

GLAMOUR IN THE PACIFIC: CULTURAL INTERNATIONALISM AND MAORI POLITICS AT PAN-PACIFIC WOMEN'S CONFERENCES IN THE 1950S

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This paper sets out to consider the reception of Maori woman delegate Mira Petricevich who attended Pan-Pacific Women's Association (later Pan-Pacific and South East Asian Women's Association) conferences as a New Zealand delegate in 1952 and 1955. She utilised both tradition and modernity in her self-promotion as a key conference figure. A member of the Maori Women's Welfare League, Petricevich was one of a post-war generation of Maori who promoted cultural difference towards indigenous resilience within settler colonialism. Petricevich and other Maori delegates brought Maori cultural identity politics into dialogue with Pan-Pacific women's internationalism as they set about interrogating the cultural internationalism it promoted. As members of the pakeha-dominated New Zealand delegation, their identification with indigenous women in the region registered a powerful counter-narrative to the interracial harmony promoted by the PPWA in the post-war decade.

IN 1955 MAORI DELEGATE Mira Petricevich was featured in a Manila press report of the Pan-Pacific Women's Association (PPWA) conference meeting in the Philippines. One of several members of the Maori Women's Welfare League (MWWL) attending as part of the New Zealand delegation, Petricevich attracted particular press attention as a recent winner of the Miss New Zealand beauty contest. According to the *Manila Times*:

All is not 'brains' at the current Pan Pacific Women's conference in Manila. Among those contributing the 'beauty' part is Miss Mira Petricevich, delegate from New Zealand, and who is shown above in a modernized version of her native Maori costume...Miss Petricev-



FIGURE 1. Mira Petricevich in 'modernized' traditional dress. *Manila Times*, January 24, 1955, p. 6. (Permission of National Library of Australia)

ich is a six-footer with dark, wavy hair...holds a B.A. degree, [and] speaks fluent English¹

Petricevich had established her reputation three years earlier at the 1952 conference in Christchurch. Not only "beauteous", but also an excellent public speaker,² Petricevich was voted the "glamour girl" of the conference.³ This article sets out to investigate the striking presence of Petricevich at the PWWA during the 1950s. Like her 'modernized' outfit, Petricevich was welcomed as an example of tradition in modernized form: an indigenous woman of a settler colony who shared the PPWA vision of world cooperation.

Recent histories of women's internationalism have noted the presence of non-western women within western-dominated international networks, particularly from the early twentieth century, as expressing the increasing readiness of white women to engage with their non-western counterparts.⁴ This engagement was one of the stated aims of the PPWA. From 1928, conferences were designed to allow women from the Pacific Rim to meet and

develop friendships across racial and cultural divides. PPWA delegates were thus to model the ways in which the 'less advanced' might join with the 'advanced' nations in international cooperation. Hostilities inspired by 'race' or nationalism were to be replaced by a world perspective cemented upon the shared appreciation of cultural diversity.

Although claiming a preparedness to cast all cultures as different from each other, PPWA internationalism remained situated within a hierarchical notion of cultural progress. Delegates from Asian countries or later from Pacific Island nations were invited into internationalism on the very grounds of their difference *from* an emerging western globalising culture that remained largely hegemonic within PPWA discourse. Numbers of historians of cosmopolitanism and internationalism amongst western progressive women at the turn of the last century have noted the New Woman's delight in culturally exotic objects, such as Oriental handcraft, dress, or furnishings, sought by them to express their interest in an expanded worldview. In her study of white women and American Orientalism, Mari Yoshihara has shown how 'the Orient' formed a central element of progressive gender politics in the U.S. at the turn of last century, and that white women contributed to its construction.⁵ In her study of 'cosmopolitan domesticity', Kristin Hoganson has argued that the consumption of exotic objects for domestic display expressed a progressive outlook intimately interpolated in the new imperialism enjoyed by elite white women and men in the U.S. at this time.⁶ And Laura Wexler extends the notion of the domestic to include photographs in which, she argues, everyday scenes become 'highly manipulative weapons' in the arsenal of middle-class white American imperialism.⁷ In each, the spaces and concerns dominated by women are deeply implicated in the project of empire. Similarly, PPWA conferences, with their delight in appearance, culture, and discussion, particularly between 'East' and 'West', need to be understood as scenes in which imperial questions of progress and civilisation were far from absent.

In the PPWA, the turn of the century imperial nostalgia of the New Woman noted above entered a new era, one marked by the increasing presence of other women. At the PPWA cultural objects already valued within this progressive economy were given new valency, such as the kimono worn by women from Japan, or the carvings and weavings presented by Pacific Island women to conference audiences. Moreover, the political interests of these women leant cultural objects a strategic significance. The politics of culture, played out also in the burgeoning of tourism and in a global economy in indigenous art and craft,⁸ was enacted daily in a variety of ways at PPWA conferences – at cultural events in which non-western delegates might perform dances and songs, in the traditional outfits they wore to social events, or in

the displays of handcraft they brought with them. This political and strategic engagement with cultural identity politics was given added significance by the fact that delegates from the U.S., Australia, Canada and New Zealand, were also settler colonial women and were thus themselves directly implicated in global systems of inequality.

By the 1950s, the PPWA emphasis on cultural internationalism found new valency in the Cold War era when western nations looked to world hegemony. While the Cold War has been typically characterised as an era of U.S. isolationism, Christina Klein has shown that integration was promoted in popular texts such as 'The King and I' and by key commentators advocating knowledge of other peoples and cultures. Decolonisation was a critical feature of this post-war context. Thus middle-level State Department official Francis Wilcox in 1957, only two years after the Manila conference, told a meeting of educators in Philadelphia that decolonisation in Africa and Asia was changing the world forever. The new task for the U.S. was to provide leadership around the world and to engage with the perspectives in particular of newly decolonised nations.⁹

Situated within this larger move to engage cultural exchange in a western civilising project, a project it had sought to carry out from the late 1920s, the PPWA illustrates the contradictory, partial and contingent nature of any meta-narrative such as cultural internationalism. Its conferences provided not a linear progression towards internationalism through cultural exchange (the new world order), but heterotopic spaces in which multiple accounts of progress were given voice. As we will see, women from decolonised nations would prove of great interest to Maori women attending 1950s conferences as they sought to draw international attention to the conditions of colonisation faced by their people in New Zealand.

While the PPWA had welcomed Maori delegates since the 1930s,¹⁰ in the post-war era a new generation of MWWL women (with Petricevich leading among them) began to interrogate the place of indigenous women within this Pacific Rim-based women's community. Historian Barbara Brooks has argued that the MWWL inherited the combination of integration with cultural identity promoted by Maori leaders in the post-war generation, during decades of enormous demographic and social change, not least precipitated through the 1945 Act 'to make Provision for the Social and Economic Advancement and the Promotion and Maintenance of the Health and Social Well-Being of the Maori Community.' Petricevich was herself a Department of Maori Affairs Officer well used to advocating what Brookes has termed the 'necessarily contradictory position' of integration at the same time as promoting Maori culture¹¹ by the time she was attending PPWA conferences in the 1950s. While the domestic world of childrearing, education, and health

issues were crucial to Maori politics in the 1950s, the MWWL's involvement in the PPWA raises the obvious question of the value of women's internationalism to Maori women activists engaged in promoting reform within New Zealand. In the following, I argue that the post-war engagement between the MWWL and the PPWA suggests the strength of leading Maori women's interests in a version of internationalism. They utilised the PPWA women's cultural internationalism as a way of accessing an international context for the Maori bi-culturalism they advocated as a way forward for the Maori people.

The Pan-Pacific Community of Women

From its beginnings as the Honolulu-based Pan-Pacific Women's Conference of 1928 and then as the PPWA from 1930, the Pan-Pacific women's network was dominated by a social reform politics promoting interracial friendship and cross-cultural exchange as the foundations for world peace. PPWA internationalism began as an experiment in facilitating the meeting of Western women with the women of the East 'on their own ground'.¹² Delegates from America, Australia, New Zealand, but also from the newly 'civilised' nations of Japan and China, had been considered most able to lead the way forward, and they continued to dominate organisational hierarchy post-World War Two. Initially the capacity of Chinese and Japanese women for international conference work impressed and even surprised women from Australia and other western countries. Encouraged to wear their regional or national dress at conference social events, these women were recognisably 'other' in their colourful outfits. Cultural difference expressed in dress constituted a pleasure that white women could enjoy during conferences, even as they rejected 'race' as one of the obstacles to internationalism.¹³ The limited but none the less notable agency exercised by non-white women in choosing when to wear 'traditional' costume for their white colleagues is most aptly illustrated in the case of Japanese delegate Tsune Gauntlett. An experienced internationalist with a British husband and a western lifestyle, Gauntlett had first learned of western women's assumptions concerning Japanese femininity while attending a White Ribbon League of Nations Conference in London in 1920. Advised that she would be expected to appear in a kimono, she borrowed one from another Japanese delegate, and always wore one when she gave speeches.¹⁴

The PPWA promoted a pacifist and anti-racist international agenda in which women were to be central agents for change. Attracting Pacific Rim women already involved in promoting women's status and conditions in their own countries, its membership was dominated by representatives of women's organisations already established across the Pan-Pacific, among them

the National Councils of Women, Young Women's Christian Associations, Leagues of Women Voters, and Federations of University Women. While representatives of these and other organisations, PPWA delegates attending conferences became members of composite national delegations. Not until after World War Two did these Christian women's networks, some with missionary involvement in Pacific Islands, consider Island women able to represent their selves.¹⁵ In the Cold War era of the 1950s, Christianity was remobilised as a force uniting women delegates in a shared opposition to Communism. According to the welcome message to delegates attending the 1955 Manila conference, Communism was the central challenge facing the "peoples of the free world".¹⁶

New Zealanders had become leading figures in the PPWA from the inter-war decades. By the time Petricevich attracted particular interest during conferences in the 1950s, numbers of pakeha women were well established in the association hierarchy. Amy Kane, a former president of the National Council of Women of New Zealand, was the president of the national PPWA and a member of the International Council from 1949 to 1958. Elected a life member of the association in the 1960s, Kane continued to participate in Annual Meetings into the 1970s. Mary McLean, a physiotherapist and long-time member, contributed an interest in the United Nations (UN) that "enabled her to give members an insight into the problems faced by the developing countries."¹⁷ A president of the New Zealand Women Writers' and Painters' Society and an executive member of the United Nations Association, Mary Seaton attended conferences from 1928. She was International Program Chair from 1949 until 1952, providing impetus for the re-convening of the PPWA following World War Two.¹⁸ Ellen Lea (National Council of Women, Country Women's Association, Women Teachers' Association, and Business and Professional Women's Association) was International Secretary of the PPWA in the 1950s. And Fanny B. Taylor (Women Teachers' Association), who became another life member of the PPWA, was a specialist in educational reform.

In addition to Maori delegates Mira Petricevich and Victoria Bennett, of whom more in the following section, Maori women present in 1955 included social worker J. Emery. Although not an official delegate, leading the Maori cultural entourage in 1952 was Mrs U. R. Zister (Ngeungeu Te Irirangi) who represented Princess Te Puea Herangi, a sponsor of the MWWL. Zister extended a traditional welcome to delegates in Christchurch.¹⁹

Reflecting the vibrancy of the PPWA in these years, the 1952 conference attracted 110 representatives from 18 countries, and in 1955, 149 delegates arrived from 20 countries.²⁰ The significance of this vibrant women's community in the Pan-Pacific was recognised by the League of Nations and

the International Labour Organisation, and then by the UN following the war. These institutions welcomed the international women's network in the region. The League sent Dame Rachel Crowdy, its Director of Traffic in Women and Opium, and the Social Question Section who was an observer at the 1930 conference in one of her last missions before her retirement. Along with the presence of renowned world feminists such as Jane Addams (honorary president of the first conference), Crowdy endorsed the PPWA as one of the leading women's international networks of its time.²¹ By the 1950s, the PPWA was one of several women's international organisations awarded consultative status by the UN, its representatives stationed in the Pacific regularly attending conferences. Where League of Nations' assertions of guardianship towards native peoples had influenced PPWA "East meets West" internationalism before the war, now the United Nations' focus on social justice and development impacted its post-war aims. In 1945, the UN asserted that all peoples were entitled to a "peace founded ... upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind," the development of new nation-states being crucial to international cooperation.²² In 1954, New Zealander and PPWA international secretary Mary Seaton visited the United Nations, an experience she described as "thrilling" and "fascinating."²³

Of particular significance, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) forged a close relationship with the PPWA, the two holding parallel approaches on the question of world progress. UNESCO promoted culture and knowledge as a basis for international exchange and world peace from its formation in 1945, just as Pan-Pacific Women's Conferences had since 1928. For its first post-war conference in 1949, the PPWA chose the UNESCO theme of promoting education for international understanding, along with human and social relations, health, welfare, race relations, minorities and land tenure, as conference themes.²⁴ In preparation for the conference, study groups were to research the measures in their own country designed to "combat ignorance and prejudice" including museum exhibits or artistic expression.²⁵

One practical outcome of this strengthening relationship was the securing of UNESCO funds for delegations from under-developed countries to attend conferences. Early conferences attracted mostly wealthy women from such countries as the Philippines, Siam (Thailand), and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). By the 1950s, with the help of UNESCO, participation dramatically expanded to include Cambodia, Burma, Samoa, Tonga, New Guinea, Vietnam and Indonesia. Delegates from these nations reported diverse political rights for women across South East Asia and the Pacific. Mrs Kyan Myint, for example, advised that for 500 years equal rights for Burmese women had been enshrined within traditional law. Miss Soesolawate described the need

for more women in Indonesian parliament. And Mrs N. Holu reported that Tongan women would vote for the first time in the next elections.²⁶ Where the Pacific Rim had dominated the organisation in the interwar years, in the post-war era South East Asian and Pacific Islands women emerged as a dominant force, determined that the desire for friendship and agreement between women should not veil over difference.

Significant numbers of these non-Western delegates from countries recently liberated from colonial regimes participating in conferences were determined to convey their own version of women's internationalism to the PPWA. Interest in the PPWA as a forum for a new indigenous women's voice in internationalism was clearly evident in 1955, when over 600 Philippine women paid for the opportunity to sit in the conference audience and listen to papers and discussions.²⁷ At the end of the Manila conference, the PPWA membership acknowledged their influence by adopting the new name of Pan-Pacific and South East Asia Women's Association.

Representation by indigenous women living under or recently liberated from colonialism increased also during this decade, notably from the Pacific Islands and Hawai'i. Increasing numbers of Pacific Island women attended conferences, several describing for the first time to an international women's audience the relatively low status of women in their countries where traditional culture and mission Christianity had combined for negative effect.²⁸ Thus Papuan delegate and mission schoolteacher, Miss A. Wedaga, remarked upon the low status and education of women in her country. In contrast, Miss S. Malietoa asserted a relatively high status in Samoa, due, she claimed, to the influence of New Zealand's education system - New Zealand being the colonial power. The civilising impact of colonialism mirrors earlier histories of how western missions impacted on traditional femininity in Hawai'i and elsewhere. (Arguably, we can see an equivalent to the historical modification of Maori women's dress, like that of the hula, in the modernised version of traditional dress Petricevich was said to wear to conferences.)²⁹

Although Hawai'ian delegations had early proclaimed their intention to include members of all races living on the island,³⁰ it was not until 1952 that the first Indigenous Hawai'ian, social worker Clorinda Lucas, joined Haoles on the delegation. Reflecting increased recognition of the role of Indigenous Hawai'ian women in social reform in Hawai'i, Lucas became their team leader.³¹

In contrast, Maori women had been members of the New Zealand delegations since before the war. A leading figure among them was Victoria Bennett who joined the New Zealand delegation to the PPWA in Honolulu in 1934. Already a Vice President of the New Zealand Young Women's Christian Association, Bennett was not only a trailblazer but also a remarkable asset to

the New Zealand delegation. According to its pakeha leader, Elsie Andrews, the bilingual and cross-cultural performances she helped to present (including dance, song and welcome speech) in 1934 provided an extraordinary example of the potential for interracial harmony.³² During the 1950s, Maori delegates including Bennett continued to combine cultural performance (including song, dance and chanting) with the presentation of conference papers and at times heated participation in conference debates.³³ Of the Maori delegates in the 1950s, Petricevich was the most remarkable.

A Maori Woman Internationalist

Miraka (Mira) Petricevich (later Szaszy) was born on the North Island of New Zealand in 1921. Her mother was connected to several important iwi (including Ngati Kuri and Aupouiri), while her father was Yugoslav-born. She was educated at one of the several elite schools for Maori girls in New Zealand, before leaving to study social work in Honolulu at the University of Hawai'i in 1948, probably the first Maori woman to do so.³⁴ While in Honolulu, she attended the first PPWA conference convened after the war, becoming known to the New Zealand delegation and seeing the organisation at work. On her return Petricevich became a Department of Maori Affairs Welfare Officer. From here, she joined the Maori Women's Welfare League (MWWL) in the early 1950s and remained one of its most important executives until 1977. She has been a leading member in various Maori Congresses, the Maori Fisheries Commission, and the Maori Women's Development Fund Trust, and remains a well-known figure.³⁵

In 1947 Petricevich was a runner-up in the Miss New Zealand contest. Maori women had participated in the contest since before the Second World War, as the winners of the Pacific Queen competition. From the early twentieth century, contestants ideally of British-origin were judged for their attractiveness as the future mothers of the white race.³⁶ By the 1950s, however, racial integration dominated public policy resulting in greater opportunities for Maori women competing in the New Zealand title. Writing of a 1961 Maori beauty queen, Maureen Kingi, historian Megan Woods argues that despite the oscillation between 'traditional' and 'modern' she was required to perform, the contest provided her nonetheless with an opportunity to promote Maori culture and the role of Maori women in its preservation.³⁷ A similarly contradictory outcome would eventuate at the PPWA.

At first rejected by her peers as too qualified and overly westernised, Petricevich became the MWWL's secretary and worked closely with Princess Te Puea, one of the most important and highly revered Maori women of her generation.³⁸ She would later recall her appointment to the MWWL as



FIGURE 2. Petricevich poses with a group of conference delegates at the 1955 conference in Manila. (Permission of PPSEAWA, Honolulu)

profoundly life-changing. Just as the re-vitalisation of Maori as a spoken language was an important issue to Maori in the 1950s, so it was through traveling around New Zealand and visiting Maori communities that Petricevich discovered a capacity for oratory in her own language.³⁹ Thus she was engaged in a significant journey of cultural and political identification when the opportunity to attend the 1952 PPWA conference first arose. Despite initial reluctance to attend, no doubt a reflection of the western-influenced internationalism it aspired to, Petricevich soon established herself within the PPWA as a commanding speaker in a different form (in English), and a striking figure.

Sophistication in style and appearance was important to Petricevich's success as a PPWA delegate. The PPWA celebrated certain attributes from its women internationalists. Its delegates admired directness of gaze, graceful posture, and stylish dress, finding in them attributes complementing the breadth of knowledge, commitment to social change, and flair in public speaking necessary to the international woman. Whiteness remained the basis against which other kinds of femininity were measured. In 1934, for example, the president of the New Zealand delegation, Elsie Andrews, described several of her co-conference delegates as "goddesses". These tall, fair-haired women embodied the classical attributes of the modern international feminist ideal.⁴⁰ Adopting elements of western style might win non-white women's approval, thereby marking their interest in becoming modern. In the 1930s, bobbed hair and simple pearl earrings were greatly admired when worn by Chinese delegates. Conversely, modernizing non-western delegates symbolised their difference through the ethnic attire they wore at



FIGURE 3. She gave a ‘very good paper, well read, [and] looked very well in white suit fitting well.’ (Permission of PPSEAWA, Honolulu)

social events. ‘Oriental’ women were often described as colourful, doll-like, and ‘delightful’, and surprise was expressed at their capacity to contribute to debate and to present their papers in English. Above all, their readiness to make friendships was universally noted, seemingly at odds with the widely accepted stereotype of the reticent Eastern woman.⁴¹

Neither reticent nor doll-like, Petricevich represented the Pacific woman – outspoken yet graceful, colourful yet smart in her western-style conference suit. She occupied a hybrid of conference typologies concerning femininity: although tall and striking like the white women so admired by Andrews, she was also racially or culturally not white. This duality mirrored her mixed cultural heritage as an ‘assimilated’ Maori. Moreover, Petricevich’s celebrated ‘beauty’ may be understood as an appreciation of her hybrid status in a literal sense – the relative paleness of her skin and her European-influenced features inherited from her father who was Yugoslavian.⁴²

Appearance was important to the impact achieved by Petricevich; embodiment a profoundly significant vehicle through which the politics of cultural internationalism were given practical expression. By the 1950s, as we will see, handcraft became a feature of the cultural politics of the PPWA conferences. When worn by indigenous women like Petricevich, handmade (and thus culturally-imbued) traditional dress was interpreted as expressing a connection with cultural life that industrialisation had long denied to women in the west. In their fascination with these cultural objects and the subjects who produced and wore them, western delegates expressed a nostalgic desire for non-western women’s relationship to culture. They anticipated that



FIGURE 4. Petricevich at the PPWA conference dinner 1955. R.M. Spoor Collection. (Permission of Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington)

non-western culture would bring about the re-humanisation of industrialised life in advanced countries.

In her remarkable capacity to appropriate the role of the indigenous international woman prescribed by the PPWA, Petricevich drew upon the legacy of the Young Maori Party in New Zealand, dominated by a generation of Maori women and men adept at working within the parameters of integration. According to historian James Belich, the pragmatic approach adopted by these “engagers” established a ‘brilliantly subversive co-operation’ between Maori cultural identity and pakeha-dominated society.⁴³ These were years of extraordinarily rapid urbanisation resulting in large numbers of single Maori women travelling to towns and cities to find work, often in the area of health.⁴⁴ Maori women became leading figures in welfare and formed a formidable force in challenging negative health and educational policies.

Noting its important place in the history of Maori rights in New Zealand, Barbara Brookes finds in the MWWL the ‘one national [and government-funded] organisation giving voice to Maori concerns in the 1950s’.⁴⁵ The question of its relationship with the PPWA would emerge in these years as one example of its concerns to maintain a Maori identity while participating in pakeha and regional affairs. While Petricevich joined the PPWA as a representative of the MWWL, during conferences in Christchurch in 1952 and Manila in 1955 tension grew between her involvement as a member of the

New Zealand delegation (dominated by pakeha women) and as a member of the MWWL. This tension was expressed during conference debates regarding the importance of culture, tradition, and family life to the status and conditions of indigenous women in the Pan-Pacific region, and was toughened by Petricevich's experience of meeting with indigenous women from Pacific island nations. They were engaged also in social reform within westernisation, many celebrating their recent liberation from a variety of colonial powers. While membership in the PPWA may initially have reflected Maori women's interest in maintaining links with pakeha women's organisations, now that they had their own organisational base it provided also an opportunity to meet in person with similarly placed women across the region. The radical potential of this experience galvanised Petricevich who came to question the subordination of Maori women within the New Zealand delegation, and to suggest their separate representation within PPWA hierarchy. In the second half of this paper, I focus on the new relationship between cultural identity and internationalism articulated by Maori women delegates including Petricevich.

From its earliest conference, the PPWA's policy of national delegations had posed a problem for those participating in ethnically mixed delegations, such as the Maori delegates. In 1928, for example, Chinese delegates attending the first PPWC were celebrated as modern representatives of the women of their country. Yet it was their delegation leader Eleanor Hinder, an Anglo Australian resident of Shanghai and tireless campaigner for the improved factory conditions of Chinese workers, who nominated China to host the next conference. While she hoped that Chinese women would thus be able to speak for themselves on the international stage, Hinder failed to anticipate the accusation from Chinese delegates that she was also implicated in the silencing of Chinese women. Dr Mei Ting, a Chinese national in the delegation, remonstrated that the women of China had not been asked whether they wished to host the next conference. This was a question only the Chinese women in the delegation could ask of them.⁴⁶

Conversely, MWWL representation within the PPWA had been a matter of discussion from its inception. Over ninety Maori women had attended the first conference in 1951. In the presence of observers from Pakeha women's organisations, one of the first questions discussed by delegates was whether to directly affiliate with the PPWA. A member of the New Zealand PPWA Dominion Executive, Bennett supported affiliation arguing that it would facilitate their greater influence in the Pacific. She asserted that Maori women could meet "face to face" with women whose "problems [were] the same" as

their own. At the same time they could contribute their considerable powers to the larger world community of women. Now was the time to “help towards gaining peace in the world” and they should “take [the opportunity] with both hands.”⁴⁷

The majority of MWWL delegates were not persuaded by Bennett’s argument, however. Although they conceded that Maori women had established their influence within “European Women’s Organisations”, this involvement had attracted only integrated women. They were those: “women of the [Maori] race who were in constant touch with European life and society and to those who felt that they could be comfortable and could hold their own among European women.”⁴⁸ In contrast, the MWWL would provide a forum for all Maori women, particularly those less comfortable in the white world. As in the case of Mira Petricevich, it would provide a forum for those Maori women who sought new ways of being Maori. The membership of the MWWL voted against affiliation, concluding that the “time was not yet come for the Maori women to join up with other organisations direct, [...] the women felt that they must learn to run their own organisation first ...”⁴⁹

In retrospect, this was a wise decision. Even at the first MWWL conference, pakeha PPWA women defended affiliation in instrumental terms. President Amy Kane asserted her qualification to speak as someone who already had “something to do with Maori groups” through her involvement with Women’s Institutes where “we have always worked with Maori members amongst us.” At the same time she supported the formation of the MWWL because “I think you can do a very great deal for your people.” New Zealand PPWA secretary Miss Mary McLean claimed affiliation would represent a return to the halcyon days of early colonisation when: “[w]e were friendly ... particularly the Maori and Pakeha women”. This renewed friendship would enhance the PPWA’s reach into the region: “In this Pan-Pacific work you people will have to help us; you will have to show us how to be one Pacific community, and I know I can rely on you during the coming year to advise us and guide us ...”⁵⁰

As would become evident in following years, pakeha women in the PPWA continued to mobilise Maori women towards the success of the New Zealand delegations. Thus long time member of the New Zealand PPWA and the organisation’s international vice president, Miss Ellen Lea expressed her pleasure at attending the third MWWL conference in 1954, because “to learn from Maori women ... would be of great use to her [own]... international work ... [and] she could pass on the views of what was being done [for and by Maori women] ... to women of other countries ...”⁵¹ In their reports of the 1955 Manila PPWA conference to the MWWL Dominion Executive several months later, pakeha PPWA women described a happy and united New Zealand team,

commenting that they were proud of “our Maori friends” who gave successful public addresses.⁵² Conference discussions in 1952 added further weight to the MWWL’s insistence on autonomy. One of five round tables discussed different methods for bringing educated and underprivileged women into the public life and work of the community. They concluded that even in some western countries, it was difficult for social workers to reach women in less settled areas. Of three organisations they commended for achieving this outreach, one was in Ceylon, another in Pakistan, but the third was the MWWL in New Zealand.⁵³ Maori conditions aligned Maori women delegates with other non-western women of the Pacific rather than Pakeha in New Zealand.

Culture, Home and Handcraft

During the 1955 conference, Maori women embraced the opportunity to broadcast the needs and concerns of the Maori community. Interviewed by local press, Mrs J. Emery, MWWL member of the New Zealand delegation, explained the extent of the settler colonial impact on her people: “[A]fter the first contact between Maoris and Europeans there had been a period of transition for 100 years and transition is often a painful process.” Its repercussions extended into the present as: “10 times more Maoris were dying of tuberculosis than Europeans in New Zealand, and inter-race relations were no-where near perfect.” In addition to warfare, disease and racism, loss of cultural identity endangered Maori: “There was a danger of the native language dying out, but the Maori people had decided that they must meet the problems before them or perish.” Where pakeha PPWA women had expressed the desire to make Maori heritage part of their own, Emery reversed this order to give Maori ascendancy: “The Maori has a priceless heritage and with the high ideals of the two peoples in New Zealand the Maori race would reach out and go forward”⁵⁴

This reversal of cultural ascendancy—from pakeha to Maori—held considerable implications for PPWA Western-style feminist internationalism. Mrs Whitelaw, President of the Women’s Committee, National Council of Churches in Wellington was one pakeha member of the New Zealand delegation concerned to engage with this new Maori women’s voice. She reported to the New Zealand PPWA following the 1952 conference of its impact during a round-table discussion concerning the reform of the regulation of alcohol. One of the (unnamed) Maori delegates present refuted recent changes to the liquor act in New Zealand that allowed Maori women to drink in hotels alongside their men. She asserted that this progressive legislation had resulted not in the equal rights of Maori women, but in the diminution of their standing within the Maori community. Maori women in the MWWL and elsewhere

fought against the deleterious health and social effects of alcohol within the Maori community. Non-Maori participants in the discussion responded by insisting that differentiating between men and women was discrimination, while distinguishing between white and Maori women was regressive. Mobilising a racist discourse of the advancement of the native child races, they contended that reinstating the restriction would “be a step backward preventing the adult Maori making free choice” and would “retard the growing up process, bringing a basic loss in development of personality.”⁵⁵

Reflecting on her involvement in this exchange, Whitelaw concluded that in order “to promote better understanding of the difficulties that may still arise in adjusting the relationships between Maori and Pakeha in New Zealand”, members of the PPWA should contact the newly formed Maori Women’s Welfare League. While the MWWL would thus act as a source of knowledge for Pakeha women, it would also be possible, with greater understanding, to “co-operate with them and give them support in their undertakings” presumably regarding the control of alcohol in their communities. Ultimately, however, she effectively overlooked the undoubted fact that one of her Maori co-delegates had spoken against alcohol reform. In her view, PPWA internationalism’s preference for national delegations absorbed the potentially divisive politics of cultural difference: “It is time we thought of ourselves not as Maori and pakeha,” she stated, “but in terms of New Zealanders.”⁵⁶ A social justice response to imperialism and settler colonialism in the Pacific was problematic for white women in the PPWA who promoted the idea of an interracial community between women. In conference debate, this disjuncture was illustrated further in disagreements over the significance of two key themes dominating 1950s conference discussions, the home and handcraft.

As early as her 1930s League of Nations’ report, Rachel Crowdy had been pleased to note that the conference theme of ‘women in political life’ included the study of home and community. Jean Begg, New Zealand chair of the Social Service Project, and International Project Director in 1930, had asserted that healthy home life produced happy citizens, and thus greatly improved the possibilities for world peace. While domestic education was useful, housewives should be recognised as holding the future of world peace in their hands. They had to bring the values of home and family into the public sphere, in order to humanise the world. For the MWWL, however, reform in the conditions of the Maori home represented the core of their social justice campaign, complexly inter-woven in the uplift of their race as well as the rights of their children to freedom from racism, to better health, education, and cultural expression.⁵⁷

As well as home, handcraft was imagined by the PPWA to unite women beyond cultural difference. In her 1939 address to study groups preparing



FIGURE 5. Indigenous Hawai'ian PPWA President Clorinda Lucas (far left) and other delegates admire the handcraft exhibition. (Permission of PPSEAWA, Honolulu)

for the next conference, anthropologist of the Pacific Marie Keesing recommended that delegates bring along examples of handcraft representative of the women in their country. "Cultures", she advised, "have different values, not more or less." Modern and traditional women might transcend language, racial and national divides through the cross-cultural appreciation of creativity.⁵⁸ In the 1940s, study groups were advised to bring a commercial or cultural product such as batik or "Oriental embroidery" to share with colleagues as a way of increasing understanding of the region.⁵⁹

Reflecting the popularisation of contemporary anthropological accounts of culture clash and the role of culture in the survival of native peoples,⁶⁰ one of the central themes at the 1955 conference was the revival of handcraft and home industries in non-western cultures.

Handcrafts brought by Asian and Pacific Islanders were displayed in a mini-exhibition, including woven cloth, shell work, printed fabric, embroidery and pottery. A collection of dolls in national costume was also prominent. According to pakeha delegate, Beryl Jackson, in her report to the PPWA of New Zealand following the conference, interest in the display was intense, including radio, press and a television broadcast, during which Mira Petricevich was interviewed.⁶¹

But as Maori delegates were keen to explain, culture was not just a means of cross-cultural exchange, but also crucial to indigenous survival in the face of colonisation. Both Petricevich and Bennett discussed the importance of

culture and handcraft to indigenous people in their conference presentations. Speaking on “Traditional Maori Craftmanship”, Victoria Bennett stated that: “the arts and crafts of a people can develop only when there is a measure of security and prosperity, when life is not merely a struggle for survival, but has a purpose and a sense of freedom.” Occupation by Europeans had brought about a “confusion” that had threatened to engulf the Maori people. With the “clash of cultures”, arts and crafts had all but disappeared as the population decreased. A “spirit of fatalism” had infected their communities until the Young Maori Party had restored “confidence” in recent years, and as the “regeneration” of race and culture gained momentum.⁶²

Indigenous women were central to cultural renewal. In her 1955 conference address about the MWWL, “The Sympathy of Today is the Justice of Tomorrow”, Petricevich linked the significance of women to the survival of her people, and in their progress towards greater cultural achievement. Asserting the need to “reach the most backward members of the race” while at the same time to “cater to the more advanced by providing them with cultural outlets,” she asserted that women were most influential in the solution of problems in the community. Hence the MWWL was a crucial organisation far beyond its engagement with the PPWA. Petricevich went on to advise that:

In order to understand the real purpose for the existence of [the MWWL] ... it is necessary to know the present-day setting of the Maori race within New Zealand – its stage of progress in modern civilization ... The bewilderment and disillusionment created by the clash both in culture and in aims resulted in the breaking up of Maori society and with it the mind and character of the people. An overwhelming sense of hopelessness and fatalistic resignation set in and the race literally began to die.⁶³

Representing the rejuvenation of Maori culture to the international women’s community, Petricevich embodied a complex web of ‘traditional’ and contemporary meaning encoded in her articles of clothing and in the objects she wore and carried. Survival was woven into her cloak (*kakahu*) and her *pari* or bodice, and carved into the green stone (*pounamu*) pendant she wore. Her outfit may have been reported as “a modernized version of her native Maori costume”⁶⁴ but its potency was no doubt recognised by Polynesian women in audience. Elsewhere the MWWL attached great importance to the authenticity of Maori dress in the representation of Maori in contemporary film.⁶⁵ PPWA delegates from around the world were educated also in the significance of Maori clothing: the ceremonial cloak worn by Maori cultural representative Zister in 1952 was described in conference reports as “a mag-



FIGURE 6. Detail from a group photograph of the 1952 delegation in Christchurch: Rachel Zister wearing a feather cloak; to her left another Maori delegate, Victoria Bennett. Photographer: William George Weigel. R. M. Spoor Collection. (Permission of Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington)

nificent ancient Maori cloak of woven kiwi feathers edged with tui feathers. Her headdress was composed of huia feathers⁶⁶

Something of the impact of this new cultural politics on western settler colonial women can be gauged in the reflections of two leading Australian women delegates. Their assertions of a new civilization in the Pacific point to the contradictory nature of their response to non-western and Indigenous delegates. Silent on the lack of Aboriginal delegates on their team, members of the Australian delegation contributed to debate about culture by reporting on Aboriginal culture in Australia, remarking that white Australia was increasingly calling this ancient cultural heritage as its own. They sought to relativise the notion of 'civilisation' and advancement dominating the PPWA in the inter-war period, positing in its place a new-world civilisation drawing on non-western cultures for its vibrancy. Reflecting a degree of discomfort at the displacement of advanced women from centre stage, Australian delegation leader in 1952, Ruby Rich (Feminist Club, Racial Hygiene Association) expressed a desire to contribute to the new civilisation emerging in the Pan-Pacific:

[T]he Pacific is really the cradle for a new civilisation, and with the present upsurge of education and improvement in the status of

women, the women of the Pacific are to wield a tremendous influence ... We [Australians and New Zealanders] must be prepared to get rid of a number of preconceived prejudices, and to look more at the humanitarian side of these peoples, and place less stress on racial superiority. We call ourselves an advanced country, but your Australian delegates were humbled on many occasions by the wisdom expressed and the advances made by delegates from those countries we are pleased to call the 'under developed'.⁶⁷

Following the 1955 conference, Australian Thelma Kirkby (Business and Professional Women) reported that the relativisation of cultural advancement had been crucial in overcoming the superiority complex of westerners. She asserted that: "[t]hose of us who had come in a spirit—not of arrogance but perhaps of slight smugness, because we were members of the so-called 'advanced' countries—very soon developed a humble admiration" for their non-western colleagues.⁶⁸

The indigeneity articulated by Maori delegates, however, extended far beyond the admiration it received from white women. In her report to the MWWL after the 1955 conference, Petricevich revelled in the central role of indigenous women in the region. She reported on "a momentous occasion in the history of our people" that had marked "a forward step in our thinking, in the broadening of our horizons and the awakening to a consciousness of the need to participate in world concerns" She continued by confirming that the MWWL was "evidence of the need and desire of Maori women for separate identity as a people" no matter the degree of "goodwill, understanding and friendship" from pakeha PPWA members. The most important desire of Maori women was to "identify themselves as self-determining individuals, with the right to choose what was best for themselves in this ever-changing world." As a result, she recommended that the MWWL consider whether they were "prepared to sink their identity as a people within the larger [PPWA] group of New Zealanders." Thus, indigenous not pakeha women should give the Maori welcome on behalf of the delegation. Manila was a particularly propitious "awakening" for Maori women for there had "awaited a people whose history has been one of subjugation for over 500 years [by Spain and the US]." More than friendship and cooperation - those "meaningless words [designed] to touch the gullible" - such women needed immediate international economic aid. Likewise, Maori women would need henceforth "tangible evidence" from the PPWA that they would work to "overcome the discrimination which exists" at home.⁶⁹

The international implication of these sentiments was reflected in indigenous women's criticism of the pakeha women hierarchy, the hierarchy that

had welcomed women from Eastern civilisations before the war, and in 1955 extended its scope to recognise the women of South East Asia. Indigenous women demanded greater recognition also, calling for their right to sit at the conference high table among conference delegation leaders. Still living under New Zealand mandate, the Samoan delegate joined with Maori delegates in calling for separate indigenous representation beyond national delegations. New Zealand as a colonial and settler colonial power was not the only focus of their critique. According to Victoria Bennett, PPWA recognition of indigenous women should extend to the Aborigines of Australia, yet to make an appearance at conferences. Bypassing the Australian delegation entirely, Bennett suggested Maori women should travel to Australia to encourage their inclusion in the international community of women.⁷⁰

Conclusions: Inter-racial Harmony

For the cultural internationalist PPWA community, the integration of Indigenous and western styles of femininity suggested a new era in inter-cultural and inter-racial relationships between women. Given the growing anti-colonialism in the Pacific of the 1950s,⁷¹ the involvement of indigenous women delegates such as Petricevich seemed to offer hope that interracial relations could be reformulated even where colonialism continued to function (as it did in the settler colonies). Indeed, the calibre of such delegates as Petricevich suggested that New Zealand itself, like the New Zealand delegation, might offer a model for future inter-racial global cooperation. Sophisticated in her dealings with western delegates yet celebrating her cultural difference, the beautiful Petricevich seemed to promise the realisation of this new cultural politics, advocated by western international feminism since the nineteenth century and promoted earnestly by the PPWA since its inception in the late 1920s. According to this cultural politics, racism would be overcome through inter-cultural exchange. Henceforth, particular aspects of non-western culture would be utilised to re-humanise an overly modernised western civilisation, and would re-establish human values so recently undermined by the madness of world war.

One of the first examples of the new indigenous woman to be welcomed by the PPWA was First Nation representative Alice Garry. Garry attended the first Pan-Pacific Women's Conference in 1928 as a self-funded representative of her people, the Spokane. Crowned Princess America in 1926, like Petricevich a beauty queen and an ambassador for her people, she appeared in 'traditional' dress on the cover of the *Mid-Pacific Magazine* in its first special conference issue.

Writing about a First Nation woman who met with the U.S. president at the turn-of-the-century, historian Laura Jane Moore has argued that such



FIGURE 7. “An American Indian Princess, Miss Alice Garry, great-grand-daughter of Chief Spokane, to be sent by her people as their delegate at the Pan-Pacific Women’s Conference, Honolulu, August, 1928”, *Mid-Pacific Magazine*, front cover, July 1928. (Permission of Mitchell Library, Sydney)

figures have been overlooked as “central actors” in the rearticulation of colonisation as global capitalism, a process actively promoted by western governments such as the US during the early twentieth century.⁷² Asserting the centrality of the improved status of women and children in the development of a post-war world economy, women’s cultural internationalism espoused by

the PPWA was inevitably also engaged in the modernisation of colonialism. As Margaret Jacobs has shown in her study of feminism and Pueblo cultures, a strong historical connection exists between feminists' desires to preserve elements of native culture and to uplift native women. White women claimed that native culture was both potentially progressive in its attachment to cultural and spiritual life, yet backward in its treatment of women, and thus required the discriminating judgement of white women like themselves who proclaimed their own capacity to speak for native women.

In the context of the PPWA during the 1950s, modernising non-western women were considered sufficiently expert in both their own and western culture in order to represent themselves at the international level. Moreover, they were to offer leadership in the process of their own integration. Being committed to the survival of Indigenous culture, modernised women like Petricevich could act as conduits leading western women towards a greater understanding of non-western cultural and social life. It was their capacity to appear one day in traditional dress and the next in fashionable suits that secured their remarkable cache in this role as bi-cultural conference subjects. Ultimately, Petricevich was admired because of the combination of western modernization and 'traditional' life she managed so glamorously.

The indigenous internationalism for which Mira Petricevich was valorised in the 1950s articulated a complex politics of culture in the Pan-Pacific context. Petricevich's example was celebrated by the PPWA as embodying a new era in world cooperation. For Petricevich, PPWA conferences offered an international audience her knowledge of Maori culture, and her MWWL work to improve Maori conditions in New Zealand. Petricevich's international politics were grounded by the resilience of her own people and culture. She and other Maori delegates asserted two essential requirements of women's internationalism in the region: They were to motivate pakeha women to spearhead the reform Maori status and conditions in New Zealand, and to provide indigenous women with the means to emerge as a world force.

NOTES

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5. Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism*, Oxford University Press, London, 2002, especially chapters 1 and 3.
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8. See for example, Margaret Jacobs, *Engendered Encounters: Feminism and Pueblo Cultures, 1879-1934*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1999; and Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990.
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14. Manako Ogawa, 'American Women's Destiny, Asian Women's Dignity: Trans-Pacific Activism of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, 1886-1945', PhD Thesis, University of Hawai'i, Manoa, 2004, p. 270.
15. Rumi Yasutake, 'Feminism, Nationalism, Regionalism, and Internationalism: Japanese Women and the Pan-Pacific Women's Conference, 1928-1937'. Paper presented to the Crossroads Conference, Centre for Japanese Studies, University of Hawai'i, Manoa, August 2001.

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18. *Women of the Pacific: A Record of the Proceedings of the Seventh Conference of the Pan Pacific Women's Association*, Manila, 1955, p. 12.
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30. Yasutake, 'Feminism, Nationalism, Regionalism', p.5.
31. 'Interview with Clorinda Lucas', Watumull Foundation Oral History Project, Special Collections, Hamilton Library, University of Hawai'i Manoa.
32. Paisley, 'Performing New Zealand'.
33. Newspaper Clippings File. Seaton Papers.
34. Mira Szaszy, interviewed by Anne Else, 'Recording the History of the Maori Women's Welfare League', *New Zealand Women's Studies Journal*, 6, 2 (November, 1990): 17-21.

35. 'Recording the History', p. 21.
36. Caroline Daley, *Leisure and Pleasure Reshaping and Revealing the New Zealand Body 1900-1960*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2003, p. 113. See also Daley, 'The Body Builder and Beauty Contests', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 71, 2001: 33-44. The link between eugenics and beauty is made by Sander L. Gilman. See 'The Ugly and the Beautiful', in Gilman, *Health and Illness: Images of Difference*, Reaktion Books, London, 1995, pp. 51-66.
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39. Interview with Mira Szaszy, *Te Timatanga Tatau Tatau. Te Ropu Wahine Maori Toko I Te Ora. Early Stories from Founding Members of the Maori Women's Welfare League. As told to Dame Mira Szaszy*. Edited by Anna Rogeres and Miria Simpson (Whanga Maori), Maori Women's Welfare League – Bridget Williams Books, Auckland, 1993, pp. 216-231. See also, Mira Szazy, interviewed by Anne Else, 'Recording the History of the Maori Women's Welfare League', *Women's Studies Journal of New Zealand*, vol. 6, no. 12 (November 1990): 17-21; and 'Mira Szaszy: Maori leader, feminist' in *Head and Shoulders*, edited by Virginia Myers, Penguin Books, Auckland, 1986, pp. 232-249.
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42. Thank you to the anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to make this point.
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62. *Women of the Pacific*, 1955, p. 84.
63. *Women of the Pacific*, 1955, pp. 34-35.
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