Pocahontas as a Public Narrative: A Sociological Approach to Narrative Analysis

Abstract

Historically, sociology relegated narrative analysis to the humanities and only recently began seriously examining narratives. The Pocahontas narrative provides a unique opportunity for scholarship because the available material is both prolific and produced in multiple mediums, historical moments, and social contexts. By examining these disparate representations, it is possible to identify trends that emerge and develop a theoretical understanding of narratives that is applicable outside of the Pocahontas narrative. My analysis frames the broader narrative of Pocahontas as a public narrative that is the product of the social construction of knowledge. Examining the relationship between individual representations and the public narrative of Pocahontas sheds light on the process through which the public narrative of Pocahontas was constructed. This paper cannot comprehensively conclude on how the public narrative of Pocahontas has changed. Using secondary literature and analysis of particular representations, I can take snapshots of how the public narrative functioned in particular historical moments. By doing this, I am identifying the process through which the public narrative of Pocahontas was not only constructed but also negotiated by individual representations. Consequently, this analysis is examining the social process of knowledge construction. The representations I have chosen to examine exist in different mediums, social contexts, and the actors constructing them have different social and political orientations and localities. Using these representations, I explore narratives as social objects, particularly focusing on how the public narrative of Pocahontas functions as a space of social discourse. I explore the relationship between the public narrative of Pocahontas and the cultural and institutional frameworks of the time (Congress, notions of race, historical consciousness etc.) Pushing back against previous scholarship, particularly “The Pocahontas Perplex” by Rayna Green, my research is ultimately urging for a more nuanced interpretation of not only narratives, but also the social worlds they reside in.