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Debunking the White Lies in Janet Rogers's Poem "Pocahontas"

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Abstract

*Janet Rogers is an Indigenous Canadian poet and a recording artist who was born on (January 29, 1963). She is a Mohawk/Tuscarora writer from Six Nations territory. She lives in Coast Salish territory since 1994 and she is known as the Poet Laureate of Victoria, the University of Northern British Columbia Writer-in-Residence for 2015 and the Ontario College of Art and Design NIGIG Visual Culture Visiting Artist in 2016. The literary heritage she has consisted of *Splitting the Heart*, Ekstasis 2007, *Red Erotic*, Ojistab 2010, *Unearthed*, Leaf 2011, "Peace in Duress" Talonbooks 2014, *Totem Poles and Railroads* 2016 and *Between Spirit and Emotion* 2018. (Vancouver Poetry House.com).*

Keywords: Rogers, Indigenous, White People, Pocahontas, Natives, White Lies.

Introduction

Rogers portrays the way of life, customs, and, most importantly, suffering of the Indigenous people. She dedicates her writings to mirroring her people and recording their lives, and all of her collections show the suffering they endure. Her 2016 collection *Totem Poles and Railroads*, which outlines the 500-year history of the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian business, serves as an example of her poetry. To take a straight passage from the collection's cover is a reasonable description:

Janet Rogers expands on that definition with a playful, culturally powerful and, at times experimental voice. She pays honor for her poetic characters- real and imagined, historical and present day from Sacajawea to Nina Simone. Placing Poetry at the center of our current post-residential school/present day reconciliation reality, Rogers's words are intimate, challenging, thought-provoking, and always personal. (*Totem Poles and Railroads*, 2016).

Much of what Rogers attempts to convey in this book is included in the title alone. Her goal is to achieve that her people are the heirs of their land and that they existed since ever as the first nation of all other nations. She has been informed and witnessed numerous attempts by the colonizers to erase the Indigenous people existence, claiming that the land is theirs and to rewrite the history with their false narratives. Thus, she employs a deft strategy to demonstrate the Indigenous long rooted existence by referencing the story of the Totem poles and railroads which are monumental carvings that are found in the Western Canada and Northern-east of the United States of America (Jonaitis and Glass, 2010). They are created by the First Nations of the Pacific Northwest to "represent and commemorate ancestry, histories, people, or events" (Jonaitis and Glass, 2010). They consist of poles, posts, pillars craved with symbols and figures of animals. These totem poles were discovered in various years, and there is still a search ongoing for more. Every single one of them dates back thousands of years, providing unwavering evidence of the Indigenous people's lengthy history as the original occupants of the area.

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In addition to the title of the collection, Rogers chooses the cover artwork by the contemporary digital artist Sonny Assu, an Indigenous painter who adapts the Kwakwaka'wakw art of British Columbia. His painting on the cover is from a collection that is called "We come to Witness"¹ 2014. His painting of the cover of *Totem Poles and Railroads* is an intervention and insertion of Ovid and U-shapes on the painting of Emily Carr² By including these forms on a well-known Canadian painting as indicators of the existence of the Indigenous people, Assu hopes to assert that the race of Indigenous people has existed and will continue to exist. It is a protest against the White colonists' declaration that they will never be able to eradicate Indigenous presence. (Vancouver Art Gallery).

The message of Rogers is clearly striking from the very beginning starting with the title, the artwork of the cover and then to the design and the layout of the pages and the font size of the poems. Some of the pages backgrounds are black and others are white. Some poems 'titles are expanded to the next page and the font size differs from line to line. There are long spaces between word and another in some poems as a way of creating confusing and questioning silence. Moreover the pages are without numbers, thus each poem could be the first or the last poem. The book's layout and design closely resemble the poet's writing style and the ideas she expresses—strong, audacious, rebellious truths that are simultaneously intensely felt and strong.

Debunking the White Lies in Janet Rogers's Poem "Pocahontas"

Rogers's poems are poems about rewriting the history from an Indigenous view. The true view as she believes. One of her aim is to debunk what the White people called the Western history, especially the American and Canadian history where she argues in her collection *Totem Poles and Railroads* that most of the White people history is a "myth" and attempt to hide and deny the existence of the original owner of the land they occupied. It is also to give the attribute of finding the land and owning it to themselves (Farajullah, Noor Zaid, and Yousif, Anan Alkass. (2022:). As she refers in her poem "Proclamation":

There will
always be.
things we don't
know
a secret
a lesson
a lie awaiting liberation.
whole histories of this (26-33)

In telling the stories of public figures like Sacajawea, Pocahontas and Laura Secord, Rogers insists on saving one of the most important traditions that is the Oral Tradition³. She tells these stories from the view of her Indigenous people who inherited these stories orally and kept telling them from one generation to another to save their history so to save their race. While civilized cultures as the colonizers doubt such a tradition and consider it as uncivilized one, Rogers assures that it is more reliable than their "fiction" as she calls it in her poem "Red Earth, White Lies":

New world born from myth.
Scientific rejected creation stories
Christian notations and bible fiction
Inflexible spiritual doctrines
Of discovery (1-5)

It is in her narrative poems where she tries to keep the cycle of telling stories as a way of looking to the past with pride and acceptance, to accept their reality that the White people tried hardly to deface. Her

poems are testimonies that are to carve all the beautiful memories on the rocks of their own land as symbols of belonging and ownership. Rogers's poems are to claim the Indigenous people presence, to recognize them as they should be and to acknowledge their existence and their rights. Thus, Rogers offers a therapy through her collection of *Totem Poles and Railroads*. It is a journey of self-healing for her and her readers generally and the Indigenous people specifically from their trauma⁴. Rogers's poems are a sunlight that shines to enlighten the dark and hidden reality:

I am writing,
new histories
absent of
white lies
from this
brown face. (Red Earth, White Lies, 100-105)

Rogers applies the contrast of the "white" and "Brown" color to declare her idea about the White people colonizers who state lies and the Indigenous brown faces who has true intentions to tell truths. She applies the binary opposition method to enhance that her idea that the original owner of the land tell true stories about the history of their land and that White people tell nothing but lies. By this, Rogers gives a direct and fixed reason that her Native people are the real owner of the land and that they know the facts of their land. For this reason, Rogers tackles one of the most important stories, a story of a loved iconic public character; Pocahontas.

Pocahontas is known by her famous account of Disney. However, Janet Rogers tackles a very different account for the same character in her poem "Pocahontas". Pocahontas must be remembered as a real person. She is not the myth that was created and the feelings that were spoken on her behalf were never hers. Away from the image that was created for her, she was a normal child who knew how to have fun and play under the trees of Virginia's woods, (The Toro Historical Review, 2022). For this reason she was called Pocahontas which means "The playful one" or "ill-behaved child" but that was her nickname. The name she was born with in 1596 was "Amonute" and another private name "Motoaka" which means kindle, (Smithsonian magazine).

Pocahontas was one among many siblings, but she was the favorite one of her father the chief of Potowomac tribe of the Werowocomoco town, (Custalow and Daniel, 2007). She lost her mother as she entered the world as it is mentioned in the very beginning of the poem:

My mother left this world as I entered
I was daddy's princess from the day I was born.
At the end of the 1500s we roamed.
We were little to distinguish our social standings.
Creator could see who was who was who
And that was all that mattered. (1-6)

As an adult woman, Pocahontas learned all the skills of an indigenous woman and that is stated in details by Roger so that to show the responsibility an indigenous little girl has as a grown up woman:

Firewood gathering, house building, food growing, preparing and serving.
teaching, childbearing, fire keeping, wearing, washing, pot making.
carving, meat processing, love making, hide tanning, harvesting.
water hauling, sewing, child rearing, going to sleep and doing it all again. (23-27)

"Pocahontas" is a book written by Carl Binder, Alan Menken, Susannah Grant, Philip LaZebnik and

Stephen Schwartz, published in May 1995 by Disney Editions. In the scenario of Disney, the story was like the real one in the sense that it focuses on the main character Pocahontas as the delightful, lively and flirtatious character. She was pictured with a brown face so as her long hair color with a quite feminine body. Although her age was never mentioned in the animated movie, she was displayed as a mature girl. Mature enough to have a romantic relationship with John Smith. John Smith is the British blond captain who aspired to settle in Virginia as the new land. He was depicted as the savor of his fellows who came to find gold and brag about his long experience of how he won his battles against Native Americans, (Baldwin and Warner, 2016).

The animated movie focused on the relationship between Pocahontas and John Smith and drove audience to fantasize about the hard love to be fulfilled between two different cultures. This old scenario that will not get old in which the filmmakers use the element of hope on love that will solve all the differences and problems that had and might be occurred. In Pocahontas, the filmmakers placed this relationship in to make the audience forget about the scene of the ecological disaster that the new settlers made when they entered the land, as if the price was justified when this love story showed up.

Moreover, Disney version of the story illustrated the repetitive image of the indigenous people as the savage and uncivilized heathens. This was emphasized in the character of an indigenous warrior, Kocoum whose presented as Pocahontas husband to be. He was pictured as Pocahontas dream killer who she was afraid to get to marry him. Kocoum was barbaric, ruthless and has no mercy as any other indigenous would be pictured. He was displayed as a tough fighter, for this reason in particular, the audience was never shown a romantic side of him and he never expressed his love for Pocahontas although he loved her. In fact, the way he was killed was justified because he tried to kill John Smith after he witnessed the scene of Pocahontas and Smith's kiss. Thus, the audience has to come up with the conclusion that Smith's friend Thomas had no choice but to kill Kocoum to save Smith's life, (Baldwin and Warner, 2016).

As a response for Kocoum's death Powhatan, Pocahontas's father, decided to captivate John Smith and to kill him, but Pocahontas was ready to save her love and bravely told her father "if you kill him, you'll have to kill me too", (Smith, 2019). For this noble action that she had done and her wise words which chose peace and love over hatred, Powhatan admitted that "my daughter speaks with the wisdom beyond her years", (39). At the end of Disney's version of story, Captain Smith and his crew had to return to their mother land. Smith gave Pocahontas the right to choose either to come back with him or to stay with her people. As wise as she had to be she chose to stay, a way to keep peace and bridge between the settlers and Natives.

In reality, Pocahontas was described as:

Graceful young woman with alert dark eyes elongated at the corners,
And lovely expressive hands. Her long, dark hair streamed down her.
Back, though at the sickles and over her forehead it was now cut short.
in the fashion of unmarried Powhatan girls. Gentle and outgoing
by nature, yet she was every inch a princess. (Woodward, 1969)

To talk about the real story of Pocahontas, it must be first known that many of the books that were written about her are not really true. Camilla Townsend, author of Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma 2005, and a history professor at Rutgers University has directly delivered the fact that:

There are truly hundreds of books over the many years that have been written about her. But when I tried to look into it, I found that most of them were full of hogwash. Many of them had been written by people who weren't historians. Others were historians, ... and other were taking it for granted that if something had been repeated several times in other people's works, it must be true. (The Toro Historical Review, 2022)

Therefore, it can be too many documents about Pocahontas, but as Townsend said, “much of what had been repeated about her wasn’t true at all”. One of the main prominent distorted parts of her story is the romantic relationship between her and John Smith. When John Smith arrived, Pocahontas was around eleven to twelve years old. The role she played was a role of an ambassador, messenger and a translator that kept the relationship between her tribe and the new settlers in peace. (The Toro Historical Review, 2022)

Later on Smith was captivated by Opechancanough, Powhatan’s younger brother. Then he was taken by Powhatan who sentenced him to death until Pocahontas plead for his freedom and placed her head over his to prevent his head from beheaded. After that Powhatan sent Smith back to Jamestown, the place where the new settlers settled in. Smith’s job with Powhatan was to trade. He offers guns and tools in exchange for some important supplies and food. Smith started to get greedy and asked for more with nothing in exchange. For this reason Powhatan stopped the pact with him and saw that there is no need for him anymore, as it is quoted in Rogers’s lines:

His name was John.
My uncle captured him.
Shoed him off like a prize
his captured captain.
Offered him to my father this.
blue-eyed British.
Foolish is what they called him. (28-34)

Rogers has made it clear that Pocahontas and Smith had had no romantic relationship, “Famous he and I became. /Together but we were never together/ in that way.” (35-37). Reading these lines come up with the conclusion that all the made up stories about Smith and Pocahontas relationship were nothing but rumors or for the indigenous people nowadays, it is an accusation. Pocahontas help for Smith came out of her natural kindness and sense of responsibility. While for Smith, he saw nothing of her more than a tool to be used for his personal needs to negotiate with her tribe.

Indigenous people were marked with different labels. One of these labels was savage. Throughout telling the story of Pocahontas, Rogers indirectly reversed this idea and shows who the real savage is. The new settlers or in more accurate word the colonizers who came to steal and occupied the land, to destroy, to control and kill the real owners of the land or the Indigenous people, the real owner of the land who tried to protect their land, culture and people. The original owners did nothing rather than answering the call of protecting what is already theirs. This is seen in Pocahontas herself when her father ordered to beheaded Smith, Pocahontas said,

My father seeing no need for him
wanted to bash his head in
and asked my permission.
No father let him go.
Are we not to be kind to those?
seeking survival as we do?
This man has two legs
two arms like us
let him live.
Let him live among us.
We adopted him. (38-48)

It is as so called the savage people at the end, especially Pocahontas, who saved the civilized one from being murdered. In these two lines “This man has two legs/ two arms like us.” (44-45), where Rogers

shows her readers that kindness and mercy need no high degree or certain civilization to be given. No knowledge is needed to recognize a human being. Smith has "Two legs" and "two arms" and that was enough to save his life.

In line (61) of the poem, Rogers created a metaphor which is "intoxicating elixir" as a way to describe Pocahontas. In this sense the poet tried to explain that Pocahontas played the role of a remedy for the two quarreled parties her people and the new settlers. What Rogers is trying to show that Pocahontas was a girl who thought of herself as a one who tried everything to save other lives no matter to which party they are aside. It can be said that Rogers has succeeded in the recount of picturing Pocahontas as a savor in these lines:

I was the intoxicating elixir to their
common and hostile ways.
Everyone got what they wanted
after the visit I paid. (61-64)

Pocahontas sense of humanity and honesty brought her to her final terminal. When Smith felt something was not going well, he asked her, and she could not help it but to tell what she knew:

Daddy's plan was to retreat in the forest.
and ambush them in sleep.
But Mister Smith pulled me aside.
and having never told a lie I gave him the truth. (71-74)

As it is obvious in the lines quoted above, Pocahontas as a princess had been raised up on the principles of honesty, honor, bravery and nobility, this is why she would never tell a lie, "and having never told a lie I gave him truth."

Different stories can be known and read about Pocahontas' life. One of them is that which has considered her as (MMIW)⁵. It is narrated as Pocahontas being brutally raped by the settlers who kidnaped and took her as a hostage. Then she was murdered, and her corpse was never found. Rogers relied on the version of the story where Pocahontas was kidnaped and might be raped in the sense of having a husband, John Rolfe that she never loved: "I did this for love?/ I would never know my father's love again." (118-19). John Rolfe is no better than John Smith, he saw of her a card to access to the indigenous tribes to flourish his tobacco trade, "He taught me his tongue/ and brought tobacco to my people after we wed." (112-13).

It was true in all versions of Pocahontas's stories that she was taken as a hostage as a compensation for the captivated colonizers men. The same account is confirmed by Janet Rogers's story:

Taken as a hostage upon
a British captured for ransom.
The price was guns and the release of their
own men. (92-95)

The part of the story where Rogers highly disagree with the other versions of Pocahontas's stories is that of her being raped several times by several men as in mentioned in the documentation of Moore Branch. Rogers argues that Pocahontas's charm and aura of a princess spared her life: "Gifted with special status and blessed with/ girlish charm I was spared harm and taken/ instead." (96-98). She was instead taken as a sample of an obedient Indigenous woman who can be saved if she continues behave in a good manner. It was propaganda for the White new comers to go out to the public with the idea that they are good to those who act well, showing the case as if it is the Indigenous people choice to be killed or to be saved.

Rogers makes a comparison between the life of Indigenous people and the colonizer's life. This is two birds with one stone; it is a way to explain what Pocahontas lost that led to her sickness when she was taken away from her homeland. Secondly, Rogers tells people that the Indigenous way of living is not savage but free and not barbaric but close to nature. They do not have to pretend; they just have to live their life as it is. This comparison has made when Pocahontas compares her life as princess before her kidnap and departure to the White settlers' land with the life of the queen of Britain:

I married a young man my father knew and approved

I lost nothing in the union.

My princess crown only grew.

Lived with him but maintained my own council.

Freedom was my constant companion.

It was my nature so naturally I would come and
go

and commune with whom I'd choose. (81-89)

On the other hand, the life of the queen of Britain which is depicted by Pocahontas' view as:

A woman who shown with stones
of every colour.

She sat with her sadness
upon a golden throne.

Never a true friend did she know.

My compassion turned confusion
watching people living every day
against their own nature.

Did they never know freedom?

My heart was touched
by a widower in mourning. (101-110)

Thus, the marriage and the crown took nothing of Pocahontas, it grew instead and added to her privileges while the crown of the queen of Britain has only fancy shape and colorful stones but an unhappy influence on her. Pocahontas can commune with whom she would like while the queen did not know any friend, she and her people act against their own nature on the other hand Pocahontas' constant friend was freedom and act naturally as she wanted.

From this early realization of the miserable life Pocahontas saw away from her homeland, it can be assumed that she was unhappy and all of her hope was to get back to her home. On the contrary of what the White settlers tried to circulate. According to Robert S. Tilton in his book *Pocahontas: the Evolution of an American Narrative* (1994), Pocahontas was died during her journey back to her home to Virginia. Whether it is true that Pocahontas attempted to return to her homeland or not, her alienation from her nation was a reason of her early death, "... the danger of an alienation from one's homeland and culture are crucial for people who have been raised between two countries and different societies." (Tilton, 1994, 184)

In most of the Indigenous accounts that are documented by authors and historians, Pocahontas was kidnaped. Even though she was not kidnaped, she was fooled and told that she would have a better life than what she had. A life that she dreamt of and later on she discovered the opposite.

Pocahontas will become more prevalent as contemporary critics continue to discuss the often ambivalent and poignant positions of people who have been taught to give up their native cultures in favor of that of dominant political power (Tilton, 1994).

This concept is illustrated by the final lines of Roger's poem:

I died at twenty-one.

Disease follows trust mistreated.

My death was wretched

But expected.

Living amongst the others

And trading my honor

For a place amongst them. (128-37)

Rogers sums it up in line (132), when she said, "Disease follows trust mistreated", she shows the bill Pocahontas paid for trusting the colonists promises. The immediate question that rose after one finishes reading the poem, does the life that Pocahontas have had worth the price she paid for? She does not give her soul away, but she was "trading [her] honor/ for a place amongst them." Rogers does not blame a little girl as much as she exposes the fact that White people are not the good people who came to save the Indigenous people as they claim. The reason is obvious because for Pocahontas to live with them, she has to give her honor and soul yet she never was one of them nor was accepted amongst them. She was one of their experiments and a tool they used to make peace for a while between them and the Powhatan tribe

Although she was baptized, dressed up like them, get married to John Rolfe and even gave a birth to an English boy, but her brown face and tattered English kept her apart from them. She was nothing to them but a puppet through whom they can tell fake stories about the noble cause they came with to invade a pre-inhabited land that is not theirs. Stories like how they came to cultivate, educate, Christianize, help and built are all excuses they invented. (Kupperman, 2021)

Rogers uses words to counter the weapons used by the colonizers to silence the Indigenous people. Their numerous cruel and severe methods of suppressing the Indigenous people were crimes against humanity. Generations of Indigenous people have been traumatized by the destruction of the environment and the land, cultural and human genocides, ethnic cleansing, murders, sexual abuse, residential schools, and a host of other issues. The worst of all is that White people, as the dominant power, falsify and deceive Indigenous people's history by rewriting it from their point of view. Rogers makes it her mission to speak for the voiceless Indigenous people by seeking out and recording the untold stories. Pocahontas's poem shouts aloud part of the truths about the original owner's history.

To conclude, Rogers's captivating and artistic retelling of Pocahontas's story captivates the reader all the way through the poem's 137 lines. Plot advancement is achieved by her skillful word choice and writing style. A reader will enjoy the poem's beauty on the one hand, and the true story from an Indigenous perspective on the other. These are two joys found in reading a work of literature. Rogers was eventually successful in her mission of documenting her people's past.

Ethics Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent This research did not involve human or animal subjects, nor did it use any sensitive data. Therefore, ethical approval was not required.

Competing Interest, I declare that there are no competing interests.

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Data Availability No data were generated or analyzed during this study because this research involved a theoretical review of existing literature.

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The Footnotes

1. It is a slang that is used widely among the Indigenous people who have witnessed terrible experiences because of the colonizers and mostly those who have been in the Residential Schools. Most of them were encouraged to witness in front of the whole world telling their stories as a way of documentation, debunking the ugly reality of the White colonizers and letting their traumatized childhood out to be free again (Vancouver Art Gallery).
2. Emily Carr painter, writer (born 13 December 1871 in Victoria, BC; died 2 March 1945 in Victoria). She was one of the pre-eminent Canadian painters of the first half of the 20th century. Carr's parents were British immigrants. They settled in the small provincial town of Victoria, British Columbia. Her paintings were mainly depicting the nature of Canada and were criticized as "appropriations of Indigenous culture" (The Canadian Encyclopedia).
3. "Oral traditions are a form of shared history in specific Native communities and are a source of historical knowledge. Indigenous peoples have strong storytelling traditions. Histories, stories, and religious rites were/are passed from the memories of one generation to the next through the spoken word. The worldview of Native people is intricately woven into the fabric of language and ways of speaking. The oral tradition connects past, present, and future and tightens tribal and familial bonds. These oral traditions can provide moral lessons for children on how to behave; they can communicate creative stories, cultural beliefs, and personal, family, or tribal history and experiences. Creation stories are often sacred and only told through the oral tradition." (National Museum of the American Indian).
4. Trauma is defined as "the nemesis of our lives. Sometimes it swamps us; at other times it haunts us. It is the fracture that stops us from running as we would wish. The word trauma comes from the Greek word meaning wound, or penetration can range from minor to lethal, but it always leaves a scar and a vulnerability." Or in traumatology, trauma is "the major upheavals and catastrophes that cause significant suffering." (Encyclopedia of Trauma, 2012).
5. MMIW can be defined as "Missing and Murdered Indigenous woman. It is a movement that advocates for the end of violence against Native women." (wernative.org).

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