

1985

Interview

Witi Ihimaera

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Recommended Citation

Ihimaera, Witi, Interview, *Kunapipi*, 7(1), 1985.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol7/iss1/14>

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Interview

Abstract

Waituhi is the first Maori opera. Do you feel there is a contradiction in expressing the need to preserve traditional Maori values in an art form that does not exist in traditional Maori culture, or is this an indication that in order to survive Maori values and culture must to a certain extent undergo a metamorphosis and absorb elements of Western culture?

At twilight they hobble into the open,
upright and brazenly watching you,
twinned ears notched against the sky.
The feeding ones lower their arms
with a rower's shrug, drop their heads
behind round rumps and shoulders,
and become brown stones on a dry grass plain,
stones that multiply at dusk,
small mobile hummocks snatching at grass.

After the dark you will hear them
making great paddock-long trips with steady elastic thumping
— that sound of Australian soil slapped hard by double pads.
Darkness has come, the old folk rule again.

Witi Ihimaera

INTERVIEW

Jane Wilkinson interviewed Witi Ihimaera in Rome on 20 September 1984.

Waituhi is the first Maori opera. Do you feel there is a contradiction in expressing the need to preserve traditional Maori values in an art form that does not exist in traditional Maori culture, or is this an indication that in order to survive Maori values and culture must to a certain extent undergo a metamorphosis and absorb elements of Western culture?

Perhaps it's strange to call *Waituhi* an opera because what we've tried to do is to adapt the operatic form to Maori music and to New Zealand, so

it's not as if we've tried to use the operatic format and then squeeze cultural beliefs into that particular format. It is music theatre and it's political theatre: it's about the dilemma of all minority cultures within a majority system and it's a very critical work. The definition we've given it at home is that it is Marae music theatre. It's simply what you would see on a marae or a Maori meeting place in New Zealand, except that instead of being supported by one instrument it's supported by an orchestra.

We've always believed that Maori culture is a very flexible culture and because of that it has been able to survive. It hasn't concretized itself into something that we call contemporary as opposed to traditional: it's still developing. I'm very pleased that we take that attitude because then we do not have the sort of psychological dilemma that often comes to minority cultures where they have to make a choice between what is traditional and what is not. Although some people would look at that and say 'Ah, but you're just adapting to European ways', what we're in fact trying to do is use European formats to reveal ourselves to a wider audience. So Maori composers and Maori writers have, for instance, taken breakdancing as a cultural pursuit and begun to compose songs for breakdancing teams on Maori themes. It's a way of reaching a new and youthful audience because, let's face it, with American influences and the whole pervasive subjection of all cultures to internationalism, what you've sometimes got to do is to give your own culture a new currency, a value which young people can respect — and they certainly cannot respect something which they might regard as being out of date. So we've moved into the electronic age. Some of our cultural groups now incorporate songs about space invaders, space invading machines, and that might also seem to be a little bit strange but we have a young Maori population in the cities which is shiftless, which is unemployed, which, for its leisure activities, plays the machines, plays cards, gets into trouble. We've not said to them that they are wrong, what we've had to do is go to them and say 'Even these machines, we can still put Maoritanga into them'. Again, the whole business of writing is not a traditional pursuit either. In the beginning I had a lot of difficulties trying to persuade people that written literature was as valid after all as oral literature. The thing is that a lot of Maori people have lost their Maori tongue but they have learnt how to read. So writing is my way, even if the vehicle is English, of trying to transmit Maori concepts.

Is much Maori literature written in Maori or is most of it in English?

There is a lot of work written in Maori but it is mainly for young children, it is designed to help the new urban Maori child to grow into awareness and pride of himself or herself. At other, more academic, levels we are still mainly collecting our waiata. The function of Maori writing in English — and most of the current crop of Maori writers write in English — is to provide a context, a wider context, using the majority language, for those Maori children and Pakeha children who will be growing up into the 1990s and the year 2000. It is a sad fact that many of us are in fact first language speakers of English.

The rediscovery and reappraisal of the past in its relation to the present and the future seem particularly important for the so-called 'new literatures in English'. One of your stories is about the laborious piecing together of a village genealogy, the 'whakapapa', by an old man who dies at the end of the story. The other protagonist of the story, a young, urbanized Maori, gradually comes to realize how this genealogy ensures his 'union with the universe'. Could you expand on this in relation to Maori literature and culture?

All Maori people believe in what we call te taura tangata, which translates as being the rope of man. In that particular rope are woven all the generations of man from creation to the present day. It's that rope which forms the basis of the search for whakapapa, the union with the universe that we talk about. It becomes difficult when a population like ours has moved from its rural hearths to an urban area because then there is a discontinuity, a dislocation, in the transmission of the whakapapa and so journeys like 'In Search of the Whakapapa' have become extremely vital for the older generation to take the younger generation on, and it's a way also of ridding ourselves of Western, urbanized traits and concentrating on oral techniques. We believe that the word is a very sacred thing. Most genealogies are only learnt orally and they are the means of cultural continuation for Maori people: we never ever consider ourselves to be just ourselves at this moment; we believe ourselves to be the inheritors and possessors of thousands and thousands of years of a wonderful cultural legacy. That is what the young man learns, in a very difficult way, but he becomes possessor of a key. Because the word is sacred, because the matter of whakapapa is sacred, it is this key which enables him to see the sacredness of the universe and puts him into a frame of mind where he can see into the essence of things, into trees and into life and into clouds.

Why trees and clouds?

Because the sap that flows in trees is exactly the same as the blood which flows in the veins: that's what the union with the universe is all about. The wind you feel is the same as the wind you breathe out or that you breathe in. One of the most exciting things is when you can feel yourself merging into the landscape. One of our customs is to bury the child's afterbirth in the earth. When that happens it's a two-way connection. It's not only a connection of yourself with the earth but it's also an acceptance by the earth of yourself as coming from the earth.

What effect has urbanization had on all this and on Maori culture? Is it possible for this feeling to continue even when the great majority of the Maori population is urbanized?

The effect that it's had has been one of absolute tragedy. I think we all have to look very very closely at what urbanization does. In New Zealand's case it means that our people are confronted with European methods and culture: they are confronted with a majority culture that sees the world in its own terms of reference and most times those terms of reference exclude Maori culture so that Maori children will watch, exactly as children do around the rest of the world, programmes like *Dallas* and other American TV series and they will value those above anything cultural which is Maori. Urbanization has transferred the population from its rural hearths to the cities, has taken them away from traditional ways of thinking about the world, from earth to concrete, from marae concepts and community concepts to concepts of individuality. All this has meant the gradual death of our culture.

It's only lately that we've begun to react. We now have a system of urban maraes which have been built in our major cities as centres of Maori cultural activity for the young who are growing up there. We have also organized language learning units, supported by the Department of Maori Affairs, for pre-school children who come every day to learn Maori language and it's very successful. We've also established another scheme whereby older people adopt young people for two or three hours a day and talk to them totally in Maori.

I've already mentioned that when you get 85% of any population transferred to cities in the space of 20 or 30 years this is tremendously disruptive to cultural continuity. It also holds economic problems for us because most of the Maori people who have moved into the cities have become part of the lower economic base of that population. If we don't watch out within the future we will have tremendous racial problems: they've already started to surface and they will continue to surface. We

have the largest population in jail in New Zealand: we are 10% of the population but about 70% of the prison inmates are of Maori descent. The fact that the crime rate is bigger among the Maori population is not always our fault, it's that the Pakeha don't understand our own concepts of behaviour. Politically, too, what has happened is that urban drift has left us in a landless and cultureless situation. So at present we've begun to protest about land issues, issues of housing, of better political representation in cities for our people, and all this has tended to make the situation in New Zealand rather intense and sometimes very racially inflammatory. Pakeha civilization, no matter where it is, unfortunately still believes that English or French or Russian or whatever is the dominant language and when you are on a small island like our own, Maori culture in all its facets becomes undervalued. In the last two years we have decided to push for Maori sovereignty. Maori people should be able to say for themselves what they want and not have that interpreted for them by the Pakeha in power.

Wouldn't this tend, though, to lead to increased separation between the two components of New Zealand?

Well, I guess that what we're talking about is survival and we have looked at the path that we have attempted to walk for integration. We don't see Maori sovereignty as being a risk to Pakeha people, but what we are simply saying is that for so long now you have told us what we should be doing and we want to retain that right for ourselves. Now this may mean increasing political representation in Parliament; it may also mean positive recruitment programmes in Government Departments and taking very firm steps to improve the social and economic standing of Maori people in New Zealand. It means that a number of Maori representatives should be included in Government committees on questions like justice or women's rights.

Surely one of the basic aspects of the whole problem of the survival of Maori culture but also of the development of New Zealand as a truly bi-cultural country lies in education. Maori is beginning to be taught in schools — to all New Zealanders?

Yes, it is. At the moment, though, it's still on a non-compulsory basis. The interesting aspect about Maori language is that it wasn't until the 1960s that Maori people themselves actually woke up to the fact of this population shift and became very concerned about engineering the education system to take account of Maori language and the need to

teach the children Maori language in the urban areas. But in 1970, for instance, which isn't too far back, New Zealand television hadn't any credence in Maori language and it was only last year that new broadcasts were acceptable in both Maori and in English. We now have a growing body of Maori people and bi-cultural people who are continuing to widen the opportunities for more Maori language programmes.

What is your identity as a writer? Do you consider yourself first and foremost as a Maori writer?

I've gone through various stages. I still think of myself as a Maori writer, but now that there are many more Maori writers — in the 1970s there were only three of us but now we seem to have entered a period of great cultural rejuvenation when a lot more people are beginning to write — I've become a little bit more selfish. I am becoming less and less a person who is writing on behalf of a culture and believes he has a role in articulating their concerns and not his own; I have now become more a writer who is articulating selfish concerns. But they are selfish simply in that they are my *own* feelings about being Maori rather than the community's. The result is that they are more aggressive: they are not more European at all, they are more pro-Maori than they ever were.

What works and authors have you been influenced by or do you feel affinity with? And, generally speaking, how do you see the problem of relations with other writing and other literatures?

I feel an affinity with any writer who comes from a tribal background. There was a critic in New Zealand who said that Pakeha readers would never be able to understand my novel *Tangi* because it was way outside their experience. I wrote back saying 'Look, all you need to do is to go back to your own tribal roots and to Anglo-Saxon. If you read Anglo-Saxon literature you will find exactly the same feeling for the hall, the community obligation to the lord, it's all naturalistic imagery and it's virtually the same sort of world as *we* have now, except that you have forgotten your own tribal roots!' Now I've gone into Italian opera — Italian opera of the sort that has its roots in Sicilian village life, like *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Those are the people who have mainly influenced my work, those tribally oriented people. But because New Zealand culture has got to be distinctive, or Maori culture has got to be distinctive in New Zealand, I've tried not to read too closely African literature or other emerging literatures because I'm sure that if I did I could possibly use

some of them without my knowledge and turn my own work into what could very well be plastic African, and I'm not into that.

What is the relationship between New Zealand Pakeha literature and Maori literature?

New Zealand Pakeha literature has provided all of us with a sense of narrative and a sense of style, but the Maori oral tradition is not a narrative tradition and what we've had to do is to try to adapt the Western tradition to our own uses. This has caused us some difficulties in publication because people say your story has got to have a beginning, a middle and an end and most of our writing is in fact circular — it doesn't begin and it doesn't end, it's just circular. In the early days this caused a lot of confusion. People didn't really like it, they thought it was too simple. Well, simplicity is part of our myths and our culture. The work was also felt to be rather sentimental — well, I'm very sorry but Maoris are people who tend to cry and tend to laugh, they are our basic human emotions and we have not been westernized to the extent that we find it difficult to cry because someone has told us that we should not do it.

This brings us to the way your work is structured and to the genres you have adopted. Do you think that the novel is suited as a genre to the expression of the Maori experience?

No, I don't, because even though, now, anything goes in the novel and you can structure a novel the way you wish, Maori culture is a living experience, not one that you read about, and the realm of the theatre is more appropriate than the realm of the novel to fully explore and to enable people fully to understand what a living culture is like. Reading about it is more analytical. We depend a lot on people's emotions, we like to involve ourselves directly in emotion, and there is no such thing as an 'audience' among the Maori people. You are all participants. Whenever you go onto a marae you are welcomed into the tribe and you become a tribesperson, but the novel doesn't allow you to do that. The novel simply keeps the reader as a reader and simply keeps you as the writer. Your emotions might be engaged as a reader but there is still that last final link of aroha which can only be done when you're in each other's presence.

Another reason why I don't like the novel as a vehicle is that editors have peculiar presumptions about what is required and if you are

concerned about doing things culturally so that your work maintains its integrity then you often have to make decisions which are extremely difficult to keep and it's not just a matter of whether or not you have a glossary or whether or not words are italicized, it's also a matter of saying or acknowledging that we are not an individualized society so the critics who complain about lack of characterization are correct, it's just that we don't have that I-focus in our work. One of the criticisms of my work and of most Maori writers' work is in fact that it doesn't conform in terms of characterization. It took me a long time before I suddenly realized that I don't characterize because we don't do that in our culture: we regard each other as being equal and to characterize someone in the way that European literature does is not correct for us. What I fear sometimes is that because the novel format is so strong, and because most of us are such very young practitioners of the novel art, we can easily be persuaded to adopt particular European narrative traditions which, while they might interpret us in a way that Pakeha people can then understand, isn't appropriate for us.

A recurrent theme in your work is death, but a death that is always linked to life, to rebirth or to the dawning of knowledge, the coming to awareness, to an understanding of life.

In Maori culture the occasions of death are the very important times when you hear stories and because in Maori culture death requires you to travel from wherever you live to your marae where the ceremonials are held, that is the occasion when everybody starts to talk about whakapapa and about relationships. So although someone has died that is the occasion for the continuing transmission. The other thought goes back to that whole concept of 'the rope of man'. While death is extremely tragic in terms of the destruction it causes, at the end of the ceremonials there is this gratefulness and there is this still caring: it's not as if a person is in the ground and that's the end of it, there is still the understanding that he continues to be here — he or she is in my blood — and while there is of course physical separation, there is still no emotional separation whatsoever.

Another feature, particularly on the linguistic level, in your use of images, symbol and metaphor, is the presence of nature, a very elemental nature, the wind, the sky, the earth, the sea, the greenstone — although stones and jewellery, particularly the greenstone and the emerald, make up an independent image system.

We are people of the land. We have always lived with the earth beneath our feet and we feel the rhythm of the land and the rhythm of the elements. I don't think we're any different from any other culture which names rocks and names mountains and names rivers and gives them animation so that they are not just a river but they are a god or a person. The earth is our mother and the sky is our father and we are the people who live between them, so we are the inheritors of a natural world, not a superficial one at all.

Greenstone is our most prized possession. It's such a beautiful, luminous, glowing stone and I've always used it to symbolize Maori culture, while I use hard, brittle, glittering emeralds to symbolize the attractions of Pakeha culture.

Another theme is that of the journey, frequently not from A to B but from A back to A again.

I think the emphasis on journeys is mainly caused by the fact that Maori people continue to go backwards and forwards and backwards and forwards from their marae to their place of work. I'm always travelling back to my marae, it's a continual journeying from Pakeha culture to Maori culture to Pakeha culture again, but it's always like a rebirth when I go back. The journey, too, is symbolical of the journey of Maori people, which they've all taken over the years, and I guess the journey is what might be called an allegory on Maori development. We aren't at the end of the journey, and certainly the nature of my work where it involves journeys is saying really that our journey is in fact back to the sort of people that we used to be. We might have to manage that journey by using different techniques, but as long as we return to our identity and carry that identity with us then we'll be fine. I've never really written about the end of any journeys because I think that is a Western concept: it's a narrative concept that requires you to give an ending, which must be either happy or sad, but Maori people don't look at time like that, or journeys like that, and it is again that whole concept of te taura tangata, an unfolding of culture through the years. That unfolding might mean that we become less Maori but it might also mean that we become more Maori, but whatever it is, whatever sort of people we are by that time, we are still Maori. We may have lost some cultural concepts along the way but we'll have developed our sense of Maoriness in other ways.

Music is present throughout your work. It's present in language, in theme, it becomes structure. And it's both Maori and Western music. What would you say is the importance of music to you?

Well, the Maori language has been called 'the singing word'. Speaking is such a flat way of communicating and most chanting and reciting of whakapapa is in fact done not in the speaking way at all, it's always sung, and so singing has always appealed to me as being the best way to mirror one's emotions. I've found a lot of compatibility with the music of the Italian tradition. It is potent, it is forthright, the words that are sung are words that come from the heart. I think that Maori music is heart music; we are a people who believe very very much in emotional expression.

Could you talk about the transposition of your work into opera and the staging of Waituhi, the problems it posed, the solutions you adopted, the traditions you had in mind?

We have a very strong tradition of marae theatre. I called the opera *Waituhi* and subtitled it *The Life of the Village* — it has no main characters at all, the main character is the village itself — so what you see and the journey you are taken on is the journey of this particular village, why it exists and what is happening to it in this present day. We had a number of staging problems with it and also we needed to be sure that the music was not too European oriented. All of the music is original, but the composer I worked with and I had to be absolutely meticulous about the kind of voices and the kind of emotions we wanted them to carry. In most of the opera there is what we call a Maori sound: it's not an operatic sound and it's not staged in an operatic way; the people act very naturally and they sing very naturally, but it isn't a touristy glamour show and it is nothing like some of the travesties I have seen of black American and black African musicals. In fact it is not a musical, it's a serious work which comments on the Maori condition in New Zealand. It sets out to entertain, certainly, but its main message is that this village has as much right to live as anything else in the world because all of the people who live in this village are descended from man. Now he might be different from your man, i.e. Italian man, or European man, or whatever, but Man is the most important creature in the world and no one is going to say that our ancestor, the ancestor of the Maori, is less important.

Do you think your theatrical experiences are going to influence your work in fiction?

I came to the realization about theatre rather than the novel being a better vehicle three years ago and so most of my work from now on will be appealing to that sort of audience. I hope to write a play shortly and

also to begin writing for television. I used to think that television was the absolute pit of superficiality, but it is the communications medium that all our kids are watching — it's just a plain fact of life — and the only way in which we can control that medium is to write for it, so whether I like it or not I'll be writing for television.

You are writing your latest novel after a very long leave off from literature. Is it going to represent a breakaway from your previous work?

My latest novel and all of the work that I have done since and including the opera is aggressive because I believe that we are running out of time and that I am running out of time, that there is a great need to try to stop the communications overload that all of our younger generations are getting from other cultures and that someone has got to be fairly stern and fairly rigid and say what I'm proposing to say in all of my work from now on, which is that there is very little of worth if you want to remain a Maori in any other culture.

Women play an important role in all your work and judging by the title this role is going to continue in The Matriarch.

Our women are just amazing. They are the ones who are going to be at the forefront of every breakthrough that Maori people will make within European society in New Zealand. It's already started to happen: they are much more radicalized, they have more to lose than the men because they are the ones who bear the children and they are usually the ones who bury them too. They are highly articulate, these women, they are not scared to speak out, they bring a warrior attitude to Maori issues which has long been needed. Maori men still tend to work within the narrow confines of traditional behaviour and I'm very excited about the role of Maori women.

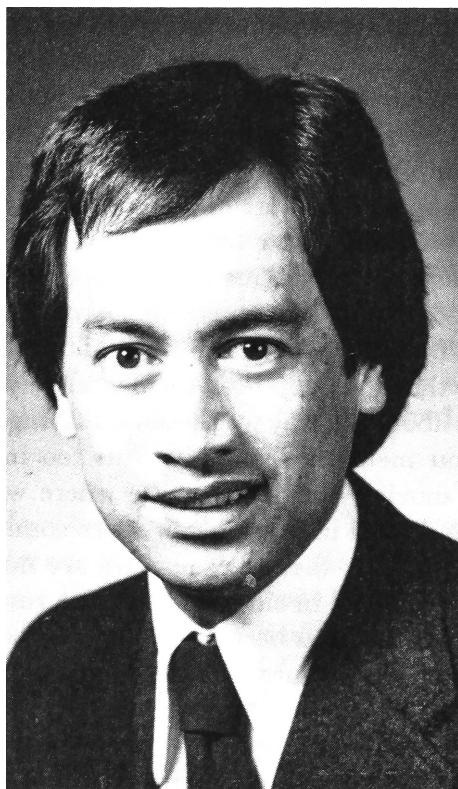
What is the future of Maori literature? In an attempt to analyse and forecast phases in the emergence of another new literature of the Pacific, that of Papua-New Guinea, William McGaw indicates four stages through which, he says, most new literatures seem to proceed: a 'cultural erosion' stage marked by the re-examination of the conflicts between traditional and western life, beliefs and customs and aiming to 'set the record straight'; a second stage moving from cultural adaptation and adjustment; a third stage in which the urban and social focus replaces the regional and cultural; a fourth phase, in which the individual and personal focus replaces the social. Will Maori literature follow the same pattern, do you think?

It all sounds very familiar and I would say that I have followed those steps fairly closely except that there is one central stabilizing force and that is that no matter what stages the literature has gone through, the fact of being Maori and of having a social and economic and political purpose never changes: the individual purpose is still to identify oneself as a Maori and try to interpret the world from that central point. Now this is probably peculiar to New Zealand and to our writers because we are such a small population. There are 500,000 Maoris on a population of 3,000,000 in a small island down at the bottom of the world. I have never heard Pakeha people saying that what they are doing is for the Pakeha people of New Zealand, but if you ask any Maori person why he is doing what he is doing he will tell you he is doing it for the Maori people of New Zealand. So that is the central stabilizing force to our literature. The way in which we approach that might be through music or through art or whatever, it's simply an expression of that central Maoriness.

Papua-New Guinea is an interesting case because its literature was in fact stimulated by Ulli Beier. Many Papua-New Guinea writers will now not acknowledge Ulli Beier's creative force and the way he pushed the literature and although some people say it was a good thing for the literature, others say it had a negative effect in that most of the books that came out were really not too dissimilar from black African writing. I think that what has now happened in Papua-New Guinea is a moderation from that first impulsive creation into a literature of their own and it could only have happened because of that initial push into independence. In New Zealand we didn't have that push. What we had to do was to create for ourselves a way of talking and a way of speaking and there has been some disappointment by people who have expected it to be more radical than it is. But all that we can say is that these are our words and this is how we say them; we don't say them your way and we can't accept your assumptions about the way we should be saying what we are saying.

The pattern you mentioned applies to us too in the sense that our literature is now moving out of the phase where we have been talking about ourselves as Maori into the much more coming-to-grips phase of race relations and I think that's because we are now seeing the rise of Maori writers who've lived in cities and have no rural roots at all. What I've attempted to do so far has been to try and catch up because my literature has always been a literature of Maori people interacting with themselves. I think this is an exciting development in New Zealand because it is only now that we are able to say to the Pakeha 'These are the good things that have happened to us and these are the bad things that have happened' on *his* terms and in language that *he* understands. This inter-

action is exciting, it's critical, it's inventive, it's creative, it's also complementary with Pakeha literature, and as long as Pakeha people don't regard this as a threat, then we will survive. If they start to regard Maori literature of the radical kind as a threat, then we are in trouble, or they are in trouble: we have a saying in Maori culture and that is 'If you stand, you live; if you lie down, then you die' and these days Maori people are not prepared to lie down.



Witi Ihimaera