**The Pocahontas Paradox:   
A Cautionary Tale for Educators**

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For many teachers, identifying instructional materials and media films that are culturally responsive to different children and the cultures that they represent is their greatest challenge, in large part because contemporary film and print media continue to promulgate racist, sexist representations of non-majority social groups, with devastating effects on young non-mainstream learners. This is especially true of American Indians. Negative and self-serving stereotypes of the American Indian held by non-Indians are deeply embedded in American life. Most children in America do not conceive of American Indians as real people, and have few or no contacts with authentic "Indians." In this article Cornel Pewewardy, a Comanche-Kiowa, analyzes the ongoing misrepresentation of American Indians in mainstream media His centerpiece example is the movie *Pocahontas*, released in 1995 by the Disney Corporation.

**The persistence of damaging stereotypes about American Indians**

We know that the white man's images of us have little or nothing to do with the reality of Indian life. Most of these images are fictional creations of the white imagination and ignore what we are truly like. Children, and children now grown, have at best a mixed conception of these mysterious peoples whom they meet through history books and the mass media. The Indian portrait of the moment may be bellicose or ludicrous or romantic, but almost never is the portrait that of real persons.

From Native points of view, there are no real Indians in America, only tribal people, gradually forming into a hybrid tribal culture, trying to hang on to what little sacred knowledge is left. Quite often, when children in this country do meet an Indian person in real life, they are fearful afraid to talk to or even approach the person. As a result of being responded to in this fashion, many Indians today are rebelling against their marginalization their invisibility in the American macroculture that sees us through deeply xenophobic eyes.

Despite heightened awareness of cultural differences and American Indian history in the past quarter century or so, the misrepresentation of Native peoples largely continues unabated. It can be readily seen in the Disney corporation's *Pocahontas* (1995). This article seeks not so much to explain the fluctuating European American interest in the Indian as to present the implications of the ideas and imagery used by whites to understand the peoples whom they call Indians. My concern over these negative stereo types is that they continue to be perpetuated in a truly paradoxical form. This form, I refer to here as the Pocahontas Paradox.

**Celluloid Indians**

Children's self-images are pliable and susceptible to external guidance and criticism, and are particularly influenced by Hollywood media products. Young Indian students who are treated as though they are less than human beings in movie cartoons and as sports mascots, logos, and even the tomahawk chop, often assume that they are, indeed, inferior to "normal" children (Pewewardy, 1991 and 1993). The effects of this assault on the self-esteem of American Indian children, when buttressed by the other factors that plague their communities - poverty, cultural dislocation, and related social ills - can be devastating (Young, 1993).

The image of the Indian displayed mostly by the motion picture industry evolved from negative stereotypes created by chroniclers of the earliest white settlers. Efforts by American Indians to control their own public image have resulted, in part, from a desire to counteract five hundred years of white people's imagery of Indians, including consistent misrepresentation in Hollywood Westerns (Leuthold 1995). We take for granted the survival of the hundreds of American Indian societies scattered across the United States.

From what we know of American history, however, it is quite remarkable that any Indian communities managed to weather the many assaults on their viability mounted during the past half- millennium (Nagel, 1996). Contradictory views of Indians, from gentle and good to terrifying and evil, stem from a Eurocentric ambivalence toward an entire race of people that Euro-Americans attempted to destroy. Deloria (1995) contends that the stereotypical image of American Indians as childlike, superstitious creatures - a subhuman species that really has no feelings, values, or inherent worth - still remains in the popular American mind.

Screen images today are descended from such influences as the captivity narratives of the eighteenth century and the romance novels of James Fenimore Cooper. The modern version of a "real" Indian princess in *Pocahontas: Friend of the White Man* is entirely a product of Western colonialism and is paradoxical. Doniger (see Levi-Strauss, 1978) writes in the 1995 forward of *Myth and Meaning* that Levi-Strauss touches upon all the great methodological paradoxes: the parallel tensions between myth and science, myth and history, myth and music, and "primitive" and "civilized." Levi-Strauss insisted that a myth could be translated only by another myth never by a scientific formula. He posited that every myth is driven by the obsessive need to solve a paradox that cannot be solved. This is the situation of the "Pocahontas Paradox."

**Who was Pocahontas?**

The "Indian Princess" stereotype is rooted in the legend of Pocahontas and is typically expressed through characters that are maidenly, demure, and deeply committed to some white man. The powerfully symbolic Indian woman, as Queen and Princess, has been with us since she came to stand for the "New World," a term that in and of itself reflects a Eurocentric value judgment.

Pocahontas, however, was no myth (Mills, 1995). The daughter of Tidewater Virginia's legendary chief Powhatan, Pocahontas (c. 1595-1617) was lured aboard a British ship in the Jamestown area and held captive for more than a year (see Roundtree, 1990). She was dressed in the English fashion and took religious instruction, becoming baptized as a Christian. In 1615, Pocahontas married British colonist, John Rolfe. In 1616, as part of a plan to revive support for the Virginia colony, the couple traveled to England with their infant son. There, Pocahontas met King James I and Queen Anne. Just as she and Rolfe were setting-sail back to America the following March, Pocahontas died, perhaps because of smallpox, perhaps because of the foul English weather. She was buried in an English churchyard a few miles from London on the Thames River, far from her tribal homeland of the Mattaponi people (Sharpes, 1995).

The Mattoponi speak of Pocahontas as a remarkable young woman (Almeida, 1995). Her real name was Matowa. Unfortunately, she has been unjustly portrayed in history as a supporter of the invading English settlers, thus giving her the reputation amongst American Indians as being an "apple and a sellout". The reality is that she was a strong supporter of her people, and at a young age was put into the position of acting as an interpreter and ambassador between two cultures. The importance of her political position must have been recognized by the English, since they kidnapped her and held her as a political prisoner.

Pocahontas showed Britishers of two lands how remarkable an Indian woman could be. Further, in a country which doted on princesses, she exemplified just what the savants were looking for- an American one (Stedman 1982). It is unlikely that the "celestial princess" concept was known to the Indians before Englishman bestowed that title upon Pocahontas. Yet the images and roles generated by a misinformed Europe continue to dominate the popular concept of who Pocahontas was. These images force young viewers to internalize white middle class standards of beauty and value, much of which denies the cultural beauty of students of color (Bonilla 1995).

**Deconstructing Pocahontas**

When school cultures do not affirm the ethnic identities of Indian children, these children usually take on the cultural norms of the dominant culture. They do so in contradictory ways (Pewewardy & Willower, 1993). Many Indian students say that they do not desire to participate in the activities of youth who are not doing well in school (i.e., cruising, drinking, doing drugs, etc.), but feel constrained to do so lest their behavior be interpreted as "getting too good for one's friends," "going middle class," or "acting white," with the inevitable outcome of losing their Indian identity, abandoning Indian people and their struggle, and joining the enemy (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). This is a real and constant tension.

When our young people go to find out about Indian figures from the past, they encounter powerful distortions that exacerbate these tensions. Many Hollywood films have roles for Indian women who die to provide the tragic but "inevitable" ending for a racist audience that assumes that the demise of Native American cultures is something for which Euro-Americans have had no responsibility. In these films, Indian women are generally portrayed as sexually more free than white women, as in the case of Pocahontas.

In the movie, Pocahontas disobeys her father and goes out to meet Captain John Smith. This most likely would not have happened during the time period in the movie, as it was a cultural norm for all tribal members to adhere to any strict directive from a parent. In contrast, Disney has created a marketable "New Age" Pocahontas to embody our millennial dreams for wholeness and harmony, while banishing our nightmares of savagery and emptiness (Strong, 1995). In this regard, how Indian women are portrayed in the movies is an extension of white America's attempt to cope with a sense of cultural guilt. It is too bad that these portrayals do not reflect real American Indian women of today, such as those found by Yellow Bird & Snipp (1994), who describe how Indian women have assumed, and continue to take on, great authority and status within Indian family structures.

In *Pocahontas*, Indian characters such as Grandmother Willow, Meeko, and Flit belong to the Disney tradition of familiar animals. In so doing, they are rendered in as cartoons, certainly less realistic than Pocahontas and John Smith; In this way, Indians remain marginal and invisible, thereby ironically being "strangers in their own lands" - the shadow Indians. They fight desperately on the silver screen in defense of their asserted rights, but die trying to kill the white hero or save the Indian woman.

Indian-white biological amalgamation, whether in or out of wedlock, is a subject well calculated to evoke spirited conceptions and feelings. Certainly, the way in which the story is told by Disney is not supported by the research of those who have probed deeply into the labyrinth of Indian-white interaction (Smite, 1991). Many historians say that Pocahontas and John Smith had no romantic contact whatsoever. She married a tribal member in her early teens and was captured later at the age of eighteen and put on a ship to England, where she fell in love with and married John Rolfe. None of this is reflected in the animated movie.

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of racism in Pocahontas is in its language, in terms such as "savages," "heathens," "pagans," "devils," "primitive," and "civilized." These terms connote something wild, primitive, and inferior. They imply a value judgement of white superiority. By negatively describing Native lifestyles and adhering to a "we" versus "they" format, subtle justification is given for subjugation of Indian tribes by so-called "advanced" cultures, in the name of progress. Then the question emerges, "Whose progress? In contrast, this movie-made little reference to the central role that such factors as greed, deceit, racism and genocide played in the historical contacts between the Indians and Jamestown settlers.

The movie lyrics are especially unsettling in the brutal "Savages, Savages":

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.  
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!

While the song presumably meant to unearth and thus neutralize from a perspective 350 years after the fact a pervasive racism of the earlier era, the song nonetheless embodies a complexity of attitudes and beliefs that remain, at their core, offensive to American Indian people and needless to say detrimental to Indian children. The song embodies the Paradox of Pocahontas. For, despite any possibly well meaning but fundamentally misguided purposes of the Disney screenwriter who wrote the song, the fact is that Indian children come home in tears - as they have for centuries - when school children or playmates sing "Savages, Savages" to them. These racial experiences leave deep emotional and psychological scars on young children.

The word "savage'' becomes paradoxical in the phrase "noble savage." Early American writers portrayed the "noble savage" as safely dead and historically past-tense. Pocahontas, of course, gracefully walked in the moccasins of the "noble savage., partly because she innocently embodied the prescribed image, and partly because she consciously invoked it. According to Mander (1991), the dominant image of Indians in the early movies was that of "savages," with John Wayne leading the U.S. Cavalry against the Indians. Today the stereotype has shifted to that of the "noble savage", with Indians- viewed as part of a once great but now dying culture that could talk to the trees like Grandmother Willow and the animals, like Meeko and Flit, that protected nature.

**Hollywood's role In the perpetuation of myth**

Movies like Pocahontas no longer bloom and die in one season. They play again and again, year after year, decade after decade, alongside, opposite, and close to movies made years earlier. With today's home video playback becoming commonplace, this situation will prevail all the more strongly. Though some movies have a more positive impact, parents and youth need to know that we still have a very long way to go before the movie industry becomes culturally responsive to the images of American Indian people.

Many Indians are beginning to be commissioned to do voice-overs for some of the historical Indian figures, particularly in animated cartoons. Some even are playing key roles in live movies. Still there are many well-known Indian actors who find themselves in the paradoxical position of committing psyche suicide professionally in order to attain more or less consistent employment in the media industry. Most find a means in their private lives to counteract the personal costs of acting out their stage roles.

**What we must do**

As an Indian parent, former kindergarten teacher, principal, and now multicultural teacher educator preparing future teachers for diverse classrooms, I am constantly approached with general questions about American Indians, many of which are sparked by the movie industry's blitz of Indian myths and stereotypes. Discussions of these questions are ongoing in our multicultural education classes, where we examine and de-construct segments of American literary writings, textbooks, and the movies. Protecting children from racism is a year-round responsibility, not just during the school year. The producers of Pocahontas carefully chose the summer season to release its recreation of their invented Indian princess character - a time when most American youth are out of school and thirsty for movie entertainment. The question is: entertainment at whose expense? Once oppressive cultural attitudes are implanted, they are hard to antidote. No one gains by allowing negative stereotypes to continue.

Just as important issues in Indian country are ready to be addressed, it seems we fall back on old battles about the literary canon. Indian people have so many other critical issues that need resolution, such as the federal Indian budget, gaming agreements, loss of tribal languages, land claims, impact aid, access to higher education, standardized testing, environment exploitation and degradation, freedom of religion and protection of sacred sites, treaty rights, repatriation of artifacts, and protection of burial sites and return of Indian remains. Yet we cannot really move on when people do not want to learn the truth about United States history.

The task facing teachers is to encourage reflective exploration of this and other dimensions of multicultural education. Language that has a visceral impact may prove effective in maintaining a dialogue that is both stimulating and thought-provoking. To this end, naming the issues is probably the most important challenge we face in dispelling misconceptions in the movie Pocahontas and enhancing understanding about American Indians. Therefore, guiding principles should be used when selecting curriculum materials and film. Does the material present females and minorities in a realistic, non-stereotyped manner? Does the material accurately reflect an holistic view of the past in terms of the contributions made by females and minorities in American history? Is there racism in the English language?

We live in a society that suffers from historical amnesia, and we find it very difficult to preserve the memory of those who have resisted and struggled over time for the ideas of freedom, democracy and equality (West, 1993). America has always been both deeply xenophobic and a land of relative opportunity. Still the pluralism ideal of adapting to the larger society of European Americans has not been accepted fully by most American Indian people. White interest in the American Indian surges and ebbs with the tides of United States history. While white fascination with things Indian never entirely fades, it has fluctuated throughout history, forever linking Indians with the untamed forests, fields and streams. The illusory Indians were so authentic to most Americans that no alternate images were acceptable. Therefore, it was easy for chroniclers to accept the "doctrine of discovery. and "manifest destiny" ideologies that Indian people, along with the forests and streams, would be crushed under the advance of western "civilization."

Again, we need to carefully review our historical past in order to understand the present, move on to the future, and not get caught up and trapped in old negative stereotypes of the American frontier past, freeze dried and recycled as modern cultural myths - all of which were mostly established by white inventors of Indian images. From experience I know that cartoons, movies and comics about Indians somehow find their way into the classrooms of America. Most common knowledge of Indians comes from the media and movies like Pocahontas, because the movies have a tremendous advantage in educating the critical masses of people. Therefore, in order for teachers to make the biggest impact on their general public, they must critically examine and screen out racism, sexism, and class bias in movie production. If left untouched, it remains a large body of culturally strip-mined material for another generation of American children to unlearn.

The transformation of indigenous spiritual knowledge, objects, and rituals into commodities, and their commercial exploitation constitute a concrete manifestation of the more general, and chronic, marketing of Native America (Whist, 1995). Indian people can perhaps be informed by what the Canadian Mounties did. They enlisted Disney to market their image in a more culturally responsive way. The Mounties spent a long time looking for licensing expertise, being fed up with exploitation of their image. The Disney corporation now oversees the licensing and marketing of the Mounties' image. What about Pocahontas? What about the images of American Indians?

My focus in the critical review of the movie Pocahontas is to stimulate teacher interest in the importance of the subject of American Indian images, particularly the paradox of many Indian heroines, images that too often have been marginalized in American history, and to raise the level of intellectual and cultural debate about Native people and their role in United States history. The overwhelming concern is how "accuracy" is defined, particularly how "historical accuracy. is defined, and by whom. Society must respond quickly with the complete eradication of such usage of stereotypic negative Indian images in public (Hatfield, 1996). As educators, we can all take steps to think about and counter the hegemonic images of racism that surround us all, committing ourselves to sorting out our collective multicultural heritage, past and present.

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