

### **“Narrating Indigenous Modernities: Transcultural Dimensions in Contemporary Māori Literature”**

*There is, indeed, a Māori story to tell. One of the great triumphs of the iwi Māori is that, although we are blending, we also retain a sense of identity. We may be on the waka with other people who also have stories to tell – but ours isn't the same story.<sup>1</sup>*

Witi Ihimaera (2007)

Contemporary Māori literature resonates with the disrupting set of tensions, contradictions, and conflicts stemming from prevailing structural imbalances that are partly a legacy of colonialism, irreversibly altering the cultural fabric of indigenous Aotearoa New Zealand. Stories, as Jo-Ann Episkenew affirms, constitute a powerful method for healing the emotional wounds that indigenous peoples have suffered.<sup>2</sup> Along these lines, Māori writing resonates with wounds of identity and belonging, inflicted by a history of culture contact, trauma and transformation.

Māori narratives acknowledge the altered framework within a global context of modernity,<sup>3</sup> showing how the boundaries of ‘Self/Other’ collide in recognition of the multifarious identity strands that inform Māori identity discourse, pointing towards the construction of indigenous modernities.

Literature in English by the native people of Aotearoa New Zealand is a relatively recent field of cultural production, as well as of critical study, that emerged in the 1970s. Since then, Māori literature has been categorized into two phases in a 1989 study by Peter Beatson.<sup>4</sup> What Beatson denotes as the ‘traditional’ first phase covers the initial texts published during the post-war period. Primarily revolving around rural and traditional topics, the narratives’ thematic focus is a nostalgic retrospective on a ‘lost’ communal culture, evincing a proclivity to accept Pākehā-dominance in what is no longer Māoriland. Termed the second phase and labeled ‘modern’ by Beatson, writing during the 1980s and 1990s critically addresses the problematical binary relationship between Māori and Pākehā within the realms of a postcolonial society. Authors

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<sup>1</sup> Witi Ihimaera, “Introduction,” in *Get on the Waka: Best Recent Māori Fiction* (Auckland: Reed, 2007): 3.

<sup>2</sup> Jo-Ann Episkenew, “Contemporary Indigenous Literatures in Canada: Healing from Historical Trauma,” talk presented at the CHOTRO conference on Indigenous Peoples in the Post-Colonial World (New Delhi: January 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Discussions of the interrelation between modernity and globalization in: Mike Featherstone, ed., *Global Culture: Nationalism, globalization and modernity* (London et al.: Sage, 1990); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1991); and Roland Robertson, *Globalization. Social Theory and Global Culture* (London et al.: Sage, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Beatson, *The Healing Tongue: Themes in Contemporary Maori Literature* (Palmerston North: Sociology Department/Massey University, 1989).

direct their gaze towards essentialist binarisms of black/white, self/other, and colonized/colonizer, emulating global anti-colonial struggles by former colonial peoples.

In the present thesis I want to argue that contemporary Māori writing reveals a turn from these established categories, pointing to the emergence of a new literary quality. Since an assertion of Māori identity today is not only situated in a bicultural framework but increasingly in a context that is perceived as multilateral, modern and global, new challenges have materialized in the re-construction and assertion of a distinct cultural identity. The texts selected for this study reinforce the impression that indigenous identity discourse has become increasingly complex and diversified under the conditions of a global modernity.

I believe that the notion of transculturality is more adequate for examining the ways in which cultures are transforming against the background of modernity and globalization. While the concept was coined in reference to a limited arena of colonial cultural production,<sup>5</sup> this thesis employs transculturality within today's modern, postcolonial context. Indigeneity in the Antipodes today is not merely formulated and constructed against a cultural 'Other', invoking the recovery of an 'authentic' and 'pure' past (a notion I firmly dispute). Instead, my reading of recent Māori novels attempts to show that Māori identities are enunciated in relation to the dominant Pākehā culture, acknowledging a transcultural blend of diverse identity strands – be they defined along ethnic, cultural, gender, class lines, religious origin or political creed – that form the basis of indigenous modernities.

My use of indigenous modernities corresponds to the disruption of the Eurocentric paradigm of modernity as described by Eisenstadt,<sup>6</sup> attesting to the fact that the context in which plural versions of indigenous realities and identities are negotiated is one of global modernity. Establishing this framework will allow for a transcultural reading in the attempt to conceptualize indigenous modernities which have become manifest in social reality,<sup>7</sup> and which often constitute conflicting, contradictory and distressing arenas of identity construction. Within the antipodean context, modern indigeneity describes the perception that articulations of Māoridom resist any invocation of a 'pristine' culture. On the contrary, employing such a terminology acknowledges the aboriginal people's place in, contribution to, and formation of modern societies.

Seeking to place Māori literature within a broader framework that explores the complex relationship between indigenous culture, globalization, and modernity, this study deliberates the following questions: How do the set texts negotiate a re-construction of indigeneity? Does the re-valorization of indigenous identity involve an uncritical parading of 'authenticity,' or rather enunciate recognition of cross-cultural blend and transgression of cultural boundaries? To what extent do cultural identity politics pervade contemporary Māori writing? In what way do indigenous writers forge indigeneity in rapidly altering social and cultural contexts of globality?

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<sup>5</sup> Mary L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," in *Daedalus* 129.1 (2000): 1-29.

<sup>7</sup> Recently, the notion of indigenous modernities has found its way into analyzing the way indigenous peoples make sense of themselves in a globalized world; publications that center on the notion of indigenous modernities include: Saïd Amir Arjomand & Edward A. Tiryakian (ed.), *Rethinking Civilizational Analysis* (London et al.: Sage, 2004); and Stephen Muecke, *Ancient & Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy* (Sydney: UNSW, 2004).

These and other questions chart my proposition that recent Māori writing has acquired a new quality. I attempt to examine the way in which the notion of transcultural Māori identities arises from blending in Pākehā culture and epistemology, and, further, how a transcultural notion of indigeneity is translated and re-coded against a global background of modern society.

My discussion includes the following novels: Witi Ihimaera, *The Uncle's Story* (2000); Paula Morris, *Queen of Beauty* (2002); Kelly Ana Morey, *Bloom* (2003); *Kissing Shadows* by Renée (2005); and Lisa Cherrington, *The People-faces* (2004). This study seeks to identify a shift in the quality of writing produced at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I propose that Māori literature elicits a transcultural quality that captures the cultural dynamics of contemporary social spaces by recognizing the blend of experiences, traditions, and cultures, a process which is irrevocably tied to the global transformation of Aotearoa New Zealand society. I believe a transcultural approach is well suited to unveil the manifold currents that inform contemporary Māori culture.

The task of examining transcultural formations and articulations of indigeneity in contemporary Māori writing undertaken in this study has been centrally informed by the perspective of reframing my text analysis. Along the lines of Linda Tuhiwai Smith, reframing involved a critical consideration of both, indigenous and non-indigenous theories, consequently placing my reading experience into a broader framework. I believe this study has gained significantly by setting the literary discussion in dialog with Māori perspectives, which has to some extent allowed recording the “changes in indigenous ways of knowing and being.”<sup>8</sup> Undeniably, such an approach can help to gain a better understanding of how the narratives make meaning of indigenous mythology, history, and epistemology against the background of a global modernity. By reframing the discussion of literary texts, it has become clear that the processes of cultural transformations encountered in the novels do not merely follow in the wake of ‘Western’ globalization. Rather, Māori authors succeed in re-coding and re-combining traditions, histories, and cultural practices to introduce novel forms of indigenous identity. Since these remain to a large degree perplexing and impenetrable to non-Māori readers, the routes to constructing these indigenous modernities are obviously not merely taken in response to the pressures of ‘Western’ homogenization.

Recent Māori fiction re-validates and re-formulates indigeneity by means of transcribing Māori language and culture onto the canvas of a globalized modernity. Hence, I postulate that indigenous modernities as inscribed in the novels discussed in this study transgress the idea of cultural expressions as a reaction or “inventive adaptations – aesthetic, social or technological – to the rapid changes brought by colonization.”<sup>9</sup> More than that, identity discourse imbues the concept of modernity with a distinctly indigenous quality by staging indigenous concepts of spirituality, cosmogony, and tradition (in Muecke’s terms the world of the ‘irrational, ritual and magic’) as palpable modern practices. Māori authors portray the *tangata whenua* not only as participants of modern society as a matter of course, but emphasize their fundamental role in constructing modern indigenous lifeworlds that are unequivocally different to Pākehā modernities.

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<sup>8</sup> Teresia K. Teaiwa, “On Analogies: Rethinking the Pacific in a Global Context,” in *The Contemporary Pacific* 18.1 (2006): 75; 71-87.

<sup>9</sup> Muecke, *Ancient & Modern*, 139.

Taking into consideration these shifts in discussing and enunciating contemporary indigenous identity in Māori literature, I conclude that the phase-approach as introduced by Beatson is insufficient to account for the transcultural dynamic emerging in recent Māori narratives. What my readings have shown first and foremost is that Māori authors explore indigeneity against the background of a rapidly altering social and cultural context, underpinning that whichever route Māori literature will be taking in the future, the dynamics of globalization and modernity are pivotal for an analysis of the indigenous modernities surfacing in literary discourse. Contemporary Māori writing engages in weaving transcultural worlds, but integrating re-negotiated, novel forms of indigenous traditions, legends, language and myths into the literary fabric. The texts pertinent to this study substantiate the paradigmatic re-definition of Māori culture in terms of indigenous modernities. As such, literature has become an important means to negotiate the socio-political as well as cultural dynamics that constitute fundamental catalysts in generating multiple affiliations and identifications.

In an article written at the beginning of his career, Ihimaera said that “mine is only an individual response to Maori life and should not be taken as the definitive view.”<sup>10</sup> More than thirty years later, Māori writing is definitely multi-vocal, manifesting a diverse set of voices that refrain from painting a coherent picture, but instead, project a transcultural map of Māori literature. Yes indeed, there is a Māori story to tell; not one, but many different stories that constantly redraw the Māori literary map in the attempt to come to terms with multiple forms of indigenous modernities.

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<sup>10</sup> Witi Ihimaera, “Why I Write,” in *WLWE* 14.1 (April 1975): 91-115.