods and all living creatures originated in a stream of Oceanus which girdles the world, and that Tethys was the mother of all his children.
>
> The ocean of our ancestors is reproduced in the watery womb of our mother and is chemically related to it. Ocean and Mother. In the dark liquid of ocean the relentless masses of water pushed past the first sonar ear. As the ear of the fetus turns in its amniotic fluid, it too is tuned to the lap and gurgle of water. (Shafer 1994, 15)

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For him, too, the ocean is at the origin – i.e. genesis – of human life on earth just as it is at the origin of each individual's foetal and prenatal experience. It is evident that the ocean belongs to creation myths in various cultures, but this myth has particular resonance for us who live along the Mediterranean coasts, as well as for all the scholars who refer to Greek culture as the founding cradle of what Said would call a "structure of attitude and reference" (Said 1993, XVI), such as Shafer and Regazzoni.

Only in the fifties did it become clear how it was possible to hear the ocean and to listen to it. Rachel Carson started writing what would become her first volume in a trilogy: *Under the Sea-Wind* (1941), where she literally listens to the sounds emitted and produced by sea creatures along the shore. However, it is in her second volume, namely *The Sea Around Us* (1950), that she discusses ocean acoustics:

> Wide experience with hydrophones and other listening devices for the detection of submarines has proved that, around the shore lines of much of the world, there is an extraordinary uproar produced by fishes, shrimps, porpoises, and probably other forms not yet identified. There has been little investigation as yet of sound in the deep, offshore areas, but when the crew of the Atlantis lowered a hydrophone into deep water off Bermuda, they recorded strange mewing sounds, shrieks, and ghostly moans, the sources of which have not been traced. (Carson 2021, 245)

Rachel Carson also elaborates on the new discoveries due to the use of hydrophones in World War II, which helped establish the sound of fish known as croakers: "a pneumatic drill tearing up pavement" (246); or, the "crackling, sizzling sound, like dry twigs burning or fat frying, heard near beds of snapping shrimps" (246); or, even, the "high pitched resonant whistles and squeals, varied with the ticking and clutching sounds slightly reminiscent of a string orchestra tuning up, as well as mewing and occasional chirps", which are the melodies produced by the white porpoises passing up and down the St. Lawrence river in Canada (247).

As if to reinforce this argument, Raymond Murray Shafer also choses to dedicate a chapter of his study in acoustics to the sounds of water creatures, in particular, whales:

> The songs of whales have been a subject of considerable recent study and some recordings of the humpback whale were produced commercially in 1970. The immediate and spectacular attention they received was partially attributable to the poignancy that the singers were an endangered species; but more than this, the songs were hauntingly beautiful. They also introduced many people, who had forgotten that the fish were their ancestors, to the echoing

> vaults of the ocean depths and united the feedback effects of popular electronic and guitar music with the multiple echoes of submarine acoustics-a subject to which we will return later. The songs of the humpback whale can be analyzed in musical terms. Each song seems to consist of a series of variations on constant themes or motifs, repeated differing numbers of times. Researchers are beginning to wonder if different herds or family groups of humpback whales may have different dialects. (Shafer 1994, 37)

Graham Huggan further elaborates on this, particularly with reference to the work by philosopher and composer Rothemberg (Huggan 2018, 94; 96; 98), experimenting with playing for humpback whales in a successful attempt the call-response practice of reciprocity.

The two novels discussed here establish an attempt at mutual communication with the ocean so as to practice both listening to the ocean and speaking to or calling out to the ocean.

In Witi Ihimaera's novel, *Whale Rider*, a little eight-year-old girl binds herself to a bull whale, saving his life and implicitly a whole species, but also proving that she deserves to inherit the title of chief in spite of being a female subject, within the Maori patriarchal and traditional practice of power transmission. This female empowerment deterritorializes patriarchy, so to speak, and male lineage, while rewriting an ancient Maori creation myth. All this thanks to the interaction with the oceanic charismatic megafauna.

In Zakes Mda's novel, *The Whale Caller*, an elderly man, well into his sixties, chooses the love for a Southern right whale he named Sharisha, while abstaining from intercourse with Saluni, his terrestrial singer bride, thus privileging zoophilia over philogyny. This love – no matter how ruinous – is another example of "a relation to animals in the form of estrangement that entails a radical repositioning of the subject" (Braidotti 2009, 526). The Whale Caller, who has managed to enchant whales by tuning his kelp horn to their songs, is a complete outsider in the community of Hermanus, where he alienates himself from the new hordes of tourists and whale watchers.

2 Listening and Speaking: A Way of Being with the Ocean

In Witi Ihimaera' s novel there are two ways in which the reciprocity of listening/speaking between a human and a more-than-human animal is portrayed. First, whales are represented as a family and a clan discussing the terrible consequences of atomic pollution in the southern oceans. Their speech and their mind are rendered through a chapter all written in italics. Thus, ocean thinking is reproduced through this slanting typographic device:

> Antarctica. The Well of the World Te Wai Ora o te Ao. Above, the frozen continent was swept with an inhuman, raging storm. […] Within the fluted ice chambers the herd of whales moved with infinite grace in holy procession. […] Then the whales could go no further. Their sonics indicated that there was nothing in front except a solid wall of ice. Bewildered, the ancient bull whale let loose a ripple of armonics, a plaintive cry for advice. […] He made a quick turn and suddenly shards of ice began to cascade like spears around the herd. The elderly females throbbed their alarm to him. They were already further south than they had ever been […] The herd followed through the crashing, falling ice. They saw their leader rising to the surface and watched as the surface starred around him.
>
> *The aurora australis was like Hine Nui Te Po, goddess of Death, flashing above the radiant land. The whale swept swiftly through the southern seas. Haumie, hiu e, taiki e. Let it be done.* (Ihimaera 1987, 78)

The herd of whales is disoriented, most probably by one of the submarine atomic tests in the South Pacific, which surprises them along their migration routes from Antarctica to Aotearoa-New Zealand. Most of all, the bull leader, in this moment of disorientation, mourns the loss of his ancient human "golden rider", who might have helped in directing the herd towards safety, rather than towards death. According to the ancient Maori creation myth, the human golden rider "had heard the young whale's distress and had come into the sea, playing a flute […] the flute's phrases imitated the whalesong of comfort. […] the young whale remained and grew under the tutelage of his master" (Ihimaera 1987, 8). In the above-quoted passage it is stressed how whales possess a way of reasoning that resembles that of humans, feeling nostalgia for a dear one, feeling disillusionment and disorientation in the face of catastrophes.

Of these atomic catastrophes we find evidence in Carson's pioneering work, *Under the Sea-Wind*:

> Although man's record as a steward of the natural resources of the earth has been a discouraging one, there has long been a certain comfort in the belief that the sea, at least, was inviolate, beyond man's ability to change and to despoil. But this belief, unfortunately, has proven to be naïve. In unlocking the secrets of the atom, modern man has found himself confronted with a frightening problem – what to do with the most dangerous by-products of atomic fission. The stark problem that faces him is whether he can dispose of these lethal substances without rendering the earth uninhabitable.
>
> No account of the sea today is complete unless it takes note of this ominous problem. […] At least until the late 'fifties, the sea

> has been selected as a "natural" burying place for the contaminated rubbish and other "law-level wastes" of the Atomic Age. (Carson 2021, 191)

Rachel Carson is not the only one to denounce the atomic pollution of the oceans, the so-called "packaged wastes" (192) – or, barrels lined with concrete and hauled out to sea – deposited on the bottom of the seas and oceans, to which one can add "the fallout from the testing of bombs, the great part of which comes to rest on the vast surface of the sea" (192).

Jan Zalasievicz, investigator of the Anthropocene Working Group, also wrote extensively about this problem, though claiming that: "the atomic bombs that destroyed the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki left negligible radioactivity. The worldwide radioactive "bomb spike" in sediment layers is a legacy of the sabre-rattling of the cold war […] when over 500 nuclear weapons were detonated at Earth's surface and in the atmosphere" (Zalasievicz 2015, 39). When France planned its nuclear testing between 1966 and 1996 in the French Polynesia, Mururoa was chosen as testing site. Mururoa is the tip of a sunk ancient volcano. Inside this volcano at a depth of 500 meters, 138 subterranean explosions were produced, and 41 aerial ones. Testing at the Bikini atoll, both in the air and underground, were conducted by the US between 1946 and 1958, determining a forced removal of the population, while little is known about the effects on ocean life.

Although the damage done has not been quantified, Carson also claims that:

> For the tiny organisms are eaten by larger ones and so on up the food chain to man. By such a process tuna over an area of a million square miles surrounding the Bikini bomb test developed a degree of radioactivity enormously higher than that of the sea water.
>
> By their movements and migrations, marine creatures further upset the convenient theory that radioactive wastes remain in the area where they are deposited. The smaller organisms regularly make extensive vertical movements […] The larger fauna, like fishes, seals, and whales, may migrate over enormous distances, again aiding in spreading and distributing the radioactive elements deposited at sea. (Carson 2021, 193)

Thus, on the one hand, Carson, rather than depicting the mega fauna only as a victim of radioactive pollution, also considers it a vehicle for the spreading of radionuclides around the oceans. On the other hand, Witi Ihimaera – through the anthropomorphization of oceanic creatures – tries to penetrate their thinking strategies and manifestations of feelings, while facing atomic disasters.

Since anthropomorphism is a characteristic also of Sharisha in Zakes Mda's novel, it is worth mentioning that this places the cetacean between two extremes. On the one hand Graham Huggan warns us against "relentless anthropomorphization" of whales (Huggan 2018, 3); on the other hand, Emanuele Coccia reassures us that "any ban on anthropomorphism would not be a defence of the otherness of fungi, squirrels, oaks, bacteria or viruses, but it would be a malicious and sly affirmation of a sacred and absolute otherness of humans, whom we have no right to compare to any other living beings" (Coccia 2022, 175; Author's translation). As a third way out of this *impasse*, Carson provides a scientific identification of agency by giving proper names to oceanic and marine creatures who "remember", "investigate, assess situations, and make decisions – sometimes catastrophic ones" (Carson 2021, xiv). The bull whale in Witi Ihimaera's novel, indeed, comes back to a well-memorized place of origin, risking his death as well as the death of all the herd. Rosi Braidotti, too, claims that "Evolutionary theory acknowledges the cumulated and embodied memory of species" (2009, 528). Last but not least, anthropomorphism is discussed by Jane Bennett in positive terms:

> We at first may see only a world in our own image, but what appears next is a swarm of "talented" and vibrant materialities (including the seeing self).
>
> A touch of anthropomorphism can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations. (Bennett 2010, 99)

Thus, material ecocriticism encourages anthropomorphism not in a narcissistic anthropocentric manner, but as a way to acknowledge isomorphism and the vitality of matter (99).

The cetaceans' ability to communicate among themselves is then balanced by a second crucial moment in the novel, when the little girl Kahu performs an act of communication both in speech and telepathy – or sympathetic communion – with the whales. When the doomed herd of whales is stranded on the beach of the village of Whangara, Kahu decides to act:

> It might have been the sudden light, or a cross current, but the eye of the whale seemed to flicker. Then the whale appeared to be looking at the young girl swimming. […] 'Help me,' she cried. 'Ko Kahutia Te Rangi au. Ko Paikea.' The whale shuddered at the words.
>
> Ko Paikea?
>
> Ko Kahutia Te Rangi?
>
> By chance, Kahu felt the whale's forward fin. She held on for dear life. […]

> 'Greeting, sacred whale,' Kahu whispered. She was cold and exhausted. She pressed her cheek to the whale's side and kissed the whale. The skin felt like very smooth slippery rubber.
>
> Without really thinking about it, Kahu began to stroke the whale just behind the fin. *It is my lord, the whale rider.* She felt a tremor in the whale and a rippling under the skin. (Ihimaera 1987, 102-3)

Thus, the girl speaks and pays homage to the bull whale, who has beached himself and has drawn all the herd with him to suffer the same destiny: "cetaceans are not amphibious and will die if beached, as breathing becomes difficult, the weight of their unsupported bodies can crush their internal organs, they cannot hydrate or regulate their temperature, and they have no protection against sunburn" (Peters 2016, 58). The bull whale on his part thinks he recognized the ancient human "golden rider" in the little girl, and responds through vibrations of his whole body. This way of communicating between human and animal is, of course, magical and ritual, perhaps shamanic. It is such an intense exchange that, in the 2003 film adaptation by Niki Caro, the corresponding sequence of images – when Kahu is nose to muzzle with the whale and whispering to him – is quite effective and touching, also due to the disproportion between the tiny, slim girl and the gigantic bulk of the exposed whale.

The novel displays more traditional ways in which whales make themselves heard also by humans: "The whales were singing a plaintive song, a fluting sound which began to recede away, away, away" (Ihimaera 1987, 85). And from Murray Shafer's acoustics, to Carson's first ocean volume *The Sea Around Us*, to literary criticism, whale songs have been scrutinized. Most recently, Graham Huggan, in his chapter entitled "Whale/song", as opposed to or paired to "Whale/watch" (Huggan 2018, 94-9), gave an overview on how technology allowed us humans to listen to whale songs and thus starting a "save the whale" agenda, primarily humpbacks and blue whales, but also thus increasing our melancholia, in projecting onto whale songs and whale communication all our utopias and sympathies. However, while all this is certainly true, the two novels here analysed seem not necessarily to privilege sight, or whale watching, or the centrality of vision – although whales end up obscenely appearing and exposed when stranded – but rather they seem to privilege listening/talking through an exchange of musicalities. Whale song is a relevant chapter also in Rebecca Giggs's ground-breaking and scientifically exhaustive study, entitled *Fathoms. The World in the Whale* (2020). With Huggan she agrees on the fact that "whale vocalisations entered the public sphere framed as the sounds of a vanishing world […] The conservation movement had found its soundtrack" (Giggs 2020, 174-5). Still, a certain degree of mystery surrounds whale songs and contributes to their charisma. Similarly, Whitehead and Rendell dedicate a long

chapter to the song of the humpback whales, among other species and families, describing their structure, their frequency, their cycles and even their rhyming schemes. The songs are properly called such because of their "structure" and they are also a cultural phenomenon, for they are transmitted, emulated and modified. They are "part of the acoustic environment of the ocean" (2015, 76).

In particular, the Whale Caller resumes music as a primary source of communication with the whales. In a novel that clearly opposes Apollonian and Dionysian qualities, for the male protagonist is a man retired and withdrawn not only from society but also from passions, while his partner, Saluni is keen on any sort of excess – actually being the bringer of euphoria – by drinking too much, disorderly dancing and singing, and above all laughing, something that the protagonist seems utterly incapable of. The Whale Caller, however, uses a musical instrument which Murray Shafer considers Dionysian: the aulos, or a sort of flute, invented by the Goddess Athena. Notwithstanding, the kelp horn – being a wind instrument – apparently shares the same qualities as the aulos, or reed oboe, as imitating the human voice, and as "breaking from the human breast" (Shafer 1994, 6); but it shares qualities with the lyre, too, for it, too, is made with a natural material, kelp, not differently from the shell of the turtle, which produces sounds "if used as a body of resonance" (6), as the instrument of the God Hermes. Yet, the lyre is considered an Apollonian instrument, being more harmonious and more mathematical in its complexity (6).

In conclusion, I would say that the Whale Caller, being himself an incarnation of Apollonian frigidity before meeting Saluni, plays a half Apollonian, half Dyonisian instrument, by which to mesmerize whales. Indeed, it is by repeatedly playing his kelp horn that he manages to signal to his favourite Southern right, one he named Sharisha and who punctually returns to the South African shores each year. Playing the horn also has the function of thinking with the ocean, it is an attempt at immersing into the waters, of putting oneself in the place of – or, side by side with – the cetacean creatures.

3 On Genesis and Apocalypse

The two novels oscillate and range between myths of geneses ("mythical stories of human origin") and apocalypses ("apocalyptic presentiments of planetary demise"), and this is a common feature of whale narratives according to Graham Huggan (2018, viii). Carson, too, feels the need to start at the beginning "of that great mother of life, the sea" (Carson 2021, 201), in order to tell the story of the ocean and the beginning of life on earth:

> Before the first living cell was created, there may have been many trials and failures. It seems probable that, within the warm saltiness of the primeval sea, certain organic substances were fashioned from carbon dioxide, sulphur, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, and calcium. Perhaps these were transitions steps from which the complex molecules of protoplasm arose. (Carson 2021, 204)

The Maori novel is rooted in the creation myth of Paikea, the Ancestor who came from Hawaiki, the traditional homeland of Maori people situated in the East, riding a whale, according to what Mentz defines "the ancient practice of wayfinding or oceanic navigation" (2024, 40). Thus, now the whale rider is memorialized by a gable structure which rides atop the meeting house, Whitireia, in Whangara, the village where both novel and film are set. "The meeting house was carved by the great master carver Pine Taiapa and opened in 1939", Ihimaera wrote in the introduction to the novel to honour the ancestral myth and the epic voyage. Zakes Mda, too, refers, although tangentially, to a time lost in the mists when Khoikhoi rejoiced for the stranding of one whale as a sign of a gift from the god "Tsiqua, He Who Tells His Stories in Heaven" (Mda 2006, 4). Similarly, Ihimaera writes: "Some would have argued that in Maori terms a stranded whale was traditionally a gift from the Gods" (Ihimaera 1987, 80).

That ancestral creation myth is now lost in memory, for the Maori people have to fight other battles in modern times. First of all, a voyage abroad gave Rawiri, the narrator, awareness of his Maori identity: "in Australia and in Papua New Guinea I grew into an understanding of myself as a Maori" (Ihimaera 1987, 55). He had realized that for the Maori in Aotearoa-New Zealand the "journey was possibly more difficult because it had to be undertaken within European terms of acceptability. We were a minority and much of our progress was dependent on European goodwill. And there was no doubt that in New Zealand, just as in Papua New Guinea, our nationalism was also galvanising the people to become one Maori nation" (55). Secondly, Kahu, Rawiri's niece, belongs to the first generation of children who could learn the traditional Maori language in primary school, thanks to its recognition as an official language in 1987, when the novel was published: "one of the students would read the speech which had won the East Coast primary schools contest. What was remarkable, he said, was that the student had given it entirely in her own tongue, the Maori language" (68). Thirdly, another major battle that Maori people constantly fight for is the recognition and restitution of lands. Koro Apirana, the elderly chief of the community is busy in a diplomatic visit to Wellington "on Maori Council business" (29): "We had a hard time down South […] The land dispute was a difficult one and I think that Koro is worried about the judge's decision" (88). More in general, Maori had always had to face transitions from tradition

to modernity. The twenty-first century only poses more challenges, namely the transition to gender equality and women's empowerment of which Kahu is the protagonist: "Girls can do anything these days. Haven't you heard you're not allowed to discriminate against women anymore?" (63). These are the terms of the postcolonial issues the novel raises and that the film accepts reproducing. But there is one more fact that matches ethnic issues and environmental issues. As Maori people see their lands stolen, appropriated by colonial powers and interests, and need to reclaim them, similarly whales witnessed atomic testing in Polinesia, at Mururoa, in the Marshall Islands, at Bikini, and the subsequent chemical pollution greately reduced their mobility and compelled them to change their traditional migration routes. The Maori fear the extinction of their chieftainship, their culture, language and costumes and this threat is paralleled in the novel by the threat of extinction whales suffer from in the Southern oceans. This is why in opposition to the novel's opening genesis, the threat of apocalypse looms large.

Not dissimilarly, in post-Apartheid South Africa, the Whale Caller distinguishes himself for his radical outsideness and anti-capitalism. To begin with, the protagonist lives a retired life in a wendy house, a shack in someone's back garden and he only eats macaroni and cheese on his meagre pension. He wears a pair of overalls that only changes when he puts on his cheap tuxedo to go and meet the whale Sharisha. Secondly, he is strongly against the local poachers, who dilapidate the coast for profit. Thirdly, he never goes fishing but once, when Saluni obliges him, and he catches a very huge fish, by which Saluni gains money from tourists who want a picture with it. Furthermore, together they engage in a very odd pastime: they go to restaurants, but only to look from the shop window at the customers while they eat inside, for the Whale Caller is disgusted by their appetite, which is the appetite of the new South Africans of the so-called post-Apartheid rainbow nation. Moreover, also in this novel as in Ihimaera's, postcolonial issues are at stake. In particular, the status of South Africa as a postcolony is criticized from the inside, from the viewpoint of a fishing village that has completely lost its identity and local subsistence economy, and has been turned into a commercial wonderland.

Another major postcolonial issue relates to the completely lost traditions of the KhoiKhoi. If the Maori are threatened with the loss of their lands and their cultural heritage, this has already happened for the ancient populations of South Africa, "the KhoiKhoi of old" (Mda 2006, 4), whose myths are now lost, to the point that the protagonist resorts to ancient Australian myths in their place:

> He remembers the Dreaming that he heard from the same sailor who told him about the shark callers of New Ireland and about

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> Starfish Man and Whale Man. Way way back the Dreamtime of Australian Aborigines the stranding of whales and dolphins attracted people to binges of feasting, as it did with the Khoikhoi of old in what later became the Western Cape. The Strong Men used to attract whales to the shore with songs and rattles and medicines. However in the Ramindjeri clan, whose totem was the whale, Kondoli nga:tji, there was one Strong Man who could sing to make a female whale and her calf escape the shallow waters. (219)

Like Kahu, the Whale Caller, too, believes he has a shamanic ability to communicate with Sharisha the whale, his marine and oceanic bride, with whom he plays, dances and sings for one whole night, in a state of trance, and is reciprocated in his frenzy and rhythms in a call-response duet, or rather, *paso doble*. This performance is also the fulfilment of a dream he often has of dancing with Sharisha floating in mid-air. Saluni, on her part, does not know how to bind him to her, to bring him back on earth. The episode of the human-animal dance is somehow reminiscent of the film by Kevin Costner, *Dances with Wolves* (1990):

> The Whale Caller raised his left leg, turned and twisted on one spot, then stamped the foot down. He did the same with the right leg. He repeated this dance in rapid succession for a long time, whilst blowing the sounds of the whining wind. […] He did not seem to tire. He just went on and on raising his legs, spinning his sturdy body in the air, and then stumping his feet on the rocks. Sharisha did not seem to tire either. She was creating a whirlwind on the water by making a complicated combination of rocking, breaching and lobtailing. […] Sharisha and the Whale Caller continued their dance unabated. Deep in the night the wails of his horn could be heard […] The next morning the dance continued […] Both his horn and Sharisha were groaning deeply like out-of-tune tubas. Both were breathless as the dance seemed to be slowly fizzling out. (Mda 2006, 64)

This singular *paso doble* dance, with the Caller in his tuxedo, spinning like a Dervish, and the whale somehow responding, creates a confusion as to who calls whom, who responds to whom and who imitates whom. The two bodies seem rather to dance in unison and communion in a frenzy of Dyonisian euphoria, that contradicts the Caller's previous cold temperament and throws Saluni – his terrestrial bride – into a fit of jealousy. She grows vindictive towards what she calls derogatorily "the fish". This is shamanic trance and dance, this is meta-physical union and, possibly, co-evolution.

This same sympoiesis, as Donna Haraway calls it, is reproduced also in the film by Zola Maseko, where the dancing session is a silent

sequence where the Caller seems to orchestrate large circling movements and the whale happily and harmoniously floats all around him.

Listening and learning from the whales characterizes the Caller's obsession, yet, he claims that the whales also learn from him, in particular his whale Sharisha: "the Whale Caller had taught Sharisha to sing like a humpback" (33). And this is how they communicate, although only the male humpback whales do sing, whereas Sharisha is a female Southern right. Interspecies reciprocity in learning and communicating is evoked here.

Rebecca Giggs clarifies that:

> Right whales crack, their sounds are known as 'gunshots'. At lower latitudes in the Southern Ocean, humpback whales make numerous sociable noises. The whales grunt, rasp, thwop, and moan; the shriek, whine, bubble, gurgle, and fin-slap on the sea's topside, as well as generating what are called 'pulse trains': subsonic resonances […].
>
> The songs humpback sing are myriads. […] The songs are ululating bow-wows that wind up and unwind, interspersed by clanks and spackling chitters, as if flinging open a cutlery drawer. There are coughs, squeaks, and tightly embouchure mewls. […] their songs can also prove tedious and unvaried. […] From time to time, humpback rhyme. This is perhaps […] a mnemonic tactic. (Giggs 2020, 180-1)

At the end of the day, probably, whale songs are a way to compensate for lack of vision in the deep oceanic darkness. It is a way to give shape and voice to the Ocean itself. For, "In the atmosphere sound vanishes quickly, extending a maximum of about ten kilometers, but ocean sounds can travel for thousands. Humpback whale 'songs' off the coast of Mexico can be heard off the coast of Alaska, and a natural 'deep sound channel' of varying depths in the ocean can carry sound around the earth" (Peters 2016, 61).

In the Maori novel, a small girl only eight years old, challenges the rough sea and the storm and swims around a stranded bull whale. Once she manages to hang from its jaw she starts talking to the whale:

> 'Greetings, ancient one,' Kahu said as she clung onto the whale's jaw. 'Greetings.' She patted the whale and looking into its eye, said, 'I have come to you.' […] 'Help me,' she cried. 'Ko Kahutia Te Rangi au. Ko Paikea.' (Ihimaera 1987, 102)

In this passage, Ihimaera seems well-aware that for cetaceans "there would be no looking into one's eyes, just looking into one eye at a time"; as Melville speculated, "experiencing a whale's visual field

would be like looking sideways through our ears" (Peters 2016, 63). Thus, the bull whale acknowledges the ancient lineage, descending from Paikea, the first man who came to Whanganai riding a whale, and who is now reincarnated in this little girl, this courageous Maori girl all on her own, who needs to show to her stubborn grandfather that she deserves to become the next generation leader of the community. She is the predestined one: her mother gave her a male name, the name of the ancestor Kahutia Te Rangi; her mother sent the umbilical cordon to the grandmother, so that it could be buried there in the sacred land of Paikea; she was the diver who went down deeper and deeper to retrieve the stone her grandfather had sunk for the testing of the boys. But since she was not the boy he expected in his lineage, he had always despised her. Now, she is the one who talks to the whale and rides the whale, guiding the bull whale and the herd of young calves back to the deep ocean and to safety.

These two novels, in spite of their differences and their topographic and cultural distance, are relevant in the field of blue ecology because, first of all, they show that we are not like whales. "We are mammals. […] But mammals are really rather odd animals. They are quite different from most other creatures on the earth or in the sea" (Whitehead, Rendell 2015, 50). And, as Graham Huggan claims: "whales are *not* like us" (2018, xiv). The purpose of the two novels is not to claim equality between humans and more-than-humans. Quite the contrary: Kahu's coma after the cetacean's immersion is the mark of how evolution has created divergent species: "because land mammals cannot live in water" (Mentz 2024, xiv). Similarly, the stranding and the eventual killing of the Southern right, due to the alluring music of the horn played by a man, in the South African novel, is a warning about a tipping point and a boundary that must not be challenged, if not at the cost of natural disasters. More precisely, in the Caller's desire to call the whale to the shore there is a mixture of biophilia and weird thanatophilia as well, an example of human trespassing, well described by Rebecca Giggs in her chapter on the charisma of the megafauna (2020, 135-70).

The meaning of the novels does not reside, therefore, in interspecies equality, but rather in showing the possibility of an interspecies meeting ground, even though only imaginary and belonging to the realm of fictional representation. Although (successful) experiments have been conducted of playing music to and with the humpback whales (Rothenberg 2008), the fact that the two novels stage and deploy oceanic soundscapes as an exercise in modes of listening to, being and thinking with nature creates a rupture with a tradition of ocular/visual centrism. As a matter of fact: "Underwater, light is scattered and absorbed but sound speed at a quicksilver pace; optics are discouraged and acoustic encouraged", writes John Duram Peters (2016, 61).

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Perhaps, what the two novels really teach us is what Emanuele Coccia summarises:

> All of us are a repetition of a preceding life. Since it is attained through a birth, life is always a repletion. […] Each life has a symbolic nature. It was not necessary to wait for the appearance of verbal language. Each life is language incarnated. In his work entitled *Thalassa. Essay on the theory of genitality*, Ferenczi claims that each form of life is the repetition of archaic forms that try to recover from an ancient trauma. Thus, any birth would represent "the individual recapitulation of the great catastrophe that, due to drying oceans, compelled various animal species, and certainly our animal ancestors, to adapt to life on land." […] The symbolism assumes a transgenerational quality: 'each life form is the symbol of a catastrophe and of a trauma, and the sign of its overcoming.' Probably what we define as hereditary is nothing but propelling onto the next generations the painful task to get rid of those traumas. (Coccia 2022, 38; Author's translation)

This is why Kahu, a small girl, in place of the first-born boy awaited by the grandfather, could not be immediately recognized as a leader; her gender, in that patriarchal and traditional society was considered a limitation. But she did not need the body of a man to retrieve the ancient strength the Ancestor had bestowed upon her, the last spear of her nation, to cleanse that ancient separation of man from nature. Similarly, the Whale Caller had reduced the gap, although only momentarily, between himself and that original trauma – which is to say, life on earth.

Finally, perhaps, it is no accident that the two protagonists are orphans of their mothers. This is the only, very slight similarity between the 8-year-old Maori girl, Kahu, and the 64-year-old South African horn player:

> According to Ferenczi, there exists a symbolic identity between 'the maternal womb, the ocean and the earth on the one hand, and the penis, the child and the fish on the other.' Maternity is a cosmic fact: 'the mother is in reality a symbol and a partial substitute for the ocean, the reverse is not true.' (Coccia 2022, 40; Author's translation)

Whoever speaks, sings, or dances, man or whale, humans or nature, it is the Planet Earth that expresses itself. The subject who takes to speaking is always Planet Earth itself. This is, in my opinion, the final message of both novels and of both aforementioned film adaptations. "The whale is a reminder of the oneness which the world once had. It is the birth cord joining past and present, reality and fantasy.

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It is both. It is both, he thundered, 'and if we have forgotten the communion then we have ceased to be Maori" (Ihimaera 1987, 94).

The two novels distance themselves from the predator-prey paradigm, and therefore from their *Urtext Moby Dick*, a story of animals as victim (Atwood 1972, 75). However, wanting to connect these two novels intertextually with the western masterpiece might be considered a way to impose a Euro-American centred filter. After all, the real intertext created by the two novels is with ancient creation myths, with indigenous shamanism and totemism.

The two texts also challenge and deconstruct the myth of man the saviour, even more so the white man as saviour, for in one case a little indigenous girl is the saviour and in the other case an African man is perhaps the cause of the doom of the cetacean. The Caller's sense of guilt might well be seen as metonymic for the guilt of humankind as an anthropogenic force extinguishing all life on the planet. Finally, in its representation, the whale is never reduced merely to a body in bits and pieces, the head, the fin, or the tale. In both stories the whale is a huge bulk, completely exposed, beautiful, majestic, and vulnerable, when it comes completely out of the water. Riding the whale and dancing with the whale allow human bodies and whales to come closer, to cohabit space, in an asymmetrical proportion that, for once, sees humans as dwarfed and impotent.

There is therefore more than one way in which the texts dismantle cliches and stereotypes about whales, despite inhabiting a certain nostalgia, of which Graham Huggan talks extensively (2018), but they also represent an attempt to reconceptualize and rethink the ocean and ocean life, and possibly do represent a "cetacean turn" (Steinwand 2011, 182; Huggan 2018, ix).

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