

Pocahontas – cultural anthropology

[Science](#), [Biology](#)



Writing Assignment #1: The Cultural Construction of the Idea of Progress

Film chosen: Pocahontas One of Walt Disney's most famous films, Pocahontas, takes place in the 1600s, as the British discover parts of the "New World" that are inhabited by native Americans. In this film, we are able to contrast the primitive lifestyle and culture of the Native Americans to that of the British, and are able to see how the ideas of "progress" or social evolution play a role in the ethnocentric bias held by the Westerners during this time, causing the primitive stereotypes to be built.

Disney uses the structure of the characters themselves- what they wear, how they speak, what they eat, what they believe in, etc. ; and the plot line of the film, to depict the cultural construction of the idea of "progress", and evoke the opposing ideas of the "primitive other" and "civilized self". This film opens showing us the life of the British as they board the ship and while they're sailing at sea. Disney starts off with the British because we as westerners relate to the British, and see their way of life as normal and civilized.

We immediately relate to the color of their skin, their westernized clothing, the way they speak, and the technology they have access too. While on the boat, John Smith (the male protagonist) refers to the Native American Indians as "savages" who should be killed if they get in the way. This gives us a sneak peak into the mindset of the British and how negatively they view the Native Americans. Leaving us with the belief that the Indians are savages, Disney then introduces Pocahontas (the female protagonist) and the Indian tribe that has been living in the New World.

Immediately we are exposed to the primitive lifestyle of the Indians. We see that their way of traveling is by wooden canoes, their clothing consist of a brown cloth that covers very little while they also do not have on shoes, they live in tents, and have nothing but nature at it's purest form surrounding them. We see the women out in the fields gathering corn by hand, while the men are coming home from battle, with only bows and arrows and spears for weapons.

The initial reaction to seeing the culture and way of life amongst the Indians is to see them as " uncivilized" and " savage", just as John Smith was saying on the boat. However throughout the film Disney begins to challenge this belief and shows us that the westerner's way of life may not be the best way of life for everyone. Up until this point, John Smith and the rest of the English men had been discovering new places and finding Native American's that had been living for many years on these foreign lands.

The Europeans always saw these natives as uncivilized, barbaric savages, who needed to be taken over and " westernized". John Smith makes a comment to Pocahontas about how they could make the Indians life better, and build them roads and tall buildings, and teach them how to " make the most of their land". This is a perfect example of the ethnocentric bias mentality of the Europeans. They never once considered that someone else's way of living and culture could actually be a successful.

They thought that their way was the best way, and anything else was just an underdeveloped, barbaric lifestyle that needed to progress into the westernized lifestyle. After John Smith makes this comment about " bettering the Indian's life styles" Pocahontas is deeply offended and proceeds to sing

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the popular song, The Colors of the Wind. In this song Pocahontas calls John Smith out on his ethnocentric stance and shows him her point of view, in singing: “ You think you own whatever land you land on, The earth is just a dead thing you can claim, But I know every 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 look and think like you, But if you walk the footsteps of a stranger, You'll learn things you never knew you never knew. ” For the first time John Smith begins to listen to Pocahontas and realizes how ignorant him and his crew have been to think they can claim any land they come across, treating the natives like wild beasts.

All this time the Europeans have looked down upon the primitive culture of the natives, thinking that they were sub-human, and needed to be nurtured and tamed just like animals; however in this moment John Smith see’s the free spirit in Pocahontas, and he admires her connection to the nature all around her. He begins to see that the Natives are just normal human beings in their natural element, a thriving off of the world around them, with no need of technology, or any of the advancements the westerners were bringing to the New World.

Overall, Disney’s film, Pocahontas, does a wonderful job contrasting the cultures of the “ primitive other” and “ civilized self” with Pocahontas and the Indians as the primitive other and John Smith and the Europeans as the civilized self. We are able to see through the Europeans, their ethnocentrism, and their naive attitudes that leads them to believe they own whatever land they land on and can treat the natives however they want. Disney however

plays out this film in a way to show us his view on this ethnocentric bias and how he believes it to be wrong and unlawful.

He makes the viewer side with the Indians and portrays the Indians as the good guys and the Europeans as the bad guys. Disney was trying to send a message that this whiteness way of thinking is not always correct and can sometimes bring harm to others even when its not intentional. Works Cited: Pocahontas. Walt Disney Feature Animation, 1995. Film. Seriff, Suzanne. " Cultural Anthropology: ANT 302. " University of Texas. Spring 2013.