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Mulan and Moana: Embedded Coloniality and the Search for Authenticity in Disney Animated Film

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Received: 1 October 2018; Accepted: 6 November 2018; Published: 11 November 2018



Abstract: As the consciousness of coloniality, diversity, and the necessity of not only token depictions of otherness but accurate representations of diversity in literature and film has grown, there has been a shift in the processes of adaptation and appropriation used by major film production companies and how they approach representing the other. One clear example of this is the comparison of the depiction of diverse, cross-cultural womanhood between Walt Disney Animation Studio's *Mulan* (1998) and *Moana* (2016). This paper will use a cross-period approach to explore the ways in which a global media conglomerate has and has not shifted its approach to appropriation of the multicultural as other and the implications for representational diversity in the context of globalization and a projected global culture. In one case, a cultural historical tale was decontextualized and reframed, while in the other, cultural actors had a degree of input in the film representation. By examining culturally specific criticisms and scenes from each film, I will explore how the legacy of coloniality can still be seen embedded in the framing of each film, despite the studio's stated intentions towards diversity and multiculturalism.

Keywords: diversity; hegemony; Disney; coloniality; adaptation

1. Introduction

Since the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, Disney has grown from a film studio to a multinational-media conglomerate—a cultural force that has made itself almost synonymous with contemporary understandings and experiences of childhood. As culture and society evolved from the 1930s through the present, Disney ostensibly responded to concerns regarding diversity and multiculturalism, a response seen particularly in efforts to relate narratives from other cultures during the Disney Renaissance (1989–1999). As Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan write regarding this period, specifically, the transition in the company's depiction of the racial other leading up to *The Lion King* (1994):

“ . . . some of the most recent Disney films have appeared to be actively engaging with questions of race, racism, ethnic cleansing and tolerance of cultural differences, marked by the climate of liberal social politics ushered in by the Clinton era, In the period immediately following his inauguration as President in 1993, from 1994 to 1996 Disney produced three films which signaled that bad old Disney would be purged and a new agenda for approaching race and national identity might emerge . . . ”.
(Byrne and McQuillan 1999, pp. 100–1)

That social consciousness has (also ostensibly) continued through the corporation's contemporary films. However, when considering the legacy of depictions of racial and ethnic diversity in Disney animated film, a retrospective view makes clear that in many ways the multiculturalism represented in the corporation's films is indicative of and reinforces the hegemonic culture within which Disney as a corporation is firmly positioned: American, Caucasian, cis-gendered, straight, Anglo, Christian,

able-bodied, etc. This is especially seen in how coloniality becomes embedded in animated depictions of other cultures despite Disney's reported efforts to tell more authentic stories from other cultures. When considering changes to Disney's methods of representing otherness, *Mulan* and *Moana* set up an interesting juxtaposition of telling stories from other cultures through the Disney lens almost two decades apart. This paper will explore the contexts of the criticisms levied at each film from the cultures from which the narratives are appropriated, centering these critiques as a necessary step to decolonizing the image of the reception of these films, despite their respective financial success at the box office and general positive reception from within Disney's own cultural sphere. Focalized through said criticisms, this paper will then use close reading to explore how narrative structure and the surrounding narrative elements can embed coloniality within the films despite stated intentions of the corporation. By examining, specifically, parallels in the opening sequences, artistic stylization, and how music and animation are layered together in each film, I hope to complicate Disney's representation of its stated more ethical intentions in representing non-Western cultures, demonstrating the gap between intentions and effect when a corporation rooted in the hegemonic status quo appropriates narratives from outside of its cultural space.

In 1998, Disney Feature Animation released *Mulan*, which was meant to mark a departure from the studio's previous princesses and modes of storytelling. Eighteen years later, Walt Disney Animation Studios' *Moana* (2016a) was meant to display again how the studio, and corporation at large, could evolve in its effort to tell more diverse stories—a trend that continues as Disney wraps production on a live-action remake of *Mulan* meant to attract the lucrative Chinese box office, which became the first foreign (not North American) market to cross \$4 billion in 2014 (Pomerantz 2015). When considering these two films as parallel transcultural adaptations, it is possible to view these two films as adaptation where, in one case, a cultural story was decontextualized and reframed deliberately to make it "universal," where universality means appealing to a Western audience (Yin 2014, p. 286), while in the other, the studio went to great lengths to prove there had been an evolution of the production process to promote a greater sense of sensitivity towards the adapted material and its original context, namely, the creation of the Oceanic Story Trust (Robinson 2016). Both films aim to retell stories with distinct cultural roots for a global audience. The production teams respectively claimed to have produced their adaptations with an eye to telling culturally authentic and authoritative stories, and to have partaken in cultural and historical research to inform the adaptation process (Bruckner 2018; Ward 2002, p. 96; Gilio-Whitaker 2016). Both films have also had a complex reception. *Mulan* and *Moana* were box-office successes with the former raking in \$304 million in the global box office in 1998 (Pomerantz 2015) and the latter grossing \$643 million worldwide (Moana 2016b), but simultaneously have surrounding them respective epitexts of criticism from their source cultures—which this paper will focus on. The claims made by Disney to authenticity and the manufacture of an authoritative version of culturally-specific stories, then projected to the rest of the world, have come under culturally-specific scrutiny. Additionally, both films also have provoked concerns that they promote a narrative capable of supplanting other more culturally-authoritative narratives as well as the global perception of that culture, via their reach and status as Disney films. Though, in listing these parallels, another eponymous, diverse, Disney princess/heroine might come to mind, I am deliberately excluding *Pocahontas* from this paper. *Moana* and *Mulan* both draw from legend or myth; *Pocahontas*, instead, is a misappropriated historical figure and the film has drawn criticism from indigenous communities for whitewashing and erasing a genocidal history. Thus, I am choosing to not conflate a narrative based in history with two narratives based on legend and folklore, and so hope to avoid contributing to that erasure and mischaracterization of both Pocahontas as a historical figure and that period of history.

Not only are both *Mulan* and *Moana* framed as and defined as being Disney films, both works are also encapsulated by being understood as "Disney fairy tales." Though the films are respectively adapted from legend and folklore of their originating culture, and are not originally fairy tales as understood within a Western literary context, wider understandings of who both titular characters are

and what their stories are become transformed once incorporated under the Disney umbrella. Jessica Tiffin's post-structural approach to the definition of fairy tales considers the defining characteristic of this type of narrative to be the "element of recognition" (Tiffin 2009, p. 3), where their cultural currency depends in part on "the ability of fairy-tale narratives to retain their characteristic shape and function despite a changing social context and their cross-pollination with a diverse range of narratives" (Tiffin 2009, p. 2). She asserts that fairy tales signal their nature and function through "highly encoded structures, a complex interaction of characteristics and content which nonetheless operates with a simple and holistic effect to create a sense of nostalgic familiarity" (Tiffin 2009, p. 2). Essentially, the cultural currency of fairy tales in Western culture depends on the element of recognition, and such recognition of a fairy tale as a fairy tale by the audience or reader is part of how contemporary fairy tales are defined. The same principle of recognition can be applied to narratives appropriated by Disney to be adapted into feature films, where no matter what the cultural history and legacy of a particular narrative might be, audiences expect a certain kind of story to be told following a particular narrative arc, by virtue of the fact that this adaptation is now a Disney adaptation. Thus, the adaptations become defined as Disney stories, with the corporation leaving its distinct footprint on the narrative's legacy, even as the new adaptation and the choice to adapt certain narratives in certain ways redefines what comprises a Disney narrative in turn.

As a corporation, Disney has successfully branded itself as a creator of and site for global narratives, however, it is important to note that Disney also wields its global positionality (how the corporation is situated in relation to other cultures, industries, and actors) and power (its ability to exert influence) through narrative transmission rather than exchange. An example of the conceptualization of this can be seen in Jack Zipes' construction of the global capitalist culture machine (Zipes 2009, *Relentless Progress*), though Zipes focuses more on the power dynamics of capitalist economic structures, where I am more concerned with the socio-cultural power exchanges inherited as a byproduct of global colonization and imperialism, and Orientalism as conceptualized by Edward Said. Orientalism, in this case, becomes a lens through which East and West are constructed in opposition to each other, and where, specifically, "the West" then defines and creates "the East" as other to it, and such construction becomes the identifiable representation of people who would embody the cultures enveloped by that constructed definition. In essence, it can be a construction of diversity tailored to suit a certain culture's worldview, that then silences or impedes the Other that is being represented from asserting agency (Said 2003). While I would hesitate to go as far as Zipes, and others, and suggest that the Disney corporation is currently attempting to impose American value systems upon the rest of the world in a deliberately political, colonizing, or imperialist way, it remains important to talk about the power dynamics involved when a company such as Disney decides to tell stories from outside its own sphere, rooted in Western, Anglo-American, conservative-leaning hegemonic culture. The attraction to telling such diverse narratives, specifically, of commodifying diversity, is related to the success such efforts garner. In the words of bell hooks, "the commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling . . . ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (Hooks 1992, p. 21). Thus, through this understanding, both *Mulan* and *Moana* are part of that 'seasoning' on the hegemonic status quo. As such, by examining two expressions of how "desire for the Other is expressed, manipulated, and transformed by encounters with difference and the different" (Hooks 1992, p. 22) it becomes more possible to understand where even outwardly good intentions can still cause harm and potential exploitation of marginalized communities.

The language of diversity, appropriation, and Otherness is nebulous, in part because while Western hegemonic culture relies on binaries as a mode of communication, the conversations surrounding positionality of people of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds cannot simply be glossed over as "White" and "not-White." To express diversity only in this binary is to assume that all members of a particular group will hold the same opinions—an assumption that is dehumanizing yet relied upon to sanction depictions of diversity across mainstream Western media. While, as the

criticisms I explore will demonstrate, some members of a community may object and problematize contemporary colonialization of culturally-specific narratives, others may see such appropriation and commodification as “a promise of recognition and reconciliation” or a sign that the hegemonic culture “can indeed be inclusive of difference” (Hooks 1992, p. 26). If diversity is understood as the incorporation of difference into hegemonic cultural institutions and norms, however, then the concept of diversity itself, too, must be problematized. Sara Ahmed writes about how the appearance of the word “diversity” within institutions has become, in some ways, a convention of speech, and that the effect of such designation to conventionality is to cause “what is being named as diverse [to become] less significant than the name “diversity”” (Ahmed 2012, p. 58). As such, it is the designation of diversity itself that holds value or political economy, not necessarily how such incorporation of difference is being functionally expressed nor the effect upon the people incorporated to bolster such claims of diversity. Through both hooks and Ahmed, however, we see that there is both an aesthetic and cultural value conferred through something being labeled as diverse; for Disney, specifically, there is the ability to fit different aesthetics into their formula and thereby sell the narrative as something ‘new’ to its target audience, simply by playing to Western predispositions to fascination with the ‘exotic’—which I will demonstrate are catered to explicitly in my close reading of scenes from both films.

Intentionally or not, Disney’s power and position when adapting narratives from other cultures perpetuate a pattern of “the West” constructing an Orientalized image of the other in its depictions of other cultures and ethnicities. The one-directionality of this transaction can be understood through coloniality—the conceptual and ideological matrix of power that came to be in the Atlantic world in the sixteenth century, and unified imperialism and capitalism, that remains the legacy of colonialism embedded in global social-cultural and economic institutions and practices (Bacchilega 2013, p. 22). For example, when Disney centers a Western, Orientalizing view of a constructed image of “China” or “Polynesia” and then projects that depiction outwards to a globalized entertainment market, it participates in and perpetuates that coloniality while setting up its version of the narrative as authoritative and authentic—usually through a nod in the credits to ambiguous, often unnamed cultural experts and consultants. Authenticity is generally understood as the quality of being “traditionally produced or presented” (Authenticity 2018), and cultural authenticity, more specifically, can be represented, simply, as work having the quality of reflecting “culturally specific realities experienced by ethnic groups” (Cai 2002, p. 38). This becomes more complicated with Disney’s aforementioned ‘ambiguous nods.’ As noted by Prajna Parasher, “acknowledging real ownership is here transformed into self-created authority” (Parasher 2013, p. 44). While Parasher’s work focused on depictions of Native Americans in Disney properties, similar criticisms have been raised concerning *Mulan* and *Moana* from both academic and public sources (Ward 2002; Dong 2011, pp. 159–87; Gilio-Whitaker 2016; Diaz 2016).

In this fashion, regardless of their respective cultural sources, positioning, and legacy, the narratives adapted by Disney to become *Mulan* and *Moana* become understood through the greater umbrella of the “Disney fairy tale” disconnected from their original context and, likewise, the titular characters become incorporated under and understood as part of the cultural umbrella of “Disney Princesses.” And yet, both of these films are meant to have addressed, in some ways, what it means to be a “princess”—and part of the Disney story world—within the larger Disney canon and thus reflect a change in philosophy in storytelling by the corporation in different ways. Intertextuality and paratexts are present on several levels here. The adaptations are read as in dialogue with both the Disney canon and to their source material, and the context of the reception of the film within the cultures the narratives were derived from adds dimensions to the paratext surrounding the films as texts, specifically, the epitext. These are far from the only two instances where Disney has attempted to represent different kinds of diversity or tell stories from different parts of the world; while there are certainly discussions to be had about the connections between folklore and adaptations, and the projections of national identities, I would like to discuss instead the power dynamics involved when Disney, or similar corporations, tells stories from outside its own cultural space.

2. Criticisms and Contexts

With a profit \$120.6 million domestically and \$176.5 million overseas, *Mulan* is considered not only a financial success for Disney, but as Jing Yin notes, has embodied a popularity in popular culture that “confers [the corporation’s] authority to tell the story of *Mulan* globally” (Yin 2014, p. 286). However, Yin, among others, notes that *Mulan* also embodies a process of appropriation of non-Western cultural materials by the U.S. culture industry, that ends with the reformulation of the perception of the non-Western—in this case Chinese—culture in the minds of a world audience. Yin’s study of Disney’s *Mulan* against its source material, *The Ballad of Mulan*, demonstrates how such a cultural artifact can be abstracted, westernized, and then supplant the original, culturally authoritative narrative. For context, briefly, the ballad itself depicts a well-known story of which there are multiple iterations, with the earliest recording dating from approximately 568 A.D., and the oldest currently available iteration of the text dating from the Song dynasty (12th century). In this narrative, a young woman disguises herself to take her father’s place in the army out of a sense of filial duty—and this is the key part—with her parents’ blessing. The secret of her sex is kept for twelve years after which she retires, refusing any reward (Yin 2014, p. 295).

In comparison, the Disney adaptation emphasizes a sense of individuality in the character of Mulan, adds a romantic interest, adds a magical talking animal sidekick, and uses the revelation of her sex as a plot device leading her to disgrace and dismissal from the army (Yin 2014; Dundes and Streiff 2016). Additionally, the film’s depictions of China are stripped of context and embed historical inaccuracies such as the episode with the matchmaker, the presence of the Huns, the presence of the shrine to the ancestors, the clothing, and presenting villains as darker-skinned. Perhaps most importantly, Disney’s iteration perpetuates Orientalized stereotypes by conflating racial and gender perceptions, where the Oriental other is both effeminate and irrational, and this depiction serves to motivate the conflict (Yin 2014; Dundes and Streiff 2016, p. 5; Dong 2011, pp. 172–73). The changes between the ballad and the film reveal a process where “Chinese cultural values were selectively disposed and replaced with Western ideologies that simultaneously pacify feminist criticism and reinforce the racial/cultural hierarchy” (Yin 2014, p. 286), and done specifically to “transform ethnic materials into a timeless or universal classic” (Yin 2014, p. 289). The underlying assumption embedded in this process is that only the dominant (Western) culture can be universally understood, and that the values of that culture are the default standard to be imposed on the rest of the world. Such domination under the guise of universalization also “imposes the perspectives or values of the dominant on the dominated, and does not allow the dominated to use their own perspectives or values,” reinforcing the construct of the dominated group as “other” and the dominant group as the natural, standard Self (Yin 2014, p. 289). These changes altered the social and cultural values of the ballad in such a way that it altered the cultural currency of the narrative while reinforcing negative stereotypes and Orientalizing of Chinese people.

Though financially successful, reception of *Mulan* by critics in the USA at the time of release was mixed. Roger Ebert might have called it “an impressive achievement, with a story and treatment ranking with *Beauty and the Beast* (IMAX) and *The Lion King*” (Ebert 1998), but other critics felt less warmly towards the film, calling it a “rich dramatic tapestry lightly stained by some strained comedy, rigorous political correctness and perhaps more adherence to Disney formula than should have been the case in one of the studio’s most adventurous and serious animated features” (McCarthy 1998), and “the most inert and formulaic of recent Disney animated films” (Maslin 1998). After being shown in the Hunan province in China, the titular character of *Mulan* was reported as being “‘foreign-looking’ in her Disney incarnation” and with mannerisms “too different from the Mulan of Chinese folklore for viewers to recognise (sic)” (BBC News 1999). In an article in the *South China Morning Post*, one viewer remarked, too, that they found the film strange, saying, “only foreigners could make this kind of film. It wasn’t like watching the Chinese story of Mulan, it looked like any foreign cartoon” (Becker 1999). In fact, many of the criticisms center on the extent to which the very texture of the film made it seem more foreign, or more like a Western imagining of Chinese-ness than culturally authentic to the people

who already had a baseline of knowledge about the original legend, and for “violating the main theme of the Chinese folk “Ballad”” (Dong 2011, p. 172).

Criticism of *Mulan* at the time of its release may not have permeated the Western mediasphere to the same extent as the praise, however, criticisms levied at the production of and presentation of *Moana* have been wide-ranging in the public sphere and easily accessible online. Arguably, this indicates that, despite its best efforts, Disney cannot control the altruistic narrative about cultural authenticity that was the main focus of the marketing campaign leading up to the film’s release, which centered the formation of the Oceanic Story Trust in order to validate the authenticity of the film. Criticism centers around the ways in which Disney created and utilized the Trust, and then also crafted its “authentic” elements within the film, which can be seen through a close reading of the film. On the topic of criticism of the films, it should be noted that culturally-specific criticisms regarding how authentic indigenous voices are used in such productions need to come from, and are strongest and most valid from within, that wider community itself. Especially worth noting is a growing body of responses specifically from the Pacific reacting through op-eds, public and academic presentations, and engagement through the Mana Moana Facebook page, which addresses not only representation in *Moana* but depictions of indigenous people from across the Pacific in Hollywood and Western media culture and the reality and impact of such misrepresentations. Such criticism includes interrogating the colonial positioning of relationships between various indigenous groups across the Pacific arena and the Western mediasphere, and how often “admiration” of other cultures or indigeneity is almost synonymous with entitlement to said culture by a corporation such as Disney (Ngata and Kelly 2016). Pacific Island scholar Vicente M. Diaz, who is from Guam, writes:

“Who gets to authenticate so diverse a set of cultures and so vast a region as Polynesia and the even more diverse and larger Pacific Island region that is also represented in this film? And what, exactly does it mean that henceforth it is Disney that now administrates how the rest of the world will get to see and understand Pacific realness, including substantive cultural material that approaches the spiritual and the sacred.” (Diaz 2016)

Additionally, New Zealand educator Tina Ngata goes on to assert that this is not an indigenous story, as “having brown advisers doesn’t make it a brown story. It is still very much a white person’s story” (Herman 2016). Ngata in an open letter to Taika Waititi, who did early work on the first version of the screenplay, further outlined the ways in which the Walt Disney Corporation continues to profit from problematic depictions of otherness from the 1990s onwards, and her fears for her own culture in that light, writing:

“We already have our own rich storytelling culture, Taika. It doesn’t reposition itself to appeal to the racist humour and privileged wallets of our colonizer (as your chosen colleague has). It doesn’t perpetuate imposed stereotypical norms of gender, culture, or sexual orientation (as your chosen colleague has), or minimalise our kaitiaki, or mock our ways (as your chosen colleague has). The story of our voyaging tipuna is not just yours to place into the hands of Disney—it belongs to all our whanaunga across Te Moananui a Kiwa. It is rich, it is complex, and it is ongoing. The placing of this narrative in the hands of Disney is, at best, cavalier—and at worst a complete sellout. While we continue to promote and demand culturally appropriate platforms and relevant contexts for telling our own stories—the mass-consumptive power of machines such as Disney has the absolute ability to eclipse our voice and position.” (Ngata 2014)

Though both the creation of the Oceanic Story Trust and Waititi’s early involvement were meant to ratify Disney’s cultural authority to tell this particular story in the public eye, the concerns of Ngata and others prove that this is far more complicated than having a relative handful of people sign off on the film. Especially when considering the prolific use of coconuts to either emphasize idyllic island pastorals about to be lost, or ridiculous coconut-armor-wearing pirate opponents, the coloniality embedded in the narrative despite the alleged attempt at being culturally accurate this time around

becomes that much more noticeable and in need of being widely problematized. Two of the major critiques include the romanticization of the primitive set against the larger, often violent colonial history of the region and the current neocolonial relationships of many Pacific Islands, and the depictions of Maui. Putting aside the infamous Maui skin-suit merchandise which was quickly pulled from shelves and problematic for many reasons (Diaz 2016; Sonoda-Pale 2016)—Maui as drawn by Disney and brought to life by Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson has also been criticized as unintelligent, a buffoon placed for comic relief, and as perpetuating negative and offensive stereotypes of Polynesians as overweight (Schilling 2016). The demigod is a heroic figure across Polynesia, and is depicted in story, comics, and other culturally-specific media as a teenager nearing manhood, a sort of trickster figure, well-dressed, charming, and intelligent. Additionally, Maui’s female counterpart is entirely omitted from the story, even from the metanarrative provided by the dancing tattoo version of himself, unbalancing Polynesian spiritual lore and further reshapes how the rest of the world comes to understand this cultural and spiritual figure. Despite these and other criticisms, however, this reshaping becomes sanctioned because of the specter of the cultural authority board that was meant to have authenticated this film.

3. Coloniality and Framing in Disney Animated Films

Keeping such culturally-rooted criticisms in mind and drawing on the parallels between the two films, I will close read scenes to understand how animated and musical narrative techniques that draw on the intention of “authentic” representation may instead become colonizing instruments based on the “Western” framing of “Othered” narrative elements. What I hope to reveal is how the contextualization of such narrative elements within the larger production frame of the film adds to the paratext that accompanies the viewer’s experience of the film, and thus impacts how the viewer might not only construct but contextualize meaning about the represented culture’s place in the larger world. In effect, othering messages might still be embedded in such films despite stated intentions of the directors, producers, and animators. It is my intent to complicate how we think of depictions of ethnic diversity by a multinational, multimedia corporation such as Disney. Thus, it is necessary to examine the potential impacts of embedded coloniality and globalizing impetuses of a corporation such as Disney, and how the effect of production decisions, use of different techniques, and overall framing can undermine the best of stated intentions.

Something that I find interesting in both films is how Disney animators use different animated and narrative techniques within films to layer depictions of otherness with a sense of communicating something authentic and pertinent to the culture from which the studio is appropriating a narrative. The changes are a part of deliberately crafting an element of otherness in introducing the viewer to the world encompassed by the film. Specifically, in both *Mulan* and *Moana*, this is seen in the following areas: in both films’ opening sequences; in how the animation style itself is utilized to convey a sense of otherness connected specifically to a cultural aesthetic meant to add to the interpretation of that culture by the viewer; how music shapes the depiction of and reception of otherness; and, where all of these elements come together to communicate otherness while simultaneously communicating culturally specific information in the form of narratives embedded in songs and accompanied by different animation styles. By examining how these elements impact the perception of other cultures separately, it becomes possible to understand the fine line Disney walks between representing another culture with integrity, and Othering another culture, when these elements are understood as part of a greater whole.

4. Openings

Mulan’s framing as a film depicting something “other”—other than the “normal” European-centric pattern of adaptation of fairy tales and cultural stories—begins from the moment the iconic castle and signature production logo appear on-screen with distinct auditory cues courtesy of Jerry Goldsmith’s score. The castle fades to black and then opens to a background reminiscent of rice paper or parchment,

and the opening credits unfold as a scrolling, animated stylized calligraphic depiction of mountains, trees, and clouds culminating in a depiction of the Great Wall of China, an easily recognized monument from and symbol of “the East” and “China” in Western culture (Dong 2011, p. 170). While the clouds scroll across the screen, in red typeface the words “Walt Disney Pictures Presents” appear and disappear before we see the title of the film itself, “Mulan,” projected above the same clouds in a larger, black typeface with a heavily stylized Chinese dragon underscoring the name. It is only as this contextualizing text fades out that we see the beginning of the calligraphic-style Great Wall, onto which the title descends before it fades. The calligraphic depiction then fades itself, to be replaced by the Great Wall depicted in Disney’s more traditional, realism-based animation style—what Paul Wells refers to as “visual orthodoxies of its own making” (Wells 2002, p. 120)—that its viewers have been conditioned to expect from previous Disney animated features. This opening framing is important because it subtly—or maybe not so subtly—frames exactly what the viewer is about to see. This is Disney’s presentation of a (traditional) Chinese cultural story, and its presentation of (traditional, historical, Ancient) China. The film’s otherness is framed by the music and the distinct animation style, but it is made acceptable, Western and relatable through the use of the Disney name and Western typesetting to communicate the necessary, concrete information. Even with the nod to difference, the narrative does not begin properly until we move away from the “old,” “ethnic” drawing-style, and exchange it instead for the contemporary, Western drawing-style. Traditional here is used to convey a sense of simultaneous separation from and connection to a specific culture—the idea that this story is being told with permission and research in a way that does not “violate the integrity of a culture” (Cai 2002, p. 38). This pull between authenticity and otherness is continually reiterated throughout the films in terms of the visual and musical effects.

Likewise, *Moana*’s opening is meant to signal the entrance to another culture, time, and place to the audience. As the Disney castle appears, the opening notes of the first song of the soundtrack, “Tulou Tagaloa” are heard and the narrative moves forward from that musical framing. Instead of “once upon a time,” we are offered “in the beginning there was only ocean” as the creation story of the world the narrative would be building out of unfolds on brightly colored tapestries, composed of repeating motifs and textures that recall woven fabrics and fibers that signify a very particular kind of idyllic island life (Herman 2016)—much as the Great Wall’s existence in ancient China is meant to ensure a very particular idyllic existence. Eventually, the digitally generated tapestries give way to Disney’s trademarked Computer-Generated Animation aesthetic as *Moana*’s grandmother terrifies a group of children—all but *Moana*—with the impending fall of darkness and destruction of their home. So again, just as in *Mulan*, we have an auditory cue of otherness, a “zoomed-out” view of the culture we’re being introduced to, and then, once the scene is set, we settle in on the “zoomed-in” view of our titular character. As young *Moana* claps at her grandmother’s story, the viewer is firmly rooted in a sense of place as the textures of the tapestries depicting the story are echoed in the textures of the wood and fibers *Moana* herself is surrounded by. We as viewers accept the location and its validity through the visual signaling of culture, and are thus prepared to accept the validity of the narrative.

5. Musical Elements

As mentioned briefly above, *Mulan* was scored by Jerry Goldsmith and included original songs written by Mathew Wilder and David Zippel—themes of which were then incorporated into the score by Goldsmith. It should be noted that Goldsmith’s own website proclaims him a master of ‘ethnic scoring’ and identifies “ethnic instruments” as part of how he constructs the signature sound of the film score (Jerry Goldsmith Online), feeding into the Orientalizing and coloniality embedded directly into the soundscape of the film itself. Close listening to the themes of the soundtrack that are meant to signal “Oriental” or “ethnic”, specifically the rising and falling seven-note structure often heard when transitioning to scenes featuring the titular character, reveals that these musical riffs are voiced primarily on various woodwinds such as saxophones, oboes, and flutes, mid-voiced brass instruments such as trumpets and French horns, and on harps. In essence, the “Oriental”

sound is created by utilizing not culturally specific instruments—instruments that would reflect the musical culture and tradition of China—but by using a Western symphony—instruments that are more prominently featured in Western symphonic and other popular musical productions, such as heavy percussion, sweeping use of string sections, mid-voiced brass such as trumpets and French horns, and woodwinds, including saxophones—for its voicing. This problematizes the depiction of the music as “ethnic” on several fronts. First, we must question what “ethnic” means in this context: Is it that it is simply signaling a non-Anglo-American/European sound, and, in context, viewers are meant to infer that, here, “ethnic” means not just “not white” but “from a specific not white part of the world”? Or is this scoring considered “ethnic” because it was utilizing melodic voicing that an American public had already been trained to recognize as “Asian” or “other” through a longer Orientalizing tradition? Furthermore, does “ethnic” then become synonymous with “Asian” or a homogeneous and all-encompassing construction of otherness that is not actually culturally specific, but defined simply by not containing the signifiers of the hegemonic culture? Though the DVD special features include a reel of clips of artists sketching in what is presumably China, and interviews with the directors describing research trips to discover how to represent this culture with integrity, the same purported research did not go into crafting the soundscape for this film.

In comparison, the music for *Moana* is by Lin-Manuel Miranda (Hamilton, *In the Heights*), Mark Mancina (the composer behind the *Tarzan* score), and Opetaia Foa’i, the founder of Oceanic music group Te Vaka. The collaboration on the songs, attested to in multiple interviews by Miranda and Foa’i (Chapman, Newman 2017; Binelli 2016; Burlingame 2016) is in some ways indicative of the step towards responsible cultural integration. From the use of Samoan and Tokelauan lyrics, to the sustained percussive rhythms driving both the score and the songbook, the soundtrack seems indicative of a new approach by Disney to really take on board community members with cultural authority in the production process and then let them truly drive the nature of the representation. However, as Robin Armstrong argues, the framing of the music within the context of the score and film points to, despite the intentions of the creators, a subjugation of the “authentic,” culturally specific musical elements, and even control over production, exerted to some extent by Foa’i (Armstrong 2018). Armstrong writes: “Before, after, and during the Polynesian music in the film, Western sounds wrap around the ‘other’ sounds like a frame wraps around a picture, safely containing the ‘other’ sounds with those that are normative.” Armstrong goes on to delineate the colonizing effects of music in this kind of framing; the argument is persuasive in terms of the net effect of framing and othering the Polynesian music embedded within a traditional American film score. It is not hard, then, to parallel this colonizing effect with the creation of the score for *Mulan* two decades prior. The auditory framing of otherness within Disney animated films has changed in that people with distinct cultural authority are becoming involved in the creation process at Disney’s behest. However, the framing devices—consciously or unconsciously—nevertheless remain, and the signifying of the soundscape then combines with the various textures of animation to enhance and mediate the othering effect to different purposes at different points in the narrative.

6. Animation Texture

Whether considering the influence of traditional calligraphic forms and watercolor painting in the *Mulan* introduction or of the woven, fibrous tapestry opening from *Moana*, it is important to note that those elements boldly set the scene before being superseded by a more traditionally-Disney sense of animation, but they do not disappear completely from the visual texture of the film, either. For example, when we meet Mulan’s father for the first time, as he stands in front of the family shrine and she rides off to town, we can see echoes of the same visual signifiers from the movie’s introduction. The outline of his body, the strokes denoting his features, and the outline of the building itself behind him are very strongly foregrounded. They stand out like ink on a rice screen, while, in comparison, the trees in the background take on a very soft, blended texture, such as that of a dispersed watercolor ink on a fibrous paper. This effect is repeated with Mulan’s mother in front of the building where the

potential brides are meant to be prepared to meet the matchmaker. The strokes denoting her figure and features are so sharp in contrast to the softer textures of the background, that she almost appears to be standing in front of a scenery backdrop, rather than a part of the scenery she is meant to be a part of. The stylization is seen again, notably, in the swirling snow of the avalanche that buries the Huns, in effect, softening and blurring the violence of the scene. This stylization and use of visual texture—referred to as “poetic simplicity” by producer Pam Coats (Dong 2011, p. 168)—is apparent throughout the film to subtly remind the audience where the narrative is situated and to keep the visual construction of the animated world intact. While this seems to be a testament to the research efforts of the production team, as I will discuss further on, it is also a technique used to highlight where a distinction is being made between the audiences’ cultural values and those of the embedded culture.

The visual effect of using different animated textures to simultaneously enhance worldbuilding and signal difference is used slightly differently in *Moana*, presumably because the medium is computer-generated rather than hand-drawn animation, but to no less an othering effect. The fibrous textures of the tapestries that depict the creation myth from the opening sequence fade to something that looks much more realistic. But, at the same time, just as the creation myth emphasizes a connection with the natural world, and affirms a mythical idyll, the visual textures of the film itself, especially those that depict interaction with natural elements, are highly stylized. There is a sense of a heightened realism to the sand and the ocean, especially when characters are seen interacting with them directly. The coconut fronds and the grain of the timber are also emphasized, as is the movement of Moana’s hair. Essentially, the idyllic nature of Montunui is made so real that the spiritual elements are secondary to how much the visual signifiers convince the viewer of the validity of the world they are witnessing. And because those visual elements track with the ideal of island life—sand, ocean, coconuts—that a Western audience has been conditioned to expect from an “island narrative,” it adds to the expectation and the idea that the story being communicated is culturally authentic through that hyperrealism via visual texture. Thus, we accept Montunui, and Disney’s presentation of “Polynesia” as plausible.

7. Layered Animation within the Song Sequences

The above effects come together in two song sequences to signal otherness to different effects, specifically, in “A Girl Worth Fighting For” in *Mulan* and in “You’re Welcome” in *Moana*. Looking at the animated musical numbers, in both scenes we find parallel elements that contextualize culture and otherness, and the viewer’s relationship to the cultural material presented within the film. Both songs embody a male voice of identity and desire in a female-driven and named film. Additionally, both scenes use a change in animation style that signals difference as specifically related to cultural knowledge, identity, or information within the film. Whether modelled on Chinese calligraphic brushstrokes or traditional Marquesan tattoos (Flores 2016), the othering effect simultaneously attempts to communicate a sense of authenticity embedded in the information imparted through the particular scene, such as cultural definitions of gender roles or imparting historical socio-cultural information that motivates the plot further, but also heavily slants the reception of the information so that it is identified clearly and visually as different and separate from the rest of the Westernized adaptation of the cultural narrative.

“A Girl Worth Fighting For” is situated directly after Mushu, the dragon sidekick, engineers having Mulan’s unit moved to the front to further his own goals. As the army laments needing to march long distances, Ling suggests in song that instead of thinking about their discomfort, they “think of instead/A girl worth fighting for” (Moana 1998, 48:01). When Mulan as Ping looks askance at the suggestion, he repeats the assertion: “that’s what I said/a girl worth fighting for,” pulling out a scroll from his armor and unfolding it (Moana 1998, 48:09). The scroll unrolls to reveal an Orientalized depiction of a woman, reminiscent of the ideal women off to see the matchmaker at the beginning of the film, hiding her face behind a fan, with writing in presumably Chinese characters vertically to the left of her. The camera then zooms in on this parchment, and, as it takes over the screen, this background is presented as having the same color and texture as the only other time we’ve seen this kind of

stylized drawing in the film. The written characters unravel themselves into stylized depictions of Ling, Chien-Po, and Yao as they all describe their ideal woman: pale, quiet, meek, willing to admire them, good at cooking—essentially subservient to them and there to improve their quality of life. Though as the song continues the visual narrative leaves the scroll and stylized animation to return to the “normal” animation style of the film, the momentary shift achieves a particular effect. In the film opening, the calligraphic style was used to solidify a localized connection between the (Orientalized and constructed) culture and the adapted narrative, thus bringing the viewer into Disney’s version of Ancient China. What we see here is a continuation of that connection, but with an added element. The song contains a message that reiterates an alleged cultural message encoded previously in the film in the song “Honor to Us All”—a woman’s worth is dependent on her ability to win a husband vis-à-vis her physical appearance, and knowing her duties and keeping to her place in society. This message is one that is meant to jar with the expectations of a Western, feminist audience—an audience being deliberately targeted by co-directors Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, who are on the record as being motivated in part by wanting to disrupt Disney’s pattern of heroines relying on a man to save them, in order to create a role model for their daughters (Bruckner 2018). The audience is meant to relate, again as in other preceding parts of the film, to Mulan’s sense of isolation and not quite fitting in with where she is meant to “belong” based on her outward appearance within this culture, with the part in the song where Mulan as Ping asks “How ‘bout a girl who’s got a brain/Who always speaks her mind?” and is promptly rebuffed.

This is not the only time where Mulan becomes the outsider; however, it is one in which the culture represented in the film is most clearly othered in comparison to “Western” values. The audience separates the “Chinese-ness” of the film from the appealing, hybridized heroine. The “Chinese-ness” becomes identifiable when the lyrics of the song are compounded by and associated with the stylized, albeit Orientalized imagery. In comparison, Mulan, who is confused and made an outsider by the messages in the lyrics, simultaneously embodies the ideals of the independent teenage heroine searching from her place and the ideal of an “authentic” yet palatable hybridization of Western ideal dressed up in a projection of what the dominant power-holder in this iteration of globalized storytelling thinks the othered culture should look like. This is an example of Orientalizing and embedded coloniality: the patriarchal values of the song are partnered visually with images that cause the viewer to connect antiquated gender roles with a particular culture, which is then in turn identified as not contemporary, especially as compared with their values as embodied in the character of Mulan. By deliberately using a different style of animation to separate this mode of thinking about a woman’s place in society as described by men, who are in this depiction conferred a higher status and more autonomy, the animators separate the message from the rest of the film, and assign it to the originating culture. In essence, through animation style, this shift communicates to the audience that ‘this is not something that belongs to US (Disney/Western hegemonic cultural norms), this belongs to THEM (the culture that is being borrowed from and othered).’ I argue that Disney uses its assumed, “self-created authority” (Parasher 2013, p. 44) to indicate that patriarchal thinking is inherent in Chinese culture, which thus is antiquated and not compatible with the sensibilities of a progressive and contemporary young woman (or audience). In this way, a seemingly innocuous or possibly comical song actually undermines any sense of incorporating Ancient China and Chinese culture into a sense of a contemporary norm through its rather blatant othering and Orientalizing. A culture that it alleged to try to represent with integrity instead is actively depicted as less progressive than “Western” culture.

Mulan directors Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook have in multiple interviews referred to the culturally specific research that went into the production of *Mulan* (Bruckner 2018; Dong 2011, p. 173). However, the relative lack of success of the film within its origin culture pointed to an area for improvement in terms of how Disney approached cross-cultural storytelling where the end product would remain accepted by the culture the original narrative came from (Dundes and Streiff 2016, p. 2). That is where the Oceanic Story Trust created for the production of *Moana* was meant to come in to fill the gaps between corporate, globalized storytelling practices and more local, culturally-specific

storytelling, to create in the end a more glocalized, more hybridized mode of adapting a narrative from outside Disney's cultural sphere. Hence, I find it notable that, with such alleged attention to detail, a similar situation occurs in *Moana* where a different, supposedly culturally authentic art style is embedded within the larger scope of the animation in order to separate the "authentic" cultural information from the "authoritative" encompassing Disney narrative.

The song "You're Welcome" serves as the audience's introduction to the character of Maui, where, after his and Moana's first encounter, he breaks into a song meant to contextualize for Moana (and the audience) his identity within the cosmology of the film. The stories of Maui's adventures play out across his body through his tattoos, which, according to production designer Ian Gooding, were modelled on Marquesan tattoos, as part of an effort to base the islands and other components on "real areas at real times" (Flores 2016, p. 121). Technically speaking, these tattoos were the result of a combination of traditional 2D animation and the 3D, Computer Generated animation that comprises the rest of the film's aesthetic (Robertson 2016). The stylization is meant to convey that the stories and events retold by Maui in the song are actually part of a larger cultural sense—essentially, that Disney has not invented this cultural history, and its inclusion stands testament to the research they had done and their utilization of the Oceanic Story Trust. This goes a step farther than, say, the sequence surrounding the song "We Know the Way" which contains musical elements that are distinctly Polynesian, that retains a sense of authenticity supported by the fact that Foa'i, who primarily wrote the lyrics, has built a career on representing his people, traditions, and ancestors with knowledge and integrity as the founder of Te Vaka (Chapman). In comparison, "You're Welcome" retains an aural aesthetic much more in line with an American Broadway Musical songbook, and the instrumentation is largely Western. Outside of the lyrics, the denotation that this information is culturally specific and "real" comes from the 2D animated dancing tattoo embedded in the 3D dancing Disney-version of Maui.

However, Maui is an actual heroic figure who appears across various Polynesian and Pacific Island cultures, with contexts and histories outside of the Disney frame, which the audience may or may not know. Tongan cultural anthropologist Tēvita O. Ka'ili noted in an op-ed for the *Huffington Post* that the delineation of Maui's feats omits Hina, the companion goddess who helps him to achieve many of his wonders, who is also present in different forms across the vast Polynesian pantheon of goddesses. He also notes that because this removes symmetry and harmony, motifs in Polynesian cultural life and lore, it amounts to a kind of colonial erasure where the integrity of the culture is diminished in the retelling (Ka'ili 2016). Stuart Ching and Jann Patarya-Ching's analysis of *Moana* in the context of the appropriation of Hawai'ian lore notes that:

"the film's mythological, cultural and historical references from Samoa, Hawai'i and Maori New Zealand suggest that Moana is set in a generic version of Polynesia; just as Disney constructed a version of Ancient China that would appeal to the assumptions and presumptions of a Western audience's expectations, so too have they constructed a pastiche of symbols that signify "Polynesia" to outsiders, but removes the internal, culturally-specific nuances that are experienced by those with culturally-specific knowledge. The film opens with a Disney-invented legend that frames the ancient Polynesian legend of Māui as well as Polynesian creation myths within a Western framework". (Ching and Pataray-Ching 2017, p. 183)

The overall reframing of Polynesian mythology at large, and Maui as a figure within that mythology reflects institutionalized coloniality, or, "the film's potential to reflect, enact and sustain longstanding histories of global imperialism that exploit Polynesian culture and negatively impact the lives of Polynesia's indigenous peoples" (Ching and Pataray-Ching 2017, p. 183). There is an intertextual dialogue created between the film's iterations of the Maui stories, and the legends as they exist and are continually propagated within various Polynesian cultures' own retellings of the legends of Maui as a trickster rather than a buffoon. Additionally, the volume of not just criticism but overall intercultural, glocalized dialogues about the impact versus the intent of the adaptation creates a paratextual context through which viewers can potentially further understand the positionality of the film in a larger post-colonial context as well as Disney's manufactured globalized context.

8. Conclusions: Positioning the Films within the Paratexts of Culturally-Specific Criticism

Disney might be firmly positioned as a powerful stakeholder within the Western hegemonic mediasphere, but that does not mean that the films it produces are easily positioned or interpreted within a wider, global cultural context. *Mulan* and *Moana* each changed the perception of what a Disney narrative could be in terms of how they position the independence and agency of their titular female characters of ethnic minority (as defined within the culture scope Disney primarily operates within and addresses), and, have each come under culturally-specific scrutiny. Evaluating what might be positive or negative in each film varies based on the positionality of who is doing the evaluation. Extra-diegetic materials—such as original contexts of the stories, the other iterations of the narratives, the positionality of the producers and artists who create the filmic adaptations, and the various reactions and criticisms of the films by other viewers—adds to a paratext that in turn adds to how audiences can position and understand the films in different contexts and construct meaning. What we can learn from juxtaposing parallel elements of the films as well as various academic and cultural criticisms of the films, is that Disney's relationship with authentic cross-cultural storytelling, is, at best, complicated.

However, what has changed, clearly, is that criticisms of Disney are now far more accessible publicly, which arguably marks a transition in the balance of power between Disney as the monolithic media producer, and various socio-cultural groups that would levy criticism against the company's productions. It is also arguable that in the past two decades, the shift from sending a production team on a research trip and engaging consultants as needed, to deliberately involving people who are of and invested in a particular culture to be part of the adaptation and storytelling process, marks a significant change in how Disney has approached telling stories from other cultures. This latter move is, at face value, a positive step, as the studio begins a necessary process of potentially moving away from appropriating and transforming cultural property in decontextualized ways and perpetuating harmful, often colonializing, stereotypes.

That being said, this transition in production processes is only the first step in moving away from stereotypical, flat representations of diversity to authentic multicultural or transcultural storytelling, and needs to be viewed as such. While more authentic, ethical depictions of otherness may well begin to speak back to institutionally and culturally embedded biases and inequalities, these cannot function as such if the ethics and contexts of the production processes are not thoroughly examined. For example, it would be worth probing, in the future, how and why Disney insists on representing their so-called "diverse" characters as being of diverse only outside of the context of the US, and from distinct historical or semi-mythical periods of time. By problematizing, further, how the divide between cultures is maintained through various elements of film production, a better picture of how difference—not necessarily diversity—becomes encoded socially through such representations is possible. In essence, it is necessary for future research to probe how the separation between 'normal' and 'Other' is maintained through casting, construction of setting, use or disregard of historical contexts of various ethnic and cultural diaspora, and many other facets of cultural erasure and inequality within even just the socio-historical-cultural context of the United States. There will always be tension between the corporation's mandate to not only protect but increase its profit margins, and the assertions of the marginalized to their right to accurate and ethical representation. Coloniality is a system of economic and cultural exchange that reinforces current hegemonic power structures, and Disney's depictions of otherness simultaneously support that structure while also claiming to disrupt it through diversifying the kinds of stories they are adapting. The ways in which coloniality remains embedded in Disney's particular narrative structure needs further examination, to better understand how, beyond the intentions of any production team, the films can still encode negative representations of other ethnicities, or contribute to harmful stereotypes. Encoding that sense of otherness while also incorporating transcultural narratives under the Disney umbrella limits the opportunity for authentic representations of diversity within Disney animated films, as the viewers are invited into a narrative but constantly reminded of all the ways in which there are potential barriers between them and the source material, and thereby the source culture. A better understanding of

coloniality as embedded within both the production of and presentation of Disney animated films as the company's oeuvre continues to deal in adaptations of its own multicultural material may lead to a better understanding of how to tell more authentic stories without compromising the integrity of the culture being borrowed from.

Funding: This research received no external funding

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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