


'Humanity rising from the depths of brine': an oceanic politics in Disney's *Moana*

Kevin Chew 

Wee Kim Wee School of Communication & Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Republic of Singapore

ABSTRACT

Disney's *Moana* (2016) portrays a village leader's daughter who leaves her home island and sails across the open ocean to undo a curse spreading across Polynesia in response to a Promethean blunder by the demigod Maui. The film's popular reception focuses on its representation of Polynesian culture, often placing an emphasis on the corporate history and practices of the Walt Disney Company. This essay instead pursues an ecocritical interrogation of the film. While Disney is perhaps inescapably complicit in economies of ecological destruction and exploitation, the production, aesthetics and narrative of *Moana* nonetheless offer a critical impulse through what I read as an ecopolitical attentiveness to the natural world. On the level of production, the management of computational capacity and the techniques used in the elaborate rendering of the ocean reflect an acknowledgement both of the complexity of natural phenomena and of the finitude of the resources fuelling the infrastructure of digital animation. The narrative of *Moana* complements this tension by presenting a fantastical mediation between its eponymous protagonist and her oceanic environment. In doing so, *Moana* recasts the political role of the female subject in the borderlands of the imperial imaginary, presenting her as an eminently powerful ecopolitical agent.

KEYWORDS *Moana*; Disney; animation; ecocriticism; ecofeminism

Offering a fantastical depiction of ancient Polynesia, Disney's *Moana* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2016) portrays the daughter (voiced by Auli'i Cravalho) of a village chief who, in defiance of her father, ventures onto the open ocean on a canoe to restore the stolen heart of the Earth goddess Te Fiti. In doing so she undoes a sinister blight triggered through the theft of the heart by the shapeshifting demigod Maui (voiced by Dwayne Johnson), saving her island community from ecological catastrophe. The Pacific context of the film has been presented by the studio as a 'respectful' narrative drawing on the cultural knowledge and background of an 'Oceanic Story Trust': a panel of consultants recruited from Polynesian communities to advise the production team

CONTACT Kevin Chew  kevin.chew@ntu.edu.sg

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

on narrative and aesthetic aspects of the film.¹ Notwithstanding such manoeuvres in marketing and publicity, *Moana* remains, as Mārata Tamaira notes, suspect for its creation of ‘idealized images of a Pacific paradise that are designed to project an idea of the region, especially of Polynesia, for the purpose of translating it into commercial gain’.² These idealized images have been interrogated in detail by Pacific Studies scholars, for instance in a review article in *The Contemporary Pacific* by Tamaira, Vilsoni Hereniko, Candice Elanna Steiner and others, who criticise the filmmakers’ use of Polynesian mythology and Polynesian languages while acknowledging the film’s merits as a celebration of Pacific Island cultures.³

My reading of the film seeks to complement these Pacific Studies-based approaches by focusing on the formal and technical aspects of the film. The extravagance of the *mise-en-scène*, featuring such figures as Maui and the lava monster Te Kā, is realized through an attention to physical detail best exemplified in the complex animation of the oceanic environment. The latter aspect of the film has drawn particular attention; as Erika Balsom notes, the film ‘has been widely hailed as a new benchmark of naturalism in the domain of fluid animation’.⁴ The popular admiration of the animated ocean in *Moana* is reflected in Vadim Rizov’s review of the film, in which he declares that

16 years after the publicity materials for *The Perfect Storm* rather pathetically and unconvincingly claimed that CG had finally mastered this element, the liquid is fully realized. Whether limpidly blue and transparent or grey and stormy, it’s totally believable – so much so that at odd moments it can appear as if CG characters are standing in front of a water tank filled with the real thing.⁵

Moana’s release and reception were informed by a celebration of technological sophistication, evidenced in this comparison with the digital effects used in live-action maritime filmmaking. The spectacular dimensions of the computer animation techniques and technology deployed in *Moana*, however, trace a loop back to political and ecocritical questions that weigh heavily on the contemporary Anthropocene imaginary. The notion of a film having ‘mastered’ water through computer-generated imaging intimates the logic of capture that Balsom interrogates in her claim that “such simulated universes of simulated water offer all too fitting an allegory for an impossible desire increasingly prevalent in our time – namely, the total algorithmic control of reality, whereby quality becomes quantity and the complexities of life are ‘solved’ through planning, metrics, and predictable models”.⁶ In Balsom’s argument, the animation of the ocean in *Moana* is a virtuoso performance in the algorithmic capture of natural phenomena that belies humankind’s inability to undo the ecological damage it has inflicted on the natural environment. Thus regarded, *Moana* becomes the latest iteration of an exotic

imaginary in late capitalism, synthesising a computational logic of capture with an acquisitive, imperial gaze that was focused for centuries on Oceania.

A mode of resisting this acquisitive method can be found in Balsom's proposal to treat 'the sea as theme and method', which 'means refusing the arrogance of mastery to see what affinities, responsibilities, and solidarities emerge from the watery depths'.⁷ As I will demonstrate, this oceanic framework can be applied to the animation process developed in the production of *Moana*. My reading will draw on such techniques as the 'fluxed animated boundary method',⁸ by which *Moana*'s animators attempted to render the complexity of the oceanic environment, to consider ways of reflecting on the abstracted materiality of digital animation. The ecological stakes of this materiality, I argue, reside in the interplay between the digital phenomenology of computer-generated animation and the ocean it seeks to portray. As I will elaborate, the simulations and compromises underlying the animation process imply a reassertion of the ocean's materiality through its overwhelming immensity. Considering 'the sea as theme and method', in my reading, inverts the dynamic of mastery Balsom criticises by thinking through the ways in which quantities – the data guiding the animation process – are restored to qualities – the sense of oceanic enormity – in the animated spectacle.

I will thus consider how the interplay between aesthetics and technology in the production of *Moana* offers a politically valuable conceptualization of ecopolitical attentiveness through the mediation of oceanic scale, in line with Stacy Alaimo's argument that 'the synchronic depth and breadth of the oceans present a kind of incomprehensible immensity that parallels the diachronic scale of anthropogenic effects'.⁹ I will also suggest that the narrative of *Moana* rehearses such an attentiveness, as Moana restores a sense of ecological balance through her alliance with the ocean rather than through an attempted mastery of nature of the kind Balsom criticises. The upshot of these technical and fantastical dynamics is that the narrative and production of *Moana* imply an ecofeminist engagement with the Anthropocene; one which, to borrow Greta Gaard's framework, 'restores connections' rather than 'identifying with the Master side of the Master/slave dualism'.¹⁰ The strongly gendered dynamic of this restoration – one pursued by Moana in opposition to Maui's hubris and her father's isolationism – shifts the Disney trope of the princess figure reliant on male assistance towards an image of a heroine whose political power and ascendance proceeds from a rapport with her fantastically sentient natural environment. In other words, the gender structures at work move the film from a generic heterosexual romance towards an ecoerotics of the kind proposed by Gaard.¹¹ Questions of scale and erotics thus facilitate an examination of the ways in which the film intimates an ecopolitical unease while insisting on

an affective interface between the human subject and the historically othered natural world.

My reading will begin by acknowledging the imperialist tendencies which persist in the studio context of *Moana*, noting that the digital animation industry as exemplified by Disney belies enormous and systemically ecophobic material expenditures attending films' production and release. Even while resting upon this destructive material substratum, however, the Disney animators' attempts to recreate the ocean signals a close attention to the natural environment. This attention, in my reading, reveals a respect akin to that which the production team attempted to express, sincerely or otherwise, towards the Oceanian culture that served as the film's inspiration: a respect grounded in a desire to create impressions of authenticity and inclusivity.¹² The engagement with Pacific culture brings in the double sense of the film's oceanic politics – a reorientation that proceeds not just from a consideration of the ocean, but also from an acknowledgement of Oceanian culture and thought, such as the perspectives articulated by Epele Hau'ofa, whose seminal essay 'Our Sea of Islands' served as a point of reference in the production of *Moana*.¹³ As I will elaborate, Hau'ofa's description of Oceanian culture as offering a 'holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships'¹⁴ is, despite the film's polysemic potential for neo-imperialist significations, compellingly illustrated in *Moana*, in which the restoration of traditional voyaging practices is closely linked with the rediscovery of ecological harmony.

My analysis will thus move towards a consideration of the ways in which the filmmakers' attention to the ocean and to Oceanian culture reflects *Moana*'s ecologically-attuned engagement with the natural world within the narrative. In my reading, the film nurtures a political impulse troubling the 'masterful practices' that, as Juliette Singh notes, 'are perversely plowing the soils of our extinction'.¹⁵ Bearing in mind that the consequences of European contact and colonization brought Oceanian culture and populations close to extinction, I argue that a spectral circuit, in the sense offered by Jacques Derrida, links my ecocritical concerns with questions of cultural representation in *Moana*. As the film's narrative intimates and its production notes elaborate, *Moana* is set two millennia ago, at the end of a thousand-year hiatus in the Polynesian voyaging history.¹⁶ A key scene late in the film depicts a spectral fleet that inspires Moana to revive her ancestors' traditions and knowledge in spite of natural and political obstacles, in a manner that exemplifies the 'patrimonial logic' of spectrality described by Derrida as an asymmetric injunction by which 'there is no inheritance without a call to responsibility'.¹⁷

Derrida's account of the spectral influence offers a way of charging the image of Moana's ancestors with a political and ethical legibility that complements the narrative of cultural resurgence. The knowledge, however, that

the cultural growth and development that followed this extradiegetic historical period was in turn almost annihilated in the last two centuries returns this scene to a further spectral circuit – one which extends beyond the film’s setting and binds the question of Oceanian cultural revival to the Anthropocene anxieties running through my reading. I suggest that Hau’ofa’s appeal for the development of contemporary Oceanian ‘philosophies and ideologies for resistance against the misapplication of modern technologies on our societies’¹⁸ can be brought to bear on this spectral image, which captures both the achievements of ‘the greatest seafarers the world has ever known’¹⁹ and an awareness of their destruction and subjugation under the conditions of a technologically self-destructive Western modernity.

‘Incomprehensible immensity’

The animation of the ocean in *Moana* is closely intertwined with questions of scale: both in the immensity of the ocean and in the demands placed on the animation process that recreated this environment in the film. The demand that the ocean perform in tandem with human and animal figures in the visual spectacle of *Moana* highlights a co-opting of the natural world in the postindustrial entertainment industry in a manner that echoes the ecologically catastrophic logic of industrialism. Timothy Clark notes that ‘structurally committed to a process of continuous economic growth, modern Western society effectively projected as its material condition an ever-expandable frontier of new land or resources’, and that, in the Anthropocene, ‘this impossible demand or assumption, long disguised by the free gift of fossil fuels, has now become visible and problematic’.²⁰ Seen in relation to this ‘material condition’ of Western society, the treatment of the Polynesian oceanic traditions and environments in *Moana* suggests a reflection of an imperialistic desire for an ‘ever-expandable frontier of new land or resources’, extending towards the mining of cultural difference and geographical remoteness for novel entertainment products. In the translation of Oceania, with its eminently complex environment and geography, into an animated film, economies of scale and production draw out a tension between the demands and resources of the entertainment industry. This tension, however, also highlights the question of environmental scale with ecopolitical ramifications.

The dynamic between neo-imperial fetishism and ecological damage is immediately apparent in the reception of *Moana*. Tina Grandinetti, for instance, argues that the release of *Moana* ‘not only helps to drive the expansion of Disney’s carbon-intensive global tourism empire but also fuels a mass market of plastic merchandise that epitomises the very culture of consumption responsible for our planet’s environmental crisis’. For Grandinetti, the partnership between Disney and Hawaiian Airlines that

accompanied the release of *Moana* highlights Disney's preponderant role in neoliberalism as an inevitable logic linking the production and marketing of *Moana* to global ecological damage via the imperialist substratum of globalization.²¹ Beyond these side-effects of Disney's merchandising operations, the ecological consequences of the film industry in general and of digital filmmaking in particular are explored by Nadia Bozak, who emphasises that 'however sophisticated digital technology becomes, and however politically affecting as a result, it remains plugged into a turn-of-the-century system of energy generation that is so outdated it should long ago have been declared, like the commodities it has yielded, not just thoroughly inadequate and antiquated, but obsolete'.²² While I acknowledge the ways in which the production context of *Moana* is inevitably intertwined with the objects of Anthropocene anxiety, I maintain that a deeper engagement with the film in terms of its aesthetics and animation process also produces ecopolitical considerations. Bozak's reminder that 'cinema is, and has always been, environmentally determined and determining',²³ while levelled at cinema's participation in environmental damage, can be reread as a signal of *Moana*'s ecocritical potential.

Of central importance in my understanding of the ecopolitical impulses running through *Moana* is the problematic of mastery. Singh argues that 'as a pursuit, mastery invariably and relentlessly reaches toward the indiscriminate control over something', in a manner that entails 'a splitting of the object that is mastered from itself, a way of estranging the mastered object from its previous state of being'.²⁴ The challenge of fluid animation in *Moana*, according to the animation team, was 'to provide art-directed simulations, defying physics, yet remaining in a grounded sense of possibility'.²⁵ This reduction of the ocean into parameters of performance and naturalistic persuasiveness follows a logic of mastery, such that the animation process fits into the imperialist dynamic explored above. This project of mastery also, however, produces its own immanent tensions, and the knowledge of material limitations and parameters that is reflected in the animation techniques behind *Moana* leads my analysis to an ecocritical mode proceeding from a contemplation of the natural world.

Exemplifying the consideration of the material world in animation, Disney animators Alexei Stomakhin and Andrew Selle explain that in the simulation of the ocean in tracking shots, such as the very frequent images of canoes in motion in *Moana*, 'a popular and naïve approach defines the window as a box where the bottom and side walls are collision objects', such that 'when the simulation window moves, liquid particles are forced to move with the window rather than remain still'. In contrast, they argue that 'a correct approach instead sources material ahead of the window and sinks material behind the window'. This method aims to create a sense of 'scene realism' by accounting for the physical complexity of large bodies of water on

a grander scale; a mode of naturalism achieved in the production of *Moana* through the development of the 'fluxed animated boundary method'.²⁶ The argument for a heightened sense of scene realism implies that a contemplation of water captures an intricacy of movement reflecting the scale of the ocean – a movement that differs perceptibly from those produced by simulating collisions against the walled boundaries of a smaller, more manageable area. Central to the understanding of water in movement, thus regarded, is an understanding of water's interaction with changes in scale. Attempts to account for oceanic enormity through techniques of computational simulation can thus be placed in dialogue with contemporary ecological discourse, following the parallel drawn by Alaimo between the 'incomprehensible immensity' of the ocean and the 'diachronic scale of anthropogenic effects'.

In their account of the development of the fluxed animated boundary method, Stomakhin and Selle draw attention to the limitations of computational simulation in relation to the natural world. When describing the challenges surrounding the animation of the ocean in *Moana*, and the consequent necessity of creating boundaries around the objects of animation, Stomakhin and Selle suggest that 'it will always be impossible and undesirable to simulate the whole world, so the rest of the world must be kinematically described'. While kinematic models are now deemed simplistic in the description of natural phenomena, they retain their utility in attempts to account for the vastness of the ocean within the limits of computational processing power: while the ocean immediately surrounding Moana's boat is simulated as a 'realistic procedural ocean', the areas nearing the boundaries of the 'simulation kill box' are rendered kinematically to reduce the computational requirements of the scene.²⁷ Such modes of simplification and of simplistic perception, which belie an underlying objective complexity, offer a framework for analysing the facile allegory and fantasy by which the ecopolitical investments of *Moana* are articulated.

In ecopolitical terms, the methods of fluid animation can be read as analogous to Clark's argument that 'scale effects of climate change' disrupt 'the easy, daily equations of moral and political accounting', such that 'a sentence about the possible collapse of civilization can end, no less solemnly, with the injunction never to fill the kettle more than necessary when making tea'. Clark explains that 'non-cartographic concepts of scale are not a smooth zooming in and out but involve jumps and discontinuities',²⁸ and there is similarly a sense of discontinuity within the animation process in *Moana*. The challenges that required the animators' interventions include 'tiling artifacts': the disruption of the image of a body of water through the emergence of visually apparent tiles as the shot length changes, which Stomakhin and Selle identify as a typical disruption in large zoom animations of the ocean.²⁹ In terms of the visual illusion serving as the basis of

Moana's naturalist depictions of water, 'easy, daily equations' are thus similarly disrupted as the parameters of computer animation threaten to interfere with the audience's experience of the animated ocean. The solution to tiling artifacts used in *Moana* pertains to the terms of the illusion, rather than consisting of a simplistic attempt to replicate objective scalar differences, the latter of which would impose impractical demands on computational capacity. The technique employed, termed 'multi-tile deep water spectrum construction', essentially entails overlapping tiles of different scales and digitally filtering the 'overlap regions' to avoid a mutual disruption of different tiles.³⁰ Constructing an illusion that accommodates the zoom shot is thus not a matter of simple changes in tile size in line with cinematographic demands, but rather a reconciliation of disparate, overlapping tiles through the specialized techniques of digital filtering.

In this sense, the computational processes behind the animation of *Moana* complicate Clark's claim that 'there are crucial differences between reading a literary text at multiple scales and the function of scales in scientific modeling and explanation', based as it is on the assumption that 'in such modeling, suppression of detail is seen as strength of work at large scales, where broad patterns can emerge overriding individual variations'.³¹ Contrary to this argument, the cinematographic challenge of the zoom shot on the ocean in *Moana* provides a technical analogy to the manner in which, in a literary context, 'reading at several scales at once cannot be just the abolition of one scale in the greater claim of another but a way of enriching, singularizing and yet also creatively deranging the text through embedding it in multiple and even contradicting frames at the same time'.³² This method of reading is thus consistent with a digital phenomenology that combines multiple layers of data to 'creatively derange' the multiple images used and thereby produce a convincing illusion of wholeness. The demands of naturalism in the *mise-en-scène* of *Moana* produce an engagement with the oceanic environment that acknowledges the limitations of computational technologies and of human perception in the methods it employs to bypass the scale of the ocean. In doing so, this naturalist aesthetic also highlights the convergence between scientific modelling and critical methods in the conceptualization of ecological scale, offering a way to read the animation process in *Moana* in terms of a more broadly ecopolitical pattern of thought.

As I have suggested above, this digital phenomenology is significant in troubling the mechanics of mastery elucidated by Balsom. While computer-generated animation is a process whereby 'quality becomes quantity' in the algorithms of the Disney studio's Hyperion renderer, the alienation of the ocean from itself using a 'simulation kill box' is also an aspect of the animators' compromises and negotiations with an external object: namely that of an experience of the ocean that might be perceived as naturalistic or, as Rizov describes it, 'believable'. This tension between mastery and aesthetic

credibility can be addressed with reference to Josephine Donovan's ecofeminist work on a 'participatory epistemology'. Taking inspiration from literature on quantum physics, Donovan places an emphasis on the 'participatory' relationship between the conscious subject and physical phenomena, by which 'an observer's consciousness *participates* in the realization of a particular given entity', in the double sense of making an entity 'real' and attaining knowledge of a phenomenon.³³ In other words, the observation of subatomic particles is an integral aspect of their constitution. Extrapolating from this insight, Donovan reflects on the notion of 'qualitative emergence', proposing that 'through this participatory dialogue a new intersubjective reality is created or emerges through the interaction between the two entities', as exemplified in sodium chloride being realized as a salty flavour by a tasting observer.³⁴

For Donovan, the immanence of intersubjectivity to empirical reality implies ethical ramifications, providing what Freya Mathews describes as 'the basis for a respectful and sympathetic attitude' towards the experienced world by reminding the subject of their inextricability from the objects of their observation.³⁵ I argue that this participatory epistemology complements Balsom's critique of mastery as a goal in the animation of *Moana*. The object of mastery, thus regarded, is not the ocean in itself but an intersubjective experience. An ecopolitical attentiveness inheres, perhaps ironically, in this mode of mastery, and the 'respectful and sympathetic attitude' that can emerge from such an engagement is exemplified in the narrative of *Moana*, which catalogues a series of interactions between human and ocean that tend towards a respectful sympathy.

A survivalist ecofeminism

Having examined how the participatory epistemology at work in the animation process might be read as an ecopolitical impulse, I will now turn to the ways in which the narrative of *Moana* rehearses such a pattern of thought in its narrative, which is eminently invested in a mediation between the human subject and the natural world. A starting point to my reading is offered by the conventions of the Disney animated features, which Maui references when he describes Moana, to the latter's chagrin, as a princess, identifiable by 'a dress and an animal sidekick'. The ways in which the narrative attempts to reposition Moana away from her generically overdetermined role of a Disney princess figure towards that of a heroine in the studio's mythologization of Polynesian history is of particular significance. As noted earlier, the rather generic portrayal of Motunui as an island paradise in *Moana* brings to mind Louis Antoine de Bougainville's description of the Pacific islands as an 'Eden' which attracted the imperial attention of the European powers. The return of such images of paradise in a contemporary Disney animated feature calls to

mind the persistence of an imperial logic in the practices of late capitalism, but it also provides a way of distorting this logic to highlight an immanent tension and the potential for resistance. Tamaira reminds us that ‘the vision of Eden that Bougainville promulgated did not end with the island’s tropical flora and picturesque terrain; it also included the female inhabitants – after all, what is Eden without Eve?’³⁶ The association drawn in the imperial imaginary between an unspoiled nature and Islander women exemplifies at first glance the “historically tenacious entanglements of ‘woman’ and ‘nature’” interrogated by Alaimo,³⁷ but the ways in which *Moana* depicts eminently empowered women working in concert with an animate nature also gesture towards a reworking of this shared historical burden.

Tamaira reminds us that “‘moana’ is a proto-Polynesian word that means ‘sea beyond the reef, ocean’”,³⁸ and Moana’s alliance with her namesake is established in the prologue of the film, in which the ocean gives Moana the jade heart of Te Fiti. Operating as the film’s other eponymous figure, the ocean, even while serving as an environment inherently hostile to human survival, aids Moana as a ‘chosen one’ in the face of adversity in varying degrees, such as by foiling Maui’s initial attempt to maroon Moana and later by shielding her from lava projectiles thrown by Te Kā. I regard this shared agency as a survivalist ecopolitics, by which Moana fulfils the ocean’s will and the ocean in turn protects Moana from the dangers inhering to her nautical voyage, as well as those presented by the fantastical parameters of her mission. Beyond the acknowledgement that Moana and the ocean both serve as the eponymous figures of *Moana*, it is clear that similar tautological entanglements persist in the film. The political power exerted by these protagonists provides a basis for reflecting on how “the fact that women’s bodies, experiences, and labor have long been denigrated for their supposed proximity to a degraded natural world creates the potential for feminist epistemological positioning and discursive reworkings that challenge the constitution of both ‘woman’ and ‘nature’.”³⁹

‘Discursive reworkings’ of this kind are present throughout the film, such as when Moana’s father Tui (voiced by Temuera Morrison) vainly attempts to persuade her that ‘Motunui is Paradise’ and that the island’s barrier reef serves as an appropriate extremity to her world view and curiosity. Moana’s grandmother Tala (voiced by Rachel House), on the other hand, insistently teaches Moana that the paradise of Motunui is a threatened one, with a catastrophic blight steadily encroaching on the island in a scene of ‘slow violence’ that works against the ‘instant sensational visibility’ Rob Nixon highlights in customary conceptions of violence.⁴⁰ Paradise is shown to be a dangerous illusion, and Tui’s repeated declaration that the looming ecological disaster is a myth casts his isolationist scepticism as suicidal denialism. His insular and agricultural politics are shown to be essentially ecophobic, in the sense defined by Simon Estok as an ‘irrational and groundless hatred of

the natural world' that 'makes looting and plundering of animal and non-animal resources possible'.⁴¹ Tui relies on the safety and agricultural manipulability of the island in face of an uncontrollable and capricious ocean, while Moana's apprenticeship as a wayfinder leads her to understand the complex workings of the ocean, producing an ecological knowledge allegorically depicted in her contact with Te Fiti. While this fantastical resolution of the ecological disaster gives way to the final sequence of the film, in which the villagers take to the ocean in search of new islands, an ecopolitical impulse can nonetheless be highlighted by dwelling on the fantasy and its stakes. The insular and agricultural politics in which the villagers engage consists of the exploitation and management of the island's animal and plant resources, while Moana's voyage, undertaken with Maui's often reticent assistance, creates a fantastical narrative space in which Moana learns to communicate with natural forces such as the ocean and Te Fiti. While the male figures such as Tui and Maui pursue failed exploitative agendas in attempting to manage the closed system of the island economy or stealing the source of life from Te Fiti, Moana's journey follows an ambassadorial dynamic in which she negotiates a friendship with the ocean and ultimately makes peace with Te Kā.

The translation of a gender dichotomy into divergent political praxes in the film is realised in various symbolic configurations. As part of his attempt to reconcile Moana with her insular political obligations, Tui brings her to the island's highest peak, on which he and his predecessors have built a cairn to symbolize the political succession in the village leadership, with each additional stone notionally raising the island to monumentalize successive generations. Moana modifies this practice at the conclusion of the film, placing a conch at the top of the stack before leading Motunui's fleet onto the open ocean. The fragile form of the conch, in opposition to the weight-bearing stone slabs, reflects the transposition of Moana's political ascendance as the village chief to her newfound role as the fleet's leader and wayfinder: rather than inviting the future continuation of the ritualistic terraforming gesture, it signals the departure of the village community from insular traditions. The abandonment of this somewhat phallic symbol can be compared to the destruction of a statue of Maui during Moana's first encounter with the demigod, after he attempts to imprison Moana in a cave and seizes her ocean canoe. Finding the statue, Moana uses it as a springboard to escape the cave, glancing downwards briefly on her way through a skylight to permit an eyeline match displaying its shattered remains on the ground, as its nose flies into the air before falling atop the rubble. Moana's alliance with the natural world and the ocean is thus aligned with her self-assertion as an eminently powerful woman, and her political agency is repeatedly signalled with the disruption or outright destruction of phallogocentric monuments.

It is clear throughout the film's opening act that Moana experiences a greater attraction towards the ocean than she does towards the social body of the island, in an antirational impulse that operates in tension with her political obligations in the village on the one hand and her father's fear of the ocean on the other. This tension is reflected in the main musical sequence 'How Far I'll Go', in which Moana describes how 'I wish I could be the perfect daughter | But I come back to the water | No matter how hard I try'. In this sense Moana's sentiments in the first act of the film are closer to the ecoerotics Gaard describes in 'the desire I inhale from a long-limbed lover who smells like trees'⁴² than they are to Hereniko's suggestion that she is implicitly 'waiting for the white male who is yet to arrive',⁴³ marking a shift from heteronormative points of reference to an ecoerotic dynamic. The ecoerotics at work are highlighted in the film's prologue, when the ocean takes the form of a tentacular water creature to style the infant Moana's hair and playfully splash at her. The ocean emerges as a both playful and maternal presence to the young Moana, in an imprinting moment that sets the tone for her later attraction to the ocean in opposition to her father's wishes. Continuing in this ecoerotic vein, the technique of dipping a hand into the water to test the current is shown to be an important aspect of wayfinding that Moana learns from Maui, but for Moana it also operates on a more intuitive level as a gesture of affection, exemplified in an earlier scene in which she seeks to reassure her chicken Heihei that 'the ocean is my friend' while stroking the surface of the water. Moana's rapport with the ocean thus links Oceanian voyaging practices, and the desire to rediscover these techniques, to an affective, embodied connection to the natural environment.

It would be an exaggeration to suggest an explicitly queering agenda in *Moana's* configurations of gender and nature,⁴⁴ despite the darkly comic interlude offered in the giant coconut crab Tamatoa's (voiced by Jermaine Clement) musical number 'Shiny', which loosely resembles a drag performance in a manner that recalls Ursula's (voiced by Pat Carroll) characterization in *The Little Mermaid* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1989). Nonetheless, the interactions and attractions undertaken and experienced by Moana gesture beyond the divisions of the human and the nonhuman, or indeed between human and nonhuman animals. The empowerment of *Moana's* female figures is signalled at the island's barrier reef: the boundary Tui attempts in vain to impose on Moana's existence and imagination. Tamaira suggests that 'moana', defined as 'sea beyond the reef', can provide "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".⁴⁵ The demarcation of the ocean as that which lies 'beyond the reef' informs the first act of the film, which concludes when, upon Tala's death, Moana departs the island on an ocean canoe. As she approaches the reef, Tala's death is signalled by the dimming of the lights

of her hut, and a wind passes down the treetops of the island to trace a path to the water. Tala then assumes the ethereal glowing form of a manta ray, which passes below Moana's canoe to lead her to the barrier reef, breaching as it traverses the previous boundary to Moana's island upbringing. The ocean beyond the reef thus becomes the site where Moana's female figures traverse human and nonhuman realms and depart from the economic structures of a human culture to rediscover their natural world. Alaimo critiques the historical positioning of the figures of nature and woman as 'external to society' in the European philosophical tradition exemplified in Cartesian rationalism, in which 'woman is not only constituted as nature, but nature is invoked to uphold the propriety of this very constitution'.⁴⁶ The blurring of species boundaries in *Moana* illustrates a means of countering this misogynistic current. Diverging from the Promethean and agricultural ideologies expressed by Maui and Tui, the women in *Moana* do not act upon natural agents such as the ocean and Te Fiti, but in concert with them and across the modes of human and nonhuman life to restore a sense of ecological balance.

At sea, the interspecies hierarchies underlying human culture are portrayed as comically awkward, to a large part through the inclusion of Heihei as an accidental stowaway during her voyage. Early in the film, a villager suggests to Moana that Heihei should be cooked on the basis that 'he seems to lack a basic intelligence'. Sunaura Taylor reminds us that the slaughter of domesticated animals is often justified with recourse to their reliance on human keepers, and that "the dependency of domesticated animals has often been presented in tandem with their supposed 'stupidity'".⁴⁷ The bemused compassion with which Moana declines to slaughter Heihei suggests an unconditional acceptance of this dependency, which runs against her evasive dismissal of her pet pig Pua's hurt expression early in the film when she snacks on some pork. It is thus striking that, when Moana puts to sea, she finds herself in the company of her eminently 'stupid' chicken rather than the charismatic and expressive pig that serves as her companion animal on the island. As a somewhat inconvenient being with no use value and a propensity to cast himself overboard, Heihei nonetheless benefits from Moana's at times self-sacrificial protection throughout the narrative. In essence, he demands of Moana an ethic of care that departs from the paradoxical but more conventional arrangement between Moana and Pua, by which, in a manner recalling John Berger's characterization of agricultural relations, Moana is fond both of Pua and of the consumption of pork.⁴⁸ Taylor argues that domesticated animals, and their deep entanglements with humans, "remind us that we ourselves are a part of 'nature', that we cannot just cut ourselves free from other animals".⁴⁹ The comic awkwardness of Heihei, a persistent presence when Moana leaves the island to find a place in 'nature', jolts the utopianism of Moana's oceanic identity and emphasises the irreversible and

inextricable bonds between humans and the other animals upon whose sacrifice and subjugation human culture is built. The ethic of care that governs Moana's oceanic voyage and loads her ultimately affectionate encounter with Te Kā with its allegorical significance thus features this entanglement as its inseparable burden. The same voyage that teaches Moana to commune with nonanimal nature also foregrounds her bonds with animal life.

With a series of entanglements binding Moana, her animal companions and an animated natural world, the narrative of *Moana* recalls the Zadist claim that 'we are not defending nature, we are nature defending itself'.⁵⁰ It is in this latter sense that Moana's oceanic identity can be further explored, as her departure from the island signals a pursuit of nonhuman knowledge. Astrida Neimanis reminds us that 'our human bodies are materially composed of water in ways that inextricably link our human, specifically situated bodies to other bodies – sea, whale, human in the distance',⁵¹ offering a literal interpretation of Hau'ofa's insistence that 'Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine'.⁵² Moana's alignment with the ocean, and her narratively overdetermined ability to navigate the seascapes of Polynesia – 'the largest culture sphere ever brought into being by the human imagination'⁵³ – intimates the possibility of making legible the radical intersubjectivity that Neimanis situates in the aqueous composition of bodies when she argues that 'the planetary hydrocommons is not outside of us, but quite literally channelling and cycling through us'.⁵⁴ Moana communicates, and therefore survives, by accessing this intersubjectivity, for which the film's oceanic setting provides a particularly apt illustration.

'Giving the sky a high five'

While Moana possesses an oceanic political power that resides in an identification and alliance with her nonhuman counterparts, the significance of this shared agency is highlighted most clearly in the moments of Moana's dissent: throughout the narrative, partnership rather than mastery defines Moana's relationship with the natural world. The intersubjectivity between Moana and her namesake entails an at times grudging acceptance of the ocean's authority over her actions, rather than suggesting the ambition for 'indiscriminate control' that Singh identifies in the pursuit of mastery.⁵⁵ This dynamic informs a scene depicting a storm at sea, during which a wave strikes Moana unconscious before she and her canoe wash up on the shores of Maui's island. Moana's initial indignation at the capsizing and beaching of her canoe prompts her to attempt to kick the ocean, at which point the ocean recedes to dodge her foot, causing Moana, having lost her balance and fallen, to angrily shout 'fish pee in you all day!' – an insult that names the ocean as a partner in a moment of disagreement. Such modes of address as Moana's

angrily ineffectual outburst are legible as a mode of politics that Michel Serres advocates in the interaction between humankind and the natural world: being reduced to offering a petty insult to the ocean entails a recognition of the political inefficacy of the human subject faced with nature.

Proposing such a politics as an extension of extant political arrangements among human subjects, Serres suggests that 'we must add to the exclusively social contract a natural contract of symbiosis and reciprocity in which our relationship to things would set aside mastery and possession in favor of admiring attention, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect'.⁵⁶ Beyond the verbal quarrel with a silent but sentient wave on a beach, the negotiations between Moana and the ocean throughout the journey to restore the heart of Te Fiti offer an illustration of Serres' proposal that 'those who share power today have forgotten nature, which could be said to be taking its revenge but which, more to the point, is reminding us of its existence'.⁵⁷ Serres' formulation can be read as a strategic anthropomorphic fantasy that helps us to extract the ecopolitical value of the fantastical portrayal of the natural world in *Moana*. Te Kā represents nature as a force that cannot be dominated but instead demands recognition and repentance, echoing Lynn Margulis's insistence that 'Gaia is a tough bitch – a system that has worked for over three billion years without people'.⁵⁸ Moana's humiliated exchange with the ocean highlights this primacy in a playful tone, prodding the viewer away from an image of human mastery towards the 'allurement and fickleness' that Hau'ofa describes as part of the ocean's appeal to the Oceanian imaginary.⁵⁹

Serres' accusatory gesture towards 'those who share power today' also echoes Hau'ofa's sharp criticism of global capitalism and its colonial precursors in Oceania, a geographical marker Hau'ofa privileges for the way in which it demarcates 'a sea of islands', rather than the remote and impoverished 'islands on a far sea' denoted in the label of the Pacific Islands.⁶⁰ The way in which *Moana*'s Polynesian setting illustrates this demand to attend to the natural world draws my reading towards Hau'ofa's call for the formulation of an Oceanian philosophy that 'would help us pay greater reverence and respect to our natural environment than we do today'.⁶¹ Hau'ofa's reflections on a programme for the revival of Oceanian culture include an ambition to report on 'the good things the oceans have bestowed on us, the damaging things we have done to them, and how we must together try to heal their wounds and protect them forever'.⁶² Such aspirations signal a convergence between the ecocritical strands emerging in contemporary Western thought and the fundament of an Oceanian identity.

To further unpack this dynamic between Oceanian and ecocritical investments, Moana's repentant and responsive attitude towards Te Kā at the conclusion of the film can be read in relation to Bruno Latour's argument that 'in order to mold a politics, you need agents who bring together their

interests and their capacities for action. But you cannot make alliances between political actors and objects that are external to society and deprived of the power to act.⁶³ The reintroduction of Te Kā as a political agent is intimated in the restoration of her heart, which leads both to her transformation into Te Fiti and to Maui being prompted to kneel and apologise for his Promethean error. This moment is a valuable image to an ecopolitical imaginary, in which, as Latour argues, “thought and practice need fiction: ‘Gaia, I name you as that which I am addressing and that which I am prepared to face’.”⁶⁴ As Greg Garrard notes, the invocation of Gaia in ecopolitical discourse serves ‘to counter the inflection of the Earth as a technologically and economically enframed globe’, such that ‘the name of an Earth-goddess allows Gaia to be appropriated as the object of global environmental consciousness, and perhaps veneration too’.⁶⁵ In addition to the image of a humbled interaction with an embodied natural world, the question of technology that Garrard raises steers us back to Hau’ofa’s Oceanian concerns. Hau’ofa posits that in Oceania, ‘the driving force that propelled human activities was the knowledge and skills developed over centuries, fine tuned to synchronise actions with the regularities in nature. As it provided the vital link between society and nature, technology cannot be dissociated from either’.⁶⁶ This reminder that pre-industrial technology tended towards natural and seasonal dynamics, which remain inescapable in the Oceanian world, highlights the ecocritical strand running through Hau’ofa’s rejection of neoliberal modernity.

The notion of technology as a mediating force between human society and the natural world emerges in Moana’s final encounter with Te Kā. Moana’s attempt to use her piloting skills to outmanoeuvre Te Kā is shown to be misguided, as she realizes that Te Kā and Te Fiti are the same entity. Moana’s political power consists in her ability to recognize the agency of the natural world, in contrast to Maui’s martial prowess that repeatedly proves ineffectual against these forces. The purpose of Moana’s revival of the voyaging tradition thus resides in the restoration of ‘balance and continuity in the ecological relationship’,⁶⁷ rather than in the acquisition of tactical *qua* technological advantages over nature. In the final confrontation with Te Kā, in which Maui, after a protracted duel, finds himself overwhelmed by her brute force, Moana recognizes Te Kā as the infuriated *doppelgänger* form of Te Fiti, taking vengeance for the theft of her heart. Moana’s rather prosaic line, ‘I know who you are’, halts Te Kā’s attacks, after which the two figures press their foreheads against each other’s in a gesture of affection. This ecopolitical framing demonstrates the stakes of animation and its particular affinity for fantastical visions: Moana’s affection towards Te Kā situates a personification of the natural world as a political allegory operating through an affective mode of address, highlighting how, as Sergei Eisenstein wrote of the early Disney productions, ‘the very idea [...] of the

animated cartoon is like a direct embodiment of the method of animism'.⁶⁸ This tendency towards fantasy demonstrates the potential of animation to tie together the Oceanian and ecocritical strands at work in *Moana* in a manner that produces a popular rhetorical appeal.

While the rapprochement between Moana and Te Kā underlines the veneration for the Earth with an emotive emphasis consistent with the generic conventions of Disney animation, it is worth noting that the film as a whole is oriented towards this ecological mode of attention. *Moana's* depiction of a natural world, with multiple personifications ranging from Te Kā to the sentient ocean, frames a system comparable to Serres' description of 'a natural contract, concluded silently and out of fear or respect between the rumbling ire of the great social beast and the noise, sound, and fury of the sea'.⁶⁹ This sense of a threatening natural environment existing in tension with a 'great social beast', however, also risks rehearsing the Western 'continental' view, critiqued by Hau'ofa, of Oceania as 'dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from centres of power'. In contrast, Hau'ofa's notion that 'people raised in this environment were at home with the sea', and who 'developed great skills for navigating their waters – as well as the spirit to traverse even the few large gaps that separated their island groups', is foregrounded in fantastical terms in *Moana*. The 'fearsome strength' appealing to Serres' claustrophobic view of seaborne life is complemented by a further *doppelgänger* form: that of an animate and benevolent ocean, which repeatedly returns Moana to the canoe during her quarrels with Maui, while also forcibly returning Maui to the boat when he attempts to flee overboard. The violence of the natural world is dispelled by an intense engagement and familiarity with the ocean that underlies the voyaging techniques acquired by Moana.

Perhaps one of the strongest gestures towards Hau'ofa's Oceanian concerns occurs in the musical number 'I Am Moana' immediately prior to Moana's final encounter with Te Kā, after Maui has deserted her out of fear of the battle. After Tala's ghost emerges from the ocean to embrace and encourage Moana, the spectres of Moana's ancestors sail past her canoe, with the fleet leader bowing to her in acknowledgement and Moana reciprocating the gesture. This interaction recalls Derrida's reflections on spectrality as a paradoxical political and ethical influence by which the past, or the dead, can hold the living to account by means of a 'spectral asymmetry'. Derrida explains this injunction by arguing that 'to feel ourselves seen by a look which it will always be impossible to cross, that is the *visor effect* on the basis of which we inherit the law'.⁷⁰ Moana's interaction with her ancestors also, however, diverges from Derrida's insistence on spectral asymmetry in fantastical terms that I read as strikingly Oceanian: rather than operating on the basis of an unanswerable 'visor effect', Moana's interaction with the spectral fleet leader offers an illustration of the chronological concepts Hau'ofa traces

in the Austronesian languages exemplified in Fijian and Tongan, which, through a circular structure, 'locate the past in front and ahead of us and the future behind, following after us'. As Hau'ofa elaborates,

what is behind us cannot be seen and is liable to be forgotten readily. What is ahead of us cannot be forgotten so readily or ignored, for it is in front of our minds' eyes, always reminding us of its presence. Since the past is alive in us, the dead are alive – we are our history.⁷¹

The scene in which Moana is overtaken by the spectral fleet, and inspired to accept the task of restoring the ecological balance that her precursors observed, illustrates this sense of circular revival, by which the dead return to lead Moana and Moana pronounces her genealogical and ideological affiliation with the spectres. Her musical line, 'I am Moana', both situates her as a subject within this cultural history and highlights her mythologically 'chosen' status in her community's oceanic resurgence. The alignment between cultural revival and ecological attentiveness brings this spectral lens to bear on the contemporary Anthropocene context, in a manner that foregrounds the significance of Hau'ofa's conceptualization of Oceanian time. The spectrality that operates in *Moana* links the distant past to the present, putting the Derridean 'patrimonial logic' to work across an extended historical circuit of revival, discovery and destruction. Against this backdrop of existential urgency, Moana's tautological identification with the ocean aligns her goals with the safeguarding of her natural environment, in an echo of Hau'ofa's insistence to the Oceanian diaspora that 'we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth'.⁷² This dual identification thus recalls Hau'ofa's suggestion that a circular conception of time could serve 'the formulation of an Oceanian ecological ideology, tying linear development to natural cycles, with the view of guiding the applications of modern technologies on our environment'.⁷³ Thus regarded, Moana's inspiration with the 'spirit' to restore the voyaging tradition, received from the spectres of her ancestors, is closely tied into an Oceanian complex of ideology and technology. In addition, the ghost fleet that inspires Moana may also haunt the film viewer with the knowledge that the Polynesian culture depicted in the film was, like much of the natural world, sacrificed for the furthering of successive imperialist and neoliberal concerns. The bifurcated address of the spectral vision thus embeds an ecocritical impulse in the aspiration of Oceanian cultural revival after centuries of catastrophic subjugation to colonial interests.

A striking aspect of this revival beyond *Moana* is the renewed interest in the traditional Oceanian methods of navigation, exemplified in the extensive voyages of the Polynesian Voyaging Society's canoe *Hōkūle'a* in the last half-century.⁷⁴ Perhaps the most visually striking technique referenced in *Moana* is the use of an outstretched palm to measure celestial constellations, made

famous by the contemporary Hawaiian navigator Nainoa Thompson.⁷⁵ As Moana initially struggles to orientate her palm appropriately during her apprenticeship, Maui quips that ‘you’re measuring the stars, not giving the sky a high five’. Notably, the moment is shortly preceded by Moana exchanging a high five with the ocean, after the ocean tranquilizes Maui to coerce him into teaching Moana to pilot the canoe. This high five realizes in a Western idiom her bond with the ocean, but the comparison drawn here between the fantastical partnership in the diegesis on the one hand and the historical practice of celestial navigation on the other is also productive in highlighting how maritime survivalism is inextricable from ecological attentiveness. While Maui sarcastically tells Moana that celestial measurements are distinct from a high five with nature, the technique nonetheless constitutes a quasi-social gesture towards the natural world which, in line with the ecoerotic dynamics I have described above, nourishes the ‘admiring attention’ expressed in the intricate rendering of the ocean in *Moana*.

Conclusion

While Dionne Fonoti expresses a guarded optimism regarding ‘a new era of respectful and collaborative storytelling’ and Disney’s potential role in such an era,⁷⁶ the critical value I have sought to demonstrate in *Moana* can be found by synthesising questions of cultural representation with a consideration of the ways in which Oceanian culture can influence an Anthropocene imaginary. Such an influence, as I have acknowledged, is perhaps inevitably equivocal in a film studio that perpetuates an imperialist logic in its use of technological and intellectual properties, but the mechanisms of the entertainment industry nonetheless demonstrate their rhetorical force in *Moana*’s images of a rapport between the human and the nonhuman. I thus argue that *Moana* recasts the borderlands of the imperial imaginary by depicting an Oceanian world in which a heroine restores an idealized ecological balance through her passion for cultural practices centred on her natural environment: an immense ocean that was traversed by an ancient civilization by means of an intimate familiarity with planetary and oceanic movements.

By putting *Moana* to work in multiple critical circuits, which both exceed and complement the celebrations and critiques of the representation of Polynesian culture that informed the popular reception of *Moana*, I have examined the ways in which the film, even as an exemplary product of the neoliberal culture industry, can nourish ecocritical arguments through its portrayal of the natural world. In particular, I have attempted to identify the ways in which this portrayal prompts a mode of attention that serves ecopolitical ends. The ‘anthropocene seas’ to which Alaimo draws our attention provide the basis of *Moana*’s cinema of attractions, taking the

form of an intricately rendered Pacific Ocean that interacts continuously with Moana as her environment and her political partner. I have drawn on this imagery to suggest that the film illustrates ways of articulating a political arrangement that accounts for human and nonhuman interests in an Anthropocene context. I have also proposed that the film's interface with ecopolitical patterns of thought, despite the ambivalence of its cultural investments, highlights how contemporary ecocriticism might converge with an Oceanian, or at least oceanic, political praxis of the kind advocated by Hau'ofa.

Attitudes that might promote such an arrangement include the contemplation proposed by Alaimo and the admiring attention described by Serres, both of which, as I have argued, can be tied into Hau'ofa's vision of an Oceanian philosophy accompanying the ambition of cultural revival on which *Moana* capitalizes. A compatible ecocritical impulse arguably bears on the animation process behind *Moana*, which, even while serving the project of art direction that transforms the natural environment into a performer in the entertainment industry, also admits and respects the scale and intricacy of the ocean in its attempts to achieve a sense of naturalism in the rendering of the oceanic world. In this sense the animation process itself follows a similar ecopolitical logic to that demonstrated by Moana within the diegesis: a participatory epistemology which contemplates the natural world as an intersubjective phenomenon, and an aesthetic that can envisage and perform a high five with a fantastically sentient ocean. An oceanic politics runs through the production, narrative and aesthetics of *Moana*, prompting an ecocritical engagement with the popular culture that produced the film.

Notes

1. Jessica Julius and Maggie Malone, *The Art of Moana* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2016), p. 13.
2. Mārata Tamaira and Dionne Fonoti, "Beyond Paradise? Retelling Pacific Stories in Disney's Moana," in *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2018), 297–327 (pp. 302–303).
3. Mārata Ketekiri Tamaira et al., "Moana by Jared Bush (review)," in *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2018), 216–234.
4. Erika Balsom, *An Oceanic Feeling: Cinema and the Sea* (New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2018), p. 20.
5. Vadim Rizov, "Moana," in *Sight and Sound*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2017), 82.
6. Balsom, *An Oceanic Feeling*, p. 21.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
8. Alexey Stomakhin and Andrew Selle, "Fluxed Animated Boundary Method," in *ACM Trans. Graph.*, vol. 36, no. 4, article 38 (2017).

9. Stacy Alaimo, "Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and New Materialism at Sea," in *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 111–141 (p. 161).
10. Greta Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism* (London: Lexington, 2017), p. 87.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
12. Apart from the appointment of an "Oceanic Story Trust," the home release of the film is accompanied by a documentary featurette titled *Voice of the Islands*, an elaborate account of a 6-week research trip undertaken by Musker and Clements to various Pacific Island communities.
13. Julius and Malone, *The Art of Moana*, p. 10.
14. Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," in *We Are the Ocean*, pp. 27–41 (p. 32).
15. Juliette Singh, *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), p. 10.
16. Julius and Malone, *The Art of Moana*, p. 10.
17. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York, NY and London: Routledge, 2006), p. 114.
18. Epeli Hau'ofa, "Pasts to Remember," in *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), pp. 60–80 (p. 70).
19. Donald B. Freeman, *The Pacific* (New York, NY and London: Routledge, 2010), p. 101.
20. Timothy Clark, "Scale," in *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, ed. by Tom Cohen (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012), pp. 148–166 (p. 153).
21. Tina Grandinetti, "Moana might be great for representation but it's not all heartwarming for Hawaii," in *The Guardian*, 12 January 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jan/13/moana-might-be-great-for-representation-but-its-not-all-heartwarming-for-hawaii>>.
22. Nadia Bozak, *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), p. 4.
23. Bozak, *Cinematic Footprint*, p. 4.
24. Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, p. 10.
25. Ben Frost, Alexey Stomakhin and Hiroaki Narita, "Moana: Performing Water," in *Proceedings of SIGGRAPH '17* (2017), p. 1.
26. Stomakhin and Selle, "Fluxed Animated Boundary Method," p. 2.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 3.
28. Clark, "Scale," pp. 149–150.
29. Stomakhin and Selle, "Fluxed Animated Boundary Method," p. 7.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 7–8.
31. Clark, "Scale," p. 162.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
33. Josephine Donovan, "Participatory Epistemology, Sympathy, and Animal Ethics," in *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*, ed. by Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen (New York, NY and London: Bloomsbury), pp. 75–90 (p. 78).
34. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
35. Cited in Donovan, "Participatory Epistemology," p. 81.
36. Mārata Tamaira, "From Full Dusk to Full Tusk: Reimagining the 'Dusky Maiden' through the Visual Arts," in *The Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2010), 1–35 (p. 7).

37. Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 2.
38. Tamaira and Fonoti, "Beyond Paradise?" p. 300.
39. Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, p. 9.
40. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 2.
41. Simon C. Estok, "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia," in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2009), 203–225, p. 208.
42. Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism*, p. 162.
43. Tamaira et al., "Moana," p. 221.
44. Perhaps on the contrary, it is interesting to consider that the ocean is implicitly gendered by the nickname 'Gretchen' that the animation team gave the rig for the ocean, as noted in Julius, *The Art of Moana*, p. 72.
45. Tamaira and Fonoti, "Beyond Paradise?" p. 300.
46. Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, p. 2.
47. Sunaura Taylor, "Interdependent Animals: A Feminist Disability Ethic-of-Care" in *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*, ed. by Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen (New York, NY and London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 109–126 (p. 115).
48. John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 1980), pp. 3–30 (p. 7).
49. Taylor, "Interdependent Animals," p. 124.
50. Cited in Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), p. 64.
51. Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 64.
52. Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," p. 32.
53. Wade Davis, "The Wayfinders," in *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World* (Toronto: Anansi, 2009), pp. 35–78 (p. 35).
54. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, p. 64.
55. Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*, p. 10.
56. Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. by Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 38.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
58. Cited in Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, p. 179.
59. Epeli Hau'ofa, "The Ocean in Us," in *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), pp. 41–59 (p. 55).
60. Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," pp. 31–32.
61. Hau'ofa, "Pasts to Remember," p. 72.
62. Hau'ofa, "The Ocean in Us," p. 57.
63. Latour, *Down to Earth*, p. 64.
64. Latour, *Facing Gaia, Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), p. 283.
65. Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 199, 201.
66. Hau'ofa, "Pasts to Remember," p. 68.
67. *Ibid.*
68. Sergei Eisenstein, *On Disney*, ed. by Jay Leyda, trans. by Alan Upchurch (London, New York, NY and Calcutta: Seagull, 2017), p. 77.
69. Serres, *The Natural Contract*, p. 41.

70. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, pp. 6–7, emphasis in original.
71. Hau'ofa, "Pasts to Remember," p. 67.
72. Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," p. 39.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
74. Sam Low, *Hawaiki Rising: Hōkūle'a, Nainoa Thompson, and the Hawaiian Renaissance* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013).
75. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
76. Tamaira and Fonoti, "Beyond Paradise?", p. 218.

Acknowledgement

This research was funded by the Gates Cambridge Trust, and its open access publication was supported by grant OPP1144 of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. I am grateful to Laura McMahon for her guidance throughout the writing of this essay, and to Kyle Stevens, Maria San Filippo and the *NRFTS*'s anonymous reviewers for their invaluable feedback on the manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation [OPP1144].

Notes on contributor

Kevin Chew is an Assistant Professor in Film Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He previously completed his PhD as a Gates Cambridge Scholar at the University of Cambridge. His research interests are focused on political conflict and popular animation.

ORCID

Kevin Chew  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8787-6002>