

Introduction

The Walt Disney Company occupies a globally influential position within the landscape of cultural production. Its animated features, theme parks, and media conglomerates function as dominant purveyors of global narratives, critically shaping worldviews of audiences, particularly children. Today, Disney's works are globally consumed cultural artifacts that have been integral to entertainment for generations.

Walt Disney believed in the "terrific power of music," asserting that films would be "dragging and boring" without it; music imbues them with "life and vitality." Following this philosophy, Disney expertly leverages music to propel narratives and establish depicted identities. Yet, just as music communicates culture, Disney's music also transmits the corporation's ideological agenda, often subtly reinforcing Western aesthetic preferences.

In recent years, Disney has been lauded for positive cultural depictions, such as Colombian representation in *Encanto*. These cultural references seep into musical composition, creating aural soundscapes of depicted locales. However, Disney operates not merely as a storyteller, but as a commercial Western entity with market-driven imperatives. Thus, these influences must be rigorously scrutinized, as the corporation risks prescribing ideologies beneficial to Western cultural dominance.

Through analysis of musical soundtracks, scholarly critiques, and interviews with involved musicians, this case study investigates how Disney's musical representation of non-Western cultures has shifted across three decades, examining what drove these transformations and whether such changes represent meaningful progress. Although Disney has replaced the crude stereotyped music of its earlier films with collaborative compositions of its modern releases, this methodological shift masks a continuity in power. This case study posits that current inclusion strategies serve to insulate the corporation from critique, allowing it to commodify cultural difference while maintaining strict Western control over the final product.

Theoretical Grounding

Edward Said's concept of **Orientalism** describes the systematic Western construction of non-Western peoples as exotic, inferior "Others" to assert Western superiority. This process of "Othering" operates ideologically: a dominant group establishes its identity by constructing an inferior counterpoint. In Disney's context, Orientalism manifests through musical and narrative choices that reduce complex cultures to stereotypical signifiers designed for Western consumption.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of **cultural hegemony** explains how dominant groups maintain power through ideology rather than force. Hegemony operates by normalizing beliefs that reinforce ruling systems, making constructed power dynamics appear natural. For Disney, universalizing and sanitizing complex cultural narratives for mass consumption.

This hegemonic control is operationalized through the economic mechanism of commodification, often critiqued as "Disneyfication." This process systematically adapts cultural, folkloric, or historical content to fit the company's commercial formula. Disney strategically adapts cultural products to be "universally accessible," effectively transforming ethnic identity

into marketable cultural capital. Disneyfication exemplifies what cultural critic bell hooks terms **commodity racism**, ethnicity functions as "spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (hooks 366). Non-Western elements are appropriated for "authenticity" but contained within Western aesthetic frameworks. This allows corporations to leverage cultural differences for "guilt-free" consumption without having to distribute genuine creative authority (Armstrong 113).

Crucially, these power dynamics extend beyond the script to the **music**. By consistently framing non-Western sounds as exotic texture while reserving Western harmonic structures for the narrative's emotional core, film scores condition audiences to accept Western conventions as the universal standard of expression.

Methodology

This study employs a multi-method approach, combining ethnomusicological analysis of musical scores with critical discourse analysis of production materials.

Interviews. Crucial insight into creative decision-making is derived from interviews with both Western composers and non-Western cultural consultants. This study cannot fully capture the lived experiences of all cultural consultants, particularly those who may face contractual constraints in discussing their work. Despite these limitations, the available evidence provides a sufficient basis for critical analysis of Disney's evolving patterns of musical representation.

Source Music. To investigate these dynamics, this study categorizes Disney's musical evolution into two distinct periods. These designations are not official corporate categories but are constructed here to delineate the shift in methodologies:

- **Phase I (The Renaissance Era):** Evidenced by critiques of *Aladdin* (1992) and *Pocahontas* (1995), this phase represents the era of explicit "Othering" and reliance on pre-existing colonial tropes.
- **Phase II (The Modern Era, Post-2010):** Documented through studies of *Moana* and *Frozen II*, this phase is characterized by formalized collaboration (cultural trusts, advisory boards).

Secondary Analyses. This study draws primarily on ethnomusicological analyses to identify how cultural signifiers are deployed through music. It also incorporates critical cultural studies scholarship examining Disney's societal influences.

2. The Mechanics of Othering and Coloniality (Phase I): Orientalism and Sanitization (1992–1995)

During Phase I, Disney relied on pre-existing colonial tropes, deploying music as superficial signification rather than culturally informed representation.

2.1. Aladdin (1992)

Aladdin (1992) deploys Orientalist musical tactics that define the Arab world as savage and inferior. The opening song, "Arabian Nights," initially described the Middle Eastern setting as a place "[w]here they cut off your ear / If they don't like your face / It's barbaric, but hey, it's home." While protests forced a lyrical revision, the retained line, "It's barbaric, but hey, it's home," signaled the film's ideological stance (King et al, 142). The lyrics frame the setting through a "white gaze," geographically and morally positioning American culture as superior to the depicted "Other."

Musically, composers Alan Menken and Howard Ashman utilized "aural shorthand"—recognizable markers of exoticism like the augmented second interval—rather than authentic Arabic music (Taxidou 13). This interval is not specific to Arab culture but is a generalized Western signifier for foreignness. This strategy reveals a crucial power dynamic where European fantasies, not Arab people, define Middle Eastern identity in the film. Furthermore, the exclusion of Arab musicians from the creative process underscores the extractive approach of this era. The film's romantic centerpiece, "A Whole New World," abandons these "exotic" signifiers entirely for a standard Broadway ballad structure. This suggests that while the "Other" provides exotic flavor, Western musical hegemony must structure the sonic core of the narrative (Baber and Spickard 9).

2.2. Pocahontas (1995): Sanitizing History through the Pop Ballad

Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995) and its score functions as a historical sanitization project, romanticizing the violent colonial encounter between the Powhatan people and European settlers. The song "Savages" represents genocide as a misunderstanding from both sides, equating Indigenous resistance with colonial violence and effectively erasing the historical power imbalance of the conflict (Petschow 14). The song's dramatic orchestration and parallel structure perpetuates harmful stereotypes under an inaccurate representation of history.

Conversely, "Colors of the Wind" employs a Western pop ballad structure that simplifies colonialism's complexity. It highlights the "postcolonial exotic," by crafting a "safe" version of Indigeneity that appeals to Western romanticism while stripping away harsh reality (Devipriya, 689). The lyrics articulate Indigenous ecological wisdom, a problematic front in two ways. First, the lyrics, based on a fabricated speech, displace specific Powhatan worldviews with generalized environmentalism (Pewewardy). By filtering Indigenous philosophy through a Western pop ballad structure, the film transforms cultural difference into marketable spectacle. Even the lyric's "blue corn moon" imagery was created for sonic appeal despite geographic inaccuracy for Algonquian peoples. Second, the music overlooks past genocidal violence and reframes colonization as environmental conflict. Environmentalism is a universal problem that doesn't directly confront Western society. *Pocahontas* becomes "indigenous in aesthetic but universal in appeal," as the movie prioritizes its Western audience's comfort over historical accountability (Devipriya 700).

3. Phase II: Commodified Otherness and Embedded Coloniality (2013–Present)

In response to criticism, Disney transitioned to a strategy of formalized collaboration for its films, from establishing advisory boards to hiring cultural consultants. However, analysis suggests that Western control persists despite these procedural changes.

3.1. Moana (2016): Consultation as Extraction

Disney positioned *Moana* (2016) as a triumph of authentic representation. Following research trips to Pacific Islands, directors John Musker and Ron Clements established the Oceanic Cultural Trust, an advisory body comprising cultural experts from Pacific Island nations ("How the Oceanic Cultural Trust"). For instance, the film incorporated Polynesian languages in the soundtrack and featured authentic elements drawn from extensive cultural consultation. Disney's marketing extensively highlighted this collaborative process, positioning the project as a culturally responsible effort.

However, the musical production process reveals the limits of this collaboration. While Polynesian musician Opetaia Foa'i contributed distinct rhythms and lyrics, ultimate creative authority remained with Western composers Lin-Manuel Miranda and Mark Mancina.

Ethnomusicological analysis reveals that Polynesian elements are systematically "wrapped" within Western musical frameworks (Armstrong). Namely, the songs' starts and ends utilize Western orchestration and harmonic structures to frame its Polynesian sounds. Even "We Know the Way," featuring Foa'i's compositions, adheres to Western pop verse-chorus structures and is performed by Miranda (Armstrong). This "wrapping" signals to global audiences that Indigenous elements are acceptable only when contained within recognizable American conventions. Polynesian musical contributions provide an additional flair of authenticity without disrupting the Western musical foundation. In an interview, Foa'i even notes how he was told to revise his compositions for "English ears," which further highlights the subordination of authenticity to marketability (Chapman). As Armstrong argues, the consultation process serves to only extract cultural legitimacy rather than relinquish actual creative authority (Armstrong). It exemplifies commodity racism, where the corporation adopts a collaborative image only to appeal to its increasingly diverse audiences and placate past critiques, while preserving the decision-making power.

3.2. Frozen II (2019): Negotiating Power Differentials in Collaboration

Following criticism of the original *Frozen* (2013) for its superficial use of generalized Scandinavian motifs, Disney implemented a formalized collaborative model for *Frozen II* (2019). The corporation partnered the *verddet*, an advisory group comprising Sámi artists, elders, and cultural experts, to ensure respectful representation of Sámi culture (Mihailova). *Frozen II* utilized the *verddet* advisory group to ensure respectful representation of Sámi culture. This collaboration successfully improved visual accuracy, correcting the generic "frozen north"

aesthetics of the first film (Mihailova). However, the musical soundscape, firmly under the authority of Western production teams, remains subject to negotiation and erasure.

The film substitutes *joik* (traditional Sámi vocalization) with *kulning* (a Scandinavian cattle call) for the central motif calling Elsa. While *joik* is culturally specific to the Sámi, *kulning* aligns more closely with Western expectations of "magical" Nordic fantasy (Fuller). Even when authentic Sámi music appears—such as Frode Fjellheim's joik-based composition "Vuelie" in the opening sequence—it is decontextualized from its spiritual and cultural origins, abstracted into a generic fantasy atmosphere (Fuller). Beck's dismissal of *joik* as "Hey Na Na music" reflects a Eurocentric refusal to engage with the complexity of Indigenous musical traditions (Mihailova). Consequently, Sámi culture enriches the film's texture but does not define its sonic identity. Its elements are only included as long as it does not disrupt the established Disney aesthetic and hinder maximum commercial appeal.

Discussion

This comparative analysis reveals that while Disney's methods have evolved from exclusion to collaboration, the underlying logic of cultural hegemony remains intact. The shift from Phase I to Phase II demonstrates the adaptability of power: in the 1990s, hegemony operated through crude stereotyping; today, it operates through managed inclusion. By integrating surface-level authenticity (instruments, languages) while retaining Western structural authority, Disney engages in a process of "consultative appropriation." This reinforces Gramsci's theory: the dominant culture maintains power not by rejecting the "Other," but by absorbing and redefining it to fit its own structures.

The Political Economy of "Universal" Sound

This structural inertia is driven by the culture industry's aversion to risk. The persistence of Western musical structures is not merely an aesthetic choice but an economic imperative. Executives operate under the assumption that Western conventions constitute a "universal" emotional language, while non-Western structures represent financial risk. When Opetaia Foa'i is asked to modify lyrics for "English ears," it illustrates how commodification strips cultural specificity to create a palatable product. As bell hooks argues, ethnicity here functions as "spice" to flavor the mainstream dish, rather than the main course. The collaboration creates a veneer of authenticity that protects the corporation from criticism while prioritizing marketability over ethnomusicological integrity.

Anthropological Implications

The consequences of this "hegemony disguised as diversity" are significant. These films function as primary sites of cultural education, creating asymmetrical learning for global audiences. They teach that while cultures may differ visually, "real" emotion is expressed through Western musical forms. This promotes a homogenization of culture where non-Western sounds are reduced to atmospheric decoration. While the visual representation in Phase II offers meaningful psychological benefits, the sonic narrative continues to validate Western norms as the universal standard. Thus, the films function as pedagogical tools that train

audiences—including those from the represented cultures—to perceive Western aesthetics as "natural" and their own traditional forms as "exotic."

Conclusion

This study investigated whether Disney's evolution in representing non-Western cultures constitutes genuine decolonization or sophisticated adaptation. The evidence suggests that Disney has reformed its methods without relinquishing structural control.

In the 1990s, the mechanism was exclusion and stereotyping; today, it is "consultative appropriation." The corporation has adapted to the era of identity politics by inviting "Others" into the room, but it has not handed over the pen—or the baton. The visible improvements in *Moana* and *Frozen II* should not obscure the persistent reality that Western composers retain final authority, non-Western elements serve Western frameworks, and profits remain centralized.

True decolonization of the "culture industry" requires more than better consultation; it requires a redistribution of creative authority. Until Indigenous and non-Western creators hold the power to define their own sonic narratives, Disney's music will remain a sophisticated instrument of Western hegemony disguised as respect. The song may sound more inclusive, but the conductors remain unchanged.

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