

## **Fakelore or Fiction?**

### **Representations of Islander Indigeneity in *Moana* and *Island's End***

Eliot Singer has described the commodification and westernization of indigenous folktales as a production of “fakelore” and “processed folk.” Despite ongoing discussions about diversity, much of what is passed as multicultural children’s literature is appropriated cultural content manufactured through corporate and authorial edits, publisher decisions, and genre tropes. Sometimes, fakelore does not register at all. In other instances, it is explained away as fiction with no claims to authenticity whatsoever. However, when the story includes representations of real-life, indigenous cultures, the excuse of fiction becomes indistinguishable from an active withholding of recognition: a form of “ignorance” that maintains (post)colonial cultural dominance over those ignored. For works addressed to the young audience—and implicitly taken as a means of teaching about indigenous cultures—fictionalization leads to fakelore. What is behind the cultural impulse to assimilate indigenous elements into a homogenized tale? Is fakelore inescapable when the story is crafted by a cultural outsider? What are the affordances of fiction that represents indigenous cultures and how can it be distinguished from fakelore?

This presentation will argue that fakelore and fiction are distinct categories. It will parse representations of indigeneity through a comparative analysis of Disney’s *Moana* (year) as an example of fakelore and of Padma Venkatraman’s *Island's End* (year) as an example of fiction. Both stories are set in specific indigenous settings. Both feature a female protagonist who aspires to an unorthodox position within her community, a threat of looming natural disaster that imposes external pressures on the protagonist’s quest, and a characterization of the ocean as a living, albeit mythical, being. Despite similarities, *Moana* and *Island's End* offer strikingly different treatments of indigeneity and different articulations of ideologies with profound ethical implications. Engaging with the concepts of fakelore, Disneyfication, emic vs etic traditions, indigenous agency, Western anthropocentrism vs Indigenous biocentrism, this presentation highlights some of the key distinctions between fiction and fakelore. Records of Oceanic oral traditions are referenced as counterpoints against *Moana*’s projected, unified narrative, and compared with the mythology introduced in *Island's End*. Ultimately, I argue that honoring indigenous traditions in children’s literature requires more than mere reproductions of art or language, but rather a substantial understanding and acknowledgement of indigenous culture’s worldview, narrative traditions, and social realities—even at the risk of immersive disorientation experienced by audiences accustomed to a Westernized story.