

‘ANY DEAD BODIES WE CAN EXHUME?’
STORY-BLOOD AND THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION IN
PAULA MORRIS’S *QUEEN OF BEAUTY*, *HIBISCUS COAST*,
AND ‘RANGATIRA’¹

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ABSTRACT

Taking into account the complicated history surrounding issues of indigenous oral-story appropriation, this paper examines the ways in which appropriation disputes in Aotearoa/New Zealand are played out within Paula Morris’s fictional narratives. Adopting as its base assumption social anthropologist Arnd Schneider’s definition of ‘cultural appropriation’ as ‘taking – from a culture that is not one’s own’ (2003: 218), and Jonathan Hart’s belief that cultural appropriation ‘occurs when a member of one culture takes a cultural practice or theory of a member of another culture as if it were his or her own right’ (1997: 138), this study uncovers the ways in which Morris’s Maori characters identify and challenge, and at the same time are often complicit with, instances of Pakeha appropriation of indigenous stories, lands, and cultural artifacts.

INTRODUCTION

Stories are not just entertainment. Stories are power. They reflect the deepest, the most intimate perceptions, relationships and attitudes of people. Stories show how a people, a culture, think.

Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, ‘Stop Stealing Native Stories’ (1998: 583)

If we deny permission to our own, then a ‘real’ outsider – some big-name foreign author, who’s oblivious to protocol and issues of ownership – will swoop in at some point and tell our stories for us.

Paula Morris (Pistacchi 2006)

Within the field of postcolonial studies few topics are more hotly debated than those surrounding the globalized fight by indigenous peoples to assert their rights over cultural and intellectual property. This debate translates within the field of New Zealand literary studies into specific localized inquiries: what exactly do we mean by ‘story appropriation’ in 21st Century Aotearoa/New Zealand when it comes to the exchange of oral and written narratives between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples? Do our definitions of ‘appropriation’ change when the appropriating takes place between storytellers who share a common cultural, ethnic or national background? And finally, how do we assess issues of ‘appropriation’ in the contemporary moment when many stories and cultural artifacts now viewed as ‘taken’ were willingly given away by people living in the past? These are the troubling questions that underlie the words of Virginia Ngatea Seton, the ghost-writer protagonist of Paula Morris’s Montana Award winning novel *Queen of Beauty*, when she asks a friend, ‘Got any gossip from your mother that we can distort? Any dead bodies we can exhume? The plot is sagging. We need more props’ (Morris, 2002: 43).

Resisting easy answers and soap-box polemics, Morris’s novels and short stories challenge us to reconceptualize how we define and identify — and ultimately react to — acts of cultural appropriation in modern day Aotearoa/New Zealand. Maori characters in Morris’s texts often display seemingly contradictory and ambivalent attitudes towards appropriative acts, with some believing, like the author herself, that ‘if we deny permission to our own, then a ‘real’ outsider... will swoop in at some point and tell our stories for us,’² and others feeling, as the character Jim does in *Queen of Beauty*, that ‘You could give [*foreigners*] a story a day and still not begin to use them up’ (p. 268). By giving equal weight to these two viewpoints in her stories, Morris seldom offers judgment, instead implying a need for justice in cross-cultural human affairs. Her refusal to sermonize in any definitive way about how ‘justice’ can be sought and served in relation to acts of cultural appropriation results in texts that ultimately pose more questions about issues of cultural appropriation than they answer. This study explores these ambiguities in Morris’s texts and examines the complex ways in which her Maori characters identify and challenge, and at the same time are often complicit with, instances of Pakeha appropriation of indigenous stories, lands, and cultural artifacts.

APPROPRIARE: ‘TO MAKE ONE’S OWN’

The Latin word *appropriare*, ‘to make one’s own’, lies at the root of our contemporary use of the word ‘appropriation’. In a narrow sense, the term can be defined as ‘the direct duplication, copying or incorporation’ of an artifact, im-

age or story by another artist or author ‘who represents it in a different context, thus completely altering its meaning and questioning notions of originality and authenticity’ (Stangos qtd. in Schneider, 2006: 21). *Cultural* appropriation, according to Jonathan Hart, goes one step further and occurs ‘when a member of one culture takes a cultural practice or theory of a member of another culture as if it were his or her own right or as if the right of possession should not be questioned or contested’ (1997: 138). While Schneider and Hart offer useful working definitions for examining instances of Pakeha appropriation of Maori culture in Morris’s fictional texts, the term ‘appropriation’, no matter how precisely defined, simmers with ambiguity. Instances of cultural appropriation can be ‘figurative or literal’ (Hart, 1997: 138), ‘tangible or intangible’ (Schneider, 2003: 217), and they are therefore often difficult to pinpoint and to classify. It is this uncertainty about the term, and the act itself, that Paula Morris highlights when she declares, ‘Appropriation is a hard topic on which to have a firm opinion’.

It is perhaps because it is such a ‘hard topic’ that Morris keeps mulling the issue over, utilizing acts of cultural appropriation as the catalyzing incidents in nearly all of her major plots.³ These acts range, in the various novels and short stories, from instances of oral-story appropriation to accounts of land theft and art forgery. At a superficial level, many of these appropriative acts appear easy to identify because they cross clear legal copyright boundaries. According to Bruce Ziff and Pratima Rao, the editors of *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, ‘At the most mundane level, the breach of an author’s copyright or the theft of an artist’s canvas [*can be identified as*] an appropriative act. Here we seem to be able to define the relevant actors with ease’ (1997: 3). It is this kind of ‘straightforward’ appropriative act that seems, at first glance, to be the type of appropriation of concern in Morris’s novel *Hibiscus Coast* (2005).

In *Hibiscus Coast* Morris’s Maori-Chinese protagonist, Emma Taupere, willingly embarks on a mission to create elaborate forgeries of Pakeha painter Charles Frederick Goldie’s⁴ paintings for illegal sale abroad. Here, the legislative boundaries of the case are evident – it is clearly illegal to paint and sell artistic forgeries as originals. Theorists such as Ziff and Rao might, however, ultimately challenge the simplicity of even this ‘straightforward’ and ‘mundane’ case by saying that an ethical (rather than a legal) reading of the situation is complicated by ‘the fact that we would be making a statement about the rights of individuals based on views about authorship or creation that give credit to a given person. In other words, our definition of the actors...is value-laden and is therefore contentious’ (1997: 3). In the case of Emma’s appropriative act in *Hibiscus Coast*, the ‘value-laden’ and ‘contentious’ nature of this seemingly

clear-cut act of forgery comes down to issues of postcolonial politics. In *Hibiscus Coast*, Emma is a woman of Maori-Chinese heritage copying a European man's artistic representations of Maori elders. It is culturally significant that it is Goldie's paintings that she is copying because,

Although Goldie may have set out to record for posterity the last survivors of what was then believed by many to be a doomed race, he also saw in the Maori, in their poignant situation at the turn of the century and in their perceived 'exoticism' in the eyes of Europeans, a rich source of material for pictorial story telling. His portraits promote a fixed and narrow perception of Maori as the 'noble relics of a noble race', and some critics have condemned his work as perpetuating a 'comforting fiction' from a patronising European perspective. (Christchurch Art Gallery, 1999)

Most contemporary critics agree there is something disturbing about the way Goldie 'appropriated' cultural wealth by creating Westernised images of the Maori for commodification.⁵ It is this wide-spread discomfiture surrounding Goldie's 'appropriating' acts that lead to a sense throughout *Hibiscus Coast* that Emma is not so much 'stealing' Goldie's paintings as she is 'taking back' the images of Maori ancestors. This idea is reinforced by Emma's art school lecturer, Dr. Smelling, who emphatically tells his students that Goldie's paintings need to be 'reclaimed and reinterpreted by subsequent generations' if they are to maintain 'cultural value' (p. 93).

Emma clearly takes this idea to heart. For her, it is important that the man whose image she is copying is a Maori ancestor and that his name, Patara Te Tuhi, is remembered by everyone who encounters his portrait. She believes copying his image is unproblematic because he 'would have appreciated the homage' (p. 147), and says she has no interest in the money she is offered for completing the forgery (p. 180). Her only concern in the entire process of creating the copy of Patara Te Tuhi's portrait is a nagging fear that his image might be taken overseas and put in a private gallery where it could not be 'reclaimed' by the viewing of his descendents (p. 147). It can therefore be argued that Emma's act of forgery is not equivalent to that of Pakeha forger Karl Sim who painted and sold dozens (and possibly hundreds) of copies of Goldie's paintings in the mid twentieth-century purely for profit.⁶ Emma copies Goldie's paintings because copying is her art, and because she enjoys spending time with Patara Te Tuhi's image.

The justification for offering different ethical assessments of Emma's and Karl Sim's appropriative acts is based on the belief that to adopt a symmetrical approach in the treatment of these two cases would assume away, or at least downplay, an important part of the cultural appropriation debate. When a European/colonial writer or artist appropriates images of an indigenous/colonized people, an event has occurred, as Ziff and Rao claim, 'that teaches us about power relationships' (1997: 5). It is these kinds of power relationships that Morris examines extensively in her exploration of cultural appropriation in the novel, *Queen of Beauty* (2002).

THE POWER DYNAMICS BEHIND 'HUNTING AND GATHERING'

The Maori protagonist of *Queen of Beauty*, New Zealand-born Virginia Ngatea Seton, is situated within the heart of this debate. When the novel opens, Virginia is living in the United States of America as a migrant overstayer in New Orleans, Louisiana. Having recently finished a degree at Tulane University, Virginia finds herself under-the-table employment as a historical researcher for the fictional Margaret Dean O'Clare, a flamboyant novelist famous for her quasi-historic Southern-belle bodice-rippers. As a 'researcher', it is Virginia's job to be a 'hunter and gatherer' who passes on 'dates, maps, photographs' (p. 19), and increasingly stories from her own family history, for Margaret to digest into her best-selling narratives.

Unlike the seemingly 'clear-cut' act of appropriation taking place in *Hibiscus Coast*, the appropriation underlying the *Queen of Beauty* narrative manifests itself in a much more subtle manner. Prior to Virginia's entrance into her employ, Margaret's 'imagination [was] strip-mined, her books repeating like a heavy lunch' (p. 20). Because she is a cunning business woman who is, in Virginia's words, 'not stupid', Margaret knows she needs to find a way to garner new 'sound bites' to give her future novels shelf-life (p. 20). She therefore informs Virginia that 'everything [is] fodder' and that Virginia is 'to be on the lookout at all times for stories to steal' (p. 69). Within this carte-blanche directive, however, 'there were rules, largely unspoken' (p. 21) about the stories she was to 'steal.' 'Margaret', Morris says, 'wants stories without strings.' Margaret therefore makes it unmistakably clear to Virginia that 'the stories must be *public domain*, falling freely and without consequences from Virginia's family history or those of her friends' and that the 'stories were to be offered up as raw ingredients... Margaret would then mix them with chef-like precision, as needed, into her trademark roux' (p. 21, my emphasis).

Margaret's cavalier equating of the 'public domain' (p. 21) with Virginia's family stories is troubling. 'Public domain' commonly denotes 'property rights that belong to the community at large, are unprotected by copyright or patent, and are subject to appropriation by anyone' (*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*). In a narrative context, this boils down to the use of stories that are not copyright protected. When Margaret discusses using Virginia's stories 'without consequence' (p. 21), she means without *legal* consequence. At no point in her discussion with Virginia does she take into account the very real emotional consequences this story appropriation has on her employee, or the people whose stories are being used as fodder in Margaret's 'roux.' Over the course of the novel Virginia feels increasingly guilty, anxious and ashamed about turning her family stories over to Margaret. In his book *Mana Tūturū: Māori Treasures & Intellectual Property Rights*, Barry Barclay describes these kinds of emotional consequences for Māori as 'no simple pain', saying, 'It is a profound sorrow, a profound hurt, and it has to do with much more than any particular injury that can be tagged in black and white as a breach of copyright or an inadvertent moment of cultural insensitivity' (2005:149).

Virginia's role in terms of the story appropriation debate in *Queen of Beauty* is therefore personally and culturally (if not legally) complex. According to indigenous rights legal expert Lenora Ledwon,

The Copyright Act defines 'work made for hire' in one of two ways— Either as (1) a work prepared by an employee within the scope of his or her employment, or (2) a work specifically ordered or commissioned for use ... Typically, under work for hire arrangements the writer receives a flat fee but does not share in the copyright or royalties. The writer in this case is considered to be an employee or an independent contractor. (1997: 582)

Margaret's 'unspoken rules' therefore revolve around points of law, and aim to make the hire-agreement explicit and undeniable: Virginia is Margaret's employee, and she is paid to deliver stories.

It is significant that the descriptions of Margaret and Virginia's employee-employer relationship take on a political and emotional charge that is absent in other sections of the novel. While Morris's descriptions make it emphatically clear that Virginia's 'contractor' work falls well within the legal boundaries of the copyright law outlined above, 'a legal positivist would be committed to the position that laws and morals are distinct. The moral content of 'theft' is not exhausted by its legal definition, and one cannot dismiss the moral claim

of theft as wrongful by appealing to the legal definition' (Coleman 2005: 21). Margaret's acts of story appropriation in *Queen of Beauty*, while lawful, are therefore described by the narrator in such a continually pernicious manner that it becomes ultimately impossible to exonerate her, in ethical terms, for the 'theft' of Virginia's stories simply because she has paid for her right to use them.

This ethical discomfiture is largely grounded in the way in which the narrator describes Margaret's 'legal' appropriative actions. In each instance of appropriation, after paying the young New Zealander to recite her family stories, Margaret 'mixes' them up, retaining all of the key plot structures, emotional capstones, narrative climaxes and resulting denouements, but rejecting the key Aotearoa/New Zealand, and specifically Maori, cultural aspects of the tales. According to Lenora Ledwon, this is often the fundamental problem with the appropriation of native life-stories by non-native authors. Referencing the works of Emmanuel Levinas, she says, 'the great failure of Western thinking is to forget and negate the Other, to want to possess the Other so that it becomes the same as 'me.' Western philosophy is 'allergic' to the Other that remains Other, and constantly works to transmute the Other into the same... That kind of writing turns the Other into a theme, destroys Otherness, and cancels the Other's autonomy' (1997: 587).

This is essentially what happens when Margaret listens to Virginia's stories and then informs her that she will use her employee's family legends as 'springboards' that she will 'subvert' (p. 13) into best-selling American novels. She lets Virginia know in no uncertain terms that she has no use for the 'names', 'the date' or what she calls 'the local colour' (p. 11). With a few strokes of her pen Margaret appropriates Virginia's family taonga – their treasured stories – and then erases the family from the published (and therefore public) recounting of their history. They have, as a people, been erased from the printed record. 'This is how a people vanish by stealth,' Barry Barclay writes. 'We become closed out of our own history because the words and the gestures and the places and the songs are made hollow through thoughtless or over-earnest or malicious appropriation' (2005: 166).

In the context of postmodern literary creations it might easily be argued that there is nothing thoughtless or malicious in Margaret's act of appropriation in this instance, and that, as Elizabeth Burns Coleman writes, 'appropriation and reinterpretation are common, if not fundamental to Western art practice. An artist like Picasso, for example, not only regularly repainted other people's paintings, but once suggested that the only paintings one shouldn't copy were

one's own' (2005: 7). Nonetheless, while it is certainly true that 'appropriation and copying are well-established practices throughout the history of art' (Schneider, 2003: 217), there is still something decidedly unsettling about the ways in which the narrator chooses to describe Margaret's use of Virginia's stories. This could be because the 'taking in the sense of 'stealing an idea' does not deny the person whose idea it was the use of the idea (or story) but it denies them the sole use of that idea, and sometimes the honour... associated with creating it' (Coleman, 2005: 17). As a behind-the-scenes researcher, Virginia, and subsequently her family, do not share in the honour of the public telling of their stories.

This sense of loss is accentuated in *Queen of Beauty* by Margaret's overwhelming sense of entitlement when it comes to the taking of Virginia's family stories. When Margaret first hires Virginia she is hiring a Maori New Zealander of mixed descent who is an illegal U.S. immigrant – a young woman with no political or social power, no legal recourse should she find the hire-agreement unsatisfactory, and virtually no support network in the United States. Margaret, by comparison, is from an old and well-established Caucasian Delta family. She is rich, famous, and seems to know everyone in New Orleans. The power in the relationship lies entirely on her side – both economically and socially. Even when she is eventually convinced to help Virginia obtain a work visa that will enable her to remain in the United States legally, she admits she is doing it only to enable Virginia to 'stay and work for me, just me' (p. 36). As a result, there is a sense throughout the first section of the novel (which, ironically, is titled 'At the Quadroon Ball') that Margaret's attitude towards, and relationship with Virginia offers a metaphoric parallel to the topic Virginia is researching for Margaret throughout *Queen of Beauty*: the relationship between powerful nineteenth-century white Creole plantation owners and their dependent quadroon mistresses.

SPINNING THE GOLD AND MIXING UP THE 'ROUX' IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL TERMS

This notion of Virginia's behind-the-scenes 'dependence' on Margaret is emphasized, with a heavy dose of cynicism, by the fairy-tale allusions scattered throughout the text. At one point Morris evokes the story of 'Rumpelstiltskin', with Virginia claiming she 'spun stories for a living, though Margaret would describe it in a different way, she supposed, with Margaret as the spinner, turning straw into gold, and Virginia as the farmhand, pitching it onto the wagon [and] hauling it into the barn' (p. 157). At another point Virginia's stepmother refers to Virginia as 'Cinderella' (p. 158), an association that evokes sympathy

on the part of Virginia's eight-year-old half-sister who is desperately worried that her big sister 'didn't have a boyfriend or a baby or even anywhere to live' (p. 158). These fairy-tale allusions draw pointed attention to Virginia's relationship to a long history of characters who have shared her position as exploited and underappreciated back-room workers.⁷

This unsettling motif of dependence and co-dependence is further enhanced by the poignant mix of culinary (and almost cannibalistic) descriptions of Virginia and Margaret's relationship throughout the novel. Virginia's job is described as 'bread and butter work' (p. 21), a euphemistic phrase referring to the fact that the work both provides survival money for Virginia and a narrative meal for Margaret to feast upon. The novelist uses Virginia's stories to flavour and 'flesh out the plots' (p. 168) of her bestsellers, creating texts Morris describes as 'roux.' Descriptions of Margaret herself continue in this culinary vein, with Morris characterizing her as 'lemony' and 'doughy' (p. 73) with 'over-floured cheeks that reminded Virginia of a brioche' (p. 20). This culinary motif traces an ongoing food-chain of story appropriation and consumption throughout the novel. Margaret gets her 'bread and butter' from Virginia—the digestion of which makes her dough-like. She in turn churns out 'roux' for her readers – texts described by critics as 'Gumbo Lite' (p. 20) – that are then 'consumed' by mainstream American reading audiences.

This unsettling theme is further complicated by Morris's recurring description of Virginia's 'bread and butter work' in pointedly archaeological terms. Readers are continually reminded that it is her job to 'unearth' (p. 19), 'uncover' (p. 20) and 'exhume' (p. 41) stories. This archaeologically rooted vocabulary is purposefully discomfiting, underplayed as it is with connotations of bio-piracy when viewed in an indigenous-rights context. These roundabout references to bio-prospecting are especially poignant in Aotearoa/New Zealand where, according to University of Auckland environmental scientist Kirsty Hall, 'Bio-prospecting — and arguably "biopiracy" — is already occurring' (qtd. in Napp, 2003: 2). Hall's research has proven that 'foreign and New Zealand companies have used Maori traditional knowledge without consultation ...and with no benefits to New Zealanders' (Napp, 2003: 2), a non-fictional scientific fact that underscores the topicality of Morris's fictional text. These archeological underpinnings are especially troubling in a Maori context, one in which the disturbing of bodies, bones and blood takes on a deeply rooted cultural significance because such acts break 'sacred tapus and breach Maori cultural sensitivity' (Pahl, 1993: 144). This crucial cultural factor is resolutely foregrounded in *Queen of Beauty* when Virginia's Great Uncle Gus tells the young ones who have found a piece of a human skull in an old burial ground, 'Human bones

should stay where they lay...Leave the poor bugger to rest in peace' (p. 113). Uncle Gus's request, combined with the narrator's numerous references to the 'unearthing' of buried stories, provide dark and haunting undertones to the scene in which Virginia tells her friend Arthur, 'Miss Margaret is stuck. She needs fresh blood. Story-blood, not history blood' (p. 43).

In *Queen of Beauty* it is clear that Morris's version of 'story-blood' belongs to a particular person or to particular people, while 'history blood' belongs to the public. Margaret's vampiric request for 'story-blood' therefore once again brings to a head the fact that when Virginia's stories are out, they will be consumed. This notion offers a faint echo of Keeshig-Tobias's recollection that a tribal elder once cautioned her to be careful when and where she shared family legends because 'blackflies, mosquitoes and other creatures like stories' (1998: 584). In *Queen of Beauty*, Margaret becomes one of these blackflies or mosquitos, sucking story-blood from Virginia — a fact of which Virginia eventually becomes acutely and uncomfortably aware.

'SOME DAYS IT FELT LIKE SHE'D GIVEN EVERYTHING AWAY'

After years of working for Margaret, an exhausted Virginia eventually comes to realize that she is 'just tired of talking and telling. Some days it felt like she'd given everything away' (p. 158). The catalyst for Virginia's epiphany is the trans-Pacific distance and perspective she gets on her work while she is away from it. When she finds herself describing her job as Margaret's 'researcher' to her Maori family members during a visit to Auckland, the young historian realizes 'there was something about it that made her feel a little ashamed' (p. 230), and she decides by the end of the novel, 'I'm not giving her any more... [I] needn't give Margaret another story, another thought, another idea, another reference' (p. 268). After making this decision Virginia realizes, 'What I've been doing is running after things and then sort of struggling them to the ground. Then watching Margaret step in for the kill... I need to put it all behind me. I don't want to be her accomplice any more' (p. 302).

Virginia's pronouncement that her job as story blood-letter made her an accomplice to some sort of appropriative 'crime' becomes the crux of the appropriation question posed in the novel. Virginia ultimately decides she will not be the one to give away their family history to a foreign author any longer. She is fiercely proud of this decision, and is therefore deeply surprised by the reaction of Jim, her Maori father:

I don't think you'll be getting any lawsuits...nothing to worry about... For every hundred stories I tell you, there are thousands more. Things I haven't told you yet, things I may never tell you. Things I've forgotten or never knew. Things people hid from me or forgot to mention, or wanted to say but never got around to. You could give – what's her name? Margaret? You could give her a story a day and still not begin to use them up. (p. 268)

Jim's nonchalant attitude towards the use (and possible abuse) of the family stories surprises Virginia, as does his attitude that 'reminiscing he enjoyed [*but*] there wasn't any point to digging up' the past (p. 93). Jim is clearly uncomfortable about digging up family skeletons, stories and secrets that the ancestors might not have wanted to pass on to future generations, but at the same time he is also extremely concerned that there might be stories that are meant to be told, but that 'people forget to tell...Maybe they [*the elders*] think there's nobody to tell, nobody interested enough to listen' (p. 267). It is in this ambivalent attitude that the appropriation debate in *Queen of Beauty* is finally housed. Equal weight is given in the narrative to Virginia's concern about their family stories being 'digested' by Margaret, Jim's belief that some stories, like bones, should remain in the grave, and Virginia's Uncle Tahu's conviction that stories must be told if a people's history is not going to slip into obscurity—even if these histories must occasionally be told and/or published by less-than-ideal story tellers.

This belief of Uncle Tahu's drives him to take Virginia up on her offer to pass on to Margaret any 'stories you want broadcast to the world' (p. 168). The story he wants preserved concerns what he considers the 'murder' of his grandmother—a death that took place when his Scottish grandfather stumbled home drunk and knocked over a lamp, causing a house fire that resulted in the death of his Maori wife. Uncle Tahu says to Virginia, 'You can have that story. Take it' (p. 239)... 'Get that writer friend of yours to put it in a book' (p. 237). Part of Tahu's motivation for 'giving' Virginia this story, and asking her to 'put in a book', is to rectify the fact that the truth about this incident, the truth about how his grandmother had died, had been hidden for years. Because the story was about a Maori woman being killed as a result of a Pakeha man's actions, the community kept the details of the story secret for an entire generation. It was only very late in Uncle Tahu's life that his niece Tiri did some research and found evidence in the official coroner's report that made it clear his grandmother had been killed by his grandfather's actions. Tahu did not want the true story to be forgotten again, and he thought the best way to ensure its retelling was for Virginia to get it 'put in a book' (p. 237).

Rachel Blau DuPlessis discusses the important role of these kinds of story 'retellings' when she says,

To compose a work is to negotiate with these questions: What stories can be told? How can plots be resolved? What is felt to be narratable by both literary and social conventions? Indeed, these are issues very acute to certain feminist critics and women writers, with their senses of the untold story, the other side of a well-known tale, the elements of women's existence that have never been revealed. (1985: 3)

DuPlessis's point is equally relevant to indigenous writers and storytellers struggling with decisions about which parts of the untold story they should share, and which parts they should 'keep for the grave.' These are the questions that Virginia (and by extension Morris) continually ask and the boundaries they push against as they attempt to negotiate the complexities of story-appropriation.

TELLING STORIES FROM 'THE INSIDE'

In her search for the answer to these questions, Virginia expresses an increasingly urgent desire to tell stories from the 'insider' or indigenous perspective – a desire that is frequently echoed in the writings of many Polynesian authors. When interviewing Pacific writers, literary critic Sina Va'ai says she was continually 'struck by the persistence of the post-colonial struggle by Pacific writers to represent their realities from "the inside"' (1999: 210). She writes, 'This process of turning the inside out, creatively speaking, leads to a process that brings healing, as the Other is allowed to see the inside view, the emotional terrain of the writer and his or her experiences and to enter imaginatively into the writer's cultural space and story' (p. 208). This is precisely what does not happen when Virginia hands her stories over to Margaret to be appropriated into clichéd American South 'historical' narratives. When Virginia tells her own stories, and when Morris publishes her own fictions, these 'insider' tales become a recognizable place where indigenous storytellers can find themselves and their culture within the pages of published/public stories.

This is perhaps why Virginia seems obsessively concerned with concepts of story 'truth' throughout the novel. Her grandmother Mary remembers that even as a child Virginia would reiterate, 'Tell me a story, or rather, tell me *that* story. Tell me *that* story again. She liked hearing the same ones over and over from the same people, with nothing added or forgotten or changed. It was worse than making something up from scratch, Mary thought: the tyranny of

the story that's never allowed to change' (p. 109–110, my emphasis). Virginia's paranoia about stories being adulterated carries into a sort of narrative despotism, a position her Maori grandmother is disquieted by and that is echoed in Morris's personal reflections on her own writing process. The author, unlike Virginia, is not entirely 'in thrall to the "truth,"' saying, 'I feel strongly that writers of fiction must have the freedom to roam imaginatively. A novel is not a sociological report; it does not have to be thorough, fair, balanced, well-researched or fact-checked.'

Nonetheless, Morris states she does feel an obligation to 'do justice to the emotional truth of a story,' something her fictional protagonist seems equally concerned about. Virginia is only able to come to terms with herself as a storyteller when she feels she is 'doing them justice,' and when she believes that there is some 'truth' in the ways in which they are retold. This is why, when she reflects on her years spent working for Margaret, she says, 'I haven't done anything particularly real for a long time' (p. 299). Virginia intuitively feels this begin to change when she is in New Zealand and embarks on a research project to uncover a well-hidden family story about the death of her grandfather's first wife, Alice. By investigating the cause of Alice's death, sharing her story with friends and family, and ordering a stone to mark Alice's long-abandoned grave, Virginia believes she is telling a family story in her own terms that will not be adulterated by Margaret or anyone else.

The transitional journey from working as Margaret's researcher to becoming her own family's historian is also a journey that allows Virginia to make peace with the difficult truth that there are some stories she will never be able to know, and therefore never be able to tell, in their entirety. This realization, according to Morris, is a huge turning point in Virginia's life journey because she has come to realize she 'doesn't own the stories. They're bigger than [her] and Margaret...they exist even when the land is sold and the family is dispersed and Virginia is away in New Orleans.' If there is a 'moral' to Virginia's not-so fairy-tale-like life, it is that she, and by proxy the readers of her story, have learned, 'Stories are slippery; they're too strong and form-changing to be contained by any one person.' (Morris qtd. in Pistacchi, 2006).

So in many ways *Queen of Beauty* becomes as much about the stories we do not tell, or cannot tell, as it is about the stories we do tell and that get retold, or re-visioned, or even (mis)appropriated in other people's work. There are many stories in *Queen of Beauty* — June's secret pregnancy (p. 107), John's first wife's death from an illegal abortion (p. 200), and Arthur's secret affair with Carol (p. 47) — that are story-secrets, the full extent of which will never be publicly

known. Some are kept secret for cultural reasons, some because they are too tragic for family members to share, and some simply because they are viewed as too scandalous to repeat. Morris's belief that we do not need to know all of these stories is reinforced when Mary tells her granddaughter Virginia the mythical story of Tane and says, 'Tane was a god; he knew what he was doing. Maybe he dropped that fourth basket of knowledge, or hid it somewhere. That was it. Tane had hidden it. No need to know everything' (p. 93).⁸ This juxtaposition between the desire to seek stories out, and the realization that there is no need to know everything is a theme Morris carries through into her more recent project of developing a novel out of the earlier story, 'Rangatira' (2004).

DOING THE STORIES JUSTICE

In the final section of *Queen of Beauty*, Jim says to Virginia,

You ask me if I miss it – miss the beach, the old life – and I can say quite truthfully that I don't. But one thing I do miss is all the stories. I wish I'd paid more attention....I wish I'd taken more in. Because it's too late now. They're all gone, all the older generation, and everything they knew and remembered and heard is gone with them. (p. 267)

These words from Morris's first novel haunt the narrative of 'Rangatira'. First published as a short story in *Landfall* in 2004, and republished in Fiona Kidman's collection *The Best New Zealand Fiction—Volume 2* in 2005 and Witi Ihimaera's collection *Get on the Waka* in 2007, 'Rangatira' is the story of the 1895 forced evacuation of the indigenous peoples from Hauturu (better known by the Crown name 'Little Barrier Island') in order for the government to use the land as a reserve for the preservation of native fauna. The story is narrated by a century-old rangatira who has lived through countless battles fought on behalf of the Ngati Wai people, witnessed the arrival of European missionaries and governments to the shores of Aotearoa, and acted as a representative of the Maori people on a nineteenth-century journey to England to meet the Queen.

The appropriation issues in 'Rangatira' are multi-layered. The most obvious layer, in a postcolonial sense, explores the bizarre irony of the British/New Zealand government's appropriation of indigenous lands in order to create a sanctuary for endangered birds. The irony of the Crown's decision to evacuate the people of Hauturu is accentuated by the fact that it was made during a time when politicians and historians believed the Maori themselves were a 'dying

race.’ In a second layer of its exploration in ‘Rangatira’, Morris returns to the question of ‘which stories can we tell’, earlier explored in *Queen of Beauty*. In ‘Rangatira’ the narrator’s great grand-niece follows him around with ‘a notebook poking from the pocket of her skirt’ because she ‘wants to know everything’ (p. 91). A Pakeha historian has given her the notebook, told her that the rangatira is ‘the last of the warriors’, and has asked her to ‘write down, every word’ of what he tells her (p. 92). The girl tells the rangatira that the historian ‘wants to know about [*the rangatira*’s] exploits and adventures, about military campaigns’ (p. 92).

While wry in his feelings about being used by the historian in this way, the rangatira says,

I’ll tell her the stories, I suppose, because I like to talk, and at least when she’s listening she’s not rustling around behind me. But she’s heard most of the stories already, and can read the rest in my face. The Pakeha’s waiting for this notebook full of words, but he could walk down Queen Street to the Bohemian painter’s [*Lindauer*’s] room and look at my picture hanging on the wall. He’ll see everything he needs to know. (‘Rangatira’, 2004: 92)

Ultimately, the rangatira, like Jim in *Queen of Beauty*, knows that no matter how many stories he gives to the girl to ‘shut in her book’ (p. 93), there will always be many more stories that he does not tell. Reflecting on these untold stories, the rangatira thinks, ‘That’s good enough for the Pakeha historian. He doesn’t have to be told everything’ (p. 95).

While writing ‘Rangatira’, which is the story of her own Ngati Wai ancestors, Morris had to think carefully about which aspects of family history to share and which to hold back. She says, ‘I don’t think about “which stories we can tell” in terms of seeking permission or gaining qualifications... [*but*] my cousin raised the issue of permission for telling this story, because while Paratene Te Manu is my tupuna, I’m from a different (lower) branch of the family, with a different marae.’ While taking into account the issues that her cousin raised, Morris ultimately decided,

It’s better that the story of his life be made public through a work of fiction, however partial and subjective and ‘untrue’ elements of that story would be, inevitably, rather than held in ever-decreasing fragments of passed-down history at his home marae. The man [*Paratene Te Manu*] who goes to England (against the wishes of his rela-

tives), who chose to sit for Lindauer, who chose to tell his life story at the request of a Pakeha [*James Cowan*] is not someone who wanted to live in secret. Seeing his portrait last week in the Auckland City Art Gallery storage facility made me even more resolved to engage with his story. I don't care who wants to tell me I can't.

Morris ultimately believes, 'If we deny permission to our own, then a "real" outsider – some big-name foreign author, who's oblivious to protocol and issues of ownership – will swoop in at some point and tell our stories for us.' Like Uncle Tahu in *Queen of Beauty*, the author seems to feel that it is critical that this family story–Paratene Te Manu's story — be saved from extinction, even if some family members question her right to be the 'recorder' of this particular aspect of the family history. It is therefore with a strong sense of conviction that she is doing the 'right' thing in 'engaging' with his story that Morris is currently doing more 'research and thinking and planning' in order to 'do justice to a novel-length version of "Rangatira."'

APPROPRIATION: 'A HARD TOPIC'

In *Mana Tuturu* Barry Barclay emphasizes the fact that if an indigenous story 'is lost in some way, if it is perverted or squandered, then it may lose its force for the people of the future' (2005:169). This mantle of responsibility is one that sits heavily on the shoulders of indigenous storytellers as they make decisions 'about something precious – what to do with a taonga...a family history'. As the late Matiu Mareikura once said, 'We've got to be able to tell our stories, or else we'll vanish. We aren't anything without our stories' (qtd. in Barclay, 2005:169).

What Paula Morris questions in *Hibiscus Coast*, *Queen of Beauty* and 'Rangatira' is how to best tell these stories — and to whom, ultimately, indigenous people should be telling them. Refusing easy, didactic solutions to these dilemmas, the three texts end up raising more questions than they answer about the line between appropriate re-inventing and re-visioning, and unethical appropriation or theft. Morris leaves it to her readers to answer key critical questions: can the appropriation of native stories be justified by the desire to keep indigenous histories from slipping into obscurity? Why is it important that in *Queen of Beauty* appropriation takes place between people located across an enormous social and economic power differential? What effect will it have on the descendents of Paratene Te Manu that when he willingly gave his story to historians and posed for Lindauer's portraits he opened up the legal rights for anyone in the general public to tell, re-tell and re-vision their fam-

ily stories? And finally, when Virginia's family stories, Goldie's paintings, and James Cowan's histories of the Ngati Wai people garner international attention in our postcolonial transnational world, do our answers to these queries shift? These are the unsettling questions with which the narratives of Paula Morris leave her readers to wrestle.

NOTES

- 1 This article evolved out of a paper presented at the Postcolonial Politics Conference on November 28, 2007 at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. The material is selected from a chapter on the works of Paula Morris in my doctoral thesis, 'Spiraling Subversions: The Politics of Survivance in Contemporary Maori Women's Critical Fictions', supervised by Prof. Witi Ihimaera, Dr. Mark Amsler and Dr. Te Tuhi Robust.
- 2 All statements by Paula Morris in this essay are taken from my online interview with the author on September 18, 2006.
- 3 Appropriative acts are so foundational to Morris's texts that the entire prologue of *Queen of Beauty* centers on Margaret's act of 'stealing' Virginia's stories, Chapter One of *Hibiscus Coast* contains a detailed and scathing account of the way in which paintings of Maori elders and cultural artifacts from the Pacific are traded by wealthy overseas collectors who have a nose for 'the exotic and arcane', but no sense of respect for what they are collecting, and the short story 'Rangatira' opens with the lines, 'The girl wants to know everything. She follows me around, a notebook poking from the pocket of her skirt' ('Rangatira' 91) in order to record her elders' stories for a Pakeha historian's use.
- 4 The Pakeha painter Charles Frederick Goldie (1870–1947) is best known for his meticulously realistic portraits of Maori. There have been numerous well-publicized attempts to forge his work.
- 5 These views are elaborated in *Hibiscus Coast* by Emma's art school lecturer, Dr. Smelling, who says Goldie 'patronised his models in his titles and saw them as noble savages, a cannibal breed' (p. 92).
- 6 Karl F. Sim considers himself to be 'New Zealand's most famous art forger.' After several decades in the business of forging, Mr. Sim was convicted in 1985. He has detailed his life and illustrious career in an autobiography titled *Good as Goldie* (Hodder Moa Beckett: 2003).

- 7 Morris recognizes that, 'Writers are always appropriating stories (see W. Shakespeare); filmmakers do this too, re-making films and adapting novels; poets and visual artists do this all the time. You take something that exists and look at it again, or re-invent it, or re-vision it (as Adrienne Rich said)...I'm often under the sway of other writers and books'. These references to Western cultural mythologies in *Queen of Beauty* therefore remind us that Morris places herself firmly within – and not judgmentally outside of — the conversation about what is and is not appropriate story appropriation.
- 8 According to Maori legend, Tane, the god of the forest, journeyed to the heavens and returned to earth with three baskets of knowledge. Virginia's grandmother believes that 'There was a fourth basket. One that Tane left behind. One still sitting up there in the faraway twelfth heaven, out of reach for ever' (Morris, 2002: 305).

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