Micro-themes are short writing exercises that provide practice in using disciplinary grounding to explain a film. Students are given guidelines and examples. For this course, micro-themes must open with a claim, followed by the warrant for the analysis, and then specific evidence. Both examples in this section are from the third micro-theme for the quarter. The focus in this unit is primal religions. While not perfect in terms of prose control and organization, both examples illustrate the kind of analysis we expected—and read—in students’ work. Both demonstrate the ability to ground analyses in the specific vocabulary and frames of reference for each discipline and to use those to deepen their understanding of the film.

Example A

What film and filmic techniques show the relationship of primal people to place and ritual in Nicki Caro’s Whale Rider?

The scene with Paikea and Koro working on the outboard explains how filmic techniques show the significance of place and the importance of ritual to primal culture. This scene is a metaphor for the entire movie. The basic plot is that the grandfather is trying to fix the outboard, he breaks the rope, then Paikea ties it back together and gets the outboard to start. The outboard engine is a prop representing the broken community. The rope is a prop representing the connection to the past and the rituals of the ancestors. Paikea and her grandfather represent themselves. The key being that she can fix what he cannot. The scene opens with a tracking shot of Paikea walking toward her grandfather, then goes directly into a roll shot around the two of them. This meant that this moment would be significant to the film and a glimpse of the relationship between Paikea and her grandfather. That roll shot also showed me the connection between them and their place by keeping the scenery in focus. Paikea’s people have what Oren Lyons, in his interview with Bill Moyers, called an “intimate knowledge” of this place (Lyons Interview 16). The dialogue in this scene is about the story of the whale and Koro compares the pull cord of the outboard to the ancestors. During this dialogue, the ocean is visibly in the background and we can hear the waves breaking. This place is not just their home, but the home of their legends. Koro’s story of the ancestors solidifies the connection to this place which strengthens their people. Everyone who lived there before is connected to them through the land and “the web of tribal relationships” with the land, the ancestors and each other, “sustains them” as a people (Huston Smith 374). Then the rope breaks and the sound changes from diegetic waves and birds to a nondiegetic musical score. To me this meant they were moving into a ritualistic state, into a moment of being connected to everything. Oren Lyons said that “we’ve got to get back to the spiritual law if we are to survive,” and Paikea tying the rope and starting the motor was symbolic of her reconnecting their people with the ancestral rituals of this place of their “spiritual law” and ensuring continuation of her people (Lyons Interview p 1, 16).
Example B

*What aspects of place and ritual are manifested in Niki Caro’s Whale Rider and what filmic techniques help us to understand that?*

Levy-Bruhl’s concept of the relationship between the ordinary and mythic world is manifested in Niki Caro’s Whale Rider when the Maori people assume identical costumes, makeup, postures, proximities, and the ritualistic songs and dances of their ancestors, thereby leaving the ordinary world and entering into the mythic. According to Huston Smith, Levy-Bruhl describes that for a primal person to feel truly alive they must be conforming their actions to the model of an archetypal figure to the extent that they truly become that figure (367). This is shown in the last scene of Whale Rider when the Maori people are on the beach, costumed in the traditional garments of their ancestors, wearing the same makeup, and assuming the postures and proximities to one another that their ancestors used, chanting the same ritualistic songs and dancing the same dance. The role of ritual in this scene is important as it is used to revitalize the community, bringing them together, and also allowing them to move forward. This concept is depicted cinematically, when we see the proximity of Shilo (Paikea’s Aunt) and Nanny flowers (Paikea’s Grandmother) positioned on each side of Porourangi’s (Paikea’s father’s) new, foreign mate, who is pregnant. The lighting is high key, and the pregnant woman uses gestures to invite Shilo to feel the baby’s movements. Shilo’s posture becomes responsive, and she places her hand on the woman’s belly. This allows us to understand that the soon-to-be mother is being accepted by the tribe. During this particular shot, the ambient sound from the haka (ritualistic dance) is clearly audible, which connects the embracing of the outsider with the tribe to the ritual. According to Smith, Bruhl identifies a totem animal as a clan emblem, symbolizing the ancestor that the members commemorate (375). The boat symbolizes a whale, with feathers on the stern and a statue of Paikea (the whale rider) along with more feathers on the bow. A low angle shot of the boat being positioned over the water, with the camera panning to following the statue is filmed to give us the significance of Paikea to the boat (supported by left to right coding, as the statue moves from the left of the screen to the right). When members of the tribe get into the boat, their posture becomes upright and still, except for Paikea, whose proximity is in the center of the boat seated next to Koro (her grandfather). He is filmed reciting the ritualistic chant while her postures involve the movement of her hands (the same chant and hand gestures form the ritual filmed earlier signaling the beginning of the work). This ritual is a transition to the mythic world, which is filmed using non-diegetic traditional music as a score, and Paikea’s voice is audibly heard leading the chanting for the rowers. Paikea fully assumes the identity of the chief as we hear her internal dialogue sating that she is not a prophet, but knows that her people will keep going forward, “all together with all our strength.”