

An anti-racist critique of *Avatar*

Alison MacNamara

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Lisa Moy

## **Introduction**

The modern context of racism, and the discourses that surround it, are becoming increasingly subtle and thus more difficult to name. “Discourse, in the sense that Foucault used the term—as a way of seeing life that is produced and reproduced by various rules, systems and procedures— form[s] an entire conceptual territory on which knowledge is produced and shaped” (Lawrence, 2003). In this paper I intend to analyse the racist discourses perpetuated within James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009) and to challenge assumptions the film makes about whiteness. I begin my analysis of *Avatar*’s discourses of racism with media reviews from several different perspectives and name the racist discourse they employ as well as the points of view for which they argue. I then discuss certain elements of the plot which describe discourses of white guilt and employ a white hero as a saviour figure with a direct connection to *Avatar*’s deity. Further, I describe theoretical links to the importance of an anti-racist critique of popular media, such as *Avatar*, with discussions of recent social science literature. I reflect on how the literature challenges my current assumptions about social work practice and philosophies with regard to race, ethnicity, and culture, and identify some of the conceptual and theoretical ideas that support possible approaches to practice.

## **Media Responses**

*Avatar* received many critical reviews in the weeks following its release, some of which I will discuss here. I have attempted to select a range of opinions and sources, to better reflect the variety of popular responses. Several of the articles I researched entirely ignore the racist elements of the movie, utilizing the discourse of denial, which is “a refusal to accept the reality

of racism” (Henry, Tator, Mattias & Rees, 2009, p. 116). This refusal is important, because media images are “influential on public opinion and popular sentiment so that collective social and cultural stereotypes are reflections not of direct perceptions but of prevailing ideas in society at large” (Murji, 2006). Thus, the words of individual writers shape society’s opinions.

A review in the *New York Press* by Armond White (2009) mentions “the white man’s need to lose his identity and assuage racial, political, sexual and historical guilt.” This desire to alleviate guilt, to lose the white identity, is often discussed in anti-racist theory (Henry et al., 2009; Murji, 2006; Twine & Gallagher, 2008; Wise, 2008) however, as Wise (2008) argued, “It’s about responsibility, not guilt” and, “we need to figure out how we’re going to be accountable for our unearned advantages” (p. 4). Regardless, this is not the author’s intent in mentioning white guilt; instead, he sees “Cameron fashionably denounc[ing] the same economic and military system that makes his technological extravaganza possible” (White, 2009). Further, he argues *Avatar* is a “single-minded anti-industrial critique” which “evokes 9/11 when the military topples the Na’vi’s sacred, towering Tree of Souls” and “implies that the World Trade Center was also an altar (of U.S. capitalism)” (White, 2009). This interpretation focuses on Cameron’s use of “villainous American characters” to misrepresent facets of militarism, capitalism, and imperialism, and completely ignores the racial stereotypes portrayed.

Writing for the *Christian Post*, Russell D. Moore (2009) made similar connections to “issues of war and peace” and declared the movie “preach[y]” propaganda. “The American military was pure evil, while the Pandoran tribespeople were nature-loving, eco-harmonious, wise Braveheart smurf warriors.” Interestingly, Moore concludes, “movies of all sort ought to remind us of the power of images, and what they can lead us to think and feel.” Even though the author was referring to anti-war and anti-American propaganda, his point is equally true

regarding the perpetuation of racist ideology (Henry, et al., 2009), which is “communicated and reproduced through agencies of socialization and cultural transmission” (p. 109).

Ross Douthat (2009) of *The New York Times* also ignores the racial stereotypes, despite his opinion that “*Avatar* is Cameron’s long apologia for pantheism — a faith that equates God with Nature, and calls humanity into religious communion with the natural world.” He notes the similarities to “the metaphysic woven through Disney cartoons like *The Lion King* and *Pocahontas*” and “the truth that Kevin Costner discovered when he went dancing with wolves” (Douthat, 2009). References to *Dances with Wolves* and similar movies were not uncommon in the media reviews of *Avatar*; however, this writer does not trace the connection beyond faith to the colonial relationship, as does Newitz (2009) and Phillips (2009), discussed later.

Adam Cohen (2009) of the *New York Times*, wrote an opinion piece which was more positive for critical race studies, calling the film's anti-imperialist message “a 22nd-century version of the American colonists vs. the British, India vs. the Raj, or Latin America vs. United Fruit.” He argues against separating the 3-D experience and the plot as if they were unrelated because, to him, “*Avatar* is fundamentally about the moral necessity of seeing other beings fully” (Cohen, 2009). This draws on what he calls “a well-known principle of totalitarianism and genocide — that it is easiest to oppress those we cannot see” (Cohen, 2009). Indeed, Freire (1983) discusses this as an obstacle to freedom because “oppressive reality... submerge[s] human beings’ consciousness” which can only be freed through “praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 33). Cohen (2009) suggests the 3-D experience might cause the audience to “undergo the same kind of moral education as the characters that lived with the Na’vi” and concludes that *Avatar* “suggests that technology cannot only make entertainment more phantasmagorical but also more humane” (Cohen, 2009). This is perhaps true; however, it

relies on the view that racism is an individual problem, to be resolved through individual education, rather than a systemic problem demanding institutional change (Twine & Gallagher, 2008; Murji, 2006) which is a typical discourse of liberal values (Henry et al., 2009).

Annalee Newitz, (2009) writing for *io9*, an internet media site, sees *Avatar* as a “fantasy about race” where “some white guy” becomes the “most awesome” member of a non-white culture. Newitz describes “the essence of the white guilt fantasy” contained within *Avatar* and similar movies as more than wanting “to be absolved of the crimes whites have committed against people of color,” and more than wanting “to join the side of moral justice in battle. It's a wish to lead people of color from the inside rather than from the (oppressive, white) outside” (Newitz, 2009). She argues the movie is about “ceasing to be white” without giving up the privilege of being white. Her conclusion argues that science fiction movies such as *Avatar* have the potential to imagine “perspectives radically unlike what we've seen before” (Newitz, 2009).

Unfortunately, as Phillips (2009) argues, *Avatar* does not deliver on this potential. She angrily asks, “why is it cinema's indigenous peoples, no matter how wise, spiritually enlightened and physically fit they are, can somehow never figure out how to defeat whitey without whitey?” Her article refutes Cohen's (2009) suggestion that *Avatar* contributes to audience members' anti-racist education. Like Newitz (2009), this author would like to see movies which imagine competent non-white heroes succeeding on behalf of their peoples and questions why a white ‘every-man’ is even required as the hero. Newitz (2009) concludes the “white guilt story” actually makes a “story about people of color into a story about being white.”

## Anti-Racist Critique

Much of the following critique was developed as a 4 minute 'response' to *Avatar's* trailer for a larger event called "Race and Entertainment" marking the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. This event was held on the UFV campus in Abbotsford on March 9, 2010. My participation in the event was the result of a community development project for SOWK 380 with Janit Doyle; my group worked to build capacity for "Discussions on Racism," an existing ad hoc committee of UFV faculty. We gathered art from local public schools to display, and we promoted the event. I also volunteered to respond to the trailer for *Avatar*, and made the following argument that the movie perpetuates modern discourses of racism. Many of the theoretical connections developed here were not discussed in that response.

The movie *Avatar* perpetuates a privileged white, liberal understanding of the modern context of racism. It is "kinder and gentler" than historical expressions of racism (Newitz, 2009; jxhensley, 2010), whether through popular media or public policy, but it is more patronizing. On the surface, the movie depicts the triumph of the environment, the Natives and a few human scientists over the racist, imperialistic capitalists. This is one of the more common interpretations of *Avatar* and is shared by Evo Morales, the celebrated first Indigenous president of Bolivia, who praised the film's "profound show of resistance to capitalism and the struggle for the defense of nature" (Agencia Boliviana de Informacion, 2010).

Indeed, *Avatar's* racism is not obvious because of the stark contrast between the capitalist, imperialist humans mining Pandora's ore and the scientist humans seeking peace with the Na'vi. The first group, who is obviously racist, sets up a contrast with the second group,

which seems in comparison as though they must *not* be racist (jxhensley, 2010). This trend has played out before in North American race politics: from genocide to removal onto reserves to residential schooling; from slavery to segregation to discrimination; changing the form of supremacy without ending it. *Avatar* does not question whether to dominate the Na'vi, it only questions how: via brute force, or diplomacy (jxhensley, 2010).

While Newitz (2009) suggests *Avatar*'s racism is a matter for debate, she also asserts the movie is "emphatically a fantasy about race" and is, ultimately, about white guilt. Making links to the movies *District 9* and *Dune*, she notes that "humans are the cause of alien oppression and distress. Then, a white man who was one of the oppressors switches sides at the last minute, assimilating into the alien culture and becoming its saviour" (Newitz, 2009).

In the movie, our human hero transforms himself to look like a native, he integrates himself into their society, and he learns in only three months what the Na'vi master upon coming of age as a warrior. He switches sides, becoming a "race traitor" (Newitz, 2009). When he faces both defeat and the Na'vi's knowledge of his deception, he downplays his own superiority, but only long enough to win it back: he is ultimately so masterful that the Na'vi recognize him in the end and make him their war leader. *Avatar*'s general storyline reinforces two self-serving myths of racism (jxhensley, 2010), or discourses of white privilege. Henry, et al.'s discourse of equal opportunity, which "ignores the social construction of race, in which power and privilege belong to those who are white" (2009, p.116) underpins the first myth: if only given the chance, individuals of the dominant group could prove they really do deserve their status. The second, the "myth of the white saviour," is the belief that subordinate groups are mainly passive and dependent on "progressive white people to hold them up" (jxhensley, 2010). This idea of deficiency relates to the discourse of blaming the victim. This discourse explains the subordinate

group's lack of success when equal opportunity and racial equality are falsely assumed (Henry et al., 2009).

At the beginning of the movie, our hero is a disabled white man in a wheelchair. The other humans either mock or pity him. However, his avatar, his Na'vi body, is able bodied, and the disability that held him back amongst the humans no longer afflicts him; among the Na'vi, he is whole. There is a subtle implication that the range of humans is somehow above the range of the natives (jxhensley, 2010). This illuminates another discourse of power and privilege in *Avatar*, tying together ableism and modern, democratic racism.

When our hero was first 'born' into his avatar, his Na'vi body, the natives refused contact. He was upbraided for being a "clumsy baby" and told to go away. He had had no opportunity to prove himself; however, a sign from the Na'vi goddess convinces the natives that they must accommodate him. The sign, luminescent white seeds from a sacred tree, land on his upper body and literally bathe him in whiteness (jxhensley, 2010).

At the end of the hero's training, when he has apparently learned the entire native culture, he is able to accomplish a feat that has only occurred 5 times in Na'vi history; instead of merely conquering the typical green dragon all Na'vi warriors ride, our hero tames the ferocious red dragon. He reveals his feat by landing the dragon in the midst of a sacred gathering. In this "demeaning" scene, the Na'vi bow to him, practically worshipping him (jxhensley, 2010). The Na'vi war-leader, who has trained all his life for this ancestral role, willingly steps aside for the hero, who yells, "this is *our* land!" and tells the Na'vi they need to do what he says to keep that land (jxhensley, 2010). According to Newitz (2009), this classic scenario plays out in other movies "from *Dances With Wolves* to *The Last Samurai*, where a white guy manages to get

himself accepted into a closed society of people of colour and eventually becomes its most awesome member.”

Just before the final battle scene, the hero prays to the Na’vi goddess for victory in battle. He is told, by a spiritual leader of the Na’vi, that the goddess does not take sides, she rather preserves the balance. Regardless, at the end of the battle, the goddess comes to the hero’s rescue, and the wild animals begin attacking the imperialist’s mercenaries. Not only does the hero “command the respect of every native on Pandora,” he is “so awesome” that even their goddess will answer his prayers, despite never having answered a single Na’vi prayer (jxhensley, 2010). This entirely unrealistic ending is particularly frustrating from an anti-racist and anti-colonial perspective because it fails to imagine viable pathways to freedom for actual indigenous peoples and their allies.

At the “Race and Entertainment” event, discussion followed my response. A participant, who self-identified as an indigenous person who has not always understood or operated from an anti-racist perspective, remarked how her daughter recommended the movie to her as an envisioning of solidarity with indigenous peoples and noted the subtleness of the racist elements in *Avatar* and of internalized oppression.

### **Links to Theory**

To many, movies like *Avatar* are merely entertainment. They do not stop to consider the deeper implications of subtly perpetuating racist ideology. When I discussed some of the ideas presented in this paper with my friends and family, most scoffed at the idea *Avatar* could possibly be racist. To many, the pro-environment interpretation was adequate, and left them feeling virtuous. The subtle implication that the range of human ability was above that of the

Na'vi, the racialized other in *Avatar* was denied by some with whom I spoke, who defended the movie as fantasy and as entertainment, and thus not to be deconstructed in this manner.

This is a problem, because people are often unconscious of the ideologies forming the basis of their social behaviour, and often have a limited understanding of racism in public discourse (Henry et al., 2009). As well, Murji (2006) discusses how media stereotyping is concerning because of the power of visual images, and quoted a Council of Europe warning that “most people do not know how to ‘read’ visual images... [which] can lead to misinterpretation and manipulation” (p.263). The author describes a distinction between racial stereotypes and stereotyping as a cognitive process needed to make sense of the world. Racial stereotypes denote social difference in ways that define social hierarchies and maintain social divisions. Further, despite some positive stereotypes, some less harmful stereotypes and some less functional stereotypes, “stereotypes are deemed objectionable when essentialized and particular traits are treated naturalistically” (Murji, 2006, p. 265).

This discourse of stereotyping can represent racialized identities as “seamless and undifferentiated” (Murji, 2006, p. 266) when in fact they are blurring and shifting (Lawrence, 2003). Lawrence argues that struggles over Native identity will continue “until traditional models of governance have been reclaimed and actualized” (p.25). For her, the Canadian *Indian Act* represents “a discourse of classification, regulation, and control that has indelibly ordered how Native people think...” and produces “a grammar—that embeds itself in every attempt to change it” (p.3). She further argues that this discourse theorizes Nativeness as something continuously evolving and negotiated from the outside, rather than as an “authentic essence” (p. 22). She concludes, “the crucial issue facing Native communities is whether they can break with the ‘grammar’ of government regulatory discourses... without taking colonizer definitions into

those recreated forms of Indigenous governance” (p. 25). A public imagination that unthinkingly reinforces such discourses (Henry et al., 2009; Murji, 2006) through mass marketed entertainment can only damage Native identity.

Twine and Gallagher (2008) examine how the relative invisibility of white privilege maintains white supremacy, and the innovative ways “third wave whiteness” builds on critical race studies’ research examining how people learn racism and explores how whiteness is “produced, translated and negotiated” (p. 12). This cultural production of whiteness occurs across diverse sites such as newspapers, music, public policy debates, and social relationships. Popular media are “spaces where collective white identities are produced and white identities normalized” (Twine & Gallagher, 2008, p. 15). These discourses legitimize ongoing racial disparities while emphasizing “democracy, social development, non-racialism and non-sexism, and individual freedom” (Twine & Gallagher, 2008, p. 15) and correlate to Henry et al.’s (2009) discourses of democratic racism, specifically to the deeper connotations of citizenship, national identity, multiculturalism and liberal values.

The narratives of white guilt (Newitz, 2009) and of the white saviour (jxhensley, 2010) identified in the internet media also tie in to Henry et al.’s (2009) discourses of democratic racism, which is “the justification of the inherent conflict between the egalitarian values of justice and fairness and the racist ideologies reflected in the collective mass-belief system” (p. 110). This values conflict makes people profoundly uncomfortable, as Wise (2008) suggests when he discusses white privilege as “a jarring, sometimes maddening concept” (p. 1) for those in the dominant group, and is the source of the guilt, which manifests in the discourses of denial and of equal opportunity (Henry et al., 2009). If we can deny white privilege and assert that everyone is equal, we can negate the inherent conflict of democratic racism. The white saviour

narrative also corresponds to Henry et al.'s discourse of blaming the victim, where "a minority population's lack of success must be attributed to some[thing] other" than the lack of "equal opportunity and racial equality" (2009, p.116). If equality is assumed by the dominant culture, one explanation for the victims' oppression "is the notion that certain minority communities themselves are culturally deficient—they may be lacking intellectual prowess or be more prone to aggressive behaviour or other forms of 'deviant behaviour'" (Henry et al., 2009, p.116). The assumption is not that society itself is discriminating against these individuals; rather, certain communities "lack the motivation, education, or skills to participate fully in...Canadian society" (Henry et al., 2009, p.116).

### **Relation to Social Work Practice**

Although the movie *Avatar* does not relate directly to social policy or social work practice, it had a large impact on the North American population and other markets around the globe. This impact on popular culture and media is important to social work practice that is truly informed by social justice. Being both aware of, and critical to, depictions of racism in popular media is a necessary element of understanding and being responsible for the unearned advantages of white privilege (Wise, 2008). Because of racist discourses which have been shown to be embedded within social work practice (e.g. Dominelli, 1988) my own assumptions and philosophies about my own social work practice must be constantly framed by anti-racist and anti-colonial conceptual and theoretical ideas. Awareness of discourses that silence marginalized groups is critical in assisting individuals to find their voice and to "regain their humanity" (Freire, 1983, p. 50) and starts with the worker aligning with the client.

An understanding of internalized racism is also crucial to anti-racist social work practice, as is an understanding of intersecting oppressions. Twine and Gallagher (2008) discuss the relational nature of white privilege, which is not absolute, but rather cut by other axes of relative advantage and subordination. This is despite being a psychological privilege as well as a material advantage (Wise, 2008). Thus, “low income whites are able to clean up and go to a job interview and be seen as just another white person, whereas a person of colour [cannot]” (Wise, 2008, p. 2). However, poor and socially marginalized white populations experience whiteness in vastly different ways from whites living in gated enclaves (Twine & Gallagher, 2008), and experience similar class-based oppressions to persons of colour.

The ability to deconstruct popular media with an anti-racist, anti-colonial lens is an important ability for social work practice. It will enhance my ability to empower and enable clients to face the realities of the discourses of racism which shape their daily lives. However, as praxis, which is “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1983, p. 33), such interpretations and arguments need to be shared, especially with those who employ discourses of denial and reverse racism (Henry et al., 2009). Thus, praxis requires something more than informed anti-racist social work practice. It requires a commitment to being an ally, to being responsible for unearned privilege by deploying the accompanying power to the benefit of oppressed groups. This commitment to praxis goes beyond the professional role and spills out into everyday life. It includes uncomfortable conversations with the aim of disrupting the discourses discussed in this paper.

## **Conclusion**

Informed social work practice encompassing anti-racist and decolonial theories requires a constant critical reflection. The advantages of white privilege are purposefully difficult to articulate because they contradict the values of democracy, and so cause discomfort, leading to unwillingness to examine the discourses that perpetuate white privilege and supremacy. Due to the fluidity of modern identities, modern discourses of racism are increasingly complex and intersected by other sources of oppression. A social worker's ability to disrupt discourses which lead to oppressive hierarchies is an advantage to the client because it creates an opportunity to imagine an alternate to the current reality. The ability, as a beneficiary of white privilege, to name and articulate examples of oppression for a client facilitates aligning with the client and developing the rapport required for a successful therapeutic relationship.

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