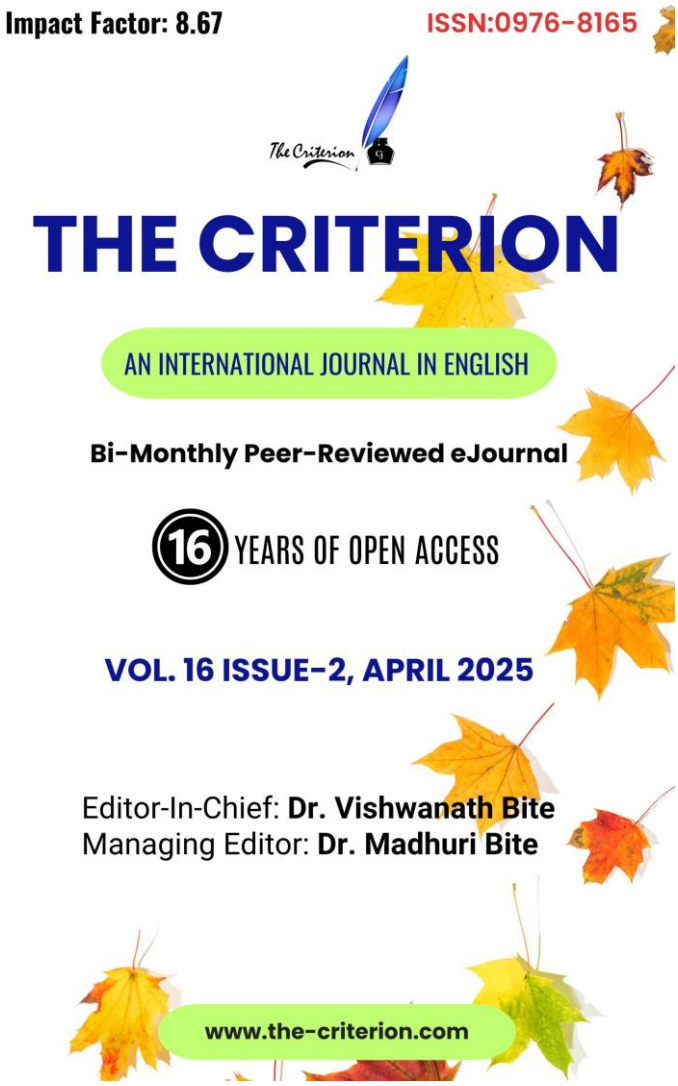

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Disney's *Pocahontas* and the Politics of Representation: Commodifying the Postcolonial Exotic

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Abstract:

This paper critically examines Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995) as a case study in the commodification and distortion of Indigenous histories and identities within global popular culture. Though marketed as a multicultural and feminist corrective to earlier Disney films, *Pocahontas* is shown to reproduce colonial ideologies through narrative romanticization, historical inaccuracy, and the exoticization of cultural difference. Drawing on theoretical insights from postcolonial studies, feminist critique, and media scholarship, including the works of Graham Huggan, bell hooks, Leigh H. Edwards, and Paula Gunn Allen, the paper analyzes the film's portrayal of the titular character as a mediating figure who facilitates colonial reconciliation through personal sacrifice. Through song lyrics, dialogue, and visual design, the film domesticates and aestheticizes Indigenous identity, transforming a history of violence into a consumable fantasy. The paper argues for the need to reclaim Indigenous narratives from such corporate framings and to center voices that challenge, rather than comfort, dominant cultural myths.

Keywords: Disneyfication, Postcolonial representation, Cultural commodification, Indigenous identity, Multiculturalism in media.

> *Disney's writing of public memory also aggressively constructs a monolithic notion of national identity that treats subordinate groups as either exotic or irrelevant to American history, simultaneously marketing cultural differences within histories that corporations can live Disney's version of U.S. history is not innocent, nor can it be dismissed as simply entertainment.*
>
> *(Giroux 109)*

Introduction

Representation of ethnicity has, over the years, become a neatly packaged commodity in the hands of a capitalist entertainment industry that is still largely Eurocentric in its worldview. The politics of representation begins with the problem of absence, then moves into misrepresentation, and finally settles into appropriation, in service of a global audience accustomed to consuming difference as spectacle. Much of what we think we know about native communities does not come from academic histories or oral accounts, but from cinema and other forms of popular entertainment. It is in this context that the representation of Pocahontas, the historical figure of the Powhatan tribe and a well-known name in Native American history, is taken up by Disney in its 1995 animated film *Pocahontas*. This paper attempts to understand how the film frames her character, rewrites historical memory, and presents a version of her life that is shaped more by market sensibilities and romantic adventure than any real cultural or historical accuracy.

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By the mid-1990s, Disney had begun facing increasing criticism for its overwhelmingly white, Euro-American portrayals of women and cultures in its princess films. Critics had started pointing out the absence of diversity and the recycling of European fairy tales with little variation in cultural setting or character background (Bell et al., *From Mouse to Mermaid*, 1995). *Pocahontas* was released in part as an attempt to address this gap and to showcase a "diverse" princess who did not fit the mold of earlier heroines like Cinderella or Aurora. The result, however, was far from a radical shift. The film offered not so much an indigenous perspective as a romantic, exoticized tale where Pocahontas is rendered palatable for global consumption, as a beautiful, nature-bound, peace-seeking woman whose primary function in the film is to mediate between the white colonizer and her own community.

The problem lies not just in the fact that Disney fictionalizes her story but in how it does so. Instead of making her a complex historical character shaped by real political events, *Pocahontas* is reduced to an icon of cultural harmony and noble sacrifice. The real historical figure was captured, held for ransom, forcibly converted to Christianity, and paraded in England before her early death at around 21. None of this finds a place in the film. Instead, the narrative is structured around the white male hero, John Smith, and the "mystical" beauty who saves him. Critics such as Buescher and Ono have pointed out that the film, while pretending to critique colonialism, actually softens it by telling a story of romantic encounter and intercultural love, thereby allowing viewers to feel good about a violent history without confronting its realities (Buescher & Ono, 1996).

This paper examines how *Pocahontas* repackages colonial history, reframes indigeneity as performance, and commodifies cultural difference for entertainment. Through an analysis of narrative structure, character design, and thematic emphasis, it highlights the film's subtle, but powerful, erasure of indigenous voice and its reinscription of Euro-American dominance. In trying

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to be politically correct, Disney ends up doing exactly the opposite: distorting reality to maintain its brand of palatable storytelling.

Disney's Colonial Gaze and Eurocentric Narrative Structures

Pocahontas opens not with the world of the Native Americans but with the arrival of the Englishmen. The narrative structure is clearly tilted. John Smith and his fellow settlers are introduced as brave explorers, driven by dreams of wealth and conquest. The opening song, "Virginia Company," is filled with excitement about new lands and the promise of gold. Native America is not a home or a place of belonging. It is portrayed as an empty space waiting to be claimed. This is the classic colonial gaze, where the land is marked for exploitation and its people are seen as part of the scenery.

From the very beginning, the film sets up John Smith as the hero. His courage is emphasized, and his eventual change of heart becomes the emotional core of the story. Pocahontas, although the title character, is shaped more by her interactions with Smith than by her own agency. Her world exists to be discovered and understood by him. This mirrors the colonial logic where indigenous cultures are not valid until they are acknowledged or changed by the colonizer.

Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism" helps explain how the colonized world is often turned into a romantic backdrop for European drama (Orientalism, 1978). Disney's Pocahontas does something similar. It takes the history of colonization and presents it as a story of mutual understanding and peace. The conflict between the settlers and the Powhatan tribe is reduced to a misunderstanding that can be resolved by individual courage and love. It removes the structural violence of colonization and replaces it with a personal journey.

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Buescher and Ono, in their study of Pocahontas as a neocolonial text, argue that the film masks historical atrocities by offering a version of colonization that feels noble and clean (1996). They show how the film uses romance and reconciliation to frame the English settlers as ultimately well-meaning. This is reinforced by the way John Smith is portrayed. He becomes the exception—the good colonizer who respects nature and listens to the native people. His heroism is rewarded with Pocahontas's love and respect, while the violent aspects of colonization are pushed to the margins of the story.

There is also a subtle hierarchy in the way the characters speak and move. The English characters are given clear, assertive dialogue. Their animation is sharp and detailed. In contrast, Pocahontas speaks in a calm, almost ethereal tone. Her movements are graceful but often overly stylized, giving her a mystical quality. Nature around her speaks and sings. This adds to the romanticization of her character but also distances her from reality. She becomes a symbol, not a person. Her identity is shaped by how she helps John Smith grow and understand the world.

The narrative tries to show cultural exchange, but it is one-sided. The English characters bring guns and ambition. The Native characters offer songs and wisdom. Pocahontas becomes a translator, not just of language, but of morality. She teaches the white hero how to see differently. But she herself is not allowed to grow or change. Her story exists to serve someone else's journey.

This structure reflects what bell hooks has described as "eating the other", which is the way dominant cultures consume racial difference as a form of pleasure or growth (Black Looks, 1992). Disney packages cultural difference as something beautiful and enlightening, but only when it is made safe for the viewer. The result is a film that appears progressive on the surface but continues to center white experience and white redemption.

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The Fetish of Authenticity and the Exoticization of Indigeneity

Disney's *Pocahontas* attempts to balance cultural sensitivity with mass appeal, but in doing so, it substitutes depth with surface-level "authenticity." While the film employs Native American consultants and casts indigenous voice actors, its approach to representation is less about cultural integrity and more about creating a marketable, multicultural spectacle. As a result, Pocahontas is rendered less as a historical figure and more as a consumable image of the exotic - spiritual, beautiful, and ultimately silent in the face of colonial power.

Leigh H. Edwards describes this as "synthetic miscegenation," where Pocahontas is constructed to visually appeal to a global market by blending ethnic traits into a homogenized, racially ambiguous beauty (Edwards, 1999). Glen Keane, the supervising animator, famously drew inspiration from multiple sources, including models and Bedard's features, but in the process created a character whose racial identity is fluid enough to be appropriated universally. In this way, Pocahontas becomes less Powhatan and more of a multicultural fantasy that signifies difference but poses no threat.

This carefully crafted "look" is central to what Jacquelyn Kilpatrick critiques as Disney's fetish for authenticity. The film, Kilpatrick argues, "takes a step backwards, a very dangerous step because it is so carefully glossed as 'authentic' and 'respectful'" (Kilpatrick 36). The use of Algonquian-inspired music, the invocation of animist spirituality, and the romantic wilderness setting all contribute to an image of indigeneity that is mystical rather than historical. Pocahontas does not resist colonial intrusion; she floats, sings, and smiles through it.

This is not simply a matter of aesthetics. The film's narrative structure depends on Pocahontas being able to "translate" her people to the colonizers, particularly John Smith. She absorbs English

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culture magically by "listening with her heart" and immediately becomes fluent. Language acquisition is turned into a metaphor for spiritual awakening, not an act of communication grounded in material or historical reality. As Paula Gunn Allen notes, this transformation erases the specificity of her cultural identity and replaces it with an abstracted, universalized "beauty" (Allen 13).

The exaggerated association between Pocahontas and nature reinforces a familiar colonial trope. She communes with wind and trees, especially Grandmother Willow, and embodies an ecological spirituality that is meant to evoke awe. But this alignment with nature, while seemingly respectful, also fixes her identity as pre-modern and otherworldly.

Nature, in *Pocahontas*, is a character, but it is also a metaphor for Pocahontas herself. It is lush, unknowable, aesthetically pleasing, and ultimately accessible only through the white male protagonist. This naturalization of the female indigenous body is central to the film's ideological work. By tying her authenticity to her environment, the film reduces both to aesthetic symbols that reinforce Western fantasy, not indigenous sovereignty.

Moreover, the film equates authenticity with appearance. Pocahontas's visual cues, i.e , her brown skin, her bare feet, her flowing black hair, signal her indigeneity more than her cultural knowledge or political position. Edwards argues that this performative authenticity satisfies viewers' desire for racial diversity without engaging in the complexities of colonialism or resistance (Edwards 154). Disney's multiculturalism, in this case, becomes a means of commodifying difference rather than respecting it.

Ultimately, the fetishization of Pocahontas as both authentic and exotic allows Disney to market her as a politically correct princess while avoiding the uncomfortable truths of colonization. She

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is sold not as a survivor of conquest, but as a symbol of reconciliation. In doing so, the film erases the historical Pocahontas, a child kidnapped, converted, married off, and buried in England, and replaces her with a fantasy figure molded to suit the needs of the dominant culture.

Gendered Colonial Ideologies and the Role of the Mediating Native Woman

Pocahontas in Disney's version is not just a Native American figure. She is a specific kind of female figure: a mediator. Her role in the film is to soften conflict, bridge cultures, and tame masculinity. She is positioned not as a warrior or a leader of her people, but as an emotional go-between. This is not an accident. It fits into a long tradition of representing indigenous women as passive, peace-seeking, and open to assimilation, especially when white men are involved. It is a colonial fantasy disguised as a multicultural story.

From the very beginning, Pocahontas is coded as both alluring and wise beyond her years. Her father is depicted as stern and inflexible. Her suitor, Kocoum, is silent, muscular, and aggressive. In contrast, Pocahontas is free-spirited, curious, and willing to break social codes. She represents what Homi Bhabha calls "colonial mimicry," where the colonized subject becomes the figure through which colonial order is justified, not through resistance, but through compliance that looks like agency (Bhabha 86).

In the film, Pocahontas teaches John Smith how to respect the land. She shows him how to see with his "heart," not just his eyes. But the learning only goes one way. She changes him, but he does not change her. She stays rooted in her community and its rituals, but her function is to make him better. This dynamic reflects what bell hooks describes as the colonial strategy of "rescuing" oppressed women from their own cultures while reinforcing white male authority (hooks 48). Disney follows this formula but masks it in the language of equality and romance.

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Leigh H. Edwards points out that Pocahontas is portrayed as an ideal multicultural subject, one who challenges colonial violence through emotion rather than politics. She mediates rather than resists. Her body becomes the site where reconciliation is performed, not contested (Edwards 155). This is why she does not speak in anger, even when her people are threatened. She does not shout, protest, or organize. She sings. Her voice is powerful, but it is framed within a musical that prioritizes healing over confrontation.

In one of the film's most symbolic moments, Pocahontas places her body between her father and John Smith. It is a literal and figurative moment of mediation. She does not fight. She pleads. The message is clear: peace is possible if the colonized woman is willing to give herself to the colonizer's story. As Kilpatrick argues, this act of mediation serves Disney's political needs more than any cultural truth. It offers a fantasy where history can be rewritten through romantic sacrifice (Kilpatrick 36).

Moreover, the film frames Pocahontas's rejection of Kocoum not just as a personal decision, but as a step away from tradition. Kocoum is tradition: stoic, protective, suspicious of outsiders. Smith, on the other hand, is modernity. He listens, changes, evolves. The love triangle is not just about attraction. It is about choosing between the "past" and the "future." Disney makes that choice easy. Kocoum is killed. Smith is saved.

This logic, as Buescher and Ono point out, is deeply troubling. It teaches audiences to favor the "good colonizer" over the "bad native" (Buescher and Ono 144). The film's emotional climax is not the survival of Pocahontas's people, but the transformation of Smith's perspective. Pocahontas becomes a tool in this moral journey. Her culture, while beautiful and wise, is never seen as powerful in itself. It gains value only when it can transform the white hero.

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Paula Gunn Allen, reflecting on Pocahontas as a historical and symbolic figure, noted that the real Pocahontas "was not a bridge. She was a warning" (Allen 13). In Disney's version, that warning is rewritten as a love song. The cost of such a change is not only historical inaccuracy, but the loss of a voice that once resisted through silence, survival, and refusal.

Historical Inaccuracies and the Politics of Whitewashing

One of the most obvious criticisms levelled against Pocahontas is its treatment of historical truth. Disney does not merely fictionalize a story, but also systematically alters documented history to suit a romantic and politically safe narrative. The film rewrites events, omits brutality, and reshapes characters to align with the expectations of a family-friendly audience. In doing so, it participates in what can be called the politics of whitewashing: a deliberate softening of colonial history to make it more digestible and profitable.

The most glaring distortion is the romantic relationship between Pocahontas and John Smith. Historians are largely in agreement that Pocahontas was around ten to twelve years old when she first encountered Smith, who was a thirty-year-old soldier and mercenary. The idea of a romance between them is not only historically implausible, but also entirely invented. As Jacquelyn Kilpatrick points out, "Pocahontas was not a voluptuous young woman when she met John Smith but a ten- to twelve-year-old girl, and John Smith was a thirty-something mercenary" (Kilpatrick 36). Yet Disney transforms her into a sexualized adult heroine and makes their love the emotional centerpiece of the film.

This is more than just an age rewrite. It is a deliberate act of erasure. The real Pocahontas was kidnapped by the English, held hostage, converted to Christianity, and married to John Rolfe. She died at age twenty-two in England, far from her homeland. None of this is acknowledged in the

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

film. Instead, viewers are offered a sanitized love story that suggests cultural misunderstanding is the only obstacle to harmony. The violence of colonization is replaced with the imagery of unity and romance. As Paula Gunn Allen observes, "They wanted the Pocahontas who gave John Smith fever and Disney Corporation beaucoup bucks" (Allen 13).

The script reinforces this romantic fantasy through emotionally charged language. When Pocahontas pleads with her father to spare Smith's life, she cries out: "If you kill him, you'll have to kill me too" (Pocahontas 01:10:42). Her body becomes the bridge between cultures, but also the shield that prevents historical reckoning. John Smith, likewise, is made to appear noble and sacrificial when he takes a bullet for Chief Powhatan and says: "I'd rather die tomorrow than live a hundred years without knowing you" (01:03:55). These lines function not only as markers of intimacy but as tools of historical revisionism, pushing the viewer to see colonial violence as secondary to individual feeling.

Leire San José Montón's study highlights how this narrative structure is not innocent. It subtly legitimizes English colonialism by presenting it as a civilizing mission led by individuals like Smith, who are depicted as noble and open-minded (Montón 14). The real power structures of colonization are ignored. The film blames one corrupt leader, Governor Ratcliffe, for all the violence, allowing the rest of the colonizers to remain innocent. John Smith's departure is not the result of political fallout or injury, but a selfless act that earns him redemption.

Even the land itself is whitewashed. Virginia is shown as a pristine wilderness waiting to be discovered. There is no acknowledgment of the centuries-long habitation of the land by Native peoples. The arrival of the English is framed not as invasion, but as exploration. When Ratcliffe leads the settlers ashore, he sings gleefully: "Mine, boys, mine every mountain / And dig, boys, dig 'til you drop / Grab a pick, boys, quick, boys / Shove in a shovel, uncover those lovely pebbles

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that sparkle and shine!" (00:25:40). The greed of colonial expansion is presented as song and spectacle. Pocahontas is shown as a guide who makes this land legible to white settlers. She becomes, in effect, a map. As Kilpatrick notes, "The visual is emotionally more compelling than the written word… and since few people will read about Pocahontas, this film will exist as 'fact' in the minds of generations of American children" (Kilpatrick 36).

This version of history is not just misleading. It is dangerous. It teaches children that colonization was a series of misunderstandings, easily resolved by goodwill and romance. It reduces genocide, displacement, and forced conversion to an aesthetic of harmony. And it turns a figure who should represent indigenous survival into a poster child for assimilation.

Commodification, Multiculturalism, and the Disney Princess Economy

While *Pocahontas* was presented as Disney's foray into political correctness and multicultural storytelling, it remains firmly rooted in a consumerist logic. Behind the narrative of cross-cultural romance and mutual respect lies a powerful engine of commodification. Pocahontas is not just a character. She is a brand. Her story, her body, her voice, and even her landscape are turned into products—costumes, dolls, lunchboxes, songs. In Disney's version, indigeneity is not preserved. It is packaged and sold.

Leigh H. Edwards calls this phenomenon "synthetic multiculturalism," where racial and cultural difference is flattened into a marketable sameness. In this view, diversity is not a threat or a critique of dominant culture, but its ornamentation. Pocahontas's racialized difference is made visually striking, her skin tone, jewelry, bare feet etc., but not politically meaningful (Edwards 149). She is indigenous in aesthetic but universal in appeal. The film offers the fantasy of inclusion without the discomfort of confrontation.

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Graham Huggan's concept of the "postcolonial exotic" further illuminates this dynamic. He argues that exoticism is not an inherent quality but "a particular mode of aesthetic perception, one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness" (Huggan 13). In this context, Pocahontas's portrayal becomes a commodified spectacle that satisfies Western desires for the exotic while neutralizing the political realities of colonialism.

This multicultural framing is emphasized in *Colors of the Wind*, the song that defines the film's moral heart. Pocahontas sings: *"You think you own whatever land you land on / The Earth is just a dead thing you can claim"* (00:38:10). The song critiques colonizer arrogance, but it does so gently, even beautifully. The visual montage that accompanies it shows animals dancing, trees shimmering, and winds swirling. It is a spectacle of ecological wonder. But it is also a distraction. The song's emotional force masks the film's structural omissions: no mention of smallpox, slavery, or the erasure of entire nations. The lesson is environmental, not historical.

Pocahontas's relationship with nature is also central to her commodification. She becomes an eco-princess, marketed not only as beautiful and brave but as spiritually in tune with the Earth. Her connection to animals, trees, and rivers is romanticized to the point of cliché. As Buescher and Ono note, she is transformed into "a representative of idealized nature," one that is passive and picturesque, and ultimately safe for consumption (Buescher and Ono 143). Her environmentalism is inspirational but also market friendly.

The film also places Pocahontas within the growing franchise of Disney princesses which is a highly profitable business strategy developed in the early 2000s. But Pocahontas's entry into this lineup is complex. Unlike most Disney heroines, she does not marry the prince. She chooses duty over love. Still, her visual design, merchandise branding, and soundtrack marketing align her with

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the same princess economy. Her story may be different, but her image conforms. Her femininity is emphasized, her strength is aestheticized, and her difference is made exotic but approachable.

Jacquelyn Kilpatrick criticizes this shift by pointing out how Disney's Pocahontas, while supposedly empowering, is still drawn with an impossible body: "a wasp waist, sexy hips and legs, and breasts that are truly impressive" (Kilpatrick 37). Glen Keane, the supervising animator, described her as athletic, but even Mel Gibson, who voiced Smith, said bluntly, "She's a babe." Such framing undermines any attempt at cultural authenticity. The indigenous female body is stripped of history and re-dressed in beauty tropes meant to appeal to the mainstream male gaze.

Even Disney's attempts to consult with Native communities during the film's production were uneven. While some cultural advisors were hired, including members of the Powhatan Renape Nation, their concerns were often overruled. Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow-McGowan, a Powhatan educator, said, "My heart sorrowed within me... Ten-year-old Pocahontas has become twenty-year-old Pocahontas. The movie was no longer historically accurate" (Kilpatrick 37). Disney was not interested in preserving accuracy. It was interested in preserving the brand.

In this way, *Pocahontas* fits into what bell hooks identifies as the commodification of difference: "ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (hooks 21). The film serves up indigenous culture in a way that is flavorful but not radical, symbolic but not political. And through its global distribution, it ensures that millions of children grow up with this version of Pocahontas—beautiful, brave, and wholly unthreatening.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Narrative and Moving Beyond the Disney Frame

Disney's *Pocahontas* has often been celebrated as a progressive turn in the studio's history of representation. Yet, as this paper has shown, beneath its veneer of multiculturalism and feminist

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aesthetics lies a deeply problematic structure, one that whitewashes colonial violence, commodifies cultural difference, and recasts Indigenous identity to fit a global consumer narrative. What we are left with is not a celebration of Native American life, but a stylized fiction that erases the trauma of colonization and replaces it with a marketable myth of reconciliation.

The film's romanticization of the colonial encounter, its flattening of historical complexity, and its visual fetishization of indigeneity all point to the limits of mainstream media in representing marginalized voices. Through a carefully curated script, emotionally charged songs, and a palette of symbolic visuals, Disney transforms the figure of Pocahontas into what Graham Huggan calls the "postcolonial exotic", a symbol of cultural difference stripped of its political agency (Huggan 13). What appears as respect is, in fact, containment.

As scholars like Buescher and Ono, Kilpatrick, and Paula Gunn Allen have argued, the Pocahontas myth has long served the interests of colonial retellings. Disney's version is simply its most global and commercial form. Instead of confronting the legacy of land theft, genocide, and forced assimilation, the film teaches children that empathy and individual goodness can erase systemic violence. That message is not just misleading. It is harmful.

Reclaiming the narrative means moving beyond the Disney frame. It means telling stories of resistance, survival, and self-definition from within Indigenous communities, not through corporate filters. It means recognizing that not every story of cross-cultural contact is a love story, and that not every Indigenous character must be rendered beautiful, noble, or spiritually aligned with nature to be worthy of attention.

The real Pocahontas was not a heroine created for a toy line. She was a girl caught in the violent crosscurrents of colonial expansion, forced to navigate a world of shifting allegiances, captivity,

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and displacement. Her life deserves more than animation. It deserves truth. As viewers, educators, and scholars, the responsibility lies with us to seek out and amplify those truths, even when they do not sing in perfect harmony.

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