
Ocean as an Archive of Memory & Resistance as Commodity: A Marxist Reading of *Moana* in the Blue Humanities

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Disney's *Moana* (2016) through the interdisciplinary lens of Blue Humanities and Marxist Cultural theory to explore how contemporary media frames oceanic environments as a site of both cultural memory and capitalist commodification. In recent years, the emergence of Blue Humanities has changed our view about oceans, rivers and other watery ecosystems. Instead of treating them as a passive, empty backdrop, as Mentz observes, now they are being interpreted as the living archive of memory, places of resistance, and agents of history (Mentz, 2019). Drawing on theorists such as Steve Mentz and Elizabeth DeLoughrey, the film presents the ocean as a living force that protects indigenous cultural traditions; at the same time, when examined through Marxist frameworks, particularly Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the **culture industry**, Marx's theory of **commodity fetishism**, and Gramsci's notion of hegemony it turns these stories of resistance into products for the global capitalist entertainment industry. Through the close reading of selected scenes and dialogues, this paper demonstrates how the film, *Moana*, encapsulates the contradictions of twenty-first-century cultural production, where



ecological consciousness and postcolonial memory often get tied up with consumerist culture.

Introduction:

The rise of Blue Humanities, in recent years, has significantly reshaped scholarly approaches to the oceanic spaces. Rather than functioning as a passive, empty backdrop, oceans are now theorized as an active agent within cultural, historical and ecological narratives (Mentz, 2019). Steve Mentz, in his seminal essay *“Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature,”* argues that oceans should not be treated only as a ‘metaphor’ rather they are epistemic spaces that shape human imagination and safeguard cultural memory (Mentz, 2019). Within this framework, the sea emerges as a subject in itself that has its own agency, threats, ambiguities and fluid boundaries (Mentz, 2019). This framework becomes particularly useful when we examine contemporary cultural texts like Disney’s animated film *Moana* (2016), directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. At the narrative level, this animated film tells a story of a little Polynesian girl’s journey across the Pacific Ocean, but it works on multiple levels by foregrounding the indigenous oceanic knowledge system and also transforming it into a commodity of Disney’s global capitalist entertainment market.

The ocean plays a central role in this movie. It chooses Moana to restore the heart of Te Fiti and repeatedly guides and protects her throughout the journey. Drawing on the Blue Humanities framework, this paper argues that in *Moana*, the ocean emerges as a site of resistance and a preserver of Indigenous cultural memory.

However, when we analyze this same movie through Marxist cultural theory, particularly through the concept of ‘**Culture Industry**’ by Adorno and Horkheimer, we see how these resistant narratives are being commodified while neutralizing their critical and political potential.

Methodology

This study conducts a close reading of key scenes, dialogues and visual elements in *Moana* to demonstrate the ocean’s active role as a preserver of indigenous cultural traditional memories. The theoretical framework uses an interdisciplinary framework combining Blue Humanities and Marxist Cultural Critique.



Ocean as Archive of Cultural Memory

Within the framework of Blue Humanities, the ocean is considered not just as a physical body of water, but rather it is a living archive that carries memories across generations (Mentz, 2019). The film opens with Moana's grandmother's narration - "**In the beginning, there was only ocean until Mother Island emerged, Te Fiti**" (*Moana*, 2016), positioning oceanic space as the foundational force from which other lives emerge. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey observes, oceans function as repositories of "sedimented histories of migration, empire, and ecological struggle, acting as both medium and repository for dispersed knowledge" (DeLoughrey & Flores, 2020, p. 132). In *Moana*, it was the ocean that preserved the ancient memories and knowledge of voyaging and community survival. The ocean itself chose Moana and guides her throughout her journey to protect its agency.

"The ocean chose you, Moana, for a reason" (*Moana*, 2016, 00:15:22–00:15:26).

In *Moana*, voyaging is not just a physical travel across the sea; rather, it functions as a way of remembering and celebrating ancestral knowledge. Moana's repeated declaration - "**We were voyagers!**" (*Moana*, 2016, 00:47:15–00:47:18), foregrounds this shared history of navigation, survival and environmental knowledge. In reality, Polynesian voyaging was mainly communal; they navigated through the stars, relied on the currents, and their wisdom of voyaging was passed down from generation to generation (DeLoughrey & Flores, 2020). Their knowledge was collective, connected to their community life. And it is the ocean that preserves all of this from one generation to another. In *Moana*, the ocean is consistently personified as an autonomous presence, not just as an object, which aligns with the framework of Blue Humanities (Mentz, 2019). Moana's line - "**The ocean is a friend of mine**" represents this reciprocal relationship, which challenges the usual human-centred point of view where nature exists only to serve human beings. The ocean at first chooses Moana, and from then it constantly helps her in every possible way. It was the ocean that passed the heart of Fiti to Moana, which again proves that the ocean is not just a passive backdrop; rather, it acts as an active agent. When Maui tried to abandon her on her boat, it was the ocean that brought her back in the boat. And, finally, the ocean's most powerful acts are performed in the climax when Moana realizes that Te Ka is actually the wounded Te Fiti. She says, "**Let her come to me**", and then the ocean is divided into two parts to make the path for Moana for the restoration of Te Fiti's heart. Thus, the ocean is framed not merely as a physical entity but as a witness which holds trauma, memory, hope and historical continuity. Through the framework of Blue Humanities, *Moana* portrays the ocean as an archive which preserves indigenous memories, cultural histories and much more.



Resistance as Commodity

Disney's *Moana* (2016) is frequently described as one of the progressive animated films that celebrates Polynesian culture, female courage and environmental responsibility, which seems like a story of resistance. However, when we look at the film through the Marxist lens, especially applying the idea of 'Culture Industry' by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, along with Karl Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, and Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, *Moana* suddenly becomes less revolutionary than it appears. Instead of challenging the oppressive system, the film transforms the idea of resistance into a marketable product. It remoulds the anti-colonial sentiment into a global entertainment.

"The ocean chose you, Moana, for a reason" (*Moana*, 2016, 00:15:22–00:15:26)

From the Marxist perspective, the emphasis on *Moana* as a chosen individual hero reflects a narrative logic that promotes a model commonly aligned with Western capitalist storytelling, which often privileges individual action over collective struggle. The film's narrative mechanism gives importance to individual heroism over collective action - one hero can solve a systemic problem, and collective action is unnecessary. The problem is identified, then the individual (*Moana*) acts, and finally, the problem is solved. This approach teaches the audience that social change comes through exceptional individuals, not movements. And thus, this movie turns the indigenous knowledge system into a marketable product. The ocean's cultural significance, political depth, resistance power are tamed and repackaged for global consumption. In *Moana*, voyaging functions as more than a physical crossing of the ocean. It becomes a cultural practice through which ancestral memory is reclaimed and honoured. And, when *Moana* declares - "We were voyagers!" (*Moana*, 2016, 00:47:15–00:47:18), she highlights their deep connection to the ocean, their shared history of navigation and their survival and environmental knowledge. Historically, Polynesian voyaging was mainly communal. They navigated through the stars, relied on the currents, and their wisdom of voyaging was passed down from generation to generation. Their knowledge was collective and connected to their community life. However, Disney transforms these collective memories into *Moana*'s personal discovery. From a Marxist perspective, this mirrors the capitalist storytelling where culture and history are transformed into personal narratives so that it can be easily sold and consumed globally. The rich collective memory of Polynesian voyagers is transformed into an entertainment product which strips down its political meaning and resistance power. Although the film celebrates the memory, it neutralizes the revolutionary potential by transforming the ancestral wisdom into a story of a single protagonist rather than a community. Thus, *Moana* (2016), by transforming voyage



into a personal story, showcases a capitalist narrative which turns cultural memory and ecological knowledge into consumable products. Memory and cultural history are acknowledged, but only in a way that entertains the global market and ultimately it fails to challenge the global power structures.

Marx's concept of commodity fetishism highlights how the film *Moana* transformed the Polynesian Culture into a commercial product. In *Capital*, Karl Marx theorizes commodity fetishism as a process through which human labour and social relations disappear beneath the glittering surface of the finished product (Marx, 1867/1990). People tend to engage mainly on the finished product, and they forget about the human labour and the history behind it. In *Moana*, Disney adapts real Polynesian traditions, its voyaging traditions, ecological ethics, and spiritual understandings, and transforms them into attractive visual products. And in this process, the cultural traditions are separated from their real-life struggles with colonialism, land loss, and survival. Finally, what audiences see are the beautiful waves and songs, not the painful history behind them. The crystal clear waves, green island, and friendly spirit of the sea create a world visually so rich that the audience enjoys the beauty and fails to recognise the story of how colonisation has destroyed the Pacific communities, banned their traditions, and continues to affect them through climate change. The ocean is shown as magical and kind, not as a witness to trauma or exploitation by colonisation. And this process even continues after the movie theatre, where *Moana* becomes a brand, and Disney's global merchandise machine converts her image to dolls, clothes, bags and theme park rides. And thus culture becomes a commodity, collective memory becomes a brand, and acts of resistance are converted into marketable moments. What ones carried historical and political connotations are now just a part of a shopping experience. Thus, the labour, knowledge, and political histories of Pacific communities fade into the background as Disney's global capitalist market. Antonio Gramsci's concept of **hegemony** offers a useful framework for understanding how Disney's cultural authority appears natural and benevolent rather than coercive over Polynesian culture (Gramsci, 1971). According to Gramsci, power does not always use force; sometimes it works by shaping what people think is "normal," "good," or "common sense". In *Moana*, Disney presents itself as a company that celebrates diversity and respects the indigenous traditions of Polynesian and the audience is encouraged to believe that by watching the film or buying its merchandise, they are supporting Polynesian culture, when in fact, this mostly supports Disney's profit system. Louis Althusser's theory of **Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs)** further explains how this process works more deeply by showing how popular culture reproduces dominant values through consent rather than force (Althusser, 1971). The capitalist system requires the reproduction of the dominant ideology to maintain power. As Althusser described, ISAs like school, media, and entertainment quietly teach people to accept the value of the system. Unlike



the RSA (Repressive State Apparatuses), such as police or military, the ISA works through ideology, not through force. And it is more effective than RSA for long-term control. *Moana* acts as an ideological state apparatus (ISA) because it teaches capitalist values through story, music, and spectacle. *Moana* teaches its audience that buying Disney products like dolls, soundtracks, or tickets is a way to show respect for culture, and in this way, consumption starts to look like a moral or cultural act, not a capitalist one. People feel proud and empowered by doing this, not controlled, which is exactly how ideology works. Buying merchandise or celebrating the film becomes a gesture of solidarity, while in reality, it primarily supports corporate profit. In this way, this film interpellates its viewers as ethical consumers, encouraging them to equate cultural respect with acts of consumption (Althusser, 1971). The **culture industry**, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer explain, turns everything into entertainment; the film, *Moana*, does exactly that. By transforming the indigenous knowledge system that once challenged Western systems into a safe, charming product. This movie also avoids talking about the real political or environmental problems, about how colonialism changed Pacific life. In the end, we see Moana restoring Te Fiti's heart, and the world is healed, and the audience leaves happy, believing everything is resolved, even though the story never touches on the real issues. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue, the culture industry always offers the appearance of change but ultimately reinforces existing social arrangements (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944/1997). And thus the illusion of change replaces real change.

Conclusion

Ultimately, in *Moana*, the ocean is presented as a preserver of the ancient memory and knowledge of voyaging and community survival. Rather than functioning as a natural backdrop, the ocean acts as a witness who preserves trauma, memory and historical experiences. Thus, this film reflects ideas from Blue Humanities, especially the belief that nature carries history and meaning. However, when we look at the film through the Marxist lens, especially applying the idea of '**Culture Industry**' by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, along with Marx's commodity fetishism and Gramsci's hegemony, *Moana* suddenly becomes less revolutionary than it appears. Instead of challenging the oppressive system, the film transforms the idea of resistance into a marketable product. It remoulds the anti-colonial sentiment into a global entertainment. Thus, the film, *Moana*, avoids dealing with deeper issues such as colonial violence, economic exploitation, and environmental damage. *Moana* shows how popular culture can talk about ecology and Indigenous identity without questioning the systems that cause harm. Although the ocean is framed as a repository of memory, ultimately it ends up as a visual pleasure.



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