

Introduction: Stop Re-centering the White Colonialist/Imperialist Subject!

This paper is intended to serve as a corrective for the main critical response to James Cameron's most recent film *Avatar* (2009). This response most often positions the film as a paradigmatic shift in cinematic aesthetics (its innovative use of 3-D technology and effects) that fails to move its plot beyond the standardized conventions of what I will call the New Western genre—Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) will serve as its exemplar. *Dances with Wolves* and *Avatar*, as a slight departure from the New Western in its own right, depart from and/or maintain the standardized conventions of the traditional Western both in their plots and in the types of heroes (the main protagonists) these films create. The Western, New Western, and *Avatar*'s treatment of the New Western, all attempt to provide types of egalitarian models. But unlike the Western genre, where the superiorities of whites are never in question, the New Western and *Avatar*'s treatment of the New Western attempt to forge these models in cross-cultural fashions that produce new types of political tensions and questions that these films are not always ready to tackle—as much as they might seek resolutions. The cross-cultural engagement of the New Western forces re-imaginings about the ways in which cross-cultural relationships might have been egalitarian in America's colonial past. But *Avatar*, as a slight departure from the New Western, is not only forced to confront the contradictions that arise when egalitarian models become cross-cultural in a colonial framework. It is forced to confront the ways in which its use of these models are politicized in a different ways when its use of the fantasy and science fiction genres blast its political relevance into a contemporary era where American imperialism continues its expansion and dominance across the globe. Cameron ultimately seems, if not incapable of engaging with, then at least unwilling to engage with the ways in which his overt advocacy for American imperialism complicates the collective forms of emancipation that the cross-cultural, egalitarian model of social transformation he is moving toward in *Avatar* requires to be a believable and politically progressive gesture.

The New Western genre begins where the Western genre concludes. The Western resurrects the American frontier and America's colonialist past in order to celebrate and justify this past as a collective (white) project necessary for the construction of a nation. Thus, the individual hero in this genre sacrifices his personal happiness for the good of white collectives as Native Americans are assimilated or exterminated. On the other hand, the New Western

resurrects the American frontier and America's colonialist past to de-center white collectives, re-center the individual white hero and a primary concern with his happiness, and attempts to show audiences, through the hero's cross-cultural interactions with Native Americans, that Native Americans were, rather than are, not the "savages" that the Western would have its audiences believe in. In fact, the New Western acts as American apologia for its colonialist past. Despite a body of criticism pointing to the contrary, the pseudo-New Western plot and hero presented in *Avatar* are actually lines of departure from the New Western that go unrealized. *Avatar* fails in its attempts to move beyond the New Western, specifically through cross-cultural dialogues, because these efforts are stymied by the resurrection of the traditional Western and New Western's preoccupations with colonial racism and the addition of its more recent imperial iterations. The difference between colonial and imperial racism will be made clear in the brief section on *Avatar*'s critical history. But, put simply, the hero's attempts at cross-cultural cooperation, understanding and explorations of difference are always undermined by a plot that continuously depends upon placing indigenous cultures in inferior positions in order to place the hero in an exceptional one. The hero cannot stand in a superior position on his own. Rather, his merits, and a primary concern with his personal happiness in the New Western, are built upon the (re)production and (re)emphasis of the demerits of indigenous populations. Indeed, the Western, New Western, and even Cameron's take on the New Western set in space, fail to remove themselves from this binary opposition. I will turn to Walter Benjamin to account for this failure.

But my point is that both the New Western (*Dances with Wolves*) and the pseudo-New Western (*Avatar*) make unsuccessful attempts to unravel this binary opposition. In fact, these filmmakers are making conscious ethical and political, if not artistic, efforts to move beyond this investment in the white hero's happiness, the binary oppositions it maintains, and to imagine cross-cultural relationships in new and progressively emancipatory fashions—specifically through dialectical forms of dialogue intended to produce cross-cultural, egalitarian models of social organization. These syntheses would ideally be as non-violent, multi-sourced, and imaginative as possible. Cross-cultural relationships depicted in film would, thus, provide universally humanizing, liberating and, therefore, egalitarian trajectories for projects of democratic social transformation that are importantly unfilmic, or, applicable to the "real world." The simple, although more nuanced, difference between egalitarian and anti-egalitarian models

is the difference between a primary concern with the collective and a primary concern with the individual respectively.

Science fiction and fantasy films are meant to serve as warnings, as glimpses into the future that show audiences how to improve upon the present. If the Western and New Western are celebrations of and apologies for colonialism, respectively, although there is always crossover, then *Avatar*, as a science fiction or fantasy film that utilizes certain tenets of the Western and the New Western, encounters certain logical roadblocks. Can a film celebrate, apologize for, and move beyond the colonialist project and still make claims for ushering in a filmic epoch of egalitarian sensibilities? The short answer is no. The longer answer is that *Avatar* tries but fails to do so. In a way, *Avatar* takes what Slavoj Žižek calls “the right step in the wrong direction” (Žižek 7). Žižek’s claim here is that the mistaken “liberal-democratic” tendency is to dismiss revolutionary projects like “Stalinism” because of the “terror” that they produced rather than, as he advocates, looking back in order to salvage “redemptive moment[s]” and “isolate” them from the “monstrosity” of the overall project (6-7). And this is very close to one main point of this paper. Where are the redemptive moments within *Avatar*—that is, those that point toward a truly egalitarian project—and why do they fail to become moments worth holding onto, worth celebrating? Interesting cross-cultural dialogues worth pursuing in the film are always overwritten by racist actions that fill the interstices between dialogues. It is, however, easy to suggest what *Avatar* tries but fails to accomplish. The far more interesting question is why and how it fails.

One problem with *Avatar* is its commitments to standardized, recycled projects of colonialist celebration or apology, evacuated of progressive—that is, an applicability to real and lasting egalitarian, cross-cultural social change outside film—contemporary content. *Avatar*, because of its connections to the Western and New Western genres, betrays this hallmark of the science fiction and fantasy genres in exchange for an evacuation of progressive cross-cultural social content. Yet an evacuation of progressive, in the sense used above, content does not mean that its content is empty of active political ideology. By looking at *Avatar* as slightly altered version of the New Western, I will unpack how Cameron uses certain characters, particularly the leader of the corporation, Parker Selfridge (the colonialist), the leader of its militia, Colonel Quaritch (the colonialist), and the main protagonist Jake Sully (the imperialist), as synecdoches

for larger political projects in order to oppose or advocate concrete political claims. But by offering a bevy of political ideologies that appeal to larger audiences, Cameron's political aim in *Avatar* at first seems to be a commitment to not having one single political point that might appear concrete. His point is not to have a point at all but, rather, to have points. However, I claim that Cameron makes a very clear point. As he critiques America's colonialist past in space and in film, Cameron, perhaps unwittingly, advocates its imperialist present on earth and outside film.

The distinction between colonialism and imperialism I will make in this paper is at the level of government. If the invading power establishes a permanent occupation and body of governance—one which is an explicit and localized representation of the invading country's rule—that regulates the organization of the invaded country's political, economic, social and cultural systems in the broadest sense, I will refer to this type of invading power as a colonial power. If, on the other hand, the invading power creates a delocalized body of governance through what is often referred to as a "puppet regime"—one in which members of the local population form a government with an obscured appearance of localized power that is always subjected to the delocalized power of the invading country—then I will refer to this type of invading power as an imperial power. Imperial control of the invaded country's political, economic, social and cultural systems takes place abroad and relies on the invaded country's appearance as an autonomous nation for its legitimation. This is not to say, however, that an imperial power will not intervene militarily to maintain its control over the invaded country. These interventions take place under the guise of terms like "freedom," "liberty" and "democracy." The meanings of these terms will become clearer in my later discussion of what Michel Foucault says about the often equivocal meaning of the term "freedom" (Foucault 68).

One way to understand "freedom," specifically individual, collective and audiences' conceptions of freedom, is as an equivocal word that produces binary oppositions which are, in turn, used to mask active political ideology within *Avatar*. Despite Jake's explorations of difference through cross-cultural dialogues, the racism that is explicit in his actions undermines the egalitarian claims for freedom that he is meant to embody. Jake's conceptions of freedom are formalized through personal and collective forms of happiness. But, just as importantly, Jake's conceptions of freedom, whether it is his personal happiness or forms of collective happiness, are

always attached to militarized interventions. Happiness and freedom for Jake are always connected to escaping his disability and becoming a soldier once again. It is going to end up that within a cross-cultural, egalitarian form of social organization, collective, democratic and, ultimately, universal forms of freedom are essential requirements. Or, put another way, the permanent egalitarian transformation of a multicultural society, the one that lasts, organizes itself around the perhaps utopian ideal that all these forms of freedom must be maintained. *Dances with Wolves* accepts this utopia as a type of nowhere space, as something that might happen outside the film, as an ideal its plot can never maintain. In *Avatar*, on the other hand, Cameron claims that this utopia happens and lasts, quite literally, in space and within the plot and duration of the film. It is important to remember, however, that *Avatar*, although it is moving toward these types of freedom, never quite arrives.

Jake utilizes the term freedom to describe his intentions toward the Omaticaya (the specific Na'vi clan he lives amongst) and to separate himself from other members of the corporation's militia during the film. He is fighting for "freedom," the other "army dogs" on Pandora (the alien planet) are not. They are fighting for profit. But even as the term "freedom" and other often exoticized and equivocal terms like "alien" (non-human being), "alienation" (the conditions of workers under the capitalist relations of production) and "avatar" (an image representing a user in an offline or online gaming environment or the descent of a deity to earth in Hinduism) are problematized in *Avatar*, they always remain in binary oppositions as, again, racist action undermines what looks like anti-racist/multicultural rhetoric in the film's cross-cultural dialogues. One main crux of the film is that it asks audiences to believe in the egalitarian form of closure it offers in the last instance. Yet even in a fantasy in which the Indians win, it will end up that they still ultimately lose. In other words, collective freedom is cast aside in favour of individual liberty, individual happiness, achieved at the expense of an indigenous collective. Cameron flaunts his claim for collective freedom in his audiences' faces. But eventually, as Jake notes throughout the film, "you always have to wake up."

***Avatar*: A Brief Critical History**

In what at first appears to be a very simplified critique of *Avatar*, Bruce Bennett claims that "Avatar's' stunning vision, technical achievements and storytelling demand at least a discussion in the debate about the greatest films of the last 50 years." "Cameron," he argues,

“gets bonus points for originality since his story is not based on existing source material, and he had to create new and exciting characters, civilizations, and languages, all set in the future.” But later in the article Bennett undercuts his previous statement about *Avatar*’s “originality.” He explains that Jake “eventually comes to appreciate [the Na’vi’s] environmentally mystic way of life (a la “Dances with Wolves’ and ‘The Last Samurai’).” For Bennett, then, Cameron’s story is original, but it is also unoriginal. When he later argues that “‘Avatar’ rebirths the old fashioned action/epic” (Bennett n.pag), his advocacy for *Avatar*’s original storyline is even more perplexing. So what can be unpacked from this ambiguity? Might one just as soon, as critic Philip Martin suggests of *Avatar*, “analyze a beach ball” (Martin n.pag)? As ambiguous and simplified as Bennett’s critique first appears, the connections between *Avatar* and New Westerns like *Dances with Wolves* he begins but ultimately fails to make are quite telling. Although he mostly resists the urge to conflate the two films, Bennett cannot resist the urge to see them as compatible in some yet indiscernible way. I will not denounce either of Bennett’s claims. Yet I am going suggest he is moving in the right direction without knowing why. Cameron does create something new in terms of 3-D technology, and he fails in his attempts to create an original story—specifically through cross-cultural dialogues. Bennett’s confusion arises from his inarticulate comparison between *Avatar* and the New Western. It will become clearer later why *Avatar*’s story can appear new yet not be new at the same time. This is most explicit if one views the film as advocating racist and anti-racist, monocultural and multicultural sentiments. Through these dualities, Jake appears to achieve everything Lt. Dunbar cannot: a lasting model of both collective equality and personal happiness within a multicultural framework.

David Brooks completely disagrees with Bennett’s conception of *Avatar* as a new story. He claims that *Avatar* is yet another in a series of films, like “‘Dances With Wolves’,” that uses “The White Messiah Fable” (Brooks n.pag). Brooks argues that the film has “a socially conscious allure” that allows “[a]udiences [to] like it because it is so environmentally sensitive” and “Academy Award voters [to] like it because it is so multiculturally aware” (n.pag). In the most powerful section of his critique, Brooks exposes this “multicultural[ly] aware[ness]” as a myth. He explains:

It rests on the stereotype that white people are rationalist and technocratic while colonial victims are spiritual and athletic. It rests on the assumption that

nonwhites need the White Messiah to lead their crusades. It rests on the assumption that illiteracy is the path to grace. It also creates a sort of two-edged cultural imperialism. Natives can either have their history shaped by cruel imperialists or benevolent ones, but either way, they are going to be supporting actors in our journey to self-admiration. (n.pag)

I will take up and depart from several of Brooks' points here: the concept of the "White Messiah": the idea that the film is not "multiculturally aware": and the "two-edged cultural imperialism" in the film. I agree with Brooks that *Avatar* "rests on the assumption that nonwhites need the White Messiah to lead their crusades." But I will point out how the "White Messiah" of the "White Messiah Fable" and the "fable" itself change slightly from film to film as the "crusades" white heroes lead produce very different results and, in turn, very different cross-cultural, egalitarian models. So part of what I will do is track and account for these changes from *Dances with Wolves* to *Avatar*. The "White Messiah" fails to save indigenous populations in the New Western. At the conclusion of *Dances with Wolves*, for example, Lt. Dunbar leaves the Sioux tribe and the colonialist project continues its expansion across the American frontier in his absence. Forging a lasting egalitarian, cross-cultural relationship, what the film attempts to do through cross-cultural dialogues, is always out of reach in the New Western. In *Avatar*'s version of the New Western, the construction of a lasting egalitarian model of social organization is more believable. Or, put another way, the hero and plot of *Avatar* are slightly different than those found in the New Western. Again, however, the racist action that surrounds potentially dialectical cross-cultural dialogues in the film always prevents binary oppositions like "us" and "them," "human" and "alien," from moving toward collective forms of equality. And the film's lack of "multicultura[l] aware[ness]" is indivisibly linked to this failure. Cameron wants to suggest that a type of multicultural fusion between human culture and alien culture, the white (American) imperialist subject and the Other, has taken place. This fusion, however, never quite comes to fruition.

The film does not contain "a sort of two-edged cultural imperialism." Rather, *Avatar* uses Colonel Quaritch (the colonialist), Parker Selfridge (the colonialist) and Jake Sully (the imperialist) as individualized representations of larger colonial and imperial projects. The corporation is an unsuccessful "cruel" colonial power, not an imperial one. The corporation

attempts but fails to establish a permanent body of governance. Its attempts at colonial forms of assimilation, like the residential schools it temporarily establishes, also fail. My point is that the corporation does not successfully control the economic, social and cultural fabric of the Na'vi society or establish a delocalized body of governance that allows for the appearance of Na'vi autonomy. But Jake does. Indeed, the choice for “Natives” is not between “cruel” and “benevolent” imperialists. As *Avatar* concludes, Cameron jettisons the outdated, “cruel” colonial corporation in favour of Jake’s “benevolent” imperial leadership. Jake, as the individualized representation of American imperialism in *Avatar*, despite the absence of America as a nation in the film, uses concepts of “freedom” to legitimate his pursuit of happiness, undermine the social and cultural values of the clan, and emerge at the conclusion of the film as the re-centered white imperialist subject. He explicitly leads when his happiness, his project, is at stake. And he allows for the appearance of Omatiyaya leadership—that is, he delocalizes himself—to maintain the equally important appearances of the Omatiyaya’s autonomy as the film concludes.

But for Mikhail Lyubansky, *Avatar* promotes an egalitarian, multicultural paradise par excellence. In Part 1 of his critique, Lyubansky explains that he does not see Jake as “another manifestation of white privilege” (Lyubansky 1). Rather, he sees Jake as “OUR avatar” that “allows us (and by ‘us’ I mean ‘humans’) to experience what he experiences and, in that process, to appreciate the Na'vi the way he does” (1). Lyubansky then argues that “[i]n his Avatar form, Jake IS Na'vi, not just culturally (though by the end of the film he is clearly that too) but biologically at the DNA level,” and, if one is to see Jake as anything in this film it is as “Biracial” (1). He also sees Jake as the “embodi[ment] of multiculturalism” in the film because he “approach[es]” the Na'vi “hermeneutically” (1). That is to say, for Lyubansky, Jake attempts to “understand [the Na'vi's] various cultural practices and traditions from” their “own perspective, rather than from the perspective of an outsider” (1). He does not see Jake’s “spying for the Colonel and working with the scientists to learn about the Na'vi” as problematic because “Jake clearly establishes his disdain for both” during the film (1). For Lyubansky, “[a]t the start of the film, Jake was obviously human, but he felt betrayed by humanity, which withheld from him the technology to restore his legs” (1). Although, while he sees this as a rational explanation for Jake’s willingness “to embrace something different,” Lyubansky does explain, in Part 2, that there is “an uncomfortable messiah theme in *Avatar* that really works against the film's intended progressive, open-minded message” (1). I have already addressed the “messiah theme” in

Brooks' critique, and I will make this clearer in my critiques of *Dances with Wolves* and *Avatar*. Yet I want to take Lyubansky's claim for Jake as "the embodiment of multiculturalism" seriously. At its most basic level, multiculturalism involves approaching different cultures, and its members, as equals. Lyubansky asserts that Jake "approaches" the Na'vi "hermeneutically"—through the interpretation and explanations of cultures in this case—in order to achieve equality. Put another way, Jake's cross-cultural dialogues with the Na'vi and his actions toward the Na'vi are crucial to establishing or disestablishing how multicultural his approach actually is. Jake's central motivation, to find happiness is, in other words, less important than what he says and what he does as a consequence of this motivation. And moments of multiculturalism act as types of safe harbours that grant audiences permission to forget Jake's racist actions on behalf of the corporation—and the violence these actions lead to.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explain that the difference between colonial racism and imperial racism is one of racism that rests upon "biology" and racism that rests upon "culture," respectively (Hardt and Negri 191). While colonial forms of racism claim that there are "essential biological differences between races," imperial forms of racism deny this claim to suggest that differences arise from "belonging to different historically determined cultures" (191-192). But for Hardt and Negri the imperial iteration aligns all too easily with the rhetoric of "anti-racist theorists" who claim that "if differences are socially and culturally determined, then all humans are in principle equal, of one ontological order, one nature" (191). Social and cultural differences, and even history, then, can be utilized paradoxically. Difference, especially as it is funnelled through history, can include or exclude people via a double-sided argument that simultaneously appears racist and anti-racist. In *Avatar*, the racist action surrounding anti-racist dialogue explodes multiculturalism. Jake's happiness at the end of *Avatar* is supposed to represent a synthesis in which the individual and collective are happy and equal. The hero wins and the Indians (the Na'vi) win. Nonetheless, as I will point out in the sections that follow, when the individual, the hero, achieves happiness in the New Western, it is always at the expense of collective happiness and equality. Jake is, in other words, the failed apotheosis of a multicultural, egalitarian fantasy.

Benjamin and Foucault: The Affective Haunting of History and the Paradoxes of Freedom

The second thesis in Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History," points to a particular threshold upon which individual and collective conceptions of history hinge at any given moment. Far from making a simplified distinction between an individual's tangible *present*—one that can somehow be more readily identified with and interrogated—and an intangible *past*—one that can only ever be misidentified through answers presented in extant cultural artifacts—Benjamin, instead, makes a claim for the irremediable connection between the past, the present, and how individual and collective histories are interpreted affectively. He explains:

The kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. (Benjamin 254)

In a latter part of the same thesis, Benjamin refers to the way in which this "redemption" of the "past" takes place through a type of cyclical "*weak* Messianic power" (254). He claims:

Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of that. (254)

One way to understand projects deeply invested in the redemptions of individual and collective histories, then, is to also view them as projects that interpret or reinterpret the past in the present in order to resolve past failures. Resolving personal and collective failures produces the forms of happiness that, as Benjamin suggests, "could arouse envy in us." The individual and collective are detectives of the past. Both are agents through which the past is resurrected to improve upon it in the present, to release failure from its bondage, to salvage something from it in order to resurrect and remember it in a more positive light—to reserve it for happiness as it were. But what is resurrected or redeemed about the past in the present? What constitutes individual and

collective happiness in these projects of resurrection and redemption? Often what counts as happiness for the individual is at odds with the happiness of the collective. And the happiness of one depends upon the failure of the other. History is, therefore, and not surprisingly, twofold. It is always a site of contestation and never perspectiveless. It will always have its winners and losers. Its resurrection, and any redemption that might follow, always pays homage to this. How, then, does Jake's personal redemption, his pursuit and attainment of happiness through the Na'vi society, modify and set limits for his conceptions of a word like "freedom"?

Put simply, history haunts Jake, his idea of freedom, and the film as a whole. It is going to end up that freedom, as Foucault attaches it to American "liberalism, the liberal art of government" at the "start of the nineteenth century" and into the late twentieth century (in the era of neo-liberalism), is implicitly connected to "the protection of the collective interest against the individual interest" (and vice versa) (Foucault 65). He claims that freedom is not "a universal which is gradually realized over time" (63). Rather, freedom for Foucault, in the most general sense, is "an actual relation between governors and governed, a relation in which the measure of the 'too little' existing freedom is given by the 'even more' freedom demanded" (63). So freedom is a paradox for Foucault. He explains that often "the mechanisms for producing freedom, precisely those that are called upon to produce this freedom, actually produce destructive effects which prevail over the very freedom they are supposed to produce" (68-69). Freedom, Foucault claims, cannot be detached from methods of "control" that "become [freedom's] mainspring" (67). I will take up Foucault's conception of freedom in terms of the individual and the collective, in the "universal" sense, in order to make a connection to American imperialism that Foucault is not so interested in here. In the cross-cultural, egalitarian models of social organization films like *Dances with Wolves* and *Avatar* attempt to produce, the more important project is a democratic type of collective freedom. So, often collective freedom needs to be protected from individual liberties, from methods of "control," to remain democratic, to remain freedom. The cost of imposing liberty cannot be the removal of collective freedom. But the cost of freedom can, and sometimes must be, the removal of liberty—at least in its individualized and dominating forms. My point is that *Avatar*'s primary concern with advocating America's imperial projects, through the ways in which Jake pursues his individual happiness, always positions the removal of collective freedom, cross-cultural freedom, as the cost of maintaining individual liberty. That is to say, collective freedom is the cost of the liberties

America takes as its “police[s]” (Hardt and Negri 20) the world. The delocalization of imperial rule, in this case a type of doubled delocalization within film, becomes one of America’s methods of “control,” its “mainspring” within film (Foucault 67).

Establishing Shifts in Genre, Plot and Hero: The Western and the New Western

Cross-cultural relationships in the New Western are attempting to move toward democratic models of social transformation—specifically egalitarian models. However, as genres shift from the Western to the New Western, all that really occurs is a shift from a primary concern with the happiness of white collectivities to a primary concern with the happiness of the individual white hero. In the 20th and 21st century iterations of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s “culture industry” (Horkheimer and Adorno 121), then, inclusionary and exclusionary aspects of cross-cultural relationships remain too often aesthetically juxtaposed in binary opposition rather than dialectically disposed en route from synthesis to synthesis. Happiness in the culture industry is a cyclical form of aesthetic oppression presented through montage. It is oppressive because it parades individual and collective forms of redemption as realizable when, in fact, these films point out that redemption is always already out of reach for some and always already certain for others. The culture industry, especially in the medium of film, presents the failures of collective happiness clothed epidermically as individual happiness. Individual happiness hides the true skin and bone of collective failure lurking underneath—purposefully addressed and left unresolved. The Western genre, and the cross-cultural interactions its films depict, is one of the most explicit places in which this begins to play out within film.

In the classic Western plot, exemplified by films such as John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), the hero is always exceptional. He kills Indians in an exceptional way. But he is always excluded from individual and collective forms of happiness as these films conclude. Indians lose, but the hero loses too. Audiences are granted permission to forgive the hero for killing Indians because he is clearly suffering, because of his exclusion, as he departs back onto the open-range when the story ends. But the story does not really end here. Films like Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* (1990) depart from the Western as they create a new type of plot and a new hero (in the New Western) I call the cross-cultural double-agent—who is always suffering physically and emotionally when the film begins. In other words, the New Western is a type of wish fulfillment

for the hero of the Western and the audiences who have already forgiven him for his violence toward Indians.

In the New Western, audiences encounter the hero after the Western has already concluded as it were. Through the simultaneous production of Occidentalism and recapitulation of Orientalism (both of which Edward Said argues against in his paradigm-shifting text *Orientalism*), *Dances with Wolves* critiques American colonialism and explores Sioux culture, specifically through dialogues between the hero, Lt. Dunbar, and the Sioux, in order to humanize “the savage” that the plots of Westerns have traditionally depended upon and alleviate the hero’s suffering within an indigenous culture. Yet the saviour complex that Lt. Dunbar adopts, manifest most clearly in his narration in regards to the Sioux, ultimately creates a paternalistic colonial relationship between himself and the Sioux—the Sioux look like unorganized children who cannot save themselves. He loves the Sioux and hates the colonialist forces of America that will come to assimilate and/or exterminate their community. But in the end the hero still departs back out onto the open-range—rendered happier by his exploration of difference, but saddened by the continuance of a colonial project he cannot stop. So, collective happiness once again fails to be anything but ephemeral for the white hero. Even in a colonial fantasy in which the white hero sympathizes with Indians by “going Native,” individual and collective happiness remains outside his grasp. Audiences sympathize with the hero because he fails to find happiness and the Indians he has befriended are still assimilated/exterminated. Colonialism, in other words, continues to have a claim on the hero’s happiness. Again, Indians lose, but the hero loses too. Yet the hero no longer has blood on his hands.

James Cameron’s *Avatar* recapitulates a similar plot and hero. The difference is that Cameron asks audiences to believe that the film’s protagonist, Jake Sully, and the indigenous population, the Na’vi, find individual and collective happiness that lasts. Like Lt. Dunbar, Jake explores the Na’vi culture, specifically the Omaticaya clan, through cross-cultural dialogues. But the saviour complex that Jake adopts, most manifest in his conceptions of “freedom” in his narration, always posits sympathy alongside new and old forms of cultural inferiority. American culture—what the film is referring to but never names—is already a site for exclusion. And the plot of this film forces an indigenous culture, the Na’vi, to become a site where new and old forms of exclusion take place. The indigenous are Orientalized and the Americans are

Occidentalized. Nevertheless, while the Occidentalization of the American hero meets its limits at his suffering, the Orientalization of the indigenous is only limited to the extent that the American hero's path to happiness demands its limitation. My point is that Cameron wants to suggest that Jake is a physically and emotionally "weak" (Benjamin 254). What he does not want to suggest, however, is that an individual or collective American past has any claim on his present redemption. Jake's redemption is somehow teleologically unhinged from the past. In other words, Cameron all too easily claims that Jake's self-realization, his realization of happiness, is achieved by throwing off his affiliations with the colonial corporation and siding with the Na'vi. Because Jake *is*, rather than *becomes*, the exceptional force of liberation and emancipation, he is an individualized representation of an American imperialism that tries to bury its connections to its colonialist past in the absence of America. In fact, as I will make clearer in my discussion of the film, *Avatar* resurrects the Western in a way that *Dances with Wolves* does not. Jake ultimately does have blood on his hands. He bears some responsibility for the deaths of Omaticaya clan members—although he is never held accountable. One reason for this is the simple shift of loyalties that Jake seems to experience. It will end up, however, that the shift Jake experiences is a more complex shift of subjectivity, from colonial ideology to imperial ideology.

Dances with Wolves: Why Lt. Dunbar Must Leave the Sioux Tribe

One of the most interesting things in *Dances with Wolves* is how Lt. Dunbar detaches himself from the colonial project through space. He never appears to be more than a casualty of America's colonial governance and civil war. Lt. Dunbar is, in other words, demonstrative of the tendency for militarized interventions/conflicts to produce suffering for individuals on both sides. Audiences believe this because Dunbar is quickly placed in the type of nowhere space I alluded to earlier. Only, at his isolated post, Fort Sedgwick, Colorado, this nowhere space is a type of utopia for one. Lt. Dunbar hopes to remove himself from the white collectivities that have produced his suffering. Yet his isolation does not last for long. He soon discovers an injured white Sioux woman, Stands With A Fist, on the open prairie and subsequently begins to befriend the nearby Sioux community she calls home. But forging cross-cultural friendships through cross-cultural dialogues, at least before Dunbar has learned to speak a limited amount of Sioux and the Sioux have learned to speak a limited amount of English, is a painstaking process.

The first set of fruitful dialogues between Dunbar and the Sioux, the first in which both sides understand part of what the other side is saying, take place at the fort. The first word to be translated on both sides is “Tatanka,” “buffalo.” And this emerges as a topic of interest for Dunbar and the Sioux at several of the meetings at Fort Sedgwick. The Sioux appear to be unable to find any buffalo. So when Dunbar discovers a herd of buffalo one evening, and alerts the Sioux, he experiences a type of upward-social-mobility within the tribe. He explains that “overnight” he went “from a person of suspicion to one of genuine standing.” Yet moving into a position of “genuine standing” does not mean that Dunbar steps outside of the colonial ideology that he has allegedly removed himself from at the fort. Despite his remarkable movements beyond the Western through cross-cultural dialogues that engender egalitarian sensibilities (a mutual interest in finding buffalo for example), Dunbar’s narrations ultimately hinder this movement.

After Lt. Dunbar and the Sioux see dead buffalo scattered across the plains, “killed,” as he explains, “only for their tongues and the price of their hides,” Dunbar suggests that “there was no blame” placed for the needless deaths of the buffalo. Rather, as he goes on to claim, “there was only the confusion of a people not able to predict a future.” The “future” here is clearly a colonial future, and one that Lt. Dunbar feels must be hidden from the Sioux who seem, for Dunbar, too “confus[ed]” and childlike to handle the truth. And Lt. Dunbar is very clear about why he dissembles. He points out that he and the Sioux, specifically “Kicking Bird” the Sioux holy man, “talk every day.” Yet Dunbar recognizes that “Kicking Bird is frustrated with [him].” He claims that “[Kicking Bird] always wants to know how many more white people are coming” and he answers “that the white people will most likely pass through this country and nothing more.” However, Dunbar notes: “I am speaking in half truths. One day there will be too many. But I cannot bring myself to tell [Kicking Bird] that.” In fact, Dunbar is grateful for what appears to be Stands With A Fist’s complicity in this concealment. “I am sure that Stands With A Fist knows that I am holding back,” Dunbar concedes, and “to her credit she says nothing.” The colonial project is, in other words, a reality the Sioux need to be sheltered from.

To the film’s credit, it later becomes clear that the Sioux chief, Ten Bears, is already aware that the number of white men coming will be, as Dunbar—who has been renamed Dances With Wolves by this point—suggests to Kicking Bird earlier, “like the stars.” So Dunbar, or

Dances With Wolves, has clearly underestimated both the Sioux's understanding of the colonial project's investment in expansion and the community's ability to confront this reality. But in an otherwise remarkably egalitarian set of cross-cultural dialogues and instances of mutual respect throughout the film, too numerous to point out in a paper of this length, colonial ideology haunts the hero's narration. It is not until late in the film, when Dunbar re-confronts the Union Army, of which he is a former member, and refuses to reveal the location of the Sioux's winter encampment, that he truly gives up his colonial prejudices and stereotypes. That is not to say, however, that the film does the same. After *Dances With Wolves* and *Stands With A Fist* leave the Sioux's winter encampment, because *Dances With Wolves* is certain the Union Army will come looking for him and find the Sioux at the same time, the film contains an on-screen quotation that gives the colonial project the last word in the film. This last word ultimately relegates the Sioux to the pages of Western history in such a way that Sioux communities and individuals are denied any claim for contemporary existence. The Sioux tribe, in other words, disappears within the film in order to validate its disappearance within Western history. The film's conclusion becomes Western history's justification.

Thus, the quote given at the film's conclusion explains that "[t]hirteen years later," 1876, "[t]he great horse culture of the plains was gone and the American frontier was soon to pass into history." Put another way, both the "American frontier" and the Sioux disappear at the conclusion of the film. Lt. Dunbar must leave the Sioux community so it, and a dream for a cross-cultural type of collective utopia that the film cannot quite realize, can be reinserted into the colonial archive. Nonetheless, while the final on-screen quotation begins to unravel the film's investment in forging cross-cultural relationships rooted in equality, the fact that the Western's Indians are given a voice, a culture, a temporary removal from the label of "savages," a human existence in the New Western, is something worth holding onto and improving upon. And this is what *Avatar* tries to do. However, even as it attempts to exorcise the colonial project that *Dances with Wolves* still pays homage to, imperialism creeps in to fill this gap in order to show that, while the Indians are human, they are still ultimately aliens that need to be organized and controlled so the hero can find happiness within an indigenous collective. The images of indigenous populations and America need to be controlled so America's imperial projects can continue to reorganize and legitimate themselves under paradoxical yet useful terms like *freedom* and *liberty*.

***Avatar*: Cross-cultural Egalitarianism Fails as the Cost of an Advocacy for Imperialism**

Just as Lt. Dunbar is quickly isolated—spatially—from America’s colonial forces, Jake is also quickly isolated from the corporation (as a colonial force) when he becomes immersed in the Omaticaya community. The difference is, however, that Jake is never isolated from the corporation for long. At the beginning of the film he is constantly moving back and forth between the Omaticaya community and the corporation’s settlement. Hence, a very different proximity between the hero and the colonialist forces is created in *Avatar*. Jake is never isolated at a fort. He is very clearly part of a collectivity subsumed under colonial ideology. Thus, seeing Jake as a type of double-agent, working for the corporation at times and working for the Omaticaya at other times, allows one to also see Jake’s shifting subjectivity throughout the film in a different light. Jake does not begin as imperialism’s agent, as Brooks suggests, and he does not, as Lyubansky suggests, simply experience a shift of loyalties. Instead, Jake’s shifting subjectivity is really a shift from colonial ideology to imperial ideology. That is to say, he experiences a shift from Quaritch and Selfridge’s biologically-based conceptions of the Na’vi as inferior aliens, to a conception of the Omaticaya, specifically its leaders, as socially and culturally inferior. Put another way, Jake initially views the Omaticaya through a lens constructed by colonial forms or racism. But eventually he views the Omaticaya through an imperial lens, through imperial racism of his own construction. If Jake is the one exceptional individual on Pandora, made most clear through his status as a double-agent, he also constructs his own exceptional form of racism and, eventually, governance.

In the opening scenes, it becomes clear that Jake considers the role he will play on Pandora to be non-military. He makes a distinction between “army dogs, marines fighting for freedom” on Earth and the “hired guns...taking the money, working for the company” on Pandora. When he becomes a member of the scientists’ “security escort” in his new avatar body, however, it becomes clear that if Jake retains his employment, he too will become a “hired gu[n]...taking the money, working for the company.” But this remains in the periphery of his thoughts as his new avatar body promises renewed mobility. The film utilizes Jake’s disability, in a particularly reprehensible fashion, to set up several things. Jake is a marginalized member of the military when he is on Earth. On Pandora, Jake is a marginalized member of the scientific community. Yet his avatar body allows him to become a productive member of the military

community once more. Jake is no longer fighting for any type of collective freedom, the role he assigns to the military on Earth, he is fighting for an individual freedom from disability. His paralysis is always seen as a type of prison, and his avatar body is always seen as a vehicle that offers escape from this prison.

Once Jake discovers that his new job will be a military job, despite the ways in which he wants to distance himself from the “hired guns,” he re-embraces (military) arms in order to regain the use of his legs. When Colonel Quaritch asks Jake to “learn these savages from the inside [...] to gain their trust,” Jake immediately agrees. Quaritch then explains to Jake that he needs to know “how to force [the Omaticaya’s] cooperation or hammer them hard if they won’t.” Before Quaritch has even offered to “get” Jake his “legs back,” upon successfully carrying out this mission, Jake responds “hell yeah” to the proposition. So, in a way, Jake agrees to Quaritch’s offer more to become a soldier again than to escape his disability. Early in the film Jake is never simply trying to escape disability in and of itself. He is also trying to become a soldier once more. Indeed, every form of escape his avatar body will offer him throughout the film is always compromised by this duality. Jake’s saviour complex advocates American imperialism, specifically the use of militarized violence, all too comfortably because the use of militarized violence is consistently connected to individual and collective emancipations and ultimately to the pursuit of happiness—although always at the expense of collective equality.

Ironically, but fitting his role as double-agent, Jake goes into the jungle on Pandora to conduct two opposing missions. On the one hand he is supposed to find what Selfridge calls a “diplomatic solution.” That is to say, Jake is charged with convincing the Omaticaya to move their settlement off of one of the richest deposits of “unobtainium”—a type of valuable mineral that stands in for fetishized energy sources like oil and makes suggestive implications about America’s most recent pursuits of oil in the Middle East—on Pandora. On the other hand, however, Selfridge and Quaritch ask Jake to gather intelligence in order to provide the corporation’s militia with a tactical advantage in the event that Omaticaya refuse to move. It is not so surprising, then, that Jake’s mission for diplomacy and his mission to gather intelligence come into conflict later in the film—specifically when Jake begins to find happiness within the Omaticaya community. Diplomacy is never simply diplomacy and the gathering of intelligence is never simply the gathering of intelligence. Both projects, because of their attachments to the

corporation, are fundamentally rooted in colonial ideology that determines Jake's racist actions early in the film. But the imperial project, through imperial forms of racism, is also clearly entering into Jake's actions. So, early in the film, Cameron is setting up the ways in which Jake will later undermine the social and cultural values of the Omaticaya clan.

After the scene in which the Na'vi Goddess, Eywa, determines Jake's exceptionalism, the scene in which what Neytiri (Jake's eventual love interest) calls the "seeds of the sacred tree" land on Jake as his arms are in a crucifical position, Neytiri brings Jake to the Omaticaya village because, as she explains to her father and the rest of the Omaticaya clan, "there has been a sign from Eywa." Once Jake enters the village, Eytukan, Neytiri's father and the clan leader, explains that Jake's "alien smell fills [his] nose." The term "alien" is immediately used again as Mo'at, Neytiri's mother and the Omaticaya's spiritual leader, explains that she "will look at this alien." The usages of the term "alien" here are meant to produce self-reflexive moments for Jake and audiences. Cameron intends to cause Jake and audiences to problematize the meaning of the term. If Jake is human, but he is an alien in the eyes of the aliens themselves (the Omaticaya), then what is the usefulness of making binary distinctions like aliens (non-human beings) and humans? In short, Cameron is attempting to move toward a type of dialectical synthesis in which these designations are untenable and both humans and aliens are essentially equal, human. But this synthesis never quite happens. Because Neytiri points out that Mo'at "interprets the will of Eywa," her "interpret[ation]" determines whether or not Eywa is telling the Omaticaya that Jake is a special sort of "alien." When Mo'at allows Jake to remain so Neytiri can teach him the Na'vi "way," it is as if Mo'at, and therefore Eywa, have decided that Jake is special, although Mo'at is uncertain why Jake has been brought to the community.

Immediately after he returns to his human form, after the Omaticaya have accepted his excuse that he "came to learn," Jake begins to provide Quaritch and Selfridge with the intelligence the corporation needs to destroy "Hometree"—a sacred tree under which the Omaticaya live—and gain access to the large deposit of "unobtainium." So it seems that Mo'at's confidence in Jake, and by extension Eywa and the clan's confidences in Jake, is misguided. Indeed, it ends up looking as if Cameron has portrayed Mo'at, Eywa, and the Omaticaya community as a whole as, if not unintelligent, then at least naively trusting as Jake conducts his superior subterfuge. Because the clan has chosen Mo'at as their spiritual leader, the clan

members' abilities to choose a strong and able leader are brought into question. Jake and (human) audiences know that Jake's mission may very well end in the Omaticaya's extermination. The type of human/alien synthesis Cameron attempts to produce, therefore, is never established. Rather, colonial racism, based upon the Omaticaya's psychological inferiority, and imperial racism, based upon the Omaticaya's inability to choose a capable leader through its established cultural and social practices, disavow such a movement and, in fact, make cross-cultural equality completely impossible. As Jake, Quaritch and Selfridge laugh about Jake's deception, Jake claims: "Hey I'm practically family." And while Jake is clearly practicing colonial forms of racism through his attachment to the corporation, Cameron is already setting up the ways in which Jake will create a type of imperial governance amongst the Na'vi. He is already asking audiences to believe in Jake's movement beyond colonial ideology. Cameron simply looks like he fails to understand where Jake is moving and how imperialism complicates cross-cultural forms of collective freedom.

The more access Jake gains to the clan's inner-most workings, the more his exceptionalism contrapuntally establishes the primitivism and ineptitude of the Omaticaya leaders and, by extension, the Omaticaya clan and the Na'vi people. In a particularly telling scene, Tsu'tey, the Omaticaya warrior who will become the next clan leader, misidentifies Jake's inability to learn the Omaticaya ways as a failure to learn itself. The accuracy of Tsu'tey's claim that "this alien will learn nothing...a rock sees more" acts as a type of litmus test to measure his authority and right to rule. In the scene that follows, after Jake returns from what appears to be his second day in the Omaticaya village, and after he unlinks from his avatar, it quickly becomes clear that, while his ability to learn the Omaticaya way is mediocre at best, what he is learning and seeing provides the corporation with the intelligence it needs to do its worst—conduct a military offensive. Again, the dialogue here attempts to remove the term alien from its exoticized meanings, but removal falls short as the irony of Tsu'tey's statement undermines his intelligence, ability to lead and, ultimately, his suitability as a mate for Neytiri (who is promised to him). As in the first dialogue Jake shares with the Omaticaya clan, and his actions that immediately follow cross-cultural dialogues, biologically (colonial) and socially/culturally (imperial) based forms of racism in this scene and the scene that follows continue to show audiences why Jake is necessarily the Omaticaya's superior.

When Jake mates with Neytiri, despite the fact that the lead scientist Grace has already told Jake that she and Tsu'tey are to become a mated pair, Tsu'tey's inferiority to Jake is completely established. The fact that Jake usurped the authority of the current and future clan leaders is given very little attention in the film. Rather, the romance between Jake and Neytiri is used as an excuse to escape the complexities, contradictions and conflicts that might arise here, and in the remainder of the film, behind. Jake's only attempt to analyze the contradictions that his emerging love for Neytiri, the Omaticaya, and his devotion to the corporation create occurs as he increasingly detests his human disability and the obstacles it creates for his happiness. It is as if Jake's increasing inability to love his human form, and the ways in which getting his legs back binds him to the corporation, forces him to confront his love for Neytiri, the Omaticaya, and what the ultimate costs of his subterfuge might be. Jake's brief attempts to confront these emerging realities are, however, treated far too simply as shifts in subjectivity that recourse to a narcissistic concern with Jake's own personal happiness rather than how he has failed those he has come to love.

In a very poignant scene, Jake unlinks from his avatar body and is clearly depressed about returning to the disabilities of his human body. Interestingly, Cameron uses another spatial movement, a type of delocalization, to mimic Jake's disillusionment with his human body and the corporation in this scene. Jake explains: "Everything is backwards now... like out there is the true world, and in here is the dream." Accompanied by sombre music, Jake wheels his disabled body down the hallway of the mobile camp situated in what Norm (one of the scientists) calls the mythical "floating mountains of Pandora." In alienated self-reflection, Jake explains: "It's hard to believe its only been three months. I barely remember my old life. I don't know who I am anymore." Jake's reflection is intended to do several things. On the one hand it is supposed to show that Jake is increasingly becoming disillusioned with his "old life" of disability and, more importantly, how it ties him to the corporation. On the other hand it is meant to show that Jake embraces his new life as a result of his disillusionment. Again, disability in this film is seen as a prison that Jake needs to escape. Thus, when Quaritch tells Jake he "got corporate approval" for Jake to get his legs back, Jake explains that his final induction as a member of the Omaticaya clan is something he needs to "finish." Jake becomes a "man," and a member in the eyes of the Omaticaya clan. By refusing Quaritch's offer to "ship out" and get his legs back, audiences are supposed to see that Jake's loyalties have shifted.

Instead of working for the corporation as a “hired gun,” Jake now embraces his old military role on earth: “fighting for freedom.” Fighting for freedom is always seen as a moral imperative in *Avatar*. In fact, Jake and audiences, specifically American audiences who are supposed to closely identify with him, believe that he has left the negative aspects of his disability/soldier duality behind to embrace its more positive counterparts: mobility and fighting for freedom. Both are led to believe that by breaking from his reliance on the corporation (and its colonial ideology) to get his legs back, Jake is able to embrace the ability to fight for freedom that the mobility of his avatar body allows for. But, as I suggested earlier, freedom is never collective freedom when the hero of the New Western achieves individual happiness. When the hero achieves happiness it is always at the expense of cross-cultural, egalitarian forms of social transformation. Freedom, in other words, is not really free. It is, rather, a banner under which imperialism legitimates its methods of control and neutralizes forms of resistance.

If, then, Jake can become “Toruk Macto” the “rider of Last Shadow,” the largest of the “ikran” that the Na’vi fly, his betrayal will be forgiven. Individual betrayal will be reconstituted as collective freedom. In an earlier scene, in reference to the name “Last Shadow,” Jake points out to Neytiri: “Yeah right, it’s the last one you ever see.” When Jake rides Toruk and becomes Toruk Macto he ironically becomes the “Last Shadow” the Omaticaya “ever see.” He is forgiven for betraying the clan because, quite simply, he becomes the fulcrum of freedom upon which the Omaticaya’s collective freedom rests. Again, Jake is not held accountable for what he has done on behalf of the corporation. The ways in which he unites the clans with Neytiri, and fights alongside the Omaticaya people, attempts to portray collective equality and liberation. But liberty in *Avatar* is, crucially, only liberating for Jake and some fellow humans who are allowed to remain on Pandora. Indeed, the type of liberty that the film advocates serves as a type of mimetic support system for the imperialist institutions of one nation outside the film. At the film’s conclusion, Jake points out that “the aliens went back to their dying world while only a few were chosen to stay.” But, again, removal of the term “alien” from binary opposition does not quite come to fruition. Just as the Na’vi needed to be saved by Jake, any protest they might have needs to be silenced. Thus, Jake has the last word in the film.

Because I see Jake as a synecdoche for imperial America in *Avatar*, Cameron’s title does not so much refer to the bodies that Jake and the scientists utilize in the film. Rather, Jake is the

Avatar, the one who descends, the deity that the Na'vi need to organize the clans and save them because they cannot organize to save themselves. He is a carrier of liberty and democracy who ultimately fails to treat the Na'vi as equals. For an audience who might most readily identify and align with Jake, most specifically a self-indulgent American audience at its worst, Jake's actions are to be celebrated. The white hero saves an indigenous population that is too primitive, helpless and inferior to save itself. On the other hand, for an audience who is less willing to identify with Jake or condone his actions, perhaps members of indigenous communities throughout the world or the "intellectuals" inside or outside indigenous communities that are calling this film racist for various reasons, Jake at least acknowledges a banal version of equality between himself and the Na'vi later in the film when he appears to support Tsu'tey's leadership and employs Neytiri's help to organize the Na'vi clans. But as Cameron critiques and dispenses with the spectres of American colonialism, he unknowingly, or at least naively, encourages audiences to celebrate American imperialism and America's exceptional status despite, and because of, the absence of America as a nation in the film. The attempted exorcism of America's colonial past acts as American apologia for the past uses of militarized violence as it endorses its more recent imperialist iterations. We are supposed to be happy for, and identify with, Jake because we are to believe that he has no blood on his hands. He pacifies the Na'vi in a bloodless revolution as it were. But despite the fact that Jake says "Toruk Macto [is] no longer needed" at the end of the film, this does not mean that Jake will not become Toruk Macto again when militarized intervention becomes necessary to maintain his happiness. Jake's rule as Toruk Macto is delocalized—Toruk flies off into the sunset. And Tsu'tey appears to lead the clan at the conclusion of the film. Yet Cameron's collusion with American imperialism, intended or not, is clear. America's white imperialist subject might be delocalized. Indeed the indigenous population might appear autonomous. But keeping up such appearances is what America and its expansionist political policies have always and continue to rely upon.

Conclusion: Beyond the New Western and White Colonialist/Imperialist Subject

One might, if they choose to, suggest that the ways in which colonial ideology permeates Lt. Dunbar's narration in *Dances with Wolves* displays how Dunbar is a product of his time, a hero of a certain moment in American history. Dunbar, in other words, can be seen as a hero that cannot escape the colonial ideology of a particular era. Yet if Jake Sully, his cross-cultural

dialogues, and *Avatar* as a whole are meant to show audiences the way forward, that is to say, to point out how egalitarian, multicultural societies can be constructed democratically in our contemporary moment of globalization and uneven global development, the film's most redemptive quality is ultimately its inability to articulate what it aims to: a multicultural paradise. In fact, the redemptive multicultural quality of the film is its limited fulfillment of the science fiction or fantasy genre's most important tenet: warning audiences about the future and providing solutions. Cameron's treatment of eco-politics, his advocacy for stopping human abuses of the environment, aligns perfectly with this project. But the cross-cultural, egalitarian form of social transformation he makes a claim for in the film, one that never quite comes to fruition, is best seen as a warning that does not find a solution within the film. *Avatar*, in other words, points out how easily cross-cultural equality goes by the wayside. It points out how easily racism can appear anti-racist, how easily the monoculturalism can sustain itself through brief moments of multiculturalism, how easily an apology for colonialism can turn into an advocacy for imperialism.

If aesthetic innovations mask political content within *Avatar*, if they stop audiences from thinking about political content, they also reveal the importance of content and thinking about content. That is to say, *Avatar*'s content has the potential to become something other than what the film articulates. So as much as *Avatar* is being received as a film that creates a multicultural utopia, it will also serve as a warning, as a filmic sign post that shows how easily cross-cultural projects of democratic social transformation can betray utopian ideals to become dystopian. *Avatar* shows why creating collective cross-cultural happiness through the happiness of the white imperialist subject never works. And in its revelation of imperialism's main contradiction, *Avatar* also begins the process of its undoing.

Works Cited

- Avatar*. Dir. James Cameron. Perf. Sam Worthington, Sigourney Weaver, Stephen Lang, and Giovanni Ribisi. 20th Century Fox, 2010. DVD.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968. Print.
- Bennett, Bruce. "'Avatar' Restores the Promise of Technology and Timeless Craft." *Mad About Movies.org* (2009). n.pag. Web. 24 Jun. 2010.
- Brooks, David. "The Messiah Complex." *The New York Times*. 7 Jan. 2010. n.pag. Web. 25 Mar. 2010.
- Dances with Wolves*. Dir. Kevin Costner. Perf. Kevin Costner, Graham Greene, and Mary McDonnell. 20th Century Fox, 1990. DVD.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France 1978-1979*. Ed. Michael Senellart. Trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Picador, 2008. Print.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, MS: Harvard UP, 2000. Print.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming. New York: Herder and Herder, 1972. Print.
- Lyubansky, Mikhail. "The Racial Politics of Avatar." *Between the Lines*. 28 December 2009. Web. 25 Mar. 2010.
- . "The Racial Politics of Avatar (Part 2)." *Between the Lines*. 29 December 2009. Web. 25 Mar. 2010.
- Martin, Philip. "Avatar Hits the Mother Lode But Doesn't Dig That Deeply." *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*. 29 Jan. 2010. Web. 20 Mar. 2010.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. 25th anniversary ed. New York: Vintage, 2003. Print.
- The Searchers*. Dir. John Ford. Perf. John Wayne, Vera Miles, and Natalie Wood. Warner Home Video, 1997. DVD.

Žižek, Slavoj. *In Defense of Lost Causes*. New York: Verso, 2008. Print.