

# THE DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE ON AMERICA'S FOUNDING MOTHER MYTH: A STUDY OF PAULA GUNN ALLEN'S POCAHONTAS

A PERSPECTIVA DESCOLONIAL EM RELAÇÃO AO MITO DA MÃE DA NAÇÃO AMERICANA: UM ESTUDO SOBRE A POCAHONTAS, DE PAULA GUNN ALLEN

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**Abstract:** Western History and Literature have been perpetuating the image of women who have played an important role in the creation of the nation. According to those narratives, they emerge as figures that have helped European men to understand, connect and be part of native culture. Most importantly, they abandoned their own culture in order to build a more "civilized" nation in alliance with the Europeans and therefore they are seen as traitors. However, more recent studies tell us different stories about those women, stories that reveal that, in fact, these women were subjugated and/or discredited. From this perspective, this article aims at reflecting upon the oppressive patriarchal colonial forces that build the narrative of native people as the other. In that intent, we will analyze the poem "Pocahontas to Her English Husband, John Rolfe," as well as the biography of Pocahontas, both written by Paula Gunn Allen, a native American writer, who gives voice to the silenced native woman and the tradition of her people.

**Keywords:** Pocahontas. Paula Gunn Allen. Decolonialism. Founding Mother.

**Resumo:** A História e Literatura ocidentais têm perpetuado a imagem de mulheres que desempenharam um papel importante na criação da nação. Segundo essas narrativas, elas emergem como figuras que ajudaram os homens europeus a entender, conectar e fazer parte da cultura nativa. Vale ressaltar que elas abandonaram sua própria cultura para construir uma nação mais "civilizada" em aliança com os europeus e, portanto, são vistas como traidoras. No entanto, estudos mais recentes nos contam histórias diferentes sobre essas mulheres, histórias que revelam que, de fato, essas mulheres foram subjugadas e / ou desacreditadas. Nesta perspectiva, este artigo visa refletir sobre as forças coloniais patriarcais opressivas que constroem a narrativa dos povos nativos como o outro. Nesse sentido, analisaremos o poema "Pocahontas to Her English Husband, John Rolfe", bem como a biografia de Pocahontas, ambas escritas por Paula Gunn Allen, escritora nativa americana, que dá voz à mulher nativa silenciada e à tradição do seu povo.

**Palavras-chave:** Pocahontas. Paula Gunn Allen. Descolonialismo. Mães fundadoras.

## Introduction

One of the main features Literary Canon that needs to be revised is the way it portrays indigenous people in the most celebrated texts throughout the cultures. There is the standard definition that they are savages in need of the white savior responsible for bringing the "civilization" through Western religion and customs. It is common to find works that celebrate submissive and obedient indigenous people who understand the importance of the presence of the European in their homelands and helps to maintain their supremacy.

In Brazilian Literature, for example, José de Alencar is known to be the most representative writer of Indianism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His three novels – *Ubirajara*, *O Guarani*, and *Iracema* –

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are literary icons in the basic education curriculum – especially the last two – and have shaped the way indigenous people are seen in modern Brazilian society. Even though he intended to value the native peoples, his Romantic nationalistic perspective on indigenous peoples carry on the Western prejudicial and stereotypical point of view, especially towards the native woman.

The homonymous protagonist of *Iracema* is depicted as someone whose deep love for the colonizer made her betray her people's tradition. Also, having a name as an anagram of America, she represents the union of the virgin continent with the European colonizer, and their son, Moacir, son of pain and suffering, would be the symbol of the new nation. The suffering and complications in giving birth and the fact that she died alone and in extreme sadness portrays the violence and killings European people have done in the colonies.

In North-American history and culture, we can find the same *modus operandi* towards a very famous indigenous woman: Pocahontas. Many historians and writers have portrayed Pocahontas's history through the lens of the colonizer. We can easily notice it through the famous Disney cartoon that has been shaping the view of Pocahontas as the “princess warrior”, whose love for the white man is the reason for all her heroism.

However, modern writers and researches, such the Native American writer Paula Gunn Allen, have been changing this scenario. She rescued the history of Pocahontas and reconstructed it through decolonial lens. Paula Gunn Allen was born in 1939 in Cubero land, New Mexico. Her father is Lebanese and her mother, Laguna Pueblo-Métis-Scot. This heritage has shaped her critical view of canonical texts, which reflects in her novels, poems, and non-fiction work.

In *Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat* (2004), Allen investigates several sources overlooked by Western researchers, who accepted Smith's story as the only truth. She tells the trajectory of Pocahontas through the point of view of the native woman. In contrast to the typical depiction of the Indian heroin as a passionate and even tragic character, Allen's Pocahontas is an important woman to her people who, due to her powers a “Beloved Woman” – which will be detailed in the next section – helped shape the fate of the Powhatan Alliance<sup>2</sup>, negotiated with Europeans, served as a spy to her people, knew the science of healing through nature and spirituality, and taught the art of cultivate tobacco.

## The Dream-Vision and the relationship with white people

[...] in the wisdom of Laguna Pueblo tradition, we are the stories [...] I have put as many stories into this story as I could: I have borrowed from both Algonquin and English story traditions to locate my interpretation and presentation of Pocahontas's life in the story traditions that shaped it [...]. While there is more, much more, that can be said, and that I trust will be said, I offer *Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat* as an honest beginning. A major rule of the Oral Tradition as I learned it is to tell the truth as best one can. Having done so, one ends one's narrative with a quaint expression that is worth pondering: “This long is my aunt's back-bone”. (ALLEN, 2004, p. 23)

The epigraph of this section is the last paragraph of the Introduction to Allen's biography of Pocahontas. It is possible to notice that the writer does not want to create a *new* or *ultimate* account on Pocahontas's history, but she offers other possibilities than Smith's single story of Pocahontas. By doing so, the author shows a postmodern and postcolonial attitude of distrusting the discourse and pays respect to native peoples. Also, by pointing out her heritage, Allen highlights the importance of native peoples rescuing their voice and taking ownership of their tradition. She questions the dominion of European people in creating native tradition as the *other* and directed by their own interests.

The Chicana writer Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/ La Frontera* (1999, p.38) remarks how colonized peoples have been reproducing the colonizer culture as if it is the central narrative of their

<sup>2</sup> Group of Algonquin peoples in the land of tsenacommacah.

lives. She emphasizes the fact that women are in an even more oppressed condition due to the ruling of patriarchal and Christian forces: “Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power - men.”

This acculturation results in the lack of representativeness of women as agents of their own existences. Instead, women are raised to believe that they are dependable of men: they must put their efforts only on being submissive wives and mothers, whose concern should be staying in the backstage while men achieve their success.

It is the position regarded to Pocahontas in Smith’s narrative, who constructed the Indian woman as someone who helped the settlers conquer lands and wealth moved by love and sense of subservience. The scene that starts the narrative of their relationship portrays Pocahontas as the innocent Indian who jumped onto Smith’s lap as if she saw on him the figure of a hero.

Nevertheless, Gunn Allen, in her book *Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat* (2004, p.28), explains the background of this scene. Years before the arrival of the Capitan John Smith to The United States, Pocahontas had her *apowa*, a Dream-vision. She was directed to a clearing in the middle of the woods, an area of powerful energy, a *hobbomak*, “a natural, sacred structure, by her *manito* – her sacred medicine power, her connection to the Great Spirits that directed her spiritual path. She would have gone at the direction of the Council of Women, responsible for teaching and guiding her along with the direction of her *manito*”.

According to Powhatan Tradition, *hobbomaks* share the same *powa* – energy – of human beings, animals, elements of nature, etc. The *powa* is the force capable of holding everything in its place, working the way they are supposed to. The *hobbomak* was the place for Pocahontas’s Dream-Vision, which

[...] would inform her of her place within great events and changes ahead. Dream-Visions are maps for navigating one’s life path. Composed of messages coded in the language of the *manito aki*, the spirit world, Dream-Visions came accompanied by a guidebook, the Oral tradition; and by travel guides: one’s guardian spirit, or *powagan*, as well as one *midéwewin* teachers/ sponsors. As the pathway to the spirit world, such dreams cross the face the nation, clan, or individual. [...] The Powhatans held that the events or occurrences in a Dream-Vision must be enacted so the *manito* could enter the dreamer’s life and reshape it in accordance with the laws of harmony [...] (ALLEN, 2004, p. 31)

Thus, the Dream-Vision is responsible for indicating the fate of Algonquin people and also serves as an instrument of predicting events. Even before she was born, Pocahontas was named the Beloved Woman due to the Dream-Vision of one of the Elders. Because of that, she had been training since childhood for the rituals, for instance, the *midéwewin*, Medicine Dance, and she had been preparing for her duties, such as the Dream-Vision.

When the time came, Pocahontas’s Dream-Vision revealed the arrival of several ships with strange people followed by the shrinking of the territories familiar to her and the disappearing of the native people. Among other elements, it also contains the image of a bearded man coming with the tide, laying in two rocks, and then looking at her. When she returned from her vision, “she realized that in one hand she held a perfect large wampum shell, a white mollusk with a purple edging and a pearly interior. Her quest was successful; the *manito* had spoken with her.” (ALLEN, 2004, p. 34)

This Dream-Vision would come to reality on a December day in 1607 when Smith changed his original route and ended up captured by Pamuken<sup>3</sup> men. The Great Council decided that some of the Beloved Women would decide whether they would kill him or “remake” him to “give him birth” as one of them. In this way, he would not be a threat but would be bounded to Powhatan people by loyalty.

<sup>3</sup> Also members of the Powhatan Alliance.

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The ceremony was prepared, both for his death and his rebirth. When Pocahontas saw Smith, she

[...] hurls her small body upon Smith's, wraps her arms tightly around him and lays her head over him. Everything stops in a great tableau; only the smoke spirals upward through the roof. Then it is known and a great wail goes up among all the people. They are thanking the spirits, and they begin to dance. (ALLEN, 2004, p. 50)

This attitude was the sign that Smith was the bearded man she saw in her Dream-Vision and that is the reason why he was prevented from death by Pocahontas. This rescue also means that Smith was to be inserted in the Powhatan nation. However, during the time Smith spent with the Algonquins, he did not learn the language or the traditions. In a way, even though he was not in his dominion, he kept his colonialist attitude of imposing his culture. That is one of the reasons to distrust his narrative about the period: the story is being told by one side.

Similar to Anzaldúa, the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Os perigos de uma história única* (2019, p.22-23) has alerted to the relations of power involved in narrating stories:

É impossível falar sobre a história única sem falar do poder. Há uma palavra, uma palavra malvada, em que penso, sempre que penso na a estrutura do poder no mundo. É "nkali". É um substantivo que se pode traduzir por "ser maior do que outro". Tal como os nossos mundos económico e político, as histórias também se definem pelo princípio do "nkali". Como são contadas, quem as conta, quando são contadas, quantas histórias são contadas, estão realmente dependentes do poder.

Even if John Smith was aware of the Dream-Vision – which we are not able to prove –, he would not have told the real conditions of his capture and his experience with the Algonquins, since it would diminish his braveness. Besides, reporting the ritual would give agency to Indigenous people and emphasize their own spiritual guided way of making decisions and taking action, which is opposed to Western Christian culture.

Therefore, retelling his narrative from the native perspective not only provides representativeness, but also rescues an entire culture that has been relegated to the category of folklore. As Adichie (2019, p.32) remarks:

As histórias são importantes. Muitas histórias são importantes. As histórias têm sido usadas para desapropriar e tornar maligno. Mas as histórias também podem ser usadas para dar poder e para humanizar. As histórias podem quebrar a dignidade de um povo. Mas as histórias também podem reparar essa dignidade quebrada.

Allen's efforts to rescue and retell Pocahontas's history not only serve as a correction to the memory of the Indian woman but also brings back her importance to American history. Moreover, it engages in the importance of going back to the Indian heritage and its traditions instead of relying on European biased knowledge.

### **“Pocahontas to her English husband, John Rolfe”**

It is common to see modern narratives of Pocahontas that confuses John Smith and John Rolfe as if they are the same person, or that Pocahontas, although in love with Smith, married Rolfe as a consolation prize. The point is that these narratives share the idea of Pocahontas being madly in love with a white man:

As we have seen, the official story nowhere suggests that Matoaka, a woman well versed in *wisocan*, the practice of medicine, and known to moderns as Pocahontas, came willingly among the English to find herself a husband. Nowhere is the suggestion offered that she “went English” in order to ensure that a steady supply of intelligence be made available to *tsecommacab*. The winning fantasy scenario seems to

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be that she came back because she had fallen so helplessly for old blue eyes that she was forever after pinning after white meat. No stories grace poem, novel, or film about she bespelled both Smith and Rolfe and worked her *powa* on both in a sacred act of world renewal. (ALLEN, 2004, p.212)

The Western accounts on Pocahontas, by choosing to ignore the Powhatan rituals and Dream-Vision, transform Pocahontas in a simplistic and sexist fairy tale favoring the white heroism. Thus, Pocahontas's power, intelligence, and the fact she was in the lineage of leadership of the *tsecommacab* disappear to be replaced by a cheesy romantic relationship. On the other hand, Allen's poem "Pocahontas to her English husband", by giving voice to Pocahontas herself, highlights the agency of the indigenous woman and averts the image of the fragile and ignorant woman – similar to a damsel in distress – in search of a savior:

Had I not cradled you in my arms,  
oh beloved perfidious one,  
you would have died.  
And how many times did I pluck you  
from certain death in the wilderness—  
my world through which you stumbled  
as though blind? (ALLEN, 1997, n.p.)

In the first verses of the poem, the speaker, Pocahontas, claims to herself the responsibility of saving John Rolfe's life more than once since he was foreign to the wilderness of her world. She explains that she not only saved his life but also introduced him to her world about which he knew nothing and this ignorance could have led him to death.

In 1609 the English settler John Rolfe and his wife boarded the *Sea Venture* with destination to Virginia. However, a hurricane made them change their route, so he spent ten months in Bermuda, where his wife and child died. When he finally arrived in Virginia, he joined Smith's settlement in Jamestown. At that time, the settlement was in severe debt with the crown.

According to Smith's narrative, they kidnapped Pocahontas in exchange for a ransom for her tribe. Allen challenges the simple statement that she was taken against her will. She contends that Pocahontas, who was a constant presence in the settlement, did not fight the *abduction* in order to be able to gather intel to her people: "Leaving the matter of her "hiding" unanswered, it is more likely that on this summer day Pocahontas had no particular reason to hold back; indeed, it is very likely that it was just this occasion she was waiting for." (ALLEN, 2004, p. 131)

While living in Jamestown, she met Rolfe and taught him how to cultivate the seed he brought from Bermuda, which would finally pay their debt with England and turn him into one of the most important settlers before the Crown. The seed was tobacco. Pocahontas taught them how to make a crop without the exploitation of nature and keeping the healthy qualities of it. As a medicine woman, she was aware of tobacco's shamanic healing properties and tried to avoid the misuse of the plant – which failed, as we know nowadays:

Had I not set you tasks  
your masters far across the sea  
would have abandoned you—  
did abandon you, as many times they  
left you to reap the harvest of their lies;  
still you survived oh my fair husband  
and brought them gold  
wrung from a harvest I taught you  
to plant: Tobacco. It  
is not without irony that by his crop  
your descendants die, for other powers  
than those you know take part in this. (ALLEN, 1997, n.p.)

These lines demonstrated how she was responsible for saving John Rolfe and the settlers from bankruptcy by teaching them how to plant tobacco. Furthermore, although the grand narrative says that she did so due to love and obedience, Allen (2004) points out that it was part of her Dream-Vision and that it was Pocahontas's intention to be infiltrated among the English settlers in order to share spirituality and native technology. She knew that fighting against the white would be a bloody tragedy, so she found ways to maintain peace between both sides. Furthermore, history has praised only Rolfe and the other settlers in the development of tobacco crops while Indians are mentioned as helpers of this transforming colonial enterprise. Nevertheless, the poem remarks that it was white people's misuse of tobacco that turned it into a killing herb.

In 1614, after Pocahontas married John Rolfe – by that time, she had already been rebaptized as Rebecca – she went to England, where she became part of royal circles. Allen (2004) reports Pocahontas's accounts for English spirituality: according to her, many influential people were interested in the occult and it was her will to exchange “arcane knowledge” with them and to deliver this knowledge back to the Native Elders. Even though she died in her voyage back, Indian spirituality does not end with the death of the body; hence her knowledge would be shared despite the fact she had no physical presence. This presence became also part of British spirituality as Allen (2004, p.95) states: “Pocahontas was a person whose presence has vitalized the imaginations of strangers to these shores, implanting in their subconscious the spirit, the *manito*, whose energy flows intimately within, beyond, and beneath the great forest”.

In the poem, the speaker also mentions her deep-rooted spirituality versus the eloquent, albeit superficial, Rolfe's contact with his God. This eloquence makes him only talk and never listen to her, never learn from her. Putting her in the position of “simple foolish wanton maid” was his strategy to overshadow her powers and raise his importance before the Crown. However, Allen (2004) observes he was well aware of her force and used it to achieve what he wanted. But, when she became dangerous due to the gathering of information about the English Crown, he found a way to eliminate her:

[...] I saw you well. I  
understood the ploy and still protected you,  
going so far as to die in your keeping—  
a wasting, putrefying death, and you,  
deceiver, my husband, father of my son,  
survived, your spirit bearing crop  
slowly from my teaching, taking  
certain life from the wasting of my bones. (ALLEN, 1997, n.p.)

Pocahontas died during the trip back to the Colony even though she was “in [Rolfe's] keeping”. The description of her death as “wasting” and “putrefying” followed by the adjective “deceiver” directed to Rolfe challenges the official version that she died by natural causes. In Pocahontas's biography, Allen (2004) also observes that the failing of providing medical reports and information about her death can be seen as a trace of his involvement in her death.

The final lines present a compelling image of the violent and devastating forces of colonialism. The “wasting of her bones” symbolizes the uncountable deaths of indigenous peoples in American soil and the destruction of nature, traditions and spirituality. More than a simplistic revengeful tone, as one may identify, the poem denounces the colonialism.

The poem marks Allen's attitude of resistance towards colonialism through, among other elements, the inversion of roles. The speaker reveals that the action the Rolfe is proud of – being a successful settler, growing tobacco, having a close relationship to royalty and other notable figures, being close to “God”, among other things – was in fact provided by her following the prophecy of the *manito*. We can also see the inversion through the irony of her descriptions of him during the poem contained in expressions such as “beloved perfidious one”, “blind”, “a foo-

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lish child”, “gaudy dreams”. Those descriptions directed to Rolfe expose characteristics that generally are not white man’s attributes. Also, as we mentioned, they culminate in the word “deceiver” in the last lines of the poem, showing that Pocahontas knew all along the intentions of her husband.

The poem, as well as the biography, install a rupture with the misguided characterization of Pocahontas as a traitor of her nation. Allen observes that she was the one who wanted to be inserted in the English group, and she carried and spread her culture, albeit in subtler ways. As a *Beloved Woman* she was trained since childhood in the diplomatic and political ways of her tribe. Thus, she became an ambassador of Powhatan people, not a pawn as Western culture insists on portraying.

## Final Considerations

This article aimed at a brief analysis of the way Western culture has shaped Pocahontas’s history in order to transform white men in heroes and consolidate the image of the indigenous people, especially women, as submissive and in wanting for a savior. This strategy justifies the colonialist impulse, in other words, the devastation of several lives, cultures and territories.

Allen’s disruptive work is a significant turning point and stimulates the readers and researchers to scrutinize narratives on native peoples towards a decolonial form of thinking to gives voice and representativeness for those who were/ are silenced due to the pervasive colonialist system.

In addition to her extensive and thorough study of the events related to Pocahontas’s history, in an interview, Paula Gunn Allen reports that, after she had read the chapter on Pocahontas in Charles Larson’s *American Indian Fiction*, Pocahontas has spoken to her for more than twenty years in what her call “Algonquian whispers” or “sendings” (BRAXTON, 2001). Those sendings resulted in the texts studied in this article.

For the Western reader, not used to abstract or supernatural realities, it may seem distrustful. However, in Native American culture, it is natural to believe in the “*Manito* life circle”, the “sacred hoop”, which

[...] means that the basic unit of consciousness is not the individual person or being but the all-that-moves-and-is spirit, the great intelligence of deepest space, from which all others arise and derive their vitality. Each individual being within the circle, the sacred hoop, connects with every other; and what happens to one, or what one part does, affects all within the circle. This is the way of the sacred. (ALLEN, 2004, p. 29)

This is a relevant remark of Allen’s work and, along with her preoccupation in creating a narrative that respects oral tradition and brings Powhatan language customs and rituals, represents an attitude named by Mignolo of “Epistemic disobedience” (2009, p. 160):

As we know: the first world has knowledge, the third world has culture; Native Americans have wisdom, Anglo Americans have science. The need for political and epistemic delinking here comes to the fore, as well as decolonializing and decolonial knowledges, necessary steps for imagining and building democratic, just, and non-imperial/colonial societies.

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