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Ellen W. Gorsevski
Bowling Green State University, elleng@bgsu.edu

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Native America Persists: Pocahontas versus Trump

Ellen W. Gorsevski

School of Media and Communication, Bowling Green State University

ABSTRACT

This essay explores Pocahontas as a polysemic symbol of multiculturalism in the US. Such critique supports decolonizing by illuminating normalizing processes refashioning Indigenous people past and present within masculinized whiteness narratives that dominate the US's current political climate. President Trump's repetition of Pocahontas as slur presents an opportunity to theorize possible ways white supremacist memes invoke colonial myths, inviting intersectional silencing through associatively equating Pocahontas, via *synecdoche*, with Senator Warren as representative of women in progressive politics. I problematize my standpoint as a white scholar with a matrilineal family narrative linkage to Pocahontas. Indigenous histories, bodies and voices may be variously represented by synecdoche in simultaneously positive and negative ways through polysemy. Exploring her mythic role as peacebuilder and multicultural heroine indicates possibilities for agency of those identified with her within multicultural discourses.

Pocahontas, the Indian princess who allegedly saved the life of English colonist John Smith, survives … as an example of an early American heroine. While Smith … embellished the story of his rescue, the importance of Pocahontas to relations between colonists and Native Americans is undisputed. Following her conversion to Christianity and marriage to Englishman John Rolfe, Pocahontas journeyed to England … to demonstrate the ability of new settlers and native tribes to coexist in the Virginia colony. (Exhibition label of Pocahontas's portrait in the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery 2018)

To aid critical multicultural scholars in decrying preponderantly pejorative ways Native Americans' (mis)portrayals dominate US society, this case study explores implications of the now infamous event in 2017 commemorating Navajo Code Talkers, when US President Trump besmirched Pocahontas's name, stereotyping both American Indians and Elizabeth Warren as a female political adversary (Flegenheimer 2018). This essay connects and critiques white supremacist (hereafter WS) discursive processes. Trump's repetition of Pocahontas as slur presents an opportunity to theorize possible ways WS memes invoke colonial myths, inviting intersectional silencing through associatively equating Pocahontas with Warren as representative of current women leaders in progressive politics.

What does Trump's repeated slur tell us about multicultural discourses more broadly? The following essay posits that denigrating Pocahontas can function in regressive and

CONTACT Ellen W. Gorsevski ✉ elleng@bgsu.edu

productive ways. Negating colonized persons diminishes opportunities for transformative multicultural awareness because it inhibits public education that distinguishes Pocahontas as a happy multicultural myth from her more likely existence as a tragic victim/survivor of sexual assault who succumbed to colonial domination and an untimely death abroad. On the other hand, Trump's critics have productively noted and decried his discursive attempts to lampoon Native Americans collectively and to silence women in politics today.

This analysis harnesses one of the most *visually evocative* forms of metonymy called *synecdoche*. Metonymy is defined as using a *visual descriptor* of a noun as an emphatic rhetorical maneuver to invite a memorable interpretation of that item. A sexist metonymy, for

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