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"I Am Not a Princess":

Navigating Mana Wahine in Disney's *Moana*

The first voice heard over the opening credits of Disney's animated film *Moana* (2016) intones a kind of *karakia* (prayer), *Tulou Tagaloa*:

> Tulou
> Tulou
> Tagaloa
> Sei e va'ai mai
> I le tātou lalolagi
> Sei e va'ai mai
> I le mātou lalolagi
> Sei e mālamalama (ko au e tu atu)
> E lelei ma le mānaia (toku manatu)
> Sei e va'ai mai ia (e taunuku te malaga)
> Mānaia o le tātou ōlaga[1]

This is an entreaty to Tagaloa, the supreme creative force in the origin narrative of Samoa, from which the film inherits multiple aspects of topography and cultural history.[2] The words envision the criss-crossing diaspora of Oceanic[3] peoples across Te Moananui-A-Kiwa, the Pacific Ocean; communities travelling to find new homes in as-yet unfound spaces.

That this first voice is uttered by an Oceanic *wāhine/vahine*[4] (woman), Olivia Foa'i (Tuvalu/Tokelau), speaks to the film's possibilities as an empowering, female-centric narrative; albeit one conceived as a marketable Happy Meal of South Seas Indigeneity.

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I deliberately avoided watching *Moana* for a quite a long time. I felt that I would have multiple ideological issues with the film's depiction of precolonial Oceania; so much so

that I would be compelled to compose a blazing diatribe of vitriolic anticolonial, anticapitalist, anti-Mickey-Mouse-ian discourse.

This is not that diatribe.

Moana tells the story of the young daughter of a chief living on a paradisiacal precolonial Pacific island. When an ecological disaster threatens the entire village, Moana rebels against local law/lore by crossing the boundaries of the reef, navigating across the sea in search of the demi-god, Maui. Her quest is to return the "heart of the ocean," a greenstone pendant, to Te Kā, a demonic incarnation of the Earth Mother Te Fiti, to remove the curse plaguing her home. Moana's adventures with the reluctant trickster Maui (and an imbecilic chicken) form the bulk of the narrative. It is, ostensibly, a family-friendly reduction of the vast and diverse cultural histories, mythologies, and cultures of all Oceanic peoples into a plastic Pan-Polynesian hero(ine)'s journey.

As a bicultural, left-leaning, female performance scholar with ancestral connections to the tangata whenua (Indigenous peoples, or Māori) of Aotearoa/New Zealand, I do have some uncomfortable feelings about this film. Criticisms of the text's troubling fusions of multiple Pacific Island traditions and forms, alongside Disney's neo-imperialism, are well founded; there are ample tools from both Indigenous thought and Western theory to support a densely disapproving discussion here. However, there are also aspects of *Moana* which, when I finally did see it, profoundly affected me.

Moana, voiced by Hawai'ian actor Auli'i Cravalho, is a Disney heroine like no other—a proto-feminist South Seas protagonist. She is neither princess, nor fairy, but an assertive, young, female leader. She embodies a myriad of positive traits in Oceanic wahine, while quashing myths about the subservience of young brown women. Moana is courageous, innovative, ambitious and assertive. She has agency. She gets things done. She is neither sexualised, nor naive. She is young, but not infantilised. She is passionate. While she has "magical" qualities, she is not evil or other-worldly. Significantly, Moana represents a chief-in-training, a role that is never contested. She is willing to evolve, yet aware of the need to uphold the integrity of her culture. Moana is a performing body, with a real, effective voice. Moana is the heroine that Indigenous girls have been holding out for.

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Feminism remains a pejorative for many Indigenous women. For those traversing multiple spaces of alterity, there is often implicit discursive pressure to choose just one of these sides to align with—are you a Māori, or are you a feminist? Perhaps the more likely question is—do you primarily identify yourself as Māori, or as a *female*? Māori sports academic Farah Palmer (Tainui, Ngāti Maniapoto) asserts "Māori girls [tend] to distance themselves from Western feminine ideologies, preferring instead to associate with their Māoriness rather than their stereotypical gendered identity" (2007, 13). Being both is messy; and the consistent feeling of not performing well as either—the imposter syndrome *squared*—is

shared by many "multiply-othered" scholars. While intersectionality has offered some commonalities, it does not speak as directly to the diverse experiences of Oceanic Indigenous women as those ideas which come from our own *whakapapa* (genealogy). From a traditional feminist perspective, *Moana* is fairly "lite"; it arguably challenges the patriarchy (yet is also very much a product of it), and may even pass the Bechdel test (only if demi-gods are not men), with an additional bonus being that there is no future marriage implied after the closing credits, (arguably because Moana is only sixteen). Yet, considering this work in relation to the discourse of mana wahine offers a more nuanced perspective of the protagonist's feminist efficacy.

This essay explores Moana's feminism, and my own response to this, through a Māori lens. It is important to clarify that Moana is not, technically, Māori (the first peoples of Aotearoa); however, the situation of the narrative as preceding one of the great voyages across Te-Moananui-A-Kiwa means that Moana might be conceived as a distant ancestor to the peoples who settled in the South Pacific.[5] The following discussion briefly contextualises previous critiques of *Moana* by Oceanic scholars and situates foreign representations of Māori and Pacific Island women with their relationships to Oceanic landscapes. I attempt to explain concepts of mana wahine, relating these to the character of Moana, and draw out the significance of her affiliation with the ocean as a metaphor for Oceanic female liberation.

I am not a film scholar; my critique of this text is framed around the embodiment of the character similarly to how I would analyse a live text. I am provoked by my unexpectedly affective experience of this reception. Indigenous feminisms are feelingful—we *feel* the impact of our own narratives through our bodies. As such, this discussion is self-reflexive, attempting to understand my own bicultural reaction to and through this text.

While similar to the notion of Cartesian dualism, there is a complex connectivity between the mind, body, and the metaphysical in *Te Ao Māori* (the Māori world) which speaks to the vitality of Moana's representation. This is usefully demonstrated by the model of *Whare Tapa Wha*[6] which organises Māori wellness or holistic health as encompassing *taha tinana* (the physical), *taha hinengaro* (the psychological), *taha whanau* (the family/social) and *taha wairua* (the spiritual; Ministry of Health/Manatū Hauora 2017). This interconnectivity between the physical, psychic, emotional, and relational is vital to Māori identities, with particular distinctions for Māori women. Te Reo/Māori language translates the word for the psychological, or intellect, as *hinengaro*, which integrates the terms *hine* (female essence), *nga* (to take breath, breathe), and *rō* (inside; Moorefield 2003-2019). The mind is the living female inside us all. I take this concept of hinengaro, the girl within, to try and make some sense of how/why I feel for Moana.

Unsettling Representations of Oceanic Women

There is a grotesque plethora of visual and performative material, dating from the eighteenth century to today, which fetishises and commodifies the young Oceanic female body; particularly, as with *Moana*, in a precolonial, or early-contact state. Westerners,

having "civilised" the Oceanic female, became consumed with capturing her untamed/wild/dusky qualities. Such bodies dominate print and televised tourism campaigns, pulp and romance fiction; scientific, romantic, expressionist, modern and postmodern art; and film genres spanning ethnographic documentary to erotic adventure tales. The Oceanic female body is the hula girl fixed to a car's dashboard, the little plastic Māori doll in the fine china cabinet, and the risqué velvet painting in an inner-city café serving craft beer and poke bowls.

In the heyday of the Hollywood Pacific paradise movies of the 1940s-1950s, the majority of these bodies were represented by non-Indigenous women: actresses such as Dorothy Lamour (*Aloma of the South Seas*, 1941), Dolores Del Roy (*Bird of Paradise,* 1932) and Maria Montez (*White Savage,* 1943). These characters are often defiant and rebellious when played by white actresses, but submissive, silent, and naive when played by locals. They are scantily clad and passionate about their primary conundrum, namely choosing which man to please: "Chief/Daddy" or "White Saviour" (human *and* holy versions). For an exemplar of the worst of these misappropriations see *Land of Fury* a.k.a. *The Seeker* (1952), filmed on location in Aotearoa, with the primary Māori female character "Moana"—a sexy chieftain's wife—interpreted by little-known German actress Laya Raki.

Hawai'i-based Māori scholar A. Mātara Tamaira (Ngāti Tuwharetoa) asserts that "representations of Polynesian women, whether rendered in the past or the present, are laden with multiple and complex meanings that constantly shift and slide between the binary opposites of sexual vulnerability and potent danger" (2010, 2). The cyclic shifting between the polarities of desire and fear in Western representations from first contact to the contemporary sees Oceanic women (and/as their bodies) as a clichéd metaphor, or synecdoche, for the geographical, cultural, and political landscapes of the colonised Pacific. Images from these texts often manipulate the eco-centric discourses of Indigenous people which align the female body with the biology of landscapes. Whether dancing, bathing, or collecting fruit, these women are always shown in, and at one with, the natural world. The sexuality of Oceanic women is frequently foregrounded by the presence of volatile environments: volcanos are vaginas (and vice-versa). Taming the native women is paralleled with the conquering of this unpredictable terrain. The alternative colonies are imagined as passive and paradisiacal: open and sensual, fertile and virginal. The affiliation with geographical terrain and the bodies of women is a deliberate imperialist ploy not isolated to the Pacific region. Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (1975), for example, explored the literary and cultural symbolisation of female bodies within/as the American landscape (Turtle Island) as a means of bolstering the colonisation project in the now United States. Other feminist critics unpack gendered symbolism in accounts of British exploration in Africa; where connections between the "dark continent" and the bodies of Indigenous women are offered as means for justifying imperial conquest. Africa is imagined as an ambivalent terrain which "refuses to nurture and refuses sustenance to its men," yet also, passively "tempts […] as an inviting female, naked and recumbent" (Stott 1989, 78-79).

Tamaira suggests that images of Pacific-woman-as-landscape "can be readily connected to what might best be described as 'colonial spin doctoring'" (2010, 11). Lisa Taoma asserts:

> The "dusky maiden" functions as a metaphor for the colonisation of the Pacific in that she, like our social, economic and religious structures, was shaped to fit a colonial agenda. She can be seen as a symbolic representation for the land itself—a guiding beacon to its fecund and fertile depths […]. The image of the "dusky maiden" is also in this way an image of domestication, of the tamed "noble savage." (cited in Tamaira 2010, 13)

These women are fundamentally voiceless; their bodies are silent, their dances and actions unexplained and decontextualised. In the past few decades, notable scholarly and critical/creative work has been produced—sometimes literally—on deconstructing this subject. Performance artists such as the Pacific Sisters and Yuki Kihara (Samoa) look to reclaiming, rather than rescuing, the body of the Oceanic female, while also speaking to the history of her commodification and fetishisation (see Tamaira 2010).

Yet contemporary performance texts also continue to draw symbolic connections between Oceanic women's experiences and/as the environment. In Aotearoa, Mīria George (Te Arawa; Ngati Awa; Rarotonga; and Atiu, Cook Islands) has created a trilogy of politically motivated works (*The Vultures* [2016]; *Fire In The Water, Fire In The Sky* [2017]; and *The Night Mechanics* [2017]), each of which explore the value and commodification of water, with wahine as the central protagonist. The activism at the heart of these narratives—confronting the dairy industry, commercial overfishing, and corporate water companies—through resistant, culturally-centred protagonists, makes these works liberating for Indigenous female performers and audiences alike. Pasifika[7] theatre company The Conch's *Marama* (2016) represented five high-born women from five Indigenous communities across the Pacific exploring the impact of deforestation in each region. Wordless, this epic-scale work drew parallels between the bodies of the performers and the destruction of their homelands. While evocative and dynamic in execution, the politics of the work and the central metaphor was also clear: for instance, a scene in which a young woman is sexually assaulted is aligned with the "rape" of her homeland by international logging corporations. While relaying an effective message about Pacific ecologies and empowering the women performing in this production through the community of collaborators, such allusions might also be considered troubling. Combining Indigenous eco-centricism with Indigenous female trauma not only complicates perceptions of Oceanic female relationships with the land, it also perpetuates the idea of wahine/vahine as victims, as idle, as doomed. While integrating ideas of woman-as-landscape in the narrative, Moana herself represents an alternative to the intrinsic passivity, or helplessness, of this trope.

Responses to *Moana* from the Pacific

Critical reactions to *Moana* by commentators in Aotearoa and the Pacific have been divided. Early responses were predominantly (or, at least, most vocally) negative. In fact, it was the volatility of prerelease discussions of *Moana* by peers and colleagues across online

platforms that informed my own initial decision *not* to watch it. Renowned Pacific scholar, playwright, and poet, the late Teresia Teaiwa, discussed Disney's problematic representation of Oceanic cultures in a 2016 article in the *New York Post*: "They wanted to get it right commercially without getting it wrong culturally […]. But there are some things that they clearly didn't mind getting wrong" (Associated Press 2016). Much of the early criticism of *Moana* focused on the representation of a hulking, clownish Maui—voiced in the film by Samoan American actor Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson—a deity who appears in the origin narratives of peoples across Polynesia: "Before Disney, I've seen a lot of other representations, and Maui is a hero […]. I think it's clear from the trailers I've seen that he's a buffoon in Disney. It's a dramatic shift. He was a trickster but not a buffoon" (ibid.). The controversial Disney Maui costume, which allowed children to dress up as the character—complete with a padded, heavily tattooed brown bodysuit—created a global outcry, provoking the swift withdrawal of the product from sale and a muted apology from Disney (see Herreria 2016). In effect, the film was perceived to deny a global audience an authentic education about Pacific cosmology, while promoting brown face as Halloween fodder in the contemporary: "A dominant group is getting to wear and become part of a marginalized group without any sense of its history, culture or even its struggles" (Tēvita O. Ka'ili in Herreria 2016).

It is the film's amalgamation of so many diverse Pacific traditions and aesthetics "as a single, unnamed Other" (Hodge 2018, 80), which has faced marked criticism from Pacific academia. Amber Pualani Hodge writes:

> Where representatives of Victoria's crown modified tales of specific Pacific traditions with targeted empirical aims, Disney conflates this mythology and inserts itself […] to generate a marketable product that is, in essence, a wholly new culture intended to be viewed—and consumed—as some "authentic" form of the past. (2018, ibid.)

Hodge suggests that Disney's representation of Pacific cultures in a form analogous to those appropriated in the Victorian age also perpetuates atavistic perspectives of Indigenous cultures which were rampant at that time. Disney are seen to be serving up a form of neocolonialism in the film's Western-led mythologizing of Pacific Island culture. This is further infiltrated by sales of commercial by-products, and via its own Imperial brand: "In the case of Disney, lack of perspective leads to colonization, masquerading consumerism as cultural preservation, and, ultimately, appropriating a corrupted indigenous mythology into the American vernacular" (Hodge 2018, 95).

However, despite the dominance of these negative analyses, other commentators offered alternative positions on *Moana*. A. Mārata Ketekiri Tamaira and Samoan Cultural Heritage expert Dionne Fonoti, an advisor on the film, discuss the widespread and complex consultancy process of *Moana*, involving a number of Pacific Island cultural experts from across the world, as a model for working to create more Indigenous agency in a corporate environment:

> [I]n the case of *Moana*, Pacific people enacted their own form of possession by staking a claim on how their collective story would be told by the media giant. Indeed, *Moana* offers a useful case study for thinking about strategic collaborative engagements between Native communities and global corporate enterprises like Disney in ways that can be productive and that acknowledge and affirm Indigenous agency while remaining attentive to the potential tensions and risks of such undertakings. (Tamaira and Fonoti 2018, 298)

The authors argue that the environmental devastation of Moana's island operates as a "metaphor for tourism, a "process of cultural invasion" that is inextricably linked to colonialism (Helu-Thaman in Tamaira and Fonoti 2018, 302). Importantly, Tamaira and Fonoti point to the liberating representation of Indigenous women in the film, in that Moana is supported by two generations of women (her mother and grandmother) to go beyond the reef against the chief's wishes:

> [S]uch assumptions and assertions of male authority are challenged and displaced in *Moana* by the presence of a female lead character who is independent, brave, and self-possessed, rather than passive and submissive. And it is clear that Moana's strong bearing resonates with young female audiences. (Tamaira and Fonoti 2018, 309)

The authors speak to the empowering impact this character has had specifically on young Oceanic females, subverting both the Disney Princess archetype as well as speaking back to the enduring trope of the "supine 'Dusky Maiden'" (ibid.). Fonoti's voice is important in this conversation as she is also speaking for the intentions of the Oceanic advisors to the film. For those involved in the project from the Pacific, *Moana* is more than just Disney packaging.

I wholly support the multifaceted arguments made by the film's Pacific Island and Māori detractors with regards to the representation of Maui and the decontextualization of culturally specific forms, ideas, and languages in an anachronistic, sentimentalised representation of the precolonial Pacific. Given my own cultural limitations, I do not have the authority to speak to these elements of the text. What I am interested in discovering is how or why—despite my own anxieties about the film's appropriations and the corporation which produced it—I still have a thing for Moana.

Mana Wahine and Māori Women

Mana wahine is an Indigenous feminist discourse which advocates for the recognition of agency, knowledge and mana (or power) for those who identify with a Māori female identity. Mana refers to the force in a person which emanates as prestige, charisma, power (Moorfield 2003-2019). Wahine can be broken down as *wa*, time and space, and hine, a female essence (ibid.). Leonie Pihama (Te Ātiawa, Ngāti Māhanga, Ngā Māhanga a Tairi)

defines wahine as the "time and space for Māori women," and mana wahine as the discursive space for the empowerment of Māori women (2001, 263). Mana wahine is founded in principles and philosophies of Te Ao Māori engaging with gender, politics, and the cultural and historical realities of Māori women. It is a discourse only relatively recently finding its way in academia, having roots in literature and the arts; reclaiming images of Māori women in visual art, such as that by Robyn Kahukiwa, through the work of the late trailblazing decolonising filmmaker Merata Mita; and in Māori herstory narratives, such as the writings of Patricia Grace, Keri Hulme, and Rangimarie Rose Pere. Key scholars in the field include Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Aroha Yates-Smith, Ani Mikaere, Leonie Pihama, Kathie Irwin, Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, and Patricia Johnston, amongst others.

In her PhD dissertation on the subject, Pihama breaks down the key concerns of mana wahine as being centred around Māori women's relationships to:

> whakapapa (genealogy), whānau (kinship), recognising the diverse realities of being a Māori woman, wairua (spirituality), Treaty of Waitangi, decolonization, mātauranga wahine (or Māori women's knowledge), and reclaiming cultural spaces, specifically those which are designated as female spaces. (2001, 263)

Māori women have traditionally been essentialised by Non-Māori historians and anthropologists as having a single role in society; prized or valued for their perceived biological "function." The plurality of terms such as *whenua* (land/placenta), *hapu* (pregnancy/sub-tribe), and the designation of the womb as *whare tangata* (house of humanity) reinforces some of the significance placed on female fertility as vital to the continuation of whakapapa, the genealogical line. Yet mana wahine stresses the significance of Māori women beyond a reproductive body. Recognition of their spiritual roles renders wāhine as inherently sacred; they can be both *tapu* (sacred) and have the ability to remove tapu (Higgins and Meredith 2011). Interconnection between body, mind, and the spiritual are vital, as Naomi Simmonds (Ngāti Raukawa) asserts: "The spiritual realities of Māori women are inextricable from their physical realities" (2011, 15). This spirituality is linked to the environment, as all beings whakapapa from and to the land itself, yet the female essence has a distinctive *wairua*, or spiritual power. The value of women is therefore multifariously practical and symbolic, and the special knowledge surrounding this connection to Pāpa-tū-ā-nuku (the Earth Mother) forms a critical part of female identity (see Mikaere 1994).[8]

Mana wahine considers Māori women, and all of their specific intersections, on their own terms. Simmonds writes "Mana wahine, as art, as theory, as method, and as practice, recognises and provides for […] in-betweeness and enables the exploration of diverse Māori realities from a position of power rather than having to talk or write 'back'" (2011, 12). Vitally, the discourse recognises and supports the fluidity of gender and sexual identities. Led by influential *takatāpui* (Māori LGTBQIA community) scholars such as Pihama and Te Awekotuku, mana wahine challenges heteronormativity through

advocating empowerment beyond imperatives of fertility/motherhood, as well as rejecting the binary thinking that constructs Māori female identity as "not male":

> It is not a re-action to males, and their violence against us; it is a pro-action, a determining of ourselves as Māori women, with authenticity and grace. And its ultimate aim is a rediscovery and renaming of that essential strength and harmony, that complementary relationship between genders, that may have occurred on these islands two centuries past. (Te Awekotuku 1991, 10)[9]

Mana wahine also seeks to confront and mend imbalances. Simmonds asserts:

> Colonisation has attempted to disrupt the balance between mana wahine, mana whenua (power from the land), mana whanau (power of the family), and mana atua (spiritual power from the ancient ancestors). Mana wahine is but one space within which we can critically analyse the impact of colonisation on all of these institutions—there are many others. (2011, 14)

Mana wahine reinforces how being both Māori and female demands a complex negotiation between present and past, between spiritual and scientific, psychic and physical, the self/local, and the collective/nation, while also confronting the realities of "double-othering" in everyday life. The symbiotic functions of these relationships are critical in reinforcing the multifaceted aspects of Māori wāhine.

Moana Navigating Mana Wahine

Moana is the first full-bodied Disney Princess; unlike the lithe, lifeless, and impossibly proportioned "heroines" of previous Disney fables such as Cinderella, Snow White, Ariel, and Pocahontas, Moana looks more like a real girl. Thus, her proximity to actual Oceanic female bodies is more palpable. Moana's physicality is athletic, and she shows incredible prowess as a navigator and in battles against a series of nautical "bad guys." There is a danger, however, that Moana's active physicality might reinforce the notion that Oceanic females' "natural" athletic abilities make up for a lack in other areas. Stereotypes of Indigenous girls being physically gifted often undermines their perceived intellectual capability. Palmer writes that many young Māori girls, for example, "consider physical ability/ giftedness as the antithesis to academic ability/giftedness" (2007, 12). However, Moana's "thought-full" actions challenge these ideas. Significantly the gender relations in the film can be viewed as liberating for females: Moana the protagonist is the proactive thinker while Maui is the predominantly inactive (or reluctant) sidekick.

Moana's driving action also revises the Maui legends inasmuch as the role of women in "his" stories are reclaimed here as "herstories." This can be seen as a decolonising gesture. During colonisation in Aotearoa, missionaries began retelling oral stories from Māori cosmology into written English (Mikaere 1994, 131). These translations led to a shift in the

gender power balance in our *pūrākau* (origin narratives; ibid.). Notably, Maui became the hero/protagonist, while many of the vital female atua in these stories, including Mahuika and Hine-nui-te-po, were recast as dark and evil villains/antagonists to fit a Western classical narrative structure and morality (ibid.). It is ironic, then, that so much attention has been placed on the misrepresentation of Maui in this film. Importantly, the embodiment of Oceanic women in Moana is made more than just a metaphor here; Moana's potency is because she is an original protagonist, rather than being based on a pre-existing myth, legend, or story. Yet, although she is without precedent, Moana also avoids being cast as symbolic/iconic in the same way that Oceanic women have become in tourist posters, velvet paintings, and other incarnations of the dusky maiden. As a historically located heroine, Moana typifies key gestures of mana wahine through reclaiming the roles and bodies of Māori women via herstory narratives. Kathie Irwin (Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Porou) describes this as "shero worshipping":

> a positive strategy of reclaiming the human spirit as accomplished simply in telling the herstories of our women. The shero emphasis lets us stand taller about the contributions our women have made […]. The strategy of reclaiming heroines, shero worshipping, contributes to theorising about Māori feminisms and development in a very grounded way, from the bottom up, rather than the top down. (2007, 182)

The character Moana, while "independent" in the Western sense, is always understood in connection with her home, her family, and her ancestors. This sense of plurality is vital to both mana wahine discourses and to Oceanic identity; we are a product of our whakapapa, which in our eco-centric lineage connects us to our geographies – understood *as* ancestors. This is shown visually in the film through Te Fiti/ Te Kā, the embodiment of the land itself and shown anthropomorphically as a young woman (beautiful/good and ugly/evil). While this alignment with a female body and a corrupted physical environment is problematic in terms of continued tropes of Oceanic women as either passive (rape) victims or dangerous sirens, Moana is the protagonist here. While affiliated with her female ancestors, she exists as an extension of these in human form, rather than a pawn or object or silent witness (like, say, the Little Mermaid). Moana looks to the past dynamically, understanding "history" in the lines of Te Reo Māori term *mua*, which designates time which has gone before, but also translates as the front, in front of, before, ahead (Moorfield 2003-2019). Moana approaches the past forward-facing—as a way to resolve challenges for the future—accompanied by her ancestors, who remain in her present as guides/beacons. This forward-facing heroine is a repeated visual motif; key images of the film feature Moana looking outside of the frame to the horizon ahead, as the waves surge behind her. In this way, the film demonstrates Moana's value for whakapapa beyond the idea of protecting (the reproductive qualities of) her own body. As a mana wahine "shero", Moana actively wields tribal knowledge to benefit all generations: restoring the past, safeguarding the present, and securing hope and prosperity for the future.

Moana's connection to her *atua*—ancient ancestors, also cosmological beings who form part of Māori genealogy (ibid.)—is vital to her character arc. In mana wahine, Māori

women's ability to harness their spiritualities is paramount and forms a critical distinction between Indigenous and Western feminisms. Simmonds writes that "a mana wahine approach which holds wairua (spirituality) as a core element challenges the hegemony of rational, masculine, and empirical discourses that continue to marginalise and silence Māori women's knowledges" (2011, 16). In other words, demonstrating or enacting spiritual intelligence is a vital way that Māori women have continued to support the wellbeing and sustenance of the whole community; a community which they are a fundamental part of, rather than apart from. Moana's education is conducted by her grandmother, Tala, voiced by Māori actress Rachel House (Ngāti Mutunga and Ngāi Tahu), and this intellectual connection continues beyond her passing when Tala's *wairua*, or spirit, appears in the form of a stingray. Tala is a *kuia* (grandmother) with wisdom and perceptivity, although she is styled as the "village crazy lady," meaning her ideas are not taken seriously by the men of the island. Nonetheless, Tala passes down special knowledge to Moana, including information about traumatic events in the past, which lead to her voyage across the reef. Tamaira and Fonoti also speak to the importance of this relationship:

> In the film, the presence of Gramma Tala both when she was alive and when she appears to Moana in spirit form reaffirms the important roles women—especially elder women— play in Pacific narrative traditions as guides and counselors. Further, it highlights the unceasing connection that exists between the living and the dead, a powerful reality that continues to hold true for Pacific people today. (2018, 307)

This treatment of a whakapapa of female leadership, transcending the present, is vital and empowering. Moana's final apotheosis with her atua Te Fiti can be read as a means of healing trauma which has passed down through generations, restoring the collective wairua of the village and leading the people to a new future. This spirituality is not shown as symbolic in the film, but vitally connected to Moana's reality and fundamental to the rational choices she makes across her journey. *Moana* restores balance. The narrative works, in a utopian and synergetic way, to bring unity between mana wahine and mana tane, righting the unsettled whenua, uniting the collective (filial and non-filial) whānau towards a new future beyond Motonui, and, ultimately, restoring balance to the wairua of the atua.

Moana/Hinemoana

The name Moana originates in multiple Polynesian languages; in Te Reo Māori it designates a large body of water; the sea, ocean or a large lake (Moorfield 2003-2019). Tamaira and Fonoti, citing Ross, Pawley and Osmond, expand this definition as the "sea beyond the reef, ocean" (2018, 301). In this regard, Moana "provides a useful linguistic cue for recalling the journeys early peoples made in an effort to get "beyond the reef" of their original home shores and settle the islands of the world's largest ocean" (ibid.). Moana's knowledge of the ocean's vitality—as the future of her tribe's survival—is initially an unknown knowledge; a spiritual intuition affirmed by her grandmother. In Te Ao Māori the ocean is personified as Hinemoana, an atua wāhine. The spiritual connections between

the female force of the ocean as a source of bounty is offered up here through Moana, (where *Hine* denotes girl and *Moana* the sea), as conduit. Moana is spiritually connected to the ocean—she has an ability to control it, yet is also protected by it (and, by extension, is looking to also protect it herself).

This metaphor is vital as it quashes the stereotypes of Oceanic women portrayed in dusky maiden imagery as passive or idle. Rather than embodying the land—as fixed, isolated, as victim of plunder, rape, destruction, contested ownership, and degradation—Moana's psychophysical affinity with the ocean signifies her moving through, her depth, her shifting. Moana is *fluid*, powerful, a life-force and ecology which operates in a different sense to the earth. While the ocean can be posited as nurturer or destroyer, Moana's respect for and connection with it shifts these binaries to one of eco-centric symbiosis. This is not to say that the ocean is not also significantly affected by the environmental impact of human waste and industry; across Te Moananui-A-Kiwa, the effects of pollution are devastating. Human-induced climate change is causing some Pacific Islands to be swallowed by the sea itself. However, Moana's connection to the ocean operates as a proactive reclamation of Oceanic identity.

Considerations of the tiny, troubled geographies of Pacific nation states from "above" often ignore the importance of the ocean itself to Pacific identity. The late Fijian/Tongan anthropologist and writer Epeli Hau'ofa's notable essay "Our Sea of Islands" draws attention to the ways in which the Pacific Islands are understood overseas:

> The small island states and territories of the Pacific, that is, all of Polynesia and Micronesia, are much too small, too poorly endowed with resources, and too isolated from the centers of economic growth for their inhabitants ever to be able to rise above their present condition of dependence on the largesse of wealthy nations. (1994, 150)

Shifting focus instead to the scale of the ocean itself and the vital industries it provides for Pacific peoples, Hau'ofa, writes of:

> tens of thousands of ordinary Pacific Islanders right across the ocean—from east to west and north to south, under the very noses of academic and consultancy experts, regional and international development agencies, bureaucratic planners and their advisers, and customs and immigration officials-making nonsense of all national and economic boundaries, borders that have been defined only recently, crisscrossing an ocean that had been boundless for ages before Captain Cook's apotheosis. (151)

Hau'ofa asserts: "The world of Oceania is not small; it is huge and growing bigger every day" (ibid.). In other words, being from the Pacific should not be seen as limiting. It is *limitless*. Pacific peoples are more than just their nations, they are their surrounding sea highways as well. Moana's rebellion may be read as an allegory for the desire by Pacific

Islanders to be freed from the paternalistic grip of nations such as the United States (and New Zealand). As Moana, the sea voyager, leads her people across the ocean, one of the film's key musical themes "We know the way" reprises. This sense of assurance and agency is vital: this is a collective movement into the future. Moana is no Little Māori Mermaid: she is the sea herself.

If the idea of hinengaro, or intellect, might refer to a kind of inner female vitality, connections with this character as an embodiment of my own ancestresses might explain some of my affinity with Moana. The catchphrase of the film "I am Moana" is offered up as an invitation ("you can be Moana too!") and also manifests as a kind of *pēpēha*, an assertion of metaphysical identity. This *self*-belief is imperative. Throughout the film, Moana asserts her own name and whakapapa as a form of right/privilege "I am Moana of Motunui. You will board my boat, sail across the sea and restore the heart of Te Fiti" (Clements et al. 2016). Moana is not Motunui, she is *of* it; as such she is both connected to, or originating from, yet also a separate entity to the landscape. Moana's intelligence is vitally related to knowledge of her self, her whānau, her environment, her (female) spirituality passed down from her (female) ancestors. These elements, manifest in her everyday life, are interwoven and require balance.

Rigorous discourse between Indigenous scholars about Indigenous texts is wonderful: it is invigorating to unpack and deconstruct through our own lens. It is also important to be wary of situating anything as synecdoche of a single Indigenous experience, or any declaration of "This is us! This is me!" that might risk complacency (i.e. "So you don't need any *more* representation, then?"). The multiple Pacific and Māori voices who contributed to this film as advisers and creative artists actually offer us impetus to create future "Moanas"; either as an unsettled, castigating gesture ("No, *this* is me!") or an affirmative, motivated response ("Yes! and…")—reinforcing that our complexly intersectional Indigenous identities are never fixed or ending.

While I don't look anything like Moana, I do see myself *in* this character; through the film's demonstration of this interconnected Indigenous notion of the female self; standing tall in the present, on the ground I belong to, surrounded by ancestors, looking to the future.

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When I first saw this film, I was heavily pregnant with my third child, a daughter. Initially I took my emotional response to have been a surge of maternal hormones. Yet, biological explanations aside, my affect was also connected to the evolving whakapapa connection I felt with the character, a pseudo-ancestor, and the new female life soon to arrive. Emmaline Matagi writes of the significance of this representation for her own children:

> *Moana* is different for them. This time they got to see themselves and they don't have to dress up, they don't have to pretend they are in a fantasy world, this is their world. (2016)

Seeing a representation of my distant ancestors sailing across the sea, led by a woman, felt wholly fulfilling—like a warm current flowing from the top of the Pacific Ocean into my own belly. Disney Corp. can colour our story with fantasy and inaccuracy, but the journey of Oceanic women is much more deeply rooted and routed than they can ever package. We know the way.

Notes

1. The English translation is:

Respectfully calling
The God of the Sea

So you can see
Our world
So you can see
My world
So you understand
How beautiful and good
So you can see
Our wonderful way of life

From "Tulou Tagaloa," music and lyrics by Opetaia Foa'i. Accessed 2 August 2019, https://www.opetaiafoai.com/tulou-tagaloa.html/.

2. While *motunui* (large Island) is a Te Reo Māori word, the geography of this space is similar to those of the Samoan Islands. There are also physiological and historical likenesses of the island's inhabitants to Samoan peoples.

3. Oceania encompasses the regions of Polynesia, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Australasia.

4. In Te Reo Māori language, *wāhine* denotes the singular *woman*, while *wahine* refers to the plural *women*.

5. This affiliation with Moana as pre-Māori is bolstered by the release of a Te Reo Māori version of *Moana*, complete with soundtrack, produced by Kokko Media in September 2017.

6. This model is attributed to Māori health scholar Professor Sir Mason Durie.

7. Pasifika denotes those descending from the Pacific Islands resident in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

8. There is also growing mana wahine scholarship on precolonial Māori society which affirms the prevalence of nonconforming gender roles, gender neutrality, and gender fluidity; a society echoed, only to an extent, in Moana.

I discuss similar ideas about the representation of Māori women in precolonial society in the chapter "A Conscious Un-couplet: Wāhine Māori stand up to Shakespeare" (*Australasian Drama Studies Journal* 73 [October 2018]: 207-237).

9. Dr Elizabeth Kerekere (Ngāti Oneone, Te Aitanga a Mahaka, Whānau a Kai Rongowhakaata, Ngāi Tāmanuhiri) explores the whakapapa of contemporary takatāpui in her 2017 thesis "Part of The Whānau: The Emergence of Takatāpui Identity—He Whāriki Takatāpui" (VUW) and the online resource "Growing Up Takatāpui—Whānau Journeys" (2017). Kerekere asserts "Mana Wāhine opens space for takatāpui who are whakawāhine, tangata ira tāne and trans to take their place within whānau, in leadership and on the marae" (2017, https://takatapui.nz/growing-up-takatapui#resource-intro/). Kerekere reinforces the points made by Te Awekotuku that in order for Māori of diverse identities to be valued in society, the mana of Māori women needs to be restored, through mana wahine.

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