

# The Politics of Culture



# The Politics of Culture:

## *An Interrogation of Popular Culture*

Edited by

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and Robyn Muir

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*To Lucy and Steve, for their encouragement, compassion and patience,  
from all of us.*



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# INTRODUCTION

## INTERROGATING THE POLITICS OF POPULAR CULTURE

IBTISAM AHMED, ELENA COLOMBO,  
ROBYN MUIR

Culture makes people understand each other better. And if they understand each other better in their soul, it is easier to overcome the economic and political barriers. But first they have to understand that their neighbour is, in the end, just like them, with the same problems, the same questions.

—Paulo Coelho

The idea for this book came about after a workshop we held on June 14<sup>th</sup> 2017 at the University of Nottingham. As organisers, the three of us had worked together with a single goal: to explore the interconnectivity of culture and politics in a gathering of students and scholars. It was, and still is, a topic very close to our hearts. Brought together as PhD students under the same supervisors, Professor Lucy Sargisson and Professor Steven Fielding, the three of us come from different backgrounds – politics, literature and history – and have a wide variety of research interests, ranging from feminism to utopianism and postcolonialism. Despite this diversity, after only a short time together it became clear to us that one thing unified us: a shared interest in how cultural outputs over the centuries influence and are influenced by politics and social issues. The importance of the relationship between politics and culture, however, is not always acknowledged and celebrated. In fact, many consider these topics as sub-fields or irrelevant. Our workshop aimed to provide a platform that highlights the role of literature, art, music, film, television, and graphic novels in understanding the political zeitgeist.

Our proposal was welcomed with enthusiasm and, thanks to the support of the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham and the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice, the day of the workshop was a success. We were thrilled by the variety of

attendees, both among the audience and the presenters. The workshop attracted students and scholars from a wide range of disciplines, and the papers presented covered an ample variety of topics, from political approaches to artistic products such as literature, film, and visual art, to reflections on the connection between culture and politics through the study of media and education. Organising “The Politics of Culture” workshop was a challenging, but wonderful, experience. It gave us the opportunity not only to hone our management skills, but also to expand our knowledge and understanding of the relationship between politics and culture and to provide a platform for debate and participation.

The proposal for the creation of this book came from Cambridge Scholars Publishing in March 2017 and was eagerly welcomed. We decided to gather some of the most relevant papers presented at the workshop in this edited collection. It was then, after more than a year spent editing and working with the authors, that we completed our work. Our gratitude goes to our fellow authors, Aref Ebadi, Martha Flor Puebla and Harry Robertson, for their cooperation and professionalism in the formation of this book; to Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their unwavering support; and to Dr Pippa Hennessy for helping us ensure that the manuscript is of the highest possible quality. Our thanks also to the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice (CSSGJ) at the University of Nottingham in enabling the workshop which started us on this incredible journey; and to the School of Politics and IR Postgraduate Research Fund for providing support in our publication logistics.

Each of the five chapters of this book originates from one of the papers presented at “The Politics of Culture” workshop. While the common thread is a broad understanding of the interplay between the personal and the political, the chapters explore many different topics, such as ecofeminism, soft power in education, conservatism, socio-political satire, and queer utopianism. We decided to start this collection with an example of unexpected interaction between popular culture and political theory. With “Know who you are: *Moana* and ecofeminism”, Elena Colombo and Robyn Muir provide an analysis of Disney’s *Moana* (2016) through the lens of ecofeminism. The film is read as a metaphorical portrait of the theories of two ecofeminist authors, Val Plumwood and Starhawk. Throughout this reading, the chapter also offers a reflection on the innovative role that *Moana* plays in the representation of women in the Disney franchise.

With the second chapter, the scope of the culture-politics relationship is further widened. Martha Flor Puebla looks at the interplay between politics and culture by examining the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as instruments of public and cultural diplomacy. In particular, she examines

the case of Mexico and argues that the Mexican legislation has enabled Mexican HEIs to portray the Mexican culture abroad, thus making them not only global actors for international relations, but also greater players for the diffusion and export of culture. While not an investigation of a cultural, artistic product through political lenses, as in the cases of the remaining papers, “Universities as vectors of cultural diplomacy: the case of Mexico” provides an excellent analysis of culture as a source of soft power.

In the third chapter, the focus shifts back to fiction: Aref Ebadi’s reading of Graham Greene’s novel *The Quiet American* provides an innovative perspective. Through a compelling overview of the major doctrines of conservatism, the author argues for the pivotal role of the conservative scepticism towards the role of abstract reason in society, and presents the tension between two characters of the novel as a representation of the struggle between a conservative and a non-conservative view towards politics and society.

The fourth chapter presents an analysis of the satirical aspect of the novels *American Psycho* (1991) and *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984). Harry Robertson interrogates the extent to which these novels could be read as satire of the Reagan-Thatcher era, and presents them as cultural commentaries for the political zeitgeist of the time.

This collection concludes with Ibtisam Ahmed’s original reading of the fictional superhero couple of Wiccan (Billy Kaplan) and Hulkling (Teddy Altman) in the *Young Avengers* series, by exploring their existence as queer immigrants in the Western hemisphere. In particular, he argues for an interpretation of these characters as embodiments of José Esteban Muñoz’s queer utopia, exploring how they occupy a space which critically deconstructs the dynamics of queer politics towards a more hopeful future.

One of the more exciting and unexpected aspects of this collaboration was the diversity we found in the work. This is not only from the perspective of the scholarship – although it bears repeating that the chapters cover a broad range of topics. What has been truly heartening is how distinct the authors are. Out of six total contributors, five countries are represented across three continents – the UK, Italy, Mexico, Iran, and Bangladesh. The editorial team consists of women and queer voices of colour. We feel that this diversity has shaped this book, not only through scholarship but also by highlighting different and often marginalized voices.

Academia has a penchant for leaning towards competitiveness and, in the age of Brexit and right-wing populism, a strong sense of isolation as well. That this humble volume can truly boast a sense of internationalism and collaboration is something we are extremely grateful for, especially as we are solemnly aware of its rarity. This is, in no small part, due to the

universal appeal of the topic. As we discovered early on in our respective academic careers, culture, broadly read, gives a level of interdisciplinarity that is often difficult to achieve without explicit planning. Yet, as we have said several times, this publication came about through a very organic process.

But it is not just its appeal to diversity that makes culture such an enticing topic. As students of Politics and International Relations, we as editors are fully aware of the growing need to understand how the political plays out with the personal on a regular basis. It would be perilous to assume that culture is in any way apolitical. If any evidence to the contrary is necessary, a simple look at which books top the best-seller lists after any given election is a strong indication of how connected the topics really are. Many would claim it to be otherwise, of course, but we are firm and passionate in our belief that culture has a strong impact on socio-politics.

Intersectionality is a term that is often thrown about without due respect to its origins – and we are aware that, despite our editorial and authorial diversity, we do not have the honour of having a black woman among our writers. Nonetheless, Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1989 theory of interlocking systems of power having an impact on the most marginalised in society does ring true to the work presented here. In one form or another, the voices presented here are very much looking at the margins and, more often than not, speaking from them too. While we must be cautious in not misappropriating the term "intersectionality", it is not a stretch to suggest that we are, at least critically, cutting across multiple identities, oppressions and marginalisations.

Culture is a powerful force that lets us do that. Its ubiquitous nature, both ephemeral in its specific context and immortal in its impact, provides a complex and vast area of study. What we hope to have presented here is just a small and precise foray into its depths. Working on this has been a pleasure.

# CHAPTER 1

## KNOW WHO YOU ARE: *MOANA* & ECOFEMINISM

ELENA COLOMBO, ROBYN MUIR

### Introduction

If we are to survive into a liveable future, we must take into our own hands the power to create, restore and explore different stories, with new main characters, better plots, and at least the possibility of some happy endings. (Plumwood 1993:196)

In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), Val Plumwood called for guiding stories in order to bring back balance to nature and humanity (196). In December 2016, Disney unknowingly created their first ecofeminist narrative with *Moana*. We say Disney has done this unknowingly because they have not explicitly stated that Moana is an ecofeminist, nor that her story is a narrative for the ecofeminist movement. Due to the scope and popularity of the Disney brand, we also doubt that they would want to associate themselves with a particular ideology, even if they were aware that their narrative contained strands of ecofeminism.

We will claim that Disney's *Moana* (2016) is the answer that Plumwood called for in 1993. This claim is not only important to Plumwood's call for "different stories", "new main characters", "better plots" and "happy endings" (196), but it also provides new generations of children (who are the future) with access to a heroine who embodies ecofeminist values. It is also important to note that, if Moana is included in the Disney Princess Franchise – something that may not occur (Barnes 2016) – then *Moana* (2016) will be one of the most progressive steps that the brand has taken in the representation of female characters.

We will draw from two scholars when discussing the ecofeminist perspective of *Moana* (2016). Firstly, we will outline the plot of the story and its relation to Polynesian mythology. Secondly, we will place Moana

within the Disney princess brand, pinpointing her differences and her role of innovation. We will move to the ecofeminist reading of *Moana* (2016): firstly outlining the approaches to spiritual and social-constructivist ecofeminism in Starhawk's (1979) *The Spiral Dance* and Plumwood's (1993) *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, respectively. Then, placing Te Fiti and Te Kā, the film's deity figures, into the context of spiritual feminism, we will explain how Moana's narrative can be placed into Plumwood's (1993) vision of the four stages of dualism. We will provide an analysis of Moana and the supporting characters from an ecofeminist perspective. Lastly, the final battle, the resolution of the film, will be discussed as a vehicle to understand the consequences of exploiting nature. We will use both *Disney Moana Book of the Film* (2016) and quotations from the film; the DVD was released in March 2017.

## Plot and Polynesian Mythology

The story of Disney's *Moana* (2016) is based on the adventures of the titular protagonist and her quest to save her island from destruction. The film starts with Gramma Tala's narration of the mythological story that provides the basis for the whole plot: according to the myth, the goddess Te Fiti retained the power of life within her heart, represented by a small glowing green circular stone. The heart, however, was stolen by the demigod Maui, a shapeshifter who, with his magical fish hook, is able to transform into different animals. Maui, during his escape, is confronted by Te Kā, "a demon of earth and fire" (Disney 2016:4), and after their fight the heart and the fish hook are lost to the sea. As a consequence, an unnatural darkness spreads through the islands, destroying all the life it encounters; only a prophesied hero will be able to find the heart and restore Te Fiti's power.

Moana, the daughter of the chief of Motonui and first in line to succeed her father, is chosen by the ocean and, as a very young child, is gifted with the heart. Her grandmother, the only witness to the event, safeguards the small stone. Moana, unaware of the real nature of the stone, grows up to uphold the responsibilities of chief, but her constant pull to the ocean puts her in conflict with her father, who prohibits everyone from sailing beyond the reef, fearing the dangers of the open water. It is only when the island's trees start to wither and die that Gramma Tala reveals to Moana the truth about the origins of their people: their ancestors were sailors, or "wayfinders", but the loss of Te Fiti's heart created demons that endangered the waters; they were forced to settle on one island and they gradually forgot their abilities. Moana's task calls for her to sail by herself

in order to find Maui and bring him to Te Fiti to restore the heart. Encouraged by her grandmother's dying words, Moana defies her father's orders and leaves the island. The film then follows her adventures to find Maui, recover his magical hook, reach Te Fiti, and face the wrath of Te Kā, the lava demon.

*Moana* (2016) draws heavily from Polynesian cultures, bringing together different elements and traditions. The characters and the plot, however, are Disney's, with the exception of Maui: he is a heroic figure in Polynesian mythology, a protagonist of many legends that differ according to the various cultures. Disney adopted this figure in a brand new adventure, although they changed his traditional slender appearance, creating some controversies (Ito 2016).

### **Moana: innovation in the Disney princess tradition**

We claim that *Moana* (2016) is an important addition in the Disney princess narratives from a feminist perspective. Her fearless, independent, and caring nature, the proactive role she plays in the plot, and the absence of a love interest are elements that denote a significant change in comparison to the previous Disney heroines. It is important to specify, however, that Moana has not been explicitly identified as a Disney princess by Disney themselves. The Disney Princess Franchise, till now, officially includes: Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana, Rapunzel and Merida. Moreover, Moana directly rejects Maui's claim that she is a princess (Disney 2016:77). Nonetheless, as Pocahontas was included within the franchise due to her status as Chief Powhatan's daughter, we decided to include Moana in this framework as well.

The previous Disney princesses are subject, to varying degrees, to oppression. The earlier princesses – Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty – are often considered “passive” and “obedient” (Stone 1975:44). They are meek and compliant, and they do not have agency within their story. These three princesses are reliant on external forces for help in difficult situations; moreover, they need love and marriage in order to have their happily-ever-after. The new installation of princesses, beginning with *The Little Mermaid* in 1989, brought a developed level of agency. Princesses such as Ariel, Belle and Jasmine always strive at the beginning of their narrative for bigger things, such as learning about human life and going on adventures; however, these desires are readily forgotten in the face of a sudden and overwhelming love interest. Moreover, despite their stronger personalities, the plots provide no opportunity for them to act, and

they are always reliant on other characters to be saved from danger. The Disney princess narrative changed with the introduction of Pocahontas and Mulan in the late nineties, which provided the franchise with a more progressive and active storyline. Although the films contained historical and cultural inaccuracies, and racial stereotypes, the heroines were more active and independent (Craven 2002:37; Dong 2010:158) than their predecessors (Dundes 2001:353). Despite having a love interest, this was not a dominant part of the story, nor was their character development. With Tiana and Rapunzel, Disney again presents active princesses whose original desires are eclipsed by the duty they feel to save their love interest within the film. The princesses initially set themselves against gender stereotypes and marriage expectations but, at the end, their happy endings inevitably revolve around marriage and romance.

Recently, however, this narrative has changed with the introduction of new heroines. Firstly, with *Brave* (2012), the plot itself is set into motion because of Merida's rejection of gender expectations and the prospect of arranged marriage. *Frozen* (2013) rejected the concept of love at first sight leading to marriage as well, mocking, in a way, the previous princesses and their clichés through the relationship between Anna and Hans. On the other hand, Merida, Anna and Elsa, despite their strength and independence, are not so much proactive as reactive characters. They start from a position of oppression (an arranged marriage for Merida, forced isolation for Elsa) and, in the attempt to escape from it, they cause horrible consequences: both their plots are based on the journey to counteract the effects of their mistakes. They do play the role of the saviour in the end, but their actions are based on the need to rectify a situation that they have caused in the first place.

Taking these elements into consideration, it is important to observe how progressive a step *Moana* (2016) is for positive female representation within Disney films. Unlike its predecessors, *Moana* (2016) does not feature a love interest: the plot focuses on Moana's journey to save her island and to discover her identity and strengths, a true coming-of-age story. Moana is not only fearless, independent, and brave: she is also the one who actively decides on her course of action. She does not need saving from others – she does the saving – and her heroic journey does not start because of a problem she is accountable for (in this case, it is Maui's fault), but from her desire to save her people: she is the first truly proactive princess. For this reason, we claim that *Moana* (2016) is a remarkable step forward, from a feminist perspective, of Disney's representation of women in the princess franchise.



## Trends in Ecofeminism

Innovation is not only brought by the introduction of a proactive character, but also, we claim, by the portrayal of ecofeminist values. However, in our reading of *Moana* (2016) as an ecofeminist story, we need to take into account the tensions that divide ecofeminist thought. Its main assumptions stand unchanged: the oppression of nature is connected to the oppression of women, and both feminists and deep ecologists need to acknowledge this connection in order to overcome the dualistic framework built by patriarchal culture. However, as Rosemarie Tong observed, ecofeminists “disagree about whether women’s connections to nature are primarily biological and psychological or primarily social and cultural” (Tong 2009:243). For the purpose of our analysis, we decided to use the works of two authors that represent those two tensions: *The Spiral Dance* (1979) by Starhawk and *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) by Val Plumwood.

*The Spiral Dance* is one of the best-known texts of spiritual ecofeminism, a branch of the movement that promotes the worship of nature as a divine force. Consequently, spiritual ecofeminists view nature’s connection with women on a transcendental level; drawing an analogy between the role of women in reproduction and the archetypal idea of Earth as a mother who gives life (Tong 2009:252). Spiritual ecofeminists stress the privileged position of women, in comparison to men. Starhawk, in particular, is a source of inspiration for the Goddess movement. She outlines the three core concepts of earth-based spirituality. First, immanence, the idea that the Goddess dwells in the living world, in every human, animal, plant or mineral. Second, interconnection, and the holistic conception of the world as a whole, which expands the view of the Self. Third, the compassionate lifestyle led by women (Starhawk 1979:22). This immanent link between women and nature, however, implies an unequal position between males and females, raising the latter to a higher level.

Val Plumwood, on the other hand, claims that women’s connection to nature is socially constructed and ideologically reinforced. In order to prove this point, she traces the origin of the dualistic thought back to the roots of Western culture: Plato. Her “master model” is based on the “denial of dependency on a subjugated other” (Plumwood 1993:41), a logic that has permeated society since its first stages and feeds the very construction of identity of human beings, as well as contemporary philosophical thoughts. In particular, Plumwood emphasises how both feminist theories and radical green theories are still set in a dualistic framework, and therefore unable to overcome the logic of domination.

Feminists, on the one hand, fall into the mechanism of differentiation, rejecting masculine ideals, and viewing the association of women/nature as outdated and oppressive. Deep ecologists, on the other hand, fail to incorporate difference into their view of the ecological self, which treats the others as a form of the same, obliterating distinction and setting no boundaries between the self and nature. Thus, Plumwood argues that a balance between difference and continuity is needed in order to move beyond the logic of dualism: a new environmental philosophy must recognise both humans' dependency on Earth and their discontinuity from it. Plumwood calls for the creation of a "democratic culture beyond dualism, ending colonising relationships and finding a mutual, ethical basis for enriching coexistence with earth others" (Plumwood 1993:193). Moreover, Plumwood proposes a new insightful reading of the world through the framework of dualisation, and points towards an ethical approach of environmental and feminist theories. Plumwood also submits an urgent plea to stop the dualising process from reaching its fourth and last stage. According to *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, the division, devaluation and denial of nature has evolved historically through four stages: first, justification and preparation, with Plato; invasion and annexation follows, with later rationalists and Descartes; instrumentalisation and appropriation is the third stage, which can lead to the fourth. This last stage is called totalising instrumentalisation, a denial of dependency between humanity and nature brought to such an extreme that the master is set to end up devouring the other who sustains him, leading the way to self-destruction.

### **Starhawk and Plumwood in *Moana***

We claim that *Moana* is a narrative that portrays different aspects of ecofeminism. In particular, *Moana* (2016) contains references to both the spiritual and social-constructivist positions that we discussed earlier in this chapter.

Starhawk's idea of the Goddess is practically embodied in the character of Te Fiti, presented at the very beginning with the mythological story narrated by Moana's grandmother. An earth goddess that spreads life, Te Fiti echoes Starhawk's words:

The Goddess has infinite aspects and a thousand of names – She is the reality behind many metaphors, the manifest deity, omnipresent in all of life, in each of us. The Goddess is not separate from the world – She is the world, and all things in it: moon, sun, earth, star, stone, seed, flowing river, wind, wave, leaf and branch, bud and blossom, fang and claw, woman and

man. (Starhawk 1979:32)

Te Fiti is the earth goddess portrayed as a nurturing mother in *Moana*'s (2016) narrative. In particular, she possesses the power of life, objectified in the film as the heart of Te Fiti, a circular stone with a spiral design on it (surprisingly similar to the image on the cover of *The Spiral Dance*), which glows green. The stone is the catalytic element of the story: it is the treasure that, contrary to the general quest narrative, needs to be brought back, instead of being conquered.

The mythological story that opens the film, however, can also be read as a metaphor of Plumwood's theories in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Maui steals the heart of Te Fiti, in a similar vein to the mythical figure of Prometheus, with the intention of gifting it to humanity. Maui, however, cannot use its power; on the contrary, his theft unleashes conflict and death. He is immediately confronted by Te Kā, a lava demon, and their combat leads to the loss of the stone in the sea. Te Kā, "a demon of earth and fire" (Disney 2016:4), brings destruction and prevents access to the place where Te Fiti used to lie. Also, the loss of the heart is the cause of a spreading ecological disease that attacks the islands, destroying all the life that it encounters: "without her heart, the island of Te Fiti crumbled, giving birth to a terrible darkness" (Disney 2016:3). This image of spreading disease can be immediately connected to pollution and the devastation caused by industrialisation and climate change. Maui enacts on screen the fourth stage of dualisation predicted by Plumwood, the one in which "reason systematically devours the other of nature. The instrumentalisation of nature takes a totalising form: all planetary life is brought within the sphere of agency of the master (Self)" (Plumwood, 1993:192-193). Maui's greed and disrespect of Te Fiti is the symbol of human reason and desire to take control over nature: it is the master model, the denial of dependency, in its full glory. This act of violation against Te Fiti is the perfect representation of the fourth stage, the last totalising action against nature.

Gramma Tala's story however, is not only a cautionary tale. It is a scary reality, acknowledged in the film when the islands and all forms of life start to wither and die, until the heart of Te Fiti is restored (Disney 2016:6). This mythological story establishes the premises of the narrative of *Moana* (2016), but it also condenses different ecofeminist views of nature and its relationship with humanity, thanks to its symbolical nature.

## **“I am Moana”**

Plumwood’s connection to the story of *Moana* (2016) does not end with the preconditional, mythological background story that lays the foundation of the film. It is the character of Moana herself that seems to start a dialogue with Plumwood’s text, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Plumwood ends the book with a call for “new, less destructive guiding stories [...] from subordinated and ignored parts of western culture, such as women’s stories of care” (Plumwood 1993:196). Disney seems to answer that call by providing a heroine that embodies the values of ecofeminism and offering the public a story whose solution indicates a path towards a better relationship with nature.

We claim that Moana is an ecofeminist heroine. The main feature that emerges throughout the film is her connection with the sea and, by default, nature. This can be interpreted as the symbolic representation of the basis of ecofeminist theories, the women-nature connection. In the film, this connection is depicted as essentialist: the ocean magically chooses Moana as the guardian of the heart of Te Fiti, and its heroine. The audience is not given an explanation of why Moana was chosen, and Moana herself struggles with the acceptance of the burden that has been placed on her shoulders. This puts some distance between Moana and the main ecofeminist theories that would normally base the connection between women and nature on oppression and the patriarchal system. The first core assumption of ecofeminism, according to Karen J. Warren, is that “there are important connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature” (Warren 1987 cited in Tong 2009:242). On the other hand, the bond that links Moana to the ocean is not based on oppression. Apart from being restricted from sailing, Moana is not presented as an oppressed character. She is loved by her family, integrated into and respected by her community; she will also inherit the title of village chief, and nobody contests her right to the title or her ability to be a leader; in fact, they embrace it.

In the film, Moana seems to be chosen by the ocean because of her kindness: she protects a small sea turtle on her way towards the waters, choosing to leave the seashell she was about to pick up. This small gesture embodies her caring and selfless nature, and seems to be the reason behind the ocean’s choice. However, we believe that there is also a second, important reason: the key difference between Moana and the other characters is her lack of fear towards the ocean. From the very beginning of the film, we can see that Moana, in comparison to her peers, is not afraid of Gramma Tala’s story about Te Fiti, Maui and Te Kā. She is able to hear the

call from the ocean, and despite her father's attempts to deter her, she keeps approaching the waters. Her status of heroine, thus, seems to depend on two qualities: her caring nature and her fearless attitude, two traits that stand out considerably in her relationship both with the ocean and with Te Fiti.

In addition, Moana finds out that the pull towards the ocean is part of her heritage and cultural identity. Thanks to her grandmother's help and encouragement, she discovers the origins of her people: they were voyagers, who travelled across the ocean to find new islands. Their own identity was defined by the ability to travel, to be connected with the environment that surrounds them and to be able to find the way:

We read the wind and the sky when the sun is high  
We sail the length of the seas on the ocean breeze  
At night, we name every star  
We know where we are  
We know who we are [...]  
We keep our Island in our mind  
And when it's time to find home  
We know the way. (*Moana* 2016)

Unlike her father, Moana embraces this heritage: she sees it as the reason behind her unusual attraction to the ocean, something that had set her apart from the rest of the island until that moment. Despite the failure of her first attempt to go beyond the reef, she does not let this deter her from beginning her journey to find Maui. Throughout the plot, she overcomes the obstacles that she is presented with, never losing faith in her relationship with the ocean. In a moment of discouragement, when she is left alone to face her mission, she tries to sever this relationship, pleading for the ocean to find another champion: "You have to choose someone else... Choose someone else, please" (*Moana* 2016). However, thanks to her grandmother's words of comfort and encouragement, she acknowledges that her connection to the ocean is a part of her own identity:

Who am I?  
I am the girl who loves my island,  
I'm the girl who loves the sea,  
It calls me [...]  
And the call isn't out there at all  
It's inside me  
It's like the tide, always falling and rising  
I will carry you here in my heart  
You'll remind me  
That come what may, I know the way  
I am Moana! (*Moana* 2016)

This is a pivotal moment for the plot, when Moana truly accepts her call as part of her identity: she knows then that even without Maui's help, she will be able to find the way, because she does not need to fear nature. Hers is truly a guiding story that celebrates the relationship with nature. Thanks to her efforts, Moana is able to re-establish the connection between her people and nature and, in this way, the connection with their true identity. Thus, we can say that the film does not tie women and nature through oppression, but presents a caring, fearless, and proactive young girl who reopens a connection with nature that has been denied and forgotten.

Moana's identity, however, is not only defined by her relation with the ocean, but also by her dedication to her community. As quoted previously, Moana describes herself as the girl "who loves the sea", but also "the girl who loves my island", who truly cares about the community she lives in (*Moana* 2016). This is a trait that links Moana to environmental philosophies and green political thought. Robyn Eckersley has argued that "the revolutionary subject is [...] the active, responsible person-in-community, *homo communitas*, if you like" (Eckersley 1987:19 cited in Dobson 1990:123): the importance of community in this film, although secondary to the plot, is still relevant. Moana is born into a position of power, as daughter of the chief and in succession to her father as the leader of the village. She knows personally the inhabitants of the island, she participates in the education of children and the manual work of adults; she is able to take decisions and make plans to fix difficult situations, while sympathising with her people and inspiring them (*Moana* 2016). The story opens and closes with Moana surrounded by her community, first within the safety of her island and her father's guidance, then as the leader who guides her people to new horizons. She is able to find happiness within her community:

My home, my people beside me  
And when I think of tomorrow  
There we are

I'll lead the way  
I'll have my people to guide me  
We'll build our future together  
Where we are [...]  
You can find happiness right  
Where you are. (*Moana* 2016)

These words, sung by Moana at the beginning of the film, seem forced upon her by her parents' wishes. Her desire to stay and lead her community is in conflict with her deep connection with nature, which

leads her to leave her island and go alone on her mission. At the end of the film, by finally embracing her identity, she brings a balance between these two forces in her life. The words of the song now sound prophetic, because they describe the ending scene of the film: Moana leading her people to a new future.

### **Feminine Support, Masculine Fear**

Moana's proactive nature is also inspired by the women in her life – especially her grandmother. Few Disney princess films have secondary female characters that reinforce positive relationships. Snow White and Cinderella both had evil stepmothers and (in Cinderella's case) stepsisters. Ariel, Belle and Jasmine had no mother to speak of, and no female confidantes (with the exception of Mrs Potts and the Wardrobe for Belle). Although Tiana had a positive relationship with her mother, she would have preferred Tiana to have found her "Prince Charming" and had a "happily ever after" (*The Princess & the Frog* 2009) as opposed to opening her own restaurant. Merida had a strained relationship with her mother, which was only resolved at the end of the film. The most significant positive secondary character in a princess film is that of *Pocahontas* (1995), where Grandmother Willow (a sentient willow tree) encourages Pocahontas to listen to her heart (*Pocahontas* 1995). As we consider both Anna and Elsa as primary characters, we can also argue that they cannot be counted within this narrative. Therefore it is clear that there are few positive secondary female characters within Disney princess films.

However, *Moana* brings about a positive change with the introduction of two secondary female characters, Moana's mother and grandmother. Both are figures of support for the protagonist, as well as agents of ecofeminist values. Though not very influential in the storyline, Moana's mother, Sina, does not try to stop her when she finds her packing for her impromptu journey; on the contrary, she helps and supports her. But it is Moana's grandmother, Gramma Tala, who plays the main role in fostering her connection with nature. Firstly, she is presented as the source of ancient wisdom, with her narration of the mythological story of Maui, Te Fiti and Te Kā. Then, she witnesses the ocean's choice of Moana as guardian of the heart of Te Fiti, and helps her maintain a relationship with the water that the heroine is so drawn to, despite her father's ban. Gramma Tala is not afraid of acknowledging her connection to the ocean openly, even though this causes isolation and derision; she is known as the Village Crazy Lady in the film. She encourages Moana to listen to the voice inside her, because that voice constitutes her true identity:

The village may think I'm crazy  
 Or say that I drift too far  
 But once you know what you like, well  
 There you are

You are your father's daughter  
 Stubbornness and pride  
 Mind what he says but remember  
 You may hear a voice inside  
 And if the voice starts to whisper  
 To follow the farthest star  
 Moana, that voice inside is  
 Who you are. (*Moana*, 2016)

Gramma Tala also plays an important role in Moana's discovery of her legacy. She shows and encourages Moana to enter the cave that is filled with their ancestors' ships, proving to her that the call to voyage, to explore and to trust the ocean, is not only a protagonist's trait, but it is innate within her ancestors' heritage. On her deathbed, Gramma Tala prompts Moana to leave, promising her she will be with her on her mission. In fact, in her moment of need, when Moana feels alone and defeated, her grandmother's spirit appears to comfort her and remind her, again, that she needs to listen to the call inside her despite the hardship:

The people you love will change you  
 The things you have learned will guide you  
 And nothing on Earth can silence  
 The quiet voice still inside you  
 And when that voice starts to whisper  
 Moana, you've come so far  
 Moana, listen  
 Do you know who you are? (*Moana* 2016)

If Moana, then, represents ecofeminist action, embracing her call and the connection with nature as integral parts of her identity, Gramma Tala embodies the past's wisdom and the importance of supporting the new generations to find their call and innovative solutions. Moreover, Gramma Tala herself reinforces the picture of the female connection to nature: her dances by the seashore and the animal personification of her spirit as a manta ray reaffirm her connection to the ocean.

The male characters of this story, contrary to the above-mentioned female characters, constantly act in attempt to restrain Moana, and their actions are predominantly dictated by fear. Firstly, her father, Chief Tui, tries to discourage Moana from approaching the water from childhood,



and then actively prohibits her to sail. His unbending attitude is explained by his fear of nature (specifically, the power of the currents of the reef), of the unknown (the waters beyond the reef), and, as explained by Moana's mother, fear of his past, marked by the death of his best friend, with whom he attempted to sail beyond the reef in their youth. His inflexible behaviour, therefore, derives from his desire to protect Moana and his people. Moana's father cares deeply for his community and his daughter; he enjoys the comfort of familiarity and strives to be a good guide and to pass these traits on to his daughter. However, he has severed his connection with the ocean and refused his ancestors' legacy. He does not want to believe the mythological story of Maui and Te Fiti, thus turning a blind eye to the devastation approaching with the spread of the disease.

The other crucial male character is Maui the demigod. At the beginning he is dismissive of Moana: he tries to abandon her on the island he had been trapped on for thousands of years and, once Moana escapes and reaches him, he repeatedly tries to get rid of her. Only the interference of the ocean forces him to accept her presence. And then he still needs a lot of convincing from Moana to consent to travel with her and attempt to defeat Te Kā and restore the heart of Te Fiti. Like Chief Tui, he acts out of fear, but his is fear for his own sake. He fears nature, especially Te Kā, the only enemy who was able to defeat him and separate him from his magical fish hook. The only thing Maui is interested in is retrieving his lost hook (which is the source of his power) and then moving on with his life. He fears the unknown power of the heart of Te Fiti, something he stole but discovered he cannot control. Maui also fears his past, his failure to gift humanity with the power of life, and the rejection of his parents.

It is only with Moana's encouragement that Maui agrees to restore the heart: Moana is the one who helps him realise that his identity should not be defined by the amount of people he has pleased by harnessing elements such as wind or fire, or the tools the Gods gave him, but by his own actions. Maui, in this Disney portrait, appears to be driven by the desire to please humanity with great heroic deeds that, as he says, "are never enough" (*Moana* 2016). The great feats that he lists in his song "You're Welcome" all take inspiration from the many legends revolving around the mythological figure of Maui. He claims, as in the main myths, to have hauled up the islands from the sea (creating the Hawaiian Islands) (Dixon 1916); he sings he has "lassoed the sun", in order to make the day last longer for humans; he "pulled up the sky", "harnessed the breeze" and "stole the fire" (*Moana* 2016). This list of great feats for the sake of humanity, especially this last one, can help us further in our ecofeminist reading of Disney's story of *Moana* (2016). The character of Maui can be

read as the symbolic representation of progress, technology, and humanity's constant strive to control, instrumentalise, and exploit nature. Even his last heroic attempt, stealing the heart of Te Fiti, was done in good faith, to benefit humanity. However, not all progress brings advantages: on this occasion, it is the trigger of destruction.

## The Final Resolution

Once Maui stole the power of life, he destroyed Te Fiti and unknowingly created Te Kā the lava demon. Moana and Maui do not know where Te Kā comes from, but they know they have to defeat her in order to reach the place where Te Fiti lies and restore the heart. However, on their first attempt, Maui's hook is damaged when he and Te Kā collide, and he then refuses to risk his life to return the heart. He is still too dependent on the power of the hook, stating that, "WITHOUT MY HOOK I AM *NOTHING!*" (Disney 2016:116). Moana is left alone and, as explained in previous sections, she decides to return the heart herself, thanks to Gramma Tala's encouragement. This time, Moana tricks Te Kā and manages to get past the barrier islands; when the lava demon attacks her again, her boat is tipped into the ocean. At this point, Maui returns to help Moana and battles Te Kā with the remnants of his hook, allowing Moana to reach the island. However, upon reaching the place where Te Fiti had lain, she realises that the goddess-island is gone. At this point, the audience is presented with a truly unexpected revelation: Moana, looking over to Te Kā, sees the spiral that Maui told her to look for emblazoned on her chest and realises that Te Fiti *is* Te Kā. The enemy, the lava demon that had been envisioned as foul and evil since the beginning of the story, is actually the benign goddess, damaged by the loss of her heart.

This representation of Te Fiti and Te Kā further encourages an ecofeminist reading of the film. In *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant describes nature as a nurturing mother: "a kindly beneficent female who provided for the needs of mankind in an ordered, planned universe" (1980:2). However, there is also the other side of the coin: a "wild and uncontrollable nature that could render violence, storms, droughts, and general chaos" (Merchant 1980:2). The goddess in *Moana* (2016) is easily associated with nature, and this final twist in the plot provides a visual representation of the two sides that Merchant describes. Te Fiti and Te Kā represent both the nurturing and caring side of nature, and the dangerous and wild side. Maui's act of prising her heart out of her spiral chest can also symbolise the way that mankind has exploited and violated nature.

The way that the final battle is fought by Moana and Maui is also very significant to our ecofeminist understanding of *Moana* (2016). Ynestra King (1989) points out that both men and women can stand with nature and work to break down the dualistic construction of culture, but in doing so they will come from different historical places and have different contributions to this process (Ynestra King 1989 cited in Plumwood 1993:36). The two approaches that Maui and Moana use to save the world are opposite. In Maui's case, he is focused on using violence: he believes that the only way to defeat Te Kā is to destroy her. These actions are then matched by Te Kā, who tries to destroy Maui with her lava once she has shattered his magical fishhook. This mirroring action suggests that nature *reacts to* rather than *acts against* its enemies. On the other hand, Moana chooses compassion in order to *understand* Te Kā, rather than try and destroy her. At the pinnacle point in the film, Moana holds up the heart of Te Fiti (an action that stops Te Kā from delivering a potentially fatal blow to Maui) and tells the ocean, "Let her come to me" (Disney 2016:130):

Te Kā, full of fury, raced down the open channel towards Moana and the heart! But Moana walked peacefully and deliberately towards Te Kā. She looked directly at the raging monster and spoke to it calmly, completely focused on it. (Disney 2016:130)

Here, it is clear that Moana has chosen a different path from Maui. Rather than using Maui's approach of violence, Moana walks towards Te Kā with peaceful intention. The above extract is from *Moana: Book of the Film*; but it is the lyrics of the song that Moana sings to Te Kā once they meet on the open channel that carry the greatest relevance:

*Loimata e maligi*  
 I have crossed the horizon to find you  
*Toku loto fanoanoa*  
 I know your name  
*Ko galo atu*  
 They have stolen the heart from inside you  
*A fakapelepele*  
 But this does not define you  
*Ko galo atu*  
 This is not who you are  
 You know who you are. (*Moana* 2016)

This is where Moana solidifies herself as the ecofeminist heroine of this guiding story. It is Moana herself who helps the world survive the last stage of Plumwood's dualising process by accepting what Plumwood defined as a dependency on nature and finding a solution in mutuality:

a form which encourages sensitivity to the conditions under which we exist on the earth, one which recognises and accommodates the denied relationships of dependency and enables us to acknowledge our debt to the sustaining others of the earth. (1993:196)

By realising Te Kā's state, Moana understands what Te Kā needs: she understands the hurt that has been inflicted on nature and finds a way to restore the balance. Earlier, Maui would just try and fight Te Kā, which, if he had continued, would have most likely resulted in his death. Furthermore, Te Kā's defeat, if possible, would not have stopped the spreading of the disease across the world.

However, it is important to remember that, in this narrative, men and women are fighting together rather than separately. Although Maui is not aware of Te Kā's true form, he still helps Moana by distracting Te Kā, which in effect challenges the dualism between men and women. Moana's method is what ecofeminist theory would define as compassion. Starhawk argued that an important part of spirituality is the compassionate lifestyle that requires people to care for one another. If we do not adopt this lifestyle, then we will not heal the wounds that humankind has caused to nature (Starhawk 1989 cited in Tong 2009:253). In this Disney narrative then, it is Moana who heals the wounds that Maui caused Te Fiti, by showing her compassion rather than fighting her. It is this action by Moana that helps Te Kā transform back into Te Fiti, bringing a positive resolution. Once Te Fiti returns, the islands begin to produce their fruits and fish again, and the darkness seeps away, showing that the solution to Plumwood's fourth stage was to heal the wounds that had been created all those years ago.

Another important point we need to stress is the moral delivered by this film. If we look at Maui as the symbol of technology and progress, then the message is clear: not all that is progress is good and helpful. The uncontrolled, unrestrained drive to progress and grow with no respect for nature turns against humanity itself and leads to destruction. This is a base Green concept. In *The Limits to Growth* it is stated that "the fundamental cause of our problems is the attempt to grow beyond the limits imposed by the earth itself" (Meadows et al. 1972 cited in Dobson 1991:14). "The most basic criticism Greens make of our current way of life is that we aspire to infinite growth on a planet which is finite in size and capacity" (Dobson 1991:4-5). In *Moana* (2016), Maui wants to use and exploit powers that he is not able to handle, and those powers end up being his worst enemy. The solution, represented by Moana, is not to overcome the enemy by gaining total control, but to bring back balance through respect and understanding. *Moana* (2016) invites the public to re-establish a closer

relationship to nature, but it is also a warning about the terrible consequences of disregarding the limits of natural resources.

*Moana*'s mythological story enacts the fourth stage of dualism, which is stopped by a magical act, a last-minute, complete resolution. The message delivered, however, is to pursue the values embodied by Moana – determination, compassion, respect for and empathy with nature – *before* we reach, in our reality that lacks magical stones and deities, the last stage of dualisation.

## Conclusion

Plumwood argued that if the world is to “survive into a liveable future”, then humanity must produce different narratives with new guiding stories (1993:196). We claim that *Moana* (2016) is a new guiding story that encourages the audience to reconnect with nature: it is a story of female empowerment and a brave attempt to inspire an ecological sensibility. It presents adults and children with an innovative epilogue that, instead of promoting defeat and annihilation of the enemy, fosters mutual understanding and balance. It is a refreshing change for an audience that is so used to violent resolutions of conflicts. It is a beautiful metaphorical call for environmental awareness, and an important progressive step for the representation of women in Disney films. If *Moana* is to be included within the Disney Princess Franchise, then her presence will certainly provide the franchise with a more positive role model for children, due to her proactive role within the film. We believe this film has provided a positive platform for more guiding stories featuring strong and active protagonists.

It is fair to say that Disney would not want to make a direct political statement with their films. However, whether they intentionally created an ecofeminist heroine or not, *Moana* (2016) is certainly an answer to Val Plumwood's call for guiding stories.

It is essential to engage in political readings of popular culture, especially those entertainment products that could be considered the most innocuous, such as children's literature, films, and merchandise. These products may influence children and young adults in their understanding of concepts such as equality, justice, femininity, nature: concepts that play a pivotal role in shaping our understanding of the world and, therefore, our political agency. This reading of *Moana* is a primary example of how the political message – intentional or unintentional – of popular culture could help in influencing the politics of the future.

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