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# Indigenously Doing Disney

## How the House of Mouse portrays indigenous populations

Soyoung Kim[1]
Hankuk University of Foreign Studies
ssoyoung710@naver.com

Christian James Gregory[2]
Stockholm University
chrisgreg87@msn.com

**Abstract**: In its hundred-year history, the Walt Disney Company has created multiple projects featuring characters from various minorities and indigenous groups. The purpose of this essay is to examine the later films of Walt Disney Animation Studios, beginning in the often-dubbed "Disney Renaissance" with *Pocahontas* and concluding with *Frozen II*, and analyze the portrayal of the native groups being featured within the narrative. Beyond this, the secondary aim of this paper is to determine whether or not any significant development has been made in said depictions in the studio's projects, both as it pertains to narrative and visual representation, as well as reception from audience members, critics, and community leaders of said ethnic groups. Beyond the analysis of the chosen films and their reception, this essay will touch upon the potential conflicts which may arise when potentially vulnerable or traditionally ignored aboriginal groups see their culture commodified by corporations such as Disney. The findings of this essay are that while Walt Disney Animation Studios still struggles with representation and commercialization of indigenous groups, the company has evidently made efforts to respond to criticism, and

**1** Corresponding author
**2** First author

increase its cooperation with aboriginal populations when developing feature film projects. For the most recent example, while the company's immensely successful *Frozen* utilizes multiple facets of Sámi culture, it does not directly feature any characters of Sámi origin. For the sequel, however, the company made efforts to work with indigenous groups to ensure a more favorable representation, resulting in largely positive reception from Sámi audiences. Whilst there are still problematic elements present, and the company's commitment to fair, accurate representation is likely motivated more by financial incentive than anything else, some progress has undoubtedly been made.

**Keywords**: Disney, animation, cultural sensitivity, indigenous studies, cinema studies

**논문초록**: 지난 100년간 월트 디즈니 컴퍼니는 다양한 토착·소수민족이 등장하는 작품을 출시하였다. '디즈니 르네상스' 시기 작품인 '포카혼타스'부터 '겨울왕국 2'까지 이어지는 월트 디즈니 애니메이션 스튜디오의 후기 작품을 살펴보면서 극중 토착민이 어떻게 묘사되는지 살펴보는 것이 본고의 목표이다. 또한 지금까지 디즈니 작품에서 이러한 서사적·시각적 재현에 유의미한 발전이 있었는지 살펴보는 것이 본고의 이차적인 목표라 하겠다. 본고에서는 대상 작품과 그에 대한 세간의 평을 먼저 분석하였고, 이후 취약계층이자 소외집단인 토착민족이 스스로의 문화가 디즈니와 같은 대기업에 의해 상품화 당하는 모습을 지켜보면서 발생하는 문제점들에 대해서도 고찰하였다. 분석 결과 월트 디즈니 애니메이션 스튜디오는 여전히 토착문화의 재현·상품화에서 부족한 점은 있으나 비판을 수용하고 영화 제작 과정에서 토착민족의 의견을 반영하기 위해 공을 들였다고 할 수 있겠다. 가장 최근 예를 살펴보면 성공작이었던 '겨울왕국'은 사미 문화의 여러가지 요소를 차용하면서도 극중에 실제로 등장하는 사미인 등장인물은 한 명도 없었는데, 후속작에서는 토착민과 협력을 통해 이들이 보다 긍정적으로 재현되도록 하였고 이 덕분에 사미 관람객의 호응을 이끌어냈다. 여전히 문제 삼을만한 점이 있고 디즈니는 금전적 이익을 목적으로 토착문화를 정확하게 재현하기 위해 노력하는 것이겠지만 분명 진전이 있었음은 사실이다.

**핵심어**: 디즈니, 애니메이션, 문화적 감수성, 토착민족 연구, 영화 연구

## 1. Background

The Walt Disney Company has always had a complicated relationship with ethnicity, nationality, and identity politics. Walt Disney strived to create for

himself the image of a man who was essentially an extended family member of every child in America. However, Disney's ambition to extend this role into a more international image was never a secret. From his very first feature length film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Hand, 1937b), the tales Walt Disney Animation Studios chose to adapt were based on stories from other cultures.

Not limited just to the films and shorts created by the studio, Disney's international ambitions extended into his other ventures. In Disney-parks in California, Florida, Tokyo, Paris, and Hong Kong, one of the staple rides is the "It's a Small World" ride, which features the song of the same name, itself a prominent part of the Disney company's musical legacy and also a reminder of the company's eventual hegemonic reach across national boundaries.

Disney as a businessman and as an artist undoubtedly understood that in order for his company to continue its expansion and reach new audiences (and to keep the existing audience engaged), the company needed to continue telling stories which featured exotic locations and characters. By the time of Walt Disney's death in 1966, the studio had however been reluctant to delve too far into non-Anglo-European-based stories. With the exception of the two anthology films *Saludos Amigos* (Ferguson et al., 1943) and *The Three Caballeros* (Ferguson, 1944), the narratives of the Disney Animation Studio rarely strayed from a Eurocentric lens.

However, the last film produced at the studio before Disney's death was *The Jungle Book* (Reitherman, 1967), which despite being adapted from renowned Orientalist/Imperialist Rudyard Kipling, was still a step toward greater ethnic inclusion in the studio's filmography. But it would not be until the 1990's and the beginning of the popularly coined "Disney Renaissance" that the true commodification of world cultures would be instigated in earnest. Of the ten theatrically released films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios throughout the decade, six of the ten were set outside of North America or Europe.[3] Furthermore, while the protagonists of these films remained primarily either ethnically Eurocentric such as in the case of *The Rescuers Down Under* (Butoy & Gabriel, 1990) and *Tarzan* (Lima & Buck, 1999) or coded Anglo-European such as in *The Lion King* (Allers & Minkoff, 1994), three of the films had more ethnically diverse settings and protagonists.

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3 The anthology musical film *Fantasia 2000* (Hahn et al., 1999) is an outlier as it is not a traditional narrative film, but a collection of short films set to classical music.

While *Aladdin* (Musker & Clements, 1992) and *Mulan* (Cook & Bancroft, 1998) were set in Asia, repackaging local stories for a world audience, the third film, *Pocahontas* (Gabriel & Goldberg, 1995), was set in North America during the time of the original thirteen colonies.

Whenever Disney chooses to commodify another culture for use in their highly corporatized productions, it will inevitably result in discussions of the ethics of the practice as well as whether or not it can be considered cultural appropriation and insensitive. With *Pocahontas*, it is unlikely that even Disney was prepared for the amount of criticism and public discourse the film would incite.

Any adaptation of historical events will of course require some level of alteration or embellishment in the dramatization process. However, unlike with *Mulan* and *Aladdin*, which originated in longstanding parts of their respective culture's narrative canons, *Pocahontas* was a direct historical repackaging and purportedly tells the story of an actual event from American history: the meeting between the early European settlers of Jamestown and the Native Powhatan tribe.[4]

This gave *Pocahontas* a unique criticizability among Disney's output during the decade, as it was not only based on an undeniably real person, Powhatan princess Matoaka (Pocahontas was only a childhood nickname), but also due to how it portrayed the monstrous eradication of the Native Americans and their culture, which occurred as a result of the pilgrims landing on the continent. Not only was the film's dedication to historical accuracy considered lacking, even at the time, but Disney's inevitable excessive merchandizing of the film and the "princessification" of its protagonist was criticized (Ono & Buescher, 2001, p. 24); the film became the most problematic example of Disney commodifying real cultures and victims of European colonization into its exponentially expanding hegemonic corporate megastructure.

While this did not deter the Walt Disney Company from continuing their expansion into more diverse storytelling locations and choice of protagonists, there have been only a handful of narratives centering on indigenous groups since the release of *Pocahontas*.

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**4** This is however by no means an indication that these films are free from criticism. Both have been criticized for their depiction of their ethnic groups as well as the melding of different cultures in order to present a more exotic world which suits the narrative they are attempting to tell.

The purpose of this essay is to, through chronological, comparative textual analysis of the films *Pocahontas*, *The Emperor's New Groove* (Dindal, 2000), *Lilo & Stitch* (Sanders & DeBlois, 2002), *Brother Bear* (Blaise & Walker, 2003), *Moana* (Musker & Clements, 2016), and *Frozen II* (Buck & Lee, 2019), examine the evolution of portrayals of indigenous groups throughout the past decades within the works of Walt Disney Animation Studios. To accomplish this, the essay will begin with a detailed examination of *Pocahontas*, as it is what we will consider the most prominent and problematic example of indigenous peoples up until that point in time. This will be followed with a section which briefly examines *The Emperor's New Groove*, *Lilo & Stitch, Brother Bear* and *Moana*. These films are relevant, but for brevity's sake, as well as due to other creative decisions, they do not warrant the same level of examination as *Pocahontas*.

The final section before the conclusion will be focused on the most recent film the studio has produced as of this writing that features indigenous groups—*Frozen II*—to attempt to introduce any potential changes which may have been made to how the studio portrays aboriginal groups. When available aspects such as people and groups consulted during the filmmaking process may be referenced. Due to the highly commercialized nature of Disney-productions, concerns such as cultural appropriation and commodification and financial interests in negative portrayals will be taken into account as well.

Also, it is vital to acknowledge the unequivocal truth as pointed out by cultural theorist John Storey that there is only one "race" when discussing issues of racism and ethnic theories; and that is the *human race* (Storey, 2021, p. 187). Notions of racial division and ethnic division are *constructed*, and as Storey writes "[it] is important to understand that 'race' and racism are not natural or inevitable phenomena; they have a history and are the result of human actions and interactions" (Storey, 2021, p. 187).

Due to this, it is also worth noting that the approach to the mentioned works in this essay is with the assumption that the filmmakers' intentions were not malicious, but merely due to ignorance and/or due to the standards of the era. However, this does not equate to there being a blanket defense that any form of hurtful portrayal or case of potential cultural appropriation should be as scholar Andy Hamilton argues, safe from harsh criticism in the name of artistic freedom (Hamilton, 2022, p. 1).

Note that plot points or specific elements featured in direct-to-DVD-

sequels made by DisneyToon studios or TV-continuations are not be considered for this essay as they are not produced by the same studio or with the same creators in charge.

## 2. Aboriginal Representation in the Disney Renaissance and Beyond

### 2.1 *Pocahontas* (1995)

**Illustration 1: *Pocahontas* (1995)**

Before *Pocahontas*, the most notable representation of Native Americans in Disney's animated projects were the *Silly Symphonies*-short *Little Hiawatha* (Hand, 1937a) and *Peter Pan* (Geronimi et al., 1953). Both of which utilize stereotypical elements of Native American portrayals (tomahawks, hollering and verbally challenged characters, etc.), to exoticize and infantilize Native Americans. The latter of which explicitly hints at these perceived native aspects being not only inferior to the ways of the British protagonists, but also to possess a corrupting element which threatens to infantilize our young heroes. As summarized by the corporation itself:

"The film portrays Native people in a stereotypical manner that reflects neither the diversity of Native peoples nor their authentic cultural traditions. It shows them speaking in an unintelligible language and repeatedly refers

to them as "redskins", an offensive term. Peter and the Lost Boys engage in dancing, wearing headdresses and other exaggerated tropes, a form of mockery and appropriation of Native peoples' culture and imagery" (The Walt Disney Company, 2022).

Cultural appropriation, as an academic term, is at its core a neutral term. Whether it is harmful is something which must be decided on a case-by-case basis depending on the work being evaluated. It is also a never-ending evaluation as standards and culture change and evolve. With this in mind it becomes clear that narratives dealing with the colonization of the Americas, especially as it pertains to the near eradication of Native American tribes and culture, should be very cautiously approached, especially when considering examples such as those mentioned above.

In fact, while one can (and should) question the ethics of retelling and altering historical stories for commercial gain, no company should be as aware of the need to exercise more caution in any attempt to do so than Disney. The Walt Disney Company arguably created the modern day cross-promotional landscape we now commonly associate with the Hollywood blockbuster. Any film made by Disney intended for mass market consumption will undoubtedly see a wide campaign of merchandizing and tie-ins. And in doing so, the barriers between art and commerce as well as between fiction and reality are obliterated.

There are certainly elements worth criticizing as it pertains to the creation of cultural works with the clear forethought that the work is meant to sell other products, but what is unique about *Pocahontas* in the Disney Animation Studios canon is that it co-opts a real-life tragedy and historical figure to do so. John Storey writes of commodification that it "devalues 'authentic' culture, making it too accessible by turning it into yet another saleable commodity", a statement which can certainly be applied and expanded onto *Pocahontas* by substituting "culture" for "history" (Storey, 2021, p. 66).

Author and media critic Lindsay Ellis assess the film as such: "*Pocahontas* is basically peak 90's neoliberalism. It has all the required merchandisable Disney-things", while showing a montage of commercial clips for products such as chocolate, dolls and ice cream (Ellis, 2017). The neoliberal commercialization of the film not only conveys a whitewashed, sanitized retelling of actual historical events, partially through the addition of a love story which never could have taken place (Matoaka was a child when John Smith

and the settlers arrived), but also essentially puts a direct price on the suffering of the native tribes through merchandise and ticket sales. "How much is the Powhatan tribe's suffering worth in 1995? Well, about $6 plus tax and whatever you choose to buy from the concession stand!" you can imagine a too-honest studio official say with a spring in his step in the summer of 1995.

Furthermore, this commodification can also prove that the company and its producers prioritized spectacle and entertainment over factual, historical representation. "We're attempting to keep the history as accurate as we can and be entertaining at the same time", producer James Pentecost was cited as saying of the production, affirming these intentions (Paust, 1993). Yes, some audience members may assimilate accurate historical information while viewing the film, but with such a clear prioritization of entertainment over dedication to accuracy, they will have no way to separate fact from fiction.

The background of how *Pocahontas* found its way to the silver screen is in some ways more important and interesting than the finished product itself. Then-studio chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg positioned *Pocahontas* as a film which he hoped would repeat the success of *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale & Wise, 1991) at the Academy Awards (Hill, 2001). In other words, to Katzenberg, the actual story of a Powhatan woman who was eventually abducted and taken to Europe only to die of disease at the young age of 21 was equally commercially viable and ethically exploitable as an 18th century French fairytale.

John Storey writes when discussing the legacy of slavery that "slavery and the slave trade were of economic benefit to many people not directly involved with its practice, the new ideology of racism spread quickly among those without direct economic interest in slavery and the slave trade" (Storey, 2021, p. 190). This statement is equally true of how indigenous populations are often viewed and portrayed by those who indirectly benefited from their suffering. Katzenberg knew, much as the people behind films such as *Dances with Wolves* (Costner, 1990) and *A Man Called Horse* (Silverstein, 1970) that the (predominantly white) intended audience of *Pocahontas* was not going to pay to see a film which forces them to re-examine their own position in the history of oppression and expulsion of the native American tribes. So, rather than doing so and risk of a loss of profits, they provided a comforting alternate history in which the audience can identify with the heroic European protagonist while feeling a detached sense of loathing toward the hostile, racist antagonists.

In *Pocahontas*, the film presents a "both-sides-are-right-and-both-sides-are-wrong"-narrative, which becomes paradoxical when one takes said stance out of the isolated environment presented in the film and places it in a greater historical perspective. One simply cannot ethically claim that "both sides" are equally complicit in the conflict when the European settlers eradicated 90% of the native population of North America by the beginning of the 1900's (Woodward, 2019). A similar situation was written about by author James Baldwin regarding the film *The Defiant Ones* (Kramer, 1958), in which a black man sacrifices his freedom in order to stay with his fellow-prison-fugitive, who is white. "[The black man] jumps off the train, in order to reassure white people, to make them know that they are not hated. That though they have made human errors, they have done nothing for which to be hated" (Baldwin, 1976, p. 67). The two men are supposed to be equals in the hatred of each other and through this they eventually come together, and the black man would rather be caught in solidarity than leave the white man to face prison alone. This despite the circumstances which led to the black man's arrest in the first place being a corrupt system which unfairly targets black people for incarceration. The two are not, and can never *be*, equals.

Scholar Andy Hamilton's stance on cultural appropriation is that while it is by no means an open-and-shut case, its labeling can be seen as a threat to liberal freedoms of artistic expression (Hamilton, 2022, p. 1). However, another aspect which is certainly worth mentioning as it pertains to Disney's utilization of historically exploited cultures, is that in a globalized world, said appropriation risks creating a hegemonic hodgepodge which Storey explains as being both "commercial" and "authentic" as well as "local" and "global" (Storey, 2021, p. 230). In other words, in making a historical character such as Pocahontas a part of the "Disney-brand", the company is not merely commercializing a historic tragedy, but they are also obscuring historic truth and muddying the waters for millions of viewers of what *actual* Powhatan culture is and who princess Matoaka was. This fact is not lost on animator Glen Keane, who admitted that he knew that "the Disney version becomes the definite version" (Gleiberman, 1995).

## 2.2 The Renaissance and Beyond: *The Emperor's New Groove*, *Lilo & Stitch*, *Brother Bear*, and *Moana*

**Illustration 2: *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000)**

The relatively tepid response to *Pocahontas*, along with its failure to receive the much-desired Academy Award nomination, undoubtedly impacted how Disney opted to utilize native characters in their narrative features moving forward.[5] After the failure of *Pocahontas*, the first film to center on Indigenous peoples of the Americas; *The Emperor's New Groove* was vastly retooled from what the project's initial intended director Roger Allers has described as "an 'epic' picture mixing elements of adventure, comedy, romance and mysticism", into a "a simple slapstick comedy" (Fiamma, 2014). The film barely utilizes its Inca-inspired location as anything other than set-dressing. Lindsay Ellis summarizes the film as having "almost no relation to the culture it takes place in", and asserts that the film is "so thoroughly divorced from the culture it takes place in that the appropriation discussion rarely even pops up in relation to this movie" (Ellis, 2017).

This lack of "spirituality" or focus on the Inca culture beyond as serving as set dressing is most likely a direct reaction to *Pocahontas*'s underperformance. "He was also uncomfortable with the spiritual and cultural (Inca) aspects of it," Roger Allers said of studio head Jeffrey

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**5** Ironically, *The Lion King*, which Katzenberg allegedly viewed as less prestigious than *Pocahontas*, while not managing to receive a Best Picture nomination, DID win the Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture—Musical or Comedy. It also vastly outperformed *Pocahontas* at both the domestic and international box office.

Katzenberg's thoughts on *Kingdom of the Sun* (the film's original title). This is in spite of Katzenberg actively attempting to lean into that type of imagery and cultural authenticity with *Pocahontas*.

**Illustration 3: *Lilo & Stitch* (2002)**

This "shallow" use of indigenous locales and protagonists would remain for the next few films. *Lilo & Stitch*, the story of a native Hawaiian girl who befriends a blue alien, is the only film until *Frozen II* which even hints at the problematic nature of colonialization and America's hegemonic assimilation of Pacific Ocean territories specifically. Lilo and her older sister Nani struggle to stay together as an agent of Child Protective Services (CPS) is sent to judge whether Nani is able to provide for her little sister.

While the film leaves most of its direct references to the problematic history the native Hawaiians have with the American settlers of the islands, it is still the only film dealing with indigenous people which as much as dares take place in contemporary times. It is also a film where, although it features alien bounty hunters attempting to recapture Stitch as more traditional antagonists, arguably positions CPS, a US government agency, as its *actual* antagonist. The state which colonizes the islands and has torn massive holes in Hawai'i's culture, is in *Lilo & Stitch* literally threatening to tear a family apart.

*Lilo & Stitch*'s most direct textual commentary of American colonization is left to its music. The film's introductory musical piece is the song *He Mele No Lilo*, a tribute to King Kalakaua and Queen Lili'uokalani, the last two monarchs of Hawai'i. The song is performed entirely in Hawaiian, meaning

that the true meaning of the song will be lost on the vast majority of the audience of the film.

This connection to the "loss of kingdom" is further emphasized in a scene later in the film where Nani and Lilo are set to be separated by CPS, Lani sings *Aloha ʻOe* to Lilo. The song, arguably the most famous Hawaiian song in the world, was written by Liliʻuokalani and translates to "Farewell to Thee" in English. As observed by Lindsay Ellis: "Nani is using one of the most iconic cultural songs of Hawaiʻi to symbolize what is literally about to happen to her: her family is about to be ripped apart by a literal agent of the United States government." She goes on to describe the film's use of subtlety and deliberate commentary as "radical" for the company. (Ellis, 2017). However, no matter how well-intentioned and progressive the film may be, there are still elements of appropriation present both within and surrounding the film as well. *Lilo & Stitch* was made by predominantly white filmmakers from the very country that annexed Hawaiʻi and even if they were well-intentioned and went as far as to cast actors of Hawaiian descent and work with said performers to make their dialogue more authentic, they still utilize a deeply complex and, to many native Hawaiians, hurtful history for financial gain. This, more than anything, is what makes it a deeply individual interpretation whether or not the ends justify the means with all of these films.

**Illustration 4: *Brother Bear* (2003)**

When viewing *Brother Bear*, vastly different similarities to *The Emperor's New Groove* and *Pocahontas* make themselves known. Much like *Pocahontas*, the film centers on the indigenous people of North America, but in this case the Inuit of Alaska. However, in a bizarre similarity to *The Emperor's New Groove*, the film's plot involves the protagonist Kenai being turned into a bear by the spirits of his ancestors after an incident where he seeks revenge for his brother's death at the hands of a bear (Kuzco, the titular emperor in *The Emperor's New Groove* was turned into a Llama in that film).[6]

*Brother Bear* is seemingly slightly more interested in actually portraying the culture and traditions of the Native Alaskans than *The Emperor's New Groove* was the Incas, but not by much. Helaine Silverman writes of *Emperor* that "I would suggest that it is ethically easier for Disney to profit from Peru's archeological patrimony by not naming the model for the film's mythical empire," as it allows Disney to have plausible deniability if every criticism is levelled against their creative decisions (Silverman, 2002, p. 313). The same claim could include the creative decision which turned the protagonists into animals.

By dehumanizing the protagonists (and sending them out on fetch-quests to find a cure), Disney protects itself from any seeming obligation to acknowledge more complex and serious elements of their chosen location's history. After all, how much offense can you make when your main character spends the majority of the runtime meandering through the forest with a bear cub and two annoying Canadian-coded moose? And while some have commended the film's use of elements such as musical ceremonies, animal totems, and shamanistic influences, even these elements reveal a continued priority of superficiality over actual historical accuracy (Schroeder, 2013, p. 2).

One need not look further than the music for confirmation of this: while *Lilo & Stitch*'s native language lyrics reveal a hidden depth and meaning to the film, in *Brother Bear* it instead obscures shortcuts and inaccuracies. The musical piece *Transformation*, for instance, which plays when Kenai is transformed into a bear, uses Inupiaq lyrics, but is sung by The Bulgarian Women's Choir in a style of music meant to invoke a feeling of spirituality and authenticity rather than accurately represent the original song (Sideways,

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**6** This also happens in *The Princess and the Frog* (Musker & Clements, 2009), Disney's long-anticipated fairytale adaptation, starring an African American princess. This means that the studio has done this three times with non-Anglo-European protagonists in the span of this paper's focus.

2017).

With *Brother Bear*, the studio clearly attempted to avoid the greater criticisms *Pocahontas* received, and considering how much less academic work there seemingly is on the film than on its 1995 forebearer, it would seem that Disney in one way or another succeeded. However, limiting the actual representation of the chosen culture (both by having the majority of the film take place in the woods and by having the main character spend the film as a bear), does not equate to less problematic commodification of the aboriginal group in question.

**Illustration 5: *Moana* (2016)**

Lindsay Ellis, when discussing the parallels between *Moana* and *Pocahontas* goes as far as jokingly referring to it as a "stealth remake" (Ellis, 2017). The film which centers on the titular Moana, takes place in an unnamed Pacific Island nation and sees the young princess of the island set out across the ocean in order to find out why the fish around their island are disappearing.

As Ellis observes, the similarities between *Moana* and *Pocahontas* are many, in theory. A female protagonist who has a strong bond with nature (and water in particular), with a supportive grandmother figure and two animal sidekicks meets a man who will help her solve the conflict and, in the process,

resolve tensions between her and her domineering father. However, where *Pocahontas* embellished and altered historical facts for its historical romance, *Moana* instead invents.

The initial screenplay was written by New Zealand filmmaker Taika Waititi who is of Māori descent, meaning that from the outset there was a creator involved in the process whom we can likely assume had a somewhat vested interest in portraying the aboriginal tribe as authentically as possible. And while Waititi ultimately chose to remove himself from the project, his influence no doubt still lingers in the finished product and he has openly praised the film, saying: "I was relieved it was not insulting to Pacific cultures. That was a big worry for me. I was very nervous about it. You often ask yourself, 'Oh my god, do I get involved with something like this?'" in an interview with *The Guardian* (Hunt, 2017).

The dedication to having input from native groups resulted in the creation of what the filmmakers called the "Oceanic Story Trust." The trust, consisting of various representatives from Pacific island cultures are for instance the reason why demigod Maui is so muscular in the finished product. "They were telling us that he needs to be a hero, almost like Superman," story head David Pimentel said of the Trust's input (Ito, 2016).

And while *Moana* is by no means immune to criticism from indigenous groups or scholars engaging in debate of representation, hegemonic capitalism, or several other frameworks, it is ultimately more protected from the extent of criticism which *Pocahontas* experienced by not only its geographical setting but also its chronological one. By *not* including Anglo-European characters at all and being set presumedly before Europeans even reached the island nations, the film is more isolated from questions of exploitation and historical wrong-doings. But that raises the question: what happens when the exploited ethnic group is natively European itself?

## 2.3 *Frozen II*: From Invisible to Visible

It is likely that no one at Walt Disney Animation Studios foresaw the criticism which would be aimed toward what would become their biggest financial success ever: *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013). Unlike the aforementioned projects, *Frozen*, a loose adaptation of H.C. Anderssen's *The Snow Queen*, is neither firmly set in an actual location or even concerned with a conflict between different ethnic groups vying for the same territory. No, *Frozen*'s issue is its

**Illustration 6: *Frozen II* (2019)**

*lack* of these themes.

From its opening scene, *Frozen* utilizes audiovisual elements within its mise-en-scene from the aboriginal Sámi people of the northern regions of Scandinavia. The film opens with a flurry of animated snowflakes, while an instrumental song named *Vuelie* accompanies the reveal of the film's title. The song utilizes the Sámi traditional singing technique known as "yoiking." In fact, the word "vuelie" is literally the southern Sámi word for "yoik." In other words, from the very first scene of the film, we are told two things: that the film we are about to view is about snow and contains traditional, aboriginal Scandinavian elements.

Yet, while the film absolutely contains several other elements which are connected to Sámi culture (male protagonist Kristoff wears traditional Sámi garb and herds reindeer, an animal strongly linked to the Sámi), there are no actual Sámi present in the film, nor is their existence directly referenced. No, *Frozen* is for all intents and purposes a mere fairytale which utilizes its setting as a backdrop for its traditionally romantic narrative.

For many Sámi representatives, this exclusion was nothing new. Unlike the Native Americans, Pacific Islanders or Inuit, who are no doubt used to seeing themselves and their culture problematically depicted in films such as *South Pacific* (Logan, 1958), *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922) or in countless classic Westerns, Sámi are traditionally ignored entirely by the filmmakers of Norway, Sweden and Finland, and if featured, Sámi are traditionally not participants in the making of the films (Mecsei, 2015, p. 73).

Seemingly as a response to this, when a sequel to the film was announced, Disney made sure to include a Sámi-like people in the plot. Much like with *Moana*, the studio created a panel of experts, here named *Verddet*, to make sure that the depiction of the Sámi-inspired Northuldra was as accurate as possible (Kvidal-Røvik & Cordes, 2020, p. 24).

With *Moana*, one of the attempts to show respect to the indigenous groups from whom the studio had drawn inspiration and relied on for help in creating a fair and accurate depiction, was to dub the film into both Māori and Hawaiian. A practice which was also done with *Frozen II* into North Sámi, making *Frozen II* the first Disney-film dubbed into a Sámi language. This gesture was, according to Trine Kvidal-Røvik and Ashley Cordes, positively received and when the voice actresses who provided the Norwegian and Sámi voices for Elsa appeared on one of Norway's most prominent morning shows to promote the movie, Sámi voice actress Marianne Pentha pointed out that by giving the characters Sámi voices, it was showing Sámi audiences that they were seen (Kvidal-Røvik & Cordes, 2020, p. 25).

Kvidal-Røvik and Cordes highlight that the film did of course receive a certain amount of backlash for various reasons. For instance, some people take umbrage with the film's climax, which reveals that the two sisters Anna and Elsa's mother was Northuldra, meaning that the two are half-aboriginal. Yet, since this was unlikely to have been intended when the characters were designed for the first film, neither of the sisters display any of the physical features which define the Northuldra in the film (Kvidal-Røvik & Cordes, 2020, p. 20). Yet, as Kvidal-Røvik and Cordes point out, the most critical voices were from *outside* the Sámi community, particularly from the United States.

Others took issue with the fact that by dubbing the film into *only* Northern Sámi, Disney in one way gave that particular Sámi language a capitalist legitimacy and weight not given to any of the many languages within Sámi tribes not acknowledged at all with a dubbed version (Kvidal-Røvik & Cordes, 2020, p. 28).

However, according to Kvidal-Røvik and Cordes, *Frozen II* saw overwhelmingly positive reception from most members of Sámi communities, a result Disney failed to achieve with *Moana*. Because while *Moana* "gave Hawaiian children a story that included characters who actually looked like them and even dubbed the film in Hawaiian (*Olelo Hawai'i*), they also culturally reproduced the islands as exotic vacation destinations and drew upon outdated and damaging gender stereotypes" (Kvidal-Røvik &

Cordes, 2020, p. 19). A criticism which certainly gains some weight when one considers that Disney has an exotic resort on Oahu. To quote Lindsay Ellis: "I'd also be really curious to see if [*Moana*] would have even been greenlit if Disney hadn't just bought its own private chunk of Hawai'i," who follows the statement by showing a clip of Moana's English and Hawaiian voice actress Auli'i Cravalho promoting the resort (Ellis, 2017).

Ultimately, there are clear reasons why Sámi groups were more receptive. Unlike the other groups represented in the films mentioned in this essay, who have continuously seen their cultures misrepresented and their people exploited by films, the Sámi are almost exclusively ignored. And while *Frozen II's* existence is nowhere near enough representation for a traditionally disregarded people, it allowed said ethnic group a voice in the discussion. Kvidal-Røvik and Cordes mention that a not insignificant amount of the criticism surrounding the film by indigenous audiences was actually aimed at Norwegian and Swedish media for not spotlighting the importance of the moment more (Kvidal-Røvik & Cordes, 2020, p. 26).

Overall, *Frozen II* proves that every case of cultural appropriation is unique and has to be assessed on an individual basis. While *Pocahontas*'s use of Native American imagery and culture caused no small amount of ire and frustration both within and outside of Native American communities, the makers of *Frozen II* managed to mostly circumvent these major issues by not only including more aboriginal experts as consultants, but also by giving the Sámi community at large a feeling of legitimacy. And while this valuation may not remain as times, values, and standards change, even in this one moment that is better than it has been many times before. The Sámi have been seen at least once on the international stage, and that is once more than they had before *Frozen II*'s release.

## 3. Conclusion

It is probably safe to say that *Pocahontas* would not be made into a romantic musical if greenlit today. If we are to take anything away from the shifts that have taken place both on screen, as well as during the production of Walt Disney Animation Studios' films, it is that indigenous groups are being considered more when decisions are made.

The ethics of these considerations are certainly worth examining. The

Disney Corporation is a financial and cultural behemoth, who hardly makes decisions such as the creation of trusts such as Verddet out of kindness. No, it is out of business interests. Disney will, as the neoliberal mega-corporation it is, continue to pursue its goals of ever-expanding financial growth and reaching new audiences. And to accomplish these goals, the company will undoubtedly only further commodify human history and marginalized and oppressed peoples. Be it in its parks, on its streaming service, in our theater or radio stations, or merchandise we eat on, wear on our bodies or decorate our houses with, Disney's hegemonic grip on the world will continue to both give voice to, and speak for those who traditionally have seen their voices silenced.

However, as the examples examined within this essay demonstrate, there are some methods of doing this which are less problematic and more well-received than others. While Disney is an international monolith, it is still an American organization, meaning that it still has a Eurocentric foundation, and colonization and oppression are undoubtedly a legacy which they as part of that world will have to keep re-evaluating and making peace with as time goes on.

If one looks at *Pocahontas* for instance, while it *did* receive a DisneyToon Studios-made home video sequel, the character has seen very little media activity since then. While it never came to fruition, *Brother Bear* (which also had a home video sequel) was initially supposed to receive a TV-series (Armstrong, 2013). *The Emperor's New Groove* received both a spinoff focused on the popular character Kronk, as well as a TV-show, and *Lilo & Stitch* saw both sequel films as well as a TV-show, and is set to be remade in live-action as of this writing, with Hawai'i-born director Chris Kekaniokalani Bright attached to direct (Kit, 2022). *Pocahontas* has as of yet not been announced for such a remake.

Cultural appropriation for financial gains is baked into the DNA of neoliberal capitalism. The current financial environment we exist within was only made possible through the oppression, enslavement and eradication of populations deemed as exploitable at best and disposable at worst.

As audience members, especially in a media landscape with fewer and fewer mega corporations controlling what we are able to see, we have to remain diligent and keep creators accountable. The reason why Disney has changed how they produce films and consult groups featured in their expanding world of princesses and colorful sidekicks is because there have been people there to demand that they be seen for what they are, and to have

their stories told in a way that makes them feel acknowledged, not *just* co-opted for marketability.

At the end of *Frozen II*, not only do the sisters Anna and Elsa find out that their mother is Northuldra, but they are also made aware of the fact that the oppression of the aboriginal people of their kingdom is due to their racist grandfather, who wanted the natives out of the way. As the film ends, Elsa, who has felt displaced in her castle and role as queen, decides to stay with her mother's tribe. And while it is no doubt meant to merely constitute a happy ending which bridges two worlds while setting up a potential third film, it does in a way affirm what John Storey said: "'race' and racism are not natural or inevitable phenomena; they have a history and are the result of human actions and interactions" (Storey, 2021, p. 187). It is our duty as consumers of media to remember that.

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## Professional Profiles

Soyoung Kim is Academic Research Professor at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Korea. Her research interests include literature, film, theater, and fine art. She has served as the performance director of the Brecht Society of Korea and the academic director of the Global Cultural Contents Association and the Korean Film Society.

Christian James Gregory has been enrolled in the MA program in Asian Studies at the Stockholm University in Stockholm, Sweden, after acquiring another MA in film studies. His other fields of interest include Korean Cinema, Issues of Ethnic Portrayals in Cinema and Video Games and Interactive Entertainment.