

Bias in Children’s Movies: Pocahontas

by Tom Roderick, Laura McClure and Chief Roy Crazy Horse

Pocahontas Does Educate—Falsely

by Tom Roderick

In 1995, children across the country packed into movie theaters to see a film in which the hero and heroine, representing peoples of different cultures who are in conflict, urge the leaders of the warring parties to “talk it out.” This fall (1995) those children will come into our classrooms humming “Colors of the Wind.”

Shouldn’t we be happy that they were exposed to a message of nonviolence and racial harmony? Aren’t we glad that for once there was a Disney cartoon in which the heroine didn’t give up everything to run off with the prince? I wish I could answer yes to those questions, but I found the movie “Pocahontas” offensive. My reasons are connected to my understanding of conflict resolution, racial harmony and critical thinking.

On the surface, the film is innocuous enough. While Ratcliffe, the greedy leader of the English settlers, sets his men to ravaging the land in search of gold, Pocahontas is courageous, peace-loving and beautiful. Her father, Powhatan, is wise and flexible. After falling in love, she and John Smith prevent war between the settlers and Powhatan’s confederacy. In the final scene, the settlers sail off to England with Ratcliffe in chains, while Pocahontas decides to stay with her people.

If this film were about fictional characters in an imaginary land, then we might indeed be able to take the story at face value and give two cheers to Disney. Pocahontas, however, was a real historical figure, and the Powhatans were and are real people. And so

it matters that the film is as historically inaccurate as it seems to be “politically correct.”

Pocahontas was a peacemaker, but not quite in the way depicted in the film. Whether she saved Smith or not is a matter of conjecture, but we do know that she was captured by the English at eighteen and held in Jamestown as security for English prisoners. There, colonist John Rolfe received consent to marry her from the governor and from Powhatan. Peace prevailed between the English and Powhatans for eight years thereafter. Pocahontas died in England of smallpox at about age 22.

What is more disturbing than the license the filmmakers took with Pocahontas’ life story are the distortions of the larger story of the European invasion. As we know, the English did not sail back to England with their leader in detention, but stayed on to establish tobacco as a cash crop (later bringing in enslaved Africans). Although the settlers’ need for corn gave them an interest in peace during the early years, it wasn’t long before they began pressing into Native American territory in search of farmland for tobacco. Led by Powhatan’s successor, the Powhatans resisted these incursions, and the result was a long, bloody war. By 1644, 27 years after Pocahontas’ death, the power of the Powhatan confederacy had been broken.

In view of what really happened to Pocahontas and her people, the film’s “pro-social” messages about racial tolerance and talking out disagreements ring hollow.

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The English invaded the territory they named Virginia, seized the lands that were home to the Powhatans and used force to define their relationship with the Powhatans strictly on their own terms.

To imply, as “Pocahontas” does, that the root of the conflict was a misunderstanding resulting from cultural differences and that each side had equal responsibility for making an enemy of the other is to forget that justice and fair play must form the basis for true racial harmony. Without a willingness to take the other party’s



The Disney image of Pocahontas.

needs into account, what is there to talk out, except the terms of surrender? The situation is analogous to wife battering, where negotiation or mediation between husband and wife are simply not appropriate until the physical abuse stops. For the Europeans, profits took precedence over racial harmony. They had the power to enforce their will; and they told the stories from which we and our children derive our cultural myths.

How we understand history affects decisions we make in the here and now. Since millions of young people and adults will see this film, concerns about its distortions of history are completely justified. “Poca-

hontas” preserves our self-image as a country that never engaged in empire-building and the ravaging of other cultures. The fact that selling this image makes millions for Disney is not a side issue. This perspective keeps us in denial about the plight of Native Americans today and serves the interests of those who want to maintain current economic and political arrangements, keeping the world safe for profit-making by American business.

Disney is not the only company using “entertainment” to promote ideology, but since “Pocahontas” is coming to our classrooms, we might as well take advantage of it. Let’s use the film to point out that through “entertaining,” the entertainment industry is educating, whether they like it or not. Let’s use “Pocahontas” to illustrate the kinds of messages communicated by entertainment products. And let’s give our students accurate information about Pocahontas and her people, and engage them in dialogue about the issues the true story raises.

The cliché is that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. Our history is more complex than any cartoon rendering, even well-intentioned ones. It is our responsibility as educators to help our students understand those complexities as part of our struggle to create a just, peaceful and truly democratic society. ✱

“Pocahontas” as Teaching Tool

by *Laura McClure*

The Pocahontas lunchboxes and notebooks and necklaces are everywhere, and some of us have heard boys taunting girls by yelling, “Hey, Pocahontas!” We’ve seen displays of packaged “Pocahontas” toys appearing in the local supermarkets—including little plastic “Indians” wearing the feather headdresses of traditional Plains Indians (Pocahontas was from an Eastern coastal tribe, the Powhatans). The Mattel toy company has already made over \$40 million in Pocahontas sales, and hopes eventually to net as much on Pocahontas tie-in toys as they did on last year’s “Lion King.” The movie itself had grossed about \$125 million by late July, and for a while the “Pocahontas” soundtrack was number two on the album charts—selling more copies than Michael Jackson’s latest.

Kids and adults may find themselves beguiled by the movie “Pocahontas,” with its beautiful animation, its romance and its seeming message of peace. In its depiction of Native Americans, the Disney film is an improvement over old stereotypes of bad-guy “Indians” in feather headdresses. In making the film, Disney did consult with Native American activists, including Russell Means, who narrates the voice of Pocahontas’

father in the film. But many Native American activists are very troubled by the film.

Teachers may want to use the opportunity presented by “Pocahontas” to help kids learn more about real Native American history, and to talk with young people about the difference between reality and what we see in the movies or on television.

Paula Rogovin, a first-grade teacher who has taught a Native American unit for two decades, sees “Pocahontas” as a chance to open up a good discussion. In talking about the film, Paula says, she wouldn’t “just knock the movie down. I would say, ‘This movie gave you a lot of information, and let’s write down what we learned about Indians from it. After that, you get down to finding out how accurate that depiction really was.’”

After urging Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR) to address the issues raised by “Pocahontas,” longtime ESR member Miriam Lyons and her daughter joined a group of ESR staff members to see the movie for ourselves one hot July afternoon. Afterwards we sat down in a coffee shop to talk about what we had seen.

All of us were immediately struck by the Barbie-doll image Disney gave to Pocahontas. She was in reality only 10 or 11 years old when John Smith came to her land; and Native American historians assure us she would not have been wearing a tight-fitting mindress.

Dr. Cornel Pewewardy of Cameron University argues that Pocahontas’ Disneyfied image is “entirely a product of Western colonialism. The Indian princess stereotype is rooted in the legend of Pocahontas and is typically expressed through characters who are maidenly, demure and deeply committed to some White man.” Pewewardy, a Comanche-Kiowa who has taught many Native American students, points out that this Hollywood image “forces young viewers to reevaluate their standards of beauty” to conform with “White middle class norms.”

At points, the movie does portray some of the colonists as greedy, warrish and racist. This outlook was counterposed with the tolerance and peace urged by Pocahontas and John Smith in the film. But by making Smith himself out to be a peace-loving innocent, the film distorted history beyond recognition. At times, “Pocahontas” made warring Native Americans and English colonizers look like equal offenders, when in reality it was the English who were the aggressors.

The very selection of the mythologized Pocahontas story as a theme is problematic. Robert Eaglestaff, principal of the American Indian Heritage School in Seattle, told the *New York Times* he felt Disney’s use of the Pocahontas story was “like trying to teach about the Holocaust and putting in a nice story about Anne Frank falling in love with a German officer. You can’t



Matoaka, nicknamed Pocahontas, depicted in an engraving by Simon van de Passe, 1616. As with Disney images, this picture may also be influenced by European perceptions of beauty.

pretend everything was okay between the Germans and the Jews.”

Some might view as positive the portrayal of Pocahontas and her people as great respecters of nature, but this too has been turned into a bland stereotype. Pewewardy argues that the old John Wayne Western stereotype of “Indians” as “savages” has now “shifted to that of the ‘noble savage,’ which portrays Indians as part of a once great but now dying culture that could talk to the trees like Grandmother Willow and to the animals like Meeko and Flit.”

The film’s finale, which seems to imply a joyful “blending” of cultures is a huge distortion of the history of genocide and forced isolation of Native Americans. Today, many Native Americans don’t view assimilation as either possible or desirable.

Disney’s ultimate goal for the movie was not to teach but to make a profit. Unfortunately, though, it does teach: It reinforces peoples stereotypes and misunderstandings. “Pocahontas” is about “selling the consumer goods based on imposed values,” says Pewewardy. “When we challenge the motives, the response from corporations and their marketers is that it is nothing

to do with racism, that it's simply good business principles. Disney says it's entertainment—but at whose expense?"

Pewewardy, a former kindergarten teacher, thinks "Pocahontas" does present an opportunity for teachers to "talk about the issues. But I think that most elementary teachers, before they can even talk about it, need a knowledge base of historical information so that they can start a critical thinking discussion. I'd suggest a nonthreatening discussion of the film with kids about the imagery it uses and about the real people."

Students can research the real Pocahontas story (insofar as it is known) and then compare it to the film which is now at video stores. Seeing the movie on video allows the class to stop the action so they can discuss what's happening.

Paula Rogovin's experience learning about Native Americans with her young students might be helpful.

I usually start out by asking kids, 'What do you know about 'Indians'?' And they'll say, 'Oh, they wear feathers, they chant, they kill children...' They go through this whole horrendous list of what they have learned about Indians, and I write everything down, just so we know where we're starting from.



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Artists' varied renderings further the legend of Capt. John Smith's life being saved by Pocahontas. Top, an etching circa 1874 associated with the artist V. Nehlig. Bottom, a circa 1970 color lithograph by the New England Chromo Lith. Co.

Then I say 'How do you know so much?' And they say, 'Well, we learned from other people, from our parents, from TV, cartoons, shows.' So we make a list of our resources for learning.

Then I draw a TV and I say, 'You know, the cartoons and some of the movies about Indians have told many things that are really not true about Indians. And we are going to find out now what is true and what is not.'

Then Paula's class begins learning about Native American peoples.

Two years ago, Paula's class examined Disney's movie "Peter Pan."

We did an analysis of the section where Peter Pan has a confrontation with a group of Indians—and it's the most bigoted, stereotypical garbage. The kids sat there with clipboards and with a partner and said, 'That's a stereotype! That's a stereotype!' when they saw the scenes of Indians dancing around a fire doing war whoops with the feathers, the face paint, and the tepees. These were all things we had researched. After that, we took action. We wrote to Disney and asked them to make a new version of the movie. They never answered our letter. But that's okay. We learned something. ✨

Pocahontas: The Reality

by Chief Roy Crazy Horse

Disney decided to release an animated movie about a Powhatan woman known as "Pocahontas." In answer to a complaint by the Powhatan Nation, Disney claims the film is "responsible, accurate and respectful."

We of the Powhatan Nation disagree. The film distorts history beyond recognition. Our offers to assist Disney with historical and cultural accuracy were rejected. Our efforts urging Disney to reconsider its misguided mission were spurned.

"Pocahontas" was a nickname meaning "the naughty one" or "spoiled child." Her real name was Matoaka. The legend is that she saved a heroic John Smith from being clubbed to death by her father in 1607—she would have been about 10 or 11 at the time. The truth is that Smith's fellow colonists described him as an abrasive, ambitious, self-promoting mercenary soldier.

Of all Powhatan's children, only "Pocahontas" is known, primarily because she became the hero of Euro-Americans as a "good Indian," one who saved the life of a White man. Not only is the "good Indian/bad Indian" theme inevitably given new life by Disney, but

the history, as recorded by the English themselves, is badly falsified in the name of “entertainment.”

The truth of the matter is that the first time John Smith told the story about his rescue was 17 years after it happened, and it was but one of three reported by the pretentious Smith that he was saved from death by a prominent woman. Yet in an account Smith wrote after his winter stay with Powhatan’s people, he never mentioned such an incident. In fact, the starving adventurer reported he had been kept comfortable and treated in a friendly fashion as an honored guest of Powhatan and Powhatan’s brother.

Most scholars think the “Pocahontas incident” would have been highly unlikely, especially since it was part of a longer account used as justification to wage war on Powhatan’s Nation.

Euro-Americans must ask themselves why it has been so important to elevate Smith’s fibbing to status as a national myth worthy of being recycled again by Disney. Disney even improves upon it by changing Pocahontas from a little girl into a young woman.

The true Pocahontas story has a sad ending. In 1612, at the age of 17, Pocahontas was treacherously taken prisoner by the English while she was on a social visit and was held hostage at Jamestown for over a year. During her captivity, a 28-year old widower named John Rolfe took a “special interest” in the attractive young prisoner. As a condition of her release, she agreed to marry Rolfe, who the world can thank for commercializing tobacco. Thus, in April 1614, Matoaka, also known as “Pocahontas” became “Rebecca Rolfe.”

Rolfe, his young wife and their son set off for Virginia in March 1617, but “Rebecca” had to be taken

Disney Responds

The producer of the movie, “Pocahontas,” James Pentecost, responded to his critics in the *New York Times* (July 12, 1995):

“Nobody should go to an animated film hoping to get the accurate depiction of history. That’s even worse than using Cliff’s Notes to rely on giving you an in-depth understanding of a story. More people are talking about Pocahontas than ever talked about her in the last 400 years since she lived. Every time we talk about it, it’s an opportunity to talk about what was, what was known about her, and what we created out of our imagination.”

off the ship at Gracesend. She died there on March 21, 1617 at the age of 21. It was only after her death and her fame in London society that Smith found it convenient to invent the yarn that she had rescued him.

Chief Powhatan died the following spring of 1618. The people of Smith and Rolfe turned upon the people who had shared their resources with them and had shown them friendship. During Pocahontas’ generation, Powhatan’s people were decimated and dispersed and their lands were taken over. A clear pattern had been set which would soon spread across the American continent. ❁



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