Representations at Work: Maori Responses to “Once Were Warriors”

The movie “Once Were Warriors” (1994) presents a fictional story of the everyday life of an urban, underclass Maori family. Based on two kinds of Maori responses to, in particular, the violence in the movie, i.e. “the film should never have been made” and “that’s not fiction, that’s reality”, the paper addresses the lived-in reality which is evoked in the Maori audience. Furthermore, I demonstrate that the fiction-reality correspondence posed a formative place in the public debate about a) violence in (Maori) society, and b) the Pakeha (New Zealander of European descent) stereotype of Maori as a violent people, e.g. when mainstream media reported ‘real’ violence by invoking images from the film. Insofar as the politics of (indigenous) identity in Aotearoa New Zealand relate to a) the politics of (mis)representations and b) the politics of marginalization, I argue that the Maori controversy over the movie reflects ambivalence about ethnic representations and identifications.