

“There Was a Veil upon You, Pocahontas”: The Pocahontas Story as a Myth of American Heterogeneity in the Liberal Western

JORDAN SAVAGE

In his 1930 epic poem *The Bridge*, Hart Crane codified the Algonquin “princess” Pocahontas as the mythical mother of the USA. This reading of Pocahontas—as a symbol of the coming together of cultures, and potential for a strong, heterogeneous future—is, by now, a staple of American folklore. This mythological apparatus was concretized, with reference to Crane, by Leslie A. Fielder in his seminal 1968 text, *The Return of the Vanishing American*, which compared Pocahontas and Hannah Duston as the two alternative mythological “Mothers Of Us All.” It’s a curious story though: the version that is closest to the facts as far as they are known—that Pocahontas was a princess, that she converted to Christianity, took the name Rebecca and married the Englishman John Rolfe—runs a slow second in popular imagination to an almost entirely fictional story: the romance of Pocahontas and John Smith in 1607 at the birth of the Jamestown colony.

Disney, of course, had a role to play in this: in their 1995 animated musical *Pocahontas* (Gabriel and Goldberg), Mel Gibson voiced the broad-shouldered, chisel-jawed John Smith to Irene Bedard’s Pocahontas in a version of the story that ends after Smith leaves Jamestown: no mention of Pocahontas’s subsequent conversion to Christianity and marriage to Rolfe is made. This adaptation, though, already existed: in the 1956 single “Fever,” it is “Captain Smith and Pocahontas” who “had a very mad af-

fair”—and never mind that neither Smith nor Pocahontas ever claimed that such a tryst had taken place (John).

What Hart Crane, Disney screenwriters Carl Binder, Sunnah Grant, and Philip LaZebnik, and songwriters Eddie Cooley and John Davenport (Otis Blackwell) had in common was a point of communion: a story that balanced the white European and Native American narratives in a romance—a narrative that mutually incorporates these two elements into an American origin myth. There are different elements at play in all of them too: the sexuality of the woman who stands up to her father in the song, protecting her lover because “he gives me fever”; Disney of course wished to tell a child-friendly story, director Mike Gabriel telling *The Columbian* that “the story of John Rolfe and Pocahontas was too complicated and violent for a youthful audience” (“So Who?”). Hart Crane, however, had a grander and more difficult plan at hand: he wished to mutually incorporate Native American and white European heritage to establish a diverse, miscegenational+ contemporary USA, and simultaneously to incorporate the real violence of that history into his narrative.

In most recent, mainstream iterations of the Smith-Pocahontas fantasy, the aim is to emphasize that something new is fashioned by the inter-racial bond: a new historical period, setting new rules for interaction between indigenous people and their colonizers. Ordinarily this is achieved, as it is in the Disney film and the jazz standard, by setting out the difference between Pocahontas and the rest of her people: where they are violent, she is peaceful; where they are hostile, she is welcoming. This version of events relies heavily on a western construction of romantic love as a transformative force; Pocahontas is different from the rest of the Powhatan people because she loves in the same way that white Europeans love. There is, of course, a singular act of violence at play in applying this narrative to Pocahontas: her actual marriage, which produced a son, was a political decision supposed to set up Rebecca Rolfe as a model for the conversion of more indigenous women. It is impossible

to know to what extent she made that conversion and that marriage of her own will: what can be known, however, is that neither would have come about if she had not first been held hostage for an indeterminate period by the Jamestown colonists (Rountree). Pocahontas is distinguished from the rest of her people by the manner in which she loves; in other versions of the story, as Edward Buscombe notes, the fact that she can be read as a “princess” is another way of distinguishing her from the other Algonquian people: “It seems that whatever misgivings the Europeans may have had about a mixed-race relationship could be at least in part assuaged if the Indian woman made up for her racial inferiority with an elevated class status” (“What’s New in *The New World*”). What we see constructed here, then, is the archetype of the “Noble Savage”: a racial other who proves to be honorable even if culturally illegible and alien, and given, in the Disney version, to long confessional conversations with willow trees. Pocahontas, then, is a type apart from the rest of her people, ready and willing to engage with colonial invaders, demonstrating her own intrepid pioneer spirit and American character in her animated desire to make the match.

In *The Bridge*, Hart Crane does not oblige Pocahontas to leap into a happy marriage with either Smith or Rolfe. In fact, neither of these white characters shows up *per se* in the “Powhatan’s Daughter” part of the poem. Instead, Crane alludes to Pocahontas’s marriage to Rolfe—and takes account of the violence and coercion behind it. He does not, however, stay much closer to the facts of the narrative, such as they are, than any other white re-teller of the events. Instead, he gives Pocahontas an indigenous paramour, in the character of Maquoqueeta—whom he immediately sacrifices to the good of his American narrative. As Fielder notes, the name Maquoqueeta is borrowed from Crane’s own boyfriend, strengthening the contact between the poet and his subject. Whilst the ritual ceremony in which he is killed is fictional, Pocahontas’s first husband may not have been. Even the Disney film notes the existence of Kocoum, who

may have occupied this role in Pocahontas's life and who is killed by the Jamestown colonists so that Pocahontas is free to marry Rolfe. Crane imagines a magical ceremony in which the guiding voice of the poem is burned at the stake in payment for the death of Maquoqueeta and the rape of Pocahontas. It is crucial for Crane's vision of a modernist utopia that a racially diverse, heterogeneous America should be founded, and he recognizes the Pocahontas myth as the story by which this could be achieved; he also acknowledges the violence done to indigenous people, and indigenous women in particular, in bringing about that heterogeneity (as far as it exists). He therefore attempts to make reparations and, in so doing, sets up the paradigm on which the rest of this argument is built.

Crane wants to get from the real history of the USA, towards an ideal future. To do so, he has to build from a violent foundation and pave over the cracks. He does this by inventing a magical tradition based on an inaccurate and appropriative version of indigenous history, skipping past the violence—whilst paying it lip-service—and making a virtue of violence against indigenous women for the role it has played in creating a racially diverse present. By comparing different representations of the Native American “princess,” it is possible to establish a sort of “Pocahontas principle” for reading the representation of Native American women, interracial marriage, and miscegenation in the liberal Western. This differs, for example, from what might be called the “Cora and Uncas” principle as Fenimore Cooper's characters explore a miscegenation in which people of color hope to move towards whiteness. The case of Pocahontas in Hart Crane's poem is presented here as the archetype of the kind of sleight-of-thought being explored. Crane's poem will be compared with Terrence Malick's 2005 *The New World* to show how the same principles hold true even in this radically different version of the Pocahontas story (Malick). Finally, Alejandro Iñárritu's 2015 *The Revenant* is used to explore how this “Pocahontas principle” might be stopped in its tracks, allowing the long literary and

cinematic history of this trope to become reintegrated into the history of lived experience. Analyzing the representation of indigenous women in the earlier texts will show how their forced submission was used to establish a liberal, multi-cultural milieu using an appeal to history or realism for recycling specific tropes. Alejandro Inárritu, by comparison, offers a model of storytelling that can end this literary colonialism.

Edward Buscombe identifies the genre of the liberal Western as beginning with *Broken Arrow* in 1950 and reaching its apex with *Dances With Wolves* in 1990, the latter a film that could be brought into germane conversation with this study. These films are defined as liberal by their attitude to “the Indian problem” and the underlying message that “violence between whites and Indians is caused not by irreconcilable differences but by the actions of bad people on both sides” (*Injuns!* 103). As cinematic literacy has deepened, the remit of the liberal Western to explicitly address racism has expanded—a comparison between *Dances With Wolves* and *Broken Arrow* illustrates this quickly. Because these films are made overwhelmingly by either white production teams or for Hollywood audiences, and often both, they generate new problems of their own. The argument presented here explores how the trope of the Native American Princess has persisted into contemporary cinema.

In *The Bridge*, Hart Crane imagines American history as a great bridge stretching to a promised land that he names “Atlantis.” He famously referred to his poem, like the building of the Brooklyn Bridge it takes as a metaphorical model, as being “begun from the two ends at once” (xiv), and that goes for the historical work of the poem as well as its poetic structure. He considers the modernist utopian project at hand to be one that was begun with manifest destiny and the opening up of the colonies. As such, he sends the cohering voice of the poem back into an imagined version of the past to bring the promise of the New World into the modernist moment.

Crane's journey back in time is, however, doomed from the beginning, and it is doomed because of his personal orientation to history. R.W. Butterfield's analysis of Crane's approach to the past, and to the indigenous people who inhabit it, provides a useful entrance into this subject:

It is a pilgrimage undertaken, first because alienated modern American man needs to reunite himself with the essence, the essential body, of the continent on which he lives, and from which he will build his bridge to Atlantis; and secondly, or alternatively, because, as a white man and therefore a rapist of the continent, he needs to purge his guilt so that he may set out on his journey of the spirit in a purified state. (158)

Written in 1969, Butterfield's text precedes much of the debate around the use of "rape" as a metaphor for ecocide or colonialism, which presents a difficult frontier for feminist, ecological, and colonial or post-colonial theory. Butterfield's metaphor sits, therefore, on a site of important investigation in understanding the literature of colonial history.¹ If nothing else, the use of this term points us to one of the key failures of Hart Crane's utopian project. Crane's use of the rape of Pocahontas not only draws the same analogy but, more profoundly, results in characterizing sexual violence as a net positive as it forces the racial composition of the USA to become heterogeneous. Annette Kolodny offers a theorization of "America's oldest and most cherished fantasy" that is useful here. She speaks of the desire for

a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on the experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratifications—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless integral satisfaction. (4)

¹For more on the difficulty of the rape metaphor in contemporary ecological discourse, see Jessica Smart Gullion's *Fracking the Neighborhood: Reluctant Activists and Natural Gas Drilling* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

As the ability to recognize eco-semiotic relationships, or even simply to understand other peoples as subjects, the potential for “painless, integral satisfaction” has become (thankfully) complicated beyond the service of colonial narrative. What Hart Crane offers here is an attempt to marry the earth in order to have possession of it just as women were understood at one time as becoming property through marriage. Kolodny situates her analysis, asserting that “[t]he initial impulse to experience the New World landscape . . . as a maternal ‘garden,’ receiving and nurturing human children, was a reactivation of what we now recognize as universally mythic wishes,” and she goes on to remind us that “*this* paradise really existed” (5). What she is asserting here is that any attempt to realize the garden of Eden on earth must necessarily be characterized by force and violence when the terrain on which it is visited really exists.

Throughout the five poems of “Powhatan’s Daughter,” the second book of *The Bridge*, Crane’s voice is transfigured into a time-travelling spirit of modernity, as he seeks to “reunite himself with . . . the essential body of the continent on which he lives.” Powhatan’s daughter herself, Pocahontas, figures as that body—with which the colonial spirit of America must be joined in order to proceed to an integrated future in the envisioned “Atlantis.” When this spirit has finally travelled far enough back in time to meet Pocahontas and the Powhatan people, she is immediately presented as his bride, and as a virgin, in the subsection entitled “The Dance”:

There was a bed of leaves, and broken play;
There was a veil upon you, Pocahontas, bride—
O Princess whose brown lap was virgin May;
And bridal flanks and eyes hid tawny pride. (13-16)

The first line here is the most difficult. The “bed of leaves” and the verb “play” are evocative of a state of nature and childishness: Pocahontas is the representative of a childish innocence that is at home in—literally makes its bed from—the natural landscape. Crane discovers her at home, in this telluric bed,

apparently stumbling upon her by accident in his journey back across years and west across the continent to the site of the frontiers that are most synonymous with some kind of essential “American” character. The play, though, is “broken”; and “[t] here was a veil upon . . . Pocahontas”: she is discovered already in her marriage-bed, and the “broken play” is the interruption of her wedding night to her original lover, Maquoqueeta. She is “virgin May,” characterized as the maiden of English “Maying” traditions, the incarnation of pastoral idyll, only because Crane, momentarily cast here as John Smith, has by elision driven out her lover. Already, the violence-by-sleight-of-hand that characterizes this section of the poem has begun.

That Pocahontas is “veiled” is important. Yes, she appears here as a bride; nevertheless, the veil obscures her face and keeps her as an object, unable to communicate for herself. Her “bridal flanks and eyes hid tawny pride”: she conceals, does not express, her feelings towards the interloper. He detects her pride, which he describes as “tawny,” diminishing its importance to being simply symptomatic of her race rather than being a felt emotion that fundamentally jeopardizes her ability to consent to this new man, who suddenly usurps her marriage-bed. This line is also in conversation with a tendency, in the American Romantic tradition, to obscure the object of desire.

Immediately after this discovery of Pocahontas, the virgin bride, Crane dissolves her into the natural environment, her “hair’s crescent” heralding the “blue / First moth of evening” (19-20). Claiming her body becomes synonymous with the exploration of the land and thereby the naturalization of Crane’s colonial figure. The only point at which Pocahontas expresses a developed emotion—and can be properly read as a subjective consciousness rather than a tool for furthering Crane’s project—is when Maquoqueeta is burned at the stake and “Pocahontas grieves” (52). She feels for, and can communicate with, Maquoqueeta. What she feels in relation to him finds expression; what she feels in relation to the white lover, probably based on John

Smith, does not, either because it is masked and suppressed by her “veil” or because it never existed at all.

The sacrificial rite in which Maquokeeta is shot full of arrows, borrowing the Catholic image of Saint Sebastian, and subsequently burned to death does not have its roots in Powhatan mythology. It is Crane’s own coinage, representing the destruction of indigenous culture after the arrival of colonizing forces. Maquokeeta, as a Powhatan parallel to Crane’s John Smith, is representative of the old order giving way to the new. Crane’s desire in this voyage across centuries is not to reinforce the real violence by which Powhatan culture was destroyed; he in fact wishes to find some means of undoing, of healing this brutality. His creation of a new legend, though, is appropriative: he uses his position as a poet and a white man to put words into the mouths of people silenced, by force, by men like Crane. In effect, he has the Powhatan Algonquins kill themselves off. Furthermore, he tries to use his own avatar, the intensely feeling, individual spirit, to completely re-write the colonial history of the USA, erasing the brutality of colonial Europeans, substituting for it the ritual sacrifice of his own spirit. It is a Catholic notion once again: that the sincerely felt repentance of one man might be sufficient to purge the colonial responsibility for the death, rape, and displacement of thousands.

Crane’s representative figure jumps into the fire beside Maquokeeta and becomes “liege / to rainbows currying each pulsant bone” (62-63). A salamander, Crane’s spirit is born again, purified, out of the flames. Throughout the poem, the “rainbow” is a symbolic representation of the bridge-in-time, travelling backwards, where the architectural structure of the bridge itself stretches forward: it is across a rainbow that Crane reaches back to Walt Whitman in the poems of “Cape Hateras.” This is part of the internal mythology of the poem, and one of the means by which Crane, at times quite successfully, gives credence to the possibility of his bridge as a way out of the present day. Here, therefore, the rainbow symbolizes Crane’s means of escape out

of the fire and back into the future. In the mythology of this particularly mystical passage, Crane tries to incarnate a spirit that suffers such weight of fellow-feeling with Maquokeeta that, in his repentance, he can clear the conscience of the present and enable the bridge to begin in earnest out of a reconciled history. Between the rainbow, the fire, the image of St Sebastian, and the “pulsant bone,” the poetics of this passage is driven by the submerged erotics of sex with the real Maquokeeta: Crane’s own libido energizes the nation-building libido of the poem. Crane also occupies the Saint Sebastian figure, saying, “I could not pick the arrows from my side.” From the opening book, “Ave Maria,” there has been an extent to which *The Bridge* is a Catholic poem, and this image of martyrdom encourages readers to understand Crane as having died to atone for Maquokeeta’s death. Because Crane in fact orchestrated, fabricated, the conditions under which Maquokeeta died, however, there is an additional violence created by *The Bridge*: the real history of the Powhatan people is subservient to the representation of reality required by the white myth-maker.

Pocahontas’s character constitutes a significant crisis for Crane. He needs to capitalize on the established role she plays in US history because, as Butterfield observes, it is Pocahontas, “infused with white blood,” who smiles on a white mother she passes on the road (Crane 24), “no longer entirely strange to the white invader” (Butterfield 173). Crane needs a reconciliation between the Powhatans and white people, and he needs Pocahontas to become a mother, in order that a utopia can be built without the supremacy of one race over another.² He wishes to elide violence against her, however—does not want to accept her rape. By not speaking directly of it at all, and by

²Muscogee lawyer Sarah Deer points out in *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America* that most Native American peoples are matrilineal, too: so taken from an Algonquian perspective, forcing reproduction on Pocahontas preserves and extends the Algonquian bloodline—rather than bringing together a new, hybrid people in the way that Crane desires (26).

leaving her at the end of “The Dance” still “virgin to the last of men” (92), Crane ends up figuring Pocahontas’s rape as a kind of immaculate conception, as a positive event, necessary to the founding of Atlantis. This use of violence in service of the utopian project is symptomatic of the kind of papering-over of theoretical and ideological cracks that allowed him to move out of the hellish subway of reality in the present directly into the light of the Bridge to Atlantis (73). As Butterfield correctly characterizes it, Crane’s Atlantis is a dream-world only, “a private place of the imagination where Crane might dwell in radiant forgetfulness of the American reality” (173).³

This criticism transfers nicely to the prelapsarian idyll that awaits the English in the Virginia of Terrence Malick’s *The New World*. There is what seems to be a “radiant forgetfulness of the American reality” at play here in Malick’s willful departure from John Smith’s 1608 account of his time among the Powhatan in favor of the popular myth of the “very mad affair” (Smith). “Radiant” seems an apposite adjective here too, in a film whose magical lighting choices enable expressive, rather than strictly narrative, storytelling. Adrian Martin notes that the characters in this film are “(far) less ‘three-dimensional people’ than they are cinematic figures—perpetually withdrawn and redrawn, created and devoured, in the play of contour and shadow, light and color, rhythm and montage, image and sound.” In an early review of the film, Leo Killsback argued that Pocahontas (Q’orianka Kilcher)—and by extension the film as a whole—was a “white male fantasy and nothing more” (“Review: *The New World*” 199) in much the same way the Powhatan’s Daughter section of *The Bridge* could be seen to be an attempt to dream a new world

³Deer also makes comparisons between the forced walks that many Native Americans were forced to take, including Amanda’s Trail and most notoriously the Trail of Tears, have echoes in the contemporary sex trafficking of Native American women—something that could be borne in mind when revisiting Crane’s representation of Pocahontas’s mixed-race descendant as a mother walking along a trail (Deer 59-60).

that lets white America off the hook by forgetting the realities of colonial history.

James Morrison, however, posits that Malick's film isn't "forgetful" of reality at all: rather that there is another kind of critical work at play. He asserts that, "[i]n *The New World*, Malick asks us to remain mindful of the fact that things might have gone differently even as the film explains how and why this hope evaporated." By this reading, Malick's film is a critical history lesson: an essay in what went wrong in the colonial history of the USA. One of the most compelling parts of Morrison's argument comes in his analysis of the kindness of the two male leads, John Smith and John Rolfe, played by Colin Farrell and Christian Bale respectively. He writes that, in spite of their kindness, "[t]hey remain emissaries of [Pocahontas's] displacement as surely as her acts of intermarriage and exogamous childbearing remain predicated on her own oppression—a point made clear in the portrayal of her acculturation into colonial society, loving yet enforced, as a process of learning compliance and shame" (Morrison).

Morrison claims that *The New World* attempts something very complicated indeed—to dramatize the fact that even the most sympathetically reconstructed version of the Pocahontas megamyth would have required force and coercion to support the narrative. The question then becomes, why should this story be re-told—and told with such beautiful actors, soft lighting, and "fetishistic" costumes (Buscombe, "What's New in *The New World*" 3). It is certainly the case that Malick is telling the story of what might have been rather than what was, but it seems more likely that he is trying to soften a violent history into a satisfactory liberal narrative of colonial history with elements of utopianism in its dream of American heterogeneity just as Hart Crane did.

Where Crane offers a sacrifice to mitigate against the violence that was done to Pocahontas, Malick instead relies on a fantasy of consent and mutuality. In his 1624 account of his time with the Powhatan—greatly expanded and embellished since the 1608

version—John Smith first introduced the idea that Pocahontas moved to save him from execution. This voluntary movement of Pocahontas towards first Smith, then Rolfe, is the foundation of Malick’s “love event,” to borrow Adrian Martin’s phrase. Lloyd Michaels cites the film’s producer, Sarah Green, who states that “first and foremost . . . we’ve created a love story.” In keeping with this, Martin argues, citing the philosopher Alain Badiou, that in *The New World*, “love is more than a mutual intoxication; it is . . . a full-blown event to which its participants must remain faithful. This . . . is a testament to the transformative, even utopian power of this entanglement.” He goes on to argue that this love-event “shows without ever explicitly spelling out” the “reconciliation of vastly different cultures.” The real point of importance in Martin’s chapter is that he shows Pocahontas as faithful to her love as a philosophical event, where Smith’s commitment fails, disappointing the narrative love as a transformative event. The film shows her as coming to meet him entirely in the utopian space of their love; indeed, when she discovers that he is still alive, she professes to Rolfe that she feels “married” to him.

The film constitutes a mutuality, too, in the access it gives to Smith, Pocahontas, and Rolfe’s thoughts. James Morrison observes of Smith’s voice-overs: “[w]hen we hear his thoughts, they sound like he is praying to his European God. Interweave his prayers with Pocahontas’s to her earth mother god and you get a theological duet, a story of two sirens.” In Malick’s film, as Martin notes above, narrative and history are subservient to feeling; although Smith’s voice-over gets more time than Pocahontas’s, the feeling of her whole being as committed to the experience at hand is communicated from the very first time we see her, naked and submerged entirely in the river in the film’s opening sequence. Buscombe notes that it is quite usual for Westerns to show Native American women, ideally chiefs’ daughters, swimming naked in the river as a straight-forward aspect of their preparation by the male gaze. He cites *The Indian Fighter*, *The Last Hunt*, and *Duel in the Sun* as examples of this

(Buscombe, *Injuns!* 126). In *The New World*, the erotics of the sequence are no less intentional, but the effect is to communicate Pocahontas as being completely submerged in experience: the river represents the third, abstracted space of her love-affair. Later in the film, we see her near-naked and submerged in the green of the forest floor during her lovers' play with Smith. Her whole body, and thereby her whole being, is integrated into the experience of the luminous world around her—until Smith leaves her and causes her first experience of abstraction from her environment.

There is much that can be, and much that has been, said about ways of reading Pocahontas as the magical naïve in this relationship—and about the importance of her relationship to Chief Powhatan in rendering her the truly “noble” savage, easy to read as capable of such fine emotion. What really matters here is that the transformative love-event is offered as an excuse for taking Pocahontas away from her people, coercing her into marriage, repatriation, and eventually death. The ways in which she continues to express loyalty to her people throughout her life, dealt with damningly by Leo Killsback, show up as, at best, endearing quirks in the otherwise authoritatively converted Rebecca Rolfe.

When we hear of Pocahontas's death—she died at Gravesend in 1617, on her way back to Virginia—it is in a letter from John Rolfe to their son, Thomas. The inclusion of the whole family is important to this study as it helps to forge a relationship with Alejandro Inárritu's *The Revenant*, and to bring the concept of marriage into specific contact with that of the family. On Malick's representation of this family, Leo Killsback writes:

The New World has one significant difference from earlier Indian films: Pocahontas's bearing of a mixed-blood child. Miscegenation is something that has never been accepted in America's movie industry. However it is made clear that the child will be raised in civilization, away from his savage relatives and the exotic wild. He has traces of his mother's dementia, but it will be bred out, giving hope and a lineage to an Indian princess for all those searching to be part of the “naturals.” Maybe the movie was titled *The New World* to give

modern Americans the opportunity to come closer to their Indian roots. (“Review: *The New World*” 200)

In this passage, KILLSBACK strikes on the reason for considering both *The New World* and *The Revenant* as liberal Westerns. They are films that make spurious claim to historical accuracy and then use a falsified story of interracial romance to valorize white history. Malick’s film stands as a nice transition between *The Bridge* and *The Revenant*. Pocahontas is herself present, as she is in Crane’s poem, and a false ritual—in this case the transformative love affair—is used to justify the violence done against her. Like *The Revenant*, which takes this model for the treatment of indigenous women and expands it beyond Pocahontas herself, *The New World* uses character doubling to mask its magical thinking. A sumptuous love-story allows Pocahontas to bear a child, the product of consent and mutuality, providing a potential founding for American heterogeneity—but the lover and the father are distinct characters. In *The Revenant*, Hugh Glass’s probably fictional, certainly highly mythologized, and already deceased wife is doubled with Powaga (Melaw Nakehk’o), daughter of an Arikara chief (Anthony Starlight), to provide the miscegenational family that enables Glass (Leonardo DiCaprio) to stand out as an uncomplicated hero in the eyes of a liberal audience.

The Revenant borrows the tropes of the “Pocahontas tendency,” and turns them against the mechanisms of national myth. Leo KILLSBACK goes as far as calling the film a “game changer,” one that “reaches audiences uninformed of Indian issues” (“*The Revenant*”). In making this comment, he observes the film in context: Leonardo Di Caprio shared stories of economic and environmental atrocities currently being committed against the indigenous population of North America across promotional material for the film and even during his acceptance speech for the Best Actor Oscar in 2016.

Overall, KILLSBACK notes, “*The Revenant* sets a new bar in filmmaking as it achieves what most films fail to do—it *fairly* represents Indians. After all, *fairness* in representation is all we

are asking for” (“*The Revenant*”). One of the key elements of the “fairness” in terms of the film’s narrative structure is, as he notes, the shared victory of Elk Dog (Duane Howard), the Arikara leader who is searching for his abducted daughter, and Hugh Glass: one achieves justice, the other revenge. In the parallel between these two characters, and in allowing the indigenous characters to be the authors of their own justice, Iñárritu offers a new definition of the liberal Western. Glass does not himself kill Fitzgerald, but rather passes him across the river to Elk Dog and Powaqa, echoing Glass’s own release earlier in the film. So, we are presented with a new approach to representing Native American characters in the Western: reconciliation, or at least catharsis, through the actions of good people on both sides.

This work toward reconciliation—or at least fairness in representation—is all the work of Iñárritu, Mark L. Smith, and their team. Neither Elk Dog and Powaqa, nor Hawk, Glass’s doomed half-Pawnee son (Forrest Goodluck), figure, in Michal Punke’s 2002 novel, from which the film was liberally adapted. Punke’s novel is the story of an American hero conquering landscape, enemies, and grizzly bears to enact revenge. Iñárritu’s version of the story is something quite different: he re-populates the emptied landscape with the type of characters who are historically un- or mis-represented—the Native American chief and, perhaps more importantly, his daughter.

The Revenant has a number of tropes in common with *The New World*, and chief among them are the use of landscape as a very vocal narrative device and the doubling of characters. At the very opening of the film, we see, in flashback, the attack on a Pawnee village in which Hugh Glass’s unnamed wife was killed; this is followed by an Arikara attack on Glass and his trapping party, led by Elk Dog, who is looking for Powaqa. Thus, the two missing Native American women are doubled: Powaqa, who is as much a “princess” as Pocahontas was, stands in emotionally for Glass’s wife in terms of the resolution of the film. Thus, Powaqa becomes a representative of Native American womanhood. As

Killsback writes, when she shoots the French colonist who is assaulting her with Glass’s gun, “[t]he sequence emphasizes . . . that kidnapping, trafficking, and violating Indian women is a crime, immoral, and is to be met with swift and severe punishment” (“*The Revenant*”). By focusing on the presence of Powaga rather than the memory of Glass’s dead wife, Iñárritu’s film redresses a balance: the real ongoing fight led by indigenous women for their own survival and self-definition is reinscribed over what was, in Punke’s novel, merely a use of the dead Native American woman as an emotionally motivating factor for the white male hero. In this film, the mixed race son, who should be the symbol of a coming together of America’s white and indigenous parental lines, does not survive the first act: the attention is re-centered on what has not, actually, been resolved in American history. Thus, a composite character who borrows the traditional trappings of the Pocahontas myth becomes a voice for the real history of Native American women. To borrow from Killsback once more, “[t]he violence is happening now and it must be stopped” (“*The Revenant*”).

Hart Crane’s bridge to Atlantis was, of course, a failure, with its most sympathetic critics referring to it as “broken,” usually for reasons of formal or poetic cohesion rather than the (in)coherence of its ideas. *The Revenant*, on the other hand, is a cinematic success. Lauded by the academy, it is, like *The New World*, a work of poetic cinematography that makes a hero—and victim—of the landscape as much as any of the characters. It inherits from the older film, and the (by now) old poem, an established set of tropes pertaining to the Native American princess, the white hero, and their mixed race child—but Iñárritu slows down the narrative: he doesn’t allow the next generation to take his audience easily forward into hope for a miscegenational future, but rather arrests the story in one generation, turning the attention of the audience away from the historical setting of the film and towards their own present moment.

WORKS CITED

- Buscombe, Edward. *Injuns!: Native Americans in the Movies*. Bodmin: Reaktion Books, 2006.
- . “What’s New in *The New World*.” *Film Quarterly* (2003): 35-40.
- Butterfield, R.W. *The Broken Arc: A Study of Hart Crane*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1969.
- Crane, Hart. *The Bridge*. New York: Liveright, 1970. Print.
- Deer, Sarah. *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2015.
- Fielder, Leslie A. *The Return of the Vanishing American*. London: Granada, 1968.
- John, Little Willie. “Fever.” By Eddie Cooley and Otis Blackwell. 1956. 45rpm.
- Killsback, Leo. “Review: *The New World* by Terrence Malick.” *Wicazo Sa Review* (2006): 197-201.
- . “*The Revenant* is a Game Changer.” *Indian Country Today*, 14 Jan. 2016. indiancountrymedianetwork.com/news/opinions/the-revenant-is-a-game-changer/. 20 Jan. 2017.
- Kolodny, Annette. *The Lay of the Land*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1975..
- Martin, Adrian. “Approaching *The New World*.” *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*. e-book. Ed. Hannah Paterson. New York: Columbia UP, 2007. Chapter 17.
- Michaels, Lloyd. *Contemporary Film Directors: Terrence Malick*. e-book. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2009.
- Morrison, James. “Making Worlds, Making Pictures: Terrence Malick’s *The New World*.” *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America*. e-book. Ed. Hannah Paterson. New York: Columbia UP, 2007. Chapter 16.
- The New World*. Dir. Terrence Malick. 2005.
- Pocahontas*. Dirs. Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg. 1995.
- Punke, Michael. *The Revenant*. London: The Borough Press, 2015.
- Rountree, Helen C. “Pocahontas: The Hostage Who Became Famous.” *Sifters: Native American Women’s Lives*. Ed. Theda Purdue. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001. 14-28.
- Smith, John. “A True Relation.” John Smith and Edward Arber. *Works 1608-1631*. Birmingham, 1844. 38.
- “So Who Does Pocahontas’ Hair?” *The Columbian* 23 June 1995. ProQuest, search-proquest-com.libproxy.siue.edu/docview/252713746/87417A7E807546CDPQ/3?accountid=13886.