

# Globalising Indigenes: Postcolonial Fiction from Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific

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When it was published in 1990, Alan Duff's novel *Once Were Warriors* spent more than a year at number one on the New Zealand best-seller lists. It remained in the top ten for the next four years. The film came out in 1995, broke through to an international audience and rocketed the book back up the best-seller list for several more years. Janet Maslin, who reviewed the film of *Once Were Warriors* for the *New York Times* in that year, observed that:

in his visceral first feature, Mr Tamahori [Lee Tamahori, the director] offers social realism with a savage kick, depicting Māori New Zealanders whose ties to their own history have been destroyed. Left floundering in an inhospitable urban world they have lost touch with their tribal past to become part of a rootless global subculture. The misery here would be familiar anywhere.

Maslin's ascription of Duff's characters to a "rootless global subculture" raises some interesting questions about the connections between indigeneity, postcolonial social realism and globalism. Use of the term "indigeneity" or "indigene" is relatively recent in literary theory and marks a shift to an identity category that is no longer constrained by nationality. At the same time, as a transnational discourse of indigeneity is developing, the currency of indigenous texts is connected to the rootedness of their representations of indigeneity—globalisation has reinvigorated locality at the same time as it has diminished the nation state. Does globalisation allow indigeneity a discourse which keeps it *in place* but frees it from the locking binaries of postcolonial nations?

The mode and reception of *Once Were Warriors* marked something of a sea-change in the Māori imaginary. Duff's novel uses gritty realism to critique a violent and abusive urban gang world. The dynamics of dispossession, poverty and a kind of social enslavement are, as Maslin points out, globally familiar, but they are not rootless. Duff's characters are located in a lightly disguised actual landscape of tribal dispossession, Rotorua; they are *Te Arawa*. Aimed at a broad, contemporary and mixed audience and endorsing right-wing self-help attitudes, the novel nonetheless speaks out of a location of specific histories and into a transnational postcolonial discourse. You don't have to be a New Zealand reader to understand what is producing the misery in *Once Were Warriors*.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand the predecessor to *Once Were Warriors* was Keri Hulme's remarkable *the bone people*, the first novel by an indigenous person to win a major international book award. In the year Hulme won his award, 1985, novels by Peter Carey, Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, J. L. Carr and Jan Morris were on the shortlist. The mixed reception of Hulme's book was accompanied, notoriously, by charges that she was not in fact an indigenous writer—she is of Scottish, Irish and Māori descent—though these charges did not come from Māori. Hulme's baggy, dramatic, mythologising and radical novel mixes violence and mysticism, and the sacred and the profane, to produce a politics of location and identity that might now be seen as mainstream for indigenous literatures. *the bone people* signalled a significant shift away from comfort for Pākehā readers of Māori literature in English, unsurprisingly synchronous with political activism, especially the famous *bikoi*, or land march, to Parliament in 1975, and the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal in the same year. As Ann Hardy has observed, a cluster of books and films focussing on the “bleak disenchantment of a racially and culturally divided society” appeared after 1975 (92). This burst of publication changed the ground in Aotearoa/New Zealand but was also part of an international shift in postcolonial literatures.

Michelle Keown has recently pointed out that Pacific, Australian and New Zealand indigenous literatures are lacunae in recent books on postcolonial theory and criticism, those by Robert Young and Ania Loomba, among others. Keown agrees with Graham Huggan's observation that the postcolonial industry privileges a handful of famous writers (Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul) and three celebrity critics (Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak) (8). Yet Māori and Pacific writers are constantly invited to international conferences,

their texts are the subject of numerous theses and academic studies, and the expanding place of indigenous literature in the world of literatures in English is marked by indigenous presses, websites, academic courses and journals. A growing international readership and viewership for indigenous storytelling, methodologies and cultural production is evident on many fronts. How might we think about this? It seems on the face of it that “indigenous” occupies a different space from “postcolonial” or at least from postcolonial theory. Would Naipul, Achebe and Rushdie think of themselves as “indigenous?” In most respects these writers exemplify characteristics of globalisation; in person and in their texts they have been mobile, transnational, de-regionalised. How might we think about the relationship between the indigenous literatures of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific, and globalisation? It seems to me there are complex unfoldings around indigeneity, globalisation and the postcolonial which might usefully be illuminated by a consideration of some texts from Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and the Pacific.

The “native” in its manifold configurations has long exercised a powerful hold on the industrialised imaginary. Part of this is no doubt a continuing appetite for the exotic, intensified by postmodern sensibilities of exhaustion and a globalised Western cultural production. But many questions remain around the term “indigenous.” What links indigenous texts and who can write them? Is there any force in that term as a collective noun, or does it break apart—Māori, Aboriginal, Samoan, Tongan, African, Native American, Ainu. What is being expressed or negotiated around the indigenous text? What cultural transactions occur in and around its space? James Clifford has argued that one of the “enduring constraints” in the changing mix of “differently articulated sites of indigeneity” will always be “the power of place”:

Indigenous forms of dwelling cover a range of sites and intensities: there are “native” homebodies, commuters, travellers and exiles. But a desire called “the land,” is differently, persistently active. (481)

The New Zealand economist Brian Easton has defined globalisation as “the economic, political and social consequences of the reduction in the cost of distance” (75). He noted that great imperial and industrial revolutions have often occurred around a reduction in the costs of distance that makes it easier to trade goods, people and information. Globalisation challenges the importance of the nation state. Jurgen Osterhammel and Niels Petersson have noted that globalisation “alters the balance of power between states and markets in favour of the latter” (6). James Clifford has argued that

globalisation has produced a “general loosening of the hyphen in the nation-state norm” (476). It might seem, then, that an effect of globalisation is to increase the “power of place” at the expense of the nation state, and this is indeed what numerous commentators on globalisation have argued, following Roland Robertson’s point that homogenisation and heterogenisation develop concurrently (Osterhammel and Petersson 7).

It can also be argued that reduction of the costs of distance configures different collectivities and human subjects. The world wide web has produced culture and behaviours which are not tied to language or geography or nation. The imagined community of the web can be the pathology of the individual. Where and who is the human subject? The political scientist André Drainville, in his recent book *Contesting Globalisation: Space and Place in the World Economy*, focuses on modes of social relation to the world economy (11). He argues that concepts like world order, the global civil society, cosmopolitanism, or global politics cannot operate on behalf of an imaginary subject “humanity” (1-8). It is in the concrete spaces of locality that “we can observe and detect [the] assembling global subject” and think critically about the world economy as a meeting place of social forces (xii). Drainville invokes Foucault, “carrying with him the language of concrete places—prisons, schools, asylums, factories—into abstracts, diagrams or epistemes,” and advocates a similar practice: global politics is placed politics (8).

Drainville’s conceptual arguments about globalisation are useful for thinking about indigeneity. If a reduction in the cost of distance is producing what Drainville calls the “assembling global subject,” a subject configured in the “discursive or ideological mirages” of “the people of the earth,” “global civil society,” “the workers” or “the poor,” indigenous texts work to counter these spectral collective selves, which in their case might be “the indigene” or “the postcolonised,” but which refuse disembodiment and inhabit the placed politics of Rotorua or Brisbane. Mudrooroo has said that indigenous writing is “consciously committed” and is never “escapist fiction”: “No adventures are recounted for the sake of the pleasure of unravelling a plot” (173). In its representations of specific cultures, histories, communities, beliefs and practices, indigenous writing counters the representational effects of globalisation in mainstream literatures, like postmodern inscriptions of identity as spectatorial, nomadic, coded, figural, consumerist and decentred. This is, of course, an obvious opposition that perhaps disguises as much as it reveals, and sets up oppositions between indigenous and globalised which are misleadingly simple.

A danger here is that of a re-inscription of indigenous as un-modern, when one of its most dynamic contemporary currencies is a shorthand for resistance, for sustained survival, for political re-identification (Clifford 475). Both history and politics show the need for reclamation of a collective noun which is, precisely, both transnational and local in its ascriptions. It is not so long ago that Australians of European descent and Pākehā New Zealanders referred to themselves as native and appropriated forms of indigenous identities to signify separation from the place of origin. In both countries the terms indigenous and postcolonial are the ground of political contestation. A Pākehā New Zealand Cabinet Minister recently claimed to be indigenous by birth; some Māori refer to New Zealand as “Occupied Aotearoa”; and who can forget Bobbi Sykes’s remark: postcolonial? have they left? (qtd. in Smith 24). A recent collection of Pacific writing, *Whetu Moana*, notes that New Zealand and Hawaii are still under (post)colonial governments, and sovereignty is a continuing demand (Wendt, Whitiri and Sullivan 2). These political differences are sharply dividing, in terms of cultural production as well as radical politics. But, as noted by Clifford, the common ground that connects indigenous texts is always the same powerful nexus of power and land, a diptych of centrality that shakes into many layers of meaning. As Peter Peemuggina put it, when talking to the anthropologist Peter Sutton about his tribal area of the Cape York Peninsula, “nothing is nothing,” which Sutton glossed as:

In a traditional Aboriginal sense, the world is made of signs. One may not know more than a fraction of their meanings, and not all their meanings are of equal significance, but the presumptive principle is that there is no alien world of mere things. . . .  
(Sutton 13)

How do indigenous texts, tied as they are to postcolonial politics and burdened with the same representational and epistemological needs and duties that have exercised, for example, feminism, mobilise, or get mobilised by, globalisation? I think the answer lies in the loosening conjunction of the term “nation state.”

Sam Watson’s *The Kadaitcha Sung* (1990) has been described as “by far the most politically radical Aboriginal novel ever to have appeared in print” (Knudsen 282). Like other indigenous texts from New Zealand and Australia, it is characterised by violence and anger, a visceral social realism produced by and representing actual conditions in which indigenous people live. Watson’s novel is set in contemporary Brisbane, but is focused on Uluru as its central site. It is also a narrative which rejects linear chronology. *The Kadaitcha Sung* revises

colonisation and its postcolonial effects by replacing historical chronology with mythological synchrony: recent history is part of ancient non-linear time, figured in rings, circles, holes and tunnels. The surface of the land is fluid, like time: beings appear through the earth, its elements dissolving and enacting spiritual and psychic forces; human dramas are surrounded by and part of vaster, more complex systems that can only be partially apprehended. What is played out in this landscape is a bloody allegorical and political narrative, but its radicalism consists in its revisioning of Australian history as *ab original*, generated by deep elemental events, ancient symmetries and protections which contain and explain colonisation. In this narrative colonial history is the result of mythological Aboriginal events that repossess the contemporary world. It is important here to note that in indigenous literatures, more generally, myth is the wrong word, as it references a Western taxonomy which clearly separates history and a body of knowledge that is more like fiction. In indigenous history, what European scholars refer to as myth is more like what Māori call *whakapapa*, a genealogical narrative of origin.

*The Kadaitcha Sung* reclaims agency for Aboriginal people, their knowledge systems, their interpretive communities, their world views. There is nothing optimistic about *The Kadaitcha Sung* except the final biblical image of pregnant Jelda and her people escaping the mission, but its recuperation of agency is a profound claim of indigeneity, and lies in the novel's narrative ontology in which events have played out according to a local and specific determinism that is not white, not European, not linear and not part of the ambitions or formations of the nation state. To pick up Clifford's loosening hyphen, Watson's re-vision of Australian history breaks apart the nation state by locating it as a consequence of primordial events and forces that overturn social structures and redraw history. As Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs have argued, *The Kadaitcha Sung* is a novel which exemplifies the uncanny, "specifically the combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar—the way one seems always to inhabit the other" (23). By re-placing contemporary postcolonised Australia into uncanny history, the power of place in the novel is redirected to an earth that is no longer Australia, but concurrently primordial and specifically local.

There are powerful synergies between *The Kadaitcha Sung* and a novel like Patricia Grace's *Potiki* (1986) where time is configured as a spiral.<sup>1</sup> For Māori, time is always back-facing, the future comes out of the past. Many Māori texts reconnect contemporary political worlds with pre-colonisation world views and beliefs and, like Watson, Grace dissolves the boundaries between

primordial ancestors and contemporary characters to produce a world view in which specifically located spiritual and cosmological beliefs are as visibly enacted as human opportunism and coercion. It is a truism to observe that the synchrony of spiritual and material worlds in indigenous worldviews and texts is one of their defining collective characteristics, but it is central to indigenous politics, and offers something of an explanation for the mobility and currency of indigenous texts in international readerships. From such concrete spaces of locality such as Brisbane or Aotearoa, primordial practices and world views can be radically re-placed, and can connect into something more like a global order of placed politics and less like a nation-state. Old knowledges become new knowledges and the limits and possibilities of indigeneity are re-visioned. Non-indigenous readers of *The Kadaitcha Sung* or *Potiki* have to engage with new and different knowledge. They have to participate, to cede agency, accept concepts, landscapes and actions that challenge not just power relations but also their apprehension of what history is and how it is understood, that challenge also their epistemologies, taxonomies and contingencies. Part of the attraction of indigenous texts for a globalised culture dealing in discursive or ideological mirages may be the revisioning they force, and the hope they offer of imagining the world locally, specifically, but also radically redrawn.

There is an important distinction between indigenous writing emerging from the South Pacific (I am referring here particularly to Samoa and Tonga) and those texts coming out of Australia and New Zealand. Perhaps I should put this boundary more simply and clearly and say there is a distinction between those nation states where indigenous peoples are a governed minority and those where they are self-governing. While *The Kadaitcha Sung* and *Potiki* illustrate one dimension or mode of indigenous writing, a political reclamation of worldview and indigenous knowledge, novels like Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999) and Duff's *Once Were Warriors* represent the violent and violated social, cultural and political worlds available to colonised and dispossessed peoples and enact their textual and epistemological dimensions. These texts accept postcolonial terms of engagement and are mobilised, not so much by the loosening or diminishing role of the nation state in globalisation, as by the impulse to record, critique and embody resistance to postcolonial regimes. But it is a resistance which, though historically and topographically located, calls into play the international politics that connect indigeneities. Both novels depict violence as the condition of certain kinds of being, violence externally directed at indigenous people, including racial policies, and violence internalised as the self-damaging

effects of disaffection and deracination. These characteristics are what you might expect of indigenous literatures—storytelling as agency, polemic and critique, especially of history and its artefacts. These represent the world in the light of colonial violence and provide the emotional and cultural ground on which identity rests and where recuperation might occur. The writing back of indigenous texts is itself a political act, and correspondingly more violent and furious where the dominant culture is still seen to be repressively calling the shots. If globalisation is a “deeply historical, uneven, and even localising” process, as Arjun Appadurai argues, then indigenous texts, in their range of difference and connectedness, in their location of global forces in historically specific sites and in their, broadly speaking, shared politics mimic the way globalisation interrupts boundaries and nation-state distinctions while intensifying localisation (17).

In Epeli Hau'ofa's *Tales of the Tikongs* (1983) the Tiko islanders are ceaselessly urged and assisted towards development by characters like the

Doctor of Philosophy recently graduated from Australia. The good Doctor works on Research for Development. . . . The Doctor is an Expert, although he has never discovered what he is an expert of. It doesn't matter; in the balmy isles of Tiko, as long as one is Most Educated, an Expert, and a Wise Man to boot. (18)

Many Pacific counter-narratives subvert western knowledge systems about the Pacific as well as aim for more directly political targets. In Sia Figiel's *Where We Once Belonged* (1996) there is a pair of *fa'afafige* (transsexual) twins, who are named after a *palagi* who interviewed them on sex, status, and domestic violence (68). They are called Freeman and Derek. Figiel's stories satirise and critique Western perceptions of island cultures, like the conceptual differences that mark off indigeneity. In her story “We,” the American Peace Corps' Miss Cunningham sets the children essay topics. Everyone avoids essay topic three, “What I saw on my way to school.” The narrator remarks:

I didn't know then why I didn't choose essay topic three. I knew only that it was hard to witness something—anything—alone. You were always with someone. . . . Nothing was witnessed alone. Nothing was witnessed in the “I” form—nothing but penises and ghosts. “I” does not exist Miss Cunningham. “I” is “we” . . . *always*. (132)

Figiel's stories, like Albert Wendt's or Hau'ofa's, are full of references to what one might loosely call globalisation—the social, cultural and political consequences of a reduction in the costs of distance. Characters travel to

and from New Zealand, Australia, the U.S., Europe; their diets are altered for the worse by sugary drinks and fast foods; their speech is peppered with allusions to television shows and Western popular culture; they are visited by “Experts” of all persuasions, and constantly subjected to the networks of neo-colonialism and the ideologies of neoliberalism. But what comes to them is absorbed, processed and repossessed. The transformative cycle occurs within the community; it is dynamic, active and dialogic, it shapes its collective identity but does not overthrow the specifics of cultural location. What the indigenous Pacific text offers is a mode of interaction with globalisation that is satirical, recycling and transformative. In Pacific texts the presence and effect of global forces on local culture is a kind of resource that is playfully but pointedly utilised to inflect the power of place. James Clifford has noted that in the contemporary Pacific, land “signifies the past in the future” (482). In contemporary Pacific literature, the Pacific landscape, with its freight of successive colonisations, exemplary of mobile labour and capital regimes, its borders always porous and sea-connected, is continually re-placed. Pacific texts provide a response to globalisation and to postcolonialism that asserts cultural agency and recalibrates the relationship between global forces and the dynamics of locality, identity and culture.

I want to conclude by taking a slightly different tack on the indigenous text and looking at response to the novel/film *Whale Rider* that in some sense sits between the Australian and New Zealand texts I discussed earlier and those of the Pacific. I collapse the novel into the film (though they are distinct texts and narratives) because it is in the translation to film text that *Whale Rider* has achieved a significant international response. Marc Savlov of the *Austin Chronicle* called the film a “pitch perfect example of how to craft a personally resonant film that speaks to all cultures at all times.” Not all the film critics gave *Whale Rider* glowing reviews. It is described as a feminist tract, propaganda, an inspirational TV movie. German reviewers worried that it was ethno-kitsch, and one reviewer dubbed the community of the film’s setting, Whangara, a now rather well known place on the East Coast, as “the little village that could.” But for all the world-weary recognitions of plot clichés and sentimental/mystical determinism, international review coverage granted the film a power of locality and a politics of indigeneity that overrode other concerns. The story of the film is based on a Ngati Konohi story of origin, Paikea’s rescue by a whale on the trip from Hawaiki to Aotearoa, and mixes contemporary gender revisions with a valuing of community, ethnicity, tradition, and environment. But it is perhaps as a story

of redemption, in which a predetermined ancient order effects reconciliation and erases the bad legacies of the past, that Ihimaera's tale has appealed to large international audiences. In her review for *Postcolonial Text* Antje M. Rauwerda commented:

The cynic in me wonders if the overwhelmingly positive international reactions to the film at festivals like those at Sundance, Toronto and Rotterdam, suggest something about "Western" viewers; perhaps the "Western" world would so much like to be convinced that indigenous populations can recover from European settlement that a movie celebrating traditional Māoriness in a contemporary context relieves our consciences.

I have no doubt that Rauwerda is right. *Whale Rider's* indirect critique of colonial history and postcolonialism, which is a critique of exclusion, also sets in place a set of transnational counter-images and -narratives to the vast, vague and disturbing possibilities of globalisation: world is replaced by village, city by nature, environmental greed by inter-species communication, the decentred subject by the placed indigene: the world as we know it didn't happen, and isn't happening. The fact that this is comforting for Western viewers is also a repositioning, bringing recognition of the politics of locality, of indigeneity, of the past in the future or the future in the past.

Across the range of "indigeneity" are some factors in common. Indigeneity is always placed; its politics, worldview and social order are site- and culture-specific, but in the unfolding of many indigenous texts a new discourse is appearing, in which the nation state and its long binarising history of "natives" is only one part of the scene, and where "indigeneity" re-articulates and responds to globalised discourses, one of which is postcolonial politics. If indigenous texts are the counter-narrative to the discursive and ideological spectres of globalisation and work to dislodge the nation state as primary dialogic partner, the reimagined world has shifted ground.

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In *The Circle and the Spiral* Eva Rask Knudsen has discussed the many connections between Australian aboriginal and Māori literatures. The treatment of time is foundational to their articulation of difference.

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