

## HERO, SAVAGE, OR EQUAL? REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MORAL PERSONHOOD OF PACIFIC ISLANDERS IN HOLLYWOOD MOVIES

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IN *WHALE RIDER*, THE PROTAGONIST, A CONTEMPORARY SENIOR MAORI CHIEF, hears unusual, plaintive cries coming from the beach just below his house. A pod of whales has beached itself on the foreshore and we then see him standing by one of the animals asking in Maori, rather than English, "Who is to blame?" That is, he understands the alarming scene in vernacular forms of moral causation, which is to say, in sociocentric, or local, terms. Somebody must be at fault. Now, of course, Durkheim (1912; see also M. Douglas 1979) would have agreed: totemism differentiates sacred from profane categories of experience, categories which must be kept separate, lest the former infect the latter. The sacred is moral, and the moral arises from, and is synonymous with, nothing other than collective forms of the social. Asocial concepts of causation may enter peoples' understanding of illness and misfortune, but ultimate cause is determinate; it stems from local violation (see also Evans-Pritchard 1976). Now Fortes (1962) would later add an important refinement to this selfsame sociology of ethical order. Moral personhood is a status that may be ritually conferred or withheld in whole or in part by society (see also Read 1955). Thus the Maori chief in *Whale Rider* desperately seeks a successor, a firstborn male heir and disqualifies his granddaughter because of her gender.

The question of moral accountability posed by the sight of beached whales illustrates my thesis in this essay. Unlike the hero in the New Zealand

production, *Whale Rider*, Hollywood tends to dispossess Pacific Islanders of the capacity for moral agency (e.g., to distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad, desirable and undesirable, as well as the power do something to solve a problem). By contrast, Hollywood confers moral personhood upon westerners. In order to exemplify a theme that amounts to little other than cinematic colonialism in four particular movies, I must first take a brief theoretical detour back to 335 BCE.

### Mimesis of the Moral

According to Aristotle, mimicry, or imitation, of social life is the key source of fictional creativity. But mimicry, he went on, is attracted to particular qualities and values in society, namely those which adhere to virtuous activity, that is, a sense of justice, courage, character, generosity, restraint, living the good life, and so on. Having pinned fictional action to mimesis of the moral, he then makes a great and useful analytical move. “When the imitators imitate the doings of people,” Aristotle proposed in *The Poetics*, “the people in the imitation must be either high or low” (1953, 18). According to what criteria? And in comparison to whom? The measurement is by degree of moral personhood in relation to the actor’s audience (1953, 19). An actor’s virtue may be better, worse than, or equal to that of his or her audience. Tragic heroes, Aristotle allowed, are superior, whereas comic figures are inferior. Heroes equal to audiences are realist characters endowed with identical moral capacities.

Some two thousand years later, Northrop Frye elaborated or extended Aristotle’s view of dramatic action (1957: 33–35) by suggesting that the moral personhood of heroes could be judged in comparison to other contexts in addition to their audiences. It might be weighed against other members of their society, as well as their ambient (natural) environment. Using these criteria, Frye went on to distinguish five types of hero as well as the discourse associated with each one. (1) “If superior in kind” to everybody and everything in his surroundings, then the hero is a god, a divine being, like Yahweh in the Old Testament, or Zeus of the Greek pantheon, and the story about him is mythic. (2) “If superior in degree” to his society, to his environment and the audience, the central character is a romantic hero who moves through worlds, the rules of which are slightly suspended for him. He takes exceptional acts of fortitude and courage for granted. His exploits are the stuff of legend, folk-tale, and so forth. But, at the same time, he is only an ancestor, a culture-hero, like the Tsimshian, Asdiwal (Levi-Strauss 1967), who has parents, no less than we, the audience, and everyman in Tsimshian society. (3) “If superior in degree to other men, but not to nature,” the hero is just a leader. Like a Mafiosi don, he has power, strategic skills, oratorical

TABLE. Northrup Frye's Extension of Aristotle's Classification.

Superior in kind to	Superior in degree to	Superior in degree to	Equal to	Inferior to
Nature	Nature	N/A	N/A	Nature
Society	Society	Society	Society	Society
Audience	Audience	Audience	Audience	Audience
Divine hero	Romantic hero/ancestor	Heroic leader	Comic hero	Ironic hero
N/A	N/A	High mimetic mode	Low mimetic mode	Low mimetic mode
Myth	Legend	Epic or tragedy	Comedy or realistic fiction	Comedy

abilities, kin, and other dependents that outweigh those of other men, but what he does is nevertheless subject to criticism, competition, and bullets. Such men are heroes of what Frye calls the “high mimetic” modes of epic and tragedy. (4) “If superior neither to other men nor to his environment, the hero is one of us.” Such a hero is found in “low mimetic” modes of comedy and realistic fiction. Like Groucho or Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov, the hero is merely a common man who is subject to the same laws of probability that limit our own experience. (5) Finally, when a hero is represented as “inferior in power or intelligence” to others, such that the audience receives a sense of looking down on a scene of frustration, or absurdity, like Jim, the runaway slave in *Huck Finn*, the hero belongs to the “ironic mode” of fiction (Frye 1957, 34) (Table).

In this essay, I adopt Frye’s Aristotelian scheme to analyze how Pacific Islanders appear in the Hollywood films *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962), *Hawaii* (1966), *The Descendants* (2011), and the independent movie, *Whale Rider* (2002). Of the heroes in these movies, we may raise questions about the extent Pacific Islanders possess moral personhood in comparison to colonial/settler society, to their environment and to we, the audience. I argue that the moral agency afforded western and Pacific Island leaders in the two Hollywood movies, *Mutiny on the Bounty* and *Hawaii*, juxtaposes a high mimetic foreground with a deficient, low mimetic background. In the former, tragic, heroic leaders confront exquisite personal and political dilemmas. In the

latter, romantic-ironic leaders improbably stumble along, or do their best, much to our sympathetic amusement. Although *Whale Rider* foregrounds Maori political succession, it simultaneously disavows that notice by means of the contradictory reality it invents.

In general, mimesis in these movies never portrays the moral personhood of Pacific Islanders as superior, much less equal, to westerners but demotes them either to exotic, romantic creatures, or inferior savages.<sup>1</sup> Granted this conclusion is not hot news, but the cinematic imagery and the deployment of the framework introduced above to their exegeses are, I think, analytically helpful, particularly because its central discriminator, moral personhood, has not been used elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962)**

The 1962 version of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, based on the Nordhoff and Hall novel (1932) by the same name, retells the story of the 1789 mutiny aboard the HMS *Bounty*.<sup>3</sup> The departure scene with which the movie opens introduces the audience to the film's antagonists: Captain Bligh (Trevor Howard) and his first officer, Fletcher Christian (Marlon Brando). Bligh is identified as a heroic leader, by Frye's criteria, a man possessing superior attributes, to whom the camera looks up. But, of course, Bligh remains a man in and of shipboard society. The moral character of his captaincy is famously called into question by his crew and by the audience during the voyage out to Tahiti during which he shows up as lacking control over nature (see also Denning 1998; Pew 2000).

Coming aboard, he is recognized to "walk like a sailor" by his crew, as opposed to Brown, the "landlubber," botanist-gardener, who has appeared just moments before Bligh, bearing pictures of breadfruit plants, obtaining which in Tahiti is the mission of their voyage. Bligh encounters Fletcher Christian, who rides up to the ship in a well-appointed, horse-drawn carriage and is accompanied up the gangplank by two beautifully dressed ladies (Fig. 1). Christian, bedecked in a florid red cape, apologizes for his lack of naval uniform, explains to his captain that he came directly to the ship from his country house upon receiving his orders, where he had been entertaining these lovely guests. Christian asks Bligh to come meet the two women, who have accompanied him with the expressed purpose of meeting his captain. Bligh obliges the two ladies only to be then humiliated when one speaks to him in French, a language in which he is unable to answer. The women depart, and Bligh turns to Christian to ask him why a man such as himself, whom he calls a "career fop" from the upper class, joined the Royal Navy in the first place. The army was "too dusty," Christian explains, while allowing



**FIGURE 1. Captain Bligh is introduced to Fletcher Christian's upper class friends.**

that “one had to do something.” Bligh answers that “high born connections” were not a substitute for “hard work” and goes on to explain, in response to Christian’s cynical view of their mission, the importance the Royal Navy accords it. Christian, for his part, acknowledges that “promotions” might then be in order. In other words, Bligh is depicted as a middle-class, career seaman and officer, rather than a gentleman of quality. He is a leader, but one who is a man-in-society, that is to say, in the same stratification system, with the same ambitions, as everyman, rather than above them.

En route to Tahiti, Bligh’s moral standing is assailed by his crew and by the audience, who are appalled by his cruelty. In a series of episodes, he is accused of being a petty thief, a heartless sadist who would flog sailors for questionable reasons and who would sacrifice the health and even the life of his crew on behalf of his ambition (Fig. 2). I cite two moments in the voyage-out sequence.

In the first, Christian and a junior officer and family friend Ned Young laugh and talk to each other as Bligh, “the sailor,” passes. Bligh takes interest in their merriment and inquires about the cause of their amusement. Young explains that a mutual friend, the Lord Foxton, was once kicked by a horse and subsequently developed a distinctive walk that seeing the Captain’s gait



**FIGURE 2. A seaman is flogged for stealing cheese.**

recalled to them. Bligh immediately orders Ned Young to spend the night high up a mast despite the freezing temperatures they have encountered. Before waddling off to his quarters, he answers Christian's protestations, declaring that he "will not be a figure of fun!" which is to say that he would not tolerate any challenge from an officer, comic or otherwise, to his superior status on deck.

The second scene depicts Bligh's subordinate relationship to nature. It revolves around Bligh's ambition to take a more direct route to Tahiti through Cape Horn around the tip of South America, rather than the more indirect, but safer route around the Cape of Good Hope. Christian points out that this passage had only been made successfully once before in naval history and many sailors were lost during the effort. Tempestuous storms, high winds, and waves break over and fling the *Bounty* about. Amid the turbulence, a big water barrel breaks loose below deck. The ship rocks and Christian orders a reversal of direction to steady it to secure the barrel. Bligh, dozing in his quarters, awakes and senses the change in course. Incensed at what has happened, he countermands Christian's order. As the ship returns to running against the wind, a sailor is crushed to death by the water barrel. Bligh goes below deck in a rage. Accusing him of sabotage and treachery, the captain demands to know why Christian gave the order to change course. Christian answers that by reversing course, Bligh had killed a sailor. Consumed by his goal to reach Tahiti, which he calls a "war" against uncooperative sailors, "high born" officers, and the elements, Bligh refuses to make arrangements for a funeral. The weather remains poor in the following weeks. To no avail,

Bligh repeatedly calls the crew on deck to work in the bitter cold and rough seas until finally he gives up, conceding defeat and reverses course to go to the Cape of Good Hope. The scene shows us that Bligh is no romantic hero. His captancy is all too human. The moral qualities of his leadership are human. Rather than autonomous or extraordinary, Bligh is seen to rely on discipline, fear, and argumentation. His values are hard work and loyalty. What is more, he is inferior to nature and cannot maneuver the *Bounty* through Cape Horn.

If Captain Bligh is depicted as a high mimetic, tragic leader, his counterpart in Tahiti, “King” Hitihiti is portrayed as an inferior, low mimetic, comic hero. In the arrival scene of the *Bounty*, he is depicted as Bligh in reverse. In the initial images, the landscape appears as a neoclassical painting, perfect and without flaws. Otherwise naked Tahitian men, dressed in little more than loincloths with leaf garlands decorating their heads, are seen walking in a line along the ridge overlooking the bay, carrying bananas and apparently returning from their gardens. They see the ship. A man instantly blows a conch shell. As they run, shouting in nonsubtitled Tahitian, men abandon work on a new canoe, and a woman, seen sitting with children weaving a leaf basket in the shade of a bush material lean-to, also jumps up to greet the ship. At the beach, innumerable small canoes are pushed off by men, women, and children. Men shove a large outrigger into the water. As they all paddle toward and converge on the *Bounty*, obviously unarmed as they are, a quickening percussion lends a menacing tone to their innocent advance.

On board the *Bounty*, Bligh warns the crew that it was not many years earlier that Hawaiians ambushed and killed Captain Cook; he arms and instructs them to be on their guard as they go ashore. The cutter, surrounded by canoes, carries a handful of men to the beach. Bligh leads them across it, through a crowd of Tahitians, decorated with leis and garlands, who separate and make way for them. The soundtrack remains portentous and ominous. Across the tideflat, a regal canoe arrives and the music now turns imposing. The movie acknowledges the arrival of the Tahitian aristocracy. We get a glimpse of the chief’s point of view as he looks out at Bligh standing and waiting for him on shore. Dressed in magnificent red, blue, and yellow feather robes and ornaments, and a towering blue headdress, “King Hitihiti” gingerly steps across a plank and offers a greeting of misrecognition to Bligh, “King George?”

Bligh answers the Tahitian leader. Acknowledging his status and personhood, he addresses him in English with formal courtesy as “your excellency,” and he introduces himself, correcting his mistaken identity. Hitihiti is accompanied by Minali’i, who also appears in ornate feather decorations that are rather less compelling than his chief’s. Minali’i answers Bligh in simple, broken English, reminding the Captain that he had accompanied Cook on his



**FIGURE 3. Captain Bligh asks “King” Hitihiti, left with headdress, for breadfruit seedlings.**

final voyages, having served as his island pilot, and that he will now serve as Hitihiti’s translator. “Hitihiti talk, I talk English.” Having himself sailed on Cook’s last voyage, Bligh recalls and compliments the great, good work Minali’i did for Cook and then orders his sailors to bring a trunk of gifts, which they deposit in front of Hitihiti.

Hitihiti picks a hatchet and some beads out of the trunk, turns the objects over one by one, in a cheerful way. He looks at himself in a mirror and laughs, as if to evoke a contrary image of his British counterpart, who had declared himself to be not a “figure of fun” during the voyage out. The Tahitian spectators, also by contrast to the long-suffering crew of the *Bounty*, laugh along with their leader. Hitihiti then asks Bligh what King George wants in return. Bligh tells him that his King wants breadfruit so that his subjects can be every bit as strong as Hitihiti’s. He shows the drawings that Brown, the botanist, has brought with him from Kew Gardens. Hitihiti is again portrayed as simple and baffled. “Breadfruit!” he exclaims, laughing. “Take all you want!” (Fig. 3). Extending his arms, he calls for welcome gifts and the preparation of a great feast for his guests. Children instantly emerge from within the crowd bearing leis and food for the sailors to music that suggests something like a Tahitian lullaby.

The conclusion of this arrival scene once again portrays Hitihiti as a moral opposite of Captain Bligh. Although the British captain had cut his crew’s rations punitively, the Tahitian chief appears as a man of unlimited generosity. That is, Bligh is superior to us, in the sense that he commands a ship and takes it across “three continents,” but he is also portrayed as morally ambiguous or even as self-serving, corrupt, and brutal.<sup>4</sup> Hitihiti



appears to us as a regal figure, albeit a very exotic one, dressed as he is in florid Tahitian regalia. But we are meant to see him in an ironic rather than a high mimetic mode. His language is not subtitled and he must depend on Minali'i to translate for him both to Bligh and us. He mistakes Bligh for King George. He plays with the trinkets Bligh offers him and without guile is prompted by these minor gifts to reciprocate whatever it is King George wants. If Hitihiti appears inferior to us, and perhaps to his British guests, his relationship to nature and to Tahitian society contrasts with that of Bligh. Although Bligh fights the weather and flogs his crew, Hitihiti appears in feathered paraphernalia that makes him stand above everyday society, if only because his headdress is so tall that wearing it, he must walk very carefully. He is surrounded by a willing community who work with, rather than against, their environment. Men are shown bearing its fruit. Women weave baskets from coconut fronds that fall from trees. Everyone paddles out effortlessly to the *Bounty* and then watches Hitihiti meet Bligh with rapt attention. However gorgeous, Tahiti is not Eden (see Schachter, Flinn this volume). It is a romantic ideal, a primitivist fantasy of simplicity, moral solidarity and abundance, unspoiled by stratification or individualism (Smith 1985). Therefore, although Hitihiti is obviously not depicted as inferior, whatever morally superior personhood he may be seen to possess, towering over Tahitian society, over Bligh and over us, is discountable. Hitihiti may be a legitimate leader and be given loyalty. He may own breadfruit. But Hitihiti is unreal, an exotic, comic other.

### ***Hawaii* (1966)**

George Roy Hill's Oscar winning film version of James Michener's best selling, Pulitzer Prize winning novel by the same name (1959) was the biggest grossing film of 1966. The movie fixed on a single chapter, "From the Farm of Bitterness," of Michener's panoramic extravaganza, the one which focused on the settlement of the first American missionaries in Hawai'i during the first half of the nineteenth century (1820–41). The mode of moral personhood conferred upon its heroes is again that of tragic heroism. That is, their relationship to society, the audience, and nature is superior but only in small degree. The moral agency of the Calvinist missionary, Rev. Abner Hale (Max von Sydow), his wife, Jerusha Bromley (Julie Andrews), and the paramount chiefess, Malama Kanakoa (Jocelyne LaGarde) are all differentiated from the society and environment to which they belong. They are portrayed as both subject to and more powerful than its norms, challenges, and biology. Thus, in this sense, *Hawaii* differs from *Mutiny on the Bounty* in that it confers a degree of moral personhood upon a Pacific Islander.

As the movie opens, we are introduced to Rev. Hale as a man who is deeply immersed in local New Haven society. He is a divinity student at Yale consumed with a desperate vision to go “save poor souls in agony” in Oway-hee. But after being criticized by church superiors for being proud, he is told that the church is not in the habit of “sending single young men to serve among naked savages.” This rebuke gives way to a tragicomic, leave-taking sequence from his parents’ farm where the Hale family prays together at the dinner table for the continued strength to reject the temptations of their lustful natures, as well as “Romanism, atheism, and Unitarianism.” Hale utters a quick prayer, refrains from kissing his mother and trudges off down the road, as she fights back tears. The courtship with and marriage to the beautiful, and emotionally straightforward, Jerusha Bromley then ensues, in no less comic, repressed terms. Her parents and the Rev. Thorn, Hale’s superior in the church, collude to have her meet Rev. Hale because she has fallen in love with a rough whaler, Captain Hoxworth (Richard Harris), of whom they disapprove. An extremely awkward and nervous Rev. Hale, quotes poetry and the Old Testament, drops teacups and comes down with a bad cold. Much to his, and our, relieved surprise, he gains Miss Bromley’s approval, if not her heart, in spite of it all. The Rev. Hale is portrayed as an emotional cripple, who is inferior to the audience, while being part of church and Calvinist society in Connecticut, rather than above it.

The couple marries and sets off and we are presented with a second voyage out to the Pacific. While the rest of the passengers become seasick, Rev. Hale shows himself to us, the audience, as arrogant, severe, ungracious, and unforgiving.<sup>5</sup> To shipboard society, he is superior. He busies himself by preaching to the sailors, condemning their drinking and the secular literary tastes of the captain. His relationship to nature is interesting. He threatens the heathen sailors with divine punishment during the dangerous passage through Cape Horn, but he prays for the ship’s safety as it makes its way through a bad storm, and he breaks the fall of Prince Ke’oki, who has heroically climbed up a mast pole in the driving rain to loosen a sail. Ke’oki is the Hawaiian divinity student who persuaded the Calvinists to send missionaries and is returning home.

Following their stressful, hazardous passage around Cape Horn into the Pacific, the ship becomes becalmed, but Rev. Hale’s torment is not. Despite his best efforts, he succumbs to Jerusha’s perfume (“Moses forbade the use of perfume,” he tells her. “Proverbs say that ‘ointment and perfume rejoice the heart,’” she answers. They debate the morality of the flesh, whether temptation or gift of God, and the purpose of marriage, which is not, as Hale avows, “to drive the thought of God from my mind.”) Despite feeling “utterly depraved,” she wins the argument and kisses him as the scene fades to Maui,

where the ship arrives. Hale's moral dilemma is that of everyman—ordinary desire fighting faith.

Upon reaching the famous port of Lahaina, the whaling village and old capital of the Hawaiian kingdom, the ship is greeted by enthusiastic, gorgeous topless women who leap from their canoes and climb aboard. Seeing the approach of his parents, Prince Ke'oki instantly dives into the bay to swim to their royal canoe. Malama, his mother, is obese. She is *ali'i nui*, the paramount chiefess, and his father, Ke'lolo, is her brother-husband. Malama is seated beneath parasols held up by attendants, whereas Ke'lolo, in feathers, stands just behind her. Ke'oki kneels as he greets his parents, and then they embrace warmly and rub noses.

Malama, immense as she is, must be hoisted on board ship. She hovers horizontally above the deck, suggesting her higher position even over the American sailors and passengers, whom she welcomes with salutations of *aloha*. Rev. Hale, meanwhile, scolds Ke'oki for kneeling to his mother, which act and the sacred *mana* it honors he dismisses as nothing more than sacrilege. Malama meanwhile is hugging and greeting the white women, and tells her son Ke'oki how happy she is to see "puny *haole* women" among the foreign visitors for the first time, allowing that the visitors' intentions are not as doubtful as those of previous arrivals. In other words, she is a perceptive woman who is more than capable of making moral inferences. She hugs Jerusha upon encountering her, and Jerusha complements her on how beautiful she and husband are. Malama takes an instant liking to Jerusha and demands she stay in Lahaina to teach her to write in English. First, Rev. Hale argues, she must learn about God "without whose grace all writing is useless." Malama flares her eyes at him and snaps, "First, write. Then maybe I listen your God." Hale objects that he has not been assigned to stay in Maui. "Where you go," Malama snaps, "I not care!" But then she learns that Hale is married to Jerusha and relents.

Malama demands that Jerusha immediately start to tutor her, and in the subsequent scene, we see attendants carrying the two of them in a wooden dinghy to her palace, Rev. Hale following on foot. At the door of the palace, Malama knocks him off his feet, with her hand, when he objects to being separated from Jerusha. Seated by Malama, who reclines on pillows close by her, Jerusha begins English lessons but soon collapses exhausted. Malama pulls her over to her lap and discovers by touching her that she is newly pregnant and needs to rest. Malama is not the simple, childlike Hitihiti by any stretch of the imagination. Obviously both possess moral personhood, being hereditary elites, but she has moral agency, purpose, and decisiveness. In contrast to Captain Bligh and the Tahitian King, Rev. Hale is portrayed as rigid and weak in her presence.

In a subsequent scene Rev. Hale asks Malama for land. She absolutely refuses to cooperate until Jerusha explains that he does not want the land for himself but to build a church. Hale begins working on the project, ignoring advice from senior men who tell him that he should not have walls because of the strong winds that will blow when Malama dies. Meanwhile, Malama arrives to show Hale a letter she has written to President Monroe in Washington, DC, defending Hawaiian land rights. And then, upon receiving his praise, she asks him, "This God. How he look?" Hale declines to take the bait. "You have the sin of pride," he rebukes her. "So do you," she replies. Demanding that Malama divorce her brother-husband, and end her sinful, incestuous marriage, he strides away.

For all of his give-and-take with the chiefess, there is no mistaking Hale as depicting a high mimetic mode of leadership. He defends Hawaiians against sailors. And of course, he works to save the Hawaiians from themselves. Whaling ships arrive bearing sailors who drink and desire women. Hale intervenes when two sailors attack No'alani, the daughter of the chiefess Malama, on the beach. He screams out to them. "How can you do this to these innocent children? Have you no mothers at home? No sisters?" He goes to Malama and demands that she institute new laws. She refuses.

Two years pass. Hymns have been translated into Hawaiian. Baptisms have taken place. Malama gives in and decrees new laws. Sailors must return to their ships at dusk. Girls are forbidden to go with them. Adultery, alcohol consumption, and infanticide are banned. "Next law: everyone will love Jesus." Conflict soon arises. The ship captain rejects the new laws. The sailors come to drink at night. They set fire to Hale's church. Fighting breaks out. The sailors are driven off.

Despite all his evident missionary success, Hale's relationship to the chiefess, Malama, remains unresolved. He continues to insist that she divorce her husband-brother and end her evil, incestuous marriage before he will agree to baptize her. The demand upsets Malama because she does not see anything wrong with her husband and does not understand why she must send him away. She suddenly takes ill. Although the American doctor cannot diagnose anything wrong with her, he concludes that she is nevertheless dying. To her deathbed, a procession of nobles approach solemnly, as commoners prostrate themselves along their path. Malama calls her husband to her side and banishes him. He departs, bowing.

Hale baptizes Malama with holy water and christens her Ruth (Fig. 4). She taboos mortuary self-flagellations. A young Kamehameha asks if people may cry. Malama grants this privilege and then asks Hale for permission to hug Ke'lolo once more and tell him goodbye. He crosses the floor on his knees to her and places a garland of leaves about her. She embraces him and



**FIGURE 4. Malama lies on her deathbed. Jerusha, Rev. Hale, and her husband Ke'lolo stand by.**

whispers in his ear as they kiss. She dies. Chanting begins. A strong wind comes up. People prostrate themselves and wail. The church is destroyed by the wind, which Hale watches, having himself been knocked off his feet by the gales. Malama, unlike Hale, has now been cast as a romantic heroine whose relationship to nature is enchanted, rather than subordinate. She is superior to Hawaiian society but not to Hale's missionary zeal and colonialism with which she is acquiescent and compliant.

A few days later, Hale is seen straightening the cross at Malama's gravesite. He hears distant drumming. The scene then shifts to a succession cum wedding ritual. We see topless Hawaiians, men and women both dressed in loincloths, guarded by sentries in gourd helmets and senior men in feather capes. Malama's widower deposits the old stone figure of the great spirit, Kane, and begins to chant. Their daughter, No'alani approaches in a great, yellow feather cape. Her husband to be, Ke'oki, also in a yellow feather cape and helmet, receives an insignia *lei* from his father. The couple is covered by a tapa cloth.

Hale bursts onto the scene, screaming denunciations: "Abomination! I forbid it! Backsliders! Heretics! Heathens!" He turns to Ke'oki and shouts: "You mother will curse you from her grave!" Malama, Ke'oki answers quietly, is "not in her grave." She ordered that her bones be dug up, secretly wanting the "Hawaiians to see her buried as a Christian because they should become Christians, but she wanted Kane and Pele to know that she loved them too."

Infuriated, Hale topples the sacred statue of Kane and calls on God to destroy the Hawaiians. Malama's moral person is that of a romantic heroine. But her superiority to nature and her society is nonetheless compromised such that she may only resolve the dilemma of her marriage covertly.

A cannon shot: time has passed and an heir to the deceased *ali'i nui* has been born to her daughter, No'alani. But the body of the infant chiefess is deformed. Jerusha tells Hale the news that the life of the baby is in danger because tradition decrees it must be killed for its deformity. "Now they will see," Hale declares, "how God rebukes apostasy!" In the meantime, Ke'oki walks with the baby and drowns her in the sea. Angrily, hearing the news of the death, Jerusha rebukes Hale for not trying to save the baby. Hale goes to the beach and picks up the baby's swaddling sheet. His moral agency is limited and in a sense inferior to us, the audience, who share Jerusha's outrage and regret.

A measles epidemic breaks out to which Hawaiians have no resistance. Hale and Jerusha exhaust themselves helping to care for the sick. Adults go to the beach to try and cool off from their fevers, Ke'oki among them. Hale finds him rolling in the sand and tries to persuade him to go home before he catches pneumonia. He tries to get Ke'oki to pray, but Ke'oki refuses, rejects God, and dies. The American doctor holds him and informs Hale that 75 percent of the Hawaiians have died since Captain Cook first discovered the islands fifty years earlier. "You and I may live to see the last Hawaiian lowered into his grave, with proper Christian services of course." Hale looks horrified and goes back home to tell Jerusha that Ke'oki "died unrepentant and went to Hell." Although he feels guilty about the dead and the dying, Hale nevertheless is certain that the epidemic is divine punishment. Jerusha disputes his view of the epidemic: "it is not God's wrath," she says, "it is a disease." The Hawaiians, she goes on, are not evil at all, but no less gentle than the first Christians. My ministry, sighs Hale, is over. Jerusha tells him to give up his wrathful God and offer the Hawaiians what has been the most difficult for him to give them and her, his love. We leave the good reverend in a low mimetic mode, his moral agency being inferior to nature, society, and perhaps to the audience as well, but the focus on the movie has entirely shifted to him; the Hawaiians are consigned to the background.

### ***The Descendants* (2011)**

The dispossession of moral personhood from Pacific Islanders and its conferral upon westerners perhaps culminates in *The Descendants*, which was adapted from a novel by Kauai Hart Hemmings (2008) and was written for the screen and directed by Alexander Payne. A tragicomedy, the movie tells a realist story in a low mimetic mode about hero who appears to crosscut

Frye's classifications. He is both superior and yet equal to his society, as well as to his audience. He is both a heroic leader and a comic figure. Set in Honolulu, we see close-ups of the beautiful tropical flora growing everywhere. The movie's soundtrack, a Hollywood first being scored exclusively with Hawaiian music, is performed by influential slack-key guitarists and vocalists.

A lawyer, Matt King (George Clooney), is descended from high-ranking Hawaiians as well as nineteenth-century settler elites. He is the bearer of full moral personhood in his lineage. Because of a legal statute bearing on property held in trust over time, he alone must decide about selling what remains of the family estate over which his father appointed him sole executor. At the same time, King and his two young girls, Alexandra and Scottie, find themselves having to deal with the aftermath of a boating accident from which Elizabeth, King's wife and the children's mother, lies comatose in the hospital. King must now father his daughters and move up from being what he calls a "backup parent" in a voiceover and manage them through the challenging time.

Scottie, the younger daughter, sent an insulting text to Lonnie, a friend, about reaching puberty over the summer. After the girl's mother phones Matt King demanding an apology, father and daughter go to the cramped, petit bourgeois house, where they meet a big, mixed-race, Asian-Hawaiian woman and Lonnie, her daughter. The setting is meant to contrast with the opulence of the King's large, two-story Victorian residence, which is set back from the street and beautifully landscaped. The house is spacious and furnished comfortably, its walls are decorated with hand painted murals of old Hawai'i and photographs of eminent ancestors.

Scottie apologizes to her friend Lonnie, in a cursory way that leaves the mother unconvinced. King quickly puts his hand on Scottie's back and invites Lonnie to come for a visit. They turn to go, but are blocked when the mother declares, "I don't think she's sorry at all." Nevertheless, the daughter, motionless and unruffled, accepts it, nodding. At the doorstep, the camera looks over King's shoulder, up at Lonnie's mother, who stands above them and wishes him luck making up his mind about the land sale, particularly given how big an impact it will have on property values and everyday life. "My husband's family is from Kauai. Hanapepe town born and bred. They hope you don't sell. All that traffic it is going to make." King takes the advice with remarkable composure and cordiality, as he leaves and bustles Scottie into the car. In his accompanying voiceover, however, he complains that everybody in the state has an opinion about what he should do with the land.

Then he learns from the doctor that Elizabeth, his wife, will not recover from her head injury and will have to be removed from life support in the next few days, in accordance with her living will. King takes Scottie, the younger

daughter, to collect Alex, her sister, from boarding school on a neighboring island. Alex is depicted as a foulmouthed teenager. Angry that her parents ignore her, upon hearing that her mother will not recover, she refuses to support her father in letting others know about what has happened. “I don’t want to talk about Mom with anyone.” Matt King chides her, pleading in a gentle way, that she let go of whatever she and her mother had fought about over Christmas break and “grow up.” Alex looks at him, “Dad, you really don’t have a clue, do you?” Her mother was having an affair, she says, which the daughter discovered after accidentally seeing her mother and her lover together on a sidewalk going inside a house. The camera is focused squarely on his face. Leaning forward, looking directly at the tearful Alex, King is wide-eyed and speechless. He squirms in his chair at learning the news. In apparent disbelief, he asks to know what Alex saw exactly and then demands if she knows who the guy is. Standing and pacing, King, now visibly upset, brows knitted, rubs his forehead and mouth, abruptly raises his arms to his shoulders, his hands clenched. Turning to Alex, he rubs his upper lip and chin, “Watch your sister!” Bursting through the door, he shoves his feet into a pair of moccasins and takes off past the dense greenery of the neighborhood, running down the curling street in a ridiculous, heel-toe sprint to confront some neighbors, who know both of them well. As he runs, we hear Gabby Pahinui singing “Hi’ilawa”, a classic, slack-key, love song whose vernacular lyrics express the bond between people on the Big Island of Hawai’i.

King’s friends confirm that Elizabeth was having an affair and tell him that she indeed was planning to get a divorce because she was head over heels for the guy, Brian Speer. Alex and Matt later go to tell Elizabeth’s father the news and he insults his son-in-law for the kind of husband he was to his daughter, a cheapskate and distracted by work. Her mother apparently has a rather serious dementia. Alex, her high school friend, Sid, and Matt search for information about Elizabeth’s lover and eventually discover that he is a successful real estate agent in Honolulu currently vacationing with his family on the island of Kauai. King decides to go and find him there and tell him the news about Elizabeth so that he can say goodbye to her and watch him react, face to face. Incredulous at the idea, Alex insists on going along, having become reconciled to her father because of the crisis. Scottie and Sid join the two of them.

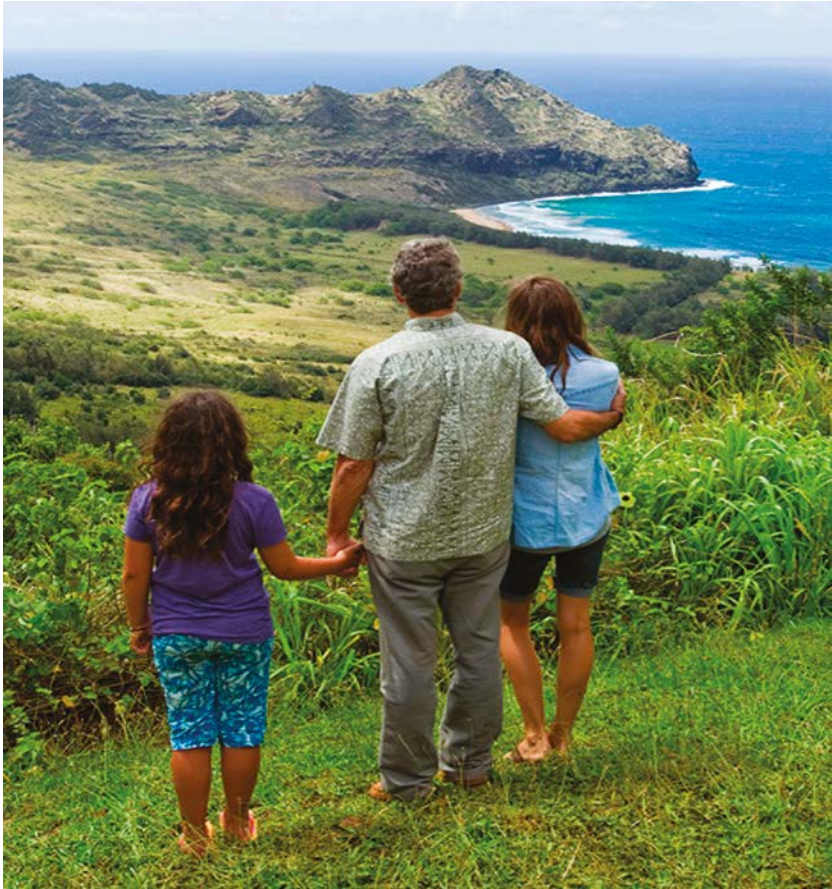
On the flight to Kauai, we see the Hawaiian Airlines jet take off and then the image fades to a map of the route there from Oahu, lending low mimetic, realism to the story. At the same time, we are serenaded again by Gabby Pahinui, now singing “Wai O Ke Aniani,” a song in Hawaiian that describes the cold mountain water of Ke Aniani, a ridge in Moanalua Valley in Honolulu.



The brief scene on the plane consists of King, the father, looking at the three children from across the aisle. He turns his head and ever so briefly catches the eye of the big, goateed Hawaiian man towering over him in the adjacent seat.

We see a quick glance from the latter man that is somewhat ambiguous, perhaps a little mistrustful. The scene switches. From behind, we see the four of them walking on the sidewalk outside the airport. We hear someone calling out King's name. It is Ralph, one of the many King cousins. Dressed in a blue Hawaiian shirt with some sort of white flower design and khaki cargo shorts, he tells King that he is returning from a business trip in Kahului, Maui. Cousin Ralph then asks King if he has come to check with some of the cousins and "make sure everybody is happy with your choice? Pay your respects to Cousin Hugh?" King protests, answering that he has come to Kauai "for a little *holoholo*, to get the kids out of town." After inquiring about whether King is going to sell the property to the highest bidder, and how Elizabeth is doing, Ralph offers to drive them to their hotel.

On the way, we hear a Hawaiian song, "Ulili E", sung by Dennis Kamakahi, which is about a little sandpiper living by the sea, singing calmly and "gracing the land/Where the sea is always calm." A close-up image of a kitschy, dark haired, doe-eyed, hula girl, with yellow garlands, wristlets, and leis sways to the music on the dashboard. As the Jeep makes its way along the coastal road, King asks Ralph to take a detour so they can take a last look at "the land." They turn off onto a dirt road and go through a gate. Cows crowd about grazing in a lush, verdant meadow. Ralph talks about a planned golf course that will rival Pebble Beach. The lovely "Ulili E" melody continues to serenade the Jeep, which winds along the one lane track. They come to a point where the road overlooks the valley down to the bay below and stone remains of a *heiau*, a Hawaiian sacred place, appear briefly as everybody walks to the edge of the hill to see the vista. "Are you shitting me? You guys own all this land?" Alex's friend Sid asks in astonishment at the vastness of the panorama stretching out before them. "Not personally," Matt explains, "it belongs to a trust." Cousin Ralph points to planned locations of a resort, a commercial area, and houses. They talk about the need to sell the property, and then Matt tells his daughters to take a "good look, girls. This is part of your great, great, great grandmother's inheritance going all the way back to Kamehameha I" (Fig. 5). Alex points to where she and her mother camped. Matt responds, "we all did, all our lives." Enviously, Scottie complains that she has been left out. "What about me? I wanna camp!" King looks at her and sighs. The camera pans over the valley and the bay below. Another selection of Hawaiian music, a love song called "Pua Hone," begins, and the image suddenly shifts to a massive statue of Poseidon standing on a pile of faux rocks set on a huge open



**FIGURE 5. Matt King and two daughters visit the family estate.**

clamshell being sprayed by water jets in the middle of a pool; it is decorating a residential community and golf course that King and his kids drive through on the way to their hotel on Hanalei Bay. The juxtaposition of a close-up shot of King holding his forehead, the Hawaiian music, and the passing imagery of suburbia perhaps suggest a sentiment of moral disquiet about the course of development on the island and/or about the prospect that lays before the cuckolded husband of the dying wife.

The search for Brian Speer, Elizabeth's lover, begins. King and kin are seen walking down the beach until dusk, talking as they go. Scottie asks her father how he met her mother. A mildly upbeat instrumental accompanies

their stroll. Now King is everyman. He spends a sleepless, dark night of the soul worrying about what a bad father he is and, in a white t-shirt, seeks counsel from his daughter's friend Sid. Upon discovering that Speer and family are staying in a beachfront cottage owned by another cousin, King seeks out its owner, "Cousin Hugh," whom he finds at a little, crowded, local watering hole called Tahiti Nui, where a trio is playing guitars and ukulele music, and asks after Speer. Cousin Hugh explains that Speer is the brother-in-law of one of the two developers bidding on the King property and will "make a shitload of money on commission" because he will handle the transactions that result. King, visibly dazed by this report, suggests that he might not go with the buyer related to Speer, although he is local, and widely supported by the family. Hugh is upset. King reassures him that he was only thinking out loud and that everything would go as the family is inclined and returns, in astonishment, to his kids. Walking back in the night to the hotel, King tells daughter Alex that he knows where Speer lives and the two determine to go there immediately. We have now arrived at the climax of the story when King confronts his comatose wife's lover on his doorstep.

Standing just below the verandah of the house, King hesitates at first to call out to Julie, Speer's wife, who has appeared as they walk up. "Don't be a pussy," Alex urges her father. He calls out to the woman and reintroduces himself (they met earlier in the day on the beach). Julie and King talk about the timing of the pending decision, when Speer bursts through the screen door offering a cheery greeting and announces himself. King reciprocates, introducing himself as Elizabeth's husband. The camera fills the frame with a wide-eyed, dumbstruck Speer (Fig. 6). King goes on to inform him about his wife's condition. "Oh, wait," he adds, "Fuck you!" He suggests that Speer might want to go see her in the hospital once more before she dies. Alex, now sneering at Speer, asks her father if this is the guy and then wonders how her mother could be attracted to him. King sarcastically observes that he is very articulate. Speer finally manages to pull himself together and express a word of sympathy about what has happened, but King and his daughter attack him for the affair. He demands that they leave immediately, but just then, his wife, who has gone inside to get drinks for their guests, emerges cheerily and wonders what everybody has been talking about so seriously in her absence. "Please tell me you are not talking about business?" Alex answers, "No. We were talking about love."

King and Speer then go inside the house ostensibly to have a look, since King spent time there vacationing as a child. Once through the door, over which a canoe paddle has been hung up as a wall decoration, the two men are seen standing at a distance from each other. The camera looks on at them behind the bar. Again realism: a jar of open pickles and a newly opened wine



**FIGURE 6.** Brian Speer and wife Julie stand on their porch and greet King and his daughter.

bottle with the corkscrew next to it have been laid out on the bar. "How'd you meet?" King blurts out. They move in parallel up to the bar. Speer explains that they met at a Superbowl party. King recognizes and names the hosts. He wants more detail. "How'd you get the nerve to ask her out? Was it about the deal? Was that when you decided she was for you?" Speer denies this motive, claiming that the affair "just happened." He tells King that his wife wanted to leave him but he didn't want her to because he loves his wife. Almost in tears, he pleads with King not to tell Julie. At King's insistent questioning, Speer goes on to tell him that Elizabeth told him that she loved him. But he did not love her. "You don't love her," King exclaims, "you were just using her to get to me!" Speer again denies this allegation. "It was an affair. The attraction was sex. She sort of got carried away with the whole thing and I guess I went with it. At least, I didn't say no to things that I should have. I love my family." They argue and then King, squirming a little, says he has a last question: "You ever been inside my bedroom?" Speer answers "twice" and King suggests that he might have had "the decency to lie about that." King tells Speer which hospital his wife is in. "That is really all I came here to say," and makes for the door. On the porch, he compliments the remodeling and the new appliances in the house. When Alex gets up to leave and Julie is about to kiss him on the cheek, King kisses her aggressively on the lips and turns to go. On the plane returning to Oahu, Sid compliments King for how he acted with Speer, not telling his wife, as he did. We hear Gabby Pahinui again singing "He'eia", a love song about a man seeking his lover on a beach, as Alex and her father worry about telling Scottie about her mother.

King must make a decision about the property. The family is to gather and vote on which bid to accept. Waking up, having fallen asleep at his desk, King drives to an old house with a tennis court and well-kept grounds. He opens up the unoccupied house, pulling back curtains. Light streams through, we hear Gabby Pahinui singing "Hi'ilawe" again, and King looks at the old photos on the walls, photos of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ancestors, all white. The scene shifts outside and we see the house and the backyard with a big tree, coconut palms, a couple of Adirondack chairs and a picnic table on the large green lawn. In the next scene, the backyard is full of kin who are putting their ballots into a wooden bowl one by one. The cousins, all dressed in Hawaiian shirts, drink beer, talk and laugh amicably. King is pictured deep in worried thought, however. He is sitting with Cousin Hugh who counts the votes and announces that the local buyer is the preference of the family. He hands King the contract but he hesitates to sign it. The image of the two original names of the estate appears briefly, the names Edward King and Margaret Ke'alahilani King. "We didn't do anything to own this land. It was entrusted to us." Shaking his head, quivering, "I can't

do it...I'm not going to sign." Angry and in shock, Cousin Hugh argues with him but King declares that he doesn't want to sell at all. He says he wants to keep the land and try to figure out how to do so. Cousin Hugh threatens to sue him. King responds:

People will be relieved, Hugh. The whole state. I sign this document and something that we were supposed to protect is gone, forever. Now, we're haole as shit. We go to private schools and clubs and we can barely speak Pidgin, let alone Hawaiian. But we've got Hawaiian blood. We're tied to this land and our children are tied to this land. Now it's a miracle that for some bullshit reason 150 years ago we owned this much of paradise, but we do. And for whatever bullshit reason, I'm the trustee now and I'm not signing. . . . So if you want to sue me, it'll just make us closer.

He tosses the contract away and sighs in relief. In disgust, Cousin Hugh stands and draws everybody's attention to Matt. King stands, the gentle guitar music starts up again. The camera looks over his shoulders from behind and the scene shifts to the hospital where Elizabeth lays dying. Julie Speer arrives with a big bouquet of flowers. She explains to King that she has come to the bedside because her husband wouldn't. She goes on to say that Brian told her about the affair, and they have been having a hard time ever since. "And then, your family's decision with the land. I think you are doing the right thing. But Brian is . . ." she sighs. "It's so complicated and confusing." Julie asks permission to speak to Elizabeth, however comatose she is. She introduces herself to Elizabeth as Brian's wife and says that she forgives her for trying to take her husband away and for trying to destroy her family. She loses control. King leads her away from the bedside. At the door, he tells her that her husband did not love Elizabeth, and Julie responds, "I know; that's why I came."

King goes back to the bed and caresses Elizabeth's hair and kisses her on the lips, bidding her goodbye, in tears. "Good Elizabeth, my love, my friend, my pain, my joy." A soft, haunting guitar instrumental plays called "Deep in an Ancient Hawaiian Forest." Images of the King property appear on the screen, and finally, King, Alex, and Scottie, in a white outrigger canoe, with leis on, pour Elizabeth's ashes into the sea. They place their leis onto the surface. At home, King brings Scottie some ice cream. She is sitting on a couch with a blanket. Alex joins them. A show about penguins in Antarctica is on

the TV. Gabby Pahinui sings “Ka Makani Ka’ili Aloha,” a song about a woman who deserts her husband and his magical efforts to bring her home.

The place of Hawaiians in *The Descendants* could not be any more remarkable inasmuch as they have been deleted. All that remains are traces of their erasure. The music, flora, place names, archaeological remains of a temple, the kitschy souvenirs, photographs, and brief appearances by actual persons, make up a Hawaiian palimpsest. The music certainly constitutes their strongest presence in, at the same time as it indexes their absence from, the movie. The music provides emotional background, or emotional expressiveness, for the King family, as if to say their hearts are Hawaiian. But, of course, lyrically it often seems that the songs are irrelevant to their actions and sentiment. In this sense, Hawaiians comprise a more acquiescent background for the moral struggle of a western person than seen in *Mutiny on the Bounty* or *Hawaii*. There is no Hihiti or Malama in *The Descendants*. The hero of the movie is Matt King, and only Matt King. The very story is told through his voice. It is he alone who possesses moral personhood in his society. Only he possesses agency in his descent group. Only he feels the angst of having to make a decision about the land, over which he is superior. Thus, his “we’re haole as shit” speech about the family’s primordial relationship is spoken in a heroic, high mimetic voice. Matt King morally incorporates not only the King legacy but all Hawaiians in that moment, completely and comprehensively, like the image of the regal Leviathan in the frontispiece of Hobbes’ famous treatise on political order.

At the same time, he must deal with the anguish and hurt of simultaneously being both a grieving and a cuckolded husband who must meet the challenges of fathering his two heartbroken daughters. But again, he possesses moral agency at this smaller-scale, too. He has the capacity to see paternal shortcomings and do something about them. And, in the turning point of the movie, he goes to meet his wife’s lover and confronts him face to face for a moral purpose, to invite him to go the comatose woman one last time in the hospital.

Matt King is also a comic and ironic hero. In the domestic arena, he is depicted in a low mimetic mode, as inferior to nature and society, not above it. His personal life is out of his control, to say the least. His wife is dying, and nothing can be done to save her. When he travels, he must run, or drive, or take airplanes, like everybody. His voice is compromised. The camera repeatedly fills the frame with his twitches and unspoken exasperations. His children are vulgar. The middle-class mother of his younger daughter’s friend scolds him for being a weak father. He doesn’t know about his wife’s affair and only hears about it from his teenage daughter. His wife’s father ironically insults him for being a bad husband to his daughter whom he thinks has been

loyal and faithful to him. In the middle of a sleepless night, he seeks and takes counsel from his daughter's friend, another ironic figure. His daughter calls him a "pussy" when he vacillates before introducing himself to his wife's lover's wife. Why is King, a heroic leader in the public domain, portrayed in this low mimetic mode?

The movie wants to make a claim to realism. Rather than a tragic hero above society and the audience, it positions King squarely within society, despite his wealth and rank. In line with a classic theme of class denial in Hollywood, such as in *Pretty Woman* or *The Social Network*, the movie is in this way able to create empathy with, or even a feeling for, King as everyman, rather than as an elite. In the last scene of the movie, he is no tragic hero but just a dad sitting on the couch under a blanket with his daughters eating ice cream and watching TV.

### ***Whale Rider* (2002)**

Thus, *The Descendants* concludes with a moral image of American kinship, and, indeed, Ortner (2012) has argued that neat, happy endings are one of the distinctive features of Hollywood studio productions, driven as they are by commercial values. By contrast, she has argued, American independent movies differ in motivation and content. The content of independent movies is challenging and critical, rather than apolitical, or merely entertaining, more realist than fictional or escapist, and usually the movie does not end positively. Now, perhaps foreign independents mix the two kinds of movies that Ortner views as in a kind of a dialog. They do not necessarily criticize, or otherwise directly contest, Hollywood, but like their American counterparts, they are made for "restricted production" of like-minded consumers (Bourdieu 1993, 53). That is to say, foreign, independent movies are produced at a remove from studio values and the cosmopolitan markets to which they appeal. As such, they are oriented toward different audiences. However, they are commercial ventures no less, I would argue, than Hollywood movies, and therefore they can be both morally challenging and entertaining, both realist and fictional, and may end in an upbeat way. At least, this odd set of combinations does seem to be at play in the New Zealand movie, *Whale Rider*.

Based on the novel (1987) of the same title by the Maori writer, Witi Ihimaera, the movie focuses exclusively on a Maori community.<sup>6</sup> Written and directed for the screen by Niki Caro, and set on the east coast of New Zealand, it is a story of Maori living not in poverty but in very modest conditions in the present day. The people, or at least the film's two protagonists, the chief and his granddaughter, believe they descend from Paikea, an apical ancestor who escaped death when his canoe capsized by riding to shore on



the back of a whale and established a chiefly patrilineage in which succession has been reckoned by a rule of primogeniture.

The movie is very much a fantasy in Todorov's (1973) sense that its strange and improbable events are meant to provoke awe but also hesitation in Paikea's society as well as in the audience who are both left uncertain about the truth-value of their meaning, reality, or authenticity (see also Hokuwhitu 2008).<sup>7</sup> That is to say, in Frye's terms, the movie foregrounds a romantic heroine who saves the Maori people. Her agency is superior in degree to society, the environment, and to us. She moves through worlds, the rules of which are slightly suspended for her. Her acts of courage and endurance, which are unnatural to most, are taken for granted by her, and the enchanted weapons, talking animals, and talismans of power that she encounters or deploys do not violate order. Her exploits are the stuff of legend, folktale, and so forth. But, at the same time, she is merely a tween, a young girl, and a daughter who has parents and grandparents, like us.

The opening titles and first scene of *Whale Rider*, thus, combine realism with mystery. We first see underwater images, hear sounds of a whale serenaded by dark, foreboding music. A young female voice speaks: "In the old days, the land was waiting, waiting to be filled up, waiting for someone to love it . . . waiting for a leader. He came on the back of a whale, our ancestor, Paikea." In a hospital delivery room, the intimate, realistic drama of reproduction and family are played out. A mother, held by her husband, attended by a doctor, writhes in pain. The father looks worried. Twins are being born, but what is interesting are the close-ups and the narrative point of view they imply. We see the baby's face. We see the baby's eye. We get a blurry view of the (m)other and the father's grief. We see as through the eyes of the newborn, the surviving, second born twin, who is given the name of the culture hero, Paikea, by her father, after her twin brother and mother both die. The grandparents get out of a sedan, together with Rawiri, the father's younger brother and walk up to the modern building. The girl's voiceover returns: "Everybody was waiting for the firstborn boy to lead us. But he died and I didn't." A senior woman begins a mourning chant for the deceased mother in the Maori vernacular.

The scene shifts to the hallway where Koro, the father's father, argues with his son, Porourangi. The senior man is searching for an heir who will redeem the people from modernity. The frame is once again filled with close-ups of faces. They embrace. The younger man cries. The senior man is interested in nothing more than to see the dead grandson, the heir. Porourangi yells at him, "I've got a child. Her name is Paikea!" a name his father finds intolerable. Porourangi stalks off, leaving Koro to raise the surviving twin, Paikea, loathe as he is to do so.

Twelve or so years pass. Grandfather now rides with his happy granddaughter on a bike down a road between lush, green rolling fields and the ocean. He has become reconciled to her, and she has shown herself to have leadership qualities in the community and to be interested in the ancestors. Her father, having forsaken his obligations as firstborn son and chiefly heir, for instance, to build the ceremonial canoe, the clan *waka*, returns from Germany, where he has become an artist. We see the huge, unfinished canoe at dawn and hear Pai's voice, "My father gave up on carving his canoe after I was born." In the kitchen, Porourangi interrupts his breakfast. His father walks by, puts on his rubber boots and leaves the house. He rushes off to help him repair the blocked septic tank at the community house, the *marae*. Koro's moral leadership is superior in degree to his society. He takes care of his granddaughter in his family but cannot control his son. He looks after his community and ceremonial house, the *marae*. But lacking an heir, he is not superior to society. The Maori, for their part, are shown as living ordinary, rather than ignorant or desperately poor, lives. They are portrayed as living in a realistic mode of low mimesis.

One afternoon, boys in Pai's class laugh at her. Koro smacks one of them across the back of his head, having just pulled up on his bike to collect Pai from school. Once home, Koro starts to clean an outboard motor. Pai asks him about the origin of the Whale Rider's whale because she has to start preparing a speech for a competition at school. The whale, Koro explains, came from Hawaiiki a long time ago. He shows her the strands of which the outboard's pull rope is made. Each one, he tells her, quoting a Maori adage about Paikea, is like an ancestor. Woven together, they are strong and go "all the way back to that whale of yours." The unfinished canoe appears momentarily in the background of the scene. Koro yanks the rope to start up the motor. It snaps. He goes to get more rope. Pai ties a knot and mends the broken pieces. Ominous music begins. She attaches the rope to the starter spool and yanks it. She calls proudly to her grandfather, "It's working! It's working!" But he gets angry. "I don't want you to do that again. It's dangerous." She, as we clearly see, is hurt by his outburst. Pai possesses an extraordinary, perhaps supernatural, capacity, we are meant to conclude, that ties to her the ancestors, like her namesake, perhaps. Or, has she just fixed the motor, which is dangerous to do? At the same time, however, she is a girl with human feelings. Her grandfather, suffice it to say, recalls both Bligh's and Hale's worst intransigence and insensitivities.

The family assembles to watch a slide show that Porourangi is to present of his art. Koro has invited Pai's teacher, a young woman, hoping to introduce her to his widower son. Some images appear of Porourangi with a white woman and he explains that it is his German girlfriend who is pregnant.

Koro turns on the light. The group breaks up. He is angry that he has not been told about the woman and angry that his son is so disloyal to his Maori responsibilities, leaving his clan canoe unfinished. "Your work," he explodes, "is souvenirs! You have obligations!" The son contends that his father doesn't know who he is. "I know who you were born to be!" Koro snaps back. "Take your daughter. She is of no use to me." Pai runs out of the house to the empty canoe, trailed by her father. Pororaungi explains to her that the leader that Koro wants does not exist. "He wants a prophet" and that Koro hoped he would be that prophet, which he can't be. Pai answers, "Me neither" and bursts into tears. They hug and Pororaungi invites her to come back to Germany with him.

Koro, the grandfather, rides Pai around on his bike on the lawn in front of his house. She is leaving with her father. She hugs Koro who reciprocates tenderly, retreats inside the house, and watches through a window as Pai hugs Rawiti, her uncle, and her grandmother, Nanny Flowers. The family is troubled by the departure. Father and daughter drive off as Koro announces that he wants to gather the rest of Pai's cohort together, the firstborn boys only, and start to train them to be Maori leaders and choose a successor from among them. "When she was born," he tells his wife, referring to his granddaughter, "that's when things went wrong for us. [Now] . . . we will find the answer." On the road, meanwhile, Pai looks out to sea from the car and sees her father's canoe. They drive on, and we begin to hear the song of a whale. Pai's attention is drawn to the breakers. We see a huge whale swimming beneath the surface. She tells her father to stop the car and runs off to look at the sea. "I have to go home," she tells him. He hugs her, knowingly, as her gaze remains fixed on the ocean. Pai has heard the cry of the totem. She is a romantic heroine. Her moral standing vis a vis nature, others in her society and even us, her audience, is superior. Koro's moral agency is perhaps more compromised. He has diagnosed a problem in the community, or for the community, the lack of an heir. But, try as he may, he cannot do anything to correct it.

Pai finds her grandfather immersed in his leadership training project at the marae, teaching *haka* chants to the boys and how to wield the ceremonial lance (*taieha*). When she tries to join, he heatedly rebuffs her. Imperturbable, she practices by herself, despite him, and eventually takes her grandmother's kindhearted advice to go to Rawiti, her father's younger brother, for private lessons. Her tenacity comes to a head when the boys chant for parents and well wishers in the marae. The father of Hemi, one of the boys, comes back from town to see his son perform. The boy finishes, and the father immediately goes off with his crew of young gangbanger men to drink. Abandoned, Hemi is broken-hearted. Paikea has been walking about practicing moves with her staff and finds her friend moping. She tries to offer

sympathy but only makes him angry. He charges her with his taieha and they fight. Paikea knocks Hemi's stick out of his hands and it falls to the ground, at which moment Koro, who has overheard the clacking of the sticks inside, appears and picks up the weapon. Seething, he screams to Pai,

Do you know what you've done? . . . You've broken the *tapu* on this *marae*, the one place it is always upheld! The knowledge . . . passed down from my grandfather to me, you've broken! . . . You're not sorry. Right from the beginning you knew this wasn't for you. But you kept coming back! Do you want me to fail? Do you want these boys to fail?

He demands, in his rage, that she apologize, and turns away. Pai shows the skill of a boy, and the moral agency of a heroic leader. Her grandfather, by contrast, fails to see what we have surely begun to recognize about Pai. Although a girl, she is what her grandfather seeks, his heir.

Koro takes half a dozen boys out in a boat to go dive for a whale tooth he has been wearing around his neck. They anchor off shore in front of grey, striated cliffs, which look like a big whale. Koro tosses the tooth into the water and it slowly sinks. Whichever boy retrieves it will be the heir, he tells them, this is the test that will determine the next leader. One by one, the boys dive after it. None succeeds, however, and, as it nestles among the leafy plants on the sea-bottom, Koro collapses into a state of depression. The music is gloomy as he retreats to bed. Pai goes to stay with her uncle and his wife. Koro sits on the edge of his bed, slumped, chanting a dirge-like plaintive call to "the ancient ones. But they weren't listening," Pai explains in a voiceover. In tears, she stands in the clan canoe and begins to chant as well. We see whales beneath the surface swim about in the emerald water. And the music is that of enchantment. Not only is Pai her grandfather's heir, she possesses her namesake's connection to nature. She can move through worlds, whose rules are suspended for her.

In a subsequent scene, Pai is out in the dinghy with her uncle Rawiti, his wife, and two male friends near the spot where Koro tossed the whale's tooth into the water. She asks her uncle where her grandfather lost it and says she will go after it. She dives in and everybody in the boat waits with increasing anxiety, as she stays under the water for what seems to be too long. We see the flowing, green flora and the whale's tooth as Pai thinks about her grandfather's depression while she swims. Her uncle anxiously dives in as his wife looks on. Suddenly, a large lobster appears on the gunwale of the dinghy. Pai



**FIGURE 7. Paiea, in tears, gives her speech about breaking the lineage of chiefs because she is a girl.**

has brought it up for her grandfather. Rather nonchalantly, she also tosses the whale's tooth on top of the crustacean. When her uncle shows it to Nanny Flowers, her grandmother, who is at home folding laundry, he asks her if she will tell Koro the news, which she says she won't do. "He's not ready yet." Ethereal music begins. Wispy, cirrus clouds swirl in the sky. Sand blows lightly up the empty beach. We see the unfinished clan canoe. Pai, it is now confirmed, is Paiea, the whale rider.

In the build up to the movie's climax, Pai wins a prize for the best speech at school and invites her beloved grandfather, who does not appear, to the award presentation. As she and her classmates sing and dance, Koro walks alone on the beach in the dark. He has had a supernatural sense that has drawn him there. Meanwhile, Pai receives her award and begins her speech, which, tears streaming down her face, she dedicates to Koro (Fig. 7). She talks about the lineage of chiefs going back to Paiea, the *Whale Rider*, into which she is born, but which she has broken because of her gender. On the beach, Koro encounters a whole pod of whales lying in the shallow rollers, still alive, but moaning and struggling to breath. "Who is to blame?" he mutters. Meanwhile, Pai is chanting the whaler rider's call to the ancestors for help.

The scene shifts back to the beach, where the family and community have now gathered. Koro is still demanding to know who is to blame. We see through a whale's eyes and then we see a close-up of Pai's eye. She is in bed but has awoken and is upset. She looks out to the beach and sees the beached whales. "I called them and they came. But it wasn't right. They were dying," she thinks to herself. The community is working hard, pouring water over the whales and covering them up with wet sheets. Pai's uncle supports their efforts. Pai herself is seen standing alone in her father's big canoe watching the biggest whale of them all. As her grandfather chants in Maori to the whale, she thinks in a voiceover, "It is Paikea's whale, sent to us because we got in trouble." Koro has the idea that, if they turn the big whale round with a tractor and get it back in the water, the rest of the pod will follow it. Uncle Rawiti runs off to get the men together.

Pai touches a barnacle on the whale's skin (Fig. 8). "Leave it," Koro bellows at her. "You've done enough." She gives him a pained look and withdraws. The men come with a thick rope and attach it to the whale's tale as the rollers drench them. Everyone pushes. The men pull the rope. The tractor pulls. Nanny Flowers chants in Maori. The rope breaks. "He wanted to die," Pai concludes in a voiceover. The community walks back down the beach in the shallows, exhausted and defeated. Pai approaches the whale and feels its skin and barnacles that she kisses with her nose. The music is ethereal and strange. Pai climbs up the barnacles and sits astride the whale's back. Giving the whale a kick with her heel, it responds and slowly begins to move. Uncle Rawiti looks back and notices that the big whale is gone. Nanny Flowers cries out, "Where is she?" She sees the distant image of Pai in the water riding the whale followed by the pod. Koro is wide-eyed by the sight. She looks back at him as the whale takes Pai underwater and resurfaces. "I wasn't scared to die," she thinks in a voiceover. She holds onto a barnacle as the whale pulls her under again. Her grandmother cries on the beach, turns to Koro, who stands alone. The youth of the chiefly training school chant in Maori. Nanny Flowers walks up to Koro and gives him the whale's tooth. "Which one?" he asks. "What do you mean, which one?" she snaps back at him and walks away. Slack jawed, he holds the tooth and finally grasps who his granddaughter is. We see the whales underwater. Pai lets go her grip and drifts off. The music is miraculous, almost new-agey.

Koro answers the phone at home in his bathrobe. The scene shifts to the hospital, where the family drinks tea in the waiting room. Koro sits by Pai's bedside and prays to her in subtitled Maori, "Wise leader, forgive me," he says, "I am just a fledgling new to flight." She wears the necklace with the big whale's tooth. We see images of whales swimming underwater. Pai awakens



FIGURE 8. **Paikea rides the whale.**

and looks at her grandfather who raises his head and looks back at her in shame, perhaps, and love. Now the music has become ominous.

In the final scene, Pai's father's big clan canoe is launched. Its prow, with the *Whale Rider* motif, has been decorated with feathers. The canoe is lifted onto rollers and pushed into the water, Pai's father taking the lead. Men and women, dressed traditionally, eyes flaring, chant a *haka* aggressively. Pai's German wife looks on, pregnant. The great canoe is stroked off by dozens of rowers as Pai, sitting next to her grandfather in the middle, chants in Maori. Pai smiles at her grandfather and thinks, again in a voiceover, that she is part of a long line of chiefs who descend from the whale rider. We see the canoe from behind as it pulls away from us and we hear chanting in Maori set to a contemporary cadence as the closing titles begin over a black background.

*Whale Rider* is a fantasy that confounds the boundaries between what is real and what is extraordinary. Can we believe the imagery of Pai as Whale Rider? She is ultimately confirmed as a romantic heroine, who fills her grandfather's dreams for tribal/Maori redemption, but the movie cannot but stop short of being credible and realistic. The transformation of an isolated Maori community in remote New Zealand, out of its anomie, alcohol and drug use, generational conflict, global influence, and lack of work and resources cannot be accomplished by a twelve-year-old girl, claiming to be the reincarnation of an ancestral culture-hero. Instead, the meaning of *Whale Rider* can be

coopted into feminism, narratives of the progress of modernity, universalism, and equality. In this sense, *Whale Rider* is not an exception to the view of the moral agency of Pacific Islanders in comic or otherwise inferior modes of low mimesis. In *Whale Rider* a pseudo realism ends in a dramatic act of romantic heroism; that is, we see a Maori community revitalized by little more than its dreams.

### Conclusion

The tragic representation of Captain Bligh as superior to others in ship-board society, but not to civilian stratification, and not to the audience's ethical sensibilities, and certainly not to nature, closely matches Frye's criteria of high mimetic leadership. The comic representation of King Hitihiti, however, as ingenuous and intellectually deficient both does and does not fit the criteria of his mode of irony, since "the King" is clearly a regal figure in his society, rather than an absolutely inferior one, and his subjects appear in a productive, fruitful relationship to nature rather than a struggle. Therefore, in this singular exception to his rank, however Bligh ceremonially acknowledges it, the audience<sup>8</sup> is presented with images of two leaders not meant at all to be viewed as equals. Moreover, we are left with Bligh's foibles, the ethical standards of his captaincy that he is represented as disregarding, deficiencies that imply a critique of this moral vision. If Bligh is cruel, so too is the west, in a word. But he is famously redeemed for audiences by Fletcher Christian and his mutineers. The same cannot be said for the Tahitians.

The Rev. Hale is paired with the chiefess Malama in *Hawaii*, and again we are presented with a high mimetic foreground of a morally superior man who nonetheless struggles with great dilemmas. Malama is more complicated than Hitihiti, however, and although she appears as a romantic heroine to a certain extent, she is still relegated to the movie's background. She certainly is afforded moral superiority. We see not one but multiple dimensions of her agency: over local and colonial society, as well as over nature. She also has a moral predicament, which is that she must give up her loving brother-husband to be baptized. She complies with Christianity and Hale, of course, acknowledging their moral superiority, only to defy them surreptitiously. Her secret disinterment and reburial were an act of resistance or in Scott's famous phrase, a weapon of the weak (1985), against missionary authority to show that she had not consented to its dominance. But as Scott argued, such tactics are hidden because of the oppressed, inferiority of the subalterns who employ them.

Now Matt King in *The Descendants* brings this kind of Hollywood colonialism to its fullest, most comprehensive, expression. Here, the Pacific Island-



ers have been entirely removed from the story. All that basically remains of them is their music and, to an extent its hero, who has assimilated them into his “blood” and feels guilty about their exclusion. However, this paternalistic stance, which recalls that of Rev. Hale in *Hawaii*, is made palatable through the voice of an otherwise comic western hero, who is one of, or perhaps inferior to, us, the audience.

*Whale Rider* was made in New Zealand and not Hollywood. That is to say, it was made outside central norms of the motion picture industry and was meant to appeal to a different market, but it crossed over, and having done so, we can justifiably ask to what extent it challenged or constituted an indie protest against the low mimetic, ironic representation of Pacific Islanders that we saw in *Mutiny on the Bounty* and *Hawaii*. My view, in brief, is that *Whale Rider* does not do anything of the sort. Instead, it features a genre Todorov calls the fantastic, the fantastic being defined for him as a hesitation of characters and readers when encountering events and persons, to know or decide whether they are real. The fantastic is not the uncanny, the grotesque, the magical, or the supernatural in fiction. It depicts a realistic world of living people in which questions arise, questions about the reality of phenomena to characters in that society, but which are not clearly answered, either for them or for us, the audience (Todorov 1973, 33). Pororangi, Pai’s father, is skeptical that an heir of the sort Koro seeks can be found. But Koro is left standing immobilized on the beach, watching the improbable image of his granddaughter riding the huge whale just offshore. At the same time, the patent realism of the setting, made up of rusting outboard motors, gang-banger youth, telephones, laundry that must be folded, and the school day, is convincing. Pai is a romantic heroine, a girl who is but cannot be.

In being so contradictory, *Whale Rider* offers no argument for universalism, progressive humanism, or cultural relativism (Lutz and Collins 1993). It rather joins *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *Hawaii*, and *The Descendants* in endorsing the longstanding Orientalist vision espoused by the culture industry (Adorno 1991) of the inferior moral personhood of Pacific Islanders, the vision that rationalized the colonial and now continues to support the neoliberal ambitions of the West over their natural resources, identities, and societies. Also, it is a vision, needless to say, that sells a product.

## NOTES

1. I would argue that this is the case not only for Hollywood movies portraying Pacific Islanders (see Wilson 2000; Edwards 2001; Brislin 2003), but for all movies in which nonwestern peoples and cultures appear. For example, see Marchetti 1993; Rollins and O’Connor 1998; Shaheen 2003; Seshagiri 2006.

2. The literature on the representation of Pacific Islanders in Hollywood has been largely written by cultural studies, rather than by anthropology and, thus, has been oriented by literary, not social, theory (e.g. Man 1991; Wilson 2000; Lyons 2006).

3. The very first filming of the story predated the 1935 Irving Thalberg/MGM version: it was a 1915 silent Australian picture. There was also a 1933 New Zealand film *In the Wake of the Bounty*, a primitive, studio-bound early talkie most notable as the first picture of future star Errol Flynn, who played Fletcher Christian. The 1962 version was directed by Lewis Milestone, who replaced Carol Reed early on location shooting. The screenplay was written by Charles Lederer (with uncredited input from Eric Ambler, William L. Driscoll, Borden Chase, John Gay, and Ben Hecht. *Mutiny on the Bounty* was filmed in the Ultra Panavision 70 widescreen process, the first motion picture so credited. It is notable for its location photography in the South Pacific and its musical score by Bronislaw Kaper. When the movie premiered in the United States, it opened to mostly negative reviews. The 1962 movie was nominated for seven Oscars but won none.

4. Actually, Bligh was unusually progressive for a Royal Navy officer of his time and cared deeply for his crew, carefully noting the decent rations and overall good health and morale of the crew, even to the point of requiring dances and music each evening to help keep the crews spirits up.

5. The *New York Times* reviewer, Vincent Canby, wrote “Not since Rev. Mr. Davidson went after Sadie Thompson has Protestant Christian proselytism come off so poorly on screen.” <<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9E02E4D7143BE63ABC4952DFB667838D679EDE>> This latter reference is to the (1928) silent film *Sadie Thompson* in which a young prostitute (played by Gloria Swanson) encounters a zealous missionary in American Samoa who wants to take her back home to San Francisco.

6. The movie grossed US\$41 million. Keisha Castle-Hughes, then aged twelve, was nominated for an Oscar for Best Actress and became the youngest nominee. The movie was nominated for twenty-nine other awards and won twenty-eight.

7. Hokuwhitu (2008) complains bitterly about just this issue, which in his view ignores the “violent . . . disruption caused by colonialization” (2008:128) and promulgates a patrilineal, patriarchal fiction that distorts and subjugates Maori masculinity and culture, thus to become a “dangerous film for the project of Maori decolonization” (2008, 133).

8. Although the movie was the sixth-highest grossing film of 1962, it lost money because of a runaway budget.

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