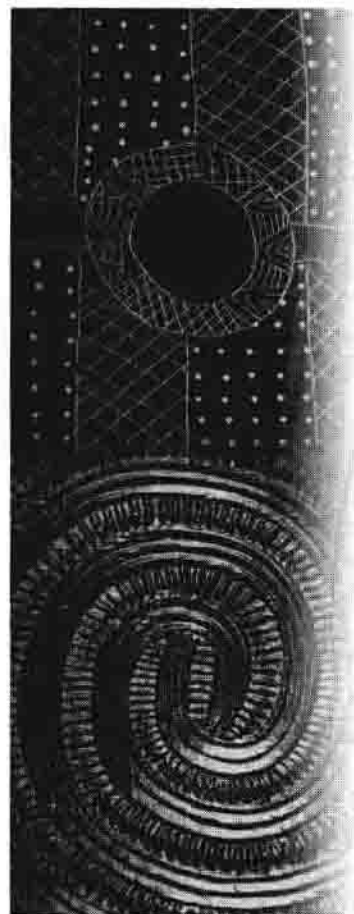


Cross/Cultures 68

The Circle & the Spiral

A Study of Australian Aboriginal
& New Zealand Māori Literature

Eva Rask Knudsen



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The Circle & the Spiral

A Study of Australian Aboriginal and New
Zealand Māori Literature

C | r o s s
u l t u r e s

Readings in the Post / Colonial
Literatures in English

68

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(Giessen)

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(Aachen)

For my parents Kirsten and Irving



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Introduction

A Declaration of Intent at the Border of Contested Terrain

THIS BOOK could be labelled white-on-black. It is a European study of contemporary Australian Aboriginal and New Zealand Māori stories written in English. To embark on such an investigation, and thus to claim (or acquire) a certain amount of expertise, on the literatures of two cultures not only foreign but sometimes also antagonistically opposed to one's own cultural background feels very much like looking through the windows of an unfamiliar house to catch a glimpse of other lives and other experiences. Cultural window-peeping, some would call it. Or showing up without an invitation. When those windows are books, however, and books that are published and distributed world-wide such an enterprise becomes less dubious. The writers of these books are obviously willing to share their experiences with the outsider. They open up windows to communication. But having survived the traumas of one or two hundred years of European domination they are instantly aware of new variants of exploitation. Thus, naturally they are not willing to be defined again beyond recognition, this time by

the literary critic. The Aboriginal activist, artist and writer Kevin Gilbert has remarked that

A whole new education 'industry' has arisen in the academic area, where it would appear that every student is doing his or her PhD English thesis on 'Aboriginal Literature.'¹

Gilbert obviously exaggerates, but his polemical remark in 1988 should not be taken too lightly as he alludes to an unreflective appropriation of indigenous writing within the academy. Today, fifteen years later, it is certainly evident that many academic careers have flourished from this 'industry' – expert niches on indigenous writing have been firmly established within the postcolonial circuit across the globe. This calls for serious consideration of how we apply the term 'postcolonial' to indigenous cultures. The indigenous people of Australia and New Zealand still do not feel that the history of colonialism is over and when the field of communication is literature, the home ground of Europe, they are particularly alert. As the black Australian writer Mudrooroo says, "Aboriginal writing in English is precisely Aboriginal writing in English because of that history."² Māori writers undoubtedly share these thoughts, although, in comparison with Australia, the greater number of indigenous academics in New Zealand helps to redress the balance of the critical 'industry'. Fortunately, the times are over when indigenous cultures were spoken of, and spoken for, but never with, and real communication across cultural borders has begun, and this is also both the *raison d'être* and the starting-point of this study. As far as Gilbert's remark and its inherent suspicion of undue textual colonization is concerned, it claims the benefit of the doubt. It goes against the misunderstood trend of political correctness according to which the white critic should show his or her acknowledgement of past paternalisms and his or her respect of present self-determinations by assuming a position of silence. However, in my view that would be nothing less than taking a position of conceited arrogance. Old relationships will never change except through dialogue and the exchange of perspectives. Nevertheless, a personal note is necessary: I am neither Abori-

¹ Kevin Gilbert, *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1988): xvi.

² Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature in Australia* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1990): 132.

ginal or Māori nor a 'would-be' representative of either group. I am Danish. Therefore, this study does not strive to present any ultimate definitions of what it is like to be an Aboriginal or a Māori person (how could it possibly?), nor does it strive to distil Aboriginal or Māori culture into a thesis. It attempts to be reflective rather than definitive, and it is deliberately as searching and as process-oriented as the literatures discussed. Structurally, it is inspired by its own title, *The Circle and The Spiral*, and therefore without a conventional introduction or conclusion. It picks up a certain beginning and moves steadily towards a certain ending; yet this ending leads back to the beginning, or forwards towards another beginning beyond all the following pages. The chapters can be read independently or as parts of the whole; as separate circles or as interconnected circles of a spiral. And, hopefully, it will appear that all chapters speak from the engaged position of a cultural outsider looking through novelistic windows into other worlds; not to peep, but to understand.

However, indigenous writing is contested terrain for reasons that lie beyond the particular positionality of the white critic crossing the border into non-white territory. Although it is easily argued from a postcolonial point of view that cultural essentialism is a colonialist legacy enforced in the past and sometimes maintained in the present by dominant European cultures, it is also occasionally re-employed strategically within indigenous groups. 'Difference' is carefully guarded. It is, one may argue, a response to the pressures exerted on marginalized cultures in a globalizing world that has long seen the end of culture as copyright. This notwithstanding, an unfortunate reverse effect of the employment of 'strategic essentialism' is that internally it may be turned against the groups' own members when they cannot present 'blood' proof that they 'truly' belong. This was the case with Mudrooroo (whose work is discussed at length in this book) when it became known in 1996 that his blackness might stem from an African-American heritage. Stern believers in genetics as the only 'real' qualifier of Aboriginality would claim that Mudrooroo should therefore be excluded in a discussion of Aboriginal writing. The issue of 'who can write as other' will be addressed in the book, but it needs to be declared from the outset that, despite the controversial debate about Mudrooroo's identity since 1996, I do consider him *the* most prominent writer of Aboriginality. Needless to say, this is a risky declaration for an outsider to make. However, as the Aboriginal activist and historian Gary Foley has argued, "Mudrooroo has lived the life of an Aboriginal person, displayed

Aboriginal values, and will always be regarded by me as an Aboriginal. He will not have to reconstruct any aspect of his identity in his interaction with me.”³ In respect to the literary field, Cassandra Pybus has reasoned along similar lines: “where does the notion of indigenous literature get us if it is to exclude its most distinguished practitioner and critic?”⁴ The obvious answer is that it would lose the history of its beginnings and the visionary agenda for its future.

Circles and Spirals is a revised version of a manuscript submitted as a Ph.D. dissertation in 1997. Then, as now, it was intended to outline the fields of indigenous writing in Australia and New Zealand in the crucial period between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s. These were particularly eventful years in terms of positionality: postcolonial theory attempted to ‘centre the margins’, to locate indigenous spaces, while it seemed that indigenous writers were keen to escape the particular centering offered in search of other positions more in tune with their creative sensibilities. This was the period in which indigenous writing in both countries left behind a strong narrative preference for social realism in favour of traversing old territory in new spiritual ways. As it became increasingly evident how tradition interacted with the need for renewal, this was a phase where roots converted into routes. Thus, rather than adding chapters to include discussion of indigenous writing that has appeared since then, relevant updates have been added, as I prefer the book to retain its specific focus as a detailed survey of a decisive period we may now look back upon in the ‘history’ of indigenous writing. However, seen in retrospect it is clear that the main argument presented in the book has not lost currency. On the contrary. A standard postcolonial reading of indigenous texts often overwrites the ‘difference’ it seeks to locate because critical orthodoxy predetermines what ‘difference’ can be. Critical evaluations still tend to eclipse the ontological grounds of Aboriginal and Māori traditions and specific ways of moving through and behaving in cultural landscapes and social contexts. Thus, the attempt to look for locally and culturally specific tracks and traces that lead in other directions than the ones catalogued by postcolonial convention requires as much attention as ever.



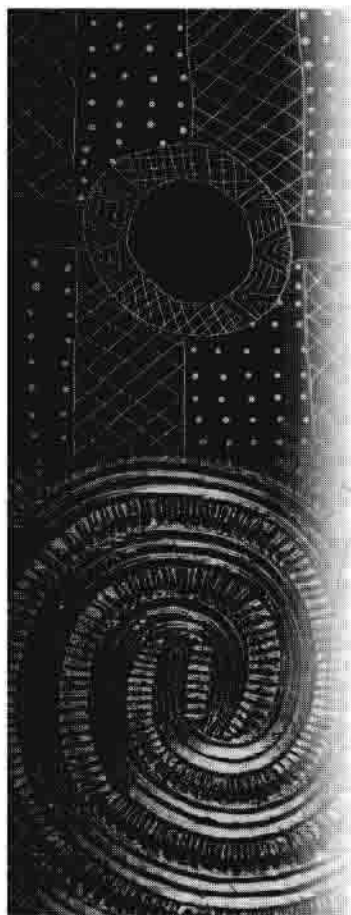
³ Gary Foley, “Muddy Waters: Archie, Mudrooroo & Aboriginality,” essay 10 in *The Koori History Website* (kooriweb.org/foley/essays, 1997)

⁴ Cassandra Pybus, “Contested Site”, *Australian Book Review* (October 1997): 19.



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1

Beginnings

Circles and Spirals

From the centre,
From the nothing,
Of not seen,
Of not heard,
There comes
A shifling,
A stirring,
And a creeping forward,
There comes
A standing
A springing
To an outer circle,
There comes
An intake
of breath –
Tihe Mauriora¹

¹ Patricia Grace, Prologue to *Potiki* (Auckland: Longman, 1986).

THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE of Australia and the Māori people of New Zealand belong to distinct indigenous cultures and also to distinctively different cultures. In fact, the most obvious common ground they share is a colonial history of having suffered under the ethnocentrism of British rule and a contemporary cultural agenda of self-determination in which the main objective is to validate and secure indigenous 'difference' against the cultural hegemony of Europe. Indigenous writing in English is an important part of that agenda and in this respect the two cultures are indeed comparable.² Both Aboriginal and Māori writers are heirs to artistic traditions from which writing and the literary arts dependent on it were absent and in which oral storytelling and mythic narratives were the main expressions of cultural traditions; yet today both peoples celebrate the survival of their cultures in the language and the literary forms of their colonizers. This is a paradoxical issue which has, of course, invited analytical and theoretical response, especially from the field – or the school – of criticism known as 'postcolonial'. Indigenous literature *in English* poses a challenge, for the indigenous writer as well as the non-indigenous reader, because both enter into domains that are foreign to their own backgrounds. Yet quite often the striking vibrancy of Aboriginal and Māori literature is not matched by equally strong vigour in criticism. Let us take the prologue of Patricia Grace's Māori novel *Potiki*, quoted above, as an example.

With a strong focus on relationships between centre and periphery, between the European (or Western) literary canon and the 'marginalized' literatures that attempt to overturn it through conscious appropriation and subversion of its form and content, the common idea that 'the empire writes back' to its former master would invariably dominate a postcolonial reading of Grace's poetic lines. Accordingly, the postcolonial critic would observe – while moving the appropriate jargon into position – that these lines are spoken by the *silenced* and *othered* Māori (neither "seen" nor "heard") who is encapsulated by the Centre yet *marginalized* at its physical fringes. The colonized Other now revolts against the Imperial 'I' who has confined the indigenous person to a subordinate position ("the nothing") by means of an *imperial-colonial nexus of power*. From this emptiness comes "a standing," an active appropriation of the language and

² The term "writing in English" covers a wide range of 'texts', from literature in novel or poetic form to drama, autobiography and political prose.

the medium of the Centre (“a shifting,” “a stirring”). These actions become the tools that open up to a renewed sense of cultural autonomy, and the Māori ‘breath of life’ can be celebrated again: “Tihe Mauriora.” In other words, any critic well-acquainted with postcolonial orthodoxy but unfamiliar with Māori mythology will agree that these lines refer to the conscious *dismantling* of the European centre. An ‘indigenized’³ reading, however, reveals that postcolonial theory – despite the fact that it has liberated non-European literature written in English from an outdated universalizing form of criticism – is by no means always emancipating; its attempt to homogenize the postcolonial world vis-à-vis Europe may seem inadequate and perhaps even unfortunate to the indigenous writer or reader. The particular insight offered by the literature suffocates in this general approach to criticism. The lines of the prologue are not concerned with the psychological tension between postcolonial notions of centre and periphery and, as such, they are virtually devoid of Europe and the attempt to break an ‘overseas’ dependency syndrome. The prologue evokes a Māori noctic and functions also as a reference to the structure of an artistic tradition mapped out in the early stages of the cosmos. This is a modern Māori creation chant in strict accordance with ‘marae protocol.’⁴ The centre to which it refers is that of the first circle in the spiral of human cognition. “From the centre, from the nothing” alludes to a particular Māori interest in ‘nothingness’ as the realm of potential waiting and pressing for its own fulfilment.

According to Māori belief, the first stage of creation was ‘Te Kore’ (the Void), an original nothingness of silence and invisibility in which nothing moved and nothing was seen or heard. But absence holds the promise of presence; gradually ‘Te Kore’ grew into ‘Te Po’ (the Night). Interestingly, this specific Māori perception of creation from which man eventually emerged out of cosmic darkness offers scope for coexisting opposites:

The night holds possibility of all things but is itself nothing.
All that shall be is contained in the night.
[...]

³ That is, the outsider’s attempt to read with an understanding of the indigenous perspective. Of course, a white European critic should not feel at ease with the use of the term ‘indigenous’ in relation to his or her own interpretations.

⁴ Usually ‘marae’ is understood as the open ceremonial space in front of a Māori meeting-house, but in this context it refers to the physical space of artistic expression.

From its own generativity will come light; the earth, the stars, the sky.
 From its timelessness will come time, from its effortlessness, effort.
 [...]

 It is beyond the elements yet from it the elements will come.
 It exists without ageing and yet from it age will come.
 It exists without personality and yet from it persons will come.
 Before man and before woman, there was the nothingness.⁵

These sets of opposites are ultimately different from the dichotomies (such as centre–margin, self–Other or superior–inferior) deciphered in postcolonial theory, because Māori cosmogony emphasizes an inter-relatedness – a system of spiralling relations – rather than the contrariety of opposites. Through a series of ellipses, ‘Te Po’ gave birth to Papatūānuku (Mother Earth) and Ranginui (Father Sky), who fostered – in their serene, close and dark embrace – an offspring of deities who separated their parents to let darkness fulfil its potential and become light. Thus emerged ‘Te Ao Marama’ (the World of Light), the realm from which mankind would eventually evolve, and the offspring of Papa and Rangi sneezed at the brightness of the day and the principles of life now visible: “Tihe Mauriora.”⁶ This “springing to an outer circle” is synonymous with the birth of human consciousness from the curling spiral of evolution already foreshadowed in the potent void. Creation chants commemorate the simultaneous birth of light and consciousness and exult in the creation of a world in which Māori identity has a fertile resting-place. Māoritanga⁷ is believed to have gradually matured like a spiral unfolding itself, or like the curling fern frond, a natural inspiration found also in Māori visual art:

From the conception the increase,
 From the increase the thought,
 From the thought the remembrance,

⁵ James Ritchie, quoted in George-Coulven Le Cam, “The Marriage of Myth and Mind in Modern New Zealand or How to Reach a Holistic Formula,” *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* 12.2 (1990): 58.

⁶ A ceremonial greeting which means ‘sneeze of health’ or ‘sacredness of life’.

⁷ ‘A way of thinking,’ which loosely translates as a Māori ‘world-view’ or ‘legacy.’ Despite a slight difference in meaning, the term is used synonymously with ‘Maoridom.’ ‘Māoritanga’ refers to the experience of being a Māori, whereas ‘Maoridom’ refers to Māori culture as a distinct group, a ‘nation.’

From the remembrance the consciousness,
From the consciousness the desire⁸

The traditional Māori conception of development as a form of spiralling progression is frequently encountered as a major inspiration in contemporary Māori literature – and sometimes even as the matrix of the narrative – because it offers a perspective from which Māori culture is seen to carry, intrinsically, the seeds of its own continuing renewal.

In the very different context of Australian indigenous culture, a similar parallel between cosmogony and textual structure is found in Aboriginal literature. The traditional Aboriginal world-view is embedded in the concept of Dreaming or Dreamtime (misleadingly translated from the Aranda word *Alcheringa*, which means ‘from all eternity’⁹), an all-embracing set of religious beliefs and social customs instituted by the Great Ancestors when they travelled the land and gave physical form to the environment. Before that time the earth was a flat, desolate plain covered in eternal darkness. It was “a world latent in its potentialities, waiting to be awakened”¹⁰ by the mythic gods or culture-heroes. Even if, unlike the Māori people of New Zealand, Australian Aboriginals refer to several creation stories – stories that vary significantly because the act of creation is intimately tied up with the specific features of specific land areas – it is also a common feature of Aboriginal creation stories that human consciousness has emerged from a process within the natural elements. According to Aranda tradition, for instance, the sky-dwelling Numbakulla brothers descended to dig out the embryonic forms of the first human beings who rested just under the surface of the earth. With stone knives, the two brothers completed the outline and cut out eyes, mouths, noses and ears so that the first human beings, with their sacredly bestowed sensibilities, would spread over the land, living by the laws given to them by the ancestors and pass them on to coming generations. Having completed

⁸ James Ritchie, in Le Cam, “The Marriage of Myth and Mind,” 58.

⁹ Time is not part of the semiotic meaning of the Aranda word, thus the original English translation ‘Dreamtime’ is often replaced by the term ‘Dreaming’. Both terms, however, are employed in this study; ‘Dreaming’ refers to the religious world view of Aboriginal culture in general, whereas ‘Dreamtime’ refers specifically to the time of creation.

¹⁰ Robert M. Berndt & Catherine H. Berndt, *The Speaking Land: Myth and Story in Aboriginal Australia* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1989): 15.