The Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia, Vol.1, 2009, ISSN 1988-5946 under the auspices of *Coolabah* Observatori: Centre d'Estudis Australians, Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona

Cultural encounters and hyphenated people

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Abstract: Cultural encounters are a dominant feature of contemporary society. Identities are ever-changing 'routes' as Hall and others have stated, so we become insiders and outsiders to our own lives. The manifaceted expression of cultural belonging and its formation is illustrated by examples from Australasian writers who express not only the conflict of belonging to more than one culture, but also its inherent value. Such writers provide the reader with alternative ways of reading culture and illustrate the increasing trend to see ourselves as hyphenated people belonging nowhere specific in a globalised world.

Key words: bi/multicultural encounters, cultural belonging, hyphenated people, insiders and outsiders

In the move from a colonial to a post-colonial, multicultural, and transnational society critics have spoken of identity, identities, pluralism and hyphenated peoples. Globalization and extensive migration in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have increased encounters between cultures and raised further questions of integration and assimilation. Matthews has defined culture as "the information and identities available from the global supermarket" (27). He sees culture as hyphenating in our materialistic society since the cultural supermarket, dominated by the mass media, leaves the ability to appropriate culture in an adequate manner socially to the individual rather than the group.

If we consider the manifaceted expression of cultural belonging and its formation, two of the most common encounters are linguistic and cultural, expressed in texts of different kinds in art, music, literature, or drama. The themes of many recent EASA conferences have underlined this aspect of Australian studies, from pluralism at the first conference, to maintaining the national, re-visioning, remembering, re-invention of itself, and translating cultures, to mention just some. In art, for example, this has been demonstrated by papers on the use of palimpsest in Japanese-Australian pottery, a fascinating picture of sculptures and vases with half Chinese and half Australian motifs. On another occasion it was shown how older colonial Australian landscape paintings were painted over, or had new features imposed on them by indigenous painters—for example, barbed wire, different indigenous signs—thus subverting and reclaiming the land. And, of course, literature has provided a plethora of examples of cultural encounters at all conferences. Brydon and Tiffin think of this kind of "cross-cultural interaction" in terms of flora, comparing it to a rhizome which spreads its roots out and

shoots up in other places, yet retains its contact with the centre (1993, 12), symptomatic of the diversification of cultures and identities.

Located at the crossroads of cultural studies and literary criticism, colonial and postcolonial literature is a rich source for the understanding of the world in which we live, and for an analysis of the process of encounters which result in the move from "being" to "becoming" to use Stuart Hall's definitions of identities (4). Such discourses, as Kahn points out, may be "able to destabilize existing systems of signification of otherness seen as falsely universalist (...) and replace them with new ones that are pluralist" (8). The issue of cross-cultural encounter is particularly relevant when speaking of settler/invader countries, and could provide a model for European countries to consider. Robert Layton's book *Who Needs the Past?* whilst primarily writing about archaeology demonstrates how narrative in its widest context illustrates aspects of social life as well as providing a "vision of order" (14). According to Robert Layton, "The view of the world expressed in (...) narratives gives meaning to many aspects of traditional social life (...) [and] a vision of the order behind the world today" (1994, 14).

The link between poetics and culture is often central when authors rewrite and revision their cultural beliefs for contemporary society by taking myths, legends and traditional beliefs and incorporating them, either as comment on the text itself, or as providing the body of the text. White (1971) suggests that we should distinguish between myth and mythological motifs in our discussion of discourse in the modern novel—what he calls the technique of "prefiguration" (11). In line with the theoretical debates of Bakhtin, Barthes and others he sees the use of mythological motifs as one common form for exploring cultural encounters. White differentiates between myths as such, and the use of motifs drawn from myth, which embody "a scheme of references to mythology" (7). Such motifs prefigure or anticipate the plot, in that they indirectly suggest an interpretation of events, real or imagined. Since the mythological motif "is better known than the new work, the myth will offer the novelist a short-hand system of symbolic comment on modern events" (12). Within Australian and New Zealand literature Alan Duff, Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace, Oodgeroo and Mudrooroo all spring to mind as authors who use mythological motifs with a conscious defamiliarizing purpose by forcing the non-indigenous reader into the position of the 'other' since comprehensive understanding of the mythology and of the language is only available to some. One of the aims of such re-departing, described by Minh-Ha as "the pain and frustration of having to live a difference that has no name and too many names already" (14), is to avoid re-circulation of the dominant cultural forms.

White's view is not unlike that of Suzanne Baker who sees myth as providing a "dual spatiality," especially in postcolonial texts. She rests her approach in part on Robert Wilson's theories of play/game: "Games define themselves, much as literary texts do, through a containing, though never fully visible, field of echoes and resonances"—which is exactly what cultural encounters bring to a literary or oral text. Wilson sees an "analogy between games and literary texts and (...) between play and both textual production and reception" (1990, 8) and a dual spatiality, which would of course comprise the concomitant effects of cultural encounters. Mythological motifs thus become "a space where alternative realities and different perceptions of the world can be conceived" (Baker 3). To Baker "[m]agic realism does not create imaginary worlds. What it does create, through its 'dual spatiality,' is a space where alternative realities

and different perceptions of the world can be conceived (...) [and] provides one space where Aboriginal voices can speak and be heard" (3). Baker interprets *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* as an example of magic realism in its acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday life, a view shared by Mudrooroo who acknowledges his use of mythological motifs when he defines myth as "[a] retelling of what is seen as the past, but a past pregnant with present meaning" (1990, 169).

The notion of cultural encounters is dominant in *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* with, for example, the constant reference to clothing and the need to conform to the colonizers' way of dress, as also in the giving of names—Jangamutukk names his children according to Western practices rather than giving them Aboriginal names, yet emphasises their own traditional beliefs. Mudrooroo juxtaposes mythological motifs and social realism, as for example the symbolic link between the church bells (118-19) and the initiation ceremonies (105-6). Suzanne Baker has suggested that the description of "the Aboriginal shaman's powers of metamorphosis which see him transform himself into a spider and into a gonna, see him change the direction of the wind, and see him conjure up Dreamtime companions" (39) is described in a matter-of-fact way of narration. I do not agree as these passages are, in marked contrast to others, blurred in meaning. The sudden moves from a portrayal of everyday life and problems to a dream world symbolizes, I would suggest, the dual identities and cultural differences which the Aborigines in the text are trying to cope with. One is tempted to ask whether Mudrooroo is suggesting that only by escapism to the world of spirituality can they even attempt to regain their lost Aboriginality. Whereas in Mudrooroo the two cultures largely remain separate as neither group accepts the other imposed on them, although they are unconsciously influenced by it, Oodgeroo's poetry is a source of elaborating encounters between black and white on a more positive note, albeit political. Oodgeroo sees the inevitable necessity of both sides joining forces to live in harmony in the future as in "Let us not be Bitter" and "The Dawn is at Hand."

> Dark and white upon common ground
> In club and office and social round,
> Yours the feel of a friendly land,
> The grip of the hand. (44)

However, she does indicate in "No More Boomerang" that these encounters may lead to annihilation of her own culture. But is this not exactly what we are discussing and fearing so frequently in our contemporary world, annihilation of part of ourselves? Oodgeroo understood that dividing people into superior and inferior whether for racial or social reasons would only lead to a state of conflict, as we have seen.

Another writer who makes considerable use of mythological motifs is the New Zealander, Witi Ihimaera. He says of *The Whale Rider*; "I attempted to create a present-day fable using aspects of mythology as a starting point" (cited in O'Brien 95). The work of Ihimaera constantly refers to this link between reality, fantasy and history:

> As a Maori, I don't actually believe that there is any difference between what is history, what is reality, and what is fantasy. As far as I'm concerned, the whole world is imbued with and energized by legend, by a sense of spirituality and other-worldliness; (...) Memory for me is not a legendary

> voice; and because our culture has been maintained by the voice rather than the written word, I tend to look at our stories as having their own truth. (Sarti 72)

The 'dual spatiality' of which Baker writes can be seen in *The Whale Rider*. Ihimaera takes the legend of the whale rider, incorporates it at various stages into his text, and gives interpretations of it so as to indicate ways of saving the culture and the people.

> The whale has always held a special place in the order of things, even before those times of Paikea. That was way back, after the Sky Father and Earth Mother had been separated, when the God children of both parents divided up between themselves the various Kingdoms of the Earth. It was Lord Tangaroa who took the Kingdom of the Ocean. (2004, 48)

In the context of the novel the role of the whale rider is a symbol of the people, and forms a backdrop for the text. Having been given freedom by Lord Tangaroa, the ruler of the kingdom of Ocean, "the whale family, the Wehengakauiki, became known as the helpers of men lost at sea. Whenever asked, the whale would attend the call, as long as the mariner possessed the necessary authority and knew the way of talking to the whales" (2004, 49). The narrator explains how the people came to Wharanga—one special whale bearing Paikea, their tipuna ancestor. As he comes towards land he throws spears which become birds and eels, but one spear will not leave his hand. So he uttered a prayer over it "'Let this spear be planted in years to come, for there are sufficient spear already implanted. Let this be the one to flower when the people are troubled and it is most needed'" (2004, 19). So the spear flew to the land but 150 years past before it was needed, that is in the twentieth century.

Ihimaera comments on how the people lost their "close relationship between land inhabitants and ocean inhabitants" (49), and "the capacity for *korero* with beasts and creatures of the sea, especially the whales" (1998, 73). Their encounter with Pakeha culture has demoralised them and changed their way of life. Their cultural relationship with nature must be restored if the people are to survive, regain pride in their identities and culture, and find a way back to the past, and an understanding of it to move on into the present. The beaching of the whales is symbolic of the beaching of the tribal group and Maori beliefs. When Kahu rides the leader whale out to sea restoration of culture is achieved. The acknowledgment by her grandfather that she is the special one, although female, is symbolic of a new generation and a new understanding of how the two cultures can exist alongside each other.

Ihimaera's concern with tradition and cultural encounters is evident not only in his work which "explore[s] the issue of cross-cultural understanding and misunderstanding" (Williams) but also in every interview. In several he has referred to the Rope of Man as a concept: "John Ranguhau (...) had this vision of Maori history being what he called Te Taura Tangata the rope of Man. This runs from the beginning of time to the end of time (...) [but] with Waitangi, the rope starts either to fray or unravel because transmission of culture is being affected" (1991, 284). But he elaborates here as elsewhere that even one strand is enough to keep the culture alive. He is thus illustrating clearly my contention that we become hyphenated peoples, because the intertwining means the two remain separate but linked. Talking of his recent book *The Rope of Man* (2005) he reveals a

change of view, and now describes the rope as "a magnificent icon spiralling from one aeon to the next, charting the history of humankind." He speaks of New Zealand as an example of successful cultural encounters where the Pakeha and Maori culture have become intertwined, as in a rope, both gaining from this.

> Pakeha heritage becomes added to it, the strands of Pakeha culture entwining with ours, adding different textures and colours. It's also fiercely twisted and soldered together by many different histories as Maori, Pakeha, Polynesian, Asian, American began to fall in love, marry and have children together The Rope continues its journey, spinning, singing, weaving, sparkling, charting its way through Time. It charts the changing nature of the human odyssey.[i]

Such encounters turn us today in many parts of the world into hyphenated people of the diasporas (Minh-Ha 1991, 14)—maybe people with several hyphens.

Hyphenated people

Though the word 'hyphenated' has often been thought of in negative terms, in today's society it is increasingly thought of as positive, indicating multiculturality—since the days of homogeneity of race are long gone. However, recently when speaking of this I have been met with a sense of derision—another attempt to make oneself different, another labelling. But are we not all hyphenated in some way, the two parts intertwined? An understanding of this could lead to a world less full of conflicts. Bhahba has discussed what happens when cultures meet, historically from the point of view of colonization, and today with immigration as the site for such exchange. He describes "[h]ybridity [as] a fraught, anxious and ambivalent condition. It is about how you survive, how you try to produce a sense of agency or identity in situations in which you are continually having to deal with the symbols of power or authority" (*THES* 1999). But he also acknowledges the mix of cultures he himself represents in this ironic description of himself as Mr. Hybrid: "The very process of colonization shifts certainties and sureties. It exposes the fictionality of certain ideas that are seen to be universal. (...) Hybridity is like the way I'm dressed - Indian jacket, silk scarf, corduroys and a collarless shirt from Italy. There you are, Mr. Hybrid" (*THES* 1999)

The hyphenated person retains parallel cultures, both influencing the other but yet remaining separate. This is most clearly seen in migrant and settler communities, but is equally relevant for all who no longer live in their so-called 'country of origin'. Trinh-Minh-Ha, the American Vietnamese film critic, has written much on these issues as she sees film as a particular example of cross-cultural encounters both in viewer and maker as well as in text and performance. She envisages such encounters as often resulting in a bricolage, a pastiche, quoting Scott Momaday: "We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves (...) The greater tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined" ('Out There' cited in Minh-Ha 8). For those migrating or of mixed racial and ethnic parentage literature has always had a vital role to play in disseminating and problematizing issues of hyphenation, from the time of Shakespeare's Caliban onwards. In *When the Moon Waxes Red* Trinh Minh-Ha uses the moon as a symbol of the constant and yet the changing, and therefore I would suggest

symbolic of how cultural encounters function. The title of the book refers to a belief in Chinese mythology that a red moon is a portent of coming calamity—the eclipse as dangerous. Just as the moon waxes and wanes, yet retains its form, so do our identities vary according to time and place, and the cultural encounters we meet.

Although prefiguration can be achieved in practice with techniques often verging on magic realism, other writers make extensive use of intertextuality to express the problematics of encounters and the hyphenated person. Much Australian literature that draws on European literary heritage counterpoises cultures, for example in Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda*, a great Victorian novel in an Australian setting, in which a glass church is built in an environment highly unsuitable; or Beverley Framer's *The Seal Woman*, where misunderstandings due to cultural differences of custom, food and language play a central role. Dagmar, originally Danish married to a Norwegian arctic sailor who has been drowned at sea, is certainly a hyphenated person, trying to live an Australian life, yet all the time being reminded that she is a 'foreigner.' Although she does decide in the end to return to her roots, as she cannot settle in Australia, Farmer juxtaposes throughout the cultural encounters that finally force her to make this decision.

Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage*, in my opinion, epitomises the discussion about hyphenated people in Australia. The protagonist is "an ABC; that is, an Australian-born Chinese. (...) a classification which straddled two cultures" (8). The text alternates between the fragments of a journal written by Lo Yun Shan from 1856 which have become "talismans for other points of departure" (4), and the twentieth century life of the protagonist who, though of Chinese origin, is called Seamus O' Young which he says, "[i]s not my real name" (8). Life is a mirror of reality and yet an illusion and Seamus epitomises the resultant duality, not only as he is an orphan brought up by white Australians so inculcated in another culture than that which he had originally, but also because he is Chinese, yet his eyes are blue.

Margins and border-crossings may be battlegrounds, but they are also sites for pilgrimage. Such encounters lead to re-departures (Minh-Ha 14), opting in, opting out of cultures, not just a moving from one side (or being pushed) to the other, but also in that move transferring part of the baggage with one. "Just as new knowledge cannot nullify previous results, different moments of a struggle constantly overlap and different relations of representation across 'old' and 'new' can be made possible without landing back in a dialectical destiny," to quote Minh-Ha (2-3). Different stages of life open up, not necessarily for new departures, but for re-departing or re-starting, as Patricia Grace comments:

> I think that we *are* our ancestors. We are here now because of our ancestors. I think of a circle - a necklace, each of us being a little bead on it. It's not a straight, long line with the past here and the future there, but with past and future circling or spiralling, so that it all becomes part of the present. (Sarti 49)

Another New Zealand text which illustrates the hyphenated person is Alan Duff's *Both Sides of the Moon* which opens thus "I am two races, two cultures and, most of all, two different thinkings. I am in a way against myself. But I can speak for both" (7). The

protagonist is a hyphenated person, and using the history of his Maori warrior ancestors he attempts to come to terms with his own half-caste identity:

> The dark half calls my white half, Pakeha. With just a little scorn in the tone, and envy it doesn't know shows, nor knows the solution to, since envy does not seek to cure itself, it just is. Festering on itself. Hating that which it fears to become.
> The Maori put his warrior thinking against the white man and reeled in confoundment at what he confronted: too much diversity, too complex, too wide the chasm of conceptual differences. (7)
>
> ...
>
> The white half calls the dark half Hori, and darkie, and whispers nigger amongst its own. With sneer that cannot help itself, not when his thinking has been pitted against the world and come out victor. (...)
> I am born of each of these. A half caste being of neither one nor the other. Indigenous yet foreigner. Coloniser and colonised. Not brown; not white. Thus I am everything of my country's racial origins and yet nothing. (8)

Cultural encounters can thus also lead to never being at home in any one culture, as Minh-Ha has also indicated: "This shuttling in-between frontiers is working out of and an appeal to another sensibility, another consciousness of the condition of marginality: that in which marginality is the condition of the center" (18). The Swedish critic Jonas Stier would call this state one of "cultural ambiguity," common among second and third generation immigrant families (94). We become insiders and outsiders to our own lives.

Insiders and Outsiders

In attempting to grasp the point of view and vision of another culture we inevitably become an outsider looking in on the insider's way of life. Minh-Ha's comparison of the search for authenticity in film with that of other texts is interesting for in film, as in art, it is in the eye of the beholder that cultural decisions and values are made, whereas in texts of other kinds such as prose and poetry it is the individual's interpretation and the cultural baggage that the individual carries which become determinate features of interpretation. Australian studies within Europe is very much a question of insiders and outsiders. Not living with Australian culture on a daily basis the European scholar can provide a different view on aspects of Australian life than the person encountering it on a daily basis. Australian studies can also play an active role in problematizing issues of ethnicity and cultural difference within present day European society. Teachers have commented that literature from countries that have a basis in the British literary tradition, already known to the pupils or students, provides an excellent starting point for focussing within their own society on situations similar to those described in the text. The initial resentment at discussing racial issues with a starting point from one's own society is mellowed by going further afield and opening up for comparative study. The use of multiple voices and multiple languages—hybridization of form as well as culture as in works by David Ireland, Jimmy Chi and Sally Morgan when encountering the cultural other, enables us to see our own with other eyes. It also demonstrates that

this is not something which is related solely to indigenous and settler communities but has global significance.

One can be both outsider and insider, particularly today when immigration is the site for such exchange. However, the result of cultural encounters for most is that one is an outsider in some contexts and an insider in others—there is not a fixed line which can be drawn. Are for example Peter Carey, David Malouf, James Joyce insiders or outsiders? To what extent are/were they influenced, albeit unknowingly, by the other cultures in which they have lived and written? However, in many parts of society there is still a lack of understanding that many of us live in two or even three worlds, not least culturally and linguistically. This clash of cultures is often criticized in the work of Patricia Grace. In Grace's *Baby-No-Eyes* the little girl who is killed in a car crash has her eyes removed for donor purposes without the permission of the parents. When the parents protest the body is handed back with the eyes in a plastic bag—hence the title. In Maori culture she must be buried whole. The idea of completion is seen again in *Potiki* when the story ends only when the final carving is put in place on the pillar. This text also demonstrates the clash of cultural encounters in that the Pakeha developers are portrayed as completely incapable of understanding Maori cultural connection to the land.

One of the most frequent positions as outsider or insider is in relation to language. As Brian Castro says.

> Language marks the spot where self loses its prison bars—where the border-crossing takes place, traversing the spaces of others. When one speaks or translates Chinese, one metaphorically becomes Chinese; when one speaks Japanese one 'turns' Japanese. Each language speaks the world in its own ways. (...) When we translate from one language to another we not only reinvent ourselves but we free up the scelerotic restrictions of our own language. We feel free to transgress, to metamorphose, to experience the immediacy of another culture, (...). Other cultures and languages reinforce and enrich us powerfully by affecting and destabilising our familial tongue. We gain by losing ourselves. (*Australian Humanities Review.*)

In *Honey-mad Women* Patricia Yæger talks of the bilingual heroine in literature. Yæger takes as her example Charlotte Brontë's use of foreign words, showing the writer's complex power over cultural codes. "The second language serves an emancipatory function in the novel in Brontë's texts, enacting a moment in which the novel's primary language is put into process, a moment of possible transformation when the writer forces her speech to break out of old representations of the feminine and to posit something new" (36). Linguistic subversiveness can thus be a form of interruption whether of thought or speech. Interestingly Yaeger does not look on this as a specifically postcolonial strategy as is so often thought today, as shown in Dasenbrock's article (1987) about a making strange of the reader, as the Castro quote above indicates. Walwicz is one Australian writer who has carried linguistic and stylistic experimentation with language to great lengths, forcing the reader into the role of outsider, as in the prose poem "Australia" : "You bore me. (...) You laugh at me. (...) You make me a dot in the nowhere. (..) You laugh with your big healthy. You want

everyone to be the same" (Damien White 90-1). Her own hybridity is echoed in "Europe" which begins "i'm europe deluxe nougat bar" (Zkrzynecki 1985, 195).

The foreign word is vector, carrier, but also, as in mathematics, open to variable quantification, the "harbinger of an abnormal way of thinking, which is capable, in its strangeness of bringing the [charcater] into dialogue with something new" (Yæger 39). I would also say the reader is brought into this situation. Yæger is speaking from a feminist critical point of view but much of the same can be found in cultural studies and postcolonial texts and theory. If we look at the concept of register—the words used are not necessarily wrong or false or untranslatable, but the way in which they hang together as continuous prose or verse means that they have a linking pattern which cannot be disrupted by the mere change of word. Are we different people according to the language we use? Aina Walwicz recalls one interviewer who said how much she had enjoyed reading her work, because she could see the Polish stylistic structure, a point which surprised Walwicz, but one which many bi/tri-lingual people would recognize. As language shows or translates thought patterns so will the use of a dominant cultural genre also be influenced by the thought processes that are inherent in it.

A discussion of cultural encounters and hyphenated people is fruitful in our understanding of contemporary global society, not least as cultural encounters open up for creative imagination and know no barriers, nor should they. At the Readers and Writers Week in Wellington, NZ in 1996 when the *Te Ao Marama* volumes of Maori writing and criticism were launched Witi Ihimaera put the writings into a postcolonial context illustrating the diverse influences on New Zealand writing by Maori. It was interesting to see some of the younger writers response to this as they stated that their writing felt no obligation to satisfy either a Western discourse or a Maori one—it was simply writing. This view was endorsed by the grand old man of New Zealand poetry Hone Tuwhare who when questioned why he so seldom wrote in Maori replied that when English had given him so many wonderful words why should he not use them.

Literature is a prime factor in assisting in the understanding of globalization, and by that I mean all texts which are long enough to allow for the development of such understanding. The brevity of much on the Internet is dangerous in this respect, as it fails to account for the time needed to come to an understanding of difference. As Brydon says in an article: "We tried to show how literature and literary criticism can play a major role in decolonising imaginations and opening up a new model for international relations based on mutual respect for national and other differences" (1993, 49). This to me is the core of how to approach cultural encounters and what makes us hyphenated people, if we are only willing to acknowledge it.

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