

Searching for Pocahontas:

The Portrayal of an Indigenous Icon in Terrence Malick's *The New World*

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Captain Smith and Pocahontas
Had a very mad affair
When her daddy tried to kill him
She said, "Daddy, oh don't you dare
He gives me fever with his kisses
Fever when he holds me tight
Fever, I'm his missus
Oh Daddy, won't you treat him right."

From *Fever* as sung by Peggy Lee (1958)

There are no truths, just stories.

Simon Ortiz, Acoma poet

In 1607, three English ships carrying 104 colonists of the Virginia Company landed at the mouth of the James River near the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia to establish the first permanent European settlement in America.¹ On board one of the ships was Captain John Smith, charged with mutiny, arriving in shackles, sentenced to be hanged, but destined to become the savior of the fledgling Jamestown colony. Soon after first stepping foot onto land, Smith would encounter Pocahontas, the beautiful young daughter of Powhatan, the most powerful Native leader among the eastern coastal tribes. The relationship that ensued between Smith and Pocahontas would change forever the course of American history, and tragically the lives of the Native people who inhabited this land – it would also provide us with the first great American love story. For

almost 400 years, the partly true but mostly mythological legend of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith has fascinated us like few other stories have. It is the tale of two supposed lovers torn apart by a clash of cultures, a love doomed at the onset, destined for tragedy. It is the American version of Romeo and Juliet made even more compelling by its foundation of historical reality.

The purpose of this essay is to review from both an academic and entertainment perspective the latest cinematic version of this story - *The New World* written and directed by the legendary film maker Terrence Malick, and starring Q'orianka (pronounced Core-ee-ahn-ka) Kilcher and Colin Ferrell in the lead roles. This film, distributed by New Line Cinema and first released to general audiences in January 2006, reportedly cost \$35 million to produce, making it the first time that an effort has been made to tell the Pocahontas story in what amounts to a major motion picture production.² In addition to the considerable cinematic expectations, *The New World* provides us with a new opportunity to revisit the history and the myth of the iconic Pocahontas. It also provides us with an opportunity to examine how the cinema has served to shape – and continues to shape - the legend of Pocahontas and John Smith.

Before moving on to a review of *The New World*, it would be first useful to take a brief look at the two people mostly responsible as to its success or failure: the writer and director, Malick, and the lead actress who plays Pocahontas, Kilcher.

Terrence Malick is considered one of the master filmmakers of our generation. Although he had made only three movies before *The New World* over a 32 year career – *Badlands* (1972), *Days of Heaven* (1978), and what might be his best effort, *The Thin Red Line* (1998) – his reputation is

almost mythical in stature. After completing *The Thin Red Line* he dropped out of sight for nearly twenty years. He is notorious for doing little to promote or market his films, preferring them to stand on their own artistic merit. None of his films have taken in more than \$37 million dollars, nor have any ever won an Academy Award, although *The Thin Red Line* was nominated for seven.³ *The New World* - film for which he reportedly wrote the screen play for over 25 years ago - received only one Oscar nomination which it failed to win, that being in cinematography. Malick's films are especially noted for several qualities, the first being that they tend to be visual masterpieces. In *The New World*, movie goers are treated to the spectacular, almost overwhelming beauty of Tidewater Virginia and to a backdrop that is immensely poetic – the sound of singing birds (Malick dubbed in recordings of the long extinct Carolina parakeet), water tumbling over rocks, blowing grass and swaying trees with sunlight piercing through the canopy – all of which is further heightened by a background of classical music. A second major characteristic of Malick's films are that they tend to be abstract, slow moving, subtle, and always thought provoking. In this regard, *The New World* is a classic Malick film. Time is of little consequence to Malick in terms of its passage and the sequence of events – a maddening trait in a historical dramatization. Long scenes are presented with little or no dialogue. Often the narrative is difficult to follow and much is left to the interpretation of the viewer. A third trait of a Malick film is that they reflect his near obsession for accuracy and detail – qualities that can be very elusive when one is focusing on a seventeenth century love affair that most historians agree never took place, made even more complicated by its inter-cultural nature.

Although not the focus of this review, a few words do need to be said about Colin Ferrell who was cast to play John Smith. Ferrell was clearly meant to be the main box office attraction for *The New World*. One of Hollywood's "A-List" actors, he is probably best known for his work in *Hart's War* (2002), *Phone Booth* (2002), and most recently in his less than stellar performance as the title character in another historically based film, *Alexander* (2004). His portrayal of John Smith as a handsome (In reality, Smith was anything but handsome) brooding soldier of fortune caught up in emotions and events over which he has little control over, is more than creditable, and at times, outstanding. At the time of shooting for *The New World*, Ferrell was 29, two years older than the age of Smith upon his arrival in Jamestown.

In many ways the most fascinating aspect of the making of *The New World*, as well as being of the primary importance for the purposes of this review, was in Malick's success in finding the right actress to play Pocahontas. When a director makes a new movie once every twenty years, he certainly needs to make the right selection as to who will play his focal character. Malick undoubtedly knew that the girl destined to be his leading lady would in effect carry the film. His Pocahontas would have to be young – very close to the age of the historical Pocahontas – yet convincing in her portrayal of arguably one of the most beloved and historically important women in American history. In sum, his Pocahontas had to be perfect, and in the end, most critics have agreed that she was.

Q'orianka Kilcher, who was 14 at the time this film was shot, was chosen from among 3000 actresses who were considered for, and hundreds who were actually screen-tested for the part over an eight month world-wide talent search - amazing considering the fact that prior to landing

this role her only previous acting experience was an inconsequential bit part in the 2000 film *Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Kilcher is of Native Peruvian descent, her father was a Quechuan/Huachipaeri artist and her mother is Swiss. The name Q'orianka means "Golden eagle" in the Quechuan language. This name was given to her by her mother who had found an eagle feather when pregnant with Q'orianka, and who wished to bestow upon her future daughter the characteristics and powers of that sacred bird.⁴ The casting of Kilcher represents a major step in the right direction in that past actresses who have played Pocahontas have always been non-Native. Kilcher was brought up by her mother who instilled in her a strong sense of her Native heritage and identity, and consequently, an equally strong desire to portray Pocahontas as culturally accurate possible.⁵

When selected for the role of Pocahontas, Kilcher was a street performer in Santa Monica, California, singing her own pop and folk compositions while her family played back-up. Her musical talents were good enough to earn her almost \$2000 each weekend in tips. In the meantime she was also taking acting lessons and had tried out unsuccessfully for a number of parts including a role in Steven Spielberg's television series *Into the West*. Although she did not get that part, Joanna Brooks, who worked for Rene Haynes Casting, saw a picture of Q'orianka that had been submitted and thought she was better suited for Pocahontas in *The New World*. After over a month and a half of call-back auditions, Malick finally chose her.⁶

Malick's gamble in selecting a complete unknown actress as the movie's central character paid off handsomely. The stunning Kilcher turns in a magnetic performance as Pocahontas. She possesses the ability to express more with her eyes than most veteran actresses can do with reams

of spoken dialogue – a critically important gift considering the language barrier that existed and needed to be portrayed on film between Pocahontas and John Smith early in their relationship. Her mastery and use of the Algonquian language was outstanding, and later, as her character learns the English language and the spoken dialogue expands, Kilcher’s performance remains equally impressive. She is, quite simply, a magnificent young actress. Throughout the film she is able to capture perfectly the youthful innocence, yet indomitable spirit and inner strength possessed by the real-life Pocahontas. It is difficult to imagine Malick having discovered or cast a better Pocahontas. While film critics have given a mixed reaction to *The New World*, and especially of Ferrell’s performance, they are nearly unanimous in their praise of Kilcher.⁷ In the end, considering the short shelf-life of most historical films, this film might very well be best remembered for launching her theatric career.

But historically, how accurate was her portrayal of Pocahontas?

Pocahontas: The Myth and the Reality

Most of what the average person knows about Pocahontas – or more correctly what they think they know – comes from the cinema and specifically from the wildly successful 1995 Walt Disney animated classic, *The Legend of Pocahontas*. This film grossed over \$141 million in box office receipts and created something of a Pocahontas craze, spawning a sequel – *Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World* (1998), an Oscar and Grammy winning song (*Colors of the Wind*), and a merchandising frenzy of coloring books, posters, dolls, drinking glasses, lunch boxes, Halloween costumes, and countless other items bearing the Disney image of the fabled Indian “princess.” Although Native American groups have generally criticized this film for its inaccuracy – Russell Mean’s spirited defense of it aside - I’ve always thought of the Disney version of Pocahontas as being a relatively harmless children’s film that I have actually shown as a comparative piece in my classes – along with an equally flawed though much more historically accurate A&E Biography, *Pocahontas: The True Story* (1995) – admittedly rather dry fare – as a means to present a contrasting visual view of this important historical figure, as well as to discuss the role of myth and stereotyping in how we view and portray Native Americans in history.

One of the questions most often asked by my students, and especially by my hormone charged young males, has been “ Did she really look like that?” Was she – as they might put it – the “babe” that Disney portrayed her as being? – the voluptuous Barbie Doll figure with long flowing black hair and sporting the off-the-shoulder look that most certainly must have been all the rage in the woodlands of seventeenth century Virginia? Well, maybe yes, maybe no.

Our main source of historical information about Pocahontas is derived from John Smith himself. Smith was a remarkable individual in many respects, one being that in an age when most English were illiterate, he was a talented and very prolific writer. Although his detractors have labeled him a braggart who was prone to exaggeration, he seems to be a reasonable accurate reporter of the historical events in which he participated. At any rate, his writings, especially *The Generall Historie of Virginia* (1624), remain our best primary sources of information regarding Pocahontas and the nature of their relationship. Later biographies of Pocahontas, most notably Grace Steele Woodward's *Pocahontas* (1969), Philip L. Barbour's *Pocahontas and Her World* (1970), Frances Mossiker's *Pocahontas: The Life and the Legend* (1996), Camilla Townsend's *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma* (2004), and several books by Helen C. Rountree, especially her *Pocahontas, Powhatan, and Opechancanough: Three Indian Lives Changed by Jamestown* (2005), have relied heavily on Smith and a handful of other colonial sources. All of these books provide more or less standard accounts of the life of Pocahontas. More recently, Paula Gunn Allen, a native writer of Laguna Pueblo-Metis descent, has offered in *Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat* (2005), a different feminist-revisionist profile using, in addition to the standard western sources, some extrapolation of tribal cultural knowledge, along with admittedly, strong doses of speculation and conjecture. It is Gunn Allen's main thesis that Pocahontas was a "Beloved Woman" – a powerful spiritual or medicine woman of her tribe – and it was this role that largely determined the course of her life. The reality is that considering the scarcity of materials that are available, we know little that is factual about the life of Pocahontas.⁸

Pocahontas's tribal name was Matoaka, meaning "Little Snow Feather." The name Pocahontas, by which Smith and the other colonists knew her, was in fact a nickname meaning "Little Wanton" – a mischievous, playful, frolicsome young girl. She was a member of the Pamunkey tribe, part of the powerful Algonquin-speaking Powhatan Nation, and the daughter of the head of that alliance, Chief Powhatan - played in *The New World* by Mohawk actor August Schellenberg. Because her father was the "chief of chiefs" of a large thirty- member tribal confederacy, and thus considered to be a "king" of his people," Pocahontas was thought of and referred to being a "princess" by the colonists. Later in life, after her marriage to John Rolfe in 1614, she was baptized as a Christian and given the name Rebecca, or more formally, Lady Rebecca.

John Smith estimated Pocahontas to be approximately 10 years old when he first met her. Other historians would later place her age at 11 or 12. Early reports has the pubescent Pocahontas visiting Jamestown – and much to the dismay of some of the more prudish English colonists – romping and doing cartwheels naked with the boys of the fort – clearly the actions of a child than a young woman. Consequently, the Disney version of the physical Pocahontas – as well as the casting of Kilcher by Malick – probably provides us with an early Pocahontas who is far more mature looking than history suggests. Still, Smith was clearly impressed by Pocahontas. He described her as exceeding all other Indian girls in her physical features, or "proportions" as he more delicately states it. She was probably already taller than the 5' 3" Smith – the English considered the Powhatans in general as being near-giants – and this factor might also have led to Smith and his fellow colonists to view Pocahontas as being older than her years. She was probably well tattooed – more so than the Pocahontas of either Disney or Malick. As for the long beautiful hair of the Disney version of Pocahontas, this is a matter of debate as some historians

maintain that Powhatan girls at the time might have shaved their heads, leaving a long braid down the middle. In today's vernacular she might have had more of a "Punkahontas" look going for hers rather than the classic beauty that most people think of her as possessing. In sum and by all accounts, however, Pocahontas was physically impressive.

More importantly Pocahontas was an extremely mature young woman who possessed exceptional intellectual powers. Smith wrote that in terms of intelligence and spirit, Pocahontas had no equal. As her father's favorite and most trusted daughter, she was a child of privilege, given the best education and free reign to explore the world around her. Although she clearly retained her childlike innocence and sense of wonderment, she would have also possessed and demonstrated a degree of sophistication and confidence - an air of dignity - that befitted her lineage. Smith, who in many of the same ways far exceeded the majority of his fellow colonists, was undoubtedly drawn to Pocahontas on a number of levels. Quite possibly he found something of an intellectual soul mate in Pocahontas, someone he could hold an intelligent conversation with, someone who was interested in what he had to say, and someone from whom he himself could acquire valuable knowledge. Smith was clearly captivated by the young Pocahontas and enjoyed her companionship. But did he love her? Did she love him? And most importantly - at least from the standpoint of reviewing *The New World* - did they share a romantic relationship?

The series of events that led to the story of an alleged romance between Pocahontas and Smith can be traced back to the circumstances of their very first meeting - again as described by Smith and more or less accurately presented in *The New World*. In early December of 1607, Smith left Jamestown with a small group of men to explore the nearby Chickahominy River and hopefully

trade with the natives to acquire badly needed food. To make a long and somewhat complicated story short, his band was attacked by a native party led by Powhatan's brother, Opechancanough - played in *The New World* by the veteran Cherokee actor, Wes Studi. Several of the colonists were killed, several escaped, and Smith was taken prisoner – spared undoubtedly because the Indians recognized him as being a leader and thus worth more alive than dead. Eventually Smith was taken to the Powhatan capital village of Werowocomoco where he was presented to the paramount chief, Powhatan. At Powhatan's side sat Pocahontas – probably Smith's first look at the young girl who would play such a major role in his future. Up until this point Smith had been treated well – “wined and dined” if you will – by his captors. This, however, changed when he was suddenly seized, thrown upon two large stones, and rushed by several warriors seemingly intent to smash in his head with clubs. What happens next is without question the least known and most widely speculated on event of the Pocahontas and John Smith story – the young Native girl appearing from nowhere, throwing herself onto the apparently doomed Englishman to shield him from the advancing blows, and begging her father to spare his life. While some historians have doubted Smith's story, most accept it. More a matter of debate is the motives behind the actions of Pocahontas. Had she, as some have suggested, already fallen in love with the colonial leader? This seems highly unlikely. Quite possibly, as Smith himself suggested, Pocahontas's actions were triggered more by the compassion of a young girl than by anything else. Even more likely, as most historians now believe, Pocahontas was merely playing a role in a preconceived plan developed by her father and his advisors – an elaborate hoax designed to demonstrate to Smith that the chief possessed the power of life or death over him, indeed, over all of the English colonists. Whatever the reason, Smith's life was spared and in the aftermath he was adopted as a son by Powhatan and given the name Nantaquoud. It is also

possible that the mock execution had been part of an adoption ceremony in which his ritualized death brought about a symbolic rebirth as a tribal member. Soon afterwards, Pocahontas was given the assignment of looking out after her “brother,” teaching him the Algonquin language – as he would teach her English - generally acting as the ambassador between her people and the colonists, and, in all likelihood, learning about the strengths and the weaknesses of the invaders.

Pocahontas and John Smith: A Legend of Love

When John Smith returned to Jamestown following his month long captivity at Werowocomoco, he was accused by his fellow colonists of treason and for causing the deaths of the men who had been killed on his expedition. The colony had experienced hard times in his absence with only forty of its members left alive. For a second time Smith was sentenced to be hanged – and again he was pardoned. In time the accusations were embellished to include rumors that he was having an affair with Pocahontas for the purpose of marrying her and inheriting her father’s land. This appears to be the beginning of what now most scholars believe to be the myth of a romantic affair between Pocahontas and John Smith. But did the relationship between the two actually blossom into love? In all probability, no. As noted earlier, Pocahontas was between the ages of 10 and 12 when they first met. Smith was 27. The relationship between the two spanned less than two years. Still, age would not have been an insurmountable hurdle for the two potential lovers. Before labeling Smith a prospective pedophile, it should be noted that norms were very different in the seventeenth century. In Smith’s native England, for example, it was permissible under law for a girl to consent to marriage at the age of 7, and to consummate that marriage as

young as age 12. Sexual openness – including marriage – was probably also the norm in Powhatan society by the early teens. Smith certainly found Pocahontas attractive and the language he uses to describe her suggests that part of the attraction was physical as well as emotional. But perhaps an even better clue can be found not so much in what Smith says about Pocahontas, but rather in what he did not say. No where in his writings, even those published decades later and long after her death, does Smith indicate anything but a platonic, if not a fatherly relationship with her.

There are several other reasons to doubt a romantic relationship between Pocahontas and Smith. As the daughter of Powhatan, Smith most certainly knew that any impropriety on his part with the young Pocahontas, especially in those critical early years that he spent time with her when the Powhatans clearly held the balance of power, risked bringing down the wrath of the powerful chief, not only on him, but against the entire Jamestown colony. Another reason was that perhaps Smith was keenly aware of his station in life. He was a commoner in a very class conscious English social structure, and Pocahontas, despite being Native American, was the daughter of a ruler and therefore of “royal blood.” Might the social barrier have seemed too high for Smith to overcome? We do know this would be a factor that would weigh heavily on the mind of John Rolfe when he later sought the blessings of both Powhatan and Sir Thomas Dale, head of the Jamestown colony, regarding his own proposal to marry Pocahontas.

Still, Smith writes of Pocahontas in a manner that has led some to interpret his feelings as going well beyond the obvious respect and any paternal love that he held for her. Did he truly love the young girl but realize and accept the hopelessness of this love? This is a distinct possibility.

And there is still yet another explanation, and one that is strongly suggested by Malick in *The New World*. Quite possibly, Smith fell in love with the *idea* of Pocahontas and what she represented, as much as with the girl herself. In the eyes of Smith, Pocahontas was - and I believe remains for Malick – a metaphor for all things good about the New World: freedom, innocence, and purity – all that had long been vanquished from the Old World. A love of the mind can be as real and as intoxicating as a love of the heart, and it is often hard to distinguish between the two.

And what of the feelings Pocahontas had for Smith? Again we do not know. Pocahontas left no written record of her life. We do know that in addition to the incident at Werowocomoco in which she first “saved” the life of Smith, she reportedly risked her reputation, and perhaps her very life, to bring food to Smith and the other colonists at Jamestown. On one notable occasion she is believed to have warned Smith of a pending attack on Jamestown planned by her father, if true a treasonous act that most certainly saved his life and probably the destruction of the Jamestown colony. Were these the acts of a girl in love? Or at least the manifestations of a “girlish crush” that Pocahontas had for Smith? Again, I think this is a possibility.

But if no hard historical facts exist to prove a love affair between Pocahontas and John Smith, why has the story endured? Quite possibly because there are no hard historical facts that exist to disprove a love affair between the two did not take place. And America does love a love story.

The legend of Pocahontas and John Smith was first brought before an audience in 1908 in a popular play entitled *The Indian Princess* or *La Belle Sauvage*. Pocahontas then went on to become the featured character in more than 50 plays between 1810-1840 – usually played as the romantically doomed forest maiden destined to save Jamestown colony.⁹ Certainly Hollywood later played a major role in keeping Pocahontas-John Smith love story alive. The Disney versions, of course, portrayed the relationship between Pocahontas and Smith to be more friendship than love. But in addition to the Disney animated movies, at least two other films have been made on the topic. Unfortunately both of these films, along with perpetuating the story of a love affair between Pocahontas and Smith, were so badly created from a historical and cultural perspective that they made the Disney films look like documentaries.

Captain John Smith and Pocahontas (1953) starring Anthony Dexter and Jody Lawrance in the title roles, shows Pocahontas not only saving the life of Smith, but also marrying him in the process. Little in this film is historically accurate. Every generic Indian stereotype imaginable is perpetuated and all Native roles are played by white actors. In regard to Pocahontas, she is presented as a woman who falls hopelessly in love with John Smith the moment she sees him, is dominated by his bare-chested masculinity, has little or no power or influence over the events that would transpire, and wants only to marry Smith, become a proper white English woman and move to London. This film can, however, perhaps be forgiven as being an artifact of its time when white swash-buckling male actors dominated, race and gender sensibilities were not an issue, and Native American actors were all but non-existent.

Less forgivable is the decidedly low-budget production *Pocahontas – The Legend* (1995 – the same year the Disney version and the A&E documentary on Pocahontas were released). This film featured Miles O’Keeffe as Smith and the Chinese-French actress Sandrine Holt, formerly Sandrine Ho, as Pocahontas. *Pocahontas – The Legend* is as void of historical facts as its predecessor of more than forty years earlier. Moreover, the Native American cultural aspects of this film are presented with the same appalling level of inaccuracy. The Powhatans are depicted as living primarily a Plains Indian lifestyle complete with Chief Powhatan wearing a feathered “war bonnet” while his warriors dance to what might best be described as stereotypical pow wow music. Buffy St. Marie provides the background “chants” in a weak attempt to show authenticity. Most Native parts were played by Indian actors, most notably the veteran actor Gordon Tootoosis (Cree/Stoney) who wasted his considerable talents playing Powhatan. In regard to Holt, this was her third film and she seems to have built her early acting career around playing Native American or other indigenous women. Her first starring role was the lead female character in *Black Robe* (1991). She followed this with an award-winning performance as a Polynesian girl in *Rapa Nui* (1994) – a film tenuously based on legends of the natives of Easter Island. Although Holt has proven that she can be an excellent actress, she was not very credible as Pocahontas. In all fairness she had little to work with in terms of a script. The brightest part of *Pocahontas – The Legend* is her portrayal of Pocahontas as being a strong and independent-minded woman who is a shaper of events rather than a mere pawn or victim. In the end, however, the saving grace to this film was that few people went to see it.

In both *Captain John Smith and Pocahontas* and in *Pocahontas – The Legend*, the two principle characters are presented as lovers caught between the self-serving plans of evil manipulators

from each opposing side. Both the Indian and colonial villains are willing to risk even the destruction of their own people for purely personal reasons such as power, and in the case of the English, for gold. In both movies the love story between John Smith and Pocahontas is secondary to the major story-line – the role each play in the survival of Jamestown. In both movies John Smith and Pocahontas will ultimately sacrifice their love for the good of the colony. Love takes a back seat to martyrdom.

In *The New World*, Malick, has taken an entirely different approach. For Malick the love affair between Pocahontas and John Smith *is the story* – everything else is secondary. Most of this film moves around the evolving love affair between his two main characters, which he handles tastefully and with a restraint that is all too uncommon in the cinema today. He does not exploit the sexual possibilities that exist, but rather stresses the more subtle and emotional aspects of a blossoming love: first the inner monologues of self-doubt and insecurity revealed in voice-overs, then the longing looks of a growing attraction, followed by the first exploratory touches, the first kiss, and then the playful, and later the slightly more seductive Pocahontas discreetly leading Smith away into the tall grass beneath the sun-drenched trees - for what purpose? Malick leaves the nature of this romance to the imagination and the interpretation of the viewer. And this is as it should be, especially considering the gray matter of the historical record he is dealing with. Still, *The New World* is without question first and foremost a love story, and in its own way a passionate one at that. If one can accept the premise that Pocahontas and John Smith were actually lovers or simply two people in love – whatever way one cares to define the term - then it would seem that Malick has at least handled the situation in a satisfactory manner.

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The New World also differs from other past films on Pocahontas in that it takes her story to the end of her life. In 1609 Smith returned to England. In Malick's version Smith leaves of his own accord, tortured over his love for Pocahontas and the realization that he was destroying her in the process. Upon his departure he leaves word that Pocahontas should be told that he died at sea. In the true historical account, Smith leaves because he is injured in an accident. Pocahontas, perhaps at Smith's instructions, is indeed told that he is dead. By this time Pocahontas is being held captive by the colonists, traded to them for the price of a copper kettle by another tribe among who she had sought refuge after being banished by her father for helping the English. Pocahontas might also have had a Native husband at this time, a Powhatan warrior named Kuocum. Only a single English document makes a reference to this marriage – one brief line recorded by the colonist William Strachey. Malick ignores this possibility. In time Pocahontas adopts the English lifestyle, converts to Christianity and is baptized, and believing Smith to be dead – and long estranged from her Native husband if he existed – she meets, marries and has a child by the colonist John Rolfe. These were all precedent setting events for any Native American woman and the full motivation behind her transition remains unclear. Quite possibly she felt that her father and her people had turned their backs on her and that it was simply more advantageous to cast her lot with the English colonists. Quite possibly she saw her union with Rolfe as helping to cement a bond that she hoped would develop between the Powhatans and the colonists and thus insure peace between the two races. And possibly she was simply a lonely young woman who was no longer accepted by either society and badly needed to be loved by someone, a void in her life that Rolfe was clearly willing to fulfill. It is also unknown as to what

degree she retained her self-identity as a Powhatan and kept to her traditional beliefs. Where did her true loyalties lie? These are things that we will never know. It does appear that the years she spent with Rolfe were happy ones. With Rolfe she began the next and final stage of her life. Together they grew tobacco utilizing Pocahontas's knowledge of the plant which was destined to become the cash crop that assures the survival of Jamestown. Equally important, especially for the colonists, is that the marriage of Pocahontas to John Smith began the so-called "Peace of Pocahontas" – a period of time that lasted approximately eight years in which relative peace flourished between the two races. Tragically the loss of tribal land to the colonists and the consequent dispossession of the Powhatan people, as well as the deadly ravages of European-introduced diseases, would continue virtually unabated until the final colonial military conquest over Powhatan's successor, his brother Opechancanough in 1644.

The final scenes of *The New World* are set in England where Pocahontas and her husband and child traveled to in 1616. Pocahontas was by then perhaps 20 or 21 years of age and true to the historical narrative, she captures the country by storm. Dressed grandly in formal English attire, she visits the royal court where she captivates King James I, a monarch well known for his disdain of women. Malick provides us with a visually gorgeous look at this moment, featuring a dazzling and seemingly very comfortable and content Pocahontas. She appears to be basking in the utter glory of the moment. Still, all is perhaps not so perfect. Also brought to the court for the king's pleasure is a menagerie of wildlife captured in Virginia. In one poignant scene Pocahontas peers into a cage containing a terrified raccoon attempting to shield itself from inquisitive viewers. The image is all too brief, but the message seems clear. What thoughts are running through the mind of the young Native woman? Does she see herself in the eyes of the

pitiful and despondent creature? Does she recognize herself as being as much a captive? If so, her expression remains stoic, we are left only to wonder.

In Malick's tale, Pocahontas learns while still in Virginia that John Smith is alive. Upon learning this fact she shuns her husband's affections, telling him that she is still "married" to Smith. The meaning of this exchange, like so much in this movie, is left to the imagination of the viewer. In reality, Pocahontas was already in England when she learned that Smith was alive. During most of her stay in London, Smith – who had written a letter of introduction on behalf of Pocahontas to Queen Anne prior to her arrival - took great pains to avoid seeing her. It was only days before her scheduled departure back to Virginia that he apparently mustered up enough courage to visit her at Syon House, an estate outside of capital city where she had been moved to in hope of improving her already failing health. Again, the only eye witness account of this reunion is Smith, and the details he provides are sketchy at best. He states that at first Pocahontas was so overwhelmed upon seeing him, that it took two or three hours to regain her composure to speak. After that time she reportedly berated him for allowing her so long to think him to be dead, as well as for not coming to see her sooner upon her arrival in England. The meeting then turned more cordial as the two briefly rekindle their friendship. In Malick's version the former lovers walk together through the sculptured hedges, trees, and manicured lawns of the lush country estate. The talk is friendly, though guarded. Both are obviously thinking of what might have been. At one point Pocahontas asks him, "Did you find you're Indies, John?" – a reference to the endless quest by Smith and other Europeans to discover a water route to the Pacific - to which he looks upon her and sadly replies, "I may have sailed past them." She then returns to her

waiting husband, leaving Smith to stand alone in the garden. They will never see each other again.

On March 21, 1617, Pocahontas died. The ship taking her home to Virginia had barely set sail when she became gravely ill, probably of pneumonia or tuberculosis. Anchor was made at the town of Gravesend where she was carried ashore. Pocahontas met death with the same courage she lived her life. With her husband and two-year old son by her side she spoke her final words, “All must die.” And with that she passed away.

In one final, wonderful scene from *The New World* we again see Pocahontas, or more correctly her spirit, running and frolicking through the gardens of the Syon House estate. For the first time since her initial encounter with John Smith and the English, she is free. The burdens of love and politics have finally been lifted from her young shoulders. In a display of sheer ecstasy, she does a cartwheel. She is a little girl once again.

The Legacy of Pocahontas: Final Takes

Native people are rightly sensitive as to how they are portrayed in the cinema. When one considers the long and sad history of Hollywood’s exploitation and stereotypic misrepresentation of American Indian history and culture over the years, this is to be expected. So how does *The New World* fare?

As noted earlier, Malick has the reputation of being a director who is obsessed with historical authenticity and detail – albeit within artistic parameters of the story he is weaving. *The New World* was filmed entirely on location in Virginia (and later in London) where Malick painstakingly reconstructed an entire Powhatan village near the site of Jamestown. In terms of set design and costuming, an effort was clearly made to be as accurate as the historical record allowed – although there are times when he went outside of woodland culture in creating his Native clothing and body decorations. Generally speaking however, Malick seems to have made good use of the written documentation available to him and he consulted with a number of historians and anthropologists from various universities and historical societies. He also employed the use of a Native American consultant and amateur, Buck Woodard (Lower Muskogee Creek), who helped merge the director’s creative vision with tribally appropriate realities. Woodard also served as the liaison to the Native cast members. According to Woodard he and the native cast members did not hesitate to discuss various concerns with the director and producer. Often their suggestions were accepted, sometimes they were not. Overall, the Native actors and other contributors I interviewed who collaborated on this film, seemed generally satisfied that a strong effort was made to assure the historical and especially the cultural integrity of *The New World*.¹⁰

I should add here that in the course of interviewing people, and especially the Native people who had seen *The New World*, two complaints were commonly expressed. The first involved the costuming of the Native American actors and particularly the overuse of body paint. The general feeling was that Malick seemed too intent on portraying the Powhatans as being primitive in contrast to the Europeans. The second criticism focused on choreography and the exaggerated

movements of the Native Americans. This concern was especially directed at the scene where Smith is brought as a captive to Werowocomoco. One Native woman I talked to complained that the actors “looked like monkeys jumping around.” Interestingly, this was the exact same image that came to my mind when I first saw this scene.

Malick’s production team seems to have made a sincere effort to bring Virginia tribes and tribal members into the making of *The New World*. There are eight tribes recognized by the Commonwealth of Virginia – all but one being original members of the Powhatan Confederation. In addition to their own internal political organization, these tribes also participate in the Virginia Indian Council, an advisory board to the governor and the state general assembly. Before filming, Malick met with the Virginia Indian Council, presented an overview of his film plan, and invited participation. In the end, a number of tribes officially supported the project and several chiefs actually acted in the film or provided the production with family items of clothing and other artifacts. The Pamunkey tribe which Pocahontas was a member of, and which are the stewards of the land in which Powhatan himself is buried - withheld their support and participation. The Mattaponi, the other tribe which Pocahontas is most associated with, also did not participate in the project. More will be said about the Mattaponi in a moment.

The best example of Malick’s commitment to authenticity – and perhaps the clearest gage by which to measure his intent to produce a historically accurate film - was his efforts to re-create and use the Algonquian language as it would have been spoken by Pocahontas and her people. Since *Dances with Wolves* (1990) – a film that was a watershed event in cinematic history - film goers have come to expect Native American language to be used in historical films dealing with

Indians – although often the language used is not that of the tribe being portrayed. Malick wanted authentic Powhatan dialogue for his film. He first sought out contemporary speakers of the language and found that “Virginian Algonquian” is a language that has been extinct since about 1785. Malick then hired Dr. Blair Rudes, a linguist from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte who is a specialist in the Algonquian languages and in “language revitalization” - the science of re-building lost languages. Rudes, who is himself of Abenaki descent, was assigned the task of re-constructing, and ultimately revitalizing Virginian Algonquian. He used for his foundation about 650 words that survive as the result of vocabulary lists recorded by Jamestown colonist William Strachey and, appropriately, by John Smith. Rudes then incorporated words from other surviving Algonquian dialects, and using his knowledge of Algonquian grammar, was able to develop enough of the language to provide the dialogue needed for the film. Initially Malick had planned to use the Powhatan language in only two scenes. After seeing the results of Rude’s work, he decided to have all of the Native dialogue spoken in Virginia Algonquian – approximately fifty scenes or one-third of the entire film.

The use of Virginia Algonquian resulted in a far more authentic film, and especially in a much more believable Pocahontas. Rudes states that while most of the other Native actors simply memorized words and often did not really know the meaning of their lines, Kilcher not only understood what she was saying, but also learned the proper pronunciation and the correct grammatical use of the Algonquian dialect. “She was actually learning the language,” Rudes stated, adding that “She spoke the language the way a young Algonquian woman would speak it.”¹¹

One additional note to the development and use of Virginia Algonquian in *The New World*.

Because of his involvement in the film, Rudes is continuing to work with the language and is coordinating his efforts with the Virginia Council of Indians. The language will continue to be developed and several tribes have expressed their interest in teaching it to their people.

Currently none of the tribes in Virginia speak their Native language. Consequently, this film might very well make an important if indirect contribution to the cultural restoration of Virginia tribal culture.¹²

The single aspect of *The New World* that I most appreciated was its attempt to portray the religion and spirituality of the Powhatan people in a non-exploitive and non-condescending manner. In the past, too often films have attempted to sensationalize Native religion by focusing on spectacular, esoteric, and usually falsely presented - aspects of ceremonialism. The individual spirituality of Native Americans is generally ignored. With the exception of the “adoption ceremony” of John Smith, of which we know little about historically or culturally and appears to have been performed somewhat “over the top,” the religious beliefs and practices of the native people in *The New World* is presented in a very subtle, under-stated manner. In sharp contrast, the Christianity of the colonists is shown for what it was at the time, aggressive and domineering. No where is the comparison more sharply drawn than in the calm, dignified conduct of Pocahontas compared to the brutality that is often demonstrated by the colonists. In one particularly powerful scene a frightened and confused Pocahontas is put aboard a ship to take her away after she has been kidnapped by the colonists. She raises her hands in silent prayer seeking the strength and protection she will need to survive whatever fate awaits her. We have seen scenes like this throughout the film, but this one is by far the most riveting. Her captors stare at

her with in bewilderment, not comprehending what they see, but knowing enough to understand that they are in the presence of a power far greater than they themselves possess. Is it embarrassment in their eyes over the shameful act they have committed? Or is it simply fear? In many ways this one single act seems to capture the essence and significance of the insurmountable void that divided the two cultures.

And that cultural divide continues to exist today, not only as to how the Pocahontas story is told, but also as to how reviews such as this one are written.

Thus far I have approached this review totally from a western perspective. Throughout this paper I have used information gleaned from books and articles that were derived from historical documents that although not completely accepted by everyone, are the standard sources on Pocahontas used by all other historians, including most tribal historians. Indeed, even Paula Gunn Allen in her biography on Pocahontas, one supposedly written from the Native viewpoint, relied almost totally on these same materials. These standard sources, however, and therefore the basic rendering of the life of Pocahontas, may very well be inaccurate or at least incomplete. The true story might in fact lie within the before untold oral traditions of the tribes of the Virginia Tidewater.

During the later stages of my research and writing of this review I was extremely fortunate to talk to, and eventually meet, Mattaponi tribal historian Dr. Linwood “Little Bear” Custalow and anthropologist Angela Daniels. Together they had written a book entitled *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*. According to the oral tradition of Custalow’s people,

Pocahontas's mother was from the Mattaponi tribe, and her father, the famous Powhatan, was also half Mattaponi. Consequently, the Mattaponi has retained a strong oral tradition regarding Pocahontas. This oral tradition also reveals that Pocahontas not only had a native husband – the before mentioned Kuocum who she had married several years before her colonial captivity – but also a son from this union. There are many Mattaponi tribal members today who trace their ancestry back to this child. These claims give the Mattaponi tribe a strong moral authority to be heard on any matters relating to Pocahontas.¹³

The Mattaponi oral tradition of the Pocahontas story differs dramatically from that of the mainstream American version: Obviously it denies that any affair ever took place between the young Native woman and John Smith. It also holds that Pocahontas was never banished by her father, but rather that she was sent away to the village of Patawmack for her own protection where she was kidnapped by the colonists – not traded for the infamous copper kettle. Most controversial is the Mattaponi oral tradition that Pocahontas was abused – raped – perhaps repeatedly - by her colonial captors. The Mattaponi oral tradition also denies that any love existed between Pocahontas and her English husband, John Rolfe, but rather that it was a marriage of convenience at best, and more likely a survival strategy on the part of Pocahontas.¹⁴

It is little wonder that Custalow and Daniels found it difficult to find a publisher for their book – especially as Virginia was preparing to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the founding of Jamestown. Quite possibly a deliberate effort was being made to silence the Mattaponi story. Fortunately Fulcrum Press stepped forward – another positive by-product of *The New World* – to publish this important historical account.¹⁵

But how should we view and treat the Mattaponi oral history? I would argue that it must be looked upon and considered to be every bit as credible as any western historical account. History – in what ever shape or form it takes - is, after all, merely the product of the memory, motivation, and character of the individual story teller. There is nothing that makes the written word more inherently accurate than the spoken word. We know that Native American oral tradition was passed down from generation to generation - usually repeated verbatim by elders and often medicine people who had a vested interest in the accurate telling of stories that ensured the survival of their people in a world in which the odds were overwhelmingly stacked against them. In recent years Native American oral tradition has slowly received a degree of acceptance from the academic community, but as a separate field of ethnographic study, not as creditable or legitimate history. Clearly a cultural divide continues to exist between western academics and the Native American community in general.

And it is exactly that cultural divide that Pocahontas attempted to, or was perhaps forced to straddle throughout most of her all too brief life. Whether she succeeded or failed in this endeavor is largely in the minds and hearts of the people who continue to embrace her today. She stands unique in American history in that she was born into a Native American tribe, then voluntarily or through necessity, cast her future with the white European colonizers. Consequently, she truly does belong to two cultures – as does her story. Indeed, some 100,000 non-Native people today claim to be descendents of Pocahontas.¹⁶ This fact has in part led some scholars to write that the standard legend of Pocahontas is largely a reflection of “white mythology.”¹⁷ Certainly there is much truth in such an analysis. However, this is also

something of a biased view since one can make a strong argument that these individual too are entitled to their own mythology, whatever it may be.

I suspect that film goers will either love or hate *The New World*. Native American people who continue to hope for a more accurate portrait of tribal history and culture will be disappointed. Western scholars who are seeking a historical narrative that closely follows the written record will also justifiably find fault in this film. Without a doubt there will be those from both sides who will attack Malick for continuing to perpetrate the legend of the alleged love between Pocahontas and John Smith that most agree never existed. No film can be perfect, and certainly no film can satisfy every critic. *The New World* is not an exception. Still, it is clear that Malick, working within the framework of the love story he is attempting to tell, has done an admirable job on all fronts. In terms of pure cinema, this is an outstanding movie that from an artistic standpoint might well be considered a masterpiece. In terms of Native American and historical content, it is in my opinion, good enough. Are there cultural and historical aspects of this film that I would have liked to have seen done differently? Positively. At the very least I would have appreciated a disclaimer at the start of the film acknowledging the fact that most people, and especially most Native American people, consider the story of Pocahontas and John Smith to be a legend, not historical fact. But *The New World* was never meant to be a documentary and should not be held to that standard. One hopes that future cinematic efforts to tell the story of Pocahontas and John Smith – and there will undoubtedly be more attempts to do so – will be more culturally and historically accurate. One especially hopes that the viewpoints of Native people and especially the oral tradition of effected Virginia tribes are accepted and incorporated

to a greater degree. In the meantime *The New World* stands as a major and positive step in the *evolving history* of the cinematic presentation of Native American topics.

In closing, perhaps the most important thing about this film is that it causes us to once again reconsider the life and legacy of Pocahontas. In the days and weeks after my initial viewing of this film, *The New World* stayed with me as I found myself continuing to think back to certain scenes, and especially reflecting on the vision, accomplishments, and the courage of this remarkable young woman. Pocahontas continues to represent different things to different people: ambassador, diplomat, peace-keeper, interpreter, prisoner, and pawn, as well as a daughter, wife, mother and kinswoman. Perhaps, as Paula Gunn Allen has suggested, she was a medicine woman, perhaps as Terrence Malick would like us to think, she was at some level John Smith's lover, and perhaps in the Mattaponi tradition she was neither. *The New World* sheds no additional light on any of the many mysteries of the life of Pocahontas. In the end she remains what she has always been – an enigmatic icon who is a beloved part of the history and mythology of two people, neither of who may truly know her to this day.

Acknowledgements

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animateur and cultural consultant; and Gayle Yiotis (Pamunkey) of the National Museum of the American Indian who worked as an extra in this film. All of these individuals not only provided me with information on the film, but also valuable insight into the motion picture industry.

Another special thank you goes out to Dr. Linwood “Little Bear” Custalow (Mattaponi) and Angela Daniel for providing me information on the Mattaponi oral history regarding Pocahontas.

And finally, a heart felt note of appreciation goes to Valarie Red Horse of Red Horse Native Productions for helping me make some of the initial contacts early on in this project. I alone accept all responsibility for the content, analysis and opinions offered in this review.

Notes

1. The historical material in this review is taken from my own lecture notes created and periodically updated over the course of almost 25 years. These are derived mostly from the standard publications regarding the legend of Pocahontas and John Smith.
2. After a premier screening for *The New World* was held in New York and Los Angeles on December 25, 2005, it opened in theaters throughout the United States on January 13, 2006. The DVD was released on May 9th with a television release planned in the fall.
3. Scott Bowles, "It's a Brave New World for Malick," *USA Today*, December 16, 2005: E 1-2.
4. Q'orianka Kilcher, Personal interview, June 10, 2006. See also Wendy Banks, "Q'orianka Kilcher is Ready for her Close-up," *National Museum of the American Indian*, Winter, 2005: 24-29 and Deborah Boehm, "Brave New World: Pocahontas Revisited," *Native Peoples*, January-February, 2006: 74-77.
5. Kilcher Interview.
6. Bowles, E-2.
7. The website Rotten Tomatoes (www.rottentomatoes.com) offers a comprehensive collection of reviews from the nation's top print and online film critics. Of the 146

reviews given on *The New World*, the film itself and the performance of Colin Ferrell have earned very mixed ratings – about one-half favorable and about one-half unfavorable. In contrast, Kilcher is given nearly unanimous praise for her performance. See also Ken Jones, “Acts of God: Naturally Wondering about Terrence Malick and his new Transcendentalist Epic,” *Film Comment*, March-April, 2006: 24-28, for further acclaim of Kilcher by an important film critic.

8. The number of books published on Pocahontas is impressive. Each new publication promises a “fresh perspective” of her life, but in reality, little of substance has been added for over three decades other than the imaginations of the writers.
9. Michael T. Marsden and Jack Nachbar, “The Indian in the Movies,” *Handbook of North American Indians: History of Indian White Relations*, Wilcomb E. Washburn, Volume Editor, 4, 607-608 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1988). See also Raymond William Stedman, *Shadows of the Indian: Stereotypes in American Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982): 17-41.
10. Buck Woodard, Personal interview, February 29, 2006; Gayle Yiotis, Personal interview, March 29, 2006.
11. Blair Rudes, Personal Interview, April 15, 2006.
12. Rudes, Personal interview.

13. Dr. Linwood “Little Bear” Custalow, Personal interview, April 1, 2006; Angela Daniels, Personal interview, March 23, 2006.
 14. Custalow, Personal interview.
 15. Dr. Linwood “Little Bear” Custalow and Angela L. Daniel, *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Press, 2007).
 16. This figure is given on an elaborate website dedicated to Pocahontas (The Real Pocahontas) – <http://pocahontas.morenus.org> – operated by David Morenus, a software developer working for Boeing Company in Virginia. Morenus states that he is an eleventh generation descendent of Pocahontas. In addition to providing historical date on Pocahontas and comparing and contrasting her real life story with that of the Disney film versions, Morenus also provides genealogical information to people who also think they might be descended from her.
 17. See, for example, Robert S. Tilton, *Pocahontas: The Evolution of an American Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
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