Katharina Luh

Intersecting Identities

Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Fiction from Aotearoa New Zealand

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IDENTITY CRISIS

I'm sick of being
a Pākehā-Māori
not a real one
but still a hori
sick of being
middle-classed
(as if poverty is
traditionally Māori)
sick of hearing
the same old thing
I'm the whitest Māori
you've ever seen
sick of people
who have to ask
am I eighth
a quarter
I couldn't be half.
But if I chose
to be Pākehā
I'd be turning my back
on my tūpuna
when I am
because they were
and because I am
they are.

(Jacq Carter 2000 [1998]: 266f.)

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

> "Life is not the same river that cannot be crossed twice. Life is all sorts of rivers and creeks, currents and eddies, cross-overs and tributaries. Even the fording points are on shifting sands." (Geertz 1995: 2)
>
> "Names are never enough: nor are simply words of gratitude." (Ritchie 1992: 4)

Much like narrative fiction itself, research must be understood as a significant and contested site of intersections between culturally specific ways of knowing and different, even divergent individual and collective interests. The pursuit of academic knowledge and the realisation of scholarly analysis can never be an objective or value-free academic undertaking of simple observing, but is always an activity that takes place in set disciplines and under individually specific conditions. Working in a different cultural context therefore calls for a demonstration of cultural competency and detailed historical knowledge of the respective local context and the research 'material' in question, and necessitates the translation of the scholars' individual background and research interests into a culturally sensitive research design. As New Zealand scholars themselves have challenged top-down power relations in research contexts, urging academics to demonstrate moral obligation and responsibility during cross-cultural research processes, the following pages shall try to clarify who drafted and conducted the research this study is based on, and who went on the long journey to write this dissertation.

Implementing intersectional theorising as a means to pluralise identities and get away from rigid hierarchies of oppressions, it thus seems both reasonable and crucial to examine my own self-positioning in relation to the studied literature and cultural context demonstrating how life experiences have shaped research agendas throughout the entire project. While the theoretical position of this thesis emerged about two years after the initial research questions were framed, steadying itself in a dialogic interchange with local cultural concepts and the chosen contemporary narrative texts, this multidisciplinary research project has profited from a vivid exchange with scholars around the globe. The project's aim had always been context-bound, cultural historical from the outset, following the desire to shed light onto the stories of both marginalised and privileged individual and collective subjectivities within contemporary New Zealand. For this reason the writing of this thesis – to a large extent – has been a political act treading carefully on initially foreign ground while simultaneously trying to show concern for and sensitivity to issues of socio-cultural justice and power plays.

So who am I in relation to my research project? And how could I be one of those "researchers who take questions of androcentrism and ethnocentrism [and a range of other '-isms'] seriously" (Tolich/Davidson 1999: 26)? The story which began in 2003 took me through an intensive "personal process of growth in understanding" (Ritchie 1992: 10) across various countries, even continents. Travelling to conduct research across Germany, the UK, and Aotearoa New Zealand, this endeavour involved 'high costs' in terms of "getting the basics, reading the classics, and working through one's

own methodological toolbox" (Bal 2002: 3). Travelling between nations and academic cultures has also meant the development and constant transformation of research perspective, and has made a complete return to previous patterns of thought impossible. In this respect, the project has been an "intellectual adventure" (ibid. 14) resulting from my own personal journeys and professional travels which were needed "to achieve the gain of new experience" (ibid. 4). And while a couple of sidetracks had to be taken in an ever emerging research design and analysis, many people along the way have made a considerable, passionate, and patient effort to put me and my work back on track. As this scholarly piece will hopefully travel on to other scholars' desks and thus in subsequent studies written by others, it would not have been possible without the following life-choices and people.

My personal love affair with the Pacific started in 1996, when I partook in a two-month exchange programme from Clemens-Brentano Europe School (CBES), Lollar to Bendigo in Southern Australia. Returning after my A-levels for an internship at a local secondary high-school in 1999, a couple of years later I decided to travel on to New Zealand in 2003. Backpacking around the country I was immediately caught up in the fascinating landscape and the vibrant culture of this place, which made me visit again the following year.

In 2008, I returned to Aotearoa once more, this time under different premises and with a completely modified perspective on this Antipodean country. In the meantime I had started to work on my dissertation at the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) and the International PhD programme 'Literary and Cultural Studies' (IPP) at Justus-Liebig-University Giessen and had the chance to complete a four-week research stay in Auckland and Wellington which introduced me into New Zealand academic culture. Spending many hours in local libraries, museums, and affiliated research institutions provided me with material unattainable in Europe and offered a totally new outlook on my project.

Travelling involved a further research stay at the Centre for New Zealand Studies (then) at the University of Birkbeck, London in 2009, where I expanded my knowledge of *te reo Maori* in a two-week intensive language course and had the chance to research in a resourceful academic environment. The same year I was awarded the New Zealand Society Fellowship in New Zealand Studies at the 16th annual conference of the New Zealand Studies Association at Goethe-University Frankfurt, a great credit for my commitment to the field.

Travelling the road to my PhD, however, not only entailed personal learning but also teaching others about what I had come to 'know'; an undertaking that I experienced more in terms of mutual exchange than as mutually exclusive. Between 2008 and 2012 I offered various lectures and seminars at my home university, and had the great privilege to share, discuss, and even co-publish research with German students. Generously, this involvement in teaching was certified with a GCSC Teaching Portfolio in 2010 and awarded the Dr.-Herbert-Stolzenberg-Award for Excellence in Higher Education Teaching in 2011.