

*Narrating Indigenous Modernities: Transcultural Dimensions in Contemporary Māori Literature*

Michaela Moura-Koçuglu

334 pages, 2011, \$99 USD (hardcover)

Amsterdam/ New York, Rodopi

Reviewed by Claudia Duppé, University of Freiburg, Germany

In *Narrating Indigenous Modernities: Transcultural Dimensions in Contemporary Māori Literature*, Michaela Moura-Koçuglu sets out to read contemporary Māori literature in Aotearoa New Zealand from a distinctly transcultural perspective that challenges the validity of prevalent discourses, and reveals the shortcomings of accustomed approaches to Māori writing. The author establishes a firm theoretical framework for the estimation of indigenous modernities, thereby going beyond common notions of biculturalism that have been ruling the critical discourse of the country since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. The idealistic notion of the two founding peoples, the Pākehā European and the indigenous Māori, as groups of equal standing has long been unmasked as an essentialist notion unfit to transcend cultural differences, not only with regard to the various categories the author mentions, but also with regard to the general perception of ‘indigenous’ as a reactionary trend in the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century hybrid lifeworlds.

Moura-Koçuglu keeps a tight rein on the current cultural debates on global modernity in which she places her argument; she succeeds in delineating a sound critical approach with which to analyze transculturality in indigenous writing—not only the writing of Māori but the writing of first nations peoples in different parts of the world. The prefix ‘trans’ in transculturality follows the Latin meaning implying that cultural practices cross and transcend allegedly clear-cut boundaries. Moura-Koçuglu reveals a thorough understanding of the socio-political complexity of cultural discourse throughout the history of Aotearoa New Zealand and deserves credit for not letting her clear assessment of cultural mechanisms be obstructed by the overpowering notion of an essentialist biculturalism. She is not timid in challenging established critics by clarifying her point, for instance when she discards the notion of ‘the two cultures’ as a narrow lens, which “disregards the cultural diversity of contemporary Māori culture, where multiple expressions of contemporary indigeneity emerge across categories of indigeneity, ethnicity, class, and gender” (40). She continues by saying that “the notion of a universal, homogenous Māori identity is highly unpersuasive, as much as is the idea of an essentialized, universal Pākehā identity” (40), thus charting a more dynamic understanding of cultural transformation which does not classify Māori as a culture that survived against all odds but as standing “in reference to Pākehā elements [it has] appropriated to indigenous form” (52).

When Moura-Koçuglu concludes her theoretical discussion by saying that the “concept of transculturality proves helpful in elucidating the interconnectedness of cultural threads in expression of the contemporary self,” she brings the cultural discussion ‘back to the roots’—both metaphorically and in real terms (67). There is no denying the fact that Māori and Pākehā cultures did intertwine, which resulted in hybrid forms that are firmly rooted in their original cultural soil. In her close analysis, Moura-Koçuglu sets out to trace this “transcultural dimension [. . .] in the aesthetic fabric” of selected literary texts (150). This transcultural dimension is most clearly visible in Witi Ihimaera’s *Tangi* (1973), one of the key texts of modern Māori literature. In fact, it is Ihimaera’s metaphor of the imaginary rope of indigenous culture to which “the Pakeha became added . . . intertwining with ours, adding different textures and colours” which illustrates Moura-Koçuglu’s theoretical framework of transculturality in literary terms (Ihimaera 30, qtd. 68). This imaginary rope could be regarded as the metaphorical joint between theory and textual analysis of *Narrating Indigenous Modernities*.

In her close readings, Moura-Koçuglu steps from “Narratives of (Be)Longing” via “Narratives of (Un)belonging” to transcultural readings of more recent fiction. By applying her theory in various case studies to established texts, like Ihimaera’s *Tangi* and *The Uncle’s Story* (2000), Alan Duff’s *Once Were Warriors* (1990), Keri Hulme’s *the bone people* (1983), or Patricia Grace’s *Potiki* (1987), to name but a few, Moura-Koçuglu attempts to systematically trace transculturality back to the time of the 1950s when major socio-cultural changes took place in Aotearoa New Zealand. To a certain extent, many arguments she presents for the established texts are not entirely new. It is the systematic approach and focus on transculturality that is. Thus, *Narrating Indigenous Modernities* represents one of the most thorough investigations into Māori literature since Peter Beatson’s *The Healing Tongue: Themes in Contemporary Maori Literature*, dating from 1989, a study which participated in the assignation of ethnocentricity to Māori literature at that time.

It is in particular Moura-Koçuglu’s notion of “failed transculturality” that indicates that the investigation of the transcultural dimension of Māori literature is not simply a modern trend of cultural criticism but a necessary undertaking. Indeed, it carries the potential of putting future analyses of Aotearoa New Zealand’s socio-political and cultural processes in a new light. The author’s analysis of Duff’s novel *Once Were Warriors*, one of the most controversial Māori novels, draws attention to the “pitfalls of essentializing indigenous traditions” (143). To Moura-Koçuglu, the cultural practice of *moko* (facial tattoo) described in the novel does not imply a cultural transfer of Māori practices but represents a means of separation both from the world of Pākehā as much as the world of Māori. In the author’s eyes, the use of *moko* in the novel distorts the traditional practices and turns the facial tattoo into a “mock image of their warrior forbears,” which she sees as a “manifestation of failed transculturality” (136). In Moura-Koçuglu’s analysis, this ‘failure’ depicts a cultural divide and indicates the

cultural uncertainty in the aftermath of the Māori Renaissance, as much as the complexity of the transcultural dimension of Māori writing of the period (147).

In sum, it is refreshing to read Michaela Moura-Koçuglu's study, in particular the analyses of recent texts, like *Bloom* (2003) by Kelly Ana Morey, which illuminates how strongly tradition and modernity are intertwined in people's everyday transcultural lives, in which "indigenous traditions are in rapport with Pākehā elements embedded in a modern context" (187), or Renée's *Kissing Shadows* (2005), where "the author envisions a . . . complex society in which both Pākehā and Māori engage in transcending essentialist and biased viewpoints" (218). Moura-Koçuglu's close readings illustrate that transculturality is imperative for the understanding of modern indigenous lifeworlds. It is to the author's merit that she allows a discursive space not only on the textual, but also on the critical level of her study, sometimes at the expense of loosening the grip on her theoretical reins. The texts do reveal a 'mind of their own' so much so that the heterogeneity of themes blurs the edges of the critical methodology she sets out to establish. As a result, Moura-Koçuglu's argument in the textual analyses is not as tightly orchestrated as in the delineation of the cultural theories she discusses in the first part of the book; yet the message is clear. *Narrating Indigenous Modernities: Transcultural Dimensions in Contemporary Māori Literature* makes a valuable contribution to incorporating the narration of indigenous modernities into the fabric of globalization as a whole and to the reading of Māori literature in Aotearoa New Zealand in particular.

#### Works Cited

Ihimaera, Witi. "Tangi 1973." *The Rope of Man*. Auckland: Reed, 2005. 9-168. Print.