



Article

Time to Face the Music: Musical Colonization and Appropriation in Disney's *Moana*

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Abstract: Despite Disney's presentation of *Moana* as a culturally accurate portrayal of Polynesian culture, the film suffers from Western ethnocentrism, specifically in its music. This assertion is at odds with marketing of *Moana* that emphasized respect for and consultation with Polynesians whose expertise was heralded to validate the film's music as culturally authentic. While the composers do, in fact, use Polynesian musical traits, they frame the sounds that are unfamiliar within those that are familiar by wrapping them with Western musical characteristics. When the audience does hear Polynesian music throughout the film, the first and last sounds they hear are Western music, not Polynesian. As such, the audience hears Polynesian sounds meld into and then become the music that defines a typical American film. Thus, regardless of Disney's employment of Polynesian musicians, the music of *Moana* remains in the rigid control of non-Polynesian American composers. Rather than break new ground, *Moana* illustrates a musical recapitulation of white men's control and marketing of the representations of marginalized people. *Moana's* music is subject to appropriation, an echo of how colonial resources were exploited in ways that prioritize benefits to cultural outsiders.

Keywords: *Moana*; Disney; music; colonialism; imperialism; appropriation; Polynesia

1. Introduction

Disney has a long history of telling other people's stories in feature-length cartoons. Despite the historical and cultural diversity of these stories, their agenda is uniform, proselytizing a conservative, white, middle-class set of "old-fashioned American" values (Wasko 2001). Disney's works promote "cultural privilege, social inequality and human alienation" (Artz 2004, p. 125). At the end of the twentieth century, to adjust to a market in need of more diverse stories (Artz 2004, p. 122), the company began plundering tales from more exotic locations. In response to criticisms of insensitive cultural appropriations, Disney began to hire traditional culture bearers to market themselves as culturally sensitive and authentic (Clark et al. 2017).¹

Music has always been an important part of Disney films, and, just as the visual traits of the animation can be used to push a cultural agenda (Artz 2004), the musical traits in the sound track can also be used as a tool to make a statement that might even contradict the superficially egalitarian message of the direct narrative (Nooshin 2004). The purpose of this article is to explore Disney's use of music in *Moana* (2016) as a tool that pushes a colonial agenda under a patina of cultural authenticity. While Disney films all include scores that situate their stories within their narrative context, *Moana* presents an especially clear distinction between what Disney markets as its respect for

¹ Disney's portrayals of non-European cultures began early in their animated features such as *Song of the South* (1946) and *The Jungle Book* (1967), but until the 1990s the stories chosen were European/American stories about other cultures. Beginning in the 1990s the narrative point of view changes and the Disney corporation began adapting non-western stories, and thus began marketing their works as multi-cultural.

cultural authenticity, and the way in which it uses music to establish imperialistic authority over an appropriated culture.²

In the past, when Disney featured a culture deemed exotic to many Westerners, it catered to fascination with the “other,” an Orientalism that dehumanizes and objectifies its subjects (Said 1978). While *Moana* has avoided the Orientalist portrayal of women in other cultures as “the exotic, the foreign and the sexual” (Lacroix 2004, p. 218), it nevertheless still presents a “Disneyfied” (Giroux and Pollock 2010) version of a non-Western part of the globe, using music as an important tool to closely control that “other.”

2. Background on *Moana*'s Polynesian Content

The music of *Moana* (2016) received much attention for contrasting and contradictory reasons. Much pre-release news focused on the Polynesian contributors to the film (Bernardin 2016; Moore 2016). All of the main singing actors of the film are Polynesian, and one of the three composers, Opetia Foa'i, is an award-winning Polynesian musician who is steeped in his culture's traditional sounds. At the same time, much attention has focused on the contributions of Broadway's golden boy, Lin-Manuel Miranda, best known for the blockbuster musical *Hamilton*. Detailed analysis of the sounds that comprise the music in *Moana* suggest that the score is much more Miranda than Moana: more Disney than Polynesia. Despite the hype about authenticity, Western musical traits open and close each song, framing and containing the Polynesian sounds. This musical containment of unfamiliar sounds by familiar ones limits the audience's access to the unfamiliar, controlling the representation of the otherness of Polynesian music. Disney, then, carefully controls the musical image of Polynesia that it markets to the world. Through this control, it appropriates and colonizes the music of Polynesia.³

From the earliest long-form animated films, Disney has taken fairy tales from Europe and simplified their stories to promote of a narrow set of conservative, small-town 'American' values (Sayers and Weisenberg 1965; Hunt and Frankenberg 1990; Wasko 2001). In the last several decades, they have turned to the stories of other places and cultures, but still focus on the same set of 'all-American' values in a true imperialistic fashion that exerts complete control over all parts of the narrative and its presentation (Kadi 1995; Cypher and Higgs 1997; Wasko 2001; Nooshin 2004; Clark et al. 2017). In all their endeavors, from films to parks, music has played a large role in both storytelling and in fashioning this imperialistic control (Carson 2004; Nooshin 2004). To combat the reputation of exploitation and appropriation, the Disney Corporation has begun to hire native experts in the cultures of the stories they tell to be able to claim authenticity rather than appropriation, to much less success than fanfare (Fleeger 2014; Clark et al. 2017).

On a superficial level, the music in *Moana*, like all Disney soundtracks, mixes a range of musical styles into a coherent score. Because Polynesian music has long been subject to stylistic synthesis (Thomas 1981; Moulin 1996) and because much of this musical mixing is a normal process for Polynesian musicians themselves (Colson 2014), this process is, in itself, not always colonial in nature. Moreover, Disney's employment of Opetia Foa'i might seem to address issues of appropriation. This paper argues, however, that Disney went beyond synthesis and into imperialism and appropriation in the way in which they used Polynesian musical traits, where they put them, and who got to sing them.

² Issues of representation and authenticity with respect to music are unique for each film, and this essay will consider the music of *Moana* to examine the case that it presents. For discussions about music in other Disney films and products, see (Carson 2004; Clague 2004; Nooshin 2004; Tulk 2010; Fleeger 2014; Hess 2017; Rodoshtenous 2017).

³ The term 'polynesian' refers to a subset of Pacific Island cultures of the region of Oceania. While *Moana*'s creators claim full Pacific Island and Oceania representation in this work (Julius and Malone 2016), the story relies most heavily on Polynesian cultures, since the character Maui is a Polynesian demi-god and the name Moana means ocean in several Polynesian languages (Tamaira et al. 2018). Outside of the “Oceanic Trust”, media discussions of the Pacific Islanders and Americans of Pacific Island heritage that are involved in the movie, use the term Polynesian to identify their cultural heritage.

3. Purpose of Paper

The arguments presented in this paper provide an avenue for widening the discussion of the potential impact of Disney films by focusing on their musical facets as interpreted by an academic with expertise both in music and sociology. The music in *Moana* plays an important role in perceptions of Polynesia, a large group of different Pacific cultures that are not well known outside of their region. Disney's decision to appoint itself as able to distill elements of a culture, in the case of this analysis, in the form of music, raises concerns about exploitation of marginalized cultures that enter the world's stage via a "Disneyfied" version that the company misrepresents as authentic.

4. The Use of Cultural Natives in Disney Productions

Moana is not the first production for which Disney hired cultural 'natives' to grant cultural authority to offset criticism of imperialism. For the 2013 production of *Jungle Book*, which takes place in Rudyard Kipling's India, the creators traveled in India for two and a half weeks (Clark et al. 2017), and "infused Indian influences into the show's design, choreography and casting" (Weinert-Kendt 2013) by hiring an Indian dancer as a consultant and Indian musicians as performers (Clark et al. 2017). What the White American creators did not do in *Jungle Book*, and what they still fail to do in *Moana*, is allow non-westerners to fashion representations of themselves and their own cultures; control always stays in the hand of the colonizers.

Westerners have long fantasized and exoticized the Pacific Islands. In 2011, film directors John Musker and Ron Clements suggested Polynesia to Disney as the next big Disney adventure inspired by the books of Melville and Conrad, as well as the paintings of Gauguin (Berman 2016). They conducted research for their creation through visiting museums, reading original myths and stories, and traveling to Polynesian locations (Julius and Malone 2016; Mottram 2016). Disney even created an 'Oceanic Trust' of culture bearers to ensure that *Moana* would be Disney's most culturally authentic animated film yet (Robinson 2016). It published a book about this supposed authenticity to ensure the public's appreciation of their efforts (Julius and Malone 2016).

While the research inspired the film makers, the Oceanic Trust advised them, and Polynesian writers and musicians helped them, the film was conceived, created, and controlled by Disney's American white men. They took a Polynesian deity, Maui, as their starting point, but rather than dramatize a Polynesian story, they created a new one that suited their own commercial goals more than it reflected any Polynesian reality. Like physical, political colonizers, Disney is merely using Polynesian resources for their own profit (Diaz 2016; Herman 2016; Ngata 2016). The creation of the music followed much the same process with similar results.

Mark Mancina, a classically trained composer with many movie and television credits, wrote the score. Lin-Manuel Miranda, the creator of *Hamilton*, who is perhaps most known for bringing rap music into mainstream Broadway, added songs to the movie. Disney also hired Opetaia Foa'i, the founder of the contemporary Polynesian musical group Te Vaka. He advised on the score and wrote "We Know the Way" (Newman 2016). While the score does make use of Polynesian musical sounds, it also contains Broadway sounds, and both are embedded into a traditional American film score. Polynesian singers produce an authentic Polynesian choral style, but it is accompanied by a Western Symphony orchestra. As the film uses a Polynesian deity and island location to tell a Disney story, the music uses Polynesian sounds that combine with Broadway and symphonic sounds to produce a Disney sound track.

5. Key Plot Elements of *Moana* and Their Corresponding Musical Coding

The story of *Moana* revolves around definitions of Moana's peoples' traditions. Seeing her people in need, Moana is at first torn between following her father's definition of their tradition (staying "Where you Are") and leaving her home to seek a solution (in "How Far I'll go"). Once she learns that sea voyaging and exploration represent an older, and presumably more authentic tradition ("We Know

the Way”) than what her father claims, she leaves on her hero’s journey. Her quest is to restore an important cultural totem to its traditional owner, and thus this voyage is about discovering, repairing, and restoring older authentic traditions.

While there is no single Polynesian musical style, there are nonetheless common musical traits; traditional Polynesian music is dominated by singing and drumming. Singing both with and without drumming was heard in solos, small groups, and big groups, and the styles of singing ran the gamut from chanting only a few notes repeatedly to wider, more tuneful melodies. Choirs sang the same notes (unison singing) more often than they sang in harmony before European missionaries arrived and taught them Western hymn singing (Smith et al. 2001). Percussion instruments are by far the most common instruments used. Polynesians make percussion instruments from many different materials and thus the instruments have many different sound qualities. These instruments were played alone as well as to accompany singers. Many places in Polynesia have flute-like instruments, and the conch shell played as a trumpet can also be found. Almost no string instruments existed in Polynesia before Europeans brought the guitar, and none were played, or sounded, like violins and cellos (Love et al. 1998). The sounds that are the most distinctly Polynesian throughout the score of *Moana* are the drum beats, male chorus chanting, and some solo and choral singing in a Polynesian language. Audiences do hear the influence of the Polynesian composer Opetiaia Foa’i, but these sounds never stand on their own but are framed and/or accompanied by the music of American Broadway and film.

6. Musical Framing

Musical “framing” is a structure in which a familiar set of ‘normal’ musical sounds precede, follows, and accompanies a different set of unfamiliar or ‘other’ sounds. In the case of *Moana*, the familiar ‘normal’ sounds are the musical traits common to all Western musicals; the unfamiliar ‘other’ sounds are Polynesian musical traits like heavy drumming and male chorus chanting. When the audience does hear Polynesian music throughout the film, the first and last sound they hear is Western music, not Polynesian. 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 (McClary 1991).

Moana begins like any other Disney movie: the audience first sees a sky, and as the scene moves on—a western countryside, a river, a train going over the river, the Disney Castle, and then on to Mickey Mouse as Steamboat Willie. The music we hear during this Disney opening is the first song on the *Moana* soundtrack, “Tulou Tagaloa.” This song begins with a long, low note played by cellos and basses seconds before a bright, female voice calls out “Tulou, tulo tagaloa.” In between the second and third word of this call we hear a strong, low drum beat. A full choir of men’s and women’s voices join in, always tuning their notes to the cellos and basses that continue to hold the same long notes. While the voices, language, and drums are traditional Polynesian sounds, the music that accompanies them is Western, especially the long note in the bottom held by the cellos and basses. Uniform, consistent pitches and melodic string instruments like cellos are essential in American symphonic film scores, but not important in pre-colonial Polynesian music (Smith et al. 2001). The cellos continue to play the same low note throughout this short song. Towards the end, their note dips down briefly and returns to the original note, in a standard musical formula that is actually the most common progression in all European and American classical and commercial music. The song ends with all voices on the same pitch that the cellos have been holding throughout.

As the pictures of Disney’s castle and Mickey Mouse at the beginning of this movie frame *Moana*’s story as a Disney creation, the consistent, persistent pitch in the low notes played by instruments found in Western film/symphony orchestras frames the music as an American creation as well, regardless of how many Polynesian musical traits the audience may hear. At the end of the opening song, when all voices sing the same pitch with which the cellos and basses opened the scene, the audience is literally

hearing Polynesian voices becoming westernized as they join the long-held, uniform pitch played by the cellos and bases.

The framing of Polynesian musical traits can also be seen as a colonial ‘civilizing process.’ Heavy percussion and rhythmic emphasis in commercial music received much criticism in the United States throughout the twentieth century. Because African music focuses on rhythm, and the musical traits that slaves brought into the Americas included more rhythmic energy than their European counterparts, conservative critics have long lamented the ‘barbaric’ and ‘savage’ sounds of any musical styles in the United States that sported heavy rhythm and percussion. Rock and Roll, which flourished during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, received especially loud outcries (Maddock 1966; Haines 2011). Concurrent with conservative outrage at such ‘barbaric’ and ‘savage’ music, the Disney Corporation worked long and hard to create a “Disney Universe” based on conservative social ‘family values’ of their own imagined small-town America (Wasko 2001). As loud, strong (Black) drumming did not fit into the (White) ‘American’ value set that Disney has historically transmitted in their works, neither do the equally strong, equally rhythmic drums of Polynesian music. To include these highly percussive sounds in a family-oriented film soundtrack, then, they need to be ‘civilized’ through the containment of the symphonic frame. Thus, the framing process is in this instance a colonial process, since “[t]he idea of ‘the civilizing mission’, as we all know very well, is firmly rooted in the history of colonization and imperialism” (Van Krieken 2011).

7. The Dominance of Western Musical Elements

Throughout the film, Western music continues to dominate Polynesian sounds, even in songs that are purportedly about Polynesian traditions, where one might—because of the topic of the songs—expect to hear Polynesian music predominate. Moana’s father sings “Where We Are” shortly after the opening scenes. As the film shows her people going about their daily lives engrossed in their traditional arts and other activities, he and the chorus of men accompanying him are teaching their values. Dancers only dance ancient dances, not new ones. People eat traditional coconut, fish, and taro. Baskets and paintings are created in the traditional manners. In fact, he lectures, “This tradition is our mission” (Miranda 2016).

The music of this song is an appealing synthesis of Polynesian and American traits. The introduction begins with a high, light male chanting ‘ooh’ backed by drums; an acoustic guitar joins in, and then Moana’s father begins to sing a tune that would fit into any movie musical. He is joined by others who support his rules. To highlight the words, “The dancers are practicing/They dance to an ancient song,” a low-voiced male chorus chants a rhythmic accompaniment and then join in with their own lyrics “Who needs a new song? This old one’s all we need” (Miranda 2016). In the next segment of text, Moana’s father is joined by a chorus of men and women singing in harmony, who accompany him off and on for the rest of the song. The instrumental accompaniment includes guitars and a bass as well as a variety of types of percussion.

In the middle of the song, Moana’s grandmother sings two verses with a different message, telling Moana to listen to her heart. In the first of these verses, the guitar and light percussion accompanies the grandmother’s singing. Then the percussion drops out, and the guitar accompaniment is joined by very soft violins and flutes. The percussion comes back in as we hear music from the beginning introduction leading us to the final verse sung by her father and the full chorus. At this point, different singers take different lines of text with independent melodies but singing them simultaneously. The resulting short segment is more complex than when they all sing the same melodies together. Moana sings the melody at the very end of the song, backed up in full harmony by the large chorus, and the symphonic strings join in the final few notes.

This song depicting island traditions is Disney’s representation of a tropical island. The center of the song describes the role of the coconut, and the accompanying action illustrates the text.

Consider the coconut (the what?)
Consider its tree

We use each part of the coconut
 That's all we need
 We make our nets from the fibers (we make our nets from the fibers)
 The water is sweet inside (the water is sweet inside)
 We use the leaves to build fires (we use the leaves to build fires)
 We cook up the meat inside (we cook up the meat inside)
 Consider the coconuts (consider the coconuts)
 The trunks and the leaves (ha!)
 The island gives us what we need

(Miranda 2016)

In reality, this simply is Disney's version of the "tiresome . . . cliché [of] the 'happy natives with coconuts' trope. Coconuts . . . are part of the shtick of caricatures about Pacific peoples." (Herman 2016).

The music works in the same manner as the coconut "shtick." Polynesian music and commercial music share enough musical traits that this pop song can represent Polynesian music in Disney's lexicon. Most sounds that are Polynesian in this song are also common in contemporary commercial music: the high male "oooh" and the light, high percussion could easily be mistaken for any Latin-influenced pop song, many of which have similar types of percussion instruments playing as we hear in this song. Because this song discusses life on an island, and most 'latin' musical sounds originate in the Caribbean islands, one way of understanding this song is as generic 'island' music that conflates cultures in Pacific and the Caribbean into one essentialized 'island' culture, i.e., the 'island shtick' in music.

We do not hear the low drums we heard earlier, and we only hear the low male chanting to punctuate the line about dancing at the beginning of the song. Many of the sounds heard here are not sounds heard in traditional Polynesian music, especially the way that the chorus sings towards the end, where each singer has a different melody but they all sing them at the same time. That is standard fare for Broadway and movies, but not for Polynesia. While we do not have continual orchestral presence, we hear the orchestra play at very strategic points: when Moana's grandmother tells her to ignore her father in favor of her own inner voice, and at the very end, like a frame. The song "Who We Are" claims to present a Polynesian representation of life on their island but instead tells an American version of a rather generic island story. Similarly, Disney implies that the lead singer is the Polynesian actor Temeru Morrison who voices the role of Chief Tui, when in fact the song is dubbed by the American actor Christopher Jackson. As the story told in the song "Where We Are" is more Disney than Polynesian (Chinen 2016), the music is more American than Polynesian.

The most important song in which we might expect to hear traditional Polynesian sounds is the one that teaches Moana about the older, voyaging traditions of her people, "We Know the Way." This song served as one of the early promotional trailers, to great fanfare, and was called a "Love letter to the culture of the Pacific Islanders" (Garis 2016). It was the first song that Polynesian composer Opetia Foa'i wrote when he landed the contract to contribute music to the film (Te 2018). Of course, Disney did not leave his finished product alone, but rather gave it a few "tweaks here and there" (Te 2018).

"We Know the Way" does contain the traditional Polynesian musical sounds of low-pitched male chanting, solo singing in a Polynesian language, and varied percussion. Like the first song of the movie, "Tulou Tagaloa" (discussed above), these Polynesian sounds are framed by a low, bass pitch played by strings both at the beginning and the end, and much of the song is lightly accompanied throughout by a typical film/symphony orchestra. The Westernization goes further than this, however, for while Opetia Foa'i sang the Polynesian lyrics, American Broadway composer and performer Lin-Manuel Miranda sang the English.

Who sings this song is especially important when considering questions of authenticity and appropriation in the music of *Moana*. All of the important roles in the film are voiced by actors of Polynesian ancestry. The composer of this song was hired to ensure musical traditional accuracy.

This composer is also a professional singer in his own right, and sings some of this song. In live performances of this song, such as the one at the New Zealand Music Awards in November of 2017, he sings all lyrics in both languages. Lin-Manuel Miranda, on the other hand, is famous in the United States and is selling many tickets on Broadway, but is not of Polynesian ancestry. The song “We know the Way” is a first-person narrative of the most ancient and authentic wayfaring traditions of Polynesian people, yet is sung by a non-Polynesian actor. Having a non-Polynesian sing this song seems counter to everything Disney has claimed about their respect for authenticity and authentic voices. It is consistent with a desire to appropriate Polynesian culture.

8. Conclusions

Colonialism is based on who sets the rules and who defines representation. While the narrative of *Moana* contains authentic Polynesian elements, Disney still controls what and who is depicted, and how they are portrayed. Despite Polynesian input, these representations are still more Disney formula than Polynesian (Wasko 2001). The music contains Polynesian musical traits but follows Western rules: the musical structure and symphonic context are Disney, not Polynesia. The framing of the Polynesian traits ensures that the Polynesian musical sounds literally follow Western music. The combination and synthesis of musical traits is firmly controlled by Disney. Even in the song written by a Polynesian musician whose lyrics describe the oldest of traditions, the majority of those lyrics are sung by a Broadway actor rather than a Polynesian singer. Despite Polynesian contributions, Disney firmly controls the film’s musical representations.

Because of the marketing claims of respect for, consultation with, and employment of authentic culture bearers, audiences might believe that musical representations in *Moana* are in fact authentic. Instead, the Disney version stifles the voices of marginalized people while making money from the production, complete with campy coconut stereotypes. As in the *Jungle Book*, the creators can disavow colonialism so that Disney and its audiences can enjoy the “guilt-free” pleasures and profits of Island exoticism (Clark et al. 2017). Nevertheless, despite marketing claims of respect, Disney colonizes Polynesian music, counting on audience acceptance of their version of authenticity.

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