A haunted and homesick nation

Keri Hulme’s *The Bone People* as Postcolonial Gothic

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which Keri Hulme, in her novel *The Bone People*, depicts New Zealand as a nation haunted by its repressed colonial past, causing it to suffer from homesickness. This unhomeliness is shown in the architecture of society as well as in the body of the individual, particularly in that of the indigene. The novel illustrates how the effects of colonial abuse prevails, inhibiting the Maori population of New Zealand to feel at home in the nation. My argument is that by utilising the mode of the Gothic uncanny, Hulme reveals how the local and national home have become unhomely, shedding light on the brutal violence hidden within familiar constructions, and furthermore, delineates how to decolonise these structures in order to make the nation homely; thus *The Bone People* may be read as a Postcolonial Gothic narrative.
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Introduction

_The Bone People_ by Keri Hulme is a novel that has garnered much critical attention since its publication in 1984, particularly within postcolonial and world literature studies. However, the road to its publication was not an easy one, as Hulme was rejected by several publishers, one of them stating that, “[u]ndoubtedly Miss Hulme can write but unfortunately we don't understand what she is writing about.”¹ It was, presumably, Hulme’s unusual prose and strange subject matter that was the objection among sundry publishers. Finally, the small feminist publishing house Spiral Collective took Hulme on, and _The Bone People_ went on to win the prestigious Booker prize a year later, after having received both the New Zealand Book Award for Fiction and the Pegasus Award for Maori Literature. These prizes are a testament to the novel’s success and its popularity, both in New Zealand and worldwide. It has been suggested that its fame in New Zealand stems from _The Bone People_’s representation of a unified New Zealand, and its mitigating effect on what seems to be a fraught society, with its history of violent and structural oppression and exploitation of the indigenous Maori population before and after the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, which saw New Zealand as an official colony of the British Crown.²

The way _The Bone People_ was heralded as The New Zealand Novel in the 1980s was telling in that it showed the apparent lack of Kiwi fiction able to satisfactorily capture and represent New Zealand life. For a young country like New Zealand, with its fragile and insecure identity,³ it is perhaps not so strange that New Zealanders would latch on to Hulme’s novel, despite its rather troubling content. One of the novel’s most alluring aspects, perhaps, is how it appears to reconcile and unite Pakeha (white European culture) and Maori culture, even when this unification is presented as something quite brutal and not at all harmonious. As Erin Mercer points out, “[t]he ecstatic reception of Keri Hulme's 1984 Booker Prize winning novel _the bone people_ is inextricably linked to its interpretation as a fundamentally New Zealand novel capable of creating a new national identity in bicultural terms.”⁴ Presumably, this wish for a new national identity made it easier for readers to look past all the violence in the novel, allowing critics to interpret it as

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² Claudia Orange, _The Treaty of Waitangi_. (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books Ltd., 1997, c1987), 85
³ Ian Conrich, “New Zealand Gothic,” in _A New Companion to the Gothic_, ed. David Punter (Blackwell Publishing Ltd.: 2012), 397
⁴ Erin Mercer. “’Frae ghosties an ghoulies deliver us’: Keri Hulme's _the bone people_ and the Bicultural Gothic,” in _Journal of New Zealand Literature_. (JNZL, No. 27: 2009), 111
a “novel of healing.” Even though it may be interpreted as such—this paper also argues for the restorative impulses of the novel—the way in which the violence was addressed or, indeed, not addressed is troubling. However, the optimistic conclusion of the novel has been met with some resistance; Antje M. Rauwerda, for example, is of the opinion that the reconciliation depicted “is a Maori one that includes Pakeha only to a limited extent, and only on its own terms. The dawn is a metaphor for a new Maori day, not a Maori/Pakeha day.” Rauwerda finds that Hulme’s vision of the New Zealand future must come at the expense of the Pakeha, hence the vicious abuse of the Pakeha child Simon, who she reads allegorically. Rauwerda offers a compelling interpretation of The Bone People with many valuable insights, however I disagree with her allegorical reading, as I find it to be reductionist. Reading The Bone People strictly as an allegory is doing the narrative a grave injustice, as this strategy inevitably fails to consider its many nuances.

The Bone People’s fame also comes from the controversy it engendered in the wake of its release, with people questioning Hulme’s Maoriness, and therefore her license to write about Maori experience. The most prominent voice in this debate is perhaps the New Zealand author and critic C.K. Stead, who has strong reservations about Hulme speaking for and about a minority group that he does not consider her to be part of. The debate raises interesting questions about how indigenous one has to be in order to write on indigenous matters. Many Maori authors have, however, expressed their support for Hulme. The poet Trixie Te Arama Menzies, in opposition to Stead, is of the opinion that the work of Hulme, and authors like her, positioned on the fringe, as it were, has a special ability to heal:

“These are the messengers of the intermediary zones, the grey areas where the solutions to our spiritual problems are going to be found, if they are to be found at all. Since the time the New Zealand education system outlawed the speaking of Māori in its schools and stifled the natural upwelling expression of its indigenous people, Māori or part-Māori writers who express themselves mostly in English have a special claim to be heard; in making themselves whole again through their work they heal us all.”

7 Margery Fee, “Why C.K. Stead didn't like Keri Hulme's the bone people: Who can write as Other?” Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada, 1 (1989), 11
Similarly, Margery Fee criticises Stead for asserting that, since Hulme has not been brought up speaking Maori, her claim to a Maori identity is invalid, as this is in fact the case for many indigenous people, not limited to New Zealand, who have lost the connection to their aboriginal culture and language as a result of a colonial system with this very goal in mind. Fee writes, “[f]or a member of a majority culture to try to deprive anyone of an indigenous identity just because of the success of this sort of program of cultural obliteration is ironic at best.”

Irihapeti Ramsden, one of the founding members of the Spiral Collective, in the essay “Borders and Frontiers,” writes about Maori identity and what it means to be Maori in the 21st century:

“What, people ask, is a Māori? The question, of course, is fundamentally wrong. Who is Māori is the question. […] If I, daughter of a Pākehā man and a Māori woman, were relieved of half of my blood, I would be a dead human being. My Māoriness is my choice. My identity is my choice. As I have crossed some borders and been forced across others, I have made a series of decisions about how I shall be to myself and to the world about me. I have chosen Māori, although my obviously Polynesian appearance would have left me little choice. […] It seems to me that Māoritanga, like all other realities, is personal. […] Who is to say what Māori really is? And who is to say exactly what Māoritanga should be? Can every Māori pluck a tītī [seabird]? […] I believe that Māoritanga is located within every Māori regardless of appearance or the story which has brought them to this part of their life and this expression of Māoriness."

Hulme seems to share Ramsden’s beliefs, as many of these thoughts and questions are echoed in The Bone People, explored in the three main characters Kerewin, Joe, and Simon; the novel is highly invested in the exploration of different ways and possibilities of being Maori in a postcolonial society, and the struggles that the indigene has to undergo. Having to defend or prove one’s indigenous identity appears to be a common experience for the part indigenous person, and although Hulme strongly identifies as Maori, she is still met with scepticism from many. It is not difficult to understand how this may give rise to a fundamental insecurity about one’s indigenous identity, an insecurity that may be seen reflected in the character of Kerewin Holmes, who is “an eighth Maori,” but “feel[s] all Maori.” Kerewin struggles because she cannot reconcile her Maori identity with her Pakeha identity, and vice versa. Joe, who is also part indigenous, feels alienated from his Maori heritage, as he has gotten accustomed to a Pakeha way of life. And finally there is Simon, the shipwrecked Pakeha child, who seemingly belongs nowhere.

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9 Fee, “Why C.K. Stead didn’t like Keri Hulme’s the bone people: Who can write as Other?”
11 Keri Hulme, The Bone People (Picador, 2011), 76
A brief summary

*The Bone People* revolves around three characters: Kerewin Holmes, the eccentric artist who has locked herself away in a tower, Joe Gillayley, the disillusioned Maori labourer struggling to raise his foster child Simon, a white shipwrecked boy who is mute. The lone Kerewin is roped into the lives of Joe and Simon when one stormy day she discovers Simon in her Tower. Simon, who suffers from several traumas, is also being abused by his foster father, and often runs away from home.

Not much is known about Simon’s past, and nor is much revealed over the course of the novel, as Simon has repressed his memories. However, Hulme’s short story ”A Drift In Dream,” written before *The Bone People*, tells of the meeting of Simon’s parents and Simon’s birth. Simon’s biological father is abusive, too—the violence starts after Simon’s mother dies. One assumes Simon’s muteness to be a result of trauma, but the short story reveals that Simon, at the age of two, before his mother’s death and the subsequent abuse, had yet to speak a word. Simon’s father is a heroin addict involved in drug trade, carrying heroin across the ocean, and it is on one of these voyages that the fated shipwreck occurs, leaving Simon stranded on a beach in New Zealand where Joe is the one to rescue him.

After finding Simon in her Tower, he and Kerewin and Joe slowly grow closer, though not without complications. Kerewin learns of the terrible beatings Joe doles out to Simon and although she is appalled, she does not let anybody know. After a physical fight with Joe, which Kerewin wins, the two of them agree that if Simon misbehaves, Joe will ask Kerewin for permission before he disciplines him. Which Joe does, at a later date, after Simon has thoroughly upset Kerewin, who then, out of anger and spite gives Joe explicit permission to thrash the child, with horrendous consequences. This time the beating is so severe that Simon is hospitalised. He partially loses his hearing and his eyesight, and for some time it is uncertain whether or not he will survive. The three of them are thus separated—Joe is sent to prison, and Kerewin, devastated by what has happened to Simon, demolishes her Tower and leaves Taiaroa.

After a year, Joe’s sentence is up and he is released from jail. However, he does not know where to go. After wandering through the wilderness, he ends up on a beach where he, badly injured, meets a kaumatua, a Maori elder, who treats him and gives him shelter. The kaumatua is dying, and he tells Joe that he has been waiting for him all his life, that Joe is destined to keep watch over the land after him. The kaumatua guards a sacred stone, brought to Aotearoa by the Old people on the first canoes, which contains a god, or *mauri* (life essence). The elder says that the stone is, “the heart of this country. The heart of this
Joe agrees to look after it and stays there for some time after the kaumatua has died, until an earthquake buries the pool in which the stone lies. However, Joe retrieves the stone and decides to leave the land, taking it with him, and heads home in hope of seeing Kerewin again.

Simon wakes up in the hospital, severely injured, but recovering. His eyesight returns but he has only residual hearing left in one ear. Joe has lost custody over Simon, and his relatives Piri and Marama, who want to take him in, are not considered suitable to care for the child. Simon then becomes a ward of the state and is sent to an orphanage. Simon, disturbed and miserable, constantly misbehaves and attempts to run away several times, but is always brought back. When they grow tired of him, he is sent to a church organisation, where they are equally unsuccessful in giving him a good home. Simon runs away again, and this time he is able to reach his old home, only to find it inhabited by strangers, and Joe is nowhere to be found. His next destination is the Tower, hoping to find Kerewin and Joe there, but all he finds is a ruin and a tricephalos (three-headed figure) of clay that Kerewin has made of the three of them.

Kerewin has fallen seriously ill, from what might seem to be a stomach ulcer. She refuses treatment and goes to her family’s bach where she prepares to die. But when Kerewin seems to be at her worst, a strange figure appears. This figure, real or imagined, treats her and nurses her back to good health. The stomach ulcer is gone, and Kerewin leaves the bach with newfound strength. She rebuilds a marae, a Maori hall, with the help of others. After this, she feels inclined to return home as well. She builds a new home, not a tower this time, but a round house modelled after a shell that “holds them all in its spiralling embrace.” The story concludes with a gathering of people in this new home, wherein Kerewin is reunited with her family—old and new. Joe and Simon are there, and so are a great many others. Where in the beginning of the novel there is separation and loneliness, in the end there is community, belonging, and family.

**The postcolonial, the Gothic, and the Maori**

*The Bone People* is a novel that is hard to define, as it is ambiguous at its core. Indeed, it revels in ambiguities. Joe is abusive but at the same time he is a genuinely loving father; at times Kerewin, who is patient and kind, shows herself to be unsettlingly malicious. The adoptive child Simon is the most ambiguous of all: he is a saint, he is the coloniser, he is

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12 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 440
13 Ibid., 537
Christ, he is the Maori trickster god Maui, he is New Zealand, all at once. The Bone People’s politics is clearly concerned with disrupting binary thinking and challenging Western ideas; as Eva Rask Knudsen writes, “[o]bviously, The Bone People reflects the postcolonial drive towards undermining the fixed meanings and dichotomies produced by colonial power structures…”

As a postcolonial novel, its project is to decolonise constructions operating in contemporary New Zealand society, and allowing the indigene to reconnect with their cultural heritage. Similarly, Margery Fee points out how Hulme, “[l]ays] out the openings to some of the most powerful fantasies of Western culture, but their conclusions are either dropped, reshaped, or awkwardly rushed, in an attempt […] to undermine their power. […] Hulme hooks us with our favourite fantasies, and then she shows us how sterile, destructive or unnecessary they really are.”

Hulme’s motivation is to reconstruct the structures that govern postcolonial New Zealand society, and in doing so she draws on both Maori and Pakeha tradition, from the latter particularly Gothic.

The Gothic is a genre that has from its onset been interested in the exploration of the horrific, of the taboo, of that which is unwanted in a healthy individual and a healthy society. Robert B. Heilman writes, “[i]n the novel it was the function of Gothic to open horizons beyond social patterns, rational decisions, and institutionally approved emotions; in a word, to enlarge the sense of reality and its impact on the human being.” The Gothic’s treatment of uncanny characters, settings, and subject matters creates a space that may challenge our sense of reality; what it investigates does not necessarily belong to a sequestered supernatural realm. Instead, by employing the mode of the uncanny, the Gothic sheds light on that which is unhomely within familiar constructions. Haunted by New Zealand’s violent past, the characters of The Bone People are suffering from a form of homesickness, which is physically, mentally, and spiritually damaging to the individual, especially to the indigene. However, despite the country’s horrific history and continuing effects thereof, The Bone People expresses Hulme’s hopes for a rebuilding of New

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15 Notably, Knudsen highlights something that is imperative in the reading of this novel, namely the fact that ambiguity and the practice of deconstruction of fixed meanings do not merely belong to postcolonial or postmodern traditions; these practices are at work in Maori hermeneutics, too. Knudsen goes on to give a very interesting reading of the novel, where instead of interpreting its strategies as purely postcolonial in nature, and by extension related to European and Western traditions, she relates the novel’s strategies more closely to Maori hermeneutics and religion, (Knudsen, 4)
16 Fee, “Why C.K. Stead didn’t like Keri Hulme’s the bone people: Who can write as Other?” 20–21
17 Robert B. Heilman, “Charlotte Bronte’s ’New’ Gothic,” in *From Jane Austen To Joseph Conrad* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), 131
Zealand society. Her vision for the New Zealand future is one of inclusiveness; it encourages and accepts new ways of being, accepting the monsters emerging from the dark.

Alison Rudd argues that in a postcolonial context, the Gothic may help postcolonial writers to:

“articulate the unspeakable history of colonialism and to uncover the obfuscation, silences and omissions inscribed by colonial discourses. The Gothic as a mode of writing can provide one such strategy, furnishing these writers with a means, in narrative and idiom, to expose and subvert past and continuing regimes of power and exploitation, and to reinscribe histories that have been both violent and repressed.”18

My argument is that The Bone People utilises the Gothic as a strategy to show the ways in which New Zealand’s colonial past is still haunting the nation; particularly by employing the mode of the uncanny, Hulme illustrates how the nation has become unhomely, causing its citizens to suffer from a homesickness. Therefore, my wish is to investigate the interplay between the novel’s postcolonial politics and the Gothic elements that it exhibits, while at the same time taking care to recognise the particular indigenous heritage that Hulme is drawing from. For example, the novel’s idiosyncratic way of moving back and forth between tender love and shocking violence can be read as an instance of what E.L. McCallum calls the Gothic pendulum19 or it can be seen as more closely related to symbol of the spiral in Maori tradition, of destruction and creation being tied together. Ian Conrich outlines the dangers of considering Maori fiction as Gothic, how “[t]he Gothic is a term that does not sit comfortably with Maori spiritualism and beliefs,” and would himself not describe The Bone People as “Maori Gothic,”20 and nor would I. There are many elements in the novel that may appear to a Western reader as Gothic, when in fact it may be intended to reflect a specific Maori concept. In order to avoid such, indeed, colonialist interpretations, a thorough and conscientious reading is warranted. The Bone People exhibits postcolonial, Gothic, and Maori literary and oral traits, and there is a constant interplay between these traditions. This assures that the novel is rich in meanings, but it also demands that the reader must navigate carefully and conscientiously between these.

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18 Alison Rudd, Postcolonial Gothic Fictions from the Caribbean, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), 1–2
19 E.L. McCallum, “The ’queer limits’ in the modern Gothic,” in A New Companion to the Gothic, ed. David Punter (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2012), 77
20 Conrich, “New Zealand Gothic,” 405
1 Theoretical framework

1.1 The uncanny

Central to the analysis of this novel will be the concept of the uncanny, as outlined by Freud in his renowned essay from 1919, “The Uncanny.” The notion of the uncanny has been vastly influential in the study of literature, and particularly within the Gothic tradition. As Freud argues in “The Uncanny,” the meaning of the word “heimlich” is of an ambiguous nature. To illustrate his point, he cites the dictionary entry on “heimlich” in Daniel Sanders’s Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache from 1860:

“Heimlich, adj., subst. Heimlichkeit (pl. Heimlichkeiten): I. Also heimlich, heimelig, belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly, etc.
   (a) (Obsolete) belonging to the house or the family, or regarded as so belonging […] the members of the household […]
   (b) Of animals: tame, companionable to man. As opposed to wild […]
   (c) Intimate, friendlily comfortable; the enjoyment of quiet content, etc., arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house.”

It gets a little more complicated, however, when the second meaning of the word is presented:

“II. Concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, withheld from others. To do something heimlich, i.e. behind someone’s back; to steal away heimlich; heimlich meetings and appointments; to look on with heimlich pleasure at someone’s discomfiture […]”

Whereas the first meaning of heimlich appears to be pleasant, its second meaning is revealed to be of a slightly ominous nature. Freud explains:

“In general we are reminded that the word heimlich is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory are yet very different: on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight.”

The word heimlich carries double meaning. Having put forward a long list of examples and usages of the word heimlich, Freud makes the case that, “among its different shades of meaning the word heimlich exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, unheimlich.”

This argument is clearly supported by the dictionary entry cited. Thus, what is described as heimlich may also be unheimlich at the same time. Freud continues, “[t]hus heimlich is a

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22 Ibid., 223
23 Ibid., 224
24 Ibid.
word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*.” According to Freud, there is an intimate relationship between that which is homely and that which is unhomely. That does not mean, however, that everything familiar ultimately is unhomely, but rather that the familiar always carries within itself the potential to become unfamiliar. This intimate, and perhaps inseparable, relationship between the homely and the unhomely is seen clearly reflected in *The Bone People,* and this understanding of the term will therefore be quite central to the discussion of the text.

It is of interest to look at Freud’s concept of ‘the double’ and how it manifests itself as an uncanny figure in literature. Discussing the work of Otto Rank, Freud writes, “[f]or the ‘double’ was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an ‘energetic denial of the power of death’, as Rank says; and probably the ‘immortal’ soul was the first ‘double’ of the body.” According to Freud, this belief in the soul as a double belongs to “the mind of the child and of primitive man,” which both stem from what Freud calls the animistic stage. However, when one progresses from the animistic stage into the scientific stage, and into the reality principle on an individual level, the understanding of the double changes. Since man no longer possesses a “primitive” mind, one is less likely to believe in this immortal soul. “From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death.” The idea of the double belongs to an early stage which modern man has long since surpassed, and to encounter the double in the present, in which its meaning has changed drastically, results in a feeling of uncanniness. To experience a doubled self, then, is to experience an omen of death.

The double, or the fractured self, is a prevalent theme in *The Bone People.* The doubled self is detrimental, and possibly fatal; it is a ghostly second self, an “uncanny harbinger of death.” However, the instances of fractured identities depicted, go beyond the scope of psychoanalysis. It is useful to turn to postcolonial theory, such as the concept of cultural schizophrenia, or ’double binds of assimilation,’ as coined by Abdul JanMohamed. Eva Rask Knudsen writes that:

“Kerewin’s ailment is intrinsic to a cultural schizophrenia caused by colonialism which Abdul JanMohamed, inspired by Frantz Fanon, has termed the ‘double binds of assimilation.’ Kerewin, the

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25 Freud, “The Uncanny,” 226
26 Ibid., 235
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
As a part indigenous person, Kerewin is caught between two cultural identities. She is caught in a bind. JanMohamed writes:

“The superiority complex of the European creates a corresponding sense of in-feriority in the native, who attempts to overcome this feeling by espousing Western values and social customs only to discover in the end that although the colonial sys-tem offers the European as a model for emulation it also effectively blocks the means to education, assimilation, and equality. […] If he chooses conservatively and remains loyal to his indigenous culture, then he opts to stay in a calcified society whose developmental momentum has been checked by colonization. If, however, the colonized person chooses assimilation, then he is trapped in a form of historical catalepsy because colonial education sev-ers him from his own past and replaces it with the study of the colonizer.”

There does not appear to be a good choice for the indigene to make. According to JanMohamed, no matter what the indigene chooses, they will be trapped in a stagnant state, stuck in a double bind. Knudsen makes the argument that if Kerewin opts to assimilate, then “her original culture is reduced to artefact.” This may be seen reflected in Kerewin’s Tower, which to Knudsen resembles “a Māori heritage museum.” Kerewin has a definite obsession with things, particularly Maori artefacts, and treats them as treasures. Since Kerewin has opted to assimilate, her connection to her Maori heritage and identity has been sev-ered. Ultimately, her self is doubled; there is her Maori identity and her Pakeha identity.

Rosemary Jackson’s discussion of Freud’s essay in her Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion makes the distinction between the heimlich and the unheimlich clearer. She considers the unheimlich a tool:

“Das Heimlich also means that which is concealed from others: all that is hidden, secreted, obscured. Its negation, das Unheimlich, then functions to dis-cover, reveal, expose areas normally kept out of sight […] It uncovers what is hidden and, by doing so, effects a disturbing transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar.”

For Jackson, the function of the uncanny is to reveal that which the homely has concealed. It is a tool that can be used to unearth uncomfortable truths about the reality perceived, to shed light on, in Schelling’s words, “everything that ought to have remained… hidden and

32 Knudsen, The Circle and the Spiral: A Study of Australian Aboriginal & New Zealand Māori Literature, 149
33 Rosemary Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion. (Methuen, 1981/1984), 65
secret.” The unheimlich is something that is familiar, but which, for some reason, has been ignored. It may be something concrete, such as a particular social behaviour deemed degenerate, or something of a more abstract character, something that is only sensed, not articulated, “for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.” Jackson writes:

“Freud is well aware of the countercultural effects of a literature of the uncanny, and its transgressive function in bringing to light things which should remain obscure. The uncanny expresses drives which have to be repressed for the sake of cultural continuity. Freud regards anything uncanny, or anything provoking dread, as being subject to cultural taboo.”

A literature of the uncanny expresses all that is undesirable in a society. The mode of the uncanny, then, has the power to be subversive because it can articulate that which has been left unsaid. Interestingly, this leads one to think of Foucauldian discourse. Behaviour that falls outside of the dominant discourse is considered undesirable—unheimlich. The dominant discourse wants to regulate and ultimately silence certain behaviours; they still exist, albeit repressed, and on the periphery. To utilise the mode of the uncanny is to shed light on that which appears familiar and safe, interrogating it to reveal the skeletons it hides within its closets.

Jackson cites Hélène Cixous’ criticism of Freud’s analysis of Hoffman’s Sandman, and agrees with Cixous’ views about the potential of the uncanny, particularly the way in which Cixous contributes to widen the understanding of the uncanny in a more practical and political manner. Cixous understands the uncanny as relational:

“The uncanny exists only in relation to the familiar and the normal. It is tangential, to one side. It ‘only presents itself initially, on the edge of something else.’ Defined by its relationality, it subverts any re-presentation of a unified reality. It is a relational signifier … for the uncanny is in effect composite, it infiltrates itself in between things, in the interstices, it asserts a gap where one would like to be assured of unity.”

Again, the existence of the uncanny is utterly dependent on that which is homely; much like how shadow is dependent on light it cannot exist without it. Furthermore, the uncanny is tangential; it is that which exists on the periphery, and in between the familiar. This tangential uncanny is seen exhibited in The Bone People in the way that homely and unhomely events are sometimes juxtaposed. It also shows itself in the gaps of the

34 Freud, “The Uncanny,” 224
35 Ibid., 241
36 Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, 70
37 Ibid., 68
narrative, particularly the gaps in time, which creates doubt in the reader as to the specific temporality of the novel, as well as directing one’s attention to the existence of something that is unspeakable. Acknowledging these gaps, in which the uncanny resides, means to acknowledge the lack of unity in reality, its constructedness, and to doubt the very fabric that has been woven. This corresponds with Hulme’s understanding of narrative, namely her “‘theory of words as a net,’ which refers to her conviction that ‘sometimes it’s the spaces between that convey the full impact of emotions and things like that.”

Jackson continues:

“Un-doing those unifying structures and significations upon which social order depends, fantasy functions to subvert and undermine cultural stability. It proposes what Cixous calls ‘a subtle invitation to transgression’ by exposing the relative and arbitrary nature of those ‘responses [which men make] to death: ideological institutions, religion, politics’. As a literature of absences, fantasy throws back on to the dominant culture a constant reminder of something ‘other’, thereby ‘indicating the vanity of notions of limit and discrimination… making that vanity its subject’. It is opposed to institutional order.”

The way gender, for example, is performed in The Bone People is often at odds with the directives given by dominant discourse, making those who fail to perform their gender correctly into uncanny beings because they stand opposed to the familiar. This is how the uncanny can be subversive; it may provide us with Other ways of being—Other ways of being that has hitherto been feared or perhaps concealed.

What Cixous and Jackson say about the uncanny belonging to the tangential corresponds with much critical writing on the significance of the setting in Gothic narratives. It is argued that the subtext can be more revealing than the text itself, meaning suggestions and silences—that which is merely hinted at or that which is left unsaid. Bradford Morrow and Patrick McGrath observe that, “Gothic fiction… was known by the props and settings employed, by its furniture.” And E.L. McCallum expounds on this, noting how the Gothic:

“[…] plays upon how suggestion and atmosphere, innuendo and setting, work together to unsettle and decenter the characters and plot events that would normally be the focus of the narrative. In other words, perversely, the context or setting of the characters’ actions overshadows them in the Gothic, and this overshadowing produces another way to threaten a self’s integrity, a formal one where the secondary features of narrative overtake the conventionally primary ones.”

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38 Knudsen, The Circle and the Spiral: A Study of Australian Aboriginal & New Zealand Māori Literature, 168
39 Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, 69–70
41 McCallum, “The ‘queer limits’ in the modern gothic,” 75–76
There is much to be learned from the setting in a traditional Gothic narrative. *The Bone People* is by no means a traditional Gothic narrative as such, but it certainly owes a great deal to that tradition. I would not say that the setting, or any other secondary feature for that matter, centre the characters or the plot events, although the postcolonial context of the novel is a looming presence that is undoubtedly responsible for the characters’ severe mental and physical suffering. A thorough investigation of the novel’s “furniture” and that which belongs to the “periphery,” as it were, will be a fruitful endeavour. The architecture, for example, in *The Bone People* is particularly interesting in relation to the homely/unhomely, warranting a thorough analysis of the homes in the novel.

### 1.2 The postcolonial Gothic

“Gothic speaks of phantoms,” writes David Punter in the introduction to *A New Companion to the Gothic*. It speaks of that which haunts. It speaks of that which has passed but refused to rest. It speaks of the past, the past that has been either forgotten or repressed, but which inevitably returns in an uncanny fashion, demanding to be recognised. Punter elaborates:

> “Gothic has to do with the uncanny: the uncanny has now come to form one of the major sites on which reinvestigations of the mind, from both the psychoanalytic and also the neuropsychological points of view, can take place. And Gothic speaks, incessantly, of bodily harm and the wound: the wound signifies trauma, and recent years have seen a veritable explosion in studies of trauma at individual, communal and global levels, an orientation which, we can only suppose in the light of recent conflicts and their terrible human consequences, will only become more urgent.”

As Punter suggests, the Gothic is particularly well suited for communicating the experience of the horrible, and thus will ever always be relevant. More than anything, the Gothic speaks of the wound—individual and communal wounds. Therefore it is perhaps not so strange that many postcolonial texts turn to the Gothic and its uncanny mode in order to express the traumas of the past, to shed light on a history that has been lost, suppressed, or ignored. Conrich maintains that despite the images of a pastoral paradise that New Zealand projects to the world, there is a powerful presence of the Gothic in its culture, “New Zealand fiction, its literature and film, has repeatedly portrayed spaces of isolation, loss, and despair, of a rugged, wild, and treacherous land that can assail and

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43 Ibid., 2–3
The nation’s fiction reveals that beneath this supposed pastoral something dark is lurking. Conrich attributes this prevalence of Gothic to the insecure identity of a young country like New Zealand. In a similar vein, Alison Rudd finds that “[t]he Gothic abjected children, in both Maori and Pakeha writing contribute to expressions of the anxieties of an emergent, but still reticent, New Zealand identity.” The character of Simon, with his many traumas, is a clear image of this emergent identity: he is vulnerable and represents many challenges to be overcome. However, despite his extensive damage, he perseveres. Eventually he is welcomed and accepted by his family as they learn to care for him.

Conrich says that for New Zealand “the past is never far away,” and this past is a hauntingly violent one. Utilising the uncanny, *The Bone People* reveals what the nation has repressed, namely the violence perpetrated by the Pakeha against the Maori population, and offers a way of healing, of remaking the individual and the nation. Indeed, William J. Schafer is of the opinion that “the mobilization of the uncanny or unhomely [is] part of the development of cultural identity […]” That:

“In the process of self-definition, cultures need to pass through a stage of hauntedness. This may be a simple analogy for the birth of historical consciousness – one way to gain historical rootedness in other than an abstract, intellectual way is to feel the past is a horror waiting to reinvade the present. If you feel raw, young, unformed, lacking in historical status, a way to gain stature is to acquire suitably ancient ghosts.”

In order to create a stable identity, the postcolonial nation has to go through “a stage of hauntedness” to confront a restless past revisiting the present. The insecure identity of the individual and the nation can thus be cured. *The Bone People* shows this haunting of the past in the form of ghosts, visions of ancestors, the disembodied voices of ancestors, as well as in the temporality of the narrative. A re-making of the nation entails accepting that the ghost of the past is part of the present. Punter writes that:

“the uncanny comes to remind us that there is no obvious beginning, to life or to thought, that we are composed of prior traces, some of them available for conscious memory but most of them sunk in a primal past which is not recoverable by conscious means but which continues to influence, and perhaps even determine, our sense of our place in the world.”

44 Conrich, “New Zealand Gothic,” 393
45 Rudd, *Postcolonial Gothic Fictions from the Caribbean, Canada, Australia and New Zealand*, 168
46 Conrich, “New Zealand Gothic,” 393
47 Ibid., 402
The uncanny maintains that humans are subjects of the past, that “we are composed of prior traces,” some of which can be accessed, but most of them unavailable. Nevertheless, these prior traces live on in the individual, influencing the way in which they operate in the present, which is of particular interest in a postcolonial context. The conception of time in Maori tradition is one of confluence, where past and present exists simultaneously within the body of the indigene. The Maori conception of time will be discussed at length in the fourth chapter, “The structuring spiral.”

1.3 The monster, the other

A major preoccupation of the Gothic is the monster. The Gothic teems with monsters: vampires, devils, demons, ghosts, ghouls, goblins, imps—anything that may lurk in the shadows. The monster is, too, important for feminist and postcolonial texts, only not necessarily configured as “monster” per se, but rather as “other.” The female body, however, is often depicted as monstrous/mysterious in Western culture, as Barbara Creed notes, “all societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject.” We may only look to Freud once more, stating that some of his male patients “feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs,” allowing him to conclude that there is something inherently uncanny about the female gender. Further strengthening the otherness of woman is Freud’s perception of woman as naught but a castrated man—in effect, woman is defined by her lack, by her difference to man, rendering the female, for Anne Williams, “the most powerful and persistent ‘other’ of Western culture.” On the other hand, woman may also be constructed as an angelic being, or what Andrena Telford calls:

“The woman may be dismissed and condemned as a monster, or she may be placed upon a pedestal so high that she cannot be reached, or reach anyone in turn—on this pedestal, she is still a monster, albeit a holy one. Nevertheless, on either side of the spectrum, the

50 Barbara Creed, The Monstrous-Feminine – Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis (Routledge: 1993), 1
51 Freud, “The Uncanny,” 245
52 Anne Williams, Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic (The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 19
53 Andrena Telford, “Maiden, mother, mistress, monster: controlled and uncontrolled female power and the curse of the body in the early Victorian novel – implications for historical stereotyping for women managers,” in Interpreting the Maternal Organisation (Routledge, 2003), 111
woman is inhuman, and so she must take care to operate right in the centre, not gravitating closer to either side, lest she loses her humanity.

Anne Williams states that, “[…] Gothic systematically represents ‘otherness,’ which is, of course, always a relative term. This Gothic ‘other’ is broadly consistent with some of the most ancient categories of otherness in Western culture.”—I.e. the binary oppositions of male/female, good/evil. The Gothic, therefore, in its treatment of otherness, has from its onset been interested in many of the same issues that are imperative in modern feminist and postcolonial texts; Robert Miles argues that:

“The writers of the female Gothic, then, were primarily absorbed in the struggle for sexual and political rights, together with cash, which is where the two issues generally come together, whereas the male Gothic aimed to disrupt the legitimacy of normative gender patterns.”

As many critics would agree, the Gothic appears to have been invested in gender and identity politics since its very beginning, aiming to challenge normative behaviours and ideas; indeed, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik are of the opinion that the instability of bodily identity found in many Gothic texts “anticipate what Judith Butler was much later to theorize as its performative rather than essential nature.” The similarities between the monster and the other become clearer when one takes a closer look at the Gothic tradition, particularly interpretations of the Gothic. For Judith Halberstam, Bram Stoker’s Dracula embodies an “otherness” that encompasses several vulnerable groups:

“… the others Dracula has absorbed and who live on in him, take on the historically specific contours of race, class, gender and sexuality… the vampire Dracula, in other words, is a composite of otherness that manifests itself as the horror essential to dark, foreign and perverse bodies.”

Dracula is the outcast, the foreigner, the degenerate, the monster—the other. He symbolises a threat to the established norms that exist in the current society, being everything that a fixed, orderly society fears. Following this notion, Elizabeth Grosz describes the monster as, “an ambiguous being whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life.” Furthermore, “she refers to [the monster’s] destabilizing of the binary oppositions male/female, human/animal, man/demon and

54 Williams, Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic, 18
The monster inhabits a liminal space, which is not easily defined, and thus not easily controlled. In the case of Frankenstein’s monster, the monster is a brand new being, an unknown life form that has sprung upon the world—their appearance may herald a new age or, if the monster is rejected, the failure of one. The monster, then, can be seen as, and has within the Gothic tradition been seen as, something subversive, a something that has the ability to challenge the status quo.

As Anne Williams says, otherness is always a relative term, and similarly Barbara Creed says in the same vein, “[t]he feminine is not per se a monstrous sign; rather it is constructed as such within a patriarchal discourse.” It is important to emphasise that there is nothing inherently monstrous in being either impaired or being a woman, but that these meanings have been attributed to these bodies within Western patriarchal culture. However, a way of dismantling essentialist, binary thinking is to introduce ambiguity. It has been argued that the Gothic is well equipped for this purpose; the Gothic is interested in revealing, in investigating that which exists on the periphery, that which is perceived as uncanny. The Bone People revels in such ambiguities. Its characters are of a nebulous nature, falling into that liminal space in which they are perceived as monstrous.

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59 Palmer, The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic, 152
60 Barbara Creed, “Horror and the monstrous-feminine: an imaginary abjection,” Screen 27:1 (1986), 70
2 Unhomely homes

“... howee, there really is no place like home, even when it’s grown a couple of sizes too small...”

– Keri Hulme, The Bone People

2.1 Kerewin’s Tower

In the light of the uncanny, the site of the home and the domestic activities that relate to it, are of great interest. In the following, I will analyse scenes from the novel that illustrate the intimacy between the homely and the unhomely, which is so prevalent in the narrative. I would first like to look at these homes, and what exactly makes them unhomely. There are two homes that are of particular interest, namely Kerewin’s Tower and the house of Joe and Simon. The strangest and most readily uncanny home in this narrative is Kerewin’s Tower.

“She had debated, in the frivolity of the beginning, whether to build a hole or a tower; a hole, because she was fond of hobbits, or a tower – well, a tower for many reasons, but chiefly because she liked spiral stairways.

As time went on, and she thought over the pros and cons of each, the idea of a tower became increasingly exciting; a star-gazing platform on top; a quiet library, book-lined, with a ring of swords on the nether wall; a bedroom, mediaeval style, with massive roof-beams and a plain hewn bed; there’d be a living room with a huge fireplace, and rows of spicejars on one wall, and underneath, on the ground level, an entrance hall hung with tapestries, and the beginnings of the spiral stairway, handrails dolphin-headed, saluting the air.

There’d be a cellar, naturally, well stocked with wines, homebrewed and imported vintage; lined with Chinese ginger jars, and wooden boxes of dates. Barrels round the walls, and shadowed chests in corners.

All through the summer sun she laboured, alone with the paid, bemused, professional help. The dust obscured and flayed, thirst parched, and tempers frayed, but the Tower grew. A concrete skeleton, wooden ribs and girdle, skin of stone, grey and slateblue and heavy honey-coloured. Until late one February it stood, gaunt and strange and embattled, built on an almost island in the shallows of an inlet, tall in Taiaroa.

It was the hermitage, her glimmering retreat. No people invited, for what could they know of the secrets that crept and chilled and chuckled in the marrow of her bones? No need of people, because she was self-fulfilling, delighted with the pre-eminence of her art, and the future of her knowing hands.

But the pinnacle became an abyss, and the driving joy ended. At last there was a prison. I am encompassed by a wall, high and hard and stone, with only my brainy nails to tear it down. And I cannot do it.”

The Tower, at first, the way it is imagined by Kerewin, seems rather homely. It appears a safe place, a place for quiet, intellectual and artistic contemplation, with its star-gazing platform and book-lined library. The interior clearly emulates a mediaeval style, with

61 Hulme, The Bone People, 8
swords decorating the walls—symbolising tradition, protection, and warfare—tapestries, and huge fireplaces. Admittedly, the building is odd because it belongs to a foregone time, but apart from this, there is nothing immediately unsettling about it. It does have its quirks, however; later we learn of niches in the walls, in which Kerewin grows toadstools and bonsais, as if the Tower has its own little ecosystems. The cellar is stocked with wine, first and foremost, Chinese ginger, and dates—luxuries, so to speak. There are barrels and shadowed chests in corners, the contents of which are not named; it seems they are only imagined for their aesthetic.

The building is constructed in a European mediaeval style, likely after the Irish round tower. Although the exact purpose of these towers is unknown, they are assumed to have been bell towers, places of refuge, or both.62 The Tower is meant to be a safe place, Kerewin’s “hermitage, her glimmering retreat,” to protect her from assailants from the outside world. However, historians have pointed out that the Irish round towers were not ideal refuges, as its chimney like structure would make it easy for attackers to smoke its occupants out, and there would be no escape other than jumping to one’s death. Much like the Irish round tower, built with the intention to protect, Kerewin’s home turns into a prison, “the pinnacle” from which she can survey the surrounding landscape, becomes “an abyss” into which she may fall. Thus, the Tower is a structure that may or may not lead to Kerewin’s death.

Interestingly, Kerewin and the Tower are introduced simultaneously. It is by the construction of the building that we first become acquainted with her, meaning that this strange house must be somehow essential to Kerewin’s character. Joe also connects Kerewin to the Tower, thinking that, “she seems inhuman… like this Tower is inhuman.”63 The very intention of its design is to isolate, and just like a tower, Kerewin stands alone, tall walls shielding her. The architecture of the building further facilitates the isolation that Kerewin believes she desires; mentally she has shut herself off from others, and building the Tower becomes the final step towards total isolation as she physically walls herself up. The Tower can be said to be a physical manifestation of Kerewin’s inner state of mind; this might explain why the Tower has anthropomorphic characteristics, with its skeleton of concrete, wooden ribs and girdle, and stone skin. Eerily, it is said to “grow,” resembling a living thing. Indeed, in classical architectural theory, a building is seen as a projection of

63 Hulme, The Bone People, 124
the ideal body. Anthony Vidler writes, “[t]he building derived its authority, proportional and compositional, from this body, and, in a complementary way, the building then acted to confirm and establish the body—social and individual—in the world.” However, if we think of the Tower as a body, it is a strange one indeed; it is a torso missing its limbs, thus not an ideal body—it is a disabled body.

In order to understand the severity of Kerewin’s impairment, one needs to understand the meaning of family in Maori tradition; the family (whānau), extended family (hapū), and the tribe (iwi) are central features at the heart of traditional Māori society. “Traditionally, and this still has enormous force in modern Māori life, one defined oneself as a Māori person in terms of tribe. One’s personal kinship network is part of oneself,” writes Tipene O’Regan. Kerewin, however, has cut ties with her family, due to a row that is only ever alluded to, “[w]e wounded each other too deep for the rifts to be healed.” Kerewin being disconnected from her community is one of the main sources of her suffering; without her family she is missing an important part of herself, without it she cannot truly identify as Maori. As Gay Wilentz points out, the Māori understanding of wellbeing is a holistic one, “in which health means a balance between the individual and the community.” She continues, “[t]his kinship-and community based notion of health and wellness is related to the fourth component: whanau (family). An individual who might appear physically healthy could not be truly well if isolated from his or her family and community.” By this definition, Kerewin is far from a healthy individual; she is wounded and disconnected, suffering from homesickness, as it were. She recognises the detachment and questions the possibility of reunion, “[w]e used to have links… but

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66 Clearly, the Tower may be read as a masculine symbol – the phallic imagery is unmistakable – but I do not find this reading particularly interesting, and so will not pursue a reading focused on this interpretation. I will grant that the masculinity of this symbol answers to Kerewin’s gender identity, and that it may be a nod towards her identification with male rather than female forms. But I am also not persuaded by the essentialist idea that genitalia is necessarily connected to what gender one chooses to identify as. It can be tempting to read “a hole” and “a tower” in this way, but taking into consideration that one of the major preoccupations of *The Bone People* is to eschew binary thinking, I do not find this to be a convincing or well-informed interpretation.
69 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 111
70 Wilentz, “Instruments of Change: Healing Cultural Dis-ease in Keri Hulme’s the bone people,” 128
71 Ibid.
Thus, the Tower, projecting Kerewin’s being, is a manifestation and a symbol of her dismemberment. Effectively, she has built herself a home out of her loneliness and separation, and finds herself imprisoned in it. Moreover, the way in which the Tower changes from a “glimmering retreat” into a prison is much like how Kerewin’s body turns against her later in the novel, when she falls seriously ill. Kerewin’s mind and body are thus closely connected to the architecture of this building, and can be seen reflected in it.

Significantly, The Tower, although it intends to isolate, is highly visible. It is an unconventional building that sticks out like a sore thumb in the landscape, consequently drawing much attention from the locals, being referred to on occasion as “that queer place.” It is mentioned how Kerewin had debated whether to build a hole or a tower. Certainly, if she had decided on a hole, it would have been easier to hide away. A tower, on the other hand, is highly conspicuous. Although Kerewin insists, “[n]o people invited,” it is indisputably a building that invites attention, and inevitably visitors. Kerewin, of course, is aware of this. When Joe wonders why Simon had broken into Kerewin’s home, she notes that, “‘[i]t was the Tower itself, I expect. I’ve had other people come and gawk at it, but never anyone inside before.’” Although Kerewin has painstakingly arranged for this place of exile, and would have others, herself included, believe that she wants to be left alone, there is a silent invitation, or a challenge perhaps, for someone to come seek her out. For the Tower is “built on an almost island,” not quite separated from the mainland, in fact, still connected to it, and significantly it stands, “in the shallows of an inlet,” an arm of the sea, a place or means of entry. The building is a monument of Kerewin’s suffering, yes, but at the same time its architecture and location reveal that she is not yet severed from the world; the Tower is a cry for help.

2.2 The Gillayley house

The Gillayley house, on the other hand, appears rather conventional compared to Kerewin’s Tower. It is unhomely still, albeit in a different way.

“So here we go, walking creepfooted into the Gillayleys’ den, following the hand-in-hand two of them. A neat lawn bordered by concrete paths. No trees. No shrubs. The places where a garden had been were filled with pink gravel. The hallway was dim, an unshaded bulb dangling from the

72 Hulme, The Bone People, 172
73 Ibid., 52
74 Ibid., 64–65
ceiling, no carpet. There was not a suspicion of dust anywhere, nor any sign of flowers. […] The kitchen is gas-heated, square and bare, almost institutional in its unadorned plainness.”

Kerewin calls it a “den,” the lair of a wild beast, or a hidden home hollowed out of the ground, which is indeed, the opposite of a Tower. It can be a hideout, a safe-place—homely, if you will. “Den” also has negative connotations, such as in “opium den,” or “a secret lurking-place of thieves or the like.” What these meanings have in common, is that of something being hidden, or kept secret within the home. Kerewin uses “den” in a wry manner but the choice of words is more apt than she could have known at that point. Most things in the house are plain and uncovered; it is so inconspicuous that it becomes conspicuous, having been laid so bare that one feels like it might be hiding something.

Kerewin senses this unhomeliness acutely. “What’s strange?” she wonders, “[n]o pictures, no flowers, no knicknacks I can see? Maybe, but not all homes have that sort of thing. Is it the barren cleanliness, the look of almost poverty?” Of course, this minimalistic lifestyle may be explained by, as Kerewin calls it, almost poverty. Joe is a working class man, working an underpaid factory job, while also attempting to care for Simon. To be sure, they are not an affluent family.

When Kerewin gets a tour of the house after dinner she thinks, “[t]hat’s one thing—everything is so drear. Small wonder the brat escapes twice weekly…” It is not a house that invites living, rather, it is a house that drives people, particularly Simon, from it. Joe too does not seem to stay there much; he works most of the day, and spends the rest either at the pub or with Kerewin at the Tower. It seems as if any effort to make the home homely has been given up. It suggests that its inhabitants do not feel at home there, and there is a logical explanation for this. The house is a State house, meaning that it is not owned by the Gillayleys’ themselves.

In the introduction to The Architectural Uncanny, Anthony Vidler discusses the alienation of the working class individual that occurred during the industrial developments of the 19th century and its relation to the home; how “‘home’ [became] a temporary illusion at best.” Vidler quotes Marx:

75 Hulme, The Bone People, 93–94
77 Hulme, The Bone People, 95–96
78 Ibid., 97
79 Vidler, The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely, 5
“But the cellar-dwelling of the poor man is a hostile element, […]—a dwelling which he cannot regard as his own hearth—where he might at last exclaim: ‘Here I am at home’—but where instead he finds himself in someone else’s house, in the house of a stranger who always watches him and throws him out if he does not pay his rent.”

Although Joe does not rent the house, they do still live in the house of a stranger—namely the State. Joe being of Maori descent adds a new, more sinister dimension to the class perspective. In this case, the stranger, the Pakeha, is the State. In order to have his own home, he has been forced to rely on the State, the very strangers that oppressed and dispossessed his people in the first place. The local and the national home coincide here in an uncanny manner; Joe, as a working class man and Maori, cannot feel at home in New Zealand nor in the house in which he lives. Moreover, Joe feels alienated from his own family and extended family, and does not consider himself to be “a real” Maori. Consequently, there is nowhere he can truly feel at home. In this way, the house of Joe and Simon is a perfect image of how European colonialists have made the indigenous individual feel like an intruder, a stranger, in their own home.

The bare, innocent façade of the house hides the cruelty that exists within it. This is much like the front that Joe puts up. On the surface, he seems a harmless man; his appearance does not give away the anger that is housed within him. During the dinner scene, however, we catch a glimpse of this angry undercurrent. It is a cheerful event, but in-between the witticisms and light conversation, Joe’s thoughts are inserted and indented: “[s]he must enjoy this. And if bloody Haimona [Simon] doesn’t wreck things, maybe she’ll want to come back again.”

Joe’s thoughts disturb the apparent harmony of the scene; they lie just beneath the performance of familiar merriment, making it uncanny. This anger, and anxiety, is directed at his foster child Simon. It is, however, clearly rooted in the violent colonial history of New Zealand. When Joe reflects on his violent treatment of Simon he wonders:

“…do I hate him then? But how can you hate someone and not know it? I love him. I just get wild with him every so often. Like I told him, it doesn’t even seem like him I’m hitting. His disobedience or something, I don’t know.”

Hitting Simon, Joe does not feel like he is hitting his son, precisely, but something else. Simon, of clear Pakeha origin, stands in for the coloniser and the violence perpetrated against the Maori people. Although Simon is innocent, hurting him becomes a sort of

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80 Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, 5, author’s italics
81 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 95
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., 211
twisted retribution. It is an uncanny repetition of former violence, as if history is repeating itself, albeit slightly different.

2.3 The ghost of violence

The past haunts. Thinking about Joe, Kerewin notes that there is “[t]oo much of the past, riding on his shoulders […]”\(^8^4\) And she wonders, “[…] what to do about […] the man’s evil shadows – the ghosts riding on his shoulders?”\(^8^5\) Joe’s abuse of Simon is a haunting of past violence; not only the violence European settlers perpetrated against the Maori, but also the beatings Joe received from his grandfather when he was a child. Reflecting on his past, Joe wonders whether Simon might be repeating his childhood, or if maybe he himself is repeating his mother’s life,\(^8^6\) as if he is trapped in some vicious cycle of repeating history. However, the abuse Joe experienced in his childhood is very much related to the effects of Empire. Joe says about his grandfather, “I think he was ashamed, secretly ashamed, of my Nana and her Maoriness. […] I think he took it out on me for being like her, for being dark, and speaking Maori first, all sorts of things…”\(^8^7\)

From an early age, Joe’s grandfather, a Pakeha man, punished Joe for being “too” Maori. He was a Christian man who “avoided the marae [sacred Maori meeting place].”\(^8^8\) Prominent Maori activist and writer Irihapeti Ramsden writes about the influence that Christianity had on Maori society, “[a] small but significant symptom of the early ideas of Judeo-Christianity and its impact on the gender roles in Māoridom is the refusal of some Māori men to hongi [traditional greeting] with Māori women. […] The effect is to denigrate the mana [power] of Māori women and therefore of all Māori.”\(^8^9\) Religion and Western gender roles affected Maori practices to such a degree that women, who had once been equal in Maori society, now were denigrated. Joe’s grandfather is ashamed of his wife and her Maoriness, and of his grandchild Joe, who is so much like her, because they are not the white, Christian, English speaking individuals that Pakeha society favours, and thus of less value. The abuse Joe endured in his childhood has instilled in him a sense of powerlessness and insecurity, and, what is more, a shame of his Maoriness.

\(^8^4\) Hulme, The Bone People, 305
\(^8^5\) Ibid., 109
\(^8^6\) Ibid., 276
\(^8^7\) Ibid., 277
\(^8^8\) Ibid.
These insecurities are clearly seen in Joe, particularly in his relationship with Simon—insecurities about himself as a man, as a Maori, and as a father of a Pakeha son. His abuse of Simon stems from a combination of these. Antje M. Rauwerda writes that “[s]exuality intersects with national identity and Joe feels defensive on both counts. He perceives Simon as a challenge to both his masculinity and his Maoriness.” Rauwerda argues that Simon is Joe’s abject, that he is “other to the Maori identity he would like for himself.” Kerewin wonders, perhaps picking up on this, “maybe it hurts, everytime someone sees you two together, notes that blondness, and looks you over speculating, ‘Cuckold? Or so Pakeha a wife your blood can’t show…?’” Having Simon as his son makes Joe feel both emasculated and generates further insecurities about his indigenous identity.

Joe is a factory worker, but in the past he went to a seminary, training to become a priest. He did not complete the training, and went on to teacher’s college, but dropped out before getting his diploma. Of the experience he says that, “I tasted both vocations enough to know they weren’t for me.” He declares self-derisively, “I’m a typical hori after all, made to work on the chain, or be a factory hand, not try for high places.” It is not the monotony of his factory job that Joe resents, rather it is the feeling of “[…] being a puppet in someone else’s play. Not having any say.” He recognises that, in many ways, his choices as a Maori man is limited, already staged for him by the colonial legacy of the country. “Hori” means ‘George,’ which denotes a worker. It is, however, only used for Maori working people, and is considered an insult when used by an unfriendly Pakeha. The phrase “a typical hori” reveals the negative way in which the culture views the Maori working class. Part of the assimilationist agenda of Pakeha settlers was to “civilise” the Maori through manual work.

“Māori women were trained as agricultural labourers and their Māori wives as domestic workers in Pākehā (missionary) homes. Underpinning this new social order were assumptions about the innate racial inferiority of Māori and the identification of Māori with the working class of England.”

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90 Rauwerda, “The White Whipping Boy: Simon in Keri Hulme’s The Bone People,” 29
91 Ibid., 29–30
92 Hulme, The Bone People, 362
93 Ibid., 280
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid., 109
96 Ibid., 543
97 Huia Tomlins Jahnke, “Māori Women and Education: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,” in Mai I Rangihātea: Maori Wellbeing and Development, eds. Pania Te Whāiti, Mārie Barbara McCarthy, and Arohia Durie (Auckland University Press, 1997), 100
98 Ibid.
These attitudes still persist, reflected in the slur ‘hori,’ a contemptuous term where the meanings of ‘worker’ and ‘Maori’ meet; the contempt for the working class is thus conflated with the contempt for the Maori. Joe, and presumably Maori like him, has internalised these attitudes. He used to have ambitions, but a lack of confidence and the internalised idea that as a Maori man he is not good for anything else than manual labour, have discouraged him from pursuing a different career, contributing to make him bitter and unhappy.

2.4 “… but it’s a bloody kind of love that has violence as a silent partner”

Ramsden writes, “[v]iolence toward women and children is another symptom of the powerlessness of some of our men, caught on the frontier, controlled by systems not designed to make them strong and confident.” Violence within the Maori community seems to have been of some concern in the 1980s. The violence appears to stem from the powerlessness felt when trapped in an uncaring system, the values of which are very different from, and indeed at odds with those of the Maori. That feelings of shame and inadequacy should proliferate from this development, and become internalised in the indigenous population, is not so peculiar.

As Gay Puketapu-Andrews states, “[m]any Māori suffer from a negative self-image and a serious lack of self-worth. Alienation and self-negation have damaged us spiritually and affected the very essence of our being.” The fact that societal systems fail to provide Maori men, and women for that matter, with confidence is a serious problem, however, this factor does not excuse Joe’s abuse of Simon. Indeed, Keri Hulme has stated that the graphic depictions of violence in the novel were, partly, a comment on the unsettling prevalence of child abuse in New Zealand at the time. Kerewin’s reaction to Joe slapping Simon proves how normalised physical discipline of children is, as she brushes it off with, “that’s the way we do it in good old Godzone.” Kerewin’s casual acceptance is complicit in the normalisation of this corrective violence, which allows for such extreme cases as that of Simon’s to happen. Clare Barker states that, “Simon’s body

99 Ramsden, “Borders and Frontiers,” 349
102 Hulme, The Bone People, 117
acts as a ‘collective conscience’ for contemporary New Zealanders, a commitment to vigilance and a reminder that violence is never acceptable.”

Merata Mita likens Joe’s seemingly harmless appearance to the colonial history of New Zealand. She writes:

“New Zealand’s deepest, darkest secret is its history of violence, subsequent repression and the damage it is doing to us as a nation. Joe’s demeanour gives nothing away—just like the face of New Zealand; Kerewin discovers his terrible secret but keeps it to herself—conscience denied; Simon suffers Joe’s beatings in silence—love and violence are inseparable.”

The abuse is a terrible secret, but it is a secret that the entire Gillayley family is privy to. They keep it a familial secret, hidden within the walls of the home—the nation. Even Simon, the one who suffers from it, is desperate to keep the truth hidden from Kerewin. When Kerewin eventually learns about it, she is not sure what to do, and ends up keeping the secret as well. The violence, and the repression thereof, is a metaphor for the violent past of New Zealand. It is unpleasant and painful to talk about; therefore it is easier to not acknowledge it. However, to ignore past violence is to ignore the bruises that are still to be felt in the body of society today—the way in which institutions structure life within the nation, and how it affects the bodies of people living there. Ignoring these consequences is a way of continuing cultural abuse. It is history, but history is not a dead thing.

### 2.5 Structuring and restructuring

The structuring of Pakeha society has, inevitably, had an immensely detrimental impact on that of the Maori. Maori writers and activists have made the case that Pakeha notions of gender and family, particularly, have severely influenced and changed Māori perceptions of gender, gender roles, sexuality, and family structure. In fact:

“[s]chools were established as major sites for transforming gender roles in Māori society by constructing and redefining the roles of Māori women and men, first by the missionaries and their wives as early as 1816, and later by the state.”

Settlers and, later, the state, worked rigorously to undo traditional Maori gender roles in order to install Western ones, and it seems that particular effort was made to control Maori

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105 Jahnke, “Māori Women and Education: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,” 100
women, who had been the equals of men in traditional Maori society. 106 Vapi Kupenga, Rina Rata, and Tuki Nepe argue that, “[i]t cannot be said, therefore, that Maori women, prior to the coming of the Pākehā, suffered oppression.”107 They continue:

“Changes in the status of Māori woman occurred with the arrival of the Pākehā, who brought with them a new economic system. Inherent in their system were individualistic and sexist values. It was a system that not only rewarded the individual, but undervalued women. Economic value became measured through a system of monetary exchange. Child-minding, cooking and housekeeping were not seen as having any economic value. […] Under a Pākehā system, the only demand was for males. Gradually the attitudes of Māori men began to change. They began to model themselves on their Pākehā bosses and workmates, regarding their earnings as belonging to themselves, and thus deciding what portions were to be meted out and to whom. With this psychological shift, Māori women began to experience a new social order, manifested not only in the new individualistic attitude, but also in the new attitude towards them as decision-makers, partners, wives, lovers, mothers, nurturers, caregivers and sisters. This had a considerable effect on the whānau [family].”108

In this way, Pakeha systems, which were centred on the individual, were fundamentally at odds with Maori systems, designed to care for a community as a whole. In this new social order, Maori women got the short end of the stick, what with the misogynistic attitudes of the West. “British cultural practices and images embedded in the dominant attitudes towards women emphasises women’s subordination to men. Thus Māori women were seen not only as being inferior to Pākehā men and Pākehā women but also to Māori men.”109 It seems fair to assume that the lowering of Maori women’s status, also contributed to the increase of violent behaviour towards them from their male compatriots. Ultimately, the structure of Western society undid that of the Maori, and the Pakeha were successful in installing a Western system.

Many Maori activists, particularly female activists, see the rebuilding of the traditional Maori family structure as crucial for Maori development. In the same vein as Kupenga, Rata, and Nepe, Kathie Irwin advocates for the need to decolonise the traditional Maori family structure:

“In Māori society, the units of the family, extended family, and tribe are all important. […] Indeed we need to decolonise the whānau-hapū-īwi unit, ridding it of the trappings that we have picked up from our colonisers. Much of the colonised thought about the role and status of Māori women in whānau-hapū-īwi has been learnt from the Pākehā culture.”110

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106 Jahnke, “Māori Women and Education: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,” 100
109 Jahnke, “Māori Women and Education: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,” 100
110 Irwin, “From ‘Māori Feminism,’” 300
Joe’s insistence on marrying Kerewin is a testament to these “trappings” learnt from the Pakeha. When Joe realises Kerewin disinterest in marriage, he laments, “[a]nd what am I going to do now? What now God?” and, “I love her, and she won’t let me close. Either of us close. Any of us close….” Joe desperately wants to form a family with Kerewin and Simon, but cannot envision this in any other way than through matrimony and a romantic relationship with Kerewin. To Joe, this appears to be the only way for them to be close, to be a family, and for Kerewin to be a parental figure to Simon. Therefore he despairs, thinking that all hope is lost for them. The units of hapū and iwi do not even figure into Joe’s understanding of family, again showing his disconnectedness from Maori culture. He eventually learns how Pakeha ways has blinded him throughout his life, “I’d worked hard, pakeha fashion, for nearly six solid years, making money to make a home. And the one thing I never made was a home…” Joe realises how there are other ways to create a home and other ways to be a family:

“Kerewin… I was trying to make her fit my idea of what a friend, a partner was. I could see only the one way… whatever she thought she was, bend her to the idea that lovers are, marriage, the only sanity. […] now I can see other possibilities, other ways, and there is still a hope…”

And, indeed, they are successful in the end. Kerewin’s Tower is destroyed, a symbol of her loneliness and disconnection, and later she builds a new home, using the materials of the old building; the Tower is reconstructed into a circular, spiralling house that can hold everyone in their whānau-hapū-iwi:

“I decided on a shell-shape, a regular spiral of rooms expanding around the decapitated Tower… privacy, apartness, but all connected and all part of the whole. When finished, it will be studio and hall and church and guesthouse, whatever I choose, but above all else, HOME. Home in a larger sense than I’ve ever used the term before.”

The new home grows out of the Tower, the individual, and expands in the same way that Kerewin’s perception of home does. This new definition of home and family is large enough to “[hold] them all in its spiralling embrace.” Seen in the novel is the effort made to decolonise and reimagine the family structure. The characters ultimately succeed in ridding themselves of the trappings they have been taught by the coloniser, and

111 Hulme, The Bone People, 355
112 Ibid., 359
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid., 462
115 Ibid., 527, author’s italics
116 Ibid., 537
subsequently reconnecting with their Maori heritage, which informs the reconstruction of the home and the nation.

2.6 A visionary architect

Kerewin is not the only one who builds. Simon, too, is something of an architect. When on the beach, he sometimes builds small structures out of miscellaneous debris, which Kerewin and Joe refer to as music hutches.

“He started picking up debris off the beach, and randomly at first, and then with a steady and abnormal concentration, he had built a spiralling construction of marramgrass and shells and driftchips and seaweed.

‘What are you doing?’

He whistled and pointed to it.

It whistles?

He lay down on the sand with his ear by it, and she went to him, puzzled. Simon got up quickly.

Listen too, he said, touching his ear and pointing to her. So she did, and heard nothing. Listened very intently, and was suddenly aware that the pulse of her blood and the surge of the surf and the thin rustle of wind round the beaches were combining to make something like music.”

The intention behind the structure is not to house anything; Simon builds the hutch in order to make music—it is like an instrument. This music is created in part by a listener and the world around them, as the sound of Kerewin’s pulse, the wind, and the sea all meld together to create some kind of tune. Clearly, a listener is essential for the music to be made. The music hutch recalls Romantic notions of music, and indeed, of architecture. Vidler writes:

“[…] we might think of the relations, endlessly drawn in classical theory, between architecture and music, whereby architecture is said in its geometrical harmonies to echo those of music. This too was a favourite romantic analogy: Schelling had announced that ‘architecture is in general frozen [congealed] music.”

In Romantic thought, music and architecture are somehow connected. Significantly, this structure is not only frozen, congealed music, it creates music as well. Just like how the Tower projects Kerewin’s body, the music hutch projects Simon’s body. The structure is described as “sturdy, yet delicate, an odd little temple, a pivot for sounds to swing round.”

Simon is delicate, too, albeit surprisingly sturdy, having survived the abuse of his biological father, a shipwreck, and is enduring Joe’s ruthless thrashings. Moreover, he is also frequently described as odd, “oddbod” by Kerewin, and there is something distinctly holy about him. Simon has a keen interest in music, and so it makes sense for

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117 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 125
119 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 156
him to build these particular structures. The music hutch, then, projects Simon’s desire to create music as well as being a vehicle for it. Until he is ready to sing himself, the music hutch sings for him.

Simon seems to find a way of expression through this structure. The sublimity of the music hutch is not to be missed; it is able to project something that is beyond language, something unspeakable, while at the same time being a conduit for it. Kerewin refers to the music as “the silence of God,” connecting it to the sublime. Simon, being mute and thus lacking verbal language, relies on a more tactile language. He does not use any official sign language, instead he uses a system that he and Joe have created together; thus a very personal and intimate way of communication. Evidently, he is accustomed to the struggle of trying to be understood, and has thus been forced to create new ways of communicating with others.

Because of this difficulty, Simon may be more attuned to alternative ways of communication. He answers very much to the Romantic notion of the child as a visionary, and is indeed constructed as some kind of prophet. “Ordinary sinner, extraordinary sinner, or some new kind of saint?” muses Kerewin. The ideas of the Romantic philosopher Novalis, concerning music and language, seem applicable to Simon’s character. Here from his 1798 “Monologue”: “And so it is with language – the man who has a fine feeling for its tempo, its fingerling, its musical spirit, who can hear with his inward ear the fine effects of its inner nature and raises his voice or hand accordingly, he shall surely be a prophet […]” Simon, with his music, appears to fulfil this role as a prophet; through music, he is able to understand this inner nature of things. Significantly, the prophet may raise “his voice or hand accordingly.” Strangely enough, this statement includes those who are unable to raise their voice, like Simon, who instead must raise his hand in order to speak. Hulme is of the belief that the Maori language has an inherent musical quality to it, indeed, she puts more emphasis on its sound than its verbal nature. “Māori is a word-of-mouth language; it has only recently been tamed to print, and a great deal of its mana [spiritual power] and strength still lie outside the blackened word. If you speak Māori, understand Māori, even what you read is fraught with sound – and not sound alone.” For Hulme, understanding Māori opens up new ways of understanding and communicating, and it is

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120 Hulme, The Bone People, 383  
121 Ibid.  
particularly the musicality of the language that facilitates this understanding. In this way, Simon’s language is close to Maori hermeneutics, much more so than that of Kerewin’s. Much of the meaning of the language lies beyond the words, and Simon, through the music hutch, seems to have accessed this knowledge, and becomes, in turn, a conduit for it—a prophet.

Narratively, Simon’s language stands in opposition to verbal/oral language, and more specifically the kind of language that Kerewin utilises. Novalis continues, “[…] on the other hand the man who knows how to write truths like this, but lacks a feeling and an ear for language, will find language making a game of him […].”124 Indeed, this is an apt description of Kerewin. She is so caught up in the many signifiers that she does not seem to grasp the things they indicate themselves. She has sought refuge in language and other systems, searching for answers there in hope of structuring the reality she finds herself in. “She thought of the tools she had gathered together, and painstakingly learned to use. […] None of them helped make sense of living.”125 This sundry knowledge that she has accumulated over the years has failed her in navigating life. Arguably, Kerewin’s obsession with these tools has only made it more difficult for her to relate to the world around her and the people in it. She calls herself a wordplayer, but in reality the words are playing her, effectively “making a game of her.”

The dichotomy between Simon and Kerewin’s relationship to language is illustrated in a scene where Kerewin and Simon are spending time together at the beach. Simon is bringing Kerewin debris and asking about their names. Kerewin tells him dutifully, even providing the child with the scientific name for each shell and flower seed that he brings her. Curiously, this seems to amuse Simon.

“He blows in her ear gently, and she shudders at the unexpected breath.
‘Meaning?’
He sits back on his heels, and smiles with half-closed eyes, shaking his head all the while.

He’d thought
knowing names is nice, but it don’t mean much. Knowing this
is a whatever she said is neat, but it don’t change it. Names
aren’t much. The things are.

Laughing secretly at himself. Because you can’t say names, Clare. But he’d come back anyway, and blown into her ear.

A whole stream of names that is. Do you like them? Segment-
lamanaria-vertebrae-lessiona-variegata-marauding-voodoo-
korfie and ALL.

125 Hulme, The Bone People, 111
Her eyes flicked open quick again, and were sharp and threatening as glass splinters. It was just air, see? he’d thought hurriedly, my hand was more real, see? But Kerewin didn’t ever get really wild. She just sat there, frowning at him.

She’ll get to know it, one of these days.”

Simon is trying to teach Kerewin a lesson. He is willing to listen to what she has to tell him about the world around them, but he, at the same time, is aware of the constructedness of language. Simon values the signified over the signifier, “[b]ecause [he] can’t say names,” he has had to learn about the things around him, not through words, but in a more hands-on way. Words, then, are insignificant to Simon, they have as much weight as the air he breathes into Kerewin’s ear: “my hand was more real, see?” Simon’s tactile language is at odds with Kerewin’s abstract one, a conflict that will have severe consequences later when they fail to communicate across this divide. Notably, after this exchange, Simon lies down to build a music hutch. The building of the hutch is a demonstration of his own beliefs, while also a criticism of Kerewin’s language. Simon’s message is that there are limits to her language; it cannot capture everything, namely that which is silent and invisible. Simon’s language, however, can. It demonstrates that what is silent can and does speak, but one has to put in the effort to hear.

Joe, however, does not share Kerewin’s fascination for the music hutches. When he first discovers Simon building them, he feels uneasy.

“Secretly, when Simon was sleeping his drugged uneasy sleep, he had stolen back down to the beach, and examined by torchlight the structure his strange little son had built. Feeling foolish, he had lain down beside the husk and listened, absorbed, for nearly quarter of an hour. Then he became scared, squashed it flat, and strode home with the wind whining round his heels. Because he heard, thought he heard, a faint but growing music from Simon’s creation… nothing he could really hear, a sound of darkness that seemed to sing… he had never told Simon about it, and he never listened to the music hutches again. And he stopped the child making them whenever he caught him at it.”

Evidently, Joe finds the music hutches uncanny. He is afraid of the construction because he thinks he can hear “a sound of darkness” coming from it. The structure is at some point, significantly, described as “spiralling.” The figure of the spiral appears yet again. The spiral is an important Maori symbol, connected to the notion of void and creation in Maori mythology. Rask Knudsen writes:

“The deeper meaning of these music hutches […] reposes in the notion of the void, once again held out as a compelling creative metaphor… The sound of darkness, possibly the womb of voice

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126 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 155
127 Ibid., 126
The building of these hutch
es, then, is a deeply spiritual act, confirming both Simon’s place in this world and the ancient mythic world of New Zealand. Language is needed in order to form identity, and, lacking verbal language, constructing this spiralling music hutch, is Simon’s way of acquiring a voice, an identity of his own. Alison Rudd asserts that, “[c]onfronting nothingness or absence is necessary for selfhood, language and identity.” Building the hutch is a way for Simon to confront this absence. Because, while the music may stem from a mythic time and/or place, it is also a symbol of Simon’s past, of which he cannot remember much, other than what he refers to as “the nightmare voice” that sings to him, presumably his abusive biological father; in a way his music serves to “overwrite” or drown out this nightmare voice. Instead of leaving his horrible past to engulf him, Simon is able to create something out of this absence by building the music hutch—he transforms the absence into presence. And the music he makes may even have healing properties; at least it does in one of Simon’s dreams, in which he wakes up two dead baby rabbits by “feeding them music.” By confronting the void, the darkness that is his past, Simon is able to form an identity, and what is more, he finds a mode of expression, or being, that has the power to heal.

Indeed, Simon’s music reappears in the shell house; Kerewin says that it contains “the singing curve of the universe.” Although clearly inspired by the Maori symbol of the spiral, it is fair to assume that Kerewin is inspired by Simon’s music, too. This music is connected to the Maori language, which Hulme insists is fuelled more by sound than meaning, and necessarily to a Maori worldview and identity; the shell house, a metaphor for the nation, is thus built with a Maori spiritualism as its foundation. The silent and unseen find expression here in this home, where the people have become attuned to listening.

129 Rudd, Postcolonial Gothic Fictions from the Caribbean, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, 139
130 Hulme, The Bone People, 247
131 Ibid., 537
2.7 The murderous and the domestic

Towards the end of the chapter "Spring tide, neap tide, ebb tide, flood," there is a scene, or rather two scenes juxtaposed, that I would like to cite, almost in its entirety, for full effect; they illustrate how intimately entwined the murderous and the domestic are. In the excerpt, Joe, Kerewin, and Simon are at Kerewin’s family bach\textsuperscript{132} enjoying a short holiday together. Simon is wandering along the beach, where he makes an upsetting discovery, while Kerewin is running errands, cooking dinner, and looking after a sick Joe.

“At the moment, he’s got to decide which way to look. By the cliffs or in the sea? He scans the beach.
Something flaps on the sand by the sea’s edge. […]

Kerewin finishes the paper and makes herself a coffee. Then she drives to Hamdon, and buys more whisky. She stops at the tavern for a quick drink […] Must go for a decent session there, before we leave, she thinks, driving in a leisurely fashion back to Moerangi.

He can’t see what it is.
It looks quite large.
He decides to go that way, looking for green stones on the way. […]
The thing flaps again.

She makes a tumbler full of whisky toddy and takes it to Joe. She kneels by the bunk and blows a stream of whisky fumes at the huddle under the blankets.
‘A kill or cure machine has arrived and is waiting for you.’
‘Gur?’
‘Whisssky.’
‘O… thag you.’
‘Sweet hell man, drink it quick. It sounds like the germs are winning.’ Snigger.
‘O?’ says Joe, with considerable restraint.

What do I do? What do I do?
Get them.
It’s a long way back.
The bird struggles again, the ruined wing beating sluggishly, the wounded body scuffling in the sand.
It’s head tilts further to one side. The beak opens and darkish froth drips out.
A stone. I could throw it hard.
He readies one of the green pebbles in his hand.
I might miss, I might just hurt it.
He drops it.
Clare, do something, hugging himself in misery.
The beak opens and shuts soundlessly.
If I wait it might die quickly.
The bird flops forward, wing drawn up convulsively, scrabbles again in the sand.
It is trying to get away from him.

She puts a leg of mutton on to roast, and prepares the vegetables in ready in pots. She helps herself to a whiskey, clears away the morning dishes, and sweeps out the bach.
Positively domesticated we are this morning.
Glancing at the clock,
this afternoon.

\textsuperscript{132} A ‘bach’ is a kind of small holiday house common in New Zealand
This afternoon? Where’s the urchin? [...] 

If I go...
I can’t leave it.
I can’t watch it die like this.
He drops to his knees beside the bird, closes his eyes, the stone tight in his hand, and hits until he can hear nothing, feel nothing moving any more.
Smell of the sea and the smell of blood.
The bird is reddened. The one wing curves, moves in the air towards the earth. It comes to rest at an awkward upbent angle.
Simon puts his head on his drawnup knees. There is a singing in his head, and a bitter constriction in his throat. He tries to swallow and his gorge rises. He dry-retches repeatedly.
I can’t cry. [...] 

And there it is, one Gillayley gremlin, in a desolate-looking hunch on the sand.

What’s the betting its feet have dropped off from frostbite?

She lays a large whiskey to a lemon drink against it, grinning as she does.

After a time, he begins to shiver, with cold and shock.

This place is getting too much.

He opens his eyes and looks at the mutilated dead thing at his feet.
It is quiet and still.”

This is an extremely compelling part of the narrative, as it contains much that is pertinent to the argument of this paper. It is structured like a poem, divided into stanzas, as it were. The killing of the albatross and the uneventful domesticity at the bach are two separate events, but they happen simultaneously, side by side. Kerewin is performing daily household chores: going shopping, cooking, and cleaning, as well as tending to a sick Joe. The events on Kerewin’s side are told in a rather detached manner, matter-of-factly; the stanzas consist primarily of simple subject-verbal-object sentences. We do not gain insight into Kerewin’s thoughts about the situation, other than the sarcastic acknowledgment of, “[p]ositively domesticated we are this morning.” She also sniggers at Joe’s condition, and seems to be in a good mood, apparently not bothered by the arrangement. It is a remarkably familiar scene, with a woman tending to the house and a man out of commission, here both from sickness and alcohol.

However, Kerewin does not use the word ‘domestic’ to describe the situation, rather she employs ‘domesticated,’ which has a sinister connotation; namely that of taming or accustoming something or someone to household life. This seems uncannily appropriate, considering Joe’s ardent wish for Kerewin to become his wife and a mother to Simon. Ever since their first meeting Kerewin has sensed this need within Joe, “[t]here’s

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133 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 284–287
something bloody peculiar about this whole conversation. It doesn’t feel right. Has he got some strange hope I’m going to be the kid’s substitute mother?” And now here she is, playing the role of a housewife. Kerewin’s complacency with this kind of arrangement, however, suggests that she may not be opposed to a domestic life with Joe and Simon. Kerewin, hurt from the split with her family, desperately wants to be part of a family again, but is, at the same time, apprehensive. “Remember how horrifyingly painful it was when you and the family broke apart? So much so, that a brief meeting with one member is enough to put you in despair. The pain is back. Be wary. Keep it a cool friendship. [...] don’t let them get too close,” Kerewin is decidedly not the motherly type nor has she any interest in a romantic, married life with a man, but these are not necessary ingredients in order to form a loving family. As discussed earlier, this is demonstrated in the epilogue, where they come together to create one big family. A new, or rather an old way, of being a family—they succeed in the “reaffirmation and, in places, reconstruction of the whānau–hapū–īwi base of Māori society.” It is a redefinition of family, in which marriage and romance may, but do not need to play a part.

While Kerewin is contemplating dinner, Simon finds himself in a very different situation. While looking for greenstones, quite possibly intended to be gifted to either Kerewin or Joe, Simon comes upon a wounded bird, a mollymawk or a toroa—a kind of albatross. However, this is not the first time this bird appears in the narrative. Earlier in the same chapter, when the three of them go fishing, they are visited by three mollymawks hoping to get a share of their catch. As the birds come closer, Joe notes: “...hey, that one’s different. Not toroa.”

“A variety I guess,” says Kerewin frowning, “but I haven’t seen his sort around before.” The newcomer is the same size as the other two, but where their heads are neat grey with dark brows, its head is shining white. Its bill is orange, flushed pink at the base, and the other mollys have black and yellow beaks, razor-keen. They all have the same appetite for fresh seaperch, however.

“Chuck that new bloke a bit, Himi. I think the others are ganging up on him.”

The connection between the three birds and the three people in the boat is not to be missed. Just like Simon, the newcomer is the odd one out: although of the same species, it is clearly not native to the place. Joe is quick to classify the bird as “not toroa,” which seems to reflect his insecurities about having a son so clearly not Maori, with his “shining white”

134 Hulme, The Bone People, 62
135 Ibid., 306
136 Irwin, “From ‘Maori Feminism,’” 299
137 Hulme, The Bone People, 261-262
head and pale skin, while Kerewin shows her more liberal nature, deeming it not different per se, but instead a variety. Nevertheless, the bird appears strange to both of them, as it is clearly a creature that does not belong in the area. Later, the bird returns, uncannily, before Simon, as it is likely to be the very bird he finds wounded on the beach. Here it shows itself as a fragile, disabled being, its “beak opens and shuts soundlessly,” lacking the ability to communicate, still so very like Simon. The fact that Simon has to engage in this mercy killing is highly disturbing, in that the bird so blatantly resembles himself. Additionally, Simon has shown himself to be highly opposed to the killing of small and vulnerable creatures, and the distress it inflicts upon him is immense. This is not, however, the first or the last time Simon can be recognised in the form of an animal.

In contrast to the detached manner of narration employed for Kerewin’s perspective, Simon’s part is highly subjective and emotional. It reads as a stream-of-consciousness as he tries to decide what to do with the bird. It is full of smells, colours, and tactile feelings. The body is remarkably present in these sections, and indeed, Simon’s actions have direct consequences on his own body. Despite how painful the scene is, it seems that the murder releases something, “[t]here is a singing in his head.” And indeed, after the deed is done he sings to the dead bird. His singing, as he calls it, has heretofore been a secret, as secret as his real name, but Kerewin comes upon him while he sings. Upon its disclosure, Simon is sent into a spasmodic fit. The singing is connected to bad memories and he has kept it secret because he fears consequences. When he finds there are no consequences, Simon is delighted. “Nothing! She heard me singing! But nothing! […] Any time, I can sing!” This, in addition to Simon’s building of the music hutch, is another important step in Simon’s identity formation. From this point onwards, he sings openly.

The juxtaposition of dull household chores to the emotionally and bodily taxing experience of Simon, renders the killing of the albatross even more jarring. And the callousness with which Kerewin jokes about Simon’s state, although she often does this in good humour, becomes cruel here, as the reader is well aware of the extreme distress the child is experiencing. This whole scene also displays Joe’s, and Kerewin’s, casual negligence of Simon, as the child is allowed to go outside without any footwear, and besides, is forgotten about until Kerewin thinks to look for him in the afternoon; Joe only offering in a drunken stupor, “[d]oan worrym, he’ll comg bag,” when Kerewin voices her

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138 Hulme, The Bone People, 289
worry. Moreover, the juxtaposition suggests that, although different, the two events are somehow related. It illustrates how violent and impactful events, like this one, are part of daily life, they happen alongside it. Some of these events cannot be witnessed unless one goes looking for them, hunting for them even, because they happen on the periphery.

Domestic and day-to-day activities also reveal themselves to be violent. While Simon detests the murdering of small animals, Kerewin revels in it. Undoubtedly, there is a murderous streak in Kerewin, which is displayed quite early on when she goes hunting for flounders.

“Nothing like a tidepool for taking your mind off things, except maybe a quiet spot of killing…. 

[…]

It is an odd macabre kind of existence. While the nights away in drinking, and fill the days with petty killing. Occasionally, drink out a day and then go hunt all night, just for the change.”

For Kerewin, there seems to be something therapeutic about the activity; killing is something that structures her day-to-day life. It has become habitual and familiar, a routine. This may explain Kerewin’s blasé attitude towards the pain and the demise of these vulnerable creatures—she is so used to it that she takes it for granted, it makes sense to her. However, Simon sees it differently. Later on in the novel, there is a scene in which the two of them go collecting shellfish along the beach. When Kerewin digs up the shells and eats the invertebrate within, Simon watches, visibly appalled, with “his mouth agape in horror.” Again, in this scene, Kerewin’s disregard for Simon’s distress is evident.

She chuckles, and prises another shrinking pipi from its shell.

He flutters his hand with distress.

‘It moves, it’s alive? Yeah, I know. So is an oyster when you eat it. And that was what you were enjoying a couple of weeks ago. Very nice, weren’t they?’

[…]

The little boy quivers.

‘Look, it would be wrong, very wrong, to eat a fowl or a frog alive supposing we had the stomach to do it. But not these.’

She hopes he won’t ask why, because she isn’t sure herself. She suspects it’s because even a lowly frog, not to mention a fowl, could make one hell of a racket as you gnawed ‘em. All the helpless pipi could do, was spurt a feeble squirt of water and die between your teeth. Dammit kid, you’ve started to make me feel guilty.”

This casual, indeed habitual, killing is painted in a very different light when Simon is there to react to it. Kerewin is prompted to question her own rationalisation and does admittedly

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139 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 16
140 Ibid., 152
141 Ibid.
feel guilty about her actions afterwards. She claims that she cannot stand to see other creatures get hurt, but there is obviously a line somewhere. What is it that makes the killing and eating of the shellfish acceptable? It is merely the fact that they cannot express their suffering in any way. Following this logic comes a disturbing conclusion: anything unable to make a sound is fair game—liable to be acted violently upon. By extension, that would, and does, include Simon. Like the shellfish and the albatross, he suffers in silence as Joe, and indeed Kerewin, beats him and feeds off of him. He cannot utter a word, and even if he could, he is adamant about not telling anyone of his father’s abuse. There is no wonder why the child is angry and crying now, and yet “[Kerewin] grins at him, standing there hunched and miserable in the winter sun.” At this point, Kerewin has discovered Simon’s bruises, though she does not yet know that it is Joe who beats him. Regardless, Kerewin’s insensitivity is striking.

Kerewin’s murderous nature surfaces again during her spring-cleaning of the Tower. This occurs at a point where she has become uncertain about Joe and Simon and the place that they have come to inhabit in her life—their presence threatens her autonomy and solitary lifestyle. Joe, meanwhile, has been thinking of asking Kerewin to marry him, failing to understand Kerewin’s complete disinterest in marriage. “‘I’m fed up with Gillayleys to here,’ […] ‘Near and dear friends be damned… what the hell are they doing to me? Sucking me dry, it feels like. Emotional vampires, slurping all the juice from my home, that’s what.’” Interestingly, they are not slurping the juice from her body, but from her home. Again, we see the connection between the Tower and Kerewin herself. “Indeed, like a body, buildings and cities may fall ill,” Vidler writes, and this is precisely what happens to Kerewin’s home, it falls ill.

“The fire in the livingroom circle is out. After the warmth and company of the Gillayleys, the Tower seems as cold and ascetical as a tombstone. Me silent dank grave. And mere months ago, they were the ones who lived in a chilly institutional hutch… what’s happened? she asks herself, grieving. Even my home is turning against me…”

The Tower has gone from being a prison to a tombstone, a grave even. Vidler continues, “a building may, [Filarete] hazarded, become sick and die, whence it needs a good doctor, the architect, to cure it.” Following the Italian Renaissance architect Filarete’s theory, it is only the architect that can cure the home. Kerewin attempts to do this by exorcising the

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142 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 153
143 Ibid., 338–339
144 Ibid., 330
ghosts, or the vampires, Joe and Simon from her home, which is why “[s]he starts a cleaning binge.”146 Ruthlessly, she rids the tower of dirt, and mice. The exorcism, however, is not successful, as a much more substantial change is warranted in order to heal the home—namely its deconstruction and later reconstruction. Besides, Kerewin is wrong to assume that it is the fault of Joe and Simon that her Tower has fallen ill. Afterwards, telling Joe of the event, Kerewin describes the activity as, “a sort of dreary combination of the murderous and the domestic,”147 which is an apt description of these uncanny episodes. Again, the insistent confluence of domesticity and violence is noted, the uncanny within the familiar—the domestic and the murderous seem nigh inseparable.

In this way, The Bone People brutally reveals the violence and murder within things considered heimlich, challenging the way one speaks, or chooses not to speak, of unhomely matters. Violence and murder have a natural place within the homes of this novel; both on a local, individual level, as well as on a national, collective level. These homes, and the bodies of those living within them, have fallen ill, and it is the prevailing effects of colonialism that cause this illness. Indeed, the home of the nation is sick, and in order for it to heal, its flawed architecture must be reconstructed, rebuilt. The suffering depicted in The Bone People is a testament to the colonial history of New Zealand, and its after effects. It illustrates how the violence of the past persists, how it penetrates, to this day, into the lives of ordinary people, haunting their homes. But the novel is still optimistic, suggesting that although there is much pain in their past, it is possible to create something new, something that can heal them, demonstrated in the building of the shell house at the end, inspired by Simon and a particular Maori spiritualism. The fact that Simon remains maimed, even more so than at the beginning of the narrative, is a stark and continual reminder of the violence performed. It cannot, and shall not be forgotten. As the narrator says, “[i]t’s past, but we live with it forever.”148

146 Hulme, The Bone People, 339
147 Ibid., 343
148 Ibid., 539
3 Monstrous others

“This is getting boring, ghost, I’m gonna immure you again.”
- Keri Hulme, *The Bone People*

3.1 Simon, the stranger

The most monstrous body in *The Bone People* is the child Simon. The hybridity that characterises him is striking, as he is allowed to embody a horde of paradoxical identities. Simon represents the white European coloniser, the violent colonial lord, but at the same time he is an innocent victim, a victim of brutal abuse from his Maori foster father. Moreover, Simon is of Irish descent, and like New Zealand, Ireland was a former colony of Great Britain; thus he is both coloniser and colonised. Simon is often portrayed as a saint, while he is also called a devil. Simon symbolises Christ, but at the same time he symbolises the Maori trickster god Maui. Simon is New Zealand, but he is also old colonial Europe; he is the future, but he is also the past. One assumes Simon to be a boy, but his gender identity is uncertain. His exact age is unknown, it is assumed to be around six or seven but he seems much older—more than once is he described as “unchildlike,” reinforcing his inhuman positioning. Additionally, to further illustrate Simon’s unstable identity, he goes by quite a few names: Simon/Sim/Haimona/Himi, his Pakeha name and Maori name respectively, and the secret name, the secret self, he does not reveal to anyone, Clare. Simon, then, is something of an enigma; he inhabits a liminal space, where he is impossible to be grasped. If a monster is, in Grosz’ words, “an ambiguous being whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life,” then Simon fits this description perfectly.

Simon is uncanny in many ways. As discussed before, the definition of ‘heimlich’ is, “belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly, etc.” Simon, however, is Pakeha; a Maori word meaning “stranger,” used to indicate people of

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149 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 26
150 He has called himself that, Clare, Claro, ever since he can remember. He doesn’t know if that’s his name, and he’s never told it to anyone. He has a feeling if he does, he’ll die.” (Hulme, *The Bone People*, 137) Hulme’s short story “A Drift In Dream,” written before *The Bone People*, tells of how Simon’s parents meet. Simon’s mother is called Marie-Clare, so it is possible that Simon was named after her. On the other hand, this name may be one of the few concrete things that Simon has retained from his past, and that he has mistakenly attributed the name to himself. Additionally, the name may symbolise the longing for a mother.
151 Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic*, 152
152 Freud, “The Uncanny,” 222, my italics
European descent. Indeed, in the short story where his character is first introduced, he is referred to as a “stranger” by his own mother the moment he is born—significantly, he is born on a ship, in between as it were, adrift from the start. Among the members of his Maori family, he truly stands out; it is clear that he is not born a Gillayley, with his white skin and blond hair. Moreover, New Zealand is not his homeland; it was happenstance that saw him shipwrecked there. In both the family and the nation, Simon is a stranger.

The word ‘heimlich’ is also attributed to that which is tame, in regards to animals, mostly. Simon, who is often described as an animal, and can besides be recognised in many of the animals in the novel, cannot be called tame in any way. Simon is a wilful child who is not bound to the house; Kerewin says of him, rather succinctly, “[n]ot quite home, and not quite all the time….”153 referring to his wayward nature as well as his constant state of remoteness. He roams wherever he likes and does what he wants despite Joe’s brutal attempts at disciplining him. He can, however, be intimate and friendly, but only with a select few. This is all without taking into account Simon’s impairment, the fact that he cannot speak. This contributes to his separation from others, as they do not readily understand what it is he wants to communicate, often lacking the will to put in the effort needed in order to understand—Joe says that, “[h]ardly anyone bothers.”154 Consequently, Simon is decidedly not heimlich in any sense; he is an uncanny stranger.

3.2 The agency of the child, the agency of the monster

While Simon is constructed as a monster, he is, simultaneously constructed as a saint and a saviour. The innocence that characterises Simon is, however, a quality that the figure of the monster has had, harkening back to Shelley’s Frankenstein. The monster is not simply evil; it houses a certain kind of purity. The innocence of the monster is akin to that of the child, and particularly that of the Romantic child. Galia Benziman writes:

“Blake and Wordsworth used the child’s voice as a rich poetic device, a means for social critique and a psychological- introspective medium. Following the educational theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, their view of childhood as a stage of life to be valued in its own right led to their construction of an alternative childlike subjectivity, one whose freshly distinct mental, moral, and cognitive perspective served to defamiliarize and reshape the interaction between the self and its natural and social surroundings.”155

153 Hulme, The Bone People, 142
154 Ibid., 132
The Romantics saw the mind of the child as an opportunity, that by recognising the child as a subject, one could seize upon the child’s “pure” perspective in order to look at the world anew. Simon is very clearly cast in the figure of this Romantic child visionary. Indeed, his *vision* is attuned to see things that others cannot: he speaks of how he sees “soul shadows” on people, which is synonymous with the Maori concept of “wairua,” which Hulme describes in an essay as “an unseen double, a soul shadow, your own spirit. [The wairua] is absolutely personal to you: it is your spiritual essence.” In addition to this, Simon is able to see spirits. Thus, his vision is broadened in a way that allows him to see that which does not belong to the physical world, he can look to that which exists on the periphery—or the void, read as a realm of possibility and creation, both in Gothic and Maori tradition. Simon’s influence helps Joe and Kerewin to perceive alternatives to their current way of being, and for them to eventually actualise these. However, Simon’s otherness is not appreciated or understood for a long time; his abilities scare Joe, so he tells Simon not to talk about them, and Kerewin, too, finds Simon’s talents uncanny on occasion.

The idealised Romantic child is supposedly at harmony with the natural world, in the belief of Wordsworth and others, but it has been pointed out that the construction of the Romantic child is more complex than such. Benziman continues:

“[…] Further, Frances Ferguson and Judith Plotz have both identified internal contradictions that underlie the trope of the Romantic child: the special status granted to the child inevitably isolates, reifies, and objectifies this figure. The idealization of childhood is also its ‘othering’; thus the child, admirable as he or she is, is distanced and relegated from the sphere of historicized interconnectedness. The dark side of what Wordsworth celebrates as the child’s blessed freedom, then, is this figure’s dehumanization and isolation. Yet the paradox is even more complex: For Wordsworth, the child is, at once, an admirable and distant other, but also an expression of the authentic, pre-social self of the adult speaker-poet. The child thus simultaneously stands for both ‘self’ and ‘other.’”

As stated, there is a dark side to this conception. The figure of the child is an ambiguous one, as they are both self and other: on the one hand, the child is a visionary, a hope for a better future, but on the other they are an uncanny other, something to be feared or even shunned. Ultimately, what makes the child a visionary, in turn makes them a monster. It is the idealisation of the child that renders them an object; it dehumanises and isolates them. Simultaneously, the child is removed from “the sphere of historicized interconnectedness,” causing them to exist outside history as a timeless being without contemporaries, and here

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Simon can be recognised once more, he who is brutally severed from his past and his roots. This gives Simon a mystical or perhaps even a mythical quality. His disconnectedness and liminality, combined with his strange powers, make him appear inhuman and not fully of this world—akin to the monster.

Kerewin speaks of the horrible nightmares that afflict the boy, “[t]his is the shadow to Simon’s light. The self-control, the unchild-like wit and rationality he often shows, the strange abilities he has, are paid for in this coin.” The casting of Simon in this role as a Romantic visionary, is partly responsible for the mental and physical pain he suffers. The relationship between Joe and Simon is characterised by affectionate love on the one side, and violent hatred on the other, illustrating how the idealisation of the child is partly responsible for the provocation of violent emotion, and the detrimental effects thereof. Because Simon is the lovely “sunchild” in one moment, but a calculating “devil” in the next, and Kerewin and Joe cannot seem to conceive of him in any other way, making the fluctuations between the two roles appear more drastic than they are in reality. Kerewin says that Joe has “[…] too much of an emotional stake in the boy to ever see him clearly, dispassionately…” The fact of the matter is that, Simon is no saint, nor is he a devil; he is merely a child who has no control over his own narrative.

This lack of control is investigated to some extent in the novel. *The Bone People* exhibits the drive to recognise the child as an autonomous subject, illustrating the adverse effects of treating children as having no personal agency. As discussed before, part of the novel’s project is to rethink the family structure in order to create a healthier family able to thrive in a homely nation. The novel thus offers criticism of the child rearing of 1980s New Zealand. Kerewin observes:

“[t]hat curious impersonal property sense parents display over their young children’s bodies… check this, examine that, peer here, clean there, all as though it’s an extension of their own body they’re handling, not another person….”

Here, the child is rendered an object, their body treated as property. Indeed, in Kerewin’s eyes, the children are impersonally handled as products of the parents’ making, and as “an extension of their own body.” As such, the body of the child belongs to the parent(s), and is, besides, a reflection of them. The body is not considered as belonging to the child in their own right because the child is not considered a subject, yet. When does this transition

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158 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 273
159 Ibid., 305
160 Ibid., 241, my italics
happen? Presumably when the child comes of age, when they legally acquire the status of an autonomous subject. Suddenly “becoming” a subject after having been treated as an object for most of one’s life is quite a momentous change. Moving from the object position to the subject position in such an abrupt manner can hardly come without its consequences.

It is alarming to see what Simon’s upbringing has taught him about his own agency, “[y]ou didn’t say No to that, not without a fight happening. From experience, you should learn not to say No….”161 This is in reference to Simon getting his hair cut by Joe, an activity he is not partial to. Joe, however, is of the opinion that Simon may choose how to wear his hair when he is old enough to take care of it himself, until then Joe will cut Simon’s hair whether he likes it or not—Simon has no choice in the matter. From experience, the child knows that he should not say no; going against the will of the parent(s) inevitably incites punishment. Whenever a child asserts their subjectivity, it is often perceived as wilfulness, and thereby an unwanted behaviour; it is important that the child knows their place. In effect, this way of raising a child teaches children from a young age that they do not have sovereignty over their own bodies, and that it is acceptable for others (adults) to act upon their bodies as they like.

These attitudes may be carried into adult life, laying the groundwork for unhealthy relationships to grow, in which it may be easier to abuse and harm others. Learning about consent is imperative, but this is clearly a foreign concept to Simon, who has learnt that he should never say no, regardless of what he wants. In a rather ominous way, Kerewin muses on the powerlessness of the child, “[s]cared as well as defiant, [Kerewin] thinks. Wonder what it feels like to be small and afraid, knowing either of us can do what we like with him?”162 Uncannily, these words are repeated later in the hospital, when Simon is told that he has been removed from Joe’s custody, “[t]hey can’t do this to me. And he knew they could.”163

In some ways, Kerewin demonstrates an alternative to the parenting performed by Joe, in that she, at times, treats Simon as an autonomous being; she is often patient with him and willing to take her time in order to help him communicate, showing that she finds his wishes to be of value and importance. She is frustrated with Joe’s way of disciplining Simon, that he would rather hit him than try to communicate with the child. “What about

161 Hulme, The Bone People, 215
162 Ibid., 326
163 Ibid., 478
korero, Joe? What about our tribe’s famous talk-it-out with all concerned? It worked tonight. Give the urchin reasons, and time to think things out, and he responds, even more than you’d expect.”

Despite this, Kerewin fails to heed her own advice when it matters the most, abusing her power as an able-bodied adult, to the detriment of Simon. Both Kerewin and Joe initially fail at caring for Simon, and the price of their failure is his further impairment and near death. The figure of the child in postcolonial texts is often an image of the nation; Rudd, for example, identifies the child as a representation of the emergent identity of a postcolonial nation. If this is the case, then the rearing of Simon is crucial, as it is, essentially, the rearing of a nation. For the nation to grow in a healthy way, a reconsideration has to be made of the way in which the child is treated. And for a child like Simon, there are many challenges that have to be taken into attentive consideration.

3.3 The disabled child

It is worth taking a close look at Simon’s introduction, which clearly owes much to the Gothic tradition. This is Simon’s first appearance in the novel, after he has broken into the strange, tall Tower, in which Kerewin has sequestered herself. Note that Simon is introduced in the act of intruding, indeed, invading Kerewin’s home—in true Pakeha fashion.

“In the window, standing stiff and straight like some weird saint in a stained gold window, is a child. A thin shockheaded person, haloed in hair, shrouded in the dying sunlight. The eyes are invisible. It is silent, immobile. Kerewin stares, shocked and gawping and speechless. The thunder sounds again, louder, and a cloud covers the last of the sunlight. The room goes very dark.”

The individual in the window is recognised as a child, a person even. But in the very next line, perhaps because the child’s gender is unknown, the child is referred to as “it.” The child is first described as a saint, shrouded in sunlight, but shortly after, the sunlight is gone, and the child is hidden in the dark. Immediately, Simon figures more like some kind of indeterminate, or ambiguous, creature than a human child; he is something that belongs both to the light and the dark. He stands petrified in the window like a statue, appearing lifeless. However, he springs to life when Kerewin calls to him:

164 Hulme, The Bone People, 332
165 Rudd, Postcolonial Gothic Fictions from the Caribbean, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, 168
166 Hulme, The Bone People, 19
“The head shifts. Then the child turns slowly and carefully round in the niche, and wriggles over the side in an awkward progression, feet ankles shins hips, half-skidding half slithering down to the chest, splayed like a lizard on a wall. It turns round, and gingerly steps onto the floor... There isn’t much above a yard of it standing there, a foot out of range of her furthermost reach. Small and thin, with an extraordinary face, highboned and hollowcheeked, cleft and pointed chin, and a sharp sharp nose. Nothing else is visible under an obscuration of silverblond hair except the mouth, and it’s set in an uncomonly stubborn line. Nasty. Gnomish, thinks Kerewin.”167

The child is wriggling, and skidding, and slithering down the wall like a lizard, with his “feet ankles shins hips,” this clause is notably missing commas, as if it is mirroring the supposedly missing joints of Simon’s body—giving him the impression of some kind of invertebrate.

Kerewin’s immediate reaction to Simon is aversion. He is “nasty” and is quickly seen as resembling the mythical figure of a gnome. He is further described, “[t]here is something distinctly unnatural about it. It stands there unmovining, sullen and silent.”168 Initially, it is the boy’s stasis and silence that render him “unnatural” in Kerewin’s eyes. And to her indignation he stays silent even when she attempts to interrogate him.

However, his silence is soon explained. He grabs Kerewin’s wrist, evidently wanting to communicate something: “the child draws a deep breath and lets it out in a strange sound, a groaning sigh. Then the fingers round her wrist slide off, sketch urgently in the air, retreat. Aue,” Kerewin realises—Simon is mute.

If Kerewin found Simon monstrous and unnatural before, this unveiling certainly increases his otherness, now that he is revealed to be a disabled child. The narrator divulges, “She doesn’t like looking at the child. One of the maimed, the contaminating...”169 Again, there is ambiguity: Simon is maimed, a victim, appearing extremely vulnerable, reinforced by the fact that he is missing all the teeth on the left side of his mouth—he lacks bite—at the same time, however, he is something that contaminates; irrationally, Kerewin perceives his disability to be contagious. Here Hulme aligns the disabled person with the monster, a being that is often maimed, disfigured somehow, and either overlooked or excluded from the dominant discourse. However, the disabled monster is not to be condemned or cured, because their non-normative bodies

167 Hulme, The Bone People, 19–20
168 Ibid., 20
169 Ibid., 21
belong in the bicultural nation. Therefore, “[Simon’s] disabilities represent real challenges to be negotiated rather than deficiency or sickness.”

Simon carries a pendant with a label around his neck where his name and address are printed. When Kerewin learns his name, the narrator ceases to call him “it” and refers to him as “he”—that is, most of the time. Kerewin, however, in her internal monologues, continues to call him “it” every now and again, particularly when she is upset with him. It is evidently hard for Kerewin to acknowledge Simon as a person at first. In the beginning he is often referred to in parts, and not as a whole, his body appears fragmented. The narrator employs synecdoches when referring to Simon’s body, as in, “reaching for a shoulder,” and, “a handful of thin fingers,” and, “the birdboned chest.” And later, when Kerewin treats Simon’s injured foot, she admits, “‘Sorry about that. I forgot you were still on the end of it. The foot I mean.’” Indeed, this first chapter is named “Portrait of a Sandal,” a sort of wry—and dishonest—comment on Simon’s insignificance. It seeks to cloak the impact that the encounter has on Kerewin, and reducing Simon to nothing more than a sandal. Thus, through Kerewin’s eyes, Simon’s body becomes fragmented and objectified.

3.4 Disability as social ability

It is clear that Simon’s impairment and fragility make Kerewin uncomfortable; so much so that she would rather not look at him, seemingly unwilling to acknowledge his existence. Even later, when they have grown closer, she is revealed to be “avoiding looking at Simon on the principle that if you ignore something unpleasant, it often goes away.” Disability is a reality that able-bodied people may be hesitant to acknowledge, exemplified in Kerewin’s behaviour towards Simon. For the able-bodied who is personally unaffected by disability in any way, it may appear as an uncomfortable, even inconvenient, reminder when suddenly faced with it. However, Simon refuses to be ignored. Clare Barker reads The Bone People as a disability counter-narrative, and that part of the novel’s bicultural vision is the urgency to “protect and value all of its members, no matter how non-

170 Barker, “From Narrative Prosthesis to Disability Counternarrative: Reading the Politics of Difference in Potiki and the bone people,” 143
171 Hulme, The Bone People, 20–21
172 Ibid., 23
173 Ibid., 255
normative they are.” Barker asserts that the novel expresses how, “given favourable social conditions, impairment does not have to be disabling.” She interprets Simon’s muteness not as a disability per se:

“[…] the face-to-face contact necessitated by Simon’s muteness, combined with his insistence on physical proximity and touch, forces Kerewin to re-engage in reciprocal relationships, rendering Simon’s muteness as a social ability rather than a communicational disability […]”

In effect, Simon’s muteness contributes to bring Kerewin closer, eventually pulling her back into society and the Maori community. Simon’s muteness (and partial deafness in the epilogue) forces his family to interact with him in a different way and:

“is therefore instrumental in the text’s exploration of language and communication as he demonstrates the compatibility of different linguistic systems when used in the same space. He provides a model rather than a metaphor for a bicultural and bilingual nation.”

In the same way that Simon’s song inspires the building of the new nation home, so does his disability, his perceived monstrousness. What renders him monstrous and other at the start of the narrative, is what helps build a new understanding of home and community; a new, inclusive way of being in the nation. The disabled monster is not to be condemned or cured—theyir non-normative bodies have a central place in the bicultural nation, and their experiences and needs shall be heard and accommodated. Therefore, “[Simon’s] disabilities represent real challenges to be negotiated rather than deficiency or sickness.”

### 3.5 Kerewin, the abhuman

When looking at Simon’s introduction, Kerewin appears to be unwilling and perhaps fearful of assembling Simon into a complete human being. Tellingly, Kerewin “leans forward and picks [the pendant] up, taking intense care not to touch the person underneath.” She is unwilling to touch Simon because she finds his body disturbing, contaminating even. However, the disturbance Kerewin feels is, in part, related to her own monstrousness, as she too inhabits a monstrous body. It seems like she might be projecting onto Simon what she does not want to recognise within herself. The psychoanalysts Laplanche and Pontalis write about projection in this manner:

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174 Barker, “From Narrative Prosthesis to Disability Counternarrative: Reading the Politics of Difference in Potiki and the bone people,” 144
175 Ibid., 137
176 Ibid., 135
177 Ibid., 143
178 Ibid.
179 Hulme, The Bone People, 21
“What is encountered in this uncanny realm, whether it is termed spirit, angel, devil, ghost, or monster, is nothing but an unconscious projection, projections being those ‘qualities, feelings, wishes, objects, which the subject refuses to recognize or rejects in himself [and which] are expelled from the self and located in another person or thing.”

What Kerewin finds uncanny about Simon is very much rooted in herself. The two of them are indeed alike; both are outcasts, both are strangers, both are light skinned, and they both possess a somewhat strange wit. Kerewin’s monstrousness, however, is shown more clearly when in the company of Simon. Because, although she perceives him as an “imp,” and he is constructed as an uncanny character, he is also, without question, an innocent victim. And if Simon is always a victim, then Kerewin, or someone else, must be an assailant. Sitting at the beach in the dark, she watches Simon approach, looking for her, thinking, “[y]ou really are a very stupid child. For all you know, there might be something terrible lurking in the shadowed cliff at your side, just waiting to sink its fangs in your flesh…” Of course, it is implied that she is this terrible thing. She continues this train of thought:

“And who knows what might rise out of the sea and come groping and flabby and inevitable and smother you forever? Doom! doom! the taniwha hath come! You have no imagination whatsoever, you unintelligent little creep, or you would never have come this far down an unknown beach at night. For all you know, I could be waiting to push you into the sea…”

She believes that, even if she is not the one to personally cause him harm, she can somehow be an enabler, essentially pushing him into it and sacrificing him to some kind of monster. Indeed, this does come true later, as Kerewin gives Joe permission to punish Simon, resulting in Simon’s near death. Above, Kerewin’s monstrousness is constructed in opposition to Simon’s innocence; subconsciously she makes herself his other by seeing him as a victim. She aligns herself with a preying monster, rather than explicitly recognising herself as one.

What this internal monologue reveals besides, is a complex tension between self-hatred and hubris that is essential to Kerewin character. She is confident in her many abilities, “delighted with the pre-eminence of her art,” and accompanying this pride is a loathing for the weak and powerless, expressed quite emphatically towards Simon in the quote above: he is “a very stupid child” and an “unintelligent little creep” with “no imagination whatsoever.” Simon is nothing compared to her, and the fact that she could

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180 Laplanche and Pontalis cited by Rosemary Jackson in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, 66
181 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 204
182 Ibid.
183 Ibid., 8
easily harm him but chooses not to, is an act of mercy on her part. At the same time, however, Kerewin is in the habit of talking to herself in a self-derisive fashion, “‘[y]ou are nothing,’ says Kerewin coldly. ‘You are nobody, and will never be anything, anyone.’”\(^{184}\) Moreover, she calls herself “a morbid abhuman bastard,”\(^{185}\) to some extent recognising her monstrousness. Still she is prideful. This pride is perhaps seen best illustrated in the scene of Joe and Kerewin’s fight, where she takes him down with ease, demonstrating her physical prowess and her joy of fighting, “O me killer instinct, riding high on my shoulders, wide with teeth and smiling!”\(^{186}\) She addresses the “little eater of people-hearts” or Tūmatauenga, a Maori war god:

> “She had stood gloating a minute after Joe went down for the final time, Ahh little eater of people-hearts, relish this… aren’t you glad you never let me loose in a more warring time? Or maybe you howl and gnash your pointy teeth for the mistiming?”\(^{187}\)

Kerewin is a formidable fighter and she knows it. Addressing a god like this, she reveals her extreme arrogance, as she deems herself so powerful as to be significant to the god’s divine plans. On the one hand, Kerewin displays a staggering amount of arrogance, but on the other an intense form of self-hate, either seeing herself as “abhuman” or nearly unto a god. She too, like Simon, fluctuates between two extremes.

### 3.6 Monstrous liminality

It is appropriate, in turn, to look at the first meeting between Kerewin and Simon from Simon’s perspective. How does Kerewin appear before him? Simon describes the encounter thus:

> “The sun on his back in the window, and how the figure below had turned and looked straight at him, though he hadn’t moved at all. […] It had looked with fear and surprise at him, but had made no move to harm him. Sharp flames flickered round it, like small fiery knives. But it listened, listened sometimes with care. And when it found out he was hurt, even that small hurt, it had helped. […] The name was Kerewin Holmes, and he had said it inside himself, melding it to his name, all the times it prowled round the room, or made the meal, or took him up the narrow haunted stairs that twisted upon themselves […] Big and strong, strong as Joe, stronger than Joe it came with sure suddenness, Kerewin Holmes covered with flames like knives.”\(^{188}\)

The similarities between Simon and Kerewin’s perceptions are stark. Simon, too, refers to the unknown person as “it.” Kerewin is configured more like an animal or a supernatural

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\(^{184}\) Hulme, *The Bone People*, 112  
\(^{185}\) Ibid., 339  
\(^{186}\) Ibid., 232  
\(^{187}\) Ibid., 234  
\(^{188}\) Ibid., 88–89
creature than a human being. Strangely, she has sharp fiery knives flickering around her head, her wairua (soul shadow), and she prowls around the room like a predator. And yet, this strange creature listens to the child, treats his injury, and gives him shelter from the stormy night, leading him up “haunted stairs,” making him feel safe, despite its uncanny abode. Kerewin lives in seclusion in an unhomely home, her Tower “gaunt and strange and embattled,” like some kind of Gothic countess who may or may not turn out to be a vampire. Kerewin is not a vampire, however. She is a jaded woman struggling to assemble herself—like Simon, she is not whole.

Kerewin may appear to be a strong, healthy, and self-sufficient individual, but she too is characterised by a hybridity that is detrimental to her. Not only is Kerewin suffering from the split with her family, she is afflicted by another ailment as well, “’I am in limbo, and in limbo there are no races, no prizes, no changes, no chances. There are merely degrees of endurance, and endurance never was my strong point.’” Kerewin exists in a liminal space, only it is quite different from Simon’s—hers is a racial liminality. “It’s very strange, but whereas by blood, flesh and inheritance, I am but an eighth Maori, by heart, spirit, and inclination, I feel all Maori,’” she explains to Joe. Kerewin is of part Maori and part European ancestry and her skin is white, therefore she is never assumed to belong to the Maori community. If she claims to be, she is often met with scepticism, “’I think she is Maori for all that white skin.’” And she feels like she needs to provide others with her whakapapa (genealogy) in order to prove that she is Maori:

“As always, she wants to whip out a certified copy of her whakapapa, preferably with illustrative photographs (most of her brothers, uncles, aunts and cousins on her mother’s side, are much more Maori looking than she is). ‘Look! I am really one of you,’ she could say.”

Among her kin Kerewin regularly feels like an impostor. Her race and her identity are not stable components, as they need to be negotiated time and again, by herself and others, which greatly inhibits her from feeling at home anywhere—namely, at home with herself or with anyone else. In this state of “homelessness” she is like Simon, being, “not quite home, and not quite all the time….” Some are of the opinion that mixed-race individuals have a special privilege, in that they belong to and may participate in two (or more) cultures at once, and, furthermore, that this position enables them to bring these cultures

189 Hulme, The Bone People, 34
190 Ibid., 76
191 Ibid., 355
192 Ibid., 138
193 Ibid., 142
together; their position may, indeed, help heal a nation fraught with tensions between differing cultures. Homi K. Bhabha, with his concept of hybridity, also finds this in-betweenness of the mixed-race person to particularly valuable. However, in Kerewin’s case, her position does not grant her valuable insight to help her navigate the postcolonial society she lives in, *The Bone People* is thus in disagreement with Bhabha’s views of in-betweenness as a positive space. Hans Bertens, discussing Bhabha, writes, “[a] ‘double consciousness’ may surely bring the broadened perspective that Bhabha associates with it, but it might equally be a painful rather than an enlightening condition.” And this is true for Kerewin; her hybridity is more painful and detrimental than it is beneficial to her.

### 3.7 “Obfuscation is my trade”

Kerewin is a well-read individual, who has immersed herself in all kinds of literature, particularly European, which seems to alienate her from her Maori identity. Eva Rask Knudsen argues that:

> “As a master of letters, however, [Kerewin] finds herself speaking into a vacuum, because her words are like refined bricks, randomly chosen, however, from the colossal mental monuments of the Old World, and they seem to belie her Antipodean place, making her a misfit.”

Kerewin’s great interest in European traditions, and her constant quoting of European literature, makes her, to a degree, a mimic woman. The way in which she speaks is more for show than anything else, as well as a front she can hide behind; the narrator says that she “talk[s] loud nonsense to cover her pain.” Kerewin displays her knowledge of language in odd and archaic turns of phrase, which ultimately fails to communicate any significant meaning. It particularly confuses Simon, who wonders:

> “[w]hat does she talk like that for? To fool me? […] Kerewin’s multisyllables were, for the main part, going straight in one ear and out the other, leaving behind an increasing residue of strange sounds and bewilderment.”

Moreover, Simon recognises that Kerewin sometimes talks “at” him, not “to” him. Often he registers her words as nothing but noise, and he fears that Kerewin will turn into

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194 Menzies, “Four Responses to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse,“* 336
197 Hulme, *The Bone People,* 30
198 Ibid., 46
199 Ibid., 89
“a husk that babble[s].” Her way of speaking confuses Joe, too, who finds her strange and hard to relate to because of this, ‘‘[a]hh Kerewin, I don’t know… I need a dictionary to talk to you.’ He thinks, You bugger, you cold lady you.” However, Kerewin is miserably aware of this habit, ‘‘[w]ordplayer,’ she says sourly. ‘Mere quoter.’ Kerewin’s language, rather than communicating and bringing her closer to others, serves to alienate her.

To be fair, Kerewin does not merely consume European literature; she has acute knowledge of Maori traditions, too. She can speak Maori and is highly invested in Maori traditions and mythology. However, more often than not, her Maori identity becomes more of an ornament than anything; it is something that she carries upon her person, but is not completely part of her. Knudsen posits that Kerewin’s assimilation to European culture makes “her original culture […] reduced to artefact.” This is seen in the treasures that Kerewin hoards in her Tower, greenstones and jewels associated with Maori practices, and all the rings she wears on her fingers. Indeed, her Maori identity has become an object to her; it is removed from her interior to her exterior, where she can only wear it as adornment.

3.8 The compromised identity of the indigene: the hunting of the snark

Kerewin’s problem lies in that she is caught in between two cultural identities and does not feel like she has a proper place in either: she is experiencing a kind of cultural schizophrenia. This split in identity is seen quite clearly in the text; Kerewin talks to herself in the third person, as if there were two of her. She often refers to this inner self as the “snark.” “We did wake in a bad mood didn’t we? says the snark. Just because we got carelessly drunk and burned ourselves, we start taking swipes at our near and dear friends.” This may simply be a wry comment on Kerewin’s admittedly snarky nature, but it is likely that the snark is meant to allude to C.S. Lewis imaginary animal by the same

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200 Hulme, The Bone People, 89  
201 Ibid., 238  
202 Ibid., 113  
204 Or ‘double binds of assimilation,’ as coined by Abdul JanMohamed.  
205 Hulme, The Bone People, 338
name, invented in his poem *The Hunting of the Snark*. The nature of Kerewin’s inner self, then, may be inferred by the name which she has chosen to give it: clearly, she experiences part of herself to be some kind of elusive creature, hard to reach, hard to capture. By referring to her inner self as a snark, she clearly views the “hunt” for a complete self a hopeless endeavour, because the snark can never be captured. The double meaning of this word is affirmed later when Kerewin says, “I paint pictures for a living and hunt snarks for a hobby.” Kerewin is engaged in a never-ending hunt for her self, which may or may not turn out successful.

The act of hunting for her other self is connected to Kerewin’s art, which is not so strange considering that, as an artist, much of her identity and self-worth is tied up with her ability to create. She brags that she used to be able to “capture a soul in painting” and laments that she is no longer capable of this. However, there is a moment in which she seemingly succeeds:

“She works with charcoal, every shade of black bearing across the white paper. […] quite suddenly, near the oily-looking smudge, she has captured something. […] The red becomes an encroaching fungus that spreads gradually but with terrible sureness to the thing that whines and wriggles and can’t get out from between the prisoning chasms that bite down to it like knives.”

This way of capturing a soul is described in a rather disturbing manner. The figure is whining and wriggling, trapped in a chasm that bites into it. It is a gruesome, unsettling picture Kerewin has made, and yet it fills her with glee, “[a]nother real thing! I am not dead yet! I can still call forth a piece of soul and set it down in colour, fixed forever….”

It is not clear, exactly, whose soul is being trapped, it could very well be a depiction of Simon, but it seems likely that it is Kerewin herself. It expresses the desire to capture part of herself in her creations, so that she can be “fixed forever.” This desire may stem from the feeling of never truly having a stable identity as a mixed-race individual. Identity is, of course, “not something fixed and stable; it is a process that will never lead to completion.” This fundamental instability of identity, however, is far more severe for the racialised subject, arguably even more so for the mixed-race subject.

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207 Rosemary Jackson writes of the snark, saying that it cannot be represented, since it is “[a] thing without signifier and a signifier without object.” (*Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, 144). If that is the case, then Kerewin’s situation seems dire.

208 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 526

209 Ibid., 88, 90

210 Ibid., 91

211 Bertens, *Literary Theory: The Basics*, 135
3.9 Mirrortalk

The split in Kerewin’s identity becomes even more overt in the chapter “Mirrortalk,” where she sits down in front of a mirror to have a conversation with her own reflection. It is a direct confrontation with her fragmented self:

“‘Hi me. I shall converse with thee. There is nobody near so fluent, so full of shining wit. You know the right things to say, to titillate me, to appall. I shall assure thee, give me praise, comfort… no end of good it’ll do, talking to a mirrored me.’”

This conversation, or korero (conversation), is prompted by a growing anxiety about Kerewin’s relationship to Joe and Simon; it is an attempt to communicate with “the self beyond self,” in the hope of reaching a better understanding about her identity and what role she wants to play in the lives of Joe and Simon—who is she, and who is she to Joe and Simon? To Kerewin’s disappointment, and fear, this conversation leads nowhere, as “[h]er voice raps into silence.” What she wants is reassurance, praise, and comfort, but she is only faced with silence, for there is no answer from the mirror, and the snark is uncommonly quiet. “In the uneasy light, she can just see her reflection. ‘Was it thee or me who spake?’ Silence. ‘Musta been me.’” She asserts that, “there is nobody near so fluent,” and that she “know[s] the right things to say,” but here, in the meeting with herself, language fails her for the first time. It is proof that, the language she has cultivated and relied upon for protection has ultimately served, not only to alienate her from others, but from her very self. The failure of communication starkly exposes Kerewin’s fragmented nature; where she hoped to experience a connection, there is none—she is cut off from herself.

At that moment, she recalls a rather ominous fear Joe told her about having as a child, “‘I used to get afraid that I’d look up into the mirror and see nothing there.’ And, ‘I had this nightmare eh. One day, I’d look into the mirror and somebody else would be looking back out my face.’” That is the end of the attempted “mirrortalk,” as the recollection has Kerewin turning the mirror away. The fear that Joe describes here is related to Joe and Kerewin’s racialised identities. Growing up in a Pakeha society, where their cultural heritage is slowly deteriorating, they both feel as if they have lost part of

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212 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 334
213 Ibid., 334–335
214 Ibid., 334
215 Ibid., 335
216 Ibid., 334
themselves, that their “Maoritanga [Maoriness] has got lost in the way [they] live.”

On the one hand, it is the fear of losing one’s corporality, one’s substance as a human being; being erased and unseen as an indigenous individual—essentially becoming a ghost. On the other hand, it is the fear of aping the coloniser’s culture to such a degree that one loses part of oneself, one’s indigenous identity, so that one turns into someone that one can no longer recognise—a mimic man, or an uncanny double.

Following Lacan’s notions of identity formation, a child’s subjectivity is formed in the mirror stage, where the self is constructed in opposition to the others that it perceives. Via the mirror stage, the child is brought from the Imaginary into the Symbolic, or the Real, which is governed by language. But whose language? The Maori language was not officially recognised in New Zealand before 1987 (two years after The Bone People was published), a result of incessant campaigning by Maori activists. Since 1903, schoolchildren had been prohibited from using the language in school. In 1930/31, however, the New Zealand Federation of Teachers proposed the introduction of Maori language in schools, but it was blocked by the Director of Education, who was of the opinion that, “the natural abandonment of the native tongue involves no loss to the Māori.” The elder that Joe meets towards the end of the narrative tells him about his childhood, illustrating the consequences of these policies:

“I’d been brought up to speak English. I even thought in English. I still can… they spoke Maori on the farm sometimes, but they were no longer Maori. They were husks, aping the European manners and customs. Maori on the outside, with none of the heart left. One cannot blame them. Maori were expected to become Europeans in those days. It was thought that the Maori could not survive, so the faster they become Europeans the better for everyone, nei?"

Much of this can be recognised in Joe and Kerewin, too. Both feeling like they have lost the indigenous part of themselves to their Pakeha ways of life. Notably, the fact that the both of them can speak the Maori language is uncommon for the time they grew up, as they would not have received schooling in it, making the two of them anomalies. However, as a result of the suppression of the Maori language, it was in serious danger of dying out in the 1970s, and had low status even among Maori people.

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217 Hulme, The Bone People, 76
219 “Education for Māori: Context for our proposed audit work until 2017.”
220 Ibid.
221 Hulme, The Bone People, 434
It was the achievement of Maori activist group Ngā Tamatoa that saw the introduction of Maori language in schools during the 1970s, as well as the following language act of 1987. 223 “If to choose a language is to choose a world, then being denied a language is being denied a world,” 224 writes Merata Mita. The Maori world has thus been denied in favour of the Pakeha world. Moving from the mirror stage into the Real in which the English language governs and the Maori language is denied, signifies a loss of the Maori language and of the Maori world:

“Ngā Tamatoa realised that if the language was lost, we have lost our Māoritanga. We would have no knowledge of our history, our legends or our genealogy. It is our link with our ancestors, our past and all its glories and tragedies. In fact, we would have no knowledge of our culture, since it is the language which makes our culture intelligible.” 225

Language is intimately tied up with culture and history, and subsequently identity, which means that, to be brought up in Pakeha society, entering into the Pakeha Real rather than the Maori Real, happens with a sense of loss of one’s self. Moreover, the indigenous individual is brought into a world that does not accept them, it is a world that tells them that they do not belong, yet provides no other alternative of being. The feeling of loss and of an unstable identity is therefore not so peculiar for those of Maori descent; indeed it seems to be an experience intrinsic to the indigenous individual living in a postcolonial society. For the indigene, then, identity formation is more precarious.

Ultimately, Kerewin’s fluency in the English language can never give her the confirmation and consolation that she craves; instead it is a testament to how the Pakeha world has denied the Maori, and thus her Maori identity. Therefore, since the “mirrortalk” is conducted in English, it does not succeed in reinforcing Kerewin’s sense of identity, it cannot merge her Maori self with her Pakeha self, it merely serves to prove her fragmented being.

3.10 A case of self-haunting

Moreover, Kerewin keeps a diary, which she refers to as her “paper ghost” and her “paper soul,” further reinforcing this notion of a separate self—a self that is as vulnerable as paper, and what is more, ghostly. It appears that Kerewin is haunted by herself. Much like a ghost haunting a house, Kerewin’s soul haunts her body, making it unhomely—literally

224 Mita, “Indigenous Literature in a Colonial Society,” 310
225 Syd Jackson, “The First Language,” 215
uninhabitable, as she falls ill and starts to deteriorate. This recalls Angela Carter’s short story “The Lady of the House of Love,” a modern Gothic text, featuring a vampiric countess:

“She herself is a haunted house. She does not possess herself; her ancestors sometimes come and peer out of the windows of her eyes and that is very frightening. She has the mysterious solitude of ambiguous states; she hovers in a no-man’s land between life and death, sleeping and waking.”

The connection between house and body is here made clear; the woman is not like a haunted house, she is a haunted house. It is her ancestors that haunt her—her past and their past combined. She exists in an ambiguous state between life and death, in limbo. This is startlingly similar to Kerewin’s situation. Kerewin is also troubled by her past, haunted by her insecurities and the family members she has severed ties with. She, too, is deteriorating physically, just like Carter’s countess and the home she lives in. Furthermore, Kerewin exists, too, in a no-man’s land between two cultures, and, as she perceives it, her gender and sexual orientation are placed somewhere in this no man’s land as well.

Writer of modern Gothic fictions Carmen Maria Machado, who cites Carter as one of her sources of inspiration, states in an interview that:

“Bodies are terrifying; they’re powerful and fragile, bloody and imperfect, uncanny, impressionable vehicles that carry our minds from birth until death. And of course they’re inherently haunted. Haunting is a kind of impression; a lingering effect from a physical act like a shoeprint or a cloud of perfume left in the air. In the same way, bodies carry trauma and choices of our ancestors. Our DNAs are blueprints of the past.”

The idea that bodies can carry trauma over generations is particularly interesting, especially in relation to the fundamental principle of whakapapa, or genealogy, in Maori culture. Tipene O’Regan writes:

“One’s personal kinship network is part of oneself. Kinship involves ancestors, and both ancestors and kin relationships are stated in whakapapa. I and my tribe are the present expression of our tūpuna [ancestors] and the source of our uri, our descendants. We are both past and future, as well as ourselves. The whakapapa that ties me to my tūpuna is also the structure that orders my history and that of my people. It is the conduit that carries their spiritual force—their wairua—to me in the present and by which I pass it forward to future generations. It carries the ultimate expression of

227 Judith Halberstam also makes the connection between identity, body, and the haunted house in Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters, particularly in her reading of The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, in which she finds Jekyll’s split identity to be mirrored in the fractured house in which he resides, (Judith Halberstam, Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters. Duke University Press, 1995), 75–76)
<https://hazlitt.net/feature/being-woman-inherently-uncanny-interview-carmen-maria-machado>
who I am. […] My tūpuna may be dead but they are also in me and I am alive. To know them you must know me! […] It says that my past is not a dead thing to be examined on the post-mortem bench of science without my consent and without an effective recognition that I and my whakapapa are alive and kicking.”

As stated here, the whakapapa stands for a connection to the past deeply important to Maori people. However, this “haunting” is not unwanted and frightening, as in the case of Carter’s countess, instead it is an integral part of the individual that connects them to their ancestors and the history of their people. The concept of the whakapapa tells us something imperative about the Maori understanding of time and history; the past is not a far away, impersonal territory; rather it is extremely personal and immediate. The individual is spiritually connected to their ancestors and thereby their ancestors’ experiences, thus history is very much alive in the body of the individual—they embody both past and future. This is in alignment with Machado’s comment above, how bodies can carry trauma over generations, how the impressions of the past linger in the body of the individual. This is true for Kerewin, Joe, and Simon, who all experience degrees of hauntedness.

3.11 “But what to call that sport, the neuter human?”

Contributing to Kerewin’s disturbance is the issue of her gender. She does not feel like a woman; the way that she describes her gender can be recognised as a non-binary gender identity. Kerewin is male/female/neither, but is referred to as “she” throughout the novel. She never corrects anyone on their use of pronouns, however, and thus seems content to navigate the world with female pronouns. Still, she is unsure of how to explain her gender identity, “[m]aybe not lady. But what to call that sport, the neuter human?” She repeatedly refers to herself as “neuter,” which comes from Latin, meaning “neither.” Essentially, she defines her gender through negation. However, later on she reveals her own invention of pronouns, “[a]nd stop calling it ‘it’: yer got yer one great invention, remember Holmes? The neuter personal pronoun; ve/ver/vis, I am not his, vis/ve/ver, nor am I for her, ver/vis/ve, a pronoun for me…” This illustrates Kerewin’s will to invent and shape language to her needs, but it also reveals that she is still struggling with the process of relabeling, having to remind herself not to default to ‘it’ when faced with

230 Hulme, The Bone People, 118
232 Hulme, The Bone People, 517
individuals of indeterminate gender—this is also the only place in the novel, quite late at
that, where this invention is referred to.

It is interesting how Kerewin has felt the need to invent brand new pronouns for
herself instead of using the gender neutral singular “they,” which would be readily
available to her. The use of “they” may not have been a common practice, however, in
1980s New Zealand, compared to its status as of today. The absence of such a pronoun
might, indeed, explain why Kerewin has felt the need to invent her own, closer to the
gender identity that she is experiencing.

In the same way that Kerewin invents and creates, displayed here is Kerewin’s will
to reinvent and restructure language. A great concern of the novel is to re-label, to find a
more fitting language to describe the reality in which the characters find themselves. This
re-naming or re-labelling is also relevant in regards to Simon and his gender identity.
Writing in her diary towards the end, about her plans to rebuild, Kerewin notes that one of
the first steps is to, “[I]learn to label with new names, for a small start.” For she has
found the stones that Simon collected during their stay at Kerewin’s family bach, “[a]nd
did he arrange them in six inch capitals, CLARE WAS HE?” Simon’s secret name
“Clare” is thus revealed to Kerewin. Simon’s hidden identity hails from his traumatic past,
it is a part of him that he cannot easily articulate or embrace, but here he has asserted his
identity, with the self-assurance that, “[t]hey won’t know. They won’t know…” Missing
the stones for the last two letters, the intended “here” becomes “he.” The message can be
understood as, “he was Clare,” but not anymore, that Clare belongs to the past and that
Simon has left Clare behind. However, this does not seem to be the case, as Simon
continues to refer to himself as Clare after this moment. Therefore, Simon both is and was
Clare; the stone message is an acknowledgement of his other self, not an abjection.

In Kerewin’s diary, the statement becomes an interrogative, a questioning of the
chosen pronoun, “Clare was he?” According to Judith Halberstam, “[s]ecret selves, in
Gothic, denote sexual secrets, secrets of the closet, more often than not.” Simon’s secret
self may thus be an indicator of his identification as female, as with the name Clare, which
is traditionally understood as a female name. Just like Kerewin is often confused for a
man, Simon is similarly confused for a girl because of his clothing, his long hair, and the

233 Keri Hulme, *The Bone People*, 528, author’s italics
234 Ibid., author’s italics
235 Ibid., 313
71
jewellery he sometimes wears, prompting strangers to inquire if he’s, “…a boy or a girl?”

He does not perform his gender according to the norm, which causes hostile reactions from some. A potential foster parent, for example, is extremely affronted by Simon’s attire, “…the one who smells like a two-bit whore? The one with the hippy jewellery? […] Struth, he looks like a proper little queer, untidy hair and scruffy jeans and all that muck on him.”

These are words that reveal intense misogyny and homophobia both, as well as the unease that gender non-conformity is able to instil in others. Joe’s violence towards Simon is, too, in part due to his fears about Simon turning out to be homosexual. Simon, however, refuses to conform despite the suffering it causes him. After Kerewin’s discovery, she writes, “It occurred to me while I watched the stone words blur, that I’d never asked him what he called himself. Just, what do they call you?”

She shows acceptance of Simon’s/Clare’s (gender) identity and the will to accommodate her language to his experience. Indeed, in the epilogue he is referred to as Simon Clare, meaning that his secret self is now known and accepted. Simon’s past and present selves have merged, making him whole. The rebuilding entails a reconsideration of names and pronouns in order to make room for a diverse family of individuals, no matter how they choose to present themselves.

Returning to the term “neuter,” it may also indicate a person who is asexual, which it is fair to assume that Kerewin is. Joe has noticed that she does not enjoy human contact and is puzzled by it. When he asks her about her love life, Kerewin explains, rather peeved:

“…I’ve never been attracted to men. Or women. Or anything else. It’s difficult to explain, and nobody has ever believed it when I have tried to explain, but while I have an apparently normal female body, I don’t have any sexual urge or appetite. I think I am a neuter.”

Joe claims to understand and accept this explanation, however, the text makes it clear that this is not the case. His uneasiness about Kerewin’s sexuality, or in his view lack thereof, is revealed in the way he sees her, as a strange, uncanny person. At one point he describes her like this:

“She is standing now at the far seaward end of the reef, on a black tongue of rock. A strange person in blue denims, sometimes obscured by mist from the waves that explode like geysers in the blowhole. She looks tense and desperately unhappy. Like she’s at war with herself. Like a sword

237 Hulme, The Bone People, 298
238 Ibid., 488
239 Ibid., author’s italics
240 Ibid., 323
wearing itself out on its sheath. She doesn’t look like a woman at all. Hard and taut, someone of the past or future, an androgyne. She hasn’t moved from the rocks there for ten minutes. Still as a rock herself.”

It is significant how Joe sees her as “a rock.” In his eyes, she appears inhuman and inanimate, cold and hard. Since Kerewin has explained to him how she does not experience sexual desire, she seems “still as a rock,” something that is insentient and unfeeling—she loses her humanity. The mist that obscures Kerewin illustrates how Joe sees her nature as elusive as well as signifying Joe’s failure to truly comprehend her. He recognises her as an “androgyne,” meaning that she does not perform her assigned gender very well, falling somewhere in between the accepted binary. It is interesting how her being of indeterminate gender makes her seem timeless, “someone of the past or future, an androgyne.” This may, yet again, connect her to the monster, as some critics have pointed out the connection between monstrousness and timelessness, “[d]rawing on Nicholas Moseley’s *Hopeful Monsters* du Gay explains that monsters are those who have not yet found their time or those not quite ready for the world.”

Once more, the liminality associated with the monster may be recognised. Kerewin’s gender identity, and sexuality, renders her, in Joe’s eyes, unstuck from time. Since the monster does not fit into current categories, they are perceived as not belonging—thus from a different time and/or place, they are always unknowable and alien. Kerewin’s seemingly human appearance yet lack of drive and feeling, may also align her with the automaton, an uncanny archetype, as outlined in Freud’s “The Uncanny,” and appearing, besides, as a favourite in many Gothic texts.

Despite Kerewin’s best efforts to explain her asexuality to Joe, he struggles to accept it. Even after her explanation, she remains “Kerewin the stony,” and “Kerewin the icy,” and “Kerewin the iron lady.” Her asexuality makes him uncomfortable because it is unfathomable to him how a human being can lack sexual urge. Kerewin is lacking something that he perceives to be fundamental to human experience and essential to any romantic relationship; it interferes with the way he wants to envision her, or, how he wants to envision the two of them together. If she is a monster, then they cannot be together:

“Sometimes she seems ordinary. She is lonely. She drinks like I do, to keep away the ghosts. She’s an outsider, like me. And then, sometimes, she seems inhuman… like this Tower is inhuman. Comfortable to be in, pleasant, if you ignore the toadstools in the walls, and the little trees and

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241 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 228
glowworms in holes by the stairs, and the fact that nobody else in New Zealand lives in a Tower… maybe I’ve got it all wrong.”

Again, Kerewin and the Tower are equated. Joe can only accept her if he can ignore her monstrousness, the toadstools and the glowworms in the walls. Because, if he cannot, then Kerewin’s monstrous liminal position will inhibit him from making her into his other, and thus affirming his masculinity and heterosexuality, parts of his identity that he is struggling to come to terms with. Joe’s attraction to Kerewin makes him even more insecure, because her identifying with a non-binary gender queers Joe’s sexuality in a way that he is uncomfortable with, despite the fact that he has been in a queer relationship before. He displays a deep wish to relate to Kerewin, but he fears that, even if they do share a few similarities, Kerewin is wholly different from him, hence “maybe I’ve got it all wrong….”

To Joe, Kerewin seems to fluctuate between being human and inhuman, male and female, and this uncertainty plagues him. He wants to envision a relationship and a family with her, and thus cannot readily accept or believe what Kerewin has told him about her sexuality, as it is not compatible with his vision of love and family. This gives rise to objectifying reflections such as, “[a]h God, sweet Jesus, look at her… leanwristed, leanankled, but strong thickhipped body, ripe for bearing children no matter what she says… Lord, I could have more children by her…”

However, as Joe sheds his colonial trappings, and is able to perceive other ways of being, he accepts Kerewin for who she is, allowing them to form a family.

3.12 The horrific re-making of the human subject

Kelley Hurley writes that, “Gothic in particular has been theorized as an instrumental genre, remerging cyclically, at periods of cultural stress, to negotiate the anxieties that accompany social and epistemological transformations and crises.” Hurley writes specifically about fin de siècle Gothic, and although it is obvious that the anxieties of late-Victorian and the early Edwardian era are of an entirely different calibre than those belonging to 1970/80s New Zealand, here too, society was undergoing a period that must be described as one of cultural stress, particularly for Maori people. The Bone People was written over the course of 12 years, during a time when Maori activism was on the rise,

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243 Hulme, The Bone People, 124
244 Ibid., 359
aiming to save the Maori culture and language from dying, as well as securing a better education and future for Maori children. The 1970/80s was therefore a crucial moment for the reassertion of Maori identity and culture.

“Out of this sense of desperation and urgency came Te Kōhanga Reo, a concept of language rescue […] [which] sought to nurture the children in an environment which was based on Māori values and to immerse them in language which was exclusively Māori.”

Maori children and their parents were thus given the opportunity to (re)connect with their language and their culture. In The Bone People we see the indigenous anxieties reflected in Joe and Kerewin, their insecurities about their Maori identity, both feeling as if they have lost an important part of themselves, and feeling as if they do not belong. Hurley states that the fin de siècle Gothic was “a genre centrally concerned with the horrific re-making of the human subject,” and in a similar way, The Bone People is concerned with remaking, although it is the remaking and rebirth of the human Maori individual who is standing on the cusp of a momentous personal and societal change.

Hurley maintains that the Gothic is a productive genre, that it is “a highly speculative art form, one part of whose cultural work is the invention of new representational strategies by which to imagine human (or not so-human) realities.” I am of the same opinion. In the investigation of the fragmented, monstrous minds and bodies of Joe, Kerewin, and Simon, The Bone People does not conclude that they do not belong or that their healing is impossible. Although damaged, they are able to become something new. The narrator declares that, “all together, they have become the heart and muscles and mind of something perilous and new, something strange and growing and great. Together, all together, they are the instruments of change.” The three of them have undergone a remaking, they have transformed into some new kind of creature, a new kind of monster, which is “strange and growing and great.” Indeed, the way the novel explores this remaking is horrific and not at all harmonious; it does not imply that a remaking will be easy and without pain, quite the opposite. They are still growing, meaning that they have yet to reach their final form. They may not be ready for the world, and the world may not ready for them. The monster thus heralds a new age, or perhaps its failure—regardless, a new age is approaching. Ultimately, The Bone People tells of how

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246 Smith, “From ‘Māori Education – A Reassertion,’” 219
247 Hurley, The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle, 5
248 Ibid.
249 Hulme, The Bone People, 4
the monster can facilitate change. It does not say whether they are successful, but it outlines the first few steps towards rebuilding and a reimagi-Nation.
4 The structuring spiral

“The structuring spiral

“New marae from the old marae, a beginning from the end. His mind weaves it into a spiral fretted with stars.”

- Keri Hulme, The Bone People

4.1 The spiral as a home, the novel as a home

The Bone People ends thus, “TE MUTUNGA – RAINEI TE TAKE”\(^{250}\) meaning, “the end – or the beginning”\(^{251}\). It points back, or ahead, to the prologue named “The End At The Beginning.” The prologue consists of a set of short prose poems, wherein Joe, Kerewin, and Simon are already together, thus giving the novel a circular narrative. Indeed, the circle and the spiral are key concepts that inform the structure of the novel as well as the reading of it. Therefore, this chapter will attempt to show way in which the spiral works. The spiral, as has been discussed briefly before, is of great importance in Maori tradition and religious belief. Eva Rask Knudsen explains:

““The koru [spiral] design denotes eternity and reflects a perspective on space similar to what is found in Aboriginal art: the world inhabited – and the artistic vision of it – embraces not one centre, but a multitude of centres. In visualizing the principles of expansion and contraction, the spiral is a symbol of the Māori notion of moving on towards the point of departure. The spiral has no natural beginning or end, no uniform centre and periphery; these are in fact interchangeable [sic] – they ‘flow into each other’ [...]”\(^{252}\)

Similarly, the narrative of The Bone People defies a natural beginning and a natural end, instead the two “flow into each other,” as it were. This implies that the events of the novel, simultaneously, have already transpired and have yet to transpire. As Knudsen says, in Aboriginal and Maori belief, the world and the artistic rendition of it, contains a multitude of centres, an idea that may be seen reflected in the way time in The Bone People circles back on itself, how the rendition of a particular event may first be provided in a sparse manner, or, as if often the case, merely alluded to, only for the narrative to return to the event later in order to fill in the gaps that have been left out. It makes up a spiral consisting of many centres flowing into each other. Moreover, it illustrates how a continuous return to past events is required to build a better understanding of history, that the past has to be

\(^{250}\) Hulme, The Bone People, 540

\(^{251}\) Ibid., 546

revisited and interrogated in order to fill the gaps in the historical narratives written. Time, then, in *The Bone People*, does not follow what is perceived to be the “natural” linear flow associated with the realist tradition of the West; rather, it ascribes to a cyclical understanding of time.

The spiral does not only order the narrative, it is also a tool that the characters utilise in different ways: for Simon it is a structuring principle in the building of his music hutches, for Kerewin it is also a structuring principle in the building of the Tower, as well as the later shell house, and is besides a useful thought-focus for her. In Maori tradition, the spiral is connected to the void yet also to creation. Knudsen writes:

“In a specific Māori sense, the void is the novel’s most crucial foundation, however contradictory this may sound, and it acts as a latent frame of reference for an understanding of its ambiguities. If the symbol of the spiral, and the novel’s vision of a spiralling advance into light, may tentatively be said to evolve from anywhere, it is from the void… So while the English word ‘void’ has only a negative ring, Te Kore [the void of potential being] … is an unbiased and productive term.”

The movement of the spiral accounts for, together with its Gothic and postcolonial persuasions, *The Bone People*’s many ambiguities. Furthermore, what Knudsen writes about the void and the Maori understanding of it as a productive term rather than a negative one, is crucial for the reading of the novel. This positive understanding of the void is echoed in Kerewin’s own reflection on the meaning of the spiral:

“The floor at her feet was an engraved double-spiral, one of the kind that wound your eyes round and round into the centre where surprise you found the beginning of another spiral that led your eyes out again to the nothingness of the outside. Or the somethingness: she had never quite made her mind up as to what a nothingness was. Whatever way you defined it, it seemed to be something […] It was reckoned that the old people found inspiration for the double spirals they carved so skilfully, in uncurling fernfronds: perhaps. But it was an old symbol of rebirth, and the outward-inward nature of things….”

The void, the nothingness, is a *somethingness*. The void, from which the spiral springs, houses potential; it is an opportunity, not a lack. Anything can be created from this void, it is thus a space of (re)birth and (re)imagination.

In the prologue, where Kerewin and her Tower are introduced, she claims that her decision to build a tower is “chiefly because she like[s] spiral stairways.” The spiral is thus the point of departure from which the Tower springs; from the spiral Kerewin builds a home. However, despite using the spiral as a basis, Kerewin is not equipped at this point to create a homely abode. The Tower is not a fit body for the spiral, because it does not allow

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254 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 54, 55
255 Ibid., 8
it to expand and evolve, the spiral becomes “the narrow haunted stairs that twist[s] upon themselves, like the inside of a corkscrew.”\textsuperscript{256} Compare that to the spiralling shell house in the epilogue, which “holds them all in its spiralling embrace,”\textsuperscript{257} a home that is “a regular spiral of rooms expanding around the decapitated Tower… privacy, apartness, but all connected and all part of the whole.”\textsuperscript{258} The stairs of the Tower are twisting upon themselves, as if contracting in agony, mirroring Kerewin’s suffering, whereas the shell house is expanding, it is breathing and full of life.

This privacy and interconnectedness is seen reflected in the text, with it’s interweaving of Joe’s, Kerewin’s, and Simon’s perspectives, and thereby their respective voices. The rich language of the novel, its use of both English and Maori, of local dialects and slang, of high and low language, prose and poetry, of fleeting internal monologues and wordplay, to the derivative sign language of Simon, is an expression of the three of them together and of the society they belong to, as well as the past, present, future in which they exist, making it an elaborately heteroglossic text. Merata Mita has high praise for Hulme’s language, and she finds the polyphonic nature of the text to be particularly Maori:

“The writer has control and uses words at will and however she chooses, to create word images that flood the mind with obtuse and explicit messages. These messages are read and are heard as seductive whispers, soothing lullabies, laments, cries of anguish, shouts of anger, and embody the loving, living, hating and dying of a time, a place, a land, a people and a language – all Māori. These messages call us to our roots, to our culture, to our history, to our oral tradition, to our mother tongue […] the bone people is the finest example of several voices speaking at once and among them is the plaintive voice of our tūpuna [ancestors], waiting to be heard again through the taonga [treasure] they left in each of us – the Māori language.”\textsuperscript{259}

Mita finds that the text expresses a multitude of voices, not only those of Kerewin, Joe, and Simon, but those of the past as well. Their ancestors gain expression through the three of them, thus their voices can be heard in the present—this both literally and figuratively.

When Kerewin wakes up, healed from her illness, she hears a disembodied chant:

“She wakes with a start, peering into the red eyes of the coals…

who said that?

Haere mai!
Nau mai!
Haere mai!

an earthdeep bass, a sonorous rolling call that reverberates still in my gut. Getting up cautiously, her skin feeling pleasantly tight and new, sniffing the plant-sweet air.

\textsuperscript{256} Hulme, \textit{The Bone People}, 89
\textsuperscript{257} Ibid., 537
\textsuperscript{258} Ibid., 527, author’s italics
\textsuperscript{259} Mita, “Indigenous Literature in a Colonial Society,” 313–314
What Kerewin hears is a formal chant of welcome. As she returns to the land of the living, it is her ancestors that greet her; their voices reverberating through the land, through time, and through Kerewin’s body—it is intimate, immediate, and physical. The fact that Kerewin’s Maori ancestors are the ones to welcome her back is of immense importance; the chant serves to confirm both Kerewin’s indigenous identity and her place in this world. The style that Hulme employs is an attempt at fusing the voices of the past with the voices of the present, showing how they are connected through language, and thus facilitates the securing of an indigenous identity through language. As language is a direct link to the past, preserving the Maori language becomes crucial for a stable indigenous identity to form.

Similarly, the interconnectedness between individuals is seen in the shift of perspective. When Kerewin, Joe, and Simon are together, they are all allowed to speak and think interchangeably. At times the perspective shifts rapidly between the three of them; Kerewin may begin the narration of a scene, but Joe and Simon’s thoughts will always be included, and more often than not, the perspective will change. This is an example of how the text shifts from one point of view to the other; it shares the thoughts and impressions of the characters involved both directly and indirectly as there is a rapid shifting between the extradiegetic and the diegetic level:

“Lay off, Holmes. He can’t call out, he can’t see you, he’s doubtless doing his feeble best, and he’s a nice child, most of the time.

The nice chid is now standing still, shivering, looking down the long dark noisy stretch of beach.

O Kerewin, where are you? I wish I could

he swallows hard.

[…]
‘Easy does it,” she says, and lifts him upwards. “God, Sim, how much do you weigh? I have more trouble with fish…”

He doesn’t know. He’s not even interested. He’s more inclined to wonder where he is, where they are, but how to ask?

Kerewin is still tching to herself over his frailty. Beneath her arms he feels slight and breakable, ribs a brittle cage for his heart, neck a thin stalk for the hair to depend on. Yet you’re a tough little bastard for all that, or you’d never have got to be this old.

‘Hard to talk in the dark, eh?’

Yeah.”

260 Hulme, The Bone People, 518
261 Ibid., 205
As seen in this excerpt, the thoughts are often indented to show that they unambiguously belong to the internal monologue of a specific character, but this is not always the case, as the narrative frequently adopts a free indirect discourse, merging the narrator with the character in question, along with direct discourse/thoughts. In this way, the private interior of the individual at times remains separate, while it may also bleed into the extradiegetic level, where multiple character voices may meet, gaining expression through indirect discourse. Consequently, the novel realises the spiral’s separateness and interconnectedness in its style of narration, becoming a place where the voices of several individuals entwine to create a private, yet communal space, mirroring the shell house of the epilogue.

At the foundation of the shell house, lies a tricephalos (three sided head) of clay that Kerewin has sculpted, depicting Kerewin, Joe, and Simon, together as an entity—as one creature:

“The hair of their heads is entwined at the top in a series of spirals. Simon’s hair curves back from his neck to link Kerewin and Joe to him. […] Round and round, and with each circumambulation, the faces become more alive.”

The clay figure is fired when Kerewin burns the remains of the Tower before her departure. The burning of the Tower is necessary for the healing to begin, for a rebirth. As Kerewin places the clay figure in the pyre, likening it to the egg of a phoenix, she wonders, “who knows what will rise if it hatch?” The Tower is destroyed and the tricephalos is complete; the destruction of the Tower, a symbol of Kerewin’s festering individualism, makes it possible for Kerewin to re-join society once she has healed—it is a new being/beginning. The Tower is transformed into the spiralling shell house, which is a place for family and community—a home that connects every individual.

4.2 The spiral as time and history

As established, the narrative of the *The Bone People* is circular, it does not follow the traditional linear form associated with Western realist literature, with a clear beginning and a clear end. The irregularity of time is to be found on several levels. First, it can be found in the way the tense changes, at times seemingly at random. For the most part, the text is

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262 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 383
263 Ibid., 389
narrated in the present tense, but every now and again, the tense changes to the past, for example here, when Kerewin discovers Simon’s sandal:

“In the dust at her feet is a sandal. […] It’s rather smaller than her hand, old and scuffed, with the position of each toe palely upraised in the leather. The stitching of the lower strap was coming undone, and the buckle hung askew. […] She frowns.”

Here, the narration moves from present, to past, then back to the present. It shifts to the past tense only for a sentence, before it resumes its path in the present. The past tense is employed here in the appraisal of Simon’s sandal, indeed, looking back at Simon’s sandal. This is a recollection rendered within the present, as it is, in fact, a recollection made by Kerewin in the future, quite possibly occurring as she sketches the sandal later that same day. The use of the past tense here, serves to point ahead, connecting it to the future. In the same way as the spiral, this snippet of the past directs our attention to “the beginning of another spiral that [leads] [our] eyes out again to the nothingness of the outside. Or the somethingness.” The past weaves itself into the narrative almost seamlessly; its thread tells us that if we follow it, there is significance connected to this sandal, a “nothingness,” because Kerewin has yet to learn it, and a “somethingness” because Kerewin in the future already knows the immense impact of this sandal.

The shifting of tense is also employed at times to illustrate how the respective characters relate to and operate within time. For example in this instance, where Kerewin reflects on a coffee mill she stole from her family after their parting, while Simon looks on, “[s]he ran her hand lightly over the little machine, and talked loud nonsense to cover her pain. The child sits, his eyes hooded, and doesn’t make any response.” As Kerewin, steeped in regret, dwells on her past, her time changes, she becomes of the past, too. In fact, this sentence reveals much about Kerewin’s character: her obsession with the past, with objects/artefacts/heirlooms, and with language—indeed, her stasis. This quotation thus functions as a constant, it is a descriptor of Kerewin that could be reiterated at nearly any point in the text (not including the fourth, and last part, of the narrative) and it would ring true. Meanwhile, Simon exists in the present—severed from his past, he cannot dwell on it, or speak of it, even if he wanted to—and so he observes Kerewin in silence from afar.

Similarly, just as the past has a tendency to appear in the fabric of the narrative, the future, too, may come into view. As discussed above, future events may be glimpsed

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264 Hulme, The Bone People, 17–18, my italics
265 Ibid., 30, my italics
through the use of the past, they are also, however, brought to attention through foreshadowing. Joe, Kerewin, and Simon go fishing, and Kerewin wonders, “‘[… ] who knows what we’ll catch in the groper patch?’” to which the narrator promptly replies, “Simon’s thumb. It all goes sweetly until that happens.” Some peaceful moments of fishing ensues, all the while the impending event looms somewhere in the distant future.

Such an unambiguous foreshadowing as this is uncharacteristic of the narrative, as it rather opts to open sudden unannounced rifts in the text so that the reader must grope blindly for a moment before being supplied with the matter that has been removed. The event of Joe and Kerewin’s fight, for example, has already found place when the reader learns about it. It is only alluded to at first, before it is related in its entirety a few pages later. Joe and Simon have a minor disagreement, and Simon refuses to join Joe and Kerewin for a walk. Kerewin suggests, “‘[l]eave him a note saying where we’ve gone, eh,’” Joe does leave a note, and after Kerewin has inquired, “‘[w]hat’s on it?’”, the tense changes from present to past, “[h]e’s folded it already, and slipped it into the doorcrack.” There is a sense of finality to it. Simon tearing up this note later is what instigates the fight. Illustrated here is the complex way in which the narrative merges the past and the present and the future:

“[Joe] shook his shoulders and breathed out hard. ‘I just worry [about Simon], that’s all.’ ‘Too much,’ she says blithely, ‘and watch your footing here.’ She began to run nimbly over the rocks.

Watch my footing, thinks Joe in the night. Watch my footing.
He murmurs it aloud, into his sleeping son’s ear.

Aue, what a day.
But it’s over now.
And with luck and no more troubles, we’re out of the woods,
hai,
sighing.
He whispers Ouch, for himself.
Kerewin the quick, she of the very fast very hard foot, sleeps soundlessly as always.”

The event of Joe slipping the note into the door crack is transformed in the moment of its happening into recollection, becoming fixed and final, a set up for the conflict that is to come. The tense changes again, briefly, as Kerewin’s warning for Joe to watch his footing

266 Hulme, The Bone People, 261
267 Ibid.
268 Ibid., 225
269 Ibid.
270 Ibid.
is related in the present. It appears that this is the present of future Joe bleeding into the past, as he recalls Kerewin’s warning, “Watch my footing, thinks Joe in the night.” Lying there, ruminating on their fight, the past moment now holds new significance, and so Kerewin’s words gain the immediate present tense in Joe’s recollection—it is as if he is transported back to that moment, watching it play out once more in his mind’s eye.

Thus the present of future Joe is weaved into time of his recollection, which again is weaved into the general present of the narrative. The details of the fight are left out because Joe is the one recalling it: the fight, which he lost, is a moment of shame and defeat he would rather not dwell on. Exemplified in here is the fluctuating nature of time, and how intimately the consciousness of each character is connected to the time of the narrative and how they choose, or choose not to, relate certain events. The text asserts that time is subjective, and that the perceptions of the people involved have a direct effect on the narrative of the story. There is also irony here, with Joe’s “[b]ut it is over now,” because it is not over, it is about to happen; thus it is proof of the prevailing nature of violence.

4.3 Time and the indigene

These gaps, although sudden and bewildering when they first appear, in actuality serve to meld the perceived distance between the past and the future. The non-linearity, the shift in tense, the spiralling circle, is a demonstration of the Maori perception of time. Tipene O’Regan writes:

“One can speculate interminably about what constituted the traditional Māori perception of history. The idea that ‘i mua’ can signify both that which is before one or in front, and ancient times, and that ‘i muri’ can signify both that which is behind and the future has captivated generations of scholars. There has developed a convention that the Māori conceptions of the past and future are in fact the reverse of Pākehā notions.”

The concurrence of past and future thus lies inherently in the Maori language. It is a perception of time that is at odds with Western beliefs. The concept of whakapapa (genealogy), as discussed earlier, ties the indigene physically and spiritually to the past and the history of their people, “[i]t carries both the past and the present and is the vehicle of [their] future.” In a way, the narrative of The Bone People works in a similar fashion. The past and the present come together, existing simultaneously in an intimate

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271 O’Regan, “Who Owns the Past? Change in Māori Perceptions of the Past,” 337
272 Ibid., 340
relationship, carrying the future, all within the indigene, not separate from them. The narrative thus displays a melding of past, present, and future, illustrating how time and history do not form a straight line, rather they exist as a circular spiralling form, an entity that lives within the indigenous body.

To illustrate further the relationship between time and the body of the indigene, is the phrase, “[e] nga iwi o nga iwi,” which comes to Simon, through the voice of Joe, while he is in hospital recovering from his injuries. Hulme explains that the phrase is a pun, meaning, “O the bones of the people (where ‘bones’ stands for ancestors or relations), or, O the people of the bones (i.e. the beginning people, the people who make another people).” Bones is synonymous with ‘ancestors,’ showing how the ancestors make up the very foundation of their bodies, and that the ancestors live on in them. The ancestors are the beginning people who make another people, who again will make yet another people. Simon hears Kerewin’s voice, too, whispering, “we are the waves of future chance,” echoing O’Regan’s words above about the present generation carrying the legacy of their people into the future, making it new. “The Bone People” is therefore “the beginning people.”

Like their ancestors, Kerewin, Joe, and Simon emerge from the void of potential being to recreate New Zealand society with help from the past. Jennifer Lawn finds that in some Maori texts, “[e]thnic identity becomes a function of memory work, the essentially political determination to listen to ghosts and incorporate their voice.” This is precisely what is shown to happen in The Bone People. As the three of them confront their dark past and go through “a stage of hauntedness” they are able to reconnect with the history of their people and their country, allowing them to form a stable identity. It is only when the characters finally meet with their past and their ancestors that their healing can begin. The subsequent rebuilding is an effort to make New Zealand homely again through historical consciousness and the decolonising of familiar constructions. In this way, the indigene may be able to feel at home both in their body and in the nation.

273 Hulme, The Bone People, 479
274 Ibid., 546
275 Ibid., 479
4.4 A consideration of Gothic inversion

Bradford Morrow and Patrick McGrath, editors of the *New Gothic: A Collection of Contemporary Gothic Fiction*, claim that inversion is the Gothic’s structural principle. Gothic fictions have a tendency to subvert expectations; for example, *The Bone People* takes the traditional narrative of the jaded male artist living in seclusion, alienated from the world, himself, and his art, and provides instead the tale of a sequestered queer female artist; not a vampiric count in his mansion, but a beastly countess in her Tower, a home and a prison that no-one has forced her to occupy but herself. And yet it is not a cynical story: while treating themes of violence and fragmentation, *The Bone People* tells a story about love and family. Despite being a thoroughly disturbing novel, it embodies hope for a better future.

Gothic texts contain spaces where inversions can happen, “where terror and unreason subverted consensus and rationality, where passion was transformed into disgust, love turned to hatred and good engendered evil.” Inversion involves a rearrangement, a changing of positions, and this holds true for the passage of time in Gothic novels, too. McCallum, who interprets the strategy of inversion as a specifically queer one, writes that dislocation in time is a key aspect of the contemporary queer Gothic, that “slippages in time – between chapters as well as within a chapter through interwoven memory, dream, and fantasy,” is a Gothic strategy. Dislocation and non-linearity are thus traits characteristic of many Gothic narratives. This strategy of dislocation through memory, dream, and fantasy, as discussed at length above in relation to the spiral, can be found in *The Bone People*, as well. The question arises, however, whether or not it is appropriate to read this temporality as a result of the novel’s investment in the Gothic. Although non-linearity and slippages in time are Gothic characteristics, I am more inclined to relate the temporality featured in *The Bone People* to a particular Maori hermeneutics, as is reflected in the argument of this particular chapter. The politics of the novel as well as its structure are clearly informed by the Maori image of the spiral. Knudsen is of this belief too; she attributes the novel’s strategies to Maori hermeneutics rather than any Western tradition.

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278 Ibid.
279 McCallum, “The ‘queer limits’ in the modern Gothic,” 79
pointing out that, “[…] Māori cosmogony emphasizes an interrelatedness – a system of spiralling relations – rather than the contrariety of opposites.”

However, the concept of Gothic inversion is still useful when considering other aspects of the novel. McCallum invokes the figure of the pendulum to illustrate the fluctuations between light and darkness in the Gothic, asserting that duality is a key aspect of the genre. She writes that “[t]he conversion of light into darkness is just one swing of the Gothic’s pendulum of horror,” and that “we would do well to expect a return swing of the pendulum – or even a consistent, steady movement from one side to another.” This movement from one extreme to the other is prevalent in *The Bone People*, with its constant investment in duality and ambiguity. If this is a Gothic strategy, it would serve to explain the, perhaps, most interesting—and disturbing—dynamic in the novel, that of Joe and Simon. Their relationship is characterised by a constant movement between unconditional love on the one side and violent hatred on the other. Joe reflects, “I loved him too hard, hated him too much.” Although they clearly care about one another, the hate between the two is so strong that it nearly leads to the death of them both.

To interpret this movement as that of the Gothic pendulum would imply that “a return swing” into darkness is to be expected at the end of the novel. This return swing does not occur. It is possible, of course, that a return swing is on the horizon for Joe, Kerewin, and Simon sometime in the future, meaning that the harmony depicted in the epilogue will regress into darkness and violence once more. Indeed, many critics have been dissatisfied with the ending of the novel, finding it utopian, problematic, and unconvincing. The reconciliation that takes place at the end of the novel is unsettling—the violence perpetrated against Simon and the irreparable damage it has caused him, does not sit well with the reader—indeed, it haunts. Erin Mercer writes that the extraordinary success *The Bone People* was met with in the mid-1980s was indicative of a national desire for bicultural harmony so urgent that it was willing to ignore the immensely

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281 McCallum, “The ‘queer limits’ in the modern Gothic,” 77
282 Hulme, *The Bone People*, 461
283 Erin Mercer voices her doubts about the optimism at the novel’s conclusion, with Simon returning to Joe’s care, and whether or not Joe can be trusted to never act violently upon the child again (“’Frae ghosties an ghoulies deliver us’: Keri Hulme’s *the bone people* and the Bicultural Gothic,” 125). Merata Mita, although largely satisfied with the novel, also has reservations about the epilogue, “[t]he re-uniting of the three after such a time of trial and tribulation is almost a letdown because there is no indication of who or what they become. Simon’s survival has offered Joe and Kerewin a salvation they do not deserve.” (“Indigenous Literature in a Colonial Society,” 313)
disturbing elements of the novel. But to ignore these disturbing elements in favour of its commensal vision is in direct opposition to the novel’s very message. Mercer suggests that, in order to understand The Bone People’s cultural politics, it should be read as ‘bicultural Gothic,’ a mode that works to “[identify] potential disharmony and disjuncture within a bicultural framework.”

Mercer continues:

“[M]aking an unqualified celebration of the Aotearoa New Zealand identity the bone people seems to imply problematic, suggesting that while there is much to be proud of still more remains to be done. Hulme is correct; the end is the beginning, but it might be a far bumpier journey than originally imagined.”

The Bone People is not asking the reader to accept the reconciliation at face value and be content with it; it may appear to be harmonious, but there is a definite discordant note that haunts—namely Simon’s damaged state. In this way, the epilogue directs attention to the disharmony and disjuncture predominant in the narrative. As Mercer intuits, this ending is merely the beginning of a changing society, and there are many challenges ahead. It is quite possible, then, that a return swing of the Gothic pendulum can be expected in the future. The figure of the spiral, however, does not preclude the possibility of a return to darkness, as its motif symbolises how, “expansion inevitably leads to contraction.” The “bright broad daylight that braids[s] their home” at the end is the start of a new day, a new beginning, but the light will inevitably fade as night approaches. However, Kerewin, Joe, and Simon might be better equipped this time around to face the night when it eventually descends upon them.

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284 Mercer, “‘Frae ghosties an ghoulies deliver us’: Keri Hulme’s the bone people and the Bicultural Gothic,” 111
285 Ibid.
286 Ibid., 127
287 Knudsen, The Circle and the Spiral: A Study of Australian Aboriginal & New Zealand Māori Literature, 177
288 Hulme, The Bone People, 540
Concluding remarks

The society Hulme depicts in *The Bone People* is a haunted one. Through the homes and the bodies of the characters, Hulme suggests that the nation of New Zealand is suffering from a homesickness brought on by the repressed colonial history of the country. This homesickness is felt particularly by the Maori, who have had their home taken from them by European settlers, a home subsequently torn down in order for a Pakeha society to be built; in effect, a society that has made poor accommodation for the indigene. Through the mode of the Gothic uncanny, *The Bone People* reveals the cruelty that is hidden within the domestic spheres of daily life in the nation, shedding light on that which may appear, at first glance, to be familiar and harmless. The novel is interested in that which happens on the periphery, bringing it into view so that it may be seen and investigated—it gives a voice to that which cannot speak, and lets that which is invisible be seen. In the re-making of the nation, these peripheral things are brought into the centre. As the characters go through a stage of hauntedness, they are able to reconnect with the past. Albeit a painful process, this allows them to heal and re-make themselves as they obtain a national identity.

The indigene is shown successful in ridding themselves of the colonial trappings learnt from the coloniser, instead they turn to and rely on forms found in the Maori tradition, letting these inform the reconstruction of the nation. Hulme demonstrates what a rebuilding may look like: a home that becomes a symbol of historical and spiritual awareness, and of Maori tradition and beliefs. The reimagining of the family structure and the rearing of the child are elements crucial to this project, as the rearing of the child is equated with the rearing of the nation. The severe damage that Simon has suffered poses special challenges, but these challenges may be overcome with a more attentive approach to child-minding in addition to a recognition of the of the child as an autonomous subject with the right to be heard, including those who cannot speak. Furthermore, the novel suggests that a reconsideration of language is imperative for new realities and identities to come into view, allowing language to accommodate non-normative individuals and their experiences—as the monsters destabilise the signifying system, language will have to make room for them.

These goals for the rebuilding of the nation are all encapsulated in the rebuilding of shell house of the epilogue. The result is a home that welcomes non-normative identities, accepting “the somethingness,” the monsters, that are emerging from the dark; it accepts,
and awaits, new (and old) ways of being: new ways of being Maori, Pakeha; man, woman, or neither. As a postcolonial Gothic narrative, *The Bone People* conveys a haunting message about the prevailing nature of colonial violence and the way its bruises may linger in the body of the indigene and in the home of a nation, making it ill. In order for it to be cured, the ghosts of the past must be brought into the light and incorporated into the narrative of the nation home. Only then may the first steps towards a rebuilding commence.
Bibliography


