

DISNEY AS ECO-LITERATURE: THE NEED FOR  
ACCESSIBLE ENVIRONMENTAL NARRATIVES

by

HANNAH SEBRING

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Approved: Hollie Smith, PhD  
Primary Thesis Advisor

We are at a moment in time where environmental crises continue to worsen and impact every aspect of life around the globe. The way people learn about, understand, and respond to the environment is of critical importance. My thesis aims to underscore the importance of media narratives in shaping environmental attitudes. Specifically, my thesis examines Disney films as eco-literature, exploring the ways in which art and multimedia can tell the story of the environment and instill environmental stewardship in audiences. Environmental stewardship and care for the planet can be instilled at an early age and grow as children are exposed more to environmental settings, and media. Through the lens of *Moana*, *Frozen*, and *Frozen 2*, this thesis examines environmental issues in films and how they are represented. Further research involves a qualitative survey which asks audiences their takeaways from *Moana*, synthesizing the experience of an audience member during and after watching a film.

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## Introduction

Once upon a time, a young college sophomore took a Clark Honors College class on Eco-literature. She was presented the opportunity to play a song she felt represented the themes of the course for her classmates. She eagerly awaited her day to share her selection, contemplating the choice for weeks leading up to the event. It had to be Disney, obviously, since it was her Walden (her safe space). It couldn't be too obvious, though, since she had to prove her knowledge of Disney *and* the environment. Suddenly, it came to her: “kid, honestly, I could go on and on, I could explain every natural phenomenon. The tide, the grass, the ground? Aw, that was just Maui messing around.”<sup>1</sup> Growing up, I spent many Saturdays with my family curled up on the couch watching a Disney movie—which is still a favorite activity for me. *Moana's* Maui perfectly encapsulated the mission of eco-literature: exploring the connection between humans and the environment.

Expanding beyond *Moana* to include more Disney films, my thesis analyzes three Disney movies as eco-literature. I am exploring how art and multimedia tell the story of the environment and instill environmental stewardship. We are at a moment in time where environmental crises continue to worsen and impact every aspect of life around the globe. The way people learn about, understand, and respond to the environment is of critical importance. My thesis underscores the importance of media narratives in shaping environmental attitudes.

As I've learned through environmental studies scholarship, the themes of ecofeminism, environmental justice, and ecology are interwoven into Disney films. One

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<sup>1</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (0:39:51).



of my challenges as a student in environmental studies has been effectively communicating with a wide range of audiences the importance of caring for the planet, while not feeling discouraged at the state of the environmental crisis. Environmental literature is sometimes hard to understand and fails to garner the care of the public. Disney, however, has garnered a wide and effective platform for communicating values, lessons, and ideologies; in recent films, this has translated to care and reverence for the natural environment as well.

Eco-literature is the study of environmental communication in literary works, for the sake of this project that translates also to multimedia disciplines such as film studies. Eco-literature, then, provides the framework for a close reading, applying themes from environmental studies to ultimately understand the interactions of the environment and characters in Disney films. I believe if the public is going to understand the magnitude of climate change, there must hope for a better future. Hope is critical for environmental efficacy as it provides a viable route for improvement, and satisfaction afterward.<sup>2</sup> Further, communication and awareness are central support systems for this hope and garnering the widespread collaboration needed to address issues such as climate change.<sup>3</sup> If there is truly no realistic hope for climate change mitigation and adaptation, the political agency, collective care, and understanding of the environment disintegrate—leaving so many vulnerable to climate disasters.<sup>4</sup> I believe the negativity surrounding much of the environmental discourse discourages a wide

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<sup>2</sup> Marlon et al., “How Hope and Doubt Affect Climate Change Mobilization.”

<sup>3</sup> Marlon et al.

<sup>4</sup> Marlon et al.

range of the American public from engaging in this existential conversation and further exacerbates the disconnect between humans and nature. Disney is engageable and light enough for many people to enjoy while still learning pertinent communal values.<sup>5</sup>

### **Framework**

This project reflects environmental studies and the humanities in its interdisciplinary approach. Aiming to reconcile the divisiveness of environmental discourse and create accessible narratives for everyone, this thesis does not seek to uphold Disney as an all-knowing corporation. Rather, the project examines how Disney portrays the environment and how this affects the audiences. While not trying to erase the gravity of efforts ahead for climate change mitigation and environmental management, this project seeks to provide hope for the future. To accomplish this goal, I first explore the valid critiques of Disney as well as previous literature on films and nature, before analyzing the representation of nature in *Frozen*, *Frozen 2*, and *Moana*. These form the foundational understanding of how the environment is represented in film works and the public eye. I connect those lessons to the actual takeaways of an audience, as evaluated through a qualitative survey.

### **Critiques of Disney**

This work will not explore the implications of Disney's corporate behavior, but it is important to acknowledge the historic damage of their representation of Indigenous communities as well as the global imperialism which comprises part of Disney's success. This project in part moves away from Disney's sorted past as the dialogue in

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<sup>5</sup> Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 2.

mainstream culture is now more receptive to genuine stories dissimilar to the white, colonial narratives of the past: “While Disney has a history of possessing—or, as the epigraph above suggests, ‘swallowing’—Indigenous stories by transforming them into two-dimensional fantasies, I propose that, in the case of *Moana*, Pacific people enacted their own form of possession by staking a claim on how their collective story would be told by the media giant.”<sup>6</sup> The important feature here is Disney would have likely told their version of *Moana* with or without consultation. While they treat the participation of Pacific Islander scholars in the creation of the tale as an elite privilege, it *ought* to be a right to include and respect Indigenous people when depicting Indigenous stories. This reflects also on the racist caricatures of Indigenous Persons in *Peter Pan*, white colonists in *Pocahontas*, glorification of slavery in *Song of the South* and the *Splash Mountain* ride that followed, as well as so many more.<sup>7</sup> Even as Disney produced a strong telling of *Moana*, the exploitation of that narrative for profit remained. Maui, a central character in the film is based on a real demigod in Pacific lore, but he is not depicted in any of those stories because he is seen as too powerful to be demeaned by form; not only is Maui depicted (in a seemingly stereotypical obese build that plays on representations of Pacific Islanders), but a Halloween costume for children was made using Polynesian tattoos and a buff suit.<sup>8</sup>

Disney’s brand is fantasy, and that appeals to storytelling and wonderment in children especially, but much of that fantasy is exploited to fit the role of Disney as a

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<sup>6</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti, “Beyond Paradise?”

<sup>7</sup> Bisset, “Disney’s Wrestling with Its Racist History on Disney Plus.”

<sup>8</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti, “Beyond Paradise?”

corporation to simply accumulate revenue.<sup>9</sup> Wasko and many other scholars refer to this as the Disney phenomenon: commodifying cultures and dominating the 21st century media domain.<sup>10</sup> The consolidation of other media companies into the Disney corporation additionally allows “a strategy of seamless market expansion.”<sup>11</sup> This expansion continues into realms such as theme parks, cruises, stores, experiences, etc. not to mention the merchandising opportunities. Profit and accumulation of capital—both fiscal and social—is crucial for the brand’s success. The appeal of Disney to this project is its scope among audiences, which is in large part because of this imperialist expansion of media control, marketing, and exploitation of stories already told. These points of critique are incredibly important and need to be considered as background context for this project. While studying and expanding these critical lines of scholarship is beyond the scope of this work, it is important to situate the Disney corporation in this historical and political context. Exploring Disney in this project does not seek to undermine any of these very important critiques and certainly does not excuse Disney from its long legacy of corporate irresponsibility. By distinguishing Disney as a corporation from the art they produce, I can recenter the values and morals explored solely in the films and relate further to the audience.

### **Disney as Art**

Disney lends itself to this analysis because of its large scope in media, its recognizability among audiences, as well as accessibility through streaming platforms.

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<sup>9</sup> Wasko, “The Magical-Market World of Disney.”

<sup>10</sup> Wasko.

<sup>11</sup> Wasko.

Film is an important avenue for exploring collective understanding of the surrounding world, linking “the conventional dichotomy between (scientific) explanation and (humanistic) interpretation” which “is inadequate.”<sup>12</sup> “When we engage fully with a film,” explains Murray Smith, “we come to believe in the reality of the represented events (or in more complex formulations, we ‘suspend our disbelief’, or ‘disavow’ our knowledge that we are perceiving a representation).”<sup>13</sup> This has been a critical notion for exploring film theory and serves as an important reminder in this project of the power of film for cognitive awareness.<sup>14</sup> Thinking of films through a naturalist perspective

can also underline that experiencing and appreciating artworks does not involve a simple one-way escalator, from early vision to purely conceptual activity; rather it draws us into a cycle of perception, emotion, cognition, and reflection. As we watch a film, for example, our embodied minds are always encountering new images and sounds, even as we formulate higher-order interpretations which relate what we are currently seeing and hearing with what we have already perceived, and in general work on processing the film at a more abstract level.<sup>15</sup>

The comprehension of a film, then, does not happen linearly and generates a cycle of personal reflection which often involves emotion. Senses like seeing and hearing account for the “embodied minds” which absorb all the new “images and sounds” on a subliminal level. Reflection of the experience of watching and interpreting in rapid succession all this information then forms perception. Even if a film is watched start to finish, the perception and processing of the work itself is cyclical. This presents an

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<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film*.

<sup>13</sup> Smith.

<sup>14</sup> Smith.

<sup>15</sup> Smith.

incredible opportunity to explore heavy emotions or themes in a highly safe and reflective process which continues after the film has ended.

Following the analysis of the film, which includes many of the elements Smith describes, a survey was designed to examine if environmental stewardship is fostered through this content. The survey reflects Smith's stages of the embodied mind: emotion, cognition, and reflection. Audiences had the opportunity to view and interpret their respective experiences with their emotions, thoughts, and key takeaways. They then were asked to make connections and reflect on the interactions between the characters and the environment in *Moana*. These movies were selected in large part for their modern lens, female representation, inclusion of Indigenous cultures, and holistic representation of environmental and human systems than many of Disney's previous films.

### **Research Questions**

This project is informed by two overarching research questions:

*Research Question 1: How is nature depicted in popular Disney films?*

*Research Question 2: Does this help audiences understand environmental issues and encourage environmental advocacy.*

These questions are informed by the increasing use of technology and visual content to educate and inform younger generations. These are the same populations which will inherit a planet strife with ecological crises, and how they manage them is of significant interest to environmentalists like myself and many other affected populations. These depictions convey the intense threats of climate change and other environmental disasters in more accessible and digestible ways than news or scientific

literature. Through this understanding, the hope is younger generations are more connected to the environment and will seek environmental stewardship roles in their day to day lives.

## **Existing Literature**

### *The Fantastic*

Accredited novelist Neil Gaiman explores the power of the fantastic in an interview with “Book Riot”. He explains, “what I find fascinating about the real world is that fantasy is one of the few things that allows you to talk about the imaginary. From what I can see, the imaginary is the thing that occupies most people’s lives and allows them to function.”<sup>16</sup> He distinguishes between fantasy and the imaginary, pointing to fantasy as a device to explore the imaginary to a large extent. Not only that, but he underscores the importance of the imaginary beyond just a leisurely form of entertainment but as something which allows people “to function.”<sup>17</sup> Gaiman extends this comment by sharing, “the glory of fantasy is that it allows you to inspect that. It allows you to take one step away from a quotidian reality in which we accept imaginary things as real.”<sup>18</sup> An important step for him as an author and for his readers, then, is accepting the imaginary as real. Through this acceptance, Gaiman argues one can inspect their function in society and their relationship with the imaginary.

Bruno Bettelheim, in his novel, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, refers to the fantastic as “a frontier between two adjacent

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<sup>16</sup> McCracken, “In Conversation with Neil Gaiman.”

<sup>17</sup> McCracken.

<sup>18</sup> McCracken.

realms.”<sup>19</sup> Bettelheim references also the placement of the fantastic as being “located on the frontier of two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny.”<sup>20</sup> These two quotes are distinct as the second refers to the fantastic’s role as a genre and the first looks at the actual application of the genre into the life of humans. The “two adjacent realms,” then can be seen as the fantastical or imaginary realm and the human ‘reality.’ This is critical in evaluating the functions of *Frozen*, *Frozen 2* and *Moana* in society and extrapolating their importance. The films are considered fantastic because all three bridge humans to another realm in which the magical or supernatural is normalized and used to demonstrate the moral. “The fantastic,” as Bettelheim continues “lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from ‘reality’ as it exists in the common opinion.”<sup>21</sup> In a film, a director makes many choices which link the characters to the audience and can manipulate many elements of the media to encapsulate the audience further, extending the fantastic even further.

### *Whitley*

In some ways, my work is an extension of David Whitley’s book, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation: From Snow White to WALL-E*. Throughout the chapters, Whitley explores how Disney’s (then) “newest films continue to demonstrate, the messages animated films convey about the natural world are of crucial importance to their child viewers.”<sup>22</sup> He explores the idea of nature and sentimentality in *Snow White*,

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<sup>19</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, 41.

<sup>21</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, 41.

<sup>22</sup> Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 1.



*The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Bambi, Pocahontas, Brother Bear, Song of the South, The Jungle Book, Tarzan, The Lion King, and Finding Nemo.* Whitley looks specifically at sentiment and the idea of wilderness. “The challenge,” in working with the sentiment of investing in technologies and small adjustments in life is the re-evaluation of entire lifestyles that comes with integrating “thought and feeling at a more profound level and in new ways.”<sup>23</sup> Whitley calls for “a whole revolution in sensibility and the value systems that underpin our lives,” and argues art has an important role to play in said revolution.<sup>24</sup>

Art—including film—according to Whitley, serves a unique function in the 21st century of focusing and integrating thoughts and feelings in a digestible way for audiences which allows them to relate “to the most fundamental challenges of our existence” and awareness.<sup>25</sup> Climate change is the most existentially threatening occurrence in the 21st century human experience. Women and younger members of society tend to be the most aware and concerned for the climate crisis humanity faces,<sup>26</sup> proving the themes of strong femininity and the aimed audience of these films is relevant in environmental conversations. Art can serve as a bridge between audiences and environmental literacy.

Whitley extends this argument by demonstrating nature, and “wild nature” have always been central in Disney’s productions. “The theme of wild nature” he explains, “forms the very heartland of Disney’s animated features from their inception in *Snow*

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<sup>23</sup> Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*.

<sup>24</sup> Whitley.

<sup>25</sup> Whitley, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 2.

*White* through to recent films such as *Finding Nemo* and *Brother Bear*.<sup>27</sup> The way humans perceive ‘nature’, and how they relate to what they deem to be ‘natural’ are of central importance to facing the climate crisis. Whitley focuses his exploration of idyllic nature in Disney through his concept of sentiment. He argues the occurring role of sentiment in stories like Disney’s can provide audiences “with a cultural arena within which heightened emotions and humor, rather than operating as a barrier to thought and critical engagements, might offer a relatively safe sphere within which crucial issues could be rehearsed and even—in light forms—explored.”<sup>28</sup> This extends the content of films beyond just aesthetic or entertainment value and proves even Disney animated features can engage audiences with “crucial issues.” Exploring these issues in a “safe sphere” means even those who would be climate change deniers or have differing agendas can re-evaluate those stances solely based on the film. Similarly, children and young audiences who have less experience with environmental discourse are first exposed to the concepts of protection in an easily accessible way.

Nature, according to Whitley, has always formed a central role in Disney’s animations and is not solely a backdrop but an immerse function of the films. As expansive animated features emerged, they were grounded in environments which were easily recognizable as “wild nature,” but did “not serve a merely decorative function.”<sup>29</sup> The environments are also central to plot development and are actively engaged with in many of the films Whitley explores. Defining home, especially for a child, requires “establishing a satisfying and interdependent relationship with nature.”<sup>30</sup> Humans, then,

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<sup>27</sup> Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*.

<sup>28</sup> Whitley, 2–3.

<sup>29</sup> Whitley, 8–9.

<sup>30</sup> Whitley, 8.

*must* orient themselves around nature to confirm their sense of self—either in conjunction with or in opposition to their environment. This is true of characters in films as well, perhaps even to a greater extent since these films often reflect deep human archetypes and timeless struggles. Whitley contends, “the emotional identification that these features in part facilitate undoubtedly enables a powerful empathy to be built up between the viewer and an archetypal image of nature as a form to which we are connected and owe allegiance.”<sup>31</sup>

While Whitley’s work came before the release of *Moana*, he compares the effects of a more pastoral—or Western—landscape and that of the tropics and argue they serve slightly different functions in works. Whitley details,

The exotic distancing effect created by tropical settings instead of a realistic landscape where, to an even greater extent than in other kinds of Disney animation, fantasies, and deep-seated cultural longings can be projected and worked through. Hence, rather than being structured around the patterns of a quasi-realistic natural history, as in *Bambi*, these films tend to take up the quest for a harmonious natural world, within which humans can be fully integrated, in the form of popularized myths.<sup>32</sup>

While conceptualizing “tropical” as “exotic” points to the objectification of the tropics for the pleasure of colonizing countries, the distancing effect Whitley mentions does entrance audiences more in the fantastical. Further, a more recent understanding of cultural representation and honoring indigenous communities would contrast Whitley’s assessment of anything besides the woods and prairie settings of *Bambi*—as he mentions—as not being “quasi-realistic natural history.” As beautiful as the tropics are as a setting, and it is used heavily by Disney in *Moana* for that Westerner gaze, for the

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<sup>31</sup> Whitley, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Whitley, 16.

people who have lived there since time immemorial it is precisely the “quasi-realistic natural history” of their community and implying otherwise undermines indigenous sovereignty and cosmologies further. It is unclear what he means by “deep-seated cultural longings,” but in the case of *Moana*, the paradise environment is what allows her to explore Polynesian and Pacific “popularized myths” and the key themes discussed later in this paper.

Although discussion thus far has centered on the power of film to connect with audiences on multiple socio-emotional levels, Whitley quantifies his work—and mine—when he says, “no one would pretend that watching Disney films is going to compensate for what Richard Louv (2005) has characterized as the ‘nature-deficit disorder’ that looms so large within modern childhood, nor that any form of art is a substitute for the understanding that comes from direct experience.”<sup>33</sup> Time outdoors cannot be substituted with screen time, especially as screen use looms over children and parents alike as technology increases. I believe there are instances where films are critical supplementary experiences, however. Environmental justice issues, policy management, access to the outdoors, and the depletion of nature may limit a child’s potential exposure to the outdoors. As the world changes, including increases in technology, the relationship with nature changes as well and may have to be supplemented by films and other formats. This thesis does not aim to undermine the value of environmental immersion

but art can foster our rich imaginative engagement with the world in surprising forms; it can provoke reflection by making us see the world

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<sup>33</sup> Whitley, 167.

afresh from strange, new or even fantastical angles; and it can bring our daydreams out into a peculiar kind of refracted light, wherein we see and feel things more intensely and pleurably for a while.<sup>34</sup>

Whitley, in this statement, precisely extrapolates what the key takeaways from this thesis aim for. The fantastical and pleasurable are the incentives for watching novelty films like the ones Disney makes, and they are clearly important for the collective imagination of society. If audiences or readers takeaway anything from my work and Whitley's, I hope it is reflection on the world around us and invoking daydreams about making it a better place.

### *The Blue Humanities*

The blue humanities shift focus from the “green” environmental humanities to an aquatic focus, or “thinking with water” and moving away from the solidity of terrestrial humanities to the fluidity embodied by water.<sup>35</sup> The blue humanities are especially relevant for *Moana*, and Tamaira and Fonoti argue Pacific people were able to engage in the telling of their own narratives, and have their cosmologies represented in a public sphere appropriately. The blue humanities allow exploration of much more fluid and ever evolving epistemological issues, expanding the realm of the possible and contrasting the restrictions of terrestrial life. “Moana,” Tamaira and Fonoti describe, “is a proto-Polynesian word that means “sea beyond the reef, ocean.”<sup>36</sup> This is pertinent in understanding Moana's journey to becoming a voyager, simultaneously embodying the potential of the blue humanities in fleeing her restrictive home and exploring her own

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<sup>34</sup> Whitley, 167.

<sup>35</sup> Alaimo, “Project MUSE - Introduction.”

<sup>36</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti, “Beyond Paradise?”

identity as an ocean namesake. Even in the face of resistance from her father the chief—a journey paralleled by many Pacific islanders throughout history—Moana serves as a reconnection to the Pacifica past as represented in *Moana*.<sup>37</sup> These journeys—much like the Northuldra/Sami in *Frozen 2*—also existed in pre-colonial times before “these artificial divisions of space imposed by the West had not yet come to define the world.”<sup>38</sup> These “divisions of space” exist solely on land, which can be conquered whereas the sea can only ever be explored. It is important to correct colonial narratives of domination and exploration in media representation for both the fostering of Indigenous perspectives and removing the notion of a single narrative of the vast environments and cultures in the world.

### *Paradise*

Paradise, as a visual and cultural representation in much of media, continues extortion of beautiful, “idyllic” environments and their Indigenous communities for the sake of commodification and Western Extractivism.<sup>39</sup> *Moana* plays into this trope to an extent with its stunning visual aesthetics and landscapes, but there is a counter ‘anti-paradise’ narrative woven into the framework of the film, discussed extensively in Chapter 1. There are “no people on earth are more suited to be guardians of the world’s largest ocean than those for whom it has been home for generations.”<sup>40</sup> *Moana* is a profound example of the need of Indigenous cosmologies to be included in resource management and environmental care; she is the youngest empowered individual of her

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<sup>37</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti.

<sup>38</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti.

<sup>39</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti, “Beyond Paradise?”

<sup>40</sup> Hau’ofa, “Our Sea of Islands.”

society and demonstrates aptly how young minds are able to transform an entire community's relationship to their environment into a symbiotic and dynamic one.

### *The Northuldra and the Sami*

*Frozen 2* acts as a sequel and prequel to the high grossing *Frozen*, wherein Elsa's powers are explained and more about the context of Arendelle as a Norwegian kingdom is explored. Especially noteworthy in the plot of *Frozen 2*, is the exploration of the mythical Northuldra who the nomadic indigenous communities are north on the fjord Arendelle sits upon. "The Northuldrians" explains Kalvig, "are easily conceived as Sami due to their way of life, a nomadic lifestyle in the northern plains (of "Norway"), herding reindeer."<sup>41</sup> The Sami are the indigenous communities of Norway, and their inclusion in the film and the execution of indigenous reparations as the key to saving everyone is an important commentary on anti-colonialism. It is refreshing and wonderful "that a movie pitched at kids should unexpectedly step into this urgent political and ethical terrain" in such a "radical and politically imaginative" manner.<sup>42</sup> This inclusion, especially in a Disney film, "is a call for a new kind of public ethics, one that asks us to extend the values we teach our children to our politics."<sup>43</sup>

Basing the Northuldra on the Sami and portraying them in such a magical and positive light is a "reversal of the primitivism of the past,' where the traits that once placed indigenous people on a lower, evolutionary stage now cater for their 'position as

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<sup>41</sup> Kalvig, "Nature and Magic as Representation of 'The Sami'—Sami Shamanistic Material in Popular Culture."

<sup>42</sup> Satia, "Frozen II Isn't Just a Cartoon. It's a Brilliant Critique of Imperialism."

<sup>43</sup> Satia.

peaceful, wise and noble caretakers of environmental wisdom.”<sup>44</sup> Disney, “the creators of these products stand out as confident creators of new worlds, magical worlds and ritualization’s for us to take part in.”<sup>45</sup> The depiction of the Northuldra still represents mainstream iconography of earth colors representing indigeneity, which can be problematic and slightly primitive.<sup>46</sup> Kalvig posits the representation of “the Sami/Northuldrians” as a “people wearing brown and beige clothes, contrasting their real-life typical use (concerning traditional clothes) of bright colors like red, blue and yellow—for the contrast between the people of Arendelle and the Northuldrians to be made.” The Northuldra are still fictitious even if based on the Sami, so the distinction in color choices may also have to do with the “color palette of both the *Frozen* films [being] mainly bluish and purple” and not necessarily primitivist perceptions of the Sami. Stylistic choices are still at the discretion of the content creators, so the color scheme of the Northuldra is not as central to their representation as their cultural practices or role in the film.

Representing and normalizing non-Christian cultures, especially those considered shaman, signals an important divergence from the whiteness and Western lens of Disney movies past. This not only greatly extends the amount of work which can be done to support indigenous communities in mainstream Western pedagogy, but also familiarizes audiences with new cultures and expands the conversations to be had surrounding environmental care. Kalvig extends, “the films, series, songs, and

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<sup>44</sup> Kalvig, “Nature and Magic as Representation of ‘The Sami’—Sami Shamanistic Material in Popular Culture.”

<sup>45</sup> Kalvig.

<sup>46</sup> Kalvig.



performances are/convey magic and religion in their own right, in playful ways, for those willing to see, listen, sense and indulge themselves.”<sup>47</sup> Satia reinforces, “*Frozen II* bravely shows that even prosperous European countries are not immune from the consequences of climate crisis, which is turning entire communities into refugees with increasing frequency.”<sup>48</sup> *Frozen 2* signals a crucial divergence from Judeo Christian narratives in popular art and a prioritizing of environmental care in the cultures represented.

## **Methods**

### *Films*

The movies selected for this project, *Frozen*, *Frozen 2*, and *Moana* were selected in large part for their modern lens, female representation, inclusion of Indigenous cultures, and more holistic representation of environmental and human systems than many of Disney’s previous films. Ecofeminism is the notion that caring about environmentalism inherently warrants caring about those affected by environmental justice (or lack thereof).<sup>49</sup> This lens helps me explore both female representation in the films as well as systematically disenfranchised communities, like Indigenous ones.

These movies are also some of Disney’s highest grossing films, meaning they are widely received and well liked among a large audience that factors into the accessibility and breadth of both Disney films and this project. “The top three highest

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<sup>47</sup> Kalvig.

<sup>48</sup> Satia, “Frozen II Isn’t Just a Cartoon. It’s a Brilliant Critique of Imperialism.”

<sup>49</sup> Hobgood-Oster, “Ecofeminism-Historic and International Evolution.”

grossing animated films are all Disney,” with *Frozen 2* surpassing its predecessor *Frozen* as “the highest grossing animated film of all-time and continues to charm enthusiastic audiences, adults and kids alike, around the world.”<sup>50</sup> *Moana* outgrossed *Frozen* at the time of its release, grossing \$600 million to *Frozen*’s \$400 million.<sup>51</sup> These movies are all released within the last decade, as opposed to Whitley’s study of Disney films from *Bambi* (1942) to *Finding Nemo* (2002), lending themselves to the modernity of this project and again reiterating the pertinence to current younger generations. For the sake of scope and consistency, all three films exist within Disney Animation Studios, not Pixar. *Wall-E*, which was originally considered for this project, was excluded because Whitley analyzed it already and it exists within Pixar Studios as opposed to Disney Animation Studios.

Although this thesis does not look at Disney as a corporation, the pertinence of the success of the films is directly applicable to the sentiment of the project and is only discussed in the context which the art will be associated with its producers. Disney+, released in November of 2019, has surpassed its 5 year goal of 60 million subscribers in just under a year, most of which are in the United States and a select few European countries—proving there is room for much more growth as a global.<sup>52</sup> “Disney,” Whitley quotes Henry Giroux, “inscribes itself in a commanding way on the lives of children and powerfully shapes the way America’s cultural landscape is imagined.”<sup>53</sup> To ignore the scope and adoration for Disney’s films—as measured in the box office—would be disingenuous to the goal of connecting the project directly to audiences.

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<sup>50</sup> Whitten, “‘Frozen II’ Is Now the Highest Grossing Animated Movie of All Time.”

<sup>51</sup> Mendelson, “Box Office.”

<sup>52</sup> Sherman, “Disney Has Won the First Stage of the Streaming Wars.”

<sup>53</sup> Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*.

These three films feature strong female leads—again unprecedented in many Disney films—as well as concerns for Indigenous cosmologies, holistic ecology, and environmental justice.

### *Close Reading*

For my analysis, I will be focusing on semiotic, narrative, and cultural analyses of each film. Semiotic refers to the “interpretation of signs and symbols,” and their relationship to characters or inanimate objects in a film. These films were selected in large part because of their cultural and political progressiveness, so cultural/historical analysis is another critical component of the close readings of the films. These analyses frame the film in the time it was made and how it interacts with those broader contexts.

Timothy Corrigan explores the key components of film analysis: story, plot, and narration.<sup>54</sup> The story refers to the events that are presented to us or that we can infer have happened, and the plot is the arrangement of those events in a certain order or structure.<sup>55</sup> Narration is the perspective that organizes the plot around a point of view which can be emotional, physical, or intellectual.<sup>56</sup> Point of view, however, may be subjective or objective and can also be interpreted culturally or psychologically.<sup>57</sup> All three films fit a classical narrative, wherein there is a logical relation between one event and another, a sense of closure (happy ending), a focus on characters, and some realism.<sup>58</sup> Corrigan notes, “One result of the expanding vision of animated cinema has

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54 Timothy Corrigan, “Film Terms and Topics for Film Analysis and Writing,” 39.

55 Timothy Corrigan, 39.

56 Timothy Corrigan, “Film Terms and Topics for Film Analysis and Writing,” 39.

57 Timothy Corrigan, 40.

58 Timothy Corrigan, “Film Terms and Topics for Film Analysis and Writing,” 40.

been the development of narratives with bi-level addresses whose stories can speak at once to children and adults.”<sup>59</sup> Animation technology has increased significantly since the release of Corrigan’s work, but he foreshadows the increase of technology like 3-D attempting “to take advantage of an often astonishing realism that allows spectators to experience a film as if physically inhabiting it.”<sup>60</sup> This immersive realism is exactly why these three modern releases are the basis of the thesis: they capture nature dynamically and entrance audiences. A question Corrigan posits, which I seek to answer in my analysis is: “How and why does animation complicate the relations between the human world and the nonhuman world in the film as a function of its forms and themes?”<sup>61</sup>

Corrigan’s work informs my knowledge on film studies, but my analysis remains in the lens of environmental studies and eco literature. Eco cinema is an emerging field which focuses specially on environmentally messaged films and their common themes. Most importantly,

‘Ecocinema’ . . . covers a broader range of films that may cultivate our perceptions of ecological and environmental issues through a reduced human subjectivity, shifting viewers’ perspective ‘from a narrow anthropocentric worldview to an earth-centered, or ecocentric, view in which the ecosphere [...] is taken as the “center of value for humanity.”’<sup>62</sup>

Ecocinema, then, does not discount anthropogenic existence but rather reframes the worldview to an ecological focus. Cultivating “perceptions of ecological and environmental issues” brings humans and the environment into a conversation. This is

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<sup>59</sup> Timothy Corrigan, 76.

<sup>60</sup> Timothy Corrigan, 77.

<sup>61</sup> Timothy Corrigan, 77.

<sup>62</sup> Chu, “Ecocinema.”

an important recognition of the need for environmental dialogue in mainstream media. Some authors distinguish between Eco cinema and environmental films, with Eco cinema serving more as a critique of the state of environmentalism rather than proposing a reframing of humans and the environment altogether.<sup>63</sup> Chu quantifies the distinction further by saying, “the initial impetus of studying natural environments in film lies in a romantic notion of resisting the destruction and conquest of nature, as a means of raising awareness towards the physical world.” They frame this in the context of traditional literary studies as well, drawing a connection between the two which also served as motivation in creating this project. Ecocinema seeks to uplift the environment and raise awareness of critical issues like destruction rather than perpetuate them. My analysis of the films demonstrates they seek to do the same: uplift the environment and the challenges it faces while refocusing human values and promoting inclusion.

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<sup>63</sup> Chu.

## Chapter 1: *Moana*

*Moana* begins with the tale of deep greed and exploitation of nature for the personal gain of humankind, propelling the climax of the story forward to one of environmental protection and connectivity. Motunui is home to Moana, the chief's precocious daughter, and it serves as the perfect idyllic representation of Indigenous Pacific paradise. Motunui is shocked into exploration and expansion to survive when the darkness spreads to the island because of the heart of mother nature being stolen by demigod Maui. Humankind and ethereal beings alike must respect nature—represented in *Moana* by the goddess Te Fiti—and cherish the relationship to thrive and flourish in all aspects. *Moana* is an eco-literature epic because Moana and Maui both learn the value of trusting in nature and depending on her for guidance, reciprocity, and any semblance of hope for the future. The hero's journey in *Moana* involves combatting ecological downfall for food security and cultural identity, and the resolution reflects hope for humans working symbiotically with nature. Moana's environmental stewardship stresses the importance of adaptation in response to ecological deterioration and exhibits creative solutions and Indigenous perspectives for environmental efficacy.

### *Te Fiti and Motunui*

The kingdom finds itself vulnerable to the environmental degradation precipitated by the Extractivism of the feminine and natural body. Grandma Tala, the chief's mother, begins the film by sharing the story of Maui and Te Ka:

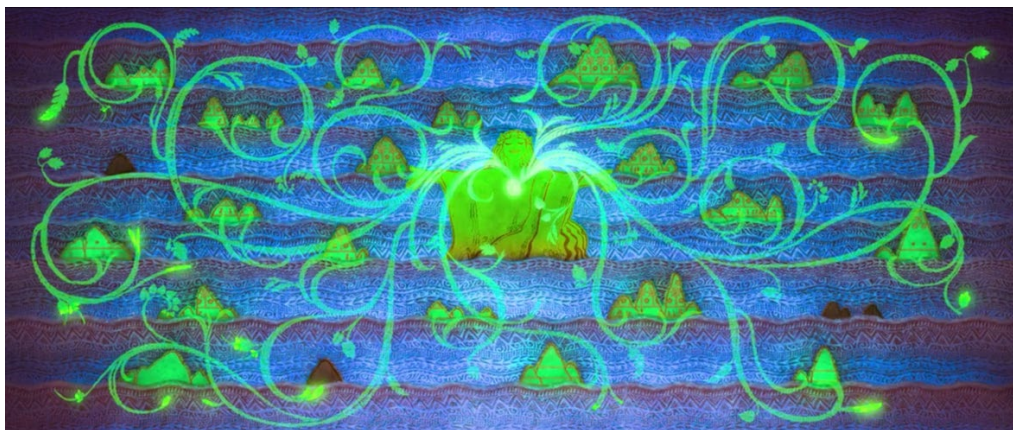


Image 1: Mother Island<sup>64</sup>

“In the beginning, there was only ocean until the mother island emerged: Te Fiti. Her heart held the greatest power ever known. It could create life itself. And Te Fiti shared it with the world. But in time, some began to seek Te Fiti’s heart. They believed if they could possess it the great powers of creation would be theirs.”<sup>65</sup>

Grandma Tala entrances the audience first in an oral narrative that represents the traditions of many Pacific Island cultures, while also introducing the intersection of femininity and nature. In Image 1, Te Fiti is central to all the islands and the lines connecting all of them across the ocean stem from her heart, a brighter green circle in her chest. She has her arms open—as if in an embrace—as the “life” flows out of her to the islands in a flurry of green and blue. Te Fiti then lies down and her sleeping body forms the shape of an island before the music escalates and Gramma Tala’s voice deepens, discussing the malice of others who sought the heart. Te Fiti as a mother-nature figure alludes to the exploitation of not only natural resources for the good of humankind—the reason given for Maui taking the heart in the first place—but also the exploitation of the feminine body. Te Fiti was sharing her life “with the world,” and not harboring the power solely for herself; it is the selfish pursuits of individuals that

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<sup>64</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (0:01:13).

<sup>65</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (0:00:53-0:01:32).

jeopardize the environmental security of the collective with their actions. The exploitation of the feminine body—the “mother island,”—emerges in the story as Gramma Tala says, “some began to seek Te Fiti’s heart.” Instead of working in collaboration with Te Fiti, they wish to “possess” her and her powers, isolated from herself.



Image 2: Giving Birth to a Terrible Darkness<sup>66</sup>

As the story unfolds, the audience sees Maui’s shape shifting abilities in full force as he navigates natural barriers like trees and shrubs before removing the glowing, green heart of Te Fiti. The heart itself is a “greenstone (New Zealand Maori) amulet.”<sup>67</sup> As he escapes, the green, lush environment turns to molten rock and chases him to the edge of the land until his hook and the heart are lost to the sea and he is banished to an island (Image 2). The music intensifies as the darkness encroaches on the green of the mother island, and the speed of Maui’s fleeing and the black following him in combination with the intensifying music creates a sense of urgency and stress for the audience. Gramma Tala explains the darkness: “But without her heart, Te Fiti began to

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<sup>66</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (0:02:25).

<sup>67</sup> Herman, “How the Story of ‘Moana’ and Maui Holds Up Against Cultural Truths.”



crumble, giving birth to a terrible darkness.”<sup>68</sup> Te Fiti is still associated with birth, but it is the birth of death in a dramatic inverse of the norms of female ecology.

Simultaneously, the villain Te Ka is identified while interfering with Maui’s escape and is demonized for wanting the heart. Unknown to the audience at this point, Te Ka is Te Fiti, so the “birth of the darkness” in the line above is the creation of Te Ka when the heart of mother nature is stolen. The visual images of greenery associated with fertile ecology and lushness turning to stone are foreboding of the turmoil and signify loss of life.

Maui steals the heart of Te Fiti as a gesture to please the humans who once rejected him. The heart holds the power of creation, and Te Fiti represents the ability to create life and nature itself. “When Te Fiti’s heart is taken,” Tamaira and Fonoti explain, “the world that she has created and sustained becomes corrupted.”<sup>69</sup> Te Fiti, “is a pan-Polynesian word for any faraway place.”<sup>70</sup> Her name signifies the journey necessary for the recovery of her heart to save the islands. This corruption, although it comes from the actions of a demigod, is facilitated to meet the needs of humans. It is humans, then, which instigate violence against Te Fiti and nature, and it is humans who will ultimately face the ‘darkness.’

“In the village,” Tamaira and Fonoti describe, “the inhabitants go about their daily lives in a pantomime of changing scenes that are stocked with quasi-ethnographic elements—cultural dances (a mix of Hawaiian and Samoan dance traditions), the

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<sup>68</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (0:02:17-:26).

<sup>69</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti, “Beyond Paradise?”

<sup>70</sup> Herman, “How the Story of ‘Moana’ and Maui Holds Up Against Cultural Truths.”

harvesting of bountiful yields of taro and coconuts, weaving, and fishing.”<sup>71</sup> This transition from collective and prospering lands to private gains and environmental degradation juxtaposes the morals of the Tragedy of the Commons<sup>72</sup> in environmental literature. Instead of collectivization being the downfall of common resources—in *Moana*, the fish, coconuts, and life itself—the individual interests risk the security of island after island. This moral points to the need for collaboration and collective care for the environment, both for its long-term renewability but also the interests of humans.

#### *The Power of Maui: Bridge between Nature and Humans*

Maui is the demigod of the wind and sea, and when mortal life rejected him, the ocean accepted and empowered him. Nature is intrinsically tied to his powers and the beings he shape-shifts into, allowing him to draw from powers of natural beings like the shark and hawk. The ocean gave Maui his status as a demigod; demigods are the intermediary between deities and humans and since Maui’s powers are granted by the ocean, the ocean itself can be seen as a deity. Moana solidifies this connection as she tells him, “maybe the gods chose you for a reason. Maybe the ocean brought you to them because it saw someone who was worthy of being saved.”<sup>73</sup> Moana interchanges “the gods” and “the oceans,” reinforcing the ocean’s status as a deity. The ocean facilitates the godly duties of saving a mortal and elevating their status. When Maui loses a crucial symbol of his identity, his fishhook given to him by the gods, Te Fiti

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<sup>71</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti, “Beyond Paradise?”

<sup>72</sup> Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons.”

<sup>73</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (1:10:18).

returns it to him as she is capable of great kindness and resilience. She holds no grudges to Maui for stealing her heart but continues to leave herself vulnerable to human and ethereal beings alike, creating a splendid community. Respect for nature and women creates mutual respect which allows life to prosper.

*Moana and Gramma Tala: The Village Environmentalists*

While the rest of the island fears the ocean because they perceive it as dangerous and threatening, Gramma Tala and Moana function as intermediaries between the village people and the ocean. In the opening scene chronicling the story of Maui, while the rest of the children are alarmed, scared, and even faint, Moana is enthusiastically engaged in the narrative. The scene is prophetic with Gramma Tala narrating:

Te Ka and the demons of the deep still hunt for the heart. Hiding in a darkness that will continue to spread, chasing away our fish, draining the life from island after island until every one of us is devoured by the bloodthirsty jaws of inescapable death. But one day the heart will be found by someone who will journey beyond our reef, find Maui, deliver him across the great ocean to restore Te Fiti's heart and save us all.<sup>74</sup>

While delivering this omen, Gramma uses ink and a tapestry to illustrate to the children the darkness spreading. Moana's keen interest in the tale and Gramma Tala's passion for sharing these stories with Moana lay the important groundwork for the protagonist and her rebellious behavior. Despite Chief Tui's strong aversion to water and exploration, his mother is the guiding entity in Moana's hero arc. Gramma Tala is the self-declared village crazy lady for her affection for the water and rejection of her son's decree against leaving the reef. She is one of the only villagers connected to the water;

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<sup>74</sup> Clements et al, (0:03:30-3:45).

this allows her to be free and truly connect on an intimate level with the water she sees as alive and even mischievous, like a child.

Gramma Tala's prophecy not only establishes Moana as the protagonist and illuminates the catalyst for her journey: restoring the heart and avoiding inescapable extinction. While Chief Tui and the other villagers consider the omen hyperbolic and mythical throughout Moana's lifetime, it is abundantly clear to Gramma Tala, Moana, and the audience that the darkness has arrived at Motunui. This disconnect parallels the dichotomy between Western and Indigenous knowledge, with oral stories usually being discounted as mythical. Chief Tui's main motivation for denying the stories is contentment with the status quo of the island, not Western pedagogy, but the doubt still propels the plot forward as Moana must prove herself.

Gramma Tala and Moana see the ocean as the only hope for salvation, but the audience later comes to understand Chief Tui's mission for security derives from fear of the ocean. Moana's mom, Sina, explains Chief Tui once snuck out beyond the reef in a boat—much like Moana plans to do—and his friend passed away when the boat overturned. As the sky turns grey and thunderclaps on screen, the audience sees the friend drifting down to the depths as Sina says Tui “found an unforgiving sea. Waves like mountains.”<sup>75</sup> The ocean is characterized as demonic and villainous itself, and Tui holds it responsible for the death of his friend. His fear prevents the exploration that would allow more food for the people. The initial challenge for Moana is attempting to reconcile her care for her home island, her father's expectations, her drive to explore, and the need to restore environmental prosperity.

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<sup>75</sup> Clements et al, (0: 15:36-15:40).

Despite the hostility towards accepting the legend of Maui, as environmental plights escalate on the island, it becomes clear Moana's people need a hero to journey for the salvation of Motunui, their cultural ways, and food security. The status quo has been "the island gives us what we need, and no one leaves,"<sup>76</sup> but the harsh transition from the upbeat song to the revelation of the fish and coconuts suffering point to the reality of the darkness: food insecurity. "The first component of food security" is "availability," which evaluates "whether food exists locally."<sup>77</sup> Climate change affects food availability and its stability—the consistency of access—in many different capacities.<sup>78</sup> Motunui, because of this darkness, faces food insecurity and instability, meaning it can no longer provide for the village. The only viable option for salvation as travelling beyond the reef—Moana's exact desire.

Only in the direct face of widespread and inescapable environmental degradation does innovation become an asset to the residents of Motunui, paralleling the urgency for climate change mitigation and adaptation. During Moana's first experiences in making executive decisions, she is confronted with the repercussions of Te Ka's darkness—still unacknowledged by Chief Tui and the villagers. The first trial is the coconut harvest as a woman tells Moana, "it's the harvest. This morning, I was husking the coconuts and . . ." <sup>79</sup> she cracks open a coconut to reveal a dark, ashy substance instead of flesh and water. The death and decay is finally directly touching the island and the food source for the people. This marks the beginning of Moana's

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<sup>76</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (0:09:08).

<sup>77</sup> Brown et al., "Climate Change, Global Food Security, and the U.S. Food System," 53.

<sup>78</sup> Brown et al., 64.

<sup>79</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (0:13:17-13:26).

training as a leader and sets the tone for the challenges she will face, with intense foreshadowing of the darkness. While Moana quickly resolves this conflict by clearing dead trees and relocating the grove, the challenges increase in difficulty.

A fisherman approaches next and reveals, despite an exhaustive list of attempted solutions, the traps are “pulling up less and less fish . . . they’re just gone.”<sup>80</sup> These challenges represent food insecurity and scarcity of resources, major concerns with climate change. “At the front line of climate change,” describes the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), “the ocean, the coastlines and coastal communities are being disproportionately impacted by . . . human activities.”<sup>81</sup> Just as access to fishing for Motunui is critical for the island’s food, “the degradation of coastal and marine ecosystems threatens the physical, economic and food security of coastal communities—around 40% of the world population.”<sup>82</sup> Since “local fishers, Indigenous and other coastal communities” are “already seeing the effects of climate change,” having these groups be the voice of alarm in *Moana* draws strong connections to real life impacts beyond the animated reality. For communities that don’t live in coastal areas, they can still empathize with the messaging of *Moana* since the visuals are so stark and resonating on screen. This depiction in the film of ecological collapse threatening a community’s security and sovereignty is highly important for communicating the drastic impact of ecological collapse.

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<sup>80</sup> Clements et al, (0:13:50-14:11).

<sup>81</sup> “The Ocean and Climate Change.”

<sup>82</sup> “The Ocean and Climate Change.”

### *Anthropomorphic Nature*

The island provides for all the villagers, sharing what it may, and they respect that generosity by utilizing every piece of the harvest or resources. Nature is generous and represents home.



Image 3: You will raise this whole island higher!<sup>83</sup>

As the camera pans first from the shore of the ocean up to the looming mountain of Motunui, Moana and Chief Tui begin the journey to the top and wind instruments play in the back. He narrates the importance of the top of the island, telling her: “this is a sacred place, a place of chiefs. There will come a time when you will stand on this peak and place a stone on this mountain.”<sup>84</sup> The peak is level with the cotton candy-colored clouds behind them, and the ocean is visible in the background as well. The rich, relaxing color draws the eye while creating a sense of ethereal wonderment at the natural elements of Motunui. The rocks on the top of the mountain (Image 3) symbolize past human leaders, ingraining not only their culture but themselves into Motunui. The music intensifies as Moana and Tui trace their hands over the rocks, which have bright

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<sup>83</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (0:10:28).

<sup>84</sup> Clements et al, (0:10:33-10:42).

green moss on them—denoting their long time in place on top of the peak. This highlights a sense of legacy and importance to one isolated home.

Moana kneels before Chief Tui, signaling her respect and reverence for her father even despite the disagreement they just had over the boats. Through her respect for her father and the traditions of Motunui, Moana intersects the important cultural history of her home while also pushing new bounds. Chief Tui also only mentions paternal chiefs, foreshadowing Moana’s pivotal role as the first female chief of Motunui. Legacy is accentuated further as Chief Tui tells Moana, “you are the future of our people, Moana. And they are not out there. They are right here. It’s time to be who they need you to be.”<sup>85</sup> As he says, “they are not out there,” the camera pans to the horizon—a stunning assemblage of bright, vibrant pink and dark blue where the sky and the ocean meet. “They are right here” signals the camera to pan lower, back down to the village of Motunui, where individual lights (fires) flash on as the introductory melodies of “Where You Are”—an iconic song from the film—begins. By panning the camera down from the ocean, where Moana’s heart longs to go, back down to the village the strong tension between the two which facilitate Moana’s character arc continues visually and subliminally. Both scenes are stunning visually, but the bright pink clouds and turquoise blue water perfectly embody the Paradise Motunui represents.

Nature is anthropomorphized through the ocean, which pushes Moana constantly to see herself in a confident light and guide her when she is unsure of herself. The ocean is characterized as wise and comical simultaneously, leading tiny Moana toward it and her own fate as a wayfinder as soon as she can walk. The ocean, depicted

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<sup>85</sup> Clements et al, (0:10:58-11:09).



as having a featureless face as it curves up to a solid wave to interact with Moana, mimics Moana in their first encounter (Image 4).



Image 4: Ocean Mimics Moana<sup>86</sup>

It tilts its “head” in the same fashion as her curious toddler self, bringing to the screen its consciousness. When Chief Tui is heard off screen, the ocean immediately stops playing with Moana and quickly attempts to hide evidence of their interaction. Its “head” rapidly looks over to where Chief Tui’s voice comes from alerts the audience to its ability to hear and process sound in a reactionary way as if alive. It quickly undoes the hairdo it has created on toddler Moana’s head and rapidly places her back to shore—using a sea turtle shell as a small boat for the toddler. The humor in the ocean being “caught,” as if a human, in combination with its distinct head shape and orally noted conscious decisions reinforce anthropomorphized nature in the human world. The ocean is a setting and a character simultaneously and is central to the plot of *Moana*.

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<sup>86</sup> Clements et al., *Moana* (0:06:33).

When a baby sea turtle struggles against seagulls while trying to leave its nest, Moana leaves a pretty rock—known to the audience to be the heart of Te Fiti—to help the creature and guide it with a palm leaf.



Image 5: Mama Sea Turtle Greets Moana

After saving the baby turtle, Moana sees the mother and baby swim by<sup>87</sup>

Even as a toddler, Moana prioritizes the lives of nature over her own desires (Image 5). Further, sea turtles are charismatic megafauna associated with ocean pollution and degradation. “These species,” explain Miller and Meindl, “are uniquely positioned to contribute to future conservation programs by inspiring younger generations to care about the environment.”<sup>88</sup> An audience familiar with environmentalism could recognize the importance of saving the turtle, and an unfamiliar audience could resonate with the charismatic animation of the baby turtle. Charismatic megafauna “are undeniably important in persuading people to care about the earth’s ecosystems.”<sup>89</sup> Including a baby, and adorably animated sea turtle (Image 6), as an example of Moana’s initial

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<sup>87</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (0:05:30).

<sup>88</sup> Miller and Meindl, “The Importance of Education and Community Engagement Towards Sea Turtle Conservation.”

<sup>89</sup> Miller and Meindl.

connection to the ocean points to her role in saving and protecting its inhabitants, and the turtle itself resonates with audiences who go home with an understanding of the importance of protecting vulnerable wildlife.



Image 6: Baby Sea turtle cowers from birds on its journey from the nest to the ocean.

It is in this moment the ocean first identifies Moana as the savior of the heart and plays with her affectionately, witnessed only by Gramma Tala, the other nature-oriented villager.

The water nurtures and is gentle when respected and trusted and allows Moana to feel connected to nature from a very young age. The care the ocean takes in placing the flower on Moana's head and ensuring she does not get in trouble with the Chief when she ventures into the water to collect shells demonstrates this. When the ocean interacts as a character, it is a lighter blue, and the "head" feature is quite distinct. Having the ocean behave as a character and a setting allows Moana the guidance and support of nature while still encouraging her own self-sufficiency. As a setting, the ocean most often works in conflict with Moana and Maui, either as a storm or remaining indignant to her direct calls for help. These moments of adversity, encourage the greatest increase in Moana's autonomy and self-confidence. Yet, when she is truly

vulnerable and needs guidance, nature—embodied through the ocean—is there to guide her, proving humans are never alone when surrounded by an environment.

*We Were Voyagers: A Polynesian History*

*Moana* remains rooted in the Polynesian cultures from which it was born, and the sea voyaging arc reignites this collective conscious of Pacific islanders' which values exploration and continuity with ecology. While *Moana* is originally considered naïve by her father and other community members, her journey to the sea is not a divergence from Motunui's culture but rather a return to it. "'Moana' is a proto-Polynesian word that means 'sea beyond the reef, ocean'" explain Tamaira and Fonoti, "it is a shared cognate in numerous Polynesian languages across the Pacific and provides a useful linguistic cue for recalling the journeys early peoples made in an effort to get 'beyond the reef' of their original home shores and settle the islands of the world's largest ocean."<sup>90</sup> The ocean, then, is not a limitation on the potential of *Moana* and her people but is the very promoter of their success.

Gramma Tala is once again the facilitator of this connection, telling *Moana*, "you've been told all our people's stories but one . . . Do you really think our ancestors stayed within the reef?"<sup>91</sup> This is the catalyst for *Moana* to explore the island's secret internal cave where the wayfinder boats are kept. She bangs the drum and is transported to the past where she can see her ancestors voyaging; this transportation is a reference to Indigenous cosmologies where time and connectivity are not merely present, tangible

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<sup>90</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti, "Beyond Paradise?"

<sup>91</sup> Clements et al., *Moana* (0:21:36-21:45).

experiences but rather visceral and circular ones. The ancestors sing, “at night we name every star, we know where we are. We know who we are.”<sup>92</sup> Historically in the Pacific islands, “epic stories were woven around themes of voyaging and settlement, gods and monsters, human accomplishments, and human failures” and were even sung when there was no written language.<sup>93</sup> This pedagogy is communicated quite strongly in *Moana*, given the incorporation of the ancestral knowledge, the music, and the precolonial exploration of Pacific Islanders. Their sense of self is directly tied to their geographic location and their ability to travel and explore.

The most sacred part of the culture, the wayfinder boats, are kept safe by the island and stored in her center, again tying the people and the land together. Maui says Te Fiti loved when Moana’s ancestors would visit the islands because they are all connected by the ocean, a powerful life force. Pushing the choice to leave the island is the need for that unity and community on land and in water, which is once more demonstrated by the conch shell becoming part of the island’s history of leaders and connectivity between all of nature in the end.

When the heart was stolen, the ocean was transformed from a “a fluid highway that enabled them to voyage” to “a restrictive barrier,”<sup>94</sup> pointing to the sweeping importance of symbiosis among all living creatures and the ecologies they inhabit. Moana asks Gramma Tala why the people stopped voyaging, to which she answers:

Maui. When he stole from the mother island, darkness fell. Te Ka awoke. Monsters lurked and boats stopped coming back. To protect our people, the ancient chiefs forbid voyaging and now we have forgotten who we

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<sup>92</sup> Clements et al (0:24:09).

<sup>93</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti, “Beyond Paradise?”

<sup>94</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti.

are. And the darkness has continued to spread, chasing away our fish, draining the life from island after island.<sup>95</sup>

Once again, the identity of the people itself is linked to both historical context *and* the environment and sailing. Ironically, the ancestors stop voyaging to protect people from the damage of Maui and the darkness, but only sailing will help save them. By rejecting their history and culture, they reject the kinship with nature which allows additional access to resources and security. The island and its life are suffering because of this rejection of cultural identity. Te Ka is not created, however, she is “awoke.” This distinction implies Te Ka was always present in Te Fiti, but was not empowered to create destruction until Te Fiti, mother nature, is harmed by the interests of humans. Nature is not monotonous; it is fluid and reacts accordingly to the interactions of humans. The islands themselves are also characterized as alive, suffering on a holistic scale just as the Motunui residents suffer. This characterization moves beyond the ecology atop the floating land but rather refers to the island as a breathing being.

#### *The Ocean Chose You: And It's Alive*

By anthropomorphizing the ocean and using it to literally transport Moana from Motunui to Maui’s island, back to the boat, and helping her reach Te Ka, this connection between Pacific people and the paradise they inhabit is increasingly clear. On her death bed, Gramma Tala tells Moana, “the ocean chose you,”<sup>96</sup> personifying the ocean and placing the responsibility of action on it. Nature is alive and actively makes decisions for its own wellbeing and humans are meant follow. Moana’s mission,

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<sup>95</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (0:26:13-26:45).

<sup>96</sup> Clements et al, (0:27:12).

directly stated by Gramma Tala, is “when [she] finds Maui, [she must] grab him by the ear,” and “say ‘I am Moana of Motunui. You will board my boat, sail across the sea, and restore the heart of Te Fiti’.”<sup>97</sup> Her identity is linked to her home, Motunui, and her mission requires access to the boats of her ancestors, their sailing knowledge, and the help of the ocean itself.

As Gramma Tala is reincarnated as a manta ray—which she foreshadows earlier in the film—Moana refers to the spirit animal: “see her light up the night in the sea. She calls me.”<sup>98</sup> According to the Encyclopedia of Death and Dying, “the positive relation to the ancestors and the recently dead is, however, one of the strengths of Polynesian culture” and “an elder who has been revered as a leader in life does not lose his or her love of family after death.”<sup>99</sup> The choice of a manta ray, another powerful oceanic megafauna further connects Moana to both her family and the ocean environment. Bioluminescence on Gramma Tala’s manta ray is also used in this scene as a phenomenon in nature depicted as magical and aesthetically pleasing. This combination of powerful ancestral relations, ocean megafauna, and bioluminescence as magic create a visceral visual experience for the audience and emphasizes the beauty of Pacific cultures and environments.

Moana embarks on her heroic journey, only to be immediately met with the challenges of navigating open ocean with no sailing experience. In a violent depiction of a dark, stormy, and unsettling storm, she calls on the anthropomorphized ocean to

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<sup>97</sup> Clements et al, (0:29-52-30:08).

<sup>98</sup> Clements et al.

<sup>99</sup> “Polynesian Religions - World, Body, Life, Beliefs, Time, Person, Human.”

help her—a call which goes unanswered. When she awakes, on an island, she lashes out at the ocean: “I said help me! And wrecking my boat? Not helping! Fish pee in you, all day!”<sup>100</sup> What is seemingly a wreck and betrayal of Moana’s trust in the ocean is actually a massive help in finding Maui. And the humor in the ocean ‘dodging’ Moana’s kick at the end of her rant reemphasizes the anthropogenic nature of the ocean throughout the film and engages younger audiences in entertainment while simultaneously alluding to the ecology of fish inhabitants of the ocean.

### *Extractivism*

By revealing the original villain, Maui, as an ally to Moana, the film comments on the Extractivism of humans, warning against greed and exploitation of the environment. One of Maui’s first lines is him lamenting, “I got stuck here for 1,000 years trying to get the heart as a gift for you mortals, so you could have the power to create life itself.”<sup>101</sup> Maui’s demigod status paints him as a bridge between the ethereal beings responsible for creation and other cosmology stories and humans, but his frustration initially creates a dichotomy between himself and “you humans.” This dichotomy begins the revelation that Maui isn’t the villain, his actions were on behalf of humans. Humans demand too much of the natural world and the ethereal beings which interact/represent it. He even goes as far as to isolate himself from ethereal Te Fiti as well, saying, “that is not a heart. It is a curse . . . That thing doesn’t give you power to create life, it’s a homing beacon of death. If you don’t put it away, bad things are going to come for it.”<sup>102</sup> The stone has the power to create life, but when it is extracted and

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<sup>100</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (0:35:56).

<sup>101</sup> Clements et al (0:38:09).

<sup>102</sup> Clements et al (0:44:13-0:44:32).



abused, it pays retribution for trying to seize control of the environment. Despite his initial aversion to being involved with “that thing” and the dangers associated with crossing the ocean with the heart, it is Maui’s desire to regain hero status in the eyes of humans which ultimately motivates his involvement with the journey.

*Wayfinding: An Ancient Art Revived*

Wayfinding is a Polynesian and Pacific Islander strategy used for navigation, and the tale of wayfinding in *Moana* reflects the true history of these people, giving power back to Indigenous Pacific Islanders in popular media. By representing this traditional ecological knowledge in *Moana*, the filmmakers made a conscious choice to honor the subjects of their film while also complicating the previously superficial princess of past Disney movies, empowering female characters and Indigenous voices simultaneously. “Wayfinding is the ancient Polynesian practice of navigating the open oceans using deep knowledge and intense observation of the celestial bodies in the sky and the swells of the water” according to Hughes.<sup>103</sup> She continues, “over 3,000 years ago, ancient Polynesians sailed thousands of miles across the Pacific, discovering and colonizing hundreds of the Pacific Islands.”<sup>104</sup> Much like in the film, there is a long pause in the voyaging timeline of Polynesia. This, in history, is hypothesized to be due to El Nino, supernovas, and “ciguatera poisoning caused by algae blooms.”<sup>105</sup> The resurgence in *Moana*, however, is a device to empower her as a female and as the hero of the tale. Maui chastises Moana,

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<sup>103</sup> Hughes, “What Is Wayfinding?”

<sup>104</sup> Hughes.

<sup>105</sup> Herman, “How the Story of ‘Moana’ and Maui Holds Up Against Cultural Truths.”

It's called wayfinding, princess. And it's not just sails and knots, it's seeing where you're going in your mind. Knowing where you are, by knowing where you've been . . . If you wear a dress, and you have an animal sidekick, you're a princess. You are not a wayfinder. You will never be a wayfinder.<sup>106</sup>

Wayfinding, as described here, is inherently the opposite of being a princess. Princess is used as a demeaning and belittling term while wayfinding is the superior objective; Maui uses his status as a demigod and male to demean Moana, but it only motivates her success further. A princess, for Maui and perhaps audience members, has no place in the ocean. Yet—with the help of a blow dart in the butt administered by the ocean—Moana proves Maui wrong.

Although Moana is ending Motunui's "long pause," her inner conflict with her people and her drive to help the ocean intensify the severity of the actions she must take and propel her hero arc further. She defends herself to Maui, "my people didn't send me, the ocean did."<sup>107</sup> His response once again undermines her abilities and the intuition of the ocean, alluding to potential ongoing environmental degradation if there is not a hero for the environment: "The ocean? Makes sense, you're what, 8? Can't sail? Obvious choice."<sup>108</sup> Yet, Moana assures herself, and the audience, that, "it chose me for a reason."<sup>109</sup> The reason is her innovative thinking and childlike wonder in reverence for nature which motivate her journey in the first place. Both Maui and Moana refer to the ocean as an omnipotent being which has an agenda—protecting life. Maui additionally references the success of Pacific Island explorers and the importance of their lifeways as he theorizes:

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<sup>106</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (0:51:55-52:21).

<sup>107</sup> Clements et al., *Moana* (0:55:49).

<sup>108</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (0:56:00).

<sup>109</sup> Clements et al, (0:56:32).

You know, the ocean used to love when I pulled up islands cause your ancestors would sail her seas and find ‘em. All those new lands, new villages. It was the water that connected them all. And if I were the ocean, I think I’d be looking for a curly-haired non-princess to start that again.<sup>110</sup>

This time, Maui removes his earlier judgment and recognizes Moana’s abilities as a “non-princess,” establishing her newfound authority to be in the ocean. He also further stresses the interconnectivity of life represented in the Pacific. There is a symbiosis, Earth needs the islands *and* the water.

Moana *must* be the one to restore the heart of Te Fiti, and the film establishes more trials between Maui and Moana to propel her success as the hero. This creates space for women to be their own heroes and work with the aid of men, instead of the archetype which prioritizes male triumphs. Further, it *must* be humans who restore the damage done to the environment through their actions. Maui serves the human desires but is still a demigod and therefore not directly responsible for Te Fiti becoming Te Ka. Moana must help Te Fiti to help her people; the relationship between nature and humans is the most critical for the environment.

In the first approach of Te Ka, it is Maui who leads the procession forward to reach Te Fiti. Moana notices the lava monsters’ limitations and avoidance of the water, but the observation falls on deaf ears as Maui pushes forward.

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<sup>110</sup> Clements et al, (1:13:10-13:32).



Image 7: Approaching Te Ka<sup>111</sup>

As the audience sees Te Ka (Image 7), “the way the lava meets the sea . . . is magical, but it is also [the] reality” for Pacific inhabitants.<sup>112</sup> Audiences can experience the vastness of realistic nature through the magic of the animation and the story, even those without access to travel.

While Moana’s judgement seems to be called into question as the mission fails and Maui’s hook is cracked, this initial failure allows her space to lead the campaign against Te Ka and fulfill her hero arc. Moana is a reconciliation of the dichotomy between ocean and land. After the guidance of Gramma Tala (in spirit form), and her ancestors (Image 8), Moana amends her mission to say: “I am Moana of Motunui. Aboard my boat, I will sail across the sea and restore the heart of Te Fiti.”<sup>113</sup> The shift places action into Moana’s hands instead of depending on Maui to complete the mission. She takes control of the situation and feels empowered thanks to the encouragement of Gramma Tala and the ocean, both of whom represent a strong connection with nature. Soft instrumental music begins to play while she says, “I am a

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<sup>111</sup> Clements et al., *Moana* (1:15:13).

<sup>112</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti, “Beyond Paradise?”

<sup>113</sup> Clements et al, (1:21:00).

girl who loves my island, and a girl who loves the sea.”<sup>114</sup> It is nighttime after Moana and Maui are defeated by Te Ka, the settings have been dark either from lava plume smoke or nighttime since the defeat. This humbles the mood of the film, and the quiet instrumentals continue this soft expression of sadness in the face of adversity.



Image 8: We Are Descended from voyagers

Moana stands farthest to the left, with Gramma Tala (in spirit form) on the bow of Moana’s boat. On the far left, on the bow of the spirit boat is the ancestral chief of Motunui.

It is not until Moana sings, “we are descended from voyagers” that the bright, luminescent boats of the ancestors break the dark horizon, signaling hope. The music finds a more uplifting crescendo and suddenly the screen is filled with these boats, formalizing the connection to the past to aid the issues of the present. In recognizing her own abilities and tying them to her ancestry, Moana is empowered to try again and save Te Fiti.

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<sup>114</sup> Clements et al., Moana, (1:20:58).

## *Fall from Paradise*

*Moana* could be viewed as a perpetuation of the paradise stereotype which can be harmful for Indigenous populations and ecologies, however the story of Te Ka reveals the vulnerability of this idyllic realm. Tamaira and Fonoti explain, “this visual tableau of an idyllic environment inhabited by a carefree society living in a ‘state of nature’ articulates with images that today continue to circulate in films . . . especially of Polynesia, for the purpose of translating it into commercial gain.”<sup>115</sup> This idyllic setting can—and does in many cases—reflect the perpetuation of Western colonization and exploitation of Indigenous bodies and environments. In the case of *Moana*, as Tamaira and Fonoti chronicle, “if paradise characterizes nature as bountiful and humans as pure and innocent, anti-paradise offers the “image of the ‘fallen’ or ‘depraved’ Eden.”<sup>116</sup>

Instead of Anglo- Saxon Eden, however,

It is the god Maui (as opposed to Adam and Eve) who precipitates “the fall” when he steals the heart of Te Fiti and transforms her . . . to . . . Te Ka. So changed, she unleashes a darkness that begins to invade the world . . . There are a number of ways we can read into this anti-paradise trope in *Moana*, one of which is to treat it as a metaphor for settler colonialism in Polynesia and the wider Pacific. Paradise and anti-paradise are prevalent topic in *Moana*, but they do not define the overall substance of the film. Indeed, the true substance is to be found in the infusion of Indigenous stories—stories that are steeped in Pacific ancestral narrative traditions but which in the context of the movie are revised and told in new ways. The film also opens up new ways of thinking about “paradise” that go beyond the image of the “Pacific paradise” that is manufactured for economic profit, particularly in the context of tourism.<sup>117</sup>

This dichotomy between paradise and anti-paradise accentuates what is risked when humans—or demigods—intervene with the natural order of the environment. Tamaira

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<sup>115</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti, “Beyond Paradise?”

<sup>116</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti.

<sup>117</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti.

and Fonoti highlight further the saturation of “Pacific ancestral narrative traditions” and the importance of the modern lens of *Moana*. This paradise trope is also specific to the blue humanities, wherein “most aquatic zones, species, and topics exist beyond human domains, requiring the mediation of science and technology.”<sup>118</sup> “The blue humanities,” as Alaimo explains, “as it is infused with science and technology studies, is paradigmatic of environmentally oriented scholarship in the Anthropocene, which must reckon with epistemological problems of scale, onto-epistemologies of rapidly altering and utterly entangled life worlds, and the urgency of extinction.”<sup>119</sup> *Moana*, through the freedom of animation and reimagining existing epistemologies, perfectly embodies the value of the blue humanities. The magical elements and fantastical nature of the film create a safe and creative space to theorize the realities of extinction without crushing alarmism, invigorating audiences to contemplate the consequences of the “wholesale ecological collapse”<sup>120</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti describe.

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<sup>118</sup> Alaimo, “Project MUSE - Introduction.”

<sup>119</sup> Alaimo.

<sup>120</sup> Tamaira and Fonoti, “Beyond Paradise?”



Image 9: Te Ka Approaches Moana

Te Ka approaching Moana, who has just recognized her as Te Fiti by the spiral on her chest which matches the heart (greenstone).<sup>121</sup>

Te Ka's villainy is only representative of her pain from having her heart—and fertile life—stolen from her. As Moana realizes Te Ka is Te Fiti and is trapped in this violent body, she sings: “I have crossed the horizon to find you. I know your name. They have stolen the heart from inside you, but this does not define you. This is not who you are. You know who you are. Who you truly are (Image 9).”<sup>122</sup> The bright turquoise of the ocean contrasts the dark plumes of the lava creature, but surround her on each side signaling a protective barrier for the two characters, Moana and Te Ka, to have an intimate moment together. The brightness on the sides of the screen signal the hopeful resolution on the frontier after the two interact. Te Ka's expression relaxes as her eyes open up wider, to a more innocent state. Her hand freezes where it is instead of reaching for Moana, signaling her hesitation to do harm. Moana placing the action which instigated the violence on “they,” humans, instead of Te Ka frees her from the pressure to be perfect and releases her from the full responsibility of the actions of Te

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<sup>121</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (1:29:06).

<sup>122</sup> Clements et al.



Ka so that she may retake her form as Te Fiti. The music slows to a serene and breath holding pace to draw attention between Moana and Te Ka as Te Ka violently approaches. As the camera cuts back and forth between the two, Moana moves much slower than Te Ka, representing the contrast between Moana’s calm state and Te Ka’s violent one. But as Te Ka approaches, and the red, black plume encroaches on Moana, Te Ka’s pace slows, and she turns from lava to molten. The music stops and Moana whispers to Te Ke, “who you truly are.” The silence of the moment apart from the whisper signals the intimacy between the two who are connected in care for the environment, femininity, and feeling misunderstood.



Image 10: Who You Truly Are

Moana discovers Te Ka is Te Fiti trapped until her heart is restored.<sup>123</sup>

Recognizing Te Fiti’s true form—fertile, blooming and green—through knowing her name begins reversing the damage done to the islands by humans. Moana tells Te Fiti, “this does not define you.” Her lack of fear in approaching and accepting Te Ka’s lava form reminds audiences to not fear nature, but to work in loving collaboration with it. By bringing her forehead up to Te Ka’s (Image 10) and sharing in

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<sup>123</sup> Clements et al., *Moana*, (1:30:00).

both their vulnerability in the situation, Moana demonstrates the beauty and power in remaining an ally to nature, even when it seems daunting or foreign.



Image 11: Moana Greets Te Fiti

This image parallels Image 10 of Moana greeting Te Ka with the same affection and adoration.

The intimacy Moana demonstrates with Te Ka is replicated as Te Fiti is restored to her original form, signaling the close bond between Moana and deified nature. By inverting Image and reversing the side of the frame Te Ka/Te Fiti is on, the filmmaker signals the transformation from one to the other. Black and dark backgrounds set the scene for the drama and looming destruction of the face-off with Te Ka, but the new bright atmosphere and lush greenness signals the completion of the turmoil and the restoration of a happy ending. Moana is center in both frames, so her role is the crux of transformation between Te Ka and Te Fiti. The goddess reciprocates the gesture in both instances, marking Moana as another bridge between the divine, natural deities and the human world. By not limiting Te Fiti to the challenges of Te Ka, who represents environmental degradation, Moana signals hope for restoring destroyed ecosystems.

With the return to Motunui, Moana places a conch shell upon the tower of past chief rocks, elevating the island to include the ocean (Image 12).



Image 12: Resolution<sup>124</sup>

Now the potential is limitless, it belongs to nature—not a chief or individual. The ocean is part of the island and vice versa. Soft instrumentals play to signal the calmness of the resolution and the satisfaction of fulfilling both the chiefly duties Moana is expected to by raising the whole island higher *and* exploring the ocean. The conch shell signifies the reconciliation of Moana’s inner conflict between her fate (chiefdom) and her destiny (ocean explorer). This is reinforced as the camera pans over to the ocean where all Motunui is out on a voyage, (Image 13) singing. In Moana’s original call to the sea, she directs her focus on the horizon, and the reef of Motunui is a major focal point of her father’s original lecture on chiefly duty.

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<sup>124</sup> Clements et al., *Moana* (1:35:27).



Image 13: Beyond the Reef

Panning the camera back to the horizon and finally revealing all Motunui out on boats reinforces the notion of harmony between the ocean and the village at the film's resolution. The distinction between the reef and open ocean is clear as well, between the aqua and the deep blue. This clear line, and the ships beyond it, prove visually the island is moving past its ways of staying in the reef and is literally surpassing that barrier to restore exploration.

Moana establishes hope for the future of environmentalism and adaptation to changing ecological systems, proving advocating for the planet, and combatting climate change are not futile efforts.

## Chapter 2: *Frozen*

*Frozen* is the earliest release of the three films, gracing theaters in 2013 and instantly becoming a Disney cult classic. The tale is loosely based on Hans Christian Anderson's *The Snow Queen*<sup>125</sup> but is highly adapted for modern audiences. Arendelle, based on Norwegian culture, is home to the two royal sisters, Anna and Elsa. They both face inner turmoil through isolation stemming from an incident as children where Elsa struck Anna in the head with her icy powers. The story moves through the girls' lives and chronicles Elsa's conflict with her inability to control her powers, and Anna's desire to spend time with her sister. When Elsa is upset at her coronation, her powers are exposed to the kingdom and she sets off a winter in the middle of the Norwegian summer. The sisters must come together to save the kingdom, and themselves, but there are many challenges in their way. Through Elsa's powers, *Frozen* draws an intrinsic relationship between humans and nature in a symbiotic relationship which has reverberating repercussions, ultimately demonstrating how important reverence for nature is.

### *Ice and Beauty*

*Frozen* draws intense reactionary relationships between humans and nature, using the freedom of magic to demonstrate the importance of a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature for the safety of both. The opening song, "Frozen Heart" foreshadows the intensity of Elsa's powers while also confessing the beauty of ice. Ice is usually not esteemed for its beauty, but rather the inconvenience of travel and human

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<sup>125</sup> "Hans Christian Andersen: The Snow Queen."

safety. *Frozen* is based loosely on Hans Christian Anderson's *Snow Queen*<sup>126</sup>, but the reinvigoration of the tale by Disney some odd 160 years later could be read to parallel the rise of climate change concerns and the threat of glacial ice depletion. Especially for audiences not in the Nordic climes of the films setting, the artfully animated ice crystals generate reverence for the beauty of ice and snowflakes. Holden contends *Frozen*'s "gleaming dream world of snow and ice is one of the most visually captivating environments to be found in a Disney animated film."<sup>127</sup> An environment which is "visually captivating" on screen and hard to access in real life (for American audiences at least), bridges an important gap in the American sensescape of the environment and invites contemplation on the importance of ice.

In the audience's first encounter with Elsa and Anna, they are playing in the snow Elsa has created and build a snowman. This childlike wonder is one of the most accessible experiences for audiences globally since they could have experienced the same joy and fun as children themselves. This invites deep care and empathy with the sisters, building suspense and alarm as Anna is injured through an accidental strike to the head by Elsa's powers.<sup>128</sup> As Elsa's distress toward the situation increases, the surface area the ice covers increase as well, establishing the symbiotic feedback loop between Elsa, her powers, and ice itself. In *Frozen*, ice is the largest symbol of the environment and facilitates the journey into the woods and North Mountain, creating a beautiful and holistic landscape on screen for audiences.

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<sup>126</sup> Holden, "From the Heat of Royal Passion, Poof! It's Permafrost."

<sup>127</sup> Holden.

<sup>128</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen* (0:05:18).

### *Trolls Facilitating Magical Elements*

Trolls in *Frozen* facilitate the magical element of the film and represent the connection between the humans of Arendelle and the magic of the forest. It is Pabbie Troll who asks whether Elsa was born with the powers so the audience can learn that she was “born” with them “and they’re getting stronger.”<sup>129</sup> Pabbie is also a narrator in the film, foreshadowing the freezing of Anna again at the hands of Elsa later in the film as he warns, “you are lucky it wasn’t her heart. The heart is not so easily changed. But the head can be persuaded.”<sup>130</sup> As he’s healing Anna, he protects her from the memory of the magic but “leaves the fun,” and shows the transformation of magical moments to more normal fun in the snow.<sup>131</sup> All the moments which are deemed important to Anna’s memory are those spent outdoors with Elsa (Image 14), signifying the importance of immersion in the environment on a child’s development. While an audience may assume the most important part of Anna’s memories are Elsa’s power to create them, the real value is in spending time with another and playing in the snow—which represents nature. Pabbie’s hand visible in the bottom left corner of the frame demonstrates his control over nature and magic as well. The trolls have a strong relationship with both nature and magic and can be a connecting entity between humans and the surrounding environment.

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<sup>129</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen*, (0:06:50).

<sup>130</sup> Buck and Lee.

<sup>131</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen*, (0:07:20).



Image 14: I recommend we remove all magic

Through one of the film’s most iconic songs, “Do You Want to Build a Snowman,” Anna strives to reconnect with her sister and spend time having fun outside with her. The song cuts back and forth from Anna making do with her more boring life as a quasi-only child and Elsa becoming increasingly stressed and isolated in her powers—reflected by uncontrollable fractals of ice. Pabbie warned Elsa, “your power will only grow. There is beauty in it, but also great danger. You must learn to control it—fear will be your enemy.”<sup>132</sup> Fearing and suppressing her relationship with the ice produces the climax and context for the entire film, signaling the importance of reverence for nature instead of fear of it.

When Anna is struck in her heart, later in the film, the trolls are the ones to explain the power of love (in song, of course) and move the story closer to resolution. Unique to *Frozen* over past Disney princess archetypes is the love referenced as the magical, saving component, is not romantic but between siblings. Pabbie says, “there is ice in your heart put there by your sister. If not removed, to solid ice will you freeze,

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<sup>132</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen*, (0:07:31-0:07:45).



forever.”<sup>133</sup> He continues, “if it was her head, that would be easy. But only an act of true love can thaw a frozen heart.”<sup>134</sup> The initial suspicion is this references Anna kissing Hans, but it is Anna’s sacrifice for her sister—whom Hans is about to kill—which saves them both. This omen also points to the intersection of natural phenomenon and human emotions and behaviors.

Trolls, a magical and fairy like species, are so immersed directly in nature they blend in. Kristoff’s relationship with them signals kinship and collaboration with nature and magic. Nature and magic are also essentially the same. The Trolls and Olaf are also good fodder for comic relief as Kristoff introduces a (freezing) Anna and Olaf to his family they are still just in their rolled-up rock form. The trolls are magical and mystical since they are one with nature and can disguise as well as take on natural phenomenon. The humor in Olaf and Anna believing Kristoff is crazy as he gestures to a field of rocks further draws the audience into the story.

The trolls, enthusiastic to see their human adoptee, exclaim, “I grew a mushroom! I earned my fire crystal! I passed a kidney stone (Image 15).”<sup>135</sup> The humor in passing a kidney stone as a rock—something humans do as well—further anthropomorphizes these creatures and makes the audience relate and feel comfortable with magic and the patterns in nature.

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<sup>133</sup> Buck and Lee, (1:08:48-54).

<sup>134</sup> Buck and Lee.

<sup>135</sup> Buck and Lee, (1:05:02-06).



Image 15: I passed a kidney stone

The red crystal lighting up and the small mushroom on the little troll's back reconnect them with both nature and magic using visual cues. The scene is almost entirely earth tones—apart from the red crystal—and is rather dark in comparison to the white, blue, and purple tones of the rest of the film. The aurora borealis is also present in the background of the rest of the scene, normalizing such a phenomenon to an American audience since it is a Norwegian norm. Animation allows room for the fluidity of the setting and exposure to remarkable but remote scenery. Moss and the other natural elements growing on the trolls camouflage them with nature, but the crystal around their necks are bright in contrast and allude to a more shaman-like religious or deity element to their characters. This is especially important to their visual representation since it is Pabbie who has the magical ability to change memories and help the human characters along.

### *Conceal, Don't Feel*

Although the warning administered to Elsa was not to grow fearful of her power or it would lead to danger, the fear of humans towards ice and its abilities further increases the stress which ultimately causes Elsa harming Arendelle and Anna. After Pabbie's warning, King Agnarr pressures Elsa to “conceal it. Don't feel it. Don't let it

show.”<sup>136</sup> This advice comes from a well-meaning place of fatherly love but exemplifies the pressure to comply to perceptions of royalty and even what it means to be human—separate from nature. It’s revealed in *Frozen 2* that Agnarr’s father also feared the strength of humans greatly linked to nature (discussed in the next chapter).

Once Elsa accidentally releases her powers at her coronation—again as a stress result—Arendelle is in jeopardy and Elsa is villainized as a witch. Leading to the grand reveal of the powers, Anna relentlessly pressures Elsa to participate in ‘normal’ behavior such as the balls, dancing, and opening the gates. Anna cries out, “why do you shut the world out?”<sup>137</sup> before her question is answered with sharp icicles. Elsa communicates her emotions through the presentation of the ice. Not only does the ice respond to Elsa’s emotions, but it seems to symbolize them entirely, linking the two together in an intrinsic way. While Elsa is fleeing, she is called a “Monster!”<sup>138</sup> for her connection with the environment, again signaling the fear of humans and nature working closely together. The Duke of Weaselton exclaims: “It’s snowing! It’s snowing! The queen has cursed this land!”<sup>139</sup> Elsa has control over the land and her relationship with the elements is witch-like. It is a curse to be feared, and the thought is she can still control it but at this point suppressing her emotions has heightened the volatility. This suppression parallels how the longer we ignore climate change and suppress strategies for mitigation and adaptation, the more doomed we will be.

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<sup>136</sup> Buck and Lee, (0:09:05).

<sup>137</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen*, (0:27:21).

<sup>138</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen*, (0:28:22).

<sup>139</sup> Buck and Lee, (0:29:40).

*Let it Go, and Let it Snow*



Image 16: Let the Storm Rage on, the Cold Never Bothered Me Anyway<sup>140</sup>

Once Elsa is free from the constraints of human social standards and can be fully immersed in nature, her powers shift from dangerous and frightening icicles to beautiful abilities and snow flurries furthering the seeming dichotomy between human status quo and environmental beauty. At the film’s resolution, when Elsa can serve as a connection between Arendelle and her magic, the beautiful parts of her powers like creating ice rinks find room in social standing—denoting the need for all aspects of nature and acceptance for a happy and functioning society.

“Let it Go” is the most iconic song in *Frozen* and begins to construct the beautiful and wonderful elements of ice *and* Elsa. She belts, “Let the storm rage on, the cold never bothered me anyways. It’s time to see what I can do, to test the limits and break through. I’m free.”<sup>141</sup> When Elsa’s calm and feels free the snow is beautiful and flowing. Storm usually has negative connotations, but in her lyrics, they are positive and empowering. A storm is chaotic and busy so it’s hard to focus on any one thing, but still

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<sup>140</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen*, (0:31:08).

<sup>141</sup> Buck and Lee (0:30:05).

Elsa works in harmony with it. Her iconic line, “the cold never bothered me anyways” references Arendelle’s original fear of the snow, and thus her liberation from that ideology of nature. She also shares, “I am one with the wind and sky,”<sup>142</sup> alluding to her herself being the storm since that’s where they would coalesce in the natural order. Visually stunning as well is her transformation of the snow into a frozen palace and her iconic blue dress. Throughout the entire scene, the detail of the ice and snowflakes is abundantly clear, and the blue pastels and purples are calming and visually appealing making the audience understand the true beauty of snow (Image 16).

Anna, in the next cut scene, is comically disgruntled that, “it had to be snow. She couldn’t have tropical magic that covered the fjords in white sand.”<sup>143</sup> As she treks through massive banks and even falls into a freezing river, this humor also references the tendency of many American audiences to picture only warm, tropical areas as beautiful and thus worthy of a vacation. In contrast to this cultural understanding, however, the stunning animation of twinkling snow and icicles hints at the need for enjoying—and even protecting—snow and ice. Anna, in juxtaposition to her earlier disgruntlement, admits she “never knew winter could be so beautiful”<sup>144</sup> (Image 17).

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<sup>142</sup> Holden, “From the Heat of Royal Passion, Poof! It’s Permafrost.”

<sup>143</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen*, (0:35:30-38).

<sup>144</sup> Buck and Lee, (0:45:21).



Image 17: I Never Knew Winter Could Be this Beautiful

Twinkling music chimes in the back as the camera pans over the group (Anna, Kristoff, and Sven) embarking through this serene setting towards the North Mountain. The cool toned blues and purples of the scene, especially with the highlights of the white snow and almost iridescent icicles are extremely calming to the audience. Creating a peaceful snow scene readjusts expectations of all snow environments to be wild storms, as is witnessed when Elsa is emotionally fraught. These feelings encourage the protection of such a serene state and could draw an American audience's empathy to Norway and the Arctic, who are representative of climate change in today's world.

### *The Storm Inside*

Elsa is blamed for the winter entirely, even though the only unnatural phenomenon is the timing of the snow in the middle of the summer. "If you are to encounter the queen, you are to put an end to this winter," Duke of Weaselton tells his men as a volunteer mission to find Anna and Elsa is launched from Arendelle.<sup>145</sup> This

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<sup>145</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen*, (0:50:40-45).

line alludes to the assassination of Elsa, with the insinuation being ending Elsa's life will also end the winter itself. Elsa and winter are constructed in this line to be one in the same. Intent is also called into question in this key line, referencing to his earlier comments of "monster," "witch," and "cursed land." As climate change becomes a more persistent threat, it is expected there will be more violent and unseasonal weather events—like snowstorms in summer.<sup>146</sup> Tying Elsa to the winter itself places blame on her for the increasing dangers of unpredictable weather, a real-life threat which is a consequence of human action.

Elsa's lack of knowledge surrounding the consequences of her powers, or their strengths, demonstrates the importance of working to understand nature instead of suppressing it for the safety of humans, even if the environment is not an appealing enough incentive. Everyone else affirms throughout the film that Elsa can end the winter and it is solely dependent on her will, however even she is unaware of the scope of a weather event like her storm. Anna and Elsa have this exchange as Anna begs for Elsa's help:

Anna: Arendelle's in deep, deep, deep, deep snow.

Elsa: What?

Anna: You kind of set of an eternal winter everywhere

Elsa: Everywhere?

Anna: Well, it's ok you can just unfreeze it

Elsa: No, I can't. I don't know how.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Stott, "How Climate Change Affects Extreme Weather Events."

<sup>147</sup> Buck and Lee, (0:56:46-57:24).

Despite Anna's confidence in Elsa's abilities and their combined resilience, the ice responds to Elsa's stress and is launched into Anna's heart, as Grand Pabbie foreshadowed earlier. Elsa laments to herself, "get it together. Don't feel. Don't feel," but this only further stresses the situation.<sup>148</sup> Ice is turning red behind her as her emotions increase. The ice, without her intervention, senses and responds to her emotions. Humans and ice are symbiotic and feed into one another.

Hans, the real villain, warns Elsa as she antagonizes his 'rescue mission' with sharp icicles not to "be the monster they fear you are."<sup>149</sup> Ironically, he is the monster in the film which has not yet been revealed so none of the characters know to fear him, as he's suggesting they fear Elsa. He attempts to empathize with her as he begs, "if you would just stop the winter. Bring back summer, please."<sup>150</sup> Yet, Elsa is still unaware of the good in her magic as she responds, "Don't you see? I can't. You have to tell them to let me go."<sup>151</sup> After Elsa frees herself from his shackles, the ice and snowstorm on the fjord intensifies with her grief. The ice finally begins to encroach on the inside of the castle; a palace is a symbol of human prestige and protection from natural elements. Ice entering the castle and risking the safety of those inside proves when there is an environmental disaster, everyone will be affected eventually.

The ice and the snow continue to intensify with Elsa's emotions, as the music picks up in pace and lowers in tone to generate stress in the audience. The cut scenes also become sharper to add an action feel to the pursuit of Kristoff towards Anna and the last-minute choice of Anna to turn to save Elsa instead of herself. As Hans lowers

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<sup>148</sup> Buck and Lee.

<sup>149</sup> Buck and Lee, (1:11:51).

<sup>150</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen*, (1:13:02).

<sup>151</sup> Buck and Lee, (1:13:18).



his sword towards Elsa, the frames suddenly slow and the intensity and severity of the sword swing is captured. Specifically highlighted through these directional choices is Anna turning to pure ice as she exhales her final breath. It is then that the snowstorm stops, and all goes silent to recenter Elsa's grief (Image 18).



Image 18: An Act of True Love<sup>152</sup>

The sisters are center in the scene, with Kristoff, Sven, and Olaf off to the respective sides. Kristoff being off to the side while the two sisters are center screen highlights the importance of familial love over romantic. Anna's frozen cape and Elsa's draping one balance each other out symmetrically center screen, and both are a bright blue shade to draw the eye directly to them. Captured in the image also is the detail of the snowflakes and the consequences of unexpected weather events as the ships are stranded in the bay and the castle of Arendelle is iced over in the background to the right of the image.

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<sup>152</sup> Buck and Lee, Frozen, (1:27:50).

Thankfully, in the case of Arendelle, love will thaw. Despite Anna being frozen (Image 18) solid while saving her sister, it is her sacrifice for someone she loves which saves her. Elsa then realizes “love will thaw!”<sup>153</sup> and melts the fjord’s wintery summer and restores the kingdom. Her acceptance of her powers and her transparency regarding them allows her and her subjects to reap the benefits of beautiful encounters with natural elements like ice instead of fearing them. Love for the planet can only help the planet.

Elsa’s powers provide an important medium for exploring symbiotic relationships between humans and nature. Fearing nature, even seemingly dangerous natural features like ice, only exacerbates the damage that can be done to both humans and the environment through this mentality. It is through loving and accepting the planet and oneself that true symbiosis is achieved, and all facets of an ecosystem can be cared for. *Frozen* instills confidence in female leadership and encourages American audiences to re-evaluate how they perceive Nordic climes and interact with ice. Ice is a major representation of climate change, so the re invigoration of this story 160 years after its original inception parallels the increasing threats of climate change, proving its role as eco-literature.

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<sup>153</sup> Buck and Lee, (1:27:50).

### Chapter 3: *Frozen 2*

Released in 2019 and directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, *Frozen 2* begins as a prequel to *Frozen*. Opening scenes chronicle the evening activities leading up to the moment Anna is struck in the head with the ice in the first film. In this reflection on the past, King Agnarr and Queen Iduna are established as involved characters representing the two respective sides of the confrontation between the Indigenous Northuldra and the Arendelains, with Elsa being later revealed to be the bridge between the two. Iduna represents the Northuldra and saved the heir to Arendelle, Agnarr, in a battle explored in later sections. Their marriage represents the potential for positive collaboration between the Northuldra and Arendelle and is rewarded with Elsa's ice powers. Through empathizing with her enemy, Iduna saves his life and later instills empathy in nature through the lullaby she sings to her children. Audiences can understand and draw from this empathy for both nature and other creatures to help promote environmentalism. By exploring empathy, understanding, and collaboration, *Frozen 2* demonstrates the power of environmental efficacy and reveals the necessity of Indigenous reparations and the power of harmonious relationships with nature.

#### *Empathy and Environmentalism*

Indigenous representation in *Frozen 2* is central to the plot, wherein nature and the Northuldra work in a collaboration defined by magic. The Northuldra are “a people modeled on the Sami, an Indigenous people in northern Scandinavia and northwestern Russia.”<sup>154</sup> Their representation is mostly accurate, apart from stylistic clothing

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<sup>154</sup> Satia, “Frozen II Isn’t Just a Cartoon. It’s a Brilliant Critique of Imperialism.”

distinctions. Depicting an empowered Indigenous community aids in reversing the primitivism of the past and recenters community strength and resiliency.<sup>155</sup> This representation is important for creating empathy with real Indigenous communities after audiences empathize with their on-screen adaptation. The Northuldra, although originally depicted as the perpetrators of violence against the kingdom, are revealed to be victims of environmental injustice through the creation of the dam. The innocence of the Northuldra reframes the enshrouded forest as an issue of colonialism rather than abuse of magic. This translates the issue of climate refugees and Indigenous protection in the film to real consequences and people, garnering empathy and understanding.

When a dichotomy is drawn between the Northuldra and Arendelle, nature punishes the conflict and its participants, protecting itself and highlighting its sentient power. Nature in *Frozen 2* is represented by the four spirits and their symbols in the forest. The directive choice to have eco-based but still fantastical symbols allow the audience to engage with potentially new theories like Shamanism and Sami culture on familiar terms. The wind (Gale) is a reference to geographic terminology, but it is also represented as having a mood as if human. When first encountered, it is a violent tornado which traps the characters. It reacts strongly to those unfamiliar in the forest, but once it is comfortable with them it becomes silly, using Elsa's braid as a mustache. Similarly, the fire-lizard reflects its inner emotions through outer behaviors like blazing fires when angry or bellyflopping into the snow when playful. Animation lends itself greatly to this narrative, as the fantastical becomes realistic when drawn and

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<sup>155</sup> Kalvig, "Nature and Magic as Representation of 'The Sami'—Sami Shamanistic Material in Popular Culture."

anthropomorphized for entertainment. The lizard's eyes, for example, are overly sized and heavily dilated when in a good mood. Its behavior is even reflective of a house pet, with resistance at first to new people and cat-like pupils when upset, but doe-eyed and cuddly when comfortable.

Agnarr directly links magic to the spirits of the elements air, fire, water, and earth, signaling a divergence from fairytale tropes of fairies and goblins and centering kinship with nature as an even more powerful force for humans.

Far away, as north as we can go, stood a very old and very enchanted forest. But its magic wasn't that of goblin spells and lost fairies, it was protected by the most powerful spirits of all: those of air, of fire, of water, and earth. But it was also home to the mysterious Northuldra people.<sup>156</sup>

While he lists the spirits, the images affiliated with them flash across the screen as music featuring whistling plays in a cheerful tone.



Image 19: Spirit Rocks

The image of the various symbols foreshadows their exploration in later parts of the film and the whimsical music casts the spirits as cheerful towards humans. Depicting the symbols on stones (Image 19) tunes in to audiences' exposure to natural elements

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<sup>156</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen 2*, (0:02:01-2:34).

representing non-Judeo-Christian faiths and even parallels real iconography like Stonehenge. Agnarr also follows the description of the powerful spirits with a documentation of the Northuldra, linking them to the power and mystery of nature right from their introduction into the narrative. This is critical in understanding how the Northuldra relate to nature and overall see it as an ally.

Although Agnarr's perspective is jaded towards this kinship—a representation of the colonial past of Arendelle and the lessons instilled in him by his father—the story intrigues Elsa greatly and foreshadows her magic as akin to the forests'. When she asks him, “were the Northuldra magical, like me?” he responds:

No, Elsa. They were not magical. They just took advantage of the Forest's gifts. Their ways were so different from ours, but still, they promised us friendship. In honor of that, your grandfather, King Runeard, built them a mighty dam to strengthen their waters. It was a gift of peace.<sup>157</sup>

A contrast is drawn between the two communities since their ways are “so different.” This immediately puts Indigenous communities and kingdoms in conflict, representing both a historical reality and a lasting impact on today's societies. The Indigenous people are depicted by the colonial entities as manipulating and taking advantage of nature and its powers when really, they work in harmony with them. The power of nature surpasses that of any individual human, even a king, and therefore poses a threat to societal status quo. Runeard and Agnarr fear this power, but it is not being exerted over anyone or anything's will and is not actually a threat. This introduction into conflict, though, parallels plights of indigenous communities everywhere to maintain sovereignty and environmental justice.

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<sup>157</sup> Buck and Lee, (0:02:34-3:00).

Agnarr narrates, “the fighting enraged the spirits. They turned their magic against us all.”<sup>158</sup> Agnarr’s tone is calm and steady, but the flash of bright pink fire and the accompanying “whoosh” sound create drama for the viewer (Image).

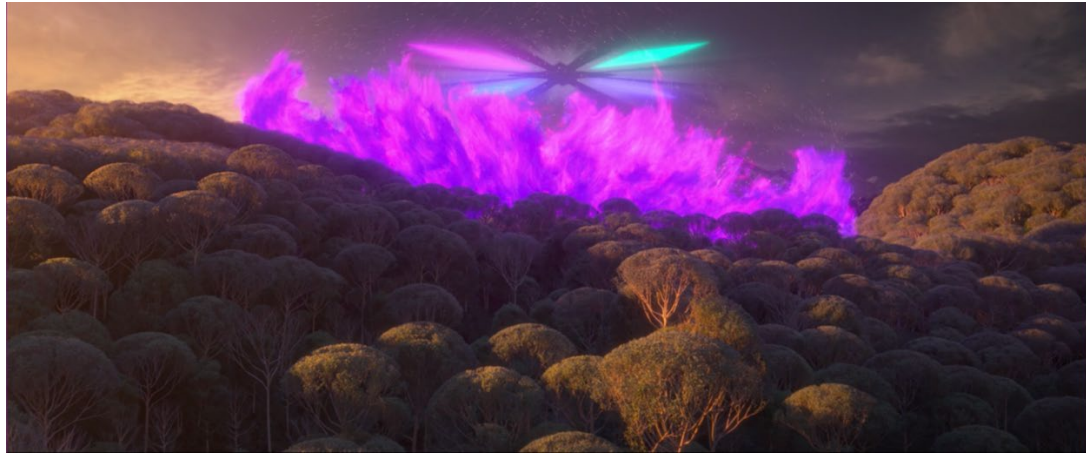


Image 20: The spirits then vanished<sup>159</sup>

This drama highlights the power of the four spirits and the camera panning away from the flash over the whole forest encompasses the audience in a sense of scale for the setting. Seen in the sky as Agnarr reveals the spirits “vanished” is a colorful snowflake. This symbol is representative of the four spirits Agnarr outlines in the beginning and is used later in Ahtohallen to reveal Elsa as the fifth spirit. In this version of the snowflake, there is not yet a center like on Iduna’s scarf or in the sky when Elsa finally reaches Ahtohallen. This withholding of full symbolism suspends the audience in ambiguity and forces them to learn new information alongside Elsa, as if in her place. The final symbol includes humans as part of the spirits of nature, revealing nature and humans are not necessarily distinct from one another but are all part of the environment. The final form of the snowflake is incomplete until Elsa understands her and Anna’s

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<sup>158</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen 2*, (0:03:34).

<sup>159</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen 2* (0:04:24).

responsibility to the forest and its dwellers who are symbiotic with nature. The saving grace, then, is collaboration with nature instead of fear.

Agnarr, who remains in the shadow of his traditional monarch role fears nature and the powers it possesses. This is also seen in the first movie as he warns Elsa not to feel or engage with her powers derived from nature, advice the audience has already seen as ineffective. His fear limits his abilities to help his daughter and his kingdom. It is largely misplaced and rooted in misinformation perpetuated by a single story. For an effective solution for climate mitigation, all perspectives must be heard and honored. His story's ending is rather foreboding: "But the forest could wake again. And we must be prepared for whatever danger it may bring."<sup>160</sup> His explicit focus on "danger" reveals his biases that nothing positive can even *potentially* come from the forest, the spirits, or the Northuldra. All of these are a direct threat to Arendelle, as later referenced by King Runeard as well, since if one derives power from nature there is no need for a monarchy. Runeard reveals his motivation for the dam itself is because "magic makes people feel too powerful. Too entitled. It makes them think they can defy the will of a king."<sup>161</sup> By knowingly harming the water source of the Northuldra through the dam, he knows the magic associated with that natural spirit will diminish as well and he can further exert himself and his kingdom over the Northuldra. Runeard and Agnarr lack empathy towards the foreign ways of the Forest, and it promotes widescale ecological rejection.

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<sup>160</sup> Buck and Lee, 2 (0:05:07-05:12).

<sup>161</sup> Buck and Lee, Frozen 2, (0:01:07).



## Understanding

### *The Fifth Spirit*

After the initial reveal of ice moments as the group explores the forest, Elsa uses her powers to quell tensions between the Arendelle soldiers and the Northuldra. To this, Yelena questions, “Why would nature reward a person of Arendelle with magic?”<sup>162</sup> Foreshadowing Elsa’s unique role, this quote also anthropomorphizes nature further. Nature has power and stakes in the abilities of people, and it is personified and even deified to explain the magical properties of the film. Nature *is* magic. Yelena also remarks, “we [the Northuldra] only trust nature. When nature speaks, we listen” in response to Elsa begging for trust.<sup>163</sup> With this dispute, the fire spirit erupts into flames and embodies the conflict between the respective parties further. While others ran away in fear, Elsa pursues it to reveal the fire spirit is a sweetheart. The lizard can hear the voice as well, which means all spirits can interact and understand one another—just like an ecosystem. At this point, Elsa and Anna are still unaware of the fifth element and the immense weight of such a role. Honeymaren explains the Northuldra traditions to Elsa: “You know air, fire, water, and earth. But look, there’s a fifth spirit said to be a bridge between us and the magic of nature.”<sup>164</sup> While they examine the symbols Elsa’s mother’s Northuldra scarf which denote the story Honeymaren continues, “some say they heard it call out the day the forest fell.” “The day the forest fell” implies the forest itself lost a battle. It’s recognized as its own distinct kingdom through its ecology and

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<sup>162</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen 2*, (0:36:24).

<sup>163</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen 2*, (0:37:19).

<sup>164</sup> Buck and Lee, (0:44:43-58).

magical properties. Bridges can fall, and so a bridge between man and nature must be maintained for proper environmental protection. The absence of Elsa up to this point limited the potential of the forest whereas at the end of the film we see her galivanting with migrating herds of reindeer and riding a water horse. The dam falls and a bridge is built.

The powers which were in the first movie believed to be a curse now hold the power to undo a colonial history and reconcile the past. The lore of Elsa's powers feeds into the mystical and the fairy tale archetype of good deeds being rewarded, instilling an environmental moral. It is through understanding their connection to the Northuldra and healing the relationship that Anna and Elsa save Arendelle *and* the forest. Elsa comes to represent the bridge between the colonial kingdom and the Indigenous forest, proving there is hope for constructive collaboration despite long colonial histories. Fear of the power of nature will lead to demise instead of innovation and adaptation—which are crucial skills in climate change mitigation as well.

From the first introduction of the spirits outside of the bedtime story, they symbolize an imbalance in the forest which effects all the populations on the fjord. Elsa is unnerved throughout the entire evening until she finally explores her gut feeling and ventures “Into the Unknown.” After Elsa identifies the symbols frozen (literally) in air (Image 21), they immediately drop to the ground in an alarming crescendo akin to breaking glass. The kingdom immediately is disrupted, and the ignorant bliss before the exploration of the truth begins is ended. This call to action is precipitated entirely by the frozen symbols in the air and the repeating motif of the spiritual snowflake in the distance (Image 21).



Image 21: Air, Water, Fire, Earth<sup>165</sup>

Elsa understands all the elements and how they're behaving with the kingdom, pushing the people out. She notes, "the air rages, no fire, no water. The earth is next. We have to get out."<sup>166</sup> Nature and its spiritual capacities facilitate human justice and protection, even when that courtesy isn't reciprocated in the history of the kingdom. Elsa never fears the power of nature, in part because it courses through her as the fifth spirit, but Anna—who represents Arendelle in the bridge analogy—is very apprehensive to engage.

Elsa: I woke the magical spirits of the Enchanted Forest. I believe whoever is calling me is good

Anna: how can you say that? Look at our kingdom

Elsa: I know, it's just that my magic can feel it. I can feel it.<sup>167</sup>

The initial apprehension to prioritize the kingdom over the forest is reverted later when the truth is finally revealed. Anna realizes, "that's why everyone was forced out. To protect them from what has to be done."<sup>168</sup> Nature was not hostile towards the citizens

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<sup>165</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen 2* (0:19:59-20:15).

<sup>166</sup> Buck and Lee, *2* (0:20:30-40).

<sup>167</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen 2* (0:21:37-22:07).

<sup>168</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen 2*, (1:10:55).

of Arendelle, just the kingdom itself and it took steps to protect everyone. Revealing the truth about the kingdom's sorted past also helps remove dichotomous language surrounding relations between different groups. When Elsa says she believes Ahtohallen (unnamed and unknown at this point) is "good," Anna's reaction places the kingdom in direct opposition to the Enchanted Forest. This opposition alludes to the Enchanted Forest not as being "good" but rather bad, using the fleeing of Arendelle as evidence. Lack of understanding and collaboration exacerbate Anna's single story until there is no alternative but the truth.

Elsa and Anna's selflessness is rewarded by saving Arendelle from the tidal wave and protecting the Northuldra. They don't quarrel with the past; they merely accept the consequences of prior action and seek a path to help correct it. "The *Frozen* Northuldrians appear as a flawless people, in terms of them being victims of the majority culture's wrongdoings in the past, and as doing no wrong in the story's narrative," explains Kalvig<sup>169</sup>. This flawlessness highlights the responsibility of correcting historical injustice as falling to the perpetrating parties. Nature, in the form of the spirits, is even protective over Arendelle as well proving the right choice to correct colonialism does not have to be a punishment and can happen collaboratively.

#### *The Flag of Arendelle: The Truth about Colonial Pasts*

The frozen water and the recreations of history which take place at Ahtohallen are the truths about the past—of colonial exploitation and environmental degradation—which *must* be uncovered for the safety of both Arendelle and the forest. Elsa and

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<sup>169</sup> Kalvig, "Nature and Magic as Representation of 'The Sami'—Sami Shamanistic Material in Popular Culture."

Anna's compassion for their people and their newly discovered connection with the Northuldra (whom their mother belonged to) allow them to reverse the highly destructive behaviors of their grandfather, Runeard. Widescale decolonization is hard to execute because it is so intrinsically linked to societal structures, but Anna and Elsa prove it is not only possible but critical. Using the ice and beautiful scenery of the forest to facilitate this message incorporates the mysticism and reality in a digestible and aesthetically pleasing fashion for audiences. In one of the opening songs of the film, "Some Things Never Change," attention is drawn to the flag of Arendelle both in on screen fixations and repetitions of "the flag of Arendelle will always fly"<sup>170</sup> in the lyrics. When the balance of nature is shifted by Elsa's exploration "Into the Unknown," one of the first signs the kingdom is in distress is the flag dramatically blowing away in the wind. Elsa and her magic are once again the same, reaffirming her strong emotional and physical connection to nature. As in *Frozen*, the trolls also help facilitate the connection between the colonial kingdom and the magic of nature. King Pabbie forewarns:

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<sup>170</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen 2*, (0:09:15-11:47).



Image 22: The past is not what it seems

Pabbie: Angry magical spirits are not for the faint of heart

Anna: why are they still angry? What does all this have to do with Arendelle?

Pabbie: The past is not what it seems. A wrong demands to be righted. Arendelle is not safe. The truth must be found. Without it, I see no future.<sup>171</sup>

The images communicate between the lines and foreshadow the mistruth revealed which incriminates Arendelle later in the film (Image 22). The entire motivation for the journey hinges on the visions Pabbie sees, proving how essential visuals and art are. Grand Pabbie's vision also foreshadows the destruction of the dam, and the full strength of Elsa's powers to stop the tidal wave which accompanies it.

Anna: The dam, it still stands. It was in Grand Pabbie's visions. But why?

Kristoff: I don't know, but it's still in good shape. Thank goodness.

Anna: what do you mean?

Kristoff: Well, if that dam broke it would send a tidal wave so big it would wash away everything on this fjord.

Anna: Everything? But Arendelle's on this fjord<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Buck and Lee, Frozen 2, (0:22:30-56).

<sup>172</sup> Buck and Lee, Frozen 2 (0:27:35-28:00).

Working in harmony with her powers and the forest, Elsa redirects the tidal wave when it does come to Arendelle and can save both the forest and the kingdom simultaneously. The contrast between the tidal wave and the kingdom is stark, with the magic from Elsa in the bottom of the dam radiating a brighter blue and signaling the magic (Image 23). The symmetry of the shot reflects the balance now struck between Arendelle and the forest, reconciling the fjord into one collective community once more. Further, it is through understanding and care for the right thing that Elsa is able to stop the tidal wave, a fact unknown to Anna at the point she breaks the dam.



Image 23: Tidal Wave

The sisters are ignorant to the entire history of the dam and the turbulent relationship between the Arendellian soldiers and the Northuldra even as they embark on their journey. Learning history and having context rooted both temporally and geographically holds the key for resolving much of nature's pending disasters. There is a function of dams and a historical framing of when and why they are built; as we learn more about how destructive they are on ecosystems; we have a moral responsibility to aid nature in the best ways possible. Agnarr told the girls earlier it was "a mighty dam" to "strengthen waters," which represents the old ways of conceptualizing environmental

stewardship. Elsa learns Runeard built the dam with the sole intention of weakening the waters and the Northuldra's environmental sovereignty. The dam serves also as a bridge, so its destruction allows Elsa to self-actualize her role as the fifth spirit and bridge between the forest and Arendelle. Not all dams are built with malice in mind, but they do have drastic impacts on the environment. Representing a dam here brings the magic of the realm back to reality and relates to a visual or physical experience the audience may have with a dam which will then help them resonate with the impact they have on ecology.

Additionally, it is in collaboration with nature and not fearing or exploiting it that the Northuldra are able to use its magic (Image 24). The man in Image 24 uses the river to move him across the water, as if walking upon it. The river gently bounces him onto the bank and he continues with his journey. Although Agnarr dictates this is manipulation of the natural elements, the image itself is lightly colored and bright, signaling happiness and contentment. Further, there are no signs of exploitation apart from Agnarr's words; the music is cheerful with the whistle sound signaling the magical spirits present, and the man does not seem to exert will over the water, but the water seems eager to help as it guides him ashore. Agnarr's perception, as represented in his dialogue, conflicts with the reality of the lived indigenous experience.





Image 24: Northuldra man ‘riding’ the water<sup>173</sup>

It is the kingdom which directly harms nature through the dam and ironically claims to be strengthening waters. The good news is Arendelle, thanks to Anna and Elsa, can correct this colonial deceit and prioritize Indigenous reparations over the perpetuation of colonial narratives.

#### *Ahtohallen: The Glacier*

Ice retains records of the Earth’s past and is one of the largest representations of the effects of climate change in the natural world, but in *Frozen 2* this record is extended through magic to store the collective cultural memory of a people. Ahtohallen, introduced in the girls’ lullaby, is later revealed to be a glacier. Glaciers are a bridge between humans and the physical world, and they “figure prominently in both indigenous oral traditions and the narratives of geophysical science.”<sup>174</sup> Synthesizing Indigenous traditions and science causes glaciers to “collide in unexpected ways in contemporary discussions about climate change.”<sup>175</sup> The ice in the glaciers retains a physical memory of past climates through trapped oxygen and carbon, so the choice to

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<sup>173</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen 2* (0:02:40).

<sup>174</sup> Cruikshank, “Glaciers and Climate Change.”

<sup>175</sup> Cruikshank.

include a glacier as a collective cultural memory alludes to their function in natural processes outside the film as well. This adds value to the social construction of glaciers, even in areas where they are not directly observable like in the United States.

“Scientists conceptualize climate change as a global process” but, “it has profoundly local consequences. Projections about global warming raise critical concerns for residents of northern indigenous communities.”<sup>176</sup> Audiences may not see the impacts of glaciers, but through appreciating their beauty in *Frozen 2* and the profound effect they have on indigenous cultures, glaciers and climate change are brought to the foreground of the audiences mind as Elsa pursues Ahtohallen. Valuable scientific and cultural information comes from the ice, so protecting the truth of the ice in glaciers—and the truth thus in Ahtohallen is critical for environmental and anthropogenic protection.

*Frozen 2* uses magic and science to convey the cultural and social significance of ice. When Olaf first proposes his ‘theory’ the objective is humor as he instructs: “Water has memory. The water that makes up you and me has passed through at least four humans and/or animals before us. And remembers everything.”<sup>177</sup> Olaf is doing a mock science class using Sven as a three-dimensional diagram; the humor in Sven spitting out the water as he learns it’s been “passed” before engages young audiences in comic relief while introducing the water cycle and trophic ecology. When it is revealed Ahtohallen is “a magical river said to hold all the answers about the past,” Olaf posits how this reinforces his “water has memory theory.”<sup>178</sup> Through this ecologically based

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<sup>176</sup> Cruikshank.

<sup>177</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen 2* (0:32:55-33:18).

<sup>178</sup> Buck and Lee, *2* (0:54:39-45).

(but still outlandish) theory and Elsa's magical powers the sisters discover the truth about their parent's death and confirm the existence of Ahtohallen. This makes the magic more believable while still engaging scientific thinking and environmentalism.



Image 25: Water has memory

Elsa pulls the water from the ships boards and combines all the droplets to recreate her parents' final moments in ice.

Water is an important element in facilitating the history of the Northuldra and the forest. Elsa's powers translate the memories stored in the water to ice (Image 25), moving from the invisible to the tangible to progress the narrative of the film. Elsa commands the water droplets stored in the wood of her parent's ship to recreate the memory of their last moments (Image 25). The frame is told from Elsa's point of view, with her head in the lower right corner to signal this. The scene is very emotionally trying since it is the death of her parents, so establishing her point of view connects the audience to the emotional power of manipulating the water and learning the truth. The brightness of Agnarr and Iduna, again, represents the magical properties of what is transpiring, and all the individual droplets are seen quite clearly. Ice, as formed from water, stores the truth about the social past of humans and allows correction of misunderstandings. Just as

glaciers hold the truth about the physical past of the Earth, the ice itself in the ship and in Ahtohallen show visually the collective narrative of the people living on the fjord.

Elsa's powers grow throughout the film and evolve to fit her scenarios; the subtle culmination of an immense amount of power which holds the past, can resolve the present, and creates hope for the future points to the importance of reverence and communication between all five elements. This escalating theme of intensifying environmental harmony stems from understanding; as Elsa learns more about the past, she unlocks her powers more. The takeaway, then, is learning about the environment and caring for it can garner special skills for better protecting and enjoying it.

Approaching Ahtohallen, it is glowing and the only brightness on the horizon after a series of jarring cut scenes involving the water spirit (Image 26). Elsa realizes, "Glaciers are rivers of ice. Ahtohallen is frozen!"<sup>179</sup>



Image 26: Glaciers are rivers of ice! Ahtohallen in Frozen.

The Dark Sea is just that, a dark and turbulent sea which poses a challenge of both scale and skill to Elsa. Intense music looms over as repetitive scenes reveal many trials of

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<sup>179</sup> Buck and Lee, 2, (1:02:43-49).

Elsa trying to cross the water using her powers. The jarring nature of the scenes in conjunction with the repetition of failed trials increases the intensity of the scene and suspends audiences in fear of failure and anxiety for Elsa. Even when she makes it atop the water, she is pursued by a daunting water-horse spirit. Dramatic music plays and the failed trial method continues, conveyed by bright flashes of lightning and short, loud thunders to shock the audiences' eyes and ears, and create a horror effect. This creates an emotional response for the audience and further invests them in Elsa's mission—protecting the forest.

Having the most powerful character struggle so intently reinforces the power of nature, especially since Pabbie warned, “we have always feared Elsa's powers were too much for this world. Now we must pray they are enough.”<sup>180</sup> This could also reinforce the fear of Agnarr and Runeard since nature is in fact more powerful than humans. Elsa's success in taming the angered water spirit with an ice lasso from her powers demonstrates success in her third encounter with the four spirits and disproves Agnarr and Runeard's theory even if the success is not immediate. These dramatic scenes help the audience in their perception and reflection on the necessity to protect and respect wilderness. Each spirit: wind, fire salamander and the horse, to this point has been introduced to the audience and the characters as violent and fear-inducing. Yet, Elsa forms a relationship with each one respectively, alluding to her role as the interdependent fifth spirit. This also grants relief to the audience and eases the turbid relationship between nature and humans, allowing them to feel comfortable with environmental immersion.

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<sup>180</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen 2* (0:22:42-48).

Ahtohallen and the truth both remain a mystery still, keeping the audience suspended in the belief of mysticism. This suspense alludes to the potential of some grandiose being, but the revelation of the fifth spirit being Elsa proves humans also have magical abilities when they work in cohesion with nature. This brings practicality back to the viewers' attention, since the key to protecting the forest is merely aiming to understand and protect it—an uncanny revelation which empowers the audience in their own life.

When the horse is lasso'd, the sea suddenly quiets and is still like a prairie for Elsa to make her dramatic ride across. In contrast to the jarring scenes preceding this, Elsa is in slow motion as she sings of her relationship with the fifth spirit (still unknown to her at this time). The aural tone shifts from suspenseful and jarring to a crescendo melody increasing gradually as Elsa approaches Ahtohallen. The glacier is glowing on the horizon and is the only bright spot in the entire scene (Image 26). Brightness draws the eye to the outline of the glacier, extending its importance to the unfolding plot and beautifully representing glaciers. Elsa even remarks, "it's beautiful," and the aesthetic and social importance of glaciers is solidified in this scene. Ice, then, is critical for both environmental protection and human history.

## *Betrayal and Colonialism*



Image 27: The Northuldra follow magic, which means we can never trust them<sup>181</sup>

Discovering the truth about the past at Ahtohallen is how Elsa came to understand and share with Anna that the dam was the root of the conflict between the two realms. Revealing this allows the past to be reconciled and hope for restoring environments affected by colonialism. As Elsa uncovers the past, she witnesses the memory of her grandfather, King Runeard, notifying his guard, “the dam will weaken their lands so they will have to turn to me. They will come in celebration. And then, we will know their size and strength (Image 27).”<sup>182</sup> The frame places Elsa in the center, from an objective point of view so the audience can watch her expression in reaction to this information. Her expression is hurt, and the differences in understanding and appreciating nature and Indigenous communities in just two generations is clear. Runeard’s exploitation and degradation of nature stems from a need to acquire power and control others. By controlling natural resources, he can control the entire livelihoods of the Northuldra, a peaceful nomadic community who do not submit to a

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<sup>181</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen 2*, (1:07:05).

<sup>182</sup> Buck and Lee, *Frozen 2*, (1:08:27-49).

monarchy but rather exist independently from it and instead commune with nature. The ice allows Elsa to experience moments in time she was not even alive for, storing a collective societal and cultural memory.

The Northuldra leader, who is entirely in tune with nature, submits his worries to Runeard: “the dam isn’t strengthening our waters. It’s hurting the forest. It’s cutting off the North.”<sup>183</sup> “Cutting off the North” signals the pain of being excluded from the rest of the fjord and the desire to be connected as one even if there are differences in community power structures. The Northuldra, then, are the clear victims of environmental sabotage aimed to reduce their autonomy, sovereignty, and access to resources. All these memories are stored in Ahtohallen, but the darkness surrounding them is dangerous and poses a threat to Elsa should she overexert her curiosity. Elsa sacrifices herself for the truth and sends word to her sister so that the right thing can be done at any cost.

The entire scene is dark, apart from the iridescence of the snow and the glow of Anna’s torch (Image 28). She aims the flame closer to the frozen moment, revealing the scene for herself and the audience. Anna affirms for the audience, “The dam wasn’t a gift of peace. It was a trick.”<sup>184</sup> While shining light on the physical memory, Anna also figuratively shines light upon the truth of the past in this revelation scene.

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<sup>183</sup> Buck and Lee, (1:09:15-20).

<sup>184</sup> Buck and Lee, Frozen 2, (1:10:30).





Image 28: The dam was a trick

The conflict between the Northuldra and the Arendelians was said by Agnarr to be caused by the Northuldra attacking the Arendelians. This conflict is the reason the spirits vanished and shrouded the forest in the first place, so its resolution is critical for the protection of Arendelle and the freeing of the forest. The image reveals it was in fact King Runeard who violated the peace treaty between the two communities, as he attacks a kneeling and defenseless Northuldra leader. Despite Anna and Olaf’s understanding of Arendelle values being conflicted by this truth, the historical reality remains the monarchical kingdom instigated violence against the indigenous communities who were not subjugated.

Priya Satia explores the effective communication in *Frozen 2* about the lasting impacts of imperialism, calling the film “more radical and politically imaginative than most popular history books”<sup>185</sup> She commends the film for the ability to condemn colonialism and rightfully restore Indigenous rights, especially surrounding the dam and its effect on the Northuldra water source which ultimately results in the trapping of the

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<sup>185</sup> Satia, “Frozen II Isn’t Just a Cartoon. It’s a Brilliant Critique of Imperialism.”

forest in mist. Most notably, Satia refers to the people of Arendelle as “climate refugees,” directly connecting the impacts of colonialism and the need for reparations to environmental degradation that results in refugee status.<sup>186</sup> Satia connects this unraveling of the past in *Frozen 2* to the perhaps radical truth that “even prosperous European countries are not immune from the consequences of climate crisis.”<sup>187</sup> This means while environmental justice issues currently disproportionately affect disenfranchised folks—which would include the Indigenous Northuldra in the mythical Kingdom of Arendelle—the reality is the climate crisis is a human issue which will ultimately affect everyone. This creates a sense of urgency and empowerment in the context of Satia’s critique as well as the context of the film; Satia acknowledges that the magic which saves Arendelle from the destruction of the wave is not practical, but it does make a compelling case for the positive impacts of colonial reparations which *do* affect environmental issues today.

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<sup>186</sup> Satia.

<sup>187</sup> Satia.

## **Film Synthesis**

## Survey

### Survey

It's important to understand how audiences engage with the film apart from the themes perceived from a scholarly perspective. This informs how Disney markets as well as provides insight to what audiences take away from watching Disney films. Disney is especially renowned for being able to engage with audiences of all ages, so families were the primary target of the survey. The survey was designed to evaluate media habits, environmental priorities, and the ways environmental stewardship may be promoted through viewing Disney films, specifically *Moana*. *Moana* was selected for this portion of the project because it is a stand-alone film whereas *Frozen* and *Frozen 2* are much more franchised and expanded through shows as well. *Moana* also entirely avoids a love interest, whereas even though sisterly love is the resolution of *Frozen* there is still a great deal of romantic overtones between Anna and Hans, and later Anna and Kristoff. This focuses the experience of the viewer to be able to hone in specifically on the environment and a pair of platonic characters' interactions with it. *Moana* is also important to this project because of the indigenous representation of Pacific Islander culture; while *Frozen 2* engages with the indigenous communities of Norway, the main characters themselves and the plot of *Frozen* are isolated from these communities. Having a representative main character, like Moana signals the importance of indigenous perspectives in environmental efficacy.

Children are highly sensitive to the media they interact with through screens and televisions—an emerging phenomenon as technology increases.<sup>188</sup> Pediatric experts recommend, “for children 2 to 5 years of age,” parents “limit screen use to 1 hour per day of high-quality programming, coview with [their] children, help children understand what they are seeing, and help them apply what they learn to the world around them.”<sup>189</sup> Entire households/viewing parties were asked to participate, facilitating a conversation between parents and children about the media they just engaged with. The survey also encouraged co-viewing and critical reflection of the messages on the film. While Disney’s motives remain profit over education—unlike PBS, as cited in the article<sup>190</sup>—encouraging this behavior through the survey can extend some of the aesthetic value of a film and *make* it educational. This also generates conversation between family members, encouraging discussion of environmental issues and efficacy beyond the survey itself. The survey was conducted with Google Forms and a convenience sample of participants were recruited via social media. The survey garnered twenty-seven responses, twenty-five of which were kept, and gathered primarily qualitatively data. The entire survey can be found in Appendix.

Survey questions were open ended so as not to inflect my own biases of hope and affiliation with Disney through this project into the audience’s responses. Originally, the objective was to conduct a pre- and post- viewing survey, respectively, to gauge how environmental knowledge changes from just watching *Moana* alone. However, I opted for a post-viewing survey only, as a pre/post method might have

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<sup>188</sup> Radesky, Christakis, and Council on Communications and Media Executive Committee, 2016-2017, “Media and Young Minds.”

<sup>189</sup> Radesky, Christakis, and Council on Communications and Media Executive Committee, 2016-2017.

<sup>190</sup> Radesky, Christakis, and Council on Communications and Media Executive Committee, 2016-2017.

decreased participation with two surveys. Collecting information about audience responses is meant to round out the project and provide insight into how people come to understand the environment and their relation to it through these films. Questions do, however, prompt the audience to engage with the connection between the media they consume and the environment in which they live. If they can see changes and similarities between the films' environment and their own, the goal is they can take the hope and inspiration of such media with them into that environment—beyond the screen. The survey aims to see if audiences are making connections between their world and the film's setting, and if they take the morals of the film home with them to be better environmentalists.

## **Data**

Twenty-seven people responded to the survey over a course of a month and a half. Two of the responses were omitted because of the low quality of the data. Descriptive statistics on the multiple choice/select all that apply questions were analyzed via Google Forms. Open-ended qualitative data was analyzed using an inductive approach.<sup>191</sup> Key words and/or themes repeated multiple times in free response questions were grouped together for analysis by hand. These include themes

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<sup>191</sup> A general inductive approach for analysis of qualitative evaluation data is described. The purposes for using an inductive approach are to (a) condense raw textual data into a brief, summary format; (b) establish clear links between the evaluation or research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data; and (c) develop a framework of the underlying structure of experiences or processes that are evident in the raw data. The general inductive approach provides an easily used and systematic set of procedures for analyzing qualitative data that can produce reliable and valid findings. Although the general inductive approach is not as strong as some other analytic strategies for theory or model development, it does provide a simple, straightforward approach for deriving findings in the context of focused evaluation questions. Many evaluators are likely to find using a general inductive approach less complicated than using other approaches to qualitative data analysis. (Thomas, "A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data.")

such as decay and death of the land, female empowerment, self-confidence, issues of the environment, community/family, and food resources.

### *Survey Demographics*

A majority of the household compositions include children between the ages of 3-7 (60%, Figure 1), with the third most frequent household member being children ages 8-12 (12%). There were also two responses indicating children younger than 3, one specified as 2.5 years old and simply “under three.”<sup>192</sup> Also of interest is the large proportion of adults. Since Google Forms counted each individual free response in its own category, the adult percentage was done by hand for a more accurate statistic regarding those responses. Adults, self-defined by as 18+ and 26, 76, or just “adult” was 24%; adults being the second biggest category indicates both the entirety of a family viewing the film as well as adults enjoying them on their own, as discussed in earlier sections of this thesis (Figure 1).

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<sup>192</sup> See Appendix

### Which of these best describes your household?

25 responses

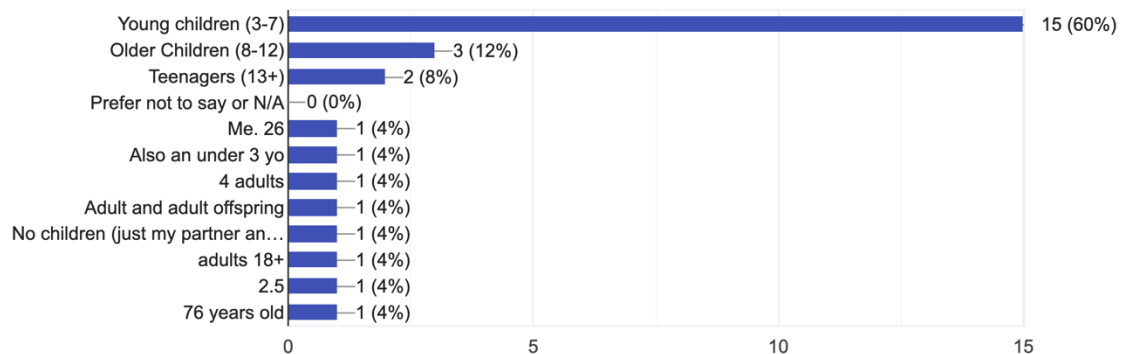


Figure 1: Household demographics of survey participants

Overall, survey response ages range from 2.5 years to 76 years, and many in between. Potentially, the ages reported for household members does not necessarily encapsulate the viewing party of survey answers. There is possibility that the question was answered in the context of general household composition, and the whole household may not have watched the film or been active participants in the survey. The instructions prompted participants to collaborate with others in their viewing party, but this does not guarantee all perspectives represented in this figure are represented in later questions. Some participants, however, chose to indicate which member's opinion was represented in the answers<sup>193</sup>—indicating at some degree of comprehension of the task.

When asked what factors influence participants' willingness to watch the film, the family component played an important role in participants' desire to engage with the film (Figure 2). This was also a select all that apply question, so audiences could be influenced by more than one of these factors at any given point. With 80% of responses signaling the family friendly component of the film, however, whole families

<sup>193</sup> See Appendix



(households and other self-defined parties) engage with the content in *Moana* (Figure 2). “Strong female leads” was the second highest incentive, with 65% of participants resonating with this theme (Figure 2).

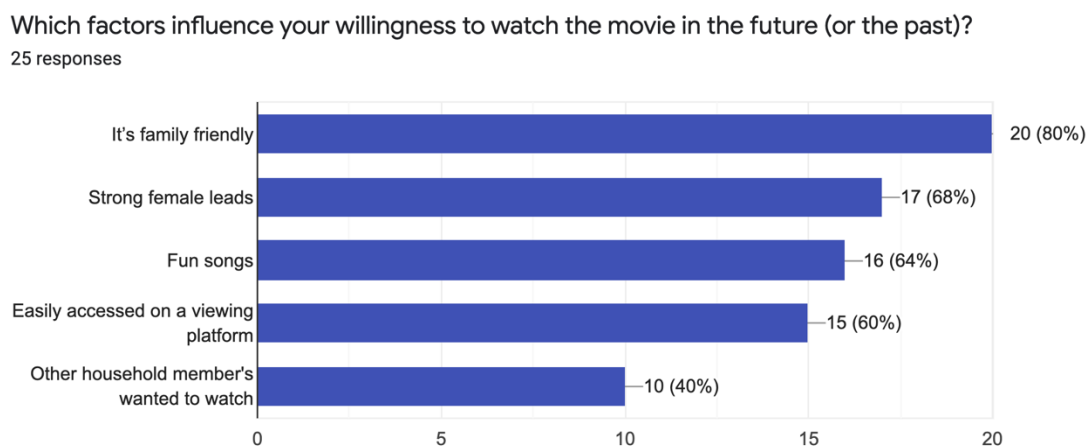


Figure 2: Participation in watching Moana

### *Key Takeaways*

Beginning the inductive approach to analysis, clear groupings of themes emerged quite quickly. Most predominantly, the themes extracted from the film by the audience involved environmental change (positive or negative), female empowerment, and community. This parallels the incentive for watching the film as being heavily influenced by family values and female leads (Figure 2) and is elaborated on in the questions following.

The first question addresses the feelings of the audience while watching the film. This question aimed to understand the mood in which audiences approach the film with to infer their acceptance of new information as presented in the medium. This was a “Check all that apply” question, with 100% of participants saying they felt happy from watching the film (Figure 3). “Relaxed” and “Sad” were the next two biggest

feelings experienced, tying at 35%. A feeling of relaxation could refer to the experience of spending time with family and watching a film as a hobby, but also means the hostilities that may surround other platforms like news or social media are not necessarily paralleled in film viewing. This points to the potential of introducing new information to audiences through creative mediums for a wider range of connections made to the content—as measured in feelings.

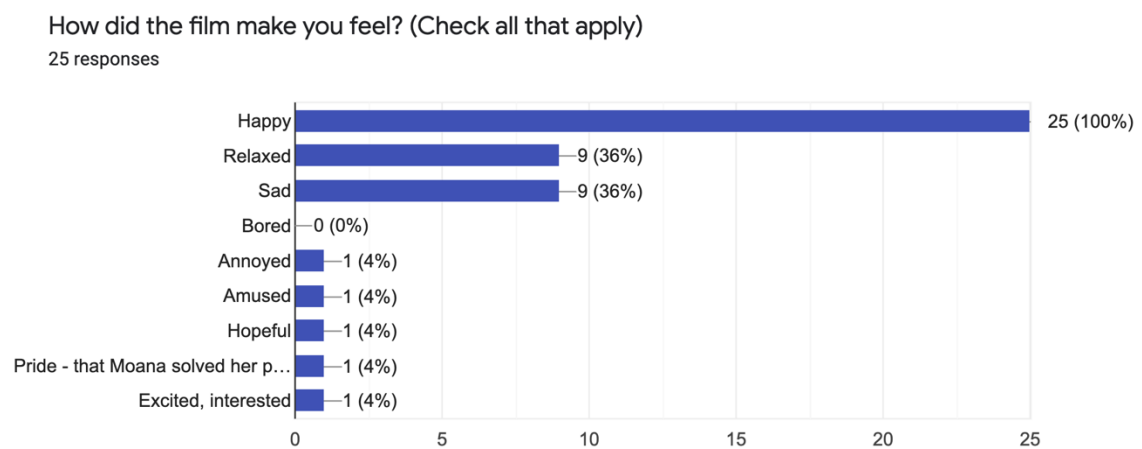


Figure 3: How did the film make you feel?

Two responses also included free response entries, demonstrating an even wider range of emotional experiences than predicted. One participant said they felt “pride” that “Moana solved her problem” (Figure 3). Another response was “Excited, interested,” which are two positive emotions. Overwhelmingly, the responses for feelings are positive which reflects hope for the power of Disney and film to captivate audiences and create positive, visceral experiences and to prompt re-viewing.

Which forms of media do you predominantly engage with for entertainment ? (Select all that apply)

25 responses

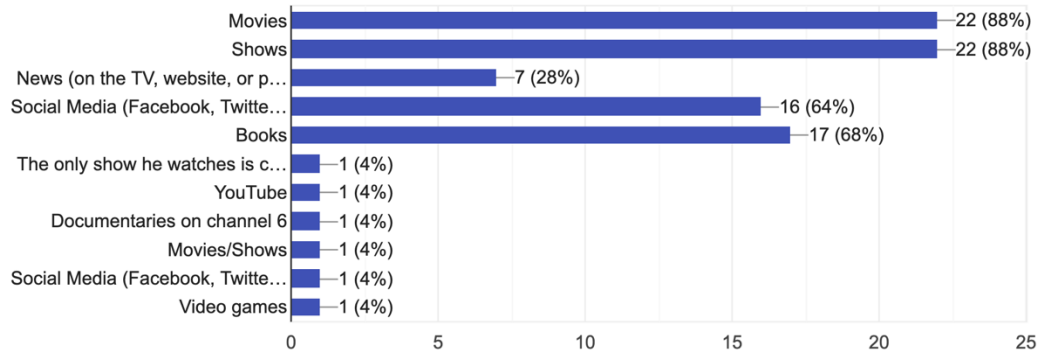


Figure 4: What forms of media do you predominantly engage with for entertainment?

Free response questions began more general to understand the audience’s initial, general reactions to the experience and allow them a space to share what they felt was more important. This also allowed me to see if environmental aspects were detected by general audiences on a holistic scale, without prompting. Largely, the takeaways were self-confidence and female empowerment (Table 1). Nature and Pacific Islander Culture was also discussed by participants, with one (9 years old) even recognizing how Te Ka and Te Fiti represent nature (Table 1).

Table 1: What were your key takeaways from the story?

Theme	Number of Responses	Exemplar Quotes
Theme: Self confidence	11	<p>“Be bold, brave, and true to yourself.”</p> <p>“You don’t need to rely on anyone else to save what you love other than yourself”</p> <p>“Be brave, take a chance, stick with your guts,”</p>

		“She was committed and didn't let obstacles deter her.”
Theme: Female Empowerment	8	“I like it when Disney princesses are strong main characters that do things rather than there only to look pretty and be rescued” “people holding females back, limiting their options.”
Theme: Nature	4	“The lava monster/mother earth character express their feelings through nature.” “Important to care for the land”
Theme: Pacific Culture	3	“I also liked the cultural diversity in this film.” “Learning about Polynesian mythology”

The distinction between ‘Female Empowerment’ and ‘Self Confidence’ is the explicit mention of females, girls, or Moana. One participant (age 13) noted how they appreciated women being “strong main characters.” Self-confidence responses were distinguished from female empowerment if they did not explicitly mention gender, and/or shifted focus on the action rather than the gender dynamic. Many of them were in the second person, demonstrating audience members resonated personally with that lesson: “Be bold, brave, and true to yourself.” The answer, “She was committed and didn't let obstacles deter her” was included in self-confidence and not Female Empowerment since the only reference to gender is in Moana’s pronouns, not a specific feminine action—just her role as a character in the film.

### *Environmental Changes*

Environmental questions were designed so the audience would specifically connect key themes to the environment but were still open ended to best reflect the true interpretation of the participants. A key theme I analyzed in Chapter 1 was

environmental change: health, to degradation, and back to restoration. While this question aimed to see if audiences could focus on the environment in their viewing experience, they were not prompted to notice the exact same phenomenon/depictions as myself. The second free response question, “Did you notice any changes in the environment as the movie progressed? If so, what?” was grouped into three main categories: Environmental Fluctuation, Death and Decay, and Food Shortages (Table 2)

Table 2: Did you notice any changes in the environment as the movie progressed? If so, what?

Theme	Number of Responses	Exemplar Quotes
Theme: Environmental fluctuation	10	<p>“It went from being isolated (the society) and dying to healthy and exploring”</p> <p>“Less resources available as people took from the land”</p> <p>“Yes, it worsened before it became better”</p> <p>“The earth was sad when the people made the environment bad (6-year-old answer). The crops were poor when people took from the earth, but were bountiful again when they recognized their responsibilities.”</p> <p>“Yes, it changed from green to dry and rocky back to green.”</p> <p>“After Moana returned the heart the islands became green again”</p>
Theme: Death and Decay	5	<p>“Yes, the environment dies the longer moana is away and the longer the stone isn’t with Tifiti (sic)”</p> <p>“Facing the main challenge, it became quite dark and gloomy, quite oppressive. A warning I guess.”</p> <p>“Te—fiti (sic) transformed into te-ka (sic) when her heart was stolen. Some kind of land cancer spread to the islands as a result.”</p>

Theme: Food shortages	4	<p>“The grounds are no longer producing food”</p> <p>“Yes, overfishing, drought”</p> <p>“The villagers had over fished the waters between the reef and their island. Their crops were failing because of over use of the land.”</p>
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Death and Decay was categorized only as responses which mentioned explicitly those processes and no alternative. As opposed to Environmental Fluctuation, which includes some mentions of death, but also contextualizes it in terms of health as well. So, for example, the response which says, “It went from being isolated (the society) and dying to healthy and exploring,” references “dying” and “healthy” which represents fluctuation and not just death. Responses which alluded to the restoration of the environment at the resolve of the movie/lesson were included in “Environmental Fluctuation” as opposed to “Death and Decay,” which is a singular theme.

Similarly, answers which referenced environmental decay in terms of food specifically were put into the own theme of “Food Shortages” as opposed to “Environmental Decay” because of their specificity. While “The villagers had over fished the waters between the reef and their island. Their crops were failing because of overuse of the land,” does acknowledge both decay (failing crops) and fluctuation (over fished), the focus is on the context of food which warrants its own theme. Clearly these audiences noticed both the environmental degradation in terms of the land, but also the human impact—food shortages—so that specificity and care is recognized through its own category.

Extending the second free response question, the third asks the audience to specifically link the character and the environment. The high number of environmental

advocacy themed responses (13) (Table 3) demonstrates the success of the question in connecting audiences to ecological awareness.

Table 3: How are the main characters reacting to changes in their environment and is that similar to reactions that you see to our environment?

Theme	Number of Responses	Exemplar Quotes
Theme: Environmental advocacy	13	<p>“The main characters noticed an issue and one person worked to solve it. It extrapolates to our society in that some people are working to solve environmental issues, but the change is obviously much slower than in Moana.”</p> <p>“I see our environment declining and people need to help it.”</p> <p>“The grandmother was inspirational. She was listening and responding to nature. Everyone else had their own opposing views which don't necessarily help the environment.”</p> <p>“People didn't understand that Maui had created Te-Ka by stealing her heart. I guess you could say offending mother happen daily with pollution (although the people in Moana seen very respectable of the environment).”</p> <p>“Finding positive solutions to environmental problems. ie: replenishing the heart of 'mother nature' to help resolve the lack of fish and the dying vegetation.”</p>
Theme: Community	5	<p>“Trying new/creative solutions to solve environmental community problems”</p> <p>“No. The people in my life refuse to make the changes necessary to protect their only land.”</p> <p>“Trying find cause and fixing it. Yes, I think we are reactive, trying to be progressive”</p>
Theme: Female Empowerment	1	<p>“Moana is unsure of herself at first but develops her skills over time. No?”</p>

Female Empowerment was a major takeaway in the first question (Table 1) but asking participants to link the characters to the environment and the relationship between them extrapolated much more environmental themes. There are still presences of feminism (Table 3), but the link to environmental advocacy exemplifies the effects of ecofeminism in films like *Moana*. Strong women who are also caring and compassionate are linked to environmental protection and can draw others in. This connection may not resonate as explicitly as ‘eco-feminism’ terminology to an audience, but the intention in linking strong, Indigenous, female role models and nature is clear. Grandma Tala was also noted in one response (Table 3) as “responding to nature,” which parallels my analysis of her and Moana being the eco-oriented characters in the film.

Prompting more thought as well, participants were asked to connect those interactions to reactions in their own environments (Table 4). If audiences did not resonate with Pacific Islander culture, or have never experienced it firsthand, this question prompts consideration of environmental issues close to their local ecosystems and experiences. The theme of “Family” demonstrates also that participants detect and resonate to some degree with a sense of community and familial relationships—both in the film and in their life. Also present most strongly in the environmental degradation theme are drastic negative human impacts on ecosystems. “The planet is dying,” one participant put quite bluntly (Table 4).



Table 4: Can you compare any similarities between the environment in the movie and the one in which you live? If so, explain.

Theme	Number of Responses	Exemplar Quotes
Theme: Environmental degradation paralleled or at least present	15	<p>“The planet is dying”</p> <p>“Their environment is more tropical, and they live on an ocean. Their environmental problems were brought about by other worldly actions rather than the people, and it is happening more quickly. In our environment, we have caused most of the problems. It has happened more slowly and is more serious overall.”</p> <p>“Our environments around the world are deteriorating like the film. Fish populations are dying.”</p> <p>“We see the same issues in the news on a daily basis”</p> <p>“Our bay has regular minor oil and fuel spills from a refinery and shipping every 2-3 years, causing may of the local beaches and marshlands to close.”</p>
No	4	The yellow one is the sun. It is also present in my environment.
Theme: Family	2	<p>“Did you see anything on her island that looks like our home here?”</p> <p>‘She has a family!’</p> <p>“We practice some of the same values”</p>

While most of the “No” responses were just that, a simple no, one response was counted for its simplicity and lack of connection. “The yellow one is the sun. It is also present in my environment” said a 26-year-old participant.<sup>194</sup> This simplistic answer with such a sweeping generalization indicated no other potential parallels between the two realms apart from the sun and was therefore interpreted as no connections.

<sup>194</sup> See Appendix

*Key Words and Phrases*

Participants were asked to list the three words they best felt described the narrative *and* lessons in the film. Words and Phrases/Sentences were sorted into two respective groups to distinguish between them for easier analysis. Words were then grouped by (the full list of words is available in the Appendix).

Table 5a: Please list the three words you feel best describe the narrative and lessons in the film?

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Verb</b>	<b>Noun</b>	<b>Adjective</b>
<b>Optimism</b>	Learn, Trust	Dreams, Kindness, Peace, Happiness, Hope, Faith	Heartwarming, Funny, Cute, Positive
<b>Bold Action</b>	Protect, Respect, Empowering	Power, Responsibility, Strength, Hard Work, Determination, Independent	Courageous, Capable, Determined, Brave,
<b>Relationships</b>		Family, Teamwork, Love, Friendship, Community	Nurturing, Caring
		Balance, Persistence, Resilience, Perseverance, Fulfillment	Reflective
<b>Environmental Efficacy</b>	Conserve	Stewardship	
<b>Moana</b>		Moana, Hawaii, Trip, Female	

Words were first grouped by part of speech to distinguish respondent's intentions and allow for more distinct analysis. For example, adjectives were deduced as those which reflect onto the viewing experience of the specific participant.

“Heartwarming,” implies the viewer felt inspired and warmed specifically throughout their experience. Once sorted into part of speech, they were grouped into themes based

on synonyms and connotations. *Bold Action* refers to empowering and invigorated phrases which command action and garner power: respect, strength, determination, brave, etc.

Anything more than one simple word was considered a phrase for the purposes of analysis. Phrases represent more elaborate thought consideration on behalf of the audience and infer more about participants processes of learning. Longer phrases rephrase more thought that could not be reduced to one key word. Key themes in phrases include: Self-empowerment, Connection, Environmental Awareness, and Execution of the Film itself.

Table 6: Key Phrases

Phrases: Bad-Assery, choosing your own path, visually striking, thoughtful but unrealistic, environmental awareness, follow your heart, see things for more than they initially appear, we are all connected, get to know people before you judge them, family, bringing the fish back to the island, “you’re welcome,” and self-faithfulness.
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## **Discussion**

Overall, I found that the themes extrapolated from the survey largely reflect the themes highlighted in my analysis of *Moana*: Environmental Degradation, Feminism, Family/Community, and Food Insecurity. The questions do prompt consideration of the environment specifically so it makes sense the themes would center around environmental observations. Also very affirming of my analysis of *Moana* specifically is the focus on feminine characters and Pacific Islander representation. In the questions not garnered towards the environment—like key takeaways— “Polynesian mythology” and “strong female leads” resonated with audiences. This is critical for more

representation in Disney films—and all media moving forward—and points to the intersection of ecofeminism, indigenous cosmologies, and environmentalism which are key themes in environmental studies.

Also of particular interest are the positive words listed in the free response question asking for the three best words to describe the experience. Hope stands out in my analysis since it is the premise of the project. While many responders commented environmental protection is much easier in the film than in practice, hope being a key takeaway means people are feeling empowered to address some of the issues they see paralleled in their environment in the film. “Stewardship” and “Responsibility” are two other key words which reflect the goal of the project as well. In Chapter 1, I thoroughly analyzed how Moana is a steward of her environment, so the fact that audiences recognize her as a leader means they can emulate her behavior in their own lives should they choose. This is especially important since, “an explicit examination of the emotion of hope regarding climate change revealed that individuals who feel more hope express stronger support for mitigation policies.”<sup>195</sup>

Of the three participants who listed “hope” as one of their descriptive words, one of them ranked environmentally friendly practices as high priority in their home. The other two ranked the practices as 3/5 priority, which is somewhere in the median. While it might be expected that those who associate hope with the environmental messages of *Moana* would all prioritize environmental practices as high in their household, the fact that none of them ranked the practices as lowest priority is also significant. Knowing

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<sup>195</sup> Marlon et al., “How Hope and Doubt Affect Climate Change Mobilization.”

environmentally friendly practices are often inaccessible, expensive, and time consuming<sup>196</sup> could help hypothesize why this median response occurred. Marlon et al. continue, “an interaction exists between constructive hope and doubt in predicting political behavioral intentions, which suggests that having hope that humans will reduce climate change, along with recognition that humans are not doing enough may also be constructive and motivate political action.”<sup>197</sup>

One participant noted, “we cannot magically fix the environment in which we live by simply returning a stone,” highlighting one of the shortcomings of drawing explicit connections between animated films and reality. The fantastical elements in *Moana* and the Polynesian mythology—also noted by survey participants (Table 1)—help make the story of salvation more probable than in our world. The participant above highlights this juxtaposition and went on to describe the film as “thoughtful but unrealistic.” Again, the magical element isn’t intended to be fully translatable to modern life, but the “thoughtful” aspect is of interest in this work. If women can be empowered and people can collaborate for thoughtful and kind solutions, there is hope for climate change management and adaptation. Despite this participant’s—very valid—pessimism, they also acknowledge, “Moana and Maui learn to work as a team.” This, to me, demonstrates hope for collaboration and innovation, even when there is seemingly no room for it—as is witnessed in the evolution of Maui and Moana’s relationship.

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<sup>196</sup> Irina Ivanova, “Buying ‘Green’ Is Too Pricey for the Average Consumer.”

<sup>197</sup> Marlon et al., “How Hope and Doubt Affect Climate Change Mobilization.”

## *The Youth*

While Disney focuses on family content, of particular interest to this project is how young generations interact with the content they are presented with in films, media, art, and stories and how that shapes their interactions with nature later in life. Gallay et al. describe, “developing the younger generation's environmental awareness, commitments and understanding of environmental issues as collective action problems in which they and fellow citizens are stakeholders, will be critical in this future.”<sup>198</sup> A three-year-old participant had this conversation with the adult helping them submit the survey (Appendix):

“Did mother earth change in the movie?”

“The lava monster was scary but then she was nice”

“What made her nice?”

“Moana gave her the green rock”

“Do you remember why she had to bring her the green rock?”

“Because all the fish swam away?”

While the facilitator did prompt the “mother earth” component in the response, a child as young as 3 was able to understand the fluctuation in the environment in response to Maui’s interference. They were also able to understand the fish leaving the reef was connected to the importance of “the green rock.” This demonstrates a great deal of comprehension on behalf of such a young participant; it is impossible to gauge whether this participant specifically will translate this comprehension later in life, but other older participants who grew up in the rise of *Moana* can provide more evidence of

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<sup>198</sup> Gallay et al., “Urban Youth Preserving the Environmental Commons.”

comprehension later in life. For example, a 9-year-old participant said: “I like that the main character is a girl. Love the songs. The lava monster/mother earth character express their feelings through nature (Table 1).” Again, there is the emergence of the connection between Te Fiti and Mother Earth, this time without prompting from a facilitator, meaning the connection is made fully by the 9-year-old and their viewing experience. Without any more resources beyond the film or guidance from an adult, the youth can extrapolate key environmental concepts from watching *Moana*. From the same viewing party as the 9-year-old, a 13-year-old commented: “I liked the grandma, and the ocean was funny. I like it when Disney princesses are strong main characters that do things rather than there only to look pretty and be rescued. I also liked the cultural diversity in this film (Table 1).” *Moana* was released approximately five years before the conduction of this survey, meaning these two participants would have been 4 and 8 respectively at the time of release. Assuming they viewed the film at this time, and many times since then, this saturation of reflection of the environmental woes demonstrates children can potentially learn critical life lessons from non-educational geared films given the right tools.

## Appendix

### Additional Framing Questions to Consider:

How is the environment represented in various Disney works?

What themes in environmental studies are present in those works?

How does accessibility of environmental literacy affect sentiments towards nature?

How can popular art media impact an audience member and their perspectives on issues addressed in the work?

How can environmental education be broadened to reach wide audiences in a digestible way?

What do audiences take away from themes presented in popular art?

### Survey Questions include:

Multiple Choice Questions:

*Which of these best describes your household?*

*Which factors influence your willingness to watch the movie in the future (or the past)?*

*How did the film make you feel? (Check all that apply)*

*Which forms of media do you predominantly engage with for entertainment?  
(Select all that apply)*

*How much of a priority are environmentally friendly practices in your household (1 being highest priority, 5 being lowest). (For example, recycling, buying eco-friendly products, reducing waste, composting, watching documentaries, etc.)*



Free Response Survey Questions:

*What were your key takeaways from the story?*

*Did you notice any changes in the environment as the movie progressed? If so, what?*

*How are the main characters reacting to changes in their environment and is that similar to reactions that you see to our environment?*

*Can you compare any similarities between the environment in the movie and the one in which you live? If so, explain.*

*Please list the three words you feel best describe the narrative and lessons in the film?*

*Is there anything else you would like to share about your viewing experience?*

*Are you comfortable being contacted for a follow-up interview? If so, please leave best contact information (phone or email)*

**Survey Responses Raw Data**

[Moana Viewing Survey Analysis.numbers](#)

**Table 5b: Complete list of word associations with *Moana***

Table 5b: Please list the three words you feel best describe the narrative and lessons in the film?

Word	Occurrence	Word	Occurrence	Word	Occurrence
Dreams	1	Teamwork	1	Persistence	1
Power	1	Hard Work	1	Hope	3

Protect	1	Stewardship	1	Power	1
Respect	2	Peace	1	Female	1
Learn	1	Conserve	1	Cute	1
Courageous	1	Independent	1	Funny	1
Balance	1	Nurturing	1	Empowering	1
Respect	2	Caring	1	Resilience	1
Fulfillment	1	Love	1	Trust	1
Responsibility	2	Brave	1	Capable	1
Community	1	Determined	1	Determination	1
Family	2	friendship	1	Happiness	1
Strength	6	Moana	1	Positive	1
Perseverance	4	Trip	1	Reflective	1
Kindness	1	Hawaii	1	Heartwarming	1
		Faith	2		

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