

Navigating 16th-18th Century Pirate Literature: Relations among Pirates and Non-Europeans

Jackson Dillingham, Katie Ditchkus, Katherine Leigh, Jodi Tarbet, and Victoria Warren

Introduction

Our research team studies a series of literary texts to understand how they represent the relationship of pirates with non-Europeans. Some imagined alliances as a key to advancing English goals in the New World; for others, conflicts between pirates and non-Europeans illustrated the self-serving and brutal nature of their plundering voyages.

Abstract

- Beginning in the **16th century** with texts about Sir Francis Drake, this research team considers how writers often romanticized early accounts of alliances forming between pirates and Native Americans.
- We next consider how some **17th-century** buccaneers continued the rhetoric of mutually beneficial relationships, while others rejected the idea of alliance and instead showed plunderers inhumanely seizing Native American resources and exploiting the people themselves.
- The **18th century** furnishes several accounts, such as *The General History of the Pyrates* (1724), that depict pirate settlements on the island of Madagascar; these pirate utopias often disintegrate into dystopias as relations across ethnic and racial groups collapse.
- The research concludes with consideration of *John Gay's Polly* (1729), an engaging satire that concludes that pirate crews were just as prejudiced as the forces of colonization they rebelled against, and sought to exploit non-European populations for private benefit.

Methodology

- A group of honors students collaborated to research pirate literature together with Dr. Frohock.
- Following a semester of group research, the students split to work on individual research topics.
- After finalizing their own research, the students collaborated to present a collective research proposal to display our findings.

16th Century

"The natives have no culture or history to lose." ¹

This study aims to explore relationships between early buccaneers and Native Americans through the scope of 16th and 17th-century literature. By exploring works such as *The Discovery of Guyana* by Sir Walter Raleigh and *The History of Sir Francis Drake* by William Davenant, this study analyzes the complex connections and interactions between races and cultures of the time. It examines the portrayal of indigenous peoples from a European perspective, concluding that the Sea Dogs who sought alliances were primarily interested in exploiting the populations they claimed they would liberate.

Sir Walter Raleigh Meets the King of Arromaia ²



Summary

17th Century

The Indians in their Robes in Council, and Smoking Tobacco after their Way ³



"... the buccaneers seem to have provided these people... with the opportunity... of vengeance for all the injustice and hardship... on their communities." ⁴

In their voyage narratives, 17th-century pirates Lionel Wafer and William Dampier describe their relationships with natives and colonists in terms of alliance, aggression, and compromise. Pirates and natives continued to have alliances in the early 1600s, but this eventually plateaued. Many pirates pursued hostile tactics and manipulations toward non-Europeans in order to gain the upper hand. However, these methods were also reversed at times, leaving stranded pirates vulnerable to Native Americans, seen for instance in the personal account of Wafer.

18th Century

John Gay's Polly

Pirate on Madagascar ⁵



"On this island, any man could have become a king, even disreputable lower-class sailors of Europe or the Americas." ⁶

Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, various pirates attempted to create extensive trade networks throughout the southern Indian Ocean. This led to the development of several pirate societies on the island of Madagascar. Alliances in Madagascar between pirates and natives were contentious and full of uncertainty. After wrecking on the island, Avery made his pirate kingdom and formed alliances with native peoples as he created his utopia for his crew. The stories and recorded history reveal that these alliances were often only facades to conceal the true intent of these pirates, which was to exploit native populations.

"We must beat civilizing into 'em to make 'em capable of common society, and common conversation..." ⁷

Depicted in new media as an opportunity for equality during a time of extreme discrimination, pirate crews have been represented as free from the racial prejudice. However, this utopia of the high seas exists only in modern imaginings. 18th-century sources, such as the opera *Polly* by John Gay, suggest that even in the unrestrained world of piracy, hierarchies based on race were embraced and utilized in the discrimination of non-white minority groups. For example, the subjugation of indigenous peoples is portrayed in the play through Gay's utilization of the "noble savage" trope and his satirical representation of natives as the irrefutable victors of the final battle.

Native Americans Attack Ships in the Harbor ⁸



Conclusions

- Piracy literature throughout the 16th-18th centuries provides means to interpret the alliances and complex dynamics between pirates and non-Europeans. The literature we researched largely depicts pirates as using alliances to create a position of self-empowerment rather than mutual benefits.
- Early modern Sea Dog narratives depict alliances with Native Americans as instrumental to advancing English imperial dominion.
- During the 1600s, the transition from easily formed alliances begins as Native Americans experience violent betrayals; native communities and cohorts of pirates form uneasy alliances and sometimes compete openly for dominance.
- 18th-century pirates create a facade to mask the tactics they use to establish domination over native populations in Madagascar. Ironically, the pirates replicate many of the exploitive situations that allegedly caused them to flee from mainstream European society.
- John Gay's opera *Polly* offers a satirical view of relationships between pirates and Native Americans. The pirates are satirized by openly discussing their exploitive intentions; Native Americans provide a virtuous contrast to pirate villainy, but are caricatured in the process.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to Dr. Frohock for creating, guiding, and leading our research group. Additionally, we would like to thank the Honors College for allowing us to represent them and aiding us in our journey. Finally, we thank the Division of the Vice President for Research at OSU for providing a poster workshop and an opportunity to present at the symposium.