

Chapter Four

Works of literature, films, artworks and other products of creative endeavour are often read and analysed in terms of the messages their creators might have attempted to convey through them. In such fields of achievement, where art and politics frequently collide, how were successful and prominent Indigenous women and their works depicted in the print media? How did they represent themselves and their work? What discursive threads were common between depictions of writers and those of filmmakers, and which were different? In this chapter I examine representations of Indigenous women celebrated for their literary and filmmaking achievements, focusing in particular on Oodgeroo Noonuccal (formerly Kath Walker). While many Indigenous women have authored or co-authored autobiographical texts as well, particularly in Australia, I focus here upon fiction writers. For the most part, fiction writers and their works have become more prominent than have the authors of autobiographical texts (although Sally Morgan is a notable exception). I explore depictions of these women as firsts or curiosities, discuss discourses of authenticity and assimilation, and consider contests over the place of politics in creative work, an issue that was particularly potent for Indigenous writers, filmmakers and artists. I discuss shifts in these trends of representation, especially relating to the emergence of Indigenous women in filmmaking. Throughout, I draw comparisons with the experiences and media depictions of Indigenous men and non-Indigenous women in the creative arts.

Indigenous Women and the Literary World

Māori and Aboriginal peoples told stories long before the arrival of Europeans, creating vibrant cultures of oral literature. After Europeans arrived, forms of written literature in English also began to be adopted, and adapted. In the second half of the twentieth century, written literature in English by Aboriginal and Māori authors proliferated, often retaining elements of the earlier oral forms, and becoming a rich field of literature which is now widely studied. Some Māori and Aboriginal women whose work was part of this development became nationally prominent and celebrated. In both Australia and New Zealand, this proliferation of published Indigenous voices writing fiction in English occurred alongside and as part of a wider phenomenon of social and political change. As Adam Shoemaker has pointed out, Oodgeroo began writing and publishing poetry within this context. Shoemaker suggested that the ‘heightening of Aboriginal pride, resolve and socio-political involvements’ during the 1960s ‘helped to provide the impetus for cultural expressions of Aboriginality, as well

as for public campaigns'. One aspect of Aboriginal resistance to the official policy of assimilation, he argued, was through 'the assertion of Aboriginal individuality, protest and pride which Noonuccal's poetry represents'.¹ Similarly, the publication of Patricia Grace's fiction in New Zealand during the 1970s and 1980s was part of what was sometimes termed a Māori renaissance. Whether or not this term is an appropriate one, there was undoubtedly an intensification of Māori demands for social and political change, and a strengthening of assertions of cultural identity, during those years. The work of Indigenous authors, like that of Indigenous filmmakers, artists and songwriters, often challenged non-Indigenous representations of Indigenous peoples and cultures.

At the same time, the second half of the twentieth century also saw a proliferation of writing by women, building on a long history of women's creative endeavours. This flowering of literature by women was connected to the second wave feminist movement, which sought to 'reclaim the value and importance of women's interests', and therefore of the issues women wrote about.² In a book of interviews with New Zealand women authors published in 1989, Sue Kedgley observed that a number of women began writing after a feminist awakening of some form enabled them to find their voice.³ While such an understanding of 'women's writing' was essentialist, as was a categorisation of writing by Indigenous people as 'Indigenous writing', the literature produced by women and by Indigenous people was advanced by, and contributed to, the assertions of identity made through feminist and Indigenous rights movements.

Oodgeroo, Fame and the Media

When she died in 1993, the woman who had become famous as Kath Walker was known as Oodgeroo of the Noonuccal tribe, and as the custodian of Minjerribah, the sand island in Brisbane's Moreton Bay (Quandamooka) that was named Stradbroke Island by Europeans.⁴ It was on this island in 1920 that Oodgeroo was born and named Kathleen Jean Mary Ruska. Her first collection of poems, *We Are Going*, was published in 1964, and she became famous more or less immediately. If it was on her poetry that her fame was first based, however, her writing was seen to be deeply entwined with her activist efforts on behalf of Aboriginal people, and she became well-known nationally for this work as well. Oodgeroo was deeply involved in the Aboriginal civil rights movement for much of her life. She was secretary of the Queensland Council for the Advancement

1 A. Shoemaker, *Black Words White Page* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2004), pp. 5, 182.

2 S. Kedgley, *Our Own Country: Leading New Zealand Women Writers Talk About Their Writing and Their Lives* (Auckland: Penguin, 1989), p. 13.

3 Ibid.

4 I refer to her throughout this chapter as Oodgeroo, the name she herself chose.

of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (QCAATSI), became involved with the Federal Council (FCAATSI) and was a key figure in the campaign for the 1967 referendum. Her writing thus went alongside and was part of her political efforts on behalf of Aboriginal people, in a period when Aboriginal issues became more visible to the wider population. In her terms, perhaps, her writing was part of her project of educating the white population of Australia.⁵ Oodgeroo later returned to Stradbroke Island to live, running a cultural and education centre, Moongalba. Over 8000 children visited the centre between 1972 and 1977, staying in tents and learning Aboriginal approaches to gathering food.⁶



Figure 7: 'Portrait of Oodgeroo Noonuccal', Australian Overseas Information Service.

Photograph. nla.pic-an11618802. National Library of Australia, Canberra.

5 Rhonda Craven noted after Oodgeroo's death that she had 'utilised every skill she had to educate' and had preferred to be termed an 'Educator'. R. Craven, 'Oodgeroo: An Educator Who Proved One Person Could Make a Difference', *Australian Literary Studies* 16, no. 4 (1994), p. 122.

6 K. Cochrane, *Oodgeroo* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1994), p. 93.

Not all writers and filmmakers are equally prominent. After the publication of *We Are Going*, Oodgeroo had considerably more public visibility than most other Indigenous women writers and filmmakers. Fame extending beyond literary circles has often been linked to involvement in non-literary public activities, such as Oodgeroo's activist work. Writers and filmmakers could also become nationally prominent through receiving prestigious national or international recognition for their work. Keri Hulme seems to have become better-known than fellow New Zealander Patricia Grace, presumably because she was the first New Zealand writer to win the Booker Prize, which she received in 1985 for her novel *the bone people*. Hulme's win prompted a spike in media interest in her and her work around the time of the award. Outside of moments such as these, writers and filmmakers are usually not large-scale celebrities in the way sportspeople, actors or musicians may be, sometimes being well-known in literary circles and almost entirely unknown outside of them. Writers such as Hulme and Grace did not make public gestures of protest, and controversy was rarely attached to them. These writers appeared in the press largely only in relation to reviews of their work, reports of prizes they had won, or events that they took part in. Oodgeroo, on the other hand, was a public person who often appeared in the media, and her protest activities made her more prominent. Indeed, her later educative work appears not to have been so well-known as her early poetry and activism.

As a public person, Oodgeroo had a sometimes ambiguous relationship with the media. Roberta Sykes remembered her having been angry about sometimes being 'misquoted' and 'betrayed' by the press.⁷ At the same time, the media provided a channel to convey her message to the wider population. Many of her speeches and gestures of protest over the years were reported in newspapers throughout Australia. For example, several newspapers in late 1970 reported the possibility that she might emigrate. She was quoted in the *Australian* explaining that she felt her poetry had done nothing but 'cause the Australian people to duck for cover with a guilty conscience', and she felt unable to remain and 'wait for the Aboriginal to die'.⁸ In another example, the *Australian* reported in 1979 that she had 'given her new book to a German publisher as a protest at Australia's treatment of Aborigines' and the country's policies relating to uranium.⁹ One of her most visible and widely commented upon gestures of protest related to the celebration of the Bicentenary in 1988. Made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1970, Oodgeroo had reportedly suggested that very year that she might return the award.¹⁰ At the end of 1987, she did so, at the same time changing her name from Kath Walker to Oodgeroo of the

7 R. B. Sykes, 'While My Name is Remembered ...', *Australian Literary Studies* 16, no. 4 (1994), p. 38.

8 "'I Won't Watch the Aboriginals Die Out': Kath Walker Talks About Deserting", *Australian*, 21 November 1970, p. 5.

9 'Kath Closes the Book on Local Publishers', *Australian*, 5 October 1979, p. 2.

10 'May Return MBE, Says Native Leader', *Age*, 27 July 1970, p. 10.

Noonuccal tribe (sometimes written Oodgeroo Noonuccal). A piece appeared in the *Age* explaining that ‘as a protest against what the Bicentenary “celebrations” stand for’, she could ‘no longer, with a clear conscience, accept the English honour of the MBE’, and would therefore return it. Seeing the Bicentenary as an anniversary of ‘200 years of rape and carnage’, she asked, ‘what is there to celebrate?’¹¹ Oodgeroo’s use of the media as a channel for her messages about Aboriginal rights contributed to her having experienced greater levels of media attention than authors and filmmakers might usually expect.

‘An Aborigine Who is Also a Poet’: Being Exceptional and Being First

Oodgeroo and Patricia Grace, like many other Indigenous women featured in this book, were hailed as having achieved a ‘first’ in their work (see Chapter Six). After the publication of *We Are Going*, it became a common refrain that Oodgeroo was the first published Aboriginal poet, or the first Aboriginal person to have a book published.¹² She was described in the *Canberra Times* in 1966 as ‘Australia’s first aboriginal poet to be published’ and as ‘the first writer of aboriginal blood to publish a volume of verse’, which made her ‘unique’.¹³ A retrospective article in 1999 referred to her as ‘the first of her race to have a book of poems published’, defining her not only as a literary first, but also in the earlier biological language of race.¹⁴ A little over ten years after Oodgeroo’s first book was published, Grace’s first collection of short stories, *Waiariki*, was published in 1975. Grace had begun writing fiction while teaching and raising seven children. Her work was first published in magazines such as *Te Ao Hou: The New World* and the *New Zealand Listener*. After *Waiariki*, she published a novel in 1978 (*Mutuwhenua: The Moon Sleeps*), and has since produced a long list of short story collections, novels and children’s books. Grace was acclaimed as the first Māori woman to publish a collection of short stories when *Waiariki* appeared, and to publish a novel when *Mutuwhenua* appeared. Although others had previously published individual stories, David McGill described her in the

11 O. Noonuccal, ‘Why I Am Now Oodgeroo Noonuccal’, *Age*, 30 December 1987, p. 11.

12 See, for instance: D. Rowbotham, ‘Brisbane Woman Compared With a Top Negro Writer’, *Courier-Mail*, 9 May 1964, p. 2; ‘There’s Rhyme in Her Reasoning’, *Sunday Truth*, 9 October 1966, p. 59; D. Warnock, ‘Kath Walker – Poet With a Cause’, *West Australian*, 21 April 1971, p. 8, biographical cutting files, National Library of Australia, Canberra. Such statements often tended to obscure the earlier literary efforts of David Unaipon, whose published work included legends, a life story and poetry. P. Jones, ‘Unaipon, David (1872-1967)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Online Edition, updated continuously, accessed 19 January 2009, available from <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A120339b.htm>.

13 T. I. Moore, ‘Aboriginal Poet: Technique has Matured’, *Canberra Times*, 17 December 1966, p. 13; ‘Prophet in Her Country’, *Canberra Times*, 18 October 1966, p. 14.

14 ‘Great Australian Poets Part Eight: Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920-93)’, *Sunday Herald Sun*, 25 July 1999, p. 51.

New Zealand Listener in 1975 as the ‘first Maori woman writer’.¹⁵ Hulme’s *The Silences Between (Moeraki Conversations)* was similarly described at least once when it appeared in 1982 as the first poetry collection by a Māori woman published in New Zealand.¹⁶

Indigenous men whose creative work was published were likewise sometimes portrayed as having achieved a ‘first’. After the publication of Hone Tuwhare’s *No Ordinary Sun* in 1964, R. S. Oppenheim described it in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society (JPS)* as ‘the first publication of a volume of poems by a Maori writer’.¹⁷ In the same journal a decade later, Oppenheim reviewed Witi Ihimaera’s 1972 short story collection *Pounamu Pounamu*, describing Ihimaera as ‘New Zealand’s first recognisably Maori writer’.¹⁸ Those who were first were sometimes viewed as role models or path-breakers, both by commentators in the media and by other Indigenous writers. Sykes considered that Oodgeroo opened a way for others, and that it was a ‘duty’ for them to ‘push the boundaries’ until ‘they break and fall away’.¹⁹ Similarly, Hulme noted in one interview that becoming a writer was ‘easier’ for her because of the example of Grace, as ‘another woman with a dual background’ whose work had been published.²⁰

Being first, or being acclaimed as first, was not necessarily positive, however (as is also discussed in Chapter Six). For writers and filmmakers, it could give rise to the belief that the success of a work was at least partly due to the curiosity of the public, rather than to the quality of the work. Just as Evonne Goolagong felt that she received greater press coverage than she otherwise would have because of her Aboriginality, Oodgeroo was quoted in interviews several times suggesting that her Aboriginality had increased interest in her poetry, at least to begin with. In a 1966 *Canberra Times* article discussing the sales success of *We Are Going*, she was quoted saying, ‘I am aware that its success was due to its curiosity value as the work of an Aboriginal, rather than any greatness in my verse’.²¹ She made a similar comment in the foreword to *The Dawn is at Hand*, her second book of poetry which was published in 1966, and she repeated the suggestion in later interviews.²² Literary critics sometimes made similar comments. In a review of *We Are Going* in the *Australian* in 1964, Ian Turner wrote that he considered

15 D. McGill, ‘Unassuming Grace’, *New Zealand Listener*, 11 October 1975, p. 21. Those who had published individual short stories included Arapera Blank, J. C. Sturm and Rose Denness.

16 D. Long, ‘A Conversation With Keri Hulme’, *Tū Tangata*, no. 7 (1982), p. 2.

17 R. S. Oppenheim, ‘Review of *No Ordinary Sun*, by Hone Tuwhare’, *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 74, no. 4 (1965), p. 525.

18 R. S. Oppenheim, ‘Review of *Pounamu Pounamu*, by Witi Ihimaera’, *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 84, no. 4 (1975), p. 506.

19 Sykes, ‘While My Name is Remembered’, p. 41.

20 Kedgley, p. 100.

21 ‘Prophet in Her Country’, p. 14.

22 G. Turcotte, ‘Recording the Cries of the People’, in *Aboriginal Culture Today*, ed. A. Rutherford (Sydney: Dangaroo, 1988), p. 19; E. Smith, ‘Are You Going to Come Back Tomorrow?’, *The Queensland Writer* 2, no. 1 (1990), p. 13; K. Walker, *The Dawn is at Hand* (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1966), foreword.

Oodgeroo to be ‘like the late Albert Namatjira ... having a *succes de surprise*’, although he thought that was ‘a reflection on the audience, not on the poet’.²³ Later, fellow poet Judith Wright wrote that *We Are Going* ‘had a high success for its curiosity value, but in fact it was a good book anyway’.²⁴

Such comments were also made in relation to work by Indigenous men. Author and critic Bill Pearson contended that Ihimaera’s writing ability was ‘obscured by the initial acclaim from reviewers and by the publisher’s promotion of him as “the first Maori novelist”’. He observed ‘an undercurrent of muttering’ from some Pākehā commentators suggesting that Ihimaera’s success was due to ‘the commercial exploitability of his Maoriness’.²⁵ Pearson quoted Oppenheim, who in his rather negative review of *Pounamu Pounamu* in the *JPS* had implied that the book was achieving success due to ‘the adulatory and unintentionally patronising Pakeha public which is thirsty, just now, for a deep draft of ethnicity’.²⁶ Conceptualising the success of Indigenous writers in such ways gave them little credit for their literary skill and success.

Occasionally, comments by critics extended to a suggestion that the work actually lacked merit, or that the writer had been exploited by publishers as a curiosity. In 1971, Hal Colebatch paid Oodgeroo a back-handed compliment in a review of *My People* in the *West Australian*, admiring her ‘achievement’ in having ‘produced several books of poetry’ with ‘no more than an elementary formal social education’ and ‘frightful social handicaps’, but contending that it was ‘impossible to pretend that the general standard of the poetry is high’. Colebatch suggested that Oodgeroo was acclaimed more by ‘guilt-ridden white liberals than by Aborigines’. Yet, he argued, it was not the ‘fault’ of Oodgeroo that the work was ‘not high class’, as the ‘blame’ was upon ‘those who have exploited her by promoting all her work, however trivial, as that of an important, serious poet’.²⁷ Similarly, David Norton suggested in 1976, reviewing *Waiariki*, that Grace had ‘probably been hurried into producing a book before she [was] ready’ and that the publisher was ‘guilty of inverted prejudice in publicizing her as the “first Maori woman author”, as if she is to be read because she is unique and because this was International Women’s Year’. Unlike Colebatch, however, Norton considered this a problem because Grace ought to be seen as one who ‘can be read because she can write well’.²⁸ Some years later, Hulme stated in an interview in 1982 that she had had a ‘nasty feeling’ that her work was ‘being looked at through a different pair of spectacles: “This is a Maori woman writing ... we’ll give it a little more time than ... if it was just a Pakeha woman”’.

23 I. Turner, ‘Colour Seeks Justice’, *Australian*, 26 September 1964, p. 13.

24 J. Wright, ‘Creating a New Dreamtime’, *National Times*, 14-19 June 1976, p. 46.

25 B. Pearson, ‘Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace’, in *Critical Essays on the New Zealand Short Story*, ed. C. Hankin (Auckland: Heinemann, 1982), p. 167.

26 *Ibid.*, quoting Oppenheim, ‘Review of *Pounamu Pounamu*’, p. 507.

27 H. Colebatch, ‘Lights and Shades in Aboriginal Poetry’, *West Australian*, 6 March 1971, p. 20.

28 D. A. Norton, ‘Not All Loners and Losers’, *Landfall* 30, no. 2 (1976), p. 152.

For Hulme, while such attention was ‘an advantage’ in terms of drawing attention, she wanted ‘to be acknowledged ... as a writer ... and not for it to be the performing dog’.²⁹

Assimilation, Authenticity and Art

Indeed, these writers were frequently described in the media in terms of their Indigenous descent, rather than simply in terms of their occupation. In the first decades after the publication of *We Are Going*, Oodgeroo was often described as an ‘Aboriginal poet’ or ‘Aboriginal poetess’, rather than simply as a poet. In fifteen articles published between 1965 and 1969, twelve references were made to Oodgeroo as an ‘Aboriginal poet’ (or ‘poetess’). One review of her work, published in *Hemisphere* in 1964, was simply titled ‘Aboriginal Poet’ in large letters.³⁰ This description became far less common in articles about her from the mid-1980s, perhaps because she was by then very well-known, or perhaps because her name change made her Indigeneity evident without need for elaboration. In one article in the *Australian* in 1969, she was termed ‘*the* Aboriginal poet’, a description that also served to emphasise representations of her as a first and a path-breaker.³¹ Grace was often described as a ‘Maori writer’ or ‘Maori woman writer’ in the years following the publication of her first book. This thread of description continued throughout her career, although as she became more established as a writer she was also sometimes described as a ‘New Zealand writer’, in local terms as a ‘Wellington writer’ or ‘Plimmerton writer’, or simply as a ‘writer’. Whether this shift reflected changing standards about how people ought to be described or a more frequent claiming of her as a New Zealander as she became more acclaimed (reminiscent of Goolagong’s being described as an ‘Australian’ tennis player) is not clear. That it might be the latter is suggested by the fact that Hulme was often described as a ‘Kiwi author’ or ‘New Zealand author’ at the time of her Booker Prize win, when she gained international prominence and brought literary glory to the nation.

Depiction in terms of Indigeneity was also common for many male Indigenous authors. Writing in 1978, Ihimaera observed that even when a Māori author did not view himself or herself as having ‘a dual role as a writer and a Maori and a dual responsibility to his craft and to his people’ it was certain that ‘other people do and indeed are very eager to cast him in various roles’. A Māori author would, he wrote, ‘suffer patronisation because people are often more interested in him

²⁹ Long, p. 5, emphasis removed.

³⁰ J. Hellyer, ‘Aboriginal Poet’, *Hemisphere* 8, no. 12 (1964), p. 17.

³¹ ‘Aboriginal Poet Sees Black Revolt as Inevitable’, *Australian*, 17 September 1969, p. 2, my emphasis.

as a Maori and not as a writer'.³² In Ihimaera's own case, such labels became more complicated when he wrote a novel in which the central character was a married Pākehā man struggling with his homosexuality. As Mark Amery noted in a profile of Ihimaera in 1995, he was suddenly 'in a position to be labelled a gay writer, to watch people try to put him within the bounds of another "genre"'.³³ As this remark suggests, the interests and identities of authors are often more fluid than such labelling allows.

Non-Indigenous women writing fiction also sometimes had to contend with being labelled in biologically deterministic ways. In 1969, poet Judith Wright was described in the *Australian* as perhaps 'Australia's greatest woman poet', a statement which qualified her status as a poet, implicitly suggesting that Australia's best poets must be men.³⁴ Pākehā author Fiona Kidman was one of nine 'women-poets' whose work was reviewed in *Islands*, a New Zealand journal of 'arts and letters', in 1976.³⁵ She commented in 1979 that she wanted 'to do without the "woman writer" label', but added that 'if it's still *necessary* in order to get recognition, we'll just have to use it'.³⁶ Indeed, reflecting on the 1975 publication of her first collection of poems, *Honey and Bitters*, she suggested that it and other books by women had been more readily accepted by publishers that year, due to their commercial utility during International Women's Year.³⁷

Moreover, as Anne Else has suggested, women's writing could be received by critics in different ways to that of men. Else has discussed the masculinism evident in New Zealand literature from the 1930s into the 1970s, which marginalised women's writing and led to negative assessments of their work.³⁸ Kidman's first novel, the 1979 *A Breed of Women*, was subjected to just such negativity by some reviewers. She recalled in a later interview that the book was 'absolutely rubbished' by critics despite selling well, and that it was described in one review as 'the thinking woman's Mills and Boon'. Such unfair criticism greatly upset her, and she suggested that she was 'treated more harshly' because it was her book that 'started to turn the tide for women writers' in New Zealand, because she was 'the first' and because she was doing something 'different'.³⁹ Such negative assessments of women's writing continued into the 1980s, Else argued,

32 Witi Ihimaera in P. Grace and W. Ihimaera, 'The Maori in Literature', in *Tihe Mauri Ora: Aspects of Maoritanga*, ed. M. King ([Wellington]: Methuen, 1978), p. 85.

33 M. Amery, 'Witi Ihimaera: Stepping Out', *Quote Unquote*, no. 20 (1995), p. 15.

34 G. Williams, 'The Calm Miss Wright Fights to Save Reef', *Australian*, 26 November 1969, p. 3.

35 S. Cauchi, 'Feminine Persuasive Force', *Islands* 5, no. 1 (1976), p. 102.

36 A. Else, 'Fiona Kidman', *Broadsheet*, no. 75, November 1979, p. 35, quoted in A. Else, 'On Shifting Ground: Self Narrative, Feminist Theory and Writing Practice' (PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2006), p. 70.

37 Kedgley, p. 163.

38 A. Else, 'Not More Than Man Nor Less: The Treatment of Women Poets in *Landfall*, 1947-61', *Landfall* 39, no. 4 (1985), pp. 431-446.

39 Kedgley, pp. 166-167. The review in question was: W. S. Broughton, 'Review of *A Breed of Women*, by Fiona Kidman', *Landfall* 34, no. 4 (1980), p. 367.

as authors ‘continued to receive the kind of critical response which took it for granted that not only was their gender the most salient issue to address, but [that] it had a predetermined and harmful significance’. In such ‘masculinist’ critical responses, women’s literary work was deemed either ‘feminine’ or ‘feminist’ (and either way of little critical import), or was ‘found to have redeeming “masculine” and/or “universal” qualities’.⁴⁰ For Māori and Aboriginal women, however, it was first their Indigeneity which was deemed the crucial issue to address in reading their work, and only secondly if at all their gender. When Māori and Aboriginal women who wrote fiction were described in terms of gender, it was in generally in tandem with descriptions which emphasised their Indigeneity. Describing writers in such biologically deterministic ways denied them the opportunity to be considered solely as authors, making their Indigeneity and/or their gender appear central to their work in a way that they themselves may not have considered it to be.

Aboriginal and Māori women writers sometimes resisted labelling as Indigenous authors. While Oodgeroo was a strong advocate of Aboriginal rights and felt that her poetry gave a voice to Aboriginal people, she also wished to be considered as an individual writer without such labels being applied.⁴¹ She commented that:

When I’m written up in the papers or the media or whatever, they always call me an “Aboriginal poet”; they always tag me with that. And I don’t see myself as an “Aboriginal poet” ... I see myself as a poet who is proud to be of Aboriginal descent.⁴²

Similarly, Grace said in an interview in 2003:

We don’t give these labels to ourselves. Other people do that. I don’t object to them – woman writer, Maori writer, New Zealand, Pacific or Oceanic writer, short story writer, novelist. The only adjective I would use for myself is “fiction,” that is “fiction writer.”⁴³

However, Grace has also observed that there is a point at which ‘you do realize ... that you’re not in the mainstream’ and that ‘there are lots of things you have in common’ with the work of other Maori writers which ‘makes it legitimate to say there is such a thing as Maori writing’.⁴⁴ Although she stressed that ‘Maori people are all different from each other’, she observed that ‘these varied backgrounds

40 Else, ‘On Shifting Ground’, p. 77.

41 Shoemaker, p. 188.

42 Personal interview with Oodgeroo Noonuccal, conducted by Cliff Watego, Stradbroke Island, August 1982, quoted in Shoemaker, p. 188.

43 P. F. Calleja, ‘An Interview With Patricia Grace’, *Atlantis* 25, no. 1 (2003), p. 112.

44 T. E. Tausky, “‘Stories That Show Them Who They Are’: An Interview with Patricia Grace”, *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, no. 6 (1991), p. 95.

may have some things in common', and that 'themes could be similar'.⁴⁵ In one interview in 1985, Ihimaera commented that his relationship with the label of 'Maori writer' had undergone shifts over his writing career. While he still considered himself 'a Maori writer', he felt that he had become 'a little bit more selfish' following the emergence of greater numbers of Māori authors. 'I am becoming less and less a person who is writing on behalf of a culture', he stated, and 'more a writer who is articulating selfish concerns'. These new concerns, however, were his own personal perceptions of 'being Maori' and were perhaps even more 'pro-Maori' than was his previous writing.⁴⁶ Racially-based labels thus had ambiguous meanings for writers themselves, sometimes acting as a vehicle for asserting identity and at other times pigeonholing their work and restricting potential readings of it.

A common thread in representations of Indigenous authors and their work thus related to a concept of 'Aboriginal writing' or 'Māori writing', that is, to discourses of Aboriginalism and issues of authenticity and assimilation. Similarly to Said's concept of 'Orientalism', the discourse of 'Aboriginalism' in Australia as discussed by Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra displays both a deep interest in Aboriginal culture and a refusal to allow that Aboriginal people can properly represent themselves.⁴⁷ One consequence of this discourse 'was to create the illusion that there is an "Aboriginal voice", spoken by a unitary Aboriginal subject'.⁴⁸ Reviews and commentaries about the work of Indigenous writers occasionally suggested that they might be considered authentic Indigenous voices. In 1966, T. Inglis Moore wrote that Oodgeroo was 'the authentic voice of the Aborigine', in a review of *The Dawn is at Hand* for the *Canberra Times*.⁴⁹ Almost a decade later, a comment in the *New Zealand Listener* suggested that while New Zealand writers of short stories often drew from 'childhood experience', Grace's stories were different in that 'she is Maori and a woman and so offers a new insight'.⁵⁰ More perceptively, in the literary journal *Landfall* in 1984, Bernard Gadd wrote of a Tuwhare poem that it had a 'totality' which captured 'the entire complex of the Maoritanga [cultural practices and beliefs] that breathes within Tuwhare's poetry even when it is not ostensibly Maori at all'.⁵¹ The emphasis placed on this idea of authenticity illustrates clearly the multiple meanings of the concept of representation. Authors' fictional portrayals of Indigenous experiences could be endowed with greater representational weight if they themselves were considered authentically Indigenous.

45 Calleja, pp. 111-112.

46 J. Wilkinson, 'Witi Ihimaera', *Kunapipi* 7, no. 1 (1985), p. 103.

47 B. Hodge and V. Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* (North Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991), p. 27.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

49 Moore, p. 13.

50 M. Duckworth, 'The Warm', *New Zealand Listener*, 25 October 1975, p. 63.

51 B. Gadd, 'Hone Tuwhare in His Poetry', *Landfall* 38, no. 1 (1984), p. 86.

At other times, the work of both male and female Indigenous writers could be denigrated as not sufficiently authentic because they were considered to be assimilated, urban, distanced from their culture and language or of mixed descent. Or, to put it another way, the author's being perceived as assimilated could provoke suggestions that his or her depiction of Indigenous lives was an inadequate representation of those lives. Hodge has observed that Oodgeroo's poetry was criticised when it appeared as 'not Aboriginal enough', and noted that 'earnest white critics who claimed to understand Aboriginality better than she did said that they would have liked the work better if it had been more obviously Aboriginal'.⁵² Similarly, Penny van Toorn observed the way in which 'essentialist beliefs about Aboriginality' placed Oodgeroo's poetry in a bind: she was in the eyes of some commentators 'too modern to be authentically Aboriginal' and in the view of others too 'old-fashioned and rhetorical to be a proper poet'.⁵³ In the first two pages of a 1977 *Meanjin* article about the work of Aboriginal poets, John Beston commented on the extent to which Oodgeroo, Jack Davis and Kevin Gilbert were assimilated. Oodgeroo had 'quite forgotten the language of her ancestors', he stated, and like Davis and Gilbert was not 'a fullblood Aboriginal' nor 'really familiar with the oral literature of [her] tribe', although the three authors were 'sufficiently steeped in Aboriginal culture' to make reference to 'myths' or 'heroes from the past or present' and to 'reproduce Aboriginal English'.⁵⁴ As van Toorn has noted, Indigenous and 'other non-Anglo-Celtic Australian writers' were often 'required to prove their authenticity and put their cultural identity on display'.⁵⁵ Criticisms of Aboriginal authors as not being authentically Aboriginal were a clear manifestation of the discourse of Aboriginalism.

Ironically, however, being considered assimilated (and thus not authentically Indigenous) could also result in praise for a writer's work. Oodgeroo sometimes implied that she was acceptable to white Australians because she could be considered assimilated. When being interviewed about her new exhibition of artwork in 1985, she was quoted in the *Australian* saying, 'I am acceptable, because I've made the grade and it makes them feel comfortable', presumably referring to white Australians.⁵⁶ Criteria used in reviewing the work of Indigenous authors also sometimes implied that literary acceptance was only possible through being assimilated and adopting European literary conventions. Writing of the work of Oodgeroo, Davis and Gilbert, Beston observed that 'the question

52 B. Hodge, 'Poetry and Politics in Oodgeroo: Transcending the Difference', *Australian Literary Studies* 16, no. 4 (1994), p. 67.

53 P. van Toorn, 'Indigenous Texts and Narratives', in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, ed. E. Webby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 30.

54 J. Beston, 'The Aboriginal Poets in English: Kath Walker, Jack Davis, and Kevin Gilbert', *Meanjin* 36, no. 4 (1977), p. 447.

55 van Toorn, p. 41.

56 A. L. Urban, 'Kath Walker is Finding Solace in Sea Creatures', *Australian*, 21 November 1985, p. 16.

was inevitably raised, whether the *ordinary* standards of literature should be applied to their work'.⁵⁷ In this comment, ways of evaluating literature that were culturally specific to a European literary lineage were assumed to be the norm against which any other approach to writing might be understood. Yet regardless of whether Indigenous authors were praised for adopting European forms or criticised as being inauthentic, discussing a concept of 'Indigenous writing' and questioning how to evaluate such writing constructed these authors as Other to an imagined norm of the writer that was both white and male.

Questions of authenticity also reared their heads in relation to the work of Māori authors in New Zealand, both men and women. Reviewing *Pounamu Pounamu* in the *JPS* in 1975, Oppenheim made reference to other reviewers who had suggested that the book's 'folk language with its carefully unitalicised Maori phrases sounds about as authentic as stage Irish'.⁵⁸ Almost a decade later, in an essay on the stories of Ihimaera and Grace, Pearson described Grace as 'an urban Maori imperfectly acquainted with the language and myths of her ancestors'.⁵⁹ And when Hulme won the Pegasus Prize for Māori Literature for *the bone people* in 1984, New Zealand writer and critic C. K. Stead drew on similar ideas in a scathing article about the book and about Hulme's win. He argued that the novel ought not to have won the prize, because Hulme did not qualify as a Māori writer, having 'only' one great-grandparent who was Māori, not having been raised speaking the Māori language, and having included in the book elements of Māori 'language and mythology' which Stead considered 'willed, self-conscious, not inevitable, not entirely authentic'. He considered *the bone people* 'a novel by a Pakeha which has won an award intended for a Maori', though he argued that this was not the 'fault' of Hulme, but a result of the existence of an award for Māori writers which he considered ill-conceived. Moreover, he suggested that the literary merit of the novel was over-estimated because it was considered to be the work of a Māori woman.⁶⁰ As Margery Fee has contended, the 'demand for "authenticity" denies Fourth World writers a living, changing culture'.⁶¹ Debating the authenticity of Indigenous writers in the media and in literary journals raised doubt as to whether their success and fame was deserved, while representing them as assimilated negated the politically uncomfortable aspects of their work and rendered them no longer threatening.

57 Beston, p. 460, my emphasis.

58 Oppenheim, 'Review of *Pounamu Pounamu*', p. 506.

59 Pearson, p. 166.

60 C. K. Stead, 'Keri Hulme's "The Bone People," and the Pegasus Award for Maori Literature', *Ariel* 16, no. 4 (1985), pp. 102-107.

61 M. Fee, 'Why C. K. Stead Didn't Like Keri Hulme's *the bone people*: Who Can Write as Other?', *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, no. 1 (1989), p. 17.

Politics in Writing: Contesting Literary Merit

Linked to debates about authenticity was thus an uncertainty about the political messages perceived to be carried in writing by Indigenous authors. Such uncertainty was clearly evident in reviews both in literary magazines and in newspapers. Where writing communicated a political message, or could be seen to do so because of its subject matter, the literary merit of the work was sometimes contested. Indeed, it might be said that Indigenous writers were sometimes criticised for making representations on behalf of Indigenous people through their fiction.

In reviewing Oodgeroo's poetry, critics appeared caught between a desire to praise the first published Aboriginal poet, a perceived need to applaud her political message, and a rejection of the poetry as lacking literary worth precisely because of its clearly political nature. Her poetry was often dismissed as being without literary merit, termed mere propaganda, as Shoemaker has observed.⁶² Poet and author Jill Hellyer, reviewing *We Are Going for Hemisphere* in 1964, considered that the best poems in the volume were those written 'from experience and observation' and that the writing became 'weak when it moralise[d]'. Hellyer insisted that Oodgeroo should 'take her more serious poems less seriously', as her 'pleadings' for Aboriginal people were 'most powerful when they do not become obvious' and the poems were weaker when 'an attitude of preaching' entered them. Oodgeroo's focus on 'the theme of her race', argued Hellyer, 'must limit her eventually unless she ceases to regard herself as a propagandist for her people'.⁶³ A year later, Bruce Beaver was even more dismissive, writing that the 'literary merit' of Oodgeroo's poetry was 'slight enough but the appeal of a propagandizing talent with a racial chip on the shoulder so close to home [was] acknowledged by a considerable audience of serious readers as well as the sentimentally inquisitive'.⁶⁴

Such negative critical assessments of her poetry remained in evidence in reviews of her later volumes of poetry. In 1971, S. E. Lee wrote that both Oodgeroo and Davis produced 'too many polemical pieces, too much didactic social comment on issues like assimilation and integration, prejudice and racism'.⁶⁵ Notwithstanding this comment, Oodgeroo's poetry appears to have often been criticised more harshly than were the works of other Aboriginal authors. In the

62 Shoemaker, pp. 182-185.

63 Hellyer, pp. 17-18.

64 B. Beaver, 'Australian Letters', *Landfall* 19, no. 4 (1965), p. 370.

65 S. E. Lee, 'Old Verse', *Southerly* 31, no. 3 (1971), p. 234.

Adelaide *Advertiser* in 1971, for instance, Katherine England suggested that it would be ‘difficult to compare [Oodgeroo] seriously with poets of the calibre of Jack Davis’.⁶⁶

Oodgeroo was herself at times dismissive of her poetry as simple and as propaganda. In an interview in 1990, she was quoted agreeing with the interviewer that her poems were ‘propaganda’ and explaining that this was because of the need to get ‘seventh generation white Australians’ to listen, a task which required ‘shock tactics’. ‘I’d rather hit them with my words’, she said, ‘than pick up a gun and shoot them’.⁶⁷ However, Oodgeroo did not always take the same view on what was political or what was propaganda as the critics did. In the foreword to *The Dawn is at Hand*, her second book of poetry, she observed that fellow poet James Devaney had ‘suggested to me that “propaganda-like stuff” which might be all right for my campaigning addresses ... is not necessarily good in poetry’. Therefore, she wrote, there was only one such poem in the new volume.⁶⁸ Reviewing the book for the literary journal *Southerly* in 1967, Lee sneered that clearly Oodgeroo was ‘unable to understand’ Devaney’s ‘good advice’, since several other poems in the volume were ‘all crudely and rhetorically propagandist’.⁶⁹ As Judith Wright later noted, ‘if there was one forbidden territory in poetry’ during the era in which Oodgeroo began writing, ‘it was “propaganda and protest” literature, especially in verse’.⁷⁰ Wright herself became known later in her career as a conservationist and a champion of Aboriginal rights as well as for poetry, and at least one review of her work considered it political. Reviewing *Fourth Quarter* for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1977, Robert Gray observed that the book included some ‘angry political poems’, and contended that Wright had not ‘written well out of anger and despair’. Ironically, part of his problem with those poems was that she had not ‘quite gone all the way’ in her protest, but had attempted unsuccessfully to maintain ‘something of the literary motive’.⁷¹ Oodgeroo transgressed the edict against politics in poetry boldly and unapologetically, and often found her work consigned to a literary dustbin, assessed as having only historical interest as the first Aboriginal poetry published, or social utility as a cry from the dispossessed.

Moreover, Oodgeroo’s work could be condemned as politically motivated on other grounds. Early in her writing career, she had joined the Realist Writers’ Group in Brisbane. Such groups of left-wing or communist authors existed throughout Australia, and envisioned themselves as the literary voice of the working classes. Established following the Second World War, the groups aimed

66 K. England, ‘Kath Walker: A Fighter in Verse’, *Advertiser*, 1 May 1971, p. 26.

67 Smith, p. 14.

68 Walker, *The Dawn is at Hand*, foreword.

69 S. E. Lee, ‘Poetic Fisticuffs’, *Southerly* 27, no. 1 (1967), p. 64.

70 J. Wright, ‘The Poetry’, published in Cochrane, p. 168.

71 R. Gray, ‘Poet in Politics’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 April 1977, p. 19.

'to promote the discussion and production of socialist realism in literature'.⁷² As well, Oodgeroo first became politically active through involvement with the Communist Party, the only party not to support a White Australia policy, though she left when she discovered that other members wished to write her speeches for her. These associations may have led to increased criticism of her poetry based on its clear political and social messages as her deep involvement in the Aboriginal civil rights movement appears to have done. As she recalled in a speech given in 1993, one of the early criticisms of her poetry was that it was not her work, but that a 'well-known Communist' was 'writing it for her'.⁷³ Likewise in New Zealand, Hone Tuwhare's membership of the Communist Party led to his being denied publication in the Māori Affairs Department magazine *Te Ao Hou*. Interestingly, Tuwhare stated in one interview in 1988 that for his poetry to 'really mean something' it ought to 'have some relationship' to his 'working class background'.⁷⁴ His emphasis of his class background in this instance, rather than of his Māoriness, illustrates the complex and multifaceted nature of personal identities and political views.

No review claimed that Oodgeroo's message was either untrue or unnecessary, but dismissing the poems as poetry effectively attempted to tame or silence that message. Criticising the poems as political or as mere propaganda suggested that if Oodgeroo wanted to be a poet, she would have to leave her political message to other arenas. In other words, if it was acceptable for her to represent Aboriginal people in her poetry through being an authentic Indigenous voice, it was far less acceptable for her to use her writing to represent them in a political sense. Nearing the end of the twentieth century her poetry began to be reassessed, as significant shifts occurred both in literary critique and in society as a whole, including the emergence of Aboriginal critics. Cliff Watego, for instance, argued in relation to Oodgeroo's poetry that 'what might be termed protest poetry is merely the poetic expression of black perceptions of the social incongruities present in Australian society'.⁷⁵ Recognition of the political messages in the poetry is now far more integral to celebration of the poetry.

Such a contest over literary merit was more muted in New Zealand. Tuwhare, apart from the *Te Ao Hou* incident, appears not to have met with criticism on these grounds. Like the work of Grace and Ihimaera, his poetry was generally received more enthusiastically by reviewers than was Oodgeroo's writing. Indeed, in one review in the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* in 1984, his poetry was said

72 J. McLaren, *Writing in Hope and Fear: Literature as Politics in Postwar Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 33.

73 O. Noonuccal, 'Writers of Australia, "I dips me lid"', Goossens Lecture, delivered at the Sydney Opera House, 9 June 1993, reprinted in Cochrane, p. 229.

74 B. Manhire, 'Ready to Move: Interview with Hone Tuwhare', *Landfall* 42, no. 3 (1988), pp. 271-273.

75 C. Watego, 'Aboriginal Poetry and White Criticism', in *Aboriginal Writing Today*, eds. J. Davis and B. Hodge (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985), p. 82.

to display ‘aroha’, or ‘human warmth and affection’, which gave ‘depth and validity’ to its ‘strong political currents’.⁷⁶ Reviews of Grace’s work far less often considered it to be political, or suggested that the literary merit suffered because of a political message. Perhaps this is partly because, unlike Oodgeroo, Grace was not actively involved in campaigns for Māori rights. One profile, in the art and literary magazine *Quote Unquote* in 1994, introduced her as being ‘as modest as she is talented’, and stated that she ‘doesn’t wage public campaigns, engage in literary debates or air her opinions on [radio station] *The Edge*’, but ‘simply writes fiction’.⁷⁷ Most reviews of Grace’s work were positive, with very little criticism. She was often praised for her ability with language, and for her sensitivity and perception. One reviewer even suggested in the *Sunday Star-Times* in 1995 that *Collected Stories* might be too positive, asking where ‘life’s larger conflict and tragedy’ figured, and if life was ‘so untroubled and easily affirmed’.⁷⁸ A decade earlier, Beston had argued that ‘her wish to avoid dealing with interracial tensions’ had restricted her writing.⁷⁹ Similarly, Pearson had observed in his 1982 essay that Ihimaera’s early short stories had ‘disappointed some Maori political activists who think writing by Maoris should advance the cause of Maori rights’, and that Ihimaera had sometimes been referred to as an “uncle Tom”, “middle-class Maori” [and] “pakeha pet”.⁸⁰ While Goolagong was criticised by some Aboriginal people for remaining uninvolved in political issues, and Te Kanawa’s occasional political statements sometimes stirred controversy among Māori commentators, the earliest Indigenous writers in New Zealand were complimented by literary critics, almost all of whom seem to have been non-Indigenous, for their lack of overt political involvement.

Critics generally considered that Grace’s work became more political in later publications, and it was in relation to her later books that most criticisms of her work as being marred by political intentions were made. Michelle Keown and Karen Sinclair have both observed that during the 1980s Grace’s writing became less engaged with celebrations of rural life, nostalgia for a past way of life or encouraging understanding of Māori culture, and more concerned with the political issues facing Māori.⁸¹ When *Potiki* was published in 1986, the book’s ‘more aggressive political stance’ was apparent to a number of reviewers.⁸² Grace herself recalled an attempt by some parents to have the novel banned from one school where it was studied, because they considered it ‘written to incite racial

76 R. Cooper, ‘Recent New Zealand Poetry’, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, no. 2 (1984), p. 37.

77 N. Cox, ‘Living in Both Worlds’, *Quote Unquote*, no. 12 (1994), p. 9.

78 M. Morrissey, ‘Tang of Salt Anchors Stories’, *Sunday Star-Times*, 1 January 1995, p. D4.

79 J. Beston, ‘The Fiction of Patricia Grace’, *Ariel* 15, no. 2 (1984), p. 50.

80 Pearson, p. 167.

81 M. Keown, ‘Interview with Patricia Grace’, *Kunapipi* 22, no. 2 (2000), p. 54; K. P. Sinclair, ‘Maori Literature: Protest and Affirmation’, *Pacific Studies* 15, no. 4 (1992), p. 284.

82 R. Robinson, ‘Grace, Patricia’, in *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, eds. R. Robinson and N. Wattie, Oxford Reference Online, accessed 30 April 2007, available from <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t200.e472>.

tension and create social disharmony'.⁸³ She argued that actual events, such as at Bastion Point and the Raglan Golf Course, had 'legitimised' the novel, which had been criticised for being 'farfetched' in its depiction of the lengths to which white developers would go to gain Māori land, although the book 'takes things a bit further'.⁸⁴ In a *New Zealand Herald* review of *Cousins*, the novel which followed *Potiki*, Penelope Carroll contended that when one of the characters became involved in Māori rights concerns, 'the story [became] somewhat lost in political polemic', and that the writer's voice intruded in place of the character's.⁸⁵ However, another review of the novel, which appeared in the current affairs magazine *North and South*, commented that there was 'a refreshing absence of stridency' in the writing and that the novel 'only towards the end ... become[s] clearly, and effectively, political'.⁸⁶ In Grace's next novel, *Baby No-Eyes*, David Eggleton considered that Grace was 'the writer as activist'. Writing in the liberal *New Zealand Listener*, he termed the novel a 'polemical' one, although he did not argue that this detracted from the book.⁸⁷

For the most part, indeed, reviewers agreed that Grace made points without lessening the literary merit of the writing. Philip Tew described her in 1995 as 'a warm writer but not a cosy one', whose stories 'don't come blustering up to you demanding your attention' but instead 'creep up and surprise you with their force'.⁸⁸ Similarly, Pauline Swain noted in 1998 that Grace had 'a deceptively light touch with material that in other hands could be bombastic or preachy'.⁸⁹ If political messages in writing had become more acceptable by the last years of the twentieth century, they were still to be softly framed. Although no literature is entirely without political import, many non-Indigenous reviewers appeared to prefer work which could be read in non-political ways and often harshly criticised work which did not leave them that option.

Literature, Activism and Representation

Observations of political themes in the works of the earliest Indigenous women writers could be echoed by representations of them in the media as activists or radicals. Shoemaker noted that in the case of Australia, 'the white public spokespersons are, by and large, not authors', whilst 'amongst the Black Australian community, public spokespersons far more frequently are writers,

83 V. Hereniko, 'An Interview with Patricia Grace', *Contemporary Pacific* 10, no. 1 (1998), p. 160.

84 Keown, p. 55.

85 P. Carroll, 'Window on Maori Life', *New Zealand Herald*, 5 September 1992, section 2, p. 6.

86 G. Lay, 'Graceful Relations', *North and South*, November 1992, p. 119.

87 D. Eggleton, 'A Child Reclaimed', *New Zealand Listener*, 28 November 1998, p. 40.

88 P. Tew, 'Warm But Not Cosy', *Press*, 18 February 1995, p. 10.

89 P. Swain, 'Vintage Storytelling', *Dominion*, 19 September 1998, p. 20.

or are influenced by them'.⁹⁰ This linkage, as was shown above, often led to disparagement of Indigenous writers' work by largely non-Indigenous critics. It also sometimes led to the potentially negative depiction of writers as outspoken radicals. For Oodgeroo, whose prominence was based upon her role as an activist as well as upon her status as a poet, such threads of representation were often evident in descriptions of her in newspapers and magazines. As well as being described as a poet, she was also often depicted as an 'activist', civil and land rights 'campaigner', 'fighter' for Aboriginal rights, or in other such terms. Similarly, she was often labelled both poet and activist in texts collecting the stories of famous or prominent Australians. In Susan Mitchell's collection *The Matriarchs*, for instance, she was described as a 'Poet and Aboriginal Activist'.⁹¹ Aboriginal men who both wrote fiction and struggled for Aboriginal rights might also be depicted in similar ways. An interview with Jack Davis in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1988 began by describing him as 'a curious mix of black revolutionary and mild-mannered liberal', while an article in the *West Australian* the same year termed him a 'political activist' as well as an 'Aboriginal poet [and] playwright'.⁹² Kevin Gilbert was also sometimes termed an 'activist' as well as being described with phrases such as 'Aboriginal poet' or 'Aboriginal writer'.⁹³ For other Indigenous writers, however, who were for the most part not actively involved in activist work or members of activist organisations, most articles appearing in magazines and newspapers focused on their literary work. Descriptions of them likewise generally focused on their work in these fields. Hulme, for instance, was usually described in newspapers simply as an 'author', 'writer' or 'poet', as was Grace.

A related set of representations of Oodgeroo also centred on her activist work. She was known for her fire as a spokesperson, and fire-related terms were sometimes used to describe her. Even in a story which described her as having 'become more a doer than a shouter', this perception of her was evident:

Put down poet and civil rights person Kath Walker's lack of fire yesterday to one of those dreaded Melbourne colds. ... That's not to say the fires have gone out – with just a minimum of stoking she can flare up as she has done so often ...⁹⁴

90 Shoemaker, p. 14.

91 S. Mitchell, *The Matriarchs: Twelve Australian Women Talk About Their Lives to Susan Mitchell* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1987), p. 195.

92 B. Evans, 'Jack Davis Smells Change on the Wind', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 February 1988, p. 74; M. Pritchard, 'WA Playwright Honoured', *West Australian*, 12 February 1988, p. 16.

93 See for instance: K. Childs, 'Aboriginal Poet Rejects "Blood Money" For Anthology of Blacks' Work', *Age*, 6 August 1985, p. 1; B. Evans, 'Grants Aid Art's Creative Force', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 October 1992, p. 14; R. Hefner, 'Nation's Disgrace Burns Within', *Canberra Times*, 15 May 1988, p. 7.

94 G. Bicknell, 'Kath's Fire Still Has Heat', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 July 1977, p. 13.

Throughout her career, newspaper and magazine articles which profiled Oodgeroo or reported upon her work and public statements often employed words such as 'fierce', 'intense', 'outspoken' or 'forthright' to describe her. One article in the *Herald* in 1969 referred to her 'tirades about the white Australians' treatment of the aboriginal'.⁹⁵ Such descriptions were evident in many newspapers across Australia, despite their different contexts and political leanings. Such a depiction of her also appeared in other analogies. Shelly Neller wrote in the conservative *Bulletin* in 1980 that Oodgeroo 'brandishes her passionate views with the force and accuracy of a stockwhip'.⁹⁶ In another example, Oodgeroo's tolerance and understanding for the Palestinians who hijacked a plane she was travelling on in 1974, though tempered by her statement that she would not 'condone what they did', was presented by the reporter, Greg Roberts, as evidence of her 'undying political radicalism'.⁹⁷ She herself both observed in one interview that she was 'very angry' in the years in which her early poems were written and 'used to have to tone myself down a lot', and remarked in another that 'I've been called an Activist but I think I'm fairly conservative'.⁹⁸ Yet other forces could also be at play in these representations. Shoemaker observed that Kevin Gilbert's angry verse was published rather than his love poems, arguing that it appeared it was 'commercially more profitable to publish a militant Aboriginal writer', and thus that publishers in this way 'dictated the public image with which well-known Aboriginal authors have been cloaked'.⁹⁹ This observation reveals the contingent nature of representations, which may sometimes be shaped as much by commercial or political imperatives as by particular ideas about race or gender.

As well as being fiery, however, Oodgeroo was sometimes also described, in more gendered portrayals, as dignified and graceful, and her dislike of violence in protest was reported on several occasions.¹⁰⁰ When she received the award of Aboriginal of the Year in 1985, she was described by the *Sun-Herald* as receiving it 'with her accustomed soft-spoken grace, edged with hard-nosed home truths about the lot of her race in Australia'.¹⁰¹ Moreover, it has been observed that Oodgeroo's positive vision of civil rights and hope for the future may have endeared her to readers who would not have appreciated a more militant stance. Eva Rask Knudsen suggested that Oodgeroo was embraced by some critics:

95 R. Rule, 'Reforms First', *Herald*, 12 July 1969, p. 26.

96 S. Neller, 'Kath Walker, Activist, Artist, Finds a New Medium For Her Cause', *Bulletin*, 3 December 1985, p. 90.

97 G. Roberts, 'Kath Walker Makes a Stand in the Sitting-Down Place', *Good Weekend*, 28 February 1987, p. 19.

98 Mitchell, p. 203; Smith, pp. 13-14.

99 Shoemaker, p. 197.

100 'Poet Hits at "Black Power" Violence', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 December 1971, p. 11.

101 M. Barnes, 'Kath's Devoted Herself to Survival', *Sun-Herald*, 15 September 1985, p. 53.

almost as a cherished national treasure or as their own symbol of redemption because her conciliatory poems gave them the chance to exorcise their own guilty feelings about a very racist Australia ...¹⁰²

As in some representations of Goolagong and Cathy Freeman, Aboriginal success and supposed assimilation could thus be appropriated as a sign that all was well in race relations in Australia. At her death Oodgeroo was lauded as ‘an outstanding Australian’, ‘one of Australia’s finest citizens’, ‘a battler’ and ‘a national treasure’.¹⁰³ Such tributes, however genuine, potentially transformed her from a controversial figure and a challenger of society into an embodiment of an idealised nation and one of its canonised heroes. This representational transformation is emblematic of the ways in which representations may shift after the death of a person, a trend which is considered in relation to Whina Cooper in the next chapter.

Providing A Voice? Motivations for Writing

How, then, did Indigenous women writers represent themselves? How did they conceive their position and objectives, and what were their publicly articulated intentions in their work and lives? Did these women understand themselves to be spokespeople for the concerns of Indigenous people, or seek to represent the experiences and struggles of Indigenous people from a privileged position as insiders? In one interview in 1977, Oodgeroo explained that in writing she was ‘putting [Aboriginal people’s] voices on paper’, and that she did not view *We Are Going* as ‘my book’ because ‘it was the people’.¹⁰⁴ Ten years later, in another interview, she remembered having felt that it was ‘time we recorded the cries of the people and gave them a book they could call their own’.¹⁰⁵ She considered herself a ‘spokeswoman’ for Aboriginal people, though only one of a number, since different groups had different representatives.¹⁰⁶ As well, she clearly viewed her work as part of a wider role as an educator, and deliberately communicated a strong political message in her poetry. Her approach to her writing is further illustrated by her comments in a review which she wrote of a book of essays on Aboriginal affairs in 1970. ‘Every Aboriginal,’ she stated, ‘when given the

102 E. R. Knudsen, ‘From Kath Walker to Oodgeroo Noonuccal? Ambiguity and Assurance in *My People*’, *Australian Literary Studies* 16, no. 4 (1994), p. 108.

103 F. Hamilton, ‘Oodgeroo Buried Beneath the Paperbarks: Tributes Flow for “Grand Old Lady”’, *Canberra Times*, 21 September 1993, p. 3; Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Robert Tickner, quoted in ‘Nation Mourns Tenacious Mother Figure’, *Australian*, 17 September 1993, p. 2; Queensland Premier Wayne Goss, quoted in D. Smith, ‘Goss Leads Tributes to “Remarkable Australian”’, *Gold Coast Bulletin*, 17 September 1993, p. 2.

104 J. Davidson, ‘Interview: Kath Walker’, *Meanjin* 36, no. 4 (1977), pp. 428-429.

105 Turcotte, p. 18.

106 R. Shiels and C. Leimbach, ‘Stradbroke Dreamtime and Beyond ... Conversations With Kath Walker at Moongalba’, *Simply Living*, no. 17 (1981), p. 63.

opportunity should spell out the humiliation, contempt and discrimination' that Aboriginal people experienced due to 'the clash of culture, the denial of human and legal rights, the ignoring of the true voice of the Aborigine, and the covering-up of basic rights'.¹⁰⁷ While she wished to be considered as a poet independent of her Aboriginality, Oodgeroo also clearly saw her poetry as another avenue through which to articulate her message about Indigenous rights.

For Grace, on the other hand, any political motivation in the process of writing appeared to be secondary to the desire to create stories, and she sometimes resisted being categorised as a political writer. In a 1998 interview, she remembered that she began writing simply desiring to write, and that she had had 'no real social motivation at all'. While she thought she had put on the back of the book that she wished 'to communicate who we are to other people', she recalled that she had not considered that as a driving force whilst actually working on the stories.¹⁰⁸ In another interview in 1992, she stated that her work was 'mainly a challenge to myself' and that she 'set out to tell a story' without 'thoughts of changing the world or of enlightening people'.¹⁰⁹

At the same time, however, she noted more than once that she felt many representations of Māori produced by non-Māori writers had been problematic and that she wished to supplement them with different representations, while also wanting to address the shortage of literature to which Māori could relate.¹¹⁰ Asked in 1994 if there were 'political themes' in her work, she responded that she had known when she began writing that 'there were people who hadn't been written about' and 'lives that hadn't been described', which she wanted to write about, but that she did not then view such writing as 'political'. However, she recalled that she 'came to see that when you write about people who don't have power, whose mana [prestige or authority] has been eroded, then it is political'. She concluded that although she had not 'set out to be a political writer', she was 'happy if people see my writing that way'. As she explained:

Good writing needs to describe the human condition, and a writer will write from her own background, her own experience, her own standpoint, her own view of life, her own realities.¹¹¹

As these comments suggest, the distinction between representing Indigenous lives in an artistic sense and representing them in an advocacy sense was often fine indeed. While Grace acknowledged in one interview that her later stories

107 K. Walker, 'Aboriginals: The Smell of Frustration', *Politics* 1 (1970), p. 90.

108 A. Sarti, *Spiritcarvers: Interviews With Eighteen Writers From New Zealand* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), p. 45.

109 J. McRae, 'Patricia Grace', in *In the Same Room: Conversations With New Zealand Writers*, eds. E. Alley and M. Williams (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1992), p. 292.

110 Patricia Grace in Grace and Ihimaera, pp. 80-83; Kedgley, pp. 55, 64.

111 A. Goslyn, 'Patricia Grace on Politics and People', *Broadsheet*, no. 202 (1994), p. 54.

were ‘more political’ than her earlier writing, she remarked that even those were ‘not real outbursts of anger’, since she had ‘never been convinced that people listen to outbursts’ and thought it was probably ‘better to sneak up on people’.¹¹² Hulme has also spoken of being concerned to tell a story, rather than to make a political point. Asked if she had ‘a quest’ in her writing, she answered that she wrote ‘for myself’, although noting that ‘I do try to look earnestly and deeply into certain social situations in New Zealand, because this place fascinates the hell out of me’.¹¹³ Like Grace, she stated that ‘your Maoriness, like everything else, is intimately part of you and it will normally show through your writing as well’.¹¹⁴

Questions asked of Grace in several published interviews addressed the issue of the place of politics in literature, often seeming to refer specifically to political issues affecting Māori. Similar questions were not often asked in interviews with Oodgeroo, perhaps due to her clear stance as an activist. In an interview published in 2003, Grace was asked if she felt that ‘Maori writing has to be political’. She answered in the negative, saying that it need neither ‘engage in political themes’ nor ‘define Maori culture’, although she qualified this by suggesting that ‘in another way it always will define Maori culture’, and that ‘in a way ... all of our writing is political’.¹¹⁵ In another interview, she acknowledged that she had felt ‘some pressure’ to write about issues of race relations, but thought it ‘natural’ to write about such issues because one wrote ‘from your own background and experience’.¹¹⁶ Ihimaera similarly once noted that he had been ‘accused of not being “political” enough or critical enough of our Pakeha-dominated society’. He commented that he felt his writing was ‘political because it is exclusively Maori’ and that ‘the criticism of Pakeha society is implicit in the presentation of an exclusively Maori values system’, but he professed himself ‘more concerned with the greatest problem we have – that of retaining our emotional identity’.¹¹⁷ While Indigenous writers were well aware that their writing might articulate messages about the social and political worlds in which they lived and wrote, such imperatives were often not as central to their work as reviewers and critics expected.

112 Kedgley, p. 56.

113 Sarti, p. 62.

114 Long, p. 5.

115 Calleja, p. 113.

116 Hereniko, p. 159.

117 Witi Ihimaera in Grace and Ihimaera, p. 84.

Entering the Film Industry: Indigenous Women and Filmmaking

Slightly later than in the literary field, a number of Indigenous women began to be known as filmmakers in the last decades of the twentieth century. While New Zealander Ramai Hayward had been making films with her husband Rudall from the 1950s, her contribution was often subsumed under that of her husband in accounts which placed her as his wife or ‘assistant’.¹¹⁸ Particularly from the 1970s under the impact of the second wave of feminism, films began to appear which could be understood as carrying feminist messages, and increasing numbers of women began to make their own films. Māori and Aboriginal people also increasingly sought to represent themselves on film and to tell their own stories, no longer accepting representations by outsiders. In the 1970s and 1980s, Essie Coffey and Tracey Moffatt in Australia and Merata Mita in New Zealand were part of this shift in the film industry. Moreover, such assertions of identity could overlap. Jocelyn Robson and Beverley Zalcock noted that films by Indigenous women united ‘an interrogation of issues related to both race and gender’.¹¹⁹ While filmmakers have often been represented in similar ways to those in which authors were represented, it is important to bear in mind the particularities of the film industry itself. Producing a film generally requires significantly greater resources than does producing literary work. Mita has noted that when Māori people choose to make a fiction film, they need to ‘satisfy the demands of the cinema, the demands of their own people, [and] the criteria of a white male-dominated value and funding structure’, including demonstrating ‘what Americans call “crossover potential”’ and raising ‘about one third of the projected budget’.¹²⁰ The differences within the industry itself, while not obviously impacting on the ways in which Indigenous women filmmakers were represented in the media, were an important part of the economic, political and cultural contexts in which those representations were produced.

As in literature, so in film being first could act as a stimulus to fame. Arguably the most well-known Indigenous women in filmmaking in Australia and New Zealand, Moffatt and Mita, were both recognised as having achieved such ‘firsts’. Mita’s 1988 feature film *Mauri* was the first made by a Māori woman and, slightly later, Moffatt’s 1993 film *Bedevil* became the first feature film made in Australia by an Aboriginal woman. However, by the time of Mita’s and Moffatt’s first feature films, comment upon their success as being due to their curiosity value appears to have become much less common. In 1988, Moffatt

118 D. Shepard, *Reframing Women: A History of New Zealand Film* (Auckland: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 12.

119 J. Robson and B. Zalcock, *Girls’ Own Stories: Australian and New Zealand Women’s Films* (London: Scarlet, 1997), p. 59.

120 M. Mita, ‘The Soul and the Image’, in *Film in Aotearoa New Zealand*, eds. J. Dennis and J. Bieringa (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1996), p. 49.

felt able to say that she thought her work was ‘receiving attention and awards not just because it is dealing with Aborigines or because I am an Aborigine but because I am experimenting with different film forms’.¹²¹ At the same time, she was quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1992 commenting that there was ‘automatic interest’ in her work because she was Aboriginal, and that she had been concerned in the past that she was chosen for survey exhibitions ‘as the token black’.¹²²

Although these women were still sometimes labelled in the media in racial terms, such labels were less common by the late 1980s. The revised Australian Journalists Association code of ethics which emphasised that undue stress should not be placed upon ethnicity, or other such attributes, had been in place since 1984, and was perhaps having some impact on media practices. However, such labels persisted sufficiently often in media profiles and critical commentaries to rouse protest from Moffatt. In an interview published in the New Zealand feminist magazine *Broadsheet* in 1993, she stated that she would prefer not to be labelled an Aboriginal filmmaker or photographer. ‘Sometimes I wish they would forget I’m Aboriginal and just look at the work’, she said, because it ought to ‘stand on it’s [sic] own’.¹²³

Indigeneity also remained central to depictions of Indigenous women in the film industry in other respects. Despite Moffatt’s often-voiced opposition to her work being read in terms of her Aboriginality and her background growing up as a foster child in a white family, discussions of her work sometimes persisted in reading it in these terms. In a 1993 article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Anabel Dean commented that Moffatt’s films were ‘influenced by her background’, and in an article in the *Age* in 2002 Geoff Masien remarked that she was ‘clearly influenced in her work by her experience of growing up female and Aboriginal in a predominantly white, working class suburb’.¹²⁴ Even after observing that Moffatt did not want to be seen as an ‘Aboriginal artist’, Jane Mills remarked in an article in *RealTime*, a journal of contemporary arts, that it was ‘hard to see why she insists on the disclaimer’, as her films had ‘a strong political sensibility in which her Aboriginality, like her feminism, is impossible to ignore’.¹²⁵

By the late 1980s, some commentators were also beginning to shift their stance on the place of politics in artistic endeavour. The choice to make representations for or against a political cause in literary or artistic work appeared to have

121 A. Rutherford, ‘Changing Images’, in *Aboriginal Culture Today*, ed. A. Rutherford (Sydney: Dangaroo, 1988), p. 155.

122 H. O’Neill, ‘From Personal to Universal’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 March 1992, p. 18.

123 M. Rupa and A. Tsoulis, ‘Indigenous Filmmakers’, *Broadsheet*, no. 199 (1993), p. 35.

124 A. Dean, ‘The Ghosts in the Family’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 October 1993, p. 20; G. Masien, ‘Something More? Try a \$250,000 Bid’, *Age*, 5 February 2002, The Culture section, p. 4.

125 J. Mills, ‘A (Filmic) Space Between Black and White’, *RealTime + OnScreen*, no. 44 (2001), p. 17.

become more widely viewed as acceptable. Indeed, Moffatt sometimes faced pressure to be more political in her work, which she resisted. In an interview in 1988, she stated that:

I didn't feel I had to set out to make films about the struggle for Land Rights, mining on Aboriginal land, issues dealing with racism which people automatically think that that's what you're going to do because you're a black film maker.

She observed that while 'statements need to be made', she was attempting to 'say them in a more interesting way'.¹²⁶ When asked in a 1999 interview whether or not there was 'a political intention' underlying her photographic work, she commented that she wished to 'create a world' rather than to 'make some grand statement on race', although she had made 'political films'.¹²⁷ Moreover, she explained that she did not wish to work in a realistic or ethnographic style, as documentaries and dramas with Aboriginal subjects usually did. She recalled having encountered some negative reactions from Aboriginal people over her depiction of Aboriginal women in her short film *Nice Coloured Girls*, because she was 'an Aboriginal film maker'. 'From certain members of the Aboriginal scene,' she said, 'you are pressured into always having to present a positive view of Aboriginal life which I find really annoying'. Moffatt noted a generational difference, explaining that she was 'not the generation that set up the tent embassy in 1972 and fought the Land Rights battle' and other struggles. Instead, she was:

of the generation who have benefitted from the work of Kath Walker and so many others like her. We're a different generation, a generation that feels comfortable in talking about Aboriginal society whether it be through film or writing or art.¹²⁸

Such a generational difference could lead both to a determination on the part of a filmmaker to resist being categorised as a political artist, and to criticism from others for failing to make political statements.

Essey Coffey and Merata Mita were both overtly and intentionally political in at least some of their filmmaking. The documentary *My Survival as an Aboriginal*, directed by Coffey, was described in the Melbourne *Herald* in 1979 as Coffey's 'cry of anger, defiance and protest'.¹²⁹ For Coffey, the urge to make the film was linked inextricably to a message that she wanted heard. Knowledge about the legacies of the stolen generations had brought her to a decision that Aboriginal

126 Rutherford, p. 153.

127 G. Matt, 'An Interview with Tracey Moffatt', in *Tracey Moffatt*, ed. M. Snelling (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 1999), p. 67.

128 Rutherford, pp. 148, 152, 155.

129 B. Wilson, 'Her Cry For Survival', *Herald*, 29 August 1979, p. 4.

people needed to use mass media in order to gain recognition.¹³⁰ Coffey was sometimes described in newspaper stories as an ‘activist’ or ‘campaigner’ for Aboriginal rights, as well as being described as a film-maker or singer.¹³¹ In at least one newspaper report she was termed ‘outspoken’, and she was also described that way in an article in *Deadly Vibe*, a magazine aimed at Aboriginal youth.¹³²

Mita’s documentaries *Bastion Point – Day 507*, about the removal of land protesters from Bastion Point by police in 1978, and *Patu!*, about protests against the Springbok tour of New Zealand in 1981 and the police response, also dealt with clearly political issues. She faced opposition from authorities, such as the police, in making both films. In one edited interview published in 1986, she noted that ‘if a film I make causes Maori people to feel stronger about themselves and lose some of their inferiority, then I’m achieving something worthwhile for the revolution’. At the same time, Mita observed that she had been ‘stereotyped as a radical political film-maker’, although she did not see herself that way. Rather, she saw herself ‘as representing what already exists – representing the truth’ and ‘exposing a Maori viewpoint’. She suggested that ‘because I’m a Māori woman’ such an endeavour was ‘seen as dangerously radical’.¹³³ As in the case of literature, there thus appeared to be an expectation on the part of some reviewers that films made by Indigenous filmmakers would be partial and political. Through her filmmaking, Mita also sought to challenge previous filmic representations of Māori by outsiders. In 1989, discussing *Mauri*, she stated that she had ‘really wanted to destroy the massive sentimental view of Māori people’ and ‘to break out of a particular characterisation that Māori people find themselves in’, especially on film. In the same interview, she spoke about a ‘Māori way of telling stories’, arguing that ‘we’ve got a tradition so we should be building on it’.¹³⁴ *Mauri*, however, was criticised by ‘Pakeha reviewers’ because it ‘did not conform to mainstream narrative conventions’.¹³⁵ As had been the experience of many Indigenous authors, non-Indigenous reviewers could be highly critical of film work that did not fit a Western norm.

130 Essie Coffey interviewed by Hazel de Berg, 1980, DeB 1154, ORAL TRC 1/1154, Hazel de Berg collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

131 See for instance: M. Ansara, ‘Bush Queen Focused on Inequality’, *Australian*, 9 January 1998, p. 11; ‘Farewell for Essie’, *Daily Telegraph*, 9 January 1998, p. 15; J. Freebury, ‘Any Reel Progress?’, *Canberra Times*, 28 February 1998, ‘Panorama’ liftout, p. 21.

132 See for instance: Ansara, p. 11; ‘Essie Coffey’, *Deadly Vibe*, no. 37, p. 12.

133 V. Myers, *Head and Shoulders* (Auckland: Penguin, 1986), pp. 66, 71.

134 C. Parekowhai, ‘Kōrero ki Taku Tuakana: Merata Mita and Me’, *Illusions*, no. 9 (1989), pp. 24, 26.

135 Shepard, p. 121.

Gender, Indigeneity and the Politics of Feminism

Thus far, my focus has largely been upon common framings of race in depictions of prominent Indigenous women writers and filmmakers. In this section, the spotlight turns to common framings of gender, and to the intersections evident between racialised and gendered representations. These women, as well as being positioned as Indigenous writers, were sometimes also positioned as women writers, and their work considered as such by critics. Such a consideration was evident, for example, in the inclusion of both Grace and Hulme in a collection of interviews with other New Zealand women writers edited by feminist Sue Kedgley.¹³⁶ Reviewers also occasionally made mention of women-centred themes in their work. Reviewing Grace's novel *Cousins*, Ngāhuia Te Awekōtuku wrote that the portrayal of women waiting for their men to return from war made it 'a women's novel, a view from a uniquely female place'.¹³⁷ Grace herself once suggested that women's writing was 'more finely detailed' than that of male writers, and that women 'tend to write about children and relationships in a closer and more understanding way'.¹³⁸ Hulme similarly saw a difference between the writing of men and women, as she did between the writing of Māori and Pākehā, since 'everything writers write is coloured and informed by their own perspective and background'.¹³⁹

None of the women whose media representation is discussed in this chapter appear to have been actively feminist through organisational membership, yet closeness to feminist concerns seemed to be assumed by several interviewers. These women were sometimes questioned about whether or not they were feminist, questions which would clearly not have been asked of male authors and filmmakers, Indigenous or non-Indigenous. Such questions were particularly asked within the context of publications with feminist perspectives which focused on the life stories of successful women. While Oodgeroo's work was rarely, if ever, discussed as the work of a woman, perhaps because her political voice was so clearly attuned to Aboriginal issues, she was several times asked if she was a feminist. In an interview with Susan Mitchell published in 1987, Oodgeroo stated that:

I don't believe in Woman's Lib. ... I was liberated the day I was born. ... Even in the Aboriginal movement I will not join women's groups. I don't even fight for Aboriginals either. I fight for all people.

136 Kedgley, *Our Own Country*.

137 N. Te Awekōtuku, "'Journeys ... Expectations, ... Self-Awakenings'", *New Zealand Listener*, 5 September 1992, p. 52.

138 Kedgley, p. 64.

139 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Further, Oodgeroo argued that women should not ‘fight’ men, but ‘educate them’.¹⁴⁰ In her view, feminist concerns were of less relevance in an Aboriginal setting. Asked in one interview if she had been concerned that there were ‘certain rules women must observe’ or ‘things they can’t do’ relating to women’s position in Aboriginal society, when she herself was ‘a driving force in the Aboriginal movement and ... extremely vocal’, she responded that she had not been concerned ‘because the same applies to the men’. Women, Oodgeroo stated, had ‘more than enough freedom in the Aboriginal world’.¹⁴¹ At the same time, she once explained to an interviewer that ‘the mother of life, the Rainbow Serpent – in our world God is a woman’, and commented that this demonstrated ‘how wise the Aboriginals were, to realise that the woman has the strength’.¹⁴²

Grace too was often asked about her relationship with feminism. If she drew on her experiences as Māori in her writing, interviewers seemed to want to know if she did the same as a woman. In an interview published in the collection edited by Kedgley, Grace commented that while she was never ‘actively’ involved in the feminist movement, she became ‘more and more aware of the position of women’ during the 1970s, as she listened to what was being said. She ‘started to realise a lot about the lives of women and especially about their expectations’, and recalled realising that she ‘could easily understand what feminists were saying, because of my awareness of racial oppression’. Asked if she identified as feminist, she replied that she had not ‘heard anyone call me a feminist’, but that she was. She explained that she believed that ‘all people should realise their own potential in their own way, and support each other’ to do so, concluding that she could be seen as ‘a pro-child, pro-family feminist’.¹⁴³ Much later, in 2003, when asked if she would describe herself as ‘a feminist writer’, she responded ‘I sometimes don’t know what to say when people ask me if I am a feminist writer because I am not well-versed in feminist theory’. However, she continued:

that does not mean that I don’t understand the position of women in society. In some ways I regard myself as a feminist activist in that I am a *woman* and I have always *acted*.¹⁴⁴

She remarked that she felt ‘very comfortable when ... writing about women, especially ... about strong Maori women characters’, and that ‘I come from a culture where women are strong’.¹⁴⁵ When asked if she wished to reveal women’s lives in her writing, as she did Māori lives, she answered that she did not ‘consciously set out to do that’ and that she wrote from her ‘experience

140 Mitchell, pp. 198, 209.

141 C. Baker, ed., *Yacker 2: Australian Writers Talk About Their Work* (Sydney: Pan, 1987), p. 289.

142 Davidson, p. 436.

143 Kedgley, p. 66.

144 Calleja, p. 111, original emphasis.

145 *Ibid.*

and background'.¹⁴⁶ Like Oodgeroo, Grace suggested that feminist issues for Indigenous women were linked to the legacies of colonisation. Once asked to talk about the status of Māori women, she stated that problems such as 'the abuse of women' or 'the low status of women' were 'not something that came from the old society' but 'a modern phenomenon that has come with colonisation'.¹⁴⁷ Women, she said, needed to 'take our place, the place that we had in the beginning, our rightful place in contemporary society', and 'reclaim our status, our mana, our leadership roles'.¹⁴⁸

Hulme was also asked if she was a feminist in an interview published in the collection edited by Kedgley. She replied with vigour that 'I'm a feminist because I was born female' although she had 'never belonged to a feminist group' and was 'not a joiner'. Asked if she was 'reluctant to be described as a "women's writer"', she stated that she was 'happy to be described as a woman writer and women's writer', but qualified that by noting that she felt 'some diffidence' in being so identified, 'because of the widespread confusion between sex and gender'. Hulme explained that 'my sex is female but my gender is neuter, which leaves me uncertain as to what kind of a woman I am', but that her 'commitment' was 'to the female side of life – to values which are commonly regarded as female ones' and that there were 'experiences which are unique to being a woman, even to someone who perceives herself to be a neuter woman'.¹⁴⁹

Among filmmakers, Mita was also conscious of facing repression in terms of gender as well as in terms of race. In one interview, she commented that 'my battles with sexism and racism have been constant'. She recalled having come 'into conflict with traditional Maori thinking' because 'lots of things I've done are contrary to how a Maori woman should traditionally behave'. As well, she saw her film work 'as a way of emancipating Maori women', since 'where I come from women don't have speaking rights on the marae [meeting place]', and film and television were able to 'speak to many more people'.¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, in both critical discussions and interviews, the focus was more often upon the position of Indigenous women writers and filmmakers as Indigenous than it was on their position as women. Likewise, representations in the media drew more often on common discourses surrounding Indigeneity than upon tropes of femininity.

146 Kedgley, p. 65.

147 Goslyn, pp. 54-55.

148 Ibid., p. 55.

149 Kedgley, pp. 98, 102-103.

150 Myers, pp. 56-57, 64.

Reflections on Trans-Tasman Difference: Postcolonial Artistry

By the 1990s, Aboriginal and Māori women were taking a strong place in all areas of the creative arts. Surveying depictions of Indigenous women writers and filmmakers in the media, and their own public articulations of their lives and work, several parallels are evident across the Tasman. As assertions of Māori and Aboriginal identity were made increasingly strongly from the late 1960s, and as movements for civil, language and land rights intensified, Indigenous women's voices increasingly appeared in published prose and poetry and, slightly later, in film. Grace once suggested that, while there were other Māori women who wrote short stories before her, 'the time was not right for their stories to come out in book form', and that the publication of her work and of Ihimaera's was 'part of the movement'.¹⁵¹ Indeed, these women's work has often been analysed academically as part of a postcolonial literature or postcolonial film industry. Placing the work of these women in this context of social and political change perhaps contributed to the continual interpretation of it as political, and to a repeated expectation that they would act as spokespeople for Aboriginal or Māori people. As Fee observed, 'white writers' may have been able to 'choose to write as whatever they like', but such a choice was less available for 'minority writers', who were often 'forced into the position of speaking for their minority'.¹⁵²

As a concept, 'representation' impacted upon the lives and careers of Indigenous women writers and filmmakers in multiple ways. Besides being portrayed in particular ways in the media, these women both represented Māori or Aboriginal worlds through their fiction writing or filmmaking, and were frequently expected to, or chose to, use their work to represent the political concerns of Māori or Aboriginal people. At the same time, media representations were by no means monolithic, often different for different women or at different times. Such differences sometimes stemmed from the level of political involvement of the women themselves and from their own aims. While not able to entirely escape having their work viewed in political terms, these women made choices which affected how they were represented, and how their work was understood both in the popular press and in literary journals. Moreover, changing trends in literary criticism and appreciation as well as wider social and political changes at times led to shifting understandings of their work. Nevertheless, the work of Indigenous women writers and filmmakers on both sides of the Tasman

151 P. Della Valle, 'The Wider Family: Patricia Grace Interviewed by Paola Della Valle', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 42, no. 1 (2007), p. 135.

152 Fee, p. 15.

was persistently viewed through a lens of difference. In depictions as firsts, as authentic or inauthentic, as assimilated or as activists, ideas of racial difference remained central, far more so than did ideas of femininity and gender.

Conclusion

Although filmmaking was in many respects a different industry from that of fiction writing, representations of filmmakers displayed many similar tropes and drew upon similar discourses about Indigeneity. Literature and films were not always viewed as political, but they were necessarily more ambiguous in this sense than were other types of achievement, because they were always read as saying something. Particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, sports stars and performing artists were more often conscripted as symbols upon which meaning could be inscribed than were writers and filmmakers, who spoke for themselves by the very nature of their work. Indigenous women writers such as Oodgeroo and Grace emerged at around the same time as did Goolagong and Te Kanawa, but had a much different experience in relation to the ways in which they were represented in the media. Far from being represented as naturally talented, their abilities in such an intellectual endeavour were sometimes questioned. Rather than being persistently depicted as symbolising harmonious race relations or reconciliation, they were sometimes treated as too political or too radical, and depiction as assimilated more often served to question their authenticity as Indigenous artists than to set them up as role models. While gender was sometimes important in portrayals of these writers and filmmakers, and in understandings of their work, it was not as central as was the case in sport, where female participation and image were more contested, or in the performing arts, where feminine glamour was often treated as central to women's fame and success. In representations of Indigenous women writers and filmmakers, both in the print media and articulated by the women themselves, discourses around Indigeneity often proved more central. Discourses about the nation were also less central in depictions of writers and filmmakers than in those about sportspeople and performing artists, perhaps because they did not perform so clearly upon an international stage, or because it was potentially more difficult to inscribe ideas of national identity upon them. Where ideas of nation might become relevant was in the possibility for these writers and filmmakers to be celebrated as legitimating the image of the nation as a postcolonial one, a possibility that was much less open to reviewers of Oodgeroo's poetry than it was to reviewers of less clearly political writers.