

Pocahontas: A Study of Disney's Approach to English Colonialism

Cultural Awareness in the Anglophone World IV

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Curso 2019-2020

Abstract

Pocahontas is one of the most renowned animated films Disney has ever produced. The brave and adventurous spirit of Pocahontas has reached every Disney fan's heart. Moreover, it was the first colored character the company had ever introduced as a protagonist in their films. Thus, at first glance, one can say Disney created a feminist and inclusive film. Yet, little attention has been paid to the manner in which historical events have been represented in the film and the hidden messages it might contain. This paper explores Disney's approach to a historical passage through the analysis of the chronicle of events on the basis of the real history, the stereotypes that have been unconsciously implied, and the subliminal messages conveyed both in the script and character portrayals. The analysis shows various historical alterations regarding age or their physical depiction, which give way to a romantic affair between the Native American Pocahontas and the English Colonizer John Smith. In addition, numerous derogatory stereotypes can be identified which convey a disrespectful image of natives implying the classic uncivilized representation that this society has been given throughout centuries in the cinematic industry. These historical alterations and derogatory stereotypes result in an attempt of conveying a justification of English colonialism. This idea will be developed through the analysis of John Smith's character and his relationship with the natives in comparison to the rest of the colonists, focusing particularly in Governor Ratcliffe. Moreover, we will analyze the character development of certain Native Americans under colonization circumstances, in this case of Kocoum and Chief Powhatan, which will bring to light Disney's characterization of the Amerindian society. Through the study of the behavior development and the actions the different characters carry out, we will be shown who the real enemy of colonialism is in the eyes of Disney.

Keywords: Pocahontas, John Smith, Disney, Colonialism, historical inaccuracies, stereotypes

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1. Introduction

Everyone must have at least once heard the name of Pocahontas. Either on behalf of Disney's 1995 version *Pocahontas*, or through the numerous literary and cinematographic adaptations made throughout the past centuries, her story has become extremely famous. The romantic affair between a Native American girl and an English colonizer does indeed sound fascinating, yet implausible. In fact, the majority of works that have versioned this story, have been historically inaccurate. Pocahontas was never involved in a romantic affair with Captain John Smith. As appealing as Disney's version might sound, it is dishonest to historical events.

When given the opportunity to relate a cultural Anglophone world topic to a cinematographic work, Disney's *Pocahontas* came to my mind. The motivation of my election lays on my fondness for Walt Disney movies. As a child I was brought up with Walt Disney films and I grew enamored of the beautiful love stories told in those fairytales. But it was not until recently that I rewatched *Pocahontas* when I became aware of the amount of mistakes the film contained. Having been studying Anglophone world history during my degree, I was taught on Native American history and culture among others. As a result, I was able to judge the film in a more analytical way, which helped me become aware of the numerous historical inaccuracies and stereotypes the film enclosed. Disney had turned a rough colonial passage where both natives and Englishmen were slaughtered, into a culturally diverse love story. This paper aims at analyzing Disney's approach to a colonial passage revealing a damaging depiction of both historical events and Native American people, as well as a subliminal message implying the justification of colonialism.

For this purpose, I will begin by situating Pocahontas's passage in history. Born around 1595, we situate the passage at the time of English colonialism. As a means to contextualizing her historic passage, I will briefly mention the causes of colonialism and most relevant matters of the occasion, along with a description of Englishmen's arrival to what will later be called Jamestown, for a better understanding of the actual story of Pocahontas. I will proceed with a brief biography of Captain John Smith, a crucial and polemic man both in the actual life of Pocahontas and in Disney's version. Once having considered Pocahontas's background, I will proceed to narrate her

authentic story to conclude the historical context. I emphasize on reporting her original story since throughout history many different versions of her story have been exposed and distorted. This will serve for a later analysis of Disney's *Pocahontas*. In these following sections I will focus on three main aspects: the historical inaccuracies, the stereotypes, and the duality of Disney's characters in *Pocahontas* by which they try to give both a message of accusation and what seems as an unintended advocacy of English colonialism.

2. Historical and Cultural Context

Colonialism emerged in the fifteenth century by means of the Spanish and Portuguese Empires. The English Empire followed soon after with the conquest of what we now know as North America. For a start, I find convenient to briefly chronicle the early history of English Colonialism, centering on the Jamestown colony for a proper later analysis.

2.1. English Colonialism

The discovery of the New World by the Spaniards was a detonating act for the European colonialism that followed. A new unexplored land meant new opportunities, and given the economic crisis some countries were undergoing, this New World implied a chance for improvement. As reported by Arneil (1996), the English began exploring America in the sixteenth century, joining other countries' first attempts of colonizing the New World. She mentions Sir Walter Raleigh to be leading the attempt at establishing an early settlement in America in 1553, all to no avail. According to Arneil (1996):

This initial failure, however, was followed by the more successful endeavors of the Virginia Charter of 1606, the founding of Bermuda and Barbados, and the Pilgrims settling of Plymouth and Massachusetts, followed by the remainder of New England, and, latterly, Carolina. (p. 65)

On this wise, the English initial endeavor resulted in no success, until a few years later in 1606 when they were given another opportunity for further expedition.

When centering on the reasons that lay behind the purpose of English colonization, an abundance of them can be found. However, I will focus on the most relevant reasons that have to do with the story of Pocahontas that follows. In accordance with Arneil (1996): “Seventeenth century colonists and politicians clearly viewed conversion as the most noble goals in colonization but one which too often became secondary to the other objectives of national glory and private gain” (p. 66). This quote makes evident that what the English sought was power, either physically by owning as much land of the New World as possible, or morally by converting Native Americans into Christians. Moreover, the English were often competing with other empires when it came to expansion (Arneil, 1996). Especially with the Spanish Empire which was a prime power, given the large number of colonies the country owned.

In regards to the English behavior towards the New World and its people, it relied upon the colonist’s purposes. The impact on the Native Americans would differ on whether the colonist was a trader/adventurer or a settler, states Arneil (1996): “The traders saw the Amerindians as facilitators for their own business. Similarly, adventurers looking for mines needed information from local populations (...). Thus, they had an incentive for getting along with their aboriginal counterparts” (p. 75). However, she follows by claiming that settlers had a different behavior towards natives, whose intentions did not go far from displacing them from their lands or converting them to Christianity. This somehow demonstrates that not all colonists were disrespectful or profane towards the Amerindians. Which takes us to the following perspective: “there were some Europeans who sincerely believed that aboriginal peoples, unlike African American slaves, had natural rights including that of property which could not without injury be taken from them” (Arneil, 1996, p. 82). She follows explaining that the English believed in the right of the Native Americans to liberty and life, which determined the Indians’ distinct position in the minds of seventeenth-century English compared to the African slaves. The Europeans’ behavior is quite ambiguous in this aspect since they believed on the natives’ right to liberty. However, their intentions strongly differed from their words since many had no doubts on stealing their lands, goods and people. Besides, the fact that the Europeans believed the Amerindians to be more worthy than Africans raises questions which Arneil (1996) answers later on explaining that “the difference lay in the belief that *Indians* were rational, educable, and potentially Christian men (...) they, unlike their African counterparts, were seen as

Europeans at an early stage of development” (p. 84). Thus, the Europeans had still a little respect towards Amerindians because of the fact that they considered them Europeans without having completely progressed yet. Nevertheless, the Amerindian was not equal to the whites even if it was superior to other races.

Thus, the English colonization aimed at not only converting native Americans into Christians but also at expanding their land and gaining national glory. These aims often interfered with the competition of becoming greater than the other empires, specially the Spanish. And in regards to Europeans views on Native Americans, it can be said that even if they were often seen as superior to Africans for instance, they would never be considered equal to whites.

2.2. Colonists Arrive to the New World

After various unsuccessful attempts by the English of expanding their territory in the New World, the colonists of 1606 were finally able to establish a settlement: Jamestown. Jamestown colony was the first successful settlement of England, named after king James I and located in current Williamsburg, Virginia (Figure 1). It was established on the 14th of May of the year 1607 entering the European competition of colonial settlements in the New World which had been leaded by the Spanish Empire since the 15th century with its discovery by Christopher Columbus (Price, 2020).



Figure 1. Jamestown location. From *National Geographic Society*, <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/p>

The settling was done by the Virginia Company, which according to Price (2020) was a private company founded by king James I who authorized a group of investors to settle anywhere between present day North Carolina to New York state. He claims that investors would be rewarded with the condition of locating gold and silver deposits and discovering a river route to reach the Pacific Ocean for trading purposes. They began their expedition on 3 ships with the name of the *Susan Constant*, the

Discovery and the *Godspeed* (Sheler, 2005). Price (2007) claims the crew of the 1606 expedition to be not made up of the best or brightest, but mostly of upper class men who would not even work to save their own skins. Months after parting England, in April, they finally docked in Virginia. Few days after their arrival they began exploring and encountered the first natives, with whom they communicated by signs according to Price (2007). He explains how the encounters were not always friendly. There were times in which they found their colony attacked by surprise while being unarmed, and times in which they were the ones doing the ambush. These mutual attacks complicated the colonist's survival on the New World since they depended on the natives for the supply of food, as they were unable to react against their own famine.

The colony underwent hard times and hardly survived the famine or diseases, even after having been helped by the natives (Caranci, 2017). The salvation of Jamestown was in behalf of two people: John Smith and Pocahontas.

2.3. John Smith

We owe many of the historical passages from the English colonization of Virginia that are known today to this man. John Smith (Figure 2) was born in 1580 in Willoughby by Alford, Lincolnshire, to a farm family and according to Price's (2007) description: "He was of slightly below-average height, (...) measuring in at perhaps five-foot-three or five-foot-four, but he was stocky and tough. He had dark hair and a full beard, and eyes that showed intelligence and confidence" (p.5). A description far from matching his usual contemporary characterization.



Figure 2. Portrait of John Smith. From *History.com*, 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/colonial-america/john-smith>

Smith always showed an adventurous spirit. At a young age he attended grammar school, but since fantasizing about crazy adventures was not enough he tried to escape, but was caught by his father and was sent to become a merchant's pupil (Price, 2007). In 1601, Smith decided to fight against the Spanish in Netherlands in the War of Independence. He joined Hungary in the fight against the Turkish Ottoman

Empire and was captured in present day Romania, but he luckily managed to escape courageously and returned to England (Price, 2007). There he was recruited by the Virginia Company to go on an expedition to the New World, probably in virtue of his experience at war in case of aboriginal or Spanish attacks. As price (2007) states, he learned valuable strategies regarding foreigners at his time at war : “His adventures in Hungary gave him the experience of dealing with foreigners both as comrades and as adversaries.” (p. 6) Not only that, but it also helped him to comprehend the world: “Those years also shaped his distinctive worldview, one in which ignorance was to be treated as a dangerous enemy, and in which people were to be judged by their effectiveness rather than by their bloodlines” (p. 6).

This explains his great skills on dealing and conversing with the natives on the New World despite his lack of knowledge of their language. In fact, Price (2007) recalls on Smith’s importance to deal with natives believing it was crucial to consider them as they were, and not as primitives or savages. Smith managed to compose a list of ethnographic writings which were beneficial for his trading and strategies on dealing with natives, and which are valuable now for our contemporary understanding of their language and culture (Price,2007).

Even if Smith managed to sustain peace and be in harmony with the natives, this was not always the case. His adventurous spirit got him into trouble various times, and led to the remarkable captive stories in which he found himself involved. Most of these stories were documented by Smith himself or his writer companions at the colony. In Smith’s work *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles* among a detailed description of the land, various passages he endured during his stay in Virginia. I will focus on the most famous and controversial one, being the time he was captured by the Powhatan tribe.

The story develops in an ordinary day when Smith, along with two other gentlemen at the colony, went out to hunt birds with the help of a native guide (Price, 2007). Smith’s adventurous spirit once again encouraged him to go explore the surroundings in hunt for food when he was surprised with a horde of Indians (Caranci, 2017). Smith was then shot an arrow that reached his leg forcing him and the guide to stop (Price, 2007). He was finally captured by the natives which happened to belong to

the Powhatan tribe, where the “chief of chiefs” (Price, 2007, p. 40) Powhatan lived. The Chief Powhatan was the leader of almost the entire Virginia territory. Thus, Smith was taken to Werowocomoco, the chief’s town . At his arrival, according to Price (2007) Smith found Chief Powhatan inside his lodge accompanied by various men and women. Besides these people, watching the events was a girl of around 10 named Pocahontas.

2.4. Pocahontas

Pocahontas (Figure 3) was one of the many daughters of Chief Powhatan. By the time the English colonizers arrived at the continent she was around ten or twelve years old, this is, she was born close to 1595 (Caranci, 2017). According to Price (2007): “She was pretty, and no doubt had fully earned the nickname Pocahontas—“little wanton”—with her feisty, mischievous nature. (She was more formally known as Matoaka or Amonute.) (p.66).



Figure 3. Portrait of Pocahontas. From *Time Magazine*, 2019, <https://time.com/5548379/pocahontas-real-meaning/>

Most of the information and characterization of Pocahontas was documented by John Smith. Their first encounter was as explained before when Smith was captured by his tribe. Once there Smith’s fate was to be decided by Powhatan. Price (2007) describes how Smith in order to save his own skin placed responsibility of their arrival to Virginia on an attack they suffered by the Spanish, which rushed their landing in Powhatan’s territory, making clear that their stay was temporary and had no intention of settling. Smith’s life then befell on Chief Powhatan whose decision was generated in fear of a prophecy foresaw that: “A nation would arise from the Chesapeake Bay and overcome his empire” (Price, 2007, p. 41). Since the English had landed on the Chesapeake Bay Powhatan decided to execute Smith. His head was put upon a stone and when Powhatan was about to assassinate him someone intervened. Smith (1907) himself recorded this passage in one of his works: “being ready with his clubs, to beate out his braines, Pocahontas the Kings dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death” (p. 101).

This is probably one of the most famous and versioned Native American stories of all time. Yet, this was not the only time in which Smith owed his life to Pocahontas. There was a second time one winter when famine was striking again. As Price (2007) reports, the English and Powhatan reached an agreement: Smith would send his crew to build an English style house and some of their weaponry, and in gratitude Powhatan would load one of their ships with food. The English accepted except for the armament, and headed to Werowocomoco. In their arrival they encountered Powhatan which accommodated them in one of their lodges to stay the night (Price, 2007). While noticing suspicious activity outside, a figure sneaked in their cabin, who turned out to be Pocahontas (Kupperman, 2017). Price (2007) states how Powhatan: “would soon be sending dinner—and the men who brought it were going to kill the English with their own swords while they ate. If those men did not succeed in killing them, there would be a much larger attack afterward.” (p. 103). If Pocahontas had not warned Smith about the tribe’s attack, he would have been a dead man that night. Once more, Pocahontas had saved his life for some unknown reason.

Numerous versions of these stories have been produced in the past century. However, few of them have been loyal to the authentic passage. Many adaptations involve a love story between the colonist and the native girl. This romantic connection between them has never been recorded in any of the colonial writings however. In fact, after that passage they never saw each other again, since Pocahontas received the false news of Smith having been executed and refused to visit the colony for another four years. The truth is that Smith had been severely injured and was sent to England to recover (Price, 2007).

Years later, with Smith no longer as the head of the colony, the English elaborated a plan to reclaim what the Powhatans had stolen from them. According to Price (2007), the English would kidnap Powhatan’s dearest daughter Pocahontas to negotiate with the natives and regain their goods. They headed to meet Chief Powhatan who resulted to be away, so the English had to deal with his brothers instead. Pocahontas however, seemed not content about returning home. Her disappointment was associated with a romantic involvement. His name was John Rolfe, among the second wave of colonists to come to the New World who had lost her wife during the journey (Caranci, 2017). Rolfe was hesitant at the beginning regarding Pocahontas

since: “He was concerned that a romantic attachment to the native girl would render him a laughingstock.” (Price, 2007, p.155). However, her exotic looks and her wittiness got Rolfe to miss sleep pondering about his will to marry Pocahontas (Price, 2007).

The English then returned to the Hernicus settlement where Pocahontas asked to be baptized. Receiving permission she proceeded and became the first Native American to be baptized into Christianity. Price (2007) conveys that the English “gave her the name of Rebecca, after the Old Testament story of the beautiful and pure foreign girl whose arrival was a sign of God’s blessing of Abraham.” (p. 157). The couple got married on April of 1614 at the age of around sixteen and Rolfe planned their voyage to England soon after (Caranci, 2017). Price (2007) notes how it was beneficial for the Virginia Company of London to bring a native woman to the country to demonstrate how their colonization attempts had actually been fruitful, and that one of their main goals, converting natives into Christianity, had been accomplished. Thus two years later Pocahontas, or Rebecca, and Rolfe landed in Plymouth and were now parents to a one-year-old son named Thomas (Caranci, 2017). Smith soon after knew about Pocahontas’s arrival, yet it took him around a year to pay a visit to her old friend, since, being apprehensive of his social status at the time feared that she would diminish him (Price, 2007). Pocahontas had then moved to London and was awaiting a departure ship back to Virginia due to her husband’s advancement which demanded their voyage back to her homeland. According to Price (2007) “It was an awkward reunion, with neither Smith nor Pocahontas sure of how to pick up the thread of their friendship.” (p. 181). Their encounter turned out to be a bittersweet reunion between two old friends.

Once the weather permitted Pocahontas and Rolfe’s departure, they set route back to the New World. Not everything went as planned however. The polluted air of London seriously damaged Pocahontas’s lungs and overall health which caused the ship to turn back around to London; Pocahontas was actually dying, (Kupperman, 2019). She spent her final hours along with her husband and son Thomas. The funeral took place the same day short after her death in London (Price, 2007). Afterwards, Rolfe boarded back on the ship to Virginia having his brother look after Thomas, afraid that the infant would not be able to survive the long voyage (Kupperman, 2019).

Pocahontas had become a legend both in England and in her homeland. She was the first Native American to have been converted into Christianity and the first to have travelled to England. Her story along John Smith's has given way to several fictional works, the 1995 by Disney being the most renowned one until now.

3. Disney's *Pocahontas* Analysis

In 1995 Walt Disney Pictures released a new 'princess or fairy tale' like movie titled *Pocahontas*, inspired in the historical passage of the American Native girl Amonute, more commonly known as Pocahontas. This version by Disney was highly controversial in its release due to various reasons. The amount of historical inaccuracies, stereotypes, or the subliminal messages in respect of colonialism portrayed by the different dialogues and characters, caused a negative reaction in the public. These historical inaccuracies spread an erroneous version of the story, along with a number of derogatory stereotypes which disturbed the audience. The film was highly criticized when it was released in June 1995 for the risk taken on altering the characters age and romantic encounter (Gilbert, 2015).

In the following lines, I will proceed to enlist and analyze the different aspects that Disney failed at portraying in *Pocahontas*. Having analyzed the real historical passage, I will now compare and contrast different aspects in Disney's fairy tale and the actual passage.

3.1 Historical Inaccuracies

Disney's work has a very notorious issue: the historical inaccuracies. The story lacks historical evidence and consequently veracity. Being a fairy tale aimed at a young public, fantastic elements are expected, however the lack of veracity lays on the unrealistic scenarios presented by Disney.

3.1.1. Age

Age is one of the first perceivable variations in the film. As above mentioned, Pocahontas was born around 1595 and was between ten or twelve years of age when the Englishmen arrived at Jamestown. John Smith born in 1580, arrived at Jamestown at the age of 26, in 1606. In Disney's version neither Pocahontas's nor John Smith's age is revealed, however, the couple appears to be in their 20s. This age alteration is deliberately effected for a later development of the story into a romance. On the occasion that Disney would have chosen to preserve their original age, it would have been completely inappropriate given the fact that Pocahontas was still an infant. On the contrary, Disney opted for being loyal to its genre, romance and fairy tales, and altered the characters' age for its purpose.

3.1.2. First Encounter

Further inaccuracies can be found in the couple's first encounter regarding historical and language issues. When the English arrived at the New World, they found language disparity to be a problematic barrier for communicative and commercial purposes. We know that Smith was actually a skilful converser owing to his time at war where he had the opportunity to communicate with foreigners. In fact, Smith was believed to have shown great sympathy towards the Native Americans, treating them as actual people as opposed to the majority of colonizers who visualized them as mere savages. Despite Smith's great communicative skills and admiration for the natives, he still struggled to learn their Algonquian language.

We have previously depicted the first encounter between Pocahontas and John Smith which took place in Werowocomoco, Chief Powhatan's residence, after having been captured. During this event, little or no words were shared between them. In the film however, the couple's first encounter is carried out effortlessly. At first Pocahontas appears confused by Smith's language. While Smith asks for her name in English, the music in the background can be perceived suggesting "listen to your heart, you will understand" (Pentecost, 1995). Immediately, Pocahontas comprehends his words and thereon begins to speak impeccable English. Fantasy takes once again control over the story, giving the characters supernatural powers in order to overcome the characters' cross culturalism. Again, since this is a fantastic picture targeted at children these type

of justifications are expectable. Nonetheless, their first encounter is once more romanticized, lacking accuracy in respect of the original story.

3.1.3. Romantic Approach

The romantic approach is the biggest inaccuracy among all. Their first encounter gives way for the romance that will follow. After having chronicled Pocahontas's life, no romantic affiliation can be found between Pocahontas and John Smith. Given that Pocahontas was just an infant when she first encountered Smith, a romantic relationship between them would have been improbable. Years later however, she did marry an Englishman, John Rolfe. Yet, this relationship was posterior to Smith's departure for England. Thus, no romantic tie was ever made between them both. Disney on the contrary opts for it, leading to an aftermath of inaccuracies, as the reasoning for Smith's capture and execution attempt.

3.1.4. Pocahontas Saves John Smith

Among the most renowned anecdotes in the life of Pocahontas, we encounter her saving John Smith's life. John Smith himself narrates the events in his travel book *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles*, nonetheless, historians are not completely certain about the veracity of these events. Smith might have misinterpreted the occasion with a religious ritual or any similar matter since afterwards Powhatan called him "his son" (Kupperman, 2019). Still, every biography of either Pocahontas or John Smith includes the narration of these events, and were portrayed in Disney's adaptation as well. Yet again, this version of the events suffers various alterations. As above mentioned, Smith got captured when taken by surprise by the Native Americans while he was exploring the area. After Chief Powhatan's deliberation, he believed to have been sentenced to death. The matter that triggered his execution was according to Price (2007) an ancient prophecy foreseeing that an emerging nation would



Figure 4. Pocahontas saving John Smith. From ABC, 2019, https://www.abc.es/play/cine/noticias/abci-verdad-sobre-pocahontas-brutal-huida-espanol-indios-canibales-201807190117_noticia.html

take over his land, which alarmed the Chief. For this account, Smith was put upon a stone to which Pocahontas jumped onto him (Figure 4) on a sudden attempt of preventing his execution.

Disney's argument for the execution of John Smith was not on account of a prophecy, but on account of the murder of Kocoum. Kocoum was a Powhatan captain rumored to have been married to Pocahontas, after Smith's departure to England (Kupperman, 2017). In the film, Kocoum is a warrior from the Powhatan territory the Chief wants her daughter to marry, despite her discontent. On a sudden outburst after spotting the couple kissing, Kocoum engages on a brutal fight with Smith, in which Kocoum fatally injured by a bullet shot by one of the Englishmen, and dies soon after. Consequently, Chief Powhatan sentences Smith to death. The rest of the events elapse as John Smith chronicled in his works, when he is about to be executed Pocahontas jumps into him in order to prevent it. The reason for Pocahontas's intervention remains unknown. Historians even believe these events might have never taken place, since she was really young to have attended this type of event. Moreover, in Smith's publications from 1608 and 1612 on the adventures of Jamestown these events are not chronicled; it is not until 1624 that he published them, which causes historians to believe the events were mere fiction (Smithsonian Channel, 2017).

Disney's approach is evidently romantic, yet the actual Pocahontas may have simply acted in compassion. Although this passage resembles the authentic events, Disney did not hesitate to alter the story once more with the purpose of giving it a romantic tone. The film proves once again to be historically inaccurate given the alteration of Kocoum's character and the reason behind the intention of executing John Smith. As illustrated above, there was a second occasion in which Pocahontas intervened in Smith's safety. This is however not depicted by Disney on its 1995 film.

3.1.5. Smith's Departure for England

Smith's departure for England underwent a few alterations in the film as well. As above examined, John Smith was forced to leave the New World in consequence of a severe bullet injury. Pocahontas had not been informed on these events and believed that he had died instead. Consequently, she refused to attend the colony for at least four years. In Disney's *Pocahontas*, the reasoning for Smith's departure corresponds to

reality. Nevertheless, while in reality he was shot by the enemy, in the 1995 Disney version he is shot by his own people. After Smith's execution is interrupted by Pocahontas, Chief Powhatan realizes the moral message her daughter is trying to express: both cultures should unify and quit fighting. Thus, while Powhatan tries to mediate the situation, Governor Ratcliffe, the leader of the expedition and the clear villain in the film, seizes the opportunity to shoot Powhatan. Smith, realizing Governor Ratcliffe's actions, takes the bullet for Powhatan. This is Disney's manner of abolishing rivalry and hatred between both civilizations. The heroic Smith having taking the bullet for his enemy, results severely injured which causes his immediate departure for England. In Disney's version as opposed to reality, Pocahontas witnessed the events and promises to see Smith before his departure. Thus, she arrives for his farewell with the rest of the tribe, once again symbolizing the amity between both cultures.

The numerous historical inaccuracies the film contains lead to a deceiving representation of not only history, but of the Native American civilizations of the time as well. The majority of times, native tribes suffered cruel slaughters in hands of the European colonizers, and few were the times where both civilizations lived collectively in peace and harmony.

3.2. Stereotypes

In addition to historical inaccuracies, the film contains several derogatory stereotypes. These involve gender and racial issues, manifested both through the script and the picture.

Centering on gender related stereotypes, the first thing one notices is Pocahontas's image. Her character is an idealized portrayal of a woman (Figure 5). We are presented a young female in her twenties, with big almond-shaped eyes, a tiny waist, long legs, and beautiful long black hair. Her aesthetic image is complemented with her



Figure 5. Disney Pocahontas. From *El Periódico*, 2018, <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/ciencia/20180706/sines-tesia-pocahontas-colores-viento-6925518>

adventurous and brave spirit, which increases her idealized depiction. Historians actually refer to her as beautiful, as above mentioned. Nevertheless, this characterization is unfaithful to reality and psychologically damaging. Age alteration in the film was made in favor of a romantic outcome between the colonist and the native, as seen in the previous section devoted to historical inaccuracies. Yet, the image alteration that accompanies it is unrealistic, idealized and could result damaging for mental health. Given the young audience the film is targeted at, depicting the heroines or princesses in such a “Barbie doll” (Aidman, 1999, p. 7) way may affect young girls’ confidence which could lead to developing mental health issues. Disney built a stereotypical dreamlike Native American woman children could idolatrise, setting unattainable model like standards.

At the same time we find John Smith, the white hero. Opposed to the descriptions given above, Disney’s Smith is depicted as tall, muscular, blonde and blue eyed, again very aesthetically pleasing (Figure 6). His portrayal is that of the perfect civilized European from the very beginning, not only by the flawless physique he has been given, but by his actions and other characters’



Figure 6. Disney John Smith. From *The List*, 2019, <https://www.thelist.com/110882/things-adults-notice-pocahontas/>

acclamation as well. When Smith approaches the ship ready to set route to the New World, his comrades praise his arrival: “Captain John Smith! I’ve heard some amazing stories about him.” and “- You are coming on this voyage too? - Of course he is (...) you can’t fight Indians without John Smith” (Pentecost et al., 1995, 00:01:03); or in a later comment “- Do you think they’ll give us much trouble? -Not as much trouble as Smith will give them” (00:05:02). Within barely a minute into the film John Smith’s character creates such high expectations that makes the spectator perceive him as an actual hero. Once into the deep ocean, the rough tides cause a crew member to fall into the dangerous water. Smith, witnessing this, unhesitatingly jumps into the sea in his rescue. Once again the audience is shown John Smith as a heroic figure. He even proclaims himself a hero, conveying the image of a stereotypical English colonizer who is thirsty for native blood as in: “leave the savages to me” (Pentecost et al., 1995, 00:04:59) or in

“Well if they’re anything like the savages I’ve fought before, it’s nothing I can’t handle” (00:18:57). John Smith’s magnified heroic characterization makes it difficult to discern the real protagonist of the film. Even if the film is entitled after Pocahontas, Smith is sometimes given more importance than the actual protagonist.

Smith, however, is not the only stereotypical English colonizer character in the film. The entire crew that accompany him on the voyage can be categorized as white colonizer ‘heroes’ in relation to the derogatory racist judgement displayed in the script: “Remember what awaits us there: freedom, prosperity, the adventure of our lives. You’re the finest crew England has to offer, and nothing, not wind, nor rain, nor a thousand bloodthirsty savages can stand in our way” (Pentecost et al., 1995, 00:04:15) states Governor Ratcliffe. Soon after arriving at the New World, the Governor commands his crew to begin exploiting the land in search for gold and goods. The above mentioned rivalry between the Spanish and the English to become the greatest Empire of all is portrayed by Governor Ratcliffe’s greed for gold and power: “Let’s not forget what the Spanish found when they came to the New World. Gold! Mountains of it. Why, for years, they’ve been ravaging the New World for its most precious resources. But now it’s our turn” (Pentecost et al., 1995, 00:25:33). This declaration is followed by a song called *Mine, Mine, Mine* dealing with Governor Ratcliffe’s greediness for power. Opposed to the hero John Smith, Governor Ratcliffe is the English colonizer version of the stereotypical Disney villain, implying the denouncement of colonization. In other words, creating a hateful character as Governor Ratcliffe, Disney is making sure that the audience will certainly dislike him and his bloodthirsty attitude, thus, entailing a critical tone with respect to colonialism.

Even if John Smith is not depicted as a villain, but as a hero, his character exhibits signs of classic colonizer conduct as well. Among the reasons for English colonization exposed in a previous section, was their intention of converting Native Americans into Christians with the purpose of educating them. In the film we can perceive signs of language imposition emanating from Smith when himself and Pocahontas are exchanging instructions on how to greet each other in their native languages: “-This is how we say hello: Winggapo. (...) -I prefer hello better” (Pentecost et al., 1995, 00:37:01). Moreover, Smith also manifests signs of disdain for the Indians insinuating their inferiority: “We’ll show your people how to use this land properly.

How to make the most of it” (00: 38: 15), or “There’s so much we can teach you. We’ve improved the lives of savages all over the world.” (00:38:38). When Pocahontas gets offended by his use of the term “savage” to refer to her people, Smith tries to explain himself stating: “Savage is just a word, you know? A term for people who are uncivilized” (00:38:57). The villain-like characterization of the English colonizers can be likewise seen in the heroic Smith. However, his character, unlike the rest of the colonizers, will develop a certain sensibility to this mysterious and unknown land with the help of Pocahontas. Which takes me to the following point: Disney’s portrayal of Native Americans.

With regard to the previous characterization the Native American society has been attributed in western films, a notable improvement can be perceived. Compared to prior Hollywood children films, the representation of aboriginal people is more versatile in this film; rather than as an isolated adversary, they are depicted within their communities and families (Aidman, 1999). At the beginning of the film the audience is misled to behold the natives as the enemy, by means of the derogatory terms the English colonizers use to refer to them. There is even a song called *Savages* declaring the colonizers hatred towards the Indians, as it is conveyed in lyrics such as: “Their skin’s a hellish red, they’re only good when dead. They’re vermin as I said and worse. They’re savages, savages” (Pentecost et al., 1995, 01:04:00). Nevertheless, as the film develops the viewers are exposed to the real adversary. Characters such as John Smith evolve into regarding the natives as an ally thanks to Pocahontas. After Smith’s arrogant comment on helping natives become civilized, Pocahontas proceeds to singing a song named *Colors Of The Wind*. The song is a denouncement of the ignorance of the English colonizers who aim to exploit a beautiful land, as can be seen in: “You think I’m an ignorant savage (...) But I still cannot see if the savage one is me” (Pentecost et al., 1995, 00:39:24), or in “You think you own whatever land you land on. The Earth is just a dead thing you can claim. But I know every rock and tree and creature has a life, has a spirit, has a name” (00:39:57).

These last few lyrics make reference to the stereotypical relation indigenous people have with nature. Nature even functions as a character in the film, establishing a relationship between humans and nature usual of colonialist narratives (Buescher & Ono, 1996). In the film, nature and animals display a human like behavior. This is the

case of Meeko, the racoon, who obtains human abilities such as pointing to things with its fingers or interrupting humans. There are other 2 natural elements that are of great significance in the film: the wind and Willow, Pocahontas's grandmother as a tree. With regard to her mother, she is depicted as the wind. The wind will play an important role in the film coupling John Smith and Pocahontas. It will help Pocahontas walk or paddle and it will even give her messages and comfort her (Buescher & Ono, 1996). As for her grandmother Willow, she is reincarnated in a tree. The tree has her grandmother's face imprinted on it, and it has the ability to speak. Pocahontas relies on her advice regarding her problems and concerns throughout the entire film.

The connection between nature and humans is such, that Pocahontas can be seen walking animal wise when spying on Smith. This contrasts with the denouncement of colonialism and native derogation Disney tries to make. Overall, this humanization of natural elements and animals is an exaggeration of the classic stereotypical portrayal of Native Americans' connection to nature.

3.3. Subliminal Messages in *Pocahontas*

As I have previously analyzed, Disney altered the age of a young girl evolving into a young adult woman, and middle aged man into a young man, turning their historical encounter into a romance. A historical passage of mass slaughter in the conquering of the Americas is converted into a rather friendly and romantic encounter between English colonizers and Native Americans, thus, helping audiences learn a beautiful and soft alternative of the typical colonization narrative (Buescher & Ono, 1996). We are tricked into beholding the English as the enemy, when they are indeed, the heroes. Opposed to the rest of the European Empires, the English are capable of maintaining a peaceful relationship with the natives in Disney's *Pocahontas* proclaiming their triumph over the rest. This idea is a way of justifying English colonization in a subliminal way. The previously analyzed historical alterations and derogatory stereotypes serve for a better understanding of the following reasoning of this issue.

3.3.1. Two Types of Colonialism

Disney presents the audience two types of colonialism: Smith's colonialism and Governor Ratcliffe's colonialism. As noted in the previous section, Smith is depicted as a hero and Ratcliffe as a wicked villain. Thus, while Ratcliffe longs for gold and power, Smith craves a land for new opportunities and adventures, which is manifested in the song *Mine, Mine, Mine*. While Ratcliffe sings about his greediness for gold: "It's gold, and it's mine, mine, mine" (Pentecost et al., 1995, 00:26:28); Smith exposes his adventurous nature: "All of my life I have searched for a land like this one. A wild and more challenging country I couldn't design. Hundreds of dangers await and I don't plan to miss one" (00:27:37). The greedy spirit of Ratcliffe differing from the adventurous one of Smith has the audience believe in two opposite types of colonization: a supposedly benevolent type deriving from Smith and a malevolent, cruel one in the hands of Governor Ratcliffe. This is achieved by Smith's character development over the film.

As stated above, Smith initial attitude towards the natives is rather derogatory, since he does not hesitate on having to fight them. This attitude lingers until he encounters Pocahontas and presents him the beauty of her land. As the film proceeds, Smith becomes enamored of this new land and its people, especially Pocahontas. When the film reaches its turning point at Smith's execution attempt, the Native Americans realize their error and put down their weapons. Ratcliffe on the contrary, seizes the opportunity to shoot Powhatan which hits Smith instead. While jumping in front of the bullet targeted at Chief Powhatan, Smith shows a significant character and sensitivity development towards the Amerindian community compared to that of Ratcliffe. Smith's courage overshadows Ratcliffe's corrupt spirit, proclaiming himself a hero and earning the confidence of not only the natives, but of the audience as well. Through contrasting attitudes as these ones, the film establishes Smith's predominance, along with the superiority of the principles and worldview he personifies (Buescher & Ono, 1996). Thus, two colonist roles are provided in *Pocahontas*: the one of the friendly colonist embodied by Smith, and the one of corrupt colonist personified in Governor Ratcliffe. Buescher and Ono (1996) make a very interesting point regarding this aspect:

The film invites audience members to choose between these contrasting representations of the colonialist by seeing Smith's kind of colonialism as heroic

and good and Ratcliffe as exploitative and evil. If the film succeeds in gaining our compliance with its fantasy, it will convince us via de fallacious assertion that only two colonial alternatives exist that we must choose one. (p. 261)

In other words, Disney leads people to believe there only exist two alternatives of colonization making the audience choose the benevolent one portrayed by John Smith, leaving aside the most humane possibility of not bearing colonization at all.

3.3.2. Kocoum's and Powhatan's Character Development

This idea of convincing the audience of the benevolence of Smith's colonialism is reinforced by Chief Powhatan's change of mind concerning the colonizers. Chief Powhatan is symbolized as the oppressive father who fails at understanding her daughter. He will engage her daughter to Kocoum, a man she does not love, not taking into consideration her feelings. Moreover, he will not accept the arrival of the colonizers, let alone her daughter's romantic affair with one of them. Nevertheless, Smith will change his heart with his heroic act once again. Smith taking the bullet for Powhatan, will have the latter believe he is not a villain but an ally. This can be observed by Powhatan's kind gesture of lending Smith his Chief coat and stating: "You are always welcome among our people. Thank you, my brother" (Pentecost et al., 1995, 01:12:07). Powhatan's conversion from enemy to friend serves for a better understanding of her daughter and her desires, along with the benevolence of colonialism (Buescher & Ono, 1996).

Unlike Chief Powhatan, Kocoum develops no sensitivity towards the English colonizers, and is consequently portrayed as malevolent, opposing to colonialism. Kocoum, as Powhatan states, is the greatest warrior in the territory: "I will lead our warriors to the river and attack. We will destroy these invaders the way we destroyed Massawomeck" (Pentecost et al., 1995, 00:23:39). Kocoum shows nothing but hate towards the English colonizers since the very beginning. His character is flat all throughout the story, it does not show a development of any type. He conserves the fighting spirit as the film develops until his death, when he is shot by an English colonizer for fiercely attacking Smith out of jealousy. As Buescher & Ono (1996) state, Kocoum depicts "the pre-feminist, anti-liberatory, and "uncivilized" native man" (p. 264). He is represented as a jealous, oppressive and authoritarian man towards

Pocahontas, as seen in: “Pocahontas can’t keep running off. It’s dangerous out there.” (Pentecost et al., 1995, 00:47:00). With just a few words and actions, Kocoum embodies the classic Hollywood representation of Native Americans as the quiet, strong man predisposed to kill (Buescher & Ono, 1996). Moreover, violently assaulting the white hero Smith, Kocoum becomes the opponent of the benevolent side of colonialism. In other words, Disney attempts to convince the audience of the benevolence of Smith’s acts as a colonizer, consequently encouraging them to despise his opponent Kocoum. Kocoum’s character is seen as a threat for colonialism, thus, in order to address this issue he results executed. His violent and uncivilized nature justifies his death, while Powhatan, the rounded character who demonstrates capability for civilization, deserves to live (Buescher & Ono, 1996).

Besides, Kocoum’s and Chief Powhatan’s oppressive nature also serve as a justification of colonialism the film subliminally implies. As above mentioned, both Powhatan and Kocoum display an oppressive conduct on Pocahontas. While her father Powhatan is unable to understand her and urges her to marry against her will, Kocoum acts as a possessive and jealous partner. This domination feels the necessity of an emancipation which will be conducted by John Smith. He will be in charge of liberating Pocahontas from his repressive father and future undesired marriage. Pocahontas is misled into believing she needs to be liberated from her own people by the English colonizers. Thus, the film utilizes feminism as a means of liberation for Native American women from their oppressive patriarchal society, consequently justifying the need for colonization (Buescher & Ono, 1996).

In brief, the narrative of *Pocahontas* subliminally conveys the Native American society’s need for civilization through a benevolent colonialism portrayed by Smith, and thus, it justifies it.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to analyze Disney’s way of approaching a colonial passage resulting in a derogatory depiction of the events and characters, along with a subliminal message implying the justification of colonialism. The initial historical chronicle of the real passage serves as a guide for the followed comparison and analysis

of Disney's *Pocahontas*. On the basis of this initial chronicle, different arguments have been retrieved in order to support the idea of colonization justification made by Disney.

Beginning with contrasting the real passage with that of Disney's, numerous alterations can be perceived. Age is the most notorious adaptation, given the considerable age gap between Disney's characters and the real John Smith and Pocahontas. A 11 year-old girl has been transformed into a young adult with the aim of building a romantic relationship between both characters. Moreover, the couple's first magical encounter differs from the actual tense one, where Smith was captured and taken to Chief Powhatan where his fate would be determined. There, the grown up Smith met a little girl who later knew as the Chief's daughter. This encounter has nothing to do with the mystical and magical moment the characters share in Disney's *Pocahontas*. Besides, the most renowned event in Pocahontas's story suffered severe alteration as well. Whereas historians argue that Pocahontas never saved John Smith from being killed and it was a fictitious anecdote originating from Smith, Disney opts for a romantic approach of the events. Scared of the enemies, Chief Powhatan demanded Smith's execution in the actual chronicle, yet Disney preferred to involve Pocahontas's husband-to-be in a fight where he results dead to make the story more dramatic. In a following attempt of saving Powhatan from Governor Ratcliffe's shot, Smith jumps and receives it himself, this however, never happened in real life.

Another analyzed factor that reinforces the implication of a colonial justification are the numerous derogatory stereotypes the script and characters contain. As for gender related stereotypes, Pocahontas's doll-like image stands out, as well as John Smith's heroic portrayal which often overshadows the protagonist Pocahontas. In regards to racial stereotypes a reversion of roles from previous Hollywood characterizations can be perceived, where the Native Americans turn into allies and the white colonizers into the evil enemy. Yet, natives are still portrayed in a stereotypical manner that can be identified in their close link to nature of their animal-like behaviour in certain occasions.

These historical inaccuracies and derogatory stereotypes can be closely linked to what I believe is an subliminal justification of colonialism the film implies. The character of John Smith is the key element to convey this message. The age alteration causing an

appropriate development of a love story between both protagonists serves as misleading message of acceptance of colonialism. The audience is being tricked into believing that friendly and amorous relations among natives and colonists were possible, when in reality they were mass slaughter events. Moreover, reverting the old stereotypes and converting the English colonizers in the villains is only a distraction attempt, since Disney does indeed portray Native Americans as evil. This is the case of Kocoum, who in comparison with the heroic Smith is portrayed as chauvinistic and oppressive. Once again, the audience is encouraged to support Smith and oppose to Native Americans. Smith's heroic acts in contrast to Kocoum's savage-like portrayal will mislead the audience into believing Smith's type of colonization is correct, that natives actually need to be civilized. Smith's heroic character will be reinforced by the opposing type of colonization depicted by Governor Ratcliffe. While Smith maintains a friendly relationship with the natives, Ratcliffe's thoughts are bloodthirsty and corrupt. Again, the audience will be influenced to favor Smith's actions against Ratcliffe's antagonistic ones.

Thus, with the use of different tools as historical alterations or stereotypes, Disney conveys a subliminal message of colonialism justification through a children targeted film. A historical bloodshed event was turned into a charming love story, providing a deceitful message of amity between English colonizers and Native Americans. Disney's intention on portraying natives in a respectful way distinguished from the previous Hollywood derogatory illustration might have been a fine idea, yet the outcome exceeds the use of derogatory stereotypes and an erroneous historical narrative.

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