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Contingent Horizons: The York University Student Journal of Anthropology. 2019. 5(1):45-62.

First published online July 12, 2019.

Contingent Horizons is available online at ch.journals.yorku.ca.

Contingent Horizons is an annual open-access, peer-reviewed student journal published by the department of anthropology at York University, Toronto, Canada. The journal provides a platform for graduate and undergraduate students of anthropology to publish their outstanding scholarly work in a peer-reviewed academic forum. Contingent Horizons is run by a student editorial collective and is guided by an ethos of social justice, which informs its functioning, structure, and policies. Contingent Horizons' website provides open-access to the journal's published articles.

ISSN 2292-7514 (Print) ISSN 2292-6739 (Online)

EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE Meredith Evans, Nadine Ryan, Isabella Chawrun, Divy Puvimanasinghe, and Katie Squires

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The Indigenous Body as Animated Palimpsest

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In 1995, Disney Studios released *Pocahontas*, its first animated feature based on a historical figure and featuring Indigenous characters. Amongst mixed reviews, the film provoked criticism regarding historical inaccuracy, cultural disrespect, and the sexualization of the titular Pocahontas as a Native American woman. Over the following years the studio has released a handful of films centered around Indigenous cultures, rooted in varying degrees of reality and fantasy. The metanarrative of these films suggests the company’s struggle with how to approach Indigenous storylines, with attempts that often read as appropriation more than representation. In response to overt and frequently hostile criticism, Disney over-compensates by creating fictional hybridized cultures that cannot definitively be attributed to any one people, so as to avoid backlash that tarnishes their reputation. Focusing on *Pocahontas* but also considering other Disney representations of Indigenous peoples, this paper incorporates Laban Movement Analysis to explore how the characters in these films serve as palimpsests for Disney ideologies of race and gender. The studio inscribes meanings onto animated bodies and movement, erasing and rewriting (or drawing) history to create a story with just enough Disney “sparkle.” Spanning the fields of popular culture, visual anthropology, and dance studies, this paper examines how *Pocahontas* and other characters are animated to absorb and embody popular understandings and misunderstandings of Indigeneity, native history, and transcultural exchange, and how subsequent films continue to add new layers to Disney’s attempts at negotiating diversity.

KEY WORDS Disney animation, Indigenous representation, movement analysis

In 1995, Disney Studios released the film *Pocahontas* (Gabriel and Goldberg 1995), its first animated feature based on a historical figure and featuring an Indigenous main character. Reviews of the time reflected mixed reactions, by turns praising the film’s “thoughtful” representation of real issues (Ebert 1995; Siskel 1995), observing that the studio “played it safe” and gave “new meaning to the phrase ‘politically correct’” (Dutka 1995), and criticizing the film for historical inaccuracy (Dutka 1995) or “propagating the ‘Good Indian/Bad Indian’ theme” (Gilbert 2015).

Comments in behind-the-scenes promotional materials from *Pocahontas*’s production staff suggest that the company felt confident in not only their choice of story material, but

their “authentic” representation of the seventeenth-century Powhatan people (Gabriel and Goldberg 2005, “Audio Commentary”). In supplemental DVD materials discussing the making of the film, producer James Pentecost and directors Eric Goldberg and Mike Gabriel discuss the reliance on Indigenous consultants—including Shirley Little Dove Custalow McGowan and activist Russell Means, who voices Pocahontas’s father, Chief Powhatan, in the film—throughout production for such elements as Algonquian language, dress, and other aspects of daily life. Interestingly, while discussions of the accuracy of these elements are somewhat general and vague, much more enthusiasm is expressed about the amount of research and detail that went into several of the film’s European elements, such as the colours of the ship that carries Captain John Smith to the New World, the types of cannons used by the English settlers, and even the ruff and bell adorning the English Governor Radcliffe’s dog Percy (Gabriel and Goldberg 2005, “Audio Commentary”).

Though significant as the first film in the studio’s animated canon to feature a story focusing on Indigenous characters and storylines, *Pocahontas* is not Disney’s first animated film to include representations of Indigenous cultures, nor is it their last. In this article I examine the metanarrative of Disney’s attempts at Indigenous representation, beginning by analyzing two Disney-produced images of North American Indigenous groups: the Blackfoot (Siksika) in *Peter Pan* (Geronimi et al. 1953) and the Powhatan in *Pocahontas*. I approach this task through the lens of Laban Movement Analysis, a method of movement observation which I will introduce in greater detail in the following section.

In the spirit of anthropologist Joseph Dumit’s Implosion Project, which provides a framework for investigating “the embeddedness of objects, facts, actions, and people in the world and the world in them” (Dumit 2014, 350), I look at the animated movement of these characters as an object. The animated gestures and postures of the films’ characters are informed by particular white, settler-colonial constructions of Indigenous people, constructions which are then echoed by the white, settler-colonial characters present in the films. The representations in these films in turn contribute to the reinscribing of popular perceptions of Indigeneity over time, including those beyond Turtle Island/Canada and the continental United States, with the characters’ movement contributing to different images of Indigeneity that are informed by and contribute to these various mythologies. Through movement analysis I engage with Indigenous scholarship to investigate how Disney replaces old settler-colonial mythologies with new ones, reinforcing the conflict between their attempts at inclusivity and social consciousness with their white, Eurocentric lens.

I then briefly track Disney’s presentation of Indigenous characters in the decades following *Pocahontas*, concluding with their recent film *Moana* (Clements and Musker 2016), as I consider how popular and critical reception of *Pocahontas* may have influenced the studio’s decisions regarding how to approach Indigenous storylines. Tracing this journey, I argue that the animated bodies of the characters created in each of Disney’s attempts at Indigenous representation function as palimpsests, as the company’s continued efforts to “get it right” manifest in both trends and alterations in the characters’ movement.

Methodology

Laban Movement Analysis, often referred to as LMA, is a system of movement observation and analysis developed out of the work of Austro-Hungarian choreographer and theorist

Rudolf von Laban in the early and mid 1900s. The system provides a descriptive vocabulary for analyzing movement that aims not to assign value or judgment to the qualities observed, but rather to identify patterns or shifts in movement. LMA has become quite detailed as those who studied under Laban have continued to expand and refine it after his death. For the sake of brevity, I will keep my explanations and usages fairly surface level, explaining terminology as necessary throughout my analysis and providing additional notes where needed. While many of the terms’ meanings can be generally understood based on the word’s English-language definition, detailed explanations in the notes provide further insight.

One convention of note for the reader is that LMA terminology is usually capitalized in order to distinguish its specific meanings from broader usages of the same words. For example, in LMA, the word “Space” with a capital S refers to Space Mode, which focuses on “the spatial architecture of human movement” (Fernandes 2015, 195). “Space” includes elements such as levels, direction, and distance of gestures from the center of the body, while “space” with a lowercase S may be used more generally to refer to the space one occupies (such as a room) or any other common definition. Likewise, the term “Quick” in LMA describes the acceleration of movement, and not necessarily the speed of its completion if it were to be timed.

Though LMA can be applied to a wide variety of movement contexts, it is important to acknowledge that it comes out of a distinctly white, European perspective and is therefore no more universal or objective than the many other methodologies and perspectives of the same heritage employed in the academic institution. As observed by dance scholars Ann Dils and Jill Flanders Crosby (2001), “like all analysis systems, the Laban system reflects the movement experiences and preferences of its makers” (67). Anthropologist Brenda Farnell (2011) identifies the latent ethnocentricity of LMA, citing Alan Lomax’s Choreometrics project¹ of the 1960s and 70s. Dance ethnographer and Certified Laban Movement Analyst (CMA) Joan D. Frosch (1999) likewise notes that while “the tidy categories reducing the dancer to a relatively neat object of study may have seemed an attractive systematic approach to some at the time” (256), the Choreometrics project is highly reductionist and neglects to consider the subjectivity of LMA as a system—its context and situatedness, to borrow from Dumit (2014). Frosch observes, however, that LMA can be a useful tool in ethnographic and cultural studies “when tied to a contextual approach” (1999, 274), and a number of dance ethnographers have been known to incorporate aspects of LMA in their own fieldwork (see, for example, Dils and Crosby 2001; Hanna 1987; Ness 1992).

Recognizing this position, the application of LMA in this study has the potential to serve as a valuable tool for identifying patterns in how white, Western animators imagine, perceive, and reproduce views of Indigeneity, and not for drawing conclusions about the actual cultural groups being represented on the screen in the films I have chosen to discuss. LMA is used here to attend, in the words of anthropologist Sarah Pink (2003), “not only to the internal ‘meanings’ of an image, but also to how the image was produced and how it is made meaningful by viewers” (186). It allows us to see what is actually going on underneath the layers of culturally-ascribed meanings that are placed onto the body and its ways of moving, and to question why we might make those connections between movement and meaning, based on our own cultural situatedness.

Indigenous literature scholar Daniel Heath Justice (2018), a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, writes of the “burdensome representational weight” that non-Indigenous language carries in stories about Indigenous peoples, and how the words used carry “layers of colonialist misunderstandings” (6). In this article I aim to identify how these colonialist misunderstandings are conveyed in the movement patterns of the films’ Indigenous characters, which are created by non-Indigenous animators. Rather than simply providing a summary of my movement observations, I have attempted to bring LMA as an analytical methodology into conversation with scholarship from the fields of Indigenous studies, anthropology, dance studies, and Disney and animation studies. In this way, I use LMA as a tool for critical reflection of the white, settler-colonial culture not only in which these films are situated, but in which their creators are situated as well.

Tiger Lily: Peter Pan’s “Indian Princess”

Pocahontas may have been met with mixed reactions regarding historical and cultural accuracy, but the treatment of the Powhatan people in the 1995 film is generally considered an improvement over Disney’s previous animated portrayal of North American Indigenous characters in 1953’s *Peter Pan*. True to mainstream priorities of the early twentieth century, accurate details of what is presumably meant to be pre-colonization Blackfoot people (so identified in a visual gag by John Darling based on a large set of black footprints) along with non-offensive, non-stereotyped portrayals, were deemed unnecessary. The animated film was released nearly fifty years after J.M. Barrie’s original play of the same name, which opened in 1904; however, it does not appear to have strayed far from the spirit of its source material, which, according to Victorian literature scholar Anne Hiebert Alton, presented many “popular fantasy tropes” of the early 1900s as caricatured, childlike interpretations, befitting the premise and setting of the story (Laskow 2014).

Daniel Heath Justice discusses the “representational burdens” present in the fantasy genre, and the “savagism-versus-civilization binary” in particular (2018, 149). He argues that Western fantasy fiction is built around this ideology,

Wherein largely white heroes possessed of courage and, sometimes, strange talents struggle to challenge evil and reaffirm the values of social conservatism and right order—namely, might is right. Civilization is bad or good; savages are noble or brutish—yet in either case, the conflict between a simplistic primitivism rooted or trapped in the past and a contemporary progressivism of technological complexity is the superstructure undergirding the narrative content of most genre fantasy (2018, 150).

In *Peter Pan*, John Darling plays the role of the white hero as he leads the Lost Boys on an expedition to “capture a few Indians,” a regular pastime in Neverland. John wears several signifiers of civilization, including a top hat and glasses, and readily sets himself in charge despite having only just arrived on the island. He demonstrates his superior knowledge as he reminds everyone that “the Indian is cunning, but not intelligent,” apparently proven first by the underhanded manner in which they capture the Lost Boys, and then

by their difficulty in understanding that it was Captain Hook and not the Lost Boys who captured their princess, Tiger Lily.

As the representative of European settler-colonial ideology, John Darling's movement qualities also serve to set him apart, both from the Lost Boys and the Blackfoot men (and later, a few women) they encounter. John demonstrates a Pin Body Attitude,² his verticality further emphasized by a lifted chin, puffed-out chest, and pulled-back shoulders. He leads the Lost Boys through the terrain of Neverland as if he is a military officer, beginning by saluting Peter Pan as he pledges to "try to be worthy of [his] post" before commanding the Lost Boys to fall in line behind him with a "Forward march!" as a military drum tattoo begins to play in the background. He marches with Mid-Limb Initiation,³ pulling his elbows back to swing his arms and lifting his knees high with each step. John tends toward Advancing Shaping,⁴ led in this scene by his chest, though he often Advances with his head in other scenes.

When they eventually come upon the Blackfoot warriors and are immediately captured by them, the two elements in John Darling's characterization of Indigenous peoples as "cunning, but not intelligent" are each presented through different means. "Cunning" is demonstrated through the characters' actions, as they have devised a plan to distract the children with their footprints and then hide in the trees to surround and capture them. In contrast, "not intelligent" is shown less explicitly through their movements, relying on the viewer's cultural situatedness to read the embedded meanings.

The primary example of this signification appears in the posture and stride of the Blackfoot men as they carry the captured Lost Boys to their camp (Geronimi et al. 1953, 35:04-21): their Ball Body Attitudes,⁵ with rounded shoulders and necks/heads protruding forward rather than upward, contrast sharply with John Darling's Pin Body Attitude and exaggerated verticality. Their steps are Initiated Distally,⁶ lifting the foot/ankle rather than the knee, and Heavy Passive Weight⁷ results in a downward emphasis on each footfall, rather than the upward emphasis of the marching seen from John and the Lost Boys. These characteristics create the sense of a slow, plodding walk as they lead their captives away in a single-file line. A childlike mentality seems to be suggested too in the image of the final Blackfoot member dragging along Michael Darling's teddy bear, which in the following scene has been tied up as a prisoner along with John, Michael, and the Lost Boys—as if these Indigenous characters do not understand that the bear is an inanimate object and not a threat. The composition of this final image of the scene both echoes and contrasts the earlier one of the Lost Boys following John Darling, but it also bears a striking resemblance to images often used to demonstrate human evolution, featuring a line of walking profiles of Australopithecus, Homo Habilis, Homo Erectus, and so on.⁸

This imagery suggests what Cherokee writer Thomas King observes in James Fenimore Cooper's 1841 novel *The Deerslayer*, that "Cooper was implying...that Whites had a pre-frontal cortex and Indians did not...Whites were human, while Indians were still working their way up the evolutionary ladder" (King 2012, 29). King's observation is supported by the work of critical race theorist Sylvia Wynter, who argues that as Western society came to embrace science over religion, race became the preferred method by which to answer the question of what it is to be human (Wynter 2003, 264). In this race-based human/

subhuman dichotomy, North American Indigenous populations were “portrayed as the very acme of the savage, irrational Other” (2003, 266).

Postcolonial philosopher Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) explores at length the tradition of Western society viewing itself as superior to others. He addresses the historical culpability of anthropology and other forms of scholarship that are situated within an imperialist society, arguing that in the nineteenth century “the Aryan myth dominated historical and cultural anthropology at the expense of the ‘lesser’ peoples” (1978, 99). In *Peter Pan*, the intellectual and inquisitive John Darling serves as a stand-in for a Western anthropologist. He leads the Lost Boys in their quest to find Neverland’s “Aborigines,” but his interest is more academic than his hosts’, given Peter Pan’s suggestion that the group “capture a few Indians” on their adventure. Daniel Heath Justice’s discussion of “Indigenous deficiency” further develops the picture being presented. According to Justice, the narrative of deficiency positions Indigenous peoples as being “in a state of constant lack: in morals, laws, culture, restraint, language, ambition, hygiene, desire, love” (2018, 2). They suffer from “constitutional absences in...character, or biology, or intellect” (2018, 3), characterizations which can be seen in *Peter Pan*.

The mid-century representations of Indigenous characters in *Peter Pan* are clearly meant to be humorous caricatures of fantastical “others,” and not thoughtful, well-rounded renderings of real groups of people, historical or contemporary. Animation scholar Paul Wells states that, due to the “tradition of caricature” which is central to the history of cartoon animation, “issues of representation are complicated, first, by the purpose of the representation, and second, by its expression” (188). The purpose seems to be to fulfil a fantasy trope alongside pirates, mermaids, and a land where children never have to grow up; and the expression is to present these characters as simpler, sillier, and more exaggerated than the main characters.

Though the use of caricature is obvious in the majority of the Blackfoot characters, there is one exception—Tiger Lily. As Disney’s first “Indian Princess,” Tiger Lily is introduced separately from and presented quite differently than the other Indigenous characters in *Peter Pan*. Literature scholar Clare Bradford observes a common trope from historical fiction in which “exceptional Indigenous characters are depicted as ‘more advanced’ than other members of their clans or nations, more apt to befriend white protagonists and to value European culture and practices” (2015, 178). Bradford cites *Pocahontas* as a prime example of this trope (which I will address below), but Tiger Lily also fits this description. She is demonstrated to be “exceptional” in her friendship with Peter Pan, her stalwart demeanor in the face of Captain Hook, and the ways in which her movement patterns more closely resemble those of the Darlings than the other Blackfoot characters, aligning her with “European culture and practices.” Tiger Lily’s skin is even a different shade than the film’s other Indigenous characters, lighter with less of a red undertone—a significant distinction, considering the protagonists’ primary interaction with the rest of the Blackfoot characters (and only interaction that occurs with Tiger Lily and her people together) features a song entitled “What Makes the Red Man Red.”

Both Tiger Lily and her father, the Chief, stand and sit with an upright posture, setting them apart as the leaders—or perhaps, in the Darlings’ European perspective, royalty—of their people. Tiger Lily’s Pin Body Attitude resembles that of John and Wendy Darling, while the Chief’s Wall Body Attitude,⁹ combined with his impressive height and stern

demeanour, lends him a somewhat more imposing air. Here we see a different representation of the white European imaginary, as the Chief appears to be modeled after the taxonomies of eighteenth-century physical anthropologist Carl Linnaeus. Linnaeus is noted by Said as a prominent figure in the “impulse to classify nature and man into types” (1978, 119), with his racial classification of American Indigenous peoples being that of “upright” and “choleric” (Linnaeus quoted in Farnell 2011, 140).¹⁰ These two characteristics are in fact so exaggerated that even when the Chief dances during the celebration of Tiger Lily’s return (and honouring of Peter Pan as her rescuer), his face remains impassive and his upper body stays rigid and upright while his feet move rapidly below him.

Pocahontas and Changing Imaginaries

While *Peter Pan* employs movement and body carriage to caricature the racial difference between the film’s white protagonists and the Indigenous “other,” *Pocahontas* uses these elements in an attempt at creating a sensitive and nuanced representation of the Powhatan people. Forty-two years later, *Pocahontas* rewrites the story of how Disney handles Indigenous characters—but retains a trace of what came before. The lineage traced between the characters of Tiger Lily and Pocahontas in particular suggests that the Indigenous body serves as a palimpsest for Disney ideologies of race and gender.

A palimpsest is, by its most fundamental definition, a writing surface on which the original text has been erased and the surface reused, and the term is frequently used to refer to anything which is, to quote the Oxford English Dictionary, “reused or altered while still retaining traces of its earlier form.” With *Pocahontas*, Disney rewrites their image of Indigeneity, reflecting shifting social views of race, culture, and history. However, just as a palimpsest may still retain traces of the original writing as it is overwritten, so traces of the physicality attributed to Tiger Lily can be seen in Pocahontas’s movement signature, such as her upright posture with prominently lifted chest and chin.

Pocahontas is first seen perched on a rocky outcropping, alone with nature. She stands with her feet further apart than the typical Disney Princess and her chin lifted high; her chest is lifted up and out, highlighted by pulling back her arms and shoulders. This stance is highly reminiscent of Tiger Lily, though Pocahontas’s Body Attitude is more Wall-like than Pin-like. Most of the film’s other Powhatan characters also exhibit a Wall Body Attitude, along with a held torso and little Passive Weight. When moving the upper body, the torso Sequences Simultaneously¹¹ from the hips, rather than Successively¹² up or down through the shoulders. Arm gestures are often Sustained¹³ and tend to occur in Far Reach,¹⁴ usually mobilizing from the shoulder or elbow in an Arcing¹⁵ pattern—a frequent habit in Pocahontas’s father, Chief Powhatan, especially. All of these elements contribute to a preference for Stability over Mobility¹⁶ in the Powhatan characters. As I will explore in the following paragraph, the film’s European characters engage in movement patterns that suggest a preference for Mobility, establishing a contrast between the two groups. This juxtaposition seems to be symbolic of each group’s position: on the one hand, the Stable Powhatan who already inhabited the land; on the other, the Mobile English traveling across the ocean.

The English settlers appear Quick and Free in their use of Effort as well as more indulgent in Shape Flow,¹⁷ with more small, incidental movements accompanying their

actions and speech. Whereas Pocahontas dismisses her potential suitor Kocoum as “so serious”¹⁸ when embodying the film’s established movement qualities for Indigenous characters, John Smith, her actual love interest, is shown to be relaxed and mobile through his Freer Flow¹⁹ and inability to stand still. While Powhatan men such as Kocoum and Chief Powhatan tend to stand in a neutral position, with little Shaping to suggest Advancing or Retreating, John Smith and the nefarious Governor Radcliffe both tend to Advance, often while interacting with objects around them, such as leaning on furniture or fiddling with whatever is at hand. This shared quality between the film’s male hero and its villain is noteworthy. Though we are meant to see one man as good-hearted and the other as greedy, the film establishes in the song “Mine, Mine, Mine” that they do share something in common: a desire to possess the land to which they have journeyed. While Radcliffe covets the land for its potential to provide him with gold and status, Smith is eager to “tame” its wilderness. Both men wish to claim dominion over the land, and perhaps their shared movement tendencies signify this impulse to disrupt and control the nature around them.

Pocahontas exudes a sense of tranquility and nobility when standing still, but she seems to revel in movement: running, diving, climbing, rolling, and frequently demonstrating her adventurous, free spirit in movements reminiscent not of the European ballet tradition, as seen in her Disney princess ancestors Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora, but that of early modern dance pioneers such as Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham—a dance tradition associated with North America, but not Native America.²⁰ Her athleticism and dexterity are reflected in her Free Flow and Shaping as she moves through nature, dexterously maneuvering herself around trees, rocks, and rivers, in contrast with John Smith’s tendency (before meeting Pocahontas, anyway) to clear such obstacles from his path. We see traces of Tiger Lily, whose love of movement manifests in dancing (perhaps the only time she is not still and composed), rewritten in Pocahontas’s more nature-centered activity, in a film attempting to share a message of respect and harmony not only between people, but with nature as well.

This approach to the interactions and attitudes of the two different cultures represented in *Pocahontas* suggests the “romantic portrayal” of pre-colonization Indigenous cultures discussed by visual anthropologist Harald Prins (2002, 62). Combined with the overall shift in Indigenous characters to a more upright posture and controlled carriage as compared to those in *Peter Pan*, *Pocahontas* appears to signify a shift in presentation from “cunning but not intelligent” toward “noble savage,” a literary and artistic trope dating back to the seventeenth century (Prins 2002). Although the mythology of the “noble savage” and other romantic portrayals of Indigenous peoples have existed for centuries, this change represents Disney’s attempts to replace the fantastical image from *Peter Pan* with updated settler-colonial ideologies surrounding Indigenous bodies—in this case, the mythology of the “Ecological Indian” (Krech 199, 216).

Theorized by anthropologist Shepard Krech III²¹ just four years after *Pocahontas* was released, the Ecological Indian myth underlies the image of Indigenous peoples as “friend[s], steward[s], and defender[s] of nature” (Krech 1999, 216). Contemporary theology scholar Daniel G. Deffenbaugh argues that this “mythic image [is] propagated to mollify the spiritual cravings of our own culture” (2000, 483). Deffenbaugh provides as an example the Keep America Beautiful public service announcement of the 1970s (Marsteller Inc. 1971), which features “what would become one of the most poignant symbols of the

American environmental movement” (Deffenbaugh 2000, 477): the “Crying Indian,” an image of an Indigenous man, at peace with nature, shedding a single tear as he comes upon pollution, litter and other trappings of colonialism and industrialization. Disney attempts with *Pocahontas* to erase and rewrite their previous antiquated, overtly racist portrayals of Indigenous peoples, but they cannot avoid leaving an indelible trace of this history due to the ideologies in which they are culturally situated.

When compared to other Indigenous characters in the film, Pocahontas does not stand out from her people as dramatically as her “Indian Princess” predecessor, Tiger Lily—in terms of movement, anyway. Because the animated tradition of caricature is limited in *Pocahontas* to animal sidekicks and white villains, Pocahontas herself is distinguished as an “exceptional Indigenous character” by other means: not through exaggerated differences in appearance and movement, but via characterization. Pocahontas stands out from her people—both to her settler love interest John Smith and to the film’s audience—first for her adventurous spirit and curiosity regarding the newly-arrived English settlers, and then for her capacity for empathy toward them. It seems to be this empathy, combined with the kindred imagination and curiosity she shares with John Smith (and perhaps her beauty as well), that prompts Smith to distinguish her from the rest of her people when he says, “We’ve improved the lives of savages all over the world...Not that you’re a savage.”

Daniel Heath Justice emphasizes the important role that empathy plays in Indigenous stories: “Imagination and curiosity are essential to the empathy required for healthy, respectful, and sustainable relationships with a whole host of beings and peoples, from cedar trees and magpies to thunderstorms and moss-blanketed boulders...The more expansive our imaginations, the deeper our capacity for empathy” (2018, 77). Interestingly, most of Disney’s Indigenous narratives feature empathy as the main goal, starting with *Pocahontas*, which emphasizes the curiosity of its two romantic leads and how that shared curiosity brings about empathy for both environment and people. A number of the films mentioned in the following section, including *The Emperor’s New Groove* (Dindal 2000), *Brother Bear* (Walker 2003), and *Moana* all resolve due to empathy and understanding rather than (or in addition to) simply defeating a villain.

White Flight: Fear of Backlash and the Avoidance of Indigenous Storylines

Disney producers may have felt that with *Pocahontas* they respectfully transformed an important historical narrative into a compelling piece of entertainment through careful research and consultation (Gabriel and Goldberg 2005, “Audio Commentary”), yet the film’s release provoked criticism regarding historical inaccuracy, cultural disrespect, and the sexualization of Pocahontas as a Native American woman. Cree scholar and performer Michael Greyeyes has addressed the pitfalls of settler-colonial efforts at celebrating or representing Indigeneity, arguing their inevitable colonial nature despite (presumably) good intentions. In the example he provides, involving a university assignment about world cultures,²² Greyeyes observes that such attempts are “completely in line with the larger colonial movement, in which the West ‘mines’ world cultures for their ideas, symbols, stories, natural resources and even people for the West’s economic, political and cultural benefit” (Greyeyes 2017, 39). The Disney-fication of Pocahontas’s story in 1995 sugar-coated the brutal mistreatment and genocide that came with American colonization, turned the

pre-teen Pocahontas into a sexualized “babe” (this aging up of the main character referred to by producers as “condensing the story” in order to incorporate a romance with John Smith) (Gabriel and Goldberg 2005, “Audio Commentary”), and disappointed audience members who had looked forward to finally being represented on the Disney screen.

With the exception of *Mulan* (Bancroft and Cook 1998), Disney followed *Pocahontas* with a string of white, Western-European narratives, carefully avoiding if not racial and cultural diversity, then at the least representations of Indigeneity. In 2000 they released *The Emperor’s New Groove*, a buddy comedy about a young, spoiled emperor who learns empathy and generosity when he is turned into a llama and forced to work with a peasant to save himself. While scholars such as archeologist Helaine Silverman have identified the setting of the film as Inca Peru both from the film’s visuals and from Disney-released information about production, influences, and research trips taken by artists, the film carefully avoids explicit identification with any one, real cultural representation (Silverman 2002, 305). In audio commentary available on the film’s DVD release, director Mark Dindal and producer Randy Fullmer mention that they chose to locate the story in a non-existent, fantastical South-American country in order to avoid offending anyone with the comedic anachronisms, inconsistencies, and lack of historical or cultural accuracy present in the film (Dindal 2005, “Audio Commentary”). Silverman frames Dindal and Fullmer’s reason for avoiding any sort of geographical or cultural specificity not as a courtesy but as a method of skirting issues of authenticity while still engaging in “cultural plundering,” adding that the vagueness was likely a response to criticism about how *Pocahontas* presented a real culture and time period (Silverman 2002, 298).

While subsequent films, such as *Brother Bear* and *Lilo and Stitch* (DeBlois and Sanders 2002), make tentative steps toward representation of real-life Indigenous cultures both past and present, the trajectory created by *The Emperor’s New Groove* and continued in films such as *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (Trousdale and Wise 2001) suggests the metanarrative of Disney’s struggle with how to approach Indigenous storylines as follows: attempts, whether well-intentioned or not, often read as appropriation more than representation. Following criticism, Disney attempts to change course, “fixing” their mistakes not by exploring how to improve these and other minority portrayals, but by creating fictional hybridized cultures that cannot definitively be attributed to any one people, so as to avoid backlash that tarnishes their reputation.

Even the 2013 commercial juggernaut *Frozen* (Buck and Lee 2013), taking place in the fictional, all-white land of Arendelle, features an opening sequence that alludes to musical styles of Native America, Pacific Islands, and Eastern Europe. These cultural mash-ups are incorporated by competing studios as well, such as the Scottish-accented Vikings living in Polynesian-styled huts in Dreamworks’s *How to Train Your Dragon* (DeBlois and Sanders 2010). It is unclear whether Disney’s goal is to increase representation despite a hesitance to commit to any particular culture for fear of offense or public criticism, or simply to expand their playground of stories to tell without having to pay due diligence to accuracy and nuance. Likely both elements are at play.

Turning to the continuing popularity of live-action film and television adaptations of Disney animation, *Pocahontas* remains one of the few Disney Princess films not to be explored in the popular television show *Once Upon a Time* (Horowitz and Kitsis 2011–2018),

an ABC/Disney production that combines and reimagines stories made famous as Disney films. A significant arc in the show's third season dedicated to *Peter Pan* erases any elements of Tiger Lily or Indigenous people. Several seasons later Tiger Lily does make an appearance (played by Indigenous actress Sara Tomko), though she is reimagined as a fairy godmother to the white Rumpelstiltskin and thus removed from any real-world cultural context. Once again, it is deemed safer or easier to avoid such representation than to put effort into a positive portrayal and risk "getting it wrong."

It is worth noting that this tendency of erasure is not limited to Disney alone. Warner Brothers' 2015 film *Pan* (Wright 2015) opts to eliminate any representational responsibility by erasing the story's Indigenous characters and casting white actress Rooney Mara in the role of Tiger Lily. Generous readings suggest that this change is intended to replace an Indigenous tribe with one "fantastic enough that no one would ever confuse [it] with an American Indian tribe" (Laskow 2014) in order to avoid cultural misrepresentation, a move not unlike Disney's avoidance of direct reference to real Indigenous peoples in *The Emperor's New Groove* and *Once Upon a Time*.

Expanding Horizons: A Cautious Return to Indigenous Storylines

Continuing to add new layers to their efforts to negotiate diversity, in 2016 Disney introduced another animated Indigenous heroine into its lineup with *Moana*. The film tells the story of a Polynesian teen, Moana, whose father is the Chieftain of her village. Though prepared to take on the responsibility as next in line, Moana longs to explore what lies beyond her small island home. Like Pocahontas, Moana is established as curious and adventurous to the point of being a bit of a troublemaker. She also appears to incorporate remnants of Pocahontas's posture and athleticism, as well as her relationship with nature, while introducing her own unique qualities as well.

Moana's Wall Body Attitude is not as exaggerated as Pocahontas's, and she holds less tension in her torso, engaging in more Shaping and allowing for Passive Weight. When walking, her arms move Successively between wrist and shoulder (as opposed to Simultaneously) and have a broader swing, and her legs also have a slightly longer stride. All of these elements suggest a greater preference for Mobility over Stability, though some of these differences are representative of a broader shift in Disney's representation of their heroines in the twenty-first century, and not isolated to representations of Indigeneity.

Moana frequently Initiates movements with her head and Advances with her head when walking, creating a sense of forward intention. She moves her hips significantly more than Pocahontas (perhaps not a surprising animation choice given the role of hip movements in several Polynesian dance forms): standing with her weight shifted over one leg, as opposed to the Stability conveyed in Pocahontas's evenly-distributed weight; isolating her hips to move them out of the way of passing children; or dancing on the beach with her grandmother.

Though reactions to *Moana* have varied,²³ many popular media reviews and articles reflect a pleasant surprise at Disney's attention to cultural and historical accuracy. Popular response online also suggests the willingness of Pacific Islander audience members to engage positively with the film, sharing their favourite or most relatable moments

alongside facts and perspectives that they feel are important for non-Polynesian audiences to know (Varner 2016). While some have criticized the blurring of cultural lines in the film (Varner 2016), the significant overlap that exists between Hawaiian, Samoan, Tahitian, and other Polynesian mythos has perhaps provided Disney with the perfect opportunity to test the waters, so to speak, of returning to representations of real Indigenous cultures by allowing them to continue their trend of combining elements from multiple cultural sources.

Disney appears to have taken great care to approach *Moana* with respect through everything from research and consultation to casting choices. However, the film still struggles to find its equilibrium between cultural accuracy and storylines that are palatable to contemporary North American audiences. *Moana* reflects the Polynesian tradition of a “close relationship to and deep love for the *‘āina* [the land]” and its connection to the “continuity between ancestors and future generations” (Justice 2018, 117). However, the film acknowledges the importance of succession by showing Moana’s father prepare her to take over as chieftain after him, in spite of the inaccuracy in many Polynesian cultures of a woman taking on the role of chieftain. Given Disney’s larger narrative of “girl power” following third-wave feminism in the 1990s and the trajectory of their female characters toward ever more empowering storylines, such a change feels inevitable.

Despite these missteps and complications, is *Moana* Disney’s attempt to tell an Indigenous story rather than a story about Indigenous people? Rather than the story of Indigenous deficiency (Justice 2018), which “displaces [Indigenous peoples’] stories...of complexity, hope, and possibility” (2018, 4), perhaps *Moana* endeavours to approach these more “nourishing” stories (Justice 2018, 4). Given the cultural situatedness of its creators in white, settler-colonial ideology, this may be an impossible feat. However, they are perhaps navigating in the right direction.

Conclusion

Daniel Heath Justice prefaces his book *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (2018) by stating that it is a book about stories—both those told by Indigenous peoples and those told about them by others—and the impact of those stories. He argues for the significant impact these stories can have on Indigenous peoples, stating that “these diverse stories can strengthen, wound, or utterly erase our humanity and connections” (2018, xvii). Tracing the meta-narrative of Disney’s history of Indigenous representation suggests that the company has worked its way backwards through this list: in *Peter Pan*, erasing humanity by the caricatured, fantasy-trope representation of the Blackfoot peoples and connections by removing this representation to a nonexistent fantasy island; in *Pocahontas*, wounding by altering the real history of the Powhatan peoples to create a more appealing romance story; and perhaps, strengthening by their efforts in *Moana* and, hopefully, by continuing and improving those efforts in future projects.

Focusing on the animated representation of Indigenous bodies, I have explored this trajectory, engaging Laban Movement Analysis with Indigenous and anthropological scholarship to investigate how these bodies and their movements are embedded in various settler-colonial imaginaries, representing and reinscribing popular perceptions of

Indigeneity over more than six decades of animated storytelling. The Indigenous body has become a palimpsest for Disney on which to write and rewrite their attitudes toward its representation—each new era provides an updated ideology within which to create new characters and storylines, yet these ideologies inevitably are informed by and carry traces of those that came before.

In *Peter Pan*, Disney presents Indigenous characters under a colonial imaginary “predicated on a fiction of Indigenous deficiency” (Justice 2018, 152). Caricatured, offensive portrayals are seen as harmless due to their manifestation as childhood fantasies, yet Justice points out the fantasy genre’s enmeshment in “settler colonial logics” (2018, 152). Forty-two years later, they have updated their representation to the “Ecological Indian” (Krech 199, 216), reflecting both the growing social and environmental consciousness of the later twentieth century and the romanticized “noble savage” image that has existed for centuries, as historical narratives of colonisation are used to teach heavy-handed lessons about setting aside our differences and caring for our planet. In following years, Disney approaches representation much more hesitantly, with a handful of vaguely Indigenous stories in which ancient cultures become blank canvasses for comedy as long as there is plausible deniability. This period in Disney’s larger narrative speaks just as heavily for Indigenous representation, however: “Stories are bigger than the texts and the bodies that carry them. When absent, they leave gaps that communicate as surely as the presences” (Justice 2018, 184). And finally, in the latter half of the 2010s, Disney takes tentative steps back toward handling culturally-specific material. Despite the care taken with *Moana*, the film did not avoid the mixed reception of previous Indigenous storylines like *Pocahontas*, and plenty of viewers have struggled with the impact of this most recent portrayal.

As Daniel Heath Justice says, “Settler colonialism...[is] woven into all aspects of our experience, and those strangling threads are too often invisible and all the more wounding as a result” (2018, 48). *Pocahontas* and even *Moana* are included among Justice’s examples of popular media that have functioned for many consumers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, as falsely presenting a sense of “autobiographical authenticity” (2018, 207). Justice argues that Indigenous storylines are “too often grossly simplified in popular culture and mainstream media” (2018, 48), and that these and other popular Indigenous storylines have in fact “skilfully manipulated stereotypes in the broader culture that reinforced what most people knew—or more accurately, *thought* they knew—about Indians” (2018, 207). He continues that the “erasure of consciousness” that leads audiences to take these narratives as accurate representations is “by social design, the corrosive consequence of a settler colonial education system, popular media, and political culture that always figured Indians through absence, ignorance, misrepresentation, degradation, and diminishment” (2018, 207). While Disney may attempt both cultural accuracy and respectful tribute with *Moana*, it is important to remember that their goal is to create, above all, a film that will entertain and earn money. As consumers have pointed out (Varner 2016), Disney has created a fun film that brings awareness of Polynesian culture and mythology to broader audiences, but it is not an “authentic” representation of Pacific Islander history or mythos.

Reviews suggest that a significant portion of viewers and critics found *Pocahontas* to be fairly progressive in 1995, but now we more readily acknowledge its problematic elements. Similarly, *Moana* has proven to be hugely successful, having a similar mix of

primarily positive reviews with a decently-sized handful of negative criticism. How will we view *Moana* after a few decades have passed? And what will be the next layer to be rewritten on Disney's palimpsest of the Indigenous body? After all, "It's only in the looking backward and forward—and in the imagining of different possibilities than the ones we've inherited—that a viable future is made possible" (Justice 2018, 140).

Notes

- 1 The Choreometrics project gathers footage of both dance forms and functional, daily movements from a wide sampling of cultures throughout the world, observing patterns and drawing connections between a given culture's performative movements and their productive ones. For more on the Choreometrics project, Bishop 2002 offers a positive review, while Farnell 2011 provides a critical one. Most critical reactions to the Choreometrics project take care to separate Lomax's application of LMA from the system as a whole (see Daly 1988; Dils and Crosby 2001; Williams 2007).
- 2 Body Attitude describes an individual's basic underlying shape and the tensions involved to maintain it. It is important to note that "shape" here does not refer to a person's height or weight. A Pin Body Attitude, therefore, is a narrow, vertical shape.
- 3 Mid-Limb Initiation: Movement is led from the middle of the limb, i.e. elbow or knee
- 4 Shaping, unlike Body Attitude/Shape, has to do with three-dimensional dynamic expressivity and how the body interacts with and adapts to space. Shaping in the Sagittal (forward/backward) Dimension consists of Advancing (forward) and Retreating (backward).
- 5 Ball Body Attitude: Rounding of the spine, resulting in three-dimensional volume
- 6 Distal Initiation: Movement is led from the outer extremities, e.g. head, hands/fingers, feet
- 7 Passive Weight describes weight that drops or gives in to gravity, rather than actively mobilizing, and can be either Heavy or Limp. Weight in LMA terms has nothing to do with an individual's measurements in pounds or kilograms.
- 8 A Google search for "stages of human evolution" brings up countless results of this image.
- 9 Wall Body Attitude: Flat and wide (unlike Pin) in the vertical plane
- 10 A further description of this period of physical anthropology, including Linnaeus's full racial classification system, can be found in Farnell 2011.
- 11 Sequencing refers to how movement flows through the body parts in question; in Simultaneous Sequencing all body parts move at the same time.
- 12 Successive Sequencing: Movement flows from one body part to an adjacent body part
- 13 Sustained Time Effort: Time Effort is about the dynamic quality of time, not how many seconds, minutes, or hours an action takes. A movement is Sustained when it gradually becomes slower, and Quick when it gradually becomes faster.
- 14 Reach Space has to do with where in one's Kinesphere (that is, the space around the body that can be accessed without shifting one's weight) a gesture takes place, with Far Reach being the furthest away, Near Reach the closest, and Mid Reach in between.
- 15 Arcing Directional Shape: A two-dimensional rounded pathway in space.
- 16 Mobility/Stability: All movement contains both mobility and stability. Stability is dynamic and does not necessarily suggest a lack of movement, just as mobility does not necessarily indicate extreme activity.
- 17 Shape Flow: Movement that is oriented around the body in relation to itself, rather than having environmental purpose
- 18 Of all the Indigenous characters in *Pocahontas*, Kocoum is the closest to an antagonist. He is also the most fitting of Linnaeus's eighteenth-century characterization of American Indigenous peoples as "upright" and "choleric." It is interesting that the animators have

- distinguished the most negatively-portrayed (and identified by Pocahontas as undesirable) Indigenous character as the most representative of settler-colonial imaginaries.
- 19 Flow Effort relates to muscular tension, with the relationship between tensed muscles determining fluidity (Free) or restraint (Bound). Free and Bound Flow are not used to associate values of good or bad to movement, such as "relaxed" or "tense," though as with all LMA observations, the cultural situatedness of the observer or the subjectivity of their own movement preferences may bring such associations.
 - 20 In fact, several pioneers of modern dance in the United States are known to have borrowed heavily from Indigenous dance forms. Some, including Martha Graham, Ted Shawn, and Lester Horton, have spoken of this influence to varying degrees (see Martin 1998, 152-3; Shea Murphy 2007).
 - 21 For a deeper discussion of and response to Krech's polarizing argument see Harkin 2007.
 - 22 Greyeyes addresses this issue through the example of the "Origins Project," an educational initiative within the theatre department of his home institution, York University, in which students research the origins mythology of a selected world culture in order to create a devised piece (see Greyeyes 2017, 38-39).
 - 23 See, for example, Chinen 2016; Constante 2016; Herman 2016; Moore 2016; Robinson, J. 2016; and Robinson, T. 2016.

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