

The Postcolonial Eco poetics of Patricia Grace's Tu: The Compost and The Labyrinth

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Abstract



This article argues that renowned Māori/New Zealand writer Patricia Grace devises an eco poetics of randomness and design in her novel *Tu* through the manifold image of the labyrinthine compost. The biological processes of the compost and the spatial dynamics of the maze complement one another in this narrative. Both the maze and the compost foreground the liminality, the ordered and chaotic aspects, of physical dwelling places and social structures. The tortuous layout as well as the putrefying and recycling dynamics characterising the war-torn environment of *Tu* are mirrored in the intricate prose of the main protagonist's diaries. His complex psychological regeneration is also influenced by composting processes. Grace's labyrinthine compost evokes a "postcolonial eco poetics" that debunks the loaded associations of randomness with life-threatening wildness, and of design with ordered civilisation, associations which characterised much of the colonial ideology. Whether construed as biological, spatial or cultural concepts, chaos and order in the maze-like compost of *Tu* appear as complementary rather than completely opposed processes.

Keywords: Eco poetics, postcolonial fiction, New Zealand/Māori literature, human/non-human mesh, labyrinth and compost, the mind and the world, environmental liminality.

Resumen

Este artículo sostiene que la reconocida escritora maorí de Nueva Zelanda Patricia Grace concibe una eco poética de aleatoriedad y diseño en su novela *Tu* a través de la imagen múltiple del compost laberíntico. Los procesos biológicos del compost y las dinámicas espaciales del laberinto se complementan entre sí en esta narrativa. Tanto el laberinto como el compost ponen de relieve la liminalidad, los aspectos ordenados y caóticos de las viviendas físicas y las estructuras sociales. El diseño tortuoso, así como las dinámicas de putrefacción y reciclaje que caracterizan el entorno devastado por la guerra de *Tu* se reflejan en la intrincada prosa de los diarios del protagonista principal. Su compleja regeneración psicológica también está influenciada por los procesos del compostaje. El compost laberíntico de Grace evoca una "eco poética postcolonial" al desacreditar las asociaciones cargadas de aleatoriedad con el salvajismo que amenaza la vida, y de diseño con civilización ordenada, asociaciones que caracterizan gran parte de la ideología colonial. Ya sea que se interpreten como conceptos biológicos, espaciales o culturales, el caos y el orden en el compost laberíntico de *Tu* aparecen como procesos complementarios en lugar de completamente opuestos.

Palabras clave: Eco poética, ficción postcolonial, literatura maorí/de Nueva Zelanda, malla humana/no humana, laberinto y compost, la mente y el mundo, liminalidad medioambiental.

As one of the most famous twentieth-century New Zealand writers, Patricia Grace is frequently referred to as the first Māori woman to have published fiction in book form, namely a collection of short stories *Waiariki* (1975) (e.g. Della Valle 135). Her reputation for her crafted and subtle prose bordering on the lyrical, and for her

humble, yet round, human protagonists is well established (e.g. Sarti, Hereniko, Della Valle). Grace exclusively published novels and short stories for both adult and younger audiences, admitting that only in this genre can she more freely investigate the characters’ motivations and their manifold interrelations (Hereniko 157, 159). Because of this generic preference, as well as Grace’s interest in the characters (Sarti 52), it may seem strange at first sight to discuss her work in relation to eco poetics, a biocentric field of enquiry that examines and foregrounds non-human creativity (*poiesis*) in the aesthetic make-up of texts, usually poetry. Published in 2004, Grace’s *Tu* has been studied predominantly for its cultural, political, and social (traumatic) aspects within the local context of Aotearoa New Zealand (namely the issues of Māori sovereignty, national identity, and Pākehā-Māori relations) and that of the country’s transnational relations with the global world (Coates, Wilson, Suzuki). Only DeLoughrey’s examination of the concept and aesthetic motif of the spiral in Grace’s other works opens up promising avenues by which the writer’s input might be discussed through the lense of eco poetics. Thus, this article seeks to add to the scholarship devoted to *Tu* by investigating its potential as an eco poetic novel that highlights the complementary processes of randomness (chaos) and design (order). It argues that, to do so, the narrative incorporates interconnecting dynamics based not only on the spiral, but also on the images of the compost and the labyrinth.

In *Tu*, Grace recounts the real-life hardships of New Zealand’s 28th Battalion during the Second World War. This polyphonic and multidimensional narrative in part focuses on soldier Tu’s depictions of the horrific battlefields on the Italian front. In these, the ravaged environment shows signs of both randomness and design, order and chaos. Regularly destroyed by bombings and infantry raids, the rural landscape appears as a giant compost heap made of superimposed layers of dead soldiers’ putrefying bodies and inorganic debris. In the nightmarish context of the bloody frontline, Māori character Tu comes to the unsettling realisation that his surroundings are a concrete “wasteland,” in which all forms of life are liable to be killed and literally composted. The multi-layered and unstable structure of this disintegrating environment also proves a confusing maze for the surviving soldiers. The notion of the world as a concrete labyrinthine compost heap highlights the physical enmeshment between human and non-human life forms, which together must navigate liminal (ordered and chaotic) topographies. Entangled physically and culturally by the common traumatic experience of war, both European nature and the surviving soldiers must go through the process of self-renewal.

In this article, my association of the labyrinth with the compost aims at recasting the human-centred perceptions of the maze within the more encompassing, i.e. trans-species, dynamics of the compost. Although not entirely similar, the biological processes of compost and the spatial dynamics of the maze complement one another in this novel. Admittedly, placing Grace’s work in relation to such Western models seems dangerously like a Eurocentric imposition on a postcolonial, Indigenous text. Yet, while this may be especially true of the age-old

European archetype of the maze, the flexible openness of compost as an ecological/poetic process—which is perhaps less culturally-determined than the labyrinth—allows for a fruitful dialogue with Grace’s poetics and subtle deployment of Māori cosmology in *Tu*.

Furthermore, by showing how the human/non-human enmeshment during the war echoes the ambivalent dynamics of a maze-like compost heap, Grace connects ecological/poetic and postcolonial issues from cultural and materialist perspectives. The negotiation of randomness and design, labyrinth and compost, decoded in abstract or figurative terms is also relevant to apprehend the cultural background of the novel, which recalls the complexity of the local postcolonial context of Aotearoa New Zealand and the complexity of its global ties with the rest of the world. This article thus argues that the eco poetic focus of *Tu* is one that strives to transcend the old colonial conceptions of “wildness” and “civilisation” forged along the lines of chaos and order, so as to favour a navigation of the world and the mind that can fruitfully accommodate these allegedly opposed dynamics. Indeed, the ecological, processual nature of compost and the spatial dimension of the labyrinth also connect to the wider concern of eco poetics, understood as a reflection on human beings’ relation to their dwelling place (both on local and global scales) and to their non-human neighbours, and as the attempt to translate this fluctuating relationship on paper.

To this end, the first part of this article reflects on the complementary paradigms of the labyrinth and the compost. When placed in dialogue with Māori cosmology, the processual dynamics of the labyrinthine compost also share interesting points of connection with the spiral motif. Moving to a close-reading of *Tu*, the second part examines how the labyrinth and the compost manifest in Grace’s prose as concrete and spatial constructions. The third part deals with the psychic dimension of this labyrinthine compost, which impacts the troubled mindscape of the protagonist, the structure of the text, and the reading experience. The fourth part explores how Grace’s aesthetics of randomness and design constitutes a postcolonial eco poetics; and finally the article concludes with a reflection on how this piece of fiction might contribute to eco poetics at large.

The Compost and the Labyrinth

Understood as tangible constructions, the compost and the maze display a multi-layered and convoluted layout respectively. In its literal or ecological definition, the compost signifies “a mixture of various ingredients for fertilising or enriching land”; more generally, it is “a composition, combination, compound” (from Latin “componere”—“to put together”) (OED n. p.). This accumulation and combination of layers of organic waste structurally echo the numerous meanders, convolutions, and zigzagging patterns of the labyrinth (especially in its multicursal

form¹). These two models of mishmashed jumble or criss-crossing pathways evoke a sense of chaotic multiplicity. The resulting walking pattern of the maze—the individual's physical roaming—further associates its processual navigation with the concept of randomness. Thus, for the maze-walker, the whole structure seems utterly disorganised; for the lay-observer of compost, the composting process may appear as relying more on chance than on careful design.

Nevertheless, both the labyrinth and the compost are also driven in some degree by order or planned organisation: the intricate structure of the maze must be skilfully elaborated by an architect in order to kindle the wanderer's mixed feelings of confusion and somehow pleasurable anticipation of navigating the labyrinth's innumerable meanders (Doob 66). Similarly, a human-made compost pile is regularly monitored: dry and wet layers of organic waste are more or less evenly distributed so that they may decompose and "bind" together into a nutritive fertiliser. By contrast, the natural compost, which for instance develops beneath the forest floor without human management, has a more random formation. In both types of compost, however, the basic composting process arguably remains similar: in a nutshell, under the right environmental conditions, the juxtaposition of various forms of organic matter favours the emergence of microorganisms (e.g. bacteria and fungi), which in turn help break down those materials. Thus, both the compost and the maze integrate randomness and design in terms of their spatial, internal composition. Nevertheless, chance is a crucial determining factor for the compost (the right environmental conditions must be met), so that it remains a highly volatile structure, in contrast to the physical labyrinthine construction whose dynamics is more confined.

Furthermore, this tension between randomness and design crucially produces the ambivalent effect of both the compost and the maze: indeed, it translates into a life/death tension, which each model develops differently. While the compost features aspects of finitude in the decomposition and decay of organic matter, its recycling stage indicates that such demise is intimately linked to the renewal of life. Navigating multicursal labyrinths is much more uncertain, for maze-walkers are never sure of their spatial position, of the presence or not of a centre or an exit. Thus, this wandering experience strikingly oscillates between life-threatening and regenerative outcomes.

In this interplay between life and death, the chaotic maze is decoded through symbolic lenses in the Western imaginary and its literatures to a greater extent than the compost. Characteristically, the literary tradition favours a metaphorical use of spatial representation: "awareness of the labyrinth always represents man's relation to space, which valorises abstract topological principles" (Schmeling 44; my

¹ In literature, the maze is most often presented as multicursal: it consists of several choices of paths and includes dead-ends. By contrast, the "unicursal" labyrinth (presumably the Cretan model) usually appears as circular and has been pervasive in visual arts. In this simple structure, the maze-walker must follow the unique path which inevitably leads to its centre and then walk backwards to find the way out (see Doob 46-51).

translation). The cultural, spiritual, and metaphorical interpretations connoting the maze operate at two main levels, i.e. society (culture, belonging) and the self (mindscape, language). Therefore, the labyrinth as a metaphor represents modern alienation occurring at an individual or collective social level.² These interpretations suggest that the maze also tends to be viewed exclusively through the lenses of human affairs. By contrast, although the compost could also be viewed in a symbolic way, it primarily comes across as an ecological/biological process and earthly artefact.

The lethal aspect of the labyrinth also results from some walkers' inability to embrace randomness as a process that complements more ordered designs that characterise the natural world and human society. When associated with the individual's psychic or spiritual initiation, wandering through the labyrinth signifies an inner journey of self-discovery (see Jaskolski 46, 73-78). In its positive configuration, this quest for personal, philosophical, or religious fulfilment results in a fruitful regeneration: experiencing the confusing labyrinth as an initiation and rite of passage, "the novice emerges from his ordeal a totally different being: he has become *another*" (Eliade 112, emphasis in original).³ This productive othering of the self seems to suggest that, paradoxically, the disorientating labyrinth has some meaningful design. Although mainly an imaginative exercise leading to a "psychic birth" (Jaskolski 46), the transformative function of the labyrinth here echoes that of the compost in its natural occurrence, with its recycling process which completely modifies the biological makeup of organic matter.

In summation, the differences between the labyrinth and compost chiefly lie in their intrinsic nature: the compost is associated with the biological processes governing organic matter, whereas the maze has to do with spatial dynamics, with the individual's relation to and navigation of his/her outside environment. In this model, space also tends to be interpreted in abstract terms, denoting the contextual spheres of culture and human society (e.g. political and social structures). On the other hand, Grace's *Tu* unveils the complementarity of these two images, crystallised in the labyrinthine compost. When allied to the labyrinth, the compost reframes the concept of space, or spatial navigation, through ecocentric and materialist lenses: the tangible nature of the compost foregrounds the biological/biophysical processes of enmeshment, alteration through decay, and regeneration that affect earthly entities. To put it differently, the compost stresses the materiality of space. Conversely, the labyrinth adds the dimension of movement in space—and erratic movement, in particular—to the compost. The resulting labyrinthine compost reminds us that, in their convoluted peregrinations in the environment, human and non-human wanderers also constantly undergo physical alteration. The

² See for instance, Kafka's "The Burrow" and the nonsensical tortuousness of bureaucracy in Kafka's *The Trial*.

³ In European medieval times, following the meandering of the two-dimensional maze reproduced on many cathedrals' paving was "similar to a pilgrimage to the Holy Land": by entering this maze, pilgrims eventually reach Jesus, since God is believed to be the centre of the universe (Jaskolski 73).

corporeality of all life forms is changed, decomposed, and renewed (either visibly or invisibly, as at microscopic level) during their journey through the intricate pathways of the Earth and through their interactions with one another.

From Maze and Compost to Spiral

While the labyrinth archetype particularly resonates with Western culture, the more inclusive and flexible, because biocentric, aspects of the compost offer possible links with the Māori worldview. In order to discuss the ecopoetic structuring of *Tu*, it is crucial to mention that the strong influence of Māori non-dualist cosmology on Grace pre-empts any simplistic reducing of her fictional work to mere displays of the anthropocentric mindset. Indeed, in Māori epistemology, human beings and the non-human environment are not “hyper-separated” as in most Western, “reason-centred” philosophies (Plumwood 115). Although Grace openly acknowledges that she is more interested in developing her characters and their “voice” than in working on a specific “plot or theme” (Hereniko 161), she intimately associates human beings with their ancestors, who, in line with the Māori worldview, permeate present everyday life and the non-human realm (such as animals and natural elements; Della Valle 137). This sense of trans-species and trans-temporal community based on kinship is essential in Māori spirituality.⁴ This is encapsulated in the processual and structural image of the spiral. Inspired by the fern plant, the folding and unfolding movements of the spiral motif (*koru*) incidentally express the fruitful alliance between chaotic and ordered patterns: “The *koru*, which is often used in Māori art as a symbol of creation, is based on the shape of an unfurling fern frond. Its circular shape conveys the idea of perpetual movement, and its inward coil suggests a return to the point of origin. The *koru* therefore symbolizes the way in which *life both changes and stays the same*” (Royal n. p.; my emphasis).

Although Grace’s body of work has not yet been investigated explicitly through the lenses of “ecopoetics,” the motif of the spiral—examined predominantly in her novel *Potiki* (DeLoughrey, Knudsen)—at least hints at the intrinsic *poietic*, productive, energy of the non-human world. Yet the spiral is often examined for its metaphorical, psychological, and metaphysical significance for the protagonists and for Māori culture at large (DeLoughrey “Spiral Temporality,” Suzuki). While these interpretations are useful to understand the postcolonial cultural dialogue and practice of storytelling in *Tu*, they hardly account for Grace’s poetics of randomness and design in this narrative, occurring as it does at the material, concrete level of the individual’s lived experience of the terrain.

The meaning of the spiral as implying a “repetition with a change” (DeLoughrey “Spiral Temporality” 68) echoes the recycling process of a compost,

⁴ Grace extensively illustrated these concepts of kinship and non-linear time in her previous novel *Potiki* (also see Grace’s explanations in Sarti 49).

through which regeneration similarly implies a continuation of living organic matter, albeit in an altered form. In a compost heap, “rebirth” does not equal “identical” repetition: through their contact with each other, the decayed elements are all transformed into a fertiliser that combines their nutritive properties. This is a tangible example of the spiralling notion according to which “life both changes and stays the same” (Royal n. p.). The compost and the spiral both emphasise the dynamic complementarity between allegedly opposed forces and concepts, such as creation (life) and destruction (death), randomness and design, repetition and alteration, beginning and end. Interestingly, the circular, one-path layout of the Cretan-style labyrinth (Doob 19) also espouses the same spiral-like form that evokes such regenerative processes in nature. Yet this is a very specific kind of labyrinth, which rarely features in Western fictional structures (see footnote 1).

Tu recuperates the models of the labyrinth and the compost through a postcolonial strategy of articulating a mutually-transforming negotiation between the various cultures, identities, and terrains that characterise the former colonies (Aotearoa New Zealand) and former “motherland” (Europe). This negotiation is made concretely possible through the Māori soldiers’ encounter with European environments and cultures during the war. Therefore, the complementarity between alleged opposites (chaos and order), the ceaseless movement, and “the organizational role of randomness” (Atlan, qtd. in Rasula 4) at work in the labyrinth and the compost are not at odds with the Māori cosmology based on “spiral temporality” (DeLoughrey) and on fluid interconnections between all life forms and spaces. The maze and the compost thus encounter the Māori spiral in a productive fashion, as a close reading of Grace’s novel shows.

Patricia Grace’s *Tu*: Warfare in Liminal Topographies

Tu focuses on the real-life 28th Battalion—the so-called “Māori Battalion”—which was part of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force during the Second World War. Indeed, in 1939, numerous Māori men voluntarily enlisted in this frontline infantry unit and were sent to fight on European fronts. This marked a historical moment in Pākehā (White people)-Māori relations: some leaders, such as Te Puea Herangi, viewed Māori men’s willingness to fight for the British Crown as a submissive act of cultural assimilation, as an “incongru[ous] [...] participating in the colonisers’ battle” (Wilson 89). Others, led by MP Sir Apirana Ngata, considered it as an opportunity to demonstrate Māori communities’ spirit of endurance and to improve transcultural, racial relations. For their wartime service, many Māori people hoped to gain respect from White New Zealand people and wider political and cultural visibility on the national scene.⁵ Such hopes are addressed in *Tu*, when

⁵ Ngata famously argued that the participation of Māoris in the war effort was the “price of citizenship.” See Coates for an instructive overview of the historical background of the Māori Battalion and the New Zealand political scene at the time (29-34). Patricia Grace herself used an extensive historical and critical scholarship to document *Tu* (“Author’s Notes” 286-87). The website

Grace recounts the pre-war personal lives of three brothers and the wartime hardships they face together. The title of the novel is an abbreviated form of the youngest brother's first name, Te Hokowhito-a-Tu, which translates as "the many fighting men of Tumatauenga" (*Tu* 7). In Māori creation stories, Tumatauenga is the god of war. This allusion, which presupposes a contiguity between the "supernatural" and the "real," creation stories and everyday life, draws attention to the subtle magic realist atmosphere. Such liminality between the real and the unreal reflects the "spiral temporality" of Māori cosmology (DeLoughrey) which counters linear conceptions of time and clear ontological (species) delimitations. This sense of in-betweenness is also concretely reinforced by the disquieting combination of order and chaos that characterises the war-torn landscape. The novel primarily consists of Tu's personal notebooks written on the frontline. Semantics and syntax remain generally fluid, involving experimentation with structure rather than actual radical experiment with language itself. *Tu* depicts a human and natural carnage foregrounding the interpenetration between all the decaying life forms trapped in its midst. This composting and meandering dynamics takes almost gothic and apocalyptic proportions: the narrative features sporadic examples of a trans-species mesh with strong magic realist and uncanny connotations, as the following analysis demonstrates. In those blends of human and non-human fragmented bodies, the co-presence of organised and random patterns informing the whole world in the novel becomes terrifying, as it threatens the protagonists' physical and mental integrity.

The Environment as Compost

Grace's male protagonists, brothers Pita, Rangī, and Tu, participate in the Italian campaign, and more particularly in the long and costly Battle of Monte Cassino (1944), in the Lazio region. The hill, where German soldiers occupied an abbey transformed into a fortress, was the stage of repeated Allied bombings and infantry raids. As a result, this rural location became an immense wasteland (*Tu* 163-64). The Māori soldiers must painfully make their way to the summit where the German fortress still proves impregnable. In Grace's narrative, the doomed and gruesome nature of this mission climaxes in the horrific image of the battlefield as a giant compost heap in which accumulated layers of lifeless bodies and inorganic debris have entered their putrefying and recycling stages:

And what we came across, entangled in all the jumble and waste as we made our way, were reeking, water-swollen corpses of Germans which had been there since the bombing and the first forays into Cassino. We didn't realise at first, after slipping and scratching along, and sliding over mud-caked rubble and stone in the dark, that on striking a soft surface it was rotting flesh that our hobnails, our hands, our knees were sinking into. (165)

<https://28maoribattalion.org.nz/> also provides a wealth of personal testimonies, archives, and information regarding the Māori Battalion's military actions.

In this passage, the accumulating principle of the compost suggests that design and randomness are tightly interrelated. The layering of this macabre “jumble” and agglomerated “rubble” paradoxically involves some kind of order, as the following sentence indicates: “Scattered on top of that under-layer of bodies were the newly dead, Jerries and Kiwis alike” (166). This tension between order and unpredictability is reflected in the uncanny contiguity of decaying matter and living soldiers. Indeed, this sense of liminality does not characterise this ravaged location only: in this decomposed and recycling battlefield, Tu grows unsure whether he and his fighting friends are alive or dead:

I'm surprised to find myself alive. Or am I alive? Dropping down, I had to believe I was dead so that others would know it too. [...] Is there really an edge that separates what is real from what is not, or is there no such separation? [...] If, like a lizard or a fish, you are so indistinguishable against rock that you are undetected by the globular eye of a fly, or any eye, have you become rock? (173)

His metaphysical considerations even ponder the nature of “reality” and “unreality” in ecological terms, as the last sentence devoted to the uncanny camouflaging skills of animals suggests.

The author expands this parallel with the mimicking abilities of non-human individuals by alluding to the gothic archetype of the walking dead. Separated from his battalion during the battle, Tu must smear himself with a killed soldier's blood and play dead in order to lure advancing German soldiers (178). Tu accepts his uncanny status, since “Another man's blood was painting me. Both the other man and I were dead, and both alive” (179). Although this blurring between life and death is quite “natural” in a composting environment, it nevertheless adds to the magic realist, in-between atmosphere of the place. Most importantly, the gothic aspect of such “magic” is based on ecological facts and metabolic principles:

[...] flies were in love with us in the same way that they love dead men. They were in love with our eyes, our lips, our skins, our backsides. If we were not dead we'd have waved at them, slapped them down. Instead we left them to circle, creep, spit, lick. [...] On the other hand there were feeders and egg-layers in love with us too, who as a rule love only the living. They crept and hopped all over us, attaching their drinking mouths to flesh and tunnelling under our skins. How could we know whether we lived or not?

Perhaps there's an in-between state where ghosts walk in and out of you, or where you could be your own ghost coming and going? (179-80)

Tu's allusions to the figure of the walking dead are not only metaphorical renditions of his shell-shocked feelings of horror and (post-)traumatic stress disorder in this war-torn place. Beside these psychological interpretations, the walking dead figure also derives from his factual observations about the soldiers' corporeality rendered uncanny—because deeply altered, yet somehow still recognisable in part—by their difficult living conditions: “we could be an assembly of the dead who, if touched by the light of the sun which we had not seen for days, would melt back into the earth's formations” (178). The ghost figure in these passages is echoed in the Māori soldiers'

allusion to the presence and stories of “*kehua*” (haunting spirits) during the battle (80, 83).

Thus, in Grace’s novel, the surviving soldiers are caught in a paradoxical in-between position, simultaneously belonging and not belonging to the recycling collective made of fallen soldiers and debris. Because of their existence as material, flesh-and-blood beings, Tu and his friends seem destined to blend in with this earthly compost sooner or later (i.e. to “melt back into the earth’s formations”). At the same time, as living, unhurt, and autonomous individuals, they reject the possibility of such an integration which would imply their death. The highly disquieting interplay between order and chaos on the battlefield acquires an eco-apocalyptic dimension: this composting process involves the entire (human and non-human) environment in which the Māori battalion finds itself. In brief, the whole world appears as a compost of waste materials.

The Environment as Labyrinth

In Tu’s recounting of the battle, the motif of the labyrinth helps emphasise the ambiguous role of the world-as-compost as well as the erratic journeying through space it implies for the soldiers. The Cassino battlefield also proves a huge maze that Tu and his brothers must navigate as best they can:

[...] there was no waking from this nightmare of Cassino as we attempted to clear a way in a town that bore no resemblance to any maps we had been shown as part of our preparation. “Via this, via that,” we’d been told. “Turn this way, turn that way.” But there was no this way, that way, no via anything. (165)

Because of the ongoing bombings, the natural and urban topographies are being altered in unexpected ways, creating a labyrinth of shifting obstacles and meanders. This structure is ambiguous in that it retains some of the old, ordered patterns, alongside new, unknown ones. This strange combination may literally lead the Māori soldiers to their death by confusing and exposing them to the concealed enemy fire. As a result, “our attack disintegrated into a kind of foraging as we moved forward and back. [...] It was cat-and-mouse out of the town” (167). The soldiers’ confusion yields to erratic movements, as Tu bitterly explains that the cat-and-mouse chase with its “zigzagging” pattern “is too clean,” whereas their intra-human chase is “brainless” (167). The perilousness of this composting maze means that death awaits the maze-walker at every turn: “We groped our way forward through the ruins and over the disintegrated pieces of men – through the rotten stink of it all – soon finding that this place where we thought there wouldn’t be a flea still jumping, was infested with Jerry [German soldiers]. Live ones, that is” (166). By contrast to the original Greek myth, however, Grace’s labyrinth blurs clear boundaries between the monster, Theseus, and the tortuous non-human space, so that they all together resemble the agglomerated elements of a composting mesh.

The Germans camouflage themselves so well in this environment that Tu cannot perceive any fundamental distinction between the land and the people (98).

As a result, the Māori soldiers feel that the environment around them has “eyes” watching them. This impression is accurate inasmuch as the hilly topography of the place gives a strategic advantage to the Germans camped in the summit fortress: “Everywhere we go we feel Jerry’s eyes upon us from on high. [...] an enemy who sees all” (111). The elevated position enables the enemy forces to organise their attacks: the Germans benefit from a comprehensive vision of the whole labyrinth (the low-lying ruined village of Cassino) and can thus find some order in it. Tu and his brothers, however, still perceive the layout of their surroundings, the sequence of the attacks, and by extension their own survival as highly unpredictable. On the frontline, such a hampered worldview can prove fatal. When Tu becomes aware of the uncanny enmeshment between maze-like nature and the enemy troops, he comments: “a feeling of unreality would come over me. I felt as though I had become part of a picture or a Christmas card, or a story of woodcutters and princes in a book once read. Here I was in the once-upon-a-time, in some make-believe place” (98). This “feeling of unreality” is triggered not only by the magic realist contiguity of different realms—i.e. between human and non-human beings (“trees could be men” concealed to shoot at Tu, 98)—but also by the liminal nature of the maze. The confused maze-walkers (the soldiers) find it difficult to reconcile the dynamics of order and chaos which characterises their encounter with the more-than-human world and their arduous navigation of this shifting environment. The defamiliarising effect of such a liminal topography has important cultural implications, as I will show later.

Finally, Italy itself, as a heavily bombed and ruined country, assumes the tortuous structure of a maze. Given this particular geographical location, the soldiers’ peregrinations on mountain roads that are “long and filled with many a turning” is somewhat reminiscent of Dante’s many-tunnelled *Inferno* (109).⁶ This last subtle analogy suggests that the environment as labyrinthine compost is not only unsettling in its conflation of random and design patterns: it also seems to take on the role of an oppressor engineering Tu’s death. At the same time, Tu’s descriptions show that the Italian rural environment is also crushed by the man-made war. Constituted by the ruins of blown-up buildings, the battlefield-as-maze bears witness to the more-than-human world as an additional victim of the depicted military apocalypse. Here, both human and non-human beings share the life-threatening and traumatic consequences of a putrefying world-labyrinth. Both must go through the process of survival: within the paradigm of the compost, this means to effectively regenerate after one’s physical decomposition, while surviving the labyrinth implies finding an exit point.

⁶ As Doob reports, many authors viewed Dante’s Hell in his *Divine Comedy* as a potential labyrinth. In this instance, although it is made of concentric circles, the *Inferno* is intrinsically a closed maze from which the damned souls can never escape (282).

Writing the Labyrinthine Compost as a Means to Recycle the Mind

More than a physical exercise, exiting the labyrinth implies psychic travail: the individual's mental energy must attune itself to the convoluted structure of reality so as to accept its ambivalent (ordered/random) organisational pattern. In this way, "making sense" of the maze means to successfully perceive how productive and creative the tense co-presence of randomness and design can actually be. Here, arguably, the compost contributes to the maze archetype, as such psychic acceptance of the labyrinth implies a reconfiguration, or recycling, of the mind and rigid cognitive categories. Grace's fictional rendition of mindscape considerably depends, thus, on the complementarity between maze and compost. Indeed, her novel constitutes a psychic maze inspired by Tu's difficulty to comprehend the random, yet somehow ordered, geography of the Earth and to reconnect his pre-war with his post-war life. Influenced by the protagonist's struggle, the structure of the text proves as sinuous and fragmented as the labyrinthine compost. Consequently, the reading experience becomes an exercise of mental meandering and spiralling through time and space. In this process, the reader, just like Tu, must reassemble disjointed plot elements so as to acquire a more comprehensive overview of the story.

Tu survives the terrifying composting labyrinth, at least in part, through his storytelling activity: writing down his memories and impressions eventually helps him organise to some degree the chaotic compost or labyrinth of his mind. The tension between randomness and design found in these two archetypes also characterises the overall layout of Grace's book. While Tu's personal notebooks are first intended as a wartime log of factual entries (16-21), the text gradually espouses a more fluid and novel-like form. In the second chapter, the book's protagonist reverts to a less rigid and orderly presentation of events so as to convey his impressions better: "Just because the days are quite monotonous shouldn't mean that writing has to drag as well" (22). This almost metafictional reflection extends to the spatial and temporal configurations of the whole narrative: blurring fact and fiction, Tu's accounts are interspersed with the pre-war life of his elder brother, Pita, in Wellington. Except for the Prologue and Epilogue, Grace's book thus systematically alternates chapters devoted to the European frontline (recounted by Tu through a first-person narrative) and the home front respectively (a third-person narration focalised on Pita). The New Zealand-based stories are actually fictionalised transcripts of Pita's confessions to Tu while both fight in Europe. However, it is unclear how much Tu embellishes or modifies these family stories (150). This ambiguity lends a subtle metafictional flavour to the whole narrative.⁷

⁷ For the writing of *Tu*, Grace was similarly inspired by her father's war diaries. The latter, however, remain very short and incomplete regarding the military action themselves. Thus, Grace relied on external research and imagination to depict such scenes ("Author's Notes" 284).

In Grace's polyphonic and multidimensional text, such labyrinthine poetics is particularly detectable in the intertwined plotlines and deceptively plural narrative point of view, thus disrupting the time-space continuum of the narrative. At the same time, a clear design structures this randomness, as the syntax of Tu's prose remains fluid and seamless, without giving way to even more radical modes of experimental writing and textual fragmentation. On the other hand, Tu's interweaving of past and present events and of various points of view also mirrors the folding and unfolding movements of the spiral. The composite blend of fact and fiction in his stories is further reinforced by the Māori's conception of genealogy, or *whakapapa*, as highly flexible. In Māori epistemology, *whakapapa*, understood as both "process and product" (Suzuki 117), accommodates change to ensure its survival (DeLoughrey, *Routes* 164). Thus, Grace's entire novel could be decoded as the written genealogy of Tu's family, one which weaves together various geographical places (Italy and Wellington), cultural traditions (labyrinth and spiral), and temporalities.⁸

Grace's technique of *assemblage* complicates the textual labyrinth by doubling "the hermeneutic burden and the Theseus-role" usually assigned to "the recipient of the text" in Western fiction (Gillespie 388). Written some twenty years after WWII, Tu's introductory and closing letters to his nephews Rimini and Benedict mean not only that the latter must navigate Tu's meandering accounts set in the past: the reader must also simultaneously negotiate the past and present labyrinths of Tu's universe, represented respectively in his wartime diaries and his current reconnection with Rimini and Benedict. As regards such processual reading experience, Rasula's prolific model of the poetic recycling compost as suffused with signs (128-29, 199) contrasts with the much more uncertain possibility of making sense of the labyrinth. What the reader makes of the maze-like narrative upon closing the book is highly unpredictable. The chaotic labyrinth epitomises the reader's dynamic cognitive journey through the tortuous plotlines of a narrative, a journey which may remain nonsensical and fruitless. By contrast, the compost emphasises the individual's assemblage of fragmented information gleaned *en route throughout* this journey. In *Tu*, the productive compost complements Grace's labyrinthine text at the end: piece by piece, the protagonist's convoluted stories reveal—and thus in a way (re)construct—the true identities of Benedict and Rimini as the respective love children of Tu's brothers.

Ironically, just like the reader, Tu himself must travel through the designed chaos of his own labyrinthine diaries. Indeed, the second and most important purpose of this maze-walking experience inside Tu's notebooks and Grace's novel is to make sense of the protagonist's own life. Two-thirds into the novel, a new section begins with Tu recovering in an Italian hospital. He resumes his diary writing in order to remember the circumstances of his discharge: "it'll help me sort out what took place and how it all happened. Now that I've begun to remember, there's

⁸ See Suzuki for an extensive exploration of the notion of *whakapapa* in *Tu*.

nothing I can do to keep half-formed recollections from making their way into my head” (*Tu* 232). Thus, Tu’s mind has become a circuitous maze or a “mind-compost” (Snyder 10) of randomly agglomerated memories, of “scraps” which are progressively “gathering themselves together” (*Tu* 232). To transcribe this difficult assembling process, that particular chapter (232-37) espouses a slightly more fractured layout than the others, as the prose is structured around short paragraphs and indented sentences or words. Reflecting the progressively resurfacing and accumulating memories, this layout conveys a sense of both contingency and organisation, with a back-and-forth movement between timeframes significantly recalling the dynamic principle of the spiral motif.

Because of his notebooks and his war experience, Tu could be seen as embodying all his fellow soldiers’ stories, or *whakapapa* (Suzuki 120-21). As he has pondered and re-assembled his and his brothers’ memories of war, “the detritus of day-to-day consciousness” is recycled, i.e. “re-created through reflection” and given back to the community (Snyder 10). In this sense, his Māori name, which means “the many fighting men of Tumatauenga, the god of war” aptly describes not only his narrative, but most importantly his own identity. This correspondence between the book as textual object and Tu as a physical character suggests that the latter is like a composting entity as well: caught in the recycling process of the war-torn environment, Tu physically and psychologically goes through the stages of decomposition and regeneration.

Moreover, because Tu’s full name—Te Hokowhitu-a-Tu—also designates “the Pioneer Battalion of Maori volunteers during World War One” (*Tu* 7), his survival also casts him as the custodian of a broader collective of human memories, or as a living testimony to the Māori people’s historical war effort. All in all, the ambivalent maze-like compost re-enacts what the reader and Tu must accomplish when reading Grace’s fractured plotline: both must connect pieces of information pertaining to Tu’s New Zealand-based family (the local) and European war-experience (the global) in the hope of finding some purpose out of Tu’s present multicultural and “glocal” life.

The Labyrinthine Compost as Postcolonial Eco poetics

Indeed, in *Tu*, the author shows how the physical trans-species entanglement at work in the labyrinthine wasteland in Italy also translates into a strong cultural bond between Europe and the former colony of Aotearoa New Zealand. Grace’s eco poetics here acquires a postcolonial dimension because her vision of the European landscape as composting labyrinth complicates the colonial ideological associations of the “Old World” (the “civilised”) with order and of the “New World” (the “savage” and “wild”) with chaos. In this process, the fact that the main narrator unveils the differences *and* similarities between European and New Zealand terrains

from a Māori perspective reinforces Grace's postcolonial deconstruction of fixed human roles (coloniser/colonised) and ecological features.

Echoing the accumulation of composting strata and circuitous tunnels in a maze, the intricate juxtaposition of different perspectives, timeframes, and places enables us to establish a parallel between the stories set on the Italian battlefields and those pertaining to New Zealand life. Tu's "feeling of unreality" while he is on the Italian front (98), as outlined in the first section of this article, also derives from his perception of Europe as the "upside-down side of the world" (174). Moreover, with its old buildings, the Italian countryside is actually "quite spooky" (47). Such mixed feelings of fascination and unease are shared by many his fellow soldiers, who have never left their home country before. Grace brings about an interesting reversal of roles between the so-called "Antipodes" ("New Worlds") and Europe (the "Old World"). In colonial times, the Antipodes were often considered as strange and "unreal" lands by Anglo-Celtic settlers; the Europeans regarded this unknown environment and its internal organisation as the epitome of life-threatening and unintelligible randomness (Cronon 70-71; see Garrard 66-85). In the eyes of many settlers, the wilderness of these colonies accordingly constituted a literal and symbolic waste-land that had to be transformed and tamed, i.e. re-designed in an orderly fashion so as to make it a profitable and safe land (Crosby 147; Huggan and Tiffin 5-8). Ironically, in *Tu*, Europe is seen in this way by the Māori soldiers, as the gothic and ambivalent depictions of the Italian environment suggest. Thereby, Grace strikingly re-appropriates the concepts of "unreality" and (apparent) "chaos" as synonyms for "uncivilised," "wild," and "irrational." The book evokes and reconfigures these notions, which have long informed imperialist arguments legitimising the colonisation of territories and Indigenous people (Cronon 79; see Huggan and Tiffin 5-11; see Garrard 77, 129-36).

Despite his feeling of uncanniness, Tu does not actually express real hostility towards this Italian putrefying wasteland and the Minotaur-like enemy troops (*Tu* 181). Rather than being driven by a colonial impulse to tame this desolate and dangerous landscape of his own, Tu seems to accept the ambivalence of this place, i.e. the fact that it appears both unfamiliar and familiar (47). The most reassuring and recognisable features lie in the mountainous topography, which both characterises Aotearoa New Zealand and some parts of Italy (110, 112, 275). Tu reflects that the Māori are forever part of Italian history not only because of the war (which implies that dead soldiers are buried overseas), but also because of the similarities in landscapes (77). These echoes provide Māori soldiers with some semblance of order—in the form of peace of mind—as they feel less bewildered by the horrifying and disorderly human and non-human compost on the battlefield. In brief, Grace blurs the rigid polarities between (post)colonial figures—White and Indigenous people—and their supposedly different perceptions of a maze-like world. Geographical and cultural oppositions between the "centre of the civilised world" (Europe; England for the British Empire) and the remote colonies "on the

edge of civilisation" (e.g. Aotearoa New Zealand) are called into question. The author's rejection of cultural and ecological binaries is informed by the cyclical dynamics of the composting pile and the interconnecting movement of the spiral. It further echoes the high human mobility, transnational, and transcultural dialogues that characterised the rise of a globalised world in the second half of the twentieth century.

Finally, the environmental ambivalence of these uncanny, controlled and unstable, dangerous and life-renewing places in Grace's novel can also be linked to the tense Māori-Pākehā relations in Aotearoa New Zealand in the mid-twentieth century. Interestingly, the image of the enemy-filled European countryside as an environment that observes Tu recalls the chapters devoted to his brother, Pita, set in Wellington before he enlisted. Pita is struggling to adjust to the strange, anonymous, and largely White urban centre of Wellington, where, historically, many Māori families moved for economic reasons at the outbreak of WWII (Coates 37-38). As he faces racial discrimination in this city, Pita too feels the burden of White people's gaze: "And it was the thousand eyes that made the colour of his skin a shame" (*Tu* 140). Whereas the watching eyes concealed in the Italian wasteland may prove physically lethal to the Māori Battalion, in Wellington the "thousand eyes" harass Pita with feelings of double-consciousness and cultural in-betweenness. This may lead to a symbolic death caused by cultural alienation (140). Grace's "layered" fiction and its juxtaposition of plotlines invites the reader to make connections between the death of the body in a composting wasteland and a symbolic demise in a city that may drastically reshape the individual's cultural identity. If the Second World War represents the decomposing and putrefying stages of the same Western civilisation that engaged in colonisation, a decomposition experienced physically by Tu (who is severely wounded) and his brothers (who both die in battle), can the post-war moment and its corresponding "crisis of reinventi[on]" for postcolonial nations (Howells, Sharrad, and Turcotte 1) initiate the recycling, regenerating process of compost through an improved transcultural dialogue and social justice for the Māori community? Tu's closing letter to his nephews Benedict and Rimini suggests that the Māori Battalion's praiseworthy service did not, unfortunately, bring in much political change (*Tu* 279). In this sense, the Māori soldiers in Grace's *Tu* could also be envisioned as waste material partaking in the composting war from a political perspective: their lives seem to have been literally wasted in vain, if one considers the racial status-quo in the aftermath of WWII.

However, projects of house renovation, further storytelling to the family, and a visit to Italy with Rimini and Benedict conclude the novel on an optimistic note (281-82). Tu's resolution to "renovate the house" (282) is highly suggestive: it points out his desire to rethink and revitalise his *oikos*, i.e. his "home or place of dwelling" (Bate 75). In view of his life-changing transcontinental and transcultural travels, Tu's home acquires more global dimensions. In a nutshell, the ending highlights the transformation of hermit-like, war veteran Tu, who previously

defined himself solely as a soldier, into a person committed to his community's livelihood and cultural re-empowerment. Echoing Māori creation stories, Tu finally shifts his interests to the other attributes of the god Tumatauenga, who is not only the god of war, but also "the god of man" (Barlow 12). Grace's choice of this highly symbolic name is in line with the "spiral temporality" (DeLoughrey) of Māori cosmology. This narrative could be decoded as recounting the adventurous life of the God Tumatauenga in twentieth-century Europe and Aotearoa New Zealand. In Grace's story, Tumatauenga makes the uncanny experience of the labyrinthine compost: he is psychologically marked by his corporeal enmeshment with the maze-like, hellish Italian landscape during WWII (to refer to Dante's famous "Hell"). In the end, he is not annihilated but manages to re-emerge "as another" (Rasula 8; also Eliade 112): though still physically maimed, Tu feels spiritually enriched and re-energised by his transnational voyages. Recalling a fecund recycling, the spiral has gone full circle, so to speak: Tu's rebirth emulates the folding movement of the spiralling fern frond back to its starting point. Tu, his family, and his home place are eventually re-united, all transformed and yet still the same. Although the soldiers and the environment are linked primarily through bodily disintegration on the frontline, the recycling process of the compost implies that these decaying entities still possess a (re)creative potential, or *poietic* energy.

Conclusion: The Novelistic Eco poetics of Tu

This article set out to demonstrate how Grace emphasises the complex enmeshment between the human and non-human realms at physical and psychic levels. In this narrative, the compost and the labyrinth are not only portrayed as concrete structures: extending into the metaphorical realm, they operate, for the central protagonist and the reader, as a processual eco poetics reflecting (on) how to dwell in the world both physically and imaginatively. Tu perceives the battlefield as a liminal terrain where randomness and design, contingency and predictability, and life and death are actually collaborative forces. Tu's accounts are not completely the result of an individual, human imagination: the composting and convoluted wasteland lies at the source of his meandering thought process and multi-layered storytelling. Moreover, the spiralling dynamics characterising the narrative's non-linear temporality and the life/death co-presence on the disintegrating battlefield intrinsically harks back to the ongoing state of biological emergence through patterns of renewal and alteration. In brief, Grace's eco poetics of randomness and design, as illustrated in the labyrinthine compost, highlights the reciprocal dialogue between the perceiver and the perceived, the dweller and the dwelling place.

Also, Grace's prolonged and intense immersion of her readers in a labyrinthine compost, destabilising their boundaries between ordered and chaotic organisations of reality, opens up the way for future reflection on the possible cross-pollinating exchange between prose and the field of eco poetics. It is granted that, in poetry, the

tense interplay between chaos and order seems to occur at the very core of language: the latter is “dislocated”, to use Rasula’s suggestive terminology (124), from the inside. Language may be said to implode thanks to the poets’ experiments with rhetorical devices, Rasula considering this trope as “poetry’s composting medium” (9). By contrast, prose texts perhaps more frequently expand the apparent disorder of the maze to their macro-structure rather than re-inventing “the word” itself. Granted too that for its defamiliarisation effects and re-enactment of a chaotic universe over three hundred pages, *Tu* relies more on a multiplicity of narrative points of view and on a disruption of the time-space continuum than on an actual re-invention of language and its plasticity from inside out. Nevertheless, while Grace’s labyrinthine compost (deceptively) conveys a sense of order at the level of prose syntax, her accumulation of layers—of characters, places, voices, epistemologies, timeframes—and the ceaseless circulation of echoing, spiralling correspondences between them definitely show the author’s aesthetic kinship with an eco poetics of randomness and design, an eco poetics that particularly evokes the difficulty of evolving in and understanding a world in constant movement. Grace’s novel, therefore, shares important characteristics with the eco-poem seen as a “making of the dwelling-place” modelled not merely after nature’s rhythms in a naturalistic fashion, but also through aesthetic procedures and textual structures inspired by dynamic ecological processes, to paraphrase Jonathan Bate (75-76). In *Tu*, as in other eco poetic texts, the reader does indeed not merely discover descriptions of the landscape and a universe brimming with fluctuating and contingent energies: he/she experiences what it means to evolve and reside in such a place.

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