



Intergenerational Healing within Waterscapes: The Spiritual Connection between Girls and Water in *Estiu 1993* and *Whale Rider*

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Abstract

Since time immemorial, humans have had a flowing communication with Water and have been connected to Water in infinite ways through ritual, celebration, storytelling, and contemplative practices (Leonard et al., 2023). We are Water. This essential truth of our interconnected existence has been denied by past and present interrelated systems of violence, such as colonialism, patriarchy, and pollution, which have affected us and our planet (Ansloos, 2023). In this article, I analyze the films *Estiu 1993* (2017) and *Whale Rider* (2003), their girl child protagonists Frida and Pai, and illustrate how young girls find a spiritual connection to themselves, their departed loved ones, and the world through a spiritual connection with the Waterscapes they have access to. I also highlight Indigenous perspectives about intergenerational healing through embodied Water practices and rituals. with the beyond-human world (Rodriguez, 2024). I offer suggestions on approaching the films pedagogically, emphasizing the potential to integrate anti-oppression and eco-justice discussions within multigenerational and culturally safe educational environments.

Keywords

seascape, waterscape, rivers, indigenous youth, rights to water

Intersectional Trauma Awareness

Estiu 1993 (2017), directed by Catalan filmmaker Carla Simón and set in the La Garrotxa Volcanic Zone National Park, won accolades for the vivid and organic portrayal of the Catalan landscapes of healthy lifestyles (Jones & Perriam, 2019). Specifically, *Estiu 1993* depicts the first summer that Frida, the protagonist, spends with her adopted family. *Whale Rider* (2003) is a film set in a coastal town in Aotearoa, directed by non-Indigenous filmmaker Niki Caro and based on a novel written by Māori author Witi Ihimaera in 1987 (De Souza, 2007). The success of the film raised critical debates about the limited Māori control over their representation in the international film industry (Joyce, 2009).

Both films share several characteristics in common, such as being directed by women, the protagonists' loss of their mothers, and contexts portraying the heavy collective historical trauma that minoritized nations bear, such as the Spanish regime in Catalunya (Beaney, 2020; Jones, D. & Perriam, C., 2019) and the British colonial invasion in Aotearoa that impacted the lives of several Maori generations (De Souza, 2007; Joyce, 2009). Land and Water exploitation and dispossession have caused ecosystems detriment and intergenerational trauma in Indigenous families in the form of chronic grief, depression, somatic symptoms, and dissociation that can be transferred and deepened over generations (Avalos Cisneros, 2014). Apart from grief and systemic injustice, patriarchy is also a significant wound carried by families in both films. The urgent need for change gives a chance for a new, emancipated reality embodied by the strong and loving women in the films: Frida's adoptive mother and Pai's grandmother.

In reality, structural oppression continues to affect children's lives, self-awareness, and understanding of the world. Furthermore, Indigenous notions of healing have been stigmatized and invalidated by colonial policies such as the prohibition and criminalization of Indigenous spiritual practices (Avalos Cisneros, 2014). Critically viewing either film can open pathways to talk about these topics with children above nine and their families, as well prepare culturally safe spaces to do so, such as intergenerational circles, cultural revitalization workshops, and art-based community stories production.

Water as sanctuary and young girls' source of spirituality

Estiu and *Whale Rider* make the most of Waterscapes, aquatic sounds, and Water metaphors, which evoke a sense of immersive experience (D'Aloia, 2012). Both films provide a depiction of young girls' nature-based, and particularly Water-based spirituality that promotes personal reflection and intergenerational connectivity. According to Indigenous epistemologies, elements of the nature are alive and sacred, and connectedness to Earth and all beings is a form of spiritual practice, including the practice of perceiving oneself as one with Water, experiencing her vastness and endless liveliness (Boldo, Kephart, and Allouche, 2021).

In *Estiu*, a notable Waterscape that provides Frida with a space for healing is the shrine by the creek (Figure 1) which Frida visits ritualistically and converts into a personal sacred space by seeking connection with her departed mother through the



Figure 1: Frida by the Virgin Mary shrine. The flowing creek and singing birds can be heard clearly.



Figure 2: Frida in awe of the sounds of the approaching storm.

image of the Virgin Mary as the Divine Mother. Close-up shots invite the audience to appreciate Frida's perspective, Water sounds are raw and spotlighted, and the absence of sound effects or background music signifies the director's intention for the audience to feel immersed in the vivid environment together with Frida, like when Frida is in awe by the approaching storm (Figure 2). Frida's moments of introspection occur by the Water (Figures 3 and 4). The connection between Water and Frida's improving emotional state is performed in scenes where she plays with Ana and other local children (Figures 5 and 6).

Frida bursts into tears in the final scene (Figure 7) represents the healing moment of letting her emotions flow, comparable to the power of the rainfall over the land that brings liveliness and health to a dry and fractured soil, and signifies the self-realization of feeling safe, loved, and spiritually connected to a new environment.



Figure 3: Frida's moment of introspection by the river as Ana's parents search for her.



Figure 4: Friday and Ana by the river.

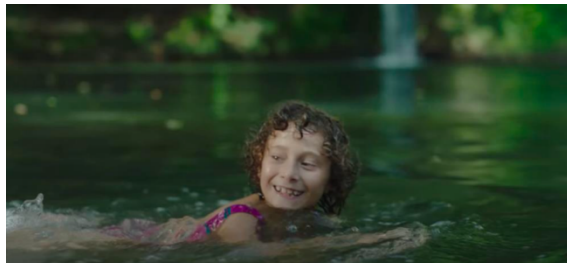


Figure 5: Frida swims, enjoys water, and smiles while playing with Ana.



Figure 6: Frida plays with local children in the river



Figure 7: Frida cries, overwhelmed, realizing and accepting she has a new, loving family.

Whale Rider is, in essence a Water-based Indigenous spirituality film, as is evident from the slow-motion opening (Figure 8). Viewers find themselves submerged in deep Ocean Waters, where recurring shots of whales enforce the idea of Pai's metaphysical connection to these animals. In one specific scene, in which Pai leaves the village with her father in a car, the camera captures elements that form part of her home: Pai sees the traditional boat carved by her dad, her house, and the ocean (Figure 9). The camera moves to trace the transition from Waterscape to landscape (Figure 10) and the shot of a whale is incorporated as a sign for Pai to embrace a spiritual call to leadership (Figure 11). The scene continues and the car remains in motion, while Pai looks out the window. The camera's variable focal length conveys the interconnectedness between Pai and the Ocean (Figure 12). The scene ends when Pai asks her father to stop the car and runs towards a viewpoint (Figure 13) where she requests to be taken back home. Her father's acceptance of her request reveals his respect for Pai's potential leadership based on her passion for revitalizing ancestral culture, which is a key part of Māori's well-being (Walker-Morrison, 2020). Later in the film, the audience grasps more about the importance of the Ocean in one of the most beautiful scenes of the film when, as a metaphor for the



Figure 8: The film begins underwater with an origin story of the *Whale Rider*



Figure 9: Embracing the spiritual call to leadership in the scene in which Pai leaves town with her father.



Figure 10: Transition from Waterscape to landscape.



Figure 11: A whale and her calf are seen and heard while Pai leaves town.



Figure 12: Varying focal length expresses Pai's connectedness with the ocean.

tremendous difficulty of reclaiming culture, Pai dives to recover her grandpa's *Reiputa* from the bottom of the Ocean and is seen submerged in the depths (Figure 14). Although Pai's life is surrounded by near-death experiences that denote burdensome spiritual journeys, it is noticeable throughout the whole film that Water is for Pai and her people a source of culture, well-being, and spiritual strength.



Figure 13: Pai asks to stop, then runs to a viewpoint. She requests to go back home.



Figure 14: Pai dives deep in search of *Reiputa*.

The drops of healing ripple across generations

According to Indigenous worldviews, Water, who travels through continents and our bodies, is an ancestor with consciousness and memory of our planet (Diaz, 2021). Connection to Water fosters awareness of time and concern for the future. Ancient cultures from around the world linked Water to rites of renewal (D'Aloia, 2012). In both films, the symbolism of Water as a place to be reborn can be appreciated with different levels of intensity. While *Estiu* offers a serene river-like experience,

dark-filtered *Whale Rider* submerges the audience into dramatic waves, near-death events, and rejection. For both *Frida* and *Pai*, Water is safe, holding, and caring—like a mother's womb, an inner world, a place for reflection, a sanctuary (Figures 3 and 4).

Stories of children that tap into the multidimensional—physical, emotional, and spiritual—power of restorative waterscapes (Walker-Morrison, 2020) and are supported by loving guardians such as in *Estiu* and *Whale Rider* can help families who have experienced trauma navigate distressing circumstances and redirect their efforts towards healing. As Roni Natov (2018) notes, “[h]ealing from trauma requires an affirmation, a belief in the young person, who cannot possibly sustain a sense of self alone.” *Frida*'s and *Pai*'s caretakers understand that “the process of moving back towards one's culture and community can be fragile and requires support and displays

of caring” (Boldo, 2021). Although neither film addresses current struggles of land and Water access, they can ignite conversations about children’s rights to healthy Waterscapes (Chi-Kin Lee, 2022; Gearon, 2006) and Water-inspired traditions, which nurture the films’ protagonists’ sense of purpose and collective belonging. These conversations can take form of an ecocultural heritage storytelling workshop, where multiple generations are invited to share water-related rituals that have moved them and would like to sustain.

Climate change is the most critical intergenerational trauma we face today. Due to its intrinsic relation to coloniality (Sultana, 2022), discussions of Water-related privileges and injustices, health consequences of Water-stressed areas, and hydrocolonialism (Ansloos, 2023) are crucial for finding just solutions. Let us ask ourselves and our communities how observing, resonating, and performing immersive practices within Water transform our relationship with her. Let us be grateful to Water and remember our essence. May Water guide us towards renewed ways of seeing ourselves and the world.

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