

University of Washington Tacoma  
UW Tacoma Digital Commons

---

Global Honors Theses

Global Honors Program

---

Spring 2015

# Preserving Identity, Empowering Children: Whale Rider, Spirited Away, Frozen

Alana Zautner

University of Washington - Tacoma Campus, [alana.zautner@gmail.com](mailto:alana.zautner@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/gh\\_theses](https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/gh_theses)

 Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Zautner, Alana, "Preserving Identity, Empowering Children: Whale Rider, Spirited Away, Frozen" (2015). *Global Honors Theses*. 23. [https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/gh\\_theses/23](https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/gh_theses/23)

This Undergraduate Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Global Honors Program at UW Tacoma Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Global Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of UW Tacoma Digital Commons.

**Preserving Identity, Empowering Children: *Whale Rider,*  
*Spirited Away, Frozen***

Alana Zautner  
B.A. Global Studies  
May, 2015

Faculty Adviser: Dr. Ellen Moore

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors,  
University of Washington, Tacoma

Around the world, children are consuming thousands of hours of media content daily. These films and television shows “provide materials out of which we forge our very identities, including our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our conception of class, ethnicity and race, nationality, sexuality; and division of the world into categories of ‘us’ and ‘them,’” (Kellner, 2011, p. 7). The use of cultural studies methods such as textual analysis through diagnostic critique, to interpret and understand media culture and the political and social meanings and messages contained in film and television, offers insights into how cultures around the world are evolving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This paper looks at three films: *Whale Rider*, (New Zealand, 2002, directed by Niki Caro), *Spirited Away*, (Japan, 2001, directed by Hayao Miyasaki), and *Frozen*, (United States, 2013, directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee).

This paper will analyze representations of gender, culture, and identity contained within these films, and identify the evolution, growth, and liberation of each film’s female protagonist(s) from repressive forces. Furthermore, this paper will identify and discuss aspects that maintain common themes of oppression and discuss how these representations intersect and reinforce each other. This research engages with feminist theory as critical theory, to examine how traditional representation of gender and cultural identity, specifically in regard to existing social struggles and recent events are changing in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world. Representations of gender and cultural identity internalized by children through the media they consume are shifting, producing an evolution in the interpretation of gender and cultural norms for children, a movement towards the preservation of tradition, and a potential shift in future socio-cultural practice.

## II.

### Theory/Method

Feminist theory as critical theory, allows the critique of a film to identify aspects of gender representations that are both empowering and oppressive, and place those representations within a framework that is both feminist and political in nature. Feminist critical theory, “serves feminists grappling with the complex politics of diversity [...] thus forms one resource or holistic critique of social action as the *simultaneity* of sexism, racism, and class discrimination in the globally dispersed, yet interrelated contexts of post colonialism, late capitalism, and enduring patriarchy,” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010, p. 60). Utilizing critical feminist theory to analyze the selected media texts, will provide for in-depth, critical identification of the evolution of gender, identity, and cultural depictions, discussion of how gender, race, and class often intersect and reinforce oppression, and speculation regarding broad future implications.

According to Judith Butler, “...gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time--an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*,” (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Film offers audiences a series of stylized acts that communicate ideologies regarding traditional societal views towards gender, female agency, and female empowerment or oppression. It is important to carefully learn to decipher these ideologies in order to identify aspects of film and media texts that encourage the formation of identities in audiences such as children. Additionally, film psychoanalysis offers an additional theoretical framework for the analysis of a media text. The concept of ‘male gaze,’ which, according to Laura Mulvey, utilizes the placing of women in an erotic, exhibitionist role, to be looked at and displayed, coded for strong visual and erotic impact, (Mulvey, 2003, p. 837), allows viewers to consider further how female protagonists in media

spectacles are represented, how they are dressed, a lack-of or blatant sexuality, and the ability of the viewer to look at the female and see past what Hollywood has trained us to see, (visual pleasure and sexuality). This allows the viewer to connect with the innate power and agency of the female character. Additionally, theories such as 'ecofeminism,' which argues that the suppression of the environment is directly related to the oppression of the female, (and which can be traced back to the Judeo/Christian viewpoint that men are rulers of nature and women), will be utilized to further break apart themes of oppression and domination that are increasingly interconnected in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, (Sandilands, 1999, p. 240).

Feminist critical theory is an effective framework for the diagnostic critique of the films mentioned above. Scholars argue that, "theory and practice are connected not separate phenomena [...] they should be integrated so that groups can recognize the internal contradictions of their cultural systems [...] respond in ways that encourage their development of just and egalitarian relations," (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010, p. 53). Furthermore, "critical theorizing and research are normative activities. This means that they are not concerned with merely describing and explaining social action," (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010, p. 53); critical theorists are "thus unembarrassed about stating their goals of exposing, intervening in, and transforming oppressive structures," (Kinchloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 305). This is especially relevant when considering the purpose behind this paper, which is to identify changing representations of women and culture in children's media texts, and place them in the broader political and social contexts of the global societies that exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

These films will be analyzed using textual analysis through diagnostic critique. Textual analysis as method in cultural studies allows for a subject or viewer to "read, criticize and resist socio-cultural manipulation which can help one empower oneself in relation to dominant forms

of media and culture,” (Kellner, 2010, p. 7). In a society where individuals are near constantly bombarded with multiple forms of media, it is important to understand and recognize forms of socio-cultural manipulations that media such as film supply. According to Kellner:

The textual analysis of cultural studies combines formalist analysis with critique of how cultural meanings convey specific ideologies of gender, race, class, sexuality, nation, and other ideological dimensions. Ideologies refer to ideas or images that construct the superiority of one class or group over others (i.e., men over women,) ... and thus reproduce and legitimate different forms of social domination, (Kellner, 2010, p. 13).

Diagnostic critique as textual analysis offers a distinctly political dimension of analysis that focuses on aspects of media texts that form political identity in regards to gender, race, and culture. Specifically:

A diagnostic critique reads films politically in order to analyze the opposing political struggles and positions and their relative strengths and weaknesses. [...] Thus, a diagnostic critique indicates how the texts of media culture help to produce political identities and criticizes those identities and effects which are counter to democracy, and that support the forces of domination and oppression, (Kellner, 2003, pg. 121).

Take for example, Douglas Kellner’s diagnostic critique of *Blade Runner*, released in 1982, a futuristic film that focuses on capitalism and technology. ‘Replicants,’ a form of robots, have been made to serve humans, however, as time passes these robots begin to acquire human feelings and rebel against subjugation. As a result, a special police task force is developed, ‘Blade Runners’, to hunt down and destroy these rebel ‘replicants.’ A diagnostic critique reveals a film that criticizes capitalism, technology, mass industrialization, and pollution, (Kellner et al., 1984, pg. 1). The style of the film leaves the viewers with a cautious apprehension regarding the future of world economic market systems as well as concerns regarding the ecological impact of said market systems. Understanding diagnostic critique as an effective means to gauge media

texts on the underlying societal issues contained within, grants viewers a measure of agency and power; furthermore, diagnostic critique allows viewers to understand what media texts are revealing about the world around them and about the role they themselves will play in the societies in which they belong. Additionally, utilizing feminist critical theory in conjunction with textual analysis through diagnostic critique, will allow for an evaluation of the political messages and representations contained in these media texts. Furthermore, it will allow for a close evaluation of the representations of evolution and stagnation of gender, identity, and cultural oppression and domination contained within these media spectacles.

### III.

#### Plot and Diagnostic Critique of Films

##### **Whale Rider:**

New Zealand's *Whale Rider*, directed by Niki Caro and released in 2002, details the journey of a young Maori girl, Paikea, as she struggles to break free of the restricting bonds of tradition, and fulfill her destiny as tribal leader. The main character, Paikea, is the young daughter of Porourangi and one of the last living descendants of Paikea of old, who was said to have travelled to New Zealand on the back of a whale. When Paikea, (hereinafter, Pai), is born, her mother and twin brother do not survive, leaving the line of the Maori tribe at risk, as tribal tradition requires male leadership. Fixated on the preservation of the tribe and the continuation of the line of ancestry, Pai's grandfather, Koro, is blind to the pain and suffering of his son, Porourangi. In light of the death of his wife and son, Porourangi flees the Maori tribe for Germany and leaves Paikea in the care of Koro and his wife, Nanny. Pai is raised by her grandparents and forges a close bond with her grandfather, despite his disappointment in her gender.

The opening scenes of the film show Pai and her grandfather riding home together on a bicycle. Pai is gently playing with a large tooth necklace that her grandfather wears. This necklace is later revealed to be the tooth of a whale and a critical part of the initiation process for tribal leaders. Pai's early interest in the tooth hints at her instinctual drive to fulfill her destiny, regardless of her gender, while her dress, and the simple fact that she needs to be picked up from school, whilst the boys ride the bus, reveals how her gender separates her from the others. The scenery on the ride home shows a village that is both traditional and modern: there are traditional wooden carved boats and carved wooden statues on the houses; however, these are intertwined with cable antennas and electricity wires.

In the middle of the film, Pai's grandfather decides to identify the next tribal leader by training and testing the local village boys. Pai is not welcome or allowed to participate; however, she determinedly observes the training from afar to learn the skills and tribal lore her grandfather is imparting to the boys. Pai is not to be educated and as a result will not, assumedly, have the skills required to become a tribal leader. However, she refuses to be uneducated, instead turning to her Uncle Rawin, (who is also an outcast of sorts), to learn the ancient ways of the Maori leaders. In one critical scene, Pai encounters one of the local boys and fights him with her stick, disarming him and further proving her natural, physical ability to be leader.

The movie peaks with Koro throwing his whale tooth necklace into the ocean as a test. The boy to retrieve the tooth will become the next leader. None of the boys are able to retrieve the necklace and Koro sinks into a deep depression, doubting the future of his tribe and tribal heritage. Unbeknownst to Koro, Pai retrieves the tooth and gives it to her uncle. Seeing her grandfather so desolate, Pai heads to the shore where she chants and prays to the ancestors for help. The whales swimming off of the coast respond, resulting in an immense pod of whales



beaching themselves on the shore. This is the ultimate sign for Koro, who sees the beaching of the whales as the literal death of his tribe, and he gives up all hope.

Pai, blaming herself for the beached whales, climbs onto the largest whale and stirs the whale into movement. The whale is able to dislodge and swim out into the water. Koro sees his granddaughter on the whale but is still unable to accept that she, a girl, could be leader. It is not until Nanny gives the whale tooth necklace to Koro that he finally realizes that Pai is indeed meant to be the tribal leader. Pai swims with the whale and nearly drowns, awaking in the hospital with her grandfather at her bedside. The film ends with the tribe coming together and paddling a newly refurbished traditional Maori boat into the water. Pai sits beside her grandfather, in the seat of the leader, and her destiny is fulfilled.

If, as asserted by Judith Butler, "...gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed: rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time--an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler, 1988, p. 519), then *Whale Rider* offers the viewer a series of acts, gestures, and movements that illustrate that the preservation of cultural tradition can lie in movements of evolution, growth, empowerment, and change. Pai is nothing if not a symbol of hope in the face of oppressive tradition, and throughout her continued struggles she fulfills her destiny with the strength of her mind, body, spirit and heart.

A closer look at the scenery in the first part of the film, the aging buildings and wooden carvings intermixed with modern wires, cables, and automobiles reveals that the tradition of old is slipping away into the modern. This is the root of Koro's fears. As the aging leader of the tribe, Koro has experienced the traditional and fears the loss of Maori heritage to modernity. He fears that the birth of a girl as the last descendent of Paikea of old, foretells the end of the Maori

tribe. The intersection of gender, tradition, culture and social class all reinforce the oppressive nature of the environment for Pai, whilst enforcing the power politics, (albeit limited power), of her grandfather. One could also argue that her grandfather is himself a victim of the intersecting broad political power of oppression due to race and social class as a poor, indigenous, tribal member in New Zealand.

Niki Caro, the film's director, portrays Pai in a manner that subverts the traditional 'male gaze.' According to Laura Mulvey, "The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness," (Mulvey, 2003, p. 837). Caro was careful in her selection of Keisha Castle Hughes, the actress who plays Pai. She is represented as a plain tomboy, almost "genderless" in appearance. The only telltale sign of her gender is her clothing, a concealing simple dress or skirt, which changes to pants and a sweater for the key end scene where Pai rides the whale and takes her place as tribal leader. This subversion of the traditional objectified view of females in cinema allows the audience to see her as more than an object for viewing pleasure and connect with her struggle to fulfill her destiny despite her gender "disadvantage."

Her grandfather's attempt to exclude Pai from the traditional education of the males for leadership roles illuminates education as an effective form of oppression. Without education Pai cannot become leader. It is here, and only here, that the viewer sees her physically fight, when she encounters Hemi, a young boy who is the leader of his class and the one her grandfather hopes will succeed him. Hemi fights using the traditional Taiaha, (Maori fighting stick), while Pai only has a broomstick. Pai knocks the stick out of Hemi's hand, winning the fight, and

illustrating her physical abilities to be leader. The stick symbolizes tradition, maleness, and courage. Pai's successful use of the stick indicates a subversion of the traditional and a movement towards change.

*Whale Rider*, produced by South Pacific Pictures, Apollo Media Distribution, Pandora Filmproduktion, New Zealand Film Production Fund, New Zealand Film Commission, New Zealand on Air, and Filmstiftung Nordrhein-Westfalen, speaks to audiences about the preservation of culture and the perseverance of a young girl seeking to fulfill her destiny. This was the first film to be produced with investment from the New Zealand Film Production Fund established by the New Zealand government in 2000 to support the production of New Zealand films on a larger scale. The Maori people, who arrived in New Zealand some 700 years ago and were subsequently colonized by the British in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, possess a history which speaks to a struggle for cultural survival that bleeds into modern times. Moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, *Whale Rider* tells the story of a people torn between modernity and tradition. Symbols such as wires, televisions, and cigarettes, all speak to a culture that is being slowly homogenized and lost.

Looking at a New Zealand census snapshot from 2001, (the year before *Whale Rider* was made), it is striking to note that nearly one in seven people in New Zealand were of Maori descent. The median income was listed as \$14,300, with males earning \$18,600 and females earning \$13,200. According to the census, in 2001 only one in four Maori spoke the traditional language, (NZ Census, 2001). The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen the Maori people of New Zealand struggling for land rights, fighting the impoverishment of their communities, and resisting the influx of urban ideologies that have permeated their culture. *Whale Rider* offers a story of hope to those Maori who desire cultural preservation, equality of treatment for both males and

females, and a cultural identity that is cohesive with, yet independent from, the dominant culture of the country in which they live in. The film also offers children around the world an opportunity to watch an indigenous female fight for her legacy, and also imparts a compelling push for the preservation of local traditional cultures that is relevant not simply to the Maori in New Zealand, but globally.

### **Spirited Away:**

Japan's *Spirited Away*, directed by Hayao Miyasaki, produced by Tokuma Shoten, Nippon Television Network, in association with Studio Ghibli, and released in 2001, centers around the transformation and empowerment of a young girl, Chihiro. The film opens with Chihiro and her parents moving to a new town; Chihiro is unhappy with the move. Her tone in speaking to her parents is petulant, selfish, and ungrateful. The back seat where she sits is covered in shopping bags and an *Adidas* brand sports bag. The scenery around them is modern. There are power lines, multiple advertisements, and suburban neighborhoods. Lost, they come to what appears to be an old, deserted entrance to a building. Her parents, despite Chihiro's reluctance, proceed inside. Once inside, her father realizes they are in a deserted amusement park. They come to a street lined with shops, and her parents find a restaurant. Not seeing any staff working, Chihiro's parents decide to greedily 'pig-out' on the food in front of them. Chihiro refuses to eat, instead heading off to explore on her own. She discovers a bathhouse and a young boy named Haku. Haku tells her she must leave, that it is not safe. Chihiro returns to her parents and finds that they have been turned into pigs, a reflection of their greedily consumed feast. As the sun sets, the town evolves into a demon city with spirits and ghosts roaming free. Haku takes her to the bathhouse, telling her that she must find a job in order to stay. Yubaba, in charge of the bathhouse, will not allow her to stay without a job. Chihiro bravely climbs down a perilous

staircase and finds the boiler man, Kamajji, and asks him for a job. He refuses, until Chihiro proves, by carrying a heavy piece of coal to the furnace, that she is capable of hard work. Chihiro is taken to Yubaba who grants Chihiro a job and has her sign a contract. When she signs the contract, part of her name disappears, leaving only the name Sen behind. From this point onward she is Sen, not Chihiro.

The next morning Haku brings Sen to the pigpen where her parents are being held. She is able to identify her parents, but when she calls to them, she identifies herself as Sen, not Chihiro; she has almost completely forgotten her previous identity. Haku hands her a card with her real name written on it and instructs her to never forget her name, as Yubaba uses their names to control them. The next day, Sen is assigned to clean a filthy, large tub in the bathhouse. In the process Sen, unknowingly invites a silent spirit inside the bathhouse. Sen needs an herbal tablet to clean the tub and with the help of the silent spirit is able to get one. Down at the bath, the silent spirit offers her multiple tablets, which Sen refuses to take. Yubaba senses a stranger coming to the bathhouse, and shortly after arrives a stink spirit. He is assigned to Sen to be cleaned and climbs into the large tub. Sen notices what appears to be a thorn protruding from his side and attempts to remove it; a bicycle and, eventually, the contents of an entire junkyard, come pouring out. The stink spirit transforms into a river spirit dragon, thanking Sen and giving her a greenish colored substance. He flies away leaving heaps of gold in his wake.

Sen, back in her room, looks out her window and notices Haku struggling to fly with what appears to be white birds attacking him. Once closer, it appears that paper birds are attacking him. He flies into an upstairs window, wounded and bleeding. Concerned, Sen climbs the dangerous wall of the building to reach the window and help Haku. In the process, Sen discovers that Zeniba, the sister of Yubaba, controls the white paper birds. Zeniba appears and

tells Sen that Haku stole her golden seal, it carries a curse and she wants it back. Haku and Sen escape from Zeniba and once in the boiler room, Sen feeds Haku some of the greenish substance the river spirit gave her and he transforms back into a boy but is still unconscious and sick. Realizing she must help him, she volunteers to travel to Zeniba by train, (a one way trip), and give the golden seal back. Her love of Haku motivates her to forestall helping her parents, and help him instead.

Sen arrives at Zeniba's home and is invited in. She apologizes for Haku taking the seal and explains that he is under a curse. Zeniba, now quite friendly and referred to as Granny, explains that Sen broke the curse when she removed the seal from Haku's body. There is a knock at the door and it is Haku, in dragon form. He has come to take Sen back as he has struck a deal with Yubaba to release her. On the journey back, Sen remembers Haku's name. His name is Kohaku, the river spirit. He lost his way due to the river being filled in. Haku is now free of Yubaba, as he has had his name returned to him. Back at the bathhouse, Yubaba gives Sen one last test. She must identify her parents from a group of pigs. Sen realizes that none of the pigs are her parents and outwits Yubaba. Now free, she runs across the bridge and towards her waiting parents. They head to their car and as they drive away, her father, unaware of all that has transpired, tells Chihiro that it *is* scary to start a new school in a new town; in response, Chihiro answers confidently that she thinks she can handle it.

In Miyasaki's *Spirited Away*, themes such as "Otherness", materialism, and environmental/cultural preservation are present. How these themes translate into the journey of Chihiro reveal a complex interweaving of both symbols and style that the film employs beautifully. "Otherness" is a concept thoroughly developed by feminist and postcolonial thinkers. Many scholars have observed that "the effacing of the corporeal from discourse

constitutes a paradigmatic element in the oppression not only of women, but of a range of other - others,” (Sunnerstam, 2013, p. 7). In the beginning of the film, Chihiro is transported to an alternate reality, filled with demons, animals, and spirits. She is “the other” and must work to blend in, (eating the food and getting a job), in order to stay and be safe. She is also “the other” in a different sense, as the only young girl in the film. She has much to prove, not only because she is human, but also because she is a seemingly helpless, young girl.

To understand “Otherness” further, consider that, “In the 1950’s Simone de Beauvoir argued that ‘Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself.’ De Beauvoir argued that woman is set up as the “other” of the man. Masculinity is therefore socially constructed as the universal norm by which social ideas about humanity are defined, discussed...” (Zevallos, 2011). Chihiro, as represented in *Spirited Away*, is the “other,” not only in gender but also as human. However, by the end of the film she is the “other” no longer; she has broken through the identity politics of the alternate reality and overcome the obstacles in her path through hard work and cleverness.

Throughout the film, Chihiro’s growth and liberation are represented through her actions and decisions. She begins helpless, afraid, and petulant, and evolves into a courageous, mature young girl who is no longer concerned with starting at a new school in a new town. Take, for example the scene in which Chihiro climbs down the perilous staircase to find Kamajii, when she challenges herself to hard work, when she helps the stink spirit despite her fear and distaste, and when she heads out on a one-way, dangerous journey to save Haku; she is discovering who she is and what she is capable of, evolving into the mature heroine she becomes at the end of the film.

Materialism is visible in *Spirited Away* and begins with the scene where Chihiro is driving with her parents to her new home; the back seat of the vehicle filled with shopping bags, western-brand sports bags, and clutter. The idea of excess, materialism and capitalism is clear. What is striking is that, despite the apparent opulence that Chihiro has access to, she complains to her father about an instance in the past when he gave her only a single rose, instead of an entire bouquet. Towards the middle of the film when a stink spirit, (in actuality a river spirit), is in the bathhouse and Chihiro removes the bicycle from his side and out pours a mountain of junk, one cannot help but think about excess materialism, capitalism, and pollution. Chihiro is repeatedly offered gold, or excess bath tokens, and as time passes she refuses the excess, revealing her evolution from a greedy, selfish girl to a less consumer-focused, mature, individual. Materialism in relation to gender, culture and environmentalism as depicted in *Spirited Away*, calls for a movement away from consumerism and a push for environmental conservation.

There is a connection between the depictions of environmental images, *e.g.*, the stink spirit filled with junk and the river spirit who is lost due to the river being filled in to build apartments, and the economic situation of 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan. Japan suffered greatly following the burst of its, “bubble economy” in the 1990’s, which resulted from banks extending excess credit and people living lavish lifestyles in the 1980’s and onward. Once banks raised the interest on the debt, the Japanese stock market crashed causing a recession in which jobs were lost, wages decreased, and credit was near impossible to acquire. It is perhaps unsurprising, as well as interesting to note the representations of the problematic nature of greed and materialism reflected in *Spirited Away* as a turn of the century film, (released in 2001). Media as cultural



pedagogy has the power to pass on mindsets that could potentially alter views towards economic participation, *e.g.*, credit, spending, and consumerism.

When considering the depictions of environmental pollution, materialism, and the empowerment of the female protagonist Chihiro, connections related to the theory of ecofeminism can be drawn. To best understand *Spirited Away* as an ecofeminist film, one must consider the history behind ecofeminism:

Beginning with the Greeks, this story goes, and carried on through Judeo-Christian traditions, the world has been divided into two halves: man/ woman, culture/nature, white/black, reason/emotion, mind/body, etc. The lower half of each duality is viewed as inferior, as the polar opposite of the [upper half, and, more] and importantly, each lower half only has value insofar as it serves the needs of the upper half. Here, nature only has value as a 'resource', as the raw material for culture, and woman only has value insofar as she serves man, as wife, as mother, as sexual object. Here, women and nature are not Others in their own right, but exist as negative reflections of the valued male character, as objects, as resources. Thus, the solution to our ecological crisis involves the recognition of the value of the subaltern pole, its affirmation as a vital component in a balanced view of human/non-human life, and the dissemination of its characteristics among a wider range of people as a movement in the direction of integration, holism, and non-dominating social/natural relations, (Sandilands, 1999, p. 240).

Miyasaki's *Spirited Away* depicts the empowerment of his female protagonist through her transformative adventures in conjunction with a push for preservation of the environment through characters such as Haku the river spirit, who is controlled and oppressed through the loss of his river, both in memory and name. *Spirited Away* is powerful as an ecofeminist media text, aligning the empowerment of the female with the preservation and liberation of the environment. As the world recognizes the need for environmental protection as well as gender equality, media

texts such as *Spirited Away*, offer the powerful message that gender equality and female empowerment are *equal* with the preservation and care of the environment.

*Spirited Away* also speaks to cultural preservation. Miyasaki described in his book, *Orikaeshi Ten*, how he desired to exercise the power of fantasy to preserve aspects of traditional Japanese folk storytelling (*mukashi-banashi*) and tradition. According to Miyasaki, children no longer find the traditional folk story convincing, and his hope was that through *anime* he would be able to revitalize old narratives and impart their wisdom to future, modern generations of children, (Okuyama, 2015, p. 2106). Additionally, Miyasaki wished to give the children of Japan a story with a female heroine who defeats her adversary, not with violence, but with her cleverness and hard work, (Hiiraqi et al., 2001, p. 3). As seen with *Whale Rider*, movements towards both the preservation of traditional culture, as well as empowering the new generation of women, are common themes. They are reflections of increasingly globalized cultural contexts, where media texts intersect and form commonalities in cultural pedagogy.

### **Frozen:**

*Frozen*, directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, produced by Walt Disney Studios, and released in the United States in 2013, tells the story of two sisters, Elsa and Anna. Elsa was born with the extraordinary power to produce and control ice and snow. Anna was born possessing a powerful, relentless optimism, courage, and faith. The audience is introduced to Elsa and Anna as children. Anna knows about Elsa's power and loves her for it. Whilst playing, Elsa slips on ice and accidentally strikes Anna in the head with her power. Elsa, terrified, loses control and her fear manifests into an immediate freezing of the ballroom they were playing in. Anna and Elsa are taken to the mountain trolls and the chief healer is able to remove the ice from Anna's head;

unfortunately, he believes it is safer if Anna forgets Elsa's powers. Elsa is told that fear is the key to her destruction, and, as such, her powers must be concealed; she must not feel emotion, nor touch nor interact with other humans. Back at the castle, Elsa's father places gloves on Elsa's hands, instructing her to, "Conceal. Don't feel. Don't let it show," (Lopez, 2013). Elsa and Anna's rooms are separated, and Elsa retreats into seclusion, believing herself a danger to the people she loves. Anna, not remembering that Elsa has powers, does not understand why Elsa will no longer play with her, why her door is shut, and why she, Anna, is never allowed inside.

The second musical sequence, *Do You Want to Build a Snowman?*, is sung as the girls grow up and, due to a tragic accident at sea, both their parents die, leaving Anna and Elsa alone. Anna pleads for Elsa to let her in her room and the focus shifts to Elsa, crumpled on the opposite side of the door, inches from Anna. Her powers have spiraled out of control. Her room is covered in snowflakes, ice and frost.

The film continues to the coronation of Elsa as queen of Arendelle. Meanwhile, Anna runs, literally, into Prince Hans, (a junior royal from a neighboring kingdom), and hastily agrees to a marriage. Their duet pronounces 'love is an open door,' as both Anna and Hans see marriage as an escape from their unhappy lives. Elsa refuses to grant Anna permission to marry as she has only met the prince that day. Anna, frustrated, follows Elsa demanding to have a reason as to why they both must live alone and accidentally pulls off one of Elsa's gloves, releasing and revealing her power. Afraid for the safety of her people and herself, Elsa flees to the North Mountain. Anna pursues her on horseback, stating that Elsa would never hurt her.

The next scene shows Elsa walking alone up the snow-covered face of the mountain, and the song she sings centers around her newfound freedom and isolation. The song's title, *Let it Go*, illustrates how Elsa has finally found her freedom. She no longer has to hide, conceal, or

suppress her emotions. She is finally free, and she lets go of all responsibility to the kingdom she has left behind. It would appear she no longer cares for the kingdom that she, unwittingly, left completely frozen under layers of snow and ice. Elsa builds an impressive ice castle and resolutely slams the door, shutting the world out and ending the scene.

Anna pursues Elsa up the mountain running into Kristoff and Sven, whom she enlists to take her up the North Mountain. Kristoff and Anna eventually arrive at the castle and Anna pleads for Elsa to return home. Elsa refuses, claiming that it is better the way it is, with her far away from Anna and the kingdom. Anna persists, telling Elsa that Arendelle is covered in snow. Elsa loses control; her fear escalating for both Arendelle and Anna, and her powers fly out from her body, striking Anna in the chest. Realizing that Anna is in danger, Kristoff takes her to his adoptive troll family. The chief healer informs Anna that only an act of true love can heal her frozen heart. Kristoff, believing that Anna loves Prince Hans, delivers Anna to Arendelle. Once at the palace, Anna tells Prince Hans what has happened, but he refuses to kiss her. Hans extinguishes the only source of heat in the room, the fireplace, and leaves Anna to freeze to death. Elsa, meanwhile, has been captured by Prince Hans's soldiers, and is sitting in a prison cell in Arendelle. Hans lets her go, planning on chasing her down and killing her.

Anna realizes that she loves Kristoff; if she can get to him and kiss him, she will be saved. With the help of Olaf, (a snowman animated by Elsa's magic), Anna escapes the palace. Struggling across the ice towards Kristoff, Anna spies Elsa collapsed on the ice with Hans's standing over her with a sword. Anna is closing in on Kristoff but instead changes course and stands between the sword and her sister. Right as the sword falls, Anna freezes solid, and the sword splinters apart. Elsa, convinced she has lost her sister, weeps over her frozen form. A heartbreaking moment passes and slowly Anna begins to thaw. Elsa, with the help of Anna,

realizes that love is the key to her power. Elsa is able to thaw Arendelle and conquer her fear. The movie ends with the kingdom thawed; Elsa and Anna are reunited, two sisters who will never be parted again.

*Frozen* represents part of a larger, attempted repackaging of the princess image by Disney:

In 2000 Disney, Disney began repackaging the way in which the princesses were communicated, leaving the traditional representations of princesses the same, and launching the princess line, uniting the princesses with campaigns targeting young girls. This received a largely negative backlash, prompting Disney to once again repackage princesses with a supposed 'positive' association in 2012. This marketing campaign focused on associating bravery, compassion, loyalty, and giving girls princesses in the form of everyday, relatable, capable, characters, (Wilde, 2014, p. 133).

Out of this marketing campaign emerged two princess tales, *Frozen* and *Brave*. *Brave*, released in 2012, tells the story of Merida, a young Scottish princess who struggles against conformity and tradition; Merida is able to avoid the traditional marriage storyline and maintain her independence. *Frozen*, as noted above, is relatively powerful as a Disney film, because it steps away from marriage and princely rescue, and shows the power of a sisterly bond. Anna, although accompanied by Kristoff and Sven, is self-reliant, and in the end, she is the hero who saves her sister, rather than the hero storyline being the stereotypical 'true love, male-female' tradition seen for the past 75 years in Disney films.

That being said, *Frozen*, unfortunately, fails to address representations of the female body and sexuality, transforming Elsa into a highly sexualized, tightly-clothed, large-busted, female with hugely disproportionate facial features that depict extreme youth, and white skin. This detracts from her power as a empowered female, instead, sending the message to audiences that,

yes, females can be strong and powerful, but that that power is contingent upon their appearance, race, and sexuality. In this aspect, Disney fails to provide audiences with a truly empowered female character, and instead falls back into the 20<sup>th</sup> century tradition of white skinned, unrealistic beauty standards. These representations of sexuality and race are especially relevant when considering that *Frozen* was the highest grossing animation picture of all time, with box office sales of \$1.3billion, (Wilde, 2014, p. 143). Additionally, it has been translated into 41 languages and is widely popular around the world.

*Frozen*'s global popularity raises concerns about cultural imperialism, which is defined as "the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the value and structures of the dominating center of the system," (Schiller, 1976, p. 9). Connecting the dots between cultural imperialism, *Frozen*, (a film that sends a message of empowerment contingent upon female sexuality, beauty, race, and youth,) and a widespread, global audience, one must warily question the values and representations that our 'Hollywood Machine' produces, especially considering the power of media ideologies and representations. It would appear that in many ways, Hollywood is failing to evolve in relation to gender representations, whereas international film, such as *Whale Rider* and *Spirited Away*, has shown a clear evolution in regards to depictions of gender.

Interestingly, *Frozen* was released following the 2008 economic crisis here in the United States. After the crash, thousands of jobs were lost, and, perhaps surprisingly, women began to gain a foothold in the employment sector, quickly overtaking men in many upper level corporate positions. According to one source, "women fared decidedly better than men during the most recent recession, (2008), by August, 2009, the unemployment rate for men had hit 11.0 percent,

while that for women held at 8.3 percent,” (Sahin et al., 2010, p.1). Perhaps then, it is possible to draw a connection between the stages of Hillary Clinton’s unsuccessful run for president of the United States in 2007-2008, and her potentially successful upcoming run in 2016. When considering potential political impact, audiences of all ages watch and enjoy films such as *Frozen*; representations of strong, capable women, found in Elsa and Anna, in addition to a growing number of women in the workforce following the recession of 2008, could potentially impact the outcome of Clinton’s 2016 campaign. Media texts such as *Frozen*, send the message of strong, capable women, and could potentially lead to an increase in the number of voters who are open to a female United States president, (if not in 2016, certainly in the foreseeable future).

If political identities can be and are formed through media consumed by children, (and adults), then ideologies that films such as *Frozen*, *Whale Rider*, and *Spirited Away* leave with their audiences, can be instrumental when considering future socio-cultural practices, not simply here in the United States, but around the world, *e.g.*, elections, political activism, pay equality for women, minority empowerment, etc. The power of media should never be underestimated. Children internalize messages absorbed through the media they consume, and these messages can influence the future of societies around the globe.

#### IV.

##### **Broad Future Implications**

This paper puts forth that films such as *Whale Rider* and *Spirited Away* contain powerful representations of gender empowerment and cultural preservation that reflect the events of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Both *Whale Rider* and *Spirited Away* subvert the ‘male gaze’ and depict empowerment based on intelligence, ethnicity, and diversity. Additionally, both films encourage children to value traditional aspects of culture, as well as the environment. *Frozen*

encourages empowerment of the female; however, this empowerment is contingent upon traditional standards of Western beauty, sexuality, and race. It is here that Disney needs to “repackage their princess” replacing the traditional with realities of the power of the mind, the value of diversity, and the beauty in ethnicity. When considering the success and global reach of *Frozen* compared to the other two films, it is saddening to consider the implications of a message of contingent female empowerment. To reiterate, *Frozen* has been distributed in over 45 territories and translated into 41 languages.

That being said, all three films encourage children to see past many traditional ideologies regarding gender, and be ‘recruited’ and ‘hailed’ to function in a manner that subverts the traditional and pushes for change. Additionally, cultural identity, as revealed in the films analyzed above, reveal a movement away from the hegemonic forces of globalization and pushes for the preservation of local tradition that has been lost in translation over the last century. Whether it is the teachings of Maori elders or the teachings of traditional Japanese folktales that translate socio-cultural depictions to the children who consume them, it is ethnic, it is local, it is traditional, and it is valuable.

According to Dafna Lemish, there is a growing recognition (among prominent feminist theorists) in the social sciences that gender differences, (in contrast to biological differences in the reproduction organs), are socially-constructed, learned sets of behaviors and perceptions. This, arguably, can be applied to cultural and identity based practices and norms as well. To further illustrate this distinction, take, for example, the fact that women are biologically capable of giving birth to children; however, it is a social expectation that women should be the primary caregivers for said children (Lemish, 2007, p. 103). Societal expectations of traditional gender roles and cultural identity take place from birth and are learned from a variety of sources. One



primary source in today's modern world is media. Historical film depictions have shown repeated suppressive and oppressive representations of women in society, as well as a pro-western agenda, that fails to address and value local traditional cultures around the globe. What is emerging in 21<sup>st</sup> century film, as seen in the films noted above, is the empowerment of the female protagonist and movement towards the preservation of traditional aspects of culture.

It is critical that we as media consumers understand, develop, and pursue for ourselves, as well as our children, a critical understanding of media pedagogy. Additionally, it is crucial that individuals learn to teach themselves, and others, how to critically decode media messages and trace their complex ranges and effects. Furthermore, it is important to be able to perceive the various ideological voices and codes in the artifacts of our common culture and to distinguish between hegemonic ideologies and those images, discourses, and texts that subvert the dominant ideologies, (Kellner, 2003, p. 335).

Films are effective in the ideologies that they impart to the children, or adult, audiences that consume them. According to Louis Althusser, "...ideologies 'act' or 'function' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals, [...], or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects by [...] interpellation or hailing," (Althusser, 2006, p. 95). In other words, media texts promote clear ideologies to their audiences. Through hailing, texts call their viewers, their subjects, into specific gendered subject positions, influencing how individuals live and function in a given society. Recognizing media texts as ideologies, and reading them as such, is critical to understanding and analyzing the messages contained within. Understanding media texts, such as the three films analyzed in this paper, allows one to speculate on the impact of said media on future socio-cultural practice.

Different forms of consciousness are grounded, to be sure, in one's personal history; but that history- one's identity- is interpreted or reconstructed by each of us within the horizon of

meanings and knowledge available in the culture at given historical moments, a horizon that also includes modes of political commitment and struggle. Self and identity, in other words, are always grasped and understood within particular discursive configuration. Consciousness, therefore, is never fixed... (De Lauretis, 1986, p. 8).

## V. Conclusion

Feminist critical theory in partnership with textual analysis, through diagnostic critique, offers a unique and thorough means to break apart media texts, and unravel the ideologies, depictions, and messages contained within. Additionally, it allows one to apply these translations to the global societies that exist today. It is both refreshing and encouraging to see media texts, such as *Whale Rider*, *Spirited Away*, and *Frozen*, encouraging children to move past traditional socio-political oppressive forces and understand the value of preserving their local culture and valuable traditions that are rapidly disappearing due to the hegemonic forces of globalization. In a world that is moving rapidly towards a homogenization of culture, it is important to preserve local culture and tradition, but equally important to discard the forms of gender-related domination and oppression that still exist today. One can only hope that the global media industry will continue to produce media for children that push for an increasingly just, egalitarian world, a world that recognizes the push and pull of globalization but holds tightly to local socio-cultural practices as well as encourages the next generation of female and male children to see past gender inequality and towards equality for all.

## Bibliography

- Althusser, L. (2006). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation). *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, 86-111.
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 519-531.
- Cochrane, K. (2013). Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/10/fourth-wave-feminism-rebel-women>.
- De Lauretis, T. (1986). *Feminist studies, critical studies* Indiana University Press.
- Durham, M. G., & Kellner, D. M. (2009). *Media and cultural studies: Keywords* John Wiley & Sons.
- Hiiragi, R., Irino, M., Natsuki, M., Sugawara, B., & Gashuin, T. (2001). Spirited away explained.
- Kellner, D., Leibowitz, F., & Ryan, M. (1984). Blade Runner: a diagnostic critique. *Jump Cut*, 29, 6-8.
- Kellner, D. (2003). *Media culture: Cultural studies, identity and politics between the modern and the post-modern* Routledge.
- Kellner, D. (2011). Cultural studies, multiculturalism, and media culture. *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, 7-18.

Kincheloe, J. McLaren. (2005). Rethinking critical theory and qualitative research. *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 303-342.

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2010). *Qualitative communication research methods* Sage.

Mulvey, L. (2003). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, , 44-53.

New Zealand Census. (2002). Census snapshot: Maori. Retrieved from [www.stats.govt.nz/census.htm?open](http://www.stats.govt.nz/census.htm?open).

Okuyama, Y. (2015). *Japanese mythology in film: A semiotic approach to reading japanese film and anime* Lexington Books.

Sahin, A., Song, J., & Hobijn, B. (2010). The unemployment gender gap during the 2007 recession. *Current Issues in Economics and Finance*, 16(2).

Sandilands, C. (1999). *The good-natured feminist: Ecofeminism and the quest for democracy*. U of Minnesota Press.

Schiller, H. I. (1976). Communication and cultural domination.

Sunnerstam, H. (2013). Food, humans and other kinds of matter: A posthumanist and materialist reading of the anime film spirited away.

Wilde, S. (2014). Repackaging the disney princess: A post-feminist reading of modern day fairy tales. *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 2(1).

Zevallos, Z. (2011). What is otherness? Retrieved from <http://othersociologist.com/otherness-resources/>.