

# **ONCE WERE WARRIORS, BUT HOW ABOUT MAORITANGA NOW? NOVEL AND FILM AS A DIALOGIC THIRD SPACE**

**CORNELIS MARTIN RENES**

Universidad de Barcelona  
mrenes@ub.edu

---

87

## **1. A Slum Story Told and Retold**

Alan Duff's novel *Once Were Warriors* (1990) became an instant bestseller in his home country, New Zealand, and immediately established his reputation as a powerful writer. The reasons for this are to be sought in the highly personal style of prose employed, the gripping story told and, foremost, the uninhibited treatment of controversial subject matter, perceived as "a kick in the guts to New Zealand's much vaunted pride in its Maori-Pakeha [non-Maori] race relations" (Witi Ihimaera in Thompson 1999: 166). Dealing with contemporary Maori alienation in New Zealand's urban areas from a harsh self-critical perspective that other renowned indigenous authors such as Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace and Keri Hulme had never employed, it propounds a shifting of the responsibility and solution for the indigenous predicament from white mainstream society to the Maori themselves. This notion the mixed-descent author develops into a neo-liberal notion of individual responsibility, self-sacrifice and hard work (cf. Harding 1992: 144) in his polemical volume of essays, *Maori: The crisis and the Challenge* (1993), which has fed back into the reception of his novel. Generally, the recasting of the politics of guilt and blame the novel projects has not readily met with acceptance from progressive readership. One such voice has it that "Duff's book is a work of great skill. However, I can't get rid of the nagging feeling that the

present New Zealand government<sup>1</sup> would like his message: what's the point of trying to do anything for Maoris when 'they' are hopeless and have only themselves to blame" (Riedlinger 1995).

Murray Waldren (1996) believes Duff to have infringed upon a taboo area "in rejecting the stereotype of Maori as colonial casualty, and by not ignoring the unflattering face of Maori society, [to have] rewritten the political agenda". On account of exaltation of western individualism —Duff is proud of his battler<sup>2</sup> mentality (Oder 1996: 138)— and exposure of the rigidities of the tribal caste system and male-dominated gender division in traditional Maori society, Duff has often been identified as collaborating with an assimilative European mainstream agenda (Harding 192: 145; Thomas 1993: 58). Christina Thompson (1995: 113) claims that Duff's stubborn "recalcitrant[ce]" represents an:

[...] overall shift to the right, away from more 'progressive' ideas about the recuperation of traditional knowledge and practices, [which] stems from an unwillingness to be co-opted by the liberal Pakeha establishment, [...] inclined to sentimentalize Maori 'traditions' and which Duff himself, as an upwardly mobile member of the working class, simultaneously resents and romanticizes.

88

Thus, in debunking the soft primitivism of rural Maoridom with an unappealing hard-primitivist depiction of Maori slum reality (Harding 1992: 142) which exchanges the Noble Savage for the "Maori male [as] a naturally violent animal" (Simmons 1998: 335), Duff has also earned plenty of criticism from Maori spokesmen for *Once Were Warriors* (Hereniko 1999: 121).

In contrast, part-Maori director Lee Tamahori, who turned this novel "that supposedly puts the boot in the face of the Maori" (Hereniko 1999: 119) into the widely-acclaimed homonymous film, has a more balanced view of the Duff case. He states it was the first time someone had made an authorized attempt to write about the harsh living conditions of the disenfranchised Maori urban underclass. Duff was born to a well-educated Pakeha father and an "uneducated" and "volatile" Maori mother (Thompson 1995: 6), had grown up in the slums, and was therefore able to give an inside view which "bred a lot of controversy, certainly amongst the intelligentsia and a radical element who are interested in a revisionist history of Maori whereby only positive images are presented rather than ever showing the downside" (1995).

Here, we may find Tamahori defending Duff's agenda, but when he, the Maori playwright Riwia Brown, producer Robin Scholes wrote the film script, they refocused the plot in what Geoff Mayer (1995: 100) calls "a drasting reworking" of the novel. Duff wrote an original screenplay that Tamahori rejected because he considered Duff too personally involved "to make the changes to keep people in

their seats”. Thus, Laurence Simmons (1998: 334) points out that Tamahori’s cinematic transfer of Duff’s semi-autobiography highlights the “complexity and [...] ambivalence of the relationship between the political and the commercial”, giving rise to what Robert Sklar (1995: 25) calls “a sensational urban melodrama”. Given these controversies, this essay will analyse what postcolonial ‘third’ spaces of *Maoritanga* (Maoriness) the written and filmed version of *Once Were Warriors* negotiate within New Zealand neocoloniality from a Bakhtinian perspective of identity formation.

## 2. Duff’s Novel, a ‘Heteroglossic’ Negotiation of Maoriness

Duff’s novel bears “a title [which] is, in a sense, the whole book” (Thomas 1993: 59) since it questions the neo-colonial class, gender and race divisions that fix New Zealand’s Maori population in disempowering urban fringe locations —the futile nature of their search for the ‘Big Three’ of work, money and entertainment after colonisation and dispossession (Taonui 2009). To this end the novel addresses the trials and tribulations of a dysfunctional Maori family in which the negligent unemployed Maori husband and his meek wife waste their lives drinking and partying while their children go from bad to worse in the slum. Their oldest son dies in gang warfare, another is a petty thief made ward of state, and their adolescent daughter commits suicide after structural sexual abuse at the homestead. Whereas the father, a self-centred violent bully, is (wrongly) accused of the rape and rejected by the locals, the mother starts up an educational project for the ghetto dwellers to analyse their dire situation and regain agency over their lives. Jake’s disempowering and Beth’s empowering performance of Maoriness form part of a discursive engagement with language, history and community that begs a *dialogic* interpretation of the novel’s narrative framework and content.

Mikhael Bakhtin’s critical theory of knowledge called *dialogism* is an “epistemology [which] exploits the nature of language as a modelling system for the nature of existence”, both considered relational and relative rather than independent and absolute. Thus, dialogism understands identity as a process in which the meanings of self and other are contextually produced. Identity’s dynamic relation with the world generates “social and ethical values as the means by which the I/other split articulates itself in specific situations”, both in time and across space (Holquist 1990: 33). Bakhtin considers the genre of the novel a privileged discursive space in which the self can be narrated/authored. Thereto the novel may use stylistic devices such as *polyphony* —a range of protagonists boasting “a plurality of

independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses [...] with equal rights and each with its own world, [which] combine but are not merged in the unity of the [communicative] event” (Bakhtin 1984: 6). Polyphony is structurally embedded in *heteroglossia*, a multi-discursive network that “governs the operation of meaning in the [...] literary text” and generates “loc[i] where the great centripetal and centrifugal forces that shape discourse can meaningfully come together” in the individual (Holquist 1990: 69-70). Heteroglossia situates the constitutive tension between one’s self-construction and existential position in the world at the intersection point where different discourses meet in the construction of the embodied self. Since we all necessarily go through a formative phase in which “someone else’s discourse is internally persuasive for us and acknowledged by us”, Bakhtin (1981: 345) asserts that individual “consciousness awakens by independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourse surrounding it [...] from which it cannot initially separate itself”.

90 These relational discursive dynamics imply that a sense of self cannot be retrieved as discrete essence or “self-sufficient construct”, because the self only exists in the constant dialogue with the world-as-otherness. In Bakhtin’s thought, self and other(ness) are not separate entities based on absolute difference but represent “the differential relationship between a center and all that is not that center” (Holquist 1990: 18-19). This shifts any understanding of self away from immanent essence to fundamental ambivalence: the meaning of self develops as a variable vantage point from which discursive events are observed as otherness. Thus, the dialogic constitution of self is performed in “site[s] of knowledge [that are] never unitary” (Holquist 1990: 15-18). The structural lack of epistemological centre opens identity up to de- and reconstruction through *addressivity*, the discursive agency of people to assume “responsib[ility] for the activity of meaning in [their] local environment” (Holquist 1990: 84) and for their performance of self. Deemed a non-dialectical epistemology of knowledge and existence, dialogism may produce non-binary discursive locations akin to Homi Bhabha’s postulation of the hybrid postcolonial *third space*:

[...] for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third arises, rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom [...]. (In Rutherford 1990: 211-212)

Bhabha defines the third space dynamically as a site of identification rather than identity, where hybridity involves a dialogic relationship with the o/Other “on the basis of a non-sovereign notion of the self”:

[I]dentification is a process of identifying with and through another object, an object of otherness, at which point the agency of identification —the subject [our ‘dialogic vantage point’]— is itself always ambivalent, because of the intervention of that otherness [...] the importance of hybridity is that it bears the traces of the practices which inform it [...] so that hybridity puts together the traces of certain other meanings or discourses. (In Rutherford 1990: 211-212)

*Once Were Warriors* constructs a postcolonial third space of urban Maoriness out of the refusal of totalising mainstream narratives and the deconstruction of the binary nation-space. It reconstructs hybrid configurations of self out of the deconstructive dialogue with the neo/colonial discourse that incorporates and ‘freezes’ the Maori in fringe locations of dispossession and disempowerment in New Zealand’s nation-space. Duff’s novel addresses the disempowering self-construction of its polyphonic range of characters; unpacks the gender, class and race discourse that besets and disables urban Maori; and proposes alternative, hybrid discursive loci of individual consciousness. Beth Heke’s groundbreaking embodiment of the responsible warriorress in charge of the new urban *marae* (community ground) defies the “primitivist tradition in western thought [...] which constructs “the truth of [Maori] cultures [...] out of] their radical opposition to modernity [so that] indigenous modernity can only be a contradictory and inauthentic location” (Thomson 1993: 64-65). Beth manages to resituate the language of Maori self-definition in an enabling discursive space beyond the discrete binaries of the urban/rural, modernity/primitivism, white/black, male/female, and master/slave in a critical dialogue between her tribal community and the slum community. This process of discursive relocation is as much a physical battle as an intellectual tour de force.

*Once Were Warriors*’ heteroglossia of race, class and gender discourses addresses Maori identity formation through ever-shifting narrative perspectives of varying analytical potential. This confusing polyphony issues from a vast array of characters, “dipping in and out of several troubled (and often unspecified) consciousnesses” (Harding 1992: 147), and from ‘encrusted’ comments of a critical omniscient narrator, which complicates the negotiation of meaning. The emotional directness but analytical inarticulateness of ghetto talk is displayed through a stream-of-consciousness and second-person direct-address technique of writing that establish an immediate sense of self, further enhanced by stylistic idiosyncracies reminiscent of Hubert Selby’s experimental novels (Harding 1992: 147). For example, the critical authorial presence slides into different, often opposed voices using the vernacular: “People doing scenes all over. All ov-ah. As though last throes, last throes, last-minute acts before the curtain fell; or to complete something, satisfy sumptin. A man could see this. But he couldn’t put words to it” (72). Dialogue

tends not to separate out and boast a colloquial use of grammar, diction and syntax: “Yeow, brother, you dream away. Ain’t dreaming, man. Tomorrow, gonna do. And after I’ve had the ribs I’m gonna buy me a cooked chicken from the Hindu’s. The Hindu’s? Man, they ain’t chickens, they’re chooks. Y’c’d string a tennis racket withem, man” (17). Sound effects such as “hahahaha” are frequent and may be printed in capital letters or italics: “Jake the Muss, that’s what his mates —his *crawwwww*ling mates call him” (23). The aim of this near-cacophony is to plunge the reader into the palpable, abject reality of the Maori slum.

A spatial metaphor discursively stages the insurmountable gap between the accommodated and disenfranchised: the dire Maori townscape is set apart from the middle-class environment of Two Lakes (recognisable as Duff’s hometown Rotorua) by vacant no-man’s land. This physical separation establishes a disempowering dialogue with the slum, whose name Pine Block immediately clarifies that in this abject environment people yearn for what is on the other side. This is symbolised by the residential suburban possessions of the white Trambert family, within sight across green pastureland but forever out of Maori reach. With quick brushstrokes, Duff paints a depressing picture of Pine Block: a ghetto where urban Maoris are confined to “two-storey, side-by-side misery boxes”, where “unkempt, ill-directed, neglected kids” roam, and where “lesser people [booze] away their lives, and the booze making things all distorted and warped and violent” (7). Pine Block is “neglected, run-down, abused and [...] prideless”, and a place of “not having dreams” (11, 8) where the more sensitive ones lose the battle for survival.

Jake Heke is the dominant male in this dysfunctional environment: “*I’m* king a [*sic*] this castle” (73). Proud to be on the dole, he spends his time drinking, partying, fighting and vaunting “[a]ll six foot three inches of hard-muscled towering man of him” but remains fatally inarticulate: “No wonder a man’s getting himself drunk all the time: it’s the – the – the. No word for it” (17-18). Lacking the discursive tools to address his shortcomings, he wallows in the aggressive urban warrior image, a perversion of the indomitable-warrior myth that formerly informed the honour and prestige of Maori manhood. Its foil, surrender in tribal warfare, would bring irreparable shame, and therefore enslavement and stifling marginalisation. A traumatised, once-bullied descendant of former slaves, Jake “the Muss” —a sobriquet earned for his strong, muscular body— now merely seeks control over his environment through blind violence, oblivious to the traditional Maori notions of respect and care for the community.

Culturally more-informed because of her noble Maori descent but scourged by domestic violence, his wife Beth analyses Jake’s manhood from a postcolonial perspective: “you, the white audience out there, defeated us. Conquered us. Took

our land, our *mana* [pride], left us with nothing. But the warriors thing got handed down, see [...] in a mixed-up sense it did. It was more toughness” (47). Thus, she is aware Jake occupies a disabling heteroglossic locus that sees him utterly fail as a father and provider, uncaring and violent towards his wife and children: “the Maori of old had a culture, and he had a pride, and he had warriorhood, not this bullying, man-hitting-woman shet, you call that manhood? It’s not manhood, and it sure as hell ain’t Maori warriorhood” (28). Beth is “a victim, yet a knowing and complicit one” (Thomas 1993: 60), who locks her Maori heritage in the past, conditioned by a present without future. Welfare dependency, imprisonment, alcoholism and drug abuse, widespread unskilled and badly-paid labour, unemployment and loss of tribal network offer no options to boost her children’s potential: “What can a woman do about their future, their education? It ain’t in my hands” (14). With both parents having succumbed to a crippling discourse on Maori urban modernity, their children have no prospects in life.

Nig (short for “Nigger”), their 17-year-old son, has already given in to the slum conditions: “what future? No future for a Maori” (16). Thus he is persuaded to exchange what remains of the Heke family network for a destructive version of the Maori extended kinship tradition —gang membership. It proves an even more disabling version of warrior as manhood which he accesses after a brutal initiation sadly but significantly coinciding with Grace’s funeral. The young gang leader Jimmy Bad Horse is in territorial competition with Jake Heke and wreaks his revenge by successfully plotting Nig’s death in a gang fight.

Boogie (a sobriquet denoting his fear of the boogeyman) is the Hekes’ sensitive 14-year-old son who has no other answer to slum life than committing petty crimes. Thus, “a wimp thrown into a den of warriors” (37), he is soon caught up in the legal system and condemned to remand. Taken out of the dysfunctional family environment, he goes through a radical transformation under the guidance of a Maori welfare officer who teaches him his Maori cultural heritage as part of an enabling sense of self. His inscription into a new, hybrid form of Maoriness poisoning tradition and modernity strengthens Beth’s evolution into leadership of the urban Maori community after Grace’s suicide.

Grace, the Hekes’ 13-year-old daughter, represents the novel’s crushed seed of hope and this awareness amongst the family members becomes the catalyst for structural change. A surrogate mother, Grace has taken over Beth and Jake’s parental duties, crucially when Boogie’s case goes to court. The “alter ego” of her notebook (De Souza 2007: 22) is the discursive locus where she addresses and records her growing sense of self, cultural awareness and hopes for the future, until her budding womanhood is the object of repeated rape at the homestead while parties rave downstairs, propelling her to self-destruction. Alcoholism, at the root

of parental abandonment, causes the final disruption of the family network as it undermines a visit to Boogie's reformatory. Unable to cope with the realities of slum life, she chooses the sturdy oak tree planted in the Trambert backyard to hang herself, facing the opportunities she was never given.

In this chilling turn of events, the 'strange fruit' of her lifeless corpse embodies the consequences of postcolonial violence, deracination and disempowerment. The disabling slum heteroglossia on ethnic womanhood has provoked an all too early, too violent awakening of her self amidst alienating discourse, causing her destruction. Right before she launches herself, Grace is undone by the meaning of 'potential' in the context of a Maori ghetto girl: sexual and domestic violence instead of the accommodation and comforts proffered to white mainstreamers in fancy magazines.

It popped up in her head, an old familiar word, concept she'd latched onto. From a magazine it was; about everyone having the right —the right, it said— to realise their potential. POTENTIAL. It sat there in her mind as clear as a neon sign. Like the McCLUTCHY'S<sup>3</sup> ONE [...] Then she jumped (119).

94

Nevertheless, Grace's suicide urges Beth's engagement with disempowering Western and Maori discourses on race, class, and gender. Beth's need to make sense of the violent deaths of her son and daughter leads to independence of thought and the recovery of her children's best qualities as the battling mother-leader. Thus the novel transforms the trope of female death into female resurrection (De Souza 2007: 15, 23), but plays on the trope of male death ambiguously. Nig's death underscores male downfall as it adds onto Jake's 'dis-Grace'. Not without reason, the last metaphoric lines of the novel suggest growth and change are only achieved by those who search for them: "And a sky stayed blue. And that cloud formation had changed shape —Oh, but only if you're looking for that sorta thing" (198). Thus through Beth, Nig's destructive gang warriorhood transforms into its emancipated female version of the Maori warriorress, which appeals to the *mana* (honour) of old but remaps race, class and gender as modern urban Maori womanhood. Beth achieves mental resilience in addressing and unpacking these binaries and reactivates the Pine Block community beyond its alienation by propounding Maoriness beyond the alleged authenticity of former tradition.

The discursive lack of a sense of history (time) and belonging (place) is therefore an important dialogic feature for the novel to address: its polyphony in short-ranged broken-English vernacular therefore functions as a unidimensional atemporal human trap in the first half of the novel. It is only in the chapter entitled *They Who Have History II* (120) that Beth re-incorporates the Maori language, belonging and history, coinciding with Grace's *tangi*. This traditional funeral

ceremony for Grace becomes the prime locus of Beth's discursive reconstruction of self. In her inner dialogue, she questions the patriarchal class divide in Maori society, "resenting the male elders, their privileged position, their secret language [...] a males-only domain. And only certain males at that. From certain families. From chiefly lines" (120). But soon her misgivings about Maori classism and male-chauvinism give way as the funeral ceremony carried out in *te roo Maori* cleanses her feelings of pain, guilt and anger. Through the regenerative ritual of *whakapapa*, in which tribal chief Te Tupaea establishes Grace's genealogy and places her within history, Beth starts "wondering if perhaps that was what ailed her people: their lack of knowledge of the past. A history" (124). She realises that in articulating a sense of their Maori past and analysing the interplay of the inequalities in traditional Maori society with neo/colonial disempowerment, she can offer her community an enabling sense of self and belonging.

Beth's intellectual awakening leads to an educational project for the Pine Block children and their parents. This project fighting ignorance is reminiscent of Duff's reading self-help scheme and underlines the discursive importance of language. Beth's aim is "to give you kids your rightful warrior inheritance. Pride in yourself, your poor selves. Not attacking, violent pride but *heart* pride. Gonna go to my people, my leaders, ask them the way" (167). Her clan's chief Te Tupaea responds by visiting the improvised urban *marae* in front of Beth's house for weekly bilingual lectures on Maori cultural heritage. He also exhorts the Pine Blockers to forge their own destinies: "telling em to jack their ideas up. Ta stop being lazy [...] Ta stop feeling sorry for emselves. Ta stop blamin the Pakeha for their woes even it was the Pakeha much to blame" (182). In coming to the ghetto and lecturing in English, Te Tupaea closes the linguistic, historical and geographical gap between rural and urban Maorihood primitivism and modernity, and cuts across traditional gender and class divisions. Thus, he publicly recognises a *woman* has made the first step out of the vicious circle of urban defeat: "Make that Maori warrior. Oh, and Maori warrioress. After all, we ain't nuthin without our women" (182). He acknowledges this by making Beth a session leader, thus working towards an enabling transformation of Maoritanga for the slum dwellers. This dawning of the Maori community ideal empowers the urban *marae* as their third space.

Grace's death necessarily becomes Jake's undoing, trapped in the urban heteroglossia that addresses Maori manhood as emotional and intellectual regression. His deeply-rooted aversion to the Maori tradition, caused by his family's slave past, prevents him from attending the *tangi*: "I don't like that [Maori] culture shet. I mean, what'd it ever do for me? Same sorta people tole a man and his family when he was growin' up they were just a bunch of slaves. So fuckem" (131). Blinded by a masculinist concept of honour, he is unable to see

that he has traded class for racial oppression, so that Beth has to expel Jake from her home and life as a first step towards their mutual emancipation. The final blow comes when Grace's suicide note is made public. Accusing him of brutal incest, it seals Jake's lot amongst the slum dwellers, and he ends up a vagrant, dethroned and banned. Bearing in mind that Nig fares no better, the urban discourse on Maori manhood is generally shown as utterly crippling. However, at the end of the novel Jake's redemptive reconstruction of self is foreshadowed in his protective, motherly role towards a lonely streetboy, a mutually nurturing relationship that will tap into a Maori third space in the novel's sequel.

### 3. Tamahori's Mov(i)e: the Feminist Turn

Duff's novel and Tamahori's homonymous film tell slightly different stories due to choice of political agenda and structural differences in the respective narrative media. To start with the latter, both literature and cinema are forms of narration, but in the cinematic adaptation of a novel "any attempt to transfer [a] sequence of events from one medium to another is not a simple process". It is conditioned by the divergent methods of production and manner of consumption of each medium, both technically, socially and economically (Giddings e.a. 1990: 1-4). This divergence makes absolute fidelity impossible and feeds into a range of transfer types characterised by their respective distance to the source text, with which they establish a creative and discursive dialogue. According to Klein and Parker, literal translations stay as close to the original as possible; re-interpretations or deconstructions retain the core of the source text; and entirely new works of art take the source text merely as a point of departure (Giddings e.a. 1990: 11).

Geoffrey Wagner defines his typology of adaptation similarly, moving from transposition through commentary to analogy, but interestingly, Wagner believes a commentary "to represent more of an infringement on the work of another than an analogy" (Giddings e.a. 1990: 11), which leads to the debates raised around *Once Were Warriors*. Tamahori himself claims that the "film was seen to be quite different from [the] book", and that he and his fellow scriptwriters "fundamentally changed the structure of the novel so that there's a lot more hope, heart and positive things in there, without destroying the infrastructure or very violent *core* of it" (1995, my italics). Yet, this statement leaves room for conjecture: if the film was received as substantially different from the novel, should it be considered an analogy rather than a commentary? Would this make for a different agenda?

Tamahori recasts Duff's story as follows. The dysfunctional Heke family is now based in a large South Auckland ghetto and both parents spend their time loafing,

drinking and partying. Jake is the local uncrowned king, imposing his authority on friends, family, wife and children through sheer force and intimidation. His son Nig joins a local gang but survives and returns home; his son Boogie is sent away to a boys' home and returns re-educated into a self-confident youngster; and his daughter Grace is raped by a friend of her father's, 'Uncle' Bully, leading to her suicide in the Heke's backyard. The strength of community feeling at her traditional Maori funeral forges Beth's decision to forsake Jake, as he remains a slave "to his fists, to drink and to himself" (min. 79). Reconstructing the snaps of Grace's notebook, torn up by Jake in a masculinist fit of rage, Beth discovers Grace's story of sexual abuse too late. Confronted with their parental failure, Beth's determination to return with her children to the *marae* of her family's village is strengthened, but Jake's response is typically limited to senseless violence; after beating Bully up at McClutchy's bar, he falls to his knees in front of his wife, signing his utter defeat and emasculation. The film finalises with Beth's reproach that, unlike Jake, the Maori once were warriors, "people with *mana*, pride and spirit" (min. 95), something which the slum as Maori urban modernity cannot provide.

A number of minor and major changes and "surprising omissions" (Gillard 2005: 19) permeate this plot which turn Tamahori's version into quite a different discursive affair and recast and trim the complex heteroglossia of the source text. First of all, the polyphonous scope is largely reduced to Beth's voice and her personality given more resilience and stamina, since "[t]he scriptwriter Riwia Brown considered that Beth Heke was [the novel's] focal point and restructured the movie accordingly" (De Souza 2007: 16). Thus, Beth is always aware of, and articulate about, the wrongs of slum society, and rebellious and vociferous when it comes to Jake. She is also able to tap into her cultural heritage by communicating in *te reo Maori* (the Maori language) and thus organise Grace's *tangi*. Beth's role in the film exudes addressivity, as her discursive control of language is unflinching and quickly leads to her construction of an independent-thinking and acting self. The strength and cultural awareness the film confers on Beth narrow Duff's self-help argument down to the individual level as no commitment with the slum community is assumed; taking her children back to her village in a soft-primitivist option for the rural tradition implies that urban community revival and transformation are no viable options. Tellingly, it is Jake who impersonates the fate of the slum dwellers: a tragic anti-hero unaware of his postcolonial deracination and enslavement to a crippling macho ethos of alcohol abuse and dumb violence, he is written off by his wife in the last scenes. The film therefore constructs a hybrid third space of gender empowerment, less concerned with race and class inscription.

Another important change is the film's reconfiguration of the pivotal sequence in the novel: Grace's rape and suicide. Unlike the novel, the film immediately

identifies the rapist and this shapes Jake's responsibility for her death in a different manner —although it is tempting to read Uncle Bully as Jake the Muss's alter ego rather than foil. In search for emotional support, Grace's utter sense of loss and despair is exacerbated by her misinterpretation of an innocent kiss proffered by her soulmate, the homeless teenager Toot. This significant reversal of the novel's action works to precipitate Grace's undoing and perfectly matches the ensuing scenes at the no-longer safe haven of her home: taking advantage of the sick, inebriated bonding at Jake's party downstairs, 'Uncle' Bully claims a kiss from Grace, parading his sexual satisfaction as a kinship obligation. Jake misunderstands her refusal as a female challenge to his authority among the men, and retaliates by tearing up the last resort of her 'alter ego', the notebook. Upon this emotional deathblow Grace stumbles out into the Hekes' backyard and hangs herself.

The choice of the poor Maori state dwelling and not the opulent white Trambert property as the location of Grace's suicide, entails heteroglossic thinning of the narrative's agenda: not so much a nuanced statement against the poverty and destruction inherent to ethnic dispossession and disempowerment, it becomes a straightforward plea against domestic violence within the family and taps into a narrower discourse of oppression. The latter ties in with what Tamahori (Sklar 1995: 25) disparagingly calls Jake's "psychological screwup" as the cause of his violence and alcoholism rather than a traumatic construction of self out of his family's slave past, and it also ties in with Beth's forsaking the slum community for the Maori village in a re-encounter with kin and tradition. Thus, Hester Joyce (2007: 161) claims that "[t]he characterisation of these violent men [Jake and Bully] together takes the narrative focus away from the colonial dispossession of the Heke family and transfers it to an exposition of gender inequity".

It is therefore paradoxical that Grace is the only one of the Hekes to die in the film, whereas Nig is saved for the restoration of the mother-centred nuclear family. The film inaugurates possibilities for change employing the traditional trope of female death, while the novel counters this with Nig's assassination at the hands of a rival gang, levelling the gender issue and profiling the motives of postcolonial deracination and class division. As the last lines of the novel convey, change is only to be achieved by addressing the slum's heteroglossia of race, class and gender simultaneously at the public level of the urban community. In juxtaposition, the film primes bonding in the domestic sphere at a thanksgiving meal after Grace's funeral, where a pun on the deceased's name —saying grace for the presence of kin and food— contrasts with Jake's emasculating descent into hell in the closing images (min. 89 and onwards).

All in all, the film draws wholly on the importance given to Beth as a strong independent female —“a 'South Seas Mother Courage'” (Joyce 2007: 161)— and

the discursive implications of Grace's rape and suicide. In writing off Jake as a failure, it shifts the focus of solutions for the Hekes' predicament from the communal to the personal, and reconfigures the *marae* ideal as the reestablishment of a mother-centred family nucleus. As Brian McDonnell (1995: 8) writes, "Whereas in Alan Duff's novel wider community issues and comparisons between Maori and Pakeha are important, the film narrows its focus to emphasize family issues more". Thus, the funeral scene highlights the strong kinship ties between Beth and the tribal Maori present, and the 'better' world that beckons from the rural setting, lining up with the soft-primitivism celebrated (as well as critiqued) in Niki Caro's *Whale Rider* (2002) after Witi Ihimaera's 1987 near-homonymous novel. In the hard-primitivism of *Once Were Warriors*, the specific ethnic and class conditions of indigenous oppression in urban New Zealand and traditional Maori society are hinted at but not explored in depth as concurring causes of the Hekes' troubles. One finds Jake deploring his slave past in passing, and the slum as if it were any ghetto world-wide, with its unemployment, gang warfare, drug and alcohol abuse, bummed-out people and reggae and soul music. The overall result is that the film works more conventionally as a universal family drama whereas the novel takes a more complex commitment with Maori community regeneration in the face of urban modernity.

Scriptwriter Riwia Brown (McDonnell 1995: 8) "wanted the film to be emotional rather than political, i.e. not as concerned with racial politics as the book". It seems that to counterbalance the preponderance of the novel's tragic content Tamahori included "positive pointers" (1995) and consequently trimmed Duff's agenda down to gender engagement. Laurence Simmons (1998: 332) therefore points out the contradiction that "[w]hat is unsatisfactory about the film from a purely political point of view is what ends up being positive about it". Thus, its "film-making in the British-realist or Hollywood-romantic style —superb acting performances, set and costume design, subtle lighting and cinematography, the roller-coaster ride of its narrative— cover up a "historical novelty and political message" that should be "obvious" rather than "adventitious". While there is no doubt that the film formulates an enabling, feminist statement against domestic violence —and this is in line with Duff's ardent defence of the role of Maori women in working change (Duff 1990: 115; Hereniko 1994: 121)—, Duff's social-realist prose underscores the postcolonial locatedness of his story, highlighting the tough, unromantic nature of Maori slum reality as the controversial heteroglossic intersection of New Zealand's race, class as well as gender relations.

In view of the novel's discursive complexity, its agenda should be dissociated from the "bluff exactitude of the autodidact" exhibited in Duff's essays, interviews and public appearances, in which he blatantly blames victim psychology rather than discrimination for the Maori plight and thus "downplay[s] the seismic shift among

Maori, who [...] transformed from a rural people to a post-WWII detribalized urban proletariat” (Oder 1996: 138). Thus, it is worth having a look at a last major issue that runs through the novel and gives its politics considerable strength. An issue, moreover, that has been treated differently by Tamahori and feeds back into the film plot’s conservative turn to family and rural tradition.<sup>4</sup> This is the question of Jake’s guilt in his daughter’s rape. It is its resolution in Jake’s favour in the novel’s sequel that dissolves the typological ambiguity in Tamahori’s cinematic adaptation of the text.

Following Wagner’s view that a commentary is more of an infringement upon the source text than an analogy, I would argue that considering the film a commentary, as Tamahori’s words imply, is in line with the way it limits the wider scope of the novel’s political message, which diagnoses “New Zealanders as unconscious sites of invasion and colonization, if not battlegrounds for wars of race, class and gender” (Harding 1992: 141). The film preserves the very violence at the core of the novel, but discursively roots it in gender, thus giving way to a different narrative and agenda. Thus, “the film shifts the power balance between [Jake and Beth], making it possible to consider the film to be in some ways a feminist re-reading and reconstruction of the novel” (1995: 8).

100

Whether Jake does or does not commit the rape remains a matter of debate in the novel. It is important to stress, however, that conclusive evidence is never given. Jake stubbornly denies being the perpetrator but cannot trust the gaps in his inebriated memory, and this insecurity together with his penchant for domestic violence destroys him. Perhaps it is the point of the novel to suggest that Jake might have raped his daughter while a veil of mystery over the affair is maintained. Even if he never touched her, by not addressing Grace’s sorry narrative and the social and emotional contract of fatherhood he *did* destroy her life. Thus, the suburban version of Maori manhood is presented as delusive heteroglossia which is intellectually, physically and emotionally devastating. If the effect of Duff’s plot manoeuvre is to debunk the urban narrative of Maori masculinity that in so many ways locks the slum dwellers in postcolonial defeat —because without a clear culprit every male in Grace’s environment is potentially guilty— then it also allows an element of integrity within the individual as the blame is on wider social structures, without exonerating individual responsibility. This interpretation would also line up productively with a dialogic perspective on the constitutive relationship between self and world-as-otherness through addressivity. Whereas in the film “most significantly, Jake does not rape his daughter, an act which in the novel, while remaining ambiguous and unstated, results in his ensuing descent to hell as a cowed, humiliated derelict”, he may “in his humiliation engage[-] our sympathies as readers and pav[e] the way for his subsequent narrative resurrection” (Simmons 1998: 335).

This is prefigured in Jake's protective role towards another lost soul, a streetboy called Cody McClean, but definitively given shape in the novel's sequel, *What Becomes of the Broken Hearted*, when Jake's innocence is proven after the police runs a DNA test (8). The sequel sees him address a sense of fatherhood already hinted at in the aforementioned friendship, which allows him to negotiate an enabling sense of self. Interestingly, Tamahori's film was released in 1995, whereas *What Becomes of the Broken Hearted* was first published in 1996, thus showing that Tamahori had correctly anticipated Duff's intentions in not making Jake the culprit. However, Tamahori's twist to the plot partly depoliticises its message, because it locates the responsibility for the crime in individual deviant behaviour rather than the ubiquitous anonymous violence of the slum.

A film's production costs far exceed those of a novel's, so a key business objective is to enhance the film's commercial viability on the national and international market. This favours shifting the plot into a feminist comment on domestic violence, an issue that sits well with the average film audience, pushing the conflictive racial-classist issue further into the background. Kirsten Moana Thompson (2003: 233-35) explains "[t]he wide cultural dissemination of [the film ...] partly through its social utility in dramatizing domestic violence, alcoholism, and sexual abuse", but her notion that it also locates the "deep-seated gender violence endemic in New Zealand's culture [...] in the legacy of colonialism" is only true insofar as this history is hinted at and not explored in depth. Tamahori (1995) seems to acknowledge the latter:

Duff is a very controversial man because he has taken on a huge amount of self-appointed responsibility about articulating what's wrong with the Maori people [...]. The movie, of course, attracted the same controversy but once the movie was made, all the controversy died away because our film was seen to be quite different from his book.

Thus, the film is less articulate on the reasons for Maori disenfranchisement and presents a more universally-palatable plot in suppressing Duff's controversial ghetto self-help project of "discipline and education and reading" (Hereniko 1995: 123), so that an ethnic controversy could in effect be avoided. That this may have boosted the film's acceptance is shown in the fact that it drew large audiences nationally and abroad, became an indigenous "blockbuster" (Thompson 2003: 230) and allowed Tamahori's step up from promoter of a local TV-commercial to a well-known Hollywood film director. The film certainly creates a meritorious third space, but this site of contestation identifies more with universal gender emancipation than with the subversion of the complex heteroglossia informing Maori disempowerment.

#### 4. Duff, His Novel, Maoritanga and the Third Space

While the feminist film plot emphasises Jake as a male icon of evil, the novel's agenda presents him as both a victimiser and victim, only able to cope with the multiple injustices of Pakeha and Maori society through wrong-headed male prerogative. This more nuanced discursive configuration of his personality neither exonerates him from responsibility in Grace's death, nor puts him down as an inherently depraved character. Inasmuch as Jake is deluded, his surname is significant: Hone Heke was the first Maori chief to sign the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, which gave the Maori full British citizenship (Charles Royal 2009) but whose ambiguous language has raised an ongoing feud about the lawfulness of the massive dispossession of tribal land which caused the Maori urban drift (2007). Duff's poignant description of the New Zealand slums adds its own weight to Beth and chief Te Tupeaea's stern appeal for Maori addressivity (167) to voices blaming the Treaty and its corollaries for the urban predicament; however, Beth also links Jake's smug welfare dependency (21) to the class stratifications in both Pakeha (white) and traditional Maori society: "Just shows we're all good, and we're all bad [...] How dare they bring my husband up believing he was a slave" (103). Thus, Bruce Harding (1992: 146) claims the novel:

abounds with very strong hints that New Zealand has an ethnic caste system [...] which has—at least in the past— acted as a barrier to social mobility [...] beyond the tacit racism of Europeans, much of [its] momentum comes from within the social structure of Maoridom itself, where conceptions of breeding and rank sit ill with Western notions of egalitarianism and where rigid conservatism often stultifies creative adaptive changes which would benefit the Maori people.

Jake's entrapment in a disabling web of indigenous as well as non-indigenous heteroglossia cannot be productively addressed in binary terms (black and white, male and female, colonised and coloniser, victim and victimiser) but beckons towards a more complex, hybridising social engagement. Although it embeds the politics of guilt and blame within wider social forces, the novel insists on people's addressivity in the search for a socio-historic awareness of self beyond traditional discursive limitations. In the making of a ghetto *marae*, urban Maoriness turns into a discursive site of contestation, as Beth's newfound warriorhood effectively reflects "the passage of women in taking leadership roles in the Maori renaissance of the 1980s" (Joyce 2007: 163). In contrast, almost until the conclusion of the novel Jake fails to address the stereotypical "negative Maori self-image" (Harding 1992: 147) that impedes the constructive dialogue with his social environment without which an enabling self-awareness cannot be constructed.

If Duff's "hard-primitivism" (Harding 1992: 145) flags Beth and Jake as showcases of indigenous alienation in urban modernity, it also suggests Maoriness can be transformed into a hybrid third space beyond the social deprivation, ethnic deracination and "emasculatation" of gender performance in the slums (De Souza 2007: 24). In this sense, the novel addresses the complex heteroglossia of contemporary Maori identity formation more accurately and productively than the homonymous film. Thus

[w]rote one New Zealand critic: "[The film] rescues Duff's novel from its reactionary political agenda and transforms it into a feminist vision". Not quite. The film actually does too little justice to Duff's bold and intricate novel, a slangy, multi-perspective brew rich in interior monologue. However, not unlike other fictioneers turned pamphleteers, Duff's public pronouncements do not match the richness of his art (Oder 1996: 137).

Following up on this, Duff's novel should be judged not in the controversial light of the author's public statements that have both troubled the novel's reception and enhanced the film's, but on the merits of its critical multi-discursive approach to Maoriness. It promotes a balanced view in affirming the Maori "once were warriors" and yet again may be "people with *mana*, pride and spirit" (min. 95), provided they address and inhabit the urban modernity of New Zealand's nation-space as the hybrid embodiment of a postcoloniality beyond binary division. In contrast, film medium technology, marketing, general overheads, expected cash return as well as Tamahori's production team's political sensibilities trim down the novel's heteroglossic potential to a cinematic commentary that markets a meritorious but essentially different story of emancipation.

103

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup>. At the time of this review, the conservative National Party was in power, and would be until 1999.

<sup>2</sup>. An Antipodean version of the self-made man.

<sup>3</sup>. McClutchy's is the local bar and Jake's favorite haunt to pick a fight and get

drunk. It functions as the 'court' of his 'kingdom' and is his personal fief. Grace inevitably associates this site with drunkenness and the destruction of individual potential.

<sup>4</sup>. An unrealistic end in that 85% of the Maoris live in cities nowadays as a result of 'urban drift'.

## Works cited

- BAKHTIN, Mikhael. 1984. *Problems of Dostoevski's Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.
- . (1981) 1994. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- CHARLES ROYAL, Te Ahukaramū. 2009. "Māori". In: New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage. *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand* 1999-2010. <<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/maori>>. Accessed 6 June, 2010.
- DUFF, Alan. 1990. *Once Were Warriors*. Auckland: Tandem Press.
- . 1993. *Maori: The Crisis and the Challenge*. Auckland: Harper Collins.
- . 1996. *What becomes of the Broken Hearted?* Auckland: Vintage.
- GIDDINGS, Robert, Keith SELBY and Chris WENSLEY. 1990. *Screening the Novel: The Theory and Practice of Literary Dramatization*. London: MacMillan.
- Gillard, Garry. 2005. "It's the Way Things Are: *Once Were Warriors*". *Screen Education* 39: 119-124. <<http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.scu.edu.au/documentSummary;dn=086121000368566;res=IELHSS>>. Accessed 12 April, 2009.
- HARDING, Bruce. 1992. "Wrestling with Caliban: Patterns of Bi-Racial Encounter in Colour Scheme and *Once Were Warriors*". *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 8 (Dec): 136-155.
- HERENIKO, Vilsoni. 1999. "An Interview with Alan Duff". In Hereniko, Vilsoni (ed.) and Rob Wilson (ed. and introd.) *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield: 119-133.
- HOLQUIST, Michael. 1990. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*. London: Routledge.
- "An Interview with Warriors Director Lee Tamahori". 1995. *Fine Line Features* online. <<http://www.finelinefeatures.com/warriors/waintv.htm>>. Accessed 24 June, 2004.
- JOYCE, Helen. 2007. "Once Were Warriors. By Lee Tamahori". In Mayer, Geoff and Keith Beattie. *The Cinema of Australia and New Zealand*. London: Wallflower Press: 157-164.
- MAYER, Geoff. 1995. "Going home: Once Were Warriors". *Metro* 101: 3-6. <<http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.scu.edu.au/fullText;dn=81114269466;res=APAFT>>. Accessed 19 June, 2010.
- MCDONNELL, Brian. 1995. "*Once Were Warriors*: Controversial Novel Becomes Blockbuster Film". *Metro* 101: 7-9. <<http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.scu.edu.au/fullText;dn=81114269467;res=APAFT>>. Accessed 19 June, 2009.
- ODER, Norman. 1996. "Alan Duff and *Once Were Warriors*: ventilating race in New Zealand". *Antipodes* 10: 2 (Dec): 137-139. <<http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.scu.edu.au/fullText;dn=970707457;res=APAFT>>. Accessed 12 April, 2009.
- RIEDLINGER, Peter. 1994. "A false tale well told". *Green Left Weekly* 179 (Wed 15 Mar 1994). <<http://www.greenleft.org.au/node/7493>>. Accessed 22 January, 2010
- RUTHERFORD, Jonathan. "The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha". In Rutherford, Jonathan (ed.) *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990: 207-221.
- "Signing the Treaty". 2007. In: New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage. *New Zealand history online* 2005-2010. <<http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/politics/treaty/making-the-treaty/signing-the-treaty>>. Accessed 6 June, 2010.
- SIMMONS, Laurence. 1998. "Ideology and class in *Once Were Warriors*". *Southern Review* 31 (3): 330-342. <<http://search.informit.com>>

- au.ezproxy.scu.edu.au/fullText;dn=991010143;res=APAF>. Accessed 12 April, 2009.
- SKLAR, Robert. 1995. "Social Realism with Style: An Interview with Lee Tamahori". *Cineaste: America's Leading Magazine on the Art and Politics of the Cinema* 21 (3): 25-27.
- DE SOUZA, Pascale. 2007. "Maoritanga in Whale Rider and Once Were Warriors: A Problematic Rebirth through Female Leaders". *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 1 (1): 15-27.
- TAMAHORI, Lee. 1994. *Once Were Warriors*. Distributed by Fine Line Features.
- TAONU, Rāwiri. 2009. "Tribal organisation – The history of Māori social organisation". In: New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage. *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand* 1999-2010. <<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/tribal-organisation/6>>. Accessed 6 June, 2010.
- THOMAS, Nicholas. 1993. "Gender and the Politics of Tradition: Alan Duff's Once Were Warriors". *Kunapipi* 15 (2): 57-67.
- THOMPSON, Christina. 1995. "Alan Duff: The Book, the Film, the Interview: The Controversial Author of *Once Were Warriors* (UPQ) Talks to the Editor of *Meanjin*". *Meanjin* 54 (1): 6-13.
- . 1999. "In Whose Face? An Essay on the Work of Alan Duff". In Hereniko, Vilsoni and Rob Wilson (eds.) *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield: 105-118.
- THOMPSON, Kirsten Moana. 2003. "Once Were Warriors: New Zealand's First Indigenous Blockbuster". In Stringer, Julian (ed. and introd.) *Movie Blockbusters*. London: Routledge: 230-241.
- WALDREN, Murray. 1996. "The Duff Guy. An Interview with the author of *Once Were Warriors*". *The Australian Magazine*. <<http://members.optusnet.com.au/~waldrenm/duff.html>>. Accessed 24 July, 2004.

Received: 7 July 2010

Revised version: 7 June 2011

