



The Living Ocean and Nonhuman Agency: Revisiting *Moana* (2016) from the Perspective of Posthuman Ecology

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Abstract

This paper explores the ecological imagination of *Moana* through the lens of posthumanism by examining how the film dismantles anthropocentric assumptions and reconfigures the relationship between humans and the non-human world. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Jane Bennett, Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, the paper argues that *Moana* presents a vibrant ecological ontology where agency is distributed across human and non-human entities. Through close textual and visual analysis, it investigates the decentering of the human subject, the agency of non-human forces such as the ocean and Te Fiti, the collapse of the dualistic framework of nature and culture, and the critique of anthropocentrism embodied by *Maui*. The study also highlights how the film incorporates indigenous Polynesian ecological epistemologies by foregrounding relationality, reciprocity, and sustainability. Hence, the film envisions ecology not as a static backdrop but as a dynamic, communicative process, where restoration replaces domination. The focus will also be given on how this cinematic representation becomes a crucial cultural text for understanding posthuman ecological ethics with a view to addressing the contemporary environmental crises.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Anthropocentrism, Agency, Indigenous Epistemology

Introduction

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The concept of anthropocentrism privileges human beings as the center of existence by positioning the natural world to a passive background. From Aristotle's hierarchical "Great Chain of Being" to the mechanistic philosophy of René Descartes, the non-human world has often been conceived as matter that exists for the use of human. This worldview was further consolidated during the Enlightenment era, where reason, progress, and human mastery over nature became dominant pillars. Nature, within this framework, was placed in the margin and reduced to a resource by legitimising extractive practices by creating a dichotomy between culture (human) and nature (non-human). Such binaries have shaped Western epistemologies and continue to inform contemporary ecological crises. However, *Moana* disrupts this hierarchy and emerges as a cinematic site for posthuman ecological inquiry. Rather than reproducing the narrative of human exceptionalism, the film reconfigures the relationship between human and non-human entities by presenting a world where agency is distributed across a network of living and non-living forces. The ocean, islands, winds, and even mythic entities are not passive elements but active participants in shaping the narrative. This reorientation invites us to rethink the notion of subjectivity with a view to understanding the "intrinsic value" of all forms of life.

Posthumanism, as theorised by thinkers like Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway, challenges the humanist notion of the autonomous individual. It foregrounds relationality, interdependence as Haraway says, "human beings do not get a pass on the necessity of killing significant others" (80). This is a process through which beings co-exist within dynamic ecological assemblages. Braidotti emphasises a nomadic subjectivity that is embedded within multiple networks of life by rejecting the illusion of human centrality. In this framework, agency is not an exclusive human attribute but is distributed among human and non-human actors by aligning closely with Bruno Latour's conception of actor-network theory, where agency circulates through heterogeneous networks (72-75). The film enacts this theoretical shift by foregrounding the agency of non-human forces, most notably, the ocean. The ocean in *Moana* refuses to remain a passive backdrop; instead, it emerges as a responsive, and communicative entity. It selects Moana, tests her courage, and guides her journey by intervening at critical moments. This portrayal destabilises the anthropocentric assumption of the centrality of human beings. When Moana's grandmother asserts, "The ocean

chose you,” the narrative relocates agency from the human protagonist to a non-human force by subverting conventional paradigms. Hence, Moana’s journey is not a solitary act of human will but a collaborative process involving multiple agencies.

The film underscores the vitality of non-human by resonating with new materialist thought, particularly the work of Jane Bennett, who argues for the recognition of “vibrant matter” (26). In *Moana*, the ocean is expressive, the island of Te Fiti embodies generative ecological power, and even the destructive force of Te Kā signifies the consequences of ecological imbalance. These elements challenge the inertness traditionally attributed to nature and instead present a world teeming with material agency. The collapse of the dualistic framework of nature and culture is another crucial dimension of the posthuman ecological vision of the film. The Polynesian community depicted in the narrative does not perceive itself as separate from the ocean or the land; rather, their identity, culture, and survival are intertwined with these ecological systems. This interconnected worldview stands in contrast to Western dualistic thinking and aligns with Indigenous epistemologies that emphasise kinship between humans and the natural world. The ocean is not merely a geographical entity but a cultural and spiritual presence by shaping communal identity and memory. The film offers a critique of anthropocentrism through the figure of *Maui*, whose theft of Te Fiti’s heart symbolises the human impulse to dominate nature. Hence, the narrative illustrates the destructive consequences of severing relational bond with the environment.

The notion of ecological fluidity is foregrounded in the film, particularly through the dynamic movements of the ocean and the shifting identities of characters. Boundaries between self and other, human and non-human, are continuously negotiated and redefined. Communication is not only about words. The ocean also communicates through movements, waves, and feelings. It shows that intelligence is not limited to human language, but can exist in other forms. This challenges logocentric assumptions and opens up alternative modes of understanding. *Moana* integrates indigenous ecological knowledge that inherently resist anthropocentrism. Navigation, storytelling, and ancestral memory are all embedded within a relational ontology that

acknowledges the agency of winds, stars, and seas. The film, therefore, not only articulates a posthuman ecological vision but also recuperates indigenous ways of knowing that have valued the interconnectedness of all forms of life. Through these multiple thematic strands, the decentering of the human subject, the vitality of non-human, the disruption of the binaries of nature and culture, *Moana* constructs a nuanced posthuman ecological framework. It invites a reimagining of human existence not as dominion over nature but as participation within network of relations.

1. The Question of Decentering the Human Subject

One of the central issues of *Moana* lies in dismantling anthropocentrism by repositioning humans as participants rather than rulers. The ocean, from the very beginning, demonstrates autonomy. It chooses Moana as its agent, not as a subordinate but as a collaborator. The sea is not shown as just water in the background. It behaves like a living being. It moves aside to reveal the Heart of Te Fiti. Hence, it shows its active role in assisting Moana. When Moana is in danger, the sea protects her and keeps her safe. It also brings her back to the canoe again and again, as if it wants her to continue her journey. This aligns with Bruno Latour's argument that agency is not exclusive to humans but distributed across networks of human and non-human actors (72). Moreover, the ocean acts as a corrective force by preventing *Maui* from abandoning the quest and guiding both him and Moana toward ecological restoration. It embodies what Donna Haraway terms "companion species" that co-shape human existence (19). Thus, the film dismantles the illusion of human autonomy and places it with a relational ontology where humans depend on and respond to non-human.

2. Non-Human Agency and Material Vitality

The film vividly illustrates new materialism, particularly through the concept of "vibrant matter" as proposed by Jane Bennett. Bennett argues that matter is not inert but possesses vitality and agency (xvi). In *Moana*, entities such as the ocean, Te Fiti, and Te Kā exemplify this vitality. Te Fiti, the living island, is not merely terrain but a sentient being whose "heart" sustains ecological balance. Her restoration rejuvenates not only her own body but the entire ecosystem. This resonates with the *Gaia* hypothesis developed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, which

conceptualises Earth as a self-regulating organism (105). Te Kā represents nature in its defensive state. She is not an embodiment of evil but a manifestation of ecological trauma. Moana's recognition "This does not define you" reveals an ecological consciousness that perceives beyond surface appearances. Even minor entities like the *Kakamora* (coconut pirates) reinforce the idea that all components of nature, regardless of their position, possess "intrinsic value". This aligns with deep ecology's principle of biocentric equality, as articulated by Arne Naess (28).

3. Collapse of Nature/Culture Dualism

Western philosophy has long sustained the binary between nature and culture by tracing back to thinkers like Plato and Aristotle. *Moana* initially reflects this division through Chief Tui's prohibition against venturing beyond the reef by symbolising the separation of civilization from the wild. However, this dualism collapses as ecological imbalance invades the island. The blight affecting crops and fish demonstrates that nature cannot be excluded. Moana's longing "See the line where the sky meets the sea, it calls me" signals a desire to transcend this division. Her journey embodies what Astrida Neimanis describes as hydrofeminism, where water becomes a medium of interconnectedness that links all bodies (2). The ocean, rather than a boundary, becomes a connective tissue, a "sea of islands" that unites rather than divides. The symbolic replacement of stone with a fragile shell atop the cairn underscores a shift from rigid structures to fluid, relational existence which is an important concept in the domain of posthumanism.

4. Maui and Extractive Anthropocentrism

Maui represents the notion of anthropocentrism by echoing colonial and imperial ideologies of mastery. His theft of Te Fiti's heart mirrors what environmental theorists identify as the commodification of nature. His song "You're Welcome" functions as a satirical manifesto of human arrogance by celebrating acts of domination over nature. This reflects what Val Plumwood calls the "mastery narrative," where humans assert superiority through control and exploitation (41). Yet Maui's dependence on his magical fishhook reveals the fragility of this power. His repeated failures against Te Kā demonstrate the limits of domination. Nature, when disrupted, resists and retaliates. Thus, the film critiques extractive practices and emphasises the necessity of reciprocity in relations of human and nature.

5. Te Kā / Te Fiti: Ecology as Process

The duality of Te Fiti and Te Kā deconstructs binary thinking and presents ecology as fluid and dynamic. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's concept of the instability of meaning, the film shows that identities are not fixed but contingent. Te Kā is not separate from Te Fiti but a transformed state resulting from ecological disruption. This aligns with the ecological thinking, where systems are constantly evolving. The climax avoids violent confrontation and emphasises recognition and restoration. Moana's act of returning the heart symbolises healing rather than conquest. Hence, this shift from combat to care reflects a posthuman ethic that values coexistence over domination.

6. Ocean as Communicative Intelligence

The film challenges the notion of human autonomy on language by presenting the ocean as a communicative entity. Though it lacks verbal speech, the ocean expresses intention through gesture. This resonates with Karen Barad's concept of "agential realism," where meaning emerges through interactions rather than linguistic structures (33). The ocean seems to feel things. When Moana does well, it appears happy and playful. When she struggles, it becomes calm or serious. This makes the ocean feel alive, as if it understands what is happening to her. The ocean also acts on its own. It does not always help Moana in the same way. Sometimes it steps in, and sometimes it stays back. This shows that it is not just reacting to Moana, but making its own choices. The film also shows that communication happens not only through words but also through motions. Moana and the ocean understand each other through actions, movements, and feelings. The ocean "speaks" through waves and water, and Moana learns to read these signs. So, the film suggests that communication can happen between humans and nature in simple, non-verbal ways, through attention and understanding.

7. Indigenous Ecological Epistemology

Moana draws deeply from Polynesian Indigenous knowledge, which is grounded in ideas of balance, and respect for nature. In these traditions, humans are not seen as separate from the environment or superior to it. Instead, they are part of a larger living system that includes the ocean, land, winds, animals, and ancestors. Every element is connected, and each has its own role and importance. This is different from many Western ways of thinking, where nature is often

treated as something to control. Indigenous knowledge, on the other hand, teaches people to live with nature. The voyagers do not dominate the sea; they listen to it, observe it, and move with it. Their knowledge comes from long-term coexistence and careful attention, not from exploiting nature.

This perspective closely connects with the ideas of Bruno Latour, who criticises the modern belief that humans and nature are separate. Latour argues that humans and non-humans are always connected in networks of relationships. Similarly, Donna Haraway encourages us to “stay with the trouble,” and she says that we should accept our responsibility within these complex ecological relationships instead of trying to control them. Moana’s journey reflects this shift in thinking. At first, she feels uncertain about her role, but as she accepts her identity as a voyager, she reconnects with her ancestors and with the natural world. Her journey is not about conquering new lands. Instead, it is about restoring balance, understanding her place in the world, and building relationships with the ocean and other beings. In this way, *Moana* presents exploration as a form of connection rather than domination. It shows that true knowledge comes from respect, listening, and living in harmony with the environment. Moana’s transformation symbolises a return to an ecological consciousness where humans act as responsible participants within a shared and interconnected world.

8. Conclusion

Unlike conventional heroic narratives, *Moana* culminates not in victory through force but in restoration through understanding. *Moana* succeeds because she recognises Te Fiti within Te Kā by transcending appearances and embracing ecological truth. This act replaces the dichotomy of master and slave with a model of reciprocity. The final image of the voyaging canoes signifies not the domination of the ocean, but a mode of harmonious coexistence. Hence, the film envisions a world where human survival is inseparable from the well-being of the non-human. In the post-global ambience of the 21st century, such representation becomes crucial in reimagining ethical relationships with the planet. Thus, *Moana* emerges as a powerful cultural text that articulates a



posthuman ecological vision that dismantles the false dichotomy of human and the nonhuman agents for a sustainable world.

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