AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE WHITE WORLD OF WIMBLEDON: EVONNE GOOLAGONG AND REPRESENTATIONS OF RACE AND GENDER IN AUSTRALIA

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Australian newspapers gave considerable coverage to the 1971 women’s Wimbledon final. Wimbledon was and is the tennis world’s premier event, yet the women’s final did not receive such coverage in Australia in the previous year, when the event was won, as expected, by Australia’s Margaret Court. Court played again in the final in 1971, but this time the result was an upset: a surprise win by a young player whose coach had predicted she would first win the tournament three years later in 1974, a prediction possibly calculated to have exactly this publicity effect. Newspapers across Australia announced the result with sensationalist headlines and hyperbole. The winner was a young Evonne Goolagong (later Cawley), aged nineteen and a newcomer on the tennis world stage. Her potential to win this tournament had been hinted at earlier in the year when she won the French Open at Roland Garros. Was it her youth, her rural Australian background and unexpected success that produced this rush of interest in her and her life? Was it her beauty, in a sport where a woman’s media profile was and is heavily influenced by her appearance and sexuality? Or was it that she was of Aboriginal descent, the heroine of a classic rags-to-riches tale of triumph?

In this article, I investigate Goolagong’s encounter with the white tennis world of Wimbledon, from her first appearance there in 1970, to her second win of the ladies’ singles championship in 1980. I explore traces of her experiences and her responses to them in popular texts. I examine representations of her in newspapers, magazines and popular books of the time, and consider how narratives of her life and career were shaped. Goolagong became celebrated within a strongly gendered and racialised society. Ideals of femininity and a woman’s place restricted women in many spheres of life, including sport. Women’s sport, both in Australia and internationally, has historically been disadvantaged in terms of funding and media coverage, although women’s tennis has now become one of the least
disadvantaged of women’s sports. White race privilege too has historically been entrenched in Australia, constraining and controlling Aboriginal people's lives. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson has shown, representations of an Indigenous ‘other’ have worked to construct whiteness as the invisible category, ‘an invisible regime of power that secures hegemony through discourse and has material effects in everyday life’. Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins’ work on Black feminist thought in the United States has shown the importance of analysing the intersections of race and gender. As Collins has pointed out, ‘the nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African-American women has been fundamental to Black women’s oppression’.

Analysing the historical representation of Aboriginal people in the print media is therefore a pressing task because the media are heavily involved in shaping ‘social discourse’ about Aboriginality. In a variety of mediums, as Marcia Langton has observed, there exists ‘a dense history of racist, distorted and often offensive representations of Aboriginal people’. Such representations may demonstrate ‘inferential racism’ rather than ‘overt racism’, that is, they may be seemingly natural depictions that rest upon unexamined racist beliefs. In Australia, the media play a significant role in constructing discourses about Aboriginality and Aboriginal people, both through negative or stereotypical images of Aboriginal people and through ‘silences’ and ‘forgetting’. In relation to gender too, the media play a significant role in shaping social discourses. Stereotyped depictions have historically been common in media coverage of women’s sport, and even ‘positive’ portrayals of women in sport often reflect ‘ambivalence’, combining such portrayals with depictions that belittle women’s achievements. The media thus plays an important role in perpetuating negative stereotypes and silences in relation to gender and race. While this article, however, does not discuss the ways in which representations were received by readers of the texts examined, it should be noted that audiences may read texts in unexpected ways.

4 Kim Bullimore, ‘Media Dreaming: Representation of Aboriginality in Modern Australian Media’, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, no. 6 (1999), 72–73.
Analysis in this article is drawn from close examination of the Australian print media’s depiction of Goolagong and Court. Newspaper reports referring to Goolagong or Court during the Wimbledon tournaments of 1970, 1971 and 1980 were collected from five major metropolitan Australian newspapers, mostly based in Sydney and Melbourne. Several key representations of race and gender emerged in the analysis of these reports. This analysis was supported by examining a number of other popular texts about Goolagong or Court in different genres of magazine and newspaper. Placed alongside these texts were two substantial book length publications. The first of these was published in 1975, claiming to be Goolagong’s autobiography. Despite its use of the first person, considerable uncertainty exists as to the genesis of this publication. In her later collaborative autobiography with Phil Jarratt, published in 1993, Goolagong hinted that the earlier book was in fact not an autobiography.

Goolagong’s profile as an Aboriginal sportsperson has been the most evident representation of her, both in her playing days and in more recent celebrations of her as a trail-blazer. Yet she was also subject to media representation in relation to her youth, beauty and positioning as a feminine woman who was also a strong and fit sportsperson. She responded publicly to some of these contrasting representations of her life, particularly in the autobiography produced in collaboration with Jarratt. Such complicating narratives reveal something of the intersections of race and gender in popular representations of prominent Aboriginal women, of the popular culture process of constructing the identity of a public figure, and of the multiple sites of identity of the person.

**Opportunity Knocks: Sport and the Rags-to-Riches Myth**

Goolagong’s early life in the small town of Barellan in New South Wales (NSW) appears to have endeared her to many people and encouraged her celebrity status. She arrived in Barellan with her family at the age of two, in 1953, and hers was the only Aboriginal family there. Her background, variously imagined as being in the outback, the bush or the rural heartland of NSW, was frequently referred to in representations of her as a fairytale success. Wrote one journalist in 1965: ‘I saw yesterday a sight that will stay in my mind forever—a slim brown aboriginal [sic] girl from the bush, playing tennis on a posh North Shore court, her face

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10 These were the *Age*, the *Australian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Melbourne Herald*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and its Sunday counterpart the *Sun Herald*.
11 These included, in particular: *Aboriginal and Islander Identity*, the *Adelaide Advertiser*, the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, the *Bulletin*, *Dawn* and *New Dawn*, *People*, *Sports Illustrated*, and the *Sun News-Pictorial*.
14 Ibid., 23.
alive with delight'. Goolagong was, thought Allan Kendall in *Australia's Wimbledon Champions*, a ‘blithe spirit from outback New South Wales’. Another journalist, after briefly describing her career in tennis, commented that ‘[t]he little girl from the back streets of Barellan made the big time’. Goolagong herself was quoted in the *Australian Women's Weekly* after she won Wimbledon in 1971 saying that ‘[n]ot many country girls have had the opportunity I’ve had’. In her first win of the Wimbledon final, her youth and rural origins were emphasised along with her Aboriginality in the media sensationalising of her achievement.

Despite the persistence of such narratives of Goolagong’s early life, much of her adolescence was spent in Sydney, where she went to develop her tennis. She was selected in 1961 to attend one of the coaching clinics run in country towns by the Victor A. Edwards Tennis School, with her fees paid. The instructors who came to teach the Barellan clinic were impressed. After waiting until the following year’s clinic, to see if she was still interested in tennis, they contacted Edwards, who drove down to see her play. After visiting Edwards in Sydney for short stays, she eventually moved there to live with his family, and attended Willoughby Girls’ High on the lower north shore. Where narratives of her life made reference to her extended stay with the Edwards family, Edwards was usually imagined as a mentor or guardian to whom her parents had entrusted her so that she might have a chance to reach tennis success. This fairytale aspect given to her beginnings was a common thread in representations of her early life, lending a legendary aura to narratives of her life.

Analogously to the experience of the land, white people discovered her talent and intervened to develop it. In one narrative of her life, it was this discovery that was central to her success. She was ‘just another underprivileged outback child, the daughter of a shearer—until a tennis coach noticed her ability to pound a tennis ball’. Sport has often been seen as an arena of opportunity and a way to overcome racial prejudice. Alan Trengove wrote in the *Sun News-Pictorial* in 1971 that sport was ‘the one arena in which the aboriginal [sic] has had almost an equal opportunity to display those qualities that the white man admires’. Sport, he said, was ‘a great leveller’, as well as encouraging ‘social integration’ and closeness between people. Colin Tatz, in his history of Aboriginal people and sport, and Mark Ella, a successful Aboriginal rugby player, have both written of sport as a potential route to economic advancement and enhanced social standing, while at

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
the same time arguing that Aboriginal people have long faced exclusion and racism in this as in other areas of life.24 Only a very small number of athletes, mostly male, manage to overcome the ingrained racial, gender and class obstacles presented by Australian society to reach such success.25

While narratives told of non-Aboriginal sportspeople sometimes share in the rags-to-riches legend evident in narratives of Goolagong’s life, there were important differences of tone and emphasis. Goolagong’s family moved to Barellan during the period in which assimilation policy was strongest, with Aboriginal people in NSW facing intense scrutiny by the Aborigines’ Welfare Board (AWB) and an estimated rise in the number of children being removed from their families, often to AWB homes or white foster families.26 This was also a time of economic hardship for many Aboriginal people, and of segregation in rural towns.27 Goolagong’s family certainly experienced financial hardship, and Goolagong later believed that her family was ‘placed by many of the white folk of Barellan in a class apart from the mission Aborigines’, as her family lived ‘like white folk’.28 She wrote that her father ‘showed through hard work and camaraderie that he was at heart a ‘white man’, while her mother ‘showed with the scrubbing brush and the wood-fired copper that no one was cleaner than a Goolagong’.29 As Goolagong grew and developed as a tennis player, magazines such as *Dawn*, published for Aboriginal people by the NSW AWB between 1952 and 1975, promoted pictures and stories of Aboriginal people who could be described as successful in the white world; assimilation success stories. Goolagong was featured in *Dawn* several times, and was described in 1968 as having ‘an extraordinary appeal’ with ‘Australian tennis crowds, who see her not only as a rising champion, but also as an Aborigine who has made good’.30 Her rise towards success was a ‘salvation narrative’ that could assuage white ‘guilt over past mistreatment’ when referencing Aboriginal individuals.31

**The Natural Athlete and Going Walkabout**

Behind the idea that sport was one of few avenues of success and recognition for Aboriginal people seems to lie a belief in the possession of greater natural talent

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27 Ibid., 91–97.
28 Cawley and Jarratt, *Home!*, 43.
29 Ibid.
30 ‘Two Years Till Wimbledon?’, *Dawn*, March 1968, 1.
for sport among Indigenous peoples. Trengove thought Aboriginal people were usually good at sport, and that many ‘seem naturally endowed with speed-of-foot and quick reflexes’. Lee-Anne Hall has observed that victory for a black athlete was sometimes interpreted as stemming from a ‘natural advantage, often linked to “animal” ability and cunning’, while it could be considered a triumph of ‘intellect and strategy over brutish instinct’ in the case of a white athlete. Such representation has been observed particularly often in relation to Aboriginal men in sports such as Australian Rules football (AFL), rugby, boxing or running, yet it has also been applied to women. In the case of the AFL, Aboriginal footballers were often described as having an almost supernatural instinct for the game. Similarly, Maori men in New Zealand were imagined as innately talented athletes, particularly in relation to rugby and league. This discourse was linked to another which constructed Indigenous people as primitive, closer to the animal world than white people; their natural talent in sport was then ‘socially-acceptable savagery’. Although not discussing the experiences of Aboriginal women in Australia, Jennifer Hargreaves identified a similar trend in the representation of black women as natural sportspeople. This narrative of natural talent was evident in some representations of Goolagong’s life and career. After she won a match against Billie Jean King at Wimbledon, she was said to have an ‘extraordinary athletic ability’ which ‘made her the most intriguing tennis player in the world’ at the time. Such an emphasis on natural athleticism and physicality downplayed Aboriginal sportspeople’s hard work, and suggested that they were closer to nature and the primitive state. Moreover, as Darren Godwell suggested, failing to question the myth of the natural athlete may result in Aboriginal people becoming ‘typecast in life as sportspeople’, as well as reinforcing existing ‘racial inequities in power relations’.

Several threads are evident in the representation of Goolagong as an Aboriginal athlete. Her Aboriginality was also called on to explain her perceived carefree, innocent nature. Mentioning the poverty she experienced growing up, sports writer Bud Collins wrote that she ‘rolls with life’s punches—perhaps this is her Aboriginal

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39 Darren Godwell, ‘Playing the Game: Is Sport as Good for Race Relations as We’d Like to Think?’, Australian Aboriginal Studies, no. 1–2 (2000), 16, 19.
Goolagong was described by Kendall as seeming ‘so innocent’, and ‘so simple and natural and trusting’. Her game was often described as being happy, rather than aggressive or driving for victory. On the court, enthused one children’s book, she beamed with pleasure, her ‘big eyes sparkled’ and she ‘bubbled with the pure joy of playing’. On court, she ‘would hum a tune, giggle because she forgot the score, and smile at the umpire even if she did not like a call’. This depiction demonstrates the intersection of gender and race in representations, as it is both gendered and raced, suggesting a purportedly feminine frivolity as well as a supposedly Aboriginal child-like naturalness. While these traits were often admired, ascribing them to a basic racial nature infantilised a champion and evoked European images of Aboriginal people as childlike from the time of early contact. In both 1971 and 1980, a significant number of Australian newspaper articles discussed Goolagong’s grace, charm or cheerful nature. As well as race and gender, her country beginnings were also called on to explain this perceived cheerful and innocent nature and relaxed approach, suggesting the importance of multiple stereotypes in media representations and cautioning against racial over-determination. Linda Jacobs wrote in her 1975 children’s book on Goolagong that her experiences during her career meant ‘[t]he quiet country life will never again be for her’, but could still be seen in her innocence, ‘joy of playing’ and ‘level-headed view of life’. ‘Going walkabout’ was also perceived as a ‘natural’ Aboriginal trait. The phrase was used in relation to Aboriginal workers on cattle stations going away for a period, taking time for seeing kin, holding ceremonies and educating children in traditional ways. In this sense, it could be considered positive. Yet the term also conjured images of directionless wandering, and employers disapproved of a perceived predisposition for Aboriginal workers on pastoral stations to leave and go back to their own people and way of life for a while. This idea was one of the two interweaved stereotypes often apparent in the representation of Aboriginal athletes, running alongside depiction as natural athletes. Aboriginal boxers in the mid-twentieth century were sometimes described in the press as ‘inconsistent performers who went ‘walkabout’, while Aboriginal footballers were routinely cast as having natural flair and ability, yet also as lacking reliability and diligence and often excluded from positions on the field demanding they be leaders or quick thinkers.

40 Goolagong and Collins, Evonne!, 24.
41 Kendall, Australia’s Wimbledon Champions, 227.
42 Linda Jacobs, Evonne Goolagong: Smiles and Smashes (St Paul: EMC Corporation, 1975), 7.
44 Jacobs, Evonne Goolagong, 38.
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This image can first be seen in relation to Goolagong in the comments of Mrs Martin, who noticed her tennis ability at the first coaching school she attended. She was quoted in a 1975 publication that claimed to be Goolagong’s autobiography, saying that ‘[y]ou never know if a child will maintain the interest year to year’, particularly since ‘with the Goolagongs being Aboriginals, you wouldn’t count on their not moving somewhere else’. In this book, the author(s) discussed the use of the ‘walkabout’ image in relation to her moments of lost concentration while playing. Supposedly in Goolagong’s voice, they explained:

When this happens, … most spectators nod knowingly, ‘Evonne’s gone walkabout’ … I’ve accepted the expression ‘walkabout’ for my spells, but the word didn’t come from me. It came from [coach] Mr Edwards. Though I know he wasn’t being condescending, it is an expression that irritates many Aborigines.

This description of her times of lost concentration as ‘spells’ implied that there was something wrong with her. The author(s) continued, explaining that the phrase was ‘good copy’ and ‘a colourful expression’, which Goolagong did not find insulting. In her autobiography with Jarratt, she acknowledged a tendency to lose concentration during games, though she denied that it caused her to lose, and commented that referring to such lapses as going ‘walkabout’ was ‘just another way of implying that Aborigines were underachievers who lacked the will to win’.

The phrase was used more often in newspaper reports of her 1980 Wimbledon campaign, by which time many writers considered that she had not dominated world tennis to the extent commentators in 1971 expected. There were eighteen references to this tendency in forty-eight articles from Australian newspapers in 1980, as opposed to seven references in thirty-seven articles in 1971, almost doubling their frequency. One match report noted that she ‘appeared to go on her habitual ‘walkabout’ part way through the match’. Kendall noted that she was seen as ‘a bit of a perhaps’ because she might at any time lose concentration; yet her record of reaching the final in those grand slam events that she played was very steady. It was often taken for granted that her times of lost concentration meant she did not win as often as she could have. One writer commented that ‘she would have won many more major events but for her famous ‘walkabouts’.

Peter Kell argued that while all players lose concentration at times, it was ‘identified as a deficiency aligned with race’ in Goolagong’s case. The stereotype image of Aboriginal people going...
walkabout was thus redeployed in relation to a tendency of all sportspeople to have moments of lost concentration, diluting Goolagong’s supposedly unbeatable natural ability to explain why she did not win more consistently.

The Exotic Other in the White World of Tennis

The image of Wimbledon as a world apart from Goolagong’s was often evident in narratives of her life, related to the rags-to-riches myth and a narrative of her as a sort of Cinderella to whom her coach Vic Edwards played the fairy godmother. One reporter thought that her ‘early background was about as far in distance and style from a gala Wimbledon finals day as it would be possible to imagine’.56 Developed from indoor tennis, lawn tennis had roots in that ‘game of kings’, as it was in sixteenth-century France and England.57 Unlike in Europe, public tennis courts were available to the majority of the Australian population, and tennis in the 1950s was not so constrained by class distinctions to the extent that it was, for instance, in the United States, so that it was possible for champions to emerge from rural backgrounds as well as urban.58 Graeme Kinross-Smith considers that it was in the 1950s and 1960s, about the time that Goolagong was a young player, that tennis became ‘open … to a wider spectrum of the Australian population’; moreover, ‘traditions of country competition’ existed in a number of states, including NSW, which contributed to the rise of strong players despite their ‘being distanced in their formative years from coaching and regular top-level competition’.59

Tennis was also a predominantly white game. Tatz, writing in 1987, included tennis among sports in Australia that did not have a history of Aboriginal participation, Aboriginal role models, or support networks, and Collins wrote that it was ‘a very white game, with a few exceptions’.60 Similarly, African-American women were often imagined as having innate talent for several particular sports over others, and found exceptional success in sports such as track and field or basketball more often than in the ‘popular’ women’s sports of tennis and swimming.61 Wimbledon was the most elite and tradition-bound tournament of all; to play at Wimbledon was to be in the centre of that elite white world. Even the clothing that competitors were required to wear was white. Before Goolagong appeared on Wimbledon’s

56 Murray Hedgcock, ‘Will Success Spoil Her?’, Sunday Australian, 4 July 1971, 42.
Centre Court in 1970, her clothing was checked to ascertain that it ‘complied with the ‘predominantly white’ regulation’. In a sense, Goolagong was performing whiteness through her dress. She herself made reference to this in 1996, when she defended Cathy Freeman’s decision not to carry the Aboriginal flag at the Atlanta Olympic Games, after Freeman had been at the centre of a controversy for doing so at the 1994 Commonwealth Games. Goolagong was quoted saying that ‘[i]t’s like I can’t wear a black dress at Wimbledon, so that’s the rule’.63

Goolagong made her first appearance at Wimbledon in 1970, and lost the match. Afterwards, she spoke to reporters from around the world. In her 1993 collaborative autobiography, she described this interview:

I had been thrashed in a second round match by a player who wouldn’t be going much further in the tournament either, yet the post-match press conference was jam-packed. … They didn’t want to know about my tennis, they wanted me to speak in Wiradjuri or throw a boomerang or something. … Did I feel proud to be the first Aborigine to play Wimbledon? What did I think of apartheid? Was there racial discrimination at home?64

Collins wrote about Goolagong as unusual in her ethnicity in the international tennis world. He stated that she was ‘different, singular’, that she ‘gave the line [of Australian champions] another hue’, and that she was ‘the authentic Australian, with the skin and the name that made the rest of them seem foreigners’.65 In an Australian newspaper, one reporter referred to her as ‘this frizzy-haired little piccaninny’, although knowing Goolagong would not like it, because he thought ‘that is what she looked like’.66 Writing with Jarratt, Goolagong explained that ‘my race made me different and therefore newsworthy’.67 Hall observed that Aboriginality in this way can cause an athlete to stand out, and can be ‘a journalistic angle [or] a sponsor’s delight’ as well as a source of pride for the athlete themselves.68 In these representations, Goolagong was depicted in contrast to the ubiquitous whiteness of the Wimbledon tennis world. Emphasising her exceptional position in this way could both place her as a role model and set her apart as difficult to emulate.

While her Aboriginality was exoticised, Goolagong was sometimes described in ways that repressed her Aboriginal identity. Kell argued that her ‘media success’ and ‘acceptance [by] mainstream Australian society’ was built partly on repressing Aboriginal identity and not being seen as ‘radical’.69 She was featured in the Australian Women’s Weekly after her win at Wimbledon in 1971. The study of that

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62 Cawley and Jarratt, Home!, 158.
64 Cawley and Jarratt, Home!, 158.
65 Goolagong and Collins, Evonne!, 10.
67 Cawley and Jarratt, Home!, 13.
69 Kell, Good Sports, 44.
publication between 1945 and 1971 by Susan Sheridan, Barbara Baird, Kate Borrett and Lyndall Ryan, Who Was that Woman?, argued that Aboriginal people were ‘named as individuals’ only when being included as ‘success stories—successes of assimilation’.70 Indeed, in the 1993 autobiography, Goolagong commented that when Aboriginal people were successful in any field, ‘there is a tendency, perhaps unconscious, for Australians to say, ‘See, we’re not holding them back, we give them every opportunity’.71

Around the time that Goolagong rose to international prominence, a strong Aboriginal protest movement was visible in Australia. In 1967, a referendum had given the Federal government power to legislate for Aboriginal issues and decreed that they be counted in the census; in 1972, the Aboriginal tent embassy was erected in front of the national parliament buildings in an evocative ‘display of black power’.72 Within this context, Goolagong was sometimes criticised by Aboriginal people for remaining unpolitcised, or for turning herself white and not doing enough for her people. She thus found herself in a double bind, as other prominent Aboriginal people have, subject to scrutiny from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. She was publicly criticised by the Aboriginal leader and former soccer champion Charles Perkins, for instance, and in an angry poem by poet Kevin Gilbert.73 The poem, published after her win in 1980, was a bitter attack on her for not using her prominence to call attention to the hardships suffered by Aboriginal people.74 Its final lines read:

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\text{Win your games Love, may they all be straight sets} \\
\text{But 'I accuse' for our people again;} \\
\text{Go on and win with your calm easy grin} \\
\text{And when sycophants raise wines to 'toast',} \\
\text{Say a few words so the truth can be heard} \\
\text{About victims with no chance to win.75}
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In the 1993 book, she responded partly by saying that she did more by playing at the top of the game than she might have ‘with a hundred soapbox speeches’.76 She wrote also that while people in Australia protested about apartheid, and the prospect of racial disturbances was raised, ‘a black Australian curtseyed before royalty, then went on to prove that Aborigines could make it to the top’.77 She appears thus to have seen herself as more able to influence the situation of Aboriginal people as

70 Susan Sheridan et al., Who Was That Woman? The Australian Women’s Weekly in the Postwar Years (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2002), 146.
71 Cawley and Jarratt, Home!, 205.
73 Cawley and Jarratt, Home!, 337–38.
74 Ibid., 338.
76 Cawley and Jarratt, Home!, 339.
77 Ibid., 205.
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a role model than as a spokesperson. When she agreed to play in South Africa in 1971, she received much criticism, including from prominent Aboriginal people who felt that she should not go and that she was letting her people down. In the 1993 book, her comments about this incident included that she did not know very much about South Africa or apartheid, although once criticism began, she was glad of the chance to ‘show white South Africans just what a black athlete could do’. After moving back to Australia later in life, Goolagong became involved in tennis development for young people and Indigenous sports programs, such as the Goolagong National Development Camp for Aboriginal children.

**Shared Representations? Female Stars, Women’s Liberation and Tennis**

Was Goolagong represented in a similar way to other high-achieving women, or did race become dominant in representations of her? She was received as a celebrity on her return to Australia after winning Wimbledon in 1971. Barellan held a parade and a ‘Wimbledon Ball’, and she went to dinners, functions and appeared on a television show. A photo spread appeared in the *Australian Women’s Weekly*. It published three pictures of her in action on the court, while a larger picture occupied the second page, showing her at the Wimbledon Ball, with a caption telling the reader that ‘[h]appy Evonne’ wore a ‘slim-fitting gown’ in ‘gold-and-silver lame’. In a September 1971 article covering her return, it was reported that she had purchased many clothes while overseas, such as the outfit she was wearing that day. The article also mentioned her beauty and glamour, saying that she ‘looked very attractive and outstanding among the crowd that swirled around her’. In these representations, descriptions of Goolagong fitted into the discourses often found in women’s magazines, descriptions which focus on family, clothes and beauty. As Sheridan and others have argued, the images of Goolagong in the July 1971 article were not different from ‘the *Weekly’s* consistent portrayal of white women as active, glamorous and sexually desirable’ at that time. Indeed, Aboriginal women appeared in the magazine between 1945 and 1971 ‘only if they conformed to such ideals of white femininity’. Many mentions were made of her beauty. For instance, in *Identity*, she was termed ‘[t]he young and beautiful tennis star’, and in *Dawn*, ‘an attractive and beautifully mannered 12-year-old’.

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83 Ibid., 8.
84 Sheridan et al., *Who Was That Woman?*, 114.
85 Ibid.
In such descriptions, gender appeared to dominate, Goolagong’s Aboriginality being subsumed under hegemonically white representations. Yet in some such depictions, racialised and gendered images were entwined, as in the portrayal of her as ‘a most beautiful, talented and be-boppy bundle of Little Orphan Annie curls set over a brown sugar face’.  

As well, some narratives of white Australian Wimbledon champion Margaret Court’s life were similar to some of those told of Goolagong. For instance, Court came from Albury, and was once described in the media as the ‘girl from Albury who became a tennis legend’. She was said to have had ‘a poor and tough upbringing in the backblocks’ of Albury, making her story almost as much a rags-to-riches tale as Goolagong’s. An oft-repeated story about both Court and Goolagong is of their having used pieces of wood as their first rackets when children. Like Goolagong, Court was discovered as a talent while still young, moving to Melbourne as a teenager under the patronage of a former champion, Frank Sedgman, who ‘plucked’ her from a hard life in Albury. Importantly, Court was also known for being subject to nerves affecting her game, particularly on the Centre Court at Wimbledon. Indeed, in one book of famous Australian sportspeople, it was stated that she would ‘undoubtedly have had an even more impressive record but for her ‘big match’ nerves’. The difference, of course, was that in Court’s case it was not blamed on race or discussed in racially loaded terms.

It is this very invisibility of whiteness, that allows it to be imposed as a norm, that contributes to the continuation of inequalities in power relations. While white feminists have begun to write about whiteness, Moreton-Robinson has argued that, rather than ‘white race privilege’ being ‘interrogated as a form of difference’, it ‘is an invisible omnipresent norm’. As she observes, the ‘white cultural system … exists as omnipresent and natural, yet invisible’; race exists as ‘a categorical object … deemed to belong to the other’. For Court, while representations of her made visible her position as a woman in sport, no reference was made to her as white. She was often described in terms related to gender or age, as a ‘woman player’, a ‘girl’, a ‘30-year-old Perth mother’ or as ‘Mrs Court’. Yet she

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89 Peter Wilson, ‘Mrs Tennis Court’, *People*, 4 February 1981, 19.
95 Ibid., 349; Moreton-Robinson, ‘Whiteness, Epistemology and Indigenous Representation’, 76.
was only ever an ‘Australian’ tennis player, while Goolagong was also sometimes
tagged as Aboriginal or part-Aboriginal, though less often by 1980. Goolagong was
represented as different, other, the only Aboriginal woman playing international
tennis. Court was part of the ‘invisible omnipresent norm’ in her whiteness, if still
marginalised by her gender.

It is important also to consider the context of women’s position in sport in
general and tennis in particular. Douglas Booth and Tatz contend that in the 1960s
and 1970s ‘[f]eminism swept across sport like a wave’, making it more acceptable
for women to be powerful and strong.97 According to Patrick Heaven and David
Rowe, it was from the late 1970s that ‘an increasingly systematic critique of the
masculinity/sport nexus’ occurred, as well as ‘a strengthening assertion of demands
for sexual equality in sport’.98 Marion Stell, however, appears to consider that it was
not until the 1980s that the ‘impact of feminism on women’s sporting lives’ was
apparent; she also argues that the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s did
not take much notice of sport, partly due to a concentration on gaining equality in
other areas such as employment, and partly because sport ‘seemed to many women
to be closely linked with the male culture they were fighting against’.99 As Deborah
Stevenson has pointed out, tennis ‘has been a site where debates on women and
sport have flourished’.100 There was considerable campaigning in the early 1970s
against women’s tennis receiving less money in prizes and less consideration than
men’s tennis. A split developed between the United States Lawn Tennis Association
(USLTA) and a new World Tennis (WT) Women’s Pro Tour, the Virginia Slims
circuit, after the latter was set up in 1970 with larger monetary prizes.101 In 1973,
when the USLTA held a women’s pro tour competing with the Virginia Slims tour,
two groups of female players formed, with Goolagong in the USLTA faction.102

Tennis in particular has been a sport in which players were represented in
terms of gender stereotypes and in which players’ physical appearance and dress
were heavily scrutinised. By the time of her second win in 1980, Goolagong was
sometimes represented as a feminine player who was different from the many
women supposedly appearing on the circuit. One reporter felt that what ‘really
won the applause from the British’ was her ‘calm femininity’, at a time when female
tennis players were often supposedly ‘neurotic’, had ‘prune faces’ or were allegedly
lesbians.103 She and her fellow-finalist, Chris Evert, the reporter noted, were

98 Patrick Heaven and David Rowe, ‘Gender, Sport and Body Image’, in Sport and Leisure: Trends in Australian Popular Culture,
100 Stevenson, ‘Women, Sport and Globalization’, 212.
102 Ibid., 70.
‘popular and attractive’, as well as ‘happily married’. Similarly, Court was said to be a powerful athlete, stronger than some men, but ‘recognisably—thank God—a woman’. The representation of Goolagong as cheerful, innocent and lacking a killer instinct was also a feminised image—she was not seen to be diminishing her gender by playing tennis. This focus on femininity is also important in the context of a widespread belief that in tennis the best female players played ‘like men’. In an echo of the dichotomy that female athletes have continually struggled with over the years, Goolagong’s defeat of Court in 1971 was ‘thought to be the triumph of grace over power’.

These similarities, however, with the experiences of white women sit awkwardly with the racialised representations of Goolagong in the media. If white women faced gender discrimination in the sporting world, black women faced ‘double discrimination’.

**Conclusion**

As the first Aboriginal person to play at the elite, white tournament of Wimbledon, Goolagong’s experiences were part of a history of intercultural encounters between Oceania and Europe. Representations of racial difference were deeply embedded in many of the narratives of Goolagong’s life and in media reports about her, and she was reflective about those representations. Yet in the actual experience of encounter, it was not always race that played the central part in shaping representations. In some representations a rural-urban binary was evident as a complicating discursive feature. Sometimes the key factor was gender, as when Goolagong’s perceived femininity was celebrated by commentators in the context of feminist pressure for change in women’s tennis and the application of negative stereotypes to many female players. Discourses of gender thus intersected with discourses about race in shaping narratives about Goolagong, complicating the nexus between lived experience and social discourses. Within the context of a racialised and gendered society in which whiteness was hegemonic and invisible, and in which women’s position in competitive sport remained contested, Goolagong became newsworthy. The media, deeply embedded in these social processes, shaped discourses around Goolagong in terms of both race and gender, both drawing from and further entrenching existing discursive formations of gender and race, perpetuating negative stereotypes that remain evident today.

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104 Ibid.
106 Thanks to Frances Steel for this point.
107 Stevenson, ‘Women, Sport and Globalization’, 218. This description of a player may not refer to lesbianism but to style of play or strength: it is ‘not necessarily negative and certainly not necessarily referring to sexuality’. Stevenson, ‘Women, Sport and Globalization’, 219.
109 Ibid., 236; Tatz, *Obstacle Race*, 269–70.