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Vaiana de Disney et la représentation de la personne morale dans le Pacifique de Hollywood (1932-2016)

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Disney's *Moana* and the Portrayal of Moral Personhood in Hollywood's Pacific (1932-2016)

par

David LIPSET*

ABSTRACT

*The goal of this essay is not to build an argument about the commercial basis or ideological functions of Hollywood movies. My goal is exegetical or methodological. I want to shift the critique of Hollywood's representations of Pacific peoples and cultures towards how they are and are not depicted as moral persons, the meaning of which I will detail below. I begin by introducing the concept of the moral person in social anthropology and in the work of the Canadian literary critic, Northrop Frye. I then examine three Hollywood movies, *Rain* (1932) and *Blue Hawaii* (1961) in which the moral personhood of Pacific Islanders is reduced and marginalized while Western protagonists are foregrounded, although in different ways. Lastly, I discuss Disney's *Moana* (2016), a movie which excludes Western characters altogether by focusing on the adventures of a pre-contact Polynesian girl. *Moana* is able to do so, I propose, because it is an animated musical.*

KEYWORDS: Hollywood movies, Pacific people and culture, moral personhood, Durkheim, Fortes, Northrop Frye, *Moana*

RÉSUMÉ

*Le but de cet article n'est pas de débattre de la nature commerciale ou des ressorts idéologiques des films hollywoodiens. Mon but est exégétique ou méthodologique. Je veux déplacer la critique des représentations hollywoodiennes des peuples et des cultures du Pacifique vers la manière dont ils sont, ou non, représentés comme des personnes morales, expression dont je préciserai la signification ci-dessous. Je commence par présenter le concept de personne morale dans l'anthropologie sociale et dans le travail du critique littéraire canadien Northrop Frye. Ensuite, j'examine trois films hollywoodiens : *Rain* (1932) et *Blue Hawaii* (1961) dans lesquels la personnalité morale des habitants des îles du Pacifique est réduite et marginalisée tandis que les figures des protagonistes occidentaux sont mises en avant, bien que de différentes manières. Pour finir, j'évoque le film *Vaiana* de Disney (2016), qui exclut totalement les personnages occidentaux, en se focalisant sur les aventures d'une jeune Polynésienne avant le contact avec les Occidentaux. *Vaiana* y parvient, selon moi, car c'est une comédie musicale d'animation.*

MOTS-CLÉS : films d'Hollywood, peuples et cultures du Pacifique, personne morale, Durkheim, Fortes, Northrop Frye, *Vaiana*

In the film studies literature, Hollywood's interest in Pacific peoples, places and material cultures has been questioned (Reyes, 1995). Raymond Betts charged Hollywood with projecting "canned" visions of a "tropical paradise with softly undulating definitions formed by waving palm, soothing surf and swaying dancers" (1991: 30). Writing about the 1925-1942 period, Glenn Man concluded that its South Seas films offered two-hour glimpses of

Edenic paradise where natives were childlike and did little more than fish, gather coconuts and bananas, feast, and, of course, make love (1991: 27, 16). For these critics, Hollywood exoticized Pacific Islanders and Pacific places (Wood, 1999).

Why so? This stereotyping may be understood in terms of the mass media and society problem, and Horkheimer and Adorno's concept of the "culture industry" (1944). In the industrialized, mass-pro-

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duced aesthetic system to which they referred, art is shaped by commercial imperatives and functions to provide ideological legitimization for capitalist society. The culture industry is nothing less than a global enterprise which makes the “whole world [...] pass through [its] filter” (1944: 98). Thus the first motivation is profit-based. “Exotic escapist fare” (Betts, 1991: 30) did, and continues to do, well at the box-office. The second is to promote a vision of Euro-American political and historical superiority (Lutz and Collins, 1993). Through

« Hollywood’s [...] lenses, [...] the Pacific [...] operates as [a] stand-in for [...] world domination, a vision that is repeatedly celebrated in numerous South Seas films and transmitted to its audiences as a form of national pedagogy on world citizenship. » (Konzett, 2017: 5, see also Wilson, 2000)¹

However, in this essay, my goal is not to build an argument about the commercial basis or ideological functions of Hollywood movies. My goal is exegetical or methodological. I want to shift the critique of Hollywood’s representations of Pacific peoples and cultures towards how they are and are not depicted as moral persons, the meaning of which I will detail below. I begin by introducing the concept of the moral person in social anthropology and in the work of the Canadian literary critic, Northrop Frye. Next, I examine three Hollywood movies that have been selected from differing eras in order to suggest that enduring stereotype and caricature which I want to foreground. *Rain* (1932) and *Blue Hawaii* (1961) reduce and marginalize the moral personhood of Pacific Islanders while the moral personhood of the Western protagonist is foregrounded, although in different ways. I then turn to Disney’s *Moana* (2016) which excludes Western characters altogether by focusing on the adventures of a pre-contact Polynesian girl. *Moana* is able to do so, I propose, because, as an animated musical, it is pure fantasy.

Moral Persons and Moral Heroes

Emile Durkheim (1995 [1912]), Marcel Mauss (1985 [1938]) and later Meyer Fortes (1987 [1973]) taught anthropologists that persons are not discrete centers of experience but rather social microcosms. Society, that is to say, confers or withholds the embodiments, relationships, capacities and values that are distinctive of the statuses of people who occupy them. Observing that Tallensi moral authority was a *post mortem* attribution, Fortes (1973) presented a striking example of what he called “full” or “complete” personhood in a West African society. Such exemplary status was granted to specific crocodiles, who became “living shrines” of specific spirits (1973: 292). “The moral conscience,” as Fortes put it, was

“vested [...] in the ancestors, on the other side of the ritual curtain” (1973: 317). This image beautifully expressed the notion that moral personhood was incomplete until an individual became a crocodile ancestor-spirit. In other words, moral identity is not conferred upon everyone in society and it may wax or wane not only in the course of the life cycle, but in the afterlife as well. Focusing on totemism in Aboriginal Australia, Durkheim emphasized that society does not merely impose moral identity on persons but endows them with moral agency that may be wielded or asserted on behalf of normative, collective order. Putting Mauss and Durkheim together, we might say this: Moral personhood, and moral agency, are not uniformly attributed in society.

Here, I want to superimpose a framework that allows us to make distinctions between kinds of agency possessed by moral persons in society. To do so, I return to a classification of central characters in works of fiction that Northrop Frye (1957) developed in the first chapter of *Anatomy of Criticism*.² His main criteria derived from the completely mundane observation that plots in fiction consist of “somebody doing something” (1957: 33). Those “somebodies” are narrative heroes who exert agency.

They may be said to act, Frye observes, in the contexts of their society, their environment and in comparison to we, their audience. In each of these contexts, the “power of their action” may appear superior, equal or inferior, in kind or by degree. If superior in kind to their society, environment and audience, the hero is a divinity, or perhaps a divine monarch, and his narrative is mythic. If he is superior by degree, Frye calls him a romantic hero, “whose actions are marvelous but who is himself identified as a human being” (1957: 33). He lives in a totemic world in which bravery is taken-for-granted, weapons are animate, animals can hold forth, while ogres and witches are feared. His narrative is the stuff of legend, folk tale, etc. If superior by degree to society, but not to his environment, the hero is merely a leader whose

« authority, passions and powers of expression [are] far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature. » (1957: 34)

He is a hero of what Frye called the “high mimetic” mode of epic and tragedy. If superior neither to society nor to his environment, the hero is “one of us” (1957: 34) and we respond to him with a “sense of his common humanity.” He lives in the same world as we do. He is a hero of the “low mimetic” mode of domestic tragedy, comedy and realistic fiction. Lastly, if the hero is inferior in power and intelligence to his society, environment and to ourselves, and thus appears to us as an enslaved, weak, inarticulate, inept subject who may be engaged in wrongdoing, or ab-

1. Man argues that Hollywood films made during “the heyday of the studio years” (1991: 27), from about WW I to 1948, included criticisms of the civilizing influence of whites as corrupting island life (see Betts, 1991: 32).

2. I made use of Frye’s classifications in two previous articles (Lipset, 2004 and 2015).



PICTURE 1. – Sadie Thompson (Joan Crawford) in *Rain* (by courtesy of United Artists)

surdity, he is an inferior hero in the ironic mode of action, with which we, the audience, may still identify as part of our own experience.

Now my methodological move is to take the forms of agency distinguished by Frye's classifications and apply them to the concept of the moral person that I have borrowed from social anthropology. The agency that narrative heroes do or do not assert in society, the environment and the audience is moral agency, and they are not merely narrative heroes, but moral heroes. Having introduced the terms in which the following analyses will be framed, I now go to illustrate their analytic utility in three exemplary Hollywood movies in which Pacific Islanders appear.

Rain as Low Mimetic Tragedy

Rain (1932), is what Frye might classify as a low mimetic tragedy. Its heroes are inferior to their society, their environment and to us, the audience.³ We first encounter them on a ship, a vehicle that establishes the superiority of a technology its passengers may access but indicates a personal inability to travel on the sea by themselves. The ship is making its way across the Pacific and is heading to Apia, the capital of Western Samoa. Another dimension of their inferior relationship to the environment, and perhaps their society, is a cholera outbreak on board ship that causes the colonial authorities to quarantine them in Pago Pago, a small military outpost in American Samoa, for two weeks until they are certain that no one else has become infected. And then, of course, they spend the entire movie sheltering from and feeling

rather overwhelmed by the relentless, eponymous downpour from which the movie takes its name. The scene is decidedly low mimetic. It is set in Pago Pago, far removed from cosmopolitan centers of power, and then specifically in a run down hotel/store run by Joe Horn, who is a corpulent, cigar smoking, American expatriate. Although in relation to their society, the moral position of the main characters is distinguished by the superiority of the missionary, Albert Davidson and the doctor, Robert MacPhail, they seem to live in the same world as us: they have wives and jobs. At the same time, they are superior to the Samoans, who appear fleetingly in the background, pulling nets or carrying loads. Dressed only in waistclothes, the Samoans are cast in the mode of low mimetic irony. Very few of them, save for Melina, the hotel proprietor's obese wife, have speaking parts. But when given something to say, they use a blunt and simple Pidgin. In short, *Rain* is a movie whose heroes, American and Samoan, are cast in a mode of low mimetic realism and low mimetic irony. Its moral intrigue is domestic in scale: it develops around little more than a crisis of one woman's virtue and a tragedy of one man's repressed desire.

The moral heroine of the story, Miss Sadie Thompson, is a vivacious, fast-talking woman, played by Joan Crawford (pict. 1). Sadie first appears in fishnets and heels; and she passes the time partying and drinking with the American marines stationed on the island. Indeed, one soldier, Sargent Tim O'Hara, whom she calls, "Handsome," quickly falls for her. Sadie is too much for the rigid and righteous missionary, Mr. Davidson, who, brimming with judgment, undertakes to save Sadie Thompson's soul from her past life as a prostitute in Honolulu and from some unspecified crime that allegedly occurred in San Francisco. When Sadie declines Mr. Davidson's spiritual demands, he has the governor issue a deportation order to force her back to San Francisco. Sadie's defiance is short lived. She begs the missionary to let her go to Sydney, where she plans to meet Sgt. O'Hara. After her appeals fall on deaf ears, Sadie experiences a religious conversion and agrees to return to California to face the jail sentence awaiting her there.

I want to discuss the details of the movie's moral climax for the light they shed on how moral personhood of the Americans and the Samoans are depicted. It begins the night before Sadie is scheduled to leave for San Francisco. For no apparent reason, the Samoans are celebrating something and the missionary, the doctor, together with their wives, appear standing side by side in raincoats and hats on the edge of the floor of a *fale* meeting house. The camera drops down to their feet and then pans across the floor where an outer circle of bare-chested Samoan men are seated, beating large drums, and an inner circle of more elaborately decorated men sit and clap.

3. *Rain* was a remake of a silent version, which was itself an adaptation of a 1922 play by the same name, the play having been taken from a Somerset Maugham story, "Miss Thompson." Other South Seas dramas in this era (1925-42) include *Moana* (1925), *Tabu* (1931), *Bird of Paradise* (1932), *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), *The Hurricane* (1937) and *Son of Fury* (1942).

A man in a distinctive head dress apparently orders a dancer to get up and perform. Waving some sort of flat staff, he calls out to a row of men seated before him, whose backs we see. They slap the floor and briefly lift themselves off it to the heavy beat. Mr. Davidson looks on but suddenly becomes anxious and tells the others that he wants to go to the hotel because “that girl and her salvation are more important [...] than anything else.” Two Samoan men paddle him there through the pouring rain, leaving Dr. MacPhail to look after the ladies.

Back at the hotel, Sgt. O’Hara pressures Sadie to go with him to Australia, which she refuses to do. Mr. Davidson climbs up the steps and sends the marine away. He reassures Sadie that his prayers will always be with her. Standing face to face with Sadie, he sends her off to bed. But neither one of them is able to sleep. Davidson appears walking on the porch, where, out of the darkness, Sadie stops him and explains that the rain and drums, still audible in the background, in addition to the prospect of returning to San Francisco to face prison in the morning, are keeping her up. Davidson allows that he too has been unable to sleep, worrying about her fate. “The darkness was full of eyes,” he tells her. “I saw things I never saw before,” and then he suddenly blurts out that she needn’t return to San Francisco if she doesn’t want to. Puzzled and confused by his change of heart, Sadie insists to Mr. Davidson that she still wants to go. “I thank Thee. I thank Thee!” he moans, his head uplifted (pict. 2). “My every prayer has been answered! I prayed that there might come in your heart so passionate a desire for this accomplishment that you now lay as an offering at your redeemer’s feet that even if I offered to let you go, you would refuse.” Sadie, ever the flawed heroine, expresses existential anxiety. Will she have the strength to carry on in Mr. Davidson’s absence. “You will be strong. No more fear,” he answers resolutely. “Radiant. Beautiful,” he mutters. “You will be one of the daughters of the King,” he tells her as his eyes burn manically. “Radiant. Beautiful,” he repeats.

Sadie withdraws to her room to try to go to sleep, as the drum beat persists. Mr. Davidson walks slowly away from her door. Shutting his eyes, he knits his brows and prays silently. We see his rapt eyes blazing as he begins to shake. His hand beats an invisible drum. A kind of a smirk appears on his face. He looks back at Sadie’s door. In a frenzy, he opens it and we hear a creak. The drumming goes on.

The sun rises next morning. The rain has stopped. We hear a sad Samoan song and see an avenue in the Samoan village leading down to a little bay where the ship that is to take Sadie back to the States is moored. A group of men pull a net by the shore and nearby, someone appears to be at work mending a net. The screen suddenly fills with the face of a Samoan man, wearing a knotted leaf bound around his forehead, who is pulling a net. The shoes and legs of a man in pants then appear, lying face down in the water. The Samoan man sees the body, drops the net



PICTURE 2. – Alfred Davidson (Walter Huston) in prayer as Sadie Thompson feels concern (by courtesy of United Artists)

and screams, “*Atua!*” as he runs into the village. Men, dressed in short cotton waistcloths, women, in cotton sarongs, and children burst out of their houses, and dash about excitedly. Now, expatriates in white suits and hats, and soldiers in uniforms turn up and jostle with the Samoans around Mr. Davidson’s body. The hotel proprietor limps in. “It’s Davidson,” Dr. MacPhail tells him. “Suicide. He’s been dead for several hours.” Mr. Horn wonders why he did it, and goes back to the hotel to break the news to Mrs. Davidson and Sadie.

Mr. Horn finds that Sadie has returned to her old, sassy self. Blues music blares from her phonograph and decked out in a white fur collar, with a feathered cap askew on her hair, she is smoking. Sadie greets Sgt. O’Hara, who has also turned up expecting to say goodbye to his true love. “Hello Handsome... Surprised to see me all dolled up, eh? Why not?... I’m radiant, beautiful. You didn’t know that did you?” O’Hara is baffled by her look and asks what happened. Glaring at him, “You men! Pigs!”, she shoots back.

Mr. Horn then tells her about Davidson’s death. “They found him on the beach this morning. Throat cut.” Sadie has little sympathy to offer. “Then I can forgive him. I thought the joke was on me. But I see it wasn’t.” She tells O’Hara that now she is willing and able to go with him to Australia.

In the last scenes of *Rain*, Samoa and Samoans are reduced to little more than an ironic backdrop for its low mimetic heroes. The environment they live in is subject to a dark, perpetual downpour. It is a colonial outpost, true enough. But at the same time, its relationship to the state’s legal institutions is incomplete: the passengers are quarantined there, but for Sadie Thompson it is a sanctuary from American justice. The Samoans there are depicted to live morally simple, isolated lives, compared to us, their audience, and the moral connection afforded them to guests in Mr. Horn’s hotel is minimal, at best. They appear paddling a small outrigger through the rain to return the missionary to “look after” Sadie. But otherwise, they work, minding their own business. They lack subjectivity, that is to say, they dance, for reasons the movie does not feel obliged to divulge. What little they are given to say is not translated for us. “*Atua! Atua!*” cried the fisherman, but there is no subtitle to tell us that the word means ancestor-spirit, and

has been extended to refer to the missionary. There is one small, albeit morally redolent, yet rudimentary, connection between them, I think, which is their drumming. Their percussion seems to drive both Sadie Thompson and Alfred Davidson over the edge, thus to face the shortcomings in their moral identities and agency. The simple four beat rhythm of the drums, beating through the background of the movie's climax, lays bare the moral inferiority of the movie's heroes to society and to us, their audience. It is the drums that seem to make Mr. Davidson succumb to the demons of his desire for Sadie. It is the drums, and the darkness, which prevents Sadie from sleep, thus to present her "beautiful, radiant" self to him in the middle of their endless night. Is this to suggest that they – white Westerners – would have been able to maintain or improve their moral integrity in the absence of the emancipating, sensual impact of the primal Samoan rhythm? And does this suggestion mean to reverse or deny the multiple forms of damage done by the former to the latter? What it clearly does suggest is that both of them are inferior to society. Mr. Davidson loses any claim to moral superiority by raping Sadie and then of course, the motives for his suicide, the shame and humiliation of the rape, and the sin of it, also deposit him in a morally inferior position in his society and to us, the audience, who can only feel shock, but also perhaps a little *schadenfreude* at the turn of events.

Rain has illustrated three points about the portrayal of Samoan people and culture, and Pacific Islanders in Hollywood. It introduced the idea that Pacific Islanders and their expatriate guests conduct themselves in modes of moral action in relationship to their environment, society and to us, the audience. Secondly, the movie introduced the more general distribution of moral personhood in the South Seas genre, which is ironic and low mimetic. And lastly, I suggested that the Samoans, were portrayed as a moral danger to the latter, the Americans. The musical comedy, *Blue Hawaii* (1961), which starred Elvis Presley, offers a slight variation on these themes (see Wood, 1999).⁴

Blue Hawaii as Low Mimetic Comedy

Elvis' character, Chadwick Gates is a non-native, or *haole*, ex-soldier. In the opening scene of the movie, he returns home to Honolulu from the service on an airplane. If not to his environment, and the military bureaucracy of the state, he is nevertheless cast as ambivalently superior to society in Hawaii. As a reluctant heir to a pineapple fortune, he is depicted as preferring to do little more than hang out with his Hawaiian buddies, despite his mother's (Angela Lansbury) dismissal of them as "beach boys." In



PICTURE 3. – Chad Gates (Elvis Presley) leads his Hawaiian buddies in a song (by courtesy of Paramount Pictures)

Frye's categories, Elvis' character is a leader, but in the mode of low mimetic comedy. His powers of expression are "far greater than ours, but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature" (Frye 1957:33). He is vulnerable to moral debasement by his love interest and his smiling Hawaiian friends who are cast as "free" from the demands of capitalist discipline and spend their time swimming, eating, playing music and dancing with Chad (pict. 3).

While "the natives" are relegated to inferior, low mimetic roles as backup singers and band members, Chad has a moral voice. He sings again and again throughout the movie, of which the title song, "Blue Hawaii" portrays the island not as the site of American business and military interests that threaten Hawaiians, but as a safe tourist destination.⁵ He ponders the problem of what to do with his future and ultimately re-invents himself as a tour guide for his father's employees, and is thus able to reconcile his upper-class parents' ambition for him with an American insistence on generational independence. What is more, he wins the hand of Maile Duval, his part-Hawaiian sweetheart (Joan Blackman), whom he marries, again, despite his mother's disapproval of her as that "native girl."

At the end of the movie, Chad has taken a tourist group of high school girls to the island of Kaua'i. There have been a few plot twists, absurd jealousies, comic expressions of adolescent id for him, and the like. But by now, all of it has been resolved. The scene opens in a hotel bar where Chad is depicted as "one of us" (Frye, 1957: 37). A bartender pours him a glass of juice as his father, and Jack Kelman, stride into the bar. The two men greet Chad and order three Mai Tai drinks. They are partners in the Great Southern Hawaiian Fruit Company, which is the Gates family business. In other words, they hold superior status in society. They sit down at a table like anyone might and Mr. Gates questions his son, like any father might, upon encountering him unexpectedly. What, Mr. Gates inquires, is Chad doing in Kaua'i? "I'm here on business," Chad answers, cheer-

4. *Blue Hawaii* was the first of three Elvis movies shot in Hawaii. It was followed by *Girls! Girls! Girls!* (1962) – which finished as the 10th top grossing film in 1962 – and *Paradise, Hawaiian Style* (1965). Earlier movies set in Hawaii include *Flirtation Walk* (1934), *Waikiki Wedding* (1937), *Hawaiian Nights* (1939) and *Song of the Islands* (1942).

5. Bing Crosby sang it in *Waikiki Wedding* (Wood, 1999; Pearson, 2010).

fully enough. In a low mimetic mode of moral personhood, he tells his father that he appreciates how much he and his mother want him to join the company. What kind of work would give him “a chance to prove what [he] can do on his own,” he has been wondering. “I think I’ve found something I can do,” he goes, “that is a way to work for the company and Chad Gates.” He suggests that his father have the company bring its employees to Hawaii for their annual business meetings and reward salesmen with Hawaiian vacations. Chad will start a tourist business and work with the Great Southern Hawaiian Fruit Company. He is an American low mimetic hero, an entrepreneur who must work for a living. Or, as Chad tells his father: “That’s my declaration of independence.”

Maile Duval, the beautiful, part-Hawaiian brunette, then walks up behind him. Chad introduces her as his new business partner. Maile sits down with the three men. Not superior, Chad asks her how the job prospect makes her feel? The business, he adds, will be called “Gates of Hawaii,” and points out that “Gates” is meant to be “plural.” Looking at her directly, he clarifies: “In case you didn’t recognize it, that’s a proposal.” Maile accepts, needless to say. The scene abruptly shifts. In their Honolulu rambler, Chad’s mother, Sarah Lee, sits alone on a couch, taking afternoon tea. Ping Pong, the slapstick Chinese butler, brings her the phone. Mr. Gates is on the line, calling her from the bar. “You better hurry over here or you’ll miss your son’s wedding. Hello? Hello?” Sarah Lee appears lying on the floor, having fainted.

Now we move from the absurd to the lush, verdant grounds of the hotel,⁶ the site of the famous film wedding scene (Wood, 1999: 117). Mr. and Mrs. Gates stand in a receiving line next to Maile’s grandparents. Her grandmother, who descends from Hawaiian royalty, is adorned in multiple *leis* while her husband wears a Hawaiian shirt. The high school girls also appear in the line, as do a number of other unspecified Hawaiians. Two little girls, in leafy green skirts run by, as Mrs. Gates, still being cast in an ironic mode, informs Maile’s grandmother that her new “daughter-in-law is of royal blood and is a direct descendant of King Kalaniapupu of Hawaii.” Mr. Gates looks disturbed. “Kalani’opuu,” the grandmother corrects her. “Our southern most island, you know,” Mrs. Gates responds. “Yes, I know. I am her grandmother.”

As Mrs. Gates looks bewildered, the bride and groom approach the receiving line from opposite directions. Walking past children, several adults and a group of young, brides-to-be, they meet on a little bridge that spans a canal and take hands. Maile is



FIGURE 4. – The wedding scene in *Blue Hawaii* (by courtesy of Paramount Pictures)

dressed in a purple *mumu* that has a short train. With a white orchid in her dark hair, a white *lei* draped over her shoulders falls down to her knees and drops down her back. Chad, with the look of dashing, romantic hero, wears white trousers and a long sleeved, white shirt. He has a red *lei* around his neck, and a red cummerbund around his waist, the wide sash of which falls down a leg.

Peering into Maile’s eyes, Chad sings: “This is the moment, I’ve waited for.” A chorus of women draped in *leis* stand on the lawn along the banks of the canal, behind the couple. They echo lines of the lyrics in Hawaiian and English. Trailed by the large wedding party, the couple turns, hand in hand, and walks along a path through the coconut grove. Dark haired, Hawaiian girls stand in pink dresses and long white *leis* together with a few bare-chested young men in red waistcloths. Chad and Maile board a raft, the floor of which is covered with banana leaves. Along its edges half-dozen, smiling Hawaiian men in red and white waistcloths and green *leis*, sit strumming ukeleles. The raft is stabilized and propelled by two decorated canoes that are attached to its sides. The canoes are paddled across a small lagoon by two young, bare-chested Hawaiian men.

Standing together on the raft, Chad sings, “I will love you longer than forever,” to Maile. Hawaiian women behind the couple, in pink *mumu*s, parrot his pledge. The wedding party follows along the banks of the lagoon and watch. At the opposite end of the lagoon, the couple walks ashore and Chad sings, “Blue skies of Hawaii smile on this, our wedding day.” A church-like building stands amid the coconut palms. The Hawaiian women make an archway adorned with pink flowers in front of which Chad and Maile kiss as the movie ends (pict. 4).⁷

This is a wedding ceremony suited to a “complete” person, to use the Fortesian term. But Chad Gates is just a leader in a low mimetic musical comedy rather than a sacred crocodile. He is subject to the order of nature. Although dressed in white, Chad cannot walk on water, but must be paddled across it. He is *of* his society, as the son of his parents who criticize him for his undesirable lifestyle, mate selection and

6. Built on a 17 acre coconut grove, which was the ancestral property of the last reigning monarch of Kaua’i, Queen Deborah Kapule, the Coco Palms Hotel benefitted from the film’s success, hosting an average of 500 weddings per year, until 1992 when it was badly damaged by hurricane Iniki. Today, it lies in ruins and disrepair. Tourists still visit however.

7. This scene “would launch Hawaii’s wedding industry” (Konzett, 2017: 188).

future plans, he is a man who must find a job after having served in the military. And, he is a friend to his Hawaiian pals. His moral agency is nevertheless superior to his society and to us, his audience. Chad creatively fulfills his filial duty and mollifies his father – in a bar. Chad makes his nonsensical mother proud by winning the hand of his beloved, who descends from Hawaiian royalty. Chad sings and dances like none other than Elvis Presley. At the wedding, Chad is at the center of a society that he and his bride have assembled. He is no impostor who pretends to be something more than he is. He is a plausible moral hero. According to Frye, the difference between high and low mimetic comedy is that the latter may involve a “social promotion” (1957: 45) Does marrying Maile, we might therefore ask, win Chad prestige and status? Or perhaps the marriage might be viewed as class endogamy since the groom is upper-class and the bride is Hawaiian royalty. If so, *Blue Hawaii* seems to depart from the theme of moral danger that Pacific Islanders posed to Western visitors that we detected in *Rain*.

However beautifully appointed and color coordinated, like the Samoans in *Rain*, the supporting roles of the Hawaiians in the wedding scene, as chorus, anonymous members of the wedding party, canoe paddlers, and so forth, enact or perform the same ironic, dependent, and inferior, moral position of Pacific Islanders *vis à vis* the Westerners quite clearly. We recognize and hear Maile's grandmother speak briefly, when she answers Mrs. Gates in the receiving line at the scene opens. But other than the Hawaiian chorus rehearsing Chad's declarations to Maile in his songs, they are mute.

Moana as Romantic Heroine

If only because of its blockbuster appeal, which included Pacific Islanders (Chapman, 2016; Hereniko, 2018), no discussion of Hollywood's representation of Pacific Islanders could ignore *Moana* (Disney, 2016), Disney's computer-animated, children's musical.⁸ The subtitle of the movie's companion book calls it a “tale of courage and adventure” (Sutherland, 2016), which is to say that the story features the moral agency of its heroine. Set in a Pacific community populated by the ancestors and totems of its indigenous, pre-contact cosmology, Moana is what Frye would call a romantic heroine. Her agency is superior in degree to her society, to her environment and us, her audience. Her “actions are marvelous but [she] is [...] identified as a human being” (1957: 33). In the world through which she moves, the laws of nature are “slightly suspended,” which is to say that her



PICTURE 5. – Moana and Maui (by courtesy of Walt Disney Pictures)

“courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to [her], and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability.” (Frye, 1957: 33)

What is more, Disney's *Moana* differs from *Rain* and *Blue Hawaii* in that its hero is a Pacific Islander rather than a white American, and female rather than male. Why did the Disney Studio confer complete personhood upon a Polynesian girl, of all people?

Moana is a chief's offspring, in other words, she is superior to her society while still being a daughter of parents. She is a willful girl, but her mother tells her that she is also “a child of destiny” who will one day do wonderful things. A “darkness” now besets the land, a “darkness” that has been caused when the culture-hero, Māui stole the heart of Te Fiti, the ancestress who created the islands. The only way to save the world from her curse is to restore the heart, which is an ancient, green gemstone engraved with a spiral, to Te Fiti (who has turned into a violent lava monstress called Te Ka). The ocean-spirit chose Moana for this project when she was only a child and her grandmother, exhorting her to attend to her “voice inside,” later gave her the green gemstone, which had come into her possession.⁹

When grown, Moana defies her father, the chief, and ventures out in her outrigger into the open ocean –together with her Sancho Panza, a rather feckless but loyal rooster– to find Māui (pict. 5). With his help, Moana returns the heart-stone to Te Fiti. The darkness is defeated and the beautiful ancestress, who personifies the land, is awakened. Flowers bloom again, the island becomes abundant once more and the Polynesian sailors, under Moana's tutelage, return their canoes to the seas.

Let me discuss the moral climax of the movie, when Moana defeats Te Ka, the lava monstress, and saves the world, more closely. Māui has deserted her at this point in the story. Having taken the form of a hawk, after his enchanted hook was damaged

8. See also Flaherty's ‘docufiction’ film by the same name (1926). Disney's *Moana* had grossed \$643 million worldwide by April 2017. Euro-American audiences, of course, flocked to the theatres to watch the movie and adore Moana, its heroine. Pacific Islanders had mixed reactions. Indigenous intellectuals who complained about stereotyping, cultural appropriation and so forth, were less won over by a story of a Polynesian heroine saving a synthetic Oceanic world created and imagined by a small group of white men from the Mainland (Diaz, 2016a-b; Kelly, 2016; Hereniko, 2018: 220).

9. In this sense, she is a classic kind of ‘find your true self,’ Disney princess (see England *et al.*, 2011).



PICTURE 6. – Māui and Te Ka, the lava monstess (by courtesy of Walt Disney Pictures)

while fighting the monstess, he has flown away in disbelief that Moana is up to the task. Moana is also suffering doubt, but her grandmother's ghost appears to her and breaks into song, which Moana joins in, while a vision appears to her of her ancestors voyaging across the seas in their outriggers. Needless to add, she recovers her resolve and sails on to go confront Te Ka alone. Māui, hook in hand, as well as with the capacity to turn not only into a hawk, but an iguana, a whale and a shark, comes to her aid in the nick of time (pict. 6). Full of determination, he fights the monstess who is hurling lava balls and knocking Moana about with her lengthy arms. In the final confrontation, Moana holds the gem stone above her head and Te Ka sees its light and is drawn to it. The seas divide; the enormous lava monstess crawls towards the small, but poised, Moana who sings: "They have stolen the heart from inside you, but this does not define you," and places the stone on the monstess' heart. She then turns back into the beautiful Te Fiti in all of her emerald, luxuriant glory. The island becomes green again. Plants and coconut palms sprout up and Te Fiti takes Moana and Māui in her giant hand. Māui apologizes for having stolen the ancestress' heart in the first place and she gives him a new hook in return. She then lies down and becomes the island. A new animate tattoo depicting Moana standing on an outrigger, waving and smiling, magically appears on Māui's chest. Moana hugs him and, now as a hawk, he flies away. Moana sails back to her island home, which has also become green and fertile. On the beach, she is embraced with great affection and relief by her mother and father. Sheepishly, Moana concedes to her father that she "may have gone a little ways past the reef." The community launches its fleet of outriggers which triumphantly return to seas as Moana leads the way.

Endowed as she is with agency, Moana is portrayed as morally superior to her society. She breaks through patriarchy and succeeds her father as chief (cf. Ihimaera, 1987). She is able to overcome spatial obstacles and navigate her way across the broad expanse of the ocean. She befriends Māui along the way, although he is initially hostile to her. Under his tutelage, she learns how to sail and navigate. In addition, she receives help from her grandmother's ghost and her spirit-familiar, the ocean, not to mention her fai-

thful companion, the rooster. Moana survives storms at sea. She escapes an army of coconut pirates (Pugh, 2012: 4-7, 12). And, she turns the monster back into the creator-ancestress of the land. The land at home becomes fertile once again, due to her great efforts, and she helps the sailors retake the sea.

For all of her superiority, she is nevertheless portrayed as a real human being living in a natural order, who she must make her way largely by means of her wit and skill.¹⁰ She is a daughter and a granddaughter. As a toddler, she shows more curiosity than her peers, and is adopted by the ocean-spirit, but her doe-eyed, baby doll body does not differ from the rest of the children in the community. Moreover, she is subjected to her father's will and taboos, which she eventually defies by sailing beyond the reef. During the adventure-time of her voyage (Bakhtin, 1981), astonishing experiences do shape her into a mature teenager who returns home after her overseas itinerary having found herself.

In short, Moana is no goddess. Indeed, the movie is very much a tale about the moral education of a girl whose courage, persistence and powers are far greater than ours. But, as I said, her capacities, her initiative in particular, remain very much incorporated in, rather than isolated from, or dominant over, the order of nature in her society and its cosmos. Her heroic deeds do not win glory for herself but make her into a leader who excels at skills that she teaches everyone who would learn them. Her superior position in society is one of degree, not kind. In Frye's categories, she is a cross between a romantic heroine in a high mimetic epic but not mythic narrative.

Now how can Disney's unique choices about this movie be explained and understood? Why did Disney decide 1) to set the scene in the pre-contact Pacific, and 2) to select a Polynesian girl to be the moral hero of the story? And, in the context of the moral asymmetry between Pacific Islanders and Westerners that we diagnosed in *Rain* and *Blue Hawaii*, does the endowment of Moana with a superior degree of agency suggest a shift in Hollywood's portrayal of the Pacific?

Why locate the story in pre-contact Polynesia? Disney had done a successful series of animated movies set outside the West, such as *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998) and interestingly,

"not one of these movies is 'diverse' or 'multicultural' [...] The Disney Princesses, while racially varied since 1992, are all located in their own culturally specific geographies." (Mitchell-Smith, 2012: 212-213)

The choice of indigenous Polynesia is thus consistent with this institutional legacy. Then, there are many resonances of the region in contemporary popular culture. The navigational skills the Polynesians put to use by way of settling the Pacific Islands are well known (Birchall, 2017). Tiki bars lit by torches and

10. Although one could argue that her chiefly lineage is endowed with *mana* in Polynesian cosmology, but this dimension of Moana's moral identity is omitted in the movie.

decorated with masks, thatch and tropical plants are a popular venue for an ethos that runs counter to the Protestant ethic (Cate, 2016). Inevitably, there may be a commercial connection to Disney's 21 acre, Aulani Resort that opened on Oahu in 2011 (Chinen, 2016; Ngata, 2016; Grandinetti, 2017).

As far as making a young girl the moral hero of the movie, several points come to mind. Aside from its feminist, girl-power appeal, *Moana* is the most recent contribution to the profitable Disney princess genre, going all the way back to Snow White in the 1930s.¹¹ She is also the latest in a line of nonwhite princesses who are

"exceptional because they are shown to resist or discard 'backward' elements in their cultures." (Bradford, 2012: 179)

At the same time, Moana and Māui, the tattoo-covered, ancestor-spirit, with whom she joins forces to save the day, do seem to challenge the unequal portrayal of moral personhood in *Rain* and *Blue Hawaii*. One could argue, I think, that the two characters actually affirm rather than contradict it. By depicting Moana as an utterly charming and sweet, albeit tenacious and adventurous, young girl, she appears as an innocent heroine, who is aided by spirit-familiars and ghosts. In Frye's terms, Moana is a

"typical hero of romance, whose actions are marvelous but who is himself [sic] identified as a human being." (1957: 33)

But what does she want to do? Like her princess forebears in this Disney genre, what she wants is nothing too progressive (Pugh, 2012: 3, 15). However strong willed she is portrayed to be, what she wants does not stray too far from the norms of moral personhood into which she was born. She wants to restore the fertility and maritime agency of her world from the heartless, lava monstress, while, at the same time, she struggles to remain a good daughter and granddaughter. That is, her goals are simultaneously superior yet equal to her society. She remains a domesticated female figure living in a personal world that is imperiled by romantic dangers. Moreover, her story has narrative closure: it ends with a

"child's happy ending [in which she is] safe, cherished, celebrated and in a family." (Bayless, 2012: 53)

Māui is also depicted ambiguously. He is powerful and does possess a degree of superiority over nature and society, but he is also a comic, hypermasculine buffoon. Partly romantic and partly ironic, his main goal, which is perhaps no less heteronormative than Moana's, is to save his magical hook, the signifier of his masculinity, without which, he admits to being "nothing" (Streif and Dundes, 2017: 4).

Together, as Hereniko has pointed out, both Moana and Māui are unattached, asexual characters. Lacking id, they promote the Hollywood image of the submissive Polynesian maiden waiting for the white

man to sweep her off of her feet, and "take her virginity [while] the Polynesian males around her are asexual" (2018: 221, see also Ngata, 2016; Dundes and Streiff, 2016).

Nevertheless, the two heroes of *Moana* constitute an undeniably exceptional moment in the history of Hollywood's Pacific Islanders, but one which merits a word of caution. There is the obvious point that *Moana* is not ethnography; if anything, it is animated ethnography that derives its authority from entertainment, narrative seduction and enchantment rather than from an "I was there" claim (Clifford, 1986). In other words, it is meant to represent moral heroes who are in an ambiguous relationship to their audience, not quite superior yet not quite inferior. The very first image in the movie, after all, is the Disney trademark, the Cinderella/Sleeping Beauty castle with fireworks exploding into the dusk sky which settle into a glowing arch behind it while a couple of notes from "When You Wish Upon a Star," from Pinocchio become audible. The castle beckons us into the less restricted realm of the romantic imagination, one in which heroic identities may emerge, and "dreams come true." What is interesting is that the dreams have a particularly gendered inflection. The Disney castle is a "nexus of transformation," Martha Bayless has argued, that opens up "a domestic space for the enactment of [...] female transfiguration," albeit whose models, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella, are rather politically backward (2012: 39-40, 50, see also Bradford, 2012: 172). Moreover, *Moana* is a fantasy, a princess film, made for children and families as the first audience, and as such, its innocence does not need to comply with convention and expectation (Bell *et al.*, 1995: 4). A culturally foreign and temporally distant story about a virtuous, asexual, but superior, Polynesian girl, allied with her powerful, but comic and asexual sidekick, makes endowing Pacific Islanders with moral personhood, while ignoring Westerners, safe for audiences. That is to say, *Moana* does not challenge the American and Eurocentric ideology featured in *Rain* and *Blue Hawaii* either politically or commercially (Giroux, 1999; Artz, 2005).

Conclusion: the moral heroes of Hollywood's Pacific

I have not meant to make a "culture industry" argument about how industrial mass media serves capitalist society in this essay. Nor have I meant to foreground the relationship between history and the movies. My goal has rather been methodological. Borrowing the concept of the moral person from social anthropology where it is defined as a status that society confers upon or withholds from actors who are endowed with varying degrees of agency, I went on to adapt Northrop Frye's framework that offers

11. See also Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, Pocahontas and Mulan (Lacroix, 2004; Bradford, 2012: 172, 179). Bayless (2012: 52) also notes the highly lucrative marketing of the Disney princess genre.

discriminations of the agency of heroes in works of fiction. I applied it to the moral portrayal of Pacific Islanders and Westerners in three Hollywood movies in which I compared modes of action, as greater than, equal to and less than others in their society, to the environment they inhabit and in relationship to we, the audience. What I want to emphasize is that my focus on moral heroism in Frye's three contexts clearly rivets analytical attention on the preoccupations of the main characters in a way that has not been appreciated before. Let me summarize how the moral heroes of these movies were made to appear in this framework.

While inferior to their environment, the American protagonists of *Rain*, Sadie Thompson and Mr. Davidson, appeared as morally ambiguous. They are both inferior and superior, in their society as well as to us, their audience. Samoans, meanwhile, were completely marginalized as ironic figures, inferior to white society, the environment and to the audience. In *Blue Hawaii*, while being cast as inferior to the environment, Chad Gates is portrayed as possessing a degree of moral superiority over his society and the audience. The Hawaiians in the movie again appeared as simple, ironic figures of fun, inferior to white society, their environment and to us, the audience. Both the Samoans in *Rain* and the Hawaiians in *Blue Hawaii* also posed moral dangers to Mr. Davidson, the rigid missionary and to Chad Gates, the reluctant heir. Now, I also suggested that this asymmetry of moral personhood in the two movies, as well as the moral vulnerability of Western moral heroes to Pacific Islanders, is part of a broader representation by Hollywood of the region, its peoples and cultures in relationship to the West. *Moana* offered an exception in at least two ways.

First of all, *Moana* sidestepped all the inequalities that figure in *Rain* and *Blue Hawaii* by featuring pre-contact Polynesia. It represented cultural autonomy rather than dependency and subordination. Secondly, Māui and Moana were portrayed as moral heroes who possessed a degree of superiority over their fellow Polynesians, over the environment and over us, the audience. The one changes into a hawk while the other separates the waters in a lagoon. Together, they defeat the monstress and restore the land's fertility and the people's maritime agency. Moana and Māui obviously depart from the shocked Samoan fisherman, the obese innkeeper's wife in *Rain* and the beach boys in *Blue Hawaii*. They could be portrayed this way, I proposed, because as an animated musical and princess film, set in a foreign, temporally distant culture, *Moana's* moral heroes become palatable for Western consumption.¹² Or, to put this last point another way, Moana's restoral of the world may be watched as an innocent fairy tale made for children. Seeing her this way does not challenge or subvert

moral order, global, patriarchal, racial, or otherwise. It seems that the genius of Disney's castle transforms more than young girls' dreams of marrying up.

Other than in animated fantasy, Hollywood does not make movies about Pacific Islanders (see *Aloha* 2015, for a recent example). It does not make movies about persons who are superior to, or even equal to, their environment, their society and to we, the audience. Its moral heroes who are endowed with the capacity to discriminate between right and wrong and good from bad do not come from anywhere in the indigenous Pacific. Hollywood makes movies about Americans who try to do something about preserving or restoring what they see as right and good. Pacific Islanders who appear in these movies do not possess the attributes and capacities associated with moral persons. This is what it means to portray them as exotic.

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12. Diaz (2016) argued that the ancient Pacific was chosen because it was viewed as a prime example of "romanticized primitivism and [...] nostalgia for lost innocence" and by setting the story in a pre-contact era, the history of racism and violence of the colonial era could be ignored.

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