2. ‘Endangered species turned dangerous’: Rena Owen and celebrity in Aotearoa/NZ

ABSTRACT

This article argues that Rena Owen’s star persona has been constrained, and ultimately undermined, by essentialist definitions of her status as Māori on the part of print media, in particular women’s magazines, in response to her role as Beth in Once Were Warriors (Lee Tamahori, 1994), a role that thrust her into the international limelight. These ancillary texts served to emphasize two stereotypes, positioning her either in relation to the traditional Pacific Island female type of the ‘dusky maiden’ or focusing on her criminal past and current scandalous behaviour. These representations of the actress detracted from her considerable talents and were undoubtedly a factor in determining a career trajectory that failed to fulfil its early promise. The scandal mongering of the tabloids expressed the uneasiness with which Aotearoa/New Zealand viewed public personalities that embraced a cultural past that included both Māori and European identities. Unlike the international press, which compared Owen’s performance to that of a range of film stars noted for their dramatic and charismatic capacities and presence, from Bette Davis to Anna Magnani, the New Zealand press portrayed her as ‘Beth’—as a social victim rather than an accomplished thespian.

Keywords: femininity, Once Were Warriors, ‘race’, Rena Owen, stardom, stereotypes

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THRUST INTO the international limelight through her association with the 1994 film Once Were Warriors (Lee Tamahori), in which she co-starred with Temuera Morrison, Rena Owen has not yet fulfilled the promise that the international and New Zealand press predicted for her on the basis of the role that she played in this film, that of Beth, the battered
and beleaguered wife and mother in a Māori family that falls victim to the vissicitudes of contemporary urban life in Auckland. ‘The extraordinary success of *Once Were Warriors,*’ which ranks number one in tickets sold, and number three in box office revenues, among New Zealand films shown in New Zealand (Stark & Pivac, 2011), provided the platform on which Owen established a reputation as a dramatic actress who would have a long and respectable career in supporting roles that shows no sign of abating. That same film, however, was perhaps responsible for the fact that she was typecast as a character actress, who incarnated off-and-on screen a particular stereotype. Film stardom and roles in which she might receive top-billing eluded her, in spite of the considerable talent she demonstrated in her break-through performance in *Once Were Warriors.* An analysis of the press’s depiction of her at the time of the film’s release suggests that, at least in part, her bicultural heritage, her difficult past and the way in which this was seized upon as a key element in her public persona, specifically in New Zealand, were factors in determining what kinds of parts Owen would be offered.

‘Celebrity’ or ‘performer’
The response of the New Zealand media to Owen’s performance gives further weight to film scholar Christine Geraghty’s (2000) oft-quoted remark (about contemporary celebrity) that ‘[w]omen are particularly likely be to seen as celebrities whose working life is of less interest and worth than their personal life’, but also the ways in which, again in Geraghty’s words, that ‘[t]he term celebrity indicates someone whose fame rests overwhelmingly on what happens outside the sphere of their work and who is famous for having a lifestyle’ (p. 187). Owen inspired media attention—particularly in terms of how Beth, her character in *Once Were Warriors,* was depicted as a product of who she was rather than her capacities as an actress—that illustrates the uneasiness with which New Zealand collectively construes its bi-cultural heritage and its relations to both Hollywood and European cinematic traditions. Equally, media attention from overseas critics underlined the ways in which viewers outside New Zealand attempt to align (for better or for worse) New Zealand culture with already familiar European and Hollywood icons and genres. Owen’s prominence in the media, which overshadowed that of her fellow actors, in particular her co-star Temuera Morrison, suggests the ways in which ‘[w]omen function effectively as spectacle in the press and on television as well as in the cinema’ (Geraghty, 2000, p. 196).
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As a figure, the feminine, then, remains a significant symbolic field on which are played out the dilemmas and paradoxes of culture—with the female star a privileged figure within that terrain. By portraying Owen as a ‘celebrity’ as opposed to a ‘performer’ (Geraghty, 2000, p. 187), whose notorious lifestyle paralleled that of the character Beth, the New Zealand media also promoted a view of Māori within New Zealand culture as predominantly members of a criminous underclass needing to redeem themselves and deserving, not of respect, but of a compassion that would lead them to see the error of their ways and, implicitly, the virtues of European values. This response in New Zealand, with its emphasis on Owen’s checkered past, and subsequent public misdemeanours, lends credence to ‘the disapproval’ expressed in response to the film and the novel on which it was based ‘from those, Māori and Pākehā alike, who saw its grim depiction of domestic violence in Māori society as complicit in a colonial repression of the indigenous culture’ (Fox, 2008, p. 189).

‘Endangered species’

In the case of Owen, the reception of Once Were Warriors defined her image as marked by indigeneity or ‘race,’ in the terms of African American scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr (see, for example, Gates, Jr., 1985, pp. 1-20, especially pp. 4-6). Gates explains in 1985 that ‘[r]ace, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognized to be a fiction. . . . Nevertheless our conversations are replete with usages of race which have their sources in the dubious pseudoscience of the 18th and 19th centuries’ (p. 4). Thus, for example, Once Were Warriors, released the same year as Spielberg’s Jurassic Park in New Zealand, provoked Newsweek (American edition) reviewer David Ansen (1995) to remark: ‘Both films are about endangered species turned dangerous’ (p. 6). Implicit in this characterisation of the film is the assumption that Māori constitute a ‘species’ or ‘race’ and that Rena Owen is a representative of that ‘race’, which now faces the threat of extinction. While the dinosaurs represented in Jurassic Park are indeed extinct, images alive only through the magic of cinema, this is hardly the status of Māori in contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The notion that Māori are ‘an endangered species’ is a relatively old one, but one that continues to spark debates even in contemporary fora such as the internet. Michael Basset (2010) in the online comments section of the New Zealand newspaper Dominion Post opined that ‘the racial purity train left 200
years ago’ while maaori.com explains that ‘“[b]lood” or “bloodedness” is a totally spurious notion used only by white people, very often to denigrate those who choose to live within non-white cultural frameworks. . . .[B]eing “Māori” is being a member of a family of “Māori” descent that operates within “Māori” cultural values, norms and beliefs, regardless of the degree of genetic infusion from outside that “Māori” line of descent’. Contributing to the controversy, scholars point to changing definitions; to the problems inherent in what is known as the ‘blood quantum theory’; to the tendency to define race in terms of culture or ‘style of living’ during different periods of the country’s history; and to policies of ‘racial amalgamation’ that appeared from time to time (Stephenson & Stephenson, 2001; Kukutai, 2007; Salesa, 2001).

Why is it, then, that Newsweek talks about a ‘race’ or ‘species,’ particularly if we accept, as do most scholars today, that the notion of ‘race’ has no biological status, as does Gates above (that is to say, that all humans are of one and the same ‘species’ and that there is little or no genetic basis for distinguishing between the so-called racial groups)? By that same token, as Gates himself remarks, we should not dismiss the social and cultural reality of ‘race’, what he calls ‘Western culture’s use of writing as a commodity to confine and delimit a culture of color’ as manifested in Newsweek’s characterisation of New Zealand Māori as a ‘species’, suggesting how the colonial project continues to operate at an international level.

From the early dates of colonisation, inter-marriage between the European and indigenous population has been an historically important dimension of Aotearoa/New Zealand that has contributed to the distinctiveness of its culture under policies of alliance and amalgamation. New Zealand historian Barbara Brookes (2011) remarks that with regard to the country’s past: ‘There was no legal segregation in New Zealand between Māori and Pākehā, and there has never been any anti-miscegenation laws’ (p. 181; see Wanhalla, 2008, for a nuanced account of early inter-marriage in New Zealand). Notwithstanding, the depiction of Owen as of mixed descent was presented by the contemporary media as further evidence of a transgressive legacy that contributed to a general view of Owen as born under a dark cloud and part of an underclass associated with the character Beth.

This history contributes to the production of a contradictory star persona imposed upon Rena Owen as both Māori and European.¹ Media discourses present Owen as alternately, and then simultaneously, Māori and European.
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However, in spite of the country’s bicultural past, her enduring image, regardless of its transitory contradictions, is one that is defined by particular ‘racial’ stereotypes associated with Māori culture in contemporary New Zealand, but not necessarily aligned with the country’s history. The international press tended to comment on her dual heritage, but as an unresolved contradiction, reflecting, perhaps, tensions surrounding definitions of ‘race,’ the views of scholars, such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., notwithstanding. Thus, in February 1995, the women’s magazine *Elle* (American edition) reported that ‘Owen was raised by a Māori father and a white mother disowned for the marriage’. Similarly, the *New York Times* remarked that Owen ‘has a Māori father and an English mother. She was brought up in Māori culture because, she explains, “Mum married Dad in the 50s, when it was a no-no, so she was disowned”’ (Brunette, 1995, p.H13). Rather than examining this dual identity, the media, in particular New Zealand women’s magazines, focused on Owen’s scandalous past and unconventional and unruly behaviour, which were associated by the press with her Māori identity. These representations of the actress detracted from her considerable talents as a performer in order to focus on her past and present lifestyle, in particular its more transgressive and melodramatic moments.

**Celebrity and notoriety**

Film stars’ breaches of propriety and encounters with the law are frequently the topic of contemporary tabloids as part of the larger media landscape that extends well beyond the movies, and is characterised by what journalist Maureen Orth (2003) calls ‘the celebrity industrial-complex’. Notoriety and stardom have always been closely intertwined—some of the earliest celebrities were criminals—such as Billy the Kid (Jameson, 2005, p. 3) and Jack the Ripper (Steenberg, 2013, p. 27; Rojek, 2003, p. 158). The fine line between film stardom and notoriety has been apparent since the early Hollywood star system, when a number of careers were destroyed by a series of scandals during the 1920s. Comedian Fatty Arbuckle was accused of rape and murder; Wallace Reid died of a drug overdose; and actresses Mary Miles Minter and Mable Normand were implicated in the murder of director William Desmond Taylor (Barbas, 2001, p. 73). Consequently, the Hollywood studios attempted to manage scandal by writing ‘morals clauses’ into star contracts—these penalised stars if they brought disrepute to the studio (Stenn, 1998, p. 231). However, this measure by no means eliminated
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star scandals. The success of stars such as Jean Harlow and Marilyn Monroe in spite of (or even because of) their scandalous off-screen lives revealed that scandal was not always counterproductive. Film scholar, John Ellis (1994), has commented on the close relationship between stardom and scandal, suggesting that stars function not as spotless ideals, but rather as ‘moral barometers’ for the discussion of contemporary moral and ethical issues (pp. 95-96). Sue Holmes and Diane Negra (2008) note in particular the extent to which ‘contemporary female celebrities are placed to operate as lightning rods for a range of concerns’.

The notoriety inspired by Owen’s bi-cultural (often interpreted as ‘bi-racial’) lineage and the contradictions associated with this are reflected, in particular, in the media’s ambivalent attitude towards Owen’s Māori ethnicity, producing an apparent split between two types of star texts. One focuses on her status as Māori (especially evident in the New Zealand media), and the other attempts to locate her in an international genealogy of stars known for their dramatic capacities as actresses (a strategy more common in the international press).

A ‘dusky maiden’
The first type of text includes those materials that emphasise Owen’s Māoridom as the defining feature of her star persona, and the locus for her allure. A common strategy in these texts is the positioning of Owen in relation to the ‘dusky maiden’ trope often imposed upon Pacific Island women, a notable example of which is the portrait of Owen that appeared on the cover of the July 30–August 5 New Zealand Listener (see figure 2). As Marata Tamaira (2010) has pointed out, from the mid-18th century—when colonial explorations of the Pacific intensified—imagery of ‘noble savages’ and ‘dusky maidens’ has proliferated in Western cultures. She argues that ‘the visual arts have operated as a vehicle by which the “dusky maiden” motif has been faithfully transported through history to the current day’ (p. 1). Tamaira observes that the dusky maiden type, which belongs to a ‘tradition of sexualising and eroticising the Polynesian female form through titillating visual representations of bare-breasted, nubile Polynesian wāhine (women)’, continues to have a strong presence in contemporary visual arts. Likewise, as noted by Sarina Pearson (2005), filmic representations (Hollywood in particular) draw heavily on the sexualised dusky maiden type and ‘over
The unrestrained and blatantly portrayed eroticism that is a characteristic feature of the dusky maiden type was also a strand in Owen’s star persona. For example, the New Zealand Listener in its feature article on Owen, highlighted the intensity of Owen’s love scenes in Once Were Warriors. In this article the film’s producer Robin Scholes is quoted as exclaiming in regards to Owen: ‘The Americans . . . just think she is so hot; so sexually vibrant and stunningly beautiful and hot’ (Stirling, 1994, p. 19). In the same New Zealand Listener article, her co-star, Temuera Morrison, remarked enthusiastically that ‘when she kisses, she really kisses. She goes for the . . . her lips are open’. Visual representations of Owen as an obviously, yet ‘naturally,’ sexy ‘dusky maiden’ were also common. For example, the May 1994 cover of New Zealand Film features a production still for Once Were Warriors that depicts Owen and her teenaged on-screen daughter, Mamaengaroa Kerr-Bell, posing together wearing short-sleeved garments that expose their arms, shoulders and décolletage, while addressing the viewer with sultry gazes. Both actresses’ hair flows over their bare shoulders in unrestrained curls. The chiaroscuro lighting effect used in the still serves to render their exposed skin all the more ‘dusky’.

A criminal past and troubled present
Owen’s star texts also repeatedly position her in relation to even more insistently negative stereotypes of Māoridom by focusing on her criminal past, and thus perpetuating prejudices that commonly assert themselves in contemporary New Zealand. The international press read the film as symptomatic of larger global problems. According to film scholar Deborah Walker-Morrison (2011), French critics’ interpretation posited that the film’s ‘violence was clearly connected to historical and/or socio-economic factors, specifically colonialism and international industrial capitalism’ (26). In contrast, within the New Zealand, during Owen’s initial rise to fame, her media biographies were peppered with references to her criminal past that avoided the larger global issues underlined by the French press.

In 1991, even before Once Were Warriors, New Zealand Woman’s Weekly ran an article entitled ‘Rena Puts Prison Past Behind Her’ (Neville, 1991, p. 14). When this story was published, Owen was receiving acclaim for Daddy’s Girl, a play she wrote and then acted in for Wellington’s Depot Theatre. Rise above adversity is a common trope in celebrity biographies, and here the
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description of her troubled youth presages her role in *Once Were Warriors*. According to the article, Owen grew up in Moerewa, a freezing works town in the Bay of Islands. Owen is quoted as follows:

> I had a similar upbringing to other children in Moerewa. It was rich in Maoritanga. We spent a lot of time on the marae, attended all the hui and tangi [. . .] But we grew up accepting alcohol and violence as normal. And there was never any money. We never read a book, and if we wanted things like sweets we would steal them. (Neville, 1991, p.14)

This particular characterisation of her early life contradicts later accounts. In 1994, the *New Zealand Listener* reported, citing Owen: ‘The Owens had a flash house—“the first Lockwood home in the north”—with lots of flowers, fruit trees, a big vegetable garden, chooks’ (Stirling, 1994, p. 21).

These contradictions underline how the *Women’s Weekly* account is structured around a narrative in which Owen redeems herself by choosing creative artistic pursuits over criminality. Before discovering theatre, after apparently having a reputation as a ‘troublemaker’ at school, at 23 Rena became addicted to heroin while living in London—this resulted in her spending eight months in a British jail on drug charges (Neville, 1991, p. 14). In keeping with the narrative of redemption, the actress/writer is portrayed as a self-aware young woman, who, now, has learned from her mistakes and opted to make better life choices and, as a result, has a promising theatrical career—her talent and training as a performer is downplayed. The article ends by asking the reader ‘not to paint her as an ex-prisoner drug addict’ (Neville, 1991, p. 15)—even though the article itself relishes the details relating to this aspect of her past.

Such stories were intrinsic to Owen’s persona—for example, a similar narrative charting Owen’s successful rise above a troubled Moerewa childhood and drug addiction in London was included in the *New Zealand Listener* (Stirling, 1994). In the same article, the author, Pamela Stirling, suggesting a degree of complexity to Owen (absent from *Women’s Weekly* depictions), also quotes the film’s director Lee Tamahori who remarks that Owen exhibits ‘excellent technical control . . . She is a formally trained actor and, if I say you have to fall down there and you have to have your head facing in that direction, she’ll go crashing into something and do all that’ (p. 19). Such references to Owen’s work as a performer are rare, overshadowed by accounts of her personal life.
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In contrast to the more multivalent account of her life offered by the *Listener*, throughout 1994, the year in which Owen was at the peak of her public prominence with the release of *Once Were Warriors*, the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* enthusiastically provided a forum for an on-going moral debate over an incident in which Owen was charged with assault after getting into a fight with a woman in a Kawakawa bar. The *Woman's Weekly*’s continued fixation on the scandal overshadows the magazine’s interest in the film or in Owen’s capacities as a ‘trained actor’. Over several months, the *Woman's Weekly* published three feature articles on this event. Two lengthy articles on Owen ‘The Price of Fame’ (Wakefield, 12 September 1994) and ‘Stressed-out Rena Snaps’ (Wakefield, 24 October 1994) provided detailed descriptions of the set of circumstances leading up to the crime and include quotations from Owen, justifying her behaviour as resulting from her struggle to cope with her newfound celebrity and the consequent harassment. Both articles revel in explaining how Owen came to break a pool cue over the head of a woman, Freda Te Tai. The articles speculate whether this instance will harm the anti-domestic-violence cause the actress had been promoting to schools and women’s refuges since rising to fame. Owen is quoted as giving the following defence: ‘Domestic violence, male violence against women, is very different to cat fighting . . . How many people have family fights? There’s no way this would have got to court if I wasn’t famous’ (Wakefield, 24 October 1994)

The magazine then published an ‘exclusive’ interview with the victim of the assault, Freda Te Tai, ‘Rena Knocked Me For A Six!’, which further contributed to the scandal by pinning the blame firmly on Owen (Wakefield, 14 November 1994). This article quotes at length from the apology letter the court required Owen to write to Te Tai and states that the assault was a result of Owen’s struggles with alcoholism. In addition to this series of articles, the *Woman’s Weekly* presented itself as allowing members of the public to weigh in on the scandal. Several letters to the editor were published in Owen’s defence. For example, one reader, tired of the magazine’s ongoing sensationalising of the assault, wrote in: ‘Come on *NZ Woman’s Weekly*. Rena made an awful mistake when she hit Freda Te Tai and now she’s been punished. That should be the end to it’ (Letters, 5 December 1994). While readers did defend Owen, perhaps recognising the exploitative nature of the way the magazine covered the event, these responses also served to prolong a debate that moved public attention further afield from her status as a talented performer.
Rachel Hunter: a Kiwi good girl
Owen’s ‘bad girl’ persona is all the more apparent when her star image is held up against that of another star who was prominent in the New Zealand and international media during the mid-1990s: Rachel Hunter. Hunter, an Auckland-born fashion model who wed British singer Rod Stewart in a well-publicised marriage, experienced intense fame at home while modelling overseas. Like Owen, she was a favourite subject for the New Zealand Woman’s Weekly and the New Zealand media in general. To give an indication of her presence in the New Zealand media, in 1993 the London Times reported that schoolchildren had voted for Hunter as the most common candidate to appear on the back of new bank notes—above notable Kiwis including Edmund Hillary and Ernest Rutherford (Robotham, 1993).

In appearance and persona, Owen and Hunter contrast dramatically. While Owen’s skin is frequently shot in such as way as to highlight its darker tones, in keeping with the ‘dusky maiden’ stereotype, Hunter is all pale skin and ‘strawberry blonde’ hair. Hunter was fresh and girlish in appearance, whereas Owen (who was several years older) was more womanly—and her face, demeanour and star biography all suggested that she had experienced more of life.

While the media relished the ‘bad girl’ aspects of Owen’s persona, repeatedly associating her with criminality, Hunter was very much ‘the unspoilt girl-next-door’ and ‘New Zealand’s favourite daughter’ (Robotham, 1993). The New Zealand Sunday Star Times, for example, praised Hunter for embodying a ‘sporty, healthy look,’ in contrast to a disturbing ‘heroin chic’ look observed by the reporter as a trend in the international fashion industry (‘Heroin,’ 1997, p. E2). While Owen was defined as working-class as a result of her role in Once Were Warriors and a celebrity biography in which tales of her impoverished upbringing recurred, Hunter evoked middle-class respectability. The London Times reported that the wholesome Hunter has changed New Zealanders’ minds regarding whether modelling is a morally acceptable career for a young woman. ‘Modelling has become super-respectable’, says Maysie Bostall Cohen, a leading agent. ‘For years fathers have been wary of letting their daughters model. Now, after every article on Rachel or cover of a magazine, we have mothers, fathers, aunts, grandmothers calling us up about this incredible find, hidden away in the country’ (Robotham, 1993).

Owen and Hunter’s coexistence as prominent but contrasting stars in the New Zealand media landscape is reminiscent of the Hollywood star system,
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which has from its early origins been structured around a vamp/ingénue dichotomy (a continuation of traditional virgin/whore dichotomy). Vamps—such as Theda Bara, Lya Di Putti and Nita Naldi—and ingénues—such as Mary Pickford, Lillian Gish and Mary Miles Minter—enjoyed equal popularity. In both cases the ingénue type is indelibly defined by ‘whiteness’ and the vamp is presented as an ethnic ‘other’ (Negra, 2001; Staiger, 1995).

A ‘Bette Davis from down under’

While the star texts discussed so far fixate on Owen’s Māori appearance and identity, a second type of text, in the international context, adopts a contrasting position. Instead of aligning her with stereotypical Māori attributes, these materials express an uneasy attitude towards Owen’s Māoridom through concerning themselves with the erasure of her ethnicity. Such texts attempt—through comparison to stars such as classical Hollywood’s Bette Davis, Italian neo-realism’s Anna Magnani, Australian New Wave’s Judy Davis, and French New Wave’s Jeanne Moreau—to associate Owen with Europeanness by positioning her within an established lineage of European actresses and ‘serious’ Hollywood film stars. For example, well known African American writer and critic B. Ruby Rich titles her rave review of Once Were Warriors ‘A Bette Davis from Down Under’. She concludes: ‘Any studio thinking of remaking old Bette Davis (1995), Elizabeth Taylor or Dorothy Dandridge films could hardly find anyone better’. The San Francisco Chronicle (Guthmann, 1995, p. C1) reviewer stated that ‘Like Anna Magnani, the late Italian star, Owen has an elemental, dirt-under-the-fingernails quality—a truthfulness in performance that’s riveting’. Peter Brunette (1995) of the New York Times (p. 18) observed that many European reviewers have drawn a comparison between these two actresses because Owen and Magnani share the same ‘visceral style of acting’. Entertainment Weekly (Gleiberman, 1995, p. 45) noted: ‘Owen suggests a Māori Judy Davis—her sad-eyed valor is stirring and forceful, heroic in a completely realistic way.’

The images of these Hollywood and European stars with whom Owen is aligned are characterised by an emphasis on the flawed and unique aspects of the appearances of these women to whom are routinely attributed ‘unconventional beauty, amazing charisma’ (Joséphine de la Baume, describing Jeanne Moreau, quoted in Olesker, 2012). Significantly these stars were frequently identified with the image of feminine suffering, in particular Anna Magnani as in, for example, Open City (Roberto Rossellini, 1945). While the actresses
Cited above were known for their dramatic range, they frequently portrayed characters that highlighted their capacities as performers, particularly through their ability to depict unglamourous women who were victims of the class system, or social injustice more generally, as in the case of Jeanne Moreau in roles such as Christine in John Frankenheimer’s *The Train* (1964), and Bette Davis in *Of Human Bondage* (Edmund Goulding, 1934). So, perhaps, even in these international associations, Owen remains at least partially connected to the type of character she played in *Once Were Warriors*. However, as a performer she was never offered the same range of roles available to these actresses—or the star-billing they enjoyed.

In addition to the many reviews and interviews that linked Owen with European and Hollywood stars, this relationship was also implied visually. For example, a photograph taken during the 1995 Cannes Film Festival, which documented Owen and Moreau’s meeting, included in a popular book on New Zealand cinema by Lindsay Shelton (2005, n.p.), deliberately suggests a parallel between the two actresses.

This image is composed so as to inspire comparison between the two actresses and positions Moreau and Owen as doppelgangers. The women’s heads slant slightly inwards towards each other. With their bodies melded close together and locks of long flowing curls swept back from one side of the face on opposing sides of each woman’s profile, the two women appear as if mirror reflections. Moreau’s blonde hair not withstanding—her hair was much darker before age and artifice intervened—the positioning of the women suggests a mother/daughter pairing. Their matching silhouettes are highlighted by the pale, unifying background and the even, symmetrical composition of the image increases the mirror effect, implying a parity between the two women and the sense that Owen is poised to follow in Moreau’s footstep within her own national cinema.

At another level, the images of Owen generated by the media recall iconographically the depiction of other stars, such as the singer Billie Holiday, who also occupied culturally and ‘racially’ ambiguous positions vis-à-vis more mainstream stars. For example, the series of portraits that appeared in issues of the *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* throughout 1994 were reminiscent of depictions of African American singers such as Billie Holiday who exuded a Hollywood-style glamour (Bogle, 2007, p. 15, p. 18, p. 68, p. 116). In this series of images Owen appears heavily made-up, hair coiffed, wearing formal over-the-elbow gloves and apparently very little else. She poses dramatically
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and the lush textures of her satin gloves and spiral curls appear highlighted against a neutral photographic background.

These theatrical images, which draw from the conventions of classical Hollywood glamour portraiture, do evoke the Bette Davis glamour attributed to Owen by B. Ruby Rich. However, the directness of the facial expressions adopted by Owen in these images mark these photographs as strikingly different to representations of film actresses in classical Hollywood glamour portraiture, which habitually position the film star as a remote, idealised, inaccessible figure. Thus, the French semiotician Roland Barthes (1993) describes ‘the face of Garbo’—the great classical Hollywood star of the 1920s and 1930s—as recalling ‘that moment in cinema . . . when the face represented an absolute state of the flesh, which could neither be reached or renounced’ (p. 56). In this series Owen addresses the viewer with an engaging expression—in one photograph she even grins broadly, displaying a full set of teeth (see Figure 1). This accessibility that characterises these images of Owen recalls imagery of Billie Holiday, such as the one included in the volume

![The price of fame](image)

Figure 1: ‘The price of fame’, New Zealand Women’s Weekly, 12 September 1994, p. 19. Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago.

The July 30-August 5 New Zealand Listener cover further aligns Rena Owen with African American celebrities such as Billie Holiday by making visual reference to Holiday’s habit of wearing gardenias in her hair, a fashion statement that was also adopted by later generations of African American performers such as Diana Ross (Bogle, 2007, p. 179; p. 181). For the Listener photo-shoot, Owen poses with a wreath of flowers of assorted colours in her hair on the magazine’s cover (see Figure 2).

This image is reiterated within the magazine. In these images, she dances in a carefree, abandoned manner pointing to the ‘dusky maiden’ trope and adding another layer to the Listener’s account, as described above (Stirling, 1994). In these same images, her simple black costume draws the focus to the vividly coloured flowers which adorn Owen’s hair. With her dark curls crowned, but unrestrained under the wreath, the effect is that of an exotic princess, a type that was also crucial in the cultivation of Holiday’s star image, as well as associated with the ‘dusky maiden’ figure.

Like Owen’s, the star narratives generated through and around these images were marked by suffering and tragedy. Though it can be argued that if these images are not alive within popular memory in the same way as, for example, the image of Marilyn Monroe, they are remembered through the repetitions of a specific iconography, as exemplified in the depiction of Owen. These half-remembered images, like ghosts, seemingly haunt contemporary images of stars such as Owen circulated by the media today, reminding us, perhaps, of how classical Hollywood stardom and its iconography remain a continuing visual influence in the media today.

Unfulfilled promise

Though Once Were Warriors catapulted Owen into the international arena (she earned the award for Best Actress at the Montréal Film Festival), it also cast her irrevocably as ‘Māori’—as a recent avatar of the tragic ‘half-caste’. Beth would remain her most enduring role, creating an image for her from which she appeared unable to escape, perhaps because of the way in which her persona has been ‘captured’ by conflicted memories of an Aotearoa/New Zealand past. If New Zealand cinema is indeed a ‘Cinema of Unease’ (Sam...
Figure 2: A ‘dusky maiden’. Source: New Zealand Listener, July 30-August 5, 1994, front cover, Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago.

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Neill, 1995), to borrow the title of a well circulated documentary, a significant dimension of this uneasiness is expressed through the media’s treatment of celebrities such as Rena Owen.

In 1994, Lindsay Shelton told the *New Zealand Listener* that he saw Rena Owen ‘poised on the brink of stardom in a country where there have never been women movie stars’ (Stirling, 30 July-5 August 1995, p. 23). Although Owen has continued to work as an actress, stardom and the big dramatic roles that her performance in *Once Were Warriors* seemed to promise have eluded her. What this brief overview seems to suggest is that this may be due, at least in part, to the fact that Rena was identified with Beth as Māori, in the sense of being linked in the media to the association of Māori with a criminous underclass, rather than praised for her dramatic, imaginative and expressive capacities as an actress, as a performer, most notably within New Zealand itself.

Speaking to *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly* (Neville, 1991) at the beginning of her career, Owen noted among New Zealand producers and directors ‘an unwillingness to cast her in roles that are not specifically Māori’. As Owen asserts: ‘I’m not a Māori activist, I’m an actor. In London I played English, Cockney and Jewish women, but in New Zealand I’m considered only if the part calls for a Māori woman’ (Neville, 1991).

At this early stage of her career, Owen expressed optimism that the range and scope of the roles offered to her might improve. However, on the whole these hopes were disappointed. Her current filmography suggests a hardworking professional, who is regularly featured as a character actress whose image remains marked by that of Beth in *Once Were Warriors* (Owen, 2012). Her more recent roles on television, which have again given her prominence in the national eye, include Kat in the television drama *Piece of My Heart* (Fiona Samuel, 2009), in which she plays a lesbian nurse whose life has been tragically marked by the loss of her illegitimate child to a forced adoption; Hine Ryan on *Shortland Street* (2010-2011), an ex-drug addict and estranged mother to Scotty; Kitty Montebello, the matriarch of a crime family of Māori, European and Torres Strait Islander descent on the Australian crime series *The Straits* (ABC 1, 2012). If she received critical acclaim for these performances, these supporting roles depended on certain ‘racial’ stereotypes that coincided with the iconography formed and circulated by *New Zealand Women’s Weekly* in the mid-1990s.

Thus, the 12 September 1994 *New Zealand Women’s Weekly* reported approvingly that after *Once Were Warriors* ‘Most of Rena’s energy . . . has
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been channeled in traveling around the country talking to school children and women’s refuge groups about the tragedy of domestic violence and abuse’ (Wakefield, 19). ‘I always said if one woman watched the film [Once Were Warriors] and thought, “If Beth can do it then I can do it”, then I would have succeeded,’ Owen is quoted as saying. The tendency to flatten Owen’s accomplishments, in particular with regard to Once Were Warriors, into a semi-ethnographic portrayal of a social problem rather than an artistic feat, is symptomatic of New Zealand’s continued association of the actress with the character Beth. Even in 2012 New Zealand Women’s Weekly, while focusing on changes in Rena Own’s personal life and her anticipated return to New Zealand, did not fail to mention ‘the role which cemented her reputation as one of our best-ever actresses—Beth Heke in Once Were Warriors,’ while citing her more recent successes on television as ‘recovering drug addict Hine Ryan’ and ‘Kitty ootebello [sic], the mother of a crime family’ (‘Rena Owen,’ 2012).

Conclusion

This brief foray into female stardom in New Zealand culture suggests a number of further avenues of research. In particular it would be helpful to look at female celebrities who successfully carved out a stable position for themselves within the international firmament—stars such as the opera singer, Kiri Te Kanawa or the actress Anna Paquin. We suspect, for example, that Kiri Te Kanawa’s glamorous image as an international opera diva of Māori and European descent is closely tied to the way in which she pursued a high art form while maintaining her background as a dedicated young woman educated by Catholic nuns. In counterdistinction, Keisha Castle-Hughes’ ‘star status’, according to media scholar Alison Maplesden (2010), ‘was and still is linked to her role as Paikea in Whale Rider (Niki Caro, 2003) (p. 352). Initially embraced by New Zealand media as “our” Keisha’, subsequent to the announcement of her pregnancy at the age of sixteen, ‘reports were quick to propose that Castle-Hughes was now a bad role-model . . .’ and ‘tended to focus upon Castle-Hughes as an example of . . . the “problem” of Māori youth pregnancy’ (Maplesden, 2010, p. 353). Like Owen, Castle-Hughes’ recent roles in the New Zealand context have been secondary, most notably in Piece of My Heart (Fiona Samuel, 2009), in which she plays a young girl, Kat, sequestered in the same home for unmarried pregnant girls as the narrative’s protagonist, Flora, played by Emily Barclay. Not
coincidentally, Owen plays the older Kat against Annie Whittle in the leading role of Flora. In contrast, Paquin separated herself from her New Zealand past by successfully taking on such roles as that of Sookie Stackhouse, replete with a Louisiana accent, in the water-cooler television series *True Blood* (HBO, 2008—current).

We are not implying that Rena Owen’s bicultural heritage and her treatment by the media were the only factors in determining her career trajectory. Her age at the time of the release of *Once Were Warriors*, her own relationship with the press, her tendency toward self-disclosure (as opposed to the actor Cliff Curtis, who is typically closed-mouthed about his private life) and her own choices in roles—all would have contributed. However, we cannot neglect the way in which the media typecast her, *New Zealand Women’s Weekly* most prominently, in a manner that seemed to predict the kinds of characters that she would play. In the absence of further research, we are confined to speculation, but remain convinced that stardom, celebrity and its representation in New Zealand culture serves, in John Ellis’ words, as a ‘moral barometer,’ the study of which promises to illuminate the underlying issues that subtend what has been termed a crisis in moral leadership characterising contemporary society.

Notes
1. Recently Wikipedia has noted that Owen is also of ‘Torres Strait Islander descent,’ a fact that seems to have to come light when she took on the role of Kitty Montebello in the Australian television drama *The Straits* (ABC1, 2012) (Hale, 2012; Wikipedia).
2. See for example the character of Peola (played by Fredi Washington) in *Imitation of Life* (1934) (Bogle, 1988, p. 115).

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