

12-2-2016

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Pollack-Pelzner, Daniel, "Lin-Manuel Meets *Moana*" (2016). *Faculty Publications*. Published Version. Submission 68.

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LIN-MANUEL MEETS “MOANA”

12.2.2016



BY DANIEL POLLACK-PELZNER

Disney's new animated film, *Moana*, with songs by *Hamilton* genius Lin-Manuel Miranda, arrived last weekend to great expectations. Would it keep Disney's musical franchise afloat? Would it continue Miranda's *annus mirabilis*? It's the Princess and the MC—but do a Disney musical and a Miranda musical want the same thing?

Trying to stave off a postprandial crash the day after Thanksgiving, my wife and I took our seven-year-old son and four-year-old daughter to an afternoon screening. Although most of the audience seemed to be salivating for another Disney princess adventure, I was craving a Miranda fix: a palate cleanser for rabid fans like me who are still gobbling up every *Hamilton* scrap while we wait for the next main dish. *Moana* has been [hailed](#) as a Polynesian girl-power trip, and Miranda has been rightly anointed the Messiah of the Broadway musical. I'm not convinced, however, that his aesthetic drive quite matches the movie's feminist thrust.

I'll admit that my Disney expertise is limited. I have watched *Frozen* with my daughter about 362 times, but since her interest runs primarily to the first 30 minutes—a terrific sequence of comedy, pathos, and musical daring that rivals *Trainspotting* for sheer visual momentum (and for the sight of adolescents testing the limits of acceptable human behavior)—I've never actually seen the end of the movie. My daughter's preferred segment culminates, of course, with “Let It Go,” an inescapable earworm that I'm ashamed to confess I

rather like. And, horrified though I am by the Disney-industrial complex, I have to admire the queasy moxie it took to meld a female empowerment anthem with a fashion makeover. When Elsa flashed that turquoise dress (with Idina Menzel’s pipes on full blast), a million karaoke covers were born, and a billion dollars in princess costumes were grossed.

Will all my daughter’s classmates sport sarongs this Christmas? Disney had to yank an ill-conceived Halloween costume for Moana’s accomplice, the tattooed demigod Maui, when charges of cultural appropriation were [levied](#), and Maui has since been dogged by [concerns](#) that his hefty physique reinforces Polynesian stereotypes. But young Moana herself (voiced by Auli’i Cravalho in an appealing debut) strikes me as blandly irreproachable: a boon to all my Pacific Islander students who’ve wished for a blockbuster heroine who looks like them, and a gift to scholars who pine for the heyday of archetypal gender criticism.

The plot rides the familiar currents of second-wave feminism. Freed from the marriage plot conventions that confined Mulan and Pocahontas, Moana’s plucky forebears, our action-heroine taps the fluid power of the maternal ocean, places her pink seashell atop her forefathers’ monolith, and rubs noses with a green goddess to restore fertility to her barren land. The hawkish Maui’s phallic hook is destroyed (and then refurbished by the goddess), and Heihei, Moana’s dim-witted pet cock, doesn’t know which seed to peck.

Moana tracks, more or less, the same Joseph Campbell-sanctioned arc as *Frozen*: a spunky princess awakens spring by restoring an angry witch’s heart, with the help of a gruff chauffeur and a dopey merchandizing sidekick—only Moana is an Anna with no sisterly Elsa in sight. Call it “Semifreddo.” My kids applauded. And at a moment when a female chief and a pluralist coalition seem increasingly the realm of fantasy, there was bittersweet comfort in seeing that fantasy top the [holiday box office](#).

But forget the story. (I nearly did.) We were there for the songs. Could Miranda—tapped to succeed Bobby Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez, the *Frozen* whizzes, as Disney’s court composer—polish up the requisite anthems and novelty numbers with (in the Marquis de Lafayette’s [phrase](#)) his practical tactical brilliance? He grew up alongside the revived Disney musical brand, when Broadway teams like Alan Mencken and Howard Ashman wrote songs for *The Little Mermaid* (Miranda’s son is named for its crab composer, Sebastian); he signed on to film Disney’s *Mary Poppins* sequel in London next year; and he revealed that Angelica Schuyler’s allusion to *Macbeth*, when she tells her brother-in-law Hamilton to “[screw your courage to the sticking place](#),” is really a nod to Ashman’s lyrics for *Beauty and the Beast*, where he first heard that line.¹

MAYBE THERE’S A GENRE TENSION
BETWEEN A DISNEY HEROINE’S BALLAD
AND THE RHYTHMS THAT MIRANDA’S

“VOICE INSIDE” CAN SING.

But even if Disney trumps Shakespeare in Miranda’s consciousness, he was determined not to be daunted. “Don’t think about ‘Let It Go’,” Miranda [told himself](#) over and over in his weekly afternoon Skype sessions with the Disney creative team, before he headed to evening performances of *Hamilton*. *Moana* brings a fresh culture and seascape to the Disney musical, within the recognized genre constraints. But beneath the tattoos and seashells beats a surprisingly familiar Miranda musical. It’s not *Hamilton*, though; it’s a South Pacific *In the Heights*.

I suppose that shouldn’t be a surprise, actually. Like Miranda’s Broadway debut, a sort of salsa-tuned *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Moana* stages a community in transition, with a heroine torn between upholding tradition and striking out anew. For *Heights*, it was an uptown barrio threatened by gentrification, with Nuyorican Miranda’s character, a Dominican immigrant named Usnavi, deciding whether to man his bodega or return to the island. For *Moana*, it’s the choice between running her island’s sustainable coconut agriculture (“This tradition is our mission,” the chief [sings](#)) or sailing off beyond the reef.

Many a first-year locavore might pick the former, but *Moana* opts for a semester at sea, buoyed by tales of her wayfaring ancestors. Mystical grandmothers spur self-realization: “Abuela, I’m sorry / But I ain’t going back because I’m telling your story,” Usnavi [raps](#) at the end of *Heights*, anticipating Miranda’s [conclusion](#) to *Moana*: “We tell the stories of our elders in a never-ending chain.” (He’s translating a Pacific fusion chant by Opetaia Foa’i). The heroes become narrators, keeping communal tradition alive through storytelling, even as they leave their islands behind.

Where Miranda intersects with the princess plot is in his penchant for a gender split between the adventurer and the narrator—or, in musical terms, the balladeer and the rapper. Unlike *Hamilton*, where Alexander takes his shot at the cascading rhymes of revolution while his wife Eliza stays home to sing his story, *Heights* features a male homebody MC who spotlights the neighborhood’s stories while the female lead, “Nina Rosario, the barrio’s best,” gets a shot at leaving Washington Heights for a scholarship to Stanford. (Her plot line might have been based on the trajectory of Miranda’s coauthor, the playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes, who was the first in her family to leave her West Philly district for Yale).

Moana’s big ocean-gazing number, “[How Far I’ll Go](#)” (answer: to every tween slumber party in the foreseeable future), swells with the refrain, “See the line where the sky meets the sea? / It calls me.” It’s a line that calls to Miranda as well, since it reflects the sightline in Nina’s ballad, “[Breathe](#)”: “I’m coming back home / With my eyes on the horizon.” Angelica Schuyler’s showstopping anatomy of social constraint, “Satisfied,” also haunts *Moana*, who rejects her assigned role: “I’ll be satisfied if I play along / But the voice inside sings a different song.” *Moana*’s different song is pretty much the same “I Want” song that’s resounded from “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” to “Let It Go,” give or take a Polynesian drumbeat, but it’s

nice to hear Miranda giving hearty voice to unbridled female desire.



Dwayne Johnson and Lin-Manuel Miranda at the Moana World Premiere. Photograph courtesy of Alberto E. Rodriguez / IMDB


To see Miranda's lyrical gifts on display, however, you have to look to the male braggadocios in *Moana*. The demigod Maui's cheeky catalogue of his gifts to mankind, "[You're Welcome](#)," takes flight when Miranda realizes that the chorus, "What can I say except you're welcome?" actually isn't all he can say. "Well, come to think of it," he punningly pivots, and then he's off, giving Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson a "Modern Major-General" patter: "Honestly, I could go on and on / I could explain every natural phenomenon." So why doesn't he? The answer comes from the score's other playful number, "[Shiny](#)," sung by Tamatoa, a bling-encrusted crab who stashed Maui's hook in his golden hoard. He's Sebastian swollen to Big Pun proportions, Smaug via David Bowie, and he's voiced as a louche glam-rocker by *Flight of the Conchords*'s Jemaine Clement, with a touch of King George III's camp disdain from *Hamilton*.


Rejecting Moana's call to heed the true voice inside, glitzy Tamatoa celebrates surfaces, and his sparkly lyrics follow suit. Although he disses the "little semi-demi-mini-god" Maui ("You can't expect a demigod / To beat a decapod"), he recognizes a fellow stylist in his tattooed rival: "For just like you I made myself a work of art." There seems to be something suspect for Miranda in this aesthetic relish, as though he were turning his own showmanship into villainy. "What a terrible performance," Tamatoa taunts Maui. "Get the hook! (Get it?)" That desire to point us toward his wordplay gets cast as preening self-regard, the destructive male narcissism that Moana's earnest heart-song has to overcome.

Or maybe there's a genre tension between the smooth self-fulfillment of a Disney heroine's ballad and the self-reflective staccato rhythms that Miranda's "voice inside" can sing. Miranda said in an [interview](#) that he identified with Moana: although he grew up in a close-knit community in northern Manhattan (you can [watch him](#) enlisting his relatives for a flash-mob version of Tevye's "To Life" at his wedding), he had his eye on the horizon, longing for a creative life on Broadway. But he didn't earn that gig by rhyming "I'll know" with "I'll go"; he won his MacArthur "Genius Grant" for [rapping](#) "a bunch of revolutionary manumission abolitionists: / Give me a position, show me where the ammunition is!"

LIKE MIRANDA'S "IN THE HEIGHTS," "MOANA" STAGES A COMMUNITY IN TRANSITION.

In his career so far, Miranda has given his heroines, from Nina to Moana, sweetly generic anthems, while his male characters savor the richest hip-hop lines. (The remarkable exception is "[Satisfied](#)," where Angelica Schuyler, the frustrated daughter who's "the oldest and the wittiest," knows "the gossip in New York City is insidious.") To an extent, Miranda is just following mainstream pop norms. ("How Far I'll Go" already has a [pop cover](#) by rising star Alessia Cara that plays over *Moana*'s end credits.) On the tracks released to date on his "Hamilton Mixtape," which features covers and remixes of the musical's songs, the guest artists mostly stick to type: women croon and men rap. But the mixtape standout is Snow Tha Product, a Latina MC who contributes her blistering bilingual verse to "[Immigrants \(We Get the Job Done\)](#)": "I'll outwork you, it hurts you, you claim I'm stealing jobs though / Peter Piper claimed he picked them, he just underpaid Pablo." Though class and race injustices provide the context, Snow Tha Product (whose stage name [nods](#) to Disney's *Snow White* merchandise) also outworks every guy on the track.

Can Miranda write a princess who doesn't have to choose between venturing beyond the horizon and singing with the full range of her composer's talents—a true freestyler? I want to know how far he'll go. And for the record, when we got home after the movie, the song my son requested was "Shiny." My daughter asked for "You're Welcome." 

1. Lin Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution* (Grand Central Publishing, 2016), p. 170 n. 7. 

#CHILDREN #FAMILY #FEMINISM #FILM #MULTICULTURALISM #POP CULTURE

ON THE TABLE



Moana

Directed by John Musker and Ron Clements

Disney, 2016