Avatar and Nature Spirituality (Preview)

Bron Taylor
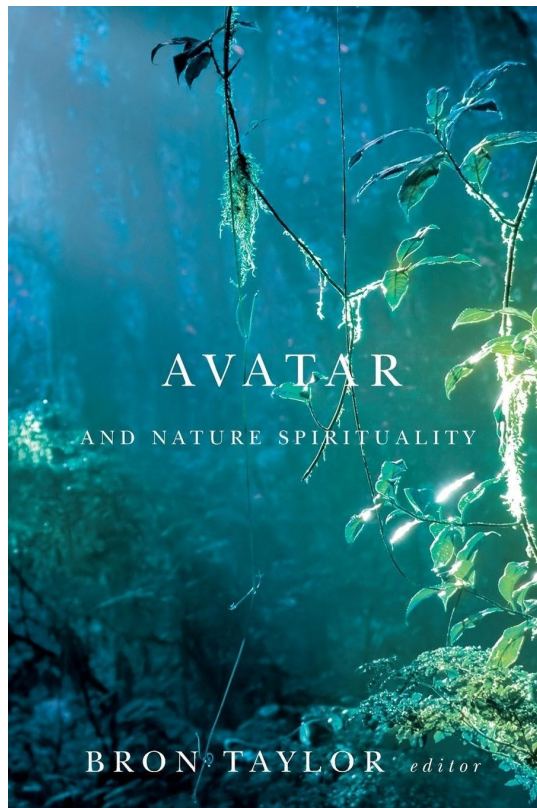
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Prologue: *Avatar* as Rorschach

Bron Taylor

I first saw *Avatar* shortly after its release in December 2009. Like most viewers, I found the bioluminescent landscape of Pandora stunningly beautiful. I was also moved by the storylines: the against-all-odds resistance by the native inhabitants of Pandora against violent, imperial invaders; the turncoats from the invading forces who join the resistance; and the love stories. Sure, there is the formulaic story—male and female find love, lose love, and find it again—but there is also the love of a people for their home and their wild flora and fauna, a contagious love that subverts the ecological and spiritual understandings of some invaders, leading them to take a stand with those they have come to exploit.

The film's producer, writer, and director, James Cameron, is adept at evoking emotional responses from his audiences and making huge sums of money along the way. Indeed, no one's films exemplify the blockbuster, money-making film genre better than Cameron's *Terminator*, *Aliens*, *Titanic,* and now *Avatar,* which banked $2.8 billion within the first two years after its release, 73 per cent of which came from outside the United States.[1] The figure would have been significantly higher had not the Chinese government cut short the film's run, reportedly out of fear that it might encourage resistance to development projects and the government's resettlement schemes (Stanton 2010). The film also gained wide recognition for its many technical innovations and won many awards, including best film drama and best director at the Golden Globe Awards (which is decided by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association) and three of the nine Oscars for which it was nominated (although not for best picture or director). The attendance records and professional accolades provide one marker of the film's appeal. But is there more to the film than tried-and-true narratives of injustice being overcome and romantic dreams fulfilled? Is it significant in some way other than for its technical achievements and profit making?

When I first saw the film, I certainly thought this might be the case. For more than twenty years, I had been tracking the development and increasing global cultural traction of nature-based spiritualities, paying special attention to how such spiritualities contribute to environmental activism.[2] My book documenting these trends, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (2010), came out shortly

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[1] *Avatar* Box Office Mojo, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=avatar.htm, updated 3 February 2013.

[2] In 1991, I began publishing a series of articles about such phenomena (see Taylor 1991 to 2008) and orchestrated collaborative research leading to the book (Taylor 1995a).

before the release of *Avatar.* In it, I argued that spiritualities that stress ecological inter-dependence and mutual dependence, involve deep feelings of belonging and connection to nature, and express beliefs that the biosphere is a sacred, Gaia-like superorganism, were taking new forms and exercising increasing social and political influence. These sorts of nature-based spiritualities generally cohere with and draw on an evolutionary and ecological worldview, and therefore stress continuity and even kinship among all organisms. They also often have animistic dimensions, in which communication (if not also communion) with non-human organisms is thought possible. Consequently, these "otherkind" are considered to have intrinsic value (regardless of whether they are useful in some way to our own species) and should be accorded respect, if not reverence. Uniting these Gaian and animistic perceptions, I argued, is generally a deep sense of humility about the human place in the universe in contrast to anthropocentric conceits, wherein human beings consider themselves to be superior to other living things and the only ones whose interests count morally.

In *Dark Green Religion*, I examined a wide range of social phenomena that expressed and promoted such spiritualities. Recognizing that the evolutionary-ecological world-view that fuels dark green spirituality has had only a century and a half to incubate and spread, and noting that despite this, the trends I had identified were rapidly gathering adherents and momentum, I speculated that we could be witnessing the nascent stages of a new global nature religion. Such a religion would have affinities with some aspects of the world's long-standing and predominant religious and philosophical traditions, and it would, in some cases, fuse with them, I suggested. Moreover, such dark green spiritualities could also *coexist* (rather than fuse) with the environmentally progressive forms of the world's long-standing religious traditions, uniting in common action to protect the biosphere, even if profound differences remained about the sources of existence. I also suggested that dark green religious forms might increasingly supplant older meaning and action systems, because the dark green forms more easily cohere with modern scientific understandings than religious worldviews involving one or more invisible divine beings. Consequently, the dark green forms could more easily adapt than most long-standing religions to new and deeper scientific understandings, especially when compared to religions that reify their "ultimate sacred postulates" by chiselling them, physically or metaphorically, into inviolable sacred texts.[3]

These were the possibilities running through my mind when I first saw *Avatar.* I had already spent considerable time looking at artistic productions, including documentaries and theatrical films that exemplified dark green spirituality; after seeing *Avatar*, I immediately thought it was another exemplar of such green religion. Moreover, as it broke box office records, I could not help but wonder if the film was evidence that global, cultural receptivity to the ideas prevalent in dark green religion was even

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[3] The term "ultimate sacred postulates" is from anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1999), who argues that oral traditions are more likely to be environmentally adaptive than those based on writing because they are more flexible than those that put their religious guidelines down in inviolable, written, sacred texts.

more profound than I had previously thought. I also wondered if *Avatar* would prove to be the most effective "dark green" propaganda yet produced. In short, I thought, there might well be something exceptionally significant about the film, even if the ideas expressed in it were nothing new and even though some would conclude that the film was not great art. I suspected not only that *Avatar* was a *reflection* of the global emergence of dark green religion but that it might even effectively *advance* such spirituality and ethics.

In his public statements about the film, Cameron has expressed a clear intention to promote themes that are central to what I have called dark green religion. When accepting his Golden Globe Award for best picture, for example, he said: "*Avatar* asks us to see that everything is connected, all human beings to each other, and us to the Earth. And if you have to go four and a half light years to another, made-up planet to appreciate this miracle of the world that we have right here, well, you know what, that's the wonder of cinema right there, that's the magic" (Associated Press 2010). Soon after, in an Oprah Winfrey television special that was broadcast shortly before the Academy Awards ceremony, Cameron repeated this theme, adding, with delight, that at the climax of the film the audience had come to take the side of nature in its battle against the destructive forces of an expansionist human civilization. Here, without using the terminology of contemporary environmental ethics, Cameron expressed an affinity for deep ecological or biocentric theories, in which nature is considered to have intrinsic value. Indeed, according to an exchange during an *Entertainment Weekly* interview, it appears that Cameron was even on the radical side of biocentric ethics. When an interviewer asserted, "*Avatar* is the perfect eco-terrorism recruiting tool," Cameron answered in an equally provocative way, "Good, good, I like that one. I consider that a positive review. I believe in ecoterrorism" (Moorhead 2010).[4]

In the light of such statements, it seems clear that dark green themes and activist motivations underlay the film's production. Furthermore, the negative reaction to the film by most conservative commentators, whether political or religious, revealed significant concern that such views and imperatives might be gaining more adherents and cultural appeal. But while pundits and scholars speculated about the possible significance and influence of the film, they usually supplied little evidence to support their assertions. So I began to gather such evidence, establishing a website domain to track relevant information as it unfolded.[5] I knew that a more concerted inquiry was needed.

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[4] For more on Cameron's long-standing environmental radicalism, see Renzetti (2009).

[5] Shortly after seeing the film, for example, and hoping to track its reception and influence, I created an online venue to provide further information about the film; see "*Avatar* and Dark Green Religion" at http://www.brontaylor.com/environmental_books/dgr/avatar_nature_religion.html.

Avatar as Rorschach

Given my own response to the film and informed by the sociology of knowledge, I knew that generating a truly critical inquiry would be difficult.[6] I was keenly aware, for example, of my own tendency to view the film through pre-existing prisms. I therefore anticipated that many others would simply interpret the film through their own intellectual and cultural lenses, including scholarly perspectives grounded in postmodern philosophies, post-colonial critical theory, cultural anthropology, evolutionary biology, environmental ethics, and film studies, as well as perspectives rooted in ethnic and religious identities and other subcultures and enclaves, whether political, ideological, economic, tribal, or military.

The spiritual, moral, and political dimensions of the film have elicited wildly diverse reactions, nowhere more apparent than in the popular press and in cyberspace. The filmmaker and the film have been labelled pro-civilization and anti-civilization, pro-science and anti-science, un-American and too American, anti-Marine and pro-Marine, racist and anti-racist, anti-indigenous and pro-indigenous, woman-respecting and misogynistic, leftist and neo-conservative, progressive and reactionary, activist and selfabsorbed. And, of course, there have been religious labels: pagan, atheistic, theistic, pantheistic, panentheistic, and animistic. More about all of these perspectives are provided in the following essays.

Observing the stunningly diverse and highly contested cognitive and emotional responses to *Avatar* reminded me of the famous Rorschach psychological test, in which individual reactions to ink blots shown on cards vary widely, presumably because of differences in the psychological constitution and cultural context of the test takers. While, as readers of this volume will find, there have been some surprising reactions to the film, it is also the case that if one were to know the cultural context and cognitive frames of the observers, it would usually be possible to anticipate their responses.

That different individuals and groups tend to perceive things differently is, on the one hand, a dynamic to be welcomed, because differently situated people may have insights that people placed elsewhere may not. On the other hand, it is a problematic tendency, for it is also possible for our cognitive frames to create a field of view in which other perspectives, as well as information that might disconfirm our expectations, remain out of focus. So it worried me when I thought about what insights might gleaned, or missed, when considering the film, given the strong human tendency to see what one expects, especially when we often remain insular, segregated in our own cultural enclaves, including supposedly enlightened, academic ones.

On a personal level, although the film *seemed* to exemplify what I had found in my previous research, I did not want to conclude too hastily that *Avatar* provided more evidence for my dark green theses. So, with regard to initial perceptions about

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[6] For the classic statements regarding the social construction of reality, the latter focusing on religion, see Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Berger (1969).

the film's dark green themes and cultural significance, I thought I should suspend judgment, pay close attention to responses and interpretations of the film at variance with my own first impressions, and seek further information. I was concerned, however, about more than whether I might misperceive the meanings and significance of the film. In the initial months after its release, I noticed that in academic circles, there was little cross-disciplinary debate about it. Moreover, many of the scholarly views that were expressed struck me as "ivory towerish" in nature, disregarding the ways in which those not embedded in scholarly subcultures were responding to and often embracing the film—even seeing their own feelings and predicaments reflected in it. The tendency toward Rorschach-style, quick-reaction analyses seemed to me methodologically flawed. Last but not least, even though the film was replete with religious themes, in the first few months after the film was released, despite a great deal of public discussion and debate about the film, I could not find nuanced discussion of its religious dimensions.

For all these reasons, I thought a more judicious and interdisciplinary approach to the film and its reception was in order. Hoping to precipitate such an enquiry, in the spring of 2010, I issued a call for papers focusing on the spirituality and politics of *Avatar.* I eventually received more than thirty submissions. Several were published in the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture,* which I edit; a wider array appear in this volume.[7]

The authors in the following pages express many points of view, sometimes, but not always, finding points of agreement. Each of them offers fascinating and important insights into the film and its putative significance. As I argue in my concluding reflections, despite my cautious approach, I think many of the essays provide further evidence of my argument in *Dark Green Religion* and my related initial impression about the film and its reception: *Avatar* reflects and dramatically presents dark green religious and ethical themes, and its commercial success is due in part to the profound, recently unfolding, and increasingly global changes in worldview that provide fertile cultural ground for dark green artistic productions. In short, the essays in this volume demonstrate that it is "good to think" about *Avatar*, as well as about the cultural trends that gave rise to it and the diverse and contested reaction to it.[8] These thoughts might even be of the kind that precipitate action, not on Pandora but right here on Earth.

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[7] See the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 5, no. 4 (2010) and 6, no. 2 (2012).

[8] That species are not only "good to eat" but "good to think" was famously asserted by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss ([1963] 1969, 89), who was expressing the idea that they are culturally and religiously significant in a number of ways. This is what I intend to suggest by borrowing the phrase here.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction: The Religion and Politics of *Avatar*

Bron Taylor

Readers who have not seen *Avatar* should do so before reading further, noting their own reactions and observations. For those unable to see the film and for those whose memory of the story and its pivotal moments would benefit from refreshing, the first section, below, provides a synopsis of the film. The second section surveys the approaches taken in the subsequent essays to guide those who may wish to pursue particular lines of inquiry. The introduction concludes by explaining both the "family resemblance" approach to social phenomena variously understood to be "religious" or "spiritual" and how this approach has shaped the terminology and framing of this volume.

Synopsis

Avatar is set on Pandora, a stunningly beautiful, often bioluminescent, and lushly vegetated moon circling a gaseous planet in the Alpha Centauri star system. There, in the year 2154, humans from the Resource Development Administration (RDA), a corporation with great political, economic, and military might that operates with the authority of Earth's Interplanetary Commerce Administration, has established a mining colony. The RDA seeks a rare mineral called "unobtanium," which is the most efficient superconductor known and is thus critically important to advanced energy systems and galactic economic enterprises. In a metaphorical allusion to the ways in which colonizers have often pursued the lands and resources of colonized peoples, *Avatar* quickly establishes that human beings have been waging a campaign to subjugate the Na'vi—tall, blue, humanoid (but tail-wagging) hunter-gatherer creatures who are the moon's indigenous inhabitants. The Na'vi stand in the way of the RDA's exploitive plans and ultimately mount a violent resistance against the invaders.

The RDA employs two entwined strategies in its campaign: one social, one military. The social strategy is scientific and is led by Dr. Grace Augustine, whose discipline is never clearly specified but resembles that of an anthropologist with a specialty in ethnobiology; when the film begins, she has already been studying Pandoran biology and Na'vi culture for some time. Although her primary passion is to learn about the moon's environment and the Na'vi's environmental and social systems, she is also there

to provide information that may be useful to the RDA so that the corporation can gain the co-operation and pacification of the Na'vi, and thus access to the coveted energy conductor. If this strategy fails, the military strategy will take precedence: the RDA will then subjugate the Na'vi by force and take the unobtanium without their consent.

One of the soldiers brought to Pandora to help secure the unobtanium is a former Marine named Jake Sully. A paraplegic who lost the use of his legs in an earlier battlefield injury, he has been brought in to replace his deceased brother, who was participating in a genetic engineering program on Pandora that produces human-Na'vi hybrids (named "avatars")— beings with human consciousness in a Na'vi body. Augustine and her anthropologist assistant, Norm Spellman, also have Na'vi avatars, enabling them to breathe the Pandoran air, which is toxic to humans, and to interact with the indigenous inhabitants. Because Sully and his brother were identical twins with the same genetic structure, Sully can assume his brother's avatar body; combined with his military background, this accounts for his selection for the project. Working with Augustine's team, Sully is mandated to learn enough about the Na'vi to convince them to leave the regions that are targeted for commercial extraction. Failing that, he is to identify Na'vi vulnerabilities and thus ensure an easy military victory.

What the imperial forces do not anticipate is that Augustine, Spellman, Sully, and, later, a tough, no-nonsense Latina helicopter pilot and former Marine named Trudy Chacon will view what is happening to the Na'vi as fundamentally unjust and will join their resistance. Chacon, however, has no avatar body as she is a part of the military forces but not the avatar project. Augustine and Spellman, like many contemporary anthropologists, come to respect not only the environmental knowledge but also the nature spirituality of the Na'vi; so, too, does Sully, although he does not come to such respect scientifically.

There are two key aspects to Na'vi spirituality. On the one hand, they perceive the planet itself as a Gaia-like, organic, bio-neurological network, which they personify as the goddess Eywa. The Na'vi believe that Eywa does not take sides between different species on Pandora but rather promotes the balance and flourishing of the entire natural world. Augustine is obviously interested in but skeptical of the religious understandings that the Na'vi have about Eywa; early in the film, she seems to understand Eywa as akin to the laws of Pandoran nature.[1]

Na'vi spirituality also involves what could be called relational animism. With such animism, respect toward all other organisms, even dangerous prey animals, is obligatory. The Na'vi's animism is rooted in their belief that Eywa is "the author and origin

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[1] In a mock *Confidential Report on the Biological and Social History of Pandora*, which purportedly draws on Augustine's research, Eywa is said to be "a kind of biointernet. She's a memory-keeper, a collective consciousness... She logs the thoughts and feelings of everything that thinks and feels. Her function is to bring balance to the systemic whole, one that is perfectly interdependent, biodiverse, self-regulating, and unified. But more than a network, she has a will. An ego. She guides, she shapes, she protects... [But] Eywa does not take sides; Eywa will not necessarily save you. Her role is to protect all life, and the balance of life. She is, quite literally, Mother Nature" (Wilhelm and Mathison 2009, xv).

of the vital interconnectedness of all its living things" (Wilhelm and Mathison 2009, xiv). But a special intimacy and bonding is also possible via a braid-resembling neural "whip" or "queue" that the Na'vi can entwine with other individuals and animals to deepen communion and communication with them. This sort of bonding enables Na'vi warriors to mind-meld with these animals and then hunt or engage in battle as though they were one being (8). They can establish this bond with creatures such as the dire-horse and two flying creatures, the banshee and the Great Leonopteryx (in biological terms, an apex aerial predator), which the Na'vi call the *toruk* or flying king lion.

Based on what they learn from the Na'vi, Augustine and the others initially try to protect them by convincing RDA officials that Pandora's true wealth is in its natural systems and the living things that constitute them, not in the moon's minerals. Put simply, even though their motives for being there in the first place are clearly not altruistic, the scientists come to love the Na'vi, their knowledge and way of life, and even the habitats to which they belong. As Augustine puts it, "There are many dangers on Pandora, and one of the subtlest is that you may come to love it too much" (Wilhelm and Mathison 2009, epigraph). Although without a scientific background, Sully also falls in love with the people and the place, albeit in a different way than Augustine and Spellman. In his case, his love for Pandoran nature is due in no small measure to his expert guide into its beauties and mysteries, the lithe and beautiful Na'vi princess, Neytiri. The beginning of their relationship is rocky because of Sully's ignorance and disrespect of the forest and its creatures. But after the small luminescent wood sprites (the *atokirina'*), jellyfish-like "pure spirits" who are the seeds of the Tree of Souls (the *Vitraya Ramunong*) descend and alight on Sully, thus indicating their favour, Neytiri decides to take Sully to her parents.[2] Her father, Eytukan, is the chief of her Na'vi clan, the Omaticaya, and her mother, Mo'at, is their shaman-like spiritual leader. Mo'at, perceiving the will of Eywa, orders her daughter to teach Sully the Na'vi ways. Sully proves to be a courageous and astute student, and he is eventually initiated into the tribe, enters a romantic relationship with Neytiri, and mates with her.

In their own ways, especially as made possible viscerally through their avatar bodies, Augustine, Sully, and Spellman each come to love the Na'vi and to respect, if not embrace, their holistic ecological spirituality. This leads to a difficult situation, however, since they know of the RDA's plans and are complicit in pursuing its social strategy to pacify the Na'vi. Knowing that the RDA is on the brink of a military operation and having been initiated into the tribe, Sully desperately tries to convince the Omaticaya to leave their Hometree. (Each Na'vi clan has a Hometree, where they live and share their lives; the massive plant actually comprises a number of individuals of the same tree species that have grown together over time into a strong, interrelated organism.) While pleading with the Omaticaya, Sully reveals how he knows the RDA's military intention. In this way, he confesses the role that he and Augustine have played in

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[2] The Na'vi terminology was invented by Paul Frommer, a linguist from the University of Southern California hired to create the new language for the film.

the RDA's objectives. Having mated with Sully, Neytiri feels anguish and betrayal, and her entire clan rejects the human avatars. Shortly thereafter, the RDA forces—led by another former Marine, Colonel Miles Quaritch—attacks. Despite the efforts of Sully and his avatar comrades, and even though the helicopter pilot Trudy Chacon refuses orders to attack the Hometree, Quaritch's forces launch missiles that obliterate the Omaticaya's Hometree and kill many Na'vi, including Eytukan, scattering the survivors in agony and terror.

Soon after, back in their human bodies, Augustine, Sully, and Spellman are imprisoned after the RDA learn of their rebellion, but Chacon frees them, enabling Sully to return to his avatar body and prove his courage and good heart by bonding with the Leonopteryx, a rare feat in Na'vi history. Thus, Sully regains the trust of the Na'vi, who acknowledge him as the sixth Toruk Makto, conferring upon him the status of a warrior-leader, which he apparently shares with the Na'vi warrior and leader Tsu'tey. Clearly, however, as the Toruk Makto, Sully emerges as the greater of the two leaders.

Sully then asks Mo'at and the Omaticaya for help saving Augustine, who was shot by Quaritch during the battle over Hometree. Despite a ritual orchestrated by Mo'at at the Tree of Souls, Augustine dies. Before dying, however, as her own energies and memories pass into the Pandoran neuroenergetic field, she exclaims, "Eywa is real!" Sully then rallies the Omaticaya and other Na'vi clans to prepare for the next attack, which he knows is imminent. Indeed, Colonel Quaritch's next target is the Tree of Souls itself, since he thinks that destroying the spiritual heart of Na'vi culture will bring a quick end to the resistance. In another important spiritual moment, Sully—acting awkwardly, apparently because he is not used to praying, at least to Eywa—beseeches Eywa at the Tree of Souls for help defeating the RDA, even though Neytiri has told him that Eywa will not take sides in a battle.

Sully and Tsu'tey, a royal Na'vi warrior and Sully's former rival, lead the fight against the invaders. Despite the bravery of the resisting forces, the Na'vi are being overwhelmed by the superior technology of the RDA. Sully himself is saved by the valour of Chacon, who is killed by an RDA missile soon after. Spellman is shot and has to leave his avatar body, but he tries to rejoin the battle in his human body by using a breathing apparatus. Tsu'tey bravely attacks the *Valkyrie*, the airship laden with the bomb that is to destroy the Tree of Souls, but he suffers mortal wounds in the effort. Clearly, the RDA forces are superior, the Na'vi are losing, and it appears that soon Neytiri and Sully will join their fallen comrades. Then, just when all seems lost, hordes of the most dangerous Pandoran animals suddenly arrive—hammerheads, sturmbeests, viperwolves, and others—routing the imperial humans. As this occurrs, an astonished Neytiri exclaims to Sully that Eywa has heard him.

Although Quaritch can see that the battle has turned against him, he fights on, now in a desperate and direct battle with Sully and Neytiri. Quaritch injures Neytiri and is about to kill her when Sully saves her, although in doing so, he is himself injured and his consciousness leaves his avatar and returns to his human body. Neytiri then saves Sully twice: first, by killing Quaritch with arrows just before he can deal a final blow to

Sully and second, by providing him with a breathing apparatus after she finds Sully's human body and recognizes that he is suffocating in the Pandoran air, to which he has been exposed by Quaritch's attack. As Sully regains consciousness, he says to Neytiri, "I see you"—a Na'vi greeting that reflects a deep feeling of connection. Neytiri, relieved and crying, reciprocates, fully recognizing her mate even though he is then in his weak and fully human form. In another important event of the battle's denouement, Tsu'tey passes on his own leadership to Sully before dying from his wounds.

At the end of the film, the Na'vi allow Spellman and a few other humans who wish to remain on Pandora to do so. Sully, Neytiri, and the other Na'vi warriors, as well as Spellman, escort the RDA's survivors to their spacecraft, forcing them to leave the scarred but still beautiful moon. The implication is that Pandora will recover, but an obvious question remains unanswered: Will the invaders return? Sully's spirit and mind, through a ritual at the Tree of Souls, is permanently moved to his avatar body, eliminating the need for either the breathing apparatus or the avatar technology. Sully thus becomes a naturalized member of Na'vi society.[3]

Overview of Essays

The next chapter in this volume provides additional valuable background from film scholar Stephen Rust, who analyzes *Avatar*'s representations of social and ecological issues as they unfold within a form of cinema—the blockbuster melodrama—that is often criticized as socially and ecologically regressive. This is followed by historian of religion Thore Bjørnvig, whose careful analysis of Cameron's obsession with science and space exploration enhances our understanding of the passions that produced *Avatar*.

In part 2, the chapters focus on popular responses to the film. In its first two chapters, we travel to (cyber)space for two studies based on analyses of website forums, called "fandoms," that have been devoted to *Avatar*. Religion scholar Britt Istoft teases out various ways in which the spirituality of the film has been understood among its fans, most often as involving pantheistic and animistic perceptions, but also in ways more compatible with monotheistic traditions as well as with naturalistic metaphysics of interconnection. She shows that the fandom discourse generally includes calls for ecological lifestyles and environmental action, and argues that given these responses, and those of fan cultures inspired by the television and motion picture series *Star Trek*, it is reasonable to surmise that *Avatar* may kindle new communities with a complex mix of Pandoran and Earthly nature religion at their centre. In the next essay, cinema scholar Matthew Holtmeier, working with the views of the French critics Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari regarding the possibility of cinema and other art forms inspiring positive action in the world, focuses on two affective responses he sees

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[3] In addition to the sources cited previously, in checking facts and details, I found this online source helpful: *Pandorapedia: The Official Field Guide* at http://www .pandorapedia.com/.

in *Avatar* fandoms, which he labels "post-Pandoran depression" and "Na'vi sympathy." Only one of these, he contends, is likely to promote positive action in Earthly domains.

The next two chapters leave cyberspace for Earthly places. Rachelle Gould leads an interdisciplinary team of environmental studies scholars striving to understand "cultural ecosystem services" through a sophisticated qualitative and quantitative mixed-methods study. She and her colleagues integrate into this wider research reactions to the film *Avatar* among inhabitants of Hawaii—both Native Hawaiians and those of other ethnicities. This fascinating study, set in a region with a relatively recent colonial history, shows how thoughtful and nuanced non-academicians can be about the sensitive historical, social, and ecological issues that *Avatar* raises. Many of these non-academics, Native and non-Native Hawaiians alike, appear to find resonance with and/or incorporate many of the film's ethical and spiritual themes; the apparent differences between different groups, however, are every bit as interesting as the similarities. Gould's essay is followed by a study led by sociologist Randolph Haluza-Delay, which explores the way in which both Canadian environmentalists and the Canadian director of *Avatar* have appropriated the film to challenge tar sands mining in Alberta, Canada, as well as the ways (that some will find surprising) in which Christians from two different traditions in that region have responded to the film's spiritual and environmental themes.

Part 3 advances a number of critical perspectives on the film and its reception. Chris Klassen offers a feminist and post-colonial analysis, first noting that *Avatar* has affinity with ecofeminist spiritualities that emphasize the interconnectedness of all living things and acknowledging the environmentalist intention. But—contrary to enthusiastic readings of the film, including those that could come from an ecofeminist direction— Klassen renders a strong, negative judgment: *Avatar* presents "a thinly veiled misogynistic plot tied to a romanticization of indigeneity." Her analysis may give pause to *Avatar* enthusiasts.

Science and technology professor Pat Munday, in an interesting, contrasting way, takes up some of the issues examined by Klassen. Deploying what he calls "postmodern semiotics," Munday focuses on the affinities between the hunting practices of the indigenous Na'vi and those of nonindigenous American hunters. Like Klassen, he pays special attention to gender, noting that Na'vi hunters are both male and female, as are contemporary American hunters, both indigenous and non-indigenous. Munday finds in the practice of hunting a spiritual alternative to the dualisms of mainstream Western culture. He suggests, moreover, that such a spiritual hunting practice has affinities with the animistic spirituality expressed in *Avatar* and that this frame makes sense in the light of biophilia hypotheses. In contrast to Klassen, Munday sees in *Avatar*'s embrace of "woman the hunter" a progressive respect for both women and non-human organisms.

While all of the preceding articles engage the spiritual dimensions of the film, the next contributions make these their central focus. Engineering and computer science professor Bruce MacLennan, showing remarkable interdisciplinary range, advances an

innovative perspective of the film with lenses rooted in Jungian archetypal psychology, evolutionary biology, and (like Munday) theories suggesting that *Homo sapiens* has an innate, albeit weak, tendency toward biophilia. For MacLennan, understanding biologically rooted archetypes and affective states can bring an appreciation of both culture and nature as important, entwined variables that are essential to understanding phenomena such as *Avatar* and its evocative power over its audiences.

Literature, religion, and environmental studies scholar David Barnhill demonstrates the continuities and discontinuities between *Avatar* and the work of American novelist Ursula Le Guin, who, in 1972, published *The Word for World Is Forest.* He examines the dystopian and utopian themes and the Gaian and animistic spiritualities in both works, building to an argument that, despite the problematics that inhere to both dystopian and utopian genres, both of these works provide a salutary focus on the ecological and social virtues needed to move *Homo sapiens* toward utopian visions while avoiding dystopian realities. Lisa Sideris concludes this section with a lucid exposition of the role of empathy in interspecies ethical concern and the way in which *Avatar* puts such affective states into play.

In wildly different ways, the next two chapters engage indigenous understandings related to the film. Musicologist Michael MacDonald examines indigenous music as a way of knowing through sound (acoustemology). He argues that had the composers been more directly engaged in relationship and solidarity with indigenous peoples, they could have made a more imaginative, evocative, and moving soundscape for the film while avoiding the ethical problem that often accompanies the colonial attitudes toward indigenous traditions—including sounds—as resources. Jacob von Heland and Sverker Sörlin take up epistemological questions in another way as they pursue the potential for cross-cultural understanding and for enhancing the resilience of environmental and social systems by integrating the traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous and local peoples with mainstream Western science. They do this by juxtaposing contemporary, supposedly post-colonial resilience science with *Avatar*'s depiction of the work and person of Dr. Grace Augustine. In Augustine, Von Heland and Sörlin see a powerful metaphor for both the peril and promise of engagement between indigenous peoples (and other local actors) and natural scientists and environmental conservationists as they struggle to understand, protect, and heal social-ecological systems.

In my concluding reflections, I survey the range of reactions to the film and wrestle, both as a scholar and personally, with what to make of the film and its contentious reception. Last but not least, in the afterword, Daniel Heath Justice, a Cherokee scholar of indigenous literatures, revisits *Avatar*, which he first discussed in a thoughtful review written soon after the film's release (Justice 2010), in the light of the reception to the film since then. In his reflections, Justice engages some of the perspectives expressed by the other contributors to this volume.

Of this I am confident: after reading *Avatar and Nature Spirituality,* open-minded readers will have a much more complicated, if not also conflicted, view of the film, its director, and its cultural, ecological, and ethical significance.

Family Resemblances, Religion, and Spirituality

Scholars have long debated the definition of religion and, more recently, have wrestled with the term *spirituality*. No consensus has emerged. Along with a growing number of scholars, I follow what we are calling the "family resemblance" approach to the study of what people have in mind when they use terms such as *religion* and *spirituality*. Such an approach leaves aside the fraught quest to demarcate where religion|spirituality ends, and where that which is not religion|spirituality begins. Those who take the family resemblance approach endeavour instead to explore, analyze, and compare the widest possible variety of beliefs, behaviours, and functions that are typically associated with these terms, without worrying about where the boundaries lie.

The family resemblance approach begins with recognition that there are many dimensions and characteristics to what people call religion|spirituality, and it rejects presumptions that any single trait or characteristic is essential to such phenomena. Instead, the focus is on whether an analysis of *religionresembling beliefs and practices* has explanatory power.

In common parlance, of course, *religion* often refers to organized and institutional religious belief and practice, while *spirituality* is held to involve one's deepest moral values and most profound religious experiences. Certain other traits and characteristics are also often associated more with spirituality than religion. Spirituality, for example, is often thought to be more about personal growth and gaining a proper understanding of one's place in the cosmos than is religion, and it is often assumed to be entwined with a reverence for nature and environmentalist concern and action (Van Ness 1996; King 1996; Taylor 2001a, b). Careful observers will, therefore, be alert to the different ways in which people deploy these terms. Nevertheless, most of the traits and functions that scholars typically associate with religion are also associated with spiritual phenomena. From a family resemblance perspective, therefore, there is little *analytical* reason to assume that these are different kinds of social phenomena. The value of a family resemblance approach is that it provides analytic freedom to look widely at diverse social phenomena for their religious|spiritual dimensions. With such an approach, whether James Cameron believes in invisible divine beings (a trait some consider to be essential to religion) is worth analyzing, but we need not refrain from examining the religious dimensions of his films, or of their reception, based on whether Cameron's worldview includes that particular trait.[4]

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[4] The family resemblance school began with Wittgenstein ([1953] 2001). For the most lucid exposition of the approach with regard to religion, see Saler (1993). For a short version of the approach, but longer than here, see Taylor (2007). For an even shorter version, see chapter 1 in Taylor (2010), also available online at http://www.brontaylor.com/pdf/Taylor–DGR_ch1.pdf. For a clear statement typical of those who object to the approach in religion studies, see Fitzgerald (1996).

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Epilogue: Truth and Fiction in *Avatar*'s Cosmogony and Nature Religion

Bron Taylor

Entwined in a complex mix of historical, aesthetic, spiritual, and ideological presuppositions, the ferment over *Avatar* has been diverse and contentious. This should not be surprising, since *Avatar* metaphorically attacks all martial, colonial, and expansionist histories, which have occurred at the expense of the world's indigenous peoples and Earth's biocomplexity. Both implicitly, through the film's narrative, and explicitly, in statements made about it, James Cameron has also challenged the materialism—and thus, the lifeways and aspirations—of the vast majority of people today. He has even implicitly challenged the world's predominant religions by offering as an alternative spiritualities of belonging and connection to nature and animistic ethics of kinship and reciprocity with the entire chorus of life, all of which could be understood either religiously (as the goddess Eywa, the divine source and expression of life) or scientifically (as an interconnected and mutually dependent environmental system). Critics quite naturally arose to defend histories, worldviews, lifeways, ideologies, and religions that they concluded Cameron had challenged in his film, contending as well that the views promoted in *Avatar* were misguided, if not dangerous.

Conservative Responses

Some of the strongest criticisms came from monotheists who felt that the film promoted a spiritually perilous paganism or pantheism. Typical of this response was the reaction of the Vatican's official newspaper, which complained that that the film promotes "spiritualism linked to the worship of nature." Vatican Radio commented that the film "cleverly winks at all those pseudo-doctrines that turn ecology into the religion of the millennium," and asserted that in *Avatar*, "nature is no longer a creation to defend, but a divinity to worship" (Rizzo 2010). A Vatican spokesman confirmed that these reviews were consistent with Pope Benedict's views about the danger of "turning nature into a 'new divinity'" (ibid.). Evangelical Christians affiliated with the Cornwall Alliance felt similarly, releasing a twelve-part DVD series titled "The False World View of the Green Movement" and a subsequent segment, "From Captain Planet

to *Avatar*: The Seduction of Our Youth," which attacked these and other programs and films as threats to the Christian faith.[1] But these attacks are moderate compared to those posted at jesus-is-savior.com, where David Stewart, while agreeing that *Avatar* teaches a demonic, false gospel, asserts that according to the Bible (which he quotes), Cameron and the film's actors will be "cursed" for promoting a false gospel. Stewart also criticizes the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* for recommending the film.[2]

Whatever their differences, these reactions from conservative Christians reflect fears that their youth are being seduced by pagan and environmentalist spiritualities and that such heterodox spiritualities are growing within Christian churches.[3] Such fears were even expressed in the pages of the *New York Times* by staff columnist Ross Douthat (2010), who perceives in Cameron's films a "long apologia for pantheism— a faith that equates God with Nature, and calls humanity into religious communion with the natural world." Douthat even seems to share a key part of Stewart's critique, claiming that "pantheism has been Hollywood's religion of choice for a generation now." Douthat expresses a clear preference for the orthodox Christian hope of divine rescue from this world, concluding, "Nature *is* suffering and death... And human societies that hew closest to the natural order aren't the shining Edens of James Cameron's fond imaginings. They're places where existence tends to be nasty, brutish and short" (emphasis in original). As we have seen in this volume, however, especially in the case study on the response of Canadian Christians (Haluza-Delay, Ferber, and Wiebe-Neufeld), some churchgoers are much more positive about the film than these critics. This may be surprising to those who only read the conservative critics or who do not know how plural and internally conflicted Christianity has become, with regard to both worldviews at variance with traditional doctrines and environmental concerns and spiritualities (e.g., Taylor 2005, esp. 1:301–82, and cross references).

The reactions of conservative political pundits held other surprises. David Boaz (2010) of the libertarian Cato Institute, for example, after acknowledging that most conservatives consider *Avatar* to be "anti-American, anti-military and ... anti-capitalist," contends that the central evil depicted in the film is the Resource Development Administration's "stark violation of property rights," which are "the foundation of the

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[1] See "Resisting the Green Dragon" at http://www.resistingthegreendragon.com/, Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation at http://www.Cornwall Alliance.org, and, especially, Beisner (n.d.) and Wanliss (2011).

[2] See "*Avatar* Movie Is Evil," an undated critique at http://www.jesus-is-savior.com/Evils%20in%20America/Hellivision/avatar_is_evil.htm.

[3] An as-yet-unpublished paper by University of California, Santa Cruz, sociologist Bernard Daly Zaleha, "'Our Only Heaven,' An Investigation into the Spread and Significance of Nature Venerating Religion," which he kindly shared with me and my students during a National Endowment for the Humanities Seminar in July 2011, provides an excellent review of research showing that in America and Europe, where we have the best data, panentheistic and other nature-venerating religions are on the rise, even within Christian churches, and that orthodox Christian monotheism is in modest but significant decline. The fears of Christian conservatives about slippage in their preferred forms of the faith appear to be borne out by existing quantitative data. See also Zaleha (2008, 2010).

free market and indeed of civilization." He concludes that rather than vilify the film, "conservatives should appreciate a rare defense of property rights coming out of Hollywood."

A dramatically different sort of conservative, the neo-con pundit Ann Marlowe (2009), contends that *Avatar* promotes universal values that Americans cherish, even asserting that it could be the most neo-conservative movie ever because it advances "the point we neo-cons made in Iraq: that American blood is not worth more than the blood of others, and that others' freedom is not worth less than American freedom." She even suggests that, although "*Avatar* has been charged with 'pantheism' its mythos is just as deeply Christian," reasoning that "the metaphor where one figure entered the skin of another" is akin to the incarnation of God in human form in Christian theology. Finally, she wonders, "Since when is flattening nature a conservative position, anyway? Are we supposed to be 'against' nature just because lefties are 'for' it?"

US Military Responses

Boaz is correct, of course, that many conservatives, including in the US Military, consider the film anti-military and un-American. The Marine Corps director of public affairs, Colonel Bryan Salas, for example, charged that the film did "a disservice" to the Marine Corps, which, he averred "prides itself on understanding host country narratives and sensitivities in complex climes and places" ("Core Official" 2010). A barrage of responses followed on the *Military Times* forum, however, showing greater diversity of opinion in the military than many would assume. Retired Marine Corps Colonel Victor Bianchini wondered if the public relations officer even watched the movie, noting (as did a number of other forum participants) that the RDA forces were "not in the service of their country, but mercenaries of a mega-corporation." "The true heroes of the film," he added, were former Marines, "the paraplegic Jake Sully and the heroic female helicopter pilot Trudy Chacon." Bianchini added other details, including, "Jim Cameron is a friend of the Marine Corps, has portrayed Marines positively in many of his films and has a brother, of whom he is very proud, who served in the Corps." Bianchini concluded his discussion by noting that "many films convey morality metaphors that are often only intended to appeal to the 'better angels of our nature,' and this one is no exception."[4] Most of the forum participants responding to the film viewed the film positively (many explicitly agreeing with Bianchini) and thought that the true Marine spirit was represented honourably; many of the positive comments were from armed service members who described themselves as politically conservative. "Gabe078" even contended that the real hero was Trudy Chacon, "who behaved how a Marine should—

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[4] His post was made on 15 January 2010 and, while signed with his name and rank, his screen name was "JUDGEBIANCHINI." His comments and the fascinating and diverse reactions to *Avatar* were posted at the Military Times Forum, http://www.militarytimes.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-1584779.html, but have since been removed.

standing up for what is right and helping those who cannot help themselves." In a subsequent comment, he added praise for Jake Sully, and then, in a statement that many postcolonial critics would probably find surprising coming from a US military serviceman, he declared: "The real enemy was ... colonization of a people and land for profit, greed, asserting a will and dominance on a 'nation of people' (an alien species in this case) who were given no choice." In an environmental ethics class that I taught the semester after the film was released, students from military families (more than a dozen) were highly positive about the film and said their families were too; none of them thought the film was anti-American. One young man among them said that he and his buddies had been drawn to the film because of the promised special effects, and he and his friends began their discussion afterward by speaking enthusiastically about these effects. Soon, however, and hesitantly at first because they were afraid of how the others might react, he and his friends began talking about the beauty of Pandora, how much they loved being outdoors (often while hunting or fishing), and how the film reminded them of the beauty of Earth.

Of course, some service members were harshly critical of the film. One veteran who commented online wrote that "portraying our military as fanatical crazed killers who have joined a military mercenary force to destroy a civilization so that corporations can capitalize on some rare commodity prized by earthlings is disrespectful to our soldiers, especially in this time of war." He added, "Knowing that 90% of 'Hollywood' is liberal ... only confirms the anti military theme of this movie" (Treese 2010).[5] Another online commentator wrote an anonymous post titled "*Avatar* Made Me Want to Throw Up," arguing that Sully and Chacon committed treason, murdering "their fellow soldiers and American comrades." After a number of respondents countered that Sully and Chacon behaved honourably, faulting the writer for failing to recognize that the RDA's forces were mercenaries, not Marines, the anonymous author responded by defending the invaders even more vehemently:

> The "Sky People" never once made the first move without due warning. They wanted the tree and so they took it. Eminent domain. I am sure the resources provided under that tree could be used to help save many American lives— why else would it be so valuable. The natives were being greedy. They did not have to die and they did not have to retaliate. If they wanted to retaliate, that is fine, but do not expect sympathy. If all had gone according to plan, NO ONE would have died and who knows what benefits would have come.[6]

He concluded that the Na'vi were "not even humans" and that, although he volunteers at an animal shelter, "you better believe I will put my human life over" that of

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[5] Some of this text had disappeared on 5 April 2012, as it had over three hundred comments in response to it.

[6] "*Avatar* Made Me Want to Throw Up," 19 December 2009, http://forums.anandtech.com/showthread.php?t=2034216.

dogs or other non-humans. These comments were met with incredulity by some of the respondents.

Which, if any, of the views expressed by current or former US military personnel will be surprising will depend on one's preconceptions about military subcultures. The same dynamic occurs with regard to views supposedly promoted by "Hollywood."

Responses from Left-Wing Radicals

Pre-existing cognitive frames seem to be no less important to the understandings of left-wing thinkers. For those acquainted with certain intellectual schools, for example, it is unsurprising that leftist, postmodern, and post-colonial theorists would criticize Cameron for promoting what they view as a destructive stereotype of the "ecologically noble savage" and for the film's implication that the liberation of oppressed peoples depends on a "white messiah" and other saviours from the ranks of the oppressors.[7] Some feminists condemn what they consider the film's misogyny. Some of these positions are presented in previous chapters of this volume, but some of the more extreme critics remain to be explored.

One of the most extreme voices is that of the Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek. He contends that, contrary to the film's "politically correct themes," *Avatar* presents "an array of brutal racist motifs: a paraplegic outcast from earth is good enough to get the hand of a beautiful local princess, and to help the natives win the decisive battle. The film teaches us that the only choice the aborigines have is to be saved by the human beings or to be destroyed by them. In other words, they can choose either to be the victim of imperialist reality, or to play their allotted role in the white man's fantasy." Thus, the film enables viewers to sympathize "with the idealised aborigines while rejecting their actual struggle" (Žižek 2010a). Yet Žižek does not explain why these binaries are the only possible interpretations of the film, nor does he provide any evidence that the film promotes sympathy but not solidarity with the actual struggle of indigenous peoples. Instead, he expresses a view held by some progressives and probably the majority of leftist radicals: that the film does little if anything to promote anti-capitalist action and solidarity with indigenous peoples, let alone revolutionary class consciousness. Žižek's apparent antipathy toward contemporary environmentalism, and especially environmental spirituality, may help illuminate his hostility to *Avatar*.[8] In a YouTube video, for example, he denounces "ecology as religion," calling it a mystifying ideology and "the new opium of the masses" (2010b). According to Žižek, this ideology— with its diagnosis of "alienation from nature" as the root of our current predicaments and its prescription for healing (namely, seeing ourselves as rooted in and belonging to nature)—is deeply conservative. Instead of trying to return to some

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[7] For a good overview of the diversity of post-colonial thinking about *Avatar*, see Thomas (2010).

[8] Literary scholar and post-colonial theorist Anthony Carrigan, who read a draft of this article, pointed out, citing Žižek (1991, 34–35) that this antipathy has been longstanding for Žižek.

supposed natural balance that hubristic humans have disturbed, he contends, we must sever our roots in nature and embrace artificiality, including by transforming nature through genetic engineering. He concludes by admiring a pile of trash and arguing that we need to love and embrace the real world, not an idealized one. Clearly, for such radicals, Prometheus lives!

Radical environmentalists, however, who advance a worldview akin to what Žižek criticizes, usually see more to praise than to criticize in *Avatar*. Long-term radical environmental activist Harold Linde (2010), for example, considers the film a stunning work of radical environmentalist propaganda that promotes a Gaian worldview as well as the view that "destroying the rain forest for profit is morally and spiritually wrong." For other radical environmentalists, however, the capitalist motivation for making the film and the immense expense of it (including the supposed costs to the non-human world from all such filmmaking) is sufficient to reject any claim that the film has value. Some of these radicals share the previously mentioned criticism that the film is rooted in regressive ideas such as the supposed white saviour theme.[9]

Anarcho-primitivists, a subset of radical environmentalists who seek to reharmonize humans with nature through a return to pre-agricultural foraging lifeways, seem to be especially receptive to the film.[10] Layla AbdelRahim, a Canadian citizen born in Moscow and of mixed Somali and Russian ancestry, for example, praised the film on her blog and on "Anarchy Radio," which is hosted by the best-known primitivist theorist, John Zerzan.[11] She contends, "The film is an overt commentary on the historical and present-day place of anthropologists in imperialist expeditions and of the role the hard sciences play in, both, elaborating the philosophy of imperialism and in providing the necessary information for its execution. As Col. Quaritch makes clear, the scientist is the carrot and the military is the stick" (AbdelRahim 2009). In another post, she directly counters the view (commonly expressed by left-wing critics) that *Avatar* is sexist or racist, arguing that "by presenting the Human as part of the animal world," Cameron attacks both speciesism and humanism, which "furnishes the philosophical foundation for all 'isms': sexism, racism, animalism, etc." (ibid.).

In two ways, AbdelRahim's commentary is noteworthy. First, it suggests that at least some of those who have affinity with anti-authoritarian and biocentric ethics may be more likely than others to approve of *Avatar*. (For a contrary view from another anarchist critic, see John Clark's scathing critique in an essay published under his pseudonym, Max Cafard [2010].) Second, AbdelRahim highlights the pernicious role that anthropologists (and other scientists) have played in the subjugation of indigenous peoples and their deracination from and the destruction of their habitats. Cameron

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[9] My account here is based on decades-long research and fieldwork within radical environmental subcultures, including since the release of *Avatar*.

[10] This reharmonization is often seen as involving the collapse possibly precipitated by insurrection of authoritarian and ecologically unsustainable industrial agricultures; see Zerzan (1994) and Jensen (2006a, b).

[11] See http://johnzerzan.net/radio/.

himself has stressed that the scientist Augustine is "on the wrong side, she's one of the invaders," even though she eventually comes to love the Na'vi people and tries to help them (Dunham 2012, 191).

Most contemporary anthropologists, of course, understand and attempt to distance themselves from this history, including through efforts to support aboriginal peoples in their struggles against further threats to their cultures and homelands (Starn 2011; Clifford 2011). Part of this effort includes criticism of ideas they consider to be overtly or covertly colonialist. This helps to explain the strong criticism of *Avatar* by those who think that it promotes an image of indigenous peoples as "noble savages" and that the plot in which turncoat American soldiers successfully defend the Na'vi obscures history and is rooted in colonialist attitudes (Simpson 2011).[12] What at least some in the anarchist tradition are doing, however, is extending their critique of authoritarianism to the exploitation and subjugation of non-human living beings, even identifying humanism (and its leftist variants) as part of the global problem. This helps explain why radical environmentalists, including the anarchists among them, have for the most part found more to praise than criticize in *Avatar*.

Evaluating the Evaluations

My own perceptions have been enhanced and complicated by the diverse commentaries about *Avatar*, including the preceding essays in this volume. This is one reason why I welcomed the widest range possible of perspectives about the film and its significance when issuing a call for critical reflections about *Avatar*. It is also why I have been especially interested in the views of those who typically do not express themselves in print and thus pursued analyses based on fieldwork that would seek out such views and voices. The fieldwork-based articles and those that analyze the many, increasingly open forums on the Internet, show how insightful and nuanced are the views of individuals who are rarely asked for their opinions.

I have, up to this point, held in abeyance my own judgments, in part because I wanted to consider carefully the diverse views precipitated by the film and possibly modify my initial views of the film as a result. While still in an analytical mode, working back and forth between sometimes competing perspectives, I will now weave in my own views about Cameron, his film, and its significance. These views have been shaped by over three decades as a scholar and activist trying to understand what leads people to participate in movements that seek to protect Earth's biological and cultural diversity. I have been especially focused on how the affective and spiritual (or religious) dimensions of human experience might relate to such mobilization. These are some of the lenses through which I examine nature-related social phenomena, which I provide

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[12] Adrian Ivakhiv (2013) provides a nuanced review of the critiques of the film, including more details on the contending views of the film expressed by anthropologists.

because, to evaluate my analyses, readers quite understandably may want to know something about what shapes my perspective.

Is *Avatar* (and Cameron) Misogynist, Colonialist, or Racist?

In my view, if by *misogyny* we mean the hatred of women (and girls), the criticism that *Avatar* (and, by implication, Cameron) is misogynist can be quickly dismissed, for it appears to be based on weak, if any, evidence, as well as upon a remarkable ability to ignore evidence to the contrary.[13] Cameron is properly recognized, to evidence a counter-argument, for creating powerful heroines, unlike most Hollywood directors (Keegan 2009, 225, 227).[14] A number of articles written or co-authored by indigenous scholars, however, have raised more poignant observations and criticisms. These express both appreciation for and disappointment with the film.

John James and Tom Ute (2011), for example, strongly criticize *Avatar* and several other films that have taken up colonial themes, contending that despite their efforts to criticize colonial repression, these films "actually reaffirm the colonial prejudices they seek to challenge" (187).[15] For evidence, they note that in *Avatar*, Sully prevails over Omaticaya natives in athletic events. This positions Sully, in their view, "not only as an unlikely Savior of the Na'vi, but as a self-indulgent one for the average theatergoer" (190). Because James and Ute do nothing to explain or provide evidence for their claim that this theme is "self-indulgent," I do not find that point compelling. But this observation gives me pause: why *does* the Sully character have to be superior to the tribals in their own sports and martial arts and with the animals they customarily use in those activities? This hardly seems necessary and may provide an example of how difficult it is, as many have argued, for the beneficiaries of colonialism to "decolonize" their minds. James and Ute, and some other critics of *Avatar*, seem to be arguing that in making Sully superior in some ways to some of the Na'vi, Cameron has revealed a moral blind spot, an assumed sense of superiority. As have many others, James and Ute directly criticize what they perceive to be the "white messiah" theme, asserting that "the film only reaffirms the colonial, social, and economic paradigms that it seeks to

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[13] One of the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript noted that here I was disagreeing with Chris Klassen's article in this volume and wondered why, then, I included it in the volume. Klassen defined *misogyny* in the most literal way, as hatred of women, and I did not find compelling her contention that the deaths of Augustine and Chacon evidence misogyny. Given this definition, I also doubt her assertion that misogyny is "nearly universal," even if it is all too common. But it would violate my expressed intention to promote engagement and debate about the film to exclude views with which I disagree.

[14] Anthony Carrigan (personal communication, 12 May 2012) is probably correct that some gender commentators would probably complain that by creating characters that mirror masculine traits, Cameron does little to disrupt assumptions about conventional gender roles. I have not found such critiques published, however, and I think, moreover, that there is more complexity to Cameron's characters than such a criticism would acknowledge.

[15] For a similar argument and many other scathing and sardonic criticisms of the film, see John Clark (as Cafard 2010). Clark concludes that *Avatar* in no way promotes resistance to the "global system of domination" and in fact, "no message will have a salutary effect in the real world, if that message is transmitted through the dominant media."

undermine by suggesting the natives' inability to liberate themselves from the forces of oppression ... thereby conferring power to a privileged colonizer, in this case, a white American male" (191; for similar critiques see Simpson 2011; Clifford 2011; and Douthat 2010). James and Ute conclude that filmmakers such as Cameron should stop congratulating audiences "for their pseudocognizant effort" and instead "hold them actively accountable for their actions" (197).

I have no idea what these critics mean by "pseudo-cognizant effort," nor do I understand how a popular theatrical filmmaker (let alone a didactic documentarian) is supposed to "hold audiences responsible" for any action, let alone for the ways in which audiences might benefit from, or be complicit in, the exploitation of indigenous populations and nature. This is only one of many examples in which critics set an impossibly high ethical bar for a filmmaker to vault. Moreover, I think it is important to ask: Through what other means has the violent deracination of indigenous peoples by imperial forces ever been presented *to a global mass public*? One would think that this would draw praise, not such sharp criticism, from those who would like to raise global awareness of this long history and resistance to its continuing process.

For many critics, of course, reaching a mass audience with a pro-indigenous and reverence-for-life message is far from enough. Columbia University anthropologist and Kahnawá:ke/Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson, who is one of many who criticize the supposed "white messiah" theme, also offers a unique argument: after noting that spectacles like *Avatar* do political work, she argues that in settler, colonialist societies, such spectacles "redirect emotions, histories, and possibilities" in a way that obscures the genocidal dynamics and law-based justifications of "dispossession, disenfranchisement, and containment" (2011, 207). She finds it difficult to see how a spectacle like *Avatar* could be, in any sense, helpful to native peoples. Nevertheless, she adds in a footnote that she appreciates one aspect of the film: "Cameron's surprise," she writes, was to "reimagine ... the familiar period in U.S. history known as 'the Indian Wars'" as one in which the settlers are repulsed and their occupation fails. In this singular aspect, she writes, *Avatar* is "optimistic, uplifting, and perhaps absolving" (212–13n1). By "absolving," she probably means that Cameron can therefore be forgiven for the film's flaws, but clearly, Simpson finds something inspiring in *Avatar*: namely, the possibility of indigenous victory and of constructing a flourishing new world.[16]

Of the indigenous analysts of the film, I found the reflections of Daniel Heath Justice and Julia Good Fox especially nuanced and insightful. Using an approach that complements the fieldwork-based studies in this volume, Justice (2010) notes that people in his own indigenous and intellectual circles, who are deeply engaged with issues of "indigenous sovereignty and spirituality, colonization and decolonization, other-than-human kinship, traditional ecological knowledge and environmental destruction," have had complicated responses to the film. Given the "blistering critique online and in

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[16] For similar views on the constructive possibilities presented by the film, see Latour (2011a) and Clifford (2011).

print from both the right and the left," Justice expected his friends and colleagues to express "substantial indignation" if not also "sweeping dismissal" of the film. "That's not how it turned out, not even for me," he writes. "Our responses ranged from guarded optimism ... to thoughtful frustration (it's powerful in so many ways, but why do we need yet another story about Indigenous struggle told through a non-Native's voice and perspective?), but no one dismissed it. On the whole, the overwhelming sense was, 'Well, it's flawed, but at least it's getting people talking.'" Justice continues, "That there's so much commentary in the blogosphere on the film's underlying current of 'white guilt' indicates to me that *something* is happening with audiences and critics" (emphasis in original). He then surmises, "There's probably a good opportunity here to engage an audience on Indigenous issues that might not otherwise have been interested or receptive."

As for the film itself, however, Justice is more critical, arguing that by creating simplistic characters that are either purely good or evil, Cameron's protagonists are so obviously unreal that audiences can not relate to them. Justice mentions, for example, that he knows many native and non-native soldiers, adding thoughtfully that military service is very complicated for Native Americans and that it is simplistic to characterize soldiers "as brutes and bigots." The result of these simplistic characterizations, Justice contends, is that audience members do not see themselves as part of the history, or current reality, that the film metaphorically depicts. Consequently, "the potential for *actual* critical commentary is diminished, and the audience is left with a self-congratulatory feeling of having grappled with major issues without having actually dealt with any of the *real* complexities of colonialism, militarism, reverence for the living world, or environmental destruction" (emphasis in original).

Even though I consider such claims about the affective states of audience members to be unduly speculative, I do think that Justice's argument is plausible, that overly simplistic characters might hinder people from making connections between their own histories and actions and the deracination of indigenous peoples from their lands and the destruction of those lands. The skepticism expressed by Justice (and others) about the film's ability to produce understanding and evoke sympathy and solidarity with indigenous peoples is certainly understandable.

Unlike the more strident critics, however, Justice acknowledges that the film has some "narrative brilliance," as when Neytiri scolds Sully for "his casual response to the destruction of life his rescue required; the soulcrushing horror of Hometree's destruction and the survivors' disorientation and exile; and the adoption ceremony that remakes Jake into a full Na'vi, with both the rights and responsibilities that such a ceremony necessitates, and his subsequent betrayal of the Na'vi and Neytiri's anguished response." He is also forthcoming about his own emotional response to the film, reporting that in places he found it moving, although he subsequently indicates that neither this nor the filmmaker's good intentions are enough: "For all its good intentions, for all its visual spectacle and effecting sentiment (yes, I got teary-eyed a couple of times), it's still ultimately a story about 'those bad guys who aren't us.' Sadly, as we know

from example after example in the past, distant and immediate, the bad guys, all too often, *are* us" (emphasis in original).

Julia Good Fox also understands well any cynicism about the film in light of the long history of filmmaking serving imperial interests and the ideology of manifest destiny. Moreover, she expresses frustration at seeing yet another cinematic expression of the "non-Tribal man's fantasy that an Indigenous woman will find him more desirable than she does all other Tribal men" (Good Fox 2010).[17] Nevertheless, she argues that "it is a willful oversimplification" to reduce the film to "going native" or "white-saviour" themes. She insightfully notes that all of Cameron's films wrestle with difficult, "cross-cultural intersections that occur in improbable circumstances," where "representative individuals and cultures misconnect, disconnect, shun connection, abuse connection, and, of course, connect." She cites indigenous studies professor Taiaiake Alfred (from the University of Victoria, British Columbia), who has observed that one of the shared traits of Native American peoples has been "the ability to appreciate and recognize multidimensional relationships," a notion found "in such translated phrases as 'all my relations.'" Good Fox suggests that in *Avatar*, the phrase "I see you" coheres with such an understanding. This notion, she writes, refers not merely to "a glance or a gaze, but rather [to] an accurate and encompassing recognition, an insightful and respectful acknowledgment." It expresses the idea that "I comprehend our connection, our relatedness." For Good Fox, *Avatar* represents a valuable exploration of what makes possible, and hinders, authentic recognition of relatedness. Moreover, contrary to many of the critics, according to Good Fox, because it is sometimes easier to communicate such realities indirectly "through the use of analogies," the film has a chance of countering manifest destiny, "the de facto ideology of the United States."[18]

With regard to the "white-saviour" critique, Good Fox observes that Sully's transformation required "the assistance and mentoring" of four women, "Neytiri, Mo'at, Dr. Grace Augustine, and Trudy Chacon." Good Fox also insightfully notes that two of Sully's female mentors (Augustine and Mo'at) are maternal figures: Mo'at plays a particularly powerful role as "the moral anchor of the film," at one point denying the request from the Na'vi men to kill Sully, an intervention that gives him "a second chance at life" and makes it possible for him "to reemerge as a new man on Pandora."[19]

Good Fox makes another striking observation, which is all the more notable since it would have been easy for her to miss given her frustration with certain aspects of the love story between Sully and Neytiri. She comments that, despite its problematic

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[17] All Good Fox quotes are from this essay, which I highly recommend.

[18] Rachelle Gould and her collaborators (this volume) made a similar point about analogies.

[19] Several of the earlier articles in this volume noted that Sully is as much if not more saved than saviour in the film; a different argument against the "white messiah" charge is that Eywa, "the planetary mind," is actually the saviour (Pilkington 2011, 39). Pilkington, moreover, argues that those who consider the film racist are willfully misreading the film's plot and particularly the events in the final battle, concluding, "Alas, not everyone who went to see Avatar left his or her expectations and prejudices behind" (68).

aspects, the love story "goes beyond white people's desire to be the object of beauty and erotic attraction for Indigenous Peoples. Colonizers also want to be forgiven for the damage they (and their ancestors) have wrought. This is most strongly suggested in the Pietà scene near the film's end, when Neytiri holds Scully's human form and the audience is presented with a visual of the perceived redemptive power of Native love for the non-Native." This struck me, in part because it reminded me of one November evening in 1995 when Walter Bresette, an Ojibwe activist who fought for Indian treaty rights and against various mining projects, hijacked a conference on ecological resistance movements that I had orchestrated at the University of Wisconsin.[20] Bresette and the Scottish author/bard and land-rights activist Alastair McIntosh used the term "hijack" when they interrupted the panel, declaring that it was improper that a conference dealing with indigenous land rights and environmental issues had no prayer or ceremony. After giving the approximately two hundred audience members time to flee if they wished (few, if any, did), Bresette led what he called a "welcome ceremony" for the nonindigenous conference participants. His stated motivation was, essentially, that if the latecomers did not feel at home, if they did not feel that they belonged to this continent, then they would continue to treat badly its Aboriginal peoples and the land itself.[21]

For the purpose of this analysis, the details of the ceremony are less important than its emotional dimensions. Some Americans with European ancestry are aware of the devastating impact on native peoples and on the continent's environmental systems that followed their arrival, feel guilty as a result, and would like to atone as best they can. But reconciliation can only really be achieved through the generosity of native peoples. After the ceremony, Bresette told me that it was a difficult thing to do emotionally, to welcome the descendants of the original invaders, but he considered this sort of ritual to be essential bridge building in the cause of protecting native rights and the continent's land and waters. Good Fox observes, it seems to me, an important parallel moment in *Avatar* that symbolizes the possibility (despite fraught histories and human frailties) that cross-cultural respect and reciprocity can be developed. Perhaps *Avatar* goes even further, suggesting that against all odds, grievances can be forgiven and respect and even love might emerge when colonial peoples acknowledge the injustices and work to change the dominant society's course. Here, it seems to me, Good

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[20] Bresette, an Ojibwe activist and enrolled member of the Loon clan of the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, was a co-founder of the Wisconsin Green Party, and an ardent opponent to mining in his homeland (present-day Wisconsin). The Indian-environmentalist alliance, which had significant successes during the 1990s, is detailed in Whaley and Bresette (1994); see also Gedicks (1993, 1995). McIntosh recalls Bresette saying, as part of the ceremony, "We must all learn to be indigenous now" (Williams, Roberts, and McIntosh 2011, 426; cf. McIntosh 1998).

[21] Bresette's was not the only Native American voice expressing such a view. In a way that reminds me of Bresette's welcoming ceremony, William Woodworth (Raweno:Kwas, of Mohawk heritage) wrote: "The Hotinonshon:ni prophecy of the gathering of peoples from the four directions under the White Pine Tree of Peace appears to be coming to fruition. The time has come for Indigenous peoples to share their ancient responsibilities to welcome and host visitors to their homelands" (Woodworth 2010, 25).

Fox illuminates important mythic and religious themes in the film, including those of repentance, redress, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

As we have seen, Daniel Heath Justice is more pessimistic than Good Fox about the film precipitating respect for and solidarity with indigenous peoples, let alone kinship feelings toward our Earthly non-human co-inhabitants. Soon after the release of the film, Justice nevertheless wrote that the "jury was still out" with regard to the impact of the film. For my part, during many interviews with environmental activists over more than two decades, I have learned that no small number of them trace their activist vocations to, or at least note important influences of, artistic productions that explore and evoke outrage and sympathies regarding injustices toward people and the wider natural world. Some have cited J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, while others have mentioned animated motion pictures such as *FernGully* and *The Lion King*, or television programs, such as the Gaia-themed cartoon series *Captain Planet* (Taylor 2010, 127–55). As a result of such testimonies, I am more inclined to expect that a film like *Avatar* will inspire some viewers to become activists or to deepen such commitments, if they are already present. Moreover, while I think Justice's concern that the exaggerated good-versus-evil characters in *Avatar* could preclude some from connecting the film to trends and events in their own histories and worlds, I doubt that this is usually the case. Many statements that audience members have made about the film, including those reported in this volume, indicate that they recognize that the film is a melodrama that exaggerates characters to get audiences rooting for one side over the other. I doubt, therefore, that its oversimplifications would significantly reduce the extent to which audiences would draw the messages the filmmaker intended to convey.

Cameron's Intentions, Strategy, and Affinity with "Dark Green" Nature Spirituality

Unlike most critics of the film, I think it is important (and a matter of fairness) to consider what Cameron has said about his intentions for the film and to note his rejoinders to the most prevalent criticisms of it.

In the prologue to this volume, I noted Cameron's intention to use *Avatar* to help people appreciate the "miracle of the world that we have right here" and to understand that all living things are interconnected and mutually dependent (Associated Press 2010). I noted also Cameron's biocentric sentiments, expressed in public statements of concern about anthropogenic species extinctions.[22] These sentiments were also shown

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[22] The kind of language he used at the Golden Globe Awards ceremony (quoted in the prologue to this volume and found at http://www.accesshollywood.com/james-camerons-avatar-wins-big-at-golden-globes_article_27831) is common for Cameron. Similarly, he told his biographer: "All life on Earth is connected ... but our industrial society ... will inevitably lead to a severe degradation of biodiversity and ultimately to a serious blowback effect against humanity" (quoted in Keegan 2009, 254).

in Cameron's delight that many of *Avatar*'s viewers took the side of nature against the destructive forces of an expansionist human civilization, even expressing support for those engaged in direct action resistance to such forces here on Earth and, on many occasions, calling for more people to become "warriors for Mother Earth."[23] Moreover, in his 1994 *Avatar* scriptment, Cameron expresses the respect he has for indigenous peoples and their often animistic spiritualities, lending credence to such spiritual perceptions through his character Jake Sully, who comes to respect the Na'vi people and their own perceptual horizons, including their belief that the forest "is alive with invisible dynamic forces" (Cameron 1994). In an official *Confidential Report on the Biological and Social History of Pandora*, also subtitled *An Activist Survival Guide*, these and related themes are also expressed, from the need to celebrate the "magic and mystery" and "interconnectedness" of nature to the recognition of biotic kinship (symbolized in the movie by the neural "queue" at the end of the Na'vi's braids). Readers are also urged to "Fight for the Earth!" (Wilhelm and Mathison 2009a, xiii, xv, xiv, 72, 31).

All of these themes are characteristic of what I have called "dark green religion" and provide evidence that Cameron has affinities with at least the non-theistic forms of such spirituality. (Cameron has forthrightly stated that he is an atheist.)[24] Additional characteristics typical of such spirituality include feelings of awe and wonder at the mysteries of the universe, peace and contentment when in the midst of relatively healthy environmental systems, and humility rooted in an understanding that like all other organisms, sooner or later, we are all part of the food chain. Cameron has expressed just such feelings and views, as, for example, when describing the peace he feels in the ocean, especially when underwater, where no one "knows who you are. You're just part of the food chain" (Keegan 2009, 212). For many who have affinity with dark green spirituality, understanding that death is the necessary wellspring of new life also eliminates the fear of death. Cameron imputes just such a perspective to the Na'vi, who "are brave and unafraid of death because they know it is part of a greater cycle" (254).

Indeed, at the very heart of dark green spirituality are *feelings* of belonging and connection to nature—and the *recognition* that all living things belong to nature, for they all emerge from, depend upon, and return to Earth. Cameron has often and directly expressed such feelings, as when responding to an interviewer who asked him

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[23] See, for example, his Earth Day speech in April 2010 at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDHkO5-Hf78, and the video introduction at the "*Avatar* Home Tree Initiative" website, http://www.avatarmovie.com/hometree/. Cameron attributed the success of the film to increasing eco-social consciousness, while also noting the strong resistance to such understandings.

[24] Cameron has "sworn off agnosticism," labelling it "cowardly atheism," according to biographer Rebecca Keegan, who recorded Cameron as adding, "I've come to the position that in the complete absence of any supporting data whatsoever for the persistence of the individual in some spiritual form, it is necessary to operate under the provisional conclusion that there is no afterlife and then be ready to amend that if I find it otherwise" (quoted in Keegan 2009, 8).

whether changes in the natural world that he had witnessed had influenced his creation of *Avatar*. Cameron answered that his "sense of a connection to nature" leads him to want to halt the widespread destruction of the natural world and that since he is a filmmaker, he tries to make a difference through the cinematic arts (Suozzi 2010). Cameron's often-expressed affirmation of the importance of connecting with nature was probably part of his motivation in making *Aliens of the Deep* (co-directed with Steven Quale in 2005), a documentary that introduces viewers to the wonders of the ocean's depths. More evidence about his desire to help people connect to nature can be discerned in his response to a question about the meaning of *Avatar*. He replied that in the movie, he tried to address critical questions about our relationships to other people and other cultures, and "our relationship with the natural world at a time of nature-deficit disorder" (in Louv 2010). The phrase "nature-deficit disorder," coined by Richard Louv (2005), reflects a common environmentalist (and dark green) belief that time in nature is essential if people are to reconnect with the sources of their being and reharmonize with life on Earth.[25]

Cameron obviously values documentaries and understands that they can help to educate and mobilize the public in positive ways, but he also recognizes that "they're usually watched by people who already understand the problem, as opposed to a piece of global mass entertainment that will reach everybody" (Suozzi 2010). So with *Avatar*, instead of just trying to provide information and provoke "a kind of intellectual reaction," Cameron sought to evoke "a powerful, emotional" response (ibid.). This alone is not enough, Cameron acknowledges, for a film like *Avatar* does not tell people what to do. He does think, however, that such art can precipitate action.

Cameron wanted, of course, to remind audiences about colonial histories wherein one group invades and steals the land or resources from indigenous cultures, "sometimes wiping them out completely, to the point that we don't have many truly indigenous cultures left in this world" (Dunham 2012, 192). For Cameron, this is not merely of historical interest but a source of outrage, as was apparent in his resistance to pressure by the studio to define "unobtanium"—I surmise because he wanted to keep its metaphorical flexibility so that the film's message could be read as relevant to diverse historical and current events. As Cameron put it, "Unobtanium is beaver pelts in French colonial Canada... It's diamonds in South Africa. It's tea to the nineteenth-century British. It's oil to twentieth-century America. It's just another in a long list of substances that cause one group of people to get into ships and go kick the shit out of another group of people to take what is growing on or buried under their ancestral

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[25] Louv himself recognized Cameron's affinity with such a view by writing an open letter to him that was published in *Psychology Today*, appealing to Cameron for help in creating a mass back-to-nature movement (Louv 2010). Louv was hardly the first to express the views that made him a well-known environmental writer; for those who beat him to the argument, see Shepard (1982) and Nabhan and Trimble (1994).

lands" (Keegan 2009, 253). "We do the same thing with nature—we take what we need and we don't give back, and we've got to start giving back" (Dunham 2012, 192).[26]

Put simply, Cameron's stated goal in *Avatar* was to evoke in audiences "an emotional reaction to how we relate to nature" so that they will "wind up looking at things from the side of the Na'vi, with their deep respect for nature" (193). Cameron hopes that this will promote dramatic change in global consciousness and behaviour: "I'm hoping there will be a continued conversation around *Avatar* and around the needs and wishes that will elevate the consciousness and help us get the things done that need to be done. That's my new mission" (201). Some of his critics, of course, are disparaging of his strategic vision.[27] One can judge Cameron's strategic choices to be ineffective or morally suspect, but it only seems fair to acknowledge that he has thought deeply about how best to communicate ideas dramatically at variance with the most prevalent beliefs and assumptions undergirding contemporary industrial societies.

Cameron's Responses to Criticisms

Cameron has responded directly to a number of the most common criticisms of *Avatar*. To the charge that *Avatar* was extremely expensive and did nothing to challenge the consumerism that drives the destruction of native peoples and environmental systems, Cameron is unapologetic, noting that the film generates profits and in so doing helps many people to make a living (Dunham 2012, 196). But he has acknowledged that consumerism is a key problem, commenting that through our consumer appetites, "market forces cause a continuous expansion of our industrial presence, our extraction industries and so on," which is clearly linked to the destruction of indigenous societies and the habitats upon which they depend (Suozzi 2010). Yet he also speaks passionately of the tragic, global loss of indigenous knowledge and asserts that all of humanity has much to learn from indigenous societies: "The main point is that there is a value-system that they naturally have that has allowed them to live in harmony with nature for a long time and those principles, that wisdom, that spiritual connection to the world, that sense of responsibility to each other, that's the thing that we need to learn. It's a complete reboot of how we see things. I'm not even sure we can do it, but if there is hope, it lies in our ability to have a sea change in our consciousness—to

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[26] Cameron has long sought to include socially important messages in his films, criticizing class divisions in Titanic, for example (Cameron and Dunham 2011).

[27] Cameron made another statement that those who want to force reparations on those who have benefited from past injustices would find objectionable: he contended that one of the great things about science fiction is that it can make us seriously "look at the human condition" without causing the kind of defensiveness that comes when charges and blame is directly assigned. As Cameron put it in an interview, science fiction "can hold up a mirror to all of us without pushing specific buttons of your worse than—this guy's worse than this guy, you see what I mean? Science fiction doesn't really predict the future, that's not what it's there for. It's there to hold a mirror up to the present and look at the human condition, sometimes from the outside" (Cameron and Dunham 2011, 193).

not take more than we give" (ibid.). Cameron has also explicitly rejected the "white messiah" critique, responding to an interviewer, "I don't buy that... I don't think that any of these indigenous people that see their reality in the film felt that at all." He added that the reaction of the indigenous people has "been overwhelmingly positive" (while acknowledging that he could be unaware of criticisms from such peoples). He then emphasized that the very survival of indigenous people is at stake as "a highly mechanized, industrialised force" destroys their forests. "When all you've got to fight back with is bows and arrows, there has to be intervention from the international community. So I don't care what race the messiahs are, but we all have to be those messiahs, we have to help these people because you can't stop a bulldozer with a bow and arrow."

Of course, in these statements, Cameron expresses an oversimplified view of indigenous cultures and what resistance entails: clearly, not all native peoples and cultures, all the time, live in harmony with nature, let alone with one another (Krech 1999; Harkin and Lewis 2007; Potts and Hayden 2008). Moreover, when such cultures have elected to resist invaders violently, they have often used weapons other than bows and arrows. Nevertheless, Cameron is correct that where indigenous people have secured concessions or (more rarely) territorial integrity in the face of expansionist cultures, allies, even colonial ones, have usually played important roles. Cameron also understands that such allies can come from surprising places, such as anthropologists and biodiversity scientists, who today are generally much more sensitive to the needs and rights of indigenous people than in the past (Suozzi 2010, Taylor 2012). Cameron also appears to be aware that relationships between indigenous peoples and prospective allies are typically bedevilled with mistrust, misperception, and misunderstanding. Still, Cameron believes that by raising awareness and evoking sympathy through the film and by helping to dramatize specific injustices presently unfolding through his high public profile, he can help to give a voice to indigenous leaders. Although Cameron insisted, "I don't want to speak for them," he was obviously pleased that by dramatizing the plight of Amazonian Indians resisting a large dam project in Brazil, he had helped to give them "a bit of a spotlight to speak for themselves" (Suozzi 2010).

The Importance of Allies

Cameron is correct about the importance of allies. Indeed, there are many Earthly examples of *Avatar*'s plot line, wherein someone from a technologically dominant, invading culture defends the invaded culture, sometimes even "going native." Scott Littleton (2011), for example, points to the example of Gonzalo Guerrero in the sixteenth century. Guerrero, a soldier with the invading Spanish conquistadors, joined the Mayan resistance, and, because of his knowledge of Spanish military tactics, helped repel the invaders for a significant period of time. Littleton concludes that the resistance apparently ended shortly after Guerrero was killed, showing that the happy ending of *Avatar*

in these sorts of stories is "very hard to achieve in real life" (210). But Littleton also accurately notes a number of examples in which anthropologists embraced the cultures they came to study and have done their best to defend them against more powerful, impinging cultures (208–9).

My own work (including with collaborators) has documented cases in which, despite missteps and misunderstandings, activists, scientists, and other concerned people have been able to work sincerely and over the long term with native peoples; through such engagements, mutual learning and respect can develop, sometimes even leading to significant victories (Taylor 1995a, b; 1997a, b). Occasionally, these successes, which have to do with preventing some further or new injustice, are directly related to the concrete solidarity provided by actors who publicize the injustice and resistance to it, forcing changes—through public scrutiny and, sometimes, outrage—to corporate and/or governmental plans (Taylor 1995a; Adamson 2012a). Rob Nixon, who has tried to foster a rapprochement between post-colonial critics and the environmentalists who are often their targets, has spotlighted the importance of writer-activists and media "spectacle" in slowing or arresting the often invisible "slow violence" of environmentdegrading imperial histories and profit-driven social systems. According to Nixon (2011), in the absence of spectacle-driven public attention, great injustices are all the more likely to occur and remain unchallenged. In 1995, for example, the Nigerian military executed the Ogoni indigenousrights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was fighting Shell Oil and government corruption in his people's homeland. Nixon notes how little international attention his case received before the execution, which made the regime think it could get away with killing an eloquent opponent, even though most observers considered the case bogus and the trial unfair.[28] It is just such a "deficit of spectacle," as Joni Adamson (2012a, 145) aptly puts it, that writers and filmmakers of various sorts can help to overcome.

Adamson cites, for example, the way the documentary *Crude: The Real Price of Oil* (2009), along with a number of celebrities and activist attorneys from the United States, contributed to the strategy and public attention that made easier an $18 billion

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[28] Anthony Carrigan (personal communication 12 May 2012) astutely observed when reviewing this point in the chapter that there is an important level of complexity here that the film does not choose to engage due to the decision to stage its colonial encounter as a moment of relatively new contact. In so many places today, one of the most enduring legacies of colonialism has been the establishment of governments co-opted by ruling class and/or military elites that work against the interests of a wider if often characteristically fractured public sphere. In short, part of the film's more romanticized approach is to give primacy to colonial contact struggles over the even messier and intractable neocolonial realities that are much closer to the problems faced by most oppressed groups today globally.

While I agree with the facts expressed in his statement, I doubt that a film more focused in a complex way on the contemporary world would have drawn a mass audience. In my judgment, *Avatar* provides a unique opportunity for scholars and activists to build on the understandings and empathies that the film arouses. There is a temptation among intellectuals to want a theatrical filmmaker to make the documentary they would have made, but I think it is wiser to welcome the efforts of such artists, for these are not just matters of the head and sophisticated analyses—they are matters of the heart.

civil judgment against the Chevron Oil Company that was filed on behalf of affected Amazonian Indians.[29] Adamson also discusses the ways in which indigenous activists have seen their own struggles reflected in *Avatar* and have used the film to dramatize their plights and campaigns. She notes, for example, that Cameron has joined the battle against the gigantic Belo Monte Dam in the Brazilian Amazon, which is threatening a number of indigenous tribes there (see Barrionuevo 2010). Working with the environmental justice group Amazon Watch, Cameron spoke out against the dam and helped produce an educational film contending that its construction would violate indigenous rights and critically important rainforest habitats.[30] As Adamson put it when summarizing one of her central contentions: "Blockbuster films and documentaries are playing an increasingly important role in global environmental justice struggles," or as she put it elsewhere, in "indigenous cosmopolitics" (Adamson 2012a, 146; see also Adamson 2013).[31]

Developing cross-cultural and international alliances to protect vulnerable peoples and habitats is difficult, however. Two volumes have focused attention specifically on the difficulties and possibilities of indigenous/ non-indigenous alliances (Haig-Brown and Nock 2006; Davis 2010). All involved agree that developing such alliances demands deep commitment and, usually, long-term hard work. As the scholar of indigenous knowledge Leanne Simpson (Alderville First Nation, Canada) puts it in her introduction to the Davis volume, "Those of us involved in the movement for indigenous self-determination and social and environmental justice are well aware that every hard-fought victory has been a direct result of the alliances and relationships of solidarity we have forged, maintained, and nurtured with supporting Indigenous nations, environmental networks, and social justice organizations" (Davis 2010, xiii). Simpson also notes that while "building relationships with our supporters has been a key strategy in our movement for change," despite good intentions, "these relationships do not always come easily. Too often they have been wrought with cross-cultural misunderstandings, poor communication, stereotypes, and racism" (xiii–xiv).[32]

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[29] Chevron's appeal of the judgment was rejected in January 2012; see "Ecuador Appeals Court Rules against Chevron in Oil Case," BBC News, 4 January 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-16404268.

[30] See "Stop the Belo Monte Monster Dam" at http://amazonwatch.org/work/belo-monte-dam, and the video "A Message from Pandora," 27 August 2010, at http://amazonwatch.org/news/2011/0907-message-from-pandora, in which Cameron shows not only that he has worked hard to understand the issues, but also that he has—as far as can be seen—attempted to work in respectful solidarity with the indigenous people and social activists whom he met there.

[31] Despite these protests, Brazil's Supreme Court overturned lower court rulings suspending the dam's construction in August 2012, but the battle has continued at the site. Although hundreds of fishers and indigenous people have occupied the site, halting construction for weeks at a time, as this volume goes to the press in the spring of 2013, it appears that the Brazilian government is likely to succeed in building the dam (Associated Press 2012, Hance 2012).

[32] For a similar statement by the volume's editor, see Davis (2010, 4). Simpson is of Michi Saagiik Nishnaabeg ancestry, is a member of Alderville First Nation, and has published these books on indigenous movements: see Simpson (2008, 2011b) and Ladner and Simpson (2010)

Despite such difficulties, the subsequent reflections in Davis's volume demonstrate the importance of alliances across diverse scales, from global campaigns to pass the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to local campaigns to protect native territories and lands (Davis 2010).[33] I was struck when reading this work, just as I have been with the generous tone of the indigenous elders and intellectuals on the occasions when my fieldwork has been in or near Native North American territories. In contrast, one rarely hears non-native activists or intellectuals, perhaps especially those immersed in post-colonial discourses, stress the unity of human beings or the responsibility that we have toward "all life," let alone the importance of forgiveness and love, as have the elder and scholar Gkisedtanamoogk and several others (see especially Woodworth 2010; Swamp 2010; Gkisedtanamoogk 2010; Da Silva 2010; and Christian and Freeman 2010).[34]

Moreover, some who have been closely tracking developments within grassroots social/environmental movements perceive a new kind of politics emerging that rejects— or at least seeks to transcend—tense relations between peoples of the Global North and South, and between environmental and social justice activists. Instead, there are those who try to embrace what Isabel Stengers calls "cosmopolitics," and Marisol de la Cadena "multinaturalism," in which nature is understood to have its own value and agency, and dualistic perceptions of a disconnect between the interests of human and other organisms are considered inaccurate and shortsighted (Stengers 2005; De la Cadena 2010).[35]

In a striking passage that draws on Stengers, De la Cadena, Good Fox, Bruno Latour, and others, Adamson (2012a, 347) links the new cosmopolitics to *Avatar*:

> What is astonishing about indigenous groups linking their own regionally specific movements to *Avatar* is not that a blockbuster film is playing in India or the Andes or the Amazon; it is that the "things" that *Avatar* is helping to "make public" ... are living systems (mountains, rivers, forests, deserts) that may help inaugurate a politics that is more plural not because the people enacting it are bodies marked by race or ethnicity demanding rights, or by environmentalists representing nature, but because they force into visibility the culture-nature divide that has prevented multiple worlds

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[33] See especially part 2, 55–210, "From the Front Lines," which "documents concrete examples of alliance-building," including the "successes, tensions, and complexities" (Davis 2010, 8). Thomas (2010) mentions several post-colonial theorists who have also stressed the importance of alliances.

[34] I wonder if "decolonizing" one's mind can include incorporating these sorts of perspectives from indigenous peoples. In 1994, Edward Said described environmentalism as "the indulgence of spoiled tree huggers who lack a proper cause." It is no wonder, therefore, that so many of his progeny have had antipathy toward environmentalists and have failed to see that protecting environmental systems is critical to human well-being as well as the rest of the living world; for this quotation, see Nixon (2011, 332n69) and the related text (250–55).

[35] Latour (2011a) has also used the term *multinaturalism*; I do not know who coined it.

and species from being recognized as deserving the right to maintain and continue their vital cycles.

The emergence of such a multi-natural, multi-ethnic, trans-national cosmopolitics—which has a religious dimension that the political theorist Dan Deudney and I have discussed as "civil" or "terrapolitan" Earth religion—is indeed coming into view.[36] The most important examples of such cosmopolitics may be found in the Ecuadorian Constitution (passed in 2008) and in Bolivian legislation (passed in 2009). Drawing in part on Andean indigenous spiritualities, in a stunning innovation for nation-states, these nations conferred rights on nature.[37] A long-odds effort to gain United Nations ratification for the "Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth," which draws on Ecuador's constitution and the Bolivian law, was subsequently proposed by Bolivia's President Evo Morales and has been studied and promoted by the UN's Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.[38]

An increasing number of scholars, likewise, seem to be gravitating toward a much more comprehensive anti-colonial perspective, one that rejects not only the domination of one human group over another but also the human domination of other organisms and environmental systems as a whole. This nascent but promising trend promotes a holistic vision that seeks to make visible and precipitate resistance to violations of the right of all living beings to live and flourish (Naess 1973, 1989; Stone 1974; Cullinan 2003; Linzey and Campbell 2009; Latour and Weibel 2005; Latour 2011a; Apffel-Marglin 2011; Huggan and Tiffin 2010; Nixon 2011; DeLoughrey and Handley 2011).[39]

Truth in the Fiction of *Avatar*'s Cosmogony

Every work of art is subject to interpretation and critique, and I hope that *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* will be valued for provoking the kinds of discussions over issues of the rights of nature and of indigenous peoples that the filmmaker, and even some

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[36] For a discussion of an emerging "civil earth religion," see Deudney (1995, 1996, 1998), in which he coined the term *terrapolitan*, and Taylor (2010a, 180–99; 2010b).

[37] Joni Adamson (personal communication, 24 July 2012), who kindly reviewed this manuscript, commented at this point that these groups were not foregrounding spirituality or ethnicity, for fear of being dismissed as "superstitious," but instead were emphasizing rights—first civil, then non-human. She also noted that they seek a broad coalition based on these rights, regardless of whether individuals practice traditional religion. For more of her views in this regard, see Adamson (2012b).

[38] Catherine Eade, "'Mother Earth' to Be Given Same Rights as Humans under UN Plan," *Mail Online*, 12 April 2011, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article -1376244/South-American-countrys-treaty-giving-Mother-Earth-rights-citizens. html. See also the "Study on the Need to Recognize and Respect the Rights of Mother Earth," Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues of the United Nations, 15 January 2010, at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=E/C.19/2010/4

[39] See also the website of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature, http://therightsofnature.org/founding-meeting/, and the sources listed there.

of those who were ambivalent about the film, had hoped might result. My perception is, however, that most of the critics, even those especially sensitive to and supportive of indigenous sovereignty, have not fully appreciated the extent to which *Avatar* is a true story. An exception to the rule is the progressive British commentator George Monbiot (2010), who, although he is critical of some aspects of the film (and especially the "preposterous" happy ending), nevertheless calls *Avatar* "a profound, insightful, important film" because it spotlights both a long history of ongoing genocidal campaigns against indigenous people that "no one wants to hear, because of the challenge it presents to the way we choose to see ourselves." He concludes that it "speaks of a truth more important—and more dangerous—than those contained in a thousand arthouse movies." I agree.

Although it is a work of fiction, *Avatar* metaphorically presents a generally true cosmogony, or narrative about how the world came to be the way it is. The steady and now intensifying erosion of Earth's biological and cultural diversity has been, first and foremost, the result of a ten thousand–year process that began with the domestication of plant and animal species and the advent of agriculture. Since the lands that agricultures need for expansion are almost always already inhabited, agricultural civilizations are *necessarily* imperial, although not in every phase of expansion violently so. As Steven Stoll (2007, 56) puts it, agrarian societies generate large populations so they must expand if their subsequent generations are "to reproduce the material world of their parents." As such societies expand, they kill or displace through threat or coercion the pre-existing gatherer-hunters, or they convert them into agriculturalists, either by convincing them of benefits (e.g., greater food security), or of the idea that their best chance for survival is to assimilate. Whatever its specific characteristics in different times and places, this process has precipitated the dramatic, global decline of both cultural and biological diversity (Amery 1976; Diamond 1987, 1997; LaDuke 1999; Lockwood and McKinney 2001; Marsh [1864] 1970; Mason 1993; Oelschlaeger 1992; Ponting 2007; Shepard 1992, 1998; Stoll 2007; Wolfe 2006; Williams 2003). This is, moreover, a process saturated with religious significance and legitimation: the now predominant so-called world religions have fuelled and legitimated this process.[40] In the West, for example, forests were seen as a threat to Christian civilization— indeed, as the "last strongholds of pagan worship" (Harrison 1992, 61). But the religious agricultures (agrarian societies) of Asia have been no kinder to indigenous peoples or biologically diverse environmental systems. Thus, the long antipathy of agriculture toward indigenous peoples, even if not universal, has been the general trend and continuing dynamic. (A few of the many recent examples include Barton 2010; Douthat 2010; Beisner, n.d.; and Stewart, n.d.). This antipathy is obvious to anyone who studies how the ongoing deracination of indigenous peoples from their lands continues in

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[40] As Robert Harrison (1992, ix) put it in his study of forests, which applies equally to other wildlands, "The governing institutions of the West—religion, law, family, city—originally established themselves in opposition to the forests, which in this respect have been, from the beginning, the first and last victims of civic expansion." For further discussion, see Taylor (2012).

those regions of the world only recently reached by agricultural civilizations, which are now all the more destructive, powered by capital, fossil fuels, and industrial machinery.

Avatar presents but one extreme depiction of the everyday reality in which bio-cultural diversity is threatened by advancing agro-industrial civilizations. It is not didactic: it does not explicitly teach about the diverse ways in which such civilization spreads. It does not explain, for example, the ways in which the "settler colonialism" of virtually all agricultural peoples is violent (if not always obviously so). Nor does it point the finger at who has benefited, whether directly or indirectly (Wolfe 2006). Nevertheless, as Cameron and some of his critics hoped, the film opens the way for discussions of the dynamics that lead to the violation of human rights and the widespread destruction of environmental systems, and it does so by evoking sympathy, if in a metaphorical way, for the many victims of these processes. It can, therefore, provide social and environmental activists with educational openings and recruitment opportunities for their causes.

The Mythic and Political Possibilities of Motion Picture Spectacles

James Cameron has said that in *Avatar*, he aspired to mythic movie making, and myths, of course, orient people to their worlds and shape actions within them. It could well be that the cinematic arts provide the most powerful medium for myth making in the modern world. "Of modern art forms," Adrian Ivakhiv (2013) insightfully writes in *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, "it is cinema—the art of the moving image—that comes closest to depicting reality itself, because reality is always in motion, always in a process of becoming." According to Ivakhiv, film also "provides for the morphogenesis, the coming into form, of worlds." And it is especially important to note that the "spectacle" of cinema is related to its affective power, and that cinema can thus serve an ethical function, to "revivify our relationship to the world."[41] In the sixth chapter of his book, Ivakhiv provides a nuanced reading of *Avatar* that could profitably be read alongside the analyses in this volume. Like many of the critics whom he sympathetically cites, he is not sanguine about the film mobilizing people in the cause of social and environmental justice. But he also suggests that the critics may be too hasty in their judgments, because "a film is not only what happens between the dimming and the turning back up of the lights. It is also what happens in our discussions, dreams, and lives as we work with the images, sounds, and symbols it makes available to us." So while Ivakhiv concurs with some other critics that the film grossly oversimplifies the world's complex political dynamics, he concludes that it also "has presented op-

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[41] These passages are from the book's foreword. Because I read this excellent book before final proofs, I could not provide pagination, nor am I certain there will be no changes during production, but I cite the manuscript with the generous permission of Professor Ivakhiv.

portunities for activists to stake their own cases" and, moreover, that "fandom, once triggered, sets off on its own trajectories, which in this case may include those that turn viewers into radical activists."

It is quite clear that the film has not led to massive consciousness change or a new army of indigenous and environmental rights activists. Yet it has not been entirely without its desired impacts, either. Its fruits include not only the attitude shifts that we've documented in this volume but also more tangible results. On 8 February 2011, the Earth Day Network announced what is probably the most concrete activist outcome: the partners involved in the "Avatar Home Tree Initiative" had succeeded in mobilizing over thirty-one thousand individuals in planting over one million trees.[42] And the previous examples of literature and film moving people emotionally and then to action, combined with the examples of modest mobilization following the film documented in this volume, suggests that the film is playing, and probably will continue to play, at least some role in environmental mobilization.

It would be best to make neither too much nor too little of the potential power of the arts in general, and cinema in particular, in changing attitudes and altering behaviour. After all, social and environmental activists deploy many strategies toward just such an end—mostly they lose and usually their successes are limited and reversible. It is better to see a film like *Avatar* as both *reflecting* broad, if nascent and fragile, cultural shifts and emerging sensitivities, as well as *contributing* to them. Whether one judges such social changes as positive or negative, it will probably remain impossible to determine their future trajectory, given that environmental and social systems are complex and that the decisive variables, feedback loops, and tipping points, if any, are difficult to discern. Far better, then, to understand *Avatar* (including the envisioned sequels) as innovative ethical and spiritual cultural productions that are, as the military officer cited earlier put it, calling people toward the better angels of their natures.

Although I cannot predict the impact of *Avatar*, I do find hopeful many of the typical responses to it, wherein people are moved by its depiction of a beautiful forest and a flourishing forest culture living in respectful reciprocity with the diverse biota of its surround. I am encouraged that some who see it feel outrage at the injustice and destruction wrought by the invaders and joy when the riotous chorus of life arises to repel them. I doubt that most of those who felt such things had the cognitive frames to understand the tragic and long-term histories to which the film alluded. Nor do I think most audience members realize that the battles melodramatically depicted in the film are going on right now, let alone that their own societies, and the ideologies and worldviews that undergird them, are highly complicit in these destructive dynamics. Nor do most audience members know that it is possible to support, if not directly participate in, the resistance to the ongoing reduction of Earth's biocultural complexity. But the film can reinforce such understandings where they exist or can lead people

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[42] See "Avatar Home Tree Initiative Plants over 1 Million!" Earth Day Network, http://www.earthday.org/gallery/avatar-home-tree-initiative-plants-over-1-million.

to them where they do not. Activists of all sorts, if not all of the film's critics, have been quick to recognize that *Avatar* has provided them with an unusual opportunity to educate and organize those moved by the film into communities of solidarity and resistance.

I especially find it hopeful that when a film reveals the beauties of Earth's living systems (even if through the artifice of spectacular technology and Earth's metaphorical displacement to another planet) and reminds audience members (or reveals to them) what is being and has been lost, a significant number of viewers are moved and wish there was something they could do to prevent or reverse the losses. Perhaps this suggests the plausibility of the biophilia hypothesis, which was discussed appreciatively by a number of the contributors to this volume. The biophilia hypothesis was originally advanced by Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson and soon afterward, by his protege Steven Kellert and a number of others (Wilson 1984; Kellert and Wilson 1993; Kellert 2007). The basic notion is that there is a universal (if sometimes weak and forgotten) human aesthetic appreciation for biologically diverse and flourishing environmental systems, and this is because we know somehow, unconsciously, from deep down in our genome, that these are the systems in which we flourish. In short, we appreciate natural beauty not just because our cultures shape our aesthetics, even though they certainly do, but because the appreciation of wild nature is an adaptive evolutionary trait. This theory, if correct, would help to explain why the aesthetic appreciation of nature is part of the emotional repertoire of our species. And if this is the case, it may be that the power of many artistic productions, including *Avatar*, is to be found in the diverse, religion-resembling ways that they express and evoke such feelings.

I began my effort to understand the significance of *Avatar* by wondering if it was another example of the increasing influence and cultural traction of what I have called "dark green religion." If it does exemplify such spirituality, I wanted to know whether it was a salutary or dangerous form of it. Clearly, some critics have judged it harshly. Like many other academicians, had I made the film, I would have anticipated and avoided some of these criticisms. That is easy to say, of course, as I have neither the talent nor the experience or vision to make such a film. It is clear that Cameron is unsurpassed in his ability to draw millions to his films, which evoke strong emotions and sometimes even inspire critical reflection and action. Whatever the critics may say, *Avatar* may be more promising as a means for revisioning our relations to nature and understanding the injustices that accompany its destruction than not only a thousand art house films but also university courses, radical political commentaries, and scholarly books. Nevertheless, *Avatar* did not emerge from a vacuum, so whatever genius lies behind it is not that of one man. Rather, it is a reflection of the increasing global awareness of the value of both biological and cultural diversity and of the ways in which all of today's dominant civilizations continue to erode them. At the same time, it also reflects diverse new ways in which people today express and promote reverence for life. *Avatar*, as well as much of the reaction to it, suggests that a gestalt change in consciousness

may indeed be emerging. How extensive and effective this will be remains to be seen ... perhaps even in the forthcoming *Avatar* sequels and their reception.

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