**Youth Films and the Nation: Imagining Obama's American Foreign Policy in Disney’s *Moana***

Moving away from a scholarly trend of analysing youth films centrally in relation to youth/youth culture,[[1]](#endnote-1) this paper demonstrates how scholars can undertake a socio-cultural reading of youth films without positioning youth as the central focus. The paper details this approach by extending Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, Emma Wilson and Sarah Wright’s contemplation of the child as a national avatar to the adolescent. In their consideration of the child in film, they propose that this figure, as a national avatar, acts as a pivot between national concerns and transnational identifications, concluding that “the child on film provokes claims on the nation or the nation claims the child” (2). Their anthology links the child to the nation by considering how the child is framed “as a metonym for national affiliation, intra-national encounter or communal dissolution” (2). Like the child in film, the adolescent is similarly linked to the nation as youth films “deal with topics of politics and religion, and more often, with tensions around culture and national identity” (Shary 4). Drawing on Donald, Wilson and Wright, this paper suggests that like the child, the adolescent becomes a site to address national concerns and positionings. However, where the child is used to provoke claims on the past and hope for the future of a nation, as I will demonstrate, the adolescent embodies the transition, transformation and coming-of-age of a nation as the nation is seemingly moved towards a stabilised identity.

In Laura Podalsky’s and Henry Giroux’s respective analyses of youths in film and youths’ relationship to popular culture more broadly, they each assert that youth functions as a “symbol of how society thinks of itself and as an indicator of changing cultural values” (Giroux 10). While their evaluations are used to unpack youth as a sociocultural category, their works nonetheless point to the way in which the adolescent, like the child, can be read as a site to explore and make sense of the nation, albeit, at a different stage in a nation’s development. As this paper illustrates, the intersection between the adolescent and the nation is informed by stereotypical Western perceptions of adolescence commonly found in Western youth films. Considering the Western socio-cultural framing of the adolescent, Catherine Driscoll notes, in the West adolescence connotes the movement “between dependence and independence[, …] between ignorance and knowledge” and between immaturity and maturity (52). As this paper will demonstrate, the transitory nature of the adolescent enables this figure to symbolically function as a site to negotiate changes to the nation. Consequently, rather than questioning whether youth films mirror the lives of real adolescents or whether the conventions of youth films create cinematic archetypes of adolescence, in this paper I argue that in youth films the adolescent can be deployed as a site to negotiate, reimagine and ultimately solidify changing national values, principals and identities.

To support my above assertions, this paper considers Disney’s 2016 film *Moana* (dir. Ron Clements and John Musker) as a case study. However, before outlining how Moana serves as an avatar for the nation, I will first give a brief overview of the film’s plot. Released by Disney in November of 2016, *Moana* is a part of the financially successful Disney princess franchise, and is Disney’s “lone Pacific princess” (Yoshinaga 189). Drawing on and adapting Polynesian folklore and mythology, the film begins a thousand years after the demigod Maui – a character superficially based on the “respected ancestor and spiritual protector of diverse Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian peoples” (Yoshinaga 190) – stole the heart of the Mother Island goddess Te Fiti. The heart, which is said to possess the power of creation, was taken by Maui with the intention of gifting it to the humans. However, shortly after taking the heart, Maui was confronted by a lava monster Te Ka, and the Heart, Maui and Maui’s magical hook were lost. Without the heart, a great darkness spread slowly from island to island bringing death. Moana, the film’s central protagonist, seeks to save her people from this encroaching darkness by finding Maui and convincing him to return Te Fiti’s heart, of which she comes into possession when the ocean, who fulfils the roles of dispatcher and helper in the film, gives her the heart of Te Fiti. Moana’s quest and consequently her coming-of-age, take place beyond the borders of her community as she travels into the unknown. This journey reflects conventions of the fairy-tale and folk genres, as characters commonly enter or move through secondary spaces where conflicts can be resolved, character growth can occur and a return to a more stable community can take place. While in fairy-tale narratives the forest usually represents this space, within *Moana*, the sea replaces the forest, as she leaves behind her imagined Pan-pacific island. Nonetheless, it is similarly through this movement across borders into the unknown that Moana leaves behind her childhood, negotiates adolescence and discovers womanhood. In her adventures Moana finds Maui, helps him to retrieve his magic hook, and saves her island by personally returning Te Fiti’s heart.

*Moana,* in line with many of Disney’s romanticised tellings, has been scrutinised and criticised for its representation of characters and cultural norms that fail to be culturally authentic. Disney, which has been criticised in the past for its cultural appropriation, racism, sexism and misogyny, sought to address past criticisms by researching Polynesian mythology and culture; by using Polynesian voices and music; by forming a story trust that largely consisted of South Pacific community members; and by not including a romantic storyline.[[2]](#endnote-2) Nonetheless, these efforts have been at times criticised as superficial, with critics such as Vilsoni Hereniko, Candice Elanna Steiner, and J Uluwehi Hopkins demonstrating how Disney cherry-picked the cultural content it included, ignored suggestions made by the Oceanian Story Trust and/or failed to respect the language, diversity and traditions of the Polynesian people (Tamaira, Hereniko, Qulouvaki, Hopkins and Steiner).

More specifically Hereniko suggests that while “*Moana* is the most accurate representation of Polynesia by a major Hollywood studio to date,” marketplace values have been prioritised over cultural authenticity (Tamaira, et. al. 217). He asserts, “well-known stereotypes, proven tropes, and decisions based on box-office appeal rather than cultural accuracy influenced the narrative, rendering the final story sold to the public culturally authentic for the most part, but glaringly inaccurate, if not offensive, in certain areas” (Tamaira, et. al. 218). These criticisms of the film’s cultural inaccuracies reflects Yoshinaga’s critique of the way “Disney’s colonial screenwriting practices” Westernise the story and deny authorship to the indigenous people (192). In terms of the cultural and mythological inaccuracies of the plot, the central criticisms of the film are often linked to its incorporation of fictional characters unrelated to Polynesian mythology, such as Tamatoa and the Kakamora; the film’s display of cultural ignorance, primarily through the characters’ disrespect of the water; the films misrepresentation of Maui as an egotistical buffoon, rather than a “cunning, justice-driven, resourceful trickster of various Oceanic folklores” (Yoshinaga, 190); and the way the film ignores, if not challenges, the patriarchal norms that are valued in Polynesian society. Finally, despite Disney’s seeming attempt to respond to feminist criticisms by creating a female lead who is not centrally concerned with romance, Hereniko accuses Disney of presenting the Polynesian community as asexual (Tamaira, et. al. 221).

Disney’s adaptation and reshaping of Polynesian culture may be read as a bastardisation of Polynesian beliefs, identity, diversity and values. However, I would propose that the film’s diversion from Polynesian culture and mythology is not simply a bastardisation of Polynesian culture in pursuit of marketplace figures – though I don’t pretend that Disney is not market driven. Instead, this diversion may also reflect the way these narratives have been adapted, and the Polynesian culture erased, to reflect American politics and society. Reflecting this perspective, Yoshinaga suggests that this appropriation becomes a means for

“Sophisticated” US audiences in blue states, especially educated urban professionals, [to] feel comforting empathy with Disney’s onscreen simulacra of indigenous peoples—without having to confront the contemporary political realities of Oceania, where indigenous Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians face the threat of losing their ancestral homelands to global warming, military occupation, outmigration, and post- as well as neo-colonialism. (192)

I agree with Yoshinaga that Disney’s depiction of Polynesian culture and mythology masks the political realities that shape Oceania today and invites it audience to engage with a comforting representation of indigenous peoples and their lives. However, I would argue that Disney’s engagement with an American audience and American expectations extends beyond an effort to create a comforting image of indigenous peoples. Instead, I would suggest that Moana is appropriated as a site to renegotiate America’s changing national identity on the global stage and its changing political positioning as a colonial force.

In exploring how Moana serves as a national avatar for the United States of America, rather than as a simple and stereotypical representation of the Polynesian people, I risk repeating some of the shortcomings found in Fredric Jameson’s article, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” which some have labelled as “a patronizing, theoretical orientalism, or as yet another example of a troubling appropriation of Otherness with the aim of exploring the West rather than the Other” (Szeman, 803). In many ways, the reading I will provide does centrally explore the West, rather than the Other. I admittedly will spend little time exploring how the film intersects with the cultures and values of the Polynesian peoples. However, it is not my intention to erase the Polynesian peoples from a discussion of this film. Instead, my reading of Moana as a national avatar for the United States seeks to reveal how Disney not only engages in cultural appropriation but colonises Polynesian mythology and culture in order to promote American myth building.

It is likely unsurprising that as a Disney film, *Moana* reflects dominant American norms and beliefs. As Justyna Fruzińska notes, “The Disney company often chooses to adapt stories belonging to different cultures and makes them resound with familiar American themes” (75). Further, as Disney productions commonly and consistently weave into its plots, premises and resolutions discourses of the American Dream, myths of the American nation serve as the backbone in Disney’s films (Mollet). Yet, *Moana*’s connection to American culture extends beyond a simple reading of the film’s cultural alignment with its origins of production. Rather, as this paper argues, by considering the adolescent as a site to negotiate changes within the nation, it becomes clear that *Moana* takes part in American myth (re)construction as the character Moana provides a site to work through past national discourses, Obama’s unorthodox rhetoric on American foreign policy and his repositioning of America on the world stage. In this way, Moana’s coming-of-age serves as a means to validate and present this recrafted American foreign policy as a maturation of national beliefs and values.

This paper consequently contributes to the long established scholarship on the intersection between American cinema and political ideology, by highlighting the ongoing relevance of the scholarship on Reaganite cinema.[[3]](#endnote-3) This scholarship largely considered how the ideological and social discourses that dominated the political sphere in the Reagan era were reflected and embodied within Hollywood films produced at the time. As this paper demonstrates, like that of the Reagan-era cinema, *Moana,* produced at the end of the Obama-era, seemingly reflects and is interwined with some of Obama’s presidential rhetoric. Where “the muscular cinema of the 1980s and the Reganite New Right in the United States” were read collectively to consider America’s humiliation following their defeat in Vietnam, a war Reagan had been linked to through his “revisionist re-evaluation of America’s role in Vietnam” (Tasker 92-93), this paper illustrates how *Moana* and the rhetoric of the Obama presidency can be read collectively to consider America’s shifting role within world politics, a shift that was brought about and actively addressed in Obama’s presidential rhetoric. Scholarship on Obama-era cinema and American politics has thus far been largely rooted in a consideration of race.[[4]](#endnote-4) This article contributes to a consideration of cinema in the age of Obama by exploring other aspects of his presidency, namely his rhetoric on U.S. foreign policy, in relation to youth cinema.

**The American Nation: *Moana,* Youth and the Rhetoric of Obama**

American foreign policy and presidential rhetoric has long been seeped in a discourse of military strength, endurance, defence and heroism. In Catherine Scott’s consideration of American nation-building she notes that

[…] from 1789 until the Civil War, five presidents commanded US forces in war, with many of them having experience fighting Indian wars (Mead 2001, 13). Long after the disappearance of the frontier, presidents have breathed new life into old war stories by invoking war heroes […]. Slotkin has described this as a ‘cult of toughness,’ an iteration of masculinity connected to territorial expansion against an enemy that reinvigorated manly imperialism (1992, 497). (8)

Similarly David Fitzgerald and David Ryan assert that it is the “endurance of American strength” that is often at the heart of presidential rhetoric, “internal memoranda and minutes in the white house and congress” (2). They assert that this need to demonstrate power takes shape through the build-up of the military, the maintenance of defense and the use of force.

Much of Obama’s rhetoric, though perhaps not all of his actions, seemed to counter this presidential discourse. Openly criticising past administrations for privileging military solutions, as he did in his 2008 campaign for presidency, Obama vocalised a need to find political solutions (Scott 213). As Fitzgerald and Ryan note, “His [Obama’s] belief in US rejuvenation was rooted in his understanding of US complexity and his conviction that solutions would be found in debate and deliberation, in ‘open-ended experimentation’ rather than a reverence for the ideals as static symbols” (2). He also highlighted the costliness of war and the importance of not rushing into military action (Fitzgerald and Ryan 5). In so doing, his rhetoric downgraded the military option, without fully taking it off the table (Brzesinski 22). As Zbigniew Brzezinski suggests, as an orator Obama sought to reconceptualise U.S. foreign policy by promoting the healing of rifts and the use of political solutions (16-17). In so doing, his language reimagined America’s collective identity and role on a global stage.

In addition to his presidential rhetoric, his military actions for counter terrorism, which strove to kill fewer civilians and endanger fewer soldiers through the use of drones, air strikes and targeted killings, has been described as “[…] at odds with the ‘cult of toughness’ defined by heroism, decisiveness, and the fear of being perceived as ‘soft’ that have long been at the heart of the nation-building project in the United States” (Scott 9). In diverting from this ‘cult of toughness’ Obama challenges and reimagines what defines American nation-building and America as a nation.

It is near the end of Obama’s 8-year presidency that *Moana* is released. It is notable that while the Disney Corporation is non-partisan in it’s political contributions, its CEO Robert Iger has not only financially supported the Democratic Party for years, but during Obama’s second presidential campaign he contributed a total of $40,800 (Federal Election Commission). During Obama’s second presidency, Obama also sought to put into place policies that would directly benefit Disney. Making his announcement to improve tourism from Disney World, he asserted that “some of America’s most successful business leaders – some who are here today – have signed up to help” (Compton). The announcement of these plans at the park, the obvious benefit to Disney who would stand to gain from increased tourism, and the insinuation that the company — as a business in attendance of the announcement – is supporting this cause, sees Obama and Disney’s interests directly intertwined. Thus while Moana may simply reflect the discourses that were dominant at the time of the film’s production, it may also reflect the political and financial links between the Disney Corporation, its CEO and Obama. Regardless of these links, this film reflects a tension between past presidential discourses and the promise of Obama’s politicised solutions. The contrasting national discourse detailed above and the role constructed by these deviating ideologies play out in *Moana* through the depiction and characterisation of Maui, through Moana’s coming-of-age, and the film’s resolution.

The film begins with an introduction to Moana, Moana’s island and her community. From the start of the film Moana’s desires and ambitions are at odds with her father, who is the chief of the community. Moana wishes to explore the world beyond the reef and to save her island from the approaching death caused by the loss of Te Fiti’s heart. Her father however wishes her to stay home to train to be the next chief. In the film’s first musical number her father insists that everything they need can be found on their island and that there is only danger and trouble beyond the reef. This perspective aligns with the myths of American isolationism, which framed the United States as isolated from the global community during the interwar period and again shortly after the Vietnam war. While scholars such as Bear Braumoeller (2010) have argued that the United States was never in fact completely isolated and that discourses of isolationism largely came from minority groups within the country, *Moana* seems to engage to some degree with this myth. In leaving the island against her father’s wishes, Moana rejects this understanding of the nation, in pursuit of a more global way of being. However, rather than initially aligning with Obama’s reimaging of the United States on the global stage, Moana’s coming-of-age sees her first engage with more traditional understandings of the American Nation and American foreign policy, as embodied by Maui.

Maui aligns with the “tough guy” masculinity associated with past presidential rhetoric and foreign policies, and acts as a counter point to Moana’s approach. As Scott asserts, “The longstanding connection between ‘tough guy’ masculinity and successful foreign policy [is] a relationship many presidents have historically used to outflank their domestic opponents and pursue victory at all costs” (1). This “tough guy” masculinity is commonly connected to the Neanderthal masculinity associated with Reaganite cinema (Tasker 71). As Yoshinaga notes, in the creating of *Moana* Disney imported “relationship dynamics and character types based on genre structures from Hollywood films, chiefly about white protagonists in Western settings” (196). Thus while they “altered the demigod’s shape from classically lean to comically large (Ito)—a mutation condemned by indigenous Oceanic leaders and scholars as replicating racist tropes of obese Polynesian bodies (Roy).” (190), Maui, with his bare-chest, exaggerated muscles and macho masculinity seems to echo the masculinity found in Reagan-era action films as he is depicted taking law and order into his own hands. His characterisation also seems to draw on the star branding of Dwayne Johnson, who as a former wrestler, first entered Hollywood by playing the role of hyper-masculine and muscular men, before his image was later softened.

When first introduced to Maui, he sings about his greatness. This greatness is specifically linked to his physical attributes and strength as he draws attention to his “bod” (through verbal reference and the flexing of his bulging muscles) and to his various tattoos that depict his heroics. These tattoos tell stories of accomplishment enabled by physical strength, such as the pulling up of the sky and the lassoing of the sun, as well as through violence, such as killing an eel and stealing fire. As Maui sings,

And the tapestry here in my skin

Is a map of the victories I win

Look where I’ve been

I make everything happen […]

Well anyway, let me say you’re welcome!

His use of the word “victory,” positions these accomplishments as militaristic in nature. Further, in repeatedly telling Moana “you’re welcome” throughout the course of the song (stated 14 times), his character implies a need to be thanked, positioning himself as a hero for humans. While one might argue that his exceptionalism is simply a reflection of Maui’s status as a demi-god within Polynesian mythology, Tamaira suggests that the representation of Maui in the film is misleading and inaccurate (221). She asserts that Maui is not just a shapeshifter or a figure of “brute strength” (220). Instead she asserts, “it is his abilities to procreate and regenerate humankind that makes him so vital as an ancestor” (220). This disconnect from a Polynesian understanding of Maui might be accounted for when reading Maui in line with American politics and presidential rhetoric, as detailed above. Thus, Disney colonises the figure of Maui as his heroism becomes symbolic of a traditional understanding of American strength, one rooted in the military, in defense and in force. Maui’s positioning within the film thus comes to embody a presidential discourse that privileges military experience, making use of wartime stories of heroism and invoking the ‘cult of toughness’ commonly associated with US military expansion.

In many ways Maui is framed as exceptional. As a demi-god, he is both of men and above them. In this way, he links to the lingering belief in American exceptionalism, whereby Americans see themselves as exceptional “not necessarily in what they are but in what they could be” (McCrisken 10). Maui embodies the potential of men and by extension American society, by reflecting the rhetoric of strength, endurance and heroism found in the political framing of early American nationhood. The celebration of this strength, and the way it masks over the violence underpinning the formation of the American nation, which was rooted in the expansion over, erasure of and/or colonisation of indigenous peoples, further reflects the way that the film’s alignment with discourses of American exceptionalism masks and erases the history of the indigenous people the film on the surface seems to represent.

While American exceptionalism has long been in existence, a contemporary understanding of American exceptionalism is specifically interlinked with American foreign policy. As Nick Robinson tells us, since 9/11 there has been a “growing interest in the theme of exceptionalism in US foreign policy, prompted in part by the policies of the American ‘neo-cons’ that were often enacted by George W. Bush’s administration during its first term” (451). The concept of American exceptionalism and its links to foreign policy are, as Robinson explains, underpinned by the following notions:

* America as an exemplar and beacon for democracy
* America as a problem solver
* America as the “land of the free”
* America as a “superior” nation
* America as progress driven and forward looking
* America as uniquely blessed by god

Seemingly cast as superior, this perception positions America as both uniquely obligated to liberate others and as uniquely vulnerable to the hostilities of others, particularly those who feel jealous or threatened by America’s exceptionalism (Robinson 456-457). America’s perceived superiority and vulnerability supports a rational that the US cannot and should not be bound by the international rules for “normal states” (457). This notion is embodied in an overconfident and elitist Maui, who views his transgressions, namely the stealing of Te Fiti’s heart, as justified and above the law because his actions were in pursuit of the betterment of the lives of others—of which he is seemingly uniquely obligated to protect.

Yet, the film invites the spectator to be critical of Maui’s worldview. The spectators, already aware of the destruction his actions have caused, are invited to see him as misguided, egotistical, self-absorbed and ignorant. Having also spent the first third of the film getting acquainted with Moana prior to meeting Maui, the audience is already positioned to read him as a potential helper, but not as the central hero, a role alternatively assumed by Moana. As a result, despite Maui’s efforts to position himself as a hero, the spectator is positioned to see the fallacy of his assumption, to expect his transformation, and to question his worldview.

While on her journey, Moana initially seeks to follow Maui’s guidance and the way that he engages with the world beyond her island. However, his approach never provides an adequate solution and it in fact inhibits her successful navigation of the world beyond her reef. She often discovers the necessity of deviating from his militaristic approach, and does so by using creative thinking and communication, rather than physical strength, to find solutions. This is not to suggest that Moana is not athletic or physically capable. In fact, the film repeatedly highlights her athleticism. However, while this athleticism aids her, her quick thinking, communication and political/diplomatic actions centrally enable her success. Moana’s gradual movement from a position of dependence to independence and from ignorance to knowledge consequently sees her diverge from Maui’s guidance and more specifically the ideals he embodies.

For example when seeking to retrieve Maui’s hook from the giant crab, Tamatoa, in the Realm of Monsters, Maui’s strategic plan involves using Moana as bait to distract Tamatoa, while he retrieves the hook from the top of Tamatoa’s shell. Once in possession of the hook Maui seeks to defeat the crab through physical force. However, his plans go askew and Moana is forced to intervene. Recognising the danger of the situation, Moana verbally tricks Tamatoa, enabling herself and Maui to escape with the hook. On one hand, her success highlights Maui’s inability to correctly judge the situation and find an appropriate solution. On the other hand, Moana’s solution highlights the strength and potential of words to evade conflict and secure a successful resolution. This moment of course also has colonialist undertones to it, as Moana steals a resource, the hook, from Tamatoa. While we are invited to celebrate Moana’s success and to view this moment as a successful resolution of a conflict, the resolution is of course one sided, as Tamatoa’s is now without the hook he had found/collected and this hook is removed from a place (read country) that Moana and Maui visited but which neither resides or originates from.

Moana’s use of words rather than warfare can be read as the use of political action to find resolution and to facilitate imperial pursuits. In this way, her solution reflects Obama’s avocation for open-ended experimentation and political solutions. In many ways it is unsurprising that it is Moana who first begins to embody these ideas. As an adolescent, she is a figure in flux. Her transitory state thus opens her character to the potential for change. Further, her gender enables her to evade the “tough guy” masculinity commonly associated with American foreign policy, and, in this way, align with Obama’s evasion of the hegemonic and traditional masculinity that has been entrenched in American imperialistic pursuits. As Marc Shaw and Elwood Watson note, Obama’s masculinity was often called into question (138-139). Seen as “mellow,” Obama’s brand of masculinity was at times linked to the feminine (143-144). While this connection was often negatively framed as wimpy or improper for a man, the film’s exploration of Moana’s growing success and accomplishment through the implementation of a foreign policy not directly informed by a masculine “cult of toughness,” creates the space to imagine the possibilities afforded by Obama’s brand of masculinity. This is not to say that Moana should be read as an allegory for Obama as a person, though their similar connections to the Polynesian community (Obama was of course born in Hawaii) and ethnic positioning outside of a white European frame, could lead one to read Moana in this way. Instead, I am suggesting that as the rhetoric around presidential masculinity shifts in the United States under Obama’s influence, a space is open for American politics to be defined, explored and embodied within a different framework. It is this shifting framework for the nation that Moana’s development aligns with and tests.

Despite Moana’s step towards adulthood/independence and her successful retrieval of Maui’s hook, having yet to fully come-of-age, she continues to rely on and privilege Maui’s “tough guy” approach to foreign resolution. Thus, rather than seeking to return Te Fiti’s heart herself, Moana initially seeks to deliver Maui to Te Fiti so that he can return the heart. However, yet again, Maui’s militaristic approach, and Moana’s efforts to mirror this approach, come up short as he fails to get past Te Ka, damages his hook in the battle and refuses to return to face her. The film consequently reaffirms the limitations and shortcomings of a militaristic approach to foreign policy.

Faced with this initial failure and Maui’s abandonment, Moana is forced to take matters into her own hands. As she moves from a position of crisis to action, her maturation becomes the site to further explore some of Obama’s alternative approaches to foreign policy. Initially alone on her boat, Moana is visited by the spirit of her grandmother, who helps her to find renewed strength and direction. Moana does so, not by abandoning all of the values Maui embodies but by transforming and reshaping these ideas as she simultaneously moves towards adulthood. Thus as Moana takes ownership of her adult identity, she also takes ownership and recrafts traditional perceptions of American exceptionalism and American foreign policy.

Moana’s abilities seemingly carry a feminist undertone, as her actions reaffirm the value of a strong and independent woman who defies a restrictive patriarchal order. As Tamaira notes,

[…] *Moana* encourages young girls and women to pursue their dreams and venture ‘beyond the reef,’ even when their fathers warn them to stay closer to home. On her deathbed, Moana’s grandmother pleads with Moana to ‘go!’ This command to a teenage girl challenges patriarchy’s enduring presence in Polynesia – in the past, but also in the present. (220)

Tamaira concludes that this challenging of patriarchy is problematic when representing an ‘authentic’ vision of Polynesian culture, as patriarchy is still a significant part of Polynesian society (220). If however, we read Moana as an avatar for the American nation rather than a Polynesian one, and we explore the text as one that has been appropriated and colonised to reflect American ideology, Moana’s success can be more clearly understood in relation to contemporary discourses surrounding American exceptionalism. In the musical number ‘I am Moana’, the song begins with her grandmother positioning Moana within the realm of American exceptionalism. Her grandmother asserts,

I know a girl from an island

She stands apart from the crowd

[…]She makes her whole family proud

Sometimes the world seems against you

The journey may leave a scar

But scars can heal and reveal just

Where you are […]

And nothing on earth can silence

The quiet voice still inside you

And when that voice starts to whisper

Moana, you've come so far

Moana, listen […]

Her grandmother’s description of Moana mimics the rhetoric of American exceptionalism as Moana is positioned as uniquely superior, as vulnerable, but also as containing an inner strength that can’t be silenced. As Moana’s accomplishments throughout the film up until this point largely stem from her ability to find political solutions, the film diverts from discourses of masculine strength and military might, and elevates Moana’s adolescent and feminine body as the alternative and ideal site to reimagine what it means to be an exceptional American on the world stage.

The value of Moana’s approach to problem solving and the appreciation of her exceptionalism is fully realised through the film’s resolution as Moana, rather than Maui, successfully returns Te Fiti’s heart. Realising the Te Ka is in fact Te Fiti without her heart, Moana sings to Te Ka:

I have crossed the horizon to find you

I know your name

They have stolen the heart from inside you

But this does not define you

This is not who you are

You know who you are.

In first highlighting her search for Te Fiti, Moana draws attention to her intersecting engagement with foreign policy and exceptionalism by positioning herself as liberator, a role she is seemingly obligated to fulfil since the ocean chose her for the task. The last two thirds of her musical address sees her committed more specifically to the aspects of Obama’s reconceptualization of American foreign policy detailed above, particularly his reframing of America’s global role as one of mediation and negotiation. As Brzezinski notes, Obama reconceptualised several important geopolitical issues by refusing to allow the “global war on terror” to define America’s global role, and by seeking to heal rifts cause by past controversies through partnerships, political undertakings and historical sensitivities (16-17). Moana’s song demonstrates her knowledge of the past wrongs committed against Te Fiti, drawing attention to her sensitivities to past traumas. It is through her recognition of these wrongs and her communication of this understanding that Moana calms Te Ka and returns the heart, transforming Te Ka, who represents the instability and hostility of foreign nations that seemingly threaten the American way of life, into Te Fiti – undoing the darkness that resulted from Maui’s transgression. Moana’s success not only reflects the promise of Obama’s rhetoric, but elevates this approach as the ideal means to global conflict resolution and the healing of rifts caused by past military actions. Further, in reaffirming the possibility of an alternative approach to foreign relations, the film also emphasises how Obama’s construction of an alternative national identity can still facilitate the nation’s exceptionalism on a global stage.

Moana’s maturation and resolution of the conflict becomes symbolic of an American maturation, as the nation is shifted, albeit temporarily, through Obama’s oration for a more politicised rather than militarised American foreign policy and presence. Moana’s transitionary state as an adolescent who has yet to claim a solidified identity, becomes a means to unpick past American presidential rhetorics and redefine the potential of the nation. In so doing, her transformation does not change the positioning of Americans and America as exceptional on a world stage, but it redefines how this exceptionalism is achieved through America’s engagement with foreign states.

The ultimate success and power of this transformation is embodied at the end of the film, when the foreign other, Te Ka, is transformed from enemy to ally. This transformation highlights the democratising potential of political solutions as Te Fiti literarily comes to mirror Moana. In her transition from Te Ka into Te Fiti, Te Ka’s lava exterior hardens and then falls away, revealing Te Fiti. Te Fiti’s facial features, namely the shape of her eyes, high cheekbones, broad lips and nose, and wavy hair reflect Moana’s own physical features. As Te Fiti is seen to embody the physical attributes of Moana as a Polynesian person, Te Fiti is by extension aligned with the Polynesian community and their culture. The visual overlap between the characters becomes symbolic of the transformation of an imagined “threatening” state by the civilising potential of the West, as envisioned within an American imaginary, and as reflective of the ideologies that underpin the imperialist pursuits of the American nation. The film consequently reaffirms the continuation of American imperialist territorial expansion but through the alternative avenue Obama’s rhetoric promises.

In Yoshinaha consideration of *Moana* she suggests, and I would agree, that to a degree Disney’s engagement with and inclusion of the Oceanic people in its production of *Moana* is superficial. It is important to acknowledge that Disney does create a film that seeks to represent the Pan Pacific people. However, as I have sought to demonstrate this engagement sees Polynesian myths and culture used as a backdrop to narrate and make sense of competing and changing discourses in contemporary American foreign policy through the persistent myth of American exceptionalism. Disney colonises Polynesian tales and culture, to not only recontextualise and perpetuate American exceptionalism, but to celebrate this exceptionalism through a colonising framework. Disney’s approach to storytelling and the political undertones of the film thus seem to mirror one another as Moana’s youthful adolescent body and adolescent journey is used by Disney to provide the space to reimagine the success of the American nation state and its place as an imperial power in an ever-changing world.

**Conclusion**

Although there is so much more that this paper could say about the allegorical ties between *Moana* and the rhetorical framings of the United States, it demonstrates that when the adolescent in a youth film is read through a political lens, changing national values, principals, identities and imaginings can be revealed. As youths in film are often read as indicators of change (Giroux 10), the story of adolescent coming-of-age can facilitate a symbolic exploration of a nation’s coming-of-age, the evolution of a nation’s identity, and/or a nation in transition. As the adolescent on screen finds or fails to find a resolution to the challenges that inform their maturation, their journey within youth films can point to, critique, reimagine and reaffirm underlining mythologies of the nation. This symbolic address of the nation provides insight into how nation states are perceived and imagined within Western popular culture. As Shary and Alexandra Seibel’s edited collection *Youth Culture in Global Cinema* suggests, the topics of politics, religion, culture and national identity are often found in global youth films (and as I have argued, are found in American youth films) (4). It is consequently likely that the figuration of the youth as a means to address changes to the nation occurs in other films, and I hope this case study will encourage future research into this area. Reversely, it also suggests that a political reading can facilitate an analysis of the adolescent beyond narratives of youth. There is thus a need to explore this intersection between youth films and politics more broadly, both in relation to American cinema and global cinema. It is my belief that the above case study provides the groundwork for this type of research in the future, and will help to unpack the diverse and complex interplay between adolescence on screen, political discourse and imagined nations.

Further my analysis of *Moana* contributes to the long-standing work on cinema and US ideology, as previously explored in the scholarship on Reaganite cinema. In moving beyond the Disney question, I have highlighted how the coupling of the disciplines of youth cinema, and US cinema and politics provides an alternative avenue to consider cinema in the age of Obama, and to analyse youth films/the adolescent beyond youth. My reading of *Moana* thus offers a framework to link youth cinema to political moments, highlighting how revisiting identity, narratives of exceptionalism and colonial practices can reveal cinema’s symbolic negotiation of the nation and myth-making. It also demonstrates how an exploration of the intersection between youths and the nation can give insight into how companies like Disney colonise cultures, communities and mythologies, as they engage in the process of American myth-making. It demonstrates how this film in many ways symbolically treats the Polynesian people as a colonised people, as their stories and visual depictions of their heritage are used to promote American myths and ideologies.

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1. **Notes**

   In Anne Jerslev’s 2008 chapter, “Youth Films: Transforming Genre, Preforming Audiences,” she asserts that scholarship on youth film tends to conform to either a social scientific or humanistic approach. She states, “the social science perspective deals with the films as *mirrors of youth* and asks what cultural function the films perform” (186), while the humanistic perspective is “primarily interested in *images of youth* and genre studies” (186). Those who align with a social science perspective primarily investigate the interplay between “film industrial considerations, social changes and the development of filmic representations of youth” (186). This scholarship raises sociocultural questions about whether youth films reflect the problems, lifestyles and identities of real youths. Scholarship such as Susannah Stern’s “Messages from Teens on the Big Screen: Smoking, Drinking, and Drug use in Teen-Centered Films,”Christina Lee’s *Screening Generation X: The Politics and Popular Memory of Youth in Contemporary Cinema,* Estella Tincknell’s “Feminine Boundaries: Adolescence, Witchcraft and the Supernatural in New Gothic Cinema and Television*,*”Laura Podalsky’s “The Young, the Damned, and the Restless: Youth in Contemporary Mexican Cinema,” or Richard Nowell’s ““There's More Than One Way to Lose Your Heart”: The American Film Industry, Early Teen Slasher Films, and Female Youth”mirror this approach.

   In contrast, the humanistic approach is centrally concerned with the interpretation of youth films as texts. As Jerslev concludes “these studies provide an overview of the development of narrative forms, motifs and themes overtime and discuss how youth film as a genre constructs and develops cinematic archetypes” (186). This approach is reflected in scholarship such as, Timothy Shary’s *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema Since 1980,* Thomas Doherty’s *Teenagers and Teenpics: Juvenilization of American Movies,* and Daniela Berghahn’s “Coming of Age in ‘The Hood’: The Diasporic Youth Film and Questions of Genre.”These two approaches at times intersect (see Elissa Nelson’s “The New Old Face of a Genre: The Franchise Teen Film as Industry Strategy” and Richard Benjamin’s“The Sense of an Ending: Youth Apocalypse Films”) and both approaches primarily agree that youth films are by and large about youth. This paper, building upon the above research, seeks to consider how youth films engage with sociocultural trends and happenings, whilst moving away from a reading of youth films as a means to primarily analyse youth. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. When creating a film about another culture, Disney has previously employed cultural consults, as seen in the production of *Pocahontas.* Despite the company’s promotion of this approach, like *Moana*, *Pocahontas* has been seen to distort the cultures it depicts (Fruzińska). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Andrew Britton, “Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment.”*Movie,* no. 31 (1986).; Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner. *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990).; Needham, Gary. “Reaganite cinema: what a feeling!.” In *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Politics*, eds. Yannis Tzioumakis and Claire Molloy, (London: Routledge, 2016).; Chris Jordan, *Movies and the Reagan Presidency: Success and Ethics* (Westport: Praeger, 2003).; Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2012).; William J Palmer, *The Films of the Eighties: A Social History* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ryan Jay Friedman, “A Moving-Picture of Democracy”: President Obama and African American Film History Beyond the Mirror Screen.” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 30, no. 1 (2013).; Douglas Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).; David Garrett Izzo, *Movies in the Age of Obama: The Era of Post-Racial and Neo-Racist Cinema* (Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).; Ian Gregory Strachan and Mia Mask, eds., *Poitier Revisited: Reconsidering a Black Icon in the Obama Age* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)