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Pocahontas. Walt Disney Pictures.

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Disney's <cite>Pocahontas</cite> is easily caricatured–as politically correct, historically incorrect, ethnographically sensitive or suspect, sexist, feminist, exploitative, what have you. There is more than enough of a basis for each of these labels but, as the co-existence of contradictory caricatures suggests, this complex film should not be so easily dismissed. Disney's heavily promoted feature not only, "brings an American legend to life," as advertised; but it also takes considerable risks in doing so. These are not financial risks, to be sure: Disney's powerful marketing machine, which hawks polyester "buckskin," plastic beads, and endless trinkets laden with Pocahontas's image, can count on the American public's perennial fascination with "playing Indian." Rather, the risks are artistic, intellectual, and ethical. <cite>Pocahontas</cite> not only retells the romantic story of Captain John Smith's rescue from an executioner's tomahawk by an adoring Pocahontas, but seeks to challenge its audience to recognize ethnocentrism and androcentrism, spiritual alienation, commodification, and exploitation as barriers to the dream of inter-ethnic harmony (of "getting along together"), which Smith and Pocahontas represent. In short, <cite>Pocahontas</cite> risks being taken seriously and evaluated against its makers' lofty–and generally laudable–intentions. <p> To what extent does the animated film successfully meet the challenges of its own message, as articulated in its dialogue, lyrics, and promotional material? [See the available press packet, available online at: `http://www.disney.com` .] In pursuing this question, we may go beyond an appraisal of <cite>Pocahontas</cite> that measures the film against an uncertain historical truth, which is particularly elusive in this case, as scholars such as Reyna Green, Philip Young, Philip L. Barbour, and Mary V. Dearborn have pointed out. <cite>Pocahontas</cite> may be the first "real-life figure" to be featured in a Disney film, but the pre-Disney Pocahontas was already a highly mythologized heroine, known only through her many colonial representations–and from the beginning a product of Anglo-American desire and discontent. Disney Studio has drawn upon various versions of Pocahontas–and Indians more generally–in the American imagination, giving new life and ubiquitous circulation to those deemed resonant with contemporary concerns. That is to say, the animated Pocahontas must be necessarily located within the entire colonial tradition of noble savagism: the natural virtues, cultural critique, and self-sacrifice she embodies are those found in Montaigne and Rousseau and Cooper and Kirkpatrick Sale. This is not to say, to be sure, that Pocahontas is entirely a product of Western colonialism, but that we only "know" her within that arena–which, after all, is tantamount to not knowing her very well at all. <p> Given all this, the most productive question one might bring to the film is one of appropriateness: how appropriate is the filmmakers' selective construction of Pocahontas vis-a-vis their own aims? How salutary is the relationship between Pocahontas as a sign vehicle and the message she embodies? Significantly, this is a two-way relationship: just as the animated Pocahontas may be (in)appropriate as a vehicle for the film's message of tolerance and harmony, so too the message may be (in)appropriate to the Pocahontas story, however construed. If we take the producer of the message and its young, semi-captive audience into account, as we must, the question becomes even more complex, for the big-screen Pocahontas can not be understood apart from the proliferation of her image in the lucrative summer-to-fall kiddy marketplace. <p> Outside of promotional material, the film's message is articulated most fully in "Colors of the Wind," the song that the filmmakers believe "perhaps best sums up the entire spirit and essence of the film." (Throughout this review, quotations not attributed to the film are taken from the press packet.) <blockquote> You think the only people who are people. Are the people who look and think like you. But if you walk the footsteps of a stranger. You'll learn things you never knew you never knew. </blockquote> In Disney's <cite>Pocahontas</cite>, as in John Smith's and John

Barth's, the heroine is both spritely and sensual. However, unlike Smith's and Barth's Pocahontas, Disney's is, above all, a teacher. Not, as one might expect, a teacher of the Powhatan language and standards of diplomacy, for the time-consuming process of learning to translate across cultural and linguistic borders is finessed through Pocahontas's mystical skill in "listening with her heart." Rather, Pocahontas is a teacher of tolerance and respect for all life. Disney's Pocahontas is not a cultural interpreter but first and foremost a "child of nature"–an unfortunate impoverishment that produces a truly awkward moment in the film. "She was just speaking English!" observed my ten-year-old daughter, as Pocahontas momentarily, before her mystical transformation, had difficulty communicating with Smith. "That's because they were translating her own language into English so we could understand it," replied her seven-year-old sister. A few Algonquian words are sprinkled through the film, but <cite>Pocahontas</cite> gives no sense of the intelligence, dedication, and humility needed to "learn things you never knew you never knew." In becoming part of the series Ariel/Beauty/Jasmine/Pocahontas, this most famous of cultural mediators (to a North American audience) is removed from the series Malinche/Pocahontas/Sacajewa/Sarah Winnemucca. Magic and love conquer all cultural distance for Pocahontas and John Smith. <p> This is not to say that it is entirely implausible that Pocahontas could teach Smith tolerance and respect for all life. One of the more subtly effective moments in the film is the animated sequence corresponding to the passage of the song quoted above: "the footsteps of a stranger" are the tracks of a Bear Person, a concept that is as unfamiliar to most viewers of the film, as it was to John Smith. "Colors of the Wind" not only challenges racism, but also humanism or androcentrism, and this passage offers a striking popular expression of the vastly expanded consciousness available through embracing cultural relativism. <p> In another couplet of the same song, Pocahontas again contrasts Smith's mode of thought with her own: <blockquote> You think you own whatever land you land on. The earth is just a dead thing you can claim. But I know ev'ry rock and tree and creature. Has a life, has a spirit, has a name. </blockquote> She then invites or, better, seduces Smith to: <blockquote> Come run the hidden pine trails of the forest. Come taste the sun sweet berries of the earth. Come roll in all the riches all around you. And for once, never wonder what they're worth. </blockquote> Alan Menken's tune is so memorable and Stephen Schwartz's poetic devices so effective that these words will be imprinted on our collective memories even if Vanessa Williams's pop version of the song does not win an Academy Award. It is the clear exposition of colonial materialism and possessiveness in scenes and lyrics like this that won Russell Means's tribute to <cite>Pocahontas</cite> as "the single finest work ever done on American Indians by Hollywood" by virtue of being "willing to tell the truth." I, too, am pleased to find a critique of capitalist appropriation embedded in the film, even if it is enunciated by a Pocahontas whose licensed image saturates the marketplace–along with that of her father Powhatan who, even more ironically, is modeled after and voiced by the same Russell Means who has demonstrated against the use of Indian images as sports mascots. It is also good to see John Smith presenting the gold-hungry Governor Ratcliffe with a golden ear of corn as the true "riches" of Powhatan's land, but it is a superficial "truth" indeed that excludes that other sacred indigenous plant, tobacco–which became the salvation of the Virginia economy thanks to John Rolfe, the husband of a mature, Christian, and Anglicized Pocahontas never seen in the film. Is this story reserved for <cite>Pocahontas II</cite>? Likely not, for the tale of Pocahontas's capture by the English as a hostage, transformation into Lady Rebecca Rolfe, and early death in London does not resonate as well with an Anglo-American audience's expectations as the story of Smith's capture and salvation by an innocent, loving, and self-sacrificing child of nature. <p> Of course, resonating with expectations is what creating a "timeless, universal, and uniquely satisfying motion picture experience" is all about. In imagining Pocahontas, the filmmakers relied not only on consultation with native people, but also on what resonated with their own experience and desires. As lyricist Stephen Schwartz comments on the composition of "Colors of the Wind": "We were able to find the parts of ourselves that beat in synchronicity with Pocahontas." But there is a significant tension between this process and "walk[ing] in the footsteps of a stranger." This is not the Pocahontas we never knew we never knew, but the Pocahontas we implicitly knew all along, the Pocahontas whose story is "universal"–that is, familiar–rather than strange and particular. This is a Pocahontas whose tale, like that of Simba in <cite>The Lion King</cite>, fits into the mold of an individualistic Western coming-of-age story, progressing from youthful rebellion to self-knowledge and mature responsibility through courage and love. A Pocahontas who speaks what is known in anthologies as "the wisdom of the elders," and communes with a Grandmother Willow who, although kindly, reminiscent of <cite>Babes in Toyland</cite>. A Pocahontas who, despite a tattoo

and over-the-shoulder dress loosely consistent with the sixteenth-century Algonquians depicted by John White, has a Barbie-doll figure, an exotic model's glamour, and an instant attraction to a distinctively Nordic John Smith. In short, Disney has created a marketable New Age Pocahontas to embody our millennial dreams for wholeness and harmony, while banishing our nightmares of savagery without and emptiness within. <p> Just as the dream of tolerance and respect for all life is voiced in song, so too is the nightmare of savagery and emptiness–the first figured as feminine in the lyrical "Colors of the Wind," the second as masculine in the brutal "Savages": <blockquote> What can you expect From filthy little heathens? Their whole disgusting race is like a curse Their skin's a hellish red They're only good when dead They're vermin, as I said And worse. <p> They're savages! Savages! Barely even human. Savages! Savages! Drive them from our shore! They're not like you and me Which means they must be evil We must sound the drums of war! </blockquote> Strong stuff, this is: the ideology of ignoble savagism at its dehumanizing extreme, representative more of colonial sentiment after Powhatan's heir Opechancanough's war of resistance in 1622 than that of the earliest years of the Jamestown colony. Still, in the context of the film, appearing as the English prepare to attack the Powhatan people, it is extremely effective, serving to underscore the brutishness of the English colonists rather than that of the Indians. Already, in the opening to "Colors of the Wind," ignoble savagism has been gently invoked and dismantled: <blockquote> You think I'm an ignorant savage. And you've been so many places I guess it must be so. But still I cannot see. If the savage one is me. How can there be so much that you don't know? </blockquote> Who is the savage? Certainly not Pocahontas, with her knowledge of the spirits of this land. So the colonists' rhetoric of savagery turns against them … at least Powhatan leads his people in a similar chorus: <blockquote> This is what we feared. The paleface is a demon. The only thing they feel at all is greed. Beneath that milky hidem there's emptiness inside. I wonder if they even bleed. <p> They're savages! Savages! Barely even human. Savages! Savages! Killers at the core. They're different from us. Which means they can't be trusted. We must sound the drums of war. </blockquote> As in "Colors of the Wind," Powhatan's portion of this song purports to offer a portrait of the English colonists from an Indian point of view, portraying them as greedy, soulless, untrustworthy killers. Given what has gone on thus far in the film, and what we know of subsequent history, the accusation strikes home. But this passage, too, ultimately rebounds against those who utter it. John Smith is laid out, the executioner's tomahawk is raised, Smith is about to be mercilessly executed for a murder another young sailor committed … and Pocahontas saves him by throwing her body upon John Smith's, and successfully pleading with her father for his life. The savagery of intolerance is vanquished through the power of love. <p> So the story goes, in Smith's telling, at least. It may be that this was all an elaborate adoption ceremony in which Smith became a vassal of Powhatan, who ruled over an expending collection of villages. It may be that Pocahontas was playing a traditional female role in choosing between life and death for a sacrificial victim. The incident may not have happened at all, except in Smith's imaginative self-fabrication–particularly plausible since this is the second time such a rescue appears in his journals. Disney is not to be faulted for repeating the story as it is commonly known, nor perhaps even for opposing violent male savagery to self-sacrificing female love. After all, both Powhatan and Smith are shown as capable of self-sacrificing love. But what about the litany "Savages! Savages!"? Does this not level the English and the Algonquian people to the same state of brutishness and ethnocentrism, portraying the prejudice of savagism as somehow natural rather than having cultural and historical roots? And what about disseminating this song on the soundtrack, outside the context of the film, where it may have a very different impact upon an impressionable audience? For many Native Americans and other colonized peoples, "savage" is the "S" word, as potent and degrading as the word "nigger." I can not imagine the latter epithet repeated so often, and set to music, in a G rated film and its soundtrack. It is even shocking to write it in a review. Is "savage" more acceptable because it is used reciprocally? But then does this not downplay the role the colonial ideology of savagism played in the extermination and dispossession of indigenous people? <p> The filmmakers are quite aware that they are in risky territory here, and characterize the episode as dealing with "one of the most adult themes ever in a Disney film." The theme is "the ugliness and stupidity that results when people give into racism and intolerance," and it is refreshing to have it out in the open, especially from a studio with a history, even recently, of racist animation. But I believe a more responsible treatment of the theme–one more consistent with the filmmakers' aims–would be more nuanced, distinguishing between English savagism and Algonquian attitudes towards their own enemies (whom they generally aimed to politically subordinate and socially incorporate, rather than exterminate and dispossess). This

could be done by telling more of Powhatan's subsequent dealings with Smith, whom he treated as a subordinate "werowance" or chief. Lacking that, I believe the circulation of the song "Savages" should have been limited to the film, where its offensiveness is tempered by its relevance to the narrative <p> That <cite>Pocahontas</cite> raises a number of difficult and timely issues–not all of which could be discussed here–is a tribute to its seriousness and ambition. Indeed, the film begs to be read as a plea for tolerant, respectful, and harmonious living in a world torn by ethnic strife and environmental degradation. That <cite>Pocahontas</cite> is rife with tensions and ironies is also a testimony to the limitations of serious cultural critique in an artistic environment devoted to the marketing of dreams. That our children are surrounded with Pocahontas hype while being called upon to treat other cultures and the land with respect requires us to clarify for them the difference between consuming objectified difference and achieving respectful relationships across difference. In other words, <cite>Pocahontas</cite> provides a valuable teachable moment that we can further by encouraging our children–and ourselves–to take it seriously when Pocahontas sings <blockquote> And we are all connected to each other. In a circle, in a hoop that never ends. </blockquote>

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