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## **Cover Page Footnote**

I thank John Rieder, David Higgins, and Vilsoni Hereniko for their feedback to an earlier version of this essay, and Anne Duggan and Cristina Bacchilega for their substantial editorial guidance. I am also grateful for conversations with Hereniko and Vince Diaz that provided me with Pacific Islander community insights and for Diaz's explanation of the Micronesian-Polynesian transindigenous educational history of modern voyaging science.

# Disney's *Moana*, the Colonial Screenplay, and Indigenous Labor Extraction in Hollywood Fantasy Films

In the early 2010s, Walt Disney Pictures shifted how its transmedia “princess” empire targeted global female consumers. *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), and more recent films such as *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and *Tangled* (2010) can be characterized by their deculturated, deregionalized depiction of international girls and women whose Germanness and Frenchness are effaced as the characters grow more Americanized. However, with *Brave* (2012) and *Frozen* (2013), culturally specific (albeit scant and stereotypical) details about Scotland and Scandinavia situate the characters within the cultural tradition from which the tales emerged. These recent films mark Disney Studios’s digital-era tactics to reposition regionality and associated “cultural authenticity” as part of its worldwide women’s brand. Disney’s animated feature film *Moana* (2016) continues this regionalist vein but in more problematic terms, given the symbolic expropriation of indigenous culture by this global media corporation. Through expropriation, a practice of cultural production by large Global North firms like Disney, Native stories and other cultural information are extracted into the narrative factory of capitalism, which hybridizes them into Western or “modern” colonial genre forms, homogenizes them further for optimal monetization, then attempts to replace those

community stories and information with its canned product within hegemony's highly commodified symbolic marketplace. Like expropriated Native land, which the modern socialist settler state might nationalize, or expropriated Native land, which the modern capitalist settler state might privatize—both governmental economic actions toward empire—the material and bureaucratic process of symbolic expropriation is not a done deal but is negotiated, resisted politically, changeable at any time through institutional practices and community movements.

In the context of this expanded consumer-advertising strategy, I use the formal tools of screenwriting studies to evaluate Disney's creation of its lone Pacific princess, *Moana*. This international and indigenous heroine of color can be viewed as a test case for the firm's profitable extraction of global creative labor from indigenous peoples for its worldwide transmedia lifestyle empire. Specifically, I analyze the script development process and its relationship to the colonial screenplay form, in terms of the worldwide division of labor and the company's expropriation of cultural knowledge from indigenous communities, and I focus on how Disney's imperial media-production practices serve its larger consumerist goals, and vice versa.

### **The Script Development Process and the Hollywood Screenplay Form**

Disney's sole animated princess offering set in the Pacific region, *Moana*, arguably suffers from an uneven story structure. A clue as to how this structure evolves might be found in tracing the character development of Hei Hei (performed by Alan Tudyk), rooster sidekick of the titular girl chief-in-training, from the preproduction through production phases of moviemaking. The corporate "story team"<sup>1</sup> of the film's key directors, producers, story artists, and screenwriters had once conceived the chicken as a cunning obstruction to *Moana* (played by Auli'i Cravalho) on her beloved, if imaginarily "pan-Polynesian," Motonui island. But Hei Hei, arrogant watchdog of Chief Tui (Temuera Morrison), father of the teen protagonist, did not work as a plot device. Four months before animation wrapped, even as the working script was being shot, the story team was tasked to either "save this chicken" or offer his scrawny neck up to the narrative chopping block, altogether deleting Hei Hei. Writers and animators switched the bird's personality into what codirectors Ron Clements and John Musker, during later press junkets, proclaimed "the stupidest character in the history of Disney animation" (qtd. in Sciretta, "How a Character").

The characterological change won over test audiences, eventually endearing Hei Hei as Moana's harmless, comical helper. The chicken's story arc within the screenplay drafts altered, helping ensure the film's record-breaking, \$82 million opening over its Thanksgiving opening weekend, breaking domestic box office records, according to Box Office Mojo.

The evolution of Hei Hei—who in the theatrical version appears so self-destructively dumb that in the opening sequences, a Motonui villager advises the young chief-to-be that the bird might be better off eaten—represents what can happen during Hollywood's story development process. For greater profitability, company-wide conversations about a film's working script can transform a character once complex, messy, and provocative into a stock stereotype. A higher-stakes scripting transformation was that of pan-Polynesian deity Maui (Dwayne Johnson), Moana's reluctant travel companion and eventual seafaring mentor. Throughout the film's development, the story team altered the demigod's shape from classically lean to comically large (Ito)—a mutation condemned by indigenous Oceanic leaders and scholars as replicating racist tropes of obese Polynesian bodies (Roy). Simultaneously, the scripted behavior of this respected ancestor and spiritual protector of diverse Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian peoples grew cruder as Maui became secularized. After Moana was added to princess-up the project, the demigod no longer resembled the cunning, justice-driven, resourceful trickster of various Oceanic folklores around whom the directors had once planned to center the whole tale (Hill; Sciretta, "Moana' Directors Talk"), and to whom Moana was initially supposed to look up (Giardina). Instead, he devolved into an insecure, fearful, narcissistic antihero whom many Pacific Islanders labeled a "buffoon" (Associated Press, "Disney's 'Moana'"). Emasculated, Disneyfied Maui, according to critics, encouraged non-Native viewers toward transmedial "Polyface" participation, a type of brownskin cosplay based on the use of toys, costumes, and other commercial products that might proliferate cultural appropriation.<sup>2</sup> Maui's de-evolution in the working screenplay and the resultant flatness of his final onscreen depiction point to the production process of hiring, then replacing, multiple screenwriters, a corporate employment pattern often underanalyzed by fantasy-genre film researchers.

*Moana's* visually and aurally rich yet highly schizophrenic cypher of a narrative cannot be decoded without grasping the script's development. The evolution of *Moana's* scripting process reveals not only the rhetorical conventions of the homogenized Hollywood three-act story structure that shaped it but also the uneven, neocolonial production relations underpinning the film between, on one hand,

(largely) non-Native Disney story team members employed as the film's artistic managers and professionals who enjoyed relatively high occupational status and job stability; and, on the other hand, Pacific Islander cultural workers hired as short-term, contingent labor. I contend that this dynamic resulted in a political authority and creative autonomy gap that ultimately constrained the animation's narrative power. Both teams exerted influence over the evolving script; however, the former wielded comparative creative control compared to the latter group, and monopolized critical accolades for its artistic "vision" upon *Moana's* theatrical release. By connecting development and reception stages of movie production with the screenplay form, film and fantasy-genre scholars might understand why many Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian writers, artists, scholars, and community activists have felt their communities disrespected and spiritually exploited<sup>3</sup> by this transnationally produced film. Such a production-centered approach to the film's textuality is particularly necessary, since many liberal reviewers of color from the United States, relatively unfamiliar with Oceania's political-economic history of colonial struggles, have proclaimed that with *Moana*, Disney finally seems to have gotten "it" right.<sup>4</sup>

For scholars focused solely on cinematic content and reception, however, this script development stage is invisible, its details a fannish afterthought, particularly if only evaluating the produced film based on thematic messages and audience response. Employing Native Pacific Islander and Hawaiian vocal talent, *Moana* was initially evaluated as culturally respectful, a position embraced by mainstream and largely non-Native reviewers in the Anglophonic West, with an overall Rotten Tomatoes score of 96 percent rising to 98 percent among forty-three "top critics" ("*Moana* (2016)"). It was even acknowledged by a few Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian scholars and writers for the rare (for US mainstream media) portrayal of Polynesian female heroism and relative lack of overt racism.<sup>5</sup> With mixed awareness of the track record of Walt Disney Animation Studios (WDAS) regarding Native identity appropriation, colonialist and racist stereotypes, whitewashed casting, and indigenous misrepresentation,<sup>6</sup> US movie audiences honored the film with an enviable "A" Cinema Score and positive word-of-mouth (D'Alessandro). Technically oriented viewers bought into Disney's full-court press directed at animation addicts, a publicity drive showcasing *Moana's* cutting-edge simulations of the Pacific Ocean, visually framing the dramedic adventure with dazzling, high-end, marine wave effects (Wolpert). They admired the next-level digital animation evidenced in Maui's glorious mane and *Moana's* lush locks, which the filmmakers called, "The best hair

we've ever done" (Topel). However problematic, Disney's fetishistic objectification of indigenous Oceanic people's watery homelands and precolonial bodies was left uncritiqued in the mainstream media, coopted by "greater" concerns. Reeling at the shocking outcome of the presidential election earlier that November, liberal US families flocked to *Moana*, labeled by film reviewers as a soothingly multicultural "escape from reality," with the national nightmare of an openly racist and sexist Trump administration looming (J. Chang). Lacking the media literacy skills to decode the film's development process, critics and audiences projected their Western liberal values on a beautifully visualized but historically hollow monolithic hodgepodge of diverse Pacific Islander spiritual traditions and misattributed scientific breakthroughs.

Today, reading this film's reception in conjunction with historic protests of indigenous peoples against empire-enforcing projects by the US settler state, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline in Iowa and the Dakotas and the Thirty-Meter Telescope in Hawai'i, I posit that *Moana* served as a glittery corporate distraction, an ideological pressure valve redirecting political imagination away from such momentous, definitive human events. "Sophisticated" US audiences in blue states, especially educated urban professionals, could feel comforting empathy with Disney's onscreen simulacra of indigenous peoples—without having to confront the contemporary political realities of Oceania, where indigenous Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians face the threat of losing their ancestral homelands to global warming, military occupation, outmigration, and post- as well as neocolonialism.<sup>7</sup> As I write this article, parallel patterns of indigenous spiritual appropriation and cultural exploitation splash across popular media, but this time, around Disney's follow-up animated monetization of global fantasy expression, the Latinx-viewership-aimed *Coco* (2017).<sup>8</sup> I regard *Moana* as a watershed experiment for the House of Mouse, which manipulated media discourse so that the film came to be perceived as an innovative "culture warrior ... a new course for making Hollywood movies" (Charity) that ostensibly "strikes at the heart of proto-Trump America" (West). In actuality, the ersatz Polynesian movie test-drove a twenty-first-century form of colonial-media expropriation of Native creative labor for collaborative, corporate storytelling, while solidifying Disney's annual earnings of almost a quarter of the domestic box office, the largest share of all movie companies (Lang). Three major aspects of Disney's colonial screenwriting practice evident in this institutionalized story development model are (1) fantasy world-building via hegemonic cultural-narrative technique, (2) Western-commercial genre dominance within the three-act story structure, and

(3) unevenly racialized production relations between “authors” of different socio-cultural backgrounds that allows for corporate extraction of indigenous intellectual property for film-related transmedia products and services.

### **Hegemonic Fantasy Authorship and the Screenwriter's World-Building Directive**

In the hegemonic authorship of commercial fantastic films, world-building comprises a narrative art wherein the risk of info-dumping presents a challenge to science fiction, fantasy, horror, superhero, and fairy-tale scriptwriters directed to keep major plot lines clearcut and linear. “Excessive” world-building can kill a film’s momentum, which guides viewers through the single-protagonist- (or single-team-) centered, three-act narrative structure of set-up, complication, and resolution. For cultural film writing, moreover, the Hollywood script presents a tightly prescribed, colonial form testing the writer’s world-building skills. As reconceptualized by American white male superstar gurus of the commercial screenplay (such as Robert McKee and Syd Field), the Hollywood script structure charges writers with introducing just enough cultural information to usher in the story world and various subtexts framing the film’s plot. Yet this Western convention constricts the scope of community world-building so as to launch the (single, individualized) protagonist on a narratively efficient journey via a clear throughline, without getting bogged down in extraneous detail.

Exactly what story content qualifies as “extraneous”— versus artistically necessary—takes on ethnocentric salience in light of the gendered and racialized stratification of screenwriters commonly hired on a Hollywood commercial film. The Writers Guild of America West’s annual diversity summary, *The Hollywood Writers Report*, notes that in 2014 among its union membership, men still dominated the ranks of working scriptwriters in the United States (75.1 percent male, 24.9 percent female); moreover, white writers occupied the vast racial-ethnic majority (89.7 percent versus a total of 10.3 percent people of color, including 0.2 percent Native Americans, 2.1 percent Asians, and 1.6 percent multiracials). In terms of current employment at the time of the survey, men made up 67.0 percent of screenwriters, with women constituting 26.3 percent and minorities 12.1 percent; age-wise, 71 percent were age forty-one and older. Within this industrial context, extraneous script details come to mean anything that did not fit the storytelling imagination of Baby

Boomer through Generation X, middle-class, white American men. Historically and today, the animation field typifies this imbalance, despite women artists' impactful but generally unacknowledged contributions (Tupper). Disney's past record of employing only male animation directors to helm its "princess" movies, as well as Pixar Animation Studios' pattern of only featuring male protagonists, was broken by Disney-Pixar in 2012, with *Brave's* codirector Brenda Chapman, whom the company eventually kicked off the film and replaced with a man (Taylor, "'Brave' Director"). Chapman, who went on to share with her replacement an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature of the Year for *Brave*, based on her story, later criticized the animation field for generally being "run by a boys [*sic*] club" (Stampler). *Ms. Magazine* notes that prior to *Moana*, the company's recent cartoon princesses have not even received titular movie titles (*Tangled*, *Brave*, *Frozen*), degendering the movies' female-protagonist-dominated paratext (Kovan). Though some female writers—such as Linda Woolverton (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1991), Susannah Grant (*Pocahontas*, 1995), Irene Mecchi (Chapman's cowriter for *Brave*), and Jennifer Lee (*Frozen*, 2012)—occasionally earn screenplay or story credit—purposeful female screenwriting employment remains a nonstandard practice in Disney's animated princess features, with Rita Hsiao the sole woman of color to wield such recognition (*Mulan*, 1998).

What does it mean that a young "princess" of color, much less an international character from a Native Oceanic background, is conceived and written (mostly) by white American men? In the case of *Moana's* script evolution—including eight produced versions (Giroux), multiple revisions of major scenes (Flaherty), and hundreds of minor drafts (Gossen)—to boost the heroine's role and highlight her relationship with her grandmother, the potentially complex kinship system of Motonui, especially masculine gender relations, vanished. *Frozen* (2013), codirected and cowritten by Lee, presents a diversity of male characters furnished with relatively full arcs, including the ambitious, aristocratic Prince Hans; the thoughtful, working-class, ice harvester Kristoff; the oblivious and cheerful snowman Olaf; and the pompous and scheming duke of Weselton. In contrast, *Moana's* two prominent men seem like rote archetypes, their development lacking in narrative nourishment. Chief Tui, the rigid patriarch, disappears after the first act, then undergoes a fatherly change of heart in the tale's warm conclusion. Maui's journey starts with his spiritual crime of stealing the amulet-like Heart of Te Fiti, spawning his banishment to an isolated island prison. From that low place, he undergoes further symbolic decline, so as to heighten the girl chief's comparable courage and wit. At one of his most

degraded emotional points, he faces underworld crab monster Tamatoa (Māori writer-performer Jemaine Clement), who power-ballads, “You don’t swing it like you used to, man ... Maui! / It’s time to kick your heinie!” while grabbing the hero by his hair. In turns ridiculous and humiliated, Maui experiences a sudden restoration during the movie’s climax that seems unearned, pained, predictable.

In fact, the dumbed-down Hei Hei serves as a sad stand-in for more complicated Pacific Islander men who disappeared from early screenplay drafts, lingering in the filmed version as an amalgamated entity, serving as the choir for Lin-Manuel Miranda, Opetaia Foa’i, and Mark Mancina’s jubilant songs. Less discussed than Maui’s transmutation is the parallel vanishing of other Native males through the script development process, especially Chief Tui’s de-evolution. The five or six brothers who would position Moana as an only daughter in a male-heavy family—likely contributed by the lone indigenous Pacific Islander who scripted for the film, Māori director Taika Waititi, who wrote the first few drafts of the screenplay—disappeared in the early story development stage. Chief Tui, in another draft possibly by Waititi, was to be the film’s first heroic Polynesian character, positioned as the initial narrative agent who tries to recover his community’s forgotten seafaring tradition as he sails “beyond the reef” to save his subjects from spiritual and ecological destruction, with his daughter following to rescue him.<sup>9</sup> In the final version, Tui became a proud but fearful leader, his agency narratively shrunk into a flashback about launching a failed voyage earlier, his screen time significantly cropped, so that Moana could replace him in this active role.

### **The Colonialistic Three-Act Story Structure**

To force-fit indigenous, minority, and global tales into the procrustean Hollywood three-act structure, screenwriters jam ethnic content into Act I, to briefly “culture-splain” the community subtext to Western moviegoers. This allows scripters to deepen the particular stakes that the protagonist must overcome in the second act, eventually paying off these stakes in the third act. As all writers know, Act II is key. Pulitzer Prize-winning screenwriter, director, and playwright David Mamet explains the peculiar challenge presented by the dramatic structure’s midsection and how some writers adapt: “Either the plot will kick in or the audience will start yawning and eating popcorn. It’s very common in the second act ... for an extraneous element to be interjected” (36). Well-designed Disney cultural scripts, such as that of

*Mulan* (cowritten by Hsiao), do not add this extra element because they organically forge narrative connections between the first and second acts, such that regional dynamics within the protagonist's community (Act I) contextualize her heroic journey (Act II). In her sexist community, Fa Mulan fails to represent her family as an honorable girl during the town marriage-broker's evaluation, then her disabled father falls under threat of military conscription (Act I), so she flees home to join the Chinese imperial army, where she becomes the masculine Ping, who earns the camaraderie of his diverse male peers (Act II).

*Moana*, frankly, exhibits what Mamet calls "second act problems," no doubt the "story problems" the brain trust encountered as late as a year and a half before the theatrical release. The film's central Moana–Maui relationship could have been modeled on a younger-Polynesian-female/older-Polynesian-male dynamic from indigenous Oceanic literatures, or on Polynesian folklore about human interactions with deities. More saliently, it could have drawn from journalistic or cultural records of the deep mentoring relationships between Micronesian navigator Mau Piailug and his many Native Hawaiian disciples, documented in indigenous Oceanic films such as Nā'ālēhu Anthony's *Papa Mau: The Wayfinder* (2010). This second act would then have been artistically interesting, teaching Western viewers more about Disney's fictional Motonui/pan-Polynesian culture. To the filmmakers' credit, this commitment was established in the first act, which illustrates the sustainable society of Motonui, Moana's responsibilities as its future leader, and the community's proud, if secret, history of seafaring.

Instead of extending this effort through Act II, substantially crossing beyond the line of the Disney formula, *Moana's* screenwriters, directors, and producers imported Mamet's extraneous element: relationship dynamics and character types based on genre structures from Hollywood films, chiefly about white protagonists in Western settings. This formal choice to draw from Western source materials, in effect, substantively deculturates the second act. For example, the filmmakers said in press interviews that the Moana–Maui relationship powering Act II's underlying genre of road movie adventure, was modeled on the unorthodox friendship between teenage Mattie Ross (Hailee Steinfeld) and elderly US Marshal Rooster Cogburn (Jeff Bridges) in *True Grit*, the Coen brothers' 2010 adaptation of Charles Portis's 1968 novel. His personality originally based on Cogburn, Maui was first conceived as a "curmudgeon" before the story team turned him comedic to lighten up the tone. Like Mattie, Moana ended up being a spunky fourteen-year-old girl traveling into unknown and dangerous regions of her world with a much older man. *Moana's*

directors structured the fight between Moana and Maui against the kakamora's tiny navy of "murdering little pirates" (tackily coconut-tiki-ized from Solomon Islands spiritual folklore), drawing on the iconic battle sequence from George Miller's 2015 *Mad Max: Fury Road*.<sup>10</sup> Stitching together stories from different genre influences is what Hollywood does, sometimes well. But the sea battle comes across as old-school colonialistic, its racist iconography contradicting Act I's indigenous world-view. When Moana grabs her oar to bat away the Minion-like creatures, mocking them as mere "Coconuts!," viewers might wonder what happened to the cultural respect for that fruit expressed by Motonuians in their Act I village musical montage ("We use each part of the coconut / That's all we need"). Further disrupting the "indigenous" thematic flow from Act I to Act II are *True Grit*'s gendered remnants, adapting Mattie's precociously eloquent speeches to Cogburn into shrilly repetitive dialog reiterated by Moana to Maui. "I am Moana of Motonui!," the girl proclaims, a patronizing characterological bit where she repeatedly reminds the demigod of her mission to retrieve the Heart of Te Fiti and thus save her island.

In other *True Grit* road sequences, the level of dialog is enriched by the two heroes' interactions with middle-aged cotraveler and Mattie's possible love interest, Texas Ranger LaBouef (Matt Damon). LaBouef's interactions with Mattie demonstrate the Coens' problematic romanticizing of Old West gender relations, wherein the rapey, ageist, heteronormative power dynamic—in "comedic" scenes where LaBouef sneaks uninvited into Mattie's bedroom or birches her britches with a branch—might have once passed as cute. In *Moana*, La Bouef has become the nonspeaking Hei Hei, so the genre trace of the male role in this "feisty," heterosexist, gender dynamic is passed to Maui. The ghost of misogynistic abuse of Western men over Western women on the colonial frontier persists throughout *Moana*'s second act, as the demigod keeps throwing the spirited tween into the sea, occasionally grabbing the heroine by the head to move her body. Maui physically handles Moana, or leaves her to die or drown, three or four times in the movie.

Through most of *Moana*'s development, the film's credited story team seemed to lack an indigenous Pacific Islander scriptwriter to contextualize Polynesian female–male relations for the key Moana–Maui dynamic, resulting in a confusing tonal range of artificial shrillness, unintended sexual tension, and manufactured "spunk." After his employment was globally publicized as proof of the film's cultural authenticity (*Korea Times*), screenwriter Waititi left the project to make other films upon submitting the first draft, which the finished film little resembles. The producers did hire, for a more impactful draft, the Kandell brothers,<sup>11</sup> raised in Honolulu

but educated in the elite, US colonial, private preparatory school 'Iolani before attending Hollywood film-school hegemon USC. Like many US residents who grew up in Hawai'i from the 1970s onward, Aaron Kandell was taught something about the contemporary science of Micronesian navigation through community-out-reach efforts of the Polynesian Voyaging Society (PVS), directed by Native Hawaiian navigator Nainoa Thompson. Thompson is recognized in the film's ending credits, but this proves a superficial acknowledgment compared with the more significant historical omission of late Satawalese Master Navigator Pailug, whose indigenous scientific literacy innovated the modern Carolinian navigational system behind the PVS's seafaring trips and whose name appears nowhere in the movie credits.<sup>12</sup> Thompson is one of Pailug's best-known pupils, and the screenwriting twins later sought his expertise on Disney's behalf. For its female–female dynamic, Disney hired American screenwriter Pamela Ribon to craft scenes between Moana and Grandma Tala (Rachel House). With respect to the resultant grandmother–granddaughter arc, Disney cannibalizes earlier “princess” Pocahontas's interactions with talking tree Grandmother Willow, who, like similarly magical Tala, in Act I bequeathes her descendant a pendant and life-changing advice, launching the heroine on a tradition-challenging journey from Act II (*Pocahontas*).

It appears to me that Disney did not include among *Moana's* leadership a Native Oceanic director or screenwriter raised deeply within the complex gender landscapes of a specific Polynesian culture, who might have revised Act II into a regionally truthful segment, wiping away such stock elements. Alongside the Kandells, Ribon, and Clements and Musker, CGI-specialist codirectors Chris Williams and Don Hall received “Story” credit—meaning most significant scripted ideas that survived through to the theatrical cut seem attributed to European American writers. Solo “Screenwriting” recognition for the final script went to Jared Bush who, along with Clements, Musker, Williams, Hall, and WDAS VP of Development Osnat Shurer, falls under the formal acknowledgment of WDAS “Studio” or “Creative” Leadership near the close of the credits. Neither Samoan animator David Derrick Jr., listed at the head of the nonmanagement-level story artists in these credits, nor indigenous Oceanic mediamakers Vilsoni Hereniko (Rotuma) or Dionne Fonoti (Samoa), the film's credited Pacific Islander consultants with actual film production experience, were included among *Moana's* official Leadership ranks. This was surprising, given that Disney's expansive publicity machine had sent Derrick out among Western animation fandom and Fonoti to speak in the US pop-culture blogosphere, to testify ardently about their inclusion in the process and to distinguish Disney's

“respectful” effort from earlier, “abusive” Hollywood portrayals of Polynesians (see, for example, Pa‘ala-Fraser).<sup>13</sup>

This lack of management representation becomes all the more astonishing because established writer-directors Waititi (a respected independent cinema director who went on to direct 2017’s *Thor: Ragnarok* and cocreate, direct, and executive produce FX network’s 2019 *What We Do in the Shadows* series) and Hereniko (a Pacific Islander film director and tenured screenwriting professor at the flagship film school of the University of Hawai‘i system) both had the skill set to author the screenplay officially. Moreover, Disney’s other animated princess films set within global cultures officially credited screenwriters from those communities, who received formal recognition for script authorship alongside Disney’s white writers and directors—for instance, Hsiao for *Mulan*; the African-American Film Critics Association’s Best Screenplay award–winner Rob Edwards for *The Princess and the Frog* (2009); and Adrian Molina, who earned not only the shared screenwriting credit but also a formal codirecting credit for *Coco*.<sup>14</sup> Alongside *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas*, *Lilo and Stitch* (2002), and *Frozen*,<sup>15</sup> *Moana* shares the distinctive status of a Disney animated feature that did not recognize Native, community-based, cultural writing talent at its highest employment level of screenplay and story credit, while the company crafted these films’ scripts ostensibly based on indigenous history, culture, or folklore. The salient distinction between “writer of color” versus “indigenous writer” becomes critical for such films. Disney seems willing to work with Americanized screenwriters of color whose cultural edges have been smoothed by a long corporate employment process (Hsiao, Edwards, and Molina, for instance, were well trained at working within US media firms: see note 14), but appears unwilling to grant power to scriptwriters deeply engaged within and committed to Native, aboriginal, First Peoples, and other indigenous communities.

Reviewers criticizing *Moana* noted that it “doesn’t quite make waves” / “doesn’t break any new ground” (Burger) but did not connect these hackneyed Hollywood genre remnants in the story’s “agreeably bizarre turns” or “empowerment clichés” (Rose) to the shortage of Native authorial representation within WDAS Leadership ranks. An indigenous Oceanic scriptwriter, I believe, would have explored numinous dimensions of the underworld, Lalotai, in a more committed way and better developed Tamatoa, originally conceptualized as Tala’s shallow counterpoint but ultimately reduced into a neon, Bowie-esque caricature, a “slimy crab” rather than the “tough hero” that some Pacific Islanders had expected (Sabrina, qtd. in Varner).<sup>16</sup> In one of the script’s laziest moments, the directors and writers choose a “singing”

fight scene between the two heroes and the monster, rather than demonstrate Moana and Maui's cultural literacy within this spiritual realm by putting them through stumbling blocks that might test their values and ethics. According to Clements and Musker, the conflict between the heroes and this subvillain symbolizes prioritizing "what you are inside" rather than "surface appearance ... what you look like" ("Moana: Ron Clements"); however, Tamatoa's trait of superficiality gets delivered via shorthanded lyrical exposition, in a "blink and miss it" moment. Forgoing characterological conflict or other moving cinematic techniques, the story team makes the crab spell out his core motivation in two quick lines, singing to Moana, "Did your granny say, 'listen to your heart; be who you are on the inside'? I need three words to tear her argument apart: Your granny lied," before launching into an underwater musical montage of the heroic pair physically battling their enemy and deftly outmaneuvering him with a shiny distraction. The replacement of regional forms of Native religiosity with slick action sequences and abbreviated references to vague values—values not even honored through prominently played-out plot points—only further fragments Act II's narrative.

As we close the second decade of the millennium, Hollywood studios and executive producers have come to acknowledge that even the most mainstream market forces now embrace diversity both in front of (stars) and behind (directors, executive producers, writers) the camera. The twentieth-century adage of "diversity doesn't sell" has been disproven as acceptable business sense, as documented through the rousing success of the *Fast and the Furious* action-film series (the eighth highest-grossing franchise in film history (2001–present)—helmed largely by male directors of color (John Singleton, Justin Lin, James Wan, F. Gary Gray) and starring a notably multiracial cast of protagonists)—and of unexpectedly record-breaking superhero fantasy blockbusters such as *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), and *Captain Marvel* (2019), directed or written at least in part by women or by people of color. There are also ratings-affirmed TV network efforts to diversify employment ranks of showrunners, show creators, executive producers, top teleplay writers, and stars of the small screen, such as LGBTQ power producer Ryan Murphy's affirmative action toward racial and gender inclusion among his shows' directors through his Half Foundation and #TimesUp cocreator Shonda Rhimes's diversity hiring practices since the African American TV uber-producer's tenure since the early 2000s in dominating ABC TV's Thursday prime-time lineup. Even Disney itself—tentatively as a first step, but with much PR fanfare—started to recognize this millennial trend when it put together the top creative team behind

its recent mainstream young-adult fantasy film, unusually hiring a black female director (Ava DuVernay) plus a female-cowriter (again Jennifer Lee) for 2018's *A Wrinkle in Time*.

### **Two Story Trusts in Unequal Labor Relations and Indigenous IP Extraction**

*Moana's* central riddle is how this bumpy second act came to be, given the avalanche of entertainment media reports on how the filmmakers tried to “respect the people and the heritage of the South Pacific” (Sciretta, “How Disney Formed”), industry buzz fostered by the Disney PR machine during the movie’s marketing and exhibition phases. Publicity highlighted the “Oceanic Story Trust” (OST) of Pacific Islander consultants (J. Robinson, “How Pacific Islanders”)—indigenous fishermen, historians, scholars, tattoo artists, linguists, elders, anthropologists, archaeologists, navigators, and other craft/cultural practitioners from the region—whose advice was said to have been sought frequently throughout development and production stages, regarding technical, artistic, and story content, through several trips the filmmakers made across the Pacific. Did the OST sign off on the movie’s second act—to what degree did its members, allegedly consulted on story beats and cultural details, wield the workplace authority to veto or protest its content? Key to this puzzle: why were there, in fact, two separate story teams (or “trusts”) for *Moana*: the “Disney Story Trust” and the OST (Giroux)? The former was the corporate story team of the film’s powerful (overwhelmingly white American male) screenwriters, directors, and producers, who led the collaborative “story room” of key artistic managers and production supervisors—a new-ish management strategy transported into Walt Disney Animation Studios from Pixar’s groundbreaking, workflow-organizational practice after the companies merged in 2006 and Disney executives put Pixar leadership in charge of restoring WDAS’s failing animation business (Catmull; Barnes; DeBruge; “Magic Restored”). This Disney story team helped the directors make major artistic decisions, such as keeping the rooster, with members contributing ideas so the whole team could discuss their merits, a somewhat collaborative practice said to loosen corporate hierarchies.

Then there the Native Pacific members of the OST, said to have provided feedback to the first group’s storytelling choices but vulnerably hired far away from the

WDAS as contract workers without specific job titles outside of “consultants,” a common, creative industry practice of global media industry that decredentializes workers by separating them from specific labor contributions. This “film that was inspired by the Pacific but not crewed predominately by Pacific people” in the words of OST member Fonoti (“Interview”), set up labor conditions wherein Pacific Islanders “in a small but significant way, contributed to it”; however, exactly how much power this Oceanic “trust” exerted over the final film—the product of five years of their consulting work—remains unclear. Conditions of OST members’ fees were likely bound by nondisclosure agreements, which restrict sharing information on this experience publicly and colonially censor very necessary dialogue with the members’ ethnic communities.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, OST members’ employment conditions were likely constricted by release-of-rights contracts, which could effectively legitimize the stealing of cultural traditions as corporate intellectual property (such as those I suspect were challenged by Fijian traditional ocean engineering consultants who publicly demanded more compensation from Disney). Such contracts could mirror the company’s IP-extraction tactics for *Lilo and Stitch* (2002), whether copyrighting music adapted from beloved performance folklore (as Disney had done for two *mele inoa* or poetic songs, originally invented by Hawaiian rulers King Kalākaua and Queen Lili’uokalani for their subjects, adapting them for that film’s transmedial commercial musical track) or the aggressive, catchphrase branding of cherished Native Hawaiian concept “ohana” in its retail and service industry sectors that market “Lilo and Stitch” products and services.

As a lifestyle giant, Disney did not just create a “proto-Polynesian” language for the film (Genegabus) but also transmedially invented fake Native folklore for the Motonui story world. For example, Disney’s corporate children’s book authors, such as Kari Sutherland, mostly nonindigenous or non-Pacific Islanders, write various “the tale/s of”-type myths and legends of Motonui, marketed to middle-school readers at Target and other upscale retail outlets oriented toward professional-class Western families, indistinguishably weaving this faux culture together with real (if simplified) Pacific Islander concepts and practices after informational extraction from various indigenous communities. To do so, Disney draws heavily on the knowledge labor of indigenous people, disingenuously expropriating cultural elements from that spiritual and genealogical work. For example, “Motonui” temporary tattoos, the end result of Disney animators consulting with sixth-generation Samoan tatau artist Su’a Peter Sulu’ape, are included as marketing “extras” within most *Moana* children’s books and showcased in related media, adding exchange value

to Disney's retail prices.<sup>18</sup> Like Pailug, Sulu'ape connects genealogically to deep intergenerational traditions and trained in his craft for decades (*Papa Mau*; "Su'a Peter Sulu'ape")—before the fantasy company extracted, Disneyfied, and then copyrighted and monetized his cultural practitioner knowledge. By marketing these fauxloric products for profit—without additionally compensating the original navigators, boatmakers, tattoo artists, linguists, storytellers, scholars, visual artists, and other Native Pacific people who guided the company in its "voyage" and without sharing expressive control over these items with the people whose communities will be powerfully affected by such transmedial images—Disney crosses the ethical line from respectful to dishonorable.

While cultural appropriation is an individual act, as its practitioners steal and warp indigenous tales, tropes, and iconographies within the cultural landscape in colonialist and racist ways, such symbolic expropriation is tied to financial, legal, and other hegemonic political-economic institutional mechanisms of empire, such as labor practices, copyright laws, court decisions, production relations, and stratified employment structures. When a corporation expands its symbolic expropriation, as Disney currently tries to do, cultural appropriation becomes the order of the day, in what Marxists would call the historical shift from the formal to the real subsumption of community storytelling work.

For globalization researchers, this transnational extraction of overseas cultural and spiritual labor into new transmedia products for First World profit might seem like the latest stage in unequal, *maquiladora*-type operations across the Global South begun in the "post"-colonial twentieth century. Scholars of global capital might point out that Disney's mutually beneficial, long-term economic partnerships have not been with indigenous communities, but with antienvironmental corporations such as Monsanto and Coca-Cola, notorious for polluting natural resources and the water supply.<sup>19</sup> For these critics, and for Native Pacific activists who speak against Disney's transmedial production of polyester/plastic Maui and Moana toys that threaten to poison their ancestor, the real Pacific Ocean (Ngata), *Moana* is not simply a romantic fantasy film. Its cinematic storytelling via the tortured script development process represents just one stage of knowledge expropriation. Disney's hiring and IP practices seem to reflect careful calculations of how to benefit from a global division of labor: specifically, the knowledge economy's endless factory of mass-designed, fantasy-narrative production. And who knows how far that'll go.

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### ■ NOTES

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1. The Disney team of core artistic and business employees who made *Moana* has been alternately referred to in media coverage as the "story team," "brain trust," or "Disney Story Trust." Writer Waititi calls it a "big story room" that collaboratively sketched the basic plot outline (qtd. in Madison).
2. As transmedia examples, see Disney's "Moana Costume Wig"; also, *Moana* producer Osnat Shurer talks of her Israeli niece wearing her Moana costume before attending school in Israel, a militarized settler colony that occupies Palestinian ancestral land. "She's got big black curly hair and looks just like her [Moana]," Shurer says of her niece (qtd. in Taylor, "The Director and Producer"), equating a member of a powerful settler-colonial group with indigenous Oceanic peoples of Polynesia who continue to struggle against colonization's historical effects. For some Pacific Islander "Polyface" criticisms, see the Associated Press ("Disney Pulls Costume") and Romano.
3. See critical statements by indigenous Oceanic individuals (Diaz, "Disney Craps" and "Don't Swallow"; Ka'ili; Kelly; Ngata, qtd. in Kolhathkar; Teaiwa) and social media posts and educational events by indigenous and ally organizations such as

Mana Moana and the Association of Social Anthropology of Oceania (“Disney’s *Moana* Film”). Transindigenous media organizing by diverse Oceanic peoples resulted in some well-researched news articles that overviewed representational issues from a Native perspective; see Constante.

4. For a typically gushing review by an American film critic of color, see CNN’s Yang.
5. Generally positive, albeit complex and critical, analyses by indigenous Oceanic writers include op-ed pieces by Pohnpeian Kihleng and Native Hawaiian Parker.
6. In terms of institutional reception, scholars such as Sperb and Roetman have documented Disney’s racist and anti-indigenous history of cinematic representation, while some media bloggers and journalists recall this corporate ideological pattern or update its transmedial history (see Broadbent; Casley; Rao; Young).
7. Examples of recent journalistic and scholarly analyses include Mellino on climate change in Tuvalu; Letman on the militarization of Guam; Gilman on brain drain in Samoa; Aguon on nuclear test effects across Micronesia; and Schertow on pan-Pacific neoliberalist policy making.
8. In its transmedial marketing for *Coco*, Disney notoriously filed a trademark application for the folkloric expression “Día de los muertos” (Day of the Dead), attempting to copyright this phrase widely associated with diverse indigenous, Iberian, and regional spiritual traditions, later withdrawing the application after social media resistance by Latinx activists (Ellison).
9. The script changes in this section are described in Giardina; Giroux; Taylor, “The Director and Producer”; Sciretta, “Moana’ Directors Talk”; Topel; and Waititi, qtd. in Madison.
10. For the film’s “story problems” and its directors’ *True Grit* influences, see Topel; for the adaptations of Cogburn and Mattie into Maui and Moana, see Hill; for Solomon Islands’ kakamora folklore, see Scott; for *Mad Max: Fury Road* influences, see Sciretta (“Moana’ Directors Talk”) and M. Robinson.
11. On Waititi’s work, see Taylor, “The Director and Producer” and Sciretta, “Moana’ Directors Talk” Waititi has joked that the only part of his script remaining in *Moana*’s finished screenplay are the words “EXT.: OCEAN—DAY” (Hunt). On the Kandell brothers and their relationship with Thompson of the PVS, see Billy V.; H. Chang; and Genegabus.
12. I am indebted to Carolinian-Filipino Diaz’s presentations on *Moana*’s misattribution of scientific discoveries that stemmed from twentieth-century Micronesia rather than “premodern” Polynesia (“No Wanna Moana”; “Decolonizing

the Disneyfication”). Diaz criticizes Disney for erasing indigenous scientific techniques within the film’s wayfinding account that depicts Moana’s relationship with the sea as mystical, primitive, and romantic, rather than pragmatic, scientific, and innovative. Piailug’s interviews and journalistic documents on the PVS crew indicate how the Micronesian seafaring expert helped Hawaiians scientifically recover Polynesian ocean navigation techniques (Brown; @TASASeafaring).

13. For Ribon’s contributions, see “Moana: Ron Clements and John Musker.” Shurer is formally credited as the film’s producer, but in publicity interviews, her title is the Walt Disney Animation Studios’ VP of Development (Hill), suggesting that she oversaw the general story development process, including connecting the Disney story team with work-for-hire scriptwriters, Oceanic Story Trust consultants, and little-recognized film workers whose labor helped shape the movie’s overall narrative. For Derrick and Fonoti’s film publicity “tours,” see Hunt; Stefansky; Pa’ala-Fraser; Terry; and Toto.
14. Writers of color Edwards and Molina have separately mentioned steeping themselves in Disney storytelling conventions to prepare for writing their scripts (Kuegler; J. Robinson, “The Surprising Influences”). I evaluate this as an auto-homogenization process of cultural-assimilationist authorship, survival writing skills for a workplace audience of overwhelmingly white bosses and colleagues. Hsiao, who has not spoken publicly of her experience in coauthoring *Mulan*, also enjoys the status of a longtime corporate film worker whose screenplay credits include *Toy Story 2* (1999), *My Little Pony: The Movie* (2017), and *Disenchanted*, Disney’s 2018 sequel to *Enchanted* (“Rita Hsiao”).
15. *Frozen* has been criticized for whitewashed cultural misrepresentation of the indigenous Sámi peoples and appropriation of Sámi spirituality by Lee and her codirector Chris Buck (see Ussir and Twenty-One).
16. The “slimy crab” and “tough hero” comments about being disappointed by Tamatoa’s portrayal comes from moviegoer Sabrina, who self-identifies as “Native Tahitian, European, and Chinese” (Varner).
17. In a review forum on the film in the *Contemporary Pacific*, Hereniko notes that Disney did not listen to OST members regarding Maui’s portrayal (Tamaira et al.). For Fonoti’s perspective, see “An Interview with Dionne Fonoti.” For Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian satire of the NDAs purportedly signed by the OST, see Perez.
18. For more on the Fijian boatmakers’ suit against Disney, see Amidi; for more on Disney’s copyrighting of its animated hula adapted from that originally written by

Hawaiian royalty, see Wallace. See also Hot Topic's licensed Lilo and Stitch product line, including clothing, jewelry, accessories, toiletries, and home goods ("Lilo and Stitch Merchandise") and the Disney Polynesian Village Resort's 'Ohana restaurant ("Ohana"), for monetizing the indigenous Hawaiian concept 'ohana. For Disney's "Pacific" cultural publishing for young readers based on the *Moana* storyverse, including books with transmedial "Motonui" tattoos, see Scollon and Sutherland. For more on Sulu'ape's consultation, see McCormick and "Su'a Peter Sulu'ape." RH/Disney's preschooler-targeting *Moana* tie-in book, *Where Monsters Live*, sports a cover boasting "Over 30 tattoos!"

19. For an example of Disney's long history with Monsanto, see Pierce. For its relationship with Coca-Cola, see as examples JDenny's photos from the fauxloric Indian "village" section of Disney Animal Kingdom that conceals Coke branding in plain, albeit "ethnic" sight, and also "Coca-Cola Store."

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