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**„Mutant Message down under“ –  
Popularizing Anthropology or lie? Eine kritische  
Materialsammlung zu Marlo Morgans Buch „Der Traumfänger“**

**von**

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**Popularisierte Ethnologie (A German Preface)**

Der Markt für ethnologische Fachbücher ist verschwindend gering. Auch renommierte internationale Verlage, wie die altehrwürdige Cambridge University Press kommen mit ihren ethnologischen Monographien nicht über eine Auflage von 1000 bis 1500 Stück. Aber auch der Markt für populäre ethnologische Bücher ist im Gegensatz zu den (prä-)historischen Nachbarwissenschaften klein. 3.000 verkaufte Exemplare sind ein Erfolg. Gelingt es nicht, ein gesellschaftlich relevantes Thema aufzugreifen (derzeit z.B. Afghanistan, Islam, Fremdsein/Fremdenfeindlichkeit, Beschneidung) oder kulturübergreifende Themen populär aufzubereiten, wie dies z.B. Marvin Harris in seinen Büchern oder Rolf Brednich mit seinen modernen Sagensammlungen tun, dann findet Popularisierung der Ethnologie auf dem Büchermarkt nicht statt.

Die Begegnung mit dem Fremden scheint für ein größeres Publikum vor allem dann attraktiv zu sein, wenn sie eine Verbindung mit dem Vertrauten herstellt (vorzugsweise mit Protagonisten aus der eigenen Kultur), sei dies auf pädagogische Art wie bei Tahar BenJellouns Buch „Papa, was ist ein Femder“, auf abenteuerliche wie bei Heinrich Harrers „Sieben Jahre in Tibet“, oder auf ironische wie bei Nigel Barleys „Raupenplage“. Noch erfolgversprechender scheint allerdings das Beschwören der Fremdheit wie bei Scholl-Latours „Afrikanische Totenklage“ oder das Vermischen von Exotik und Erotik wie bei Corinna Hofmanns Schlüsselochreportage, „die weiße Massai“.

## Marlo Morgans: Der Traumfänger

Den Vogel im Feld der populärethnologischen Bücher schießt zweifellos Marlo Morgan ab, deren Bücher mit verkauften 4 Mio. Exemplaren inzwischen rechnerisch in jedem 15. deutschen Haushalt stehen dürften.<sup>1</sup>

Bei Ihrem Bestseller „Traumfänger“ handelt es sich um den Erlebnisbericht „...einer mutigen Frau, die mit den Aborigines wanderte und die wundervollen Geheimnisse und die Weisheiten eines sehr alten Stammes erfuhr“, wie Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, die weltbekannte nahtoderfahrene Bestsellerautorin in einer Amazon-Rezension schreibt; und sie fährt fort: „Es geht dabei um Dinge, die wir alle in unserer modernen Gesellschaft lernen müssen: wieder eine Beziehung zur Natur herzustellen, zu vertrauen und an unser inneres Wissen und unsere eigenen Ziele zu glauben.“<sup>2</sup> Das Problem mit dem Traumfänger ist: Als authentischer Erlebnisbericht einer Botschafterin der letzten wirklichen Aborigines („Real People“) aufgemacht, ist er eine Fälschung. Marlo Morgan war nie im *Outback*, ihr angeblicher Gewährsmann, der dem Buch Authentizität verleihen sollte, ist mit den Stammestraktionen nicht vertraut, und sie plaudert angebliche Stammesgeheimnisse und geheime Zeremonien in ihrem Buch aus, die sie, ernst genommen, nie hätte veröffentlichen dürfen. Die Verbreitung von Morgans Büchern wird deshalb von den Aborigines erbittert bekämpft. Dabei steht das Recht an der authentischen Darstellung sowie die Verhinderung der kommerziellen Ausbeutung der eigenen Kultur im Mittelpunkt der bisher weitgehend erfolglosen Aufklärungskampagne.<sup>3</sup> Es scheint, als ob die meisten Leser des Buches diese Botschaft nicht hören wollen oder ihr gleichgültig gegenüberstehen.

Morgan nutzt die Sehnsüchte und Projektionen von Kübler-Ross und Millionen anderer Leserinnen und Leser schamlos aus. Nicht umsonst verkauft sich das Buch bei den Landsleuten, die es besser wissen müssen, ganz schlecht: den Australiern selbst.

Der Traumfänger, das ist ursprünglich jener hölzerne, in Spinnennetzform verzierte Gegenstand, den die Ojibwa in Kanada (nicht aber die Aborigines in Australien) ihren Kindern vor die Betten hingen, um schlechte Träume abzuwehren. Schwamm drüber, dass ausgerechnet dieser Kulturschnitzer für den deutschen

<sup>1</sup> Vom Traumfänger (Morgan 1998) wurden inzwischen 2,8 Mio. Exemplare als Taschenbuch verkauft. Der als „Roman“ verkaufte Nachzieher „Traumreisende“ (Morgan 2000) hat insgesamt als Hardcover und Taschenbuch über 1 Mio. verkaufte Exemplare (mündl. Mitt. des Verlags Bertelsmann/Random House vom 25. Feb. 2002).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.amazon.de/exec/obidos/tg/stores/detail/-/books/3442437407/reviews/302-7769370-6760021#34424374075000>. Aufruf am 3.5. 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Zur Frage der Aneignung und kommerziellen Ausbeutung und der „Copyright-Fähigkeit“ kulturellen Wissens ist im Rahmen der Debatte um intellektuelle Eigentumsrechte indigener Gruppen ein heftiger Streit auch unter Ethnologen entbrannt. Für einen Überblick zu dieser Frage vgl. Brown, Michael F. 1998: Can Culture be Copyrighted? In: *Current Anthropology* 39 (2), 193-222 (incl. Kommentare).

Buchtitel erhalten musste. Der eigentliche Traumfänger in Marlo Morgans Buch ist sowieso sie selbst. Sie hat ihren eigenen Traum von der Begegnung mit der ursprünglichen Wahrheit und die ihrer weltweiten unkritischen Gemeinde in ihrem Buch einen Rahmen gegeben und zu einer Geschichte versponnen. Um sich die Authentizität und Legitimität zu verschaffen, die jeder Missionar für seine Botschaft braucht, inszeniert sie sich selbst als wahre Aborigine. Und die Leserinnen und Leser danken es Morgan mit Umsatzzahlen, die mit dem gesamten Merchandising inzwischen die 100 Millionen Dollargrenze erreicht haben dürften.

Was mich an der Geschichte um dieses Buch besonders interessierte, war die Reaktion von Ethnologen: Sie blieb weitgehend aus. Selbst in Australien blieben die Ethnologen stumm. Es gibt keine Debatte über den Traumfänger, keine ethnologischen Veröffentlichungen. Wir haben insgesamt nur zwei ethnologische Internet-Stellungnahmen finden können. „It is bad science fiction, not worth talking about“. Dieser Satz stammt von Howard Morphy, Australienforscher und Autor eines Sammelbandes zur Populären Ethnologie in einem privaten Briefwechsel. Er trifft damit die Haltung der meisten Ozeanisten, mit denen wir in den letzten zwei Jahren über den Traumfänger gesprochen haben.

Wenn ein Buch grottenschlecht ist, ist dann selbst fundierte öffentliche Kritik und Aufklärung unter der Würde der Ethnologen? Um diesem Defizit zu begegnen, haben wir uns in einem kleinen Projekt entschlossen, die bis dato gesammelten und zugänglichen Materialien zu ordnen und kritisch kommentiert in das Medium zu stellen, das den Leserkreis von Morgans Büchern am ehesten erreicht: das Internet. Die Studierende Rebecca Fressmann hat diese Fleißarbeit im Rahmen eines Seminars übernommen. Damit wir Ansprechpartner auch über deutsche Sprachgrenzen hinweg bekommen, haben wir gemeinsam entschieden, das Dokument auf Englisch zu publizieren.

Auf der Amazon-Homepage – dem Ort, wo wohl am meisten Bestellungen für Morgans Bücher in Deutschland zusammen laufen, haben wir schon 1999 eine - zu diesem Zeitpunkt noch eher seltene - kritische Stellungnahme eingestellt, die seit 2000 auch auf unser Internetdokument verweist. Inzwischen sind etliche Anfragen und Korrespondenzen aus dieser Stellungnahme entstanden. Sie haben zumindest bei einigen LeserInnen zum Verzicht auf den Kauf des Buches geführt.

In absehbarer Zeit soll auch die im Jahr 2000 von Frau Freßmann verfasste Seminararbeit auf den neuesten Stand gebracht und dabei auch die Internethinweise direkt verlinkt werden.

Trier im Juni 2002, Michael Schönhuth

**„Mutant Message down under“**  
**- Popularizing Anthropology or lie?**

Seminary thesis under supervision of Dr. Michael Schoenhuth , authored by:

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## 1. Preface

When I first read „Mutant Message down under“ at the beginning of 1999 I found it to be a good piece of work. Later that year I changed my opinion. This was due to a course I took at University, called „Popularizing Anthropology“. Previous to that course I was not aware of the controversy it had caused. Having done some research on the topic I discovered, that the Internet provided quite a lot of material concerning the matter. In addition I realised the material depicting the different points of view had not yet been summarised into one coherent essay. This paper shall therefore not only reveal why the book is so heavily discussed, but also divulge the most important and opposing perspectives the gathered material has offered. In a nutshell the polar extremes in perspective vary from harsh critique to admiration. In order to make the information available to as many people as possible, I decided to write this essay in English. Since English is not my mother tongue, I hope the reader will excuse any mistakes resulting from this fact.

A short insight into the genesis and the worldwide distribution of the book will be followed by the New Age Movement's reaction to it, as this was that group that made it popular. Next I want to focus on the Aboriginal Perspective, which for me at least seems to be the most interesting in this controversy. Rarely has an endangered ethnic group used the Internet to such a great extent in order to make its situation and concerns known. Marlo Morgan's own perspective is revealed here through her reactions to the natives' campaign. Next I will focus my attention on Burnum Burnum, an Aborigine who Morgan considers a friend and who was for some time supporting her and her book. I consider this important as his support as indicated in the book makes the reader assume that the book is accepted among the Aborigines. The anthropologists' perspective will be presented in the next section as it is interesting to see how the scientific community reacts to the matter. Finally I will focus on the public. That is a very heterogeneous group, as some of them –for different reasons- know about the numerous mistakes the author makes in her book, whereas others are not at all aware of the fact, that what they have read simply can not be true. In this context I will also draw the readers' attention to two radio-interviews Marlo Morgan gave. I do so as the mass media seems to be another important medium which informs and sensibilizes the public. In the conclusion I will both critically resume the controversy surrounding the book and demonstrate how my own opinion on the book has changed since first reading it.

## 2. The book and its background

According to Marlo Morgan's own (fairy) tale it was in 1990 that a middle-aged American woman works in Australia in the field of preventive medicine, especially for the Aborigines. She successfully starts a company with a few native young people. Due to the fact that she is invited by a group of Aborigines to meet them, she believes that they want to honour her work. She travels to Western Australia in order to meet a representative who shall take her to the group. The tribe, of which she says, is the last one moving through the Outback in the traditional way, takes her on a 120 days lasting trip right across the Northern Territory. She learns about their Way of Life, culture and spirituality before she in the end is invited to take the message -which means the knowledge of their way of life- into her world. The tribe itself has decided to live in celibacy in order to slowly die out.<sup>1</sup>

The author reveals in an interview, that she wrote her experiences down in order to make them available to her grandchildren once they were old enough to read. When she gave talks about what she had seen and done in Australia, people were so impressed, that they asked Morgan for copies of her story (PhenomeNews). In 1991 she finally released a book about her experiences. Not finding a publisher she had to publish it herself, a process her whole family was engaged in. After a while Morgan also started selling products related to the book, such as audio-tapes of her lectures or an oil which is supposed to be the one that healed her feet during the walkabout (see No.1, section1.1.3). As the book became a success Marlo Morgan put the publishing rights to auction. In 1994 Harper Collins bought them for \$A3 million (\$US1.7) and started a marketing campaign for another \$A 300 000. Up till then the story was always marketed as the true account of the author's walkabout, but the Harper Collins version contains a disclaimer, stating that the story is fictional. There are two versions of why the disclaimer suddenly appeared. Marlo Morgan herself states that it happened in order to protect the „Real People“ tribe, others assume, that the publisher had no other choice as persisting doubts as to the book's authenticity arose.<sup>2</sup> Among other things it was Morgan's tearful apologies for deception on radio and TV, that also contributed to this (see MM downed). This second edition of the book was sold over half a million times in the USA alone and was a top five bestseller for 26 weeks (see No.1, sec. 1.1.3). In 1996 it was estimated, that Marlo Morgan had gained about \$90 million from her lectures and the film rights she had sold (see Apology). By 1998 the book had been translated into 24 languages (PhenomeNEWS) and had reached worldwide distribution.

### 3. The New Age Movements Perspective

Though it is said, that especially the New Age Movement contributed considerably to the success of Morgan's book (see No.1, sec. 1.1.3), I could not find too much information about this special interest group in the Internet. It simply does not seem to be one of their main sources of communication. Therefore this part of the essay will mainly consist of the discussion the book caused in „Das Goetheanum“, which is a German anthroposophical magazine. The discussion started in 1995 after an article in which Marlo Morgan was presented as an admirable person who fights against the prejudices the Aborigines have to face in Australia today and against their characterization as lower class creatures. In general the article is a summary of the book and assumes that what it states has really happened. But the summary is also full with anthroposophical hints. For instance Rudolph Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy, is referred to twice: once when in the context of nourishment, his „kosmische Ernährung“<sup>3</sup> is equated with the Aborigines' ability to live with a minimum of food. The second reference is made, when towards the end the question is raised as to whether, if we are able to understand the books message. It is answered by an appeal to finally accept, that we can only bring about change, once the western human race starts subordinating itself under the laws of the cosmos instead of overvaluing itself (Böckemühl 1995a, p.222). The reactions to this article reveal how differently Marlo Morgan's book is viewed even within the New Age Movement. An Australian reader<sup>4</sup> reacts on this by stating, that the book, which is -both in Australia and in America- known to be untrue, was probably only written in order to make money. The reader, who seems to have quite a lot of information, both about the book itself and the discussion around it, then points out the most obvious mistakes Marlo Morgan makes in her description.<sup>5</sup> Agreeing with an Australian anthropologist and the leader of an aboriginal corporation he says, that Morgan's description of the Australian desert and its conditions seems to be unlikely for someone who is familiar with the area, and that every piece of information Morgan uses could easily be taken out of any book about the Aborigines. Furthermore he condemns her technique of covering-up and not revealing names and places she has been to with the „Real People“. He does not believe her motive was to protect the tribe (see van Kerckhoven 1995, p.250). It is the author of the article- Almut Böckemühl- who reacts to this letter. On the one hand she states that she is sorry for having summarized the book in such a naive way, although the discussion about its authenticity had already started. On the other hand though, she attacks Van Kerckhoven and assumes for her part, that he quotes from sources that are not scientific enough to be able to prove Marlo Morgan's statements to be wrong. She then states that the same information Morgan presents in her book was also given to her on a journey to Australia<sup>6</sup> and that at least her own appeal -to

become one with the earth- should be taken seriously. In her last sentence though she says that she would not have written the article if she had known about the debate the book had caused (see Bockemühl 1995 b, p.251-252). Bockemühl is then supported by a reader who cannot imagine that Morgan actually wrote the book for the purpose of earning money. He rather believes that she wanted her message to be spread and that it is that message which makes the book important, nothing else<sup>7</sup> (see Burchard, 1995, p.268). The Aborigines themselves have a quite different view towards that. Their perspective and actions against Marlo Morgan will now be presented and analysed.

#### **4. Dumbartung fights Marlo Morgan<sup>8</sup>**

The Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation was incorporated in 1987. It is an organization that is wholly in aboriginal hands and aims at ensuring that the Aborigines are „more in control of the promotion and development of cultural arts in Western Australia“, but it also keeps an eye on the way that the aboriginal culture is presented abroad (No.1). In 1992 R. Eggington<sup>9</sup>, the coordinator of Dumbartung, was given the book during a journey to the USA. He was informed that it had reached high distribution in the States –above all on the New Age Market- and asked to comment on the truth and authenticity of the story told. Back to Australia he was asked again about the book. His reply was „It made me physically and emotionally ill“ (No.2). As the book became more and more successful, Dumbartung felt forced to unify all Aborigines in a campaign against this book (see No.2)<sup>10</sup>. Therefore a meeting between aboriginal groups and aboriginal organizations was held in March 1995 in Dumbartung’s headquarter in Perth. The group decided that: Marlo Morgan’s journey should be declared as a hoax, legal action should be undertaken in order to cause her to retract her book from sale in Australia and stop her lecturing tours. Dumbartung should coordinate and represent the united voice of the Aborigines and inform the participating groups of achieved results. Furthermore it was decided that a group of representatives should travel through Western and Central Australia –the area Marlo Morgan claims to have travelled in with the real people- in order to discuss the book and the planned opposition against it with the Aborigines living there. Visiting as many groups as possible the representatives also wanted to find out if any aboriginal group had ever heard of or had contact with either Marlo Morgan or the „Real People“. Groups that could not be visited were sent an information pack about „Mutant Message down under“ that contained among other things a copy of the book. The survey of the groups could not reveal any sign of Morgan’s presence and/or the „Real People“ in the area indicated by the author. The journey seems to be a pure fantasy which would make

both her demand to be an Aborigine and her teachings that she bases on this experience untrue (see No.1).

The Aborigines are concerned about Morgan's book, because she misinterprets aboriginal customs and culture for profit and other selfish reasons and because the book is marketed and bought in America and Europe as a true story. The natives understand, that the readers often have no other choice but to believe Marlo Morgan as her depiction of the aboriginal culture and Australia is the only one they have and that is exactly what concerns them. It was already outlined, that only the self-published version stated that the story was true, whereas the following were labelled fiction. But from the way the story is presented in the book the reader is, for different reasons, still tempted to regard it as non-fictional: In the very beginning of the book Marlo Morgan dedicates it to her mother, her grandchildren etc. and later it becomes obvious, that the main character's relatives have the same names as her relatives. In addition the main character's personal characteristics fit those of Marlo Morgan. In the quotations following this section she quotes the chief of the „Real People“ tribe along with Chief Seattle, a Cree Indian prophecy and herself. The reader therefore believes, that he is not a fictional character, but a real person. In the section „From Author to Reader“ it is said, that the story is nonfictional and based on actual experiences. This preview is signed with „Travelling Tongue“, a name the author chose after an aboriginal tradition. For these reasons one assumes, that the author has actually experienced what she is writing about (see No.1, sec. 1.2). In the following disclaimer though, Marlo Morgan states, that it is a fictional story only based on what she has experienced in Australia and that it is up to the reader to either only read the book as a good story or draw personal conclusions from it (See Morgan 1994, p.11-15). This whole arrangement tends to confuse a reader. The main concern for the Aborigines is that books like Marlo Morgan's lead to a misappropriation and distortion of the Aboriginal culture that make it even more difficult for young Aborigines to get to know and safekeep their culture properly (see No.1, sec. 3.0).

Besides these concerns the Aborigines are also angry. For them it seems to be clear that the book would not be a bestseller if noone would read it as a true story. Since it was not possible to find anyone who knew either the „Real People“ or Marlo Morgan, accusations arose, stating Morgan wanted to avoid any questions about the authenticity of the book and therefore sold it as a novel (see No.1, sec. 1.1.2). For the Aborigines the journey could never have occurred like it had been described in the book. They condemn the misappropriation of their culture and the fact that it is mixed with American Indian cultures.<sup>11 12</sup> But there are other things that are of even greater concern for the Aborigines. Marlo Morgan writes, that the „Real People“ once lived close to the shore but were forced into the desert when the British

came. As Aborigines never enter the area of another tribe without asking someone should have remembered their existence after Dumbartungs anquirees (see No.1, sec. 3.1.2).<sup>13</sup> What is worse is the fact that Morgan, without any respect and knowledge about aboriginal rules, reports both women's and men's business. This is something that is always held strictly apart. „Aboriginal law holds severe punishments for women who witness men's business and vice versa. Traditionally, this is punishable by death“ (No.1, sec. 3.1.3). She considers herself to be an Aborigine and does not even show knowledge of the fundamental laws. One of the most harmful things to the Aborigines and their fight against assimilation is that Morgan asserts that the „Real People“ are the only tribe left living in the traditional way and that this was the reason she was asked to spread the knowledge of Aboriginal culture. Through this assertion Morgan has not only taken the right from the Aborigines to tell their own story but also has recounted it completely wrong (see No.1, sec. 3.1.4). Furthermore she states that hers is the only tribe that has a sacred site left.<sup>14</sup> This is also extremely offensive as the Aborigines have to fight very hard for their sacred places (f.ex. Ayers Rock) and their right to use them. Naming the urban Aborigines „half casts“ and stating that they would rather be white does not facilitate the natives lives either (No.1, 3.1.5). At the end of Jan. 1996 a delegation of eight Aboriginal elders travelled to the USA in order to explain their reasons for objecting to Morgan's depiction of their culture.<sup>15</sup> Apart from a press conference<sup>16</sup>, a meeting with the film company, that bought the script rights for a movie based on the book, was planned to be held in Los Angeles. It was cancelled in the short-term under vague explanations.<sup>17</sup> With the support of Hollywood actor Steven Segal the group had a telephone conference with Marlo Morgan. During this conference she promised to reveal the fact that the book was a hoax. This did not happen. Instead the group was two days later confronted with the fact, that they would in the future only be able to contact her through Harper Collin's lawyers. Travelling on to San Francisco the somewhat disillusionized Aborigines were warmly welcomed. They were able to start a very productive mutual cooperation with some Indian groups.<sup>18 19</sup> The American natives promised to keep an eye on Marlo Morgan's activities in the USA and to enlighten her audiences and readers about the fact that the book is a hoax. Furthermore they wanted to ensure that school and university teachers do not take the book's message unreflected to students.<sup>20</sup> The campaign also attained positive attention in the mass media.<sup>21</sup> A San Francisco review for example stated that the book is: „Cultural imperialism masquerading as harmless new age spiritualism“ (see irene). Dumbartung continued its campaign in 1997 in Japan, where the organization was even more successful than in the USA. After Eggington and another Aborigine appeared in lectures Morgan held in Kobe and Tokyo in which they stated their opinion, a third lecture was cancelled without any statement of reasons.<sup>22</sup> Also the

Japanese media supported the Aborigines strongly and they were given the opportunity to talk about their concerns at the university (see No.3).

I now want to draw my attention to a so-called aboriginal friend of Morgan, Burnum Burnum.

## **5. The controversial Aborigine- Burnum Burnum**

Burnum Burnum was an old Aborigine who is said to have been the only Aborigine that supported Morgan. Unfortunately his opinion was the only one directly presented to the reader (his full-page support is stated at the end of the book). In this note he states that he is a true Australian native who has read the book and was impressed by it because Morgan had not misused the trust the Aborigines had given her (see Morgan 1994, p.251). Burnum Burnum accompanied Marlo Morgan on several lectures she held in Germany and the USA where he always stated how precious Morgan was for the Aborigines and that her book was holy. So far Burnum Burnum seems to be a trustworthy supporter of Morgan's book. One starts to query the relationship though once one finds out that he was for several years a member of the anthroposophical society in Australia (see Das Goetheanum, p.268). In 1996 he retracted his support<sup>23</sup>, excusing himself by stating that he was „a non-initiated, non-traditional, urbanised, Aborigine from the East Coast of Australia“ (burnum).<sup>24</sup> From then on and up to his death in 1997, he put a stop to all contact with the author. Nevertheless Morgan's preface still states that the book „has the blessing and approval of Aboriginal elders“ (see irene). Furthermore she claims his support for two other books she released after his retraction.<sup>25</sup> I will now reveal the anthropologists' view of „Mutant Message Down Under“ in order to show how the scientific society reacted to the book.

## **6. Anthropological support for the Aborigines**

Anthropologists are not very actively participating in the discussion surrounding „Mutant Message down under“. Nevertheless I was able to find two anthropological commentaries on the book in the Internet. It is quite interesting how differently they handle Marlo Morgan's book. Firstly there is Jonathan Schwartz who is basically commenting on the impact the book has on the aboriginal culture as such. He reveals that the professional opinion concerning the „Real People“ is that they do not exist. Nevertheless the readers, who were informed of the fact that the book is a hoax at a very early stage<sup>26</sup>, would still largely assume the story to be true. The author states furthermore that the self-published version of the book was even more ethnocentric than the Harper Collins version and contained statements close to racism. In addition to that he judges Morgan's description of the „Real People“ and their lives to be a

typical example of the phenomenon of romanticizing the „other“. A dangerous effect results here as it could mean that all Aborigines are judged against a background of an ideal tribe that does not exist. The book therefore endangers the aboriginal society in two ways. On the one hand it works against decent field reports on this culture and on the other hand the idealization of the „Real People“ makes it even harder for the Aborigines to gain acceptance for their culture. Many of them have to live under third world conditions that were imposed on them through colonization. Due to the fact that Marlo Morgan states that the „Real People“ are the last tribe living in a traditional way, she makes it even harder for these people to gain the cultural respect the Aborigines so desperately need. According to Schwartz the book leads to a further exploitation of the aboriginal culture (see [Schwartz](#)).

Then there is John Stanton, who was asked by Aborigines to comment on the book from an anthropological point of view. He says that his aim is to reveal some aspects from which the book might be criticised without prejudice and without making any judgement. His report does not line Schwartz's focus on the harmful effects on the aboriginal culture. It rather refers to the concrete mistakes and offences towards the natives as presented in the book. After his analysis of „Mutant Message down under“ the book must be criticised on the basis of three main facts: it is marketed as fact inspired by actual experience, it is more demonstration of Morgan's imagination than a documentary of first hand experiences and it „insults the religious beliefs of the Desert Aborigines“ (see [stanton2](#)).

For Stanton Morgan's ignorance for the Aborigines is made obvious through her description of their way of life, their clothing, their rites etc. She either explains and expounds things that are in fact true for some aboriginal tribes, but not for those living in the area she claims to have travelled in, or she writes in a manner totally ignorant of indigenous cultures in general by referring to things and traditions that refer to native Americans and not to Aborigines. This is for example proven by the fact that the reported names of the people depicted all refer to special abilities or tasks that a person has within his or her tribe (for example secret keeper, sewing master) although the Aborigines' have a non-hierarchical social organization where each person has the same diverse range of skills and functions (see [No.1, sec.1.1.3](#)). Furthermore an Aborigine is not free to choose his dream; it is rather assigned to him after a complex system. For Stanton some of the errors she makes would be amusing if the book was not written, marketed and read as representing actual experiences. This refers to things like the Aborigines' sleeping-position or the description of a „senior man's“ clothing. Stanton's commentary: “Not since Kevin Cameron launched his similarly imaginative Teaching Stones of the outcast tribe have I read this kind of thing. Perhaps she saw his book?” (see [stanton](#)).

Other mistakes have a deeper impact on the Aborigines culture though. For example Morgan insists on having watched men's ceremonies and also insists that she was told of the way Aborigine women give birth to their children by a man.<sup>27</sup>

What prevails in the text is New Age imagery. Morgan reports that the „Real People“ were frequently giving massages to each other and that they have a remarkable relationship with nature. How high emotions are valued regarding to well being and health becomes obvious in Morgan's report of the healing of one tribe member (see Morgan, 1994, p.124-136).

Stanton also remarks that the text is permeated with stereotypes about aboriginal abilities like vanishing into the air when in danger or illusion of multiplication. He somewhat mocks at Morgan's statement that the „Real People“ basically used telepathy as a means of communication and that this was possible because they never told a lie and therefore need not be afraid of being caught thinking something bad. He rhetorically asks if these people are human. This is exactly what Schwartz meant when he said that Morgan glorified these people in such a way that makes it very hard for any existing Aborigine to be accepted.<sup>28</sup>

When Stanton in his last sentence quotes Morgan's last sentence: „to spend the rest of my life using the knowledge I learned in the outback. Everything! Even the magic of illusion“, it becomes very obvious that for him -as well as for Schwartz- the book is a mere hoax.

I will now refer to the last and most heterogenous group; the public.

## **7. The public- Believers and Non-believers**

It is quite interesting to see how differently the public reacts to Marlo Morgan's book.<sup>29</sup> On the one hand there are those, that for various reasons believe every word she says. For instance some readers are so unfamiliar with the Australian Aborigines' culture, that they at first have to believe what they read. One could argue, that the campaign against the book was fought so strong that they should have heard about the fact that it is a hoax. However even a Japanese publisher states that he was neither aware of the uproar it had caused, nor informed about it when he was offered the book for publishing (see No.3).<sup>30</sup> In Germany the controversy is not very well known either. This can be concluded from the reactions to the book as published on the Amazon Internet sites. None of the reviews<sup>31</sup> presented there suggest that the readers are aware of the fact that the book caused such a debate. The only things that they criticize are the book's linguistic weakness and Morgan's inability to keep the reader excited throughout the first chapters (see amazon.de). Going further on to amazon.com one is confronted with the fact that a lot of Americans still believe what Marlo Morgan says (see amazon.com). It is exactly that group of readers the Aborigines refer to when they say that the

book is harmful as the information Morgan gives is the only one the readers have (see [No.1, sec. 1.1.2](#)). A second group of readers are aware of the hoax. For them the story is no longer true and is nothing but poor fiction. They are outraged by what Marlo Morgan did to the Aborigines and the fact that she is still lying to her audience. It is interesting to see that it is for example a reader from Japan, who states that the book is not what it seems to be: *„This white trash Marlo hoosier woman is exploiting people's ignorance of both Australia and Aboriginal society. I applaud her marketing strategy with her statement that this is based on an actual account and is called fiction because she wants to protect the people she met. Yeah, right. I've blessed this book and have released it back into the library. If it were mine this would be one of the few books that I would actually throw in the garbage. ughh good riddance“* (October 21, 1999) (see [amazon.com](#)). This reaction to the book shows that the Dumbartung campaign seems to have reached a wider audience in Japan.

Another reader directly hints at the Dumbartung campaign when reviewing the book and by doing so sensitizes the public towards the fact that the book is a hoax: *„Boycott this book. For those interested in this book. Please read the document in "dumbartung.org.au/report1.html". Then if you still want to read the book, sell yourself out by all means to the money hungry, disrespectful modern-day exploitation people that she represents“* (Dublin, November 8, 1999) (see [amazon.com](#)).

A last offensive quote from a reader who is convinced that the book was written for material reasons: *„Laughable "spiritual" message about a woman allowing herself to be kidnapped and enlightened against her will??? It is poorly written in so many ways: a preachy, didactic environmental theme, unplausible plot, and cardboard characters. It is hypocrisy incarnate that this book was written to make MONEY at the expense of those who have a non-materialistic focus. Boring fiction (Utah, September 30, 1999)“* (see [amazon.com](#)).

A third group of readers are those that are familiar with the Australian context and recognize the mistakes Marlo Morgan makes. One of them has written a quite detailed text about the book, that does not only reveal how wrongly Morgan describes the Aboriginal culture, but also that she does not seem to have any experience with Australia as such (see [Fantasy](#)). To her it is therefore obvious why the book was no success in Australia. The numerous mistakes Morgan makes concerning Australia include for example that she does not seem to be familiar with the currency of the country. For instance she writes that she made a phone-call with a quarter. This coin does not exist nor do the telegraphic offices from which she supposedly collected money that her office had sent her. The reader states furthermore that the fact that the subtitle of the book „down under“ is written upside down, demonstrates Morgan's attempt to satisfy the American desire to see Australia as exotic. The Australian desert culture is also

wrongly portrayed in „Mutant Message down under“ in several ways. Concerning the way the „Real People“ and their lives are described the reader says: „*I would be tempted to believe that this was the story of a Native American tribe lost in Australia if Marlo Morgan had not herself assured us that they are Aboriginal*“ (Fantasy). The fact that these people make tea and use menstrual pads remind her of a book by Jean Aurel called „Valley of Horses“, which describes similar practices from Stone Age Europe. The facts about bush medicine etc. also seem to have been taken from books published in Australia. But besides all that the book is wrongly presenting Aboriginal beliefs and the religious obligations that they have. Morgan for example does not talk about the rituals that the Natives have to carry out every day. Instead she describes a concert where among other instruments a bullroar was played. That is a highly sacred instrument which women are forbidden to listen to. Furthermore it has to be pointed out that western concepts and beliefs are put into the „Real Peoples“ mouths. For example the concepts of free will, celibacy or mutation and the bible-story of Noah’s flood are all included in the book. To sum it up the reader states: „*It sounds much more like the personal philosophy of an American woman who is promoting the kind of pop psychology we have all read in numerous other New Age publications over the last few years*“ (see Fantasy).

What I attempted here was to depict a rough characterisation of the different groups of readers. I do not suggest this characterisation is complete but I have tried to elucidate peoples’ general reactions to the book.

As I already have mentioned I also briefly want to highlight two interviews Marlo Morgan gave in the public and which are completely different from each other. One was given for „PhenomeNEWS“ from Michigan /USA, which seems to be at least an New Age related corporation (see phenomeNEWS2).<sup>32</sup> The interviewer is clearly admiring Marlo Morgan and is willing to believe everything the author says despite the debate it caused especially in the USA. Morgan is warmly welcomed to both introduce her new book and state how her life has changed since her journey with the Aborigines.<sup>33</sup> What is very important about that interview is that Marlo Morgan denies that she was required to take the „Real Peoples“ message into her world. She says it was up to herself although the book clearly states that she was in fact asked to do so (see Morgan 1994, p.236-237). Regarding her new book „Message from forever“, which she aims to promote in the radio show, she states that it was written by her in the name of some aboriginal friends who believe that no one would buy a book written by one of them.<sup>34</sup> This evokes the impression that Marlo Morgan is still an accepted medium for the Aborigines. To sum it up: Morgan is freely able to present her message and opinion on several different topics due to the interviewer’s lack of critical questions regarding the authenticity of her story or the way she behaves towards the Aborigines who fight against her book.

In the second interview which Morgan gave in 1994, the situation is quite different. There she is not given the chance to reveal her message as the interviewer is permanently critical and poses her questions with an undertone of disbelief. Morgan reacts with confusion to it. When she is confronted with her statements from the book which state that the tribe lives in celibacy and that she was asked to take their message into the world she reacts offensive and says that this is what people like the interviewer read from it.<sup>35</sup> When being asked about the controversy as to whether the book was fact or fiction Morgan states that it is all true and that Burnum Burnum had sanctioned the book. The interviewer then confronts her with the fact that Burnum Burnum has been associated with the New Age Movement and does not seem to be a representative for all Aborigines. Morgan is again defensive and states that the only complaints she got about the book were from white people. As a result of this the interviewer confronts her with a statement by an Aborigine who says the book is untrue and harmful to the Aborigines. Morgans reaction hints at a journey to Australia she wanted to make in December 1994 so that these problems could be solved. The transcription of the interview also contains a comment by the interviewer, who says that to her Marlo Morgan seems to have experienced something traumatic. She later tried to deal with it by making up this story. When the New Age Movement became interested in the book Morgan became involved in something that she did not plan. However, owing to the large sums of money she book promised she did not reject this development. This is an opinion that might be worth talking about.

## **7. Conclusion**

After presenting the different perspectives on „Mutant Message down under“ I would like to include a few critical comments.

The critical comments that are added to the last interview include the suggestion that Marlo Morgan might have been pushed into the situation she is in now by the New Age Movement and its interest in stories like hers. Two different lines of argument result from that fact. On the one hand one has to ask why the New Agers stick to stories like that even when they are rather unlikely to have occurred as said. As I understand it, their aim is to disassociate themselves from the western way of life that which they –in my opinion- regard to be crucial to the survival of mankind. The question is why they almost uncritically accept everything that they are told by people like Morgan who actually ridicule the New Agers attempt to free themselves through their lies? On the other hand and in this context Morgan herself must be criticized, as she sells herself to a movement that is rather insusceptible for critique in matters

that they believe in disregarding any justifiable critique. As long as the message is in line with their belief they do not seem to care about anything like authenticity or cultural impact. To me Marlo Morgan seems to be under great pressure to under no circumstances admit that her book is not what she claims it to be: Several times, she has been very close to doing so, but in the end she changed her mind again. I would assume that she has been pushed into a corner with the help of various threats which do not allow her to draw back her claim of authenticity. Her reactions therefore might be an expression of her weak position against for example her publisher whose aim it is to make as much money with the story as possible. This should not be regarded as an excuse for her though as she alone took the right from the Aborigines to tell their story their way. Furthermore she made a „criminal assault against an ancient race struggling valiantly to survive under the dominance of a hostile white society which continues to find many ways to try to wipe them out“ by means of genocidal projections. An example of such projection is that „their population is declining by their own free will“ (Fantasy). These are things she has to be blamed for.

As far as I see it there is nothing the Aborigines as such could be blamed for in this case. They openly shared their knowledge, story and history with anyone who was interested in it and had to experience that some people used it for reasons that were harmful to the aboriginal culture in the end. What they have most certainly learned from the past is to be careful regarding to who they share their knowledge with. According to Dumbartung have for example several anthropologists used their knowledge not only for scientific means but also made it available for everyone. As they published information about bush medicine and cultural materials as well as secret (religious) information -something they did not have the right to do- people like Marlo Morgan are enabled to write books like „Mutant message down under“ without even ever having had any direct contact with the culture (see No.2).<sup>36</sup> It is for this reason that anthropological works are also included in the Dumbartung's „Wall of shame“. This is an initiative that „exhibits examples of Cultural Appropriation and Exploiting“ (see Campaign). Furthermore anthropologists have stolen sacred objects or bodies of dead Aborigines in the name of science. This is not only unethical but in my understanding also contradictory to the self-understanding nature of this science. Instead of making-up for those mistakes by supporting the Aborigines' fight against Morgan many anthropologists seem to lack the feeling of ethical responsibility which would have encouraged their help. I at least agree with Irene Cunningham, a historian journalist from Perth, who states that one has to deal with the matter instead of dropping it: the influence of a book that had been on the bestseller list for 25 weeks cannot be simply denied (see irene). It is therefore not right to say

that it is bad science fiction and not worth talking about as Howard Morphy did in an e-mail he sent me concerning the matter (see Morphy).

With regards to Burnum Burnum I doubt that his support for Marlo Morgan was only because of her book and the things written in it. The information I collected and presented in this paper – for example his relation towards the anthroposophical society- make it too difficult to believe him even if he does belong to the „lost generation“ and therefore might have less information about his culture.

Regarding the reader I would say that the circumstances as presented in this paper reveal, that most of them really can not be blamed for buying the book. Despite the intensity of the Dumbartung Campaign it could not reach everyone. I myself in retrospect am somewhat ashamed of my first reactions to the book. We as the readers should really learn to be more suspicious of books like that and not simply read them without questioning their content.

As a final thought I would like to impress upon the reader the importance of ethical behaviour when dispersing the knowledge of other cultures. Ethical behaviour means above all to consider and respect all cultural borders. This is something we owe to the people who have already suffered and are still suffering from the dominance of the western cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> A more extensive summary might be found under No.1, section1.1.

<sup>2</sup> It is assumed that Stillpoint Publishing did not print it in 1992 because of these doubts. Morgan on the other hand states that this happened as they decided to print a book written by the owner of this company instead of hers (see The KUNM Evening Report).

<sup>3</sup> That is explained to be the possibility to live on what the senses experience (see: Bockemühl 1995a, p.221).

<sup>4</sup> From his name Gilbert van Kerckhoven it can be assumed though that he might be of German or Dutch origin.

<sup>5</sup> Those I will refer to in later parts of this essay.

<sup>6</sup> That refers mainly to things like the Aborigines using telepathy, feeling at one with the earth etc.

<sup>7</sup> The reader compares the situation with Karl May, who has for generations of teenagers created their image of Indians although he had never been to America. I believe that his hint is worth a critical thought. Nevertheless one should not legitimise one injustice with another.

<sup>8</sup> In this part I have to be highly selective concerning the topics and information I give, as Dumbartung provides a far-reaching amount of information that an exhaustive handling would not only exceed my capacities for this paper, but would also lead towards a non-balanced presentation regarding the other perspectives presented. I will therefore restrict myself to information directly concerning Marlo Morgan's book and the other interest groups I am presenting. For further information about Dumbartung's work see the organisation's homepage:

<http://dumbartung.org.au>

<sup>9</sup> For more information about R. Eggington see No.2

<sup>10</sup> That attempt was not easy to put through, as the Aborigines are known for their diversity of opinions and views (see irene)

<sup>11</sup> The Aborigines believe that the author wrote the book mainly for the New Age Market and wanted to give her readers something to recognize. Therefore, they believe, Morgan fell back upon the American Indian culture as most New Agers are familiar with it. (see No.1, sec. 3.0).

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<sup>12</sup> The best or rather worst example for this cultural mixture is, that chapter 18 in the English edition and the whole German edition is entitled „Dream catcher“ or „Traumfänger“, a name that refers to a northern American indigenous object (see [No.1, sec.3.1.1](#)).

<sup>13</sup> For further information about the particular procedures and processes regarding the protocol see [No.1, 2.0](#) and [No.2](#).

<sup>14</sup> She denigrates aboriginal sacred sites by explaining that the „Real People“ are hoarding western rubbish in theirs (see [No.1, 3.1.5](#)).

<sup>15</sup> Prior to the arrival of the delegation Marlo Morgan contacted the FBI as she was frightened the Aborigines would be after her blood. She concluded this from a statement made by an Aborigine in the context of mixing-up men’s and women’s business: „if Marlo Morgan has done what she claims to have done this is punishable by death under Aboriginal law“ (see [No.2](#)).

<sup>16</sup> After the press conference the Aborigines presented their art and music in order to show how respectfully the knowledge of a culture can be presented if the members are given the opportunity to do it themselves (see [No.2](#)).

<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless the Aborigines stated that the Company would have to face mass-protests both from the natives and the Australian film industry if they tried to film in Australia (see [No.2](#)). In this context Dumbartung got to know that the planned movie would be a sensationalized version of Morgan’s story (see [No.2](#)). As I wasn’t able to find out whether the movie was made yet, I would be glad if someone could let me know.

<sup>18</sup> During those meetings it was possible to exchange experiences with the sale of indigenous cultures, as the same things that effect the Aboriginal culture in the USA occur in Australia with regard to the Native American cultures (see [No.2](#)).

<sup>19</sup> Another example of a white woman claiming to have indigenous knowledge is Gloria Orenstein. It was also in 1990 that she wrote the book „The Reflowering of the Goddess“, which is recognized as an equivalent to Marlo Morgan’s book. In this case too the book was mainly written for the New Age Movement (see [Sami](#) und [Sami2](#)). For further information on New Age and cultural appropriation see: [www.stelling.nl/simpos/marlo.htm](http://www.stelling.nl/simpos/marlo.htm).

<sup>20</sup> Mr. Singer’s reaction that shows that there is hope. He is asking for information about the controversy in order to reveal the right things to his students who are very positive about the book (see [Singer](#)).

<sup>21</sup> The BBC planned to make a series about the Dumbartung visit and the fraud (see [MM](#) [downloaded](#)). This support might have been a surprise for Dumbartung as they lament that the Australian media are rather uninterested in the campaign (see [Campaign](#)). One Australian newspaper article can be found under [Apology](#).

<sup>22</sup> Morgan’s quite opposite reactions to the Aborigines’ appearance in the two cities seem to state that she is/ was very insecure about how to react to their speech (see [Campaign](#) and [No.3](#)).

<sup>23</sup> He did so when he heard that Morgan had confessed to her hoax (see [irene](#) and [WHO magazine](#)).

<sup>24</sup> Morgan writes that Burnum belonged to a „lost generation“ of Aborigines who were taken away from their parents and raised in institutions or adoptive families. This happened frequently after the Native Welfare Act was introduced in Western Australia in the early twentieth century (see [No.1](#)).

<sup>25</sup> The first book is „Making the Message mine“, released in 1996/97, which contains a picture of Morgan and Burnum Burnum in order to visualize the Aboriginal support for her work (see [No.2](#)). The other is „The last farewell“ from 1998. Here she says that Aboriginal elders, among them Burnum Burnum, asked her to write this book (see [phenomeNEWS](#)). Besides that his support never has been taken out of „Mutant Message down under“.

<sup>26</sup> Schwartz states that the Washington Post and other papers wrote about this at a time the book was just hitting the bestseller lists (see [Schwartz](#)).

<sup>27</sup> How the Aborigines reacted to this has already been referred to in the fourth section of this essay.

<sup>28</sup> In this context it should be said, that Stanton as well as Schwartz critiques Morgan’s statement that the „Real People“ are the last tribe left living in the traditional way and owing a sacred site as this might contribute to a further exploitation of the Aborigines.

<sup>29</sup> The reactions presented in this section should not be generalized. I can not claim that they are characteristic as I am only referring to a few Internet pages. Furthermore I am not able to say what kind of mechanisms concerning selection were taking effect on them.

<sup>30</sup> Since Dumbartung states this on one of their sites I am likely to believe it to be in accordance with the truth.

<sup>31</sup> All reviews presented in this section were written in 1998 or 1999, which means long after the controversy and long after the Dumbartung campaign started.

<sup>32</sup> I assume the connection to the New Age Movement as the slogan is: „PhenomeNEWS is your ...We are your source to the Metaphysical, Holistic Health and New Thought Communities“ (see <http://phenomenews.com>).

<sup>33</sup> I can only recommend everyone to read the interview in full length as it is impossible for me to cover everything Morgan says in this essay and because one gets a good insight into Marlo Morgan’s character.

<sup>34</sup> One of these friends is Burnum Burnum a character I have already referred to.

<sup>35</sup> I am citing a transcription of the interview in which critical comments by the interviewer are included.

<sup>36</sup> I believe that the information given in this paper shows, that Morgan probably did not have intensive contact with Aborigines, if any at all.