Anthropocene terror in two girl-centred narratives: The leitmotifs of mythological time, colonisation and monstrosity in the films *Whale Rider* and *Moana*

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Abstract

The place of children in societies is a question that we have been grappling with in many forms, maybe nowhere more creatively and visibly than in the products of our imaginary complexes, such as films. Educational theorist and cultural critic Henry Giroux (2012) describes a contemporary crisis about youth and considers youth as potential cultural and pedagogical 'border-crossers or outlaws'. Our complex contemporary engagement with the concept of youth coincides with an increasing awareness of, firstly, the genderedness of our world and, secondly, of anthropocene planetary ecological states of crises. In this article I consider two girl-centred films, both with young female protagonists, where the convergence of these discursive forces is depicted in the narrative context of the current renewed appreciation for indigenous cultures, particularly those of the global south. The films are New Zealand director Niki Caro's *Whale Rider* (2002) and Disney's animated film *Moana* (2016). There are clear similarities between the films, and the Disney creators have openly credited *Whale Rider* as influential in their creative process. I particularly consider how these two films, when read together, engage with ideas of cyclical mythological time, the leitmotifs of exploration, gender and colonisation, and with the trope of monstrousness or monstrosity as metaphors for paradoxical and complex living in an age of increasing complexity and anxiety.

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Introduction

Recent increasing emphasis on indigenous knowledge systems coincides with an awareness of the current age of the anthropocene, into which the world has entered largely because (western) man (here carrying both the gendered meaning of maleness and the more general lexical meaning, denoting humankind) has been perceived as the proverbial centre of the universe. The term anthropocene was coined by Paul Crutzen in 2000 to describe our contemporary era, which 'could be said to have started in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane. This date also happens to coincide with James Watt's design of the steam engine in 1784' (Crutzen 2000:415). Since Crutzen first introduced this term, discourses about planetary calamity, climate change, environmental degradation and social decline, as a direct result of the damaging influence of humankind ("western", "consumerist" and "neo-liberal" are often implied, if not overtly cited), have become ubiquitous, to the extent that they have even given rise to new terminologies, and a new ideological zeitgeist, of "apocalypse fatigue", "climate anxiety" and "environmental/eco anxiety".

Amid this more general planetary anxiety, reports also regularly appear about individual cultures and languages that are dying out. But side by side with these, there are also those reporting on increased speakers and the reinvigoration of what were previously considered dying indigenous languages and cultures. One example is the Maori Renaissance of the 1980s, the reported increase in speakers of the Te Reo Maori language in New Zealand (Roy 2018), and the general increased popular interest in Polynesian cultures. For example, Disney also worked within this complex ideological space of cultural reinvigoration and (re)appropriation in their 2016 animated feature film, *Moana* (Clements & Musker).

The seeming discursive inconsistency or dissonance, created when crisis mode and regeneration mode exist simultaneously, is an example of the increasing complexity of contemporary reality. Both the losses and gains in this constantly changing cultural and discursive landscape are often the outflow of mass-mediated visibility, and conversely, invisibility, in particular, as technology and social media now put power in the hands of every person who can click a button on an electronic device. At play here is often the romanticisation, even fetishisation, of certain cultures or languages, and, conversely, the potential for vilification or even demonisation of others. This is admittedly not a new precedent, but is today just so much more accessible, to far greater numbers at the same time and at greater speeds, than ever before.

Such media(ted) messages are then also often directly aimed at those who are arguably the most discursively vulnerable – children. This does not mean that children are necessarily powerless. Indeed, never before have children, and childhood, held such social, cultural and economic power as they do currently. The multi-million dollar industry built on nostalgia for the seeming lost innocence of childhood is a fairly recent phenomenon, as is the concept of children's rights (as any reading of Charles Dickens shows). Indeed, as Elizabeth Le Bow and Debbie Cherney (2015:35) argue, our contemporary ideas surrounding children's rights have evolved entirely subsequent to, and out of, an increasing awareness of, and emphasis on, *animal* rights. The place of children in societies is therefore both a perennial and a modern question, with which we have been grappling in many forms, maybe nowhere more creatively and visibly than in the products of our imaginary complexes, such as films.

In keeping with this renewed emphasis on children and childhood, it is now fairly commonly acknowledged that 'the endurance of a language, like many aspects of culture, depends on the youth' (National Geographic 2009). So, a social grouping ("youth"), that until fairly recently often had been little more than ideologically disregarded, is now held up as the salvation of societies, cultures, and even the planet. This revolution in our thinking about children, and their social and political (and economic) significance, broadly coincides with our increasing anthropocene awareness of the impact human life has had on our planet and its ecology. A case in point here is the controversial young Greta Thunberg, a 16-year old Swedish girl, who leads the world in climate strikes against global warming. At the 2019 World Climate Summit, Thunberg scathingly raged at the adults of the world, who she said had let her and other children of the world down. Thunberg is, in short, a symbolic embodiment of our contemporary anthropocene terror of the world in which we live and the destruction we have wrought upon it.

This new large-scale and mainstream contemporary awareness of our anthropocene terror has, of course, been with us since long before Thunberg and can most vividly be seen in products of the human imaginary machine, such as films. Disaster and apocalyptic films have become a staple of our entertainment experience – arguably since *The Ten Commandments* was first filmed in 1956 by Cecil B. DeMille. In more recent disaster films, the overt religious context is removed or secularised, and our anthropocene terror is depicted in its most visceral and paranoiac form, as high-pitch adrenaline races against apocalyptic destruction, or its potential dystopian results, wrought either by nature or by human interference with planetary ecology, providing a vast contemporary visual library of chaos and destruction. But we also engage with our anthropocene terror in more subtle ways, in other types of narratives, such as children's films.

Filmic sublimation and anthropocene terror

I consider two film narratives in which ideas about anthropocene terror coincide with simultaneous ideological recastings of indigenous culture and of youth; in particular, girlhood. I focus on New Zealand director Niki Caro's 2002 film *Whale Rider,* based on the 1987 novel of the same name by Maori author Witi Ihimaera, and Disney's 2016 animated film *Moana*. Both films revolve around young female protagonists, Paikea and Moana, who symbolically represent their communities' (and the viewer's) existential crises in the face of anthropocene terror and ecological anxiety.

Whale Rider tells the story of Paikea, who was born as one of twins into a long line of Maori tribal succession. Paikea's mother and twin brother die during their birth, and her grieving father names her, his only living child, after the (male) founding father of their tribe, Paikea, who, it is told in tribal lore, rode on a whale from their land of origin in Hawai'ki to found a new tribe in Aotearoa (New Zealand). Young Paikea's paternal grandfather, Koro, is the current chief of their tribe, but he refuses to acknowledge his only grandchild, Paikea, as his rightful heir and as successor to the chieftainship of their patrilineal tribe. His sole reason for this is that Paikea is a girl. The narrative follows Paikea's inner struggle as she defies her grandfather, whom she loves dearly, and patriarchal tradition in her attempt to be recognised as his rightful successor and the leader of her dwindling and troubled tribe, the Ngāti Porou, a real Maori community located around the New Zealand town of Whangara.

Moana is an animated film from the powerful Disney stable, which in significant ways breaks away from their well-known standard princess-formula – no romantic or love relationships, sexualised bodies, normative gendered role play or female rivalries are depicted in this film. The main character and protagonist is Moana, a young girl, of around the same age as Paikea, who is the much-loved daughter and celebrated future successor of the tribal chief of a Polynesian tribe on the fictional island of Motonui. But Moana is an explorer at heart and burns with a deep desire to sail beyond the reef, which forms the historically imposed boundary (enforced by her father) of their island paradise. Spurred on by her paternal grandmother, Moana finds a cave on the island in which ancestral tribal boats remained hidden for a long time. She discovers that her ancestors were, in fact, seafarers, who traversed the oceans of the world. When ecological decline threatens her island and village, Moana decides to defy her father and tradition, sailing off across the reef in one of the old tribal boats in order to find a way to fix the problems that threaten the survival of her world.

In both films there is strong subtext of ecological and environmental crises. In *Moana* it is identified as The Darkness that descends over Moana's tribe when their fishing grounds

become depleted and their crops begin to fail. This is mythologically explained in tribal lore as the result of demi-god Maui's theft of earth/mother goddess Tefiti's life-giving heart. In *Whale Rider* there is a more subtle threat, depicted as the social decline of Paikea's tribe, who is beset by the familiar socio-economic challenges of many rural and indigenous peoples: unemployment, poverty, addiction and a general sense of *anomie* and *ennui*. This is symbolically depicted in the climax of the film when a pod of whales, the totem animal of the tribe, suicidally beaches near Paikea's village. Both films carry the message that the *girl* child holds the solution for the ecological and social problems of her tribe, and by inference, the larger world as a whole. The two girls, Paikea and Moana, are both closely associated with the sea and its inhabitants, with tribal ancestors and gods, and with a wisdom that can generate reconciliation between the sexes, between generations, and between humanity and the earth. In both narratives, the girls are depicted as the carriers of hope for humanity.

I have elsewhere discussed the films' significance in terms of gender(ed) dynamics, specifically the depiction of young girls in traditionally male heroic roles (Du Plooy 2019). An overemphasis on the obvious gendered subtexts of the films can, however, lead to ignoring the problem of the troubled relationship of humankind with the earth and how these films present a sublimation of this neurosis. In natural sciences, the word "sublimation" literally means a process of transitioning from one state to another, solid to gas, without the intermediary state of liquidness. In psychology it would refer to the diversion of biological or natural impulses away from potentially destructive manifestations, such as anxiety and obsession, to more productive or acceptable ones. In pedagogical terms, it would mean teaching and entrenching habits and attitudes that are more pro-social than anti-social. The associations in these films between the two girls and ecological crises are significant in all three contexts of sublimation: the scientific, as both girls occupy and represent a fluid liminal space between land and sea; the psychological, as the girls are symbolically depicted as redemptive and as carriers of hope for humanity amid ecological threat; and the pedagogical, as both girl-centred narratives teach new things about the relationship between youth, femaleness, and the earth.

Cinema is a medium of sublimation *par excellence.* Both *Moana* and *Whale Rider* can be read as the sublimation of the destructive impulses of humanity (exploiting our natural and social resources to the point of devastation and destruction) into messages of hope and redemption. Both films therefore present sublimations of contemporary anthropocentric terror and its attendant discourses of climate change, global warming and environmental decline. In both films the young female protagonists are depicted as drivers of their communities' (and by inference, humanity's) resolution of existential crises and as social change-makers that turn the impending implosions towards more constructive and productive directions. This is conveyed through the depiction of a simultaneous return

to, and transcendence of, tradition. It demands the ability to live with complexity, in paradox, at a point of self-contradictory *aporia*, holding multiple truths (crisis and regeneration, decline and renewal, self and other, past and future) equally and simultaneously. It poses eternal questions of reinvention and redemption – of retaining the good, while ridding ourselves of the bad. In the rest of this article, I specifically consider the engagement of these two girl-centred films (at times I also refer to Ihimaera's original 1987 novel) with ideas of cyclical mythological time, the leitmotifs of exploration, gender, colonisation and monstrousness or monstrosity as metaphors for paradoxical living in an age of increasing complexity and anxiety.

Theoretical contextualisation: Critical and public pedagogy and the significance of youth

Educational theorist and cultural critic Henry Giroux deals with the twin concepts of critical pedagogy and public pedagogy in much of his work. The former, critical pedagogy, signifies one's ability to critically engage with and critique one's environment and the various social apparatuses that govern and manage it. The latter, public pedagogy or cultural pedagogy, is 'an array of different sites of mass and image-based media that have become a new and powerful pedagogical force, reconfiguring the very nature of politics, critical production, engagement and resistance' (Giroux 2012:28). Giroux (2012:28) says that 'popular culture provide[s] the medium through which we learn[ ] how to negotiate our everyday lives'.

Cinema is a medium that has particularly utilitarian potential for the insidious and subliminal communication of ideological messages. But it is also a medium redolent with 'witnessing and testimony', which to Giroux (2012:14) means, 'speaking and listening to the stories of others as part of both an ethical response to the narratives of the past and a moral responsibility to engage the present'. Giroux (2012:13,14) sees youth as potential 'border crossers and outlaws' in the dynamic relationship of cultural (co-)construction and deconstruction. Giroux (2012:xiv) says that, 'lauded as a symbol of hope for the future while scorned as threat to the existing social order, youth have become objects of ambivalence caught between contradictory representations, discourses, and spaces of transition'. He (2012:xiii) further says that 'any discourse about the future has to begin with the issue of youth, because young people embody the projected dreams, desires and commitment of a society's obligations to the future'. Speaking before Greta Thunberg appeared on the scene, Giroux (2012:xv) talks quite presciently about the zeitgeist that she embodies, for example, when he says that, 'caught up in an age of increasing despair, youth no longer appear to inspire adults to reaffirm their commitment to a public discourse that envisions a future in which human suffering is diminished while general welfare of society is increased'.

I here read *Whale Rider* and *Moana* as being in conversation with these statements by Giroux. Both films provide an eloquent example of the changing role of, particularly female, youth in contemporary societies and the paradoxical complexities situated at the nexus where popular pedagogy and critical pedagogy merge and conflate. The learning and knowledge in these films cannot comfortably be separated into the popular and the critical; that which needs to be consumed/accepted and that which needs to be interrogated/engaged. The concepts of "the popular" and "the critical" inform and destabilise one another in a dialectical and agonistic conversation that does not allow for easy unpacking and categorisation. It also makes for exceptionally good storytelling, as it not only represents fully rounded and resonant characters, capable of complex, ambiguous and self-contradictory thoughts and actions, but also acknowledges the same in its audiences.

The directors of *Moana*, Ron Clements and John Musker, openly acknowledged that Caro's *Whale Rider* inspired them in making *Moana* and that there are clear thematic correspondences between the two films (Giardina 2016). One must, however, remember that, despite their similarities, the two films are aimed at very different audiences and their pedagogical and narrative approaches and impacts are therefore different. *Moana* is a Disney animated feature film and is aimed at the pre-teen mass market – and their economically empowered sponsors as the vast merchandising franchise and Disney products associated with the film show. As a critically acclaimed independent film, locally produced in New Zealand, *Whale Rider* is a very different type of product from *Moana*. It is also not a children's movie; as legendary film critic Roger Ebert (2003) has said, 'there is a vast difference between movies for 12-year old girls and movies about 12-year old girls'. But despite their different production dynamics and positioning within the vast global film industry and market, these two girl-centred films, with young indigenous female protagonists, teach similar lessons, ask similar questions, and trouble similar issues regarding the relationship of humanity with the earth and our increasing sense of anthropocene terror. Greta Thunberg's journey across the ocean to address the United Nations is another example – a real-life version in this case – of female youth challenging dominant power structures, and she can therefore be read as belonging to the same trope, and as resonant of the same imaginary presence, as the two filmic/literary characters, Moana and Paikea.

Mythological time and exploration

Both narratives function on the premise of cyclical time, where the narrative present dovetails with a mythological past and future potentialities – places and spaces of interbeing and becoming; of what Toni Morrison (2004:43) so eloquently in *Beloved* calls 'rememory'. In Ihimaera's (2003:125) novel, young Paikea is said to 'suddenly

remember what she should do' when she approaches the stranded alpha male whale on the beach: she climbs on its back and rides it back into the ocean, like her ancestor Paikea did. This is an ancient memory that reaches across many generations back to a time of 'oneness' and 'forgotten community', when 'past and present, reality and fantasy' were joined; when 'Gods talked to our ancestors and man talked with the Gods' (Ihimaera 2003:116-117). Both *Moana* and *Whale Rider* employ magic realism as narrative technique to realise this cyclical temporality, as the realistic and mundane are presented as magical, and *vice versa*. This liminal shifting of symbolic boundaries is then narratively extended to other binaries, such as past, present and future, human and nature, oral and written, male and female, self and other, orient and occident, and north (signifying western cultural imperialism) and south (signifying alternative and indigenous traditions). As Marnina Gonick (2010:313) notes about *Whale Rider,* 'in marking out a space that is both the future and the past, Pai[kea] may be said to represent a disruption of time – she is a new time, an interstitial time, both past and future. She is where relations of time, memory, and hope for the future are reconfigured'. This similarly holds true for the character of Moana.

However, both films are also narratively set in a specific historical present. *Whale Rider* is set in a more contemporary present, namely postcolonial New Zealand (around the late 1980s), a time when the Maori people were in crisis. This is also a time that has been called the Maori Renaissance, with a renewed blossoming of Maori language, literature, traditions, culture and political consciousness. Ihimaera, author of *Whale Rider*, was one of the leading figures in this cultural and political movement.

Moana, on the other hand, is set at an unspecified (pre)historical past moment that is now commonly called The Long Pause by scholars of Polynesian history. Moana's story speculates about a possible reason for the end of The Long Pause, with the female character Moana being seen as the fictional catalytic driver. Thus, Moana is a change-maker and harbinger of new things during her own historical time, but also, through fiction and imagination, by implication, for our own time, when the film was made; and potentially for currently unforeseen future times, when the film may function in different contexts. Doug Herman (2016), of the Smithsonian Institute, explains the historico-mythological space in which the film is set:

> People using Stone Age technology built voyaging canoes capable of traveling thousands of miles, then set forth against the winds and currents to find tiny dots of land in the midst of the largest ocean on Earth. And having found them, they travelled back and forth again and again to settle them […] Western Polynesia – the islands closest to Australia and New Guinea – were colonized around 3,500 years ago. But the islands of Central and Eastern Polynesia were not settled until 1 500 to 500 years ago. This means that after arriving in Fiji, Samoa and Tonga, Polynesians took a break – for almost 2 000 years – before

> voyaging forth again. … [This] huge mystery, sometimes called The Long Pause leaves a gaping hole in the voyaging time [of the people of the Pacific region] … Then when they did start again, they did so with a vengeance … settl[ing] nearly every habitable island in the central and eastern Pacific. Nobody knows the reason for The Long Pause or why the Polynesians started voyaging again.

This raises interesting questions around colonisation as a historical (and prehistorical) *fait accompli*, but also, more specifically, about the survival and expansion of non-western cultures about which there may only be faint oral histories, bundled up in syncretic folklore and mythology. In Herman's description of The Long Pause, as in *Moana*, historical Polynesian peoples are by implication depicted as active colonisers, instead of the more familiar depiction of them as the passive colonised. This forces necessary engagement with, and reconsideration of, exactly what the often-used term "first peoples" may mean in different contexts. In a contemporary context, questions about migrancy, its causes and effects are raised, coinciding with sadly familiar contemporary images of refugees in capsising boats on the Mediterranean Sea, which are seen in our news reports daily. As Jeffrey Tucker (2016) notes, *Moana*, by implication, reminded him of the concept of "the tragedy of the commons":

> At some point, overgrazing, overfishing, overharvesting, and overconsumption lead to shortages … After all, it is not some vague longing for adventure that causes whole tribes to brave the seas on small boats. It is the economic fear of starvation, and that, in turn, comes about from institutional failure …

These are very familiar contemporary ecological, political and economic debates and discourses, and not only speculation about (pre)historical motivations. The subtext in *Moana* clearly folds back through time to speak to us about the present time.

In *Whale Rider* there is also reference to the seafaring origins of Paikea's Maori tribe and their founding of new life in a new land. Whales, the totem animals of the tribe, acted as guides to explorer-ancestor Paikea; as they also do for the young Paikea when they call to her, allow her to join them in the ocean, and finally return her as their emissary back to the land and to her tribe. Like her namesake ancestor, Paikea is directly associated with both the whales (sea) and the land (Hawai'ki and Aotuaroa); with past, present and future. In *Moana* it is the heavens that guide both the girl and her ancestors on their journeys of exploration, as the whales do for Paikea. Moana is taught by her travel companion, demi-god Maui, to map the heavens, as her ancestor wayfarers did before her. This practice is called way-finding in Polynesian cultures, also 'dead reckoning' (Berman 2016), and is part of a rich Polynesian nautical tradition. Under Maui's tutelage, Moana learns how to use the shifting heavens for navigation and guidance on the fluid and equally shifting oceans of the world. This comes with all the associated narrative implications of following one's inner compass and desires,

specifically relevant and subversive here, because it is being conveyed to a young indigenous *girl*.

In Ihimaera's novel, the complex relationships between Paikea and her ancestors, between humans and gods, and between humans and nature, are built out further as an ancient tribal myth of love – between humankind and the ocean/nature. This is also a subtext in *Moana*, especially if one reads the two films as standing in an intertextual relationship with one another, as the Disney directors intended. Ihimaera tells of how the land and oceans longingly waited for the arrival of mankind, like a pregnant mother for a child, or a lover for their beloved. The myth tells of the world's joy at the arrival of mankind and of a loving symbiosis that elevated all creatures of the earth. But when humans began to kill whales, the relationship was compromised, the love was lost and the trust was broken. Simultaneously, the hope was also born for a redeemer who would heal the rift, restore the trust, and reinvigorate the relationship between humanity and nature, past and present, male and female – thus capturing the cyclical nature of any good myth. What Paikea's patriarchal grandfather misses in his obsessive waiting and searching for the redeemer is, of course, that the redeemer may well be a *girl* child, and not a boy; that, in fact, the female of the species may hold the key to the redemption of the decaying world, and that tradition may need to adapt in order to ensure its continuation. In the mythological backstory to *Moana*, the original unity of life was shattered when demi-god Maui (humorously depicted as uber-masculine in the film) stole the greenstone heart of the mother island, Tefiti. Like the humans' whale killing in *Whale Rider*, this sacrilegious act committed against the earth is a moment of symbolic rupture that must be redeemed by the heroic protagonist.

In both films, the mythological past, which is central to the narratives, specifically the time of the characters' Polynesian seafaring ancestors, is conveyed through tribal origin myths and legends, of which the grandparents are the conveyors. In *Moana* this role is fulfilled by her grandmother, who encourages her (actually directly instructs her) to explore beyond the reef and to find her destiny. In *Whale Rider*, Paikea's grandmother plays a similar role, although in a much more muted and more futile way. (She has a stronger role in the novel, in which matriarchal heritage and female leadership are more central to the narrative). The antagonist in *Whale Rider* is clearly Paikea's grandfather, Koro, who blindly clings to the destructive patriarchal and patrilineal traditions of his tribe, yet resolutely insists that he is waiting for the redeemer, who ironically has been there all the time, in the form of his granddaughter, Paikea. Moana's father also represents this blind (male) adherence to tradition and authority – he teaches her that 'tradition is our mission'. Both films therefore represent two very different attitudes towards ancestral traditions – the first (and female) is open, dialectical and challenging, encouraging growth and change; the latter (and male) is

closed, staid, set and decaying, because it refuses to change and adapt. From a pedagogical perspective, the lesson that is conveyed here about what should be taught across generations, and how youth should speak back into their own traditions, is very significant.

The two girls are presented to the viewer as not only explorers of the physical world, they are also explorers of new interpersonal and relational potentialities. They are symbolically explorers of new ways of being in the world, which the films present to us through familiar narrative conventions, mediums and techniques (popular culture). The films also simultaneously challenge the normative conceptions (critical pedagogy) we have of our own being in the world, both as humans in relationship to nature, but also as gendered and generational beings, situated within specific traditions and conventions. These, the films teach their viewers, may periodically be in need of revision and revitalisation.

Gender(ed) colonisation

I have already mentioned the complex subtext of colonisation in both films. Most significantly, the (re)colonisers in both films are led by a woman, in the form of a young girl, who (re)appropriates space, physically and symbolically, for her tribe (here to be read as both her indigenous tribe, but also for "girls" more generally). This subverts the standard normative depictions of colonisers as men, descending from boats as they set foot in new lands, so-called virgin territory. In *Moana* and *Whale Rider*, it is the virgin territory (the two pre-pubescent indigenous girls) that occupy and inscribe the world with meaning. In a reversal of the traditional colonisation trope, both films end with the tribes victoriously returning to the ocean to reclaim their tribal heritage of sailing the seas and expanding their influence. The films, however, significantly, never show the tribes *arriving* anywhere, and thus draw a veil of silence over what will happen when they do set foot on foreign soil and stake a claim there. The obvious message is therefore a rather naïve one of restoration and reclamation, but subliminally raises important questions about expansionism versus isolationism, and the consequences of both.

Moana and Paikea's exploration of the sea is clearly a metaphor for women's exploration of their own dreams, desires and abilities, also in claiming public and political leadership roles. As the fluidity of her name (which means "ocean" in several Polynesian languages) signifies, Moana is never represented as *owning* the sea, but as being wholly part of the very essence of the sea, which is always presented as fluid and constantly shifting – she is part of it as it is part of her. Moana's story, like that of Paikea, is a narrative of humanity's *return to* the sea and to a nostalgically respectful

and mutually beneficial relationship with the earth and others. Symbolically, at the climax of the *Whale Rider* narrative, Paikea saves the stranded whale pod (and by implication, her indigenous tribe, and by further implication, humanity) by climbing on the back of the alpha whale and steering the whales back into the sea.

The depictions here of women as colonisers differ significantly from the familiar historical depictions of colonisers as male – emerging from the sea in boats – and who are conventionally presented as taking ownership of stationary land, then mapping and delineating it (it is *terra firma*, after all) and, ultimately, defending it, often ironically against the very inhabitants they first encountered there. Much has been said, for example by Anne McClintock (1995) in *Imperial Leather*, about the representational relationships between colonisation and women's bodies, and how women and land (as the colonised and appropriated) were both historically inscribed by male colonisers. Women (like children) were traditionally depicted as *terra nullius* or "empty land", virgin territory, a blank slate or *tabula rasa*, to be inscribed with meaning by men and patriarchy.

Moana, however, presents us with the image of a girl, who, in reverse, inscribes the land with meaning, as she is responsible for the restoration of Tefiti, the mother-island and source of life, when she places the greenstone heart back into the body of Tefiti's alter-ego volcanic monster, Te Ka. The drama of the narrative is driven by Moana's journey across the oceans, alongside Maui, to return the heart to Tefiti, which Maui stole from her in a Promethean act to ingratiate himself with humankind. Ironically, Maui's comically hyper-masculine body, which matches his egotism, is inscribed: it is covered in living tribal tattoos, which, having a life of their own, provide much of the comic relief of the film, and acts as Maui's conscience or superego throughout the story.

Similar subversive themes about gender, colonisation and the inscription of land can also be detected in *Whale Rider*. In the original novel, Ihimaera relates the tribe's origin myth, in which (male) ancestor Paikea, riding on a whale towards the new land he is colonising, throws spears at the land to bring forth life. But one spear will not fly from his hand, 'so the whale rider utter[s] a prayer over the wooden spear, saying … "Let this be the one to flower when the people are troubled and it is most needed" … and the spear, soaring through the sky, [comes] to rest in the earth where the afterbirth of a female child w[ill] be placed' (Ihimaera 2003:6;142). Young Paikea (whose afterbirth is indeed in the novel secretly buried by her grandmother at the tribal *mara* or meeting house) is the embodiment of this last spear, released during troubled times to inscribe the land with new meaning and to restore her tribe, and by implication, all of humanity.

Both *Moana* and *Whale Rider* represent the symbolic recuperation of a lost paradise through the relationship of a young girl with the ocean, since land is no longer a convincing metaphor for hope, neither is patriarchy, nor are adults. Thus the sea, youth and femaleness are conflated in a new vision of hope and redemption, embodied as young indigenous girls – a symbolic act of (re)occupation, (re)colonisation and (re)inscription.

Monstrousness and monstrosity as narrative trope

It is a well-known cartographical anecdote that maps of past ages inscribed dangerous areas of the ocean and unknown geographical territories with the legend "here be monsters". The association of the sea with fear and terror is therefore narratively very familiar. Contemporaries of a certain age group (in their forties and fifties today) can immediately conjure this up by merely saying the one-word film title *Jaws* (1975), based on Peter Benchley's 1974 novel, as by-gone generations would have done with the dreaded Kraken, or the biblical Leviathan from the book of Job; also the whale that swallows Jonah; Monstro in *Pinnochio* (the 1940 Disney film, based on Carlo Collodi's original 1883 Italian children's story), and the white whale in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). Innumerable variations on the theme exist and each generation and culture has its own thrilling, terrifying, awe-inspiring monsters from the deep that haunt its dreams. A recent addition, for example, would be Guillermo del Toro's water creature in the 2017 film, *The Shape of Water.*

As Jeffrey Cohen (1996:4,5,13) argues in his seven theses on monster culture, 'the monster's body is a cultural body' and so 'monsters must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them'. In our contemporary anthropocene context, this matrix of relations would necessarily include the ecological and environmental. Cohen (1996:4) further says,

> The monster is born only at [a] metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy … The monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again.

In *Moana*, Te Ka is the monster from the deep, a dreadful lava demon who is also the vengeful alter ego or shadow-self of Tefiti, the broken-hearted mother island/goddess. Te Ka originated from the rupture between humanity and nature, when The Darkness entered the world because Maui desecrated Tefiti by stealing her greenstone heart. The anthropocene symbolism here is obvious and clearly stands for the way humans' exploitation of the earth and its resources have led to our current planetary crises.

Consequently, Te Ka must be appeased by the sacrifice of a young girl in order for humanity to redeem itself from the destruction wrought by a man-god (Maui) (Griffith 2017). Maui represents the dangerous hubris of humanity, which is a very familiar narrative trope, and Te Ka represents the consequences of his actions, which he must ultimately face. Narratively this is also a poetic way of depicting the emotive meaning that lies at the heart of the term "anthropocene", our current geological age, during which the planetary environment has been significantly altered because of the activities and actions of humanity; and our now near-obsessive awareness of the effect we have had on the earth.

It is significant that Tefiti is depicted as gendered in all of her incarnations: as a nubile earth goddess, as the *mother* island, as the cronish and hag-like Te Ka and, finally, as Moana herself, when she recognises, firstly, the truth of Te Ka and Tefiti's unity, and, secondly, the mirroring truth of her *own* simultaneous destructive and creative potential. As the liminal and unstable volcanic boundary space where earth and water, solidity and fluidity, history and future, humanity and nature, life and death, meet, Te Ka acts as a mirror to Moana's own liminality and, ultimately, becomes the carrier of redemption. As only water can cool and solidify lava – thus rendering it safe, and ultimately fertile again (redemption) – so only the girl, Moana ("ocean"), can act as intermediary between humanity and the earth, between past and future, between male and female, to transform Te Ka back into Tefiti – through simultaneous empathic self- and other-love – and so save humanity from its own destructive power. That the viewer, in turn, identifies with the protagonist, and therefore learns the same lessons as Moana, is part of the cathartic magic of good storytelling, with the eventual sublimating pedagogical aim that cognitive knowledge combined with empathic feeling will transform behaviour; that awareness will become action.

That the female monstrousness in *Moana* seemingly forms an example of the familiar good girl/bad girl or Madonna/whore archetypal binary split (Gilbert & Gubar 1979) is obviously significant, but also deceptive. Unlike traditional narrative tropes grounded in this archetypal binary split, the film here teaches a far more modern and revolutionary lesson. Its central message is one of simultaneity, multiplicity, unity, complexity and paradox, therefore that *the binary is the myth*. As Cohen (996:6) notes, the monster is necessarily always 'a mixed category, [it] resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a "system" allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction), and resistance to integration'. In *Whale Rider*, similar themes are addressed, as Paikea becomes the liminal intermediary between symbolic binaries of land and sea, past and future, male and female, young and old, self and other, life and death.

The metaphor in *Moana* of a volcano (Te Ka) as cosmic birthing process is obvious and familiar, as land emerges from water in a manner reminiscent of many origin myths. However, despite on one level being presented as an amniotic space of life-giving potential and gestating future hope, the sea is also, on another level, presented as a subliminal reminder of the inherent dangers associated with creation and the giving of life. The potential for betrayal or death is ever-present. In *Whale Rider* the mythological cosmic balance is disturbed when humans begin to kill whales (until then considered ancestors/family) and in *Moana*, The Darkness (what Moana's grandmother calls 'devouring, blood-thirsty inescapable death') descends after Maui's theft of the greenstone heart of Tefiti. Both moments represent a rupture in which a life-giving force is betrayed by its progeny, and cosmic and ecological balance is disrupted as a result.

The reality of this symbolic birthing rupture, of mother-loss and of maternal self-sacrifice, is never far from the core of the narrative in *Whale Rider*, since Paikea loses her mother and twin brother at birth, when neither of them survive the birthing process. Paikea's return to the ocean on the back of the alpha whale, which clearly is a self-sacrificial suicide, is not only a symbolic death, but also a symbolic rebirthing – a reunion with her original life-force and a recovery of parts of her that were lost – for herself as an individual subject, but also for her community.

Similarly, in *Moana*, the young girl child is repeatedly depicted as symbolically dying in the ocean and being (re)born again, with renewed courage and wisdom, to face existential terror in order to renew and redeem herself and her tribe. Moana also loses her grandmother (a narrative mother substitute) to death in the film, which provides her with the impetus and courage to enact her own departure from her tribe, her subsequent adventures across the oceans of the world, and her ultimate return back to her community. As Moana leaves the island on a stolen tribal boat, her dying grandmother's spirit is seen rebirthing and reincarnating itself as a manta ray, in which form she then acts as Moana's spirit guide; the narrative frame of mythological cyclical time is reaffirmed, as one generation makes way for, and guides, the next. Both girls are shown to individuate and reintegrate successfully as they dispel the devouring threat of existential terror by sublimating it into a communal ethic of care.

Conclusion

Read from a pedagogical perspective, both of these girl-centred film texts make a strong case for complex thinking and for intersectionality as essential to the human condition, thus narratively positing and role-modelling ideological both/and complexities

rather than an insistence on exclusive and excluding either/or binaries and dualities. These are very difficult abstract concepts to contemplate – and practice – and may even seem counter-intuitive and threatening to many, especially in contexts where tradition is held as sacrosanct, like it is for Paikea's grandfather, Koro, who tells her that 'you don't mess with sacred things', and for Moana's father, who at the start of the film teaches her that 'tradition is our mission'. It is little wonder that we yearn for and nostalgically (re)create utopian myths about the return to a simpler time and place, where and when 'we knew who we were', as one of the tribal songs from *Moana* says. It also explains why we remain fascinated with and enthralled by the idea of childhood as redemptive and why narratives such as these, depicting children as counterbalances for our anthropocentric terror, has such popular appeal.

As Cohen (1996:5) notes, in any monster story, upon being vanquished, 'the monster itself turns immaterial and vanishes, [just] to reappear someplace else … [n]o monster tastes of death but once'. For the deep-rooted anxiety at our very core, which we continue to carry with us – even as we exit our cathartic viewing experience and leave the proverbial movie theatre (whether a real theatre or, increasingly today, the virtual theatres in and on our deceptively safe homes and portable devices) – is that the monstrous threat really still exists and may be lurking somewhere, ready to accost us again. Such too is the nature of the anthropocene terror which has become an inherent part of our very existence today, as the real-life monstrous dramas of climate change, environmental degradation and planetary catastrophe play out in front of us daily and increasingly affect our very being and survival, as individuals and as a species.

The association of children, terror and monstrousness is narratively always particularly effective, because it troubles our ideas about innocence, its inevitable corruption, and our culpability, just as it constructs youth as a redemptive category that will save us from our own darkest tendencies. As Cohen (1996:23) indeed notes, 'monsters are our children' – we create them and they hold us accountable, much like Frankenstein's creature, arguably the quintessential monster at the core of our modern imaginary complexes, who says to his parent-creator, 'Beware, for I am fearless and therefore powerful. I will watch with the wiliness of a snake, that I may sting with its venom. Man, you shall repent of the injuries you inflict' (Shelly 1987:179).

As Cohen (1996:23) says, our monsters 'can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return'. Cohen (1996:23) continues to say,

> And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, human knowledge – and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the

> Outside. These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to re-evaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them.

Moana and Paikea's battles with monstrousness, both in terms of human-wrought ecological degradation and social injustices, such as patriarchy, provide a discursive and imaginary space in which we can symbolically grapple with exactly these questions and insights. I end by returning to the real-life example we have today in the figure of young climate activist Greta Thunberg, who spoke on behalf of the children of the world – but also on behalf of the terrified children inside all of us – when she angrily spat the following words at world leaders at the 2019 United Nations Climate Action Summit:

> You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words … How dare you! … You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you … We will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not.

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