

Settler Aesthetics: Visualizing the Spectacle of Orinary Moments in The New World

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In 2005 acclaimed director Terrence Malick released his fourth film *The New World*. Early suspicions of an art film adaptation of a Pocahontas-based story included a mix of worry and wonder among critics. Contemporary reviews of the film ranged from praiseworthy (Mick LaSalle of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian*) to censorious (Stephen Hunter of *The Washington Post*). Rumours of Malick incorporating Indigenous talent, historic Algonquin language, tribal consultation, and authentic reconstruction of Jamestown helped to build anticipation over the project. For certain audiences, the final result proved to be both visceral and astounding. Critics such as John Patterson for *The Guardian* and Matt Zoller Seitz for *Reverse Shot*, have since heralded *The New World* as one of the best films of its decade, and an affective story of the melancholic loss of land and love between colonial explorer John Smith and Matoaka/Pocahontas (born Amonute). Nevertheless, a major inconsistency underlying the film is the fact that Matoaka (whose name we will honour in this review) was never romantically involved with Smith in real life. Moreover, her enduring story as an appropriated figure of colonial assimilation requires deeper scrutiny in challenging Malick's apparent masterpiece. Here, in *Settler Aesthetics: Visualizing the Spectacle of Orinary Moments in The New World*, Mishuana Goeman interrogates the defining settler aesthetics within Malick's film, to challenge longstanding myths surrounding orinary encounters. In focusing exclusively on *The New World*, her text vitality extends both research on Malick and Indigenous North American studies in her analysis of a film that manages to be both transformative and destructive in our perceptions of Matoaka and her legacy.

When Malick released *The New World* (hereafter *TNW*), the adaptation of this fictive love story came as a surprise for many viewers. Much attention has been paid to *TNW*'s poetic and striking visual language—it was also the inaugural film of Emmanuel Lubezki and Malick's working partnership, which would continue with his opus *The Tree of Life* (2011) and the post-*Tree* 'Weightless Trilogy' films. *TNW* was distinctive for its attempts to authentically represent the Indigenous cultures of present-day Virginia. Extensive research informed Jack Fisk's set design and Jacqueline West's costuming, while North American Indigenous actors were hired to play the Powhatan peoples (Tsenacommacah)—more specifically, the Pamunkey Indian Tribe. Similarly, the film was shot on location throughout Tidewater Virginia, and original Algonquin language was employed through the narrative, under the direction of American linguist Blair A. Rubes. While these efforts to capture historical authenticity are admirable and do invoke a degree of 'visual sovereignty,' the underlying ideology of the story still remains problematic (Goeman, 2023: 13). Positioning these colonial encounters with First Peoples of eastern North America as difficult yet sublimated by an apparent love story between Matoaka (Q'orianka Kilcher), Smith (Colin Farrell), and later John Rolfe (Christian Bale), erases the true colonial violence at the heart of these histories.

Malick is often known for his affective visual imagery and cryptic romantic narratives. Goeman crucially addresses the problematic aspects of the film's content, in its endorsement of a historically inaccurate colonial romance narrative, whatever its artistic merits as an affective visual work. In so doing, she challenges conceptions of the originary myth as a wondrous encounter with the 'New World,' instead enabling a vital perspective in readdressing the obfuscated narrative of Matoaka and the ethics of rendering cinematic spectacles of originary settler history moments. Despite Malick's approach to the representation and visual sovereignty of native peoples within the film, Goeman provokes deeper inquiries into the settler aesthetics that are upheld even in stunning films such as *TNW* which strive for cultural authenticity.

In her introduction, Goeman contends that 'settler aesthetics' downplay the history of colonial conflict with Indigenous communities, and instead privilege romanticised narratives as the focal point for audiences. She writes: 'These aesthetics, or critical reflections on how settler art assigns values, and creates and imagines worlds, enable the viewer to lament the loss without being accountable to the afterlife of colonialism,' adding that a 'settler aesthetic merges with that of the sublime, and evokes a greatness at the precipice of encounter' (3). While examining these aesthetic issues is central to her study, one important point that Goeman also establishes within the monograph is that it is not her intention to outright dismiss Malick as an inventive and meditative filmmaker. Rather, she endeavours to call attention to how his techniques create certain settler aesthetics and cinematic geographies, and how the visual can construct limiting cultural insights, despite the best intentions. Across four succinct chapters, Goeman interrogates this complicated film by offering essential Indigenous feminist perspectives, which have been notably neglected in Malick scholarship. She examines cinematic geographies through aesthetic conceptions involving terra nullius. She addresses the privileged romanticisation of colonial narratives. And finally, Goeman studies the contemporary politics of recognition for Virginia Tribal Nations.

Chapter 1, 'The Consumption of Mythic Romance and Innocence' addresses the commonly perceived romanticised history of Matoaka, why this narrative arose historically, and how this fictional settler narrative ultimately undermines Malick's film. Goeman also defines important terms of originary moments, settler colonialism, and concepts of the spectacle that greatly inform *TNW*. In highlighting the romantic myth surrounding this story, she acknowledges how early colonial depictions of the Americas idealised the so-called 'New World' as a feminised, and sexualised Indigenous symbol in the emergence of a new nation (30-31). This romantic depiction of the colonial encounter with the Powhatan nations seeks to undermine the inherent violence of colonialism, instead generating an impression of Matoaka as a symbol of unfortunate, yet inevitable cultural assimilation. Goeman writes: 'The myth, mired in the settler aesthetics of settler innocence and innocence lost, lacks accountability to the disregard for consent of bodily integrity and rights to land' (35). Goeman also draws from feminist scholar Rayna Green and her notion of 'The Pocahontas Perplex,' which contends that impressions of Matoaka as a role model for Indigenous peoples, and the narrative of her heteronormative coupling, dangerously obscures colonial violence (30-35). In this version of the myth, Matoaka is

rendered an *ingenue* both in the popular historical consciousness of America and within *TNW*.

Chapter 2, 'Settler Aesthetics and the Making of Cinematic Geographies,' discusses the romanticisation of land through Malick's visual techniques, and how 'even in the hands of a master like Malick' this 'reproduces a geographic settler aesthetic [...] and by doing so evacuates American Indian histories and geographies' (49). Goeman highlights how perceived colonial ownership of land was fuelled by prevailing Lockean concepts that promised individual rights to land through resource extraction, hard labor, and by dehumanising native people and their inherent rights to land. Colonial myths surrounding Matoaka further justified this property theft by emphasising her role as the mother of a new nation, and not as shaped by her relationality to land.

'Filmic Apologies and Indigenous Labor' analyses the apparent positive aspects of Malick's production, particularly the authenticity of *TNW*'s *mise-en-scène*, while recognising the pervasive features of settler aesthetics that disrupt the more admirable aspects of the film. Goeman's third chapter incorporates the research perspectives of Patrick Wolfe, and his definition of settler colonialism, and Joanne Barker's feminist critiques, which address the hyper-sexualisation of Matoaka and the circulation of false colonial narratives. Goeman ultimately interrogates the film's 'attempt to correct cinematic colonialism by creating a simulation of the real' (16). And Malick falls short of his aspirations for authenticity by privileging certain settler aesthetics that attenuate the otherwise promising Indigenous participation in *TNW*. In the film's attempts to evoke themes of environmental loss and melancholic romance don't fully work because Malick focuses too much on the Smith-Matoaka-Rolfe romantic entanglements as a transformative journey, rather than centralising the Pamunkey narrative of conflict, endurance, and autonomy against the destruction of colonialism.

In her final chapter "'The New World" of Race, U.S. Law, and the Politics of Recognition,' Goeman brings these critical conversations into the present, by looking to contemporary Indigenous nations of Virginia and their collective struggle for federal recognition as tribes. The understanding that the U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs did not grant the Pamunkey people official tribal recognition until 2015, speaks to the enduring legacy of colonialism. Virginia Tribal Nations have continued fighting for federal acknowledgment for over a decade after the release of *TNW*, and most of these nations were not appropriately recognised until 2018. The 'paper genocide' that comes from these fights for federal recognition demonstrates how 'Malick's *TNW* offers up a spectacle of originary moments, recirculating the myth and again placing Indians in place and in the past' (147). Moreover, the initial apprehension from the Virginia Council of Tribes (including the Pamunkey) to endorse the film, is reflected in their limited participation when Malick first approached them for consultation and support. Much of this hesitation surely owes to Malick's interest in filming a historically misinterpreted love story, instead of focusing on the cultural complexity of the Pamunkey Indian Tribe and their political struggles with the colonial forces.

Overall, Goeman's Indigenous feminist perspective to this subject draws on personal encounters with 'the apparition of Pocahontas' in connection to her role as an Indigenous studies scholar (20). Her critical approach to Malick is also complex and interesting, given the prevailing scholarship on him. Many scholars of Malick's cinema, tend to be apologists for him as a director. But Goeman strikes a balance where she is able to at once appreciate him as an accomplished filmmaker, while also raising issues with *TNW*'s attempts at visual sovereignty for the Indigenous peoples through 'the artifice of authenticity' (47).

Goeman notes that while Malick does well in constructing a strong mise-en-scène for this narrative, he also perpetuates a fiction that endorses ostensibly well-meaning but ultimately inappropriate conceptions of romance and the transcendental ideation of Matoaka. In highlighting Malick's apparent decision to present an altered history in his film, she writes: 'The effect of the artifice of authenticity, rather than evidence from the archive, is created in Malick's script and visual narrative' (46). This approach obscures the violent reality of her story as an enduring Indigenous figure who was harmed by colonial subjugation, assault, and historical obscurity. In response to Malick's aesthetically rich and ethically complicated film, Goeman endeavors to rectify these prevailing fictions and enliven Matoaka's narrative (and its cinematic depictions) with scrutiny and integrity.

Many readers may approach this book with a great interest and appreciation for *TNW*. But Goeman reconciles an important gap Indigenous studies perspectives by analysing the settler aesthetics that fortify this otherwise impressive film. Perhaps most importantly, Goeman challenges her readers to be open enough to think critically and scrutinise films and filmmakers whom we hold in regard. Her book is not necessarily an indictment of Malick nor *TNW*, but rather a thoughtful and serious inquiry into the systems of settler narratives and structures that pervade our art, media, and cultural awareness. Reconciling with the true violence of Matoaka's story is essential for our understanding of colonial histories, even if that disrupts the narrative ideation of stories that we feel affinities for. *The New World* is an undeniably beautiful and aesthetically rich text and Mishuana Goeman's thesis here allows us to better understand Malick and his work, for both its inherent issues and its transcendental qualities.

Considering Malick's artistic attention to mise-en-scène and language one might wonder how Indigenous filmmakers would benefit from Malick's generous resources. If such a cultural perspective can be assumed to elevate the work, then perhaps Malick could be viewed as a bridge towards more authentic and productive work in Indigenous filmmaking by Indigenous peoples. This important monograph allows readers to thus recognise the influence of settler aesthetics and provides Indigenous creatives around the globe with perspective on how to deploy new aesthetics of authenticity in the Indigenous cinema of the future.