

## READING B: Extract from ‘Narratives of identity and history in settler colony texts’

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I [consider here] picture books which engage in the postcolonial strategy of revisioning history, representing colonial events from the point of view of indigenous peoples: [...] a New Zealand text, Gavin Bishop’s *The House that Jack Built* (1999), and a Canadian text, Thomas King’s *A Coyote Columbus Story* (1992), with illustrations by William Kent Monkman. Bishop is a Maori author-illustrator; King is a Native author of Cherokee descent; and Kent Monkman belongs to the Swampy Kree band [a group of native communities in Canada]. [...]

### The House that Jack Built

Gavin Bishop’s *The House that Jack Built* concerns itself with colonial history and its effect upon the land and its indigenous people. The narrative is focused through the story of Jack Bull, who departs London in 1798 and whose progress from trader to wealthy merchant is ended in the Land Wars of the 1860s. Bishop draws upon three quite distinct sets of visual imagery: Western styles of representational art; folk art characterised by stylised figures and forms; and symbols from Maori mythology. These three strands comment ironically on one another as well as producing a composite portrait of a nation where British and Maori traditions and ideologies jostle and struggle for ascendancy. [...]

The nursery rhyme that comprises the book’s verbal text is, like Jack Bull, of British stock, and is imbued with signifiers (cow, dog, cat, rat, malt, priest, soldier)<sup>1</sup> which, in the new country, no longer bear stable relations to systems of meaning. Such instability is crucial to Bishop’s postcolonial strategy of defamiliarising aspects of European culture by representing them through Maori perspectives, an effective example of which occurs in the double-spread in which a Maori man encounters the ‘cow with the crumpled horn’, depicted following its act of tossing the dog that worried the cat [see Figure 1].

The elaborate borders on the spread enclose a narrative about the *taniwha*, a shape-changing trickster who ‘could look like a log floating in the water or he could look like an eel’. The Maori is a man of status — he wears a nephrite ear-pendant and ornamental feathers in his hair, bears the *moko* (tattoo) of a warrior and holds a wooden club with a carved edge. He does not, however, wear a traditional cloak made of flax fibre, but a length of red flannel from Jack Bull’s store, which in itself is suggestive of a shift in signification: a length of cloth within British culture comprises the raw materials for a garment, whereas for this Maori warrior it functions as a cloak. However, as is clear from the folds at his neck and the necessity of holding the fabric with one hand, it departs from traditions of Maori garment-making,



**Figure 1** Gavin Bishop, *The House that Jack Built*, pp. 8–9.

which through complex techniques of weaving produced cloaks designed to fit the body, and which were finished with ties, borders and sometimes collars (Pendergrast, 1996, pp. 126–43). Throughout Polynesia the colour red was ‘the colour of rank and sacred value’ (Neich, 1996, pp. 74–5), worn only by those of the highest status, whereas Jack Bull’s red flannel allows anyone to appropriate such a position. The length of red cloth worn by the warrior is therefore a sign of indeterminacy – neither British nor Maori in its form and function, and metonymic of the shifting meanings of colonialism and its destabilisation of traditional life.

Bishop’s strategy of placing this moment of encounter within a frame alluding to Maori traditions filters figures and events through a perspective that accepts the existence of a host of supernatural beings, deities, spirits and ancestors intimately involved in the lives of humans (Te Awakotuku, 1996, pp. 26–30). The spirals incorporated into the frame, and the face with protruding tongue and rolling eyes seen at top left, encode this supernatural world, while in the background beyond the cow and the man, the eyes of the gods can be seen. These eyes, staring out of the page and ungrounded in bodily forms, position readers to imagine a watching presence, just as the wary, knowing eyes of the cat at the bottom right of the picture seem to observe and judge from the perspective of a creature introduced to the land. The encounter between the cow and the warrior, which on the face of it has a ludic quality, in fact conveys a much more serious interplay between cultures with opposing and incompatible epistemologies and systems of valuing and belief.

The book’s visual narrative represents colonisation as a process in which Maori people experience alienation and degradation: Jack Bull cuts down trees to build his house without appeasing Tane, the god of the forests; Maori use shellfish to barter for goods instead of as food for their people; and rifles,

alcohol and tobacco become the principal objects of trade. Along with this narrative goes another, which involves the courtship of ‘the man all tattered and torn’ and ‘the maiden all forlorn’. The man in question is European and the maiden Maori, and their interracial relationship is blessed by ‘the priest all shaven and shorn’ who stands before the pair at their wedding [see Figure 2].



**Figure 2** Gavin Bishop, *The House that Jack Built*, pp. 21–2.

The woman wears a nephrite *tiki*, which is traditionally associated with fruitfulness, while the man smiles out of the page, his *pohutukawa* buttonhole echoing the flowers with which the woman is adorned. Behind the pair the eyes of the gods observe, while in the facing page a complex set of signifiers appears. The copybook page which serves as background encodes the imposition of English upon indigenous people and the ascendancy of literacy over orality, while the framed, folk-art picture beneath the rhyme identifies colonisation with Christianity and Maori culture with devil worship. These signifiers of constraint and prohibition are taken up in the carving that ushers in the scene of the wedding, and relate specifically to sexuality, for the genitalia of the two ancestor figures are covered by the Christian symbol of the cross. Bishop’s representation of the happy couple and the possibility of interracial harmony, read in the light of these images, is thus loaded with doubt and premonition.

From this point, the narrative tends towards conflict as the land is engulfed by buildings; the native birds are driven out by the ‘cock that crowed in the morn’; and the farmer sows his corn on land formerly covered by trees. The poem’s reference to the ‘soldier all weary and worn’ leads to a page whose border describes how Tumatauenga, the war god, ‘called to the people of the land. “*E Tu!*” he cried “Stand up! Protect the earth mother! Rise up! Fight for the spirit of Papatuanuku.” The people took up their weapons and the terrible dance of war was heard over the land.’<sup>2</sup> Bishop’s note, ‘About this book’, also appears on this spread, explaining that ‘on the last

pages the conflict is recorded for future generations on the wall of a meeting house in a folk-art style blending traditional Maori and European artforms. Both cultures are now intertwined in the rich history of Aotearoa.’ But the impact of the book’s endpapers ironises Bishop’s explanation, especially his final sentence concerning racial harmony. For these *tukutuku* panels<sup>3</sup> comprise three images: *te pakeha*, the Pakeha; *Tumatauenga*, the god of war; and *te tangata whenua*, the people of the land [see Figure 3].



**Figure 3** Gavin Bishop, *The House that Jack Built*, endpapers.

Not only are Maori and Pakeha separated by Tumatauenga, so interrogating the notion that the two cultures are ‘now intertwined’, but the nature of the images – the static, warlike poses – fixes them in a state of conflict. The central image of Tumatauenga, which adheres to the stylised figure of the *manaia*,<sup>4</sup> has a forcefulness which makes it the focus of the panel, producing the inference that conflict is inevitably present in interactions between Pakeha and Maori.

### A Coyote Columbus Story

Thomas King and William Kent Monkman’s *A Coyote Columbus Story* deploys a different strategy for rereading colonialism, one involving the parodic undermining of the high seriousness with which stories of colonial exploration have traditionally been told, and of the trope of explorer as hero. The trickster figure of Coyote (represented in Kent Monkman’s illustrations dressed in shorts, shocking pink tanktop and sneakers) creates turtles, beavers, moose and turtles expressly to join in the game of ball which she desires above everything else. When these creatures evince little enthusiasm for the game, she ‘sings her song and dances her dance and thinks so hard her nose falls off’, and so creates Native people, who enjoy playing ball until

they grow weary of Coyote's propensity for changing the rules in order to win. It is at this point, when Coyote is bored, that she makes a foolish mistake – she 'doesn't watch what she is making up out of her head', and Christopher Columbus and his men arrive:

Hello, says one of the men in silly clothes with red hair all over his head.  
I am Christopher Columbus. I am sailing the ocean blue looking for India.  
Have you seen it?

Forget India, says Coyote. Let's play ball.

In a playful mix of periods and cultures, verbal and visual texts interrogate colonial discourses. Columbus is a cartoon figure, using words from a playground chant ('sailing the ocean blue') to describe his mission. Represented as a visual cliché, he is surrounded by characters who include an Elvis look-alike wearing red stilettos and carrying a bundle of firearms [see Figure 4]. With their golf clubs and suitcases, the explorers look like



**Figure 4** Thomas King and William Kent Monkman, *A Coyote Columbus Story*, p. 15.

shady entrepreneurs and they prove themselves to be concerned solely with material gain as they search the New World for gold, chocolate cake, computer games and music videos. Within this scheme, native animals are no more than commodities:

I see a four-dollar beaver, says one.  
I see a fifteen-dollar moose, says another.  
I see a two-dollar turtle, says a third.  
Those things aren't worth poop, says Christopher Columbus.  
We can't sell those things in Spain. Look harder.

When Columbus conceives the idea of transporting Indians to sell in Europe, Coyote laughs: 'Who would buy human beings, she says'. The frame of this coyote story does not allow for explicit moral commentary, since Coyote's concern is with the balance of humans with the natural environment, and not with individual humans. Rather, it is Kent Monkman's illustration that uncovers colonial meanings, showing 'a big bunch of men and women and children', tied together like so many pieces of firewood, transported from the shore to the Spanish frigates [see Figure 5].



**Figure 5** Thomas King and William Kent Monkman, p. 23.

Readers are positioned to look from Columbus's gleeful smile as he stands at the foreground of the frame, to the Spanish sailor who gives him a thumbs-up sign; and from the sailor to the Native people as they stand in

the dinghy, bound together. These are stereotypes of Indians – the unemotionality projected onto them within colonial discourses constructs them as Other, as impervious to the ‘normal’ range of emotions and as somewhat less than ‘us’.

King’s strategy of collapsing historical periods allows for a connection between colonial and neo-colonial practices: when Columbus returns to Spain, he sells the Indians to ‘rich people like baseball players and dentists and babysitters and parents’, figures representative of those who benefit from the labour migrations that feed the accelerating demands of contemporary capitalism. Meanwhile, emerging from their hiding places, the remaining Native people challenge Coyote: ‘you better watch out or this world is going to get bent’. The narrative concludes with another wave of colonisers when Jacques Cartier reaches the New World. As the beavers, moose, turtles and human beings ‘catch the first train to Penticton’, Coyote continues to hope for another chance to play ball; however, the untrustworthy smiles of the colonisers, and their accoutrements of golfclubs and cameras, promise only the continuation of colonialism under a new guise.

The [two] picture books I have discussed are alike in their refusal of consolatory closures: [...] *The House that Jack Built* projects a future of cultural conflict; and *A Coyote Columbus Story* builds into its ending the expectation of new waves and forms of colonial subjection. These texts thus refuse to induct readers into the fantasy that colonialism is finished, its effects blunted and ameliorated by time. Rather, their revisionings of stories of colonial engagement insist on how the past is present to indigenous peoples and national cultures and remind readers to read against the grain of colonial and neo-colonial narratives.

### Notes

- 1 Polynesian dogs (*kuri*) came to New Zealand with the ancestors of the Maori, but with the advent of European breeds of dog, the *kuri* was bred out. A species of small rat was also introduced by the Maori immigrants.
- 2 Papatuanuku is the earth goddess.
- 3 *Tututuku* are knotted latticework panels which feature in meeting houses. They are often used for narrative purposes.
- 4 *Manaia* are highly significant figures normally shown in profile and characterised by avian and reptilian features such as forked tongues and lizard-like feet; in ancient carvings, a hand with three fingers is common.

### References

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