

Neocolonialism in Disney's Renaissance:  
Analyzing Portrayals of Race and Gender in *Pocahontas*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and  
*Atlantis: The Lost Empire*

by  
Breanne Johnson

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

Honors College

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Public Health: Health Promotion/Health Behavior  
(Honors Scholar)

Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Sustainability  
(Honors Scholar)

Presented June 7, 2019  
Commencement June 2019



## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Breanne Johnson for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Public Health: Health Promotion/Health Behavior and Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Sustainability presented on June 7, 2019. Title: Neocolonialism in Disney's Renaissance: Analyzing Portrayals of Race and Gender in *Pocahontas*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*.

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Elizabeth Sheehan

The Walt Disney Company is one of the most recognizable and pervasive sources of children's entertainment worldwide and has carefully crafted an image of childhood innocence. This wholesome image is contradicted by Disney's consistent use of racist and sexist tropes, as well as its record of covertly using political themes in its media. Disney has a history of using its animated films to further a neocolonial ideology – an ideology that describes how current global superpowers continue to control the natural and capital resources of underdeveloped countries and to profit off of the unequal trading of these resources. The period of Disney's history known as its animated Renaissance marked a clear return to the brand's championing of American interventionism abroad. *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001) all utilize the same gendered and racialized tropes to present parallel stories of American exceptionalism and white benevolence toward communities of color. Through the stereotypes of the violent white colonizer, the white male savior, and the sexualized woman of color, these three films implicitly justify in the minds of the public the neocolonial project as a preferred alternative to colonization. When it is reproduced so heavily in children's media, this neocolonial ideology may influence how generations who grew up with these films interact with communities of color and broader political and economic issues into adulthood.

Key Words: neocolonialism, Disney, film studies, race, women and gender studies

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June 7, 2019

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Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Public Health: Health Promotion/Health Behavior and Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Sustainability project of Breanne Johnson presented on June 7, 2019.

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Breanne Johnson, Author

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## Introduction

Popular media today has immense power in shaping culture, society, and even politics. Films in particular have the capacity to clearly convey certain messages and ideas in a brief two-hour window of time, ideas that might be hard to circulate if not wrapped in emotion and framed as entertainment. Vera and Gordon describe the United States as a “cinematic society,” or one in which much of our national identity – and even many aspects of our daily lives – is defined by the films we produce and consume (8). By exposing us to lives and experiences other than our own, films teach us what it means to be a man, a woman, white, black, a hero, or a villain. These lessons are typically not unique within individual films, but follow patterns across films that are shaped by cultural constructions of identity. Films grant audiences access to communities they themselves might never be a part of and might never even interact with in a meaningful way, making the lessons they teach about those communities even more important (Vera and Gordon 8-9). The ways that cultural differences are presented (or obscured) in popular films hold much weight in determining how audiences will view those cultures once they leave the cinema, and if many films employ the same narratives regarding cultural difference, those narratives will exist as fact in the minds of the audience.

One of the most significant forms of social difference in American society today is that of race. The United States has a tumultuous racial history predating the nation itself. However, rather than confronting this history head-on and attempting to move beyond the racism and white supremacy the country was built on, popular films often water down this history into stories that are more palatable to the dominant white public. Films can be thought of as “social therapeutic devices” (Vera and Gordon 10) that seek to assuage white guilt for the ills of our collective racist past by masking the continued existence of white privilege. In the popular (white) imagination,

the United States has entered a post-racial era ushered in not by the continual resistance and activism of people of color, but by the benevolence of white society. This is most clearly evidenced in films that employ the “white savior” narrative, wherein a white (usually male) hero enters a community of color in order to rescue its members from their present circumstance, a circumstance almost always caused by oppression brought on by the dominant white society (see Hughey). In addition to its utility in relieving white guilt for a regretful racist past, the white savior narrative serves a dual purpose of reinforcing the existing racial hierarchy by placing white heroes at the forefront of the struggle for justice and progress. Not only is this reinforced hierarchy significant in the ways it shapes everyday Americans’ interactions with one another, but it also works to justify the more pervasive global economic and political structure that places the interests of white Western nations above those of developing nations of color. This structure as it exists today is referred to as neocolonialism, as it was borne out of the violence and exploitation of the colonialism of the past five centuries and continues to perpetuate the same systems of domination and control created by it (Buescher and Ono 131).

Children’s media has a unique position in reinforcing these predominant global power structures: it can indoctrinate youth from an early age and normalize latent ideas of white supremacy and neocolonial relations for entire generations (Lacroix 226-227; Vera and Gordon 193). Children’s films often also escape the same levels of scrutiny given to more overtly political films created for adult audiences, as brands work hard to project an image of innocence in order to gain parents’ trust (Giroux and Pollock xiii). Perhaps the children’s media brand that has done this most successfully is the Walt Disney Company, one of the largest and most profitable media conglomerates of our time. With its hundreds of television shows and animated and live-action films and the scores of merchandise produced in association with each of them,

Disney has infiltrated nearly every aspect of children's lives. It has also been able to craft a public image as a creator of wholesome, apolitical entertainment so successfully that even students of critical film studies balk at the idea of scrutinizing it (Vera and Gordon 193). However, many of Disney's animated feature films reveal deeply racist, sexist, and classist underpinnings that go unnoticed or ignored by typical audiences, in part because the stereotypes they employ have become so deeply engrained in American culture. As a multinational corporation, Disney is entirely reliant on the neocolonial political and economic structures allowing it to exploit the resources and labor of underdeveloped countries to create its merchandise (Giroux and Pollock 191). For this reason, Disney has a vested interest in normalizing the neocolonial paradigm, reimagining it through its films as a system whereby benevolent Western heroes occupy communities of color in order to spread progress and democracy.

Disney's films of the late 1980's to the early 2000's, a period in the company's history referred to as its Renaissance, reproduce many of the same patterns regarding the justification of the neocolonial project and the righteousness of American interventionism. The 1990's were a time of increasing globalization, during which the institution of the World Trade Organization and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) were created to reduce trade barriers and spread Western free-market capitalism (French and Manzanárez 73). Three of the animated films released by Disney during this time – *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001) – employ parallel narratives that showcase the benefits of neocolonialism for both white people and people of color alike. Though each film draws on different source material, the ideological message remains the same in all three. *Pocahontas* appropriates actual historic events, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is based on the

classic French novel by Victor Hugo, and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* is an original story set in a mythical place, but they all contain the same narrative structures and character tropes of the white male savior, the violent white male colonizer, and the beautiful woman of color whose community needs rescuing. These same tropes are intrinsic to the neocolonial narrative that underdeveloped nations – almost always nonwhite nations – have been disadvantaged by colonialism, and the only way to uplift them in the modern era is through neocolonial domination by their former colonizers (Buescher and Ono 147). Disney serves as a cultural tool for easing the transition from the United States' colonial past into the new era of global neocolonialism by teaching children of the NAFTA era that neocolonialism is the ideal.

This thesis seeks to locate Disney's Renaissance-era films within the larger discourse surrounding neocolonialism and its implications for cultural constructions of race and gender. Some previous literature on *Pocahontas* has explored this topic in-depth (see Buescher and Ono); however, most available scholarship on both *Pocahontas* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* focuses narrowly on specific aspects of racial and gender constructions divorced from the global sociopolitical landscape (see Lacroix, Kilpatrick, Martin and Kazyak), and scholarship on *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* is almost nonexistent. The neocolonial race and gender tropes and relationships reproduced in such popular children's media need to be explored in depth, as it is these ideas that will shape how the Renaissance generation engages with communities of color and with global political and economic discourse as they enter further into adulthood in the current decade.

### **Disney's History of Controversy**

The Disney brand has been no stranger to controversy in its nearly one hundred years as a media machine. The media, particularly visual media, is increasingly becoming the major driver

of culture and cultural education in the United States, and the Walt Disney Company has a near monopoly on the visual media consumed by children (Giroux and Pollock 2). This omnipresent influence in children's lives through its media and associated merchandise uniquely positions Disney as both teacher and cultural creator (Lacroix 214). Due to this disproportionate influence, Disney should be under intense scrutiny by parents and educators interested in the values and ideas children are exposed to each day. To both avoid and combat this potential scrutiny, Disney must walk a fine line between the overt commoditization of children and the more subtle process of tapping into childhood emotions and desires in order to make a profit. Disney has often been criticized by the psychology community for hiring child psychologists to design marketing campaigns aimed at exploiting the purchasing power of youths (Giroux and Pollock 3). Despite these professional criticisms, Disney is clearly doing something right, bringing in a profit of nearly \$60 billion in the 2018 fiscal year (The Walt Disney Co.). Giroux and Pollock credit this success to the widespread apathy and even acceptance of the American public to commercialization in all aspects of their lives (4). This in itself is a testament to Disney's marketing acumen, not only in campaigns that exploit the commercialization of childhood, but also in campaigns that create and normalize this exploitation.

Disney has based its entire brand ethos on fun and wholesome family entertainment. It is widely regarded as the premier creator of modern children's media, and parents with a myriad of other daily responsibilities can feel good entrusting their child's innocence to Disney's films and television shows (Giroux and Pollock 6). Even this feeling of trust has been carefully fostered since Walt Disney founded the company and began curating a specific image of childhood innocence that can only be protected by wholesome children's entertainment (17). This idealized version of childhood innocence is often disconnected from many children's real, lived

experiences, but is nevertheless expedient in selling the Disney brand to concerned parents. This “titanium-clad brand image” of innocence also works to shield Disney from criticism and controversy (Giroux and Pollock xiii). Despite its efforts to appear wholesome and objective, the influence of Disney on America’s cultural landscape cannot be discounted, nor can the political nature of that influence. It offers a lens through which children view much of the world, particularly those parts of the world that they have little or no direct experience with. This lens employed by Disney is far from innocent: it is a direct consequence of a Eurocentric worldview that places white European-American stories at the forefront and engages in biased depictions of gender, race, and culture. The Eurocentric model of the world locates Europe (and subsequently the United States) as the center of modern civilization from which all meaningful progress flows (Blaut 13-14).

While it may be true that Disney’s adherence to the Eurocentric worldview that predominates Western culture simply marks it as a product of the modern era, it also cannot be denied that this worldview is the very one that has historically justified the widespread proliferation of capitalism and colonialism and created the economic and political conditions that allow the Walt Disney Company to exist today (Blaut 19). Nor can it be said that Disney executives are ignorant of the immense power they hold in both presenting and even shaping cultural ideals. In 1989, former Walt Disney Company CEO Michael Eisner admitted to the power of “American entertainment” in globalizing Western (Eurocentric) values<sup>1</sup>, implying an awareness of just what Western values Disney is trying to spread (Giroux and Pollock 29).

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<sup>1</sup> “It may not be such an exaggeration to appreciate the role of the American entertainment industry in helping to change history. The Berlin Wall was destroyed not by the force of Western arms but by the force of Western ideas. And what was the delivery system for those ideas? It has to be admitted that to an important degree it was by American entertainment.” (Eisner as quoted in Giroux and Pollock 29)

Behind its mask of innocence branded with Mickey Mouse ears, Disney has consistently employed sexism, racism, and classism in its films and other media since the time of Walt himself. Perhaps the most glaring example of racism in Disney film is the sentimentalized version of slavery portrayed in 1946's *Song of the South*, which, although it was condemned by the NAACP and pulled from video stores, remains a prominent part of Disney culture via the popular song "Zip-a-dee Doo-dah" (Vera and Gordon 54). Beyond employing prejudiced character tropes in their popular films, the Walt Disney Company was also directly involved in U.S. military and economic interventionism throughout its early history. Walt Disney himself testified against suspected Communists to the House Un-American Activities Committee and produced several propaganda films during World War II (Giroux and Pollock 133-134). Then, in the 1940's, he traveled to South America as a guest of the government to bolster the Good Neighbor Policy in the region, subsequently releasing the film *The Three Caballeros* (1945) to make U.S. imperialism more acceptable to the American public and the nations of Latin America (135-136). Even after Walt's death, Disney continued to publish comic books for the Latin American market that praised capitalism into the 1960's, blending economic ideology with its cultural products to promote a self-reinforcing mechanism of profit (Giroux and Pollock 159).

### *The Cartoon Renaissance*

Following a period of relative stagnation in the Disney brand during the 1970's and early 1980's, the end of the 1980's ushered in a new era in animated film for the company (Pallant 71). This era, often referred to as Disney's Renaissance, saw the production of some of Disney's most artistically and commercially successful films to date. Each of the major animated feature films released by Disney between 1989 and 2001 earned over \$100 million worldwide in their first run (Giroux and Pollock 93). In addition to several advances in animation technology, the

installation of Michael Eisner as the new CEO of the Walt Disney Company in 1984 marked a turning point for Disney's cultural and economic prosperity (Pallant 81). Eisner encouraged his team to put out at least one animated feature film a year during his tenure as CEO, and his emphasis on aggressive marketing and product development was a major driver of Disney's ubiquity in the lives of children and adults alike (83). The Renaissance period also ushered in the return of the Disney Princess, producing the first five films in the Princess series since 1959's *Sleeping Beauty*. Some of Disney's popular films of its Renaissance include *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Tarzan* (1999). Three of these films, *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001) will be explored in greater detail later. While *Atlantis* falls outside of the oft-cited end of the Disney Renaissance in 1999, the story concept and animation style are in keeping with the trends set during the previous decade, and it can be viewed as one of the final films in the denouement of the company's late-century success.

It is the films of this Renaissance period that most shaped the lives and perspectives of the generation of children that came of age around the turn of the century. However, little cultural criticism exists regarding this decade of children's media, and the criticism that does exist offers a relatively incoherent picture of the period as a whole (Pallant 89-90). As noted earlier, children's media is often seen as purely innocent and exempt from the same types of scrutiny given adult films, and Disney's legal department goes to great lengths to limit published criticisms of its works (Giroux and Pollock 97). However, more criticisms exist of Disney's Renaissance films than its previous animated works, and the body of literature on this topic is growing, particularly in regards to portrayals of race and gender.

Much of the criticism aimed at this period of Disney films centers on portrayals of the film's female heroines and the relative sexualization of them and their bodies (Lacroix 213, Giroux and Pollock 101). The Renaissance period marks a distinct increase in the sexualization of cartoon women which only increased as the period progressed, particularly in the films' women of color (Lacroix 214-215). This occurred in line with a larger cultural move toward increased representations of female sexuality, but it works in opposition to Disney's continued claims of prioritizing innocence. Criticisms have also been rallied against Disney for its use of ethnically coded speech, with the majority of ethnically accented characters being portrayed as evil (Lippi-Green 117). Examples of this include the hyenas of *The Lion King*, two of which are voiced by Whoopi Goldeberg using a New York accent and Cheech Marin with a Mexican one, and Jafar, the villain of *Aladdin*, whose accent is an Arabian-English hybrid that stands in stark contrast to the strong American accent of Aladdin himself. This usage of ethnically accented voices serves to orient the white American male as the pinnacle of strength and morality, even when the heroic character himself is non-white or even non-human.

While the majority of literary critiques regarding Disney's Renaissance films are engaged with specific examples of voice, characterization, and narrative devices (see Lacroix, Lippi-Green, Martin and Kazyak), fewer engage with the broader cultural and historical context the films are situated in or the specific motivations the Walt Disney Company might have for reproducing these historical narratives. This analysis seeks to expand upon these specific examples cited in previous critiques in order to locate them in a larger neocolonial context from which Disney continues to benefit. Before the particular films of Disney's Renaissance can be explained in this context, a brief history of the United States and its involvement in colonial and

neocolonial enterprises is warranted, as well as an examination of the employment of neocolonial systems in modern film more generally.

### **(Neo)Colonialism and the United States**

The legacy of colonialism – and its modern counterpart, neocolonialism – pervades global politics, economics, and even popular media. The roots of early colonization run deep, and their continued existence is fertilized by the economic power structures of the current era. The following is a brief explanation of the relevant arguments surrounding Euro-American colonization and an exploration of its continued effects on global economics and political power. A cursory analysis of the employment of neocolonial narratives in popular film is also included in order to set up the deeper analysis of Disney's specific neocolonial stories.

#### *Principles of American Colonialism*

The United States of America would certainly not be the global superpower that it is today, would not even exist, in fact, without colonization. Any third grade Social Studies student could tell of how the English came to this country, settled on the land, and built a nation of democracy, adventure, and industry. Until the past few decades, the story typically taught to schoolchildren was that this feat of empire was done because of the goodwill of the English, so that they could share their knowledge and prosperity with native peoples and teach them the best way to live (Greene 89). What's more, the people of the colonies welcomed them with open arms and were happy to share their resources with their new neighbors (Vera and Gordon 50). Although this false notion of colonial benevolence has fallen out of fashion in recent years, modern teaching about the colonial era still rests on a foundation of white supremacy and exceptionalism. The accepted theory in academia and in society at large over the past few centuries has been that the European colonizers that invaded the farthest reaching corners of the

globe were able to do so because of some “unique historical advantage” (Blaut 1), and that with this invasion they brought with them all of the makings of a successful civilization. This theory, known as Eurocentric diffusionism, has been used to justify the conquest and exploitation of non-European (and, more recently, non-American) nations with little challenge. However, this prevailing narrative regarding the circumstances of this colonization and its successes warrants much criticism.

Eurocentric diffusionism presents the claim that the most important developments in human history were achieved in and around the European continent (Blaut 3). European explorers and settlers then spread, or diffused, the knowledge and innovations associated with these developments to all of the non-Western world through the process of colonialism. The story is largely one of peaceful settlement and benevolent acceptance of native peoples into the European way of life. When the brutality of the colonizers is acknowledged, it is portrayed as an error of history that is looked back on with shame, not as an intrinsic part of how society has been shaped to work in favor of certain groups that retain this control today. In actuality, the processes of colonialism persist today, albeit less overtly. These processes include the exploitation of labor and natural resources, the erasure of indigenous peoples, the dehumanization of people of color more broadly, and the marginalization of women, particularly women of color.

Kloby defines colonialism as “the formal political domination of one country by another in which the relationship between the two nations is always one of economic exploitation, although the dominant nation may pretend otherwise” (100).<sup>2</sup> Given this definition, it is

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<sup>2</sup>Though the practice of colonialism predates modern notions of the sovereign country or nation-state, the power dynamics and motivations described here by Kloby hold true throughout colonial history. For a more nuanced and complicated definition of colonialism and its relation to

impossible to accept the prevailing rhetoric that, while the exploitation of native labor and the expropriation of natural resources by colonizers was pronounced, indigenous peoples in the colonies were more than compensated by the diffusion of European technology, government, religion, etc. (Blaut 16). It cannot be denied that white European colonizers saw both indigenous lands and bodies as lacking integrity or worth beyond economic exploitation and were therefore open to being violated (Smith, *Conquest* 12). This “myth of emptiness,” or the idea that colonized lands were initially empty of meaningful civilization, formed the basis of settler-colonialism from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century (Blaut 15). Returning to the idea of Europe’s “historical advantage” in the way that it rose to dominate the globe, it was only because of the capital European nations accumulated through the expropriation of natural resources like gold, silver, and cotton in the Americas, extracted by the forced labor of indigenous peoples and eventually imported African slaves, that this economic domination was able to occur (Blaut 10).

In addition to the idea that colonization ultimately benefited indigenous peoples and lands through the introduction of European values and the wealth they gained in return was a more than fair compensation, the colonists justified the exploitation of indigenous peoples through simple white supremacy. European colonists seemed to be convinced of their superiority over the societies of indigenous peoples. They believed this because they had to, or else they would have to assume guilt for their genocide of indigenous peoples, which would hinder their economic and political progress. Historically, white supremacy rose out of European empires seeking permission for spreading political power and capitalist accumulation (Blaut 19). It also had religious roots in the superiority of the Christian religion and the accompanying inferiority of any people that did not accept it (Blaut 19). This aspect specifically was used to justify the conquest

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empire divorced from the nation-state, see Williams pp. 82. Such a definition, while useful in larger historical discourses, is beyond the scope of discussion here.

of even the most advanced pre-colonial societies. It was the colonists' view that indigenous peoples, and people of color more broadly, could only rise to a civilized level if they accepted the truths of Christianity, and even then only under the strict guidance of Europeans via colonial control (Blaut 4). If they refused God's grace, they could therefore be subjected to slavery and genocidal massacres.

A key element in the conquest of native peoples during colonialism was the exploitation of indigenous women. According to Buescher and Ono, the "colonization of land and women go hand in hand" (145). Colonial relations are inherently both gendered and sexualized via images of white male colonizers raping lands and dominating the feminized natives (Smith, *Conquest* 8). Beyond these generalized racial dynamics, sexual violence against native women was specifically and strategically used by European colonizers in the Americas to assert their dominance. In her analysis of colonial women, Pettman argues that "colonial power made use of certain ideas of women and sexuality to construct and police both women's bodies and racialised [sic] boundaries" (142). Indigenous women were at once seen as amoral temptresses and victims of their own brutish culture, therefore in need of saving by a civilized white man (Pettman 147). The image of the native seductress justified the vision of bodies of color as "polluted with sexual sin" (Smith, *Conquest* 10), a vision promoted by Christian colonial writings that stripped them of their bodily integrity and allowed for their rape and murder. The image of the innocent victim further allowed for the rape and concubinage of indigenous women, but it also posed a danger to racial purity in the colonies, thereby called for the policing of interracial relations beyond sexual domination by white men (Pettman 148).

The demonization of women of color served a secondary purpose of maintaining control over white women in the colonies by spreading false narratives about the dangers of fraternizing

with indigenous peoples (Smith, *Conquest* 21). In contrast to the colonial story that native women were oppressed by violent native men, most native societies gave women equal status in decision-making and valued their domestic work just as much as that of the men (Smith, *Conquest* 18). Though colonizers claimed indigenous people were eager to take on their superior way of life, the opposite was often true: more white settlers chose to live with the natives than the other way around, particularly white women tired of the restrictive misogyny of European society (Smith, *Conquest* 18). The ideological manipulation of white women against native women was necessary to reinforce the supremacy of the colonizers as well as to help persuade native peoples to accept submission via religious conversion. Despite fears of being corrupted by the sexually perverse natives, white women played an important role in the assimilation project of colonization, often taking on missionary roles in order to spread the Christian faith and European ideals on femininity, domesticity, and obedience (Pettman 145). White women were not innocent within the colonial enterprise, as they were members both of the oppressed gender and of the dominant race and certainly benefited from the spoils of conquest and exploitation. Modern linkages between the systemic oppression of (white) women and people of color cannot overshadow the specific historical experiences of women of color and their oppression as an attack on both their race and gender identity (Smith, *Conquest* 8; Pettman 142-143).

#### *Neocolonialism: Empire for the Modern Age*

Though the overt practice of colonization was largely complete by the beginning of the twentieth century, many of the colonies created during the era of empire remain under the economic domination and covert political control of their former colonizers or, in the case of many nations in Latin America and the South Pacific, of the United States of America. This system of continued exploitation of formerly colonized peoples under the guise of spreading

progress or economic advancement is known as neocolonialism (Blaut 27-28). Neocolonialism describes how current global superpowers, most notably the United States, continue to control the natural and capital resources of underdeveloped countries and to profit off of the unequal trading of these resources (Greene 90). As Vandana Shiva writes, “the economic inequality between the affluent industrialized countries and the poor Third World ones is a product of 500 [sic] years of colonialism, and the continued maintenance and creation of mechanisms for draining wealth out of the Third World” (163). Neocolonialism’s current existence relies as much on the successes of traditional colonialism as it does the dismissal of colonialism’s continued legacy. The history of neocolonialism is as follows (via Buescher and Ono): first, colonizers take land, conquer indigenous peoples, and set up colonial governments. Next, the “civilizing process” begins through the diffusion of the colonizer’s language, religion, technology, and knowledge systems. Finally, the colonizer produces narratives of successful conquest that frame their work as benevolent and necessary for the advancement of the colonized (131). These narratives are what allow for the modern neocolonial project as they normalize the claim that the agents of empire are only acting with goodwill and to the benefit of those they dominate. This serves to justify in the minds of the public (mainly the public of the dominant power) the necessity of the current prevailing economic and political systems that overwhelmingly support the new colonizer at the sake of the colonized.

As a relatively young country, the United States began its colonizing mission later than other global super powers; by 1900, when the U.S. was just beginning to come into its own in terms of colonialism, nearly the entire non-European world had already been “discovered” by Europeans and either colonized or brought into the trading economy (Blaut 26). This meant that America’s strategy for empire was not to settle in new lands, but to take control of already

established colonies from their European imperial rulers and to block any further meddling by them in this Western hemisphere. The Monroe Doctrine, put forward by the United States in 1823, claimed that all of the lands in South and Central America were closed to European powers, ushering in a new era of U.S. domination of the region (Friedman and Long 133). This set the stage for the adoption of a new strategy near the turn of the century called Pan-Americanism, which sought to “integrate Latin America into a U.S.-led system based on political, commercial, legal, and defense coordination” (Friedman and Long 135). This aggressive strategy allowed the United States to monopolize control of resources and trade markets in the hemisphere at the expense of European powers. Beginning with the Spanish-American War in 1898, U.S. interventions in Latin America under Pan-Americanism continued largely unchecked until well after the First World War (120). The United States ousted Spain from many of its former territories and took control of Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Philippines, and Nicaragua, either directly by instituting colonial governments or indirectly through covert political and military intervention.

Following World War I and the Great Depression, President Roosevelt officially instituted his Good Neighbor Policy of nonintervention in Latin America in 1933 due to significant pressure from local governments in the region (Friedman and Long 135). However, this policy only applied to countries where dictators remained submissive to U.S. economic and political interests. When the results of World War II made it clear that many countries previously under colonial rule wanted their own independence, it became even more crucial that the United States affirm the idea that social and economic modernization could only be made possible by preserving American capitalist control (Blaut 27-28). The Good Neighbor Policy was over, and the rest of the twentieth century was marked by a series of clandestine operations in which the

U.S. sought to protect its economic interests in Latin America in the face of local revolutions and the spread of Communism (Blaut 29; Friedman and Long 152-153). By ousting politicians unsympathetic with its cause, the United States could ensure that those holding power locally in the region would protect its investments when forming economic policy. Though formal and explicit colonization of Latin America has ended, it is these systems of unbalanced trade and political domination that ensure that most everything produced in Latin America is still ultimately turned into American capital (Galeano 128).

The most notable contributor to the current neocolonial enterprise of the United States is the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA. Implemented in 1994, a year before Disney's *Pocahontas* was released, NAFTA codified an economic relationship between the United States, Canada, and Mexico based on free market capitalism and globalization (French and Manzanárez 8). While NAFTA's stated goal was to bring Mexican industries into the global market, the realized effect of NAFTA has been to prioritize U.S. corporations through deregulation of manufacturing centers in Mexico and reduction in tariffs on U.S. agricultural commodities entering the Mexican market (39-40). This translates to huge profits for American businessmen at the cost of increasing poverty among rural and working class Mexicans. On an international level, the World Trade Organization (WTO), founded in 1993 and approved by the United States the same year as NAFTA, also seeks to reduce trade barriers to further market globalization (French and Manzanárez 73). The United States is the second largest trader within the WTO behind the European Union, giving it considerable power in influencing global economic policy (74). The capitalist principles of free trade and industrial deregulation promoted by NAFTA and the WTO allow the United States to continue its neocolonial legacy of economic exploitation, now in the form of corporate profit-seeking.

Neocolonialism retains many of the features of traditional colonialism – resource exploitation, institutionalized racism and sexism, etc. – but in a much more ambiguous way. The current neocolonial paradigm asserts that the ills of colonialism are over and that we now live in a post-racial, post-colonial world where democracy and equality reign, at least in the developed West (Buescher and Ono 130). Neocolonialism’s very survival as the prevailing global political and economic model depends on this image. However, the past century of American foreign relations has proven this assertion to be false, as have social conditions domestically. The United States’ continued involvement in Latin America and, more recently, in the Middle East points to a clear pattern of political manipulation in the service of the American economy. This manipulation disproportionately comes at the expense of people of color, particularly women of color and indigenous communities. Like colonialism before it, neocolonialism takes advantage of those communities that have been made to rely most heavily on its existence. Once all of the wealth and natural resources have been expropriated from a region, the local peoples are forced to accept the neocolonizer’s limited economic and military protections, which take the form of bilateral development aid and occupation via the positioning of U.S. military bases (Blaut 28-29). The neocolonial project must not end here, for the continued subordination of underdeveloped regions is predicated on the neocolonizer’s ability to constantly subdue rebellion and minimize forms of resistance, as well as to erase stories of local resistance from the public consciousness.

### *Neocolonialism and the White Savior Film*

One of the hallmarks of neocolonialism is the sense of paternalistic control that the dominant country or community asserts over its subordinated groups. This is largely borne out of a sense of white supremacy and the accompanying inferiority of non-white communities, which

allows white people to view themselves as the saviors of other races. This turns the neocolonial project into one of wholesome benevolence in which the neocolonizer is ostensibly only seeking to aid in the development of the dominated country (or the dominated group within the neocolonizer's own country, as in the case of indigenous peoples). Often referred to as "the white man's burden" (Kipling), the moral and intellectual labor the neocolonizer must go through to "save" people of color is shown as having little or no material benefit to the white man himself. In order to sell this image of goodhearted cross-cultural assistance, the "white savior" myth has been "rewoven into the social fabric" of the West through popular culture and media such as movies, television, novels, etc., popular culture which is then diffused to the non-Western world (Buescher and Ono 130). The "white savior" myth is embedded in all manner of popular films, from the classic (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Dances with Wolves*) to the recent (*The Blind Side*, *Green Book*). Matthew Hughey defines a "white savior film" as one "in which a white messianic character saves a lower- or working-class, usually urban or isolated, nonwhite character from a sad fate" (1). This definition can be extended to include historical narratives of white characters saving nonwhite characters or even entire nonwhite communities in pre-urban or pre-class societies, in which the "sad fate" that threatens them is that of colonization itself. In these stories, the white savior is set apart from other white characters as the pinnacle of whiteness, or the only white person who is able to see the injustice in colonialism and therefore the only one able to stop it.

Most iterations of the white savior film revolve around a similar set of tropes or archetypes that shape a character's appearance, personality, and motivations. These tropes also determine a character's role within the larger plot of the neocolonial narrative. Hughey explains that the three central categories that characters in these films fall into are the villain, the

nonwhite victim, and the white savior themselves. Characters that do not fall into one of these three categories are used to further contrast the white savior either from the villain or from the nonwhite victim; they may be a morally ignorant white person who also requires the guidance of the savior away from the racist villain, or an evil member of the nonwhite group serving as a secondary villain who tries to thwart the savior, to the detriment of their own race. The main villain, or the force that the characters of color must be saved from, is almost always either an institutionalized system of oppression created by the white-dominant society, or a single (white) character that embodies this system. This villain represents normalized racism and sexism taken to their most violent and extreme, overshadowing the often also present prejudice of the white savior. Next to this villain, the hero can be positioned as unprejudiced – or, if they are racist and/or sexist, it is only a side effect of their proximity to the villain and can be overcome (Hughey 48). The victim in the white savior film is a person or community of color that is in need of saving, either from structural oppression or from their own moral or intellectual deficiency (or both). It is important that the victim does not need saving from the dominant white society as a whole, but only from the faction of that society that is oppressive. The “good” parts of white society – its technology, language, religion, etc. – are in fact necessary for the second part of their salvation: salvation from themselves. The nonwhite community is portrayed as naïve and intellectually and technologically backwards, and it is therefore the duty of the white savior to share with them Western progress and ideals.

The most important character in the neocolonialist white savior film is the righteous white hero who enters an unfamiliar land that is physically and/or socially distant from their own and brings about the salvation of its (nonwhite) people (Hughey 8, 28). Though many white savior films may be marketed as stories centered on the uplifting of marginalized characters and

communities, the protagonist of the story is almost always the white savior themselves and not a member of the group to be uplifted. This positions the white character and, thus, whiteness as the “invisible but all-too-powerful center” (Lacroix 218) against which all other identities are placed. The white hero is brave, selfless, and compassionate toward the plight of the marginalized community while also being ignorant of their own privilege in relation to this marginalization (Ash 25). In this way, the white savior trope is employed to redeem the white race from the injustice caused by a seeming minority of violent racists in positions of power, thus erasing the continued significance of these injustices (Hughey 161; Vera and Gordon 10, 15). Once the nonwhite race is saved and the white race is redeemed, the white savior experiences no loss of status, and their status may even increase following their saving actions. A clear parallel exists between the white savior’s vanquishing of the explicitly racist power structure and the neocolonial idea that the violence of traditional colonization has ended, particularly in the ways that both are able to retain their own identities and privileges within the new social order they have created.

Matthew Hughey describes the danger of the pervasiveness of the white savior narrative in popular culture as a threat to the status of nonwhite communities everywhere:

This trope is so widespread that varied intercultural and interracial relations are often guided by a logic that racializes and separates people into those who are redeemers (whites) and those who are redeemed or in need of redemption (nonwhites). Such imposing patronage enables an interpretation of nonwhite characters and culture as essentially broken, marginalized, and pathological, while whites can emerge as messianic characters that easily fix the nonwhite pariah with their superior moral and mental abilities. (2)

The near omnipresence of Western, and particularly American, media on the global cultural landscape has allowed the trope of the white savior to invade nearly every corner of the world. The popularity of films showcasing this narrative among both white and nonwhite audiences points to the normalization of the neocolonial project across society as well as to the interest in and success of the dominant white race in masking its own privilege and absolving itself of “white guilt” (Ash 23). The following sections will examine how the white savior narrative has been employed in popular children’s media by the Walt Disney Company near the turn of the century and how this served to indoctrinate a new generation with the ideas of neocolonialism.

### **Disney’s Bodies of Color**

In the current neocolonial era, race and racism operate much less explicitly in politics, economics, and social systems than they did during the time of direct colonization, so much less that many of those in power often refer to this as a new “post-racial” world. However, within the current “post-racial” paradigm there actually exists a complex social stratification of race and ethnicity that is created by global neocolonial relations and is reflected in the media we consume. The animated films of the Walt Disney Corporation can be critiqued for the disparate ways they characterize white people and people of color, revealing some aspects of the racial hierarchy. This system of bias manifests in the ways characters look, think, speak, and act, as well as how they operate within their respective plots. Disney’s films of the late 1980’s to the early 2000’s, while being lauded by the general public for giving new attention to the stories of marginalized communities and people of color, recreate the same neocolonial white savior narratives being used by politicians to justify American involvement overseas and the ongoing paternalism projected onto communities of color in the United States and abroad. Three of the films from this so-called Renaissance period of Disney animation, *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre*

*Dave* (1996), and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001) clearly represent the company's ongoing employment of the white savior narrative and its increasing exploitation and sexualization of people, particularly women, of color. The various ways in which Disney "others" its women of color and their communities, in position to their films' white heroes, expose their participation in spreading neocolonialism.

### Portrayals of Race and Culture

For many children in the United States (particularly white children), the only exposure they get to cultures different than their own is through the popular media they consume, particularly visual media. The disproportionately large influence it wields over children's media makes Disney one of the principle educators for youth around the world, lending its portrayals of race and culture particular significance (Giroux and Pollock 19). Information that Disney provides children in regards to cultural difference shapes how those children will view and engage with others throughout their lives, so it is important that this information be accurate and nonbiased. Though it is presented in this way, this is not the case for the information regarding the indigenous and Romani gypsy cultures portrayed in *Pocahontas*, *Hunchback*, and *Atlantis*. These films offer caricatured pictures of nonwhite cultures that ignore many of the ways these cultures have been shaped, changed, or even destroyed by white colonialism. This is particularly suspect in instances such as *Pocahontas*, where Disney claims to be telling a true story but ignores many historical facts in order to make a film that is marketable to children (Kilpatrick 36). The erasure of the lived realities of oppression faced by people of color in these films reinforces the neocolonial idea of a post-racial world where American domination is due to benevolence, not white supremacy.

Much of the scholarship analyzing Disney's portrayals of nonwhite communities centers on the representation of Native American peoples in its 1995 film *Pocahontas*. When the film was released, much attention was given by the company and by the news media to how "authentic" and "respectful" the portrait of Pocahontas and her people was (Kilpatrick 36). *Pocahontas* came out during a time when the prevailing story of Columbus as the heroic discoverer of America was being challenged by indigenous rights groups and in the public discourse, and the film offered a new, more palatable image of American colonization (Buescher and Ono 127-128). Disney even brought on several consultants from the Native American community to aid in the historical accuracy of the film; however, the advice of these consultants was only followed when it fit conveniently with the story Disney wanted to tell (Kilpatrick 37).

According to Buescher and Ono, in attempting to "[make] history fun," Disney "[makes] fun of history" (128) by warping the violence and exploitation of colonialism into an interracial love story that overcomes the clear power differences between the colonizer and the colonized. *Pocahontas* as a neocolonial text draws on an image of white/indigenous relations as one of mutual benefit and goodwill, employing stereotypes of Native Americans as kind to the point of being naïve, generous, and overall willing to accept the diffusion of white European ideology, at least once the messy business of war is over (128-129). One of the main critiques of *Pocahontas* from the indigenous perspective is of its emphasis on the native tribe as inherently warlike (Kilpatrick 37). The juxtaposition of the colonizers' and the tribal warriors' preparations for battle during the "Savages" musical number equalizes the feelings of prejudice on both sides and minimizes the very real advantage in power of the violently racist and more heavily armed colonizers. In addition, it creates a false picture of native tribes as aggressive and in constant conflict with one another, which contradicts the reality that native societies were largely peaceful

and diplomatic in their relations and rarely engaged in war (Smith, *Conquest* 18-19). These stereotypes serve to shift the colonial narrative away from one of native resistance to colonization and genocide on the part of the colonizers, toward the acceptance of settler-colonialism by the Native Americans, which is essential to the modern neocolonial project. The scene of the Europeans sailing away from the New World at the end of the film also leaves the impression that the horrors of colonization ended with this initial encounter (Giroux and Pollock 107). In actuality, violence against indigenous communities and particularly indigenous women persists today in astonishing numbers, with American Indian women being twice as likely to become victims of violent crimes as any other gender or racial group (Smith, *Conquest* 27-29).

Disney continues its trend of employing racial and ethnic stereotypes under the guise of historical accuracy in its portrayal of the Romani gypsies in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996). The reduction of the Romani people to a romanticized group of artists, dancers, and charlatans in the film garnered little criticism in the United States at the time, perhaps due to the relative lack of an American Romani community. However, the Roma represent one of the largest ethnic minorities in Europe even today, and they continue to face discrimination and institutionalized oppression (Roma Support Group 5). As with adapting the historical narrative of the native woman Pocahontas, Disney's choice to turn Victor Hugo's 1831 novel into an animated children's film warrants scrutiny. The original work, set in fifteenth century Paris, is a scathing political commentary by Hugo on the repression of the French underclass and on the sins of the Church and of society at large (Schneeweis 101). In contemporary popular media, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* becomes a much simpler and more sanitized story of romance and adventure, one with a happy ending that, again, dismisses the ongoing marginalization faced by the community of color it purports to represent.

Disney's version of *Hunchback* focuses on Quasimodo, a disabled man stolen as a baby by Claude Frollo, a religious fanatic and Parisian Minister of Justice, who murdered Quasimodo's gypsy mother. Although Quasimodo is noted as being of gypsy birth, he has pale white skin and red hair, blatantly erasing his ethnic identity. It is unclear why Disney chose to make Quasimodo appear white when his gypsy heritage is explained, other than to perhaps centralize his disability as his only relevant identity and to further "other" him from both the dominant able-bodied society and the gypsy underclass. Making the main character white and thus positioned outside of gypsy culture also allows for a more voyeuristic view of the Romani people. While Quasimodo may succeed at dispelling the harmful negative stereotypes that Frollo assigns to the gypsies – that they are lazy, poor, dirty, dishonest, and dangerous – these are replaced with new stereotypes of the Roma as bohemian, romantic, artistic, and free-spirited (Schneeweis 100). In both cases, the Roma are portrayed as having a homogenous identity rather than as a diverse ethnic group with a rich history. The reinforcement of the seemingly positive stereotypes of the gypsy people at the end of the film may in fact be more harmful to the Roma, making it seem as though prejudice against the ethnic group is nearing an end and thus disregarding their ongoing marginalization centuries after *Hunchback* takes place. The romanticization of the nomadic nature of the Roma is also misleading and minimizes the harsh realities of forced migration and asylum-seeking that are characteristic of Romani history and of many nonwhite refugees today (Roma Support Group 3-4, Schneeweis 104-105).

It is more difficult to critique the portrayals of race and culture in *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001) because the Atlantian people are entirely fictional. By divorcing the colonization of Atlantis from reality, Disney may hope to escape criticism as there is no real-world community directly affected by their portrayal. However, the characterization of the Atlantian

race and cultural identity is rooted in historical depictions of indigenous peoples across the Western hemisphere. The treatment of the Atlantian people by the American invaders also has clear parallels with U.S. foreign policy at the time. *Atlantis* takes place in 1914, a time when the United States was increasing its involvement in Central America through economic domination, as was the case in Panama and Honduras, and physical conquest, as in Cuba, Haiti, and Nicaragua (Friedman and Long 135). In each of those cases, local peoples and coalitions of Latin American nations resisted both U.S. occupation and the trade controls it imposed. By choosing the same time period to showcase a story about the failures of exploitation and the triumphs of neocolonialism, *Atlantis* rewrites American colonial and imperial history under the guise of science fiction. As with *Pocahontas* six years prior, Disney undertakes this rewriting by acknowledging the colonizers' initial intentions for resource extraction, but then emphasizing a change of heart undergone once they met the local people and learned their true value (Buescher and Ono 128). Rather than committing racial genocide, as occurred in traditional colonialism in this hemisphere, the American explorers entering Atlantis learn the error of their ways and begin the neocolonial project of imbalanced exchange necessary to bridge the cultural gaps with an accepting native community.

Rather than create a new cultural identity for the Atlantian people, Disney relies on many of the already known and accepted stereotypes of indigenous peoples that appear in *Pocahontas* (Buescher and Ono 130). The people of Atlantis, though at first skeptical of the American interlopers, are eventually kind, generous with their time and resources, and welcoming of the knowledge of the colonizers. They are also deeply connected to their environment and have a mystical connection to the land and its resources, a trope often assigned to indigenous communities (Lacroix 225). Despite this connection and their astounding technological prowess,

they are not able to dominate the natural world in the same way as the colonizers. The downfall of the Atlantian civilization is illustrated as due to a fundamental error in their understanding of the natural world and of their own culture. Blaut asserts that, in the Eurocentric imagination, historical nonwhite civilizations that are conceded to have been prosperous and technologically advanced ultimately fell due to a lack of rationality or, more traditionally, a lack of acceptance of Christian moral principles and thus a lack of God's grace (21). Disney's characterization of the Atlantian king as stubborn and close-minded points to this supposed lack of rationality, and the great storm that buried Atlantis can be seen as an act of God akin to the Biblical flood. It is only the rationality of the (white, Christian) neocolonizer and his superior knowledge of the local resources that allow Atlantis to return to its former glory, positioning neocolonialism as a fundamental component in the uplift of communities of color.

### *The (Racialized) Female Body*

The main vehicle for Disney's portrayals of nonwhite cultures is the female heroine of each film. As is often the case in the real world, women of color in films are not seen as characters in their own right, but must stand in as a representation for their entire gender, race, and culture (Lacroix 217). The heroines of *Pocahontas*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* each reveal patterns of racial bias on the part of Disney that are also noticeably gendered. Lacroix points to a trend among Disney's Renaissance films of "an increasing emphasis on sexuality and the exotic [...] particularly in the female characters of color" (213). Pocahontas, Esmeralda, and Kida, three of Disney's few heroines of color from this time period, are each much older and more physically and sexually mature than their white counterparts in films released around the same time, namely Ariel of *The Little Mermaid* and Belle of *Beauty and the Beast* (Lacroix 219). Each of these women is reduced within her

respective narrative to a body used for the representation of her racial or ethnic group and for the consumption of the violent white colonizer and the neocolonial white savior.

Perhaps the most blatant hypersexualization of a woman of color in Disney film is that which occurs in *Pocahontas*, simply because Disney is reconstructing the image of a real historical figure. In the 1995 film, Pocahontas is characterized as an athletic and adventurous young woman in her early twenties, while the actual Pocahontas was only ten or twelve years old at the time the Virginia Company came to her land (Kilpatrick 36). By increasing the age of the Native American princess, Disney is able to insert a heterosexual romance between Pocahontas and the colonizer John Smith at the center of its narrative, a romance that Disney deems essential to making the colonial story entertaining for children (Buescher and Ono 128). It also allows for the employment of the white male gaze to sexualize and fetishize Pocahontas throughout the film. Not only is the animated Pocahontas older than her predecessor, she is drawn in minimal clothing, wearing even less than the other native women in her village, and her long legs, full bust, and slim waist are often specifically emphasized in scenes of her running through the forest (Lacroix 220-222). Her movements and the movements of her fellow natives are animalistic, keeping with the stereotypes of indigenous peoples as close to the earth and subtly imbuing them with a non-human otherness.

Pocahontas' personality and decisions within the plot are also significant to her representation as an indigenous woman. Her choices throughout the film are inextricably linked to her race, particularly those related to the principle dilemma of the film: whether she should adhere to the strict tribal culture and marry the warrior Kocoum, or assimilate into the white European culture through a romance with John Smith, the film's neocolonial force. Ultimately, she chooses to remain loyal to her people, a sacrifice which further marks her with the stereotype

of the brave and noble savage (Lacroix 224-225). However historically accurate it may be, this is likely a somewhat disappointing ending for the intended white viewer, who throughout the entire film has been asked to sympathize with Pocahontas and her “plight [of] entrapment within a patriarchal order” (Buescher and Ono 132), a sympathy that “reinforces the legitimacy of the neocolonial narrative” through “the justification of colonialism for the emancipation of dark women by enlightened white men” (133). Jolly makes a similar claim that, more generally, “sexual access to local women legitimized the colonial relation” (qtd. in Pettman 147). During the colonization of America by European settlers, boundaries were drawn around white women, indigenous women, and indigenous men, boundaries that only white men were allowed to cross (Pettman 148). Though Pocahontas’ choice to pursue a romantic relationship with John Smith is portrayed as emphasizing her agency, it can also be read as a result of the uneven power dynamics at work in the colonial relation that give white men privilege over men of color (148).

Esmeralda, the heroine of 1996’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, is the most overtly sexualized of the three Disney women examined here, while notably also having the darkest skin tone (Lacroix 221). According to Schneeweis’ analysis of the 1997 Canadian musical version of Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris*, “as a popular cultural commodity, [Esmeralda] strips the body of the gypsy woman of any real-world meanings and transforms it exclusively into an object of gaze” (104). Disney retains many of the same sexualized and exoticized elements of Esmeralda’s popular characterization in its animation, drawing Esmeralda with wide eyes, full hips, and a stereotypical gypsy dress that bares her shoulders and cleavage (Lacroix 222). While Esmeralda athletic like Pocahontas, her athleticism manifests not in diving off of waterfalls, but in dancing seductively in front of crowds while the animation follows a voyeuristic male gaze. She even performs a strip tease and does a pole dance in front of a crowd at a festival, epitomizing the

caricature of the promiscuous and immoral Romani temptress (Schneeweis 100). In contrast to the white princesses of the Renaissance era, whose bodies are rarely exposed and almost never ogled at, Esmeralda is almost caught naked by Quasimodo in a significant scene and is regularly viewed by men with unconcealed lust (Martin and Kazyak 329). She is regularly shown using her sexuality to trick and manipulate men, behavior that is framed as a necessary part of life for a street-hardened gypsy (Martin and Kazyak 330, Lacroix 225). However, no matter how resourceful Esmeralda may be, she is ultimately a victim of oppressive religious extremism and must be saved by men, one white and one white-passing. By the end of the film, Esmeralda's ethnic body has been fetishized by nearly every character, and her independent and willful spirit is revealed to be insufficient for survival without the saving grace of white men and a more sanitized version of white religion.

In *Atlantis* (2001), the sexualization of Kida's body is at times both overt and highly symbolic. Like Pocahontas and Esmeralda before her, Kida is drawn with a lean, athletic body and in revealing clothing coded as traditional of her tribe or group. She is introduced to the audience through a tight shot of her impossibly large doe eyes, and close-ups on her face frequently emphasize her full, pouted lips. Rather than being reverent, reactions to her beauty are often a source of comedy: Milo is teased by his friends for ogling her, the Frenchman Mole whispers a provocative remark to her and earns a punch in the face, and Milo sputters over his words when he sees her in a bathing suit ("I swim pretty girl... Pretty good!"). These moments, played for laughs, serve to "[normalize] men's objectification of women's bodies and the heterosexual desire it signifies" (Martin and Kazyak 332), objectification that disproportionately affects women of color. As another indigenous woman in Disney, Kida's characterization is remarkably similar to that of Pocahontas before her in that both rebel against a domineering

father and patriarchal tribal culture in favor of aiding a white neocolonial force. The native women's open-mindedness and acceptance toward the colonizers is used to justify their invasion of native lands under the guise of being welcomed with open arms.

The relationship between Kida and the most prized resource of the Atlantian civilization is deeply symbolic of the ways that native lands have been violated throughout history. The lifeblood of the Atlantian people is manifested in glowing blue crystals that each Atlantian possesses on a necklace, crystals that are used to heal wounds, power technology, and protect the city from invasion or natural disasters. Through means largely unexplained, Kida herself is the incarnation of these crystals' energy in physical form. The aim of the colonizers is to extract this energy source, which results in the attempted kidnapping of Kida once they discover her connection to it. The rape of indigenous women and the pillaging of native lands have long been connected by imagery of penetration, domination, and exploitation (Pettman 143). Smith asserts that "the project of colonial sexual violence establishes the ideology that Native bodies are inherently violable – and by extension, that Native lands are also inherently violable" (*Conquest* 12). Perhaps no image could make this connection clearer than the manifestation of a native woman as the very resource the colonizer seeks to extract. Kida's kidnapping can be viewed as a metaphor for the longstanding colonial practice of raping both indigenous women and indigenous lands, a practice that, in *Atlantis*, comes to an end when Kida is saved via neocolonial intervention.

### *Erasing Men of Color*

In the minds of the colonizers, the greatest threat to the neocolonial project was not the violent colonist, but the empowered man of color (Buescher and Ono 143-144). When Europeans first entered the Americas, they found native societies that were not based on social hierarchies

or nuclear family structures, but on community ties and shared ownership of resources (Smith, “Heteropatriarchy” 72-73). Part of the process of domination was to institute social hierarchies that legitimized the power of the colonizers, which took the form of instituting patriarchy, or what Smith calls “the building block of the nation-state form of governance” (“Heteropatriarchy” 71). Once patriarchy was naturalized among native peoples, white male colonizers had to be sure to retain their own place at the top of this patriarchy. While the actions of the colonist were inherently essential to the successes of neocolonialism, equally essential then was the erasure of the agency and even existence of men of color. When they are not completely erased through genocide or being sold into slavery, men of color are routinely feminized and dominated by white actors in order to strip them of their agency and to leave their communities weak to outside attacks, both militarily and culturally. Portraying men of color as both feminized and hypermasculine justifies the need for (neo)colonialism to save women of color from their broken and oppressive cultures (Pettman 147). Men of color, particularly indigenous men, are viewed as savage, violent, and sexually aggressive, elevating them to a status of near superhuman strength and physicality, while at the same time they are subhuman in their lack of stability and resolve (147). Colonialism depends on the feminization of the hypermasculine man of color so that he becomes no longer a threat to the colonizer, and this feminization can further be used to rationalize the need for a new, strong, white leadership within the community of color.

*Pocahontas* employs both the hypermasculine and the feminized tropes in its portrayals of indigenous men through the characters of Kocoum and Powhatan. Kocoum, the fiercest warrior of Pocahontas’ tribe and the man she is arranged to marry, embodies every characteristic of the stereotypical native savage. He is inhumanly strong, emotionally detached, and heavily invested in the repressive patriarchy of the tribe. His obstinate nature means that there is no

chance of him accepting the new colonial power, making him its greatest obstacle for which he must be killed (Buescher and Ono 143). Powhatan, on the other hand, is the feminized vision of the native man, a wise old tribal chief who, although initially opposed to the colonial invasion, may be converted into a friend of the colonists if he simply gets to know them better (142).

Rather than having his identity erased by being killed, Powhatan has his agency removed in the relative ease with which he is convinced to accept and aid the white settlers. This caricature of the elderly native man, manipulated by the colonizers due to feminine compassion and a lack of youthful virility, is also present in *Atlantis* in the characterization of Kashekim, Kida's father and the Atlantian king. King Kashekim follows almost the exact same character arc as Powhatan, going from a steadfast defender of the patriarchal tribal order to a benevolent supporter of the neocolonial enterprise. Unlike Powhatan, both Kashekim's agency and identity are erased as he is killed by the violent colonizer. Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* includes only one significant man of color in the entire film, Quasimodo, and his identity as a Romani man is obscured by the animators by giving him pale white skin, which underscores his removal from the gypsy culture to which he belongs by birth. The Roma therefore have no male voice to advocate for their rights within the dominant patriarchal society and are thus completely dependent on the aegis of white men, who will not listen to the woman of color fighting for justice.

### **Villains and Heroes: The White Men of Disney**

Much of the active political work in Disney's neocolonial films is done through the characterization and behaviors of the white men within the narratives. In many instances in these films, the women of color and their communities are simply passive objects for the white men of the story to act upon. A principle conflict in each *Pocahontas*, *Hunchback*, and *Atlantis* revolves

around the antagonism between two (or three, as in *Hunchback*) white men with differing strategies for intercultural relations, one violently colonial and one benevolently neocolonial. The juxtaposition of these two strategies, and their positioning as the only possible strategies once cross-cultural contact has occurred, serve to justify the neocolonial project by highlighting its superiority above all other options (Buescher and Ono 139). Once this justification is made clear, the righteous white man representing neocolonialism must convince the community of color and, perhaps more importantly, his fellow white people that his strategy is the ideal one, to which he always succeeds. In this way, the audience is reassured that the neocolonial project of interracial tolerance, cultural exchange, and one-sided paternalism is acceptable, even heroic (Vera and Gordon 34-35). It is important to note, however, that in each case the neocolonizer's encounter with the community of color would not have been possible without the initial invasion by the colonizer, of which the neocolonizer is initially a part. This mirrors the real-world history of neocolonialism as a progression of previous colonial exploits and the associated privilege of the neocolonizer as a result. Once these two competing images of white men are examined in a global neocolonial context, their places in this paradigm and the work they do in its justification become clear.

### *Image of the Colonizer*

The project of intercultural relations begins in each of the films with the will of the colonizer. This man, always white, middle-aged or older, and hungry for wealth and power, leads the action into the unknown territory of nonwhite lands and cultures. Whether literally leading an expedition onto foreign soil or figuratively leading an ideological mission, the colonizer guides the neocolonizer under his command toward an interaction with those to be colonized. He comes from a place of privilege in relation to the neocolonizer due to his elevated status as a governor,

minister, or general, bestowing him with a sense of entitlement over the land, resources, and bodies he comes in contact with. This sense of entitlement is often grounded in white supremacy and Christian notions of moral superiority, two of the hallmarks of early Eurocentrism, which still prevails as a dominant academic and institutional paradigm today (Blaut 3). By characterizing the colonizer as unquestionably evil and violent, Disney distances itself from this type of blatant white supremacy while still privileging an ideology of Eurocentric diffusion via benevolence and white saviorism.

The quintessential archetype of the European colonizer can be seen in the character of Governor Ratcliffe of *Pocahontas*. From the moment he is introduced, shown boarding the ship to the New World while, in the foreground, a menacing-looking rat scurries aboard with him, he is instantly unlikeable. Compared to the handsome and adventuresome John Smith, Ratcliffe is ugly, obese, and pampered; it is his job not to colonize the New World, but to let the working class men do the dirty work for him while he reaps the benefits. Though they are ostensibly both from London, Ratcliffe speaks with a refined English accent, in stark contrast to Smith's American one. Disney draws on many of the stereotypes of a pompous British aristocrat in order to associate colonialism firmly with British history and not with American foreign relations. Ratcliffe truly showcases the worst of colonialism: he orders his men to completely destroy indigenous lands in search of gold and has no qualms about killing "filthy little heathens." As a villain, Ratcliffe's purpose is to act as Smith's "alter ego" in order to highlight the righteousness of Smith's neocolonial attitude, as well as to accept all of the blame within the narrative for the racism and devastation of colonization and absolve Smith of any guilt for his role in it (Buescher and Ono 141-142).

*The Hunchback of Notre Dame* employs a slightly different colonial trope in its characterization of the villain Claude Frollo, the Parisian Minister of Justice. Instead of being a direct colonizing power in the way of entering the lands of indigenous peoples and exploiting their resources, Frollo is engaged in a more indirect ideological colonization through his association with religious extremism within the Catholic Church. In his case, the objects of colonization are not indigenous peoples but are a migrant community of color, the Romani gypsies, within a predominantly white country. The entire colonial/neocolonial dynamic in *Hunchback* is predicated on the religious conversion efforts of early colonists and on ongoing Eurocentric missionary work. As Rodney asserts in his criticism of European influence in Africa, “missionaries were agents of colonialism” (123), a statement that holds true for missionaries living and working within Europe as well. The Catholic Church, one of the largest religious institutions in the world and the one most directly linked to European colonialism, was able to accrue immense wealth through the exploitation of people of color both in Europe and abroad (Galeano 132). The Church was able to rationalize this colonial project by bending the Word of God to its purposes, at once stressing the irredeemable nature of people of color and the entitlement of the white race as God’s chosen people (Galeano 137; Rodney 124). Frollo engages in the same kind of manipulation of religious doctrine, describing himself in the song “Hellfire” as “purer than/ The common, vulgar, weak, licentious crowd” while also placing blame for his own sins on Esmeralda, whom he refers to as a “witch” and a “siren” while calling for God to send her to hell. European society in general during the time of colonization was deeply misogynistic, and the violence of the “Christian patriarchy which structured [it]” (Smith, *Conquest* 17-18) makes the Catholic Church an easy scapegoat as the source of this hatred toward women and minorities. This allows the more moderate Christian identity of Quasimodo,

and the United States' professed secularism espoused by neocolonialism, to appear nonracist and nonsexist and thus benign.

The white colonial antagonist of *Atlantis* is Captain Lyle Tiberius Rourke, the military commander of the expedition to the titular lost city. Captain Rourke, while given many of the same motivations for power and wealth as Governor Ratcliffe in *Pocahontas*, differs from Ratcliffe in that he is not portrayed as evil or even unlikable from the start. Rourke comes to symbolize the aggressive militarism of U.S. colonialism through his propensity for violence and heavy weaponry, and his initial appearance as an ally to the neocolonist Milo Thatch hints at the early "good intentions" of the American colonial enterprise. However, Thatch and the audience soon realize that Rourke's intentions are less than innocent and colonialism is once again demonized, opening the door for Thatch's benevolent neocolonial ideology to save the day. Rourke's approach toward the colonization of Atlantis embodies the "myth of emptiness" that reigned in the colonial imagination, which claimed that previously uncolonized regions were devoid of civilization and thus open to be settled (Blaut 15). The entire crew of the expedition to Atlantis is initially under the impression that the city is empty of people; when they discover that there are, in fact, still indigenous Atlantians living there, their differing reactions define their position within colonialism. While the neocolonizer Thatch is excited at the opportunity for cultural exchange, the violent colonizer Rourke remains dedicated to his mission of exploitation no matter the cost to human life. This is a key difference in their characterizations and is another way that Disney uplifts neocolonial relations as the ideal in interracial interaction.

### *The White Savior Complex*

Rather than simply being positioned in contrast to the heroines of color in each film, the white male colonizers are always paired with another white man, the neocolonial hero. This

pairing in necessary because the goal of the neocolonial narrative is not only to portray the ills of traditional colonialism, but also to provide a replacement paradigm in the form of the white savior. The white savior complex can be defined as a cultural preoccupation with stories of white individuals going into communities of color and rescuing the people there, either from external white oppression or from their own internal deficiencies (or both), by way of the savior's superior intellect or moral reasoning (Hughey 2). People of color are not empowered enough to save themselves from the oppressive legacy of colonialism, but must instead be saved by an "enlightened" member of the colonizer's society. Vera and Gordon take this criticism a step further by explaining that "[the] natives exist for the white men to realize their own potential" (36). This complex is reproduced time and again by the Walt Disney Company in its Renaissance films. Disney even goes a step further by imbuing the white savior narrative with a romance between the neocolonial savior and the central woman of color, further romanticizing the idea of white dominance disguised as cultural uplift. These interracial romances are noticeably different than Disney's previous same-race relationships, where by the end of the film the (usually white) couple receives a "happily ever after" in the form of a wedding, then departs into the sunset (Lacroix 225). The interracial couples are not allowed a sunset, as their unions are only as legitimate as the neocolonial power relations they are based on allow them to be.

John Smith represents the neocolonial white savior in 1995's *Pocahontas*. Though the film is supposedly about the titular native princess, Smith is the first major character that appears on screen as the animation opens with a scene of a bustling London port. Each of Disney's three neocolonial Renaissance films begins similarly, by showcasing white urban life which sets whiteness as the norm from the get-go. Unlike the nonwhite lands and communities the characters are entering, the white spaces they embark from need no formal introduction (Lacroix

227). Rather, it is the entry into nonwhite spaces that needs to be prefaced as brave and exciting. In this vein, Smith signs onto the journey to the New World due to his sense of adventure, a righteous motivation compared to the unconcealed greed of Governor Ratcliffe. Smith is everything that the violent colonizer Ratcliffe is not – young, handsome, athletic, and charming. While Pocahontas is portrayed as older than her historic counterpart, Smith is made younger, going from a man in his mid-thirties to one in his mid- to late-twenties. He is admittedly attractive, which garners him favor in the eyes of both Pocahontas and the audience.

Smith's charm and good looks allow for his casual racism throughout the film to be excused as a product of his time – as Rosaldo puts it, the “mood of nostalgia [for the colonial period] makes racial domination appear innocent and pure” (qtd. in Buescher and Ono 129). In contrast to the outright and unapologetic racism of Ratcliffe, Smith is only racist on a surface level and is able to see the error of his ways when he meets the right indigenous woman, whose beauty compels him to the side of cultural tolerance. Smith is then washed clean of the blood of the native peoples he has killed previously by taking on the neocolonial project and the modern diffusionism of Western economic and social progress (Buescher and Ono 141, Blaut 28). His new ideology of acceptance and paternalistic authority convinces Ratcliffe's men, the prior agents of colonialism, to join the neocolonial cause and engenders so much support from the native people that they hand over their resources willingly. Though in the end Smith leaves the New World and returns to London, he has succeeded in ameliorating the indigenous people to the white race and its cultural ideologies.

*The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is unique among neocolonial films in that it features two examples of the white savior trope, both white men who fall in love with the gypsy Esmeralda and participate in her liberation from the religious persecution of Claude Frollo. The more

clichéd agent of neocolonialism in *Hunchback* is Captain Phoebus, a soldier under Frollo's command. Parallels between Phoebus and John Smith are clear: both are handsome, blond, white men with military backgrounds who begin to deviate from the colonial paradigm when they meet a beautiful woman of color. Phoebus' character receives less attention than Smith because he is competing as the neocolonial savior with Quasimodo, the eponymous hunchback and Frollo's adopted son. Though Quasimodo is officially of gypsy birth, this fact is only mentioned once, and his fair skin and red hair allow him to pass as white and therefore receive many of the privileges of being a member of the dominant racial group. Of the two men, Phoebus ultimately gets the girl, but Quasimodo does much more of the neocolonial work within the narrative.

It is Quasimodo who introduces and seemingly converts Esmeralda to the Christian religion despite the violent prejudice the religion has shown her in the past. Missionaries have long been agents of Eurocentric diffusion in both the colonial and neocolonial projects (Bluat 24). Quasimodo represents the modern missionary, for whom spiritual conversion is a side effect of instilling cross-cultural tolerance rather than a vehicle for justifying exploitation. While both Frollo and Quasimodo sexualize the gypsy Esmeralda, Quasimodo's objectification of her is allowable because he does not wish to possess her in the way that Frollo does ("She will be mine/ or she will burn!"). In view of the innocent Quasimodo's Catholic faith, Frollo's usage of religion to justify his wrongdoings is a gross perversion of the Church's doctrine rather than the exploitative norm. In this way, the Church is excused from the project of colonialism and is thus free to participate in neocolonialism. The Church can almost be viewed as a third white savior in *Hunchback*: Esmeralda turns to it for protection despite knowing it is the religion of the colonizers, and she prays to a statue of the white Christian Virgin Mary for salvation in "God

Help the Outcasts.” In this song, Esmeralda, the embodiment of the Romani people, is shown as helpless and in need of saving, and for that she is willing to accept the colonizer’s religion.

The principle agent of neocolonialism and the romantic interest of the heroine of color in *Atlantis* is Milo Thatch, an academic from Washington, D.C. chosen for the journey to Atlantis due to his expertise in cartography and linguistics. Unlike Phoebus and Smith before him, Thatch is not conventionally attractive and has little physical strength. He is slim, awkward, and nonthreatening, characteristics which further enforce the idea that neocolonialism is innocent and safe for people of color. Thatch is portrayed as a researcher, interested solely in the intellectual exploits of colonization. Even after his knowledge of the Atlantian language is manipulated by the forces of violent colonialism, Thatch remains dedicated to the pursuit of academic inquiry and cultural exchange.

In addition to his sexual attraction to Kida, the native princess, Thatch fetishizes the entire Atlantian culture as his obsession with every aspect of it. This obsession, though mocked by his companions, is ultimately helpful as it turns out Thatch knows more about the Atlantian language than the Atlantian people themselves. Due to some uniquely advantageous intellectual capacity, Thatch is able to decipher the entire written language of Atlantis, a skill which became lost to the actual people of that civilization over the past few thousand years and must now be returned to them. This “unique historical advantage” is the same as has been used to justify all manner of colonial and neocolonial projects in the past, as has the idea that white Westerners have a superior capability to understand and adapt nonwhite cultures (Blaut 1). Thatch also understands the technology of Atlantis better than the locals, co-opting the incredibly advanced inventions of the Atlantian people as gifts of neocolonialism. These inventions – flying vehicles, projectile weaponry – become necessary to the continued existence of the Atlantians in the face

of the violent colonial power, “[implying] that while technology may not always be desirable, the colonial subject must continue to acquire knowledge and power of technology in order to survive” (Buescher and Ono 146).

### Characters at the Margins

The moral and intellectual superiority of the white male heroes within these narratives is also reinforced through their positioning in relation to their films’ side characters. Given Buescher and Ono’s assertion that “each character represents a particular ideological position in the colonial world” (134), the utility of the characters at the periphery of the narrative should be examined. The colonial expeditions of both *Pocahontas* and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* feature significant numbers of subordinate crew members, who primarily follow the lead of the dominant white male colonizer. This colonizer, embodied by Governor Ratcliffe and Captain Rourke respectively, initially maintains ideological control over his crew. The crews of both films are made up of working class individuals seeking to use the wealth gained from colonization to make a better life for them and their families, showcasing how colonial powers exploited the conditions of the poor in their home countries in order to recruit labor for their own conquests (Greene 92-93). The crew members are portrayed as having blind faith in the goals and ideals of the colonizer, but they are eventually swayed to the side of righteousness by the inspiring white neocolonial savior. This exploitation and subsequent enlightenment have different implications for each of the crews, depending on their racial and gender makeup.

In *Pocahontas*, Ratcliffe’s crew is entirely white, representing the allure of colonialism’s greed to the dominant racial group at the time. The crew members exhibit the same violent racism as Ratcliffe and are ready to commit genocide on the native population, but after a stirring speech by John Smith, they realize that their real enemy has been Ratcliffe all along. The

solidarity exhibited in this moment between the working class crew and the indigenous population underscores the evil of the colonizer and the beneficence of the neocolonizer. It “shifts all guilt for colonialism’s wrongs [...] onto the evil character of Ratcliffe” (Buescher and Ono 142), uniting all of the white characters under the banner of neocolonialism. In a similar way, the citizens of modern Western nations are absolved of blame for the past ills of colonization, so long as they accept and endorse neocolonialism’s economic domination. Racism is thus viewed not as a systemic institution, but as existing only in “a few bad leaders” (Vera and Gordon 74). By examining and defining the complicity of the white public in the ongoing oppression of people of color, this complicity can be challenged and the structures of neocolonialism can begin to be dismantled.

In contrast to the entirely white, male crew of *Pocahontas*, Rourke’s expeditionary crew in *Atlantis* is made up of a diverse mix of races, genders, and ethnicities. Crew members include Vinny Santorini, an Italian explosives expert; Audrey Ramirez, a Puerto Rican female mechanic; and Dr. Joshua Sweet, a mixed race doctor. If Rourke and Thatch represent opposite ends of the spectrum of white colonialism, then the non-white, non-American crew members populate the space in between. Like the crew in *Pocahontas*, they are all originally motivated by greed and subscribe to the same ideas of conquest and wealth accumulation as their leader, the colonizer. Even after Rourke’s true violent nature is revealed, this diverse crew is still unable to let go of their own greed and their ideological subordination to the colonizer. Indeed, when Rourke is about to realize his plan of kidnapping the Atlantian princess and leaving the native population to die, Thatch is the only one to recognize the moral implications and must convince the non-white crew members to dissent against the mission. As is characteristic of many neocolonial films, the

white savior is portrayed as the only character able to see the ethics of cross-cultural cooperation, framing modern whiteness as innately just and good (Hughey 7-8).

## **Conclusion**

These three pivotal films from Disney's Renaissance period of animation – *Pocahontas*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* – each represent a further step taken by Disney to contribute to the neocolonial project. The films utilize the stereotypes of the violent white colonizer, the benevolent white savior, and the fetishized and oppressed woman of color to tell parallel stories of conquest, conflict, and the eventual triumph of modern white intellectualism. Taken in isolation, these films purport to offer an entertaining tale of adventure and romance to children, but when placed in the context of the global neocolonial ideology, they provide an opportunity for the Walt Disney Company to profit off of the circulation of white supremacist and capitalist ideals. The result is a generation of children exposed to messages proclaiming the righteousness of the neocolonial project and its benevolence toward indigenous communities and people of color. It also generates immense wealth for the Walt Disney Company and allows it to maintain global media dominance.

### *The Spoils of the Neocolonial War*

Colonialism involved the drive for capital accumulation among white European societies; likewise, neocolonialism preserves the structures of capital accumulation created under colonialism to serve the economic interests of the new empire, the United States (Blaut 19, 28). The ideology of neocolonialism works to convince the non-Western world, and the Western public, that the social, political, and economic systems of the West are superior to those found elsewhere, and that the diffusion of these systems into the non-West is desirable (Greene 89). The subscription of the public to these neocolonial ideas is essential to maintaining the global

capitalist power structure. According to Shiva, “the economic inequality between the affluent industrialized countries and the poor Third World ones is a product of 500 [sic] years of colonialism, and the continued maintenance and creation of mechanisms for draining wealth out of the Third World” (163). Disney is a direct beneficiary of the gains created by these mechanisms. As a multinational corporation, Disney relies on the continued exploitation of the labor and resources of the underdeveloped world to make its merchandise, much of it based on the characters of its neocolonial cartoons (Giroux and Pollock 191). This means that Disney’s profits are inextricably linked to American capitalist values and their worldwide proliferation. Because of this, it is important for Disney to reproduce narratives that justify Western economic power and American interventionism in countries that might be unreceptive to it.

In order for the corporate heads at Disney to maintain the immense profits the company’s films and merchandise bring in, it is essential to retain the global economic order that prioritizes Western consumption over non-Western development. The three Renaissance films discussed here each grossed roughly \$100 million domestically and \$200 million worldwide in their initial releases, not including merchandise sales (Pallant 93, 95). By appropriating the stories of indigenous and Romani peoples in these franchises, Disney is not only exploiting the resources and labor of people of color, it is exploiting their very histories to further its capital accumulation. In reframing these histories to prioritize the idea of the white savior, Disney “[edits] the public memory to foster nostalgia for a past unsullied by historical injustices [and marshals] reconstructed narratives of American history that serve [its] corporate image” (Giroux and Pollock 32). This “Disneyfied American history” absolves white Americans from blame for the horrors of colonialism and reinforces the morality of neocolonialism (41). With its collective

conscious cleared of guilt, the public can enjoy Disney's reimaginings of colonial history and continue to contribute to its ever-growing wealth.

### *Shaping a Generation*

In addition to contributing to its own capital accumulation, the employment of neocolonial stereotypes in Disney's films serves a dual purpose of indoctrinating a generation of children with the neocolonial worldview. This particular worldview relies heavily on notions of white intellectual superiority, part of a Eurocentric belief system defined by Blaut as diffusionist ethnoscience (32-33). Disney employs this ethnoscience in order to "[eliminate] the negative associations of colonialism with ruthless materialism and [resignify] colonialism as a positive value in a multicultural world" (Buescher and Ono 146). In addition to teaching children that the consumption of media and manufactured products is good, Disney's films also teach them the supremacy of the United States' culture and values (Lacroix 226). In the minds of the American youth viewing these neocolonial films of the late 1990's and early 2000's, the United States' place in the neocolonial project has always been to liberate people of color from oppressive colonial and religious structures and to share with them the superior American way of life. This same type of indoctrination occurred in British schools during the colonial era (Greene 88-89), and it is now occurring more informally through popular media in this country. The children who came of age around the turn of the century when these animated white savior narratives were released are now the young professionals who will come to dominate the global sociopolitical environment in the coming years. Their neocolonial education has the potential to implicate this generation heavily in the maintenance of unequal global structures.

Part of this neocolonial worldview includes the ways that women and people of color are imagined by the public, which affects their disparate treatments in relation to male whiteness.

Disney's "limited view of women's agency and empowerment" positions them as subordinate to the strength and character of male heroes (Giroux and Pollock 108). Its racial stereotyping and erasure of men of color place white men at the top of an unspoken hierarchy, giving them all of the power in their respective environments, whether they are heroes or villains. According to Lacroix, "these images will lay a groundwork for young children's understandings of themselves and others" (227), a groundwork that will affect how they interact with differing identities throughout their lives. As such, children's media needs to be viewed critically, and prevailing structures of power within those media constantly questioned and resisted (Vera and Gordon 192-193). As this new generation finds its place within the global economic and sociopolitical landscape, it is important to analyze the ideologies they have been exposed to and indoctrinated with since childhood, and to work to counteract the negative effects of corporate ideological dominion on the public consciousness.

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