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**Opinion: “#CartoonsSoWhite?” “Moana” Points the Way for Actor Diversity**

**By Michael Cavna, Washington Post on 8.31.16**

When the Disney film "Moana" lands this November, it will feel fresh to many moviegoers for an unusual reason: It is a mainstream Hollywood animated film that casts featured voice actors of color who represent the culture being depicted.

"Moana" centers on the adventure of a young woman looking for a fabled Pacific island, with demigod Maui in tow. Princess Moana herself is voiced by young Hawaiian native Auli'i Cravalho — who was discovered after an extensive casting call — and Maui is voiced by Dwayne Johnson, whose mother is of Samoan descent.

The voice cast also features several New Zealand–sprung actors who are part Maori: Jemaine Clement ("Flight of the Conchords"), Temuera Morrison and Rachel House — as well as Nicole Scherzinger, who has Hawaiian and Filipino roots.

"Moana" will arrive in the wake of complaints that another new American animated film, Laika/Focus Features' "Kubo and the Two Strings" (which opened Friday), hired too many white voice actors for its lead roles. The film, which is set in a fantastical version of ancient Japan, centers on a folktale in which some characters are transformed into animals.

"Kubo" features the voices of Oscar winners Matthew McConaughey and Charlize Theron and Oscar nominees Rooney Mara and Ralph Fiennes, with Irish-born teen actor Art Parkinson voicing the title role. In secondary roles are the Japanese-American actors George Takei and Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa, with the cast also including Minae Noji, Alpha Takahashi and Ken Takemoto, among others.

The Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA), a watchdog group, has criticized Laika for casting white actors in the roles that receive the most screen time. "Why are white actors playing an entire extended Japanese family," MANAA's founding president, Guy Aoki, says in his criticism. .

In other words, often when it comes to casting leading voices: "#CartoonsSoWhite."

Gene Luen Yang, a Chinese-American cartoonist, says that the "Kubo" casting certainly is curious.

"There are so many Asian-American actors these days. It just makes me wonder why they didn't just go with one of them," Yang, a two-time National Book Award finalist ("American Born Chinese," "Boxers & Saints"), says.

"The critical conversation around diversity is one that Laika cares very deeply about," "Kubo" director Travis Knight said in a statement. And when I asked Knight this month about the creative diversity behind "Kubo," he pointed to Laika's global multiculturalism represented by its employees.

Hollywood at large, of course, has increasingly faced accusations of "whitewashing" — by which white actors are cast in ethnic-specific roles — with Sony's "Aloha" (in which Emma Stone played a character who is part Asian and part Hawaiian), Marvel's forthcoming "Doctor Strange" (in which Tilda Swinton plays a character who traditionally has been of Tibetan descent), and 2010's "The Last Airbender" (in which some of the featured actors are white in the fantasy's tribal South Pole setting) as recent examples. (Since then, Yang has written for the "Avatar: The Last Airbender" comic books for Dark Horse Books.)

Lalo Alcaraz, the "La Cucaracha" cartoonist and cultural commentator, has long criticized Hollywood's lack of diversity, especially in high-profile and decision-making positions.

"I have seen plenty of animated films in the last decade where the cast is almost always 100-percent Anglo actors, with a token minority actor, if that," says Alcaraz, who recently served as a writer/consulting producer on Fox's animated "Bordertown."

"It seems that most talking nonhuman characters somehow always seem to be voiced by white actors," Alcaraz, who is a consultant on Disney/Pixar's forthcoming "Coco," tells The Post's Comic Riffs.

Judging by early signs, "Coco," which includes a Day of the Dead theme, promises to be as culturally aware as "Moana." And in "Moana," in fact, you can detect a through-line in how Disney's approach to culturally sensitive casting has evolved over just the past quarter-century.

In 1992, veteran Disney directors John Musker and Ron Clements released "Aladdin," featuring mostly white voice actors in the lead roles — with Lea Salonga, the Asian American actress who sang in this film and "Mulan," being a notable exception. (It's worth noting: The next year, the New York Times reported on how a lyric in "Aladdin" mentioned a barbaric act, and Disney changed it in response to criticism from the American-Arab AntiDiscrimination Committee. The piece was headlined: "It's Racist, but Hey, It's Disney.")

By 2009, Musker and Clements were directing Disney's animated "The Princess and the Frog," starring such actors of color as Anika Noni Rose, Bruno Campos, Keith David and Michael-Leon Woodley in voice roles. (Oprah Winfrey and Terrence Howard were also cast.)

And now, with "Moana," Musker and Clements can help lead mainstream American animation ever toward more culturally sensitive casting.

After all, if animation can't draw up a cast without an over-reliance on white tints, what chance does the rest of Hollywood have?