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## ***We Māori: Point of View in Māori Biofiction***

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*We Māori: Point of View in Māori Biofiction*

Abstract:

Point of view is the novelist's great gift and restriction, positioning the narrative and determining what's included and excluded. In biofiction that explores the lives of historical Indigenous figures, the challenge of point of view demands an imaginative leap that not all fiction writers are prepared or able to make. Sherman Alexie's notion of tribal sovereignty extending to culture suggests the ethical issues in the field, including appropriation or distortion of Indigenous experience, and the violation of boundaries (psychic, familial, religious). In discussing the issues faced in writing the novel *Rangatira* (2011), this article interrogates Melissa Kennedy's claim that *Wulf* by Hamish Clayton (2011) is "imagining a Maori viewpoint" [sic] without including a Māori point of view.

Biographical Note:

Paula Morris MNZM (Ngāti Wai, Ngāti Whātua, Ngāti Manuhiri) is an award-winning fiction writer and essayist. She directs the Master of Creative Writing programme at the University of Auckland, where she is an Associate Professor. Paula is the founder of the Academy of New Zealand Literature ([www.anzliterature.com](http://www.anzliterature.com)) and Wharerangi, the Māori Literature Hub ([www.maorilithub.co.nz](http://www.maorilithub.co.nz)). With Alison Wong, she edited the 2021 anthology *A Clear Dawn: New Asian Voices from Aotearoa New Zealand* (Auckland University Press). She writes about Korean film and television for [www.koreaseen.com](http://www.koreaseen.com).

Key words:

Māori fiction, Indigenous literature, historical biofictions, historical novel, sovereignty

## Introduction

The selection of a point of view in a novel, contends David Lodge in *The Art of Fiction*, is “arguably the most important single decision that the novelist has to make, for it fundamentally affects the way readers will respond, emotionally and morally, to the fictional characters and their actions” (Lodge, 1994, p. 26). Point of view positions the narrative relative to the experiences and perceptions of one or more of the novel’s chief characters; it determines what is included, what is omitted, and how the story is told.

The access to consciousness offered by point of view is the novelist’s great gift, and also the form’s greatest restriction and challenge. In striving to create and convey a protagonist’s experience of the world, and therefore the characters, places and events of that protagonist’s story, the fiction writer is tasked with evoking that experience – from visceral to intellectual to cultural – in depth and in detail. In each new work, writers are confronted with limits: of our own imagination, knowledge and empathy, as well as of our technical ability as artists. Like readers, writers have idiosyncratic cultural perspectives and ways of interpreting the world. We have our own perceptions of familiar and foreign, of ordinary and exotic. These perceptions, and the conditions of our lives, might not be shared in any way by our characters. Like readers, we must make an imaginative leap into experiences – ways of seeing and being – that are not our own.

In biofiction that explores historical Indigenous figures, this leap is both great and perilous. The limits and challenges writers must confront multiply. The past is not simply another time characterised by different costumes and idioms, but complex sets of beliefs, memories, experiences, and knowledge, as well as ways of interpreting the past, present and future. Even if a contemporary writer shares a particular character’s Indigenous culture, we cannot share an experience of that culture in the past. Often, we must engage with a profoundly alien way of seeing and articulating the world – which may be a lost way, and a lost world.

For some writers – as well as readers – that imaginative leap is too great a demand. In *The Colour* by Rose Tremain, a novel about English immigrants to New Zealand set in the nineteenth century, the point of view of an Indigenous character is diluted by non-Indigenous perceptions. “It seemed to Pare that the invisible god of the forest was nearby” (Tremain, 2003, p. 37) is a framing that is external to that character’s point of view. Pare, a Māori working for an English family, would not think about her people as “Maoris”, adopting the English use of ‘s’ for the plural. She would not believe that “to be raped by the ngārara [reptile] was the most terrible fate a woman could suffer” (Tremain, 2003, p. 38).

Writers may opt to locate point of view with a non-Indigenous character, real or invented, which means filtering the novel’s characters and events through a different set of experiences, perceptions and preconceptions. This decision may be based on the technical challenge of writing historical experience – idiom, frame of reference, belief systems, Indigenous knowledge. It may also be informed by fear of criticism by Indigenous audiences, or anxiety

about the authority to represent. In *The Secret River* (2005), Australian novelist Kate Grenville excluded any Indigenous point of view rather than engage in what she saw as appropriation. She discussed this decision in her memoir *Searching for The Secret River*: “Their inside story – their responses, their thoughts, their feelings – all that was for someone else to tell, someone who had the right to enter that world and the knowledge to do it properly” (Grenville, 2006, pp. 198-199). In nonfiction, the discussion is usually of appropriation of story rather than point of view, questioning the ways Indigenous experience and culture have been exploited – and sometimes distorted – by non-Indigenous writers. Sherman Alexie, reviewing Ian Frazier’s 2000 book *On the Rez*, argued that many “Indians, myself among them, believe that the concept of tribal sovereignty should logically extend to culture and religion” (Alexie, 2000). When questioned about this in an interview for *Atlantic Unbound*, Alexie said that “non-Indians should quit writing about us until we’ve established our voice – a completely voluntary moratorium. If non-Indians stop writing about us they’ll have to publish us instead” (Chapel, 2000). Frazier, he says, “writes about the Oglalas without stopping to wonder if the Oglalas want to be written about” (Alexie, 2000).

Bruce Chatwin’s *The Songlines* (1987) remains controversial in part because of its attempt to mediate Aboriginal history and culture when the author – a white British writer – was neither invited nor sufficiently informed. Chatwin has been accused of reaching conclusions uninformed by existing scholarship in anthropology, history or ethnography, explained in part by his notion of artistic licence and the malleability of genre. “To call it fiction isn’t strictly true,” he said in an interview with *The New York Times*, “but to call it nonfiction is an absolute lie” (Eckholm, 1987).

The Indigenous “characters” in *The Songlines*, reviewer Andrew Harvey writes, “wander like ghosts through the book, largely voiceless extras in a play supposedly dedicated to them, statues on which ideas are draped, not beings vibrant in their own right” (Harvey, 1987). Chatwin, Graham Huggan contends, is another example of Western writers who employ “rhetorical strategies ... to bridge the gap between themselves and cultures the points of view of which continue to be interpreted by outsiders rather than being allowed to represent themselves” (Huggan, 1991, p. 66). One of Chatwin’s Australian contacts, Robyn Davidson, suggested he “found it very difficult as an idea that there were some things you couldn’t know. He felt that information should be free, that knowledge is out there for everybody. That’s not so. In Aboriginal culture, information is a currency” (Shakespeare, 2000, p. 489).

In the New Zealand Māori context, information is also a currency. Knowledge of whakapapa (ancestral relationships) and history – and dissemination of that knowledge – may be restricted to those within a given iwi (tribal group): it is an iwi decision, not an individual’s, about what is private and what is made public. In Māori culture, we look backwards and forwards to our tūpuna (ancestors); they are both behind and in front of us, living presences in our marae and in our stories. William Faulkner’s line in his 1951 novel *Requiem for a Nun* – “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” – was situated in the American South, but it also pertains to Māori and many Indigenous cultures (Faulkner, 1996, p. 85). The lives of our ancestors – and specifically their points of view – are to be protected, not handed to outsider writers in search of a good story. Any investigation of Māori history has ethical considerations; whakapapa is a

living network of relationships, claims, and affiliations. Writers of historical biofiction who are unrelated outsiders may face issues of consent and access, and accusations of appropriation.

In New Zealand, as in the United States, discussions about Indigenous sovereignty over culture are an ongoing and sometimes heated debate. Māori have status as tangata whenua (literally “people of the land”); te reo Māori is an official language of New Zealand. To be “voiceless extras” (Harvey, 1987) in literature is unacceptable.

This does not preclude writers who are Pākehā (white) and other tauwi (non-Indigenous New Zealanders) from including Māori characters in their work or writing from Māori points of view. A work of realist fiction set in contemporary Auckland, for example, would struggle to confine itself to Pākehā characters and remain realistic. But as Grenville did in *The Secret River*, some New Zealand authors choose to avoid Māori characters and content, believing they do not have “the right to enter that world” (Grenville, 2006, p. 199). Elizabeth Knox has observed of the issues facing a New Zealand writer seeking publishers – and readers – in other places:

I write about New Zealand and they ask for footnotes. Or I write about New Zealand in an American voice or British voice (it’s been done). Or I write about it as a sort of allegorical adjunct to a certain kind of inner life (that’s been done too), or mythically (which isn’t available to me). (Knox, 2000, p. 123)

To Knox, the mythology of New Zealand, which is Māori, is not “available” to her as a Pākehā writer. The wording suggests a closed door rather than a door the writer chooses not to open, and that position is problematic as well. The ghosts Andrew Harvey describes in Chatwin’s work are not even included on the page in Knox’s work: they are shut out. By avoiding rather than engaging with Māori language, belief and experience, a writer refuses the challenge that engagement presents both technically and culturally. And by stripping New Zealand of Māori myth and history, the writer re-draws the country in Europe’s image, colonising the landscape – geographic and psychic – again.

Witi Ihimaera’s *Sleeps Standing/Moetū* (2017) – its English text published with a parallel te reo Māori translation by Hēmi Kelly – addresses the issue of “the right to enter that world” (Grenville, 2006, p. 199) in a different way. The novel tells the story of the legendary battle of Orakau in 1864, featuring the famous rangatira (leader) Rewi. But Ihimaera chose not to write from the point of view of Rewi or of anyone from his iwi, Ngāti Maniapoto. Instead, the young man who comes to be known as Sleeps Standing – Moetū in te reo Māori – is drawn from the ranks of the battle’s supporting players, the Rongowhakaata people of Gisborne, from whom Ihimaera is descended. For the author, whakapapa (genealogical connection) offers a direct line to the battle, and he embraces the imaginative challenge of framing a major event from the point of view of minor characters.

In my fourth novel, *Rangatira* (2011), the story was based on a real person, my tūpuna, Paratene Te Manu, so I was also working within my own whanaungā (kinship group). Despite this, point of view remained a significant challenge. Paratene’s life spanned the nineteenth

century, beginning in a Māori-dominated world and ending in a Pākehā-dominated one, an experience no living writer, or living New Zealander, can claim. Paratene's precise birth date is unrecorded, because at that time Māori had no written language and did not observe the Western calendar. Before 1911, the only Māori marriages requiring registration were those with a Pākehā spouse. Until 1913, Māori births or deaths did not require registration. In the 1970s when my grandmother, born in 1902, applied for a passport, there was no official record of her birth date.

In 1895, when he was a very old man, Paratene gave an oral history of his life at the request of journalist and historian James Cowan, written down, in te reo Māori, by my great-grandmother. Paratene spoke of three things only: his eight taua, or war parties, when he was a young man, with the fabled northern rangatira Hongi Hika; his subsequent conversion to Christianity; and a trip made with other Māori to England, where he met Queen Victoria (Cowan, 1930, pp. 78–82). Although he does not specify dates, Paratene's first taua took place in 1823 – a date known because of historical accounts of Hongi Hika (Ulrich Cloher, 2003). It is probable that Paratene was born very early in the nineteenth century. He died in 1896, so during the course of his life he saw himself become an outsider and a minority, even an oddity, in his own country. His distinctive moko (tattoo) was a mark of status, and a signature rather than an adornment. Ngārino Ellis has defined moko as “a visible expression of *iwi*, *hāpu* and *whanau* “family” identity”, one that “personified rank and accomplishment” (Ellis, 2014, pp. 30–31, original italics). Some parts of the moko, she notes, “were generic, while other design elements were unique to the wearer and were often inherited according to *whakapapa*” (Ellis, 2014, p. 31, original italics). So individual were moko that, until the 1840s, they were often drawn by their owners onto land deeds in place of a written name (Ellis, 2014, pp. 30–54). In a study of the moko as Māori textual culture, Sarah Gallagher argues:

The meanings of the designs used and placed within the context of established image areas must have been intimately understood by Maori to not only be recognised, but to be drawn accurately in all their complexity by the wearer. This suggests that a Moko orthography existed in the nineteenth century ... Moko, like the book, is a physical structure capable of being read by others. In the nineteenth century at least, it was a means of communication just as paper and ink were. (Gallagher, 2003, p. 47)

Discouraged by missionaries, new moko were rare after the 1860s; by then the Māori language was written as well as oral. By the end of the century, moko were increasingly unintelligible to both Māori and Pākehā. Like te reo Māori itself, they were perceived as a relic of the pre-European past.

A painting of Paratene Te Manu, his facial moko rendered by a foreign artist, drew me to his story. The artist was Gottfried Lindauer, a Bohemian who lived in New Zealand from 1874 until his death in 1926. [1] Auckland businessman Henry Partridge commissioned paintings by Lindauer, from life or from photographs, of aging Māori. Partridge wished to capture the images of a passing generation and what James Cowan called their “old-time customs” with an eye to “the ethnologist of the future” (Cowan, 1930, p. ii). In Cowan's book on the paintings of the Partridge Collection, *Pictures of Old New Zealand*, he included – next to the Lindauer

portrait – an English transcription of Paratene Te Manu’s oral history (Cowan, 1930, pp. 78-82).

Paratene did not cite dates for his taua or conversion: as discussed, dates were a colonial construct, and not how Māori of his generation recognised the passing of time. But on the trip to England he was specific, perhaps because the dates reveal the magnitude of the journey: “It was on the first day of February in the year 1862, that we sailed for England, and in May we arrived there” (Cowan, 1930, p. 81).

Paratene did not discuss the reasons for the trip: he was invited, almost by chance, along with a number of rangatira from the north, a region less hostile to the Crown than Waikato further south, engaged that year in warfare with British troops. Organised by a group of Nelson settlers, led by one William Jenkins, the journey had soft-diplomacy aims, including a money-making lecture tour of England; the “Natives” in the party would return, it was hoped, “wiser and more civilised” (Mackrell, 1985, p. 20).

In fact, the tour was a financial disaster, a year of defections, illness and recriminations. By the time Jenkins returned to New Zealand he was estranged from most of the rangatira. Paratene Te Manu chose to recall only the glories of the journey, but I was interested in what might have been difficult and alienating for him, and in what he had omitted from his public narrative. Although he spent over a year in England, he only talked about two occasions from early in the trip: a visit to London Zoo, and to the Isle of Wight to meet the Queen (Cowan, 1930, p. 81). There is nothing in his account of the other cities he visited or of the divisions within the Māori group. Even within that short oral history, the contradictions of his character were evident. “Williams baptised me,” he said. “Then were ended my days of warfare and of shedding blood” (Cowan, 1930, p. 81). But at the same time, he talked at greatest length about those days of warfare – before times changed, and he changed to accommodate them. These contradictions, the complexity of his experience as a man born into a true te ao Māori (Māori world), drew me to the challenge of writing the novel.

Language was a central concern. I was writing in English, but the real Paratene Te Manu did not speak English, and did not navigate the world through English words, concepts or culture. The decision to write the novel – apart from a brief prologue – from Paratene’s first-person point of view meant embedding a great lie at the story’s heart: giving Paratene a voice in English. This he uses to write – in the novel’s 1886 frame story – but not to speak, suggesting the caution and secrecy of his nature. “There’s too much to this story – too much to remember, too much to explain,” he says at the beginning of the novel. “I will write it down, and I will write it down in English. There must be a record. So much depends, as I have discovered, on things that are written down on paper” (Morris, 2011, p. 30). This is a reference to the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand’s founding document, of which the English original and te reo Māori translation had significant discrepancies: “What we rangatira expected to keep for ourselves, the English words had given away to someone else” (Morris, 2011, p. 211).

My research for the novel took almost a decade in libraries, archives and historical sites in both the UK and New Zealand, from Osborne House on the Isle of Wight to the old pa (fort) site at

Ngunguru. But as any historical novelist will attest, research only goes so far. The novel still depends on that crucial imaginative leap – in the case of *Rangatira* into the point of view of a person born into a pre-Christian world, in which every single person around him was immersed in what the missionaries called a pagan belief system.

The only non-Māori in New Zealand for the first two decades of the nineteenth century were whalers, traders, and a scattering of missionaries. Māori were the vast majority. No one alive today has the experience of growing up around only Māori people and Māori language and Māori customs, without consciousness of English and without the influence of its cultural dominance. Paratene Te Manu did not become a Christian until 1830 at the earliest, by which time he was a grown man. At this point there were only around 300 Europeans in the whole of New Zealand (Owens, 1992, p. 50).

Paratene is his Christian name, but that doesn't mean that Te Manu was a surname: it was his only name before baptism. This is another issue for contemporary readers, reading in English, knowing only a post-Christian New Zealand, as it were. Māori did not have last names. When he was baptised, as an adult, he added the name Paratene – a transliteration of Broughton, the Bishop based in Australia who had recently visited New Zealand.

Our family did not have a last name until the very end of the nineteenth century, when my great-grandfather adopted the name Paraone, a transliteration of Brown. By World War II, the family were known only by the name of Brown. This sometimes random adoption of surnames to fit Pākehā custom is the reason many contemporary Māori do not have Māori last names.

As my parents grew older, I saw how the events and habits of youth returned in their stories and memories, and I came to understand a little of how my protagonist could be both Paratene and Te Manu at the same time. In writing *Rangatira* I followed Paratene's lead, and made the trip to England the focus, incorporating his memories of fighting under the leadership of the great Hongi Hika, something he remained proud of even though it contradicted his later and equally profound Christian beliefs.

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In writing a novel like *Rangatira*, in English, for an English-speaking audience, who only know an English-speaking New Zealand in which English is the dominant language, the point of view is one that will be inexorably alien to both writer and reader – even for a contemporary Māori writer, and a contemporary Māori reader. A novel cannot explain, so it is inevitable that this point of view might be misunderstood or misread; it may be too challenging. For some Pākehā literary critics, an inability to grasp the profundity of that otherness confines them to a superficial engagement with point of view, the book itself, and the historical figures that book re-imagines. It also reveals their own lack of knowledge about – and lack of sympathy for – te ao Māori and the complexities of another culture.

In her 2013 essay “All Our Pasts Before Us: Hamish Clayton’s *Wulf*”, Melissa Kennedy praises Clayton’s 2011 novel for:

engaging with Maori characters, imagining a Maori viewpoint, and describing negative aspects of Maori culture ... Rather than take a Maori or a Pakeha side to the well-worn debate over identity and belonging, *Wulf* enacts a constant state of uncertainty not only in interactions between Maori and Pakeha, but also within the two groups themselves. (Kennedy, 2013, pp. 150–151)

This, she contends, is in contrast with *Rangatira* and with Witi Ihimaera’s landmark novel *The Matriarch* (1986). *Rangatira* is set in Auckland in 1886 with flashbacks to the ill-fated trip to England in the 1860s. Ihimaera’s novel, in which the narrator’s life parallels some aspects of the author’s, encompasses a number of historical figures, including the nineteenth-century prophet and guerrilla fighter Te Kooti, and the politician Wi Pere (1837–1915). Te Kooti was also a central figure in Maurice Shadbolt’s novel *Season of the Jew* (1987), but – like Clayton – Shadbolt restricted his narrative point of view to a fictional Pākehā protagonist.

The first-person narrator of *Rangatira* uses the term “We Maori”, usually because he is recounting the experiences of a group of fourteen Māori on that trip: “We Maori seemed intent on disgracing ourselves in every possible way” (Morris, 2011, p. 229). This, Kennedy argues, is the voice of an:

historical Maori narrator [who] didactically speaks for “we Maori” to describe a litany of colonial British and Pakeha misunderstandings and exploitation of Maori, ... a very recent update of Witi Ihimaera’s much-cited tirade in *The Matriarch* (1986) against “you Pakeha”. (Kennedy, 2013, p. 152)

These two novels, according to Kennedy, illustrate the “position-taking common to – and arguably expected of – Maori literature [which] is the use of historical revisionism to indict colonial-era malpractice, the legacy of which is sometimes felt to justify an embattled present in terms of Maori-Pakeha race relations” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 152). *Wulf*, she argues, written by a Pākehā author, represents a more nuanced approach compared to “distinct and discrete Maori and Pakeha literary traditions that follow prescribed ways of talking about each other” (Kennedy, 2013, pp. 151-152). Much is problematic with Kennedy’s analysis, not least the assertion that “Maori literature” is expected to take a “position”. Here I will examine more closely how point of view relates to these discussions, and whether *Wulf* does indeed include an imagined “Maori viewpoint” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 150), despite having no Māori point-of-view character.

In *Wulf*, Hamish Clayton draws on an old Anglo-Saxon poem, *Wulf and Eadwacer* – source material of just nineteen lines – in which an unnamed woman laments her separation from the man she loves. The novel’s action focuses on the 1831 raids by the feared Ngāti Toa leader Te Rauparaha – the “wolf” of the title – travelling from his Kapiti Island base to wage war on Kai Tahu enemies in the South Island. Te Rauparaha, however, is never given a point of view in the novel. The point of view in *Wulf* is largely that of an unnamed young English sailor who

listens in rapt awe to his legend, living “on the edge of history” rather than observing it firsthand (Clayton, 2011, p. 181).

Knowledge of Te Rauparaha’s deeds and terrors largely comes from the fictional character John Cowell, the young trade master, who speaks te reo Māori and performs Te Rauparaha’s famous “Ka Mate” haka for the crew. “As good as having a native”, the crew is told in Sydney when Cowell joins the ship (Clayton, 2011, p. 39). Cowell is “a man whose meanings are several”, “a teller and translator of stories” with, the narrator believes, a “dark purpose” that lies ‘somewhere in his acts of translation’ (Clayton, 2011, pp. 178, 168). By the end of the novel the narrator suspects Cowell of stealing some of his stories – perhaps even his memories and dreams – from older seafarers like Captain Briggs. “He was a trader and a fabler, a dealer in the lives of others” (Clayton, 2011, p. 202).

In this filtered structuring of the story – and in its obsession with rivers, real and imagined – Clayton recalls Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. In Conrad’s novella, the first point-of-view character listens to Marlow, the adventuring sailor, tell his stories. The horrifying mythical figure is Kurtz, someone Marlowe knows by reputation long before they meet. Te Rauparaha – like the European megalomaniac Kurtz – is both god and devil; he has unleashed a “horror” of the kind that torments Kurtz in his final moments (Conrad, 1993, p. 98). Conrad sets up “layers of insulation between himself and the moral universe of his history”, as Chinua Achebe wrote, by creating “a narrator behind a narrator” (Achebe, 1977, p. 19). We are likewise reminded throughout *Wulf* that our narrator is hearing stories about stories, always filtered through English/Pākehā characters with little direct interaction with Māori beyond sex and trading. For our narrator, New Zealand is an exotic, alien, dangerous place of ‘strange trees’ where there is “a madness growing from out of that earth ... a madness that grew from our own imaginations” (Clayton, 2011, p. 17). The darkness he sees is sexual, like the women of “warm brown shades” who are “game” to be seduced (Clayton, 2011, p. 16).

In this, the narrator is of his time, as predictable in his imagery as the men in a Rider Haggard novel, for whom African landscapes are similarly wild and sexualised, a series of women’s bodies to defile or penetrate. “The landscape of potential empire becomes the landscape of pornographic fantasies and of sexual terrors”, Rebecca Stott writes about Haggard’s novels (Stott, 1989, p. 84). “The focus is always on the experience of the white male dominator or explorer, not on the experience of the colonized” (Stott, 1989, p. 84). *Wulf*’s narrator feels “the animal pull” of New Zealand and wants “the black thighs of hills rising out of those harbours around me” (Clayton, 2011, p. 45). He ejaculates in a river, wanting “to be found, naked and hard and helpless, by women with skins as brown as exotic fruit” (Clayton, 2011, p. 45). This is a plausible Englishman’s point of view given the era of the novel’s action, but hardly evidence, as Kennedy contends, of the novel avoiding “prescribed ways of talking about each other” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 152).

This “other” in *Wulf* has no way of talking – no voice at all, unless it is rendered by Cowell or another crew member, like Captain Briggs. The narrator yearns for knowledge, but from Cowell, not from Māori: “I wished to inhabit Cowell’s body and all the stories contained within him” or “I needed to draw fresh water from Cowell, from the deep well of stories within him”

(Clayton, 2011, pp. 35, 40). When some of the men from the ship go ashore at Kapiti Island to meet Te Rauparaha, the narrator is not among them. His information remains second-hand, “the more tangible for being felt as an echo through Cowell’s words” (Clayton, 2011, p. 162). On Kapiti Island a Māori man draws Te Rauparaha’s moko in the sand, with the narrator looking on from a clifftop, unable to hear the man “explaining to Cowell the meaning of the lines he’d made” (Clayton, 2011, p. 190).

In Cowell’s cabin he finds a preserved Māori head – probably pilfered from a grave – and Cowell’s diaries, “unable to guess if the fragments and stories I read there were stories he had plundered or invented” (Clayton, 2011, p. 41). The narrator wants “to enter that country with Cowell ... That country needed to be spoken for, and if I wanted to hear it speak then it would speak for me with Cowell’s voice” (Clayton, 2011, p. 46). The first time the narrator – and the reader – hears a story about Te Rauparaha is when Cowell announces: “Let me tell you about their Great Chief”, though Cowell has not yet seen or met him (Clayton, 2011, p. 49).

This decision – “of jointly historicising and mythologising Te Rauparaha, the absent subject of the text” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 157) – Kennedy praises, because it means “the narrative structure and perspective refrain either from appropriating a Maori point of view or from judging Te Rauparaha’s deeds” (Kennedy, 2013, pp. 157-158):

As the imaginative centre of the novel, Te Rauparaha’s character is woven most richly, mixing the few Maori stories the sailors have about him, through the interpreter Cowell, with their own legends from Anglo-Saxon poetry and liberal doses of their own imaginations. The Maori chief is introduced in the novel as an imaginative projection of the seafarers’ desires and fears. ... From their own storytelling tradition this Maori “Wolf” is – or could be – the legendary Beowulf, the enigmatic Wulf of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, or the generic wolf lurking outside in any number of fairytales which sets the safe inside against the great unknown. (Kennedy, 2013, p. 158)

Te Rauparaha, not permitted his own point of view, is instead “an imaginative projection” of Pākehā who could either be a hero (Beowulf, who slays monsters and dragons), or the “generic wolf ... of fairytales”, feral evil and danger in animal form. He is seen from the outside, by outsiders, arguably the author’s intention in a novel that plays with myth-making and historical record, where the Wolf is an object of terror rather than admiration – Grendel rather than Beowulf. None of them, the narrator admits, can know “the way of Te Rop”raha’s heart and mind” (Clayton, 2011, p. 186). He remains the other, an invention, an exaggeration – like Kurtz – a horror story. Denied point of view, he is denied both complexity and agency, and remains a projection – not, like Jay Gatsby, a mystery and projection of a peer, but a projection of someone of a different culture, world and language.

A narrative that gives no voice to its central Indigenous historical figure is biofiction once – or possibly further – removed. So, while *Wulf* is lyrical, sinister and often absorbing, it does not support the contentions of Kennedy that the novel is “keeping in play both sides of the conversation” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 170) and “confronting contemporary attitudes and expectations about how colonial history and Maori heroes ought to be portrayed” (Kennedy,

2013, p. 170). When all Māori voices are silent, how are “both sides of the conversation” possible (Kennedy, 2013, p. 170)?

Kennedy’s conclusion, that “Wulf keeps all our pasts before us” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 170), suggests that “our pasts” can be addressed by an all-Pākehā narrative voice without any intrusion by “We Māori” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 170). The only “we” in *Wulf* is Pākehā; Māori remain “they.” For Kennedy, like the book’s crew, Cowell’s presence in the narrative is as “good as having a native” who can interpret Māori culture for both characters and (implicitly Pākehā) readers (Clayton, 2011, p. 39). This is no less exclusionary a position than Elizabeth Knox’s declaring Māori myth not “available” to her as a Pākehā writer (Knox, 2000, p. 123). The word “available” means ready for use. The challenge for Pākehā writers engaging with Māori figures, historical and mythical, in biofiction is not to seek material ready to “use” but rather an immersion in point of view.

The passage Kennedy dismisses in Witi Ihimaera’s *The Matriarch* specifically keeps “our pasts” in the frame and posits Māori as the “we” at the narrative’s centre:

The Treaty [of Waitangi] was signed between the British government and some Maori chiefs on 6 February 1840. It was the instrument by which the British decided to extend their sovereignty to New Zealand. From the Pakeha point of view the British Crown was surprisingly accommodating, given the colonial imperative by which all the major white conquerors were motivated. ... The trouble is that the Treaty has never had any status in domestic or international law. The Pakeha signed it knowing it was worthless.

Now, from te taha Maori, the view is different. ... Maori tribal lands from the very beginning, even before the ink was dry on the document, have been illegally taken, granted, sold, leased and wrongly withheld, misused and misplaced. ... What contentment is there for Maori, knowing how our forefathers fought and died last century to rectify the inconsistencies and injustices that the Treaty embodies? ... For most assuredly *you*, Pakeha, began taking the land from us as you were signing your worthless Treaty.

... That was why we went to war. (Ihimaera, 1986, pp. 73-74)

*The Matriarch* was a ground-breaking work in New Zealand literature precisely because of its blatant political anger, its interweaving of family and national history, and the re-framing of many key events in nineteenth-century history. This, C. K. Stead wrote in the *London Review of Books*, was “the novelist as warrior, the novel as [the weapons] *taiaha* or *mere*, the reader as ally or enemy” (Stead, 1986, p. 21, original italics). Over thirty years later, in an interview with Brannavan Gnanalingam, Ihimaera would describe the novel as “the story of a tribal leader, the matriarch of the title, literally at war with New Zealand” (Gnanalingam, 2019) and noted that it “was conceived amid my growing Indigenous as well as Aboriginal political awareness” (Gnanalingam, 2019). He continues to be, he says, “a minority writer writing explicitly against New Zealand” (Gnanalingam, 2019).

The aim was confrontation, not conversation, though the novel's impact – it remains one of Ihimaera's most read books and is taught in many university courses around the world – suggests the particular Indigenous point of view it presented was the starting point for new ways of reading the past and its ramifications. In 2018 he noted that the novel's source was a series of bloody Greek tragedies rather than a lament:

[A]lthough the *Orestia* was the classical analogue for the novel, *The Matriarch's* mainframe was Maori sovereignty. It was my wero, my challenge, my dart placed in the ground. The book openly challenged any sanction of the Treaty process. It repudiated the assimilationist policies of Government and the continued alienation of Maori land. And in writing it, I was able to affirm the role of women as a force in changing the world. (Ihimaera, 2018)

It is telling that Kennedy does not discuss another Ihimaera work of biofiction, published just two years before *Wulf*. The protagonist in his novel *The Trowenna Sea* is a Māori man named Hohepa Te Umuroa, an historical figure who fought alongside Te Rauparaha in the 1840s and was one of the few New Zealanders ever to be sentenced, for rebellion against the Crown, to transportation to penal colonies in Tasmania (then Van Diemen's Land). Two of the three narrative points of view in the novel are those of a white married couple who were Te Umuroa's gaolers on Maria Island, where he died. Ihimaera's white characters are also based on historical figures – John Jennings Imrie and his wife Etty (née Bailey) – but in the novel he renamed them “to honour the original Imrie and Bailey families and not fictionalise their lives” (Ihimaera, 2010, p. 523). “Change all the names,” Kate Grenville decided when writing *The Secret River*, seeking a similar freedom to both invent and offend (Grenville, 2006, p. 187).

Kennedy's work on Clayton's novel assumes that there are only two sides to any conversation about the past; that Pākehā narrators are permitted to distance, distort and even vilify Māori but Māori narrators must not “take ... a side”; and that the character of an historical Māori figure can be “woven most richly” by “mixing the few Maori stories” of Pākehā characters “with their own legends ... and liberal doses of their own imaginations” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 158). This reflects a profoundly Pākehā world view, like Bruce Chatwin's, in which all stories are available and knowable, ready for appropriation and interpretation by outsiders.

Kennedy also assumes that Te Rauparaha was previously portrayed, in literature and historical assessments, as one of New Zealand's “Maori heroes” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 170), yet his reception is not uniform within Māori communities. In *The Matriarch* he is cited as “feared” by Ngāti Kahungunu, along with other Māori raiders. Ask contemporary Ngāi Tahu how they feel about Te Rauparaha, the self-proclaimed “black hawk”, who slaughtered their ancestors. In the last century, the group that has done the most to present Te Rauparaha as a heroic figure is New Zealand Rugby, and the decades of performing his famous “Ka Mate” haka by the All Blacks.

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In contemporary New Zealand novels, the subjects of historical biofiction include three of our most famous writers, Katherine Mansfield, Frank Sargeson and Janet Frame; they include Captain Cook and Governor Grey, missionaries like William Yate – in Annamarie Jagose’s *Slow Water* – and, in Fiona Kidman’s *The Captive Wife*, of settlers like Betty Guard who was kidnapped by Māori in the 1830s. In *The Book of Fame* by Lloyd Jones, the plural first-person point of view is that of the first New Zealand rugby team to sail to Britain, in 1905. Another novel by Fiona Kidman, *This Mortal Boy*, won the Acorn Foundation Fiction Prize at the 2019 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards: it is based on the true story of Albert Black, a young man from Belfast who was hanged for murder in Auckland in 1955.

Most of these “real-life” subjects are Pākehā, or European – the first and still-major group of non-Indigenous people in New Zealand, and the dominant group within New Zealand publishing, bookselling and book-buying, as well as literary criticism and academia. A recent survey demonstrates this clearly. In 2017 Janis Freegard assessed New Zealand fiction titles published in 2015. Of 68 titles, 91% were written by Pākehā authors. Asian writers represented 4% of titles, as did Māori writers; Pasifika writers represented 1% of the total. This does not reflect the census data of 2013, which listed Pākehā as 74% of the New Zealand population and Māori as 15% (Freegard, 2017).

This is the context in which novels by Māori authors can be read – by academics like Kennedy – as “position-taking” and “didactic” in placing “We Maori” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 152) at the centre of the book, rather than confining Māori experience, and characters, to a place off-stage where they can serve as the “imaginative projection” of a Pākehā character’s point of view (Kennedy, 2013, p. 157). Her contention is that *Wulf* asks “the reader to imagine history as if from both sides, aware of the biases of our current bicultural viewpoint” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 153), as though every reader is the same, and as though every novel is not a unique exercise in point of view, expressing a character’s experience and interpretation, not necessarily an author’s.

Critical hostility to Māori writers’ “position-taking” in subject matter – and beyond – is not new. *Pōtiki* by Patricia Grace, published in 1986, drew criticism for her use of many te reo Māori words and phrases in the narrative without translation. In a 2016 interview with Adam Dudding for the Academy of New Zealand Literature, Grace said:

When *Potiki* first came out there was quite a bit of criticism of it. One of the reasons was because of the use of Māori terms and passages in the book; the other was that some people thought I was trying to stir up racial unrest. The book was described as political.

I suppose it was but I didn’t realise it. The land issues and language issues were what Māori people lived with every day and still do. It was just everyday life to us, and the ordinary lives of ordinary people was what I wanted to write about, so I didn’t expect the angry reaction from some quarters.

But there was one deliberate political act, and that was not to have a glossary for Maori text or to use italics. A glossary and italics were what were used for foreign languages, and I didn't want Māori to be treated as a foreign language in its own country. (Dudding, 2016)

By the time I published *Rangatira* in 2011, including a glossary was still a conversation with the publisher, but not a major debate. (The novel's Māori title was more of an issue.) Many New Zealanders now have wider Māori vocabularies; many emerge from school more confident in Māori language and cultural practices. Grace, however, not only had to face a hostile reception at home. When *Pōtiki* was published in the US, the *Publishers Weekly* review of *Pōtiki* not only complained about the use of Māori words "with no explanation", it declared that "the saga of native people suffering at the hands of an imperialist oppressor is not especially fresh" (*Publishers Weekly*, 1995). To that North American reviewer, Māori experience could be reduced to that of any "native people".

For Patricia Grace and Witi Ihimaera, as well as subsequent generations of Māori novelists – including Kelly Ana Morey, James George and Tina Makereti – English is the first language. Creating Māori characters sometimes means working in translation. Confining flexible Māori concepts to limiting English words is also a challenge. The most obvious translation of the word "rangatira", for example, is chief. But it means much more than this: it means leader, ruler, person of high birth, person of influence. It can be a man or a woman; it can be a group of people. The most obvious translation of iwi is tribe, and of hapu is sub-tribe. The most obvious translation of whanau is extended family. But in Māori culture these things intersect; ancestry creates circles rather than lines. If we say "House" rather than tribe, we get closer to the true nature of iwi and its complex system of alliances, and the importance of status and hierarchy in traditional Māori society.

For evidence of hierarchy, look no further than te reo Māori – in which there's a specific word for the oldest child in a family, mātāmua, and a word for the youngest, pātiki. The word tuakana means: *elder brother of males, elder sister of females; elder brother's children in reference to younger brother's children, elder sister's children in reference to younger sister's children*. Everyone in relation to each other, at all times. And as in any great house, kinship and inheritance, values and traditions, a sense of shared history extending back through time, and a responsibility to maintain the physical estate – in a Māori context the marae and urupa (cemetery), and any shared land that remains – are the key issues.

This is the reason I used the phrase "we Maori" in *Rangatira*. Paratene Te Manu, for whom te reo Māori was his first – and, in reality, only – language would have framed his experience as part of a group rather than as an individual. My aim was not to make a political point, or air a communal grievance against nineteenth-century colonialism. It was to be true to my narrator's point of view.

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A crisis over point of view in *Rangatira* occurred after the book was written, while it was being readied for publication in New Zealand in 2011 and in a German-language edition in 2012. This related not to words on the page, but the image on the cover. As a descendant of Paratene Te Manu I sought and received permission from the Auckland Art Gallery to use the Lindauer painting on the book's cover (see Figure 1). Certain rules around presentation were imposed, including to what extent type could encroach on the painting. The work in its entirety was reproduced, in a smaller version, on the back cover.

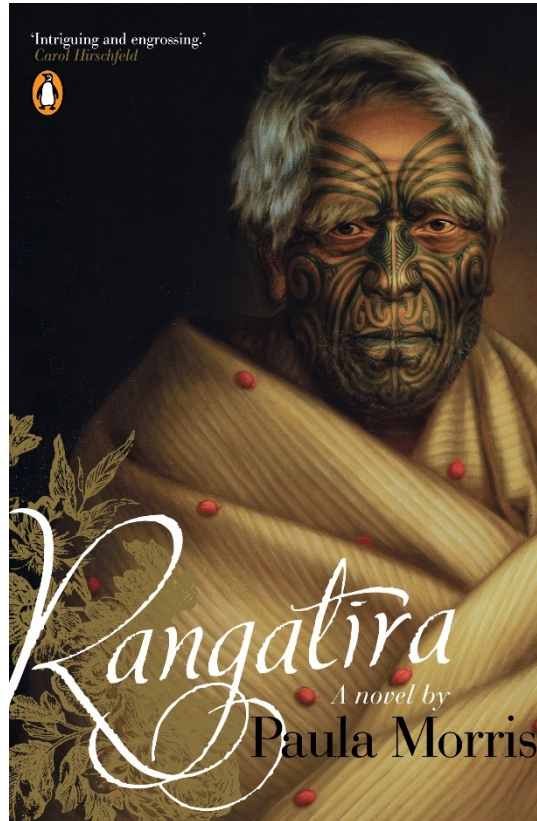


Figure 1: New Zealand cover of *Rangatira* including the painting of Paratene Te Manu by Lindauer.

But the German edition chose a different balance of type and image, and usage permission was withdrawn the week the book was going to print in Europe. The painting was no longer the dominant image; the face of Paratene Te Manu was now an illustrative element. A new cover had to be designed and approved so the publication could go ahead (see Figure 2).

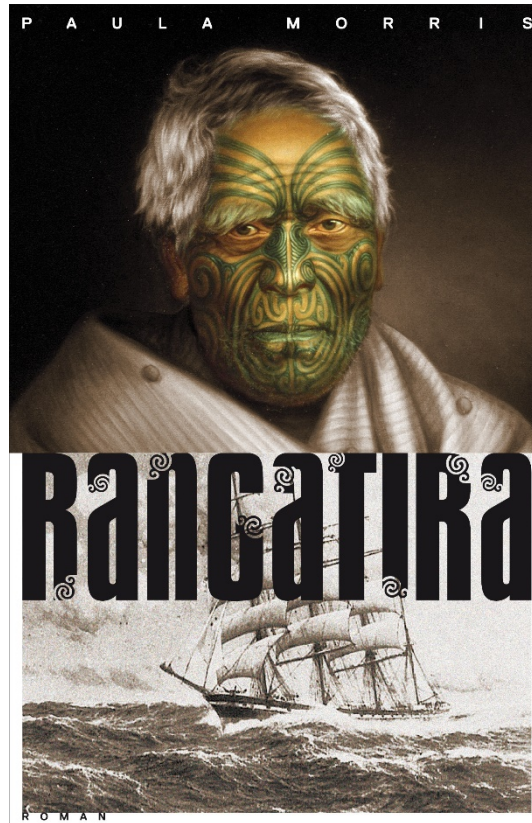


Figure 2: The revised German cover of Rangatira.

To the European publisher, this was a mystifying and frustrating process, and unnecessary bureaucracy. To their way of thinking, a reproduction of the Lindauer painting was not a taonga that needed to be handled in a careful way. They did not consider it to be what Ngahiraka Mason calls “part of a living Māori reality” – that is, the image of an ancestor (Mason, 2014, p. 228):

The figures in the [Lindauer] paintings are respected and beloved ancestors, and therefore Māori create ceremonies for them, because in the Māori world-view the mana of the portraits can be harmful to people from cultures different from ours. Māori care about them and their impact on people, because ancestral images are considered mediators between the human and the supernatural world of Māori, which is inhabited by good and bad spirit beings. We pay the portraits the same regard as we do cultural objects made by Māori people. (Mason, 2014, p. 228)

Wrongful use of images, she argues, “denigrates the ancestors and detracts from their mana as well as from the mana of their stewards or descendants” (Mason, 2014, p. 228). Exhibiting these paintings overseas, or giving permission for use in books, requires the “education of Europeans in a Māori perspective on portraiture” (Mason, 2014, p. 228).

An education on perspective is necessary, then, for viewers of such a picture, as it is for a reader. The misreading of a Māori character, in words or in pictures, exposes the tension in interpretation across cultures. Just as narrative point of view prioritises and excludes, revealing

prejudices as well as insights, our own points of view inform how we read that narrative, or scrutinise visual representations of the historical figures the narrative represents. In the extant pictures of Paratene Te Manu – by artists and photographers – there is clear evidence of how he was seen and mis-seen by his contemporaries.

None of the pictures on record are true portraits, in that his image was always more important to the artist than his name: he was a model rather than a subject. Although *Rangatira* places Lindauer and Paratene Te Manu in the same room, it is extremely unlikely that they ever met, as Lindauer painted often from photographs and took frequent artistic liberties. As discussed, when he painted Paratene Te Manu, he was not painting for a Māori audience: it was for a Pākehā patron. The Lindauer portrait on the cover of the book, the initial spark for the story, was painted from a photograph.

The photograph on which the painting was almost certainly based was taken in 1886, in Auckland. [2] Under the cloak draped around Paratene by the photographer, we can glimpse his jacket: a Māori man visiting the city at that time would have worn a jacket and trousers. But in the Lindauer painting there is no sign of any European garments. In the place of the jacket there is bare skin. The European eye – of not just the painter but of his patron and imagined future audiences at galleries and museums – wanted to see Māori in their “primitive” state, wearing a cloak rather than a suit, as they were in the historic past rather than the present.

Paratene was asked to pose for pictures often in the last half of his life – sketches, photographs and paintings – and the person capturing the image, as well as its primary audience, was always European. These encounters became an essential part of *Rangatira*. Numerous photos were taken in England, where the Māori party were initially a *cause célèbre*, beginning with a photo shoot for the *Illustrated News*. Some pictures were made into *cartes de visites*, given to the aristocracy who entertained them (Mackrell, 1985, pp. 37, 43). In July 1863, preparing for their audience with Queen Victoria, the Māori group were asked to wear cloaks, as though they were taking part in a theatrical performance and needed costumes. All the Māori party grew to dislike posing in cloaks – “native costume” – and brandishing weapons. Missionaries had told them that everything relating to the ways of their parents and grandparents, particularly regarding dress and battle, was sinful, yet they were often presented at public events and in the press as “warriors” and pressed with audience questions about cannibalism (Mackrell, 1985, p. 74). The insistence of their Pākehā handlers that cloaks be worn at all public events was unpopular with the Māori group, contributing to the eventual break with William Jenkins.

Because the Māori group were seen as a collection of natives rather than individuals, and because there was little understanding of the importance of rank in Māori culture, the act of taking photographs itself became fraught. The first session for a photograph in London took five hours, according to William Jenkins, who complained in his diary that it “was no little trouble to get the Natives to submit to be pulled about in order to group them properly” (Jenkins, 1863-1864/2011, p. 4). The photographer’s notion of a proper grouping could be quite different from that of Māori from different iwi, of different ages, and of different social standing. One London photograph contrives a casual positioning, with some people standing and some sitting. [3] Paratene Te Manu, seated on the far right, was the oldest person there. To

him this would show a lack of respect for the relationships among them, as well as a lack of understand of mana; it would send an incorrect message to the viewer.

The 1863 James Smetham work “The New Zealand Chiefs in Wesley’s House” was the sole painting of the group during their stay in England. [4] From a Māori point of view this is similarly chaotic and disrespectful. Smetham sketched each Māori briefly, while William Jenkins made multiple visits to the artist to have his own likeness taken. The painting’s setting is the home of the late John Wesley, a place the Māori party – most of whom were Anglicans – had visited once. Paratene Te Manu is positioned on the far left, almost obscured. The Māori most prominent in the painting is Wiremu Pou, one of the youngest in the group, and notorious for absconding to join a music-hall troupe of so-called Māori warriors appearing at the Alhambra in Leicester Square. In this painting William Jenkins is centre-stage, declaring his own importance, but the Māori are misrepresented – that is, painted with scant regard for their actual physical characteristics – and scattered about the place without any sense of their age or rank.

In the novel, in an imagined scene, Paratene Te Manu visits Smetham’s studio to see this painting, along with Horomona Te Atua, the brother of Wiremu Pou. They struggle to recognise themselves, and for Paratene it is a humiliating moment, seeing himself on the periphery, his likeness poor and moko incorrect, his place in the group reduced to that of a bystander. This is a moment of what Ngahiraka Mason calls a “cultural intersection” in which tension is created by differences in perception (Mason, 2014 p. 228). The scene in the novel offered the possibility of re-casting the painting’s extras as protagonists in their own story rather than passive models.

Writing *Rangatira* was a process by which I learned to read from Paratene Te Manu’s point of view – to read pictures, events, behaviour, speeches, interactions. Certainly, this is an imagined point of view. But fiction offers the novelist an opportunity to explore consciousness, in a way the biographer, confined by factual record, cannot. That deep exploration and interrogation is the ultimate challenge for the novelist, and our ultimate requirement. Fiction writers must make the imaginative leap because we always write about other people; we trade in otherness. But our work is a success only when that otherness is overcome or disguised on the page, or else if otherness serves the story and both expresses and exposes point of view.

In the context of historical biofiction, meeting the challenge of point of view demands both research and imagination. Not all writers are capable of both, or can integrate both. Not all writers recognise the limits and assumptions of their own point of view. The reader may not follow, because some readers seek a moment of recognition, not a constellation of differences. Like some scholars and reviewers, they may demand to feel empathy rather than be confronted with mystery – or, indeed, be confronted at all.

But writers must learn to see again, and learn to listen, and learn to speak, and learn to remember, so that writing someone else’s story is possible. If we fail in that essential act of empathy and imagination, point of view, then the book will fail. Our characters will be like the

Māori ones in the Smetham painting, sketched in haste, arranged at random, neither seen nor drawn as complex individuals.

## Notes

[1] Lindauer's painting can be viewed online through the Auckland Art Gallery's website of the artist's work (<http://www.lindaueronline.co.nz/maori-portraits/paratene-te-manu>).

[2] The photograph is reproduced in James Cowan's 1939 article.

[3] This photograph, "Maori group who visited England with William Jenkins" (1863), can be viewed online through the National Library of New Zealand (<https://tiaki.natlib.govt.nz/#details=ecatalogue.189205>).

[4] An online version of this painting can be accessed through the Hocken Pictorial Collection at the University of Otago: <https://otago.ourheritage.ac.nz/items/show/4567>.

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