Pocahontas:
A Critical Analysis

By Allison Michelle Morris
Full Sail University
Spring 2015

This analysis will attempt to identify and address the appropriation of indigenous culture in the animated film *Pocahontas* (1995). Specifically, how this film utilizes the major American Indian stereotypes of the "lovely Indian princess," "natural ecologist," "noble savage," and "wise Chief" in contrast to the "white savior" trope to assuage American audiences.

Captain John Smith leads a group of Englishmen to the "New World" in search of gold. However, the Powhatans along the shoreline are increasingly wary of these "pale visitors" with their strange weapons. The only person who isn't afraid is Chief Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas. Prior to the Englishmen's arrival, Pocahontas has a vision about a spinning arrow, and believes it indicates a significant change in her life. While Pocahontas and John Smith foster their burgeoning relationship, the Powhatans and the Englishmen are on the verge of war.

While *Pocahontas* was praised at the time as a progressive narrative during the Disney animation renaissance, it relies too heavily on racial stereotypes to tell its story. The movie is marketed as a Disney Princess film, but Pocahontas herself has very little autonomy because of her "white savior" John Smith. Smith fills the role of the white savior who, after learning about the ways of the world from natural ecologist Pocahontas, is determined to stop the Englishmen from harming her and her people – even going so far as throw himself in front of a bullet to protect Chief Powhatan – despite being an experienced and accomplished conqueror himself, which is conveniently forgotten once Pocahontas shows him "what's around the river bend."

It is problematic that a film called *Pocahontas* isn't predominately about Pocahontas. John

Smith has as much "air time" as Pocahontas, and is a far more proactive character. This closely follows the ideas of the theoretical lens concerning racism. I highly doubt Disney intended to release a racist film – during production the studio made a concerted effort to consult with indigenous scholars and artists, and hired Native talent whenever possible for the project – but by utilizing old Hollywood's well-established stereotypes about American Indians, Disney has introduced and continued to perpetuate these misconceptions about an entire group of people to a very young audience.

Pocahontas is flawed from its opening sequence. The film starts at the docks in London as Governor Radcliffe, Smith, and the rest of the crew say goodbye to their loved ones before their voyage to the New World. For a film named after an American Indian "princess," it is unusual that the first four minutes places such a strong emphasis on the Englishmen's hardships and Smith's heroism. The only reason filmmakers would do this would be to foster sympathy for the English settlers before they ever arrive to the New World, and to contrast the sophistication of European life with the natural simplicity of Pocahontas' world.

Once the film has established who will most likely fill the role of the white savior, the audience finally gets to see the Powhatan village as the chief arrives home after victoriously defeating a warring tribe. Although historically Chief Powhatan was a successful warrior who united several tribes under the Tsenacommaca banner, *Pocahontas* reinforces the stereotype of noble savage by introducing these characters as ruthless conquerors without any explanation for their actions, which in some ways diminishes Radcliffe's impact when he brings his crew to essentially do the same thing to the Powhatans.

Additionally, Pocahontas herself embodies the stereotypes lovely Indian princess and natural ecologist:

The Disney folks have made much of the fact that Pocahontas is the driving force of [the]

> movie, which presumably means it makes some sort of feminist statement. She does sing to John about living naturally in tune with the Earth – also skirting dangerously close to the Natural Ecologist stereotype – but she does it in an off-the-shoulder, form-fitting and very short dress… Perhaps Mel Gibson (the voice of John Smith) put it more succinctly when he said, "She's a babe." (Kilpatrick, 153)

Whimsical and precocious, Pocahontas herself seems less "Native American" than the rest of her tribe, including her own father Chief Powhatan, and chooses the company of animals and the intriguing explorer John Smith over her own friends in the village.

While it's hardly reasonable to expect animators to draw Pocahontas in such a way as to resemble the historical Pocahontas, in looks and actions, Pocahontas isn't really an American Indian character. Even her physical attributes separate her from the indigenousness of her tribe: Pocahontas is drawn with slanted eyes, pouty lips, overall softer facial features and a Barbie doll body – a teensy waist and improbably perky breasts (Ono). While Disney's Pocahontas does not reflect the historical figure, these stylistic changes do help her fit in with the rest of the Disney Princess cast. In using a "traditional" princess formula to portray Pocahontas, the filmmakers placate American audiences of Pocahontas' inherit "otherness" – similarly to *Aladdin*'s princess Jasmine (1992) – but also weaken her importance as an indigenous woman (Putnam). "Disney has created a New Age Pocahontas embodying Americans' millennial dreams for wholeness and harmony while banishing our nightmares of savagery" (Turner Strong, 198). Disney's Pocahontas is American Indian by convention, not in character.

Furthermore, Pocahontas' hyper sexualized representation speaks to Hollywood's tradition of producing American Indian characters that, because of their child-like mentalities and carnal tendencies, the white man must placate and then rectify. "The presumed lack of mental prowess may have something to do with the image of the Native American as intensely sexual – more creature than human, more bestial than celestial" (Kilpatrick, xvii).

Hollywood has had a voyeuristic obsession with American Indians and indigenous cultures since Thomas Edison's first film depicting the Sioux "Ghost Dance" was released in 1894. Since then, American Indian characters have been delegated to roles like bloodthirsty savages, sidekicks, and mystical teachers.

The most common stereotypes in regards to Native Americans and film are exhibited in "beloved" and "classic" films like *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Little Big Man* (1970), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Stagecoach* (1939) (Kilpatrick). These harmful stereotypes still survive because American Indian characters have been the most malleable of metaphors for filmmakers, and American audiences are not yet ready to release these images because of long-standing misconceptions of American Indians (Kilpatrick).

These misconceptions have been perpetuated by Hollywood for so long, it is becoming increasingly difficult for audiences to separate the caricatures from real people. It is especially troubling to find these baseless stereotypes in films like *Pocahontas*, which is marketed to children and families. While Disney's portrayal of Pocahontas is significantly more encouraging than Princess Tiger Lily dancing to "What Makes the Red Man Red?" in *Peter Pan* (1953), it still poses the problem of utilizing racially motivated stereotypes in a children's film.

Perpetuating such stereotypes gives these images a sense of normalcy: It's the white savior's responsibility to "save" people who identify with a minority group because they cannot possibly help themselves. Because indigenous communities have been caricaturized in so many ways, these characters become plot points instead of believable people. In extreme cases, marketing these images to children in their formative years yields the potential of fostering microaggressions and unrealistic expectations of American Indians, but by extension towards all minority groups.

References

Bloodworth, B., & Pentecost, J. (Producers), & Gabriel, M., & Goldberg, E. (Directors). (1995). *Pocahontas* [Motion picture on DVD]. United States: Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, Inc.

Kilpatrick, J. (1999). *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Ono, K. A., & Buescher, D. T. (2001). Deciphering Pocahontas: Unpackaging the Commodification of a Native American Woman. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 18* (1), 23-43. doi:10.1080/15295030109367122

Putnam, A. (2013). Mean Ladies: Transgendered Villains in Disney Films. In J. Cheu (Ed.), *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability* (pp. 147-162). Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Turner Strong, P. (1998). Playing Indian in the 1990s, Pocahontas and The Indian in the Cupboard. In P. C. Rollins & J. E. O'Connor (Eds.), *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* (pp. 170-186). Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.