The Princess Problem: A Critical Analysis of Disney’s Representations of Cultures and Gender in The Princess and the Frog, Frozen, Elena of Avalor, and Moana

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract: Disney movies have influenced many children for over eighty years. However, there is an ongoing controversy about how they can stereotypically portray gender roles. In this thesis, I will perform extensive research on world cultures, genders, and Disney’s representations of these and then redesign Disney’s most recent protagonists from Frozen, Moana, Elena of Avalor and The Princess and the Frog in a way that accurately represents cultures and genders without perpetuating stereotypes. This research is crucial because Disney is one of the largest media sources, especially for children, and to perpetuate misrepresentations of cultures and genders substantiates harmful and discriminatory views of people.
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Introduction

The idea that Disney has portrayed stereotypes through their characters is not a new notion—much research already exists that shows not only which stereotypes are shown in Disney’s media productions, but also the effect they have on how children view other cultures and genders. Children, especially young girls, are at an age where what they pull from the Disney princess movies is how they should look and act, but not how they should think (Dell’Antonia). Through Disney movies, children have the potential of learning that money, beauty, and white skin are the only things that will allow a person to live in a happy-ending situation (Ewert). The goal of this research is to study and analyze the cultures and genders of the four most recent Disney princesses—Tiana from Princess and the Frog, Elsa from Frozen, Elena from Elena of Avalor, and Moana from Moana—and redesign them in a way that eliminates harmful stereotypes of the cultures and genders they are meant to portray.

Disney’s Portrayal of Gender and Culture

The influence of mass media on the perception of gender roles and norms has been a topic that has been highly discussed beyond the lines of the Disney empire, often referencing popular children’s media and toys such as the Barbie franchise (Coyne). However, Disney’s widespread popularity and expansive reach to children of all ages and cultures makes the company one of the key influencers on ideas of gender roles (Golden). For this reason, it is crucial for Disney to create a more diverse set of female characters—
compared to the current princess line which features similar princesses in both looks and behavior—that will serve as role models for girls (Golden).

Because Disney is so widespread, images of what women are supposed to look like are ingrained in young girls, and they keep these ideas for the majority of their lifetime (Coyne). Children’s views of gender roles and norms are often learned or reinforced by watching mass media and has been seen to be one of the most influential aspects of child development (Coyne). Knowing that “one of the most popular types of media and merchandise for young girls is the Disney Princess line” (Coyne 1909), it can be inferred that Disney’s role on a child’s perception of gender norms is extensive. Therefore, it is paramount for a company as influential as Disney to be conscious of what new characters they release into mainstream media, as each new character has the potential to serve as an idol for children, and especially young girls.

In our contemporary culture, one of Disney’s most difficult tasks is creating characters that depict a more accurate representation of women around the world, but also designing ones that are still marketable for mass audiences. In the near future, this task will prove difficult because world audiences have been taught that the most beautiful characters are those who have tiny waists, larger hips and busts, flawless hair and faces, and big, sparkling eyes. To break from this norm and risk losing profits for the sake of making more accurate characters will be a decision that could initially hurt the company. Ultimately, though, more realistic representations would be better for all future Disney fans so that they do not begin to mix fiction with reality. Children do not know how to discern between accurate and fictional representations of gender and culture, and they
may view their princesses as the true and correct form of the gender and culture that
princess is meant to portray, which has the potential of teaching children untrue and
harmful stereotypes about others.

On a recent trip to Disneyland, I visited an art gallery that sold Disney related art
made by artists from around the world. Though the art was truly beautiful and inspiring,
one particular trait stood out in each piece: all female characters had waists that would be
extremely unhealthy if translated to a living human. Unfortunately, I admittedly found
myself more drawn to the images where the women had accentuated features, such as the
small waist and big hips. After looking at five postcards I bought from that store, I
noticed that if the postcard featured a female character, she fit right into the gender
stereotype that women are supposed to be thin and frail while still having sufficient child-
bearing hips. I had fallen straight into the trap that many people do, unknowingly
continuing to perpetuate and support art that capitalizes on unrealistic standards for
female body types. The problem extends beyond Disney—I was not raised on princesses,
yet I am subconsciously still drawn to art that depicts thinner women characters. This
proved that Disney is not the only one to blame for this issue. However, Disney has the
power to change the widely spared idea of what makes a woman attractive. It, therefore,
will be crucial for Disney to introduce more merchandise that celebrates the variation of
the female body—especially since they ironically serve some of the unhealthiest foods
within their resorts.

With modern media and the highly accessible nature of the internet, the issue of
body image and self-esteem has been seen in children at young ages. “Studies have
shown that as early as preschool, children begin to express a preference for thin body types, and girls as young as 5 years old express fears of getting fat or show problems with body esteem, a self-evaluation of one’s body and appearance...many [children] are aware that body fat is undesirable for women” (Coyne 1911-1912). This message is reinforced continually through mass media, including in their beloved Disney princesses, which further perpetuates the unhealthy stereotype of the tiny-waisted female (Coyne).

Although more modern Disney princesses have been depicted with fewer gender stereotypes (such as Moana and Merida in *Brave*), they are still hyper-feminized for Disney merchandise (Coyne 1910). This phenomenon can especially be found with the amounts of glitter added to each character in merchandise—while I was in the parks, it was noted that characters who had no glitter on their original costumes were covered in it in the merchandise representations of the same characters. By doing this to merchandise, Disney continues to show children that even the strongest of females have to be covered in sparkles to be considered a princess and that no woman can be powerful without the aid of shimmering glitter. The merchandise that depicts male characters, however, tended to be devoid of glitter, showing boys that to be a strong male, they should not shimmer. These versions of male and female characters limit children of each gender to either liking glitter or not, and thus serves as another example of how Disney perpetuates ideas of what each gender is supposed to act like.

In mainstream media, including Disney media, gender stereotypes portrayed are not limited to physical expressions of gender—rather, it includes norms about how females are meant to act on a daily basis. “The princess narrative influences girls in a
culture that often puts more emphasis on how a girl looks and behaves than on how she acts and thinks” (Dell’Antonia), which in turn affects how the girl viewing the princess story views herself in her own ‘princess-play’ games (Coyne), then later her views of herself in society. “Girls reported feeling pressure to be thin, kind, caring, please everyone, speak softly, and not cause trouble. Conforming to the unreasonable standards to which girls are exposed through the media generates excessive anxiety for girls” (Golden 300). It is, therefore, important for a company as extensively consumed as Disney is to create characters that allow them to feel free to be themselves, without the constant pressure to fit the description of ‘the perfect female.’

Disney’s large influence on children affects not only their perceptions on gender norms, but also their views of other cultures of the world. With Disney’s recent surge in films concerning other world cultures, children have been able to experience and learn about the rich variety of people that live on this planet. It is also true, however, that depicting world cultures can prove to be a difficult task as it is a sensitive topic. Many do not look kindly on having their cultures analyzed and represented with an outsider’s point of view as I have concluded through interactions with peers and through reading and listening to people online. Although Disney has made progress in how they research other cultures, it is still true that the company still has a few fundamental issues with how they treat the cultures they are trying to portray through their animations (Armstrong). Disney’s portrayals of other cultures can affect how children view that culture, in the same way that children draw from Disney movies to understand gender norms, and it is, therefore, crucial for a company as influential as Disney to not only do extensive research on the culture they are trying to depict, but also to go and actually experience the
culture they hope to capture. The success and pitfalls of Disney’s representation of the four characters studied in this paper (Tiana, Elsa, Elena, and Moana) will be discussed in each of their chapters, offering further insight on how Disney has decided to portray world cultures.

**Redesigning Tiana, Disney’s First African-American Princess**

Audiences initially hoped for multicultural representation with the debut of Tiana, Disney’s first African American princess. Perhaps she would be the one to disrupt the instantiation of the white Disney princess. Tiana came with the hope that there would finally be an African American princess that little girls all over the world could relate to (Lester). *Princess and the Frog* was largely a positive film, as it depicted an African American as a full Disney princess who achieved her dreams through hard work and dedication (Lester). Although the movie was mostly positive, there were some downfalls in regard to the depiction of race and culture, as is pointed out in various articles.

Although many were pleased that Disney had finally chosen to depict an African American princess, the question still remains as to why they chose one of the darkest periods of African American history to put her in, and why they chose to give her the role they did. During the time period when this film takes place (supposedly the 1920’s), Jim Crowe laws had just become more extensive, and people hardly saw African Americans unless they were in a server’s role (“A Brief History”). The first point made is that Tiana, although she is African American for the first and last part of the film, is primarily depicted in the shape of a frog, hiding her ethnicity the majority of the film (Lester). The
author points out that by making Tiana a frog for a large percentage of the film, Disney was able to avoid bringing up racial issues and conflict that would have been present for the era Disney decided to set the film (1920’s New Orleans). This time period has been considered an odd choice for Disney, as it was at the peak of the enforcement of Jim Crowe laws (“A Brief History”). Because this film was set in such a dark period of American history, Disney changed Tiana into a frog to avoid racial issues, which caused many to be upset—rather than addressing racial problems, they chose to depict their first African American princess as a frog, ignoring the dark facts of the Jim Crowe era (Lester). By making Tiana a frog, Disney also reasserts the idea of hiding African American women, as she spends the majority of the movie concealed under her frog skin (Gregory).

Another problem with Tiana’s depiction is that she is shown as a cook—it is her dream to own her own restaurant and cook for the people of New Orleans. Although the dream of owning a restaurant is completely valid for any race or gender, the tradition of cooking has been largely connected to African American women, and by placing Tiana in this career, Disney re-establishes the notion that African American women only have a place in the world as cooks and workers (Dundes). Tiana also reflects the cultural stereotype that African American women can only achieve their dreams by working hard, unlike their white counterparts who merely have to wish upon stars, and more importantly, that African American women are stuck in the cooking industry (Dundes). It has also been said that by making Tiana a cook, she becomes more marketable because she is in a profession that everyone can relate to and love: cooking (Parasecoli). Rather than creating a marketable character by extensive thought and design, Disney chose to
depict Tiana as a cook, which inherently is marketable because of the general love for food, and especially the love for sweet beignets that Tiana makes (Parasecoli). Making a princess use hard work and determination was a step ahead in regard to showing children good moral standards, but the timing was off—Disney may have considered saving this message for another princess rather than placing the “hard work” responsibility on the only African American princess.

The entire premise of The Princess and the Frog makes the redesign of Tiana difficult; the setting of the film and the way Disney ignored the racial issues of the time by turning her into a frog reflect a problem in the initial concept of the film. Although the film was beautiful, the animation was done exquisitely and the overall message was a step forward in helping African American children feel like they had a princess to idolize, the film also seems to create more issues than solve them. Essentially, for the best redesign to occur, the plot and setting of the film would have to change; unfortunately, this is beyond the scope of this research. So, the focus of redesigning Tiana is placed on her cultural and gender depiction.

Disney’s representations of culture have been long debated, with the growing concern that Disney ‘Americanizes’ world cultures for marketing purposes (Herbert-Leiter). For example, many aspects of Tiana’s culture—Cajun and New Orleans cultures—have been changed to reflect a more marketable version of the culture, in hopes of making a more marketable movie and character (Herbert-Leiter). This is largely noticeable in the final scenes of the film when Tiana transforms back into her human-self at her marriage with her prince-charming, Naveen, at which point she is magically given
a princess ball gown. Although Disney may have done this to allow young African American children to feel like they too could be a Disney princess, Tiana’s ball gown reflects nothing of 1920’s New Orleans dress styles. The ball gown perpetuates the idea that to be a princess, girls have to have big, extravagant dresses covered in glitter.

Tiana also shows the classic gendered features of what women are supposed to look like, which include big eyes, small waists and large hips, qualities that are found in multiple Disney princesses (Coyne). Looking at *The Princess and the Frog*, the audience sees that even when Tiana transforms into her amphibious, non-gendered figure such as a frog, Disney portrayed Tiana (in her frog form) with big eyelashes, eyeshadow, sparkling eyes, a slim waist and bigger hips (*The Princess and the Frog*). By designing Tiana in this way, Disney shows girls that no matter the circumstances, women are still supposed to be perfect and classically ‘beautiful,’ rather than accepting that what they look like is beautiful already. For Tiana specifically, another issue lies in the hairstyle Disney chose to give her; the style seen in the parts of the film when she is a princess reflects a white-washed version of what African American hair is supposed to look like—pulled back, keeping natural curls out of the picture. Although it is true that Tiana’s hair could naturally be like this, it is important to show little girls that their natural hair is perfect the way it is. These types of traits will have to be re-imagined for one of the hardest-working, independent Disney princesses, while still making the character appealing to audiences.

For the purposes of this research, Tiana’s princess ball gown will be reimagined solely using ideas from the articles read, and not in a way that would change the entire plot of the story. In her redesign, Tiana will be put in a more traditional 1920’s dress with
only the amounts of glitter that would have been seen on dresses at the time. Her princess ball gown will be reimagined solely using ideas from the articles read, and not in a way that would change the entire plot of the story. Her facial features will be redesigned in a way that reduces the amount of makeup she wears, as well as make her eyes smaller to create a more accurate female face. And finally, Tiana’s hair will be redesigned in a way that is more natural and not pulled back, hopefully showing off a more empowered hairstyle for little girls to look up to.
The image above shows how Tiana has been redesigned. The first and most obvious change is the style of her dress: instead of having the voluminous ball gown, she has been given a 1920’s style dress inspired by a traditional dress (see fig. 1). The dress was lengthened given it is supposed to be a wedding dress, and small beaded accents
were added to reflect the jewels found on 1920’s flapper dresses. The dress was designed with some modern accents that reflect natural aspects of the swamps of Louisiana, including iridescent dragonfly wings and representations of large tree roots. Tiana’s hair was designed to be in a more natural state, with added green pearls that remind the viewer of 1920’s beading. Her body has been given a more realistic waist to hip ratio that is still thin, but that is not unhealthily thin. Her eyes reflect a more natural look that is more representative of 1920’s makeup styles and that represent a more accurate eye size. This redesign hopefully captures the essence of Tiana’s character, while at the same time eliminating previously found stereotypes in her original design.

Figure 1: A traditional 1920’s dress that helped inspire Tiana’s dress. From “Style Icons From The 1920’s.” *HuffPost*, 20 May 2013, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/1920s-fashion-coco-chanel_n_3293425](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/1920s-fashion-coco-chanel_n_3293425).
Redesigning Elsa, The Secretive Ice Queen

One of Disney’s most independent characters, Elsa of Arendelle, can be found in the movie Frozen. In their writings about Frozen, Streiff and Dundes state that Elsa, the outcast protagonist with magical snow powers, conforms to the gender norm of women being unable to control their emotions, and who, therefore, should not be trusted with large amounts of power, as it might cause someone to get hurt (Streiff, “Frozen”). Their research also shows that Elsa, who does not form any type of romantic bond throughout the movie, perpetuates the stereotype that women with a large amount of power are unattractive to men because it has the potential of emasculating them (Streiff “Frozen”). Further, they note that Elsa’s gloves that her father gives to her to conceal her power are a symbol of patriarchal control, which Elsa accepts without question (Streiff “Frozen”). Although these stereotypes are woven into the construction of the character, these problematic plot points cannot be changed because that would then alter the entire film.

Elsa has two main costumes throughout the movie: her coronation dress worn when she becomes Queen of Arendelle and while she is still concealing her powers, and her famous ice dress that symbolizes her freedom and her acceptance of her snow magic. For her coronation dress, Disney artists wanted to depict patterns and symbols from the Norwegian culture. Jean Gillmore states that, “When it was decided to bend the film visually towards the Norwegian aesthetic, the design was streamlined using the Bunad—The traditional Norwegian style of Folkware—as a touchstone for this and all costumes in the film” (Solomon). Attention to detail in the fabric choices, stitching, patterns and traditional Norwegian designs was crucial in creating characters that were more
believable and appealing. However, some designs had to be simplified to make the movie more cartoon-like, and to make animating the less expensive—the more details on a costume, the more expensive it gets to animate (Solomon). In order to keep the Norwegian style, Michael Giaimo comments that artists and animators used traditional fabrics, such as wool as a base for each dress, and velvet, linen, and silk for accents on each dress (Solomon). Although these aspects were well maintained for Elsa’s coronation dress, the same cannot be stated for her ice dress.

Early versions of Elsa’s ice dress showed signs of more traditional Norwegian styles (Solomon), however, as new versions of the dress were created, the traditional style and patterning of Norwegian dresses were almost entirely lost. After watching Frozen, it became blatantly apparent why her dress was designed in a way that removed Norwegian styles: the dress had been designed for marketability rather than accuracy. Elsa’s ice dress is a light teal color covered in glitter—two aspects of design that are easily marketed to young girls as it has been ingrained in their minds that these are things they are supposed to like. Though designers were trying to emulate the colors of snow, there were other ways to do so using more mature colors and far less glitter. By covering the dress with glitter then marketing it to girls, the notion that glitter is meant for girls is further reinforced, reminding them that to act as a typical female they must like all that sparkles and shines. Although it is true that snow has a certain glittery look to it in the right lighting, and, this is what designers may have been trying to capture, snow-sparkle is subtle; the decision to add the number of rhinestones to Elsa’s dress was presumably more likely done so to make it more marketable to girls.
There is another issue in her ice dress that is far more problematic than the colors and glitter in her dress. After watching Elsa transform into a powerful, free woman, the first thing the audience sees is her tight dress that accentuates her thin waist and big hips, which is then added to by putting a slit in her dress that shows off her thin leg (*Frozen*). Some even describe her transformed look as “an exotic pin-up model” (Rudloff), which is reinforced when “she walks sensually, hips swaying, posing and alluring gazing directly at the audience (Rudloff). This representation of the ‘freed-woman’ reinforces the idea that the only kind of freedom a woman can have has to also be attached to a sexual aspect. Although it had been argued that it is Elsa who chooses to represent herself in a sexualized manner, it still reinforces the idea that even though they may be empowered, “Women are still located in their bodies…albeit heterosexually desiring ones” (Rudloff). Elsa represents the feminist ideal of being herself both in inner strength and outer beauty; however, as Rudloff states, this notion “conflates the feminist call for liberation and empowerment with the postfeminist notion of the right to look good”—although the two are not always mutually exclusive, mass media, including Disney, have taught women and girls alike that their feminist power and strength *has* to be attached to outwardly beauty. This is a theme that has occurred often in the real world, such as in today’s movement to accept all sizes of female bodies so long as the size of a woman contributes to her “curves” and, therefore, her sex appeal (Rudloff). This is not a problem that Disney contributes to alone; however, children would benefit in seeing a princess become powerful without the addition of being sexualized. By showing young girls images of power such as Elsa in her ice dress, Disney teaches audiences that only sexy women can be strong and independent, or that even in gaining vast amounts of power, women should
still be concerned with their body image (Rudloff). This notion leaves girls with the belief that intellect and a strong drive alone will not lead to successful lives, and that beauty and body shape are the only true influencers in a happy life. This has the potential of leading girls into obsessions with their self-image. Rudloff argues that “popular discourse identifies in Elsa a role model because she breaks free from societal constraints and follows her own life path, but the extremely conventional connotations that cling to her newfound visual appearance makes it difficult to agree with the critic who proclaimed that ‘Little girls dressing up as Elsa are the future of feminism’” (Rudloff).

The cut of Elsa’s ice dress is also problematic in the way that it does not represent any Northern European style, and rather is solely a representation of Elsa’s ice power. Although this would be fine in other contexts, for Frozen it creates a disconnect for the audience. Because all of the other costumes, buildings, and landscapes in the film are in a Norwegian inspired style, giving Elsa a different dress removes all aspects of Norwegian culture and leaves the audience somewhat disconnected from the culture. It also diminishes the beauty of the original culture Disney was trying to portray by not allowing traditional Norwegian dress styles to be in the limelight. As an audience member, after watching Frozen, I did not leave the film with any knowledge on what traditional dresses would have looked like. Although Disney’s main goal may not have been to educate audiences about Northern European cultures, it is important to maintain consistency in costume designs both for the believability of characters, and in the case of Frozen, to not misrepresent the Norwegian culture.
The goal of redesigning Elsa’s will be to give her a dress that resembles more closely the traditional styles of Norwegian dresses with a flair that will still capture the feeling of Disney magic. Because it will be designed in a way that is more accurate to Norwegian Bunads (see fig. 2), it will inherently eliminate the slim, sexy style of her original dress, and will be more accurate both in gender and culture. Elsa’s new design can be seen in the image on the next page.
In this reimagined version of Elsa’s ice dress, there are still aspects of design that capture the fact that she is an ice queen without the extensive use of glitter that was seen in her original dress. The dress is also more representative of the Norwegian Bunad but
was given the flair of the translucent undershirt that shows her ice power in a different way than previously seen. The colors were chosen because they are more mature for what Elsa would have worn as a 21-year-old, and that are truer to traditional Norwegian colors. The cut of the dress is also less sexualized, and her waist has been designed to be more accurate to female waists, showing off her power rather than her body. Lastly, her hair was inspired by Norse warriors, for in the moment when she leaves her kingdom, Elsa becomes more a warrior than a queen.

Figure 2: Norwegian Bunad used to inspire Elsa’s new ice dress. From Artstor.

Redesigning Elena, Disney’s Unknown Princess

On 22 July 2016, Disney introduced its first Latina inspired princess (*Elena*). Elena of Avalor was a much-anticipated princess because parents and children alike were thrilled to finally have Latina representation within the Disney Princess universe; audiences noted that their children had princesses from many other cultures to look up to, but not a Latina one (Wertz). However, unlike all other Disney princesses, Elena would premiere on her own television series that is still currently airing (*Elena*). Although at first the television series was popular (as was noticed through the proliferation of pictures of Elena on social media in the form of fan art and costumes), talk about the princess has since declined. She now only appears in social media during times of Latinx\(^1\) holidays. Concerns about having the first Latin American princess not having her own full-length animated feature have proven—through my time doing this research—as a valid concern as every person I have spoken to about the princess have never heard of her. With her popularity in decline, Latin American representation in Disney princesses has once again started to fade, leaving audiences to question when a Latina princess will be featured in a full-length animation.

Before Disney would be able to release a full feature of a Latina princess, they would have to use Elena’s shortcomings and successes as a character to analyze how to best represent the Latinx community without further perpetuating the portrayal of stereotypes to children through Disney’s princesses. The choice Disney made to make

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\(^1\) Perez defines Latinx as “a non-gendered word that refers to those of us of Latin American descent” (Perez).
Elena of Avalor was an important step in the right direction, as the Latinx community has long awaited to have a princess their children could relate to (Barnes). Some have argued that Disney made the right choices in designing Elena (Quinones-Fontanez); however, through journal articles and personal observation, it becomes clear that Disney still has some issues with the design that continue to perpetuate stereotypes both in gender and culture.

As with any media, and especially Disney media, critiques of Elena of Avalor immediately started emerging even before the show had aired (Perez), pointing out everything that was wrong with the characters, the setting, the messages, and the entirety of the show. Although some of the criticisms are certainly valid to address, it showed an inherent truth about media—that no matter what someone creates, there will always be people who seek to diminish the value of the creation by slandering it with accusations that point it out as racist, sexist, and an all-around disaster. This was found to be the case with Elena of Avalor, and it should be made clear that Disney’s design of Elena was none of the latter—in fact, many in the Latinx community praised Disney for creating a princess to look up that reflects their own culture (Quinones-Fontanez). In her article, Quinones-Fontanez states how quickly people started criticizing the idea of Elena: “Who knew there would be so much pressure to be a Disney Latina Princess? While many claim to want one, they are always quick to scrutinize anyone that comes along. I can’t help but wonder if Latinos will ever be satisfied with one” (Quinones-Fontanez). She also identifies with the challenge of being acceptably Latina, much like Elena of Avalor, when she speaks about times in her life when she has been pointed out as not “Latina enough” (Quinones-Fontanez). She states, “I have spent most of my life explaining why I don’t
speak Spanish. I have had to reassure strangers that I am proud of being Puerto Rican even though I do not speak Spanish. As if language and cultural pride go hand in hand” (Quinones-Fontanez). This argument forces audiences to re-think how they might be stereotyping Latin American cultures by saying that being Latinx only lies in having brown skin and speaking Spanish. She continues by writing “Latinos are a diverse culture with a rich history. Our skin, hair, and eye color come in every shade and our hair comes in every texture. We all eat different food and even our language varies slightly from country to country. But we have one unifying trait: we all identify as Latinos, and we are all extremely proud of our culture. It would be nearly impossible to create a Latina Princess that would fit everyone’s ideal” (Quinones-Fontanez).

The most noticeable criticism of not only Elena’s design, but of the entire concept of the show is something that has also been noticed in Disney’s feature *Moana*, in which Disney clumps multiple cultures into one, claiming it as a fictional culture inspired by the large variety of cultures of the real world—and for Elena’s case, of the Latin American world. By doing this, Disney is able to avoid criticism from any person on the misrepresentation of a singular Latin American culture, as they can defer to the fact that their version of Latin American culture is fictional and does not mean to represent a real culture. Concerns of constructing a cultural piecemeal were made evident when Latinx people asserted “I fear Disney will flatten and generalize the diversity of Latino identity” (Lozada-Olivia). When asked about why Disney was going through such efforts to make a princess that encapsulated all of Latin American culture, Sylvia Cardenas Olivas (writer of *Elena of Avalor*) stated that they wanted Elena to be “everybody’s princess” (Lozada-Olivia). Nancy Kanter, Disney Junior Worldwide EVP and general manager, was excited
to announce that *Elena of Avalor* would be a visually beautiful show that would be able “to tell wonderful stories influenced by culture and traditions that are familiar to the worldwide population of Hispanic and Latino families” (“Disney”). Although this notion is a well-intentioned one, it can end up being more detrimental in teaching children that all Latin American cultures are exactly the same and that they can be boiled down to the version we see in *Elena of Avalor*. Disney likely wants to make a princess that pleases everyone for two main reasons: the first is for marketability, as the company can make more profits if they have a princess that will appeal to all Latin American cultures rather than just one, and the second reason is to appease the criticism they would get for choosing one culture to depict over another. However, in terms of marketing and eliminating cultural stereotypes, Disney would benefit from choosing one culture over another, as children from all Latin American cultures would love a Disney princess no matter which culture she originated from (as can be seen with the popularity of all Disney princesses who come from many different world cultures (Coyne)) maintaining her marketability. As we have seen previously, no matter how Disney decides to depict a culture, they will receive criticism—and it may be more beneficial to choose only one culture to show children rather than clumping all Latin American cultures into the same kingdom. As Lozada-Olivia states, “I don’t think we can make progress by waiting for ‘everybody’s princess’” (Lozada-Olivia).

On a more physical level, the design of Elena’s dress is mildly confusing. Although I did not grow up in a Latin American culture and cannot, therefore, prove this is true, the dress seems to reflect a more Spanish style dress than Latin American, and because the show is supposedly set before any Spanish invasion (*Elena*), it is reasonable
to think her dress should have no Spanish influence at all. Her other costumes throughout
the series do reflect dress styles of other cultures, but this main dress she wears has hints
of Spanish design both in color and in style.

Although Disney’s creation of *Elena of Avalor* was able to further add diversity in
the Disney princess line, they once again fell short in creating a diverse female character
that breaks free from the gender stereotypes we see in their older princesses. Elena,
having to take over her kingdom at the young age of 16 after her parents’ death, has a
strong spirit and leadership skills that most children can look up to ("Disney"). However,
after watching just the first five minutes of the show, Elena shows clear signs of being the
stereotypical Disney princess: her comportment, voice intonations, and general attitude
are all light and airy, with the classic bent wrist and naïve high-pitched voice world
audiences are used to. But maybe more importantly (and more alarmingly), her features,
besides her darker skin, all reflect the older Disney princesses such as Cinderella and
Sleeping Beauty, almost erasing all the progress that would be made with Moana’s
design. As a 16-year-old teenager, Elena’s design brings back the tiny waist, big eyes,
voluminous and long straight hair, and muscle-less and fatless body that girls have been
taught to embrace as what they should look like (Coyne). Besides the darker skin, Elena
completely follows the older version of what Disney princesses looked like—in the end,
it almost seems as if designers created a white princess, gave her darker skin and darker
hair, and claimed her as Latina. With such a strong push from audiences for Disney to
make a more diverse set of Disney princesses, character designers and producers will
have to consider not only how diverse their character is in culture, but also how diverse
they are shape and size—not all girls have the genetics to have such small features, and
little Latina girls who fall into this category may fall victim to self-hatred stemming from the fact that the only princess they have to relate to perpetuates the idea that women have to be skinny and beautiful to have worth in society (Coyne).

Given the complexities of cultural and gender representations, when evaluating Elena and her design, my goal will be to redesign her in a way that eliminates harmful stereotypes of Latin American cultures and gender norms. My goal will not be to point out why Elena does not fit the description of the Latin American community, but rather to find general issues with the portrayal of Elena regarding the entirety of the Latin American culture. Her redesigned dress will give her everyday look inspired by Mexican patterns and designs.
The image above shows the redesigned version of Elena. In it, her dress has been changed in a way that reflects more traditional Mexican styles, colors, and patterns found in everyday wear removing any Spanish influence that was originally seen in her dress.
design. Her hair is also more traditional and is no longer a voluminous ponytail. She is depicted with less makeup and smaller eyes and is given a more attainable waist size.

**Redesigning Moana, The Polynesian Progressive Princess**

In the fall of 2016, Disney released *Moana*, inviting children and adults alike to go on a colorful, beautiful, and magical journey into the Pacific Islands. Although the story of *Moana* is not based on a real myth of Polynesia, the film still is able to introduce world audiences to a small part of the Polynesian culture (Coates), and put it in the limelight by celebrating the people and the colorful aesthetic presented in the movie. One of the most important aspects of the film and the production of it is that Disney made many efforts to keep the characters and the story culturally accurate by creating a group of advisors called the Oceanic Story Trust, a group of native Polynesians with whom the directors and production artists consulted when designing the various pieces of the story (Julius). Though there are still ongoing debates as to whether or not a company such as Disney had the right to appropriate the Polynesian culture for their film, and though some even question what right Western companies such as Disney have to portray non-Western cultures (due to fears of the representations of the non-Western cultures being inaccurate as it is not their own culture) (Herman), it is clear that of all of the four princesses studied in this thesis, Moana was the most culturally accurate. This important fact shows that as time progresses, Disney puts more thought into the design of their characters to ensure there are no (or minimal) stereotypes portrayed and passed onto world audiences.
On a physical level, the design of Moana has been argued as one of the most successful designs of a Disney princess, as she shows fewer stereotypes both in the portrayal of her culture and gender. It is important to note that there is much praise from Polynesian audiences for the character design of Moana—Disney’s representation of Moana showed Polynesian girls that they can be strong and determined without the need of a love story, or being saved by a man (Tamaira). From personal observations while watching the film, I admit that for the first time watching a Disney princess movie, that I did not feel as if my body was too large, or not pretty enough, because Moana, although still considerably skinny, has a much more normal and healthy waist to hip ratio (Moana). From my observation, she is also not portrayed as busty as other princesses of her age while many other sixteen-year-old princesses are depicted with an above average size bust. This is important in her design because it does not further perpetuate the already existing notions that women are supposed to have tiny waists, big hips, and large busts, notions that have been engrained into our culture for decades. In the film, however, it is still noticeable that Moana has been given big eyes, big eyelashes, and perfectly shaped eyebrows—all features that are expected of women. If Disney was trying to truly depict a sixteen-year-old Polynesian girl, then their designs should have avoided perpetuating the stereotype that women need to have perfect faces, especially when depicting a character that is meant to be a child.

In some of the initial designs by Bill Schwab, Manu Arenas, Annette Marnat, and Minkyu Lee, Moana was portrayed as more of a child in such a way that gives the reader the feeling of a more authentic Polynesian child, rather than a “Disney-fied” version of what a child should look like (Julius 31-32). These designs could have been beneficial to
use as versions of Moana, because “given Disney’s wide marketing and product campaign, children also have frequent opportunities to rehearse the gender stereotypes they view in the movies through playing with princess toys, dressing up in princess costumes, and more” (Coyne). Therefore, while watching a movie such as *Moana*, children—especially young girls—may be compelled to wear makeup and have more adolescent features to mimic the look of Moana. This type of design can have negative impact on the lives of children because it reinforces the idea for both genders that women, and even young girls, are supposed to wear makeup and look like adults to be as successful as a Disney princess. Had the designs for Moana been kept as they were in early stages of development, children would have had a more age-appropriate hero to look up to that would have showed them that they are perfect as they are in such a crucial time of their development.

Although some aspects of Moana’s gender show signs of stereotyping, she has been praised for her breakthrough in a movement of future princesses that show audiences the beautiful variability in the human body. It is also stated that Disney was able to successfully portray the Polynesian culture due to their attention to detail: “Among the most thrilling aspects of the film are the use of tattoos (even though they are too modern to be accurate for the period) to suggest that Māui is an embodiment of Polynesian culture; the portrayal of belief in sea creatures such as the stingray as family totems; the careful attention paid to the costumes (except for Māui’s)” (Tamaira 218-219). As Tamaira indicates, Disney is making progress in accurately representing world cultures and that due to extensive amounts of research from Disney, children were able to watch a movie about Polynesia without forming incorrect ideas of what the Polynesian
culture is like. Throughout this research, I have noted that there are few articles that criticize the way Disney portrayed Moana’s costume—as seen above, her costume was celebrated by Polynesians, and, therefore, will not be a main focus in my redesigning of her.

Some Polynesians and scholars have noted that it is unfair to group all of Polynesia into one culture, as they are as diverse as separate countries would be. In an article that focuses on how accurate the story of Moana was to Polynesian cultural truths, the Doug Herman states, “Who gets to authenticate so diverse a set of cultures and so vast a region as Polynesia and the even more diverse and larger Pacific Island region that is also represented in this film?” (Herman). This question is extremely important for filmmakers and producers to ask themselves when creating a new film, as culture can vary greatly from one town to another in the world. For example, if Disney had applied this same logic to a film located in Europe—the grouping together of cultures—they may have grouped French, German, and Spanish cultures into the same movie, which are entirely different from one another. Although it seems that one of Disney’s goals is to create new and imaginary worlds based off of real-life cultures and locations, it is paramount for their group of researchers not to try and group too many cultures into one new Disney-made culture. It is important to note, however, that there are plenty of successful Disney films (including princess films) that are true to one location and avoid the grouping of cultures. But, after reading the criticisms of how the fictional Disney Polynesian culture offends many Polynesians, it is reasonable to assume that Disney created the new culture to avoid being confronted by its audience with proof of inaccuracies portrayed in the film. By creating a version of the Polynesian culture that is
not found in this world, Disney can fall back on the fact that the culture is a fictional representation of the Polynesian culture, and it is, therefore, acceptable to portray the culture in the way they did. This is something that Disney should avoid because although some adults may be able to see this film as fiction and understand that it is not an accurate representation of the entire Polynesian culture, many other people, and especially children who are still developing ideas about other cultures, will watch the film and interpret it as a correct and true representation of how all Pacific Islanders live. In my representation of Moana, I will redesign her to portray only one of the many beautiful Polynesian cultures in hopes of avoiding the incorrect grouping of multiple different cultures.

For her redesign, Moana will be depicted as a Samoan princess—this choice was made by comparing her current costumes throughout the movie to pictures of different Polynesian cultures, and finding that she closely resembles Samoan women. Although other aspects of the film depict other Polynesian cultures, Samoa was chosen in order to best preserve Moana’s original look.

Through all of the articles read for this chapter on Moana, it has become evident that no one person would ever be able to design a Polynesian princess that would cover everyone’s needs due to the expansive area Polynesia covers and the continual diversity within Polynesian cultures. It would take decades of ethnographic research—research done by living within the culture—to be able to best capture the true essence of Polynesia. Even then, it would be a daunting, almost impossible task. As we see with any film, characters get analyzed constantly by everyone, and what one person may point out
as negative may be found as a positive characteristic by another. I have tried to the best of my ability to see what criticisms were common in many articles and focus on those to redesign Moana in the new drawings. I have also used my own interpretations of the film *Moana* within the drawings in hopes of creating a less stereotyped character.

The image on the next page is the redesign of Moana, using a Samoan influence to best represent her culture.
As seen above, in her new design, Samoan Tapa designs are used for her skirt and her top; the flower designs on Moana’s original skirt have been replaced with a more traditional Samoan pattern in order to eliminate both the stereotype that all girls want flowery clothes and the stereotype that all Polynesian cultures are the same by clumping
them into one. She was further redesigned to have a more normalized waistline—although some may claim that the current version of Moana is more normal (which is true compared to Disney’s previous princesses), she still shows signs of extreme skinniness that will only further teach young girls that they have to be unhealthily thin to be considered beautiful. In her new design, Moana has not been designed to be obese, in hopes of not perpetuating the stereotype that all Polynesians are large, but she has been redesigned to have a more normal hip to waist ratio.

The two images below are images of Samoan Tapa used to help design the skirt and top of Moana.

![Figure 3: Tapa Cloth, Ii5 Front / Recto. before 1900, Image: 03-Jun-2009. Artstor, library.artstor.org/asset/AWSS35953_35953_38223001](image-url)
Figure 4: Siapo mamanu (tapa cloth), 1890s, Samoa, maker unknown. Gift of Alexander Turnbull, 1913. Te Papa (FE000825)

Conclusions

After examining the pitfalls and successes in each character’s design, it becomes clear that some of the design issues, especially those that have to do with cultural misrepresentation, are not always fully intended. As it was seen with Moana, Disney took great measures to try to ensure that the Polynesian culture was well represented and that it was accurate (Julius), which proved largely successful by the comments of native Polynesians who praised her design (Tamaira). In this regard, Disney has made progress, as they took the right step in making a group of Polynesians who could confer with designers to ensure the most accurate story. After researching criticisms of each
character, however, the most common errors Disney seems to have made could have been avoided, had there been proper representation within the design field. Currently in the United States, 79.9% of designers are Caucasian and 8.89% are Asian, only leaving 11.21% of the design field for every other world population (Designers). If Disney wants to avoid creating characters and stories that have cultural stereotypes, their next step, beyond creating a group like the Oceanic Story Trust, is to create groups of designers that are balanced in ethnic background and gender. It will be especially important to hire designers who are also from the regions they want to depict, as designers from there will be able to bring a rich knowledge that United States born designers will not have. Doing this would provide people outside the United States an opportunity to present their viewpoints on each character and would bring Disney the chance to welcome in more diversity into their workforce.

The design workforce is fairly equal in regard to gender—57.1% of designers are female (Designers). In Disney films, dating back to *The Little Mermaid*, the addition of female designers has helped the studio create female characters that have broken boundaries and gender norms through time (Lange). Though each character still had flaws in their designs, the fact was that progress was being made in female representation and continues even today as new films are created (Lange). By allowing women in the design stages of a feature voice their opinions for what they wish they could see in a princess, more accurate representations of women can come into the light (Lange). It is crucial for Disney, whose princesses have such a large influence over how children perceive gender roles and norms (Coyne), to allow women to speak up and voice their opinions about the
designs of the princesses. This step is paramount in ensuring that future Disney princesses are more diverse in how they look and act, showing girls and women of all ages that who they are is exactly what they should be.

The final conclusion found during the length of this research is that no matter what artists make, there will always be criticism. This was made clear with the example of Elena, who was both criticized and praised by audiences around the world. This made it clear that the most important action to take is to make characters and princesses that are the least stereotypical versions of themselves, and not worry about marketability—of course the characters will be criticized by some, but it may open the doors for a new audience who has been waiting for their gender and culturally sensitive princesses their whole lives.
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Siapo mamanu (tapa cloth), 1890s, Samoa, maker unknown. Gift of Alexander Turnbull, 1913. Te Papa (FE000825)


