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Theda Perdue

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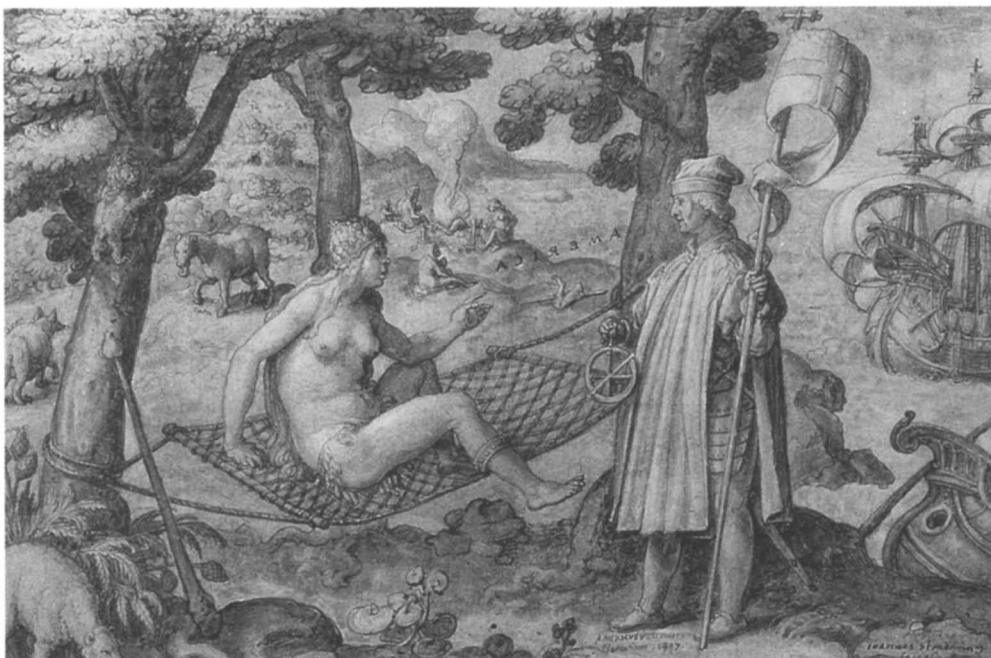
Columbus Meets Pocahontas in the American South

by Theda Perdue



s icons of the European colonization of the Americas, Columbus and Pocahontas represent opposite sides of the experience—European and Native, invader and defender, man and woman. Biographies and other scholarly writings document their lives and deeds, but these feats pale in comparison to the encounter these two legendary figures symbolize. Columbus embodies European discovery, invasion, and conquest while Pocahontas has become the “mother of us all,” a nurturing, beckoning, seductive symbol of New World hospitality and opportunity.¹ The two never actually met in the American South, of course, except metaphorically, but this symbolic encounter involved a sexual dynamic that was inherent to the whole process of European colonization, particularly that of the American South.

John Smith’s tale of succor and salvation fixed the Pocahontas image forever in the American mind, and his autobiographical account of peaceful relations with her people, the Powhatans, has exempted Englishmen from the tarring Columbus has received as an international symbol of aggression. The Columbian encounter with Native women seemed, in fact, to be radically different from Smith’s. On his initial voyage of discovery, Columbus had relatively little to report about Native women except that they, like men, went “naked as the day they were born.” The loss of one of his ships on this voyage forced Columbus to leave about a third of his crew on Hispaniola. When he returned, he found the burned ruins of his settlement and the decomposing corpses of his men. Local Natives related that “soon after the Admiral’s departure those men began to quarrel among themselves, each taking as many women and as much gold as he could.” They dispersed throughout the island, and local caciques killed them. The men on Columbus’s expedition had their revenge: “Incapable of moderation in their acts of injustice, they carried off the women of the islanders under the very eyes of their brothers and their husbands.” Columbus personally presented a young woman to one of his men, Michele de Cuneo, who later wrote that when she resisted him with her fingernails, he “thrashed her well, for which she raised such

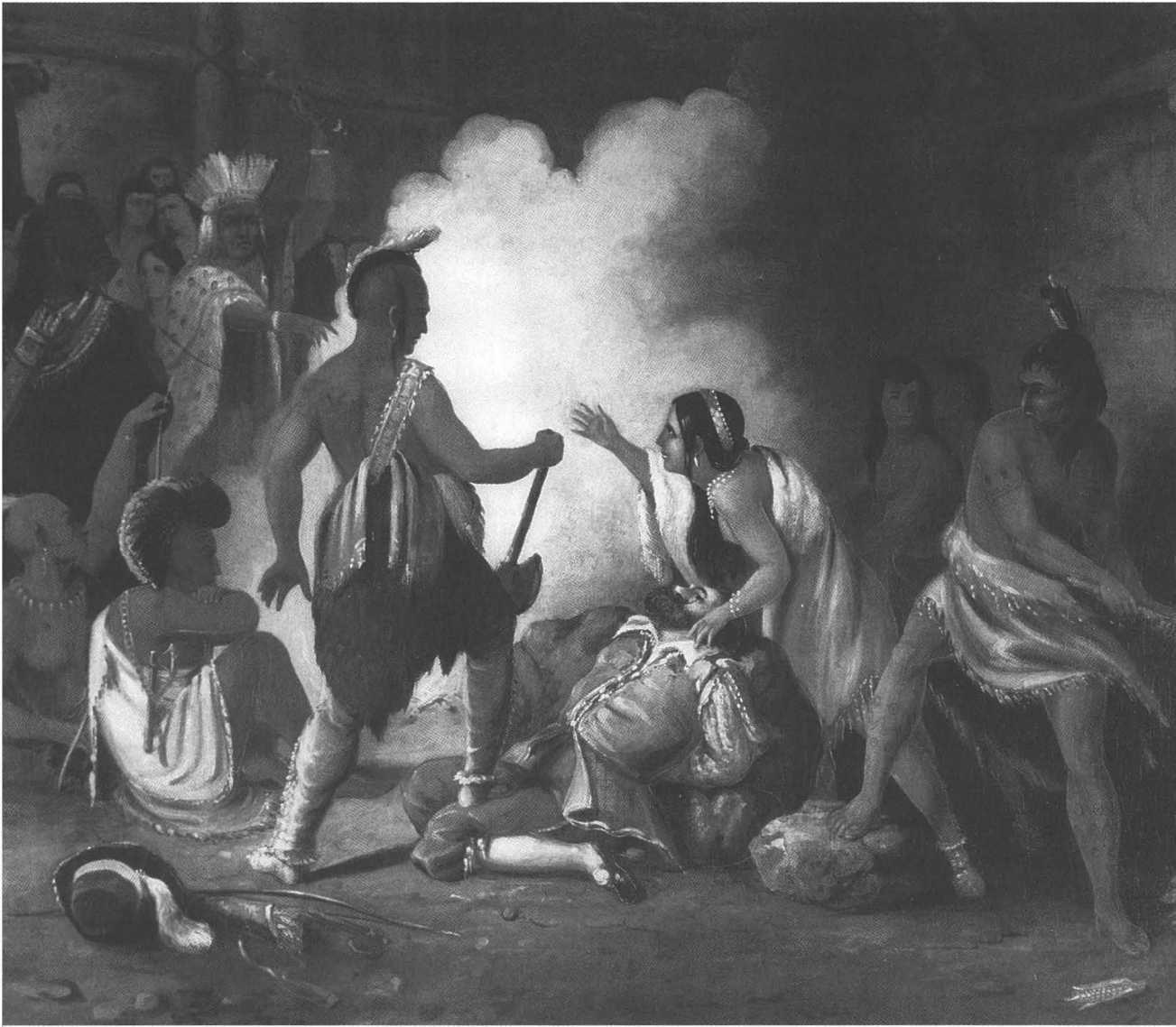


*Jan van der Straet (Stradanus), The Discovery of America (1575), drawing on paper, 7½ × 10⅞ in.
Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of the Estate of James Hazen Hyde, 1919.*

unheardof screams that you would not have believed your ears.” In the accounts of the conquistadores, Spaniards seized women as they seized other spoils of war.² Such violence contributed to the “black legend” of Spanish inhumanity to Native peoples and stands in stark contrast to early English descriptions of their encounters with Native women.

John Smith, according to his own account, did not face the kind of resistance from Pocahontas and other Native women of the Virginia tidewater that the Spanish had met in the Caribbean. When Smith and a delegation from Jamestown called at the primary town of Powhatan, Pocahontas’s father, they discovered that he was away, but the chief’s daughter and other women invited the Englishmen to a “mascarado.” “Thirtie young women,” Smith wrote, “came naked out of the woods, only covered behind and before with a few green leaves, their bodies all painted.” They sang and danced with “infernal passions” and then invited Smith to their lodgings. By his account, written with uncharacteristic modesty in the third person, “he was no sooner in the house, but all these Nymphes more tormented him then ever, with crowding, pressing, and hanging about him, most tediously crying, Love you not me? Love you not me?”³

The contrast is obvious—the Spanish supposedly raped and pillaged while the English nobly resisted seduction. By focusing merely on the colonizing Europeans, however, we lose sight of the Native women who are central actors in this drama: they are, after all, both the victims of Columbus’s barbarity and the se-



John G. Chapman, Pocahontas Saving the Life of Captain John Smith (ca. 1836–40), oil on canvas, 21 × 25¼ in. Collection of the New York–Historical Society.

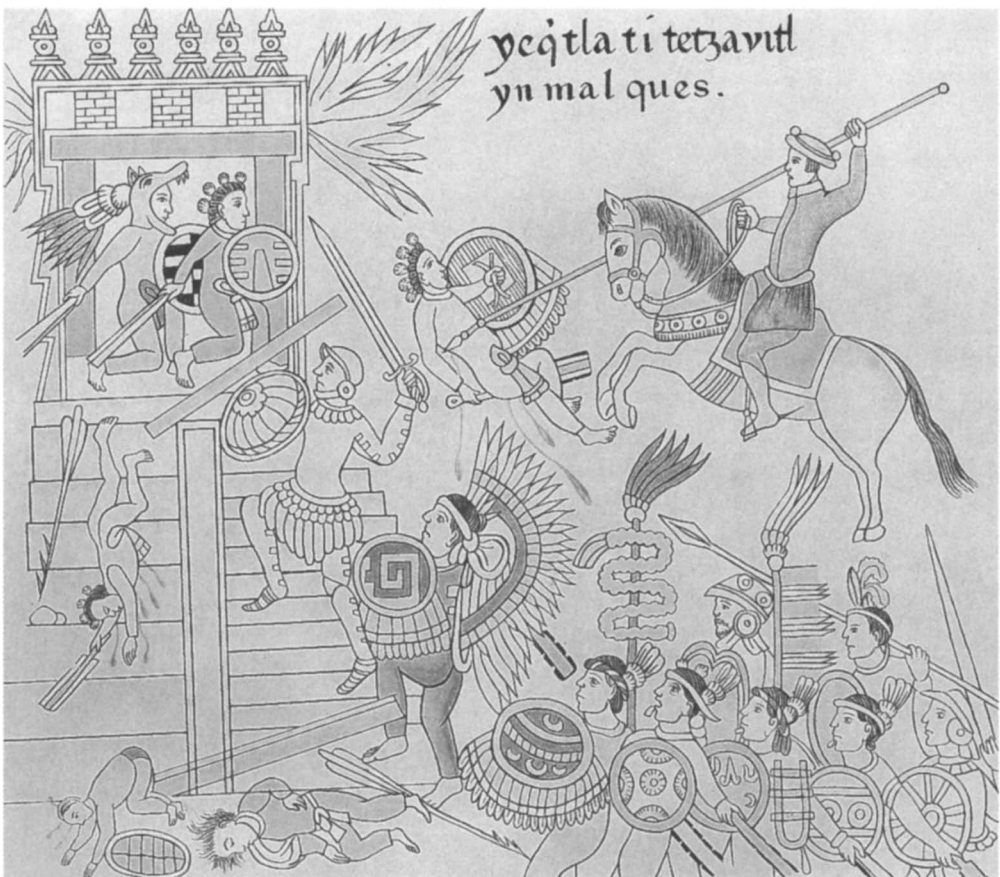
ductive sirens luring Smith's party. Despite differences in the ways these women are portrayed in historical sources, their experiences suggest that conquest and colonization had their own sexual dynamic. One of the facts of colonization that rarely surfaces in polite conversation or scholarly writing is sex, yet we know from the written records left by Europeans and from the more obscure cultural traditions of Native people that European men had sexual relations with Native American women. What can the Columbian voyages, the Jamestown colonists, and the experiences of subsequent European immigrants to the American South tell us about the ways in which men and women crossed cultural and racial

bounds in their sexual relations? What do these relationships reveal about European views of female sexuality? And how did these views shape European expansion?

THE EUROPEAN VIEW OF NATIVE SEXUALITY

One thing seems fairly certain: Native women were never far from the conscious thought of European men, be they Spanish or English. Nudity insured that this was so. Accustomed to enveloping clothes, Europeans marveled at the remarkably scant clothing of the Natives. De Cuneo described the Carib woman whom he raped as “naked according to their custom,” and Smith noted that except for a few strategically placed leaves, his hostesses were “naked.” De Cuneo and Smith were not alone in commenting on Native women’s lack of clothing. The Lord Admiral himself noticed not only that the Caribbean women he en-

This Aztec illustration from the 1540s offers a Native view of the Spanish conquest. The Attack on the Great Temple, assault against Teochtitlán by Cortés and his Indian allies. Neg. no. 330879, photo. Rota. Courtesy Department Library Services, American Museum of Natural History.



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countered wore little but that they had “very pretty bodies.” The Jamestown colonists first encountered the pre-pubescent Pocahontas frolicking naked with the cabin boys. The combination of her youthful enthusiasm as well as her nudity led William Strachey, official chronicler of the colony, to describe Pocahontas as “a well featured, but wanton young girl.” Other Europeans also tended to link the absence of clothing to sexuality: Amerigo Vespucci, for whom America was named, noted that “the women . . . go about naked and are very libidinous.”⁴

While Native women frequently exposed breasts, particularly in warm weather, they normally kept pudenda covered. When women did bare all, Europeans had another shock in store: Native women in many societies plucked their pubic hair. While some evidence points to female singeing of pubic hair in ancient Greece and even early modern Spain, most Europeans recoiled from hairless female genitalia. Thomas Jefferson, whose interests extended far beyond politics, attempted to explain hair-plucking among Native Americans: “With them it is disgraceful to be hairy in the body. They say it likens them to hogs. They therefore pluck the hair as fast as it appears.” Jefferson revealed both the reaction of non-Native men and the artificiality of the practice: “The traders who marry their women, and prevail on them to discontinue this practice say, that nature is the same with them as with whites.”⁵ However comfortable Euro-American men may have been with visible penises, depilation left female genitalia far more exposed than most could bear. Because women revealed their private parts intentionally, they seemed to be flaunting their sexuality.

Another cultural modification to the female physique also provoked comment. Among many Native peoples, women as well as men wore tattoos. While some Euro-Americans became so enamored of the practice that they adopted it, others regarded tattooing in the same light as make-up applied to make one more physically attractive. The late eighteenth-century Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush, for example, compared the body markings of Native peoples to cosmetics used by the French, a people whom he described as “strangers to what is called delicacy in the intercourse of the sexes with each other.”⁶ Unnatural markings on the body, to Europeans, signaled an enhanced sexuality.

As contact between Native peoples and Europeans grew, women gave up tattooing and hair plucking, and they adopted the blouses and long skirts common among non-Native women along the colonial frontier. Other features of Native culture, however, perpetuated the view of Native women as sexually uninhibited. Some Europeans found the humor of Native women to be terribly bawdy. Most women enjoyed teasing and joking, and pranks and jokes with sexual overtones were not necessarily taboo. The teasing Smith endured—“Love you not me?

Love you not me?”—provides a good example. One Native woman even managed to shock a Frenchman. Louis-Philippe made a tour of the American West at the end of the eighteenth century, and during his visit to the Cherokees, his guide made sexual advances to several women. “They were so little embarrassed,” wrote the future French king, “that one of them who was lying on a bed put her hand on his trousers before my very eyes and said scornfully, *Ah sick.*”⁷

Directness characterized courtship as well as rejection. Smith clearly expressed amazement at the forwardness of the “thirtie young women.” In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson compared the “frigidity” of Native men with the assertiveness of women: “A celebrated warrior is oftener courted by the females, than he has occasion to court: and this is a point of honor which the men aim at. . . . Custom and manners reconcile them to modes of acting, which, judged by Europeans would be deemed inconsistent with the rules of female decorum and propriety.”⁸ When the epitome of the American Enlightenment attributed Native women with a more active libido than Native men, who could doubt that it was so?

The arrangement and use of domestic space seemed to confirm a lack of modesty on the part of Native women. Native housing afforded little privacy for bathing, changing what little clothes women did wear, or engaging in sexual intercourse. Several generations, as well as visitors, usually slept in the same lodge. The essayist Samuel Stanhope Smith admitted that Indians were unjustly “represented as licentious because they are seen to lie promiscuously in the same wigwam.” Nevertheless, few Natives allowed the lack of privacy in their homes to become a barrier to sexual fulfillment. During early eighteenth-century explorations in Carolina, one of John Lawson’s companions took a Native “wife” for the night, and the newlyweds consummated their “marriage” in the same room in which other members of the expedition feasted and slept: “Our happy Couple went to Bed together before us all and with as little Blushing, as if they had been Man and Wife for 7 Years.”⁹

Most European accounts of Native women in the South commented on their sexual freedom, particularly before they married. In the late eighteenth century, naturalist Bernard Romans observed: “Their women are handsome, well made, only wanting the colour and cleanliness of our ladies, to make them appear lovely in every eye; . . . they are lascivious, and have no idea of chastity in a girl, but in married women, incontinence is severely punished; a savage never forgives that crime.” John Lawson suggested that even married women “sometimes bestow their Favours also to some or others in their Husbands Absence.” And the trad-

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er James Adair maintained that “the Cherokees are an exception to all civilized or savage nations in having no law against adultery; they have been a considerable while under a petti-coat government, and allow their women full liberty to plant their brows with horns as oft as they please, without fear of punishment.”¹⁰

Women in the Southeast sometimes openly solicited sex from Euro-Americans because sex gave women an opportunity to participate in the emerging market economy. Unlike men, who exchanged deerskins, beaver pelts, and buffalo hides with Europeans for manufactured goods, women often had to rely on “the soft passion” to obtain clothing, kettles, knives, hoes, and trinkets. Among some Native peoples a kind of specialization developed according to John Lawson, who claimed that coastal Carolina peoples designated “trading girls.” Sometimes prostitution was more widespread. Louis-Philippe insisted that “all Cherokee women are public women in the full meaning of the phrase: dollars never fail to melt their hearts.”¹¹

Selling sex was one thing; the apparent gift of women by their husbands and fathers was quite another. To Europeans, sex was a kind of commodity, purchased from prostitutes with money and from respectable women with marriage. An honorable man protected the chastity of his wife and daughters as he would other property. Native men in many societies, however, seemed to condone or even encourage sexual relations between Europeans and women presumably “belonging” to them. Even husbands who might object to “secret infidelities” sometimes offered their wives to visitors.¹²

Europeans also viewed the widespread practice of polygyny, or a man taking more than one wife, as adulterous because they recognized only the first as the “real” wife. Many Native people favored sororal polygyny, the marriage of sisters

Simon van der Passe, engraving of Pocahontas in European dress after her marriage to Englishman John Rolff, ca. 1616.

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opposite:

John White, Indian Woman (1585),

watercolor on paper, 9¼ × 5¼ in..

© Trustees of the British Museum.

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to the same man, and the groom often took sisters as brides at the same time. Since this meant, in European terms, that a man married his sister-in-law, sororal polygamy was incest as well as adultery. Jedidiah Morse, in his *Universal Geography*, wrote: "When a man loves his wife, it is considered his duty to marry her sister, if she has one. Incest and bestiality are common among them."¹³ Morse apparently regarded marriage to sisters as serious a violation of European sexual mores as human intercourse with animals; in his mind, both constituted perversion.

Polygynous, adulterous, and incestuous or not, marriage meant little to Indians in the estimation of many Euro-Americans. Lawson, for example, described the ease with which the Native peoples of coastal Carolina altered their marital status: "The marriages of these Indians are no further binding than the man and woman agree together. Either of them has the liberty to leave the other upon any frivolous excuse they can make." The trader Alexander Longe relayed a Cherokee priest's view of his people's lax attitude toward marriage: "They had better be asunder than together if they do not love one another but live for strife and confusion."¹⁴ Europeans would have preferred that they stay together and, despite domestic turmoil, raise their children in an appropriately patriarchal household.¹⁵

When husband and wife parted, children normally remained with their mothers because Native peoples of the southeast were matrilineal, that is, they traced kinship solely through women. John Lawson attributed this very odd way of reckoning kin, in his view, to "fear of Impostors; the Savages knowing well, how much Frailty possesses *Indian* women, betwixt the Garters and the Girdle." While paternity might be questioned, maternity could not be. Despite the logic of such a system, Europeans had both intellectual and practical objections. Matrilineality seemed too close to the relationship between a cow and calf or a bitch and puppies: it was, the Iroquois historian Cadwallader Colden asserted, "according to the natural course of all animals." "Civilized" man presumably had moved beyond this "natural course" and had adopted laws, civil and religious, that bound fathers to children and husbands to wives. Europeans who married Native women of matrilineal societies nevertheless had difficulty exercising any control over their children and often abandoned them to their mothers' kin because men had no proprietary interest in their offspring. Thomas Nairne wrote of the Creeks: "A Girl's Father has not the least hand or concern in matching her. . . . Sons never enjoy their fathers place and dignity."¹⁶

Blatant disregard of marital vows and paternal prerogatives was shocking enough, but many Native peoples exhibited little concern for the chastity of their

daughters. Jean-Bernard Bossu reported that among Native peoples on the lower Mississippi, “when an unmarried brave passes through a village, he hires a girl for a night or two, as he pleases, and her parents find nothing wrong with this. They are not at all worried about their daughter and explain that her body is hers to do with as she wishes.” Furthermore, according to Lawson, “multiplicity of Gallants never [gave] . . . a Stain to a Female’s reputation, or the least Hindrance of her Advancement . . . the more *Whorish*, the more *Honourable*.”¹⁷

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THE REALITIES OF NATIVE SEXUALITY

European men who traveled through the Native Southeast thought that they had stepped through the looking glass into a sexual wonderland. Actually, they had encountered only a fractured reflection of their own assumptions about appropriate sexual behavior. Native women were not as uninhibited as most whites thought. Europeans failed to realize that Native peoples did have rules regulating marriage and sexual intercourse, although the rules were sometimes quite different from their own. In the Southeast, unmarried people could engage freely in sex, but many factors other than marital status regulated and limited sexuality. A warrior preparing for or returning from battle (sometimes much of the summer), a ball player getting ready for a game, a man on the winter hunt (which could last three to four months), a pregnant woman, or a woman during her menstrual period abstained from sex. In other words, Native southerners had to forego sexual intercourse for a far greater percentage of their lives than Europeans.

Furthermore, there were inappropriate venues for sex. Although a Native couple might engage in sex in a room occupied by others, there were places, such as agricultural fields, where amorous encounters were forbidden. Violation of this rule could have serious consequences. According to the trader James Adair, the Cherokees blamed a devastating smallpox epidemic in 1738 on “the adulterous intercourses of their young married people, who the past year, had in a most notorious manner, violated their ancient laws of marriage in every thicket, and broke down and polluted many of their honest neighbours bean-plots, by their heinous crimes, which would cost a great deal of trouble to purify again.”¹⁸ For many Native southerners, therefore, a “toss in the hay” would have been a very serious offense.

Native peoples also had rules against incest, but they did not define incest in the same way Euro-Americans did. Intercourse or marriage with a member of a person’s own clan, for example, was prohibited, and the penalty could be death. Clan membership, which included all individuals who could trace their ancestry



back to a remote, perhaps mythical figure, often ran into the thousands and included many people whom Europeans would not have regarded as relatives. Consequently, the number of forbidden partners was far greater than the number under the European definition of incest. The Cherokees, for example, had seven clans. No one could marry into his or her own clan, nor was the father's clan an acceptable marriage pool. The result was that, for any given Cherokee, almost one third of all Cherokees were off-limits as sexual partners.

Each Native people had particular rules regarding marriage and incest. Many societies permitted men to have more than one wife and to marry sisters. The effect was not necessarily the devaluation of women, as European observers often claimed. Some cultural anthropologists suggest, in fact, that sororal polygamy correlates positively with high female status.¹⁹ In the Southeast where husbands lived with their wives, the marriage of sisters to the same man reduced the num-

opposite:

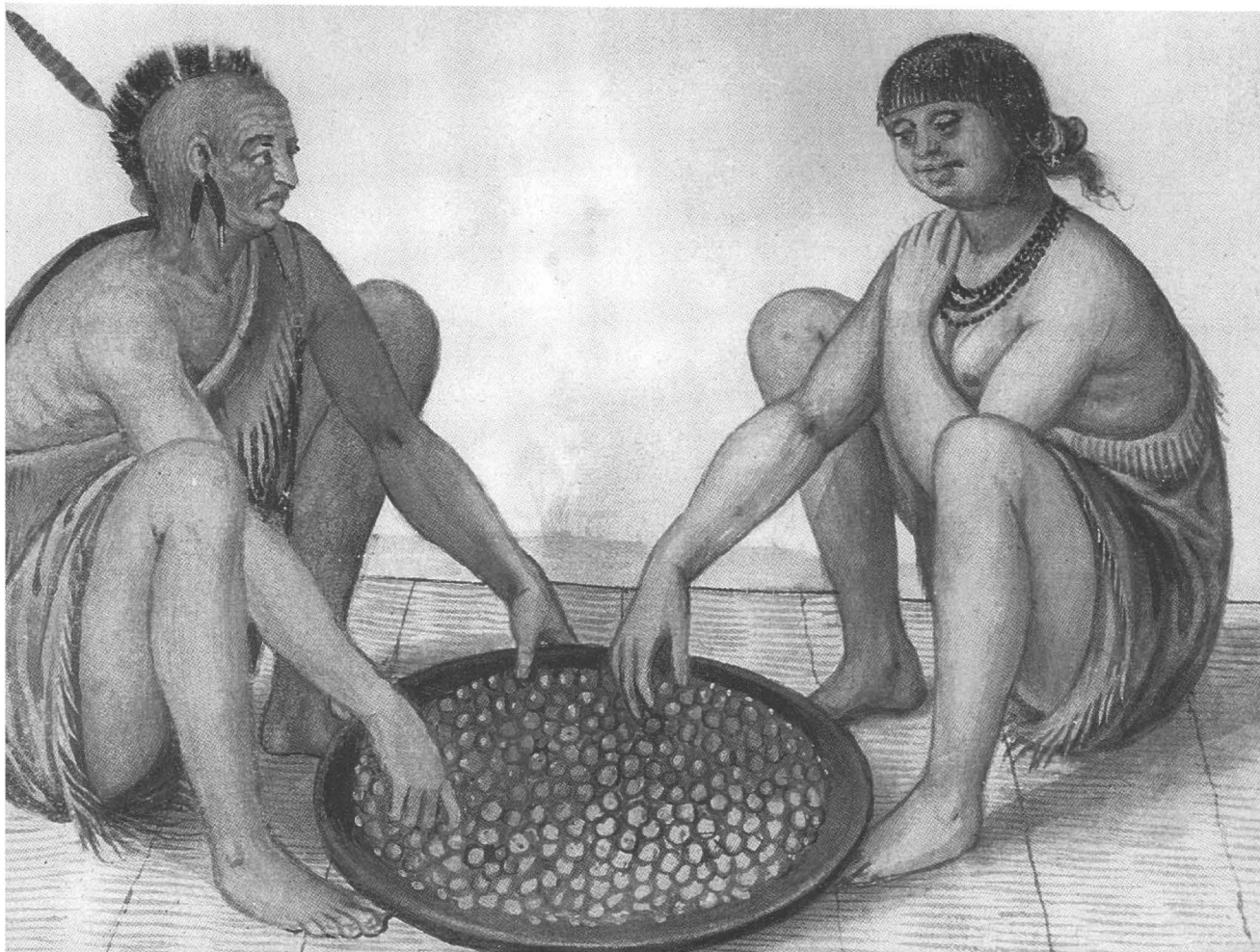
Human-effigy vessel (female nursing), *A.D. 1200–1400, Near Cahokia site, St. Clair Co., Illinois.*

Ceramic, 5⁷/₈ × 3⁷/₈ in. From the Henry Whelpley Collection at the St. Louis Science Center.

below:

John White, Indian Man and Woman Eating (1585), watercolor on paper, 8¹/₄ × 8¹/₂ in.

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ber of men in the household and strengthened the control of the women over domestic life. As Morse suggested, sisters often wanted to share a husband just as they shared a house, fields, labor, and children.

Ignorant of Native rules, southern colonials tended to view Native women as wanton woodland nymphs over whose sexuality fathers, brothers, and husbands could exercise little control. Many colonists took full advantage of the situation as they perceived it. Some evidence, however, suggests that southeastern Native women were not as amenable to sexual encounters as Europeans suggested. Louis-Philippe's anecdote reveals a woman, however bold and uninhibited, rejecting a sexual advance. When women did engage in sexual activity, many of them probably succumbed to pressure or force rather than charm.

European culture at this time countenanced considerable violence against women. William Byrd's confidential account of surveying the boundary line between North Carolina and Virginia, for example, describes several episodes of sexual aggression. One young woman, he wrote, "wou'd certainly have been ravish't, if her timely consent had not prevented the violence." This cavalier attitude toward a woman's right to refuse sex characterized much interaction between Native women and Europeans. Race almost certainly exacerbated the situation. The records of the South Carolina Indian trade are replete with Native complaints of sexual abuse at the hands of Europeans. One trader "took a young Indian against her Will for his Wife," another severely beat three women including his pregnant wife whom he killed, and a third provided enough rum to a woman to get her drunk and then "used her ill."²⁰ Obviously, the women in these incidents were not the ones who were lascivious.

Some Native peoples came to regard sexual misbehavior as the most distinguishing feature of European culture. The Cherokee Booger Dance, in which participants imitated various peoples, portrayed Europeans as sexually aggressive, and the men playing that role chased screaming young women around the dance ground. As it turns out, from the Native perspective, the British colonists of the American South may not have been so terribly different from Columbus's men after all.

The people who do stand in stark contrast are Native men. James Adair, a resident of the Chickasaw Nation and a trader throughout the Southeast, perhaps knew the region's Native cultures better than any other European in the eighteenth century. As the husband of a Chickasaw woman and an occasional member of Chickasaw war parties against the Choctaws, he wrote with authority that "the Indians will not cohabit with women while they are out at war; they reli-



Charles Wimar, The Abduction of Daniel Boone's Daughter by the Indians, 1853. Oil on canvas, 40 × 50 in. Washington University Gallery of Art, St. Louis. Gift of Mr. John T. Davis, Jr.

giously abstain from every kind of intercourse, even with their own wives." While Adair believed, perhaps correctly, that the reason for a period of abstinence was religious, the implications for female captives were clear. "The French Indians," he wrote, "are said not to have deflowered any of our young women they captivated, while at war with us." Even the most bloodthirsty Native warrior, according to Adair, "did not attempt the virtue of his female captives," although he did not hesitate to torture and kill them. Even the Choctaws, whom Adair described as "libidinous," had taken "several female prisoners without offering the least

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violence to thir virtue, till the time of purgation was expired.” Adair could not, however, resist the temptation to slander the Choctaws, the Chickasaws’ traditional enemy: “Then some of them forced their captives, notwithstanding their pressing entreaties and tears.”²¹

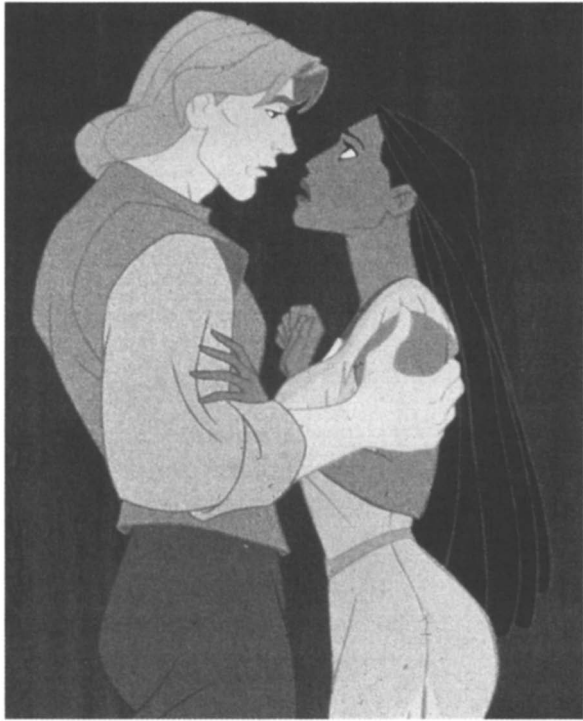
Captivity narratives suggest Indian men raped very few, if any, women victims of colonial wars — “a very agreeable disappointment” in one woman’s words.²² Rules prohibiting intercourse immediately before and after going to war may have contributed to the absence of documented sexual violence, but Native views on female sexuality and au-

tonomy may have been equally responsible. Indians apparently did not view sex as property or as one of the spoils of war.

Columbus’s men do seem to have equated sex and material plunder. The accounts of the destruction of the Hispaniola settlement link his men’s desire for women with a desire for gold. In perhaps a more subtle way, British colonists also considered women to be a form of property and found the Native men’s lack of proprietary interest in their wives and daughters incomprehensible. It called into question the Indians’ concept of property in general and paved the way for Europeans to challenge Native people’s ownership of land. From the second decade of colonization in the South, wealth depended on the cultivation of land, and southerners found the argument that Indians had no notion of absolute ownership particularly compelling.

While Native southerners forcefully maintained their right to inhabit the land of their fathers, they did not, in fact, regard land ownership in quite the same way as the Europeans who challenged their rights to it. They fought for revenge rather than for territory, they held land in common, and they permitted any tribal member to clear and cultivate unused tracts. Land did not represent an investment of capital, and Native southerners did not sell out and move on when other opportunities beckoned. Indeed, the land held such significance for most of them that they suffered severe economic, social, and political disruption rather than part with it. In the 1820s and 1830s, frontiersmen, land speculators, and politicians joined forces to divest Native peoples of their land, and southern state governments and ultimately the federal government took up the aggressors’ cause. White southerners made a concerted effort to force their Indian neighbors to surrender their lands and move west of the Mississippi to new territory. What difference did it make, many whites asked, which lands the Indians occupied? With squatters encroaching on them, shysters defrauding them at every turn, and federal and state authorities unwilling to protect them, Native peoples in the South struggled desperately to retain their homelands. They did so for reasons as incomprehensible to Euro-Americans as the sexual behavior of

Pocahontas and Captain John Smith
from Walt Disney Pictures' animated
feature *Pocahontas*.
© Disney Enterprises, Inc.



Native women. People who objectified both land and sex had encountered people who did not.

Ultimately, Native southerners lost. Representatives of the large southern tribes—the Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles—signed treaties in which they agreed to move west to what is today eastern Oklahoma. Remnants of some of those tribes as well as other isolated Native communities simply retreated into the shadows and eked out a living on marginal land while the cotton kingdom expanded onto the rich soil that Native peoples had surrendered. In the cotton kingdom, land was saleable rather than sacred, and power not parity characterized sexual relationships.

In recent years we have come to admire Native sensitivity to the natural world and to compare ourselves unfavorably to Indians on environmental issues and attitudes toward the land. Columbus and Pocahontas probably thought about sex at least as often as they did ecology, but we seem incapable of recognizing that their views on sex might have been as different as their ideas about land use. Disney's recent movie, *Pocahontas*, merely perpetuates the notion that romantic love is a universal concept that transcends cultural bounds and has little connection with specific aspects of a culture. The film depicts Pocahontas not as the autonomous person she probably was, but as a subservient young woman submissive to her father, betrothed to the warrior Kocoum, and won by Smith. Pocahontas's love for Smith (and vice versa) resolves conflicts with the Indians, and the En-

glish presumably set about the task at hand. "Oh, with all ya got in ya, boys," Governor Ratcliffe sings, "dig up Virginia, boys." True love, of course, characterized neither the real relationship between Pocahontas and John Smith nor the dealings of Native women and European men. Instead of Disney's John Smith, most Native women really met Columbus. Perhaps in the American South, where Columbus and Pocahontas metaphorically collided so forcefully, we should expand our comparison of Native Americans and Europeans beyond environmental issues and consider the interactions between men and women. Then we might begin to make connections between the materialism and exploitation that have characterized so much of southern history and sexual violence against women.

NOTES

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