

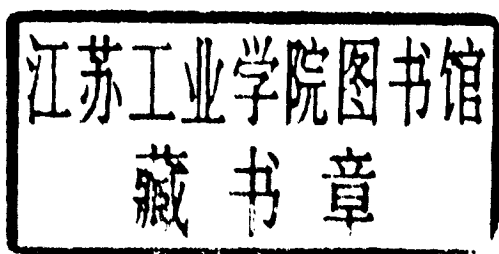
# POSTCOLONIAL PACIFIC WRITING

MICHELLE KEOWN

# Postcolonial Pacific Writing

Representations of the body

Michelle Keown



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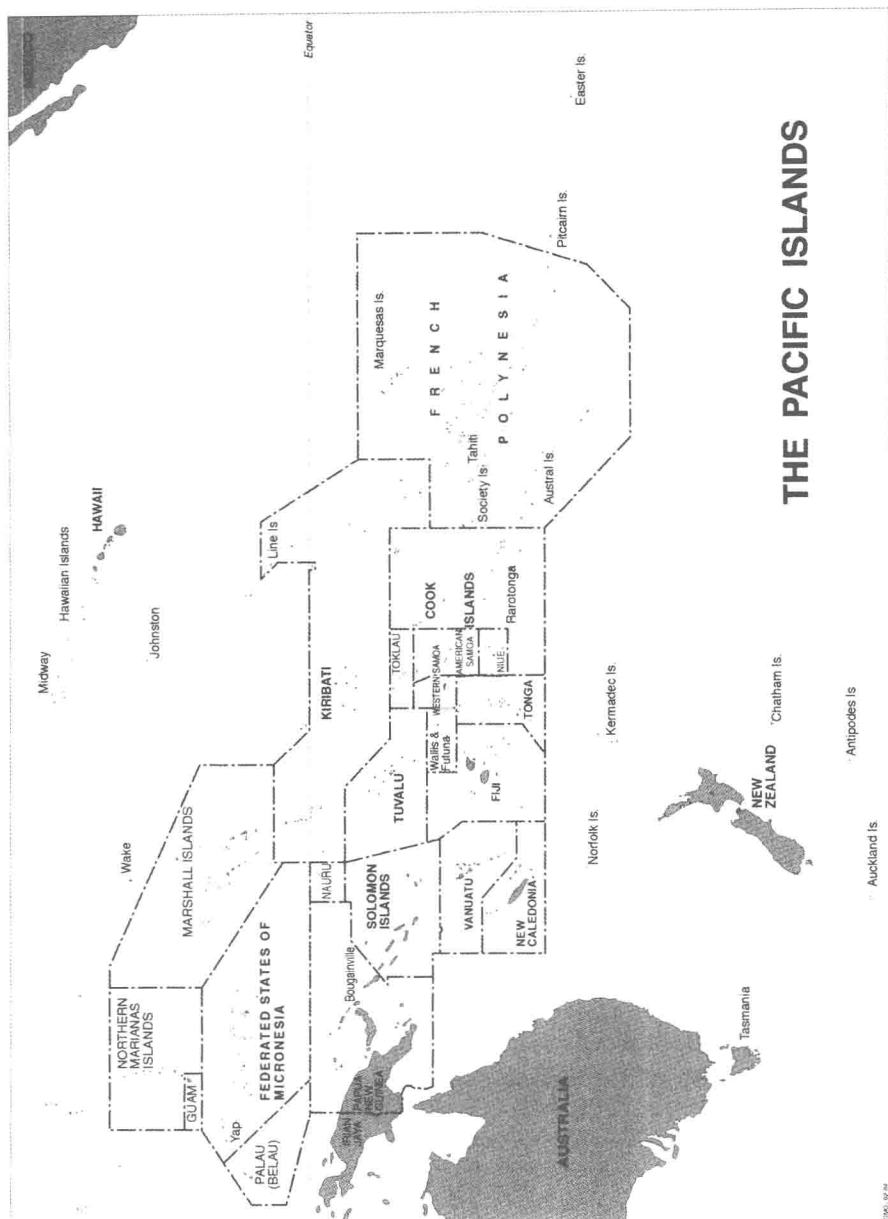
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*Figure 1* Map of the Pacific Islands, by Max Oulton, Geography Department, University of Waikato, New Zealand.



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# Introduction

This book offers an introduction to the contemporary postcolonial literatures of the Pacific through a focus on eight of its most renowned writers, examining the various ways in which these writers negotiate a central pre-occupation in Pacific indigenous literature in English: the representation of the indigenous body. Rather than attempting to undertake a survey of the entire corpus of indigenous Pacific literatures, which have emerged from a large and diverse range of cultures spread across the vast Pacific Ocean, I have chosen to focus upon the South Pacific region, and more specifically upon a group of Māori and Pacific Island writers situated within the geographical and conceptual category of Polynesia. These include Samoan writers Albert Wendt and Sia Figiel; Tongan writer Epeli Hau'ofa;<sup>1</sup> Cook Island writer Alistair Te Ariki Campbell; and New Zealand Māori writers Keri Hulme, Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace and Alan Duff.

From a geographical point of view, Polynesia comprises a vast area – known as the ‘Polynesian Triangle’ – extending from Hawai‘i in the north, to New Zealand in the south-west, and Easter Island in the east. As a conceptual category ‘Polynesia’ did not yet exist when European explorers such as Captain James Cook and Louis-Antoine de Bougainville first visited the Pacific region. It was French navigator Jules-Sebastien-César Dumont d’Urville who, in 1832, introduced a systematized distinction between Polynesian and Melanesian races on the basis of skin colour (B. Douglas 1999: 65).<sup>2</sup> Such divisions ranked Polynesians (and Micronesians) as ‘racially, morally and politically superior’ to Melanesians and Australian Aborigines (ibid.: 65), and in European literature which appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Polynesian cultures (and bodies) were persistently stereotyped as ‘paradisiacal’, ‘gorgeous’, ‘fertile’ and ‘idyllic’, while Melanesian islands were represented as ‘fetid’, ‘decaying’, and ‘hellish’ (Kjellgren 1993: 99; see also Hau'ofa 1975: 286; Hereniko 1999a; Teaiwa and Kabutaulaka 2000: 30). Since the late 1760s, when European explorers first brought reports of Tahiti and other Pacific Islands back to the metropolitan centres, Polynesia – above other regions within the Pacific – has proved to be of particular fascination to European

## 2 *Introduction*

travellers and writers (B. Smith 1985: 1; Edmond 1997a: 16). The putative physical beauty of Polynesians – and in particular Tahitians – led eighteenth-century explorers such as Bougainville and Joseph Banks to draw parallels between Tahitian culture and classical Greek culture, and the region became figured, in romantic terms, as a South Seas Eden inhabited by noble savages untouched by the corruptions of the ‘civilized’ European world (B. Smith 1985: 42).<sup>3</sup> Described by Bougainville as ‘la Nouvelle Cythère’, Tahiti was also accorded a reputation as a sexual paradise, and as Bernard Smith points out, the island ‘became notorious throughout Europe in the popular mind as a land of free-love’ (ibid.: 47). Such stereotypes have fired the imaginations of generations of European artists and writers,<sup>4</sup> and these idealized constructions have persisted into the contemporary era, fuelled (as Rob Wilson notes) by media and tourist-industry representations of the Pacific as a timeless paradise within which Western desires and fantasies may be played out:

[The] New Pacific . . . threatens to remain . . . a strategic and commercial space where European, American, and Asian desires – to use these tourist sites for pleasure zones, for journeys of regression and redemption, for phallocratic bodily bliss, for temporary release into excess and leisure, for landscapes of Edenic wilderness and ecological purity – are still being played out at the expense of a globally worked-over and trod-upon native culture.

(1999: 10)

The writings of European missionaries, who came to the Pacific in increasing numbers following the establishment of the London Missionary Society in Tahiti in 1795, were to generate a second set of stereotypes focusing upon the Polynesian body. Nineteenth-century European missionary accounts of the South Pacific perpetuated the sexualization of Polynesian cultures, but they also represented Polynesian peoples as ignoble, savage heathens – who indulged in ‘abhorrent social practices such as cannibalism, infanticide and tattooing’ – in order to justify native conversion to Christianity (Edmond 1997a: 9; I.C. Campbell 1980: 57; Pearson 1984: 27). New Zealand Māori, in particular, were represented as hostile and aggressive in spite of their putative beauty and nobility. This reputation had its origins in a series of misunderstandings and violent conflicts between Māori tribes and European explorers,<sup>5</sup> as well as eyewitness reports of inter-tribal warfare and cannibalism from European missionaries and travellers.<sup>6</sup> Such ideologies were to influence early colonial policy in New Zealand, although, as increasing numbers of Māori perished during the nineteenth century,<sup>7</sup> the popular currency of neo-Darwinist ‘fatal impact’ theory<sup>8</sup> prompted a refiguration of the Māori people as ‘noble savages’ facing certain extinction (Sinclair 1986: 203). Further, in spite of the continuing circulation of representations of the Māori as a

fierce warrior culture<sup>9</sup> – consolidated when Māori inflicted a series of humiliating defeats upon their European opponents during a series of land wars in the 1860s – the Māori physique was frequently described as sensuous and neo-Grecian,<sup>10</sup> spawning a tradition of idealized literary constructions of the Māori body (particularly the Māori female body).<sup>11</sup> In recent decades, changes brought about by large-scale post-war urbanization of Māori – who, until the 1950s, had remained largely within rural and coastal village communities – have triggered new variants of the established ‘noble/ignoble savage’ stereotypes. On the one hand, recent government statistics, which indicate that Māori are disproportionately represented among the unemployed, criminal and socio-economically deprived sectors of New Zealand society, have precipitated negative constructions of Māori as a violent, benefit-dependent underclass. On the other hand, Pākehā<sup>12</sup> anxieties about colonial injustices against Māori – and the inimical socio-economic consequences of these injustices – have fostered defensively idealistic representations of New Zealand race-relations in which Māori and Pākehā dwell harmoniously in an antipodean utopian ‘godzone’.<sup>13</sup> The Māori writers described in this book, like their Pacific Island counterparts, set out to challenge these established stereotypes. The differing political and cross-cultural circumstances which distinguish New Zealand from its Pacific Island neighbours, however, have ensured that the two groups of writers discussed in this book address the issue of representing the Polynesian body in discrete and distinctive ways.

While most Pacific Island cultures, for example, have been subject to European colonial or neo-colonial incursion in some form, the process of post-war decolonization, which saw a variety of Pacific island cultures gain independence from the European imperialist centres, has left countries such as Western Samoa, the Cook Islands and Fiji (all of which feature in the work of the writers discussed in this book) free of the direct European hegemony which characterizes the current political situation in New Zealand. Nevertheless, evidence of a continuing neo-colonialism in the Pacific Island region is manifest in the work of the Pacific Island writers featured in this book. New Zealand, like Australia and the United States, has itself operated as a colonialist force within its sphere of influence, and the legacy of Western colonial incursion into the Pacific is evident in the heavy dependence of certain Pacific Island cultures upon foreign aid from their Western neighbours. In addition, a high proportion of Pacific Islanders currently emigrate to these countries in order to find work and to send remittances back, primarily in order to support relatives in the islands, but also to maintain oversized local bureaucracies originally established by colonial administrations. The acronym ‘MIRAB’ – conflating ‘migration, remittances, aid and bureaucracy’ – was coined as a label for Pacific Island cultures characterized by these conditions.<sup>14</sup> The socio-political dynamics of MIRAB societies are explored in some detail in the

writing of Epeli Hau'ofa, who has lived and worked within a variety of Polynesian and Melanesian cultures. Hau'ofa examines, within a pan-Pacific framework, the problems attendant upon foreign aid and continuing neo-colonial activity in the Pacific region. Wendt and Figiel explore similar issues with specific reference to Western Samoa, over which New Zealand maintained colonial jurisdiction from 1914 to 1962.

A sense of a shared experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism among Pacific Island cultures has intensified in recent decades, particularly since the founding of the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Suva, Fiji, in 1968, and the subsequent establishment of satellite campuses in various Pacific Island countries (Va'ai 1999a: 24–7). The late 1960s and early 1970s also saw the emergence of an indigenous Pacific creative writing tradition. This was headed by Albert Wendt – a senior and founding figure in Pacific literature and literary criticism<sup>15</sup> – and fostered through the establishment of the South Pacific Creative Arts Society (SPCAS) at USP in 1972, as well as through the activities of other local organizations within various Pacific Island cultures (Arvidson 1975; Simms 1986; Sharrad 1993, 2003; Tawake 2000; Subramani 2001).<sup>16</sup> The SPCAS founded the journal *MANA* (edited by Cook Islander Marjorie Crocombe) in 1973: the title was selected because the word 'mana' – a multivalent term which carries connotations of power, psychic force and socio-political influence – existed in almost all Polynesian and many Melanesian languages, and therefore encapsulated the SPCAS's intention to bring together writers from throughout the Pacific region (Va'ai 1999a: 27–8). The early 1970s also saw the emergence of the philosophy of the 'Pacific Way', a movement which – as Sina Va'ai points out – recognized 'the commonality in developmental problems that required a unity in co-operation' in order to combat 'a common foe, the colonial powers' (1999a: 32–3). As Va'ai suggests, the movement also assumed a Pacific Island 'ideological brotherhood' and a set of 'cultural principles and practices' which united Pacific Island nations (1999a: 33, 35). These sentiments were critiqued by Albert Wendt<sup>17</sup> and by Epeli Hau'ofa,<sup>18</sup> who identified the 'Pacific Way' movement as a 'shallow ideology that was swept away by the rising tide of regional disunity of the 1980s' (Hau'ofa 1998: 394). During this period, the regionalist ideologies of the 'Pacific Way' movement were opposed and eroded by the nationalist and ethnic fundamentalist ideologies which ultimately helped to precipitate the 1987 Fijian coup. As Ton Otto and Nicholas Thomas suggest, when championed by indigenous elites, 'tradition can function as a political instrument for both liberation *and repression*' (1997: 7, my italics; see also Lawson 1997).

In spite of these socio-political schisms, however, the concept of a regional Pacific identity has persisted – albeit in a modified form – in recent Pacific cultural theory. In a series of seminal essays published throughout the 1990s, Hau'ofa himself has advocated the notion of an

'Oceanic' identity which recognizes and protects unique local forms and traditions, as well as fostering a dynamic regional ethic in response to the pressures of global capitalism and cultural imperialism (Hau'ofa 1993, 1994, 1998: 392–3). His arguments have been taken up (and in some cases, critiqued) by a number of Pacific writers and scholars, and as Director of the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture at the University of the South Pacific, Hau'ofa has been able to put his regionalist theories into practice by fostering links between writers and artists from across the Pacific region (Keown 2001; Sinivaiana-Gabbard 2001; Subramani 2001; see also Edmond and Smith 2003).

The dawning of the 'Pacific Way' movement coincided with the advent of the 'Māori Renaissance', a New Zealand-based movement which developed in response to widespread concern about the effects of post-war developments in Māori society, as well as the inimical socio-economic effects of more than a century of Pākehā hegemony. In the 1950s and 1960s increasing numbers of Māori began to leave their rural tribal communities in order to seek employment and other opportunities in the Pākehā-dominated urban centres. By the 1970s, concern over the attendant loss of traditional values and cultural practices, documented evidence of a huge reduction in the numbers of indigenes speaking Māori as a first language,<sup>19</sup> and general dissatisfaction over political and socio-economic disparities between Māori and Pākehā, precipitated a pan-Māori objective mounted in order to address these issues. Urban Māori began to establish supra-tribal Māori organizations in order to replace the traditional infrastructures of the dwindling rural communities, while political activists petitioned parliament for the establishment of courses in Māori language and culture in schools. Activist groups also advocated the concept of biculturalism in New Zealand society as an alternative to integration, which many Māori viewed as a thinly disguised contemporary version of the colonialist policy of assimilation (King 1985: 104). From this cultural milieu emerged writers such as Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace, the first Māori fiction writers to have their books published in English.<sup>20</sup> While Ihimaera and Grace's early writing was dominated by a nostalgic affection for a rapidly disappearing rural communalism, their later writing (like the work of other Māori writers published since the mid-1980s) has become more overtly politicized and anticolonialist, focusing more closely on the urban environments and attendant socio-economic problems which have become a reality for many contemporary Māori. While the political issues addressed by Māori (as an indigenous minority culture living within a settler colony) set them apart from many of their Pacific Island counterparts,<sup>21</sup> since the 1970s there has been a constant exchange of ideas between Māori and Pacific Islander writers, who have met periodically at conferences and other literary events in addition to reading one another's work.<sup>22</sup> The dialogical relationship between Māori and other Pacific Island writers is also reflected in university syllabi in the South

Pacific region. Albert Wendt, for example, has spent the past fifteen years as Professor of English Literature at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, where Pacific texts are taught alongside works by Māori writers. Undergraduate courses featuring New Zealand and Pacific literatures are also offered at the University of Otago, the University of Canterbury and Victoria University of Wellington, while the School of Māori and Pacific Development at the University of Waikato offers courses featuring Māori and Pacific literature and performing arts. Further afield, the Pacific Writing Forum at the University of the South Pacific has established strong links with Pacific Island and Māori writers, and the University of Guam offers undergraduate courses featuring the work of Māori and Pacific Island writers.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, there are documented historical, linguistic and cultural affinities between Māori and other Polynesian cultures which justify the grouping together of writers from this region. Various academic studies and fieldwork projects have established linguistic and archaeological links between Māori and other Polynesian cultures in countries such as Samoa, Tonga, Hawai'i and the Cook Islands (Krupa 1982; Crowley 1992; Edmond 1997a). It is widely held that Polynesian culture originated in the central Pacific islands of Tonga, Samoa, Uvea and Futuna, and that during the last two millennia there were a series of migrations eastwards to the Cook, Society and Marquesas Islands, followed by a second wave of migrations to Hawai'i in the north, Easter Island in the east, and New Zealand in the south-west (King 1997: 14). Carbon dating has proved that the New Zealand landfall was made by the thirteenth century AD (King 2003: 18), and some Māori historians date the arrival as early as AD 800 (Walker 1990: 24).<sup>24</sup>

Demographic developments in New Zealand in the post-war period have consolidated links between Māori and other Polynesians. The New Zealand economy was rapidly industrialized in the period following the Second World War, and thousands of Pacific Islanders, particularly Polynesians, were invited into the country to offset an industrial labour shortage, and were channelled mainly into semi-skilled and unskilled employment in the manufacturing sector (Macpherson 1992; 1997). Many of these migrants applied for permanent residency in New Zealand, precipitating chain migration patterns. Although New Zealand's immigrant policy has subsequently tightened<sup>25</sup> and socio-economic conditions for Pacific Island immigrants have worsened,<sup>26</sup> at the time of the 2001 Census 1 in 16 (or 231,801) people in New Zealand were of Pacific Island ethnicity, with Polynesians making up the vast majority of those numbers.<sup>27</sup>

As a consequence of these developments, intersections between Māori and other Polynesian cultural traditions are increasingly evident in the work of New Zealand-based Polynesian artists, writers and musicians (Thomas 1996). In a publication accompanying a 1990 exhibition of Polynesian migrant art which toured New Zealand (curated by Māori New



Zealander Rangihiroa Panoho), for example, several artists featured in the exhibition made reference to shared Polynesian 'motifs' and a community of New Zealand-based Polynesian artists (Panoho 1990; Thomas 1996). References to a pan-Polynesian community also appear in the lyrics of hip-hop artists such as King Kapisi (born in Samoa and raised in New Zealand) and Sheelahroc (a New Zealand female rap group which originally comprised eight members of various ethnicities: Māori, Samoan, Niuean and Japanese). In the literary arena, Auckland University Press has recently released *Whetu Moana: An Anthology of Polynesian Poetry* (2003), edited by Albert Wendt, Robert Sullivan and Reina Whaitiri. The anthology includes the work of poets from Aotearoa/New Zealand, Hawai'i, Tonga, Samoa, the Cook Islands, Niue and Rotuma, but the editors have deliberately arranged the poets by alphabetical order of surname rather than by country. This was in order to 'juxtapose the poetries of the Pacific to generate views of culture that are both common and strange, to see Polynesian poetry through a prism creating many coloured bands' (2003: 3).

This sense of a common ancestral heritage among Polynesian cultures is elsewhere evident in shared linguistic and mythological references which appear in the work of writers such as Albert Wendt and Patricia Grace, both of whom invoke the pan-Polynesian myth-cycle focusing upon the demi-god Māui. Wendt's 1992 novel *Black Rainbow* explores racial and historical affinities between Māori and Pacific Islander Polynesians within a futuristic dystopian framework in which New Zealand-based Polynesians are 'reordinaritized' or reprogrammed with Europeanized identities. In a recent interview, Patricia Grace has expressed an awareness of the relationship between Māori and other Polynesian cultures in terms of shared historical and mythological narratives:

The link between us is always there: the link we have with Pacific Island Polynesian people. ... [We] ... refer to them as our older brothers and sisters. Our stories all say that we came from Hawaiki. So we have this history that links us. We call them our older brothers and sisters to honour the fact that we came from them. Languages are similar. The stories are all similar.

(DeLoughery and Hall 1999: 14)<sup>28</sup>

In view of these affiliations and associations, the publication of a book-length study of contemporary Polynesian writers seems timely, particularly given that many of these writers are attracting increasing international attention and acclaim. Keri Hulme's novel *The Bone People* (1983; discussed in Chapter 5) won the Booker Prize in 1985, and more recently, Sia Figiel's novel *Where We Once Belonged* (1996a; discussed in Chapter 2) won the 1997 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for best first book in the South-East Asia and South Pacific Region. Her compatriot Albert Wendt's novel *Ola* (1991) was chosen as best book for the Asia-Pacific region in 1992.