

AVATAR: A CULTURAL AND ETHICAL JOURNEY
ACROSS SETTLER-COLONIALISM

by
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ABSTRACT

This thesis critically examines James Cameron's blockbuster *Avatar*, as a complex cinematic narrative that delves into themes of colonialism, environmental degradation, and Indigenous rights. By identifying the practices of settler-colonialism present and denounced in the movie, this paper aims to draw parallels with the settlement in America and to understand if *Avatar*'s anti-colonial and environmental messages is a truthful representation of Native American culture in the United States.

In this line of reasoning, the focus will be on the portrayal of Pandora as a parallel representation on Earth and his interpretation of the roles of the Indigenous inhabitants of Pandora. First, looking at the movie as a critique of settler-colonialism, also embedded in the American history, and of the cultural construction of race will help shed light on the intricacies of the understanding of cultures and their appreciation.

Then, by focusing on the strong environmental message conveyed in the movie, as interconnectedness, respect for nature, and the safeguarding of resources is omnipresent throughout, I aim to understand to what extent James Cameron's *Avatar* is authentically—or not—representing Native American spirituality and environmental values. Finally, this paper explores the potential of the movie as decolonizing, although Cameron's representation and depiction of Indigenous cultures have caused controversy.

INTRODUCTION

With the release of his 2009 film *Avatar*, James Cameron opened discussions about indigeneity and coloniality. Through a fictional world, the ethical and cultural journey on which the movie takes the viewer aims to denounce the unfair and oppressive practices settlers exercised over Native nations the history of the Americas. Cameron was the film's director, producer, and screenwriter. After its release, he declared the film's decolonial intentions, saying: "*Avatar* is a science fiction retelling of the history of North and South America in the early colonial period [...]. *Avatar* very pointedly made reference to the colonial period in the Americas, with all its conflict and bloodshed between the military aggressors from Europe and the indigenous peoples." In 2013, this statement was presented to the United States District Court - Central District of California, asserting ownership of *Avatar* as an original idea and script in a plagiarism and theft lawsuit that the court dismissed in the same year.¹ This 2013 lawsuit was not James Cameron's first time defending himself from accusations of plagiarism. In fact, he has been accused more than 8 times of theft or plagiarism for *Avatar*, and multiple other lawsuits involving his other blockbusters *The Terminator*, or even *Titanic*. While he beat these accusations in court, it is important to note that Cameron's decolonial vision for the film was first articulated in his own defense. Hence, a first question arises: how trusted can James Cameron's vision and works be?

Cameron's claim suggests that *Avatar* is not simply a fantastical tale set in an alien world. Rather, it serves as a metaphor for the real-world historical injustices committed during the colonization of the Americas. By connecting the story's themes and narrative elements to the colonial context, Cameron aims to make a strong statement about the consequences of imperialism and its impacts on native populations. In this sense, *Avatar* reflects the dynamics of historical

colonial encounters through the depiction of the humans (representing colonial whiteness) and the Na'vi (representing native peoples). James Cameron himself makes this parallel in his 2013 statement to the United States District Court: “Europe equals Earth. The native Americans are the Na'vi. It's not meant to be subtle.”²Likewise, Scholars and cultural critics have acknowledged these similarities, taking up this question of the film as a critique of colonialism.

In this paper, I will focus on James Cameron's 2009 *Avatar*, comparing and drawing parallels between the movie's themes of colonization and the settling in America by Europeans. I will Explore Indigenous stories and accounts of history and analyze Cameron's understanding of Early American colonial cultures through his attempts to interpret and re-tell colonial histories. *Avatar* is a movie that resulted from 14 years of cinematographic and technological development to create a world with a new, yet familiar, environmental and cultural structures. Ahead of his time, James Cameron brought to life a film that he considered “the most high-tech film in terms of its execution”³—as he used brand new technologies and techniques – but that socially and environmentally raised many cultural and ethical questions about our history and the way humans engage with discoveries.

After the release of the blockbuster, James Cameron had already written a saga originally set to have four sequels. Filmed simultaneously, the sequels of *Avatar* explore, yet again, new filming techniques and technologies, as used in *Avatar 2: The Way of Water*, which premiered on December 16, 2022. *Avatar 2* carries on some of the first movie's themes; more specifically, the second film reprises the environmentalist ethos of the original *Avatar*. *Avatar 2* maintains the original film's critique of colonialism while extending its critique of the environmental devastation it entails. Through depicting this critique of resource exploitation and environmental devastation,

Cameron immerses the audience in a world unspoiled by the Anthropocene era, yet at risk of sharing Earth's fate if colonizers persist in their pursuit of resources.

To many, it seems that decolonization has already taken place, and the United States is a decolonized society. The mainstream definition of the word “decolonized” implies the “withdrawal” of one power from its colony – which happened when America gained its independence from Great Britain – and is the “process of freeing [...] from the cultural or social effects of colonization.”⁴ However, as will be analyzed in part one, to read American culture is also to understand that decolonization is still taking place today. As a matter of fact, Nick Estes, a historian born into the Lakota Tribe, explains that decolonizing America means first to end the “continual destruction of Native life and land.”⁵ But it is also about regaining control and sovereignty. According to Estes, “reconnecting [with] indigenous places and histories” is one step; another step would be to regain the agency of “independently govern[ing]” themselves,⁶ allowing Native communities to reclaim the lands which were taken away by settler colonialism. According to Audra Simpson, “in this model of colonialism [settler-colonialism], ‘the settler never leaves,’ so the possession of territory requires the disappearance of ‘the native.’”⁷ This definition of settler colonialism, which arises out of the work of Patrick Wolfe, suggests that replacement of Native populations, rather than resource or labor extraction, is the driving force and the result of colonial tactics.

Avatar demonstrates that settler colonialism and its extractive variants can rarely be disentangled to the extent that the above definition suggests. Although at first sight the colonial goals seem to revolve around extraction rather than replacement, the native peoples of *Avatar* face similar violence to historical and contemporary Native American people. James Cameron

illustrated and conveyed this dynamic between the “dominant” and the “dominated” communities through explicit imageries and language. For instance, the Na’vi are called “savages,”⁸ and the film emphasizes scenic contrasts between the humans’ settlement appearing gray, cloudy, with technological advanced weaponry, versus the lush, bright and colorful land on which the Na’vi community lives. Although Cameron’s comparison is accurate in some respects, it is crucial to raise the following question: is *Avatar* successful at “decolonizing” these histories? The question is particularly relevant as the movie has been highly critiqued over time, especially before and during the release of *Avatar 2: The Way of Water*, which was boycotted for a time by Native activists.⁹ James Cameron is legitimate in expressing his creative interpretation of colonization through his movie; however, decolonial critiques often require input from a broader range of perspectives, disciplines, and experiences.

Chapter one explores the analysis of Cameron’s blockbuster to understand how *Avatar* reads and creates “culture” around tribalism, colonialism, and related concepts such as appropriation or enculturation. Colonialism is a central theme in the movie, mirroring historical events of imperialistic expansion and resource exploitation. The presence of humans on Pandora is driven by the idea of extracting valuable resources, without considering the native community living on the planet, the Na’vi, or their rights to land. Thus, the movie portrays the destructive consequences of colonialism, through environmental degradation, loss of cultural heritage, and violent confrontations.

Returning to Cameron’s statement, it is then quite obvious to see an anti-colonialist message emerge from the movie, which will be the focus of the second chapter. First, the deep connection between the Na’vi and their natural environment of Pandora, or the fact that their ways

of life revolve around respect for nature and their understanding of the interconnectedness of all living beings,¹⁰ makes the movie an environmentalist enterprise which contrasts with the destructiveness of conquest. Moreover, the human community that lands on Pandora comes from a futuristic, technologically advanced Earth. The military power of humans compared to the weaponry of the Na'vi demonstrates a battle fought unequally. An image that can be easily transposed to settled America and the arrival of Europeans.

Finally, it is important to note that *Avatar* is based on James Cameron's point of view and his imagining, and understanding, of settler colonialism. The third chapter will examine the many critiques the movie has received about the heroization of the characters and other aspects of the movie. Some critics argue that *Avatar* oversimplifies the complexities of settler colonialism.¹¹ Moreover, the disregard for Indigenous voices in the movie has raised the question of what is “representation” and how does it defer from the notion of “agency.” Many Native activists denounce the lack of native agency in a movie which was intended for them.¹²

This thesis will take up these questions through the lens of Indigenous scholarship about colonialism, as well as through the lens of film analysis, in order to produce an analysis that deconstructs James Cameron's critique of colonial America which may have succeeded cinematographically and works as a critique of colonization, but which fails to function as a decolonizing element in Indigenous narrative.

THE CULTURES BEHIND *AVATAR*

When *Avatar* was released in 2009, the modern use of 3 dimensional (3D) techniques was groundbreaking. “3D” is supposed to make you feel like you are part of the experience, deepening visual effects. The use of this technique immersed the viewer in a fictional cultural world which oddly resembled our own. Kathy Short, professor in sociocultural studies at the University of Arizona writes that “[s]tory is the way we make sense of the world,”¹ and that “the way we create and tell stories is culturally based.”² Hence, stories create culture in the sense that since humans live “storied lives,”³ these stories generate a community’s, a nation’s, a group’s cultural norms. *Avatar*, then, creates both meaning and culture, inscribing itself in the universal habit to construct meaning through stories,⁴ and by (re-)telling a story of Indigenous struggles and oppression. In this part, I will focus on what “culture” means in the context of American colonization and Cameron’s *Avatar*, by first looking at *Avatar* and its sequel as stories with a specific plot and cast. Then, I will explore the themes of “colonization” and draw a parallel between Historical colonial events and the movies fictional “colonial” culture. Here, analyzing the social construction of race will help unpack Cameron’s anti-colonial message.

Avatar and its sequel establish a new way of reading Indigenous culture, through the conquest of a foreign planet. In this respect it counts among its predecessors anti-imperialist *Star Wars* franchise, while also extending the questions of colonization in that film to embrace a more

¹ Kathy G. Short, “Story as World Making.” *Language Arts* 90, no. 1 (2012): 10.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41804370>. Accessed Sep. 2023

² *Ibid.*, 11

³ *Ibid.*, 9

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9 - 11

specific vision of indigeneity. However, is Cameron's attempt at "cultural authenticity"⁵ succeeding? The subtle differentiation between "cultural authenticity" and "cultural appropriation" is a crucial distinction to make. Is *Avatar* appropriating, misappropriating, or simply representing and illustrating? In order to answer these questions, it will be useful to first summarize the film's plot and character development in order to establish a clearer picture of whether the film lives up to its own cultural messaging.

Avatar, a Synopsis

Avatar opens on a future in which Earth's resources are dwindling, and humans are seeking valuable minerals on other planets. The movie is set in the mid-22nd century on a moon called Pandora. The moon is inhabited by the Na'vi, who have a deep connection to their environment. To interact with the Na'vi and navigate treacherous terrain, humans use avatars, which are genetically engineered Na'vi-human hybrids controlled by human operators. This portrayal proposes the objectification and appropriation of Indigenous culture in the movie, which I will touch on later on in this paper, and how far would the humans go to achieve their goals.

The main character, Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), a paraplegic Marine, is chosen to replace his deceased twin brother as an avatar operator on Pandora. His mission is to infiltrate the Na'vi and gain their trust, allowing the human corporation to mine Pandora's resources. Jake undergoes training and begins to explore Pandora through his avatar. As explored later in chapter two, the manipulating aspect of the military complex present on Pandora reflects the doings of

⁵ Concept mentioned in: Yoshinaga, Ida. 2019 "Disney's Moana, the Colonial Screenplay, and Indigenous Labor Extraction in Hollywood Fantasy Films." *Narrative Culture* 6, no. 2 (Fall): 188–215. <https://doi.org/10.13110/narrcult.6.2.0188>. Accessed Sep. 2023

American military on Earth. This questions the evolution of thought of military purposes years in the future. In James Cameron's depiction, humans still make the same mistakes of conquest and disrespect for other cultures.

During his time among the Na'vi, Jake is captivated by their culture and falls in love with Neytiri (Zoe Saldaña), the daughter of the Na'vi clan's leader. As he spends more time with the Na'vi, he becomes torn between his loyalty to his fellow humans, who are intent on exploiting Pandora, and his newfound allegiance to the Na'vi and their way of life.

Conflict escalates as humans threaten the Na'vi's sacred land, and Jake must make a choice: follow the orders of the human military, led by Colonel Quaritch (Stephen Lang), or stand with the Na'vi to protect their home. The film climaxes in an epic battle between the Na'vi and the human forces. In the end, Jake chooses to embrace his life as a Na'vi permanently, transferring his consciousness into his avatar's body. He leaves his human existence behind, symbolizing his commitment to Pandora and the Na'vi culture.

Jake's transformation brings to light cultural dilemma: what kind of hero is he? A disabled man, who is given the chance to start over, and is adopted into the Indigenous community rightfully. Drawing the picture of open-minded enculturation, or the social process by which culture is learned and shared, and demonstration of cultural relativism, which is the belief that values and belief systems of different cultures are diverse and deserve respect. Or, a white man appropriating Indigenous body and culture, leading them to victory and taking over control by manipulating the Indigenous spiritual beliefs—Becoming the great Toruk Macto, or driver of the banshee (Ikran, the flying creatures) Toruk—and serving and continuing the culture of white saviorism found in history and in other movie franchises.

First set to come out in 2017, *Avatar 2* was finally released thirteen years later in December 2022. The sequel, entitled *Avatar: The Way of Water*, is set a decade after the first movie events. Jake Sully lives on Pandora with his family, in the Omaticaya tribe. A year after humans return on Earth with the intention of making Pandora the “new home for humanity,”⁶ a familiar threat, Colonel Quaritch back from the dead, returns to finish his mission: colonize Pandora, “pacify[ing] the hostiles,”⁷ and to kill the Sully family. To protect his family, Jake decides to leave the Omaticaya tribe, banishing himself and his family, and finding refuge in Metkayina, “a coral reef island whose clan and lifestyle is adapted to Pandora’s aquatic habitat.”⁸ Jake and Neytiri now have to yet again fight to protect their family and their lands from human settlers and hybrid-avatars.

Environmentalist in nature, the second movie follows in the original *Avatar*’s path introducing new fauna, resources and ecosystems coveted by humans and protected by the Native peoples of Pandora. The colonization of Pandora highlights the greed of “humans;” and of European settlers who set foot on the American land to find a new home, disregarding the original inhabitants of said land.

What Is Colonization?

First used by Australian Patrick Wolfe in 1999, the notion of “settler colonialism” appeared in order to separate the traditional practice of colonialism – “Colonialism is a form of

⁶ *Avatar 2: The Way of Water* (20th Century Studios, 2022). 24:10-30

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24:10-30

⁸ “*Avatar, The Way of Water: plot*” *IMDb* online. 2022.

https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1630029/plotsummary/?ref_=tt_stry_pl accessed May 2023.

domination—the control by individuals or groups over the territory and/or behavior of other individuals or groups”⁹ – and settler colonialism – “‘the settler never leaves,’ so the possession of territory requires the disappearance of ‘the Native.’”¹⁰ Cameron’s *Avatar*, explores these notions through the conquest of Pandora, a foreign, far-away, moon on which life has been discovered. Noticeably, parallels can be drawn between the conquest of Pandora and the conquest of the American continent.

It is essential to differentiate the various aspects of colonialism when considering their relationship with the movie *Avatar*. While the movie depicts colonizers aiming to exploit the new world’s resources, resembling a form of “traditional colonialism,” it also requires the transformation of human colonizers into settlers. This implies the establishment of human communities and the displacement of Native peoples, echoing historical events seen in American and Indigenous history. In both *Avatar* and its sequel, Pandora’s “treasures” become the sought-after goal for humans. As mentioned earlier, the pursuit of “unobtainium” served as the driving force behind human settlement on the moon, leading to the relocation of the Na’vi and ultimately resulting in the destruction of their habitat.

Nevertheless, it is in the sequel that the shift happens and settler colonialism does become a “settler’s” need for a new home. When “the sky-people” come back to Pandora, the colony they built looks ten times bigger than the one in the first movie, and it is evident the goal is now to relocate humanity, even if it means taking the land of Native communities and clans present

⁹ Ronald J. Horvath “A Definition of Colonialism.” *Current Anthropology* 13, no. 1 (1972): 45–57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2741072>. Accessed Jul. 2023

¹⁰ Audra Simpson, “Settlement’s Secret.” *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 2 (2011): 205–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41238320>. Accessed Nov. 2021

already. The new commander of the colony tells colonel Quaritch “Earth is dying. Our task here is to tame this frontier. Nothing less than to make Pandora the new home for humanity. But before we can do that, we need to pacify the hostiles.”¹¹

The central theme of colonialism mirrors historical instances of colonial expansion and resource exploitation. The human presence on Pandora is driven by the goal of extracting valuable resources, without consideration for the Na'vi's rights to their land and way of life. The movie portrays the destructive consequences of colonialism, such as environmental degradation, loss of cultural heritage, and violent confrontation. This parallels the devastating impact of colonization on many Indigenous communities around the world. Throughout history, different versions of colonialism have emerged, each with its unique motivations and outcomes. *Avatar* draws from these historical variations and interweaves them into its narrative. By doing so, the film invites viewers to reflect on the broader implications of colonization and the ethical dilemmas surrounding cultural interactions.

Initially, there were interactions with Indigenous peoples that were relatively peaceful. Nevertheless, these encounters soon took a hostile turn. As an interesting example, here is an excerpt of Giovanni da Verrazano's voyage on the Dauphine circa 1523.

Sending ashore by swimming one of our young sailors carrying to them some trinkets ..., and being approached within 4 fathoms of them, throwing the goods to them a wishing to turn back he was so tossed by the waves that almost half dead he was carried to the edge of the shore. Which having been seen, the people of the land ran immediately to him; taking him by the head, legs and arms, they carried him some distance away. Where, the youth, seeing himself carried in such a way, stricken with terror, uttered very loud cries, which they did similarly in their language, showing him that he should not fear. ... Taking off his shirt and hose, leaving him nude, they made a very large fire near him, placing him near the heat. ... His strength recovered, having remained with them awhile, he showed by signs

¹¹ *Avatar 2: The Way of Water* (20th Century Studios, 2022). 24:10-30

that he desired to return to the ship; who, with the greatest kindness, holding him always close with various embraces, accompanied him as far as the sea, and in order to assure him more, extending themselves on a high hill, stood to watch him until he was in the boat.¹²

Here, the “peaceful” encounter completely depended on the interactions between the Europeans and the Indians. We can see that the calmness and the non-aggression of the Indians allowed the sailor to get back to the boat safely. We can, however, say that if Verrazano himself had landed on the shores, he and his men might have overpowered the Indians, for instance, with their weaponry. As a matter of fact, Verrazano continues:

Anchoring at which, XX men going about two leagues inland, we found the people through fear had fled to the woods. Seeking everywhere, we met with a very old woman and a damsel of from XVIII to XX years, who through fear had hidden themselves in the grass. The old one had two little girls whom she carried on the shoulders, and back on the neck a boy, all of eight years of age. The young woman had as many of the same, but all girls. Having approached toward whom, they began to cry out, [and] the old woman to make signs to us that the men had fled to the woods. We gave them to eat of our viands, which she accepted with great gusto; the young woman refused everything and with anger threw it to the ground. We took the boy from the old woman to carry to France, and wishing to take the young woman, who was of much beauty and of tall stature, it was not however possible, on account of the very great cries which she uttered, for us to conduct her to the sea. And having to pass through some woods, being far from the ship, we decided to release her, carrying only the boy.¹³

Gaining the confidence of the group before abducting one of the children as a trophy, and wanting to take the girl as well because of her “beauty” (hence implying using her for their own pleasure later on), the encounter took a dark turn. Europeans often seized lands, ignoring the long-established cultures and societies that existed. What this story also brings up is the nuance between

¹² Giovanni Da Verrazano, and New York State Historian. *Verrazano's voyage along the Atlantic coast of North America*. (Albany, the University of the State of New York, 1916) Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/17027055/>. Accessed Sep. 15, 2023.

¹³ Ibid.

the white settler, considered as “civilized,” in contrast with the Native American, the hostile “savage.” But as we can see, it is not as “black and white.” In this story, the European sailors are the ones exhibiting hostility and savagery, contrary to general discourse at the time that the Indigenous peoples were the savages.

Avatar reveals a story of conquest and dispossession, where the Indigenous inhabitants of Pandora find themselves in a battle for their land and way of life. This dispossession is the film’s central claim, and its resonance with the historical colonization of the Americas can be found through language, with the humans calling the Na’vi “savages” for example, and through cinematographic techniques – playing with colors, lights, and effects of grandeur. Tensions between humans and Na’vi are introduced at the start of the movie when Grace speaks with Parker.¹⁴ The latter reminds Grace that peaceful negotiations have failed. The hostile relationship between the two species is then explored throughout the movie, with the whole military force working against the Indigenous people, and towards the exploitation of Pandora’s resources

The hostility on the human’s part, on the settler part, is shown on multiple levels. First of all, the power dynamic highlights humans as a technologically advanced military force, armed with weaponized robotic suits, machine guns, missile launchers, and more (Figure 1).

¹⁴ *Avatar* (CA: 20th Century Fox), 13:35



Figure 1 *Avatar* by James Cameron, 06:03. Jake lands on Pandora and discovers the colony. A man passes in a robotic suit with a rifle in his hands.

In the first movie, despite the scientific purpose of the human incursion on Pandora, the military, as embodied by Colonel Quaritch, is the institution with decision making power. An early conversation between Grace Augustine and Parker Selfridge sets this context, but it also brings to light the clear intents of the human settlers on Pandora:

PARKER: You're supposed to be winning the hearts and the minds of the Natives. Isn't that the whole point of your little puppet show? You look like them, and you talk like them, then they'll start trusting us. We build them a school, we teach them English, but after, what, how many years? Relations with the Indigenous are only getting worse.

GRACE: Yeah, that tends to happen when you use machine guns on them

PARKER: Right, come here. ... This is why we're here. Unobtainium. Because this little rock sells for 20 million a kilo. That's the only reason. It's what pays for this whole operation. It's what pays for your little science experiment. ... Now, those savages are threatening our whole operation, we're on the brink of war, and you are supposed to be finding a diplomatic solution. So, use what you've got, and bring me some results."¹⁵

¹⁵ Ibid.,12:59-13:40

In this scene, Parker's bitterness and his use of tone and words—such as the sarcastic “puppet show,” and “little experiment,” or the mention of “savages...” – is meant to villainize him and the human settlers, whose sole purpose is to exploit Pandora and get rid of the “savage.” The obvious representation of the Na’vi society as a sophisticated and harmonious civilization, and the overall promotion of cultural relativism throughout the movie evident in characters like Jake and Grace, underscores the ignorance of the human settlers who persistently adhere to their own beliefs without making an effort to comprehend foreign cultures and various ways of life.

When in the first movie, avatar drivers were meant to create communication and connection with the people in order to peacefully engage with the Native communities, it is clear to see that in the sequel of the movie, *The Way of Water*, the goals have changed on both sides. The Avatar drivers who are part of the new human colony, are now dedicated to wage war on the Na’vi and very explicitly seize their land no matter the consequences. Colonel Quaritch’s consciousness has been implanted in the Avatar body so that he would finish his mission of colonization.

This, in turn, brings us back to the European settlements in America. The desire for land and resources drove European colonizers to aggressively expand their territories. Land was seen as a valuable commodity, leading to the displacement and dispossession of Indigenous populations. The Europeans employed various tactics, including warfare, deceitful treaties, and forced relocations, to take control of Indigenous lands. As Tebbel and Jennison explained,

As the settlements grew, [isolated] incidents became more numerous because there were more people and more opportunities for friction. With the growth, too, hunting rights and territories were soon in dispute, and the Indian began to feel the pressures of an invading, growing, pushing population.¹⁶

¹⁶ John Tebbel, and Keith Jennison, *The American Indian Wars*, (New York: Bonanza Books, 2003) p. 14

The escalation of tensions and conflicts can be seen as a direct result of the settlers' expansion and their impact on the existing Native societies. The power dynamics shifted even further as the European settlers sought to establish dominance over the land, resources, and ultimately the Indigenous populations themselves. This not only led to territorial disputes but also had far-reaching cultural and social implications, as the Indigenous communities were forced to contend with the overwhelming presence of a foreign power that was reshaping the landscape and social structures. Those cultural and social implications involved the social construction of race which have long defined societal norms, enhancing a fear of the "other."

Social Construction of Race

If the conquest of the Americas was carried out under the dehumanizing banner of settler colonialism, it has been maintained, at least in part, by the construct of race and the hierarchies it entails. One crucial aspect of understanding racism in the U.S. is recognizing the social construction of race. In "The Origins and Demise of the Concept of Race" Charles Hirschman explains that:

Although racial differences may be only skin-deep, it is widely assumed that races have been a primordial source of identity and intergroup antagonism from the earliest societies to the present with ancient hatreds, exploitation, and discrimination among the most common patterns.¹⁷

Here, Hirschman hints at the origins of "color" as "race." One might see more to the difference two "races" have than just skin color. A difference that has been approached and studied by other scholars, such as Isabel Wilkerson. She states in *Caste: The Origin of Our Discontent*:

¹⁷ Charles Hirschman, "The Origins and Demise of the Concept of Race." *Population and Development Review* 30, no. 3 (2004): 385-415. <http://jstor.org/stable/3401408>. Accessed Sep. 24, 2023

“color is a fact, race is a social construct.”¹⁸ Thus, the concept of race is not rooted in biology but is a social construct, meaning that it is a product of societal beliefs, culture, and historical context rather than inherent genetic differences. Throughout American history, various racial categories have been created and modified to justify social hierarchies, unequal treatment, and the exploitation of certain groups. Understanding and acknowledging the social construction of race is essential for recognizing that racial differences are not innate but are created by society. This recognition is a crucial step in addressing and combating the deeply rooted issue of racism in the United States and working towards a more just and equitable society. While Wilkerson’s notions of race as “social construct,” “social hierarchies,” etc. can be just as well transposed to Native American populations, it is essential to acknowledge that “[t]he concept of ‘race’ can be a problematic descriptor for Native American identity, which is a political and legal identity in addition to a racial one.”¹⁹

The description of Indigenous peoples by European explorers was considerably used in journals and travel memoirs. Descriptions included skin-color, clothes, but also physical features.

Verrazzano describes in his journals page 7:

The older had on his nude body a skin of a stag, artificially adorned like a damask with various embroideries; the head bear, the hair turned back with various bands, at the neck of broad chain ornamented with many stones of diverse colors. ... They excel us in size; they are of bronze color, some inclining more to whiteness, others to tawny color; the face sharply cut, the hair long and black, ... the eyes black and alert, the bearing kind and gentle, imitating much the ancient [manner]. Their women are of the same beauty and charm; very graceful; ... they go nude with only one skin of the stag embroidered like the men, and some wear on the arms very rich

¹⁸ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste*. (New Delhi, India: Allen Lane, 2020). p 67

¹⁹ Robert Maxim, Gabriel R. Sanchez, and Kimberly R. Huyser, “Why the Federal Government Needs to Change How It Collects Data on Native Americans,” Brookings, March 30, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-the-federal-government-needs-to-change-how-it-collects-data-on-native-americans/>.

skins of the length; the head's bare, with various arrangements of braids, composed of their own hair, which hang on one side and the other of the breast. ... they have in the ears various pendant trinkets as the orientals are accustomed to have, the men like the women among which we saw many plates wrought from copper...²⁰

Both Verrazzano's depiction and the portrayal of the Indigenous people in the film share a common theme of emphasizing "otherness" through the highlighted differences and the accentuation of "race" as a common denominator.

In *Avatar*, James Cameron pulls from the idea of "alienness" of the Na'vi to creating them as tall individuals (they are 9 to 10 feet tall), facial features (animal like), skin pigmentation than the average human, and the clothing seems to reference Indigenous dress (Figure 2). Many of these features have been used in history as factors to categorize people and have been at the basis of American institutionalized racism.



Figure 2 *Avatar* by James Cameron, 39:00. Neytiri (Zoe Saldana) in traditional Na'vi dress.

²⁰ Giovanni Da Verrazzano, and New York State Historian. *Verrazano's voyage along the Atlantic coast of North America*. (Albany, the University of the State of New York, 1916). Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/17027055/>. Accessed Sep. 15, 2023

The way the Indigenous peoples are dressed in *Avatar* appears to draw inspiration from portrayals of Native American communities, but not only that. In the behind-the-scenes Disney+ video “Na’vi Costumes,” costume designers Deborah L. Scott and Mayes C. Rubeo talk about James Cameron’s vision for the Na’vi. “I think he [James Cameron] had, obviously, very specific ideas about the culture of the people,” Deborah Scott said. “What Jim [James Cameron] wanted to portray in the Na’vi people is actually a tribal look ... We look at all the major ethnic tribal parts of the world, Africa, Mexico, Meso-America, Indonesia, Maori.”²¹

Although inspired by peoples of the world, a question arises with the “traditional” dress of the Omatikaya. Native American activists have mentioned on multiple occasions that *Avatar* appropriates and sometimes misrepresents Indigenous cultures. These questions are relevant to understanding the limitations of the film’s decolonial critique, since settler colonialism involved not only the physical dispossession of land but also the erasure or suppression of Indigenous cultures. When settlers appropriate elements of Indigenous cultures, it can be seen as an extension of the historical process of erasure and domination. For instance, settler societies imposed a need for individuals from different cultures to assimilate into the colonial way of life.²² Maralee Nieves states: “Activists not only claim that the ideas promoted by James Cameron are dangerous revisionist history, but that his depiction of the Na’vi people is racist cultural appropriation.”²³

²¹ Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment LLC., ed., “Na’vi Costumes,” *Disney +*, 2010, <https://www.disneyplus.com/en-gb/video/7b3747a3-cc6e-46b9-9b98-a12ff1d8944d>.

²² Betty Le, 2015 “How to Identify and Resist Cultural Appropriation,” blog.pachamama.org. April 24, 2015 <https://blog.pachamama.org/how-to-identify-and-resist-cultural-appropriation#:~:text=Cultural%20appropriation%20is%20a%20result>.

²³ Maralee Nieves, 2022 “Avatar: Why Native American Activists Are Calling for the Boycott of the Film,” *MovieWeb*, December 26, 2022. <https://movieweb.com/avatar-why-native-american-activists-are-boycotting/#:~:text=Native%20American%20activists%20have%20called>

Cultural appropriation is the adoption, often by dominant or privileged groups, of elements from a culture that is not their own. This can include clothing, symbols, rituals, language, and other cultural elements. James Young explains that three sorts of cultural appropriation can be found: “subject appropriation,” “content appropriation,” and “object appropriation.”²⁴ All three forms can be traced to the production and narrative of *Avatar*. Young says that “[subject appropriation] occurs when an outside represents members or aspects of another culture. This sort of appropriation would occur when an outsider makes the culture or lives of insiders the subject of a painting, story, film, or other work of art.”²⁵ This is perhaps the most obvious form of appropriation in the film: James Cameron is white, and has no firsthand knowledge of the struggles his film attempts to represent. His representation of the Indigenous peoples in *Avatar* can hence be considered as “cultural appropriation” in itself.

To continue, Young defines “content appropriation” and “object appropriation” as follows:

2. *Content Appropriation*: When content appropriation occurs, an artist uses the cultural products of another culture in the production of his or her own art. This sort of appropriation is quite various ...

3. *Object Appropriation*: Object appropriation occurs when the possession of a tangible object (such as a sculpture) is transferred from members of the culture that produced it to the possession of outsiders. The most famous case of object appropriation is the transfer of the friezes from the Parthenon to the British Museum. The transfer of artifacts from minority aboriginal cultures to public and private collections has also proved controversial.²⁶

²⁴ James O. Young, “Profound offense and Cultural Appropriation.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 2 (2005): 135-146 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-8529.2005.00190.x>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ James O. Young, “Profound offense and Cultural Appropriation.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 2 (2005): 135-146 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-8529.2005.00190.x>.

In *Avatar*, Jake Sully is a white disabled American veteran who is “offered the possibility of becoming in bodily form, the very people and culture under siege.”²⁷ As a matter of fact, the first form of appropriation present in the movie is the way humans engage with the Na’vi, by incorporating avatars—reproduced through human techniques of bioengineering—and by becoming “Avatar Drivers”²⁸ (Figure 3).



Figure 3 *Avatar* by James Cameron, 9:32. Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) and the Avatar, he will be driving in the movie.

This is problematic in different ways. Even though it shows the advancement of human technologies, it also implies questions of respect and acknowledgement, and a lack of cultural relativism on the American/human part, on the colonizer part. For instance, the humans incorporating avatar bodies are called “avatar drivers,” objectifying the Na’vi people and using them as a new technology to acquire and conquer. Jake’s appropriation of the Native body allows

²⁷ Audra Simpson, “Settlement’s Secret.” *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 2 (2011): 205–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41238320>. Accessed Nov. 2021

²⁸ *Avatar* (CA: 20th Century Fox), 9:30

him to be integrated in the Omaticayan community, as Audra Simpson presents it: “When he assumes this new, improved self and bodily form (that of a Native) he no longer occupies Indigenous territory unjustly, and in this new form, leads the "Na'vi" in their resistance to dispossession, removal, and ecocide”²⁹.

Although Simpson regards this in a negative way, and although indeed there are elements of the cultural appropriation critique that are relevant to a reading of the film, Jake’s transformation can also be regarded as a form of criticism against colonial rule. *Avatar* explores Indigenous cultures and the history of colonization and exploitation in order to denounce the colonial culture we still live in today. In his attempt, Cameron touches upon crucial elements which are “othered” in mainstream culture and creates a technical storied world in order to convey his message. When the colonial power of *Avatar* mirrors Europeans in the early settlements in what is today Eastern United States and the expansionist ideas of Manifest Destiny, the Na’vi seem to have agency and enough power to overthrow this colonial power, although immensely more weaponized and hostile. This begs the question of representation and the question of “strength”—or lack of—Cameron tries to disentangle throughout the movie. How is the Na’vi empowerment and agency portrayed in the movie? The interconnectedness of Pandora, its fauna, flora, and peoples, brings into the narrative a powerful environmental message that adds to the criticism of the human colonial power. At first sight, it appears that James Cameron wanted to show the strength of nature against technology and military advancements, which ends up defeated at the end of the first movie.

²⁹ Audra Simpson, “Settlement’s Secret.” *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 2 (2011): 205–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41238320>. Accessed Nov. 2021

THE CULTURES BEHIND *AVATAR*

Pandora is a world of lush and abundant nature. The ecosystems of the planet were created to be otherworldly, extraterrestrial. However, amidst the natural interconnectedness found on Pandora, there is an intricately woven familiarity with flora and fauna found on Earth. The movie serves as the backdrop for a narrative that carries a profound anti-colonial and environmentalist message. Within this allegorical tale of two planets, Pandora and Earth, the film explores the complex interplay between militarization, technological advancement, and resource hunting. This chapter will explore the theme of environmentalism, as well as the destructive consequences of unchecked human ambition, and the urgent need for a more conscientious approach to our environment.

As the Na'vi live in harmony with nature and are deeply connected to the planet's ecosystem, they represent an environmentalist approach. The Na'vi's spiritual connection to the planet and their respect for all living creatures is a strong contrast to the colonizers' disregard for Pandora's delicate balance. Their relationship with nature is depicted through the bond with their Ikran (or the banshee, the flying creatures) and connection with Eywa, a spiritual representation of Pandora's interconnected web of life.

Resource hunting lies at the heart of the human presence on Pandora. Their quest for unobtainium drives the colonization efforts. The corporation's persistent pursuit of profit symbolizes the historical resource-driven motivations behind colonization. The film shows how resource extraction can lead to environmental devastation, as the exploitation of Pandora's resources results in the destruction of ecosystems and the displacement of Indigenous populations.

Two Planets, One Evil: An Environmental Approach

James Cameron has defined himself, over time and projects, as being an environmentalist at heart. Janet Wilson writes in 2010 for *Grist*, “Hollywood mega-director James Cameron is now promoting *Avatar* as the most successful environmental film of all time.”³⁰ She continues by quoting Cameron: “I wanted to do a film that had a deeply embedded environmental message ... but do it in the form of a science fiction action adventures.”³¹ Collaborators on the movie also applauded *Avatar* for its respect for nature and the critic on world destruction. It is the case for botanist Dr. Jodie Holt, who claimed “*Avatar* obviously has a strong environmental message and a conservation message ... The message in *Avatar* of conservation and living in harmony with nature is one that I think resonate with many ... viewers of the movie.”³²

Looking more deeply into the depths of Pandora, its fauna is very similar to the one found on Earth. And if not found on Earth today, it is compelling to look back at extinct species that used to inhabit the planet. Journalist Jeremy Hance wrote in 2010:

Some people seeing the new blockbuster film report becoming depressed afterwards because the world of *Avatar*, sporting six-legged creatures, flying lizards, and glowing organisms, is not real. Yet, to director James Cameron’s credit, the alien world of Pandora is based on our own biological paradise—Earth. The wonders of *Avatar* are all around us, you just have to know where to look.³³

³⁰ Janet Wilson, “James Cameron: I’m the Greenest Director of All Time!” *Grist*, March 2, 2010, <https://grist.org/article/2010-03-01-cameron-im-the-greenest-director-of-all-time/>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Pandora Flora*. Disney +, 2009.

³³ Jeremy Hance, “World of *Avatar*: In Real Life.” *Mongabay Environmental News*, (2010) <https://news.mongabay.com/2010/01/world-of-avatar-in-real-life/>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2021.

As I mentioned before, Pandora is a world full of beauty, unique creatures, and resources unknown to Humans. The planet's nature is immense and the Omaticaya clan have their own center of civilization in the heart of the biggest tree of the area.

Pandora seems impossible to find on Earth as many viewers have developed what Hance calls the “*Avatar* blues,” an emotional response which results from the realization that Pandora and the world depicted in the movie is not real.³⁴ However, botanist Dr. Jodie Holt explains that “In the conversations with Jon Landau and Jim Cameron, it was clear that they wanted Pandora to follow the natural laws of biology and physics that we have on Earth, and to really be as realistic as it could be.”³⁵ Holt recalls that James Cameron’s wanted “Pandora to be possible.”³⁶

Accordingly, although animals on Pandora are science fiction—Invented species by designers who worked on creating the Banshee (Ikran), the bird-like predators Na’vis ride to fly, or “Thanator,” the panther-like predator chasing Jake at the start of the movie—they are strongly inspired by Earth creatures. James Cameron describes the banshee as a “bird of prey” or “an alien eagle.”³⁷ Looking more closely at the physicality of the animal, its features are reminiscent of flying-dinosaurs.

The Banshee is a creature that behaves similarly to how, for example, Pteranodons are depicted in the Jurassic World movie³⁸. This suggests that the design and behavior of the Banshee may have been inspired by extinct species like the Pteranodon that used to exist on Earth.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *Pandora Flora*. Disney +, 2009.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *Creating the Banshee*, Disney +, 2009.

³⁸ Jurassic World Universe, “Pteranodon (the Lost World, Jurassic Park 3, Jurassic World),” Jurassic World Universe, November 30, 2014, <https://www.jurassicworlduniverse.com/dinosaurs/pteranodon/>.



Figure 4 Picture taken from Avatar.com. Mountain Banshee, or Ikran. Accessible online: <https://www.avatar.com/pandorapedia/mountain-banshee>

The Banshee is not the only creature in the movie that seems to have been inspired by Earth's species, including those that have gone extinct. The six-legged horse ridden by the Na'vi is another example. The use of horses as a means of transportation by Europeans and Euro-Americans dates back to 3000 BCE³⁹ and quickly became part of human civilization.⁴⁰ Thus, these similarities challenge the narrative of the colonizers in the movie, who view the Indigenous inhabitants of Pandora as "savage" or uncivilized. The Na'vi people behave in ways that are not dissimilar to how humans on Earth have interacted with their environment, including the Na'vi exploitation of creatures like the "direhorse" for transportation. This similarity underscores the idea that the Na'vi have their own civilization and way of life, even though it differs from that of

³⁹ Meghan Bartels, "Humans Started Riding Horses 5,000 Years Ago, New Evidence Suggests," *Scientific American*, March 3, 2023, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/humans-started-riding-horses-5-000-years-ago-new-evidence-suggests/>.

⁴⁰ "The Role of Horse Riding in Human Civilization: A Historical Perspective - MUNDUS 2035," *Mundus 2035*, March 8, 2023, <https://mundus2035.com/the-role-of-horse-riding-in-human-civilization-a-historical-perspective/#:~:text=Horse%20riding%20has%20been%20a>.

the colonizers. James Cameron emphasizes in the movie the similarities between the Na’vi and the colonizers, by creating hierarchical roles in the Na’vi society, or ascribing them a religion—which is crucial to Europeans during the settlements in America. However similar the Indigenous peoples of Pandora are to the human colonizers, there is always a certain value colonizers give themselves as privileged or as a priority. This kind of prioritization has also been adopted by European settlers in America.

Pandora seems to be a reflection of Earth but set centuries ago, before colonization and before humans entered the era of the Anthropocene—or “the period of time during which human activities have impacted the environment enough to constitute a distinct geological change.”⁴¹ It is easy to find similarities between Earth’s prehistoric environment and Pandora. For instance, the gigantism found on Pandora, in the vegetation, animals, but also in the Na’vi themselves (as they are 9 to 10 feet tall) reflects Earth’s history. Dr. Holt explains the size of the flora found on Pandora, equating the elements found on Pandora to what is already known Earth’s history:

On Pandora, or anywhere, the environmental factors that would have the most influence on plants, would be the light, the solar radiation, which is needed for photosynthesis. The gasses in the air. Carbon dioxide, certainly, which is needed for photosynthesis.⁴²

Simply put, life developed on Pandora for similar reasons it evolved on Earth. But there is more to Pandora and its atmosphere. The planet undoubtedly has a different composition than Earth.

Holt further explains:

Plants respond to gravity. Plants have means of determining which way is up and which way is down. So, they can detect gravity. So, on Pandora there’s a very strong

⁴¹ National Geographic Society, “Anthropocene | National Geographic Society,” [education.nationalgeographic.org](https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/anthropocene/), May 20, 2022, <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/anthropocene/>.

⁴² *Pandora Flora*. Disney +, 2009.

magnetic field and very weak gravity, so plants were able to grow much larger. So, gigantism, the large trees, the large plants.⁴³

The weak gravity and strong magnetic field described in the quote are two factors presented as the scientific reasons for why the Hallelujah Mountains float in the film. This passage provides a basis for understanding how these majestic and (seemingly) impossible views in the movie, could be possible. Or at the very least, how they could be imagined as a hypothesis.



Figure 5 *Avatar* directed by James Cameron. 59.40. Size of the vegetation of the forest compared to 9 feet tall Neytiri

On Earth, “island gigantism” is a biological phenomenon where some species that colonize isolated environments, such as islands, tend to evolve to larger sizes compared to their relatives. Factors such as reduced competition, fewer predators, and the availability of abundant resources can account for such a phenomenon. Benjamin Elisha Sawe writes for *World Atlas* that a study “revealed some interesting observation such as rodents lean towards gigantism while lagomorphs, carnivores, and artiodactyls (deer and hippos) tend towards dwarfism. In summary, large species

⁴³ Ibid.

decrease in size when food is limited while small species grow big where there is no significant predation pressure.”⁴⁴ Similarly, megafauna—giant animals—were found on Earth, Shepard Krech III says, in the first chapter of *The Ecological Indian*, that “these so-called megafauna (literally large animals) were exceptional.”⁴⁵ In the context of Pandora, the relative isolation of the planet (from Earth), as well as the natural cycle of life being respected by the flora, fauna, and peoples inhabiting the planet, could also explain the gigantism of many of its Native species. The movie’s portrayal of a world where evolution has been allowed to unfold relatively undisturbed by external influences aligns with the principles of “Island gigantism” observed on Earth, in the Galapagos islands or the Seychelles.⁴⁶ With a lush and unique ecosystem and fewer external factors which would affect their evolution, the creatures on Pandora may have evolved to become larger. Hence, the reduced competition—the mutual respect—and distinct ecological niches might have allowed for the evolution of oversized organisms.

The importance of the beauty of the land in *Avatar* can be associated to the essential place of land in Native American, or Native peoples, cultures, in the preservation of its ecosystem. And especially, because of the sacredness of the land. In the scene where Jake meets Neytiri, the latter throws Jake’s fire in the pond. As the environment seems to dip into darkness, trees and plants, and underwater ecosystems “turn on” and brighten the forest as if in daylight, accompanied by a

⁴⁴ Benjamin Elisha Sawe, “What Is Island Gigantism?,” WorldAtlas, April 25, 2017, https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-is-island-gigantism.html.

⁴⁵ Shepard Krech III, “Pleistocene Extinctions.” *The Ecological Indian* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).

⁴⁶ Alexander L. Jaffe, Graham J. Slater, and Michael E. Alfaro, “The Evolution of Island Gigantism and Body Size Variation in Tortoises and Turtles,” *Biology Letters*, 7, no. 4 (January 26, 2011): 558–61, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2010.1084>.

soft, engaging music.⁴⁷ The flora is majestic, luminescent at night. Viewers understood this aspect of the Pandora flora as a piece of science fiction. However, as pointed out in Hance’s article, “Pandora is based on our own biological paradise.”⁴⁸ Hance identifies that:

One of the aspects of *Avatar*’s visual beauty is that many of the organisms literally glow with their own inner light. But this is not science fiction; innumerable organisms on Earth have evolved this glowing light, known as bioluminescence. Most familiarly, fireflies use bioluminescence [...]. But it is in the deep dark of the oceans where bioluminescence has taken over in a way not dissimilar from Pandora. Nearly all species in the abyss—from fish to squid to crustaceans to corals—employ amazing light shows to communicate, attract prey, or escape.⁴⁹

Even in the possibility of bioluminescence, the movie implant scientific reasoning in order to prove that Pandora is “possible” or realistic. The viewer sees Pandora through Jake’s eyes throughout the movie. The beauty of Pandora seems to be, on a historic point of view, equal to the beauty of Native lands—before the settlement and colonialism, or at least, appear as how the land was imagined to be before the colonization of the continent. In his journal, Christopher Columbus mentions the “beauty” of the islands: “[The admiral] says that everything he saw was so lovely that his eyes could not weary of beholding such beauty, nor could he weary of the songs of birds, large and small”⁵⁰. The land was then abundant in nature. Donald Hughes writes, that “When Indians alone cared for the American earth, this continent was clothed in a green robe of forests, unbroken grasslands, and useful desert plants, filled with an abundance of wildlife.”⁵¹ The arrival of Euro-Americans on Native lands transformed the landscapes into advanced technological

⁴⁷ Ibid., 36:30 to 39

⁴⁸ Jeremy Hance, “World of *Avatar*: In Real Life.” *Mongabay Environmental News*, (2010), <https://news.mongabay.com/2010/01/world-of-avatar-in-real-life/>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2021.

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Columbus, Cristopher. 1960 *The Journal of Christopher Columbus*. 1 Jan. 1960. Translated by Cecil Jane

⁵¹ J. Donald Hughes, *North American Indian Ecology* (Texas Western Press, 1996).

communities. For instance, Snoqualmie Falls, located in Washington state, is a sacred (threatened) land to the Snoqualmie Tribe of the Puget Sound region.⁵² After the construction of a hydroelectric plant in 1898 on the river by the Puget Sound Power & Light Company, the natural flow and mist of the falls reduced significantly, impacting its spiritual and cultural importance to the Snoqualmie people.⁵³ The Snoqualmie Falls are a “prominent theme in [the] tribal mythology” of the Snoqualmie people and a “significant site for spirit power.”⁵⁴ The transformation of this sacred place because of technological advancement is a theme found in *Avatar*, as the arrival of humans on Pandora led to the destruction of Eywa, the sacred tree of the Na’vi, to exploit resources and force the Na’vi off of their land.

The Na’vi are a spiritual community that believes in the vitality of nature and the interconnectedness of things. Their goddess, “Eywa,” can be found in the “Tree of Voices” or the “Tree of Souls” (figure 6) Comparably, the relationship between Native American tribes and the land is one of respect.

⁵² Amy Corbin, “Snoqualmie Falls – United States,” Sacred Land, (2004) <https://sacredland.org/snoqualmie-falls-united-states/>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Kenneth D. Tollefson, and Martin L. Abbott. “From Fish Weir to Waterfall.” *American Indian Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (1993): 209–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1185528>.



Figure 6 *Avatar* directed by James Cameron. 2:08:20, “Eywa,” the Three of Voices

In the Northern Cheyenne tradition and culture, for example, the relationship between the land and the people is one of a mother with her children.⁵⁵ Hughes describes the natural exchange between Native tribes and the Earth as a secret, lost to Europeans: “the secret of how to live in harmony with Mother Earth, to use what she offers without hurting her; the secret of receiving gratefully the gifts of the Great Spirit.”⁵⁶ For instance, the Banshee holds importance in the Na’vi culture. It is considered a rite of passage when an Ikran forms a lifelong bond with its Na’vi rider. This bond symbolizes the deep connection between the people of Pandora and the natural world, particularly the forests and the creatures that inhabit them. This connection stems from the importance of the interconnectedness of the Na’vi and their environment.

The Na’vi are respectful of and interconnected with all natural systems of the planet. The Na’vi have a sensory connection to other animals or to certain trees. Their faith is connected to

⁵⁵ Henrietta Mann, “Earth Mother and Prayerful Children: Sacred Sites and Religious Freedom.” *Native Voices: American Indian Identity and Resistance*, by Richard A. Grounds et al., Lawrence, (University Press of Kansas, 2003).

⁵⁶ J. Donald Hughes, *North American Indian Ecology* (Texas Western Press, 1996).

nature. They use or exploit only what is needed for their survival, and they ask for forgiveness when they have to take a life.⁵⁷ Around the first half of the movie, Neytiri and Jake meet in the forest. Neytiri is forced to kill predators who were threatening Jake. When Jake thanks Neytiri for killing his opponents, Neytiri is upset: “don’t thank for this. This is sad, very sad only,” she tells him, and continues: “All this is your fault. They did not need to die.”⁵⁸ This encounter draws a distinction between the Na’vi and the humans. When Jake is thinking about his safety and the danger in front of him, Neytiri is thinking about the unnecessary battle she had to intervene in. This meeting builds a shift in the eyes of the viewers. They start to understand that the colonizers’ violent ways are a threat for the environment, and more specifically, it forces the Na’vi to act differently as well.

When Jake meets Neytiri, a whole new world is introduced to the spectator through Jake’s eyes. Jake learns directly from a Native of Pandora, and his enculturation into, or his opening to Na’vi culture starts here: Jake is alone in a foreign environment, without any means of defending himself. In this scene, Neytiri extinguishes Jake’s torch, throwing the fire in the river. It is eye opening to analyze this encounter with fire. Symbolically, fire is an essential part of human civilization. It holds both spiritual and mythical significance, as well as philosophical. Interestingly, one can look at ‘fire’ as Zeus’s lightning, creating fire with its strike,⁵⁹ or see the creation of life through earth and fire, as Plato offered.⁶⁰ Prometheus gifted fire to its creation,

⁵⁷ *Avatar* (20th Century Fox, 2009).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 38:15 – 38:40

⁵⁹ Stephen J. Pyne, “Fire in the Mind: Changing Understandings of Fire in Western Civilization,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 371, no. 1696 (May 23, 2016): 20150166, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2015.0166>.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*,

humans who he made of mud. By doing so, he defied Zeus, who punished him of an eternity of agony. Fire is a godly invention and a privilege for the Gods. Which apparently wasn't made for humans, and in fact, "Prometheus's flames acted as a catalyst for the rapid progression of civilization," for with it, they created weapons and waged wars.⁶¹ When Neytiri extinguishes Jake's fire in the movie, it is a humbling moment, when she opens Jake's eyes to the beauty of her world and criticizes human's way of trying to act like Gods. Usually, ignorance is metaphorically related to darkness, and extinguishing the fire means to deny knowledge. Here, the contrary is happening,. Extinguishing the fire (right after using it as a weapon against predators), means to leave behind ignorance, violence and old human ways. And for Jake to start seeing nature as it is. She is opening his eyes, rather than putting him in the darkness of ignorance.

The fact that humans possess fire and the Na'vi don't starts a debate over civilization, as fire symbolizes progress. However, in today's discourses, fire is "returning" as a "problem" and fueling the effects on nature.⁶² Pyne says, "fire on the Earth has become a scientific subject of accelerating interest, a political issue of international scope in the form of climate change, and a public concern as a recurring and perhaps chronic disaster."⁶³

In colonialist practices, the best way to submit peoples to the dominant group is usually to destroy their faith or symbols of it. In *Avatar*, the "Tree of Voices" is destroyed by humans and

⁶¹ TED-Ed, "The Myth of Prometheus - Iseult Gillespie," *YouTube*, November 14, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_u91SjrEOE.

⁶² Stephen J. Pyne, "Fire in the Mind: Changing Understandings of Fire in Western Civilization," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 371, no. 1696 (May 23, 2016): 20150166, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2015.0166>.

⁶³ *Avatar* (CA: 20th Century Fox),

their technology. This show of power on the humans' part in *Avatar* has been demonstrated in history on several levels.

However, a critique can be made of James Cameron's depiction of the Na'vi or Native cultures as, almost inherently, ecological. The "ecological Indian" trope is found in various forms of media, where Indigenous peoples are depicted as innately more in tune with nature and possessing special environmental wisdom.⁶⁴ On the one hand, the Na'vi do fit into this picture, as they are depicted as a harmonious and eco-conscious society, in contrast to the environmentally. However, while this representation highlights the importance of Indigenous perspective on environmental subjects, it also raises concerns about the oversimplification and romanticization of Indigenous cultures. the official birth of the "environmental Indian" stereotype can be traced back to 1971 with the appearance of an anti-littering campaign on American television. This campaign "features the famous 'crying Indian.' Dressed in full buckskin regalia and feather headdress — an invocation of the disappeared noble savage — the 'Indian' is shown among intermingled images of pristine nature and man-made pollution."⁶⁵ This representation is problematic because this image, used by non-Indigenous climate activists, or simply groups, reinforces the notion of cultural appropriation which was mentioned and explained in the first chapter of this paper. The "ecological Indian" trope, is thus, a "reflection of the country's ambivalent relationship with Indigenous peoples," according to Dina Gilio-Whitaker, and James Cameron's portrayal of Indigenous cultures as romanticized protectors of Nature fits into the narrative of the "ecological Indian" trope.

⁶⁴ Shepard Krech III, "Pleistocene Extinctions." *The Ecological Indian* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).

⁶⁵ Dina Gilio-Whitaker, "The Problem with the Ecological Indian Stereotype," PBS SoCal, February 7, 2017, <https://www.pbssocal.org/shows/tending-the-wild/the-problem-with-the-ecological-indian-stereotype>.

The romanticization and oversimplification provides potential misrepresentation and disrespect for the complexities of Indigenous societies and their historical and contemporary struggles. Hence, it is crucial to engage with Indigenous cultures and their perspectives in a respectful and nuanced manner, acknowledging their diversity and the agency of its members, rather than reducing them to simplistic environmental stereotypes. To address the Ecological Indian trope, it is crucial for filmmakers to engage with Native cultures to understand the diversity within Indigenous communities. In its depiction of the different Na’vi clans, Cameron attempts to create diverse and complex cultural specificities. The Na’vi are showcased as environmentally aware, and the challenges they face due to the human intrusion is explored—they are central character in the film. This environmental depiction of the Na’vi does not only serve as an environmental critique, rather it helps criticize the complex broader issues of colonialism, and the destructiveness of human interventions.

The environmentalist approach of the movie, set in a system untouched by the colonizer’s destruction and within an eco-friendly, or eco-conscious, framework leads us to consider the over-militarization of the colony of Pandora as mirroring the “strongest” military power, the United States, in the world (as of 2023)⁶⁶ and their control over foreign land, Indigenous lands, and resource hunting and harvesting. Hence, looking at the humans, or the colonizers of Pandora, as a critique of environmental challenges and debates today implies an analysis of military power and of resource colonialism as a goal “worth” killing and destroying for.

⁶⁶ GlobalFirepower.com, “2023 United States Military Strength,” www.globalfirepower.com, 2023, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=united-states-of-america#:~:text=GFP%20annual%20ranking.-. The Global Firepower Index (GFP) shows that the United States ranks 1st out of 145 countries considered, hence making it the “stronger” military power in the world.

Resource Extraction and Geopolitical Conflicts

It is impossible to analyze the environmentalist value of the movie without exploring two key factors: firstly, the primary objective of the corporation, which is resource extraction, and secondly, the extensive presence of the military and their control over the human colony. *Avatar* has offered a thought-provoking lens through which to examine the complex relationship between technological advancement, resource hunting, and their impact on geopolitics and the environment. This part will delve into the intersection of resource extraction, technological prowess, and the role of the military-industrial complex, both in the fictional world of Pandora and in the reality of our world.

In the fictional universe of Pandora, the human colony's primary objective is resource extraction: harvesting as much “unobtainium” as possible is the main goal of the corporation in the first movie, when the sequel delves into the long researched “fountain of youth,” finally found on Pandora through the Tulkuns, leading to a possible environmental crisis if not controlled. Although these are alien resources, they easily mirror the pursuit of valuable resources—like oil, natural gases, gold, and uranium—on Indigenous lands. On the one hand, this part will look at real-world examples that mirror this resource-driven conflict, such as the expansion to the West and the discovery of gold on U.S. soil. On the other hand, it is crucial to analyze the specificities of the Tulkuns, whale-like mammals. They are the holder of the secret of life. Synthetized, a liquid found in their brain will give eternal life to humans seeking it. The fountain of Youth that Tulkuns represent is both a proof and a symbol of human destructive greed.

To look at American extractive traditions is to look at oil extraction within the United States as a first step into understanding the American government control over other world resources.

During Manifest Destiny and expansion to the West, driving Native communities away from their homelands oftentimes violently, the discovery of gold and the value it implied brought many corporations, entrepreneurs, and miners, to take over the area in which Gold had been discovered. Educator April Moore, member of the Nisenan Maidu tribe, explains her people's encounter with the discovery of Gold:

My family had resided in these geographical areas way before there were any European people, even way before the Gold Rush. It just so happens it was the area where they found the gold at Sutter's Mill along the American River. And this gold strike brought thousands of people from every place known to man into our traditional territory. And because it was such an environmentally productive area, in the beginning they didn't have a problem with eating, but because there were so many people, they overused the area and created drought and created starvation for themselves, and along with them for the Indigenous peoples.⁶⁷

This kind of encounter between Native American peoples and Gold Rush entrepreneurs always has a common denominator: the Indigenous peoples are the ones driven away from their land, suffering from diseases or starvation, and having to relocate. In an article published on the Library of Congress webpage, it is said that:

The newcomers seldom honored any legal safeguards for the tribes under Mexican deeds, and the Natives were not even safe on reservations set aside for them by the government. If whites wanted the lands for gold mining or other purposes, the tribes found themselves shunted to even more desolate reservations. And every year, the expanding network of railroads brought more whites closer to the lands of California's Native peoples.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ "The Gold Rush Impact on Native Tribes" *Montana PBS*, online access <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldrush-value-land/> accessed Oct. 19, 2023

⁶⁸ "Other Californians" Found in the collection *California as I Say It: First-Person Narratives of California's Early Years, 1849 to 1900*. Library of Congress. Online access <https://www.loc.gov/collections/california-first-person-narratives/articles-and-essays/early-california-history/other-californians/#:~:text=However%2C%20the%20Gold%20Rush%20took,white%20Americans'%20greed%20for%20land.> Accessed Oct. 19, 2023

This kind of forced relocation is depicted on *Avatar* through the destruction of the hometree. After Jake and Grace tried to warn the Omaticaya of the RDA's intentions, the Omaticaya decided to fight and protect their home.

The hometree is a symbol of the Na'vi's connection to their land, culture and spiritual beliefs. Destroying the Hometree is a violation of their sacred space. The scene starts with the ominous approach of a massive airship, facing the tree. On the ground, the Na'vi warriors stand unwavering, armed with their bows and arrows as the airship hovers over them. Jake and Grace are held captive after they lost the Na'vi's trust, accused of betraying them. It is the humans who hit first, launching gas canisters on the Omaticaya. Eventually, after forcing the N'avi to retaliate, opening fire on the airships with very little damage to the giant ships; Quaritch gives the order to switch to incendiary rounds, causing fire damage to the hometree, and forcing Eytukan, the Omaticaya leader, to order everyone to fall back into the woods. Although the Na'vi were fleeing, the fleet switched again to high-explosive missiles, destroying the outer columns of the tree and eventually, causing it to fall. This scene highlights the imbalance of power between the humans and the Na'vi. The humans, armed with advanced weaponry, launching an assault on the Na'vi, who resist with traditional bows and arrows underscores a clash between nature and technology, deepening the environmental approach on the film.

The corporation's ties (Parker Selfridge) with the military force (Colonel Quaritch) produces a critique of governmental/military relationships in the United States during relocation periods and gold mining eras, as well as today considering the omnipresent and increasing role of the military in American society.



Figure 7 *Avatar* by James Cameron, from 1:43:00 to 1:46:00. Gradual destruction of the Hometree Pics 1-3

As a matter of fact, the United States military, although considered the strongest military in the world in 2023 by the GFP index, has been criticized because of its over-presence in the rest of the world, asserting its supremacy over already powerful nations—such as Germany, Japan, Korea...—and its role within the country.

The tension between the military and the scientists present on the colony reveals the different agendas that drives them and force them to conflict. Grace Augustine's allegiance lies with the safeguarding and the communication with the Indigenous peoples; after building a school and teaching the Na'vi English, and learning everything about Na'vi culture and traditions, she clearly set herself apart from the military power found on the colony by distrusting Jake's Marine background, or by being confrontational about the violent ways of the corporation.⁶⁹ When the corporation is threatening to destroy the Hometree, she asks Selfridge "There are families in there, There are children. Are you gonna kill children?"⁷⁰ Her stance clearly contrasts with Quaritch's and Selfridge's goals. It is evident that the latter do not care about the Na'vi in the same way.

Though the film draws a clear line between scientific and military interest in the colony, technology—including scientific technology— has played a significant role in enabling resource extraction, transportation, and surveillance in these areas. Advanced drilling and extraction technologies have increased the efficiency of resource extraction but have also contributed to ecological destruction and disputes over the control of these resources. Similarly, in order to harvest Unobtainium in the first movie, humans decide to destroy the Na'vi's religious center – by destroying the Tree of Voices – and ultimately, their home. During the destruction of both entities,

⁶⁹ *Avatar* (CA: 20th Century Fox).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:35:10 – 1:34:45

technology has played an important role. Human inventions are centerstage, and light is shed on the giant bulldozers; the flying airships, threatening the home tree; the robot-suit patrolling, making sure no one threatens the corporation's work. Their power is in machines, science, and knowledge, as much as it is in men. In fact, science is a double-edged sword which can both aid progress and the evolution of human intelligence on Earth and on Pandora—one can think of the bioengineering of the Avatar bodies which aim to facilitate communication with the Na'vi—but also as an entity which stands against the freedom of the peoples of Pandora, as the extraction project on Pandora ultimately interrupts the Na'vi ways of life and forces them to relocate and adapt to a new reality.

These machines act as a means to colonize—through the avatar bodies, the construction (or here destruction) vehicles and plane-space ship meant to destroy the Native lands—lead to an almost planetary ecocide and war, which has been known on different parts of Earth during settlements or the extraction of resources. For instance, one can think of the Suez Crisis of 1956, or the Abadan Crisis and the Iranian oil compromise, which are proof that wanting to acquire foreign resources can lead to long lasting conflicts, not only between two countries, but creating civil wars within the country itself as well.⁷¹

⁷¹ Barr, James. *Lords of the Desert: The Battle between the United States and Great Britain for Supremacy in the Modern Middle East*. Hachette, 2018.



Figure 8 *Avatar* by James Cameron. 1:25:30. RDA Giant bulldozers destroy Eywa, the religious center of the Na'vi

The continuity between the two movies can be found in the environmentalist approach James Cameron explores. While the richness of the Pandoran forest lies with “unobtainium,” the next valuable resource found by the humans in the new world directly criticizes human enterprises and greed, by undertaking to find the long-researched fountain of youth trope. The concept of the Fountain of Youth has captivated researchers, scientists, explorers imagination for centuries. Its history is intricately intertwined with the thirst for immortality, as fear of death was lurking. The Tulkun is an interesting case study to understand how the quest for rejuvenating “elixir” symbolized the destructive greed inherent in some patterns of human historical voyages and wish for discoveries.

Moreover, the concept of eternal life contrasts deeply with the film’s depiction of a degraded and dying home planet. Abandoning Earth because the planet is dying is a critique that Cameron uses to develop his environmental approach and argument. There is a need for a new planet, and unfortunately, looking at the beginning of *The Way of Water* shows that humans are following the

same pattern that led Earth to become unlivable. In the first 10 minutes of the movie, humans invade Pandora again and ships land in the forest, destroying and burning ecosystems. As they walk the earth of Pandora, the robots, bulldozers and armed soldiers convey explicitly the new goal and message of the new colony: destruction as a means of colonization.⁷² The scene, which lasts two whole minutes, almost looks like a re-enactment of the devastating asteroid impact on Earth, about sixty-six million years ago,⁷³ as fire and smoke ravages at the surface and wildlife runs away from it searching for shelter. The return of the humans would then signify the start of the decline of the original species living on the moon of Pandora.

However, the Na'vi are not ready to give up their land. And fighting back has become vital. There is a shift with the Omaticayan clan as war parties are sent to derail the colony plans. The new on-world commander tells Quaritch "Sully's raids are becoming bolder and more frequent. His strikes are well-planned."⁷⁴ Sully's military training could be an advantage for the Indigenous peoples because Jake knows the military strategies used by Americans, who make up most of the colony of humans on Pandora. It is interesting to see that the Na'vi now use a mix of Indigenous weapons, the arrows and bows, and heavy weapons. The adoption of heavy weaponry reflects first, a probable adaptation to human culture, or a mutual enculturation where the exchange of cultural knowledge seems to be a necessity for survival. The film's environmentalism is a powerful multi-layered critique which successfully showcases the beauty of an untouched nature, and the hostility

⁷² *Avatar 2: The Way of Water* (20th Century Studios, 2022). 6:40-8:48

⁷³ Emily Osterloff, "How an Asteroid Ended the Age of the Dinosaurs," [www.nhm.ac.uk](https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/how-an-asteroid-caused-extinction-of-dinosaurs.html#:~:text=Sixty%2Dsix%20million%20years%20ago%2C%20dinosaurs%20had%20the%20ultimate%20bad), n.d., <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/how-an-asteroid-caused-extinction-of-dinosaurs.html#:~:text=Sixty%2Dsix%20million%20years%20ago%2C%20dinosaurs%20had%20the%20ultimate%20bad>. Accessed October 2023.

⁷⁴ *Avatar 2: The Way of Water* (20th Century Studios, 2022).24:34

of a land ravaged by the Anthropocene and the consequences of human interventions. However, although this environmental approach is successful, the movie struggles to “decolonize” thought.

A MOVIE FRANCHISE SUBJECT TO CRITICISM AND OCCASIONAL CONTROVERSY

This movie franchise has not only enchanted audiences but also ignited debates, criticism, and periodic controversy. A question remains: is *Avatar* decolonial? On one hand, some critics argue that the movie endorses a “white savior” narrative, contributing to perpetuating a historical pattern of white individuals assuming leadership roles in stories about marginalized communities. This can be seen as a form of oppression and cultural appropriation. On the other hand, *Avatar* can be seen as an attempt to address themes related to colonialism, environmental destruction, and Indigenous rights, as explored previously in this paper. Categorizing James Cameron as “decolonial” is inaccurate; I will argue that instead, he serves as an ally who directs attention toward longstanding struggles. Cameron's endeavor to spotlight colonialism and Indigenous rights is commendable, and his outsider perspective introduces aspects of understanding and cultural appreciation. However, regardless of Cameron's cultural sensitivity, if he is the sole architect⁷⁵ of an Indigenous culture—the Na’vi culture—it can never be an authentic portrayal of Native cultures. In fact, although it’s clear that Cameron demonstrates cultural sensitivity, approaching the depiction of the Na’vi with a certain amount of awareness and respect for some cultural specificities, his portrayal is still limited by his personal knowledge and assumptions of the multiple Indigenous cultures that exist. The experiences, traditions, and specificities are diverse and within a large umbrella made of different societies and communities. As we will see, even if well intentioned, James Cameron still needs to work with Native communities. Indeed, he has failed to do so in the first two movies, and needs to build conversations with Native communities

⁷⁵ If not him only, he and his crew. It is widely known that there is no Native representation in the production and design crew either.

in the future, honor their agency, by involving Native representatives in the discussions surrounding Indigenous cultural practices, in order to understand *Avatar* as a strong narrative about the harmful consequences of colonialism, and maybe then will we be able to call his work “decolonial.” Nevertheless, allyship has the potential to be a significant influence in cinema, functioning as a powerful tool for advocacy and awareness. Cameron's choice to delve into themes of colonization, environmental destruction, and Indigenous rights in the film contributes to a more extensive conversation on these crucial issues.

Exploring Heroism

Before plunging into the intricate layers of heroism within the franchise, it is essential to understand the weight of this archetype in storytelling. The hero stands as a paragon of virtue, embodying the qualities and ideals to which readers or viewers aspire. Jane L. Bownas explains in *Myth of the Modern Hero*, that,

The mythical hero can be regarded as a particularly significant archetype, and according to Jung this hero archetype has become incorporated into the collective unconscious and becomes manifest in dreams, in which, by becoming the hero, individuals can face and overcome difficulties in their own lives, and achieves goals previously regarded as unattainable.⁷⁶

Bownas suggests that the hero has become deeply ingrained in the collective unconscious. It implies that the hero's journey is a narrative pattern that resonates with people on a fundamental level, transcending cultural and individual differences. Later, Bownas continues by saying that “The fictional hero represents the ideals to which the reader aspires for...” the enduring power of

⁷⁶ Jane L. Bownas, *Myth of the Modern Hero: Changing Perceptions of Heroism*. (Sussex Academic Press, 2018)

the hero in human psychology and culture is underscored here. The hero is not confined to the realm of storytelling, rather, it is deeply rooted in the collective human experience.

Heroization in movies often aims to highlight the central characters as the heroes of the story. In this context, it holds true that Jake Sully, the main protagonist, is indeed the primary hero. However, the way his heroism is portrayed may raise some concerns. First of all, because Jake is a former Marine and the military is portrayed as an enemy in the movie. It also delves into themes of racial tolerance, belonging, and resistance, while simultaneously condemning colonial practices and human greed. Lastly, as we will see, female characters play a pivotal role in the film. Nevertheless, it's worth noting that the hero of *Avatar* is a white male who is a military veteran. This prompts us to question the process of hero creation. Do the female characters, human or Na'vi, also embody heroic qualities, or is heroism solely attributed to Jake Sully? In other words, who ends-up being responsible for the Na'vi's victory and "salvation"?

The primary focus of this analysis will be to explore the intersections of heroism and feminism, as well as heroism and white saviorism within the *Avatar* movie franchise. To begin, I will delve into the dynamics of heroism and feminism by examining the roles and journeys of various characters in the films. This will encompass an exploration of the vastness of women characters and their empowerment in the movie franchise. Then, I will examine understanding how viewers interpret the character of Jake Sully, who has drawn controversy from activists due to his identity as a white man. We will scrutinize how Jake Sully's character fits within the broader themes of heroism and whether it perpetuates the white savior trope. Is Jake a true Omaticaya hero? Or is his character actor in a perpetuation of white saviorism and white privilege witnessed in human history?

Heroines in *Avatar*: A Feminist Analysis

Through the concept of feminism and the female characters portrayed in the movie, Cameron touches on the representation and importance of women in Indigenous cultures. Light is shed on the roles, agency, and contributions of women within the Na'vi society and, by extension, in many Indigenous cultures. For instance, the film portrays the Na'vi as a matrilineal society, a lineage and inheritance found (in similar form) in some Native communities.⁷⁷ With a specific focus on the portrayal of heroines, we will scrutinize how the female characters of *Avatar* challenge conventional gender norms, empowering themselves and contributing to a deeper dialogue on feminism, heroism, and the evolving landscape of gender dynamics.

The colony on Pandora is depicted as being under the control of male authorities. It is controlled, particularly, by the military rather than by the scientists whose primary mission is to study Pandora and the Na'vi. More specifically, throughout the movie Colonel Quaritch is portrayed as a strong, muscular, and testosterone-fueled character, symbolizing the embodiment of military power and abuse. His relentless ambition to wage war against the Na'vi reflects a militaristic culture that is willing to use force to achieve its goals. This portrayal exposes a phallogocentric society where men occupy central positions of power and influence. It strengthens the belief that gender is a social construction which assigns labels and creates divided groups: a phallogocentric society like the human colony displayed in *Avatar* shows the still omnipresent concept of binarism, and therefore, creating a society that is unequal and sexist.⁷⁸ An example of gender bias in the movie is observed when a soldier addresses Dr. Grace Augustine with the

⁷⁷ Arthur C. Parker, *The Constitution of the Five Nations, or, The Iroquois Book of the Great Law*, (Oswego, Ont.: Iroquois, 1991)

⁷⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (Routledge, 1990)

statement “you’re the man, doc.” This comment reflects the ingrained macho culture within the colony and demonstrates how gender stereotypes persist. The phrase implies that being a “man” is equated with competence and authority, highlighting the inequalities in the society’s gender norms. Moreover, in the movie, masculinity is exemplified by the figure of the “soldier,” who have also been considered “heroes,” hence, raising the problematic of a male-centered narrative around heroism and the idea of “protector,” “defender” of the country, in the context of American soldiers, and of humanity, in the context of *Avatar*. The Greek “heros” means “protector, or defender of the people,” it can also refer to “warrior[s]” or “fighting men.”⁷⁹ Soldiers have long been symbolized as heroes, embodying characteristics such as bravery, strength, and a willingness to face danger for the greater good. This representation raises fundamental questions about the perpetuation of traditional roles within both the hero narrative and society. However, in *Avatar*, the male-centered colony is critiqued by switching roles and giving heroic attributes to the female characters in the movie, such as Grace Augustine and Trudy Chacon (Michelle Rodriguez) who both die heroes, and even as martyrs.

The representation of the colonizers as a strong but male-centered community differs from the Na’vi communities. The choice to depict leadership in the colony primarily emanating from white strong men implies a certain traditionalism and resistance to social change. These gender dynamics in the film are stark, and demonstrate disparity in the human colony as the RDA in the first movie is led by men rather than an equal representation of both men and women.

⁷⁹ Jane L. Bownas, *Myth of the Modern Hero: Changing Perceptions of Heroism*. (Sussex Academic Press, 2018)

The narration in *Avatar* is constructed of two different important points of view: Jake's and Neytiri's. The movie is built around Jake and his significance as an outsider accepted into a foreign culture. But it is important to acknowledge Neytiri as a main character of the movie as well. The emphasis on white male leadership within the colony can be seen as a reflection of deeply rooted historical patterns in which white males often held positions of power, thereby reinforcing a status quo. It symbolizes a society where traditional hierarchies and power structures, particularly those favoring a specific gender and ethnicity, are upheld. Conversely, the Pandoran society stands in contrast to the human colony. The Na'vi are portrayed as an egalitarian and harmonious community, where power and authority are not monopolized by one gender or group. As stated before, their culture promotes a harmonious coexistence and interconnectedness with nature, a culture which contrasts with the dominance-driven and exploitative nature of the human colony.

This contrast between the human colony and the Pandoran society is a powerful criticism on societal disparities and the consequences of an imbalance of power. Therefore, the movie's representation of female characters sheds light, on one hand, on the roles, agency, and contributions of women within the Na'vi society and, by extension, in many Indigenous cultures; and on the other hand, on the empowerment of the human heroines who took part in the battle for unobtainium as allies to the Indigenous peoples of Pandora. In some Native American cultures, the woman is a crucial political, as well as social, member of a clan, as aspects of their societal norm position women as central—for example, in lineal descents, in wars, as spiritual leaders. Writing about post-contact tribal communities, Patrick Deval writes in *American Indian Women*, that “it was quite obvious to these learned gentlemen [the first European observers], that Indian women enjoyed notable personal freedom, that they had property rights (instead of being property), that

they were respected and even represented on governing councils,”⁸⁰ Deval later quote Beverly Hungry Wolf, a Blackfoot writer, “I have found that among some tribes the women were not too well treated, but among others they were equal to the men and among some they even served as chiefs and leaders.”⁸¹ In many Native communities, women have lineal importance, as highlighted in the Iroquois Nations Constitutions where the woman is considered as the “progenitor of the nation” implying that men and women should “follow the status of the mother” therefore, the woman “owns the land and the soil.”⁸² Drawing on these traditions, the film also portrays the Na’vi, or at least the Omaticaya, as a matrilineal society, where lineage and inheritance passes through the female line. Neytiri’s mother, Mo’at (played by CCH Pounder), is the spiritual leader of the Omaticayans. She communicates with and connects people to Eywa. She is a strong character in the movie, who grows in importance from the moment the viewer first sees her to the end. The matrilineal descent is explicitly mentioned by Grace when she quizzes Jake on the clan members: “GRACE: Tsu’tey. He’ll be the next clan leader. *Switches pictures and shows Neytiri.* JAKE: Neytiri. GRACE: She’ll be the next *Tsahik* [spiritual leader].”⁸³ For the Omaticaya, both roles of clan leader and spiritual leader are fundamental for a functioning society, the descendance of these roles are equally as important. In turn, such a system challenges the patriarchal norms

⁸⁰ Patrick Deval *American Indian Women* (Abbeville Press, 2015) p. 6

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p 15

⁸² Arthur C. Parker, *The Constitution of the Five Nations, or, The Iroquois Book of the Great Law*, (Obsweken, Ont.: Iroqrafts, 1991)

⁸³ *Avatar* (CA: 20th Century Fox), 51:00-51:30

often imposed by colonial forces, where women's voices and contributions are often marginalized.⁸⁴

Neytiri is a fierce warrior. She is one of the main protagonists of the movie and has a strong voice within her community. She is a central female character who embodies strength, wisdom, and leadership. As a skilled warrior and spiritual guide, she is indispensable in guiding Jake Sully's transformation and understanding of the Na'vi way of life. Her character challenges the stereotypical portrayals of women in Western images of the woman as property and domestic. As Marsha Collins points out:

As is the case with many more contemporary romance heroines in the West, Neytiri also displays considerable courage and prowess in combat and, indeed, tutors Jake on Na'Vi hunting and survival techniques, ultimately rescuing his injured human form and saving him at the end of *Avatar*.⁸⁵

In the Na'vi community, gender was not constructed socially the same way it was built in the human/American colony. Females are equal to males; they have a voice and strength as leaders and as warriors.

Moreover, the depiction of Neytiri's relationship with her mother, Mo'at, highlights the intergenerational transmission of wisdom and cultural practices. Native American women often hold important roles as "healers, warriors, life givers, protectors, lawmakers, leaders, artist, that are invaluable contributions to tribal nations,"⁸⁶ but also as "knowledge keepers of traditional food

⁸⁴ Drew VandeCreek, "Women's Experience and Gender Roles | Northern Illinois University Digital Library," digital.lib.niu.edu, March 31, 2002, <https://digital.lib.niu.edu/illinois/lincoln/gender>.

⁸⁵ Marsha S. Collins, "Echoing Romance: James Cameron's 'Avatar' as Ecoromance." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 47, no. 2 (2014) p. 108

⁸⁶ www.ncai.org. "Women's Issues | NCAI," n.d. <https://www.ncai.org/policy-issues/education-health-human-services/women-s-issues#:~:text=One%20cannot%20truly%20understand%20Native>.

systems and medicines. They are champions of Indigenous languages and cultures. They defend the environment and Indigenous peoples' human rights."⁸⁷ In *Avatar*, Mo'at is portrayed as the bearer of cultural and spiritual knowledge, and this knowledge is shared generationally. As a matter of fact, although this is not explained explicitly, it is very much implied when Neytiri is assigned as Jake's teacher. Her role is thence, the role of a teacher and of a knowledge keeper as she teaches Jake the Na'vi language and ways.

The film's exploration of Native American feminism serves to counter the historical erasure and misrepresentation of Indigenous women's roles in mainstream media and colonial narratives. Indeed, Deval observes that "for a long time, the 'Hollywood Indian woman' was simply part of the background. When she emerged from it, she turned out to be a dangerous siren to the frontiersmen."⁸⁸ By presenting Neytiri as a capable and respected leader, Cameron challenges the one-dimensional portrayal of Indigenous women and underscores the diversity and agency within their communities.

The theme of strong female characters in the Na'vi community persists in the sequel, featuring the character Ronal (played by Kate Winslet) as the Tsahik of the Metkayina clan. Ronal's profound spiritual connection with the Tulkun Ro'a is a central element of the story, highlighting not only the Tulkuns' significance in maintaining the health of the reef ecosystems but also the essential roles played by all females as mothers, nurturers, and guardians.

⁸⁷ United Nations. "Indigenous Women's Work to Preserve Traditional Knowledge Celebrated on International Day | UN News." United Nations, August 8, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/08/1124182#:~:text=%E2%80%9CIndigenous%20women%20are%20knowledge%20keepers>.

⁸⁸ Patrick Deval *American Indian Women* (Abbeville Press, 2015) p. 193

The women of the movie are also portrayed as allies to the Na'vi. Both Grace Augustine and Trudy Chacón (played by Michelle Rodriguez) take on the role of protectors and advocate for the well-being and safeguarding of the Na'vi and their habitat and culture. Trudy Chacón was a helicopter pilot for the military group based in the RDA colony. Her strong values and her will to defend the Na'vi will make her an enemy of the colony, widening the gap between the male oriented and prominent colony of humans/Americans on Pandora, and its peoples and their allies. Trudy questioned the behavior and actions of the RDA and disobeys direct orders from Quaritch during the destruction of Hometree, leaving the ship formation declaring "I did not sign up for this."⁸⁹ Deserting her post by getting Jake, Grace and Norm out of the RDA base, she fights amongst the Na'vi and takes part in the final battle, wearing "rebel" war make-up and taking a stand in the sky with her helicopter. Trudy embodies strength and courage who died fighting alongside the Na'vi in the last battle.

As discussed previously, Grace is a scientist collaborating with the Na'vi in order to know them better. Her main primary goal within the RDA was to befriend them, teach them "human" ways, and her mission is to make the Omatiyaya relocate in peace. While her primary mission is similar to assimilation and forced conversion to Christianity that occurred in the 19th century, the film prompts viewers to reflect on the potential consequences of imposing one culture above another, highlighting the delicate balance between scientific exploration and cultural sensitivity. In a scene previously mentioned in this part, Grace refers to Tsu'tey and Neytiri as the next "mated pair."⁹⁰ This draws attention to the use of dehumanizing language, reducing the characters to

⁸⁹ *Avatar* (CA: 20th Century Fox), 1:42:45

⁹⁰ *Avatar* (CA: 20th Century Fox), 51:00-51:30

animals, objectifying them, emphasizing a lack of individual identity. In this scene, although Grace is considered a hero in my analysis, this statement brings to light questions about her engaging in dehumanizing the characters. However, this comment was made fairly early in the movie, at a point when all humans allied to the Na'vi still behaved according to the colony's values. This underscores the influence of the patriarchal society in the society Grace lives in, conditioning its members to adhere to specific values and beliefs. Although Grace's mission revolves around a "one-way" exchange—transforming the Na'vi so that they are more easily controlled—it becomes evident that her role transcends her mission. Grace develops a genuine connection with the Na'vi and is driven to understand and appreciate their culture. In fact, she demonstrates cultural relativism. Her character as a culturally sensitive ally ends-up criticizing the practices of assimilation and conversion. For ten years, Grace taught English to Na'vi youth, until the school closed. In the full movie, a special edition with deleted scenes,⁹¹ the viewer learns that the school closed after soldiers shot down students under Grace's supervision, after a group of them set a bulldozer on fire. Grace tells Jake:

Neytiri's sister, Sylwanin, stopped coming to school. She was angry about the clear-cutting. And one day, she and a couple of other young hunters came running in all painted up. They had set a bulldozer on fire. I guess they thought I could protect them. The troopers pursued them to the school. They killed Sylwanin in the doorway. Right in front of Neytiri and then shot the others. I got most of the kids out. But they never came back.⁹²

⁹¹ The version found on DVDs, or on Disney +, is considered to be the "commercial" version of the movie *Avatar*. However, looking at the full version of the movie deepens the significance of Na'vi/human relations, while explaining a darker side of the colonization of Pandora. These scenes were taken out of the "commercial" version because Cameron and his crew of editors and producers wanted to lighten the weight of the movie.

⁹² *Avatar* (CA: 20th Century Fox), 1:13:30-1:15:05 of special edition

In this same scene, after admitting to Jake having failed Neytiri and her sister, and all Omaticaya youth, Grace goes on “A scientist stays objective. We can’t be ruled by emotions. But I put 10 years of my life into that school. They called me Sa’nok [mother].”⁹³ This revelation positions Grace as both a nurturer and protector, revealing her ability to embrace the culture, ultimately earning acceptance into the clan as an ally. Moreover, this “mother” trope is continued in the sequel as Grace gives a miraculous and mysterious birth to Kiri—who is going to be adopted by Jake and his family. Shot while escaping the RDA colony site, Grace dies, later as an attempt to save her life, at the foot of Eywa, the Na’vi deity. Notably, she and Jake are the only humans to have ever ventured to this hallowed place. This fact strongly suggests that Grace had earned immense respect and trust as an ally, to the extent that Mo’at attempted to transfer her consciousness into her avatar body with the assistance of Eywa. Although this endeavor did not succeed, it serves as a compelling testament to Grace's profound significance within the clan.

Through their journeys, the viewer witnesses women who are not confined by narrow stereotypes but are leaders, warriors, protectors, and agents of cultural preservation. The parallel between *Avatar* and the roles of Native American women underscores the resilience and versatility of women’s contribution to their societies. Nonetheless, while James Cameron's portrayal of female characters and their intricate societal roles offers a thought-provoking critique of contemporary norms and beliefs, the perception of these women as heroes is somewhat eclipsed by the controversial figure of Jake Sully. Sully, a white paraplegic veteran adopted into a culture his own people are attempting to eradicate, introduces complexities that cast a shadow on the very meaning of heroism.

⁹³ Ibid

Jake Sully: A White Savior or a True Omaticaya Hero?

Heroization is a concept easily applied to a story: the Odyssey, Native American oral stories about the creator, classic novels, or movies. As mentioned by Collins:

Traditionally, the heroes and heroines of romance, although not perfect, are markedly superior in character, abilities, and physical beauty, but as exemplars and leaders of the forces of good in romance's polarized universe, they tend to show more simple, symbolic characterization rather than psychological nuance and complexity.⁹⁴

However, when talking about heroism, some philosophers “highlight hero worship as a way to re-establish meaning and idealism.”⁹⁵ Jake Sully is the main hero of the movie. In fact, the movie is narrated by him. He is a former marine who was injured on duty and left in a wheelchair. When he transfers into his avatar body, he can do things that his human form cannot do anymore, like walk and run. At first, his eagerness to transform into his avatar form is attributed to his new personal freedom and his personal goals. As said before, his human’s body limitations are overcome when he drives his avatar. Moreover, if he follows orders and successfully spies on the Na’vi, Quaritch has promised him new legs. Jake tells the viewer early on that spine reconstruction is now possible on Earth.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, when Quaritch starts to question Jake’s intentions and starts seeing him as an obstacle, he tells Jake: “by the way, you are going to get your legs back... I got corporate approval. It’s a done deal. Gonna have you on a shuttle tonight,”⁹⁷ However, Jake refuses to leave on that shuttle and prefers to stay. His goals have changed. He answers Quaritch:

⁹⁴ Marsha S. Collins, “Echoing Romance: James Cameron’s ‘Avatar’ as Ecoromance.” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 47, no. 2 (2014) p. 108

⁹⁵ Elaine Louis Kinsella, et al. “Attributes and Applications of Heroes: A Brief History of Lay and Academic Perspectives.” *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, by Scott T. Allison et al., (Taylor and Francis, 2017) p. 19

⁹⁶ *Avatar* (CA: 20th Century Fox) 5:40-6:10

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:18:45-1:20:00

“I’ve got to finish this. There’s one more thing. A ceremony. It’s the final stage of becoming a man. If I do it, I’m one of them. And they’ll trust me.” In this scene, we can see Jake’s shift from his transformation being necessary to achieve his personal goals, to being a way to help the Na’vi, earn their trust, whilst concealing his agenda from his superior, emphasizing the shift in his allegiance as well. His eagerness to transform is now to protect the Na’vi from his people, demonstrating a sense of solidarity with their cause. As he learns more about the Omaticaya clan, their culture, and their ways of life, Jake will finally be integrated and adopted into the clan. As a matter of fact, the very last scene of the movie shows Jake’s consciousness being transferred into his avatar body permanently and his human body dying. He can be seen as a traditional hero in some respects. He possesses physical aptitudes and unique abilities, thanks to his avatar body, which make him become a leader and ultimately, a symbol of the resistance against the oppressive practices of the human corporation. Moreover, Jake’s transformation from a former marine working for the human corporation to a champion of the Na’vi people represents a form of hero worship. The Na’vi characters and even some humans come to look up to him for his bravery and willingness to stand up against the exploitative practices of the corporation—his own people. Jake realized that his own values were in conflict with the corporation’s values, and he saw how problematic the presence of his human counterparts was becoming.

Jake Sully becomes the main actor of the Omaticayan resistance, displays great strength and wears cultural symbols to belong in the community. Jake Sully is what Kinsella et al. describe as a martial hero: an individual who is “bound to a code of conduct where they are trained to

protect and rescue others from danger.”⁹⁸ They consider that heroes “tend to map onto three key areas of influence: uplifting and enhancing the lives of others, modeling morals and values, and protecting.”⁹⁹ Therefore, Jake acts at the same time as an influential character and as a symbol of survival and resistance. He becomes a decolonizing character being indigenized and who is being encultured into the Native ways of life. If we look at captivity narrative, which is a genre of literature that recounts the experiences of individuals who were captured by, and lived among, Indigenous peoples.¹⁰⁰ They portray the captives’ adaptation to a different way of life. Thus, in sight of this, although Jake has not been captured by the Na’vi, he experiences a cultural captivity narrative as he becomes deeply integrated into the Na’vi culture. He undergoes a transformative experience that challenged his ordinary way of life. Once he is “integrated” by the Omaticaya, he will distance himself from his (human) people by calling them “them,” or “the sky people,” and by becoming the Na’vi hero, leading them to victory. He is a character the Na’vi look up to. He has a position of reference: people can compare their behavior to Jake’s.

Given this complete transformation, the question that arises is: how does Jake’s role as the hero align with or challenge traditional colonial narratives, considering James Cameron’s anti-colonial discourse? After all, Jake is still a human/American, contradicting what was said before about heroizing the Native people. A first answer would be to say that Jake is not a Native Pandoran, even if he becomes a member of the clan. But rather he is another “white savior.”

⁹⁸ Elaine Louis Kinsella, et al. “Attributes and Applications of Heroes: A Brief History of Lay and Academic Perspectives.” *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, by Scott T. Allison et al., (Taylor and Francis, 2017) p. 24

⁹⁹ Ibid 25-6

¹⁰⁰ Birgit Hans, “Encyclopedia of the Great Plains | CAPTIVITY NARRATIVES,” plainshumanities.unl.edu, n.d., <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.gen.007>.

Critics¹⁰¹¹⁰²¹⁰³¹⁰⁴ argue that Jake’s portrayal perpetuates the idea that the Indigenous people need a “white” outsider to lead and save them.¹⁰⁵ It can be seen as a simplistic and paternalistic view of Native communities, while not acknowledging their agency and resilience. It seems like the battles faced in the movie couldn’t be won without Jake as the Omaticaya leader. Hence, the film’s representation of Jake as a “white” hero contradicts Cameron’s desire to empower Native voices and decolonize thought. Professor Philip J. Deloria writes, in *Playing Indian*, that:

Disguise readily calls the notion of fixed identity into question. At the same time, however, wearing a mask also makes one self-conscious of a *real* “me” underneath. This simultaneous experience is both precarious and creative, and it can play a critical role in the way people construct new identities.¹⁰⁶

Driving the avatar body is at first a disguise for Jake, who behind his new and improved body, masks and hides his military purpose, which is to comply with, and obey, Colonel Quaritch’s orders. In fact, it appears that Jake is the only character with a military background to be driving an avatar. And the only reason he is driving this avatar is because he has similar DNA to his deceased scientist twin brother who was supposed to take on this adventure. In this scenario, Jake is living a dual existence: his human one which is miserable, and his Na’vi one, which is exciting.

¹⁰¹ Diversity Inc. “Avatar, a White Savior Narrative?” *Medium*, (2023)

<https://medium.com/@divercity/avatar-a-white-savior-narrative-652f16bc87ce#:~:text=It%20has%20become%20known%20as..>

¹⁰² Maralee Nieves, “Avatar: Why Native American Activists Are Calling for the Boycott of the Film,” *MovieWeb*, (2022) <https://movieweb.com/avatar-why-native-american-activists-are-boycotting/#:~:text=Native%20American%20activists%20have%20called.>

¹⁰³ Harmeet Kaur, “Indigenous People Are Criticizing the ‘Avatar’ Sequel for Relying on Tired Tropes,” *CNN*, (2022) <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/22/entertainment/avatar-2-way-of-water-indigenous-boycott-cec/index.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Kolya Shields, “Orion Magazine - James Cameron’s Avatar Has an Anthropocene Problem,” *Orion Magazine*, n.d., <https://orionmagazine.org/article/avatar-james-cameron-anthropocene-colonization/>.

¹⁰⁵ George J. Dei, et al. “CHAPTER FOUR: White Power, White Privilege.” *Counterpoints* (2004) p. 244. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42979560>.

¹⁰⁶ Philip J Deloria, *Playing Indian* (Yale University, 1998) p. 7

The notion of cultural appropriation surfaces here as a pertinent connection to the idea of identity. Cultural appropriation involves the imitation (or borrowing) of elements from a different culture than our own, as discussed in chapter one. “Playing Indian” is a specific form of cultural appropriation wherein non-Native individuals adopt Native American clothing, rituals etc... this practice raises a question of identity. In the context of *Avatar*, Jake Sully is “forced” to play Indian, he learns the ways of the Natives, starts wearing similar clothing and symbols. But to make the Na’vi trust him again, Jake becomes the Toruk Macto, by bonding with the most dangerous banshee known to the forests of Pandora, Toruk, “the Last Shadow.” Neytiri explains the spiritual and political importance of Toruk in the movie.

NEYTIRI: My grandfather’s grandfather was Toruk Macto. Rider of Last Shadow.
 JAKE: He rode this? NEYTIRI: Toruk chose him. It has only happened five times since the time of the First Songs. JAKE: That’s a long time. NEYTIRI: Yes. Toruk Macto was mighty. He brought clans together in times of great sorrow. All Na’vi people know the story.”¹⁰⁷

Toruk Macto is a crucial myth and symbol to the Omaticaya. Jake Sully becoming the Toruk Macto is a problematic element of the movie, as it can be seen as an appropriation of an important Na’vi symbol to gain power within the community. He is stepping into a role that is deeply meaningful to the Indigenous culture, deepening the idea of “white saviorism,” as he assumes a central role within the Na’vi, and almost seamlessly adopting the Native discourse that he has no real knowledge of. For instance, when he passes the rituals and ceremonies to become a member of the tribe.

However, Jake’s involvement and his becoming the Toruk Macto are a proof that he has been truly adopted into the Omaticaya clan. Jake is not simply an outsider anymore. He is actively

¹⁰⁷ *Avatar* (CA: 20th Century Fox) 1:16:45-1:17:40

learning the Na’vi way, integrating himself into the clan. He truly becomes connected to the Na’vi culture and to the people. His journey is one of respect and integration, and he demonstrated cultural relativism by embracing the culture and its diverse traditions and rituals. There is a true enculturation process, as Neytiri is teaching him as she would teach a new generation of Na’vi. Through his learning, he is slowly being adopted into the clan. So much so, that he is given the opportunity to take part in one of their most important rituals, which is the bonding with a banshee, and the Na’vi ceremony making him a “true” Omaticaya. Jake is accepted into the clan, based on his merit rather than because of his race. Fanny Kelly, in her autobiographical novel *Narrative of My Captivity Among the Sioux Indians*, tells the story of fourteen-year-old Charles Sylvester, a white boy, who lived among the Sioux. She narrates:

One year after, one day, when this boy was out hunting, he killed a comrade by accident, and he dared not return to the village; so he escaped, on his pony, to the white people. ... After awhile, being discontented with his own people, he returned to his adopted friends on the North Platte, and became an interpreter and trader, and still remains there, doing business at various posts.¹⁰⁸

Sylvester’s story is compelling to put in parallel with Jake Sully’s story. They are both straddling two worlds, struggling with their allegiance and experiencing a sense of displacement. This parallel illustrates a repeated theme in storytelling, where characters, no matter the cultural context, navigate the difficulties brought by dual identities and belonging. Both chose to stay with their adopted communities. One can think that his becoming the Toruk Macto is a way for Jake to show that he respects the traditions and legends of the Na’vi, and that he is deeply committed to the Na’vi and their cause. Jake fulfils his role as a science fiction hero, he embodies heroic qualities

¹⁰⁸ Fanny Kelly, *Narrative of My Captivity among the Sioux Indians* (1871), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/63673/63673-h/63673-h.htm>, November 8, 2020, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/63673/pg63673-images.html#CHAPTER_IV.

and values. His evolution as a hero is interwoven into his role as an ally, his adoption into a Native tribe, and his eagerness to learn, offers a transformative representation of heroism.

Avatar, a Blockbuster but for Whom?

In this part, I will address some of the criticism made against the movie franchise. As a matter of fact, *Avatar* is categorically controversial, and seeing the franchise as problematic is valid. One aspect of Cameron's creative approach that raises questions is an underlying "God complex." In fact, Cameron told MTV News that "Every director has a God complex ... Every director is creating a world even if it's a story that takes place in an apartment."¹⁰⁹ James Cameron has strong values. Although these values are supported in the movie, through the narrative against environmental destruction, for example, Cameron uses a questionable methodology to convey his messages. His identity as a "white" man has called into question the legitimacy of his claims. IllumiNative CEO Crystal Echo-Hawk told Harmeet Kaur, writing for CNN, that "[it's] a level of arrogance once again that a White filmmaker can just somehow tell a story that's based on Indigenous peoples better than Indigenous peoples ever could."¹¹⁰ Echo-Hawk mentions Cameron's "notion" of Indigenous history, a crucial point to make as *Avatar* is a version, told from Cameron's point of view and knowledge, of Native American history.¹¹¹ Moreover, Maralee

¹⁰⁹ Eric Ditzian, "'Avatar' Director James Cameron Confesses to His 'God Complex,'" MTV, December 14, 2009, <https://www.mtv.com/news/45dxt9/avatar-director-james-cameron-confesses-to-his-god-complex>.

¹¹⁰ Harmeet Kaur, "Indigenous People Are Criticizing the 'Avatar' Sequel for Relying on Tired Tropes," CNN, (2022) <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/22/entertainment/avatar-2-way-of-water-indigenous-boycott-cec/index.html>.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

Nieves, and other journalists,¹¹² have quoted James Cameron's following statement, which has been widely criticized:

I felt like I was 130 years back in time watching what the Lakota Sioux might have been saying at a point when they were being pushed, and they were being killed, and they were being asked to displace, and they were being given some form of compensation. This was a driving force for me in the writing of *Avatar*—I couldn't help but think that if they [Lakota Sioux] had had a time-window, and they could see the future... and they could see their kids committing suicide at the highest suicide rates in the nation... because they were hopeless, and they were a dead-end society—which is what is happening now—they would have fought a lot harder.¹¹³

This quote is problematic in multiple ways. First of all, Cameron appears to be oversimplifying and generalizing the historical and contemporary experiences of the Lakota and the challenges they faced. Additionally, this statement, even if unintentionally, may uphold a narrative of victimization. While the intention may be to draw attention to the injustice faced by the Lakota, this statement is reductive and undermines the agency of Indigenous communities and portrays them as passive victims rather than active agents in their own history. Nevertheless, Cameron created a world which denounces, by exemplifying, historical practices of destruction and oppression. Rather than simply another arrogant director, it is useful to consider Cameron an ally of Indigenous peoples through his attempt at denouncing such sensitive subjects as the ongoing colonization of America and the silencing of Indigenous peoples. While allyship can never take the place of Indigenous voices in decolonial struggles, it opens up perspectives and plays a crucial role in supporting and to show solidarity to Indigenous communities. By actively listening

¹¹² Shaznay Martin, "Avatar Films Have Always Been a Gross Reimagining of Colonialism," *www.refinery29.com*, (2022) <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/avatar-the-way-of-the-water-colonialism-indigenous-history>.

¹¹³ Maralee Nieves, "Avatar: Why Native American Activists Are Calling for the Boycott of the Film," *MovieWeb*, December 26, 2022, <https://movieweb.com/avatar-why-native-american-activists-are-boycotting/#:~:text=Native%20American%20activists%20have%20called>.

to and learning from Indigenous perspectives, we are committing to foster a safe environment to work in collaboration with them, advocating for their rights, to dismantle systemic injustices.

In the discussions, an argument which is recurrent is the lack of diversity and Native agency in the movie. First and foremost, it is crucial to acknowledge the racial diversity in *Avatar*. The clear division between the two groups is evident in the casting choices. While the human community, or colonizers, is predominantly portrayed by white actors—a point critiqued by Kaur who notes that “many of the other characters are still voiced by White actors”¹¹⁴—this intentional casting decision serves a purpose. It should be understood as a deliberate statement, with the RDA meant to symbolize the privileged "white" category of humans on Earth—who are following orders and applying force to achieve the RDA’s goals, ready to lead an ethnocide or genocide of the Native peoples. Conversely, actors playing Na’vi characters or allies are mostly non-white comedians. In fact, when examining the film's casting choices, it's evident that the actors and actresses portraying the Na’vi Omaticayan and Pandoran peoples represent diverse ethnicities. For instance, Zoe Saldaña, of Puerto Rican descent, CCH Pounder, a Guyanese-American, and Cuban Laz Alonso, contribute to this ethnic diversity. Besides, among the characters on the humans/American side, only two are played by non-white actors or actresses, with Michelle Rodriguez being one of them. Interestingly, both characters portrayed by non-white actors/actresses are Na’vi allies—although they are not the only humans allied to the Na’vi. This intentional disparity in the movie's ethnic representation serves a purpose, highlighting the film's commitment to showcasing a variety of ethnic backgrounds and underscoring the narrative contrast between the two distinct groups.

¹¹⁴ Harmeet Kaur, “Indigenous People Are Criticizing the ‘Avatar’ Sequel for Relying on Tired Tropes,” *CNN*, (2022) <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/22/entertainment/avatar-2-way-of-water-indigenous-boycott-cec/index.html>.

Nonetheless, Kaur writes in 2022 that the movie “lacks... Indigenous representation;” in January 2023, Ashton Jackson wrote for CNBC that “most of the actors in the film are non-Indigenous,” he continues “[it] is unclear whether Cameron consulted with Native people before shooting the film.” Key words and phrases such as “involving,” the difference between “agency and representation,” “lack of” representation, or “listen[ing] to” Indigenous peoples can be found in a plethora of sources.¹¹⁵¹¹⁶¹¹⁷ The call to “listen to” Indigenous peoples reverberates, emphasizing the importance of genuine engagement and collaboration in the storytelling and designing processes. Crystal Echo Hawk told CNN that IllumiNative—“Which aims to improve media portrayals of Indigenous people”¹¹⁸—is discussing how the *Avatar* franchise could involve and give more agency to Indigenous peoples in the future sequels to the movie.¹¹⁹ This discourse underscores the critical need for authentic and respectful portrayal of Indigenous cultures in film. It prompts reflection not only on the visible diversity within the cast but also on the behind-the-scenes involvement and consultation with the communities being portrayed. As the conversation persists, it serves as a reminder of the responsibility filmmakers hold in accurately representing

¹¹⁵ Ashton Jackson, “Despite \$1B in Ticket Sales, Some Indigenous People Take Issue with ‘Avatar: The Way of Water’—Here’s Why,” *CNBC*, (2023) <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/01/07/why-indigenous-groups-are-boycotting-avatar-the-way-of-water.html>.

¹¹⁶ Lauren Richards, “Avatar Inspires Activism: An Environmental Message from the World of Pandora,” *Impakter*, (2022) <https://impakter.com/avatar-inspires-activism-an-environmental-message-from-pandora/#:~:text=Avatar%20is%20just%20a%20movie%2C%20but%20its%20core%20message%20transcends.>

¹¹⁷ Harmeet Kaur, “Indigenous People Are Criticizing the ‘Avatar’ Sequel for Relying on Tired Tropes,” *CNN*, (2022) <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/22/entertainment/avatar-2-way-of-water-indigenous-boycott-cec/index.html>.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

and acknowledging the voices and perspectives of Indigenous peoples in cinematic narratives. However, there is one actor which—if not breaks, nuances this discussion—it is Wes Studi. Wes Studi, Cherokee, joined the American Indian Movement (AIM) coming back from the Vietnam war, as a war veteran.¹²⁰ He protested, marched and even got arrested while on his Native activist journey. He mentions, in his biographical page on his website, that he “wanted to make [him]self a viable part of the machinery that affected [his] people.”¹²¹ After turning his life around and wanting to channel “his feelings toward positive change,” it is in 1988 that he obtained a role in his first film, *Powwow Highway*.¹²² Twenty years later, Wes Studi became the only Native presence in the *Avatar* franchise, as he portrayed Eytukan, the Omaticaya clan leader. He became the first Native American actor to win an Academy Award in 2019.¹²³ In an interview with Brad Balfour for Huffpost, Studi declared:

I think a lot of the research had been done on the part of the writers themselves... But yes, I could certainly relate to what was on the printed page, and I think they had a good understanding of the situation from a general viewpoint. And the idea that Native Americans are perhaps more connected to nature is reflected in the Na'vi connectedness of the tree and the roots that expand everywhere. And it's a Native American premise to life that everything is connected and that we're all related in one way or another and it's a matter of cause and effect.¹²⁴

Here, although Studi's perspective may not represent the views of all Indigenous communities, it does sound like Studi acknowledges that the crew behind *Avatar* delved into the subject and did

¹²⁰ Wes Studi, “About Page,” Wes Studi Official Site, n.d., <https://wesleystudi.com/about/>.

¹²¹ Ibid

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ Oscars, “Wes Studi Receives an Honorary Award at the 2019 Governors Awards,” www.youtube.com, (2019)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=IjYeyOkEIS4&fbclid=IwAR0x6L_LgLuLrRtuFLumXOITP0FByiFOSTmMwWybgYouIKpw19xSV_RYpyA&app=desktop.

¹²⁴ Brad Balfour, “Native American Wes Studi Is a Valued Player in Avatar,” *HuffPost*, (2010) https://www.huffpost.com/entry/native-american-wes-studi_b_430261.

good research, he emphasizes that a sense of connection between Native American perspective, or culture, and the Na'vi. In this interview, Studi told Balfour:

I like to be able to raise people's consciousness, yes. And to remind that those of us involved in the receiving end of the oppression, we have a duty. What they really make up is a prophecy of, "Why should we continue to do what we've always done? Can't we do it in different ways?" Like the characters that Sigourney and Zoe play, in that research is one thing, and perhaps that would lead to a better kind of conciliation between the two groups if it wasn't just the out-and-out use of "might is right." It's something that, unfortunately, we as a human race haven't really learned up to this point.¹²⁵

Studi suggests a call for a more thoughtful and considerate approach to conflict resolution. He notes the collective failure to fully embrace lessons learned in history, and mentions a need for reflection and change in our societal attitudes and behaviors. In this answer, Studi expresses that movies like *Avatar* need to serve as a reminder that there is a responsibility to challenge existing norms—particularly for those facing oppression. He questions the perpetuation of established patterns and proposes the necessity of finding alterNative ways of approaching societal issues.

Hence, is Cameron "contesting" colonization? As Kolya Shields questions in the article "James Cameron's *Avatar* has an Anthropocene Problem." Activists have condemned *Avatar* and called for the boycott of the sequel,¹²⁶ firstly, regarding the Native peoples as "aliens" is dehumanizing according to Shields,¹²⁷ and emphasized by the controversial "body driving" of Indigenous peoples which have been referred to as "Blue Face." Chase Iron Eyes describes "blue

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Shaznay Martin, "Avatar Films Have Always Been a Gross Reimagining of Colonialism," *www.refinery29.com*, (2022) <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/avatar-the-way-of-the-water-colonialism-indigenous-history>

¹²⁷ Kolya Shields, "Orion Magazine - James Cameron's Avatar Has an Anthropocene Problem," *Orion Magazine*, n.d., <https://orionmagazine.org/article/avatar-james-cameron-anthropocene-colonization/>.

face” as a perpetuation of “the practice of red face,”¹²⁸ essentially appropriating Native American practices, symbols and traits and often turning it into “racist caricatures.”¹²⁹ However, in the context of *Avatar*, the “appropriation” of Na’vi bodies by bioengineering and driving these alien bodies is intertwined with the idea of “blue face.” On Pandora, the natural world, the flora and fauna mirror Earth and elements found on our planet. Pandora is an Earth. “Blue facing” is a way to illustrate how far colonists are willing to go for money, wealth, power and advancement. Humans did not stop at destroying their planet, their greed takes them to that further point-of-no-return: embodying their “enemy”—with the exception of their fingers, as hybrid non-Native avatars have an extra finger. Using “blue face” is a way to show the colonists’ greed, their lack of respect for other cultures and their racist ethnocentric cultures and practices. *Avatar* is an (almost) exaggeration to denounce a colonial culture of misappropriating and dismissing other practices.

Finally, these depictions of the dynamic between colonists and Indigenous peoples not only serve as a portrayal of historical narratives but also act as a means of addressing and exemplifying contemporary societal issues. However, according to Shields, the movie ends-up “exemplifying, rather than addressing, the problematic of the Anthropocene.”¹³⁰ In their words, the Anthropocene is “Typically defined by examples of human technologies’ planetary impact. Through this framing, species-*human* is implicitly blamed for the mass-scale environmental degradation of climate

¹²⁸ Ashton Jackson, “Despite \$1B in Ticket Sales, Some Indigenous People Take Issue with ‘Avatar: The Way of Water’—Here’s Why,” *CNBC*, (2023) <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/01/07/why-indigenous-groups-are-boycotting-avatar-the-way-of-water.html>.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*

¹³⁰ Kolya Shields, “Orion Magazine - James Cameron’s Avatar Has an Anthropocene Problem,” *Orion Magazine*, n.d., <https://orionmagazine.org/article/avatar-james-ron-antropoceno-colonizacion/>.

change on a *planetary*, geological scale.”¹³¹ They go on by quoting chemist Paul Crutzen “[the] mastery of fire by our ancestors provided humankind with a powerful monopolistic tool unavailable to other species, that put us firmly on the long path towards the Anthropocene.”¹³²

However, isn’t exemplifying addressing at the same time? To exemplify is to use specific example, sometimes vivid, to add more information to explain, illustrate or persuade a general idea. It gives a body to an idea to support it solidly and to make a strong argument. The fact that the movie exemplifies or embodies the Anthropocene—through the environmental messaging among other things—or tales of colonialism, is a way to address these issues. The harsh depiction of these themes ends-up becoming a critique of real-world issues. Addressing is to “give attention to or deal with a matter or problem.”¹³³ Flannery O’Connor said: “you tell a story because a statement would be inadequate.”¹³⁴ The “moral of a story” serves as a powerful tool to link exemplification and address. American folklorist D.L Ashliman said: “many fairy tales owe their longevity to an ability to address tabooed subjects in a symbolic manner.”¹³⁵ *Avatar* serves as an illustration of the silenced subject of Indigenous struggles during colonial times. By embodying these struggles in the fictional world of Pandora, the film exemplifies the broader issues faced by Indigenous peoples in the world. The “moral” in *Avatar* goes beyond a mere lesson, it becomes a

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ *Cambridge dictionary*, Online, def. addressing, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/address?q=addressing>

¹³⁴ Flannery O’Connor’s essay “Writing Short Stories.” Collected in *Mystery and Manners*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, First Edition 1970)

¹³⁵ David Lewin, “Between Horror and Boredom: Fairy Tales and Moral Education,” *Ethics and Education* 15, no. 2 (February 17, 2020) pp. 213–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2020.1731107>.

means of addressing the historical oppression of Indigenous peoples, bringing back attention to a narrative that has been marginalized or silenced.

In essence, *Avatar* stands as a complex and multifaceted world, sparking critical dialogue on issues ranging from Indigenous representation to environmental concerns. In the context of the ongoing discussions and criticisms presented in my analysis, it is complex to definitively label James Cameron's work as a clear example of decolonizing thought. While the film brings attention to important issues and prompts conversations, the nuanced critiques suggest that the approach and perspective may not align seamlessly with decolonization efforts. However, *Avatar* still raised awareness to struggles and issues ongoing today.

CONCLUSION

James Cameron, renowned for his visionary filmmaking and technological innovations, occupies a position of influence in the film industry. However, the trust placed in his portrayal of historical events, as shown by *Avatar*, needs to be carefully taken into account. As mentioned before, *Avatar* serves as a metaphor for the real-world historical injustices committed during the colonization of the American continent. The exaggeration of a natural planet conquered by an over-technologically reliant colony introduces a movie politically positioned and activist in its messaging, particularly in denouncing colonization as destructive and oppressive. *Avatar* rejects the traditional “colonial” narrative found in other genres, where Indigenous peoples are often portrayed as a violent, romanticized and oversimplified community. It presents physically—and also more subtly—a dominant/dominated dynamic echoing imperialistic initiatives found in human history. In fact, racism is a complex, deeply rooted, concept in both *Avatar* and real-world United States, and deepens the ideas of “otherness” based on racial differences—emphasized by the “alienness” of the Na’vi, reminiscent of historical factors which contributed to institutionalized racism, such as appropriation. Indeed, criticisms are turned toward the potential misrepresentation of Indigenous cultures in *Avatar*. Exploring the concepts of cultural appropriation, cultural appreciation, and cultural relativism, has helped me understand to what extent James Cameron attempts to depict cultural appreciation, although, sometimes, failing to do so because of his lack of actual knowledge of Indigenous practices. Had he conducted a thorough ethnography of Indigenous cultures, involving Indigenous communities in the discussions and giving them roles and agency, instead of creating the world of Pandora by memory or personal assumptions, the

criticism would then have been a lot stronger and the answer to my question “is *Avatar* successful at ‘decolonizing’ thought?” would have been positive.

However, *Avatar* is not a perpetuation of the colonialist ways of appropriation, rather a critique of the destructiveness of colonial practices. Cameron’s detailing of the Pandoran flora and fauna, the science behind it all and the on-point depiction of the Native communities being interconnected to their environment and to all natural beings, definitely offers a new view on Native culture representation in box office movies such as *Avatar*. In fact, Pandora is based on Earth’s biological paradise, emphasizing the criticism of the natural condition of Earth—climate change, more and more species disappearing. Earth in *Avatar* is dying, and Pandora is the last chance for humanity, a trope which could end-up being a reality. Presenting itself as some sort of allegory for environmentalism, the film portrays the destructive consequences of unchecked human ambition and advocates for a more conscientious approach to the environment. Moreover, introducing gender equality elements, important to Native American cultures, supports my understanding of *Avatar* as a criticism of colonial and “white” patriarchal societies. The matrilineal structure of the Na’vi society draws parallels with certain Native American cultures and emphasizes the importance of women in these communities. Although people see the main hero as being Jake, the non-Native male, I consider Neytiri as an equally important and fierce character who embodies those same virtues a hero should have. Nevertheless, Jake Sully is seen as the main hero because of his narrator position, as well as because his character raises many discussions and debates of legitimacy.

Finally, despite the film’s attempt to denounce colonial culture, James Cameron’s decolonizing efforts are controversial. Whether it is looking at the cast or questions of cultural

understanding, the movie is still viewed as perpetuating stereotypes and undermining the authority of the film's anti-colonial message. However, James Cameron positions himself as an ally by choosing to delve into these themes and by using his platform—filmmaking—to shed light on the struggles faced by Indigenous peoples, at least, initiating conversations about anti-colonialism and environmentalism. The film's portrayal of Indigenous culture is problematic, and rightfully criticized, due in part to James Cameron's whiteness and the lack of Indigenous collaborators on the *Avatar* project. However, its critique of colonialism is valid. Colonial violence can and should be criticized by everyone, including and especially from those who have historically benefited from it. These kinds of criticisms are important because denouncing colonial practices is a universal responsibility.

The discussions I propose in this paper are significant because the discourses of decolonization and misappropriation of Native cultural heritage is an ongoing issue in the United States today. In this 21st century, marked by a heightened awareness of cultural sensitivity and social justice, the film industry stands at a crucial juncture. However, the question is, should movies entertain, contribute to the broader conversations that shape cultural consciousness, or both? It has become imperative to answer vital questions about representation, authenticity, and the responsible portrayal of diverse cultures.

In this regard, considering the thematic trajectory established by the 2 first movies, *Avatar* 3 will most probably continue to discuss colonialism and environmentalism, as well as the representation of Indigenous cultures. However, the main question of representation versus agency remains, as discussions about James Cameron maintaining a commitment to authentic

representation, by involving Native voices into his discourses and processes, is a main subject of focus for activists.

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