

# From Texas to Aotearoa: The Indigenous Turn to Communal Identity and Respect for Tradition in Disney's *Moana*

Author: Melanie Garcia  
Subject: English/Film Studies

## Abstract

Disney's Polynesian *Moana* neatly follows Disney's archetypal and Universalist "self-discovery" plot structure. Such an act might be seen as an example of colonial cultural appropriation by westernizing an indigenous story. However, the film inverts the westernized plot structure by challenging western individualism with its heroine's anchoring of her identity in community and cultural tradition, thereby indigenizing Disney's usual plot archetype.

Disney's *Moana* is hailed universally as an animated triumph due to storytelling, glorious visuals, and spectacular songs (it currently has a 96% positive rating on the review tracking site [rottentomatoes.com](http://rottentomatoes.com)). Despite this positive reception, critics acknowledge that the film's basic plot structure is conventional. A. O. Scott, of the New York Times, described the plot as following the "tried-and-true Disney-Pixar formula" (Scott). While, arguably, the film's entertainment value is not negatively impacted by following this classic, albeit derivative, structure, its use is potentially problematic given the film's indigenous subject matter. Disney's structure has been used innumerable times to portray principally western stories. The question then is, is it an act of colonialist cultural appropriation to apply a predominantly western concept to indigenous and Polynesian culture? Canadian professor Marina Gonick's article, "Indigenizing Girl Power: The Whale Rider, Decolonization, and the Project of Remembering," addresses a similar issue in analyzing *The Whale Rider*, a film that tells the story of the indigenous Māori culture. Gonick discusses female agency; a concept that is not philosophically western, but one that has been popularized by western culture to the extent to which it is associated. Gonick argues that *The Whale Rider* film indigenizes the westernized concept of female agency and thereby "decolonizes the screen" (Gonick 305). *Moana* arguably does likewise; it indigenizes Disney's plot archetype. The film manipulates Disney's Universalist storyline by inverting western tropes to reflect the indigenous values of communal identity and respect for tradition.

*Moana* fits deftly into the universal (not theoretically western) archetypal Disney mode of storytelling. The Disney archetype features a young, idealistic, protagonist who desires to leave his or her prosaic existence behind and eventually goes on an adventure of self-discovery (accompanied by some humorous or amorous companions). *Moana* fits methodically into this archetype. *Moana* longs to leave her island behind to sail the seas and eventually does so with comedic (notably not romantic) companions on a quest to return the stolen heart of Te-Fiti to its owner. Disney characters usually

have external motivations, but they are centrally motivated by the question (as posed by *Moana*'s grandmother), "Who are you meant to be?" (Clements and Musker). *Moana* wants to save her island, but also wants to define her existence. This self-discovery trope drives Disney's formulaic films and appears innumerable. The trope is arguably so prevalent because of its reliability and universality. The use of universal tropes in indigenous film is polemical as it can be seen as commodification of a culture. As a paradigm, consider the film *The Whale Rider*. Based on a novella by Māori Renaissance giant Witi Ihimaera, the film tells a crowd-pleasing story of a girl who must become the first female leader of her iwi. Māori scholar Deborah Walker-Morrison argues that the film adaption is successful for its portrayal of "Māori ways of being [and] universal themes" (Walker-Morrison 33). However, Māori scholar Christ Prentice in her article, "Riding the Whale? Postcolonialism and Globalization in *The Whale Rider*," argues that universality can undermine the indigenous identity of a culture if used too liberally in film. Specifically, Prentice critiques the film's overreliance on the "story's appeal to 'universal' values" (Prentice 258). Such reliance is, according to Prentice, at the expense of authentic cultural representation. The Māori cultural elements of *The Whale Rider* merely exoticize a universal and familiar story of "intergenerational" conflict (Prentice 258). Possibly, Prentice's critique could also apply to *Moana* as the film tells a universal story. Some degree of universality is arguably necessary to make an indigenous culture appealing to a global audience. There is certainly a compromise between a film that appeals too specifically to an indigenous audience, and a film so universal that it objectifies a culture. Self-discovery is a journey both Māori and American people take. The trope is not then, by its philosophical nature, problematic.

Since Disney's archetypal films often endorse western ideas such as individualism, if *Moana* strictly followed Disney plot archetypes, it would be problematic. Such a structure has been used so prevalently to tell western stories that it has become associated with western culture as has female agency and empowerment. Faithfully following it would make *Moana* merely just another Disney film with Polynesian trappings, thereby raising ethical concerns about exoticism. Prentice's critique of *The Whale Rider* would thereby be legitimate for *Moana*. However, *Moana* indigenizes the classic "self-discovery" trope, whereas *The Whale Rider*, according to Gonick "'indigenizes the image' of the empowered girl" (Gonick 306). In most animated Disney films, the self-discovery trope is highly individualistic. The protagonist's journey is insinuated by his or her desires as in *The Little Mermaid* (directed by Ron Clements and John Musker), where it is Ariel's desire to be a human that drives the plot. Disney nuanced this trope in both the ethnic princess films *Pocahontas* (directed by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg), and *Mulan* (directed by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook). *Mulan* disguises herself as a soldier to fight in the Chinese army to save the life of her elderly and disabled father. Native American princess *Pocahontas* attempts to bring peace between English settlers and her tribe. Both are motivated by a desire to help others—though also through a desire to define who they are, i.e. *Mulan*'s song "Reflection". However, their motivation comes out of a desire to help their immediate family. *Mulan* attempts to save her father while *Pocahontas* is primarily trying to save her lover, John Smith, from execution. While the films shy away from strict individualism, they still exemplify familial individualism. Thus, both films fall to the prevalence of western individualism in Disney films.



Individual desire also drives Moana, but a communal responsibility takes a precedence, thereby signaling a change from individual needs to communal needs in the Disney plot structure. She yearns to sail the ocean she loves so deeply. However, Moana only fulfills her desire when the plight of her people prompts its necessity. Her first venture beyond the boundaries of the reef is in search of a fruitful fishing ground for her people. Finally, she only begins her quest to find the demi-god Maui when it becomes clear that her people will perish unless she succeeds. This communal connection is an integral part of Polynesian—specifically Māori—culture. Indeed, Gonick affirms that, “To identify as indigenous is to mark oneself as a member of a people” (Gonick 316). Thus, in terms of accurate film representation, an indigenous character cannot be wholly individualistic. He or she must bear a cultural pride in his or her people. But this concept goes beyond the nature of accurate representation. Indigenous culture—specifically Maori—is more communal than individualistic. For example, traditional Maori education is philosophically communal. Students are taught skills so they may eventually benefit the community (Ross). Conversely, individualism often drives western students; they pursue an education to obtain success for themselves or their families. Western culture’s commitment to individualism explains the prevalence of it in Disney films. But *Moana* takes a different turn. In a pivotal sequence, Moana attempts to accomplish a daring feat in order to get past the raging fire demon Te Kā. The reckless action results in the cracking of Maui’s fishhook thereby compromising the quest.

“I told you to turn back!”  
 “I thought we could make it!”  
 “We?”  
 “I thought I could make it” (Clements and Musker).

Here, Moana is reprimanded for her individualism. Her desire for personal renown is compromising her responsibility to her community. The film is thus critiquing the hyper-individualism that is often embraced by Disney films. In *The Little Mermaid*, for example, Ariel’s contract with the sea-witch, Ursula, compromises her mermaid community’s safety. Her selfishness is never overtly critiqued in the film; Ariel is instead portrayed as a victim.

Lastly, there is Moana’s identity epiphany; the moment when her journey of self-discovery is resolved in a manner that exemplifies Maori identity. Moana, in response to her grandmother’s question, “Do you know who you are?” replies, “Who am I? I am a girl who loves my island [people] and a girl who loves the ocean. I am the daughter of the village chief. We are descended from voyagers” (Clements and Musker). This declaration of identity mirrors the Māori identification of *tangata whenua* (Walker 26). Māori people identify themselves with both the land and their community. Official introductions consist of a naming of a family *waka* (not orally referenced in the film, but notably Moana makes her declaration while standing on her boat), *whakapapa*, and *iwi*, and notably “before naming people, [they] name the mountain and river or lake that attach each *hapu* [subtribe]... to its *tūrangawaewae*” (Walker 26). Moana’s quest for self-discovery culminates in a traditional Māori identification. She references *moana* (her *tūrangawaewae*), her ancestors (*whakapapa*) and her people (*iwi* or tribe, if taken in a broad Polynesian context).

Most importantly, her identity lies in her people, thus completing the film’s challenge of hyper-individualism.

A counterargument to the above conclusion might point to the convenience of unification between individual and communal desires. Moana’s desire to sail the ocean and her people’s survival essentially become one. Sailing the seas saves her people, but also conveniently fulfills her desires. While such unification is progress for Disney’s hyper-individualistic tendencies, it might be argued that, through this unification, Disney is merely pandering to indigeneity. A closer examination of the film however, reveals that Moana chooses to serve her people at the expense of her personal desires. At the beginning of the film, Moana’s personal desires and her people’s desires are in conflict. Moana desires to sail the seas while her father reminds her that, as the daughter of the chief, she has a duty to lead her people. As a young girl, Moana continually runs from her duties to the ocean. Finally, however, her father shows her a sacred place of past chiefs and tells her, “It is time to be who they need you to be” (Clements and Musker). It is time for Moana to forsake her personal desires so she can lead her people. Moana accepts this. She pledges, “I’ll lead the way, I’ll have my people to guide me. We’ll build our future together” (Clements and Musker). From then on, Moana sacrifices her personal desires to lead her people. She becomes the person who her people need her to be. She forsakes the ocean and dutifully learns the intricacies of leadership from her parents. When the spreading darkness endangers her people, Moana becomes the “way finder” her people need to her to be. Moana thus signals a philosophical modification in Disney’s individualistic plot archetype.

*Moana* also inverts Disney’s westernized archetype by its unique respect for indigenous tradition. A very common trope in Disney self-discovery films is the necessity of breaking traditions or challenging authority. Tradition provides a needed conflict in order to restrain the protagonist’s desires. Breaking tradition or parental authority enables the protagonist to make a substantial choice therefore aiding in necessary character evolution. Indeed, film critic Steve Greyndaus observed in his review of *Moana* that, “Tradition, in a Hollywood cartoon, exists solely for the purpose of being broken or changed by the end” (Greyndaus). The protagonists in these films are faced with obstacles to his or her desires, which therefore must be broken. In Disney/Pixar’s *Brave* (directed by Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman), the Scottish princess Merida, by tradition, is nearly forced to wed the suitor who wins her hand. Both Merida and her mother, the queen, perceive the injustice of such a tradition and therefore disband it. Even *Mulan*, a film set in the rich tradition of China, centers around Mulan’s breaking of tradition concerning gender roles. Furthering of gender equality is certainly admirable, but it is troubling that Disney so often focuses on the negative aspect of tradition. Tradition is, generally, more important to an indigenous society than a western one. It is therefore not so easily broken since it is held as sacred. This is especially true for a colonized culture. Scholar Wendy Wiseman describes the postcolonial environment—in Aotearora New Zealand—as having a “vitality and vulnerability of cultural traditions [due to] ...the colonial aftermath of modernity” (Wiseman 73). Traditions are “vulnerable” because of the cultural suppression of colonial hegemony. Revising or contravention of a tradition must be considered carefully. Even though *Moana* is set in a precolonial reality, it is a film released as part of a postcolonial world. In the beginning of the film, tradition appears to be an obstacle.



Tradition binds Moana to become the chief of her people and binds her to her Motunui. For hundreds of years no one has left the island. However, when it is revealed that her people were once voyagers, Moana realizes that it is her tribe who is breaking tradition. By taking to the ocean, Moana is fulfilling tradition. Tradition is a pathway; it is not an obstacle. In a parallel to the indigenous cultural renaissance after the repression of colonialism, tradition is revived.

*Moana's* universal, yet indigenous plot, is as refreshing as its love-interest free heroine. Of course, an unequivocal endorsement of the film's indigenous cultural representation would be overly simplistic. The film has received criticism for its physical portrayal of Maui as perpetuating obesity stereotypes and his representation as a demigod with self-esteem issues appears to undermine Polynesian mythology (Perry). But its de-colonial manipulation of Disney's archetype is revolutionary. While Prentice critiques *Whale Rider* for its overreliance on universality, a certain amount of universality is arguably necessary for a global film. Conceivably, the solution to this crux is modeled in *Moana*. Filmmakers should not "combine[e] Maori ways of being with universality" as separate entities (Walker-Morrison 33). For accurate indigenous cultural representation that reaches a global market, filmmakers should instead manipulate Universalist themes to exemplify "Maori ways of being" (Walker-Morrison 33).

## Bibliography

Andrews, Mark, Chapman, Brenda, directors. *Brave*. Walt Disney Studios and Pixar Studios, 2012.

Bancroft, Tony, Cook, Barry, directors. *Mulan*. Walt Disney Studios, 1998.

Calman, Ross. "Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand." New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage Te Manatu Taonga. Ministry for Culture and Heritage Te Manatu Taonga, n.d. Web. 27 Sept. 2016

Caro, Niki, Tim Sanders, John Barnett, Frank Hübner, Witi Ihimaera, Keisha Castle-Hughes, Rawiri Paratene, Vicky Houghton, Cliff Curtis, Grant Roa, Mana Taumaunu, Rachel House, Leon Narbey, David Coulson, Lisa Gerrard, and Witi Ihimaera. *Whale Rider*. Santa Monica, CA. Lionsgate Films. 2011.

Clements, Ron, Musker, John, directors. *The Little Mermaid*. Walt Disney Studios, 1989.

Clements, Ron, Musker, John, directors. *Moana*. Walt Disney Studios, 2016.

Fandango. "Moana". N.d. rottentomatoes.com. Retrieved from [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/moana\\_2016/](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/moana_2016/) Accessed December 11, 2016.

Gabriel, Mike, Eric Golderberg, directors. *Pocahontas*. Walt Disney Studios, 1995.

Gonick, Marnina. "Indigenizing Girl Power: *The Whale Rider*, Decolonization and the Project of Remembering." *Feminist Media Studies* 10.3 (2010): 305-319. Communication & Mass Media Complete.

Greydanus, Steve. "SDG Reviews 'Moana'". November 23, 2016. National Catholic Register. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/sdg-reviews-moana>. Accessed December 8, 2016.

Lin-Manuel, Miranda (Various Artists). "Moana Soundtrack". Walt Disney Records, 2016.

Perry, Nick. "'Moana' a Disney Hit but Portrayal Irks Some in the Pacific". December 9, 2016. *The Oklahoman*. Retrieved from: <http://newsok.com/article/5529966> Accessed December 8, 2016.

Prentice, Chris. "Riding the Whale? Postcolonialism and Globalization in *Whale Rider*." *Cross / Cultures: Readings In The Post / Colonial Literatures In English* 85. (2006): 247. Publisher Provided Full Text Searching File. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.

Ross Calman. "Māori Education – mātauranga - Education in Traditional Māori Society". Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand". Retrieved from: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/Māori-education-matauranga/page-1> Accessed December 11, 2016

Scott, A.O. "'Moana', Brave Princess on a Voyage with a Chicken". November 22, 2016. Retrieved from: [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/22/movies/moana-review.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/22/movies/moana-review.html?_r=0)

Walker-Morrison, Deborah. "A Place to Stand: Land And Water In Māori Film." *Imaginations Journal* 5.1 (2014): 25-47. Academic Search Premier. Web. 11 Dec. 2016.