Civilized Colonialism: Pocahontas as Neocolonial Rhetoric

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This essay argues that Disney's animated film Pocahontas is a neocolonialist text that rewrites the history of American colonial encounters with Native Americans, replacing the history of mass slaughter with a cute tale that functions to "civilize" and re legitimate colonialism. This essay demonstrates how the film's romantic narrative appropriates contemporary social issues of feminism, environmentalism, and human freedom in order to make racial domination appear innocent and pure.

The year 1992 had tremendous symbolic importance for nationalists, educators, and indigenous peoples living in the U.S. The perception of Columbus as heroic founder of America changed as a result of commemorative events, books, articles, speeches, films, and other popular discourses about Columbus and his infamy. These public discourses questioned whether it made sense to say "Columbus discovered America." Thus, 1992 represents a key juncture within U.S. rhetorical history, for it marks a time when students of nationalist history, who believed themselves the beneficiaries of the legacy of colonialism, began to question on a system-wide basis the moral, political, and ethical choices of their "forebears" as well as their own individual relationships to those decisions. At the same time, indigenous peoples protested pre-1992 conceptions of Columbus and the patriotic reverie associated with them. As a result of protests by Native American peoples and allied political groups, many grade school teachers taught students to question the Columbus discovery story. In the face of new stories about Columbus and colonialism, students began to ask difficult questions such as "Well, why did he/she do it?" and "it" meaning slaughter indigenous peoples, ravage natural resources, and steal land and other material wealth in a word, colonize.

One answer to that question appeared in the summer of 1995 in the form of Disney's film Pocahontas. Parents and other adults may not have recognized, at first glance, the profound rhetorical significance of this film's story of Pocahontas, a story that is a prime example of the ways in which a popular narrative can present an alternate history that sanitizes and romanticizes a history of domination by using a number of rhetorical strategies.

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of this film because Disney did not market the film to them. As with most of its films, especially animated ones like Sleeping Beauty (1959), Cinderella (1950), and The Little Mermaid (1989), Disney marketed Pocahontas to children, and especially to girls. Disney has long been known for creating fantasies, but this was the first time in Disney's long history of producing animated films that it turned an historical narrative into an animated fable—transforming the memory of a Native American woman into a "toon." The animated Pocahontas story Disney tells is more fun, more exciting than those kids may read in their history books, and certainly more exciting than the less popular films about Columbus shown three years before with a "PG-13" rating. Disney makes history fun—or does Disney make fun of history? Call it artistic license or effective marketing, but Disney turned the 10- to 15-year-old Native American girl (depending on which history one reads), Pocahontas, into a woman; turned the middle-aged man, John Smith, into a young man, and turned their "supposed" meeting into a romance. And as we all know, especially Disney, romance sells.

We contend in this paper that Pocahontas rewrites the quintcentennial story of Columbus and other colonizers' conquering of the Americas, and in its place tells the tale of a relatively peaceful, romantic encounter between colonizers and Native Americans. In this way, Disney helps audiences unlearn the infamous history of mass slaughter by replacing it with a cute, cuddly one, a memorable exception to the typical colonization narrative. Disney's Pocahontas narrative answers the question, "Why did he/she do it?" by arguing that colonists were searching for gold, and though they were willing to kill what they called "savages" to get it, when they found no hidden treasures, they opened their eyes and saw a beautiful land with friendly people—treasures of a different sort but even more valuable. In Disney's version of history, except for one errant "savage," most native people are nice and one woman actually is eager and willing to learn and to practice the colonial ideology, the English language, western romantic rituals, and (hopefully) religion. The skeptical chief initially looks like a "savage" to the colonizers, but upon further acquaintance shows promising signs of good faith and potential acceptance of colonization. The chief personifies the wise Native American who just might be converted too. Upon leaving this newfound paradise—albeit without gold—colonizers would need to return, because the natives seemed almost civilized and therefore civilized. Pocahontas presages events to come; it foretells the hazards Native American society could pose to colonialism's advancement in the Americas, but it shows that even those hazards eventually could be overcome.

We begin this essay by defining colonialism and distinguishing it from neocolonialism. Then we briefly describe a version of the historical way colonialism functions. Sketching the traditional colonial story and its conventions generates a better understanding of the differences between colonialism and neocolonialism and of how Pocahontas operates within a neocolonialist economy. Then we describe the film's narrative, addressing the film's construction of characters as symbolic figures within neocolonialist narratives. We provide an extended discussion of how this film "civilizes" colonialism through a contemporary neocolonialist rhetoric. Finally, we discuss how this form of neocolonialism functions within contemporary society.

In part because neither of us is Native American, our critique of dominant representations of Native Americans does not attempt to explain what Native American culture is or how it should be represented. Thus, while we argue against what we see as damaging depictions of Native Americans, we choose neither to "set the record straight" on the history of Pocahontas nor to tell the "real story." Instead, following Rosaldo (1993) who noticed that "a mood of nostalgia makes racial domination appear innocent and pure" (p. 68), we attempt to unmask the neocolonial narrative of one particular text in order to initiate further discussion.

A Generic Colonial Story

Disney's Pocahontas holds together Anglo Euro-colonialism at the point where it begins to unravel. For children and adults starting to rethink the legitimacy of colonialist practices, it provides a tightly woven answer in the consumable form of an amiable, innocent, accepting, nurturing, and feminine cartoon figure: Pocahontas. Pocahontas transforms colonialism into a benevolent ideology of good will, proto-environmentalism, proto-feminism, and cross-cultural tolerance, a soothing tonic with which to heal public social ills. As such, Pocahontas is a neocolonialist text. It masks present-day colonialist relations inherited from the past and appropriates contemporary social issues such as feminism, environmentalism, and human freedom in order to justify both fear of people of color and beliefs of their inferiority.
Colonialist practices today operate for the most part under the conscious threshold of the contemporary popular imagination. Thus, neocolonialism is contemporary culture's willful blindness to the historical legacy of colonialism enacted in the present. Contemporary culture masks the continuing lived history of people disenfranchised by colonialism by failing to acknowledge colonialism's presence in the U.S. today. Whereas colonialists killed Native Americans and later justified it, neocolonialists depend on a history of successful colonialism, forgetfulness that colonialism continues, and the production of therapeutic public stories to quell any lingering dis-ease with continuing practices of disenfranchisement.

Colonialism in the United States was never overthrown; the Anglo-colonizer was never cast out, and native peoples never regained political control. Indeed, the ideology of colonialism was re-woven into the social fabric through popular cultural products such as movies, television, novels, radio, and consumer goods, as well as more pedagogical media: textbooks, military training manuals, and religious texts. Neocolonialism is the contemporary form that colonialism took: a remodeled colonialist ideology for the present. Neocolonialism employs contemporary ideological and economic strategies to make racism, sexism, nationalism, and inequitable capital distribution appear necessary. Neocolonialism pretends to offer a kinder version of present global economics than past colonialism; hence, its presence may at times be quite subtle.

_Pocahontas_ is a complex rhetorical object which offers a particular system of beliefs about the world. The film relies on historical representations and, thus, does not persuade audience members to accept a new ideology so much as it ratifies their unspoken, taken-for-granted attitudes and assumptions about colonialism's necessity. A critique of gender relations, narrative, or ideology alone would be insufficient to explain the complex racial dynamics, the specificity of representations of Native Americans, or the historical significance of colonialism in this film. However, a critique of neocolonialism combines these concerns in order to answer a series of difficult questions evoked by _Pocahontas_. What is the relationship between the construction of nature and of Native American women? How does the text differentiate between two colonialists: John Smith and Governor Ratcliffe? Why and how does the text contrast Powhatan to Kocoum? And, finally, how do these representations function within the larger symbolic and narrative economy of neocolonial film portrayals? This critique of neocolonialism, then, addresses the complex rhetorical functions of cinema's representations of women, gender relations, Native Americans, and history within _Pocahontas_, and in so doing offers an enhanced understanding of popular culture's strategic neocolonialist appropriations of environmentalism, feminism, and multiculturalism.

While little research in communication studies has addressed the questions we ask above, recent scholarship in other academic disciplines does attempt to explain what happens when colonizers invade a geographic region and claim it as their own. To explain this practice of colonization which, with variations, repeats itself cross-culturally on an international scale, we rely heavily on Sharpe's (1993) _ Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text_. In addition, we use the works of various writers (e.g., Ahmed, 1992; Malkki, 1992; and Shehat, 1991) who address colonialism within divergent but specific contexts to scrutinize the story of "civilization."

Colonization begins when colonizers appropriate land, conquer indigenous people, and found colonialist governments to oversee the efficient operation of property and labor. Once they conquer indigenous peoples—eliminating the most threatening and enslaving the rest—the _civilizing process_ begins. They teach the colonized the language, logic, and history of the colonizer. Colonizers force colonized people to submit to the colonizer's moral standards, laws, principles, and often religion (Christianity in the case of U.S. colonizers). However, this is not meant to imply that the colonized simply accept or even participate willingly in the civilizing process. Some colonized peoples may purposefully refuse to learn the religion, morals, and laws of their oppressors; and those who do may choose not to abide by rules of language.

Despite resistances and protests made by colonized peoples, colonizers produce narratives, histories, and tables describing their successful conquests. In those stories, colonialists typically depict the oppressed as barbarians and themselves as beneficent peoples acting in the best interests of all involved (Sharpe, 1993). Colonialists subdue rebellions and protests by "barbarians" who have not been properly civilized and who therefore continuously must be re-taught their proper positions, roles, and stations within colonialist society. Such colonialist narratives tell us that natives ultimately need colonialism (to "progress") and that, despite their
uneducated opinions, native peoples deep down really do desire the superiority, control, reason, and order colonialism offers (Shohat, 1991).

Colonial narratives also argue that colonialism was needed to rescue native women from oppressive native men. In the name of saving women, colonialism presented itself as a necessary and benevolent force. As Ahmed (1992) points out, “Colonial feminism, or feminism as used against other cultures in the service of colonialism, was shaped into a variety of constructs, each tailored to fit the particular culture that was the immediate target of domination” (pp. 150-151). Thus, feminism is used as a rhetorical trope in colonialist narratives to justify colonialist domination of native women and men as well as colonial women.

Colonialism holds up the banner of “freedom” for some to justify and legitimate the servitude of others. Sharpe (1993) writes, “The development of a racial argument in response to the attack on slavery shows that the fixing of race is intimately bound up with a humanist discourse of emancipation” (p. 5). As the self-chosen emancipator of women, the colonial man in these narratives invades land and native culture in order to preserve white women’s virtues and womanhood, both of which he invented as “a colonial iconography of martyrdom” (p. 55) to justify the civilizing mission. Colonial women’s rescue from the clutches of darkness restores the moral order. Colonialism utilizes feminism and the concept of emancipation to guide women out of oppressive relationships with men; it becomes the grounds for feminist individualism (p. 55). Thus, the emancipation of white women is a model for the emancipation for her “lesser” women counterparts.

The colonialist narrative constructs the audience as a sympathizer with acts of vengeance; the audience becomes an accomplice to the crime of colonialism, an enablement of social power. For example, in discussing the Abolition Act of 1829 in which the British occupying India banned sati ritual suicides of women, Sharpe (1993) writes, “the European is a moral agent. The magistrate positions the horrified onlooker who is sympathetic to the widow’s plight as one who is morally superior to the cruel and unfeeling crowd enjoying the spectacle” (p. 52). Pocahontas positions the viewer in a similar manner. The film asks for the viewer’s sympathy with Pocahontas’s plight, her entrapment within a patriarchal order which demands that she marry a man she does not love. Each and every person who crosses the boundary to sympathize with Pocahontas and dreams of her union with John Smith reinforces the legitimacy of the neocolonial narrative because such a crossing requires the viewer to participate in the justification of colonialism for the emancipation of dark women by enlightened white men. As such, neocolonialist narratives incorporate liberation discourses in an attempt to justify both historical and contemporary colonial practices. In order to explain how the neocolonial narrative Pocahontas accomplishes this, we turn specifically to an analysis of the film’s narrative.

The Pocahontas Narrative

Pocahontas uses feminism, environmentalism, and multiculturalism to argue for the benevolent colonialism signified by John Smith versus the malevolent colonialism typified by Governor Ratcliffe. Through a happy cross-cultural encounter and a sharing of gifts, Pocahontas suggests that colonialism was simply one manifestation of today’s precarious multicultural world. Furthermore, colonists emancipate Pocahontas from Native American patriarchy by figuring Pocahontas as a woman dreaming of a more exciting life, or, as her counterpart Belle in Beauty and the Beast (1991) sings, “more than this provincial life”; for Pocahontas, adventure is “just around the river bend.” By pitting the “natural” Pocahontas and John Smith against the greedy Governor Ratcliffe, who wreaks havoc on the environment, Pocahontas affirms environmentalism while eliminating only Ratcliffe’s form of colonialism. Thus, the Pocahontas narrative argues that the colonialism represented by Smith, when done properly, is a benevolent emancipatory process.

Disney’s movie Pocahontas opens with members of the Virginia Company (all white men), headed by Governor John Ratcliffe, setting sail for the Americas to find their fortune—gold and land—and glory. On the voyage the crew endures dangerous sea weather that almost kills a crew member, Thomas. They also talk and sing joyfully about killing savages. When the crew arrives on the mainland, Pocahontas, who has realized she wants more for her life than marrying the suitor (Kocount) chosen by her father (Powhatan), sees the white sails of the incoming ship. John Smith, the experienced colonizer and all-around heroic figure, later spies Pocahontas through the sights of his gun.
They meet and their evolving romance coincides with growing tensions between the native people and the colonizers, who have begun to build a camp and tear up the land in their search for gold.

The culmination of these tensions is the death of Kecoum, the suitor chosen for Pocahontas by her father, Thomas. The boy Smith rescued earlier from the clutches of the sea, shoots Kecoum. Thomas's shooting of Kecoum and the native peoples' (subsequent) "capture" of Smith leads to warfare between the Native Americans and colonials. Pocahontas takes it upon herself to prevent further bloodshed. As the native people, led by Powhatan, approach the crest of a precipice where they intend to kill Smith, Pocahontas runs valiantly to rescue him. With the aid of the wind, eagle, and various other natural spirits, she jumps in front of the death blow her father is about to deliver to her suitor. The colonizers and the Powhatans suddenly realize the error of their warring ways and put their weapons down to "fight no more." However, the Governor, blinded by greed, turns on the Powhatans and, in an attempt to shoot Chief Powhatan, hits Smith instead. The colonists then turn on the bloodthirsty governor and, finally convinced of his villainy, bind him in chains and gag him for the trip back to England. Despite Smith's invitation, Pocahontas opts to remain with her people and bids Smith a sad farewell.

In the process of telling a story of romance, the film imbues each character and each relationship between characters with specific meanings. The film codes main characters with features, attributes, actions, and values typical of characters within the colonial narrative. As a result, each character represents a particular ideological position in the colonial world. However, by ornamenting these characters with certain details, the film not only creates possibilities for audience associations between the film and the neocolonialist narrative, but also gives each character greater ideological resonances with other characters.

Three sets of dialectical connections between characters help the film construct a neocolonial ideological economy. That is, neocolonial ideology establishes a series of relationships of power and maintains those relationships to allow for efficient operation of the colonialis logic. However, the colonialis narrative differs from the neocolonialist one in specific ways. Colonialis produces a rape threat in order to justify future insurgencies and past actions; neocolonialism cites, appropriates, and reinscribes past colonialism onto the present in order to produce a feminist heroine and privilege her romance over contemporary social problems. Moreover, whereas colonialis grounds its logic within a feminism that subscribes to a morality of virtues that exist prior to the 1800s, contemporary neocolonialism utilizes a postfeminist rhetoric that assumes feminism happened, was successful, and no longer is necessary except to free colonized pre-feminist women from their masculine oppressors. This postfeminist rhetoric relies on the legacy of a 1960s modernist feminism of individualism to make its argument. Thus, both colonialis and neocolonialism rely on a kind of feminist discourse. However, neocolonialism strategically employs the rhetoric of contemporary social movements for liberation, such as environmentalism and multiculturalism. In contrast, colonialis safeguards morality by depicting woman-as-victim, thus producing the rape threat and justifying the grounds for saving her via invasion. Individual characters, especially as they contrast or align with other characters, symbolize allegorical ideological relationships within the neocolonialist textual economy.

**Pocahontas/Nature**

_Pocahontas_ not only tells the story of a powerful Native American heroine, it also establishes a relationship between women and nature typical of colonialist narratives. While it might seem odd at first to suggest that nature functions as a character, in the context of a Disney animated film in which a tree has arms, a face, and speaks, it makes sense to do so. Indeed, Flit the bird and Meeko the raccoon not only make noises that imply rudimentary language skills, but also interrupt people, point to objects, and have distinct personalities. Powhatan and Kekata, the Powhatan shaman, define the wind as Pocahontas's mother, and the wind comforts her, carries messages to her, and helps her think, talk, walk, and paddle. Thus, the film inscribes human characteristics onto natural phenomena and, through this anthropomorphic lens, also cultures and genders nature.

Indeed, the film draws an essentialist connection between women and nature by implying that both require colonization. The film portrays Native American women as caretakers of nature and, in turn, depicts nature as caretaker of all people. Thus, while men canoe, fraternize, and wage wars, Powhatan women, except for Pocahontas herself, plant corn and gather food. While for other women the cornfields represent work, for princess Pocahontas the cornfield represents...
the site of her romantic interludes with Smith. Pocahontas, who at one point picks one ear of corn but then stops, is more accurately the corn waiting to be picked.

Similarly, in *Pocahontas*, the landscape of the Americas is wide open, lush, pristine, beautiful, and full of "resources." Perhaps reading these descriptors as ideally feminine, the colonialists give the land a woman's name, Virginia, and the Governor announces that the colonialists claim this land as Jamestown, the first settlement of Virginia, for King James. The depiction here of civilized masculinity settling on virgin female land enhances rather than detracts from the colonialist logic. As Shohat (1991) writes:

> the notion of "virginity," present for example in the etymology of Virginia, must be seen discursively related to the metaphor of the (European) "motherland." A "virgin" land is implicitly available for deflowering and fecundation. Implied to lack owners, it therefore becomes the property of its "discoverers" and cultivators... A land already fecund, already producing for the indigenous peoples, and thus a "mother," is metaphorically projected as virgin, "untouched nature," and therefore as available and awaiting a master (p. 47).

As Shohat (1991) intimates, the image of empty, pristine land awaiting colonization defines the film's central protagonist, Pocahontas, as well. The film depicts her as a young woman "coming of age." Although the film does not say this overtly, it invites us to understand her romance with Smith as her first relationship. Her closest friend, Nakoma, to whom she entrusts her secrets, makes no mention of anyone prior to him, even during moments when they are alone discussing men. Moreover, because the text lets us know that the Powhatans subscribe to the practice of arranged marriages, and because Powhatan announces Pocahontas's marriage to Kocoum, we are encouraged to assume she has had no prior suitors.

In addition to her portrayal as a virgin, the film also depicts Pocahontas in other ways associated with the land—specifically, as landscape and as animal. For instance, at the very beginning of the film when Pocahontas observes the ship's approach, she crawls up to the rock's precipice on all fours and flattens herself to blend in with the landscape in order to see without being seen. Similarly, when John Smith climbs the rock face, Pocahontas hides, crouching down low behind the bushes, and quiets the animals who might attract Smith's attention. Further, Smith's first vision of Pocahontas is her image reflected in the stream water he cups in his hands. In this first view, Smith sees her only as a reflection of and through nature. Not only does she bend low and double as the landscape itself, but one repeated shot, in the film trailers shows her running and jumping off a cliff, doing a "swan dive" with wing-like suspension before disappearing into the water below. She not only is connected to the land, but through her movements begins to resemble it.

Unlike Pocahontas, who is able to walk, run, and float, and whose body is coded as natural and feminine, Grandmother Willow, the magical tree with whom Pocahontas secretly talks, remains rooted to the earth. Whereas Pocahontas begins to resemble the land, Grandmother Willow is indistinguishable from it. While Willow also is coded as a woman, this centuries-old tree is a bodiless but humanized caretaker of small wild animals and Powhatan women. In contrast to Pocahontas, Willow is more nature than human. Although she speaks, has a face, arms, and even a history, this "Grandmother" who tells Pocahontas of her own mother's past cannot ambulate, which means she receives no social contact unless people see fit to visit her. Apparently, women with too much nature tend toward paralysis.

Despite the fact that we learn that she gains pleasure from looking at John Smith's (hence men's) body when she tells Pocahontas that Smith is "handsome, too," Grandmother Willow has no human body to move toward romance. She merely supplies advice and information about romance. To illustrate the travails of romance, she tells Pocahontas about the marriage between Powhatan and Pocahontas's mother (nameless, except insofar as she is presented allegorically as "The Wind," as indicated in the credits). And while she finds matchmaking more fun, Willow's primary role as both nature and grandmother is that of caretaker. She is Pocahontas's spiritual guide and the protector of those incapable of taking care of themselves (i.e., the forest's small creatures). For example, when Lon and Ben, two members of the ship's crew to whom the film gives names and faces, come searching for Smith, Grandmother Willow hides Smith and Pocahontas. She then scares off Lon and Ben by lifting a root (leg) to trip them and snipping them with "vines," an action that both protects her granddaughter and fuels the English settlers' beliefs that this new land is mystical, haunted, and inhabited by savages—that they are, in fact, in alien territory.

The wind appears as an even less tangible form of femininity and nature than the nearly petrified Willow. As magical connector and mediator, the wind has no personality or voice; she is simply an ethereal...
real spiritual guide, visible only as enveloping swirls of leaves and mystical symbols around Pocahontas. Her main purpose in the film is to lead Pocahontas to follow her heart, which is recognition of her love for John Smith.

Still, the wind has another important role in the film: it brings Smith to Pocahontas. In creating a tremendous storm at sea, the wind sets the stage for John Smith’s heroic rescue of Thomas and fans the sails for the “new” world. During the storm in the Atlantic, the wind tosses the colonizers’ ship, the Susan Constant. The wind’s gusts and waves nearly swallow the boat and ultimately cast Thomas overboard. After John Smith saves Thomas and both are back on deck, the wind stops blowing. As an invisible, omniscient character, the wind witnesses John Smith’s heroic act, an act which demonstrates his suitability for Pocahontas. Just as Powhatan ultimately offers gifts to John Smith, the wind brings John Smith to Pocahontas with a stamped seal of approval.

In addition to acting as Pocahontas’s protector, the wind—as Pocahontas’s benevolent mother—both accompanies and educates Pocahontas. Kekata, the shaman, enunciates the link between Pocahontas and the wind when he says, “You know Pocahontas. She has her mother’s spirit. She goes wherever the wind takes her.” At this moment the film cuts to Pocahontas standing high above her people while the wind and leaves circle around her. The wind embodies the spirit of her desire for freedom and adventure. While talking to Pocahontas, Powhatan says of her mother, “She is still with us. Whenever the wind moves through the trees, I feel her presence.” Later, when Grandmother Willow tells Pocahontas to listen to the voice of the wind, she ultimately chooses the direction of the colonizer.

Smith/Ratcliff

Unlike Pocahontas’s identification with nature, John Smith gains identity in relation to other men. John Smith is a bit clumsy in nature, but as the Anglo-Victor he has the power to overcome natural obstacles and other men. On “her turf,” John Smith not only spies on Pocahontas without her realizing his presence, but he also outruns and outclimbs her throughout the film. Symbolically, then, civilization overcomes nature. In scenes with John Smith and Pocahontas, the film often portrays their relationship as more of a friendly competition between hunter and hunted than as a simple tale of attraction between woman and man.

The film also contrasts Smith’s comfortable relationship with nature/Pocahontas with the discomfort of Ratcliff and shipmates. While Ratcliff plunders nature without conscience, Ben and Lon express skepticism and fear toward nature when Grandmother Willow trips them. John Smith, however, shows no fear in the face of nature (Thomas’s rescue), and indeed, sees nature as a cherished possession: a conquered love versus a conquered foe. Through a series of contrasts between Smith and other men, the film develops his superiority and the superiority of the values and world view he embodies.

John Smith and Governor John Ratcliff offer two versions of the male colonist—one friendly, the other villainous. The film invites audience members to choose between these contrasting representations of the colonist by seeing Smith’s kind of colonialism as heroic and good and Ratcliff as exploitative and evil. If the film succeeds in gaining our compliance with its fantasy, it will convince us that only two colonial alternatives exist that we must choose one. While one form of colonialism makes no sense, the other form does. The film encourages us to rationalize Smith’s colonialist practices of befriending native peoples, educating them, and making them understand the benefits of colonialism over the only other alternative. Thus, when the other colonialist Ratcliff shoots at Powhatan with a gun, the colonialist Smith jumps in front of Powhatan and takes the bullet. As a result of his bravery, Smith reveals Ratcliff’s sinister purpose, which renders Smith the hero not the traitor that the crew originally suspects him to be. Smith’s successful differentiation from the villainous Ratcliff earns him Pocahontas’s love, the spectator’s trust, and his fellow’s admiration.

Indeed, Smith is so much the hero of the film that he threatens to upstage Pocahontas, the character for whom the film was titled. Smith’s bright blond hair represents the white alternative to dark Native American masculinity; Smith is a pro-feminist alternative to Native American patriarchy. Smith smiles, laughs, and even gives biscuits and a compass to Meeko, the raccoon. Unlike Pocahontas’s father, Smith relates to and understands Pocahontas as a person; he supports her efforts to liberate herself as a woman from the confines of what the film codes as oppressive Native American patriarchy and to embrace