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Paper Title: Indigenous Women's Narrative Sovereignty in *Cousins*

Abstract:
This paper examines Indigenous women's narrative sovereignty as a question of storytelling form rather than representation alone. Building on Michelle Raheja's theory of visual sovereignty, which foregrounds Indigenous control over image-making and spectatorship, I extend sovereignty to the level of narrative composition. Narrative sovereignty, as I define it here, concerns the authority to determine how stories unfold and how they refuse expected arcs of development and resolution. Focusing on *Cousins* (2021, NZ), directed by Ainsley Gardiner and Briar Grace-Smith and adapted from Patricia Grace's seminal Māori novel, the paper examines how wāhine Māori writing is translated into cinematic form. The film moves across generations in a non-linear rhythm, holding onto matrilineal continuity rather than narrowing its focus to a singular protagonist's development. In doing so, it sustains a collective narrative logic grounded in whakapapa and shared memory. Rather than building toward individual triumph or narrative closure, *Cousins* is shaped by return.

Cousins was produced within Aotearoa's national screen funding system, and its narrative form cannot be understood outside that institutional context. Institutional support makes the film possible, yet it does not determine its storytelling logic. Narrative sovereignty, I argue, takes shape in the space between national expectations of legibility and the film's commitment to whakapapa and mana wāhine. In adapting Patricia Grace's novel, Gardiner and Grace-Smith retain its refusal of singular perspective and linear progress, even as the film circulates within a state-supported screen industry. Through this tension, *Cousins* demonstrates that narrative sovereignty is not secured in advance by funding, nor foreclosed by it; it is worked out within the act of storytelling itself.

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Biography:

Babsie Keulemans is a doctoral researcher in Film, Theatre & Television at the University of Reading (UK). Her research examines Indigenous film development and screen policy in Aotearoa and Canada, focusing on how institutional frameworks operate and shape access and narrative possibilities for Indigenous women filmmakers. She holds a BA in Film Studies with Communication and Media Studies and an MA in Screen Studies from the University of Liverpool. Her research interests include Indigenous cinema, film policy, small-national cinema, and women-led filmmaking practices.

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