



## BOOK REVIEW

# THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF ONCE WERE WARRIORS

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*Once Were Warriors: The Aftermath*, by  
Emiel Martens, Amsterdam: Aksant, 2007,  
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*Once Were Warriors: The Aftermath* examines the “war of interpretation” surrounding Māori writer Alan Duff’s 1990 novel *Once Were Warriors* and the 1994 film adaptation of this book by Māori film director Lee Tamahori. Notable for its depiction of domestic abuse within a Māori family, *Once Were Warriors* generated controversy within Aotearoa/New Zealand in the early 1990s. Alternately hailed as a positive and constructive text that lifts the lid on the myth of bicultural harmony between Māori and Pākehā (the descendants of European colonizers) and as a dangerous text that reiterates negative stereotypes about Māori, as a cultural event *Once Were Warriors* reveals a postcolonial milieu where representations of Māori are highly politicized. Due to a complex range of social, political, economic, and historical factors, Māori have had limited

access to modes of cultural production in Aotearoa (it would take eight years for another Māori-made film to emerge after the film version of *Once Were Warriors* was released in 1994). Tamahori's film therefore not only remains a touchstone for the New Zealand film industry (the film was widely popular both nationally and internationally) but also serves as an important reference point for discussing the cultural politics surrounding contemporary representations of Māori. Martens's book attempts to bring to light the tensions generated by Duff's novel and Tamahori's film adaptation (placing specific emphasis on the film version).

As "self-appointed *bête noire* of contemporary Māori writing in English" (Drichel 2006), Alan Duff has dedicated his career to debunking romanticized images of Māori and those images of bicultural harmony pushed in much governmental and popular discourse. The aim of *Once Were Warriors: The Aftermath* is to reveal these complex and competing factors, and the term "aftermath" is a crucial one in that it refers not only to the short-term impact of the release of both book and film but also to the more enduring outcomes of British colonization within contemporary New Zealand society. Martens is particularly concerned with the ways in which *Once Were Warriors* illuminates the limits of what is seeable and sayable about Māori identity at the time of the emergence of both book and film. One of Martens's key questions is "why did *Once Were Warriors* cause such a controversy within the Māori community?"

Answering this question requires a three-tiered analysis of the textual, ethnographic, and historical characteristics of the book and film that explores *Once Were Warriors* as simultaneously a "meaning-system, social discourse and historical process" (p. 15). As if to gesture toward a relationship between method and content, the book is structured in three parts. The first part ("*Once Were Warriors: The Novel and the Film*") provides biographical details of both Duff and Tamahori and outlines the key distinctions between the book and film. The second part ("*Once Were Warriors as Māori Representation*") situates *Once Were Warriors* within the wider ideological context of postcolonial New Zealand where representations of Māori are highly politicized. Part three ("*The Realities of Once Were Warriors*") examines the impact of the film on the New Zealand public, and the ways in which the themes and language of the film infiltrated other forms of public discourse in the wake of the film's release. The book also includes film stills and additional "boxed" materials about the actors in the film and specific themes and production details that complement the main text. As such, Martens's book is a potentially useful toolbox. Admitting that his study is "not structured as a linear and systematic order, but rather as a syncretic and exploratory methodology" (p. 15), Martens intersperses references to the work of film and cultural studies theorists such as Stuart Hall, Richard Dyer, and Bill Nichols throughout all three parts of the book. Martens thus delivers a so-called cultural studies analysis

that follows in the “postmodern tradition” that “generally assumes that reality is essentially pluralistic by nature, arguing that everybody interprets reality in his own way and that everybody creates his own hybrid analysis” (p. 15). Before considering the limitations of such a “cultural studies/postmodern” approach I would first like to outline the productive dimensions of *Once Were Warriors: The Aftermath*.

Overall, the premise of the book is a good one and Martens quite usefully identifies the power of *Once Were Warriors* to incite a competing range of discourses about the status of Māori (and representational politics in general) within a postcolonial setting such as Aotearoa/New Zealand. Martens’s three-tier approach has value in that his mixed methodology expresses the messy discursive entanglements of much postcolonial media production. This approach ably demonstrates the dynamic and sometimes contradictory relationships between authorial intention, critical interpretation, and popular reception as well as the pressures placed upon indigenous cultural producers to maintain artistic integrity while also negotiating the politicized nature of cultural production. As such, the book’s methodology has the potential to make an important contribution to the fields of film and cultural studies. Martens gathers together a great deal of historical and contemporary criticism that situates *Once Were Warriors* within a longer history of representation. He revisits the critical reception in film and literature dealing with Māori, and he situates New Zealand filmmaking practices within a wider global economy of Hollywood-dominated cinematic production. As Martens implies when he provides a historical overview, the legacy of colonization still haunts contemporary modes of representing Māori. Not only this, the geopolitics of New Zealand filmmaking practices (the industry’s reliance on global investment, its need to appeal to a global audience) also makes inevitable a certain repetition of stereotypes of Māori as noble savages, fierce and animalistic warriors, or romanticized spiritual beings. While these wider issues of *Once Were Warriors*’s conditions of production and critical reception are ably outlined, Martens’s attempt to provide a detailed account of the “war of interpretation” that occurred *within* the Māori community is less successful.

As an urban melodrama, the style, narrative, and themes of the film version of *Once Were Warriors* appealed to a global audience, an appeal that Martens argues “went against the conventional expectations of the Māori community” (p. 81). According to Martens, many Māori commentators took issue with Tamahori’s negative portrayal of Māori and were disappointed that the film did not pose a challenge to dominant representational regimes. For Martens, Tamahori’s film (as well as his public articulation of himself as both a filmmaker and as Māori) both confirmed *and* rejected these dominant regimes. The film version paid some heed to the pressures of “Māori cultural brokers” eager to promote the spiritual and timeless characteristics of Māori culture (as

suitably demonstrated in the rediscovery of cultural traditions for both Boogie and Beth). Yet, Tamahori's film also challenged this cultural romanticism by addressing the harsher issues of domestic violence and gender inequities. The film thus gave voice to Alan Duff's bad-boy attitude to Māori political correctness. For Martens, these contradictory depictions expressed the discontinuities and diversity of modern Māori society. While this is a good premise from which to begin, Martens's book ultimately offers a static and somewhat artificial discussion of the controversy generated by *Once Were Warriors* by constructing a comfortable opposition between Duff and Tamahori (framed implicitly as "post-traditionalists") and Māori cultural nationalists (alternately described as "traditionalists" or "cultural brokers") – a structural logic that ultimately brings a broad brushstroke to a topic that requires a more precise and carefully detailed approach.

Martens begins to outline this oppositional logic at the start of part two where he leans particularly heavily on the work of Leonie Pihama (a noted Māori filmmaker and academic), to represent those Māori commentators who condemned the film. While Pihama's name is given much space in this section, her critique of *Once Were Warriors* is presented in a piecemeal fashion and we do not get to read the actual details of her commentary. Instead, Pihama (along with many unnamed "other Māori commentators") is used to stand in for those cultural nationalists who denounced or condemned the film as a Māori representation (p. 55). In this part of the book it is also hard at times to distinguish between the reception of the book and the reception of the film among Māori "cultural brokers." Near the end of part two Martens adds the names of Ranginui Walker, Merata Mita, and Andrew Eruera Vercoe to the list of those who accused Duff of being "a Māori dissenter" (p. 93). Yet again, Martens does not provide an analysis of the actual critiques made by these people and he extends these critiques to include Tamahori, with both men labeled as "outlaws" (p. 133). This lack of detail seems surprising for a book dedicated to examining the complex meanings generated by *Once Were Warriors*. Indeed, a closer look at Pihama's commentary on the film would reveal that she herself was always already interested in the contradictions inherent in Tamahori's film and that it is not so much the film that matters, as the context in which it was received (Pihama 1996). At points, Martens gestures to the subtleties of Pihama's argument (she is more interested in the slippage between discourses of the real and filmic discourse in her critique), yet these remain mere gestures; instead, he effectively obscures her contribution by not distinguishing it from those of a range of unnamed others. Collectively, they get branded with a Māori cultural nationalist position that allegedly accentuates traditional forms of knowledge and promotes the timeless nature of cultural identity.

The artificial nature of the division between “post-traditionalists” and “traditionalists” is further compounded by the sources Martens refers to. Instead of providing a nuanced account of the construction of “Māoridom” by Pihama, Walker, or Vercoe, Martens uses the work of anthropologist Toon van Meijl to explain the classic model of Māori identity. Martens then uses scholarship drawn from the fields of cultural studies and film studies to disrupt this classic model, a model that allegedly informs a Māori cultural nationalist position. Accordingly, indigenous scholarship is drowned out by the presence of Toon Van Meijl, who appears as the authority on Māori culture. Instead of attending to the complex dynamics of tribally based indigenous thinkers who might already approach the construction of Māori identity in strategic and contingent ways, Martens draws upon cultural studies scholars to explain how “in reality, such an essentialised and uniform [Māori] identity does not exist” (p. 117). With these techniques, it seems as though the more covert intention of Martens’s book is to bring cultural studies and postmodern theory to a certain community of Māori cultural nationalists under the illusion that cultural identity is static, unchanging, and authentic (p. 115). While Martens is eager to “break down the wars over cultural boundaries” that *Once Were Warriors* so engendered, the final irony is that *Once Were Warriors: The Aftermath* reiterates a simplistic binary logic between traditionalists and post-traditionalists that ultimately fails to capture the nuances of indigenous cultural politics within a contemporary settler nation such as Aotearoa/New Zealand.

## REFERENCES

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