

Analyzing Avatar: A Review Essay

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By the time I decided to see James Cameron's *Avatar*, I had already heard enough about the film to be unsure whether it would be worth the time, effort and petroleum to see it. People's comments about the film ranged from praise for its groundbreaking 3D animation; to criticism of its racist portrayal of the indigenous; to disappointment with the overly predictable storytelling; to appreciation for its critique of colonization and civilization. I even heard complaints from fellow peace church Mennonites about its overwhelming use of redemptive violence. After seeing the film through my Christian anti-civilization (anti-civ) anarchist vegan antiracist woman of color lenses, my sense is that *Avatar* is more complex than many of its detractors or advocates acknowledge.

Set on the planet Pandora, *Avatar* is a sci-fi story of a mercenary-backed corporation's attempt to confiscate and mine the land inhabited by humanoid aliens known as the Na'vi. Enter Jake Sully, the paraplegic U.S. marine protagonist who joins the science and anthropology wing of the operation as a substitute navigator for his deceased twin brother's avatar. Early in the film, we discover that the avatar is an expensive high-tech clone that allows its user to temporarily experience and subsequently infiltrate the Na'vi community. After a series of unexpected events during his first avatar excursion, Jake finds himself living amongst the Na'vi clan known as the Omaticaya where he becomes an apprentice to the female tribe member Neytiri. From that point, the film revolves around the internal and external conflicts that arise as Jake bonds with the Omaticaya and struggles between his mission and his allegiance to the aliens.

Although *Avatar*'s primary focus is on Jake's steady transition from an ambivalent supporter and participant in colonizing Pandora to a rebel against both the project and his own people, the film also touches on a number of hot-button issues. Without trying too hard, viewers will quickly notice thinly veiled commentary on the Iraq War, the American government's policy on terrorism, veteran benefits, corporate greed and concern for the environment. There even appears to be a nod to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict as the Na'vi attempt to fight heavily armed helicopters with wooden bows and arrows. Yet these and other references are used to explore the film's bigger question: who are the savages, the terrorists, the "uncivilized?" Is it the near-naked, primal, forest-dwellers with the intimate connection to each other and their planet? Or is it the technologically advanced humans who kill and dominate on behalf of their shareholders? *Avatar* clearly answers: it is the latter. Yet,

the film also insists that the colonizer's savagery is not a permanent condition. How it chooses to make this second point, however, is praiseworthy at times and problematic at others.

The Na'vi

As I reflected on *Avatar's* depiction of the Omaticaya clan, I have come to believe that both the praise and the critique it receives depends in part on the critic's view of nature, nonhuman animals and civilization. As a woman of color and an ethical vegan, I experienced the animal-like Omaticaya as a robust community with traditions, language, spiritual practices and indigenous knowledge. I was attracted to the tribe's shared male-female leadership, its pre-modern union of mind, body and spirit, and its sustainable relationship with their planet. Untainted by industrialization and environmental degradation, the Omaticaya clan represents a way of living that stands in stark contrast to the attitudes and practices that have led to our present ecological crisis. Finally, I was impressed with the Na'vi's primal connection to Pandora and the ways they reflected my view that a healthy relationship between people and creation relies in part on embracing that the human is an animal whose survival depends on a complex web of life that neither technology nor science nor civilization can overcome.

Although the Omaticaya undoubtedly represent a hyper-idealized collage of various indigenous communities, they nevertheless reflect what anthropologists have discovered about pre-civilized societies in both recent and distant human history. Is some of the backlash against the Na'vi a result of ignorance about this primitive past and fascination with "being civilized"? Are people who are offended by the "animality" of the Omaticaya simply captive to the dominant speciesist view that nonhuman animals have little or no value outside of human use and enjoyment? Yes. And no.

The Omaticaya does not represent any specific indigenous group, nevertheless several of its members are easily recognizable as people of African descent. This is partially due to the film's technology, which animates the actors who portray key tribe members like Neytiri (Zoë Saldana), Tsu'Tey (Laz Alonso) and Mo'at (CCH Pounder). However, the resemblance to an African-like people is also apparent in the film's use of tribal music with African drumming, the alien's adornments (beads, headdresses, etc.) and their pattern of speech.

Therefore, when the overtly feline Omaticaya adopt recognizable primate behaviors like swinging through the trees and bearing their teeth at other "animals," and are called "blue monkeys," the film immediately calls to mind longstanding racist stereotypes about Black people in particular being a less evolved, subhuman species. Even a cursory look at historical race theories reveals exaggerated,

derogatory images of Black people as apes and lengthy arguments aimed at proving the monkey-like traits of Africans and their descendents. In the U.S context where the history of Black people's legal status as enslaved beasts is still raw, and a political cartoon featuring Barack Obama as a gunned down chimpanzee attempted to pass as humor, I am not surprised that some people of color and their allies bristle at the African-inspired Omaticaya being depicted as humanoid animal-like aliens. Historical and present-day racism in the U.S. will undoubtedly affects how viewers respond to the film. Ignoring these perspectives because of the film's environmental message or its anti-civ leanings or its critique of the Bush administration will only alienate people for whom this is a critical issue.

The Colonizers

One of the other comments I heard before seeing *Avatar* was that the characters leading the Pandoran occupation were too one-dimensional. Another person I spoke with was also exasperated that "all the bad people were white." Here again, I think these statements have a lot to do with the lens the viewer brings to the film as well as the level of knowledge she has of the history of colonization and racism. To address the second point first, it is simply not the case that white people alone are the enemy. For example, secondary characters Trudy Chacon (Michelle Rodriguez), a Latina pilot assigned to escort to the science and anthropology unit, and Max Patel (Dileep Pao), an Indian scientist who works on the avatar project are part of the corporation before having a change of heart. There are also peripheral characters like the sergeant on Jake's spaceship, a machine operator Jake encounters upon his arrival and several non-speaking extras who are Black, Latino and Asian. While the racial representation in the film is small, I nevertheless found it disconcerting that the person who complained about all the white people being bad did not notice that the bad people were not all white.

For me, watching those people of color eagerly fighting against the Na'vi as part of the mercenary army sparked a series of questions: what brought them to Pandora in the first place? Did they, like Jake, feel pressured by circumstances beyond their control? Were they thirsty to "fight terror with terror" like their commander? What is it that drives those who are ostracized, oppressed and "othered" in their own social system to ostracize, oppress and "other" those with whom they share the most in common?

In light of these lingering questions, Trudy's decision to fight alongside the Omaticaya intrigued me. Despite not having personal experiences with the Na'vi, she recognizes the savagery of the acts committed against them, and acknowledges the disjunction between what she signed up to do and what her superiors were asking of her. What enables her to see the injustice when most of her

peers do not and leads her to resist until the end? The film provides very little if any clues, but I like to think that her own social location as a woman and a person of color—as another kind of outsider—helped her finally relate to the Na’vi’s struggle and compelled her to take a stand.

To the critique that the film portrayed military and corporate personnel as people lacking substance and complexity, I would again respond with a yes—and a no. On one hand, characters like Colonel Miles Quaritch and businessman Parker Selfridge are motivated by nothing but bloodlust and greed respectively. They have no redeemable traits, making it easier for the audience to relish their comeuppance. Furthermore, the film does not provide meaningful back-story for any characters besides Jake and, to a lesser extent, Grace, making it unclear why they make certain choices.

On the other hand, what *Avatar* lacks in subtlety, it gains in accurately capturing the sordid history of colonization, domination and extermination of indigenous people in the U.S. and beyond. From the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the present, European peoples and their descendants have forced indigenous communities like the fictional Omatiyca from their lands and oppressed them for personal and professional gain. Unfortunately, the blunt rhetoric used by the colonel and Parker echo the rhetoric used to justify oppression against pre-American native communities and the enslavement of millions of Africans and their descendants. In addition, some of the film’s dialogue includes direct quotes from the propaganda that fueled the march toward war against Iraq, demonstrating that violent language remains a part of our rhetoric. In this regard, *Avatar* does not need to go out of its way to make the military and corporate forces “look bad.” The distant and recent history upon which the film draws speaks for itself.

Jake Sully

As I previously noted, *Avatar* focuses on Jake’s journey from one who comes to destroy the Na’vi to one who participates in their fight for liberation. Like so many other aspects of the film, what critics have reduced to another story about a white hero is to my eyes more nuanced. As Jake increasingly integrates into Omatiyca society, he slowly realizes that he is the one who needs rescuing from the human civilization he occupies and that occupies him. In one of his video-logs, he observes that the Na’vi will not negotiate with the corporation for their land because his people have nothing that they want. During another video-log, Jake also shares that the world of the Omatiyca feels more real than the one he is in while he is awake. With this in mind, I interpret Jake’s paraplegia—a condition that disappears when he is in his avatar—as more of a metaphor for his experience than a criticism of people with differently-abled bodies. While war, fear, greed, the state and other

hallmarks of “civilized” life have paralyzed Jake both literally and figuratively, life among the Omaticaya makes him physically, emotionally and spiritually whole.

For most of the film, *Avatar* demonstrates an awareness of the myriad pitfalls involved in telling the story of a dominant white male protagonist living among an alien community modeled after a hodge-podge of indigenous groups. Unlike the countless movies that feature white teachers or teacher-figures single-handedly instructing, directing and otherwise rescuing belligerent, hopeless youth of color, Jake is depicted as the ignorant “baby” with an empty-cup that needs to be filled with new knowledge. Indeed, his military training is of little use to him as he lives as an Omaticaya. Neither his technological knowledge nor his civilized eyes are of use as he learns to truly see.

The two scenes that best reflect the film’s attempts at sensitivity occur as the three-month deadline to relocate the clan draws near and Jake has officially joined the clan. In the first instance, Jake attempts to warn the community about the rapidly approaching demolition team and their plan to destroy hometree by demanding his right to speak as one of them. Just as he begins to assert himself, Colonel Quaritch and his unit disable his avatar link, causing Jake to return to his reality and his empty Na’vi body to fall to the ground. The scene serves as a powerful reminder that the clan’s acceptance alone is not enough to make Jake a full member of the People. As little more than an alien in an expensive suit, he is in no position at that point to assert his will or invoke his rights over them. The second scene that comes to mind occurs after Jake arrives at the Tree of Eywa as the One Who Rides Last Shadow (Turok Mak’to). Despite his new powerful position, he goes to Tsu’Tey who has become the rightful Omaticaya leader, and asks permission to speak and to fly alongside him as a brother. The scenes work together to show the conflicted and precarious position Jake inhabits throughout the film as stranger and brother, enemy and friend, invader and guest.

Although *Avatar* makes several skillful moves in handling Jake’s relationship to the Omaticaya, at times it is unsuccessful in treading the thin line between Jake the savior and Jake the ally. For example, before Jake yields to Tsu’Tey in the aforementioned scene, the clan first venerates him as Toruk Makto. As a result, he takes on an elevated status among the People, eclipsing Tsu’Tey’s power to organize the Omaticaya and the other Na’vi. Jake is the one who calls the other tribes to war and leads them in battle, and the rest of the Na’vi who get a blink-and-you’ll miss-it mention early in the film become faceless warriors under his command. Jake is also the one whose voice Eywa hears and who Eywa chooses to liberate her people and their planet. This raised significant tensions for me. On one hand, Jake best understands the humans and their ways of thinking and

fighting, and as someone who has already witnessed earth's desecration, he is tactically best suited to help the Na'vi resist. At the same time, I found myself yearning for a film that depicts the oppressed using their own ingenuity liberate themselves. Why not tell a story in which Jake shares his knowledge with Tsu'Tey and Neytiri and fights without being in charge? Why perpetuate the popular message that the oppressed must always have an outsider to secure their freedom?

In addition, Jake's re-entry into the clan after the damage he caused seemed too easy. While I understand that becoming Toruk Makto, fighting and almost dying for the Na'vi, and essentially renouncing his place among the humans certainly proved his loyalty, I nevertheless felt as if the film glossed over his betrayal of the clan. To be clear, I am not saying that the Omaticaya should have punished or excommunicated him. If anything, the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation are themes that fit well with my own Christian perspective. Still, I left the theater both times needing to see something that went beyond Jake's triumphant return to the clan and Neytiri greeting him with open arms minutes after watching mercenaries destroy her people's sacred spaces and home, and kill her father with the aid of Jake's duplicity.

Arguably, the most controversial part of Jake's story takes place when a ritual ceremony enables him to transfer his consciousness from his human body to his Na'vi avatar. On one hand, his birthday signals Jake's full entry into the Omaticaya community by which he is both literally and metaphorically saved. Like the aforementioned practices of forgiveness and reconciliation, the themes of conversion, rebirth and becoming a new creation that are inherent in his transition resonate with my understanding of Christian faith and practice. In this vein, the act of shedding his old skin and taking on a new form based on his transforming encounter with the tribe and with Eywa has a few parallels in catechesis and baptism. From another perspective, the shift he makes from human to Na'vi also suggests that to resist injustice, civilization and whatever else threatens life one must transfer allegiances completely and stand fully on the side of all that is threatened.

At the same time, however, Jake becoming Na'vi raises some noteworthy tensions. First, within Jake's rebirth as Omaticaya is a tacit approval of the science that contributed to his dying civilization and made colonizing Pandora possible in the first place. Indeed, because cloning and genetic manipulation enable Jake to experience the Na'vi, his entire story rests on support for these technologies. (Thank you to Katherine from Anarchy Radio for illuminating this point during our discussion.) Second, Jake becoming Omaticaya is also uncomfortable given America's current racial dynamic and discourse. A historical example might help explain this point. In the book, *Black Like Me* (1961), journalist John Howard Griffin artificially darkens his skin and travels through several

segregated states to experience living as a Black man in a white world. Yet, in spite of an increasingly multi-racial society and knowledge that race does not exist ontologically, my sense is that many people—even those who are staunchly anti-racist—would say that Griffin could never “be Black”, insomuch as Blackness is a social construct that carries certain pressures, expectations, histories, cultural signifiers, politics and socio-economic realities for those who share that identity. As one who could erase his dark-skin at the end of his experiment, albeit with new knowledge, even his intense and intimate experiences would not be enough to cross him into a new social category. To relate it back to the film, Jake’s ability to go beyond walking in Omaticaya shoes to becoming one of them strikes a strange cord in a context in which even “bi-racial” individuals often feel pressure to choose. In this way, the vision *Avatar* puts forth in Jake’s final scene is one that warrants wrestling with in large part because it seems so foreign to the ways identity and race are currently conceived in U.S. culture.

A Few Extras

After seeing the film twice, I know there are many other areas of *Avatar* that I could examine in detail—the film is just that ripe for analysis. However, a few closing snapshot on several smaller issues will suffice.

Grace and Norm: One of the surprises of the film was how fascinated I was with secondary characters like Grace and Norm. Grace was particularly interesting to me for the ironies she represents. For example, her scientific research and her relationships with the Omaticaya—things that eventually compel her into solidarity with the Na’vi—depend entirely on the resources provided by the same mercenary-backed corporation seeking to destroy everything she comes to love. In addition, Jake briefly but insightfully singles out books like the one she wrote on the Na’vi as the place where colonization begins. Finally, even when she tries to convince Parker not to mine Pandora for precious metal at the expense of the clan, she does it because the planet’s “real” value is in its electrical power. In these and other ways, she reminds me of how many well-meaning people working for change are often ignorant of or thoughtless of the ways we wittingly and unwittingly support the same oppressive systems we want to resist. It is sobering to think that more people—even among us radical types—are as entangled and conflicted as Grace than we would like to admit.

As for Norm, this largely background character came to the fore for me during the final battle. At one point, his Na’vi clone is badly wounded, disabling his avatar link. Yet, that does not stop him from returning to fight alongside the clans as a human being. Although the scenes probably total less than a minute, there is significant power in them. While Jake chooses to give up his human body to

become wholly Omaticaya, Norm's experiences of seeing with Na'vi eyes compels him to stand in solidarity with the People, in his own body and to risk his own life—as himself—on their behalf. In this way, I believe Norm provides an alternative means of being an ally to marginalized groups. Unfortunately, a similar resolution was not in the cards for Jake whose sexual relationship and love story with Neytiri demands that he have all the right Na'vi parts.

Redemptive violence: As I mentioned at the onset, one of the complaints from fellow Mennonites was that the *Avatar* glorified redemptive violence. In response, I want to make two points. First, I would contend that although the film stylizes and makes a spectacle of killing, it also shows that said violence is ultimately an immense failure. When the smoke and arrows clear, neither the mercenaries nor the Na'vi wins the war. Instead, Eywa prevails by summoning all the creatures on the planet and they destroy all that stands in the way of life's balance. Christians who find this resolution uncomfortable would do well to remember that the God of Israel liberated the enslaved people by overthrowing oppressors through super-natural. Far from being antithetical to our tradition, the way the battle unfolds between the humans and the Na'vi—and the role of the deity within that struggle—bears great similarities to our own Hebrew Scripture.

That said, the film does foster a kind of glee in the brutal killing of Colonel Quaritch who fights to the death out of sheer prejudice and bloodlust. Still, given the Na'vi's reluctance to take the lives of other creatures, it might have been more consistent to write the scene as one in which Quaritch is captured and sent back to earth with Parker and his other associates. Perhaps it would have been less satisfying for some viewers but as a friend noted, it certainly would have fit the character of the Omaticaya that Cameron previously established.

Conclusion

Although I highly recommend that people see *Avatar*, I must admit that it is difficult answering the question “Did you like the film?” When I say “Yes” I immediately continue with the explanation that I especially like it because of the conversations it has fostered, the rich interpretations it allows, and the myriad issues it invites viewers to reflect on and wrestle with. While it is also true that I thoroughly enjoyed the animation, the action and the actors—especially Worthington and Saldana's portrayals—it is really the analysis that *Avatar* has inspired that made it so worthwhile, I had to see it twice.