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MALS 277: Coloring Gender  
17 November 2016

*Breaking Barriers in Whale Rider:  
Overcoming Gender Roles to Unite the Whangara*

The film *Whale Rider* tells the fictional story of Pai, a twelve-year-old girl living with her grandparents in the small community of Whangara on the coast of New Zealand. The Whangara believe their people date back to a single ancestor, Paikea, who survived when his boat capsized in the middle of the ocean by riding to shore on the back of a whale. Since Paikea's time, the Whangara people have lived in a patriarchal structure where tribal chiefs can only be first-born males. Pai believes she is destined to become her people's first female chief, but she must overcome the rigid gender stereotypes set forth by her traditional grandfather, Koro, and prove to him that she can learn the ways of her ancestors and lead her people.

The Whangara are a tribe of indigenous Polynesian people of New Zealand referred to more broadly as Maori, whose culture has established specific gender roles that allocate different roles and responsibilities for males and females. In *Whale Rider*, Pai's resistance to assume her people's traditional female gender roles clashes with Koro's ideas of the masculine qualities needed for leadership. In analyzing how gender and specifically masculinity are depicted in Maori culture through the relationship between Pai and Koro in *Whale Rider*, it becomes evident that the strict separation of gender roles actually serves as a hindrance to the wellbeing and progression of the tribal community as a whole.

*Maori Culture Depicted in Whale Rider*

Land rights in New Zealand have historically been a contentious issue because of the important role land plays in the Maori society and culture, which is in direct conflict with the

European colonizer's Western approach to land ownership. Europeans view land as a commodity that can be purchased and sold, but for the Maori, "[...] people did not own the land, but belonged to the land" (Wonu Veys 55). The Maori treasured land and viewed it as a gift passed down from one generation to the next, and thus believed it served as a direct link to their ancestors. "*Whakapapa* (genealogy) is the knowledge of who your ancestors are and where you come from" (Wonu Veys 56). This knowledge is vital to Maori culture as it connects people both with each other and with the land.

This knowledge of and connection to Maori ancestors is a central theme in *Whale Rider* and is depicted through the myth of Paikea. The legend that Paikea rode on a whale's back many years ago has been engrained in the Whangara culture and resulted in strong affinities toward whales (*New Zealand Department of Conservation*). For Whangara, whales are seen as mythical creatures that form a direct link back through their ancestors, all the way back to Paikea himself. As a result, whales hold a sacred, revered place in society and only certain "chosen" tribal members can communicate with the ancestors through them. There are hints throughout the film that Pai is able to connect with her ancestors through whales, but it becomes clearer in the film's conclusion, when Pai rides on the back of a beached whale as it swims out to sea, that she is destined to be her people's next leader.

Whales also played a central role in Koro's most prominent personal adornment, the whale tooth necklace he wore that signified his status and leadership in the tribe, as well as his *whakapapa* (genealogy) to Paikea (Wonu Veys 108). Koro wore this necklace consistently throughout the film, and toward the end of the film, he used it as a test for the first-born male children in the village to show their true leadership. Koro brought the children out to a cove in the ocean and threw his necklace in the water, explaining that the boy who brought the necklace

back to him would be their people's new leader, as chosen by their ancestors. When none of the boys were able to retrieve the necklace, Koro fell into despair thinking the ancestors could no longer hear him. Unbeknownst to him, Pai went to the same cove several days later and successfully retrieved Koro's necklace from the ocean floor, once again proving herself to be the tribe's rightful leader.

Maori culture also centers around the performing arts, both through oratory and the *haka*, "[...] an active, chanted dance demonstrating fitness, agility and life force" (Wonu Veys 128). Genealogical knowledge is an important aspect for orators, and currently the art of oratory is almost exclusively performed by men. Women are more active in the recitation of chanted poems, which is also considered part of the oral tradition (Wonu Veys 127). In *Whale Rider*, Pai is frequently seen at school alongside her female classmates reciting poems in the native Maori language. When Koro decides to open a boys-only school to teach the young men in the village the ways of the ancestors, Pai and her grandmother, Nanny Flowers, are only allowed to participate by reciting poems as part of the opening ceremony. Towards the end of the film, Pai's school holds a speech contest, where she is granted permission to participate as a female orator. Pai wins the contest and performs her speech in honor of her grandfather, whom she loves and respects deeply, despite the friction in their relationship caused by his traditional views on women's roles in the tribe.

The *haka* has a long history of tradition in Maori culture as a war chant, but the nature of the *haka* has changed over time. Recently, the *haka* became well known through international sports competitions, where it is performed before the start of every New Zealand team rugby match. Performance of *haka* dances varies across tribes, but most Maori are united in the belief that the *haka* is a way to showcase their traditions and regain their cultural heritage. Much like

oratory, *haka* are generally seen as dances for only men to perform, while women hold less visible duties like composers for the performance, or they perform off to the side of the main male *haka* group. There is still controversy surrounding women's involvement in *haka* today as some leaders believe women have no place in the performance (Wonu Veys 129).

The *haka* is depicted in *Whale Rider* at Koro's school for boys, where he teaches the village boys the art of the performance. He insists the boys remove their shirts and convey aggression by pounding their chests and sticking out their tongues. Koro instructs the boys, "When you extend your tongues, you're saying to your enemies: I'm gonna eat you" (*Whale Rider*). Other characteristics of the dance including rolling the eyes back so only the whites are shown, stomping, and using the whole body to enhance movement and performance (Wonu Veys 129). Pai is excluded from the lesson by nature of her being a girl, but she hides off to the side in hopes of secretly learning the *haka* from her grandfather.

As a female, Pai is also excluded from learning about weaponry, another important aspect of Maori culture. Weapons are more than just objects to use in fighting but serve as important indicators of status and prestige. Weapons associated with infamous warriors or chiefs came to acquire a particular notoriety of their own, and some believed these weapons even came to possess supernatural powers (Wonu Veys 100). Koro taught the young boys in his school martial skills with the *taiaha*, the most prestigious long-handled weapon that has a blade on one end a carved face on the other end (Wonu Veys 103).

As with the *haka*, Koro refused to allow Pai to participate in learning martial skills at his school. Pai knew she could be a great leader for her people, but she was frustrated not to be receiving the same teachings as the boys her age. She sought help learning the *taiaha* from her uncle, Rawiri, who was an extremely skilled fighter but had been overlooked by Koro all his life

because he was a second-born son. Pai excelled at learning the *taiaha*, so much so that when Koro's favorite pupil challenged her to a duel, she beat him. Koro was outraged with Pai for betraying him and their ancestors by learning the *taiaha* after he had forbidden it. Koro also banned the boy Pai had defeated from his school. Throughout the film, Pai consistently outperforms her male classmates in one challenge after the next, but Koro's traditional beliefs will not allow him to see beyond the rigid gender stereotypes engrained in their culture. It requires an incident of mythic proportions to capture Koro's attention and force him to finally realize that Pai has been the chosen one all along.

### *Socially Constructed Gender Roles*

That Pai was born a girl is a major source of contention for Koro, who believed a first-born male prophet would save their people and lead them all to greatness. Pai had a twin brother, the supposed prophet, who died at birth along with their mother. Pai's father was devastated by the death of his wife and newborn son, so he left on the day of her birth, leaving Koro and his wife, Nanny Flowers, to raise Pai. Before leaving, Pai's father named her Paikea, after their great whale rider ancestor. Koro refused to acknowledge her by that name, instead opting for the nickname Pai. As Pai matured, her relationship with Koro became very complicated. There was obviously a deep love between them, but the more Pai tried to embrace her destiny as the next chief, the meaner and colder Koro acted toward her.

Koro's views of male leadership are based on his culture's historical understanding of the term "gender" and the set of defined roles that are allocated to each gender. Definitions for gender can vary, but is it commonly thought of as a social and cultural construction that attempts to label individuals as male or female. Generally, gender systems play a large role in the regulation of human lives and link to other social structures and identity sources. How gender

specifically operates within a culture varies based on the norms of that culture and the historical time period.

Current critical studies of gender have signified the importance of distinguishing between sex, a biological category, and gender, a social construction; however, this was not always the case. The meaning of the English word *gender* continues to evolve, but it was originally derived from both Latin and Greek sources that characterized three human activities: first, classifying people into separate groups and assigning specific characteristics to each of these groups; second, using language to create and maintain sexual classifications to characterize these groups; and third, practicing a sexuality with aims of reproduction to continue future generations (Stimpson and Herdt 3). In the 1950s and 1960s, John Money, a U.S. researcher, adapted the term gender to the medical and psychological field by assigning gender roles to infants based on interpretations of their external genitalia. Money's work was viewed as controversial as he influenced the meaning of gender to include the organization and definition of sexual difference. This organization consisted of the symbols of femininity and masculinity and how these symbols were framed as inseparable, normative concepts. Money claimed the interactions of these symbols and concepts helped to shape individuals' subjective gender identities, which in turn shaped how they responded to the world (Stimpson and Herdt 4).

Stimpson and Herdt provide an example of this framework in that the Roman Catholic church permits only men to become ordained priests and prohibits women from doing so. It is impossible for a Catholic woman to become a priest based solely on her gender, which as a result places limitations on the possibilities for her religious life. Whether she chooses to accept these limitations, rebel against them, or find an alternate religious role permitted for women, she can never be an ordained priest (Stimpson and Herdt 4). Pai faces similar limitations in *Whale Rider*,

where she is prohibited from becoming chief for the sole reason that she is female. As the film progresses, Pai moves from a position of acceptance of her status in the tribe to one of rebellion. Unlike Catholic women today, who are still unable to become ordained priests, Pai eventually succeeds in breaking down her culture's long-established gender barrier to fulfill her role as chief.

Gender roles are also typically characterized by a dualistic thinking and stratification system that ranks social statuses unequally. Men are said to represent culture, lightness, and mind, which is then masculinized and placed at one pole, whereas women are said to represent nature, darkness, and body, which is feminized and placed at the opposite pole (Stimpson and Herdt 5). "As a process, gender creates the social differences that define 'woman' and 'man'" (Disch 98). Throughout their lives, individuals construct and maintain gender order by learning what is expected in social interactions and then acting and reacting in expected ways. Individuals produce gender in their encounters by either behaving in ways expected of them based on their gender status or choosing to resist these norms. These gendered expectations are constantly reinforced in daily interactions with family, work, and other organizations and institutions (Disch 98).

Stratification is a system of ranking that places men above women of the same race and class. Looking at the examples of genders as "A" and "Not-A" from an individual's point of view, established gender boundaries indicate to the individual who is like him or her, thus signifying the rest are unlike. From a society's point of view, one gender is singled out and viewed as the dominant norm. In Western societies (and for the Whangara in *Whale Rider*), this norm is man viewed as "A," whereas woman is viewed as "Not-A." In societies such as these, it

is common for men's work and activities to be valued more highly than women's because they are valued more as the superior group (Disch 99).

### *Masculinity as the Norm*

Several prominent theories have emerged on the development of masculinity. One such theory is a Freudian psychoanalytic theory that proposes for boys to become men, they must reject their mothers as well as the feminine within themselves. The end goal for boys is “[...] the achievement of personal masculine identification with their father and sense of secure masculine self, achieved through superego formation and disparagement of women” (Disch 99). A Marxist theory takes a different approach, emphasizing gender inequality as a result of belittling women's abilities and preventing them from learning technological skills, which preserves women as a cheap and exploitable labor resource. Marx claims there are two key factors that help men maintain their separation from women in the workforce: the gendering of jobs and people and the creation of multiple subdivisions in the work process, which created hierarchies “that allow men to advance and keep their distance from women” (Disch 100).

One critical theory of masculine identity is hegemonic masculinity, where the power of male dominance in society is viewed as normal and natural (Miller 116). This dominance is not only based on male-to-women relationships, but also on male-to-male relationships. In this model, one definition of masculinity is regarded as an ideal against which all men in a given society must measure themselves. For example, in America the hegemonic masculine ideal could be described as “[...] a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports” (Kheel 37). Men who fail to live up to this standard could be seen as unworthy or inferior, thus demonstrating that hegemonic masculinity is dominant not only over women but



also men deemed as less than masculine. This construction of masculinity is also based on a hetero-normative ideal which views women as potential sexual objects for men (Kheel 37).

Hegemonic masculinity through the male-to-male relationship can be seen throughout *Whale Rider* in the Whangara community and particularly through Koro's leadership style. Koro believes a connection to the ancestors is essential for any tribal chief, but that only first-born males are able to make this connection. As a result, Koro forms a masculine ideal for his people that only first-born sons can fulfill. Consequently, other males in the community are deemed as unworthy and less than masculine because of their birth order. Even Koro's own youngest son, Rawiri, has been neglected in favor of his oldest son (Pai's father), Porourangi, who no longer even lives in New Zealand. Porourangi has become an artist, and when he comes back to visit Whangara, Koro shuns him for abandoning his people and pursuing such a "less than" masculine endeavor.

Toby Miller examines the concept of hegemonic masculinity and describes certain physical and behavioral characteristics that are stereotypically associated with masculinity, such as "[...] practicality, violence, desire, competitiveness, a bluff approach to feelings, and a teleological orientation to attaining goals" (Miller 115). Miller points out the sexism involved in this model as well, including some more obvious examples such as rape, domestic violence, and obstacles to female occupational advancement. In addition, some less obvious examples of domination come into play, such as women's exclusion from certain social environments and sports teams and biased media interest (117). Most theorists are in agreement that the critical issue for discussing men and masculinity is power and "[...] that everywhere one *turns*, men seem to be *in* power, but everywhere one *listens*, they seem to feel *powerless*" (Miller 118).

Koro's masculine ideal for his people disregards females by automatically excluding them from the scope of leadership and other positions of power within the community. At the beginning of the film, it is clear that his strict views on separate gender roles have influenced Pai. When Pai walks into the house and sees her grandmother and her friends playing cards and smoking, she states, "Maori women have got to stop smoking. We've got to protect our child bearing properties" (*Whale Rider*). This line of thinking is in stark contrast to her views later in the film, where she repeatedly defies the gender limitations set forth by her grandfather.

Koro also tries to instill his sexist beliefs in the village boys through their training at the all-boys school. Pai is upset to be excluded from the school, but on the first day she performs part of the opening ceremony since females were allowed to do so. Afterwards, she sits in the front row alongside the other boy students. Koro refuses to proceed while she sits with them as though they were equals. Instead Koro states, "You're a girl. Go to the back" (*Whale Rider*). When Pai defies Koro she is exiled from the school, although that doesn't stop her from repeatedly showing up in an attempt to learn the lessons in hiding. One of her male classmates catches her and, in an effort at kindness, suggests she could be allowed to sit in the back as long as she was quiet. This wasn't a satisfactory solution for Pai, who wished to be treated as an equal to the boys in school.

### *Overcoming Limitations*

Leading up to the film's conclusion, both Pai and Koro feel frustrated and helpless. Koro feels powerless that his attempt to find a new leader failed, and he thinks the ancestors can no longer hear him. Pai is hurt by her grandfather's treatment toward her, but deep down she still loves and respects him and wishes for a path for them to move forward together. She also knows how upset Koro is that the ancestors are not responding to his calls, so Pai tries to reach out

instead. Throughout the film, there are several instances where Pai is seen near the ocean and the image cuts to whales swimming below, signaling a connection between Pai and the whales, and thus a connection between Pai and her ancestors.

On the night of Pai's speech contest at school, Pai delivers an emotional performance in honor of Koro and the love she has for him. Pai says she knows she is not the leader her grandfather was expecting, but she hopes that knowledge can be shared with everyone, instead of just a select few, so all of her people can be strong together. Koro misses Pai's speech because the pull of the ancestors leads him to the shore instead, where he finds dozens of beached whales. That night and the following morning, the whole community comes together to try to save the whales, for they believe Paikea heard their calls and sent the whales to help them. As the day progresses they are still no closer to helping the whales get back in the ocean, and everyone becomes fearful that the whales will die. Koro takes his frustration out on Pai, whom he blames for the dying whales because she had disobeyed him as well as Paikea for trying to learn the ancient ways.

One whale was especially large and stood out from the others, and Pai knew this particular whale was the one Paikea had ridden many years ago. If she could help this whale get back in the ocean, the others would follow its lead. She greeted the whale and climbed on its back, and the whale immediately began swimming out to sea. Her entire village looked on in awe as she rode on the whale's back, just as Paikea had done before her. As they stood watching Pai from shore, Nanny Flowers gives Koro the whale tooth necklace Pai had retrieved from the ocean floor. In this moment Koro finally understands how wrong and small minded he had been, and he knows Pai is the chosen one to lead their people. Pai rides the whale further and further out to sea, and her people start to fear she is in danger; however, the ancestors protect her, and

she wakes up safely in the hospital with Koro by her side. Koro asks forgiveness from Pai and the ancestors for his misguided thinking, and he gives Pai his whale tooth necklace as a symbol of her rightful leadership.

Pai's induction as chief has reinvigorated her people's culture and brought the entire community together. The final scene of the film depicts the members of the village on the shore dressed in traditional tribal attire performing ritual chants and dances together. Pai's father, Porourangi, had also returned from abroad to rejoin his family and community. Porourangi's war canoe (or *waka taua*) that had remained unfinished since his departure, is now fully carved and decorated. War canoes are very ritualistic as they signify the body of an ancestor, and consequently women are typically never allowed on board (Wone Veys 95). As the canoe leaves shore carrying dozens of warriors, Pai sits in the middle wearing the whale tooth necklace and leading the war chant, with Koro's arm around her shoulder. As the canoe heads out to sea and the film comes to a close, Pai narrates, "My name is Paikea Apirana and I come from a long line of chiefs, stretching all the way back to the Whale Rider. I am not a prophet, but I know that our people will keep going forward, all together, with all of our strength" (*Whale Rider*).

### *Conclusion*

Judith Butler refers to the concept of a stable gender identity as an illusion, instead emphasizing the performative nature of gender as an ongoing process that is open to disruption, variation, and transformation (Glover and Kaplan 181). Thinking of gender in fixed terms can lead to inaccurate stereotypes and limitations based on a social and cultural construction of perceived gender norms. Additionally, even in countries that encourage gender equality, the male gender and masculine qualities can be viewed as more valuable than perceived feminine characteristics. Many societal roles are still gendered, claiming women are responsible for most

of the domestic labor and child bearing responsibilities (sometimes while working full time) while being paid less than men for the same work. Additionally, men frequently hold the majority of positions of authority and leadership in government, military, and law (Disch 100).

In *Whale Rider*, Pai rejects the gender expectations imposed on her as a female and denies the gendered stereotypes established in her culture. Instead, she upsets the norm as she constructs her own identity and place in society as a female leader. Pai shifts the balance in power from a hegemonic masculine ideal to one of shared power and inclusivity among all people, regardless of gender. Pai's actions honor Gloria Anzaldúa's call for a bridge to break down gender lines and embrace people's otherness, differing beliefs, and perspectives. "A bridge [...] is not just about one set of people crossing to the other side; it's also about those on the other side crossing to this side" (Anzaldúa 246). Pai successfully creates this bridge for all of her people to come together, share in their combined knowledge and power, and move forward to a hopeful, inclusive future. She thereby also proves that cultures are not stable, but subject to constant change.

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