Indigenous Civilizations of Latin America in Animated Film:
An Analysis of Cultural Representation in The Road to El Dorado and The Emperor’s New Groove

Accurate cultural representation in mainstream media, or the lack thereof, has become an increasingly frequent source of contention over the past couple decades. Today, Oscar-nominated films intended for adult audiences are not allowed to perpetuate cultural appropriation or historical inaccuracy without facing harsh criticism. However, animated depictions of both past and present cultures are not always held to the same standards. The portrayals of Indigenous cultures of Latin America in two animated children’s films released in 2000, The Road to El Dorado and The Emperor’s New Groove, illustrate this point. The Road to El Dorado and The Emperor’s New Groove were written by Americans for American audiences and sacrifice historical accuracy for the sake of entertainment. However, The Emperor’s New Groove for the most part makes these sacrifices in the form of harmless whimsy while The Road to El Dorado does so with the residual effect being offensive stereotyping. Neither film explicitly identifies the culture represented, but it can be assumed that The Road to El Dorado is set within the Aztec Empire and The Emperor’s New Groove is set in Inca Peru based on easily identifiable characteristics of the settings. Though the films differ in the methods they employ to manipulate the past and entertain audiences, both represent Indigenous cultures of Latin America through a selectively accurate American lens that may influence how children view these cultures today.

The Road to El Dorado takes place in the year 1519 and begins in Spain, where two con men by the names of Tulio and Miguel use loaded dice to “win” a map to El Dorado, the legendary city of gold. Following a convenient streak of luck, the duo reaches the gates of the city where they meet Chel, an inhabitant of El Dorado who is trying to flee but is stopped by guards. Tulio and Miguel’s good fortune continues as they are mistaken for long-awaited gods and welcomed into the city of gold with open arms by Chief Tannabok. However, the religious
leader Tzekel-Kan is not pleased when the “gods” reject his offers of human sacrifice. Meanwhile, Chel agrees to help Tulio and Miguel in their plan to take the city’s gold back to Spain as long as they help her escape. The film ends with one of the men leaving for Spain with Chel and the other staying behind in El Dorado, but neither ends up with the gold they had originally intended to steal.

In *The Road to El Dorado*, the people of the hidden city are portrayed as either simple-minded, barbaric, or a combination of the two. It takes no more than their white skin and a coincidental volcano eruption for Chief Tannabok, a man in a position of great power and authority in El Dorado, to venerate Tulio and Miguel as gods. In reality, this ruler would have worn a white robe (*tilmatli*), as opposed to being bare-chested, and he would have been widely respected in Aztec society for his military achievements (Carrasco, 2012). Alternatively, Chief Tannabok is portrayed as a “cooperative native,” a childlike fool who is outwitted by two Spanish con men and used for comic relief (Weaver-Hightower, 2014). Though the film’s plot relies on Tzekel-Kan’s scheme to overthrow Chief Tannabok, Tzekel-Kan’s priestly status would have made him chief speaker (*tlatoani*), the most highly ranked leader in Aztec society (Carrasco, 2012). This prominent figure is instead depicted in the film as a power-hungry and bloodthirsty villain. Tzekel-Kan’s practice of ritual sacrifice is portrayed as barbaric and horrific rather than recognized as a religious belief shared among members of the civilization. Chel, the only prominent female character in the film, is characterized by her desire to leave the civilization of El Dorado, implying that Aztec society was something to escape while European society was something to aspire to join. Additionally, Chel wears very revealing clothing, whereas real Aztec women would have worn more conservative garments spun and woven out of plant fibers that they would have extracted themselves. Aztec women were valued for their great
medicinal and economic contributions, none of which are represented by Chel’s hypersexualized character (Carrasco, 2012). In painting its Indigenous characters as morally and intellectually lesser than their white counterparts, *The Road to El Dorado*’s attempt at humor is unabashedly Eurocentric.

*Chief Tannabok (left), Tulio and Miguel (middle), and Chel (right). Stills from The Road to El Dorado (2000).*

*The Emperor’s New Groove* begins by introducing Emperor Kuzco, whose namesake was the capital of the Inca Empire. After notifying a peasant named Pacha that he will be building Kuzcotopia, a luxury pool resort, on the land of the peasant’s village, Kuzco is transformed into a llama in a failed assassination attempt by his advisor, Yzma. By a stroke of luck, Kuzco-the-llama can speak, and he succeeds in convincing Pacha to help him get back to his palace so he can be turned back into a human. Following a series of obstacles, Kuzco becomes human again, and he and Pacha become unlikely friends. Kuzco’s transformation is mental as well as physical as he shows signs of being a more caring ruler in his promise to not destroy Pacha’s village as he originally intended.
The Road to El Dorado features a cultural clash between Indigenous peoples and European colonists; The Emperor’s New Groove, per contra, avoids this controversial topic and instead focuses on interclass conflict in Inca Peru (Borthaiser, 2010). The sapa inca was the human representative of the Sun-deity and the supreme ruler in Inca society, and Emperor Kuzco seems to fill this role. Though the sapa inca wore gold earrings, not turquoise ones, even the detail of that accessory is not overlooked in Kuzco’s appearance. Further, Kuzco’s gold chest plate and sun-shaped headdress are representative of his relationship to the sun. Kuzco’s plan to displace Pacha’s village with a summer resort is unrealistic in the context of the real Inca Empire, but the idea is so absurd that it is easy to realize that it is fictional. Kuzco actually appropriately exercises his power as supreme ruler in planning to take land from the common people for himself, a reflection of interclass relations in the empire (Karsten, 1969). Similarly, Kuzco’s transformation into a llama is clearly not something that could have happened in Inca Peru, nor anywhere else for that matter. However, the use of the llama is not arbitrary and actually is a nod to the llama’s importance as a domestic animal in Inca society (Karsten, 1969). Further, though the scene inside an American-style diner is misplaced in Inca Peru, it allows for young American audiences to relate to the movie and engage with the characters in a familiar modern setting. Though not historically accurate, the inclusion of the diner scene is ridiculous enough that the average viewer can understand that it is purely comedic and not a representation of life in the Inca Empire.
Emperor Kuzco (left) and the diner scene (right). Stills from The Emperor’s New Groove (2000).

The Emperor’s New Groove illustrates the sociopolitical hierarchy of Inca Peru with general accuracy, but the film is not without its faults. For example, no regard is given to the cultural significance of each character’s name, and the “C” that should be used in spelling Kuzco’s name is replaced with a letter that does not exist in the Andean alphabet, symbolizing cultural erasure (Silverman, 2002). Additionally, Yzma, a woman, would not have held such a high position of power in the patriarchal society unless she was the queen, or coya (Silverblatt, 1978). While this cultural inaccuracy could have possibly been cast aside had Yzma been represented as a strong female figure that children could look up to, this is not the case, and the fact that the only significant female character is portrayed as villainous hints at misogynistic undertones.

Similarly, the portrayal of Tzekel-Kan in The Road to El Dorado as a wicked murderer for performing human sacrifice promotes Eurocentrism and leads viewers to inaccurately associate Aztec religious practices with mass slaughter. Public execution of prisoners is not unique to the Aztecs, and contrary to popular belief, there is no evidence that humans were sacrificed to a greater degree in Aztec society than they were in Spain (Restall, 2017). This type
of hypocrisy in representation is not overlooked by social activist groups like the Mexica Movement, which “accused the film of presenting ‘our people as stupid, as whores, as savages’ and of making it look ‘as if the Spaniards came to save our lives in 1519’” (Scorer, 2011). Further, recent archaeological evidence suggests that more animals were sacrificed than humans in Aztec society, and most human sacrifice took the form of bloodletting, in which individuals would offer drops of their own blood to nourish the gods without the loss of human life (Carrasco, 2012). Though a lighthearted children’s movie should not be expected to teach how Aztec religious sacrifice was conducted, human sacrifice in general should not be featured at all; if it is, it should at least be historically accurate.

It is argued that movie producers are not responsible for creating historically accurate content for two main reasons: for one, it would be a waste of resources that could go toward making the movies more entertaining, and secondly, the civilizations are not explicitly identified and can therefore be considered fictional. However, both production studios spent production budget funds to send teams to Latin America to document the landscape to make for more accurate depictions of the scenery (Silverman, 2002). The Road to El Dorado’s official website even praises the authenticity of the film due to research trips led by a UCLA professor with expert knowledge on ancient Mexican art and writing (Scorer, 2011). Further, both films’ failures to identify the civilizations being represented is a display of deliberate partial accuracy, the cultures instead being used as exotic backdrops for the viewing pleasure of European-American audiences. The films also consciously ignore all achievements made in the arts and sciences by the Indigenous civilizations, misleading audiences to believe they were unenlightened prior to European contact.
It is ignorant to disregard these animated movies as just entertainment without considering their profound educational impact. Just as kids learn letters and numbers from *Sesame Street* and Spanish from *Dora the Explorer*, when they watch movies like *The Emperor’s New Groove* and *The Road to El Dorado* it is often their first and sometimes only interaction at such an early age with the Indigenous cultures of Pre-Columbian Latin America. Animated films “help children understand who they are, what societies are about” and they “carry cultural and social messages that need to be scrutinized” (Giroux, 1999). Children leave theaters believing these “creative interpretations” to be true because there is no asterisk suggesting otherwise. While the narratives are fictional, and most children can understand that a man cannot actually be transformed into a llama, it is not easy for children to unlearn the less obviously fictional fundamental details about the civilizations without guidance.

Animated film also serves as the medium through which most children are first exposed to ideas that fuel the modern political atmosphere. At the time that *The Road to El Dorado* and *The Emperor’s New Groove* were created, stories of border conflicts and deportations of illegal immigrants flooded the news (Borthaiser, 2010). Whether deliberate or not, these movies represent Latin American cultures in a way that paints them to be “others,” in effect planting seeds of xenophobia in the minds of American children. For the American children descended from the Indigenous peoples of Latin America, the movies serve to reinforce the idea of American superiority over their native cultures.

In his book *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, Giroux suggests that it is our responsibility as a society to counter the negative impact that these types of films can have on children by incorporating popular culture into education. However, it is unrealistic to believe that occasionally having students analyze historical inaccuracies in animated movies
would serve as an effective solution, especially since this is a task geared more towards students at least in middle or high school rather than younger age groups that are more likely to be negatively influenced by these films. Moreover, this solution does not account for movies viewed outside the classroom. Is it more outrageous to expect parents to become educators overnight with extensive knowledge of Indigenous cultures or to ask production studios like DreamWorks and Walt Disney Pictures to simply represent these cultures with accuracy and respect? Until animated children’s movies are held to the same standards as the movies nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture, producers will continue to release films that sell out box offices at the expense of tainting the minds of those who will become the future of our nation.
Works Cited:


