From Narrative Prosthesis to Disability Counternarrative: Reading the Politics of Difference in *Potiki* and *the bone people*

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While the disabilities of the child protagonists of Keri Hulme’s *the bone people* (1983) and Patricia Grace’s *Potiki* (1986) are often commented upon in critical readings, they are usually interpreted in terms of the texts’ Maori cultural politics, the disabled child being read in terms of possible narratives of indigenous disempowerment, survival and activism. It is certainly the case that both texts are primarily concerned with issues of Maori cultural participation and viability. Grace represents an autonomous Maori community and its struggle for sovereignty within capitalist society, while Hulme offers a less politicised vision of a ‘commensal’ bicultural nation, denoting a version of cohabitation in which difference can be maintained and respected. Within these contexts, the disabled child is seen to signal the future of Maori culture in New Zealand: Simon is the focus of *the bone people’s* commensal vision, representing the challenges to be faced in the movement towards a true biculturalism, and Toko, in *Potiki*, who narrates his story after his death, can be read as the symbol of continuing Maori agency in the face of cultural oppression and violation.

I want to argue, however, that while the texts’ politics are primarily cultural in focus, Grace and Hulme both characterise disability in ways that coincide with progressive notions of disabled social agency, and utilise strategies of representing disability that are politically enabling in terms of both disability...
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and culture. Rather than *symbolising* Maori culture’s continuity either despite their disabilities (and Toko’s death) or even because of their status as damaged yet triumphant representatives of a surviving community, Simon and Toko function as integrated and engaged members of their communities, as active agents within the cultural and political negotiations of the texts. Their disabilities are not abstract metaphors for a damaged, yet surviving, nation, but markers of the writers’ commitment to a definition of social agency that actively includes all members of New Zealand society. Reading these texts in conjunction with disability theory, as I propose to do, therefore facilitates a subtly nuanced social analysis which reveals the exact function of Simon and Toko as disabled agents within the cultural narratives of Maori sovereignty and activism.

The symbolic capital of both Toko and Simon has been well documented. Both characters have been understood either as sacrificial, Christlike figures whose physical suffering (and, in Toko’s case, death) enables the revitalisation of Maori community, or as tricksters, modern-day Maui figures, whose unruliness instigates cultural regeneration.1 The application of a materialist mode of disability theory, however, exposes the disservice that such socially dislocated readings do to Hulme’s bicultural project and Grace’s notion of Maori self-determination. By assuming that Toko and Simon’s impairments have a primarily symbolic function in their respective texts, such readings become complicit with the processes of ‘narrative prosthesis’. As theorised by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, this is the utilisation of disability as a ‘stock feature of characterization [or] an opportunistic metaphorical device’; the ‘prosthetic contrivance upon which so many of our cultural and literary narratives rely’ in order to convey meanings quite separate from the experience of disability itself.2 Disability is most often used, Mitchell and Snyder argue, to reflect individual, social, or cultural deficiency, breakdown, or sickness; it becomes, in short, the ‘master metaphor for social ills’.3 Disability

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representation therefore often functions as the crutch that supports a text's figurative content and informs its critical interpretations.

Within such logic, Simon’s disabled presence in *the bone people* has been interpreted, by Anna Smith among others, as the symbol of the frail and defective New Zealand nation: ‘He is the kind of figure who bears sickness for others, as if New Zealanders had implicitly made a pact that the mad and disfigured among them should make visible the suffering of all.’4 Any consideration of the disabled subject as an active agent exposes how this type of reading reinforces stereotypes of disabled passivity and victimisation, and is guilty of ‘further stigmatizing disability in the imaginations of its audience’.5 To read the disabled protagonists in Christian terms of suffering, sacrifice and salvation therefore denies the agency of these characters, agency that is abundantly present in both texts. Immediately upon noticing Kerewin’s crucifix, for example, Simon himself dismisses the model of Christ’s suffering as sinister and fatalistic: ‘He shivers. Why does she keep a dead man nailed on the wall?’6 Prosthetic readings thus effectively disengage the narrative from its own politics of disabled identity and agency.

Similarly, although Hulme and Grace both utilise Maui mythology to emphasise the Maori epistemological framework of their texts, this mythology is firmly located within the historically and socially situated context of Maori communities in 1980s New Zealand. Eva Rask Knudsen’s reading of Simon as an unproblematic archetype, the ‘contemporary embodiment of Maui’7 therefore dissociates him from the text’s social critique and enables the following ethically ambivalent conclusion regarding his disablement: ‘Joe’s violence towards [Simon] must also be understood in an archetypal sense which transcends the context of social outrage at child abuse. Otherwise, his brutality is morbid and unforgiveable.’8 Even more disturbingly, the simplistic symbolism of Antje Rauwerda’s recent reading of *the
bone people, which interprets Simon as the Pakeha ‘whipping boy’ for Maori revenge, actually facilitates a justification of his abuse: ‘Simon is beaten because he is white; he is beaten for the role he plays in an allegory’; ‘[t]he abuse the child suffers is, in terms of a postcolonial allegory, retributively just’. The depoliticisation of disability (and disablement) achieved by such metaphorical readings is accomplished by precluding any consideration of its grounded social and cultural context. As Mitchell and Snyder have ascertained, ‘the reliance upon disability in narrative rarely develops into a means of identifying people with disabilities as a disenfranchised cultural constituency. […] This exceptionality divorces [the character with disabilities] from a shared social identity’ (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 55). Since it is this ‘shared social identity’ that is central to both Hulme’s and Grace’s Maori cultural politics, their decision to focus these politics through the lens of disability indicates that disability itself should be assumed to be inherently political and to be intricately engaged with issues of community and identity. The disabilities of Simon and Toko must therefore be read in terms of ontology rather than metaphor, and considered in their sociohistorical contexts. Far from symbolising the social and cultural problems of Maori in 1980s New Zealand, these characters are active members of their communities and are directly involved in the texts’ cultural negotiations.

The communal focus of both Potiki and the bone people refuses the sentimental narrativisation of disability that frequently contributes to its depoliticisation. As disability studies scholar Lennard Davis explains in his work on normalcy, in conservative disability narratives:

When one speaks of disability, one always associates it with a story, places it in a narrative. […] But by narrativizing an impairment, one tends to sentimentalize it and link it to the bourgeois sensibility of individualism and the drama of an individual story[.]"
Set against this, both novels are marked by an absence of individualism as a narrative focus, which enables an inclusive, community-based approach to disability to emerge. Simon’s disablement is not the story of the bone people, as Simon, Kerewin and Joe ‘only make sense together’ (p. 479). Similarly, the interweaving perspectives of Grace’s multiple narrators prevent the mapping of Toko’s physical ‘decline’ onto an individual, linear chronotope from special boots to sticks to wheelchair, and deflect the potential attending tragedy narrative. Instead, Toko is consistently contextualised in terms of group activity and participation:

I could not work in the gardens on any day, but I could be there, and be useful in many ways. I could sort seed, or count out the little plants ready for transplanting, and I could label boxes, bags and trays. 11

In the context of his whanau, Toko is an agent and a valued group member. He insists upon a positive interpretation of his impairment, viewing it as the occasion of his gift of matakite, his ‘special knowing’:

my understanding was more than ordinary for a person who was five. Well that’s what I’ve been told. Given in place of a straight body, and to make up for almost drowning—nobody has told me that but I think it might be so. (p. 55)

Toko counters the standard interpretation of his impairment as ‘deficiency’ with a compelling account of its enabling and exceptional aspects, and resists the invalid/in-valid diagnosis with his continuing demonstration of his value as a group member and a narrator.

In the bone people, Simon also refuses to be disabled by his muteness, which is presented as an opting-out from an imperfect and potentially harmful representational system. His early traumatic experience of a ‘vivid haunting terrible voice, that...
seemed to murmur endearments all the while the hands skilfully
and cruelly hurt him’ (p. 5), establishes this precocious mistrust
of language, causing Simon to prioritise what is signified
(‘things’) over their signifier (‘names’):

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. (p. 155)

By way of contrast, as a performative and directly referential
system, in which ‘the language indicates directly by embodying,
literally, the narrative’, Simon’s own invented sign language is,
to his mind, an improvement upon spoken language; a more
accurate communication system than speech, which carries the
inherent potential to deceive or betray: ‘The metonymic nature
of sign anchors [the signer] to the signified rather than the
signifier. As such, sign can better express emotions and
sentiments.’ Sign bears a more direct relationship with Simon’s
world, as Joe explains: ‘All you need to know about his hand-
language is that it’s mainly derivation. You know, from an object,
or a way of doing things that is ordinary, or from ordinary
things, or things …’ (p. 59). Furthermore, 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: ‘Is his
face really that easy to read, or am I just looking harder because
he can’t talk? Probably years of practice at non-verbal
communication’ (p. 25). As Maryanne Dever notes, Simon
understands English, Maori, and (possibly) French; with sign
language as another linguistic option he is actually multilingual
despite his muteness. This prevents the tyranny of any one
linguistic system, supporting Hulme’s promotion of the Maori
language as a necessary component, equal in status to English, of
a bicultural New Zealand. As Dever writes of Simon: ‘His
“silent” presence in the text serves [...] to focus Hulme’s exploration of language and communication.” It does this without resorting to metaphor: Simon’s ability to communicate without speech offers a direct exposition of the interrelational alternatives to spoken English. His identity ‘is confirmed not through its difference to and separateness from others, but through his interconnection with them’, therefore demonstrating the benefits of interdependence—a key concept in Hulme’s vision of biculturalism—and simultaneously advocating the centralisation of disability in a redefined notion of community.

Interdependence, rooted in utu, is performed in Potiki as a fundamental principle by which everyday life in the Tamihana whanau is governed. In this community, difference does not fall under what prominent disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson terms a ‘compensation model’ or even an ‘accommodation model’. Rather, it exists as part of a system of total integration. Toko’s physical impairment is translated into individuality, which then becomes a sign of recognition and an affirmative marker of familiarity rather than estrangement: ‘She [Granny Tamihana] knew it was me by the special sound of my walking’ (p. 54). Here, physical difference reinforces inclusion rather than stigmatisation, and tikanga is frequently and willingly modified to enable Toko’s absorption into the group’s procedures. He is allowed to speak in the wharenui, for example, a privilege usually reserved for elders: ‘But the people knew that I would never be old, and that is why they allowed me oldness while I was a child still’ (p. 154). In addition, the main structural variance between the old and the new wharenui is a modification made to accommodate Toko’s impaired mobility:

There is a special door that was made for me and my chair. It is a door at the side of the new wharenui specially hinged so that it opens either out or in. There is
a ramp and a wide pathway from the road to enable me
to come and go easily. [...] My uncles planned and built the special door for me, and
the people made the ramp and path. My brother James
carved the doorway, and in his carvings told the special
story of the joining. It is the story of how our people had
become as one with the people of Te Ope. (p. 153)

This ‘special door’ simultaneously signifies collaboration,
modernisation, cultural adaptation and accommodation. The
cultural project of rebuilding after the fire is seamlessly
combined with the social issue of disabled access, showing
Grace’s commitment to representing disability within its social
and cultural context. Toko’s wheelchair also occasions a
celebration of unity as the common ancestress of Te Ope and
the Tamihanas takes her place above the door. The inclusion of
the disabled individual within the group’s practices is therefore
beneficial to the whole, extended, community, increasing the
mana of the whanau and demonstrating the compatibility of
cultural formations with contemporary notions of social welfare.

Both Grace and Hulme thus establish that, given favourable
social conditions, impairment does not have to be disabling.
Simon is able to communicate with Joe, Kerewin and the
Tainuis, and Toko’s physical needs are accommodated by his
whanau. The differences of both children are naturalised within
their immediate familial surroundings. Both texts, however,
represent the encounter between the child with impairments and
the wider (predominantly Pakeha) social sphere as disabling and
potentially damaging. ‘Society’ is represented as having
expectations of normalcy to which disabled children do not comply. As Davis writes, “[t]he hegemony of normalcy is, like
other hegemonic practices, so effective because of its invisibility.
Normalcy is the degree zero of modern existence.” By
constructing normalcy as an oppressive presence in their texts
rather than an absence of difference, Grace and Hulme enact
powerful critiques of what Garland-Thomson has called the ‘normate’ identity: ‘the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries’.19

From the normate subject position, Simon’s muteness is assumed to be a deficiency rather than the difference that Hulme has established: ‘generally he’s either treated as an idiot, or deaf as well as mute’ (p. 60). His disobedience and destructive behaviour are contextualised as resistance to the reductive policy of ‘normalisation’ that society’s institutional representatives—doctors, teachers, social workers, child psychologists, foster carers, the police—are authorised to impose upon him. As Robyn Munford suggests, discussing disability in a specifically New Zealand context, ‘the idea of normalisation has lacked an exploration of power relations and can fail to make explicit the ways in which individuals are assessed and classified in order to meet society’s expectations’.20 Through Simon, Hulme demonstrates the potentially harmful nature of such expectations. Simon’s social objectification as the ‘local oddity’ (p. 61) of Whangaroa, with whom the police ‘know what to do’ (p. 32), constructs his behavioural and linguistic difference as a community concern, as public property. The symptoms of a lifetime of abuse are domesticated and trivialised as the object of local entertainment: Simon’s exploits are narrativised and exaggerated into ‘incredible tales’ (p. 115) told in the local pub. The corrective or normalising impulse of the authorities is implicitly undermined by Simon’s simultaneous social ‘enfreakment’, a process theorised by Garland-Thomson, and the social status of Simon’s disabled presence is therefore caught in the permanent state of tension inherent in a position of enforced conformity.

Of course it is Joe who exerts the greatest social pressure upon Simon. His conflicting urges to compensate for difference with physical affection and to puritanically discipline difference into conformity are indicative of his feelings of helplessness and
inadequacy regarding Simon’s care. These in turn reflect the cultural aspect of Hulme’s critique of the care services available in New Zealand. Many parents, care practitioners and disability activists have noted a fundamental ‘failure to acknowledge Maori ethnicity and culture in health, education and community services’, meaning that ‘[t]he choice for many families is to opt into Pakeha-style services or to do without’. In this context, Simon’s disabilities confirm Joe’s alienation from Maori cultural formations. The abuse Joe inflicts upon Simon as punishment is an extreme manifestation of the normalising impulse, which, as Hulme suggests and Joe finally realises, is much more damaging than any physical impairment:

I know my child was a gift, and that I loved him too hard, hated him too much. That I was ashamed of him. I wanted him as ordinarily complex and normally simple as one of Piri's rowdies. I resented his difference, and therefore, I tried to make him as tame and malleable as possible. [...] And I loved and hated him for the way he remained himself, and still loved me despite it all. (p. 461)

The child abuse in the bone people is therefore consistently depicted in realist (rather than allegorical) terms as being motivated by disabling social conditions of enforced conformity and Maori disempowerment.

Similarly, Simon’s own violent behaviour is constructed as a response to his oppressive social context. It is only when Simon is introduced into hostile social situations, when expectations of normalcy are imposed upon him and others are unable (or refuse) to read his signs, that his muteness becomes disabling: ‘he'll fight you to make you understand. It's his last resort, spitting and kicking … he'll do his damndest to punch into you what he wants to say’ (p. 60). His destructive vandalism is therefore an effort to communicate; he smashes the windows of thirty shops, for example, after discovering that Binny Daniels
has bled to death after falling on a smashed sherry bottle (p. 368). In his fear and rage, Simon departs from his own rule of referentiality, rendering his act of communication indecipherable. It is therefore Simon’s behaviour, and not his muteness, that signals an inadequacy in communication, demonstrating how impairments can become disabilities in unaccommodating social contexts. Deficiency, in Simon’s case, is firmly located in the social ideology and welfare policy of a conformist society.

The enfreakment and accompanying social marginalisation of a person with disabilities is also powerfully operative in Potiki, in the pivotal scene in which Toko encounters ‘Dollarman’, the Pakeha land developer:

Right then I saw what the man saw as he turned and looked at the three of us and as my eyes met his eyes. I saw what he saw. What he saw was brokenness, a broken race. He saw in my Granny, my Mary and me, a whole people, decrepit, deranged, deformed. (p. 102)

According to Garland-Thomson’s analysis of the nineteenth-century freak show, ‘[w]hen the body becomes pure text, a freak has been produced from a physically disabled human being’.23 Dollarman’s gaze transforms the physically non-normative bodies of Toko, Mary and Granny Tamihana into a text of deficiency, a ‘hyperlegible text’ in Garland-Thomson’s terms,24 and then further translates these bodies into a symbol of cultural deviance. Given that the meeting in the wharenui in this part of the novel re-enacts the negotiation of the Treaty of Waitangi, Dollarman’s gaze palimpsestically overwrites the Treaty and reinforces its subsequent narrative of historical oppression. That the Pakeha assumes the normate subject position in the wharenui, the cultural space of Maori, emphasises the urgency and necessity of Grace’s politics of indigenous autonomy and sovereignty. Simultaneously and interdependently, Dollarman’s complicity with oppressive disability narratives of normalcy and
enfreakment indicates a textual concern with the politics of reading the disabled body.

Dollarman’s reading of Toko, Mary and Granny as symbols of a ‘broken race’ is prosthetic: he relies upon the perceived lack of the disabled body to support his intended political aim, the act of racist objectification. Grace’s strategic and detached employment of narrative prosthesis here exposes its processes as violently reductive; it clearly lacks validity within the ethical and ideological operations of the text as a whole, a Maori whole to which Dollarman’s views are non-normative. When Dollarman reduces Toko to metaphor, Grace immediately reinstates his agency. Toko is able to translate Dollarman’s text of hatred and anger back into terms with which he can identify, imposing upon it the values of shared identity and community held by his culture: ‘And the pain belonged to all of us’ (p. 102). Dollarman’s epistemological attack is therefore contained, and the appropriation of the disabled body by normate ideology is ultimately unsuccessful.

Indeed, Toko’s death in the arson attack on the wharenui further reinforces Grace’s liberation of the disabled body from normalising discourse, albeit in a seemingly paradoxical way. Far from conforming to the resolutions of conservative disability narratives which often ‘espouse an open cure-or-kill mind-set in order to comprehend disability’s absence or unspeakability’,25 Toko’s death is rather a violation, occurring under circumstances which equate orthodox narrative responses to disability—the ‘kill’ option—with the institutionalised violence directed towards indigenous communities. Toko’s death does not resolve any of the text’s social or cultural issues as it would if he functioned purely metaphorically. Instead, the community’s struggles against the developers are redoubled under the auspices of utu, with Tangimoana’s vandalisation of the development prompting court cases that are ongoing at the text’s close. The project of Maori self-determination is therefore not associated with success or failure, but with a continuing process of what Gerald Vizenor,
discussing indigenous identity in North America, terms ‘survivance’. The untimely and overtly criminal nature of Toko’s death disallows any narrative closure that might suggest an easy resolution to the novel’s cultural politics of Maori autonomy. Toko remains a textual presence, narrating his story from his place of ‘eversight’ (p. 183) within his carved representation which depicts ‘the spinning, patterned wheels of the chair’ (p. 172), reinforcing the validity of disabled experience and its inclusion in the whanau’s stories.

The politics of sovereignty that Grace uses to empower the Maori community therefore also applies to her treatment of disability. As such, *Potiki* can be characterised as a ‘disability counternarrative’ that undermines and critiques Dollarman’s conservative reading of the disabled body as deficient. *The bone people*, too, acts as a counternarrative, as it ‘does not seek to fully repair or resolve a character’s impairment, but rather delves into the social, personal, political, and psychological implications of impairment as bequeathing a social awareness’. Simon is not cured or killed at the text’s conclusion but is disabled further. Not only mute and scarred but now almost completely deafened as well, Simon appears too broken to participate meaningfully in his own vision of togetherness. According to symbolic readings, his obvious dependency in the ‘Moonwater Picking’ section of the novel seems to make the commensal ideal advanced by Hulme illegitimate: ‘Simon is present along with the others in the spiral-house at the end but it has been built, or bought, at his expense.’ However, Simon performs two acts of agency in the final chapter. The first, pressing his face against Kerewin’s guitar, establishes his deafness as an unacceptable loss and emphasises Hulme’s indictment of child abuse. Simon’s status as victim in the abusive relationship is therefore not denied or trivialised. Simon is not, however, assigned to a permanent role as victim. His second act—‘[t]he fingers veer up into Luce’s face, effoff’ (p. 539)—confirms his agency and concurrently re-establishes the validity of sign as Simon’s primary mode of communication. His
deafness effectively commits the whole whanau to a new linguistic mode: as Simon can no longer hear speech (at least temporarily), they must all sign if he is to understand them. If made communal in this kind of way, deafness creates its own cultural space:

In the context of Deaf (capitalized in this usage) culture, signing does not imply affliction, nor is it a ‘prosthesis’ or accommodation, but a wholly legitimate mode that satisfies the definition of a language as a shared system of symbols and rules.30

Simon 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.

Simon’s wounds therefore bear sociohistorical rather than metaphorical significance. His disabilities represent real challenges to be negotiated rather than deficiency or sickness. Victimisation is shown to be a consequence of a specifically located social interaction rather than an inherent characteristic of the disabled subject. Garland-Thomson’s enabling interpretation of disabilities in African-American women’s texts is equally applicable to Hulme’s representation of Simon: ‘these literary representations accentuate the marked body’s historical context, infusing the material body with social meaning rather than metaphorical significance, surrounding them with life rather than props’.31 Simon’s deafness, muteness and scars are not abstract symbols of suffering, sacrifice and communication breakdown but are connected, specific markers of a particular social problem—child abuse—that is rooted in a particular context. Like Garland-Thomson’s African-American women, Simon’s body acts as a ‘collective conscience’32 for contemporary New Zealanders, a commitment to vigilance and a reminder that violence is never acceptable. With Simon’s disabilities, as well as
his agency, manifest and omnipresent, Joe and Kerewin are unable to slip back into violence: ‘No way. Not that way ever again’ (p. 539).

It is this commitment to the maintenance of difference within an inevitably shared cultural space that enables these writers to engage with disability politics in such a sensitive, astute, and essentially ethical manner. While undoubtedly not the primary political focus of the texts, a complex politics of disability representation does emerge, almost organically, from the cultural ideologies the writers promote. For the New Zealand nation to have any kind of bicultural future, Hulme suggests, it must protect and value all of its members, no matter how non-normative they are. For Grace, a necessary condition of the politics of sovereignty is the agency of self-representation, as the encounter between Toko and Dollarman so powerfully delineates. The centralisation and validation of disabled experience that operates within these texts therefore has a dual political function: as well as promoting disabled self-determination it affirms the fundamental principles of a cultural project of national inclusion. Disability and cultural politics therefore exist in a symbiotic, mutually reinforcing, configuration in Potiki and the bone people, just as Hulme envisions Maori and Pakeha relating in a ‘commensal’ nation space. It is only through an analysis of the writers’ representations of disability in contextual cultural and sociohistorical terms that this enabling relationship becomes apparent, allowing our critical understanding of these texts to move beyond narrative prosthesis to disability counternarrative, and further promoting the cause of indigenous autonomy in New Zealand.
Notes


7 Knudsen, p. 169.

8 Knudsen, p. 158.
12 Davis, p. 20.
13 Davis, p. 69.
15 Dever, p. 29.
18 Davis, p. 170.
24 Garland-Thomson, p. 121.
Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), p. 15: ‘survivance, in the sense of native survivance, is more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survivance are an active presence. [...] Survivance is an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry.’


Dale, p. 421.


Garland-Thomson, p. 132.