Redesigning Pocahontas: Disney, the "white man's Indian," and the marketing of dreams
Gary Edgerton

It is a story that is fundamentally about racism and intolerance and we hope that people will gain a greater understanding of themselves and of the world around them. It's also about having respect for each other's cultures. - Thomas Schumacher, senior vice president of Disney Feature Animation (Pocahontas 35)

The challenge was how to do a movie with such themes and make it interesting, romantic, fun. - Peter Schneider, president of Disney Feature Animation (Pocahontas 37)

Thomas Schumacher and Peter Schneider are two of the key executives who have re-established the Walt Disney Company as the premier animation studio in Hollywood. Schneider, in particular, became president of Disney Feature Animation in 1985, and since that time has assembled a coterie of first-rate talent and guided the division to a level of unprecedented success, boasting a lineup of recent productions that now includes The Little Mermaid (1989), Beauty and the Beast (1991), Aladdin (1992), The Lion King (1994), and Pocahontas (1995). Disney is the film industry's exemplar for creating blockbuster motion pictures, fueling the releases with highly sophisticated advertising and marketing campaigns, and then maximizing profit by licensing literally hundreds of ancillary products. For example, the film The Lion King and its merchandise have already grossed an estimated $2 billion worldwide (Biskind 81). With each subsequent feature, Disney executives try to equal or top their last success.

Disney executives and animators had a related, though secondary, goal with Pocahontas, however. They wanted to address the rise in public criticism from various ethnic groups over racial stereotyping in their most recent productions. Arab American groups, for instance, protested against certain imagery and lyrics in Aladdin (Kim 24; Sharkey 22). African American critics similarly pointed out that the three hooligan hyenas in The Lion King were thinly disguised black and Hispanic characters who seemed to be living in a jungle equivalent of an inner-city ghetto (Sharkey 22). Disney executives understood from the outset that Pocahontas could be similarly problematic for the studio and planned to be more careful and sensitive in designing the film's portrayal of Native Americans.

The genesis of Pocahontas actually came from the eventual co-director, Mike Gabriel, who was trying to initiate a new project after finishing The Rescuers Down Under in 1990. He wanted to do a western, "a big scale epic that would lend itself to the kind of Broadway-oriented animated musicals that Disney had recently reinvigorated" (Pocahontas 36). Peter Schneider, for his part, had been considering an animated version of Romeo and Juliet for several years. The two seemingly disparate ideas merged for Gabriel when "somehow the name Pocahontas came into my mind . . . everyone knew the tale about her saving John Smith's life and it seemed like a natural for telling a story about two separate clashing worlds trying to understand each other" (Pocahontas 36). The Pocahontas narrative also furnished source material that could easily conform to the coming-of-age and romantic dictates of the Disney formula, as well as provide a spunky heroine as protagonist in the mold of Ariel in The Little Mermaid, Belle in Beauty and the Beast, and Jasmine in Aladdin.

Within this conventional framework, then, the talent at Disney Feature Animation began shaping its portrayals. Writers Carl Binder, Susannah Grant, and Philip LaZebnik drafted a script, while 12 interrelated teams of animators started experimental sketches of the characters and setting. Supervising animator Glen Keane journeyed to Tidewater, Virginia, hiring a number of local Native American consultants to advise his production team. Native American performers, moreover, were cast to provide the voices and characterizations for the main American Indian roles, including former American Indian Movement activist-turned-actor Russell Means, who would play Chief Powhatan, Pocahontas's father. The Walt Disney Company was apparently making all the appropriate and necessary preparations for an elaborate update of the Native American on film.
Don't Know Much About History

Moviemakers shouldn't be handcuffed when using real stories as jumping-off places for works of entertainment. - James Pentecost (Kim 24)

We never wanted to do a docu-drama, but something that was inspired by legend. - Peter Schneider (Pocahontas 37)

Representatives of the Walt Disney Company inadvertently alienated their chief Native American consultant, Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow McGowan, by sending her mixed signals about the kind of guidance they were seeking from her. Co-director Eric Goldberg, for example, remembers how "we met with surviving members of the Algonquin nation in Virginia and realized that it would be fascinating to show their culture in our film. We wanted to be as faithful as possible" (Pocahontas 34). In response, Custalow McGowan recalls I was honored to be asked by them . . . but I wasn't at the studio two hours before I began to make clear my objections to what they were doing . . . they had said that the film would be historically accurate. I soon found that it wasn't to be. . . . I wish my name wasn't on it. I wish Pocahontas' name wasn't on it. (Vincent, Disney E5)

The filmmakers at Disney never really intended Pocahontas to be historically accurate, despite all the sentimental rhetoric; they were producing yet another animated feature after all. Native American advisors were hired to secure a more positive, even hagiographic, portrayal of Native American characters within an earnestly sympathetic narrative. Studio executives were, therefore, banking on the likelihood that a post-modern restyling of Pocahontas and her legend would also be an immensely popular and profitable version for audiences in the mid-1990s. They were, moreover, attempting to favorably affect public opinion regarding "Disney's America," a historical theme park planned for Northern Virginia, which was subsequently abandoned.

Artists and authors have actually been reshaping Pocahontas and her history for nearly four centuries. In Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend, William M. S. Rasmussen and Robert S. Tilton surveyed literally dozens of depictions, beginning during Pocahontas's lifetime, when she was "living proof that American natives could be Christianized and civilized" (7). Fact and fiction were blended at the outset into this legendary personality who symbolized friendly and advantageous relations between American Indians and English settlers from a distinctly Anglo-American point of view. Disney's animators are merely part of that longer tradition, the latest in a series of storytellers, painters, poets, sculptors, and commercial artists who have taken liberties with Pocahontas's historical record for their own purposes (Rasmussen and Tilton).

Disney's Pocahontas is, once again, a parable of assimilation, although this time the filmmakers hinted at a change in outlook. Producer James Pentecost for instance reported that "Colors of the Wind" perhaps best sums up the entire spirit and essence of the film . . . this song was written before anything else. It set the tone of the movie and defined the character of Pocahontas. Once Alan [Menken] and Stephen [Schwartz] wrote that song, we knew what the film was about. (Pocahontas 51-52)

Schwartz agreed with Pentecost, adding that his lyrics were inspired by Chief Seattle's famous speech to the United States Congress that challenged white ascendancy in America and the appropriation of American Indian lands (Pocahontas 52).

"Colors of the Wind" functions as a rousing anthem for Pocahontas, extolling the virtues of tolerance, cross-cultural sensitivity, and respect for others and the natural environment:

You think you own whatever land you land on The earth is just a dead thing you can claim But I know ev'ry rock and tree and creature Has a life, has a spirit, has a name You think the only people who are
people Are the people who think and look like you But if you walk the footsteps of a stranger You'll learn things you never knew You never knew.

The entire plot structure is similarly calculated to support the Disney game plan. The film begins in London in 1607 with John Smith and the Virginia Company crew setting out for the New World, and it concludes with Smith's return trip to England in 1609, although the duration of the movie seems to span weeks rather than years. The scriptwriters, nevertheless, terminate the narrative at the most expedient juncture, avoiding the more tragic business of Pocahontas's kidnapping by the English; her isolation from her people for a year; her ensuing conversion to Christianity; her marriage and name change to Lady Rebecca Rolfe; and her untimely death from tuberculosis at age 21 in England (Barbour; Fritz; Mossiker; Woodward). Disney's filmmakers did, in fact, research those details of Pocahontas's life before starting production, but obviously their aim was to keep audiences as comfortable as possible by providing a predictable product.

Co-director Eric Goldberg later claimed that "it's important for us as filmmakers to be able to say not everything was entirely hunky-dory by the end . . . which it usually is in a traditionally Disneyesque movie" (Mallory 24). Given the eventual fate of Pocahontas and the Algonquins, though, Disney's animators could hardly have opted for the usual "happily ever after" finale. The filmmakers, after all, were genuinely trying to offend no one, including the Native American community and their consultants.

Consider the redesigning of the character of Pocahontas. Supervising animator Glen Keane remembered how former studio chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg charged him with reshaping Pocahontas as "the finest creature the human race has to offer" (Kim 24). He also admitted, "I don't want to say a rut, but we've been doing mainly Caucasian faces" (Cochran 24). Keane, in turn, drew on then 21-year-old Filipino model Dyna Taylor; and white supermodel Christy Turlington (Cochran 24). After studio animators spent months sketching her, their Pocahontas emerged as a multicultural pastiche. They started with Native American faces but eventually gravitated to the more familiar and Anglicized looks of the statuesque Turlington. Not surprisingly, all the key decision makers and supervising artists on Pocahontas were white males. Disney and Keane's "finest creature" clearly is the result of a very conventional viewpoint.

Accordingly, what of avoiding old stereotypes? Native American actors were cast in all the native roles in the film; still, Pocahontas's screen image is less American Indian than fashionably exotic. Many critics, for example Newsweek's Laura Shapiro, refer to the makeover as "Native American Barbie" (Shapiro and Chang 77) - in other words, Indian features, such as Pocahontas's eyes, skin color, and wardrobe, only provide a kind of Native American styling to an old stereotype.

The British colonists also replace the Indians as stock villains in Pocahontas, with Governor Ratcliffe, in particular, singing about gold, riches, and power in the appropriately titled song "Mine, Mine, Mine." The film's final impression, therefore, is that, with Ratcliffe bound, gagged, and headed back to England, American Indians and Europeans are now free to coexist peacefully. Race is a dramatic or stylistic device, but the more profound consequences of institutional racism are never allowed even momentarily to invade the audience's comfort zone.

Perhaps the Disney studio should trust its patrons more. Fairy tales and fantasies have traditionally challenged children (and adults) with the unpleasant realities lurking just beneath their placid exteriors. Audiences are likely to enjoy added depth and suggestiveness enough to buy plenty of tickets and merchandise. Disney's Pocahontas raises important issues but does not fully address them; it succeeds as a king-sized commercial vehicle, but fails as a half-hearted revision.

Contested Meanings
The meaning of a text is always the site of a struggle. - Lawrence Grossberg (86)

History is always interpreted. I'm not saying this film is accurate, but it is a start. I grew up being called Pocahontas as a derogatory term. They hissed that name at me, as if it was something dirty. Now, with this film, Pocahontas can reach a larger culture as a heroine. No, it doesn't make up for 500 years of genocide, but it is a reminder that we will have to start telling our own stories. - Irene Bedard (qtd. in Vincent E5)
The comments of Irene Bedard, the Native American actress who plays the voice of Pocahontas, augment many of the critical responses that surfaced after the release of Pocahontas in the summer of 1995. She offers audiences some valuable insights into the Native American perspective, especially with her painful recollection of being ridiculed with the surprising taunt, "Pocahontas." As she says, this film signals a welcomed counterbalance to such insults; most significantly, she calls for the emergence and development of a truly American Indian cinema that is the next needed step for fundamentally improving depictions of Native Americans on film.

Until that time, however, we can extend our understanding of Pocahontas, in particular, and established and alternative views toward Indian people in general, by examining the spectrum of critical reactions that the animated film engendered. The most striking aspect of Pocahontas's critical reception is the contradictory nature of the responses: the film is alternately described as progressive or escapist, enlightened or racist, feminist or retrograde - depending on the critic. Inherently fraught with contradictions, Disney's Pocahontas sends an abundance of mixed messages, which probably underscores the limits of reconstructing the Native American image at Disney or, perhaps, any other major Hollywood studio that operates first and foremost as a marketer of conventional dreams and a seller of related consumer products.

As teachers, critics, parents, or students of popular culture, we can usefully extend the scope of our examinations of Pocahontas by studying the various critical communities that have engaged the Disney version with their own unique perspectives. These additional points of view help to illuminate not only what Pocahontas presented directly - such as mainstream representations of race and gender - but also what it underplayed or ignored - such as peripheral outlooks on those issues or the historical reality underlying the legend.

The Native Americans who worked on the film - such as Russell Means, the voice of Powhatan, and Irene Bedard - generally commended it. Means specifically called it "the single finest work ever done on American Indians by Hollywood" (Pocahontas 34). His comments especially drew fire from the Native American press, where a number of both columnists and readers who sent letters to the editor wondered if the former head of the American Indian Movement had "sold out to the white man and his money" (Rattler D1). Means's pronouncements evidently became a source of controversy in a debate that highlights the competing conceptions of American "Indian-ness" that co-exist in contemporary America.

**NOTE: These are excerpted pieces of text from a much longer work.