Drawing on the collective symbols of Māori Culture as literary devices for constructing narratives in biographical research

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Pepeha

• Tena Koutou, tena koutou
• Tena Koutou Katoa
• Ko Taranaki tōku maunga
• Ko Waitara tōku awa
• Ko Tokomaru tōku waka
• Ko Owae Waitara tōku marae
• Ko Te Atiawa tōku iwi
• Ko Ngati Rahiri tōku hapu
• Ko Helene Connor tōku ingoa
• No Reira,
• Tena Koutou, tena koutou
• Kia ora Tatou Katoa
Introduction

• This paper discusses several collective symbols of Māori culture which I have drawn on when constructing life narratives for biographical research projects with Māori participants.
Symbols

• Can represent both personal and collective representations and can be seen as containers of meaning and transformation.

• Their use as literary devices for the construction of life narratives within biographical research is both culturally appropriate and practical.
Constructing a narrative

• around a particular symbol also provides a space for creativity, innovation and connection, enabling representation of cultural identity and promoting transcultural understanding as stories are read and shared across diverse communities.
The Totara tree

- an indigenous tree of Aotearoa/New Zealand is highly regarded by Māori. The roots in the symbolism of the Totara mark out a whakapapa/genealogical reference point and tie us to Papatuanuku, the Earth Mother.
Nga Aka - The Roots

The roots of the totara represent connection to the land. For Māori, the totara is a very special tree, brought into being by Tane Mahuta, the atua of the forest.

Symbolically, this very important tree can be viewed as representing everything that roots us, anchors us, identifies us and locates us in the Māori world.
The roots in the symbolism

- of the Totara mark out a genealogical reference point and tie us to nature. Our roots, our whakapapa, lead us to forge identities and bonds within our whanau, hapu and iwi. The symbolism of the totara as a symbol of rootedness to that place called home, for Māori, has become a symbol of nostalgia in a mobile society.
As a symbol of nostalgia

- The roots of the Totara provided
- Betty Wark, (subject of a biographical research project) with feelings of belonging and being rooted in the Hokianga, the place of her birth and the place where she wanted to be returned to at her death.
Te Katua – The Trunk

The trunk of the Totara symbolises life and growth. It reaches down towards Papatuanuku and up towards Ranginui at the same time, forming a link between the two primal parents, separated by Tane, the Atua of the forests.
The Trunk in the symbolism

• Of the Totara represents both literally and metaphorically, sustenance.
• Standing straight and true, its sapwood surrounding the heart-wood beneath symbolises the pilgrimage on which we can all set forth.
The Totara Trunk

• Can symbolise personal explorations of the concealed heart-wood and provide an insight into the “inner-life” which sustains.

• In the life narrative of Betty Wark for example, the Totara trunk came to symbolise her Catholicism and her Māoritanga
The Totara leaves are stiff and prickly to touch.
The branches of the Totara can be viewed as representing the various paths open to the children of Tane.

This metaphorical interpretation of the branches renders them as celestial branches, symbolising the baskets of knowledge.
The Three Kete (baskets) of Knowledge

• Māori mythology relates that Tāne, the god of the forest, collected three baskets of knowledge from the outer world and brought them back to the world of mortals.
Māori Marsden suggests the 3 Baskets of knowledge can be interpreted as follows:

**The basket of light** is present knowledge,

**The basket of darkness** things unknown,

**The basket of pursuit** is the knowledge humans currently seek.
Branches in life narratives

• Deal with the different ways the life has branched out in the personal and public spheres and how the 3 baskets of knowledge have symbolically impacted upon their lives – what kinds of pathways have they sought? What kinds of strife have they had to deal with? Where are they heading?
Nga Hua Rakau – The Fruits

Fruits, in tree symbolism, represent maturity, fertility, offspring and nourishment.

The bright red fruit of the Totara tree were a valued food in traditional Māori society. The fruits are sweet and juicy with a slight pine flavour and are only produced by the female tree.
The Fruits in biographical texts

In Betty Wark’s life, the fruits symbolised the culmination of her life’s experiences and life’s work:

Her relationships and children
Her heart politics
Her community development work with Māori youth ….
The Totara is often used in whakatauki (proverbs) when someone has died

The mighty Totara has fallen
She stood proud and tall in Tane’s forest
She provided shelter for the homeless and food for the needy
Her heart was filled with love and tenderness as she showered affection on those around her
In Māori tradition, Papatūānuku is the land. She is a mother earth figure who gives birth to all things, including people.
Papatūānuku

• Produces life and gives sustenance and is a strong symbol when writing about the embodiment of the feminine principle and procreative power in the life narratives of wahine Māori (Māori women)
Subjects of Biography can also select their own symbols to represent their cultural identity

- Three Māori women who had all been in prison were asked to select a symbol to represent their Māori cultural identity. These symbols were used as literary devices to tell their stories
He Matau

Hiraina, a Māori woman from Nga Puhi iwi (tribe) chose a matau or fishhook pendant as her symbol.

The pendant had been given to her by her father and he had told her that it represented her ability to ‘hook’ everyone in the whanau to come together.
Tu-honohono

Ramare, a Maori woman from Te Arawa iwi, chose a moko (tattoo) as her symbol.

This symbol was very important to Ramare as it represented her Māori identity and her wahine toa – her strength as a Māori woman.
Te Whakairo o nga wahine tokotoru

Kimiiora, a Māori woman from Nga Puhi, chose a three dimensional carving as her symbol. The carving represented three generations of women for Kimiora. Herself, her mother and her daughter, portrayed as an embryo in the representation of the uterus. The dolphin represented the symbolic guardian of fertility.
Symbols

- Reveal different planes of reality
- Each of the symbols chosen by the three women represented their Māori identity and had personal significance for them
Symbols as a literary device

• Enable the telling of stories in ways which both connect and empower the narrator.
• Symbols can help subjects of biography talk about aspects of their lives in insightful and creative ways
• Symbols can also address collective cultural identity where there are shared meanings of symbols as well as individual meanings