



# Once were Warriors: The Aftermath: The Controversy of OWW in Aotearoa New Zealand

*Emiel Martens*

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In 1990 unknown Maori author Alan Duff suddenly became both famous and notorious in New Zealand for his first novel *Once Were Warriors*. The violent story of a poor urban Maori family aroused much controversy in New Zealand society, and the Maori community in particular. Many Maori commentators condemned the novel for its negative and allegedly racist portrayal of the indigenous Maori people, accusing Duff for hanging out the dirty linen and blaming the victim. Four years later, the homonymous film by Maori director Lee Tamahori led to similar fame and controversy. On the one hand, critics strongly disapproved of the commercial indigenous film on social, political and aesthetic grounds. On the other hand however, *Once Were Warriors* became the most successful motion picture in the history of New Zealand cinema, grossing over 6.7 million NZ dollars in the national box office and reaching a large international audience. *Once Were Warriors* was not just a novel or film, but a powerful cultural representation which had a significant impact on New Zealand society.

In this richly illustrated book Emiel Martens examines the impact of *Once Were Warriors* in Aotearoa New Zealand by exploring the two cultural representations (with a specific emphasis on the film) and their aftermath in postcolonial New Zealand society: Why did *Once Were Warriors* cause such a controversy within the Maori community? Which were the underlying metaphors of the public debate on both the novel and the film in New Zealand society? And what did the heated reception of *Once Were Warriors* say about the position and identity of the indigenous Maori people within modern New Zealand? Bringing together a wide variety of popular and academic texts, the author discusses these urgent questions in relation to timely New Zealand and wider postcolonial issues such as racial stereotypes, cultural politics, ethnic relations, indigenous media and Maori identity. As an interdisciplinary Cultural Studies endeavour, this book is surprisingly accessible and will prove interesting reading for anyone who wishes to know more about cultural identity, postcolonial representation and indigenous filmmaking in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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