Environmentalism and the "Ecological Indian" in *Avatar*: A Visual Analysis

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Abstract: James Cameron's 2009 blockbuster, *Avatar*, is a tale of Indigenous resistance to environmental destruction. In the film, Earth moves outward to distant planets in order to satisfy its resource hunger. In their search, Earthlings arrive on Pandora, a biologically rich planet with a diverse and complex ecosystem. In defence of their home planet, the Indigenous people of Pandora (the Na'vi) engage in combat with the earthlings over which aspect of the planet is more important: the life above or the resources below. The environmental message in Avatar is one which promotes balance and harmony between humans and nature. However, this balance is represented by the film's essentialized Indigenous population. Thus, as a foil for Earth's technology-dependent resource-intensive society, the Na'vi are represented as a stereotypical Indigenous population; they are cast as closer to nature in their role as the "ecological Indian." By using archaic portrayals of Indigenous peoples, the film uses an "Indigenous" voice to propel its environmental message. This article visually analyzes how the film uses, produces, and perpetuates stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples and how these representations effect and advance the film's environmental message.

Key Terms: environmentalism, ecological Indian, representation, visual analysis, noble savage, ignoble savage, *Avatar*, Indigeneity

Introduction

In 2009, James Cameron unveiled *Avatar*, a film where both the world, Pandora, and its indigenous population, the Na'vi, have been created through the film's extensive use of Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI). This humanoid yet "alien" population, with their readily recognizable physical and cultural characteristics, "encourage a pattern of sympathetic identification" through which the viewer can interact with and accept the Na'vi and the film's message (Veracini, 2011, p. 359).

This message is one of environmentalism; its medium is the Na'vi, a purposefully stereotypical Indigenous population.

In the film, Earth's military has occupied the planet Pandora in order to ensure "the company's" continued and uninterrupted mining of a substance called "unobtainium" (Cameron, 2009, 6 mins.). Unfortunately their proposed mine lies directly below the "hometree" of the Na'vi. Initially, the military attempts to establish friendly contact with the goal of peacefully relocating the Na'vi through the use of the "Avatar Project": a program that allows an Earthling to mentally occupy an artificially created Na'vi body. Jake Sully, the protagonist, is chosen for the job, and he begins the arduous task of enculturation with hopes of eventually pushing the Na'vi from their land. However, the longer Sully lives with the Na'vi (in his Na'vi body) the more he empathizes with them. Realizing their program's failure, the military attacks the Na'vi's "hometree" and, instead of talking the Na'vi into leaving the proposed mine site, they force them to leave. Sully then has to decide where his true identity lies. Ultimately, he sides with the Na'vi and leads them to victory, killing many of the Earthlings and sending the rest back to their "dying world" (Cameron, 2009, 152 mins.).

In this case "the massacre" (a common trope of films focused on Indigenous peoples) is inflicted upon *Avatar*'s antagonists, the Earthlings, instead of upon the Indigenous population (Baird, 1996, p. 200). With this role reversal, it is apparent that the film is leading the viewer to ask, what would happen if "they" won? What can "they" teach the "West"? I argue that what the film claims the West can learn from Indigenous peoples is how to live an environmentally conscious life: a "life that's in balance with the natural cycles of life on earth" (James Cameron as quoted in *The Telegraph*, 2009). This concept of Indigenous identity has been labelled the "Ecological Indian" by Krech and remains a seemingly positive, yet insidious, assumption held by the general public (1999). An "Indigeneity" in complete harmony with nature has been variously constructed, dwelling in the collective western imagination since contact. Much like the anti-black racist American literature of the 19th century, this connection to nature has been used explicitly in media and politics to dichotomize both sets of actors and, further, to create a hierarchy between them (Hall, 1997b, p. 244). However, to make any sort of claim regarding the film's use of recycled and harmful representational modes toward an environmental message, I will need to argue four things: 1) there is a history of non-Indigenous peoples representing Indigenous peoples, 2) these modes of representation carry social evolutionary baggage which is used to "say something" about "difference" and/or an "evolutionary progress" to an audience, 3) activists, NGOs, and governmental bodies have used these representational modes to forward

their own environmental messages, and 4) the film uses these modes of representing Indigenous peoples to connect "Indigeneity" with environmentalism (Hall, 1997a, p. 5). The result of this inquiry will lead to an answer to the question: how does the film represent the Na'vi as the "ecological Indian" in order to push forward a particular form of environmentalism? From an anthropological perspective this question is necessary to answer, now more than ever, considering the looming threat of runaway climate change and the sheer marketability and appeal of the film's message despite its questionable medium.

The "Ecological Indian"

The "ecological Indian," as documented by Krech (1999), descends genealogically from its predecessors: the "noble savage" and the "ignoble savage." The "ignoble savage" has been portrayed as a "wild, marauding beast" with "cannibalistic, bloodthirsty and inhuman" characteristics (Bird, 1996, p. 245; Krech, 1999, p. 16). The "noble savage," on the other hand, is represented by switching the poles of morality and aligning this unquestioned "savagery" with positive rationality and vigour (Krech, 1999, p. 16): "noble savages" are "close to the land, spiritual, heroic, virtuous—and doomed" (Bird, 1996, p. 245). Where the "ignoble savage" and the "noble savage" claimed that Indigenous peoples are just *of* nature, the "ecological Indian" is *of* and *for* nature. The "ecological Indian" is not only in harmony with nature but "understands the systemic consequences of his actions, feels deep sympathy with all living forms, and takes steps to conserve so that earth's harmonies are never imbalanced and resources never in doubt" (Krech, 1999, p. 21).

The idea that Indigenous peoples are the ideal stewards of nature corresponded with environmental concerns that arose near the end of the 20th century. With these concerns, new conceptions of both nature and "Indigeneity" took hold. Opposed to a Hobbesian conception of nature as "nasty, [and] brutish" (2006, p. 535), nature, as fostered by the environmental movement of the 1960's and 70's, was constructed as pristine and constantly moving toward a harmonic *telos* (Krech, 1999, p. 23). So, as concepts such as ecology, conservation, and preservation entered the frame they came to the center of the discussion regarding what Indigenous peoples were thought to actually do (Krech, 1999, pp. 22-23). The "ecological Indian" myth not only alters the image of Indigenous peoples but also perpetuates a new assumed state of nature which "they," as a single entity, are a part of. However, Krech claims that the image of nature as a web of harmonious interconnectivity is patently false: "In the absence of human interference . . . natural systems are not inherently balanced or harmonious; and that left alone, biological communities do not automatically undergo predictable succession toward some

steady-state climax community, which is an illusion" (Krech, 1999, p. 23). Linking a static nature to a static Indigenous peoples distorts culture and perpetuates many of the latent social evolutionary theories contained in the "ignoble savage," "noble savage," and "ecological Indian" tropes. The social evolutionary theories referred to above are diffuse and many, but generally they assume that "savagery" naturally "evolves" into "civilization" in a unilinear manner. This sort of relationship places one above the other on a hierarchy defined by those in power: the "civilized."

The point, as Krech and others have claimed, is that the myth is harmful and untrue. In fact, Krech goes to great lengths to disprove the "ecological Indian" hypothesis citing examples of Indigenous peoples' destruction of their environments. Taking a different but parallel route, Nadasdy has claimed that "the definition of conservation is biased, judgmental, and western in construct" (Nadasdy as cited in Hames, 2007, p. 181). On the other hand, those who wish to argue for the validity of the "ecological Indian" claim conservationism as a universal (despite the fact that as a concept it may be an import): "A people engages in conservation or it does not" (Hames, 2007, p. 181). For my purposes it is not pertinent to determine whether or not the "ecological Indian" trope has any legitimacy, but, rather, to explore how it has been strategically and wrongfully used by non-Indigenous peoples.

The use of a constructed Indigenous identity by non-Indigenous people for either ideological or personal gain is a common practice. As Conklin notes, the voice of the Wari' has been appropriated by several environmental groups in hopes of using Amazonian Indigeneity toward their own devices: "In Amazonian eco-politics . . . non-Indian spokespersons have come to promote an idealized image . . . Amazonian Indians are represented as guardians of the forest, natural conservationists whose cultural traditions and spiritual values predispose them to live in harmony with the earth" (1997, p. 713). Similarly, as Anderson claims, while discussing ways in which the environmental movement can move forward, "traditional and local people have managed, in most cases, to conserve environments and manage resources sustainably" (2011, p. 56). It is unclear whether or not this is true, but it *is* clear that these ruminations are the result of a significant tension; as Kopnina and Shoreman-Ouiment claim, "today, we face some of the greatest environmental challenges in human history" (2011, p. 1). The environmental movement is constantly seeking new solutions to this ever-growing problem. Environmentalism, then, is not simply a theoretical standpoint, it is intended to be a way of life: "'The environment' . . . is affected by human activity, and . . . securing a viable future depends on such activity being controlled in some way" (Milton, 1993, p. 3). In their search for a solution, the environmental movement has sought out alternative ways of life, and, often, these ways of life are

aimed at becoming closer to particular environmental groups' conception of "nature." Unfortunately, this has led certain non-Indigenous environmental groups to appropriate Indigenous identities and voices (Conklin, 1997; Hames, 2007). It could be argued that these individuals and groups are engaging in a form of cultural appropriation that takes advantage of and ultimately perpetuates power imbalances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

I have spoken here of environmental groups and their use of Indigenous identities as an almost necessary response given the looming threat of, say, runaway climate change: a response which some would argue 'the ends justify the means.' However, it should be kept in mind that these environmental groups profit not only in the sense that the activists' children may inherit a better world, but individuals within these groups could profit monetarily and politically.

Indigenous Identities and Cultural Appropriation

Thus, an analogy can be made between environmental groups and *Avatar*. It is assumed that while environmental groups that use representations of Indigenous peoples to promote a message of environmentalism are merely profiting on the side, Cameron's film has used representations of Indigenous peoples for profit by pushing forward a particularly marketable environmental message. This nuance may not distinguish the two as readily as those who argue 'the ends justify the means' would like to think. The end for Indigenous peoples, as shaped and moulded peoples—often subject to the whims of the representers—is ultimately the same. While it can be said that Indigenous peoples have used the "ecological Indian" trope as both the representers and represented, it is clear that little or no form of cultural appropriation has occurred (Martello, 2008). However, non-Indigenous use of assigned Indigenous identity is not acceptable. In this sense, James Cameron's Avatar and certain environmental groups should be equally kept in mind while discussing cultural appropriation, its effects, and its ethics.

In his theorization of cultural appropriation, Rogers makes use of the definition provided by *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*: "to take or make use of without authority or right" (Rogers, 2006, p. 475). In addition, it is not encompassed by a single moment in time; rather, it is "an active process" (Rogers, 2006, p. 476). This "active process," in which it is clear that someone must *act*, cannot be legitimized by good intentions. Instead, Rogers wants to detach cultural appropriation from questions of intentionality (i.e. an individual who is in good faith regarding their decision to culturally appropriate can still be morally wrong). For Rogers, malicious cultural appropriation is determined by the positionality of the actors: "the symmetry or asymmetry of power relations, the appropriation's role in

domination and/or resistance . . . and other factors shape, and are shaped by, acts of cultural appropriation" (2006, p. 476). So, when cultural appropriation occurs between "equals" it is defined as "cultural exchange" (2006, p. 477). However, he is not naïve enough to claim that this state can exist; instead, "cultural exchange" is an ideal. Marked by the "reciprocal exchange of symbols, artifacts, [etc.] . . . between cultures with roughly equal levels of power," "cultural exchange" is often used as the neutral case against which other forms of cultural appropriation are judged (Rogers, 2006, p. 477). Alternatively, when a "dominant" culture uses cultural elements from a marginalized or oppressed culture Rogers labels it "cultural exploitation" (2006, p. 489). In Rogers' conception of "cultural exploitation," commodification plays a large role in how the "dominant" culture steals, distorts, and degrades the culture of "subordinate" peoples. In one example, he claims "those appropriating Native American cultural elements may believe that they are opposing the very system they are supporting through their consumption and circulation of commodities, potentially degrading the very culture they intend to honour and protect" (Rogers, 2006, p. 489). By using the voice of marginalized peoples, the speaker has the ability, through power differentials, to shape how that culture is publicly perceived. Additionally, unlike what other prominent scholars have argued, "if insiders are worried about being harmed by artworks produced by outsiders, they can simply decline to be part of the audience for these works," it is clear that the effects of representation don't stop at the site itself (Young & Haley, 2009, p. 279). They, as Hall has claimed, "[enter] into the very constitution of things" (1997a, p. 5-6).

This is where the film *Avatar* again becomes relevant to our discussion. As I have shown, representations of Indigenous peoples that bring forward past socio-evolutionary theories have the ability to affect the thinking of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. These representations are often used strategically to "say something" to an audience through a specific form of cultural appropriation that takes advantage of power differentials (Hall, 1997a, p. 5). In doing so, the representer perpetuates a specific mode of representing and entrenches it in the discourse surrounding what it is to be, in this case, an Indigenous person. This occurred in Conklin's research among the Kayapó. In 1988, Sting, in his campaign for "The Rainforest Foundation," claimed that "It didn't take long for the varnish of civilization to leave us. After 48 hours, we were naked, covered with paint, and fighting snakes" (Sting as quoted in Conklin, 1997, p. 714). In that same year a Brazilian judge, in agreement with Sting's shallow description, argued that a Kayapó man could not be an Indian because he knew how to operate a VCR (1997, p. 715). This sort of reduction of Indigenous identity, and the perpetuation of these ideas,

makes it easier to use a constructed Indigenous voice to espouse a particular belief or message. I would claim that Cameron's film is doing just that. It is an active agent in the construction of a reduced, essentialized, homogenous, and naturalized Indigenous identity through the representation of the Na'vi as the "ecological Indian" in the film *Avatar*. Analyzing how this is done is the aim of this paper.

Analysis of the Film

For my visual analysis I will employ specific methodologies, relying upon Rose's compositional analysis; Rose's, and White and Marsh's content analysis; and Rose's discourse analysis (Rose, 2007; White & Marsh, 2006). Compositional analysis focuses on how an image is put together in terms of production, content, and social context (Rose, 2007). Rose first claims that to do this sort of analysis one must have "the good eye," which is only ambiguously defined, but necessarily requires one to "take images seriously" as consciously created "things" (2007, p. 35). Without a clear methodology, Rose instead attempts to define compositional analysis by what compositional analysts look at. Most importantly for film, the compositional method looks at how the shot is taken and what the differences between, for example, a long shot and a close-up shot may say about the image's message or its possible interpretations (Rose, 2007, p. 52). Other compositional elements include the camera's point of view (is the camera an omniscient viewer or does it seem to embody the perspective of an existing character), what is involved in the shot (in comparison to what the viewer "knows"), and the meaningful editing of the film (the joining of scenes and their relative placement) (Rose, 2007, pp. 52-54). Compositional analysis is focused on how images are produced, how the film as a whole, in this instance, is put together, and what that may mean.

Content analysis, on the other hand, chooses to look at what is actually in the shot rather than the production, framing, or context of the shot (Rose, 2007). Rose focuses on the quantitative element of content analysis (i.e. the counting of specific instances in which a sign, symbol, or the like appear) rather than its qualitative elements. This is not how I approach it, but her methodologically explicit sampling technique is helpful nonetheless. If one were to read a film as a collection of images (24 per second—at least) the resulting data and work load would be insurmountable. As a result, the method of selecting images is important. Rather than any sort of random sampling, I use selective stratified sampling, or "chunking," a technique more in line with the qualitative content analysis methodology of White and Marsh

(2006, p. 29). And, rather than exclusively viewing the images as frames, I bind scenes (thus speaking to a collection of images) and analyze stills.[1]

The film can first be divided in two: scenes focused on either the Na'vi or the Earthlings. For my purposes, all Na'vi-based scenes are equally available for analysis. Furthermore, I have divided the film into five sequences following the traditional dramatic structure: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and dénouement. The latter two have been omitted in my analysis as together their in-film running time constitutes approximately 11 minutes total of the two and a half hour feature. Additionally, I do not focus on the exposition as it is centered around the introduction of the military, the "Avatar Program," Jake Sully and, superficially, the Na'vi (total running time approximately 50 minutes). Also, the climax, with its action-centric military-heavy themes, is inappropriate for this analysis. This reduction in analyzable film time still leaves the middle of the film: approximately one hour and twelve minutes (from 0:50 - 2:02), which focuses specifically on the Na'vi culture and Jake Sully's enculturation. From there, I have chosen particular Na'vi-based scenes in order to come to an understanding of how the film portrays the Na'vi as the "ecological Indian." Further, as an introductory section, I discuss the Na'vi's physical make-up and appearance using stills selected from the entire film. This is necessary as clear shots of specific Na'vi biological, physical, and decorative features are few and far between. In this vein, my analysis of *Avatar* is influenced by the methods in which I have selectively pulled stills and scenes from the mass of images contained in the criteria above.

> To justify this practice Hall has claimed that
> many meanings . . . are potential within the photo. But there is no one, true meaning. Meaning 'floats.' It cannot be finally fixed. However attempting to 'fix' it is the work of representational practice, which intervenes in the many potential meanings of an image in an attempt to privilege one (Hall, 1997b, p. 228).

I have selected images and scenes in order to privilege the meaning that I wish to analyze. However, while looking at these images it is clear that content and compositional analysis are only useful in providing ways of looking at raw data and ways of sorting through that data in a systematic way. But, as these approaches require some sort of valuation in order to interpret the images, a more theoretical approach must be undertaken. The movement of a camera and the content of images

[1] The film stills used in this article were created by the article's author. These still are taken from the movie *Avatar*, released in 2009, directed by James Cameron. Further reproduction of the stills in this article are not permitted.

are not inherently meaningful. Therefore, I will use Rose's discourse analysis to view the chosen scenes more critically.

Discourse analysis, instead of looking exclusively at the image, asks questions about how the image is involved in a discourse, and thus "how, precisely, is a particular discourse structured, and how then does it produce a particular kind of knowledge?" (Rose, 2007, p. 156). It asks why particular elements of an image are in that image, and *how* these images participate in constructing accounts of the world through their taken-for-granted symbols and signs. The "how" grasps outwards at larger contexts of meaning, taking into account structures of power in society at large (Rose, 2007, p. 169). In this sense, I will look at how the film uses visual features descended from now archaic modes of representing Indigenous peoples in order to reify these modes and speak to a western audience. *Avatar* uses the power differentials between the dominant culture and Indigenous peoples to impose a strategic definition of "Indigeneity" on Indigenous peoples, promoting one view (the "ecological Indian") over another (Indigenous peoples as non-homogenous and fully human). So, while looking at the images themselves, I will also bring in select quotes by the director, James Cameron, to support my argument. As Hall has claimed, "the 'meaning' of the photograph . . . does not lie exclusively in the image," nor does it lie exclusively in the text to be read, but it lies "in the conjunction of image *and* text" (1997b, p. 228).

The Na'vi's Appearance

Avatar relies heavily on motion capture technology and CGI to construct the Na'vi. In the film they are "on average, approximately 3 meters (~10 feet) tall, with smooth, striped cyan-colored skin, large amber eyes and long, sweeping tails. Their bodies are more slender than humans" (Wikia, N.d.). It is clear that as CGI constructions every one of their features has been consciously created. Additionally, their alien-ness should place them in a distinct evolutionary line from humans. Thus, any and all (humanoid) features of this alien species are in place either due to Cameron's lack of imagination or because of his desire to elicit a certain response from his audience. These two distinct features of the Na'vi give Cameron leeway in how he is able to project his idea of "Indigeneity" through the Na'vi's visual expression. His use of certain images and features shown throughout the film serve to cast the Na'vi as of nature and thus more readily accepting of both the "ecological Indian" trope and environmentalism. I have chosen to focus on three features of the Na'vi: female breasts, clothing, and their "neural whips." Throughout this section I will discuss stills of Neytiri exclusively as she is the only "real" (non-human) Na'vi character with any substantial screen time.

Figure 1: Neytiri praying to the Na'vi deity: Eywa. Note her breasts and garments. (Cameron, 2009, 115 mins.)

The first film still (Figure 1) was chosen because it clearly shows Netyiri, the main female Na'vi character (and Jake Sully's love interest), and her breasts. This still illustrates how her breasts are variously hidden and exposed and thus, keeping in mind her alien-ness, leads us to question why she has them and what that means. James Cameron has been quoted as saying: "Right from the beginning I said, 'She's got to have tits,' even though that makes no sense because her race, the Na'vi, aren't placental mammals" (James Cameron as quoted in Rushfield, 2009). Why then does she have them? I would argue that the use of the exotic bare-breasted "other" is a tool that the film uses to elicit a familiar response from its audience. In this picture we can assume that the necklace is not being used by Netyiri to cover her breasts unless she is employing some strategically placed tape. Instead, the necklace is added to keep *Avatar*'s PG-13 rating in place while maintaining the symbolic power of the bare-breasted exotic woman. Neytiri and her breasts are there to make the film more appealing for the assumed white, male, heterosexual viewer. And thus, the film, the message, and Netyiri become consumable through her aesthetic objectification. In contrast, as Lutz and Collins have noted in their book *Reading National Geographic*, older women's breasts are rarely shown to this end (1993). This trend can also be seen in *Avatar.* Mo'at, Neytiri's mother (shown in the background of Figure 1), wears clothing and thus the "taboo [of] . . . showing old

women's sagging or dimpled breasts" is not violated. Regardless, the young female bare-breasted "other" is not just displayed for the viewers' pleasure, nor just to increase the consumability of the message, it also *carries* a message.

For Lutz and Collins the use of the bare-breasted Indigenous woman conveys a social evolutionist message to an American audience that Indigenous women, and more generally Indigenous peoples, are more clearly aligned with "nature" than "civilization" and its assumed exclusive domain of culture (1993, p. 172). This dichotomy is established through the message bare-breastedness is supposed to convey to a Judaeo-Christian audience—a lack of modesty. This "basic cultural trait" is assumed to represent the dividing line between "man" and "nature" as it was said to have been given by God to humans when Adam and Eve were banned from the Garden of Eden. Conjuring polygenetic theory (or the concept of multiple Adams), the bare-breasted Indigenous woman is thus taken to be of a different genetic line. So, despite her sexualisation, the bare-breasted Indigenous woman is cast as animalistic. For Cameron, she is both loved and feared—part human and part animal. She represents the bridge between nature and culture and can thus stand as both nature's translator and its steward.

Figure 2: Neytiri and her *Ikran*. In this still her "loincloth" is clearly visible (Cameron, 2009, 67 mins.)

Here, I want to focus on Neytiri's clothing, specifically her "loincloth" (Figure 2). James Cameron has described the Na'vi's dress and the rationale behind

his decision: “I designed her costumes based on a taparrabo, a loincloth thing worn by Mayan Indians. We go to another planet in this movie, so it would be stupid if she ran around in a Brazilian thong or a fur bikini like Raquel Welch in One Million Years B.C." (James Cameron as cited in Rushfield, 2009). The assumption here is that the taparrabo is more appropriate for an "alien" "Indigenous" person to wear than a bikini. Why does James Cameron assume that a taparrabo can logically move more freely between planets, cultures, natures and the like than can a bikini? I argue that this assumption is a function of the film’s homogenization of all Indigenous peoples. I do not believe that this homogenization stems from his desire to make a statement about solidarity among Indigenous peoples where “'indigeneity' has come to . . . presuppose a sphere of commonality among those who form a world collectivity of 'Indigenous peoples' in contrast to their various others"—a commonality frequently cited in the literature as arising from the historical processes of colonialism (Merlan, 2009, p. 303). Instead, it seems that the film’s conception of Indigenous peoples descends from an idea of a common connection to a common harmonious nature despite different evolutionary lines. I argue that by implying that the taparrabo's presence across all cultures and natures makes sense, the film’s homogenization relies on a universalized concept of nature to which it assumes all Indigenous peoples belong. The taparrabo is thus pretercultural: it is natural. If nature is the same everywhere and develops in universally predictable channels, the taparrabo and the people who wear it (the Na'vi and Indigenous peoples at large) are a natural extension of this common and predictable nature. As the film seems to claim that the Na'vi's culture is natural, the Na'vi have both a stake in nature and the authority to speak for it, again as its stewards.

My third analysis, rather than merely placing the Na'vi in nature, physically links them with it. In this still Neytiri is engaging in tsaheylu (or "the bond") through her "neural whip" braided delicately through her hair (Figure 3). Tsaheylu allows the Na'vi to connect with their ancestors (through the tree of souls, as seen above), other animals, and each other. These connections allow for a true, unmediated knowledge of nature and ecology. This knowledge is not just fostered by simply living in "nature," rather it is a biological and mental connection—the neural whip, as a feature belonging exclusively to the Na'vi, is a requirement for the Na'vi's environmentalism and stewardship—and there is thus a deterministic character to Cameron's positioning of Indigenous peoples. Without “civilization's stain,” the film assumes that the Na'vi, through their symbiotic evolution with nature, have experienced a "predictable succession toward some steady-state climax community" (an idea which Krech has called "an illusion") (1999, p. 23).

The Na'vi and Indigenous peoples are thus the timeless inevitable representatives of nature, hovering between sentient beings (presumed to eventually occupy a place "above" nature) and wholly natural beings. The Earthlings, however, lack this basic ability and thus only through the Na'vi can the Earthlings learn about and stop themselves from destroying the environment. The Na'vi and nature are ultimately only valuable as a means to an end. In the face of significant environmental stressors, *Avatar* has used the Na'vi, as a stereotypical Indigenous people, to teach the West how to preserve their way of life via Indigenous peoples' fundamentally different being and their assumedly more truthful understanding of "nature."

Figure 3: Neytiri engaging in *Tsaheylu*, or "the bond," through her "neural whip." (Cameron, 2009, 82 mins.)

By placing the Na'vi on the side of nature in a nature/culture dichotomy, the film uses the voice of Indigenous peoples to put forward a particular message. Through this reduction, the film hangs modes of representing Indigenous peoples like decorations from the Na'vi's being. Because the Na'vi are represented on the side of nature, these modes of being are affected by how the film represents Pandoran nature. This idea will be further explored through the film's use of the "ecological Indian" to put forward an environmental message.

"Ignoble Savages," "Ecological Indians," and Cultural Appropriation

As stated earlier, the "Ecological Indian" can be seen as an attempt to portray Indigenous peoples in a positive light—in harmony with their environment—while simultaneously critiquing the West. However, by deterministically reducing Indigenous peoples to their relationship with nature, the representer perpetuates "scientific racism": "the belief that the different races of human beings exist on an evolutionary continuum ranging from 'savagery' through 'barbarism' to 'civilization'" (1996, pp. 47-48). Thus, through these representations, Indigenous peoples are placed "lower" on the evolutionary ladder, no matter which pole of morality their "nature" is aligned with.

At the beginning of *Avatar*, the Na'vi are portrayed as "ignoble savages"—they are cast as traditional wild-west "Indians" who halt colonization and "progress." However, as Sully comes to identify with them, Cameron's representation shifts toward that of the "ecological Indian." As the negativity of the "ignoble savage" is replaced by the equally superficial positivity of the "ecological Indian," the latter appears more truthful. The authority that comes with the film's assumedly more "truthful" representation allows it to use the Na'vi as environmental stewards while simultaneously critiquing the West: "There's a sense of entitlement - 'We're here, we're big, we've got the guns, we've got the technology, we've got the brains, we therefore are entitled to every damn thing on this planet.' That's not how it works and we're going to find out the hard way if we don't wise up and start seeking a life that's in balance with the natural cycles of life on earth" (James Cameron as quoted in *The Telegraph*, 2009). Again, Cameron represents a life in balance with the "natural cycles of life on earth" (or Pandora) through the Na'vi and Indigenous peoples at large.

However, Cameron's environmentalism isn't as naïve as simply living *with* nature. Implicit in his message are ideas of conservation, preservation, and ecology *from above*. For Cameron, the Na'vi and Indigenous peoples are *of* nature, but they also serve as a bridge between "man" and "nature." So, while they must be controlled by Sully during the Navi-Earthling war near the end of the film, the Na'vi fight for both themselves and Pandoran life. Indigenous peoples are thus valuable, for Cameron, in the sense that they have something to teach the West—they allow the West to preserve "their" way of life in the face of environmental degradation.

How though is the Na'vi's way of life represented in the film? The first hint we get is during Sully and Neytiri's initial encounter. After Neytiri saves Sully from a pack of *viperwolves*, he begins to follow her. Repeatedly, he asks to stay with her and, repeatedly, she tells him to leave. As she begins to anger the "seeds of the sacred tree" drift down and cover Sully's body (Figure 4; Cameron, 2009, 41 mins.).

"Nature" has told Neytiri to change her mind, and she quickly tells Jake to come with her. However, on their way Jake is tripped by a *bola* and falls into a ring of Na'vi warriors; the warriors proceed to emit unintelligible yips and draw their bows, threatening Sully. The leader of the troop, Tsu-tey, reminds Neytiri, in the Na'vi's language, that "these demons are forbidden here" (Cameron, 2009, 43 mins.). She promptly responds: "There has been a sign," and, with no more talk, Tsu-tey tells his cohorts to "bring him" (Cameron, 2009, 43 mins.).

Figure 4: Sully covered in the "seeds of the sacred tree": Eywa's physical presence. (Cameron, 2009, 41 mins.)

Here, "a sign" obviously refers to the actions of the seeds of Eywa, and, with that, the Na'vi law (the forbiddance of an Earthling, in any form, in Na'vi territory) is void. The Na'vi, in this regard, are subject to natural laws, represented by Eywa's seeds. But, how these laws are disseminated is extraordinarily subjective: the seeds of the sacred tree do not tell Neytiri to spare Jake, they simply land on him. It is thus the Na'vi's responsibility to bend and shape their cultural laws according to their interpretations of natural laws. The Na'vi are responsible for protecting nature, and do so through the incorporation of the needs of Eywa, plants, and animals into their life-ways.

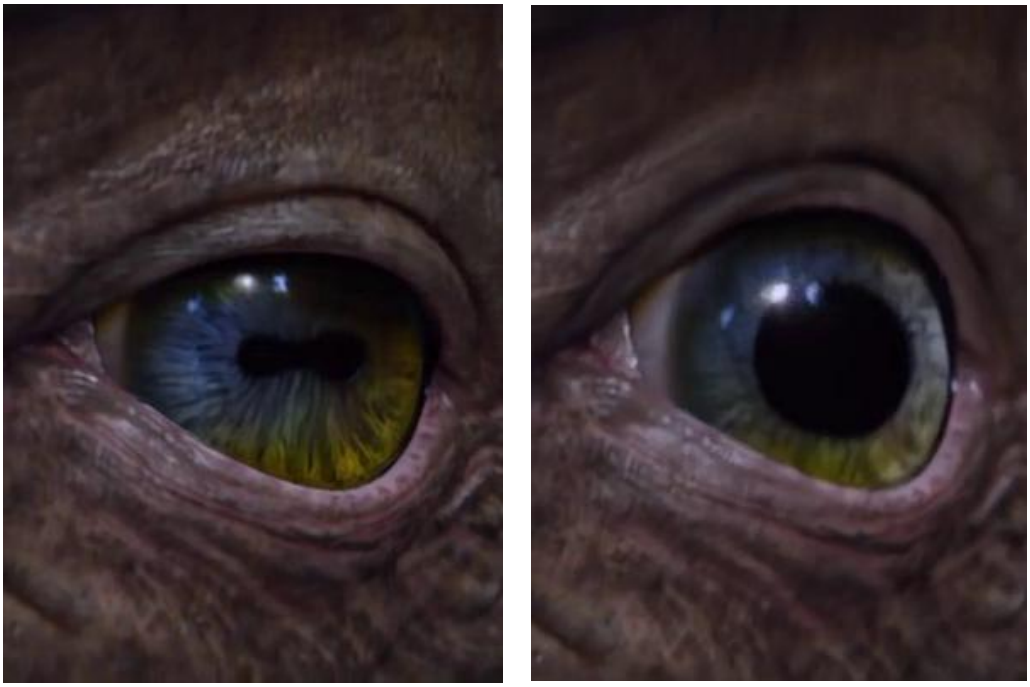

Figure 5: A *direhorse's* eye before (left) and during (right) *tsaheylu*. (Cameron, 2009,

Another example occurs during the rising action of the film (Cameron, 2009, 52-53 mins.). After being told that she must teach Sully the ways of the Na'vi, Neytiri explains the act of *tsaheylu* through the use of a *direhorse*. As Sully makes the bond, the *direhorse* rears and the camera zooms in on its rapidly dilating pupil (Figure 5). Once the *direhorse* calms, Neytiri explains to both Sully and the viewer what has just happened: "that is *tsaheylu*, the bond. Feel her," the camera pans around Sully's satisfied expression (Cameron, 2009, 52-53 mins.). "Feel her heartbeat," the *direhorses* beating heart becomes central in the audio mix (Cameron, 2009, 53 mins.). "Her breath," the camera zooms in on the *direhorse's* breathing apparatus, located on its neck; the animal then breathes heavily (Cameron, 2009, 53 mins.). "Feel her strong legs," here we get a more physical sense of the *direhorse* as the camera moves around its body (Cameron, 2009, 53 mins.). "You may tell her what to do . . . inside," and Neytiri points to her head (Cameron, 2009, 53 mins.). As the shots move outwards, from the *direhorse*'s fully internal heart to its breathing apparatus, fundamentally connected to internal organs, to its muscular exterior, the *direhorse* is portrayed as fully controlled. This is solidified when Neytiri claims that "you may tell her what to do . . . inside" (Cameron, 2009, 53 mins.), emphasizing the neural connection between the brains of the two beings, and the fact that when the bond was made Sully's pupils did not dilate, nor did he rear.

As Losh has noted, the control portrayed in the act of *tsaheylu* is reminiscent of current movements in both bio- and organic technologies (2009). The Na'vi are thus presented not as "traditional" "ecological Indians," but, instead, through their connection with nature, they come to represent the "future." The film, however, expects that these two parties (Earthlings and the Na'vi) will reach this same point, but through different routes. Through symbiotic evolution the Na'vi have achieved a deep connection with nature and the ability to control it. The Earthlings, however, do not and cannot come upon this relationship naturally. Instead, they are to learn from the Na'vi and, alternatively, are to develop it culturally. For the Na'vi, the use of *tsaheylu*, and thus their use of nature, serves the purpose of protecting that same nature. This is seen in the climax of the film when Neytiri uses the most dangerous and hostile of Pandoran animals, a giant cat-like creature the Na'vi call *palulukan*, in order to defeat the Earthlings and reinstate environmental stability. However, for the Earthlings, or the West, environmentalism, eco-technology, and Indigenous life-ways are only valuable in that they serve to preserve a (slightly altered) western way of life. Because of a lack of actual connectivity, humans, despite gaining a "natural" connection of sorts through bio-technology, cannot use their newfound ability to correctly interpret the will of "nature" or Eywa. There are then two levels of control: The Na'vi control nature for nature and Sully controls the Na'vi (and thus nature) for the West. In this sense, the concepts of ecology, conservation, and preservation *from above*, as is the case regarding *tsaheylu*, are strategically enlisted by the film to comment on the future of western life (Krech, 1999, p. 22). So, despite the western flair that permeates this "ecological Indian" concept, the Na'vi still remain "natural" while pointing toward another's brave new world.

Perhaps the most telling segment of the film comes in the form of a montage during the rising action. Here, the viewer is introduced for the second time to the Na'vi after being subject to their initial representation as the "ignoble savage." The montage begins as Norm (another human Avatar driver) and Neytiri teach Sully "superficial" aspects of Na'vi culture including their language and archery. Almost immediately, however, Sully is shown as a fairly adept *physical* member of the Na'vi, able to keep up with Neytiri as she runs swiftly through the forest. He attributes his newfound physicality and agility to his having to "trust [his] body to know what to do" (Cameron, 2009, 61 mins.). What appears superficial in the Na'vi's practices have become physically placed, and by experiencing the world through the locus of his Avatar (Na'vi body), by trusting his body, Sully begins to internalize the practices. As Grace, the typical anthropologist, reminds him, "This isn't just about eye-hand coordination out there, you know? You need to listen to what she says. Try to see the forest through her eyes" (Cameron, 2009, 62 mins.).

However, what Grace fails to understand, and what the carefully ordered montage displays (moving from representations of the Na'vi's physical-cultural elements to their mental-cultural ones) is that the physicality of Sully's actions allow him to "see" the forest through Neytiri's eyes. Using the mind/body dichotomy, *Avatar* constructs the Na'vi's being as emerging out of the body's interaction with nature, from the various practices it allows (in contrast to the "civilized" individual's unrestrained mind). Along the lines of social evolutionary theory the mind/body dichotomy is aligned with similar binaries: namely, civilization/savagery, culture/nature, and rationality/irrationality.

The montage then shifts to focus on Sully's further experience of nature; he watches animals, pokes insects, traverses the forest at all its levels, and swims through Pandora's clear water. Not a word is said between Sully and the Na'vi, yet through the accumulation of the above-mentioned tactile experiences, the montage comes to show Sully as a culturally competent adult among them. For instance, he no longer needs instruction in archery, nor in their language. In fact, several of the smaller scenes in this section have nothing at all to do with Sully; he blends right in. The essentialist "naturalness" of the film's constructed Na'vi culture enculturates the "white" protagonist in a matter of minutes. During these segments, Sully's voiceover proclaims his understanding of Na'vi culture: "Trying to understand this deep connection people have to the forest. She talks about a network of energy that flows through all living things. She says, 'all energy is only borrowed, and one day you have to give it back'" (Cameron, 2009, 64 mins.). This deep connection, while being briefly philosophically explained, is visualized through Neytiri's placement of a "[seed] of the sacred tree" in a Na'vi grave (Figure 6). This seed, presumably, will use the Na'vi individual's body as a food source to grow into another "tree of souls," thus producing more seeds (Cameron, 2009, 74). Here, again, we return to the purpose of the "seeds of the sacred tree." They represent natural law's alteration of the Na'vi's cultural law through "signs." However, the Na'vi have the role of interpreting these signs, through their physical connectivity to nature, and thus they have the ability to decide what is best for themselves and "nature" generally. Through their conception of "energy flow," the planting of the "seeds of the sacred tree," and, generally, the movements of their bodies, the Na'vi constantly perpetuate their "ecological Indian"-ness and their stewardship of nature in a way accessible to "outsiders" (Cameron, 2009, 64 & 41 mins.): with the right parts (the "neural whip" and the Na'vi body) and a few minutes the interpretations can be easily made.

Figure 6: A deceased Na'vi with a "seed of the sacred tree" (Cameron, 2009, 41 mins.). (Cameron, 2009, 64 mins.)

When we see Sully again, with Neytiri by his side, he seems to understand his role. While hunting, Sully takes his shot, runs up to the animal, stabs it in the heart, and says, in Na'vi, "I see you . . . Brother . . . and thank you. Your spirit goes with Eywa. Your body stays behind . . . to become part of The People" (Cameron, 2009, 64-65 mins.). Commenting on his "prayer" and actions Neytiri proclaims it "a clean kill" and says, "You are ready [to become one of the Na'vi]" (Cameron, 2009, 65 mins.). Whether or not Sully actually believes what he is saying, by seeing him go through the motions, Netyiri is willing to ritually accept him as Na'vi. Being Na'vi is thus acting through one's body in essential and prescribed ways. As is seen often in the film, these cultural elements focus on the use of nature for nature's sake in terms of conservation, and preservation, but mainly for ecology and Pandora's harmony. (For instance, the forest floor lights up with every Na'vi step—their environmental "footprint" is always manifest.)

However, in the film there is one scene in which conservation, preservation, and ecology are not practiced; harmony is disturbed by the Na'vi. During Sully's first foray into the forest he becomes lost. As night approaches, using a low-angle instable shot, Cameron indicates that Sully is being stalked by one creature or another. From earlier sequences, the viewer knows that Neytiri is one of these creatures, but the shot is too low (at ankle level) to be her. As he becomes suspicious and begins to prepare, a pack of *viperwolves* attack and overtake him. Luckily for Jake, Neytiri swoops in and kills them all. In this scene the "balance of

nature" is upset (Neytiri kills the creatures who, later in the montage, represent nature's harmony) to save one man. Echoing this point, Sully later asks Neytiri, "If you love your little forest friends, why not let them just kill my ass?" (Cameron, 2009, 39 mins.), to which she responds lamely, "you have a strong heart" (Cameron, 2009, 39 mins.). Sully is saved because he holds the key to ultimately protecting the Pandoran environment. The ends justify the means. The continuation of life, as is, is more important than the lives of individuals. The Na'vi act to preserve their own livelihood and the livelihood of nature, taking actions which, it is assumed, only they can see as beneficial. In killing the *viperwolves*, Neytiri at once speaks and acts for nature, despite the *viperwolves'* cries to the contrary. Sully later does the same thing while leading the Na'vi to victory: the behaviour is learned. Through Sully's experience of Pandoran life (via the locus of his Avatar), and his becoming a Na'vi, he gains the ability and right to speak and act on nature's behalf. Similarly, the film's use of Indigenous "identity" to convey an environmental message comes about at a time when, for some, it is necessary to *act* in order to preserve a western way of life. In appropriating the "ecological Indian" trope, non-Indigenous peoples essentialize, naturalize, and homogenize Indigenous peoples in order to "say something" to a western audience with the goal of critiquing and ultimately preserving the West (Hall, 1997a, p. 5).

Conclusion

Minh-Ha, in her book *Woman, Native, Other*, positions herself against the abstract male anthropologist (spoken of as "he") and claims that "she can no longer align any trace on the page without at the same time recognizing the trace of his traces" (1987, p. 48). In this sense, these force-fed Hollywood representations of Indigenous peoples have the ability to reinforce common conceptions of an Indigenous "other" to a largely "white," male, heterosexual audience. But, they also have the ability to make that same "other" see them-"selves" in that depicted "otherness." The potential effects that mass media can inflict on identity creation are what makes this analysis important.

Specific visual devices, representations of Indigenous peoples, and the representers themselves, seek to elicit certain desired strategic responses from their audience. In placing Indigenous peoples with a state of nature—and thus reducing, homogenizing, naturalizing, and essentializing them—representations use power asymmetries (which have allowed non-Indigenous peoples, in the first place, to unselfconsciously represent Indigenous peoples) to perpetuate those same asymmetries for their own benefit. Rogers has called this process "cultural exploitation" and claims that commodification, as in *Avatar*, plays a large role in

how the "dominant" culture steals, distorts, and degrades the culture of "subordinate" peoples (2006, p. 489). In *Avatar*, this commodification occurs at the confluence of the image and the message: in their combined appeal. By looking at *Avatar*, we can see how individuals take in and use images in predictable ways, but also how these images have the ability to take on a life of their own and affect ways of thinking. Lutz and Collins have described a similar phenomenon (1993). In their case, race was constructed visually by *National Geographic* to elicit a response from an audience (Lutz and Collins, 1993, p.164). But, over time, these same constructed images came to the forefront of how race is thought of and represented in general (Lutz and Collins, 1993, p. 164). Representations, as Hall has claimed, "[enter] into the very constitution of things" (1997a, pp. 5-6).

Avatar uses the image of the Na'vi and their relationship with nature (constructed as either savage and violent or harmonious and interconnected) to put forward a message of environmentalism. The Na'vi have been constructed to dress, speak, and move like a homogenized Indigenous people (Lutkehaus, 2009), and their struggles against settler colonialism/neo-colonialism are made to seem strikingly similar to those of Indigenous peoples worldwide. To promote his environmental message, to "say something" to his audience (Hall, 1997a, p. 5), Cameron utilizes the "ecological Indian" trope in his portrayal of the Na'vi. Cameron's use of this trope perpetuates the essentialization, homogenization, and naturalization of Indigenous peoples. The Na'vi control nature, yet live in it, are of it, and work for it, as beings of a lower order on an "evolutionary continuum" (Steele, 1996, pp. 47-48), while the "West," embodied by Jake Sully, have only to control the Na'vi (which they are obligated to do as rational westerners) in order to become environmentalists. By employing these traits Cameron is able to appropriate the voice of Indigenous peoples and propound a sellable message of environmentalism which is reducible, and reduces Indigenous peoples wholesale, to "living a life that's in balance with the natural cycles of life on earth" (James Cameron as quoted in *The Telegraph*, 2009).

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