

# Sheroes of the Sea: A Comparative Reading of the Girl-Centred Films *Moana* and *Whale Rider*

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## Abstract

This article considers two contemporary films in which youthful female leadership has been depicted as sea narratives. These are New Zealand director Niki Caro's 2003 film *Whale Rider*, based on the 1987 short novel of the same name by Maori author Witi Ihimaera, and Disney's 2016 animated film, *Moana*. There are clear similarities in the narratives and, in fact, the directors of *Moana* cited Caro's *Whale Rider* as inspiration for their film. Both texts present the stories of young girls from Pacific Island communities and their individual and communal crises of existence and rites of passage. The classic hero's journey merges with the iconic trope of the sea journey (both traditionally male genres) and both are presented as the personal existential quests of young girls and their subsequent transformation of the communities they eventually will lead. Both films participate in the contemporary critical pedagogical revisioning task, by providing female equivalents or parallels to previously male-dominated mythologies and narratives of heroic journeying and quest, thereby contributing to a contemporary tradition of female sheroics.

**Keywords:** *Moana*; *Whale Rider*; patriarchy, Polynesia; ecology; leadership

## Introduction

*Whale Rider* (2002) is a critically acclaimed and internationally successful film by New Zealand director Niki Caro, which tells the story of a 12-year-old Maori girl's struggle for leadership of her community against the disapproving force of her patriarchal grandfather's restrictive tribalism. *Moana* is a 2016 Disney animated children's film, which tells the story of the rebellious daughter of a Polynesian tribal chief and her journey across the ocean, against her father's strict prohibition, to save her deteriorating island community from certain ecological destruction.



In both *Whale Rider* and *Moana*, the classic hero's journey merges with the iconic trope of the sea journey in Western literary traditions, both traditionally male genres. Consider for example, the quintessential voyage narratives of Jason and the Argonauts (first recorded in the *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius in the 3rd century BC), Odysseus in Homer's *The Odyssey* (first published in English in 1616), Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1623), the story of Queequeg, Ishmael and Captain Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900).

However, both the sea journey and the hero's journey are here, in these two girl-centred films, presented as the simultaneous coming-of-age inner quests of young *female* protagonists and their existential transformation of their communities. The survival of the *girl* child is the key to the survival of the community—also, by implication, the larger all-encompassing global community under ecological and climatological threat. This is a subliminal message in *Whale Rider*, written in 1987 and filmed in 2002 before the current discursive dominance of ecological crises narratives in both news and popular media, but it is quite explicitly at the centre of the more recent *Moana* (2016).

In this article, I will analyse these two oceanic girl-centred films as examples of sheroism, of which there are increasingly varied examples emerging in popular culture. What these two specific films have in common are their situatedness in broad Polynesian culture, their popular appeal and general enthusiastic reception, and their use of the sea as a running leitmotif for female quest, agency and voice, as opposed to the more traditional sea-based associations with maleness and male conquest. In both films the girl child specifically, and in particular in her relationship with the sea, is depicted as a symbol of sheroic hope.

I use the concept shero here as a regendered version of hero and because hero is often contaminated with patronising and paternalistic associations of gendered normativity that plays to the feminisation, superficialisation and infantilisation of great deeds of courage, commitment and bravery when performed by women. I use it also to distinguish it from the millennial (post) feminist concept of "girl power," with which Angela McRobbie eloquently engages in much of her work about what she calls "top girls" (2000; 2004a; 2004b). Often this representation of girl power degenerates into a highly sexualised inversion of hegemonic and normative laddish or bad boy behaviour, or it represents women who are obsessively anxious about sex and relationships. This kind of girl power is a trope that is, despite—or maybe because of—its direct inversion, still firmly embedded in the traditional heteronormative princess iconography associated with contemporary fairy tale narratives and Disney-type "girl" films. Examples of this type of girl power trope are the Spice Girls and the Pussycat Dolls girl bands of the late nineties, television programmes such as *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998–2004) and *Ally McBeal* (20th Century Fox Television, 1997–2002), and the Bridget Jones films (2001; 2004; 2016; based on Helen Fielding's books [1996; 1999; 2013]).

In comparison to these older anxiously sexualised women characters, and the more traditional Disney princesses (Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Beauty/Belle, Ariel, Jasmine—who are all presented as curvaceous, older, sexually aware/manipulative/manipulated girls), *Whale Rider* and *Moana* are both about young not-quite-yet teenage girls. Both films score highly on the popular Bechdel test (measuring the representation of women in film), which requires more than one named female character on screen who in a sustained way have conversations and meaningfully interact with one another, and do so about issues other than men, relationships, sex and romance.

## Similarities between the Two Films

Both *Moana* and *Whale Rider* present the bildungsroman coming-of-age stories of young girls from Pacific Island/Polynesian seafaring communities, their individual and communal crises of existence and rites of passage. In both films, the relationships of these two young female leaders are depicted in relation to the significance of the sea to their communities. As Mary Wiles (2007, 175) notes, “fantasies of girlhood are also [often] narratives of nation, replacing the male pioneer with the imaginative, tenacious female storyteller whose coming-of-age can be understood as the allegorical re-envisioning of national evolution.” Familiar heroic mythology is at the core of each of these stories, while each narrative rewrites or revitalises traditional non-Western mythologies, with female-centred counter-mythologies of communal, global and ecological hope. The films reflect the gendered discourse and politics of the four decades that collectively bookended the new millennium, which represented “discourse[s] of crisis and loss in relation to boyhood and discourse[s] of hope in relation to girlhood” (Nairn and Wyn 2015, 621).

In *Moana* and *Whale Rider*, the relationships of the female main characters with their father figures are complex (Electra, as Freudians would be quick to point out [Streiff and Dundes 2017, 1]) and these intergenerational gendered relationships are filled with subtexts of leadership struggles, legitimacy, legacies and heritage. Land, sea, male, and female binaries are juxtaposed to analyse the male-centredness and patrilineal traditions of the communities within which the characters are situated (as well as those of the broad viewing audience) and to emphasise the contrariness of the female lead characters. Both *Moana* (whose name means “ocean” in various Polynesian languages) and *Paikea* (in *Whale Rider*, irreverently and iconoclastically named after her tribe’s original *male* founding ancestor by her father) challenge patriarchy and their communities are shown to eventually be transformed and strengthened as a result.

The sea (and not the landscape, as Wiles notes) “serves as a correlative to the emotional states of [the] adolescents” (Wiles 2007, 175). Their successful negotiation of oceanic fluidity, depth and tempestuousness is what transforms the physical, conceptual and ideological landscape inhabited by *mankind* (their tribe or community), and the “rules of man/men.” The latter can be read in the sense of both the dominant socio-political patriarchal/patrilineal ideologies of the vast majority of cultures (historical and

contemporary) and in the psychoanalytic Freudian-Lacanian sense of the symbolic Law of the Father (what the father semiotically represents or signifies). The liminality of these young girl children, negotiating their tribal oceanic boundary spaces, is therefore the symbolic negotiation of a mirror-stage developmental experience on behalf of their communities (and cathartically, by implication, the viewer).

In both films, land is presented as a space of contestation, discord and division within communities and families, between male and female and between generations. However, the sea is depicted as a fluid space of co-ed or co-gendered and cross-generational unity. The ocean is where Moana unites with demi-god Maui to save the world. It is also where the reunification of Tefiti and Te Ka (the forces of life and death, creation and destruction) is established. In *Whale Rider*, it is the space where Paikea's (re)union, on behalf of her community, with their tribal ancestral whales symbolically frees her community from its blind adherence to debilitating belief systems.

At the end of both films, boundaries are crossed and space expands as the communities and individuals reach out toward the mythical other, on the other side of the reef or ocean, but also on the other side of the gender and generational divide, thereby rendering the other less of a threat and more of an identifiable likeness. Significantly, this boundary-spanning unity and openness to change results from the leadership of the two girl protagonists, Moana and Paikea. At the cusp of adulthood, but still children, they signify the liminality of "border-crossers or outlaws," which Henry Giroux (2012, 13) notes is a quintessential characteristic of youth. Giroux also speaks of a contemporary crisis regarding youth: "Lauded as a symbol of hope for the future while scorned as threat to the existing social order, youth have become objects of ambivalence" (2012, xiv–xv). It is this ambivalent liminality, being both inside and outside the established social and gender order, that enables Paikea and Moana to challenge and eventually transform their societies powerfully *from within*.

This ambivalent liminality of youthful boundary-spanners is therefore in both films presented as potentially unifying. This is depicted in the resolution and final scenes of both of these films of heroic hope. Both films end with scenes of the communities (men and women equally and together, across generations) launching and steering tribal boats out onto the sea, reclaiming the voyaging traditions of their Polynesian ancestors, with a girl at the helm leading the way into the unknown future, alongside her father (in *Moana*) and grandfather (in *Whale Rider*, her father and uncle are also present). The message is quite clear in both films, presenting what Gonick calls "the notion of a future that is female" (2010, 312). *Moana* tellingly ends with the song, "We Know the Way," with the emphasis both on "we" (as in together, unified) and on having recuperated direction, purpose and meaning. *Whale Rider* similarly ends with Paikea in voice-over concluding her own narrative with the words, "I'm not a prophet, but I know that our people will keep going together with all our strength."

Compare these images of young girls at the helms of tribal boats, heading into the distant horizon, to the old sailors' superstition that women on a ship would cause disaster and the seemingly contradictory tradition of, often bare-breasted, female bow figureheads as protection for sailors against the dangers of the sea. Reputedly, the bare breasts would shame or awe the sea into calmness. This binary juxtaposition and depiction of women as both curse and salvation is typical of much of Western—and arguably many other—cultural and narrative traditions. In *Whale Rider* and *Moana* these familiar binaries are troubled and interrogated, as the young girl protagonists are depicted in complex relationships with both the sea, their communities and their ancestral traditions. I here also include the more general heteronormative global tradition of male dominance and patriarchy, as both films appeal to global audiences and addresses global concerns through a universal appeal to common contemporary challenges, such as the power and love relationships between sexes and between generations.

### **The Politics of Representation and of Indigenous Context/Content**

At this point, I would like to acknowledge the existence of some critiques from within the Maori community and from Maori scholars about the depiction of Maori/Polynesian femaleness in films aimed at global audiences. Tania Ka'ai's (2005) reading of *Whale Rider* is especially insightful in these terms, particularly her notes on Maui's link to femaleness through his fish hook (which is not presented in *Moana*) and the lack of reference to Maori female deities, such as Hine (who is not mentioned in either film). Ka'ai also insightfully speaks of the existence of varied traditions within Maori culture, which in some cases are rooted in rich matrilineal traditions and traditions of female leadership, unlike that which is depicted in Caro's version of *Whale Rider*. The original novel provides more nuanced depictions of different male and female traditions in Maori culture and mythology, but the core narrative of a girl challenging patriarchy remains intact. It is thus important to acknowledge the complexity of representation in both films (who is telling the story, about whom, to whom and for what purpose) and the complexity of cultural diversity within all indigenous cultures, which are always necessarily inherently plural and never a single or simple monolithic entity.

Disney's *Moana* indeed creates an indistinct and conglomerated "syncretization of Polynesian cultures" (Streiff and Dundes 2017, 1), which could be Hawaiian, Samoan, Maori, Tonganese or Fijian, set at an indistinct time in the long-distant mythological past. This is part of the universal appeal of the film to a variety of diverse global audiences. *Whale Rider*, on the other hand, is situated within a specific Maori tribal community (the Ngāti Porou) in a specific location (the town of Whangara on the east coast of New Zealand), although it extensively uses magic realism to fold back to a mythical time of tribal origin. *Whale Rider* was written by one of the most respected Maori authors, Witi Ihimaera, who was also involved in the conversion of his original 1987 novel into script format for the film. Ihimaera is often seen as a leading figure in the Maori renaissance of the latter decades of the twentieth century (Child 2015, 1; Evans 2006, 16). Both Ihimaera and the Maori community where the narrative is set

(and the film was made) enthusiastically and proudly accepted the film as a Maori text and cinematic product (Dodd 2018, 8). White female New Zealand director Niki Caro set new standards for engagement with indigenous communities through the ways in which she involved the local community in the making of the film and sought their approval and advice during production. Virginia Pitts (2010, 2013) sees this as the evolution of “a mutually respectful democratisation of traditional screen production culture.” Disney, similarly, 14 years later, established the Oceanic Story Trust for *Moana*, consisting of locals, elders, advisors and experts on Polynesian culture, traditions and customs, to steer the sensitive representation of the story and its characters (Hamacher and Guedes 2017).

For the purpose of the argument here I therefore acknowledge but will avoid the contested issues around the rights to representation of indigenous cultures, and the variety of versions of any given tribal or oral tradition, as these issues are being discussed in many other spaces, specifically with regard to these two films. In the rest of this article, I will consider both films as indigenous-based narrative products with universal appeal, aimed at global audiences, and I will focus on providing a comparative reading of the films from such a perspective. Future projects may include a reading of girl-centred narratives from other cultures and contexts, for example the South African narratives of Racheltjie de Beer, Klara Majola/Violet Jansen and Nongqawuse.

## **The Complex Nexus of Critical and Popular Pedagogy**

These two films exemplify the complexity at the mediated nexus where critical and popular pedagogy meet. Following Henry Giroux, critical pedagogy can be defined as the ability to critique or to critically engage with one’s environment and the variety of social apparatuses employed in all forms of its governance and management—of thought, behaviour and affect. Public pedagogy, on the other hand, 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). For Giroux, “any practice which intentionally tries to influence the production of meaning is a pedagogical practice” (Giroux and Simon 1988, 21). Film is then necessarily pedagogy *par excellence*.

Giroux further states that “the political work of pedagogy includes the articulation of practices not only within sites, but also across them” (Giroux and Simon 1988, 21), which is exemplified in the way that *Moana* and *Whale Rider* function at the nexus where the sites of feminism, history, indigenous cultures, mythology, narrative practice and film technology converge. The universality and relatability of a narrative (the monomyth, according to Joseph Campbell, or Jungian archetype) is part of the ineffable “magic” of successful storytelling. Generally, stories would simply not survive if they did not appeal to their audiences in a relatable way, especially not in our contemporary time with its overabundance of alternatives at the click of a button and the increasingly short attention spans of audiences/consumers.

Consequently, the wider and more general the appeal and uptake, the better, especially if transformation is the aim (as in the case of critical pedagogy), but also in the case of popular pedagogy where economy (fiscal, as well as the economy of information, signs and symbols) is a driving force. As Giroux says in his analysis of the cultural influence of Disney in *The Mouse that Roared* (1999, 110),

If Disney films are to be viewed as more than narratives of fantasy and escape, becoming sites of reclamation and imagination that affirm rather than deny the long-standing relationship between entertainment and pedagogy, it is important to consider how we might insert the political and pedagogical back into the discourse of entertainment. In part, this points to analysing how entertainment can be addressed as a subject of intellectual engagement rather than as a series of sights and sounds that wash over us. This suggests a pedagogical approach to popular culture that asks how a politics of the popular works to mobilise desire, stimulate imagination, and produce forms of identification that can become objects of dialogue and critical investigation.

The critical question is then, how is the appeal factor controlled and managed and how is it constituted by, and in turn constitutes, subjectivity, experience and identity? Part of the subversiveness of both of these filmic texts (whether intentional or not) is the fact that they portray, enact and perform youthful female critical pedagogy (young women learning from, teaching and changing their communities; they are change agents to societal transformation), while simultaneously applying appealingly familiar tropes (heroism, the quest, the sea journey) *and* functioning on the mass market popular principles associated with the entertainment industry (consumerism, commodification, merchandising). Thus, they present critical pedagogy and public pedagogy *simultaneously and interdependently*, with the one driving the other and *vice versa*. Meaning and pleasure are combined in the learning process, which “make[s] the familiar strange and the strange familiar” (Giroux and Simon 1988, 9, 13). Attempting an uncoupling would be futile.

## **Intertextuality, Subtexts, Narrative Gaps and the Tradition of Heroism**

The similarities between the two films are immediately obvious: powerful, adversarial, paternal figures; supportive but deceptively limited maternal figures, who wield different kinds of power; the Polynesian cultural context; “a community frozen in time” (Morris in De Souza 2007, 15) by tradition and convention; natural forces, in particular the ocean, that become anthropomorphised as characters (in *Whale Rider*, as whales), acting simultaneously as aids and adversaries to the protagonists; and an adventurous young girl on a personal quest, but on a greater mission to help her community—and to save the world. These are conventional staples of the traditional heroic quest tale and journey narrative, though the traditional protagonist is usually male.

Ron Clements and John Mesker, the directors of *Moana*, indeed acknowledge that Caro’s *Whale Rider* inspired them, so there is an openly acknowledged homage in the

one film to the other (Giardina 2016). They also said they were inspired by films such as *True Grit*, originally a 1969 Western (remade in 2010) in which a young girl sets out with a grumpy John Wayne across the American Wild West to save her family from ruin and to avenge her father's death, and *Maidentrip* (2013), a documentary film about Laura Dekker, a 14-year-old Dutch girl who single-handedly crossed the oceans, in an attempt to sail around the world (Ramos 2016).

Contemporary audiences might immediately recognise the controversial young environmental activist, and now Nobel Prize nominee, Greta Thunberg here. Thunberg has, for example, committed herself to travelling in ways that are environmentally friendly (not flying, which means travelling mostly by boat across the oceans of the world) and in a scathing speech at the 2019 United Nations Climate Change Summit she raged against the global powers-that-be on behalf of the children of the world. Reflecting much of what Giroux said about the contemporary crisis about youth and their role as outlaws and border-crossers, Thunberg (NPR 2019) said,

You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. ... We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. 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. And if you choose to fail us, I say, 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.

Although both *Whale Rider* and *Moana* (also *True Grit* and *Maidentrip*) were released long before Thunberg emerged on the global media scene, it would be interesting to know whether Thunberg has had access to any of these filmic texts (and other similar ones) and whether they would have implicitly or explicitly influenced her, in which case interesting questions could be asked about life imitating art.

Though we cannot answer for Thunberg's influences here, it is, however, abundantly clear that both *Moana* and *Whale Rider* tapped into what Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) calls a monomyth, which makes them historically, internationally, cross-culturally and cross-generationally universally relevant. The films tap into well-known archetypes, in Jungian terms. Like it or not, that is the "magic" of Disney, irrespective of whether one says that with an ironic subtextual reference to the popular mass-market consumer ideology on which the Magic Kingdom is built, or whether one more naively sees in it only the youthful transformative appeal of idealism and hope. Actually, it is necessarily a bit of both, with the one depending on the other for its narrative survival.

As a result, both *Moana* and *Whale Rider* participate in the contemporary critical pedagogical revisioning and re-mythologising task, by providing female equivalents or parallels to previously male-dominated mythologies and narratives of heroic journeying and quest, and thereby contribute to creating a tradition of female heroics. L. Frank



Baum's Dorothy in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (first published in 1900 and captured on film in 1939) is one of the perennial examples of female heroic journeys in contemporary culture, following on Lewis Carroll's earlier young female character in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (first published in 1865).

More examples that are recent can be found in Disney and Pixar's female characters in *Maleficent* (2014; 2019) (a sympathetic revisioning of the evil witch in the fairy tale about Snow White), *Brave* (2012) (with Scottish Merida who refuses to marry on her family's command), *Frozen* (2013) (from the traditional tale of "The Snow Queen," with the *philiat* love story between sisters Elsa and Anna), and even in *Saving Mr Banks* (2013), in which a multi-layered backstory is given to Mary Poppins and her creator P.L. Travers. An example can also be found, of course, in the character of Katniss Everdeen, of the *Hunger Games* film trilogy (2012; 2013; 2014; 2015), originally written by Suzanne Collins (*The Hunger Games* [2008], *Catching Fire* [2009] and *Mockingjay* [2010]). A more recent illustration can also be found in Patty Jenkins's version of *Wonder Woman* (2017), which depicts the heroic deeds of Diana, an Amazon with superpowers, from the mythical island of Themyscira.

Each country and culture would have their own set of historical and fictional heroes, but films from New Zealand seem to be particularly concerned with female youthfulness. Wiles (2007) says that "the New Zealand girl character is metonymically associated with a nostalgia for an innocent, pure state" and Message (2003) notes that "the girl' invokes the intertwined concepts of innocence and experience and signifies as a symbol of the tradition of transcendence" (as quoted in Gonick 2010, 309). Two other popular New Zealand films that received global releases and critical acclaim (also significant criticism in the case of the latter, for reasons not relevant to this article's topic) and can be read in conversation with *Whale Rider* and *Moana* are Jane Campion's Academy Award-winning *The Piano* (1993) and *River Queen* (2005, directed by Vincent Ward). Both are historical narratives, set during colonial times in New Zealand, and feature young women (though older than the child protagonists in *Moana* and *Whale Rider*). Furthermore, in both films, like in *Moana* and *Whale Rider*, water (the sea in *The Piano* and the rivers of New Zealand in *River Queen*) is a continuous metaphor for the protagonists' psyche, sense of, or struggle for, identity and (disconnection from) community.

In these films water is also a metaphor for female sexuality, which is an aspect that is absent from the narratives of *Moana* and *Paiea*, girls on the liminal cusp of womanhood, but still definitively innocent children. Psychoanalytical readings of *Moana* and *Whale Rider* may be quick to point out that the girls' negotiation of bodies of water is symbolic of their transition into womanhood and their battles with patriarchal traditions symbolise their emergence (baptism / birthing) into the gendered order (Connell 1987). Though valid, this would be a subliminal reading, as the texts provide no overt clues to sexuality, although (the challenging of) gender roles are obviously a strong theme in both films.

However, Ihimaera's original novel of *Whale Rider* is at times quite redolent with sexual subtext, though not in relation to the young protagonist as such, but rather in the depiction of the original mythical greater ecological love relationship between humanity and nature, particularly the sea, and also between the land (as the place of modern mankind/humanity) and the sea (as the place of the ancestor whales). For example, Ihimaera (2003, 6) narrates the tribe's origin myth in overtly sexualised language when he writes the following:

In the old days, the years that have gone before us, the land and the sea felt a great emptiness, a yearning ... they ... seemed to be waiting. ... Waiting. Waiting for the seeding. Waiting for the gifting. Waiting for the blessing to come. ... The first of the Ancients were coming, journeying from their island kingdom beyond the horizon. ... The land and the sea sighed with gladness: We have been found. ... In that waiting time, earth and sea began to feel the sharp pangs of need, for an end to the yearning. ... Then one day, at its noon apex, the first sighting was made. A spume on the horizon. A dark shape rising from the greenstone depths of the ocean, awesome, leviathan, breaching through the surface and hurling itself skyward before falling seaward again. Underwater the muted thunder boomed like a great door opening far away, and both sea and land trembled from the impact of that downward plunging.

... Then the flying fish saw that astride the head, as it broke skyward, was a man. He was wondrous to look upon, the whale rider. The water streamed away from him and he opened his mouth to gasp in the cold air. His eyes were shining with splendour. His body dazzled with diamond spray. Upon that beast he looked like a small tattooed figurine, dark brown, glistening, and erect. He seemed, with all his strength, to be pulling the whale into the sky. ... And the song in the sea drenched the air with ageless music, and land and sea opened themselves to him, the gift long waited for: *tangata*, man. With great gladness and thanksgiving, the man cried out to the land: *Karanga mai, karanga mai, karanga mai*. Call me.

In both *Moana* and *Whale Rider*, the two female protagonists are presented as the result of this ecstatic seeding between land and sea, humankind and nature, as the future hope and continuation of their people, and so as the revitalisation of this greater ecological relationship of mutual love and care.

Both films are significantly devoid of the clutter of traditional heteronormative romanticised and sexualised love relationships. There are no conventional love interests in the films—a departure for Disney from their traditional princess formula, which also could be seen in their 2013 blockbuster hit, *Frozen*. In *Frozen* the love story is the one between the two sisters, Anna and Elsa, thus it is a story of *phillial* love and of sisterhood. In *Moana* and *Whale Rider* the love story is about the love of a girl for her community and her heritage, thus again *philia*, *agape* and *caritas* instead of *eros*. This is a significant turn in popular (girl) children's films, especially for Disney, and thus in popular pedagogy, as it sends clearer messages about equality of the sexes and of the fluidity, expansiveness and complexity of love and care as encompassing more than

merely a romanticised utilitarian coupling of characters, irrespective of whether these couplings are heteronormative or not.

However, another image entirely is presented in another acclaimed and globally successful New Zealand film, centred on the story of a young girl of the same age as Paikea and Moana. One would be remiss not to mention it here, though it differs from the other films in that the sea does not feature in this film. This is Lee Tamahori's 1994-film *Once Were Warriors* (based on Alan Duff's 1990 novel). In it Tamahori presents a cultural dystopic image of the post-colonial reality in which many contemporary urbanised Maori people live—exactly the opposite of the fertile and fecund images conjured up in the above passage quoted from Ihimaera's novel, the verdant hills and coastline of *Whale Rider's* Whangara and the vividly animated island-paradise of Motonui, where Moana lives.

Tamahori's film was billed as a story about “one woman's fight for freedom ... one woman's journey home” from the “frightened ... angry ... lost” remnants of a once-proud Maori people (*Once Were Warriors* Original Theatrical Trailer 2016), so the sheroism theme is clearly apparent. Here too, original Maori myths and legends (restored by a young girl, who unlike Moana and Paikea, tragically does not survive or triumph) are juxtaposed as a lost communal ethic of care, in comparison to the existing degradation of urbanised poverty, addiction and violence. *Once Were Warriors* tellingly opens with a shot of the pristine New Zealand landscape (snow-capped mountains, lakes and grass lands), then pans away to reveal this image as a billboard advertisement for some or other product, placed high above a busy city freeway with rushing traffic. This can be read as an equivalent subtext to the Darkness that descends over Moana's island and tribe, though here it is symbolically depicted more in terms of environmental degradation than in socio-political terms. It is also clearly depicted in the lethargy and dissociation of the community of Whangara in *Whale Rider*.

The storyline of *Once Were Warriors* centres on a 13-year-old Maori girl, ironically named Grace, who is raped by an uncle and then commits suicide. Her grief-stricken mother, Beth, says the following to her abusive and drunken husband, Jake, who refuses her the right to bury her dead child at her tribal *marae* (sacred meeting ground):

From now on, I make the decisions for my family ... You've got nothing I want. Our people once were warriors, and unlike you, Jake, there are people with *mana*, pride, people with spirit. If my spirit can survive living with you for eighteen years, then I can survive anything.

As she gets in the car to drive away from him, one of her surviving children asks her, “Where are we going, Mom?”, to which she answers, “We're going back.” The implication is back home, to her tribal community, but also to the original traditions and cultures of the Maori people, before contamination, dilution and disempowerment. Arguably, this return home is exactly what is depicted in the girl-centred films *Moana* and *Whale Rider*, which could in that case be read as a textual response (though not

necessarily intended as such) to Tamahori's scene in which the female intention and drive to go home is so powerfully depicted.

I also read this in relation to another scene from *Once Were Warriors*, when Beth and her surviving children sit down for a meal at their dining table. Her husband Jake is absent, drinking in a bar with his friends. This is a moment that takes place just after they return from Grace's funeral. The broken family of mother and children hold hands to say a blessing over their food and Beth unthinkingly speaks the very familiar words, "let's say grace." One of the children then calls "Grace!" into the empty rooms of the house, as they would have done so many times when their sister Grace was still alive. Not only is this family joke a heart-breaking moment of familial pathos and memorialisation, but it is also a symbolic calling to the ancestors, a calling up of the spirits of guidance and protection. When read in conjunction with the soon to follow scene of Beth's final confrontation with, and departure from, Jake (quoted above; also with the moving scene of Grace's burial at the tribal *marae*), then the G/grace they say also signals the resurrection of their family and of their reunification with their heritage and tribal traditions. Though Grace paid the ultimate heroic price, as the symbolic Christ-like scapegoat, for the detachment from community and tradition, her death (like those of so many tragic heroes) becomes a symbol of redemption and hope for those who survive and supersede her. In this context, I read both the characters of Paikea and Moana in conversation with, and as iterations of, Grace. They are situated on a spectrum of filmic symbolic representations of sheroic girlhood, with tragic Grace on the one end and Paikea and Moana triumphantly on the other end of the spectrum.

## **The Sea as Metaphor for Youthful Female Leadership**

Both *Moana* and *Whale Rider* extensively employ magic realism, fable and fantasy to simultaneously both subvert and moralise (Gonick 2010, 306). Gonick calls *Whale Rider* "a gender fable ... at a crossroads of discourses and meanings" and "a double project that resymbolises girlhood as it also produces a decolonising of the screen ... and the notion of a new, active, powerful and agentic femininity" (2010, 305). The same applies to *Moana*. Both films deal with three ideological assumptions that are metaphorically, rather than realistically, depicted and related. These are patriarchy, social and ecological decline. In the films these themes are presented as "sublimated and metaphorical violence" (Joyce 2009, 247), entrenched by means of paternalism, exploitation and subsequent environmental degradation.

In both films the sea and its surroundings are presented as an ancestral anchor to the community, which has become unmoored and is in need of direction. As such, the sea is both symbolic of an idyllic mythical past and of a nostalgic hope for the future. The sea is depicted as a metaphor for communal (re)integratedness and unity, stretching beyond chronological parameters and timelines, and beyond mere individual participation, as it is the symbolic intergenerational theatre of ritualistic legacy and hereditary dynamics.

As the sea is in both films associated with the young female protagonists, it is also a fluid space for a corrective to previous petrified, exploitative, male-dominated and patriarchal traditions. In Ihimaera's *Whale Rider*, Paikea's grandfather-patriarch is mirrored in the old bull whale that leads his pod to suicide by beaching himself, as her grandmother, Nanny Flowers, is also mirrored in the matriarch of the whale pod. Both grandfather Koro and the old bull whale are dinosaurs of a previous time, caught in a blind melancholic male-centred nostalgia for what they believe to have been a utopian by-gone era. Ihimaera extensively employs magic realism as a narrative technique in his novel and the thoughts of the whales are therefore visible to the reader. The thoughts of the whale matriarch, and companion of the old suicidal bull whale, are narrated as follows (Ihimaera 2003, 137–38):

In her heart of hearts, she knew that he was badly wounded and near to exhaustion. ... Although she loved her husband, and had done so for many whale years, she was not blind to his faults. Over the past few years, for instance, he had become more and more depressed, considering that death was upon him and revisiting the places of his memory.

Both Nanny Flowers and the matriarch whale try to influence their male partners, who are self-destructively stuck in their male-centred nostalgia for another time, but both older females fail, since they are complicit in that which brought their tribes and societies to their states of crisis. Both grandfather Koro and the old bull whale are eventually turned away from certain personal and communal destruction through the gentle steering of the youthful *female* leadership of the young Paikea, the reincarnation of their tribal ancestral wisdom.

The danger is that their fixation on their nostalgia for an imagined past could very well destroy the future, as the whale's submergence with Paikea would mean her certain death and therefore the tribe's loss of their opportunity for regeneration and renewal. The matriarch desperately tells the bull whale, "the rider that you carry isn't Paikea ... this is the last spear, the one which was to flower in the future ... It is the seed of [ancestor] Paikea ... and we must return it to the land" (Ihimaera 2003, 141). Slowly it then dawns on the old bull whale that he is dealing with a new generation and that he must look towards the future and not towards the past.

Similarly, Nanny Flowers hands the totem whale's tooth necklace that signifies tribal leadership back to grandfather Koro when Paikea disappears under the waves with the whales and is thought forever lost. The totem was lost when Koro took the young boys of the community out on a boat, excluding Paikea from his search for a new tribal leader. He threw the totem in the sea and instructed the boys to jump in to find it; that the one who finds it will be the designated chief after him, chosen by the sea and ancestors. However, none of the boys manage to find it. They are also not particularly keen to do so, as they are also not very keen to take up the leadership role in their community; they all know and accept that this is Paikea's destiny. The totem is then shown to sink to the bottom of the sea, lodging among sea weeds and coral, presumably lost forever, as Koro sinks into a deep melancholic depression and takes to his bed in despair over the future

of his tribe. Without her grandfather's knowledge, Paikea asks her uncle Rawiri (accompanied by her grandmother in the book) to take her in his boat to where the totem was lost. She jumps overboard and easily emerges soon afterwards, victoriously holding the totem of her tribe's chieftainship—a clear sign that even the sea and ancestors acknowledge her designated leadership and rightful place at the head of the tribe.

The last sight the community has of Paikea is of her riding on the back of the alpha whale towards the horizon, with all the other whales following, then being submerged under the waves. Ideas of suicide, sacrifice and the immeasurably painful burden of rejection are resonant as the weeping community loses Paikea and her grandfather is given a final sign that she was indeed his designated and worthy successor to lead the community, when his wife gives him back his totemic chief's necklace, which Paikea recovered from the sea. He asks her "which one?" (meaning "which one of the boys found it?") and she answers him with the words, "what do you mean 'which one?'" implying that there was always only one—Paikea, his granddaughter. In the novel, Ihimaera describes his realisation and reaction as follows: "He raised his arms as if to claw down the sky upon him" (Ihimaera 2003, 133).

The film, however, does not end here, but continues to show Paikea's grandfather later receiving a phone call from a hospital to say that she has been found and is in a coma. They hasten to the hospital, where he finally transcends his own self-righteous and patronising limitations, and begs Paikea's forgiveness with the words, "Wise Leader, forgive me; I am just a fledgling new to flight." Paikea opens her eyes and looks at him with recognition and forgiveness. Joyce (2009, 248) speaks of Paikea's "insistence on being heard by the only person who will not listen," namely her grandfather. Similarly, Moana's father does not hear her visionary voice, as he warns her to stay away from the sea and prohibits her sailing beyond the protective reef that signifies their tribal boundary. But at the end of the film Moana returns home to the warm embrace of her mother and father. She tells her father, "I may have gone a little beyond the reef," to which he says, "it suits you."

At the end of both films, both father figures are transformed, as they have to face the death of their daughters and the loss of their legacy, because of their stubborn insistence on patriarchal tradition and the credo of father knows best. The subversive subtext of the story is therefore arguably far more important than the female journey, the *anagnorisis* (self-discovery and insight) and *peripeteia* (change of attitude and behaviour) of the patriarchal male characters, which signal a transformation of attitude and behaviour within their communities. The critical pedagogy at work here is obvious, as it presents new lessons about new ways of engaging with the self, the other and the common world that all must share together. In Ihimaera's (2003, 142) text this change in the old bull whale is narrated as follows:

As he remembered, the bull whale began to lose his nostalgia for the past and to put his thoughts to the present and the future. Surely, in the tidal waves of Fate, there must have

been a reason for his living so long. It could not have been coincidence that he should return to Whangara and be ridden by a descendant of his beloved golden master. Perhaps, his fate and that of the rider on top of him were inextricably intertwined. Ah, yes, for nothing would have been left to chance.

## **Transformative Leadership, Female Voice and Agency**

*Moana* and *Whale Rider* are also very significantly stories of girls as transformative leaders. As Joyce (2009, 247) says about *Whale Rider*, both are stories of a girl “who can bring her community into the twenty-first century.” In both films, the viewer sees the protagonists in familiar hero shots, traditionally the domain of male heroes. Both Paikea and Moana are shown alone against the odds, facing down or resisting male authority figures, and as being in conflict with their communities’ compliant acceptance of a variety of environmental, socio-economic or socio-cultural conditions. Through their non-compliance and subversiveness, the two girls transform the world around them and lead their communities to renewal.

Messages about female voice and agency are ubiquitous throughout both films. It is most obvious in the fact that the stories are focalised from the perspective of the girls, and in the film version of *Whale Rider*, Paikea is also the narrator (this is not the case in the novel, which is narrated by her uncle Rawiri). Paikea’s emotional speech at school, in honour of her absent grandfather, specifically calls for a new style of leadership. This is, as Gonick (2010, 314) points out, a “significant political speech act for a Maori girl in the name of her desire that is radically deligitimised by the authoritative figure of her grandfather.” As De Souza (2007, 19) notes, “she assumes her role as a breaker of tradition but also establishes her ancestral lineage as she addresses the empty chair in the front row.” Ihimaera (Ihimaera, Meklin and Meklin 2004, 360) notes (also about his own female relatives) that “while Maori women may have had cultural power, Maori women did not have political power ... their whole lives were engaged in negotiations within a primarily patriarchal culture and political framework. That is still the situation today.” In her speech, Paikea claims and occupies the tradition and discourse that marginalises her, thereby changing it *from within*. Speaking to her grandfather’s empty chair, she says:

This speech is a token of my deep love and respect for Koro Apirana, my grandfather. My name is Paikea Apirana. I come from a long line of chiefs, stretching all the way back to Hawaiki, where our ancient ones are. The ones that first heard the land crying and sent a man. His name was also Paikea. I am his most recent descendant. However, I was not the leader my grandfather was expecting. In addition, by being born, I broke the line back to the ancient ones. Nevertheless, we can learn. If the knowledge is given to everyone, then we can have many leaders. Soon, everyone will be strong, not just the ones that have been chosen. Because sometimes, even if you are the leader and you need to be strong—you can get tired. Like our ancestor, Paikea, when he was lost at sea ... and he could not find the land, and he probably wanted to die. However, he knew the ancient ones were there for him. Therefore, he called out to them to lift him up and give him strength.

Similarly, in the song “How Far I’ll Go,” Moana verbalises her struggle about leadership when she says,

I can lead with pride, I can make us strong  
I’ll be satisfied if I play along  
But the voice inside sings a different song  
What is wrong with me?  
See the light as it shines on the sea, it’s blinding  
But no one knows how deep it goes  
And it seems like it’s calling out to me  
... See the line where the sky meets the sea  
It calls me  
And no one knows how far it goes  
If the wind in my sail on the sea stays behind me  
One day I’ll know how far I’ll go

Women’s voice(s) are in many traditions associated with water, especially with the dangerous lure of the sea, as the sea is anthropomorphised into creatures such as mermaids and sirens. The word siren literally means to send a warning call and refers back to the sirens of Greek mythology (no man survived after hearing their alluring voices), who were originally nymphs who aided Demeter in her search for her daughter Persephone, who was abducted by Hades, god of the underworld. In *Moana*, this legend is reversed, as it is the girl child, Moana, who searches the oceans of the world to bring the mother island, Tefiti, back to life. In *Whale Rider* Paikea is also motherless and searching for reunification—her mother died along with Paikea’s twin brother during their birth.

The Greek hero Jason (and his sailors, the Argonauts) only survives the call of the sirens because they have Orpheus among them on board, a famed musician, who drowns out the song of the sirens with his own in order to ensure the survival of his shipmates. Some narcissistic intertextuality is at play here and one can clearly see resemblances with the humorously self-aggrandising character of Maui in *Moana*. Paikea’s grandfather Koro similarly silences her and drowns out her voice and vision. The other seminal Greek hero, Odysseus, saved his ship and crew from the sirens’ call, having his sailors fill their ears with wax, while he had himself tied to the mast of his ship as a way to resist the female voices of doom.

But women’s voices are also portrayed as most dangerous to themselves. Some legends say that the sirens committed suicide after Odysseus’ escape, as prophesy foretold would happen when their voices were resisted. Also, consider the original Hans Christian Anderson tragic fairy tale about Marina, “The Little Mermaid” (1837). This is Ariel to Disney aficionados, depicted in the 1989 happy-ending film version created by the same directors responsible for *Moana*. In the original narrative, the mermaid protagonist exchanges her voice for land-dwelling legs and the love of a disloyal man.



In the end she must mutely choose between killing him or killing herself; she chooses the latter.

Think also of the Lorelei in the Celtic-Germanic tradition—a word that literally means “murmuring” (the sound that water makes), but also “lure,” thus denoting enchanting water-voices that lure sailors to their death. In the legend of the Lorelei, she lures men to their death with her voice in vengeance for being betrayed and spurned by the man she loves. Her origins, incidentally, lie in the Greek myth of Echo, ignored/spurned lover of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own image in a pool of water. Again, it is not difficult to see the resemblance with Maui here.

There is, of course, also Shakespeare’s (1603) quintessential tragic heroine, Ophelia, who drowns herself when Hamlet rejects her love for him (which he, in part correctly, identifies as the manipulations of her father, Polonius). There is the equally tragic Lady of Shallot (1833 and 1842) in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem of Arthurian courtly love, who, when fated to love a man who cannot return her love, sets herself afloat in a boat down the river, where she sings herself to death: “a long drawn carol, mournful, holy, / she chanted loudly, chanted lowly ... singing in her song she died, / The Lady of Shalott.” Both Moana and Paikea avoid this fate and emerge from their symbolic oceanic deaths empowered and triumphant.

So, in *Moana* and *Whale Rider*, female voice is appropriated very differently from the long-standing and prevailing male-centred traditions with which they engage. After following their inner calling (their inner voices toward self-discovery, not self-destruction), both girls turn this outward to carry a new message to their tribes in order to facilitate the transformation of their communities. Their leadership does not merely replace one form of dominance with another, but is communal as it empowers all members of the community; as Paikea’s speech clearly states, “if the knowledge is given to everyone, then we can have many leaders.” The survival of the agentic girl and her speaking of truth to power signifies the survival of the tribe. By speaking up and out, these young girls transform the previous generation, rejuvenate communal leadership and thereupon follows the change in the social systems of their people. They prevent not only their own self-destruction, but also the implosion of their communities. In this way, the resurrection from the water, of the individual female subject, also becomes the resurrection and renewal of the community, with new and improved values and beliefs. The baptism of the characters is also the baptism into a new way of life for their communities.

## Conclusion

In a 2016 interview (DEGNZ), Niki Caro noted that she thought the girl power aspect of *Whale Rider* was obvious and old-fashioned and not the most interesting thing about the narrative. She conceived of it as more essentially a narrative about “what it takes to be a leader” and therefore about gender politics. She considers the success of the film (and other New Zealand films) as centred on the combination of unique authentic voices,

specific stories, and in their dealing with deep subjects with a light touch. She also speaks of seeing Paikea's story as a metaphor for her own creative work and struggle as a female director of a feature film in an overwhelmingly male-dominated industry. This is an issue that has recently (also amid the #MeToo furor, which started in Hollywood) received much renewed attention (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media n.d.; Women and Hollywood 2018).

When Paikea's grandfather finds out she has been training by herself in the tribal male ceremonial traditions (*haka* [war chant] and *taiaha* [stick fighting]), through eavesdropping on and copying what he teaches the boys, he shouts at her that "you don't mess around with sacred things." Similarly, Moana's father tells her, "Motunui is all you need ... tradition is our mission ... you must find happiness right where you are." Ironically, this is exactly what both girls go ahead and do, and what the films do: they mess around with sacred things; they challenge the established norms of their societies and transform customs and tradition in true heroic form. Their communities are rejuvenated and transformed because of their symbolic sacrifice, and consequently unity is ritually enacted by their tribes venturing forth together in boats onto the ocean. The restorative message is one of intrapersonal, interpersonal, communal and ecological unification, which is communicated by the bull whale in Ihimaera's novel (2003, 147), when it says,

Then let everyone live, and let the partnership between land and sea, whales and all humankind, also remain.

In addition, the whale herd sang their gladness that the tribe would also live, because they knew that the girl would need to be carefully taught before she could claim the place for her people in the world.

Girl-centred films such as these function on a pedagogical and political level by supplying alternative images and role models to the silences, gaps and stereotypes of earlier times. As the slogan of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media states, "if she can see it, she can be it" (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media n.d.). By depicting young girl heroes who triumph and are celebrated, films such as these construct images of, what Nairn and Wyn (2015, 830) call, future girls, "located in ordinary settings in which gendered and racialized stereotypes are significant hurdles to be overcome." They also suggest that representations of girls "overcoming the limitations of these stereotypes is presented as a parallel to solving deeper social problems." The films *Moana* and *Whale Rider* are pertinent examples, also in their intertextual relationship with one another, of this potentially transformational pedagogical force of, and in, popular culture.

## **Biographical Note**

Belinda du Plooy has worked in higher education for more than 20 years in various capacities, both academic and managerial. She holds qualifications in Public Relations

Management and Communication Studies (NDip: PRM) and in English Studies (BA, BA Hons [cum laude], MA [cum laude]). Her highest qualification is a DLitt et Phil degree. Her master's dissertation is on the topic of pain and healing in the work of Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison. Her doctoral thesis is on the topic of compassion as metanarrative in postmodern discourses. She lives in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, and works at Nelson Mandela University as an academic engagement manager and postgraduate supervisor across a variety of Social Science and Humanities departments and disciplines. Her areas of academic specialisation, publication and supervision include literature, philosophy, popular culture, film studies, women's and gender studies, communication and media studies, and higher education practice.

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