

# Seeing blue: negotiating the politics of *Avatar* media activism

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'Bil'in weekly demonstration reenacts the Avatar film'

Source: <http://www.bilin-village.org/english/articles/testimonies/Bilin-weekly-demonstration-reenacts-the-Avatar-film>.

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how the Hollywood blockbuster *Avatar* (2009) has been taken-up in media activism directed towards Indigenous struggles against imperialism. It assumes the importance of locating this phenomenon within the discursive and material regimes that mediate, enable, and constrain it. I therefore offer a contextualised analysis of the film and media relating to its appropriation, which focuses on the representational practices and structural mechanisms that inform the production, circulation, and reception of the texts. This approach emphasises the tensions and contradictions that underpin activists' relationship to the media they mobilise. Such contradictions are particularly apparent in relation to the politics of race that shape *Avatar*, the Indigenous activism that references it, and the media regimes that make this possible. The very forces that marginalise Indigenous voices empower auteur James Cameron to speak on their behalf and to be heard. Activists must also negotiate the tension between co-opting media spectacle and being commercialised *as* spectacle. However, refusing a simple critique of the representations activists deploy as media spectacles, I argue for a model that foregrounds the alliances that they seek to engender. Drawing on the work of feminist scholars Oliver (2001) and Deslandes (2010), I signal a theoretical approach that focuses on *how* the mediated spectator relates to such representations and insists on the spectator's responsibility to respond. Acknowledging that the tensions that animate *Avatar* media activism can be both constrictive and creative, this project seeks a model that maximises the potential for the latter. It thus resists the paralysis of activism that can come with critiquing how we fight for the world we imagine.

# Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	IV
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>THE AMBIVALENCE OF <i>AVATAR</i> MEDIA ACTIVISM</b>	
ACTIVISM AND THE MEDIA	3
INDIGENOUS STRUGGLES AGAINST IMPERIALISM	7
<i>AVATAR</i> , ACTIVISM, AND THE POLITICS OF RACE	10
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>REPRESENTATION AND REDEMPTIVE HEROICS: THE MEDIATORY ROLE OF JAMES CAMERON</b>	
GOING NATIVE: HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS AND CONTEMPORARY FANTASIES	14
THE REDEMPTIVE HEROICS OF JAKE SULLY	16
'HOLLYWOOD TITAN TURNED AMAZON CRUSADER'	21
IMAG(IN)ING SOLIDARITY: REPRESENTATION, PERSPECTIVE, AND AGENCY	23
STRUCTURING REPRESENTATION: RACE AND THE MEDIA INDUSTRIES	26
CONCLUSION	30
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>SEEING BEYOND THE SPECTACLE: THE USE OF <i>AVATAR</i> IN CREATIVE ACTIONS AGAINST OCCUPATION</b>	
THE POLITICS OF PARTICIPATION, NEW MEDIA, AND ' <i>AVATAR</i> ACTIVISM'	35
REVOLUTION, RACE, AND TECHNO-UTOPIANISM	39
CREATIVE INTERVENTIONS IN CONVENTIONAL NARRATIVES	44
CONCLUSION	49
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>FROM REDEMPTION TO RESPONSIBILITY</b>	
REFERENCES	55

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## **Introduction: the ambivalence of *Avatar* media activism**

In the winter of 2010, a group of Indigenous rights activists on a converted school bus in remote South Australia debated the politics of painting themselves blue to resemble the alien Indigenous Na'vi from the Hollywood blockbuster *Avatar* (2009). The participants in the 'Indigenous Solidarity Rides' were about to launch a demonstration against the proposed expansion of uranium mining at Olympic Dam, located on Arabunna land. It was difficult to reach agreement: some were enthusiastic about the Na'vi as a striking symbol of resistance; some were uncomfortable with the idea of a group of predominantly non-Indigenous activists adopting the exoticised stereotypes from a 'going native' fantasy; and others lamented that contemporary activism had degenerated into a game of media spectacle. In the end there was no consensus. At the protest that day there were Na'vi impersonators, activists painted blue to symbolise the water wasted in the mine, and a few activists who were decidedly not blue. 'What are you—Smurfs?' taunted one confused or contemptuous police officer.

This scenario, recounted to me by a friend who was on the bus, suggests the ambiguity of the politics of *Avatar* and its applicability as a resource in political activism. There has been substantial debate about the seemingly overt politics in *Avatar*, evidenced in the themes of imperialism and environmentalist deep ecology. Yet, while the politics rendered in the film may be considered overt, the interpretations of such are varied and contradictory. Audience responses have ranged from celebrating the film as explicitly anti-imperialist (Cohen 2009; Ribellarsi 2009; Rao 2010), denouncing it as anti-American (Gardiner 2009; Podhoretz 2009; Wolf 2010), or rejecting it as a racist white fantasy (Newitz 2009; Brooks 2010). This has led one commentator to describe *Avatar* as an 'ideological Rorschach blot' (Phillips 2010).

The activists on the bus in remote Australia were not alone in contemplating the value of *Avatar* as a political tool. This thesis examines how reference to *Avatar* has been mobilised in media activism directed towards Indigenous struggles against imperialism.<sup>1</sup> The project arises from my ambivalence in response to the seeming incongruity of the film with anti-imperialist activist agendas. While I explain my ambivalence, I do not try to prove such incongruity. Rather, this thesis explores the tensions arising from the social, institutional and industrial structures—discursive and material—that inform the film. I also explore the way it has been taken-up by activists, and the way that this appropriation has in turn been figured in media and academic discourse. These tensions both animate and constrain media activism.

Since its release, many activists around the world have referenced the film as a reflection of, or potential resource in, their own struggles. There have been numerous assertions by activists and advocacy groups that ‘*Avatar* is real’, highlighting the similar struggles against invasion, exploitation and dispossession faced by Indigenous peoples around the world (Quiroz 2010; *Survival* 2010a, 2010b; Bakchos 2011). Like the activists protesting at Olympic Dam, supporters of various struggles have also donned Na’vi costumes in an effort to attract media attention and enliven their demonstrations (see, for example, Wade 2010; Robintheatre 2011).

Depending on the resources available to them, activists mobilise a range of media platforms, from participatory online sites and broadcast news media, to targeted advertisements. The Non-Government Organisation, *Survival* (2010c), placed an advertisement in the film industry magazine *Variety*, which appeals to auteur James Cameron to help the Dongria Kondh tribe of India in their struggle against the threat of

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<sup>1</sup> For convenience, I use the term ‘*Avatar* media activism’ as shorthand for this phenomenon throughout this thesis.

proposed mining. This tactic was repeated by a coalition of fifty First Nations and environmentalist groups campaigning against the Alberta oil sands in Canada. They placed a full-page notice in *Variety* in the lead up to the Oscars, headlined 'Canada's AvaTar Sands', voicing their support for *Avatar's* Best Picture nomination (Grandia 2010). Participatory online platforms such as YouTube have also played an integral role in the media interventions of activists. For example, the 'AvaTar sands' advertisement directs viewers to DirtyOilSands.com. There are two YouTube videos embedded in the website which playfully appropriate the film, encouraging viewers to write to U.S. president Obama and ask him to lead an end to the trade in dirty oil (earthworksaction 2010a; 2010b). On the social networking site Facebook (2011), a page, titled 'If you love Avatar so much, support Indigenous self-determination on Earth', encourages users to share examples of real Indigenous struggles. At the time of writing, the page has 5,456 'likes'.

### **Activism and the media**

As these examples suggest, my encounter with the appropriation of *Avatar* in political activism is largely mediated by the representational practices of established and new media. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that my methodology employs contextualised readings of media texts. This analysis focuses on both the signifying practices and representational codes of a text, as well as the structuring forces that shape it. I seek to extend the focus of the debate about the politics of *Avatar* beyond a reading of the film in isolation, but to do so without dislocating the activism it has inspired from its structural context. Framing the issue of Indigenous struggles against imperialism in terms of Hollywood and new media enables me to foreground the question of who is empowered to speak within convergent media regimes. This is particularly the focus of

chapter one. This framework also allows me to trace the correlation between commercial discourses about new media, the techno-utopian fantasy that the film offers, and the treatment of *Avatar* media activism in public intellectual commentary. Chapter two explores this relationship.

It is now widely established in film and cultural studies that audience readings of a text are active, varied, and contingent (Turner, 1998:199). In *Film as Social Practice*, Graeme Turner (1999) allows for the multiple readings that a film may invite, signaling the ways in which film becomes meaningful beyond textual production, and further through the intersections and specificities of sociocultural experiences and desires that shape processes of spectatorship. Toby Miller et al. (2005:41-2, emphasis in original) argue that in addition to analysis of the text and practices of spectatorship, there needs to be 'an account of *occasionality* that details the conditions under which a text is made, circulated, received, interpreted and criticised'. Their approach combines cultural studies and political economy in an effort to link theories of text and spectatorship in a way that neither reduces the audience to passive dupe nor overstates the subversiveness of 'aberrant decoding' (2005:38,39). My methodology combines elements of each of these approaches. I examine processes of cultural production in relation to the structural mechanisms of the Hollywood film industry and new media industries behind online activism. However, analysis of the aesthetic qualities and signifying practices of the film remains crucial for thinking about the attraction of *Avatar* and the readings it invites. While I do not engage in audience research, I acknowledge the contingency of audience interpretations by offering my own reading of the film, and the textual products of the activism it informs, as a partial and situated critique.



There are two elements of media activism that are relevant to my research. First is the way activism is negotiated within mass mediated societies, including the ways in which activists make their struggles visible and legible within mainstream media regimes. Second are the ways in which activists use new media to facilitate grassroots activism and mobilisation on a global scale. Whether as a primary objective or as a strategy in other campaigns, media activism seeks to intervene in media practices (Carroll and Hackett, 2006:84; Meikle, 2002:5).

Much has been written since the 1990s about new media activism, often focusing on the Internet as both a site of and a tool in a range of political struggles. Research on Internet activism tends to focus on left-wing, oppositional politics, linking new media to the emergence of an international protest movement against neo-liberal global capitalism and anti-corporate globalisation (Carroll and Hackett 2006; Kahn and Kellner 2004; Cleaver 1998). Exceptions include Graham Meikle (2002) and Sean Scalmer (2002), who also examine right-wing online media activism. It is worth noting that media activism and alternative media did not arise with the advent of the Internet, even though the Internet has genuinely altered the possibilities for horizontal communication (Pajink and Downing, 2008:7; Rennie 2006).

The debate about the democratising potential of the Internet is central to discussions of Internet activism. Dismissing the teleological narratives of the Internet's democratic potential, scholars argue that such potential must be actively fostered and consolidated (Meikle 2002; Jenkins 2006; Jenkins and Thorburn 2003). It is easy to overstate the accessibility of alternative voices online. As Matthew Hindman (2009:18) argues, structural, economic, and social hierarchies continue to influence whose voice gets heard: 'While it is true that citizens face few formal barriers to posting their views online, this is openness in the most trivial sense [...] there are plenty of formal and

informal barriers that hinder ordinary citizens' ability to reach an audience'. This is an important challenge to the assumption that computer and Internet access is an equaliser. More commonly, scholars identify the limitations of the rhetoric of democratisation in relation to the uneven distribution and depth of participation across culture and globally (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins and Thorburn 2006; Diani 2000). This is further explored in chapter one, focusing on how the politics of race shapes participation in and production of digital culture.

Much of the literature on Indigenous media activism comes from within the field of (visual, cultural, or media) anthropology. Such studies often focus on the paradoxes and perils of counter-hegemonic strategies of self-representation that tap into Western tropes of primitivism, exoticism and authenticity (Conklin 1997; Prins 1997, 2002). Rather than simply denouncing such images as pernicious stereotypes, there has been increased attentiveness to Indigenous agency and processes of strategic negotiation (McLagan 2002; Prins 2002), as well as the complex ways in which Indigenous peoples identify with and relate to such representations (Nadasdy 2005). The importance of the situated agency of the audience in interpreting and circulating exotic imagery has also been considered (Prins 1997; Bessire 2003). Recognition of such is a crucial part of acknowledging the 'simultaneity of hegemonic and anti-hegemonic effects' (Ginsberg et al. 2002:23) of media practices. While the ethnography that enables such insights is beyond my methodological scope, these studies inform the tone and objective of my analysis.

Interest in Indigenous media activism has extended to the use of digital technologies by Indigenous peoples in their struggles for cultural survival. Again, anthropologists Faye Ginsberg (2008) and Harald Prins (2001) have studied and documented the ways in which Indigenous peoples have appropriated and mobilised

the Internet as a means of sustaining and extending their traditional networks of communication and their cultural worlds, not only to a wider non-Indigenous audience, but also within their own communities and with other Indigenous peoples globally. Ginsberg (2008:139) identifies Indigenous media production as a form of cultural activism, which informs and furthers Indigenous peoples' ongoing struggles for self-determination and recognition. Ginsberg's approach is important as it disrupts assumptions that Indigenous peoples are simply on the negative, receiving end of global flows and processes of globalisation. It suggests the need for a more complex understanding of how new media has impacted Indigenous lives and the ways in which Indigenous peoples relate to new media. This is not the focus of my research. Nonetheless, it is a useful reminder of the need to avoid totalising accounts of media regimes and practices, recognition of which informs this project.

### **Indigenous struggles against imperialism**

The various examples of media activism that I refer to in this thesis demonstrate Indigenous struggles against the threat of exploitation, occupation, and/or dispossession posed by states, corporations, and other parties. I identify these threats as imperialist, using the term to signal the way power is exercised over peoples or groups through colonisation, military force, or more indirect means of control (Kohn 2010).<sup>2</sup> The relationship to media that activists participating in such struggles must negotiate points to other elements of imperialism informing this process, including the colonialist discourses that resonate in *Avatar* and the media imperialism that underpins

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<sup>2</sup> While this definition serves the purpose of this thesis, it does not capture the complexity of contemporary imperialism or the academic discussions concerning it. Activists and scholars are faced with the challenge of identifying exactly whom or what constitutes the imperium or imperia—or whether such a thing exists any longer (Hardt and Negri 2000)—given the difficulty of drawing distinctions between the collaborating interests of states, transnational corporations, macro-economic institutions, and other parties. However, entering this discussion is beyond the scope of this thesis.

its status as a global blockbuster. This thesis does not attempt to unify these multiple facets into a coherent analysis of contemporary imperialism. Rather, it focuses on localised struggles that use globalised media to strengthen resistance. Signaling the various dimensions or examples of imperialism that are at work in this phenomenon does, however, explain my ambivalent response to the mobilisation of *Avatar* for anti-imperialist agendas.

It is necessary to clarify what I mean by media imperialism. As Diane Crane (2002) points out, in theories of cultural globalisation, media imperialism replaces cultural imperialism theory. The term media imperialism acknowledges that the global media market is driven by global capitalism rather than the 'purposeful and intentional' cultural domination that cultural imperialism assumes (Crane, 2002:3). It is important to note the limitations of the media imperialism thesis. While it illuminates the dominance of a few First World countries in the production and distribution of global media, it does not account for the power to resist, incorporate, appropriate, and transform foreign influences at the point of reception (Shohat and Stam, 1994:31). Nonetheless, the issue of media imperialism warrants attention given that *Avatar* exemplifies the Hollywood blockbusters that dominate the international market for films. The film dominated the international box-office, reaching number one in 106 markets within its opening five days (Segers 2009). *Avatar* surpassed the record for all-time highest grossing film previously held by another James Cameron blockbuster, *Titanic* (1997), with 70% of its worldwide revenue coming from foreign markets (Segers 2010).

John Downing also signals some of the limitations of defining imperialism through a centre-periphery model of globalisation that locates the U.S. as the epicenter. He notes that cultural imperialism theory is often dismissed because it allegedly:

blots out any capacity of the world's citizens to resist or appropriate in their own fashion the messages of global advertising or US television, and additionally presumes that worries about cultural survival are uniquely provoked by the policies of the major powers, and not equally by nation-states against ethnic minorities within their own frontier ( Downing, 1996:223 in Miller et al. 2005:76).

This is particularly apparent in relation to Indigenous peoples and populations, for whom the immediate threat is often posed by the state, or government in collaboration with industry. This passage also suggests the challenge of acknowledging the concentration of economic power in the First World without resorting to totalising accounts that elide the diffusion of agents, interests and beneficiaries of contemporary imperialist agendas.

Accounts of globalisation as a monolithic, inexorable, and unidirectional force also obstruct a nuanced understanding of contemporary Indigenous struggles. Kristy Belton (2010:194) challenges the assumption that Indigenous peoples are simply reacting to threatening processes of globalisation. She examines cyberspace and the United Nations Forum on Indigenous Issues as 'two unique spaces of a globalizing world' that Indigenous peoples use to further their struggles for recognition and self-determination. Belton's analysis is useful as it articulates the link between globalising processes and the internationalisation of Indigenous movements. However, while Indigenous movements such as the Zapatistas are often cited as the antecedents to contemporary broad-based international movements, it is important to note, as Belton (2010:196) does, the specificity of Indigenous struggles. Thomas Hall and James Fenelon (2008:2) argue that international Indigenous movements cannot be lumped in with other transnational social movements as they are using global tools to pursue an

old and specific agenda: 'to preserve some political-cultural space to remain different' in the face of the ongoing threat of exploitation, occupation and dispossession posed by states, corporations and other parties.

### ***Avatar*, activism, and the politics of race**

This thesis is divided into two chapters, each of which focuses on an example of media activism that mobilises *Avatar* as a resource in Indigenous struggles. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, my analysis is predominantly informed by critical whiteness studies, feminist anti-colonial and post-colonial theory, and feminist cultural studies. An underlying concern is the politics of race at work in *Avatar*, in the activism that references the film, and in the discursive and material structures of global media institutions.

Chapter one examines the representation of auteur James Cameron's advocacy to stop the construction of the Belo Monte hydro-electrical dam on the Xingu River in Brazil. I argue that the colonialist trope of 'going native' that underpins the narrative of *Avatar* resonates in the media representation of Cameron as the heroic mediator between nature (and 'natural man') and civilisation. The racial politics of these texts is located in the structural context of the Hollywood film industry and the new media industries behind online activism. This example signals the contradictions between the immediate aspirations of this form of media activism and the broader implications of the representations they deploy.

Chapter two focuses on an *Avatar*-themed demonstration against the Israeli separation barrier in the Palestinian village of Bil'in. It responds to new media theorist Henry Jenkins' (2010a; 2010b; 2010c) discussion of '*Avatar* activism' in terms of 'participatory culture'. I argue that while negotiating and deploying new and established

media is indeed an integral part of the resistance movement in Bil'in, the *Avatar*-themed demonstration is not reducible to Jenkins' commercially oriented conception of participatory culture. While an analysis of the politics of race is less pronounced in this chapter, it emerges in my critique of the correlation between the hyperbolic discourses about *Avatar*, the techno-utopian fantasy in the film—figured in racial terms—and a new media studies approach to *Avatar* media activism.

Like any project of this size and scope, my approach has limitations. For example, I can only speculate about the motives of the Indigenous peoples who are clearly active in creating the performance of Cameron 'going native'. The negotiatory processes that inform the production and distribution of such representations remain uninterrogated due to methodological constraints. There is a notable discrepancy between the two chapters: while the first is preoccupied with representational analysis, the second ventures to speculate more about the motives of the activists deploying the film and its particular function within the context of their struggle. This disparity does not differentiate the value of the different forms of activism that each example represents; it is due to the resources accessible in the time available and from my location.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these limitations, the contextualised reading of media texts that this thesis offers is a necessary part of understanding how media activists have used *Avatar* in Indigenous struggles against imperialism. It is through media that activists in such struggles seek to amplify their voices and mobilise solidarity and support. It is therefore imperative to interrogate the discourses that operate in the texts that result from activist interventions in media, and the institutional structures that contain them.

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<sup>3</sup> Bil'in is emblematic of the joint Palestinian/Israeli resistance to the wall and, as a result, there is recent ethnographic scholarship on anti-occupation activists' tactics of creative non-violent resistance. Moreover, the Bil'in Popular Committee Against the Wall and Settlements maintains a website that provides insight into the motives and objectives of using *Avatar* as a political resource.

However, while I foreground the tensions and contradictions that arise from *Avatar* media activism, I also try to move beyond the revelatory project that this can entail. The second half of the thesis gestures toward an alternative theoretical trajectory, drawing on the work of feminist scholars Kelly Oliver (2001) and Anne Deslandes (2010). I thus reorient the question to consider *how*, as a mediated viewer located in the First World, one relates to media spectacles of Indigenous resistance. I do so in an attempt to make the ambivalence that was the impetus for this project productive rather than immobilising. This speaks to the need to avoid the paralysis of activism that can come with critiquing how we fight for the world we imagine, making space for critical yet creative activist initiatives.



## Chapter one

### Representation and redemptive heroics: the mediatory role of James Cameron

A nameless corporation bent on the destruction of the natural world; a native uprising brings clans together to fight a modern enemy; a passionate outsider changes sides to rally against his old way of life. It could be real life. It could be a movie. And for director James Cameron, now it's both.

Alexei Barrionuevo (2010) *New York Times*

Commentators have noted that *Avatar* is 'a fantasy about race told from the point of view of white people' (Newitz 2009); another 'White Messiah fable' (Brooks 2010) in which the white adventurer goes native, undergoes a personal transformation, and leads the native people to victory in a battle against his own destructive people. The (invariably) noble and exotic Indigenous subjects, while appealing and intriguing, function within this narrative as a vehicle for the redemptive transformation of the disillusioned white protagonist (Justice 2010). In *Avatar*, the perspectival privileging of the white hero permeates beyond the narrative structure. This chapter demonstrates that this form of address is echoed in media coverage of James Cameron's involvement in the movement to stop the construction of the Belo Monte hydro-electrical dam on the Xingu River in Brazil. In both the film and the media coverage of Cameron's advocacy, Indigenous peoples are sidelined as the agents of resistance against imperialism and the agency and transformation of the white hero is privileged as what really counts. I consider the implications for imagining social change and solidarity, locating this within

a structural critique of the Hollywood film industry and the new media industries behind online media activism.

### **Going native: historical precedents and contemporary fantasies**

As the persistence of the trope suggests, the 'going native' genre has had a resounding presence in the U.S. cultural imaginary. It is tied to the central yet ambiguous position of Native Americans in the national self-imagination (Deloria 1998; Huhndorf 2001).<sup>4</sup> The ideological self-justification of European-American dominance and national legitimacy pivots on the treatment of Indigenous peoples. The replacement and bypass of the indigene is a distinct and dominant feature of settler colonialism (Moran, 2002:1016).<sup>5</sup> Discourses of settler nationalism are therefore structurally compelled to engage with Indigenous dispossession in order to explain and legitimise national origins and existence, 'whether through deafening silence, denial, justification, or accommodation' (ibid.). 'Indianness' plays a pivotal role in the ambivalent imagining of U.S. national identity, which expresses the desire for both 'civilized order' and 'savage freedom' (Deloria, 1998:3).

Richard Slotkin (1973; 1998) signals the formative role of the going native trope in the myth of the frontier. He argues that the frontier myth originates in the era of conquest but endures as the primary paradigm through which U.S. historical memory and exceptionalist self-narration is organised. The borders between White/Indian and civilisation/wilderness structure the frontier myth (Slotkin, 1998:14). Within this

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<sup>4</sup> As Shari Huhndorf (2001:1) clarifies, the term 'Indian' is more specific than 'Native American'. The latter includes Indigenous peoples of the United States, Alaska, Canada and Hawaii. However, all of these terms—Indian, Native American, and Indigenous—arise from colonisation and overlook the diversity and specificity of the groups they encompass. As I am referring to the United States, I will shift between the two terms following their use by the authors discussed.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Moran discusses the process of 'Indigenizing settler nationalism' in the Australian context. Australia resembles the U.S. to the extent that both are settler-colonial nations whose legitimacy is troubled by the ongoing presence of Indigenous peoples. For a critique of Indigenisation in the Australian context see Moran (2002) and Haggis (2004).

schema, separation and temporary regression to the 'primitive' or 'natural' state is figured as the necessary path to redemption. The quintessential American hero, according to this myth, was one who had overcome both the savagery of the western wilderness and the authoritarianism and 'false values' of the European metropolis (12). Thus, the process of going native is one of 'perennial rebirth' (Huhndorf, 2001:56), providing the colonist with the 'new consciousness through which he transforms the world' (Slotkin, 1998:14). However, this transformative process remains oriented towards colonial progress and the pioneer's mastery over both Indigenous peoples and the land.

Philip Deloria (1998) and Shari Huhndorf (2001) both highlight the significance of adopting some form of 'Indianness' as a means of defining European-American racial and national identities. Deloria (1998) focuses on instances of temporarily dressing in Native costume and 'playing Indian'. Huhndorf (2001:8) examines instances of 'going native' that express the conviction that 'adopting some vision of Native life in a more permanent way' is required to regenerate European-American identity. Both Deloria (1998:7) and Huhndorf (2001:14) relate this identification with Native life to the anxieties about authenticity and origins sparked by industrial and post-industrial capitalism, whereby the 'primitive' is idealised as (post)modernity's 'Other'. Huhndorf argues that: 'In its various forms, going native articulates and attempts to resolve widespread ambivalence about modernity as well as anxieties about the terrible violence marking the nation's origins' (2). Significantly, she articulates the various forms and instances of going native as (re)enacting and extending the conquest over Native peoples. According to Huhndorf, modern formulations of going native demonstrate the 'changing relationship of the dominant, colonizing culture to Native America' and remain connected to more explicit and familiar modes of colonialism (15).

## **The redemptive heroics of Jake Sully**

*Avatar* is a formulaic white-hero-goes-native western come sci-fi fantasy. Audiences were quick to point out, and Cameron soon to admit, the overt parallels between *Avatar* and other popular 'going native' films produced by Hollywood, such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) and *Pocahontas* (1995) (see for example Boris 2010; Ryzik 2010; Boucher 2009). The protagonist of *Avatar*, Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), is a paraplegic ex-marine who accepts a mission to the moon Pandora to work for the RDA Corporation that is mining the valuable mineral unobtainium. Following the death of his scientist brother, Jake replaces his twin in the corporate funded Avatar Program, animating an avatar of the humanoid Na'vi in order to learn about the Indigenous population and the biosphere of Pandora.<sup>6</sup> Despite his ignorance about the Na'vi peoples and their planet, down-to-earth 'everyman' Jake manages to infiltrate the Omatikaya clan and is given the opportunity to live as they live. The head of the corporation's security forces, Colonel Quaritch (Stephen Lang), recruits him for a reconnaissance mission that must facilitate the dispossession of the Omatikaya from their Hometree, under which rests a rich deposit of unobtainium. In return, Jake is offered the expensive spinal surgery that will restore the use of his legs. However, Jake's life and loyalty is increasingly divided as his affinity with the Na'vi and their world grows. When the security forces attack the Na'vi clan into which he has been adopted and initiated, Jake not only fights by their side but also becomes their leader. He initiates a counter-attack that allies the Na'vi clans and successfully defeats the invaders, forcing them off Pandora.

Like the other Hollywood 'going native' films triggered by *Dances with Wolves* almost twenty-years prior, in *Avatar* idealised Indigenous society serves as the

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<sup>6</sup> An avatar is a remotely inhabited biological hybrid of human and Na'vi genes.

redemptive influence for a disillusioned coloniser. Exemplifying the stereotype of the noble savage in both character and appearance—dignified, stoic, esoterically spiritual and wise, tall, lean, and athletic—the Na’vi are the counterpoint to the greedy and corrupt military-industrial complex representative of the human world.<sup>7</sup> Cameron explicitly articulates this opposition, stating that ‘the Na’vi represent something that is our higher selves, or our aspirational selves, what we would like to think we are or maybe what we realise we’re losing’. The humans in the film ‘represent what we know to be the parts of ourselves that are trashing our world and maybe condemning ourselves to a grim future’ (Cameron in *The Telegraph* 2009). Here, Cameron expresses the primitivist impulses underpinning *Avatar*, in which exoticised Indigeneity is envisioned as an idealised version of Euro-American identity and morality. This is a conventional feature of colonialist discourses about Indigeneity, through which Indigenous peoples are defined only in relation to the coloniser (Dodson 2003). The Indigenous ‘Other’ is immobilised as the object of colonialist fantasies. Moreover, as a stereotype of Indigeneity stylised from stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, Cameron’s fictional Indigenous population is an abstraction of an abstraction. Ultimately, the narrative function of the Na’vi is ‘only to show what qualities the good humans will attain’ (Justice 2010).

*Avatar* focuses on the experiences and point-of-view of the white protagonist, Jake Sully. The audience’s encounter with the Na’vi and their struggle against imperial invaders is not only mediated by his interpretation. The representational and technical codes in the film also invite the audience to identify with him as the messianic saviour of

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<sup>7</sup> According to Philip Deloria (1998:4), the term ‘noble savage’ encapsulates the ambivalence towards native peoples: it ‘both juxtaposes and conflates an urge to idealize and desire Indians and a need to despise and dispossess them’. Noble savagery is a ‘flexible ideology’ that emerged out of the entangled histories of European colonialism and European Enlightenment (ibid.). The term can be used to legitimise colonial superiority and progress, or as a counterpoint through which to critique the West. See Dodson (2003) and Peters-Little (2003) for a discussion of the noble savage in the Australian context.

the Na'vi. The scene that illustrates this most explicitly follows the violent displacement of the Omaticaya from Hometree by the human security forces. Jake, as his Na'vi avatar, returns to the sacred Tree of Souls to regain the trust of the surviving Omaticaya who are taking refuge there. Having linked with a Toruk,<sup>8</sup> a dangerous predator resembling a pterodactyl that has been tamed only a few times in Na'vi history, Jake descends on the mourning clan from the sky. Pounding drums and a regal trumpet and bugle herald Jake's entry, drowning out the screams of the Na'vi as they disperse beneath the beating wings of the flaming orange and red beast. A low-angle shot pictures Jake mounted on the neck of the rearing creature as it roars, brass instruments resounding. The triumphal figure is dramatically thrown into relief by the rim lighting of the sun. This effect is repeated when the setting sun casts a numinous halo around Jake's figure as he walks through the parting crowd of Na'vi, who behold him with awe and reverence. The Na'vi princess and love interest, Neytiri (Zoe Saldana), confirms his status as saviour when they reunite: 'I was afraid, Jake, for my people. I'm not anymore'.

The protagonist is so aggrandised that his past betrayal is immediately forgotten and his assumption of leadership is unchallenged, even by his former rival and the official new Omaticaya chief, Tsu'tey (Laz Alonso). This is symbolically conveyed a couple of scenes later when Jake takes Neytiri's hand and approaches the chief. Neytiri is in the middle of a close-up, shot reverse shot between Jake and Tsu'tey, as Jake says to him: 'with your permission, I'll speak now. You would honour me by translating'. The chief does not respond verbally but stoically nods and steps aside, symbolically relinquishing leadership to the white hero. The position of Neytiri is significant in this scene. Neytiri and Jake have already consummated their relationship, Jake thereby

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<sup>8</sup> The Na'vi possess filaments in their braided ponytails that can temporarily fuse with compatible plants and animals, enabling mental connection. This is referred to in the film as 'linking'.

displacing Tsu'tey, who should be paired with her according to their kinship system. Neytiri's presence between the former rivals foregrounds her union with Jake and serves to naturalise and legitimate his usurpation of leadership. His self-appointed command is expressed in his rallying speech to the Na'vi:

You ride out as fast as the wind can carry you. You tell the other clans to come. You tell them Toruk Makto<sup>9</sup> calls to them. You fly now, with me, my brothers, sisters. And we will show the Sky People that they cannot take whatever they want; and that this, this is our land!

Thus, while Jake pretends the protocol of deference to the chief, the aesthetic codes of the film clearly emphasise the redeemed white hero as the intended leader.

*Avatar* offers the fantasy of a new beginning. Jake metamorphoses into a messianic saviour and finds his true identity, instantiating the recurring motif of rebirth at the core of the film.<sup>10</sup> The film closes with Jake being reborn when his consciousness permanently fuses with his avatar Na'vi body through the forces of the nature deity Eywa. In the lead up to the closing scene, Jake remarks in his final video log: 'I don't want to be late for my own party. It is my birthday after all. This is Jake Sully signing off'. While the film subverts the assumption of pioneering progress underpinning the frontier myth, the redeemed 'American hero' resonates profoundly. Like the American hero of the frontier, Jake is celebrated as 'a New Man emancipated from [...] history', leaving behind the mistakes of the degenerate Old World (Earth), with all the time and possibilities of the New World (Pandora) available before him (Shohat and Stam, 1994:141).

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<sup>9</sup> The name given to a Na'vi individual who tames the pterodactyl-like creature, Toruk.

<sup>10</sup> Jake is 'reborn' three times throughout the film: when he is first initiated into the Omaticaya clan; when he symbolically becomes their leader; and when he permanently embodies his Na'vi avatar at the end of the film.

This analysis makes clear that the redemptive narrative of the frontier myth is revived and revised in *Avatar*. This signals how the ideological reference points through which the film invites particular readings are clearly embedded in the ongoing colonial history of the United States yet revised to accommodate contemporary sensibilities and anxieties. *Avatar* taps into contemporary environmentalist concerns about the destructive and exploitative nature of militarism and corporatism. It predictably turns to the assumption of environmental harmony that characterises contemporary formulations of the noble savage. Much has been written about the neo-primitivist appeal of the mythic figure of the 'Ecologically Noble Savage' (Redford 1991) and its ambivalent function in allying environmentalist and Indigenous agendas (Conklin 1997; Nadasdy 2005). I would argue, moreover, that the film resonates with white fantasies of transcending the impasse of the '(never quite post) colonial' (Haggis 2004) condition of settler-colonial nations, in which non-Indigenous belonging is predicated on ongoing Indigenous dispossession (Moreton-Robinson 2003). The white protagonist resolves his complicity in colonisation by 'going native', yet he does not renounce his power. By assuming leadership, he evades his guilt but retains his position of dominance. Like the frontier myth, this is a fantasy of being emancipated from the mistakes of history and beginning anew. This time the colonisers go home, but the redeemed white hero gets to stay and enjoy the offerings of paradise. *Avatar* offers the kind of primitivist escapism that ostensibly challenges the expected Eurocentric hierarchies, yet, in terms of colonialist power relations, very little has changed. Rather, the film 'reinforces the racial hierarchies it claims to destabilize' and thus fulfils a primary function of going native (Huhndorf, 2001:3).



### **‘Hollywood Titan Turned Amazon Crusader’<sup>11</sup>**

Following the commercial success of *Avatar*, numerous advocacy organisations and Indigenous communities have reportedly approached James Cameron requesting that he use his status as a Hollywood super-auteur to assist Indigenous peoples whose struggles resemble the scenario portrayed in the film (Lee 2010). Cameron has since become involved in the campaign to stop the construction of the Belo Monte hydrological dam on the Xingu River in the Brazilian state of Pará. According to the nonprofit organisation *Amazon Watch* (2010-11), which has facilitated Cameron’s involvement in the campaign, the project will divert up to 80% of the Xingu River from its original course, causing permanent drought on parts of the river, requiring the excavation of two huge canals 500 metres wide by 75 km long, and flooding a large tract of rainforest. The project will directly affect the Paquiçamba and Arara territories, displacing the Juruna and Arara Indigenous peoples. As a result of his three tours of the Amazon, Cameron produced a twenty-minute documentary short, ‘A Message From Pandora’, about the plight of the Amazonian tribes. The documentary short was released in full on the extended collectors edition DVD re-release of *Avatar* (see Acland 2011b), and a shorter 3:11-minute segment was uploaded to YouTube by *Amazon Watch* (2010a).

In both a *New York Times* article, titled “Tribes of Amazon Find an Ally Out of “Avatar”” (Barrionuevo 2010), and in the documentary short subsequently produced by Cameron himself,<sup>12</sup> Cameron’s experience is favoured as the point of interest. Both texts frame the story of Cameron’s involvement in the Belo Monte campaign in terms of the

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<sup>11</sup> This is the title of an audiovisual slide show (Barrionuevo et al. 2010) that accompanies Barrionuevo’s (2010) *New York Times* article.

<sup>12</sup> My critique is confined to the 3:11-minute version that is available via YouTube rather than the twenty-minute extra on the DVD box set of *Avatar*. The shorter version of the documentary was previously embedded in the *Amazon Watch* website. This has recently been updated to the full version (see *Amazon Watch* 2010b).

parallels between *Avatar* and the real-life struggles of tribal Indigenous peoples in the Amazon, implying a parallel between Cameron and his heroic protagonist in the film. Alexei Barrionuevo, in his report for the *New York Times*, introduces Cameron in the opening sentences as ‘the Hollywood titan’, not only signalling his industry status but also connoting mythic heroism. The article is preoccupied with detailing Cameron’s ‘personal crusade’. A photo precedes the written text, picturing Cameron—orange paint streaked across his cheeks, adorned with a yellow and white feathery headdress and beaded necklace, and with a spear in hand—dancing alongside Indigenous leaders amongst the green thicket. An audio visual slide show accompanies the article on the *New York Times* website, with photos documenting Cameron’s visit, voice-over by reporter Barrionuevo and sound bites from Cameron. The slide show begins with a still from *Avatar*, in which Jake Sully, as his Na’vi avatar, is in the foreground firmly gazing beyond the frame (coincidentally, with orange war paint streaked on his forehead, not unlike Cameron’s). Behind him, the Na’vi princess Neytiri watches him with anticipation. Below the image is a caption quoting the rallying speech Jake gives before the Omatiyica clan when he symbolically becomes their leader (Barrionuevo et al. 2010). The obvious inference is that Cameron resembles the heroic leader in his epic film.

Likewise, ‘A Message From Pandora’ (*Amazon Watch* 2010a) addresses the viewer from Cameron’s perspective. However, it is less explicit in linking the heroism of *Avatar*’s protagonist with the actions of the filmmaker. Rather, if the documentary short is a ‘message from Pandora’, then Cameron is undoubtedly the messenger. The style of the documentary combines journalistic and emotive forms of address, editing interviews, authoritative graphics of the proposed dam, and shots of daily life in the Arara village together with scenes from *Avatar*. Throughout the clip, Cameron and two

actors from *Avatar*, Sigourney Weaver and Joel David Moore, are the only people to provide information or commentary about the proposed dam and Indigenous opposition to it. Theirs are the only voices heard, with one exception: a local woman cheers 'our newest warrior!', translated with subtitles, as she smears orange paint across Cameron's face. Any footage of Indigenous leaders addressing the guests is silenced by either music or the voice-over of the celebrities. Thus, they do not make sense on their own; any sense of their struggle is mediated by Cameron's interpretation.

The documentary clip favours footage of Cameron addressing Indigenous leaders, as well as focusing solely on Cameron's desires and efforts to affect change. Within the first 30 seconds there is a shot of Cameron being introduced at the International Forum of Sustainability in March 2010. The camera zooms out, foregrounding an applauding audience. As Cameron approaches the podium, he is framed on either side by a row of panellists. A later shot returns to a close-up of Cameron at the podium, imploring the Brazilian President, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, to reconsider the proposed dam complex. Thus, the documentary not only positions Cameron as the mediator of the viewer's encounter with Indigenous struggles against the State. It also suggests that he is the mediator between the Indigenous peoples of the region and the Brazilian government. Like the mythic American hero who goes native, he mediates between the 'natural world' and 'technological civilisation' (Cameron in Barrionuevo 2010).

### **Imag(in)ing solidarity: representation, perspective, and agency**

How is solidarity and social change figured in both the film and the media activism that mobilise it? Cherokee scholar and activist Daniel Heath Justice (2010) argues that *Avatar*, in reducing the complexities of issues such as colonialism to Manichean

oppositions, 'actually fails to take seriously what would really be required of the audience to effect real and lasting change'. Apart from addressing the audience from the perspective of the white hero, the villains in the film are so maniacally vicious and racist that they repel audience empathy. Justice (ibid.) acknowledges the ways in which *Avatar* has generated discussion about Indigenous issues and engaged audiences that might otherwise be unreceptive. However, the more difficult questions of audience complicity in the major issues dealt with in the film are obscured:

audiences can *only* claim the righteousness of the Na'vi for themselves. In so doing, they—or rather more often, we—are exempted from the hard work that actually accompanies the struggles for decolonization, social and environmental justice, and peace (ibid., emphasis in original).

In this way, the film reflects the liberal tendency to confine racism to an individual problem or pathology. This view of racism elides more insidious and pervasive forms of racialised oppression and obstructs avenues to combat it (Oliver, 2001:160-161).

In each of the media texts analysed in this chapter, the white hero is the centre of consciousness and attention, marginalising Indigenous resistance and agency. This is a familiar scenario in Hollywood films representing the struggles of oppressed peoples. For example, scholars have noted how films about African-American movements for equality tend to relegate African-Americans as the passive 'supporting cast' in their own struggles (Shohat and Stam, 1994:179), favouring instead the point-of-view of the 'anti-racist-white-hero' (Madison 1999). Such a manoeuvre implies that Indigenous peoples, like other oppressed groups, are in need of rescue and leadership from white people. This echoes the paternalistic colonialist trope of infantilisation, through which colonised or formerly colonised peoples are figured as politically immature (Shohat and Stam, 1994:140). Moreover, by privileging the Euro-American mediator as the 'White

saviour of the oppressed', these texts reinscribe a liberal ideology that 'posits individual altruism as the sole legitimate force for social change' (Shohat and Stam, 1994:206). Again, this evades the perhaps more threatening self-politicisation of Indigenous peoples and communities, as well as the institutionalised racism that perpetuates their structural oppression.

It is important to note the specific aspirations of each text. 'A Message from Pandora' aims to 'raise consciousness' (Cameron in *Amazon Watch* 2010a) in the first world about the proposed dam complex and mobilise the support and intervention of privileged outsiders.<sup>13</sup> The *New York Times* report fulfils the strategy of Cameron's visit to the Amazon as a media stunt by reporting it in mainstream U.S. media, tailoring the story to the expectations of its readers. As a form of media activism, there is strategic logic in focusing on Cameron as the 'Amazon Crusader'. As Atossa Soltani (in Lee 2010), the executive director of *Amazon Watch*, points out, Cameron has brought international attention to the struggle against the Belo Monte dam project, which would otherwise have been unreported by the media.

I do not intend to suggest, moreover, that the Indigenous people of the Xingu River actually *are* lacking agency. Rather, their agency is marginalised by the representational codes of the texts, in spite of the fact that active participation in the media stunt is apparent. Much has been written from an ethnographic perspective detailing Indigenous agency in such negotiatory processes, particularly in relation to the 'strategic objectification' of cultural difference (McLagan, 2002:91; Prins 2002; Conklin 1997). As these studies demonstrate, a number of contradictions and tensions inhere in this form of media activism, including the tension between 'hard political goals' and the

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<sup>13</sup> It also feeds into advertising for *Avatar* and the image of the film as 'revolutionary', which has been cultivated by advertisers in the wake of the film being taken up by activists (see Acland 2011). This point is elaborated in the following chapter.

means of achieving those goals (McLagan, 2002:94). For the Indigenous peoples of the Xingu River and their allies at *Amazon Watch*, the goal is to push the issue of the Belo Monte project onto the global media agenda and generate international support and pressure to stop the construction of the dam. This involves acceding to the expectations of the Western audience, in this case predicated on the 'over-valuation' of the experiences and perspectives of their white (celebrity) supporters (Madison, 1999:409). Of course, the priority is saving their land and material culture. Nonetheless, the fact that Indigenous struggles against imperialist incursion will not receive media attention unless framed in terms of the white, male hero is indicative of the contradictory relationship to media that activists must negotiate.

### **Structuring representation: race and the media industries**

Hollywood is not only complicit in constraining the ways in which structural racism and the ways of dismantling it are figured on screen. With regards to institutionalised disadvantage and discrimination, Hollywood is a case in point. The industry is notorious for being overwhelmingly white and male dominated in executive and creative positions. This is evident, for example, in the Directors Guild of America's (DGA 2011) recent report about director diversity in episodic television. Of all 2,600 episodes from the 2010-11 season that were analysed, 77% were directed by Caucasian males, 11% by Caucasian females, 11% by "minority" males, and 1% by "minority" females.<sup>14</sup>

As in other corporate settings, hiring at the executive level of the industry is often based on interpersonal connections and informal criteria, conditions in which

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<sup>14</sup> See also: the Screen Actor's Guild of America (SAG 2007) for data on screen performers in television and theatrical roles; the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP 2008) for a comparative report on diversity in the television industry. NAACP is one of the largest and longest established minority-ethnic advocacy groups in the U.S. See Beltrán et al. (2005) for a discussion of the role of such groups in putting pressure on the media industry to increase and improve representations of people of colour.

decision-making based on stereotypes thrives. In this context, women and ethnic minorities are typically disadvantaged (Bielby and Bielby, 2002:21; Beltrán et al. 2005:163) There are also distinctive structural features of the industry that entrench discrimination: ‘a high level of risk and uncertainty, and emphasis on reputation, demographically-based marketing and a product that embodies cultural idioms about age, gender and race’ (Bielby and Bielby, 2002:21). Typecasting is a tenet of business in Hollywood; it is assumed that only young people can write scripts targeted at youth, and African-Americans can only write for black-themed films or television series. Yet executives continue to assume that white people can produce films about any racial or ethnic demographic. This logic almost totally excludes Latino, Asian-American and Native-American writers, who constitute less than two percent of writers in the industry (Bielby and Bileby, 2002:25).

There is also the matter of Hollywood’s global dominance, which is ‘entangled’ in the processes of U.S.-led capitalist expansion (Miller et al. 2005:109). Toby Miller et al. (2005) challenge the conventional argument that Hollywood’s dominance is determined by consumer desire, the success of private enterprise, and the absence of state interference. Rather, they argue, it is the result of the concerted and coordinated effort of state and capital to secure economic and ideological dominance. They detail the history of collusion between the two—the tax incentives, government subsidies, and trade agreements coordinated by the state, and the ideological and commercial cooperation offered in kind by the film industry. Miller et al. argue that this public funding of purportedly private enterprise ‘is typical of the overall economy, which routinely starts and maintains industries with major public investment, then seeks to destroy foreign competition by arguing that it should follow *laissez-faire* principles’ (96). Despite its free market rhetoric, the U.S. is highly protectionist, limiting external

participation in the domestic cultural market, while seeking to expand the market for U.S. cultural products worldwide by establishing political-economic frameworks and trade relations that favour U.S. economic and ideological interests. Miller et al. acknowledge that the processes of U.S.-led capitalist expansion are chaotic and far from totalising (109). Nonetheless, they insist that such processes represent the neo-imperialist current of ‘corporate domination’ (51), through which the U.S. maintains its commanding presence in the ‘clear and broad geographies of power’ (Massey, 1994:160) where capital remains concentrated.

In contrast to Hollywood, the participatory online platforms that activists use to amplify their political messages have lower barriers to entry. Despite excitement about the democratising potential of such participatory media, the reality is that white, educated, middle-class males are vastly overrepresented online (Jenkins, 2006:23; Turner, 2010:135-6; Kolko et al. 2000:9; Hindman, 2009:18-19). Internet access and use is still dependent on income, education, and the requisite cultural capital—all of which are structured by the axes of age, class, gender and race (Hoffman and Novak 1998). However, access is not only a matter of the availability of digital technologies and the capacity to use them. Scholars have demonstrated the ways in which racial politics inform the very character of the Internet and digital culture, thereby challenging the myth that ‘access equals fair representation’ (Nakamura, 2002:27; Sterne 2000:209). In this vein, Jonathan Sterne (ibid.) argues that ‘the politics of access are not simply a matter of getting more people online [...but] also a matter of how, when, and on what terms people are coming online, and what they discover upon arrival’.

Liberatory discourses about the Internet also assume normative ‘western affluence’ on a global scale (Turner, 2010:140). This assumption obscures the fact that not everyone is empowered to speak by the openness of new media platforms:



With most of the world's population lacking a stable system of telephony—let alone the provision of broadband—we start to see how the democracy affirmed through Web 2.0 replicates many colonial structures of the nineteenth century. The empowered speak on behalf of the disempowered—the old, the disabled, the black and the poor (Brabazon, 2008:68-9, in Turner, 2010:141).

On the other hand, it is important to note the eurocentrism and 'neo-developmental language' (Ginsberg, 2008:130) that underpins the discourse of the 'digital divide', through which the cultural, economic and technical barriers to participation is often articulated. The phrase assumes the inevitability and desirability of digital expansion, suggesting that those less fortunate within or beyond the privileged West are simply waiting to catch up yet inevitably falling farther behind (Ginsberg 2008:103). Moreover, racial categorisations continue to shape labour in the information economy. For example, while cultural discourse places African Americans on 'the "wrong" side of the digital divide', Asians are constructed as the ideal technological workforce—'an undifferentiated pool of skilled (and grateful) labor'—awaiting exploitation (Nakamura, 2002:27,23).

The exclusions and hierarchies enacted through these structural conditions ensure that some people are more empowered than others to speak and be heard through convergent media regimes. The systematic exclusion of Indigenous peoples from the means of cultural production and the ongoing preoccupation with Indigenous peoples as *objects* of racialised representations (Downing 2005) necessitates a discussion of these structural mechanisms. That is not to suggest that such exclusionary processes are totalising. As the examples of media activism in this thesis demonstrate, these exclusions are negotiated and contested by activists deploying both conventional and alternative media. Nonetheless, by demonstrating the structural constraints that

shape media activism, I seek to temper the hyperbole that has characterised discourse about *Avatar*, insinuating its way into activist responses to the film. This is further discussed in the following chapter.

## **Conclusion**

In *Avatar*, the recurring and enduring trope of going native functions as a transformative and redemptive vehicle for the (moral and racial) regeneration of the disillusioned white protagonist. This trope, and the privileging of the 'white' perspective that it instantiates, is echoed in the representation of James Cameron's advocacy on behalf of the Indigenous tribes campaigning against the construction of the Belo Monte dam. The representational codes of the texts marginalise the agency of Indigenous peoples by privileging the white protagonist as their hero and saviour. In the process, racism is reduced to a problem caused by pathologically racist individuals and combated through individual altruism. In this liberal vision of solidarity and social change, institutionalised racism remains uninterrogated. This chapter has therefore sought to explain the underlying structural asymmetries and exclusions that compel Indigenous peoples to solicit a white, male Hollywood auteur to speak on their behalf.

This example demonstrates the contradictions that inhere in activist relationships to media. On the one hand, mobilising *Avatar* in this way may contribute to undermining a development project that will dispossess Indigenous peoples of their land and material culture. On the other hand, the potential success of this tactic is predicated on the 'over-valuation' of white perspectives and experiences (Madison, 1999:409) and the romanticisation of their relationship to the 'primitive'. Activists in Indigenous struggles negotiate these contradictions between the means and the ends of political struggle. So far I have predominantly focused on media representation and the

colonial relations it re-inscribes. The following chapter examines public intellectual commentary about *Avatar* media activism in the context of popular and commercial discourses about new media. I seek to extend the terms of the discussion beyond media texts and practices to consider the meanings they hold in the localised and globalised contexts in which they are deployed.

## Chapter two

### Seeing beyond the spectacle: the use of *Avatar* in creative actions against occupation

Like Palestinians, the Avatars fight imperialism, although the colonizers have different origins. The Avatars' presence in Bil'in today symbolizes the united resistance to imperialism of all kinds.

Bil'in Popular Committee (2010)

As the previous chapter suggests, it is telling that much of the activism that has gained coverage in the mass media in relation to *Avatar* has revolved around soliciting James Cameron to use his industry clout to assist allied Indigenous and environmentalist struggles. This indicates some of the contradictions of media activism that attempts to push marginalised issues onto the mainstream media agenda. To do so, it often must accede to the interests of the mass media and the supremacist assumption that white experiences and perspectives are more newsworthy and appealing than non-white experiences and perspectives, even though the goal of such media activism is to resist imperialist agendas. Despite the predominant presence of this mode of media activism in conventional news media, lobbying James Cameron is not the only way in which *Avatar* has been used as a political resource. Activists have also mobilised the film's striking imagery to add a theatrical quality to their demonstrations by painting themselves blue and dressing-up as the Na'vi.

This chapter considers the ways in which *Avatar's* status as a multimedia spectacle makes it a useful resource in political activism. Not only is the film the epitome of a Hollywood blockbuster, but the discourses surrounding it have also been

characterised by hyperbole. Reference to the film in political actions, such as the demonstration in the Palestinian village of Bil'in discussed in this chapter, both taps into and fuels the hype about *Avatar*. This chapter responds to Henry Jenkins (2010a; 2010b; 2010c) discussion of what he calls '*Avatar* activism', in which he articulates the convergence of established media such as Hollywood film and new media activism through the language of participatory culture. I weave together an analysis of Jenkins work, the 'revolutionary' rhetoric surrounding *Avatar*, and the figuration of race and technology in the film. This is contrasted with a contextualised discussion of the creative actions deployed in Bil'in, which demonstrates that the appropriation of *Avatar* by activists amounts to more than the participatory consumption of media. In response, I argue for an understanding of *Avatar* mediated activism that foregrounds 'responsibility' (Oliver 2001), thereby implicating the spectator through the relation of seeing.

*Avatar* is a 'tentpole' production, which is film industry argot for 'a movie expected by the studio to be the biggest grossing blockbuster of the season' (*Variety* 2011). Tentpole films usually have large budgets and often start or continue a franchise (Acland 2011a). With a production and advertising budget that reportedly adds up to half-a-billion dollars, and as the highest grossing film ever made, *Avatar* has exceeded its role as the centerpiece of distributor Twentieth Century Fox. Like most blockbusters, an array of other products is tied in to the *Avatar* film franchise, including DVDs, toy figurines, computer games, and books. There has been a great deal of attention paid to the immersive quality of the film in popular and commercial discourse (see, for example, Bodey 2009). CGI and motion capture technology vividly brings the fantasy world of Pandora to life. This is said (in large part by the film and media industry itself)

to herald the 3-D 'revolution' in cinema (Acland 2011a; Huggins 2008).<sup>15</sup> Thus, *Avatar* has had an incredibly high profile across a range of media platforms. This is amplified by Cameron's advocacy on behalf of environmentalist and Indigenous groups, as well as the various other examples of activism that appropriates the film.

This includes the use of *Avatar* by a group of Palestinian, Israeli, and international activists in the Palestinian village of Bil'in in February 2010. The group adorned themselves with blue paint, braided wigs, pointy ears and tails, and traditional kaffiyehs in an *Avatar*-themed variation of their weekly protest against the Israeli occupation. Two versions of the 'reenactment' are available on YouTube (haithmkatib 2010; emadbornat 2010), uploaded by members of the Bil'in Popular Committee.<sup>16</sup> Both feature shaky camcorder footage of protesters marching to the fence erected to secure construction of the wall and sustaining tear-gas and sound grenade fire from the Israeli military deployed there. In one of the clips, the voice-over of a sound bite from *Avatar*, in which protagonist Jake Sully gives his rallying speech before the Na'vi, accompanies footage of the protest interspersed with shots from the film. The footage of the lush green rainforests of Pandora and the luminous blue skin of the Na'vi in the film is contrasted with the dusty, arid Palestinian landscape scarred by the barbed-wire fence that divides it. In this example, a parallel between the exoticised Na'vi and real tribal Indigeneity is not mobilised. Rather, it is the film's theme of ruthless occupation that speaks to the struggles of those living in the Occupied Territories.

From February 2005, the weekly demonstrations have occurred every Friday, often mobilising motifs from other contexts so as to animate and enliven both the

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<sup>15</sup> *Avatar* stands alongside a spate of recent 3-D films produced by respected filmmakers, including Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) and Werner Herzog's documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010). Suggesting that this signals 3-D cinema's shift from 'gimmick to commercial art form', Hollywood promotes 3-D cinema as the 'next dimension in cinema' (Huggins, 2008:21).

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.bilin-village.org/>.

demonstrators and the media alike. This is a central tactic in their ongoing non-violent resistance to the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and the construction of a separation barrier along the territory bordering Israel, a programme implemented by former Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon. Sharon's wall project annexes and cantonises Palestinian land, enclosing entire towns and depriving them of access to their farmlands and water sources. Bil'in, which had already lost part of its land to Israeli settlements that extend into the West Bank, would have lost a further sixty percent of its remaining lands if the proposed route of the wall went ahead (Reinhart, 2006:209). In September 2007, the Israeli High Court ordered the state to re-route and dismantle a section of the wall, returning thirty percent of Bil'in's land to the village. The struggle continues as the village refuses to cede the other thirty percent of their land annexed by Israel and rejects the legitimacy of the barrier. On July 1 of this year, the people of Bil'in held their Friday prayers for the first time on the retrieved land.<sup>17</sup> Of the Palestinian communities affected by the construction of the wall, Bil'in has formed a focal point for both political organisation and media attention since 2005, being exemplary of the ongoing and imaginative resistance in the Occupied Territories (Reinhart, 2006:209).

### **The politics of participation, new media, and 'Avatar activism'**

California-based media studies scholar, Henry Jenkins (2010a; 2010b; 2010c), has been one of the first to observe the phenomenon of activists using *Avatar* as a political resource, publishing public intellectual commentary in both *The Globe and Mail* and *Le Monde Diplomatique*, as well as on his academic weblog. Jenkins is interested in the ways in which examples such as the Bil'in demonstration show the appropriation of

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<sup>17</sup> See the newsfeed at <http://www.bilin-village.org/english/>.

popular culture as 'resources for political speech'. Following this example, he calls this 'new style' of dissent '*Avatar* activism'. While such 'participatory performance[s]' do not articulate the complexities of the struggles they serve, Jenkins argues they 'provide the emotional energy needed to keep fighting [...and] may direct attention to other resources' (Jenkins 2010a). In addition to the repurposing of a Hollywood blockbuster toward political ends, the fact that the Bil'in activists produced and disseminated their own media via the Internet platform YouTube corresponds with Jenkins' (2010a; 2006) focus on the ways in which digital media enable consumers to 'take media into their own hands'. He calls this 'participatory culture', in which 'newly empowered consumers' (2006:19) actively produce and circulate both meaning and media, thereby blurring the boundary between media producer and consumer.

From Jenkins' point of view, the mobilisation of *Avatar* in political struggles demonstrates 'convergence culture' in operation. This is the thesis about media change that Jenkins (2006) advances in his book of the same title. According to Jenkins, we live in a convergence culture characterised by the increased collaboration between new and established media industries, the 'flow of content across multiple media platforms', and the 'migratory behavior of media audiences' (2). In the chapter most relevant to our concerns, 'Photoshop for Democracy: The New Relationship between Politics and Popular Culture', Jenkins argues that audiences are adapting the skills learned through 'play' as consumers of popular culture towards political purposes. Moreover, like popular culture, political culture demonstrates the 'pull and tug' between old and new media institutions, and commercial and grassroots media channels. According to Jenkins, this development not only signals a change in how young people in particular engage with politics. It also offers the opportunity to enrich 'participatory democracy' and step outside partisan politics: 'we may be able to talk across our differences if we



find commonalities through our fantasies' (239). As a product of convergence culture, 'Avatar activism' involves the appropriation of an established popular cultural media form for local and particular purposes (as a resource in political activism), refashioned by media consumers/producers using new production tools, and disseminated through both new and established distribution channels.

However, a number of limitations inhere in his approach when applied to the use of *Avatar* as a political resource. To begin with, we should perhaps be wary of extending this model to account for the diverse appropriations of *Avatar* in political activism given that it is extrapolated from the select set of media practices. Jenkins (2006:23) himself acknowledges that participation in convergence culture is disproportionately characterised by educated, middle-class, white, North American men. He is upfront about the fact that the ability to engage in this emerging culture is unevenly distributed. Despite the fact that participation is gendered, racialised, and classed, there is little elaboration of this in Jenkins' work on participatory culture beyond the cursory acknowledgement of those who remain excluded from participating in emerging media practices and institutions.<sup>18</sup>

This is a deliberate decision by Jenkins (2006:248) to opt for a 'politics of critical utopianism' that concentrates on 'what we are doing with media' and not 'what the media is doing to us'. Jenkins does not view new media technologies as inherently democratic. Nevertheless, by providing an optimistic projection of a future mediascape based on the practices of a relatively few early adopters, his model of convergence

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<sup>18</sup> In the Afterward of the second edition of *Convergence Culture* (2008), Jenkins elaborates some of the limitations of YouTube as a political platform. He notes that 'an open platform does not necessarily ensure diversity', nor does it mean that user-generated content is necessarily 'progressive' or 'resistant' (290, 292). Here too he qualifies his enthusiasm for the political potential of participatory platforms such as YouTube by acknowledging the 'voices [that] remain trapped outside [...] the marketplace of ideas' (294), although little attention is paid to whose voices are excluded or the mechanisms through which such exclusions are enacted.

repeats a tendency in new media studies to overstate the shift or break that contemporary media change represents (Driscoll and Gregg, 2011:577; Hay and Couldry, 2011:473). As Graeme Turner (2010:153) points out, academic attention to participatory media has 'been inordinately preoccupied with predicting the future', with inadequate concentration on empirical and historicising analysis. To the extent that Jenkins elaborates a thesis for media change based on the (albeit specific) study of a select set of media practices in which the most privileged of consumers predominantly partake, his theory of participatory culture fits Turner's description. Jenkins thus contributes to the 'digital optimism' that has characterised popular, academic and industrial discourses about the Internet, which has tended to obscure the question of who is actually participating in media cultures and what is the nature of that participation (Turner 2010; Driscoll and Gregg 2011; Terranova 2000; Nakamura 2002).

The commercial register of *Convergence Culture* also stands out as a limitation of explaining the use of *Avatar* in political activism through the theoretical framework of participatory culture. *Convergence Culture* evidences the blurring of the boundaries between academic and commercial interests identified by Turner. This is articulated by Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg (2011) in their analysis of the feminist legacies underwriting, but largely written out of, Jenkins' work on convergence culture. They claim 'the overwhelming function of Jenkins' perspective in the book is to offer insight into fan behaviour: for industrial application rather than the benefit of participants' (569). They go on to question what is meant by 'participatory', noting that according to Jenkins' thesis of convergence 'it appears to mean participation in an industrially determined mediascape' (573). Driscoll and Gregg argue that, by eliding the 'structuring conditions of everyday life' (of which they foreground labour and gender), Jenkins

offers little account of the meaningfulness of online practices in the daily lives of those who participate. Rather, the meaning of participation is referenced only to media consumption (565, 574).

Given these features of Jenkins' model of convergence, I am skeptical about co-opting the diverse practices of activists who take-up *Avatar* under the heading of 'participatory culture', as Jenkins does. Not only is the meaning of media practices referenced to consumption, but it is also generalised from the fan practices of dedicated consumers in North America. Jenkins' democratic model of participatory politics is far removed from the everyday realities and aspirations of the activists that mobilise *Avatar* in Bil'in, a point to which I will soon return. Before doing so, I examine how the currency of media 'convergence' as a description of our current era (Hay and Couldry, 2011:473) is apparent in popular and commercial rhetoric about *Avatar*, and how this is figured in terms of race.

### **Revolution, race, and techno-utopianism**

It is worth noting the correlation between the celebratory treatment of media participation in Jenkins' model of convergence—with its emphasis on consumer empowerment—and the discourse of 'technological revolution' surrounding *Avatar*. Charles Acland (2011a; 2011b) discusses the latter in two essays published on the online forum *FlowTV*.<sup>19</sup> He examines the film not as an isolated text but as the bundle of products and technologies that the commodity *Avatar* encompasses and promises. Acland identifies *Avatar* as a 'technological tentpole':

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<sup>19</sup> *FlowTV* is an online journal produced by scholars for scholars. Much of the academic commentary about *Avatar* has been published via this forum by scholars taking advantage of the quick response it enables compared to traditional peer reviewed journals. These sources offer readings of the film, and I refer to them in that capacity.

*Avatar* is celebrated and promoted to stand out as a flagship work beckoning the next wave of industrial and consumer technologies and entertainments. With *Avatar*, we have 3-D filming processes, 3-D exhibition, digital exhibition, and 3-D home entertainment all counting on the film's appeal for their own advancement (Acland 2011a).

In this way, *Avatar* is celebrated and promoted as a 'game-changer', despite the fact that the rhetoric of revolution is a familiar tactic within film and media industries (ibid.).

Moreover, according to Acland, the idealised notion of transmedia networks promised in the multiple format options promoted to consumers is also represented in the film text itself. Not only is the film 'replete with screens on screen'. He indicates the ways in which the tropes of symbiosis with nature and the interconnectedness of all beings are figured in the film through technological references. Such tropes are characteristic of contemporary configurations of Indigenous nobility and also inform the theme of deep ecology. Pandora is described as a complex and exhaustive data network through which 'energy flows through all things' (*Avatar* 2009). Moreover, the sacred Tree of Souls, 'the spiritual heart of the ecosystem', is 'ostensibly, a colossal organic server' (Acland 2011a). Director James Cameron has explicitly described the Na'vi in opposition to 'technological civilisation' (Cameron in Barrionuevo 2010), tapping into the mysticism and exoticism of the mythic noble savage. Yet the ways in which the Na'vi are figured in the film seemingly complicates this distinction between organic nature and technological civilisation. As Acland points out: 'like the technological tentpole commodity *Avatar* itself, the Na'vi offer an image of a superior technological system'. In other words, Pandora embodies not the refusal of technology in favour of organic symbiosis with nature, but a fantasy of what Acland refers to as 'technological naturalism' (Acland 2011a).

One particular scene in the film illustrates well the synthesis of tropes of ecological nobility and technological synergy. It is the scene immediately after Jake Sully's regal return to the clan and just before his rallying speech (discussed in the previous chapter). Jake appeals to the clan's spiritual leader, Mo'at (C.C.H. Pounder), to heal Grace (Sigourney Weaver), the stern but benevolent head scientist of the Avatar program who has been critically wounded. Beneath the sacred Tree of Souls, Mo'at leads the clan in a healing ritual in which they call on the nature deity Eywa to heal Grace. Pulsating, florescent filaments resembling optical fibers extend from the roots of the tree and caress Grace's human body and her Na'vi avatar, laid at the foot of the tree. The clan members kneel before the tree, swaying and chanting, clutching the arms of the Na'vi on either side. Their braided ponytails—a kind of cable with electrical filaments through which they physically and mentally link with other animals—are 'jacked-in' to the intricate network illuminated around them. They are thus literally and visibly connected to each other, the environment and their deity. At the same time, the spiritual leader stands over Grace, convulsing as she calls on Eywa in her language, her eyes glazed and white as if she is possessed.

This scene suggests an analogy between the mysterious and esoteric noble savage and digital technology, or more specifically, the 'digital native'. The Na'vi embody the myth of the 'digital native', according to which those born into the so-called 'Digital Age' are viewed as a 'qualitatively different' type of subject who intuitively knows how to use digital media (see Prensky 2001).<sup>20</sup> The Na'vi are physically and spiritually integrated within the all-encompassing technological system that, according to Acland's (2011a) reading, Pandora represents.

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<sup>20</sup> I borrow this application of the term 'digital native' to the Na'vi from Hamilton and Nakamura (2010), who discuss the myth of the 'digital native' and racial difference in the science fiction film *District 9*. Acknowledging the problematic presumptions of the term, I link it to the techno-utopianism in *Avatar* and the ways in which race and technology are figured in relation to each other.

*Avatar* articulates an ambivalent relationship to the alien 'Other' in the way it links the mystification surrounding ideas of the 'digital' and the 'native' apparent in romantic discourses about digital media and Indigenous cultures. On the one hand, the alien world of Pandora connotes the operational knowledge behind computing that remains unintelligible and alien to the majority of people, particularly when the idea of computer literacy refers to the ability to use computer programs but not the ability to control or understand computing (Sterne, 2000:192-193). The idea of the digital native—and its opposite, the 'digital immigrant', referring to those born before the emergence of digital technology—speaks to anxieties about an 'increasingly informationalized world' and assuages those anxieties by creating the myth of a generation that is technologically proficient by nature (Hamilton & Nakamura 2010). On the other hand, the film displays positivist arrogance by assuring the audience that the spiritual and embodied interconnectedness of the Na'vi and their eco-system is empirically knowable within the framework of Western science. This is confirmed when, in the scene described above, Grace connects with Eywa and announces: 'I'm with her Jake. She's real'. This echoes her earlier justification to the CEO of the corporation that runs the avatar project: 'I'm not talking about pagan voodoo. I'm talking about something measurable in biology'.

In contrast to the Na'vi, the outsider Jake must acquire the skills to master this system and achieve integration. His Na'vi avatar endows him with the hardware, yet the software is a matter of mindset; it is only as he becomes more sensitised to the Na'vi ways of knowing and being in the world that he becomes fluent in the technical skills necessary to harness the full potential of his new body. At the end of the film Jake transcends both his disabled human body and the temporary synergy that his avatar

prosthesis enables by transforming permanently into a digital native.<sup>21</sup> *Avatar* thus exemplifies the techno-utopian fantasy of leaving the physical and political baggage of our bodies behind to live in permanent virtuality (Peterson et al. 2010).

Clearly, both the content and format of *Avatar* taps into and bolsters the sustained hype about new media technologies. The currency of media 'convergence' is evident in the idealised vision of transmedia networks that informs the film as a product and a text. Moreover, this vision is inflected by the work that race performs in the film, particularly through the romantic figure of the noble savage. In this way, race and digital technology 'inflect and project each other' (Kolko et al. 2000:11) in *Avatar*. In this context, race can be easily co-opted by commerce (Nakamura, 2002:2). Reading 'Avatar activism' through Jenkins' model of participatory culture may therefore obscure more than it reveals about the significance of media in political struggles that mobilise *Avatar*. I am not suggesting that the use of *Avatar* in activism should be imagined as free of commercial interest. The power of the film as a resource in Indigenous struggles derives in part from its spectacular media presence and the commercial investment in ensuring that *Avatar* remains a topic of conversation. This attracts attention to struggles that are otherwise ignored by conventional news media. At the same time, these appropriative demonstrations inadvertently contribute to the media spectacle, or may be deliberately co-opted in order to advertise *Avatar* (see Acland 2011b). This tension is a feature of this form of media activism. Rather, the point is that, as the example of the Bil'in demonstration illustrates, participation is a means and not an end in these struggles; it is a means to something that is not reducible to commercialisation and consumption.

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<sup>21</sup> For a more focused reading of the visual trope of disability in *Avatar*, see Peterson et al. (2010).

## **Creative interventions in conventional narratives**

To return to the Bil'in example, this is not to understate the importance of media in the political struggle of activists. In fact, both the use of online media and the negotiation of mainstream media attention are central to the mobilisation of resistance to the Israeli separation barrier. The communication that such media facilitates is essential given that a key function of the Israeli system of control is to deprive Palestinians in the Occupied Territories of 'political and territorial contiguity' (Usher, 2006:9). The principle of separation and control is enforced through the numerous checkpoints, strategically located army bases, and the system of restricted bypass roads that dissect the West Bank and isolate Palestinian villages.<sup>22</sup> The separation barrier consolidates this 'infrastructure of separation', the function of which is to impede the movement of Palestinians in the West Bank and their ability to politically mobilise (Hallward, 2009:544, 545). Israeli historian Baruch Kimmerling refers to this policy as 'politicide', defined as 'the dissolution of the Palestinian people's existence as a legitimate social, political and economic entity' (Kimmerling 2003 in Usher, 2006:22).

Media thus plays an important role in challenging the separation of Palestinians from each other and from their Israeli and international allies. Simon Faulkner (2010) calls attention to this in his blog response to Jenkins' discussion of the Bil'in demonstration, titled 'Not just Avatar activism'<sup>23</sup>:

This situation means that for communities like Bil'in, politics has to a large degree become a matter of developing tactics for overcoming this regime of control and division, finding ways to work with Palestinians from elsewhere in

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<sup>22</sup> These are Jewish-only roads linking the 137 Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank to Israel within the 1948 borders.

<sup>23</sup> The blog is linked to Faulkner's teaching at Manchester Metropolitan University related to the History of Art and Visual Culture.



the West Bank and with Israeli activists as well as to make their situation visible in an international context (ibid.).

Such tactics include a website maintained by the Bil'in Popular Committee Against the Wall and Settlements (<http://www.bilin-village.org/>). The site provides local accounts of the weekly demonstrations, links to conventional and independent media coverage, information about how to engage in and support the resistance movement, and photos, videos, and audio material about the struggle. In conjunction with producing and disseminating their own media via the Internet, the people of Bil'in invest much energy in attracting the attention of regional and international mainstream media through their creative non-violent actions, which they have sustained since construction of the wall began in February 2005.

As the quote opening this chapter articulates, the people of Bil'in mobilised the distinctive and striking figures of the Na'vi as symbols of anti-imperialist resistance. In an interview Mohammed Khatib, one of the primary Palestinian organisers of the *Avatar*-themed protest, adapted protagonist Jake Sully's rallying speech: 'Like the film, the occupation has sent us a message that they can take whatever they want and we can't stop them. But we sent them a message in return: They cannot take whatever they want. This is our land!' (Khatib in Franzen 2010). Having been informed about the likeness of the Na'vi's struggle to their own, the activists watched a pirated copy of the film. They immediately drew a parallel between the human hero, who swaps sides to fight with the Na'vi, and the Israeli activists who have joined the movement against the barrier (Franzen 2010). In this sense, the film speaks to the 'new forms of popular resistance' coalescing in opposition to the wall (Reinhart, 2006, 174), characterised by the collaborative Palestinian/Israeli struggle against the occupation. Bil'in and other villages along the route of the wall have become renowned for this 'joint' anti-

occupation activism (Hallward 2009). After researching the film and learning that 'hundreds of millions of people around the world saw and sympathized with the Na'vi' the Bil'in activists decided that *Avatar* was an apt and evocative symbol of their struggle against the Israeli occupation (Khatib in Franzen 2010).

The creative actions deployed by activists in Bil'in are purposed toward the particular context of segregation in the West Bank. According to Maia Hallward (2009:546), the system of control in the West Bank functions not only to separate Palestinians from their neighbours and allies, but also to strengthen the separation—both 'geopolitical and narrative'—of Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>24</sup> Activists in Bil'in endeavour to disrupt these territorial divisions by mobilising symbols and motifs significant to their sociopolitical context in their creative actions. Hallward suggests that:

Through their creative banners, floats, and actions, the residents of Bil'in strive to shift the coverage of their demonstration away from the 'illegality' of their presence in a 'closed military zone' to the relationship between Occupier and Occupied and thereby counteract the effects of territoriality (548).

She later adds that creative protest aspires to '*personalize* the struggle and to *fill* the space [of the 'construction zone'] with evidence of its Palestinian landowners' (ibid., emphasis in original). While the *Avatar*-themed protest is not mentioned, this description corresponds with the accounts given by activists involved in the demonstration, such as that provided by Khatib. By impersonating the Na'vi, the activists unmistakably identify the people of Bil'in as the rightful owners of the occupied land and the Israeli military as the ruthless occupiers. They thus seek to channel the

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<sup>24</sup> Hallward's article on creative resistance in Bil'in is based on fieldwork among Palestinian and Israeli activists carried out in 2004-05, a visit to Bil'in in 2006, and other secondary resources.

emotional alliances with the Na'vi that the film invites. As Khatib (in Franzen 2010) states: 'When people around the world see our demonstration and the conditions that provoked it, they will realize that the situations are identical'.

Finally, it is necessary to comment on the issue of visibility in media activism. Activists in Bil'in have sought to mobilise the currency of *Avatar*-as-spectacle by appropriating motifs from the film. However, their creative actions are not reducible to media spectacle, despite the possibility that the viewer may reduce them to such. Faulkner (2010) observes that the 'condition of being imaged and being aware of being imagined has followed the Palestinian struggle at least since the 1960s'. He goes on to suggest that this awareness consists of more than Palestinians knowing that they are the objects of stereotyped media representations, such as the 'terrorist monster', the 'guerrilla hero' or the 'refugee victim'; they are also aware of how the media can serve them (ibid.).

By deploying creative actions such as the *Avatar*-themed demonstration, activists in Bil'in are not merely striving for media attention and visibility. As Faulkner signals, negotiating the 'oscillation between invisibility and hypervisibility' (Oliver, 2001:150) has long been a part of Palestinian struggles. Rather, such actions 'carry strong political messages [...] that seek to engage with the humanity and moral principles of soldiers, on-lookers, and any who might see media coverage of the event' (Hallward, 2009:548). In other words, they strive to shift the frame of reference through which the anti-occupation movement is perceived and elicit an affective and ethical response. This recalls feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver's critique of the 'politics of vision':

The myth that the relationship to the seen is as an object of sight, even a spectacle there for one's own enjoyment, denies the interconnection between the

seer and the world seen and ignores the responsibility of seeing. Seeing is an activity that like any other brings with it responsibilities (Oliver, 2001:157).

She thus advances a conception of 'seeing' predicated on 'response-ability'. Theorising the constitution of the subject, Oliver seeks to move beyond Hegelian politics of recognition. In the chapter titled 'Seeing Race', from which I am drawing, she argues that 'being seen, like recognition, is a goal created by the pathology of oppression' (149). This kind of vision divides the world into seeing subjects and seen objects (157). Oliver's formulation of 'response-ability' follows Levinas, asserting that the subject is necessarily constituted in relation to the other and is therefore also 'obligated to the other' (Bergoffen, 2005:205). She states: 'Beyond recognition there is responsibility. And for Levinas responsibility is for the Other's response; it is response-ability' (Oliver, 2001:206).

Oliver's analysis of the politics of 'seeing', necessarily simplified for my purposes, provides a useful approach for understanding theatrical protest beyond the spectacle, towards a consideration of the kinds of relationships such a performance elicits. Following Oliver's formulation, the ethical way of seeing the Na'vi impersonators in Bil'in is not to fix them as objects to be seen, but to respond to the humanity they affirm and thus acknowledge *their ability* to respond. Framing media activism in this way is preferable to Jenkins' model of convergence. Jenkins privileges the novelty of the form rather than the historical continuity and purpose of the message. Deploying Oliver's concept of 'response-ability', on the other hand, extends attention to the solidarity that media activism seeks to engender. Moreover, by drawing attention to the responsibility that vision entails, this model allows for a more complicated relationship to the mediated audience than a simple critique of media activism-as-spectacle admits.

## Conclusion

The currency of *Avatar*, combined with its striking imagery and sympathetic narrative, lends itself to the media activism of the anti-occupation movement in Bil'in. Participatory media such as YouTube has played an integral role in this form of activism, enabling activists to produce and circulate media that enriches and elaborates on the demonstration itself. However, the significance of media texts and technologies in the context of Bil'in is not reducible to Jenkins' model of convergence culture/activism, which foregrounds the participatory consumption of media. The communication that dominant and grassroots media facilitates is crucial for combating the regime of separation and control that enables the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. The *Avatar*-themed protest is one example of the creative actions that anti-occupation activists have deployed in the ongoing non-violent resistance to the separation barrier. By referencing the film, activists not only appropriate the spectacle to gain publicity. The motif of the Na'vi also serves a narrative function by tethering the construction of the barrier to the issue of imperialist occupation. Activists thereby foreground the relationship between occupier and occupied that is evaded through the territorial and narrative separation of Israelis and Palestinians. Creative demonstrations such as this seek to engender an emotional alliance with those who watch the event, whether from the Israeli soldiers present or the mediated audience. Thus, while they deploy spectacle, such actions are not reducible to spectacle. Rather, as Oliver's model of 'response-ability' suggests, actions such as the *Avatar* reenactment implicate the viewer through the relation of seeing and seek to elicit their response. The responsibility for response-ability therefore lies with the spectator.

## **Conclusion: from redemption to responsibility**

By generalising the diverse appropriations of *Avatar* under the label ‘*Avatar* media activism’, or even by defining such practices as a phenomenon that warrants analytic attention, there is a risk of overlooking the specificity of the struggles that this tactic aids. In other words, in asking the question ‘how has *Avatar* been used in media activism?’ one should be attentive not only to the fact of the film’s appropriation, but also to the purpose it serves in a particular locale and struggle. This could mean the difference between co-opting political activism into *Avatar* the multimedia spectacle—*Avatar* with an activist twist—or interrogating the co-optation of *Avatar* for activist agendas—activism with an *Avatar* twist.

As I have suggested throughout this thesis, activists must negotiate a number of tensions that underpin their relationship to media. These include the tensions between: open and closed media (Meikle, 2002:14); co-opting spectacle and being co-opted as spectacle; attracting media attention and the nature of media coverage (Scalmer 2002); and the means and the ends of political struggle. These tensions are part of the very fabric of activist struggles and have the potential to be both limiting and productive.

This thesis foregrounds the contradictory relationship to media that informs the appropriation of *Avatar* as a political resource in Indigenous struggles. It demonstrates the contradictions that arise from the politics of race at work in *Avatar*, the activism that references the film, and media regimes in which they are contained. By doing so, it signals the irony of celebrating *Avatar* as anti-imperialist when the film is a product of Hollywood, an industry that is both notoriously white and male dominated and emblematic of contemporary media imperialism. James Cameron derives his authority from an industry that is overtly shaped by exclusionary racial politics and neo-

imperialist capitalist expansion. It is this authority that makes him an attractive ally and advocate in Indigenous struggles.

Many of the examples of using *Avatar* that I have mentioned, and both of the examples expounded upon, utilise participatory online platforms to amplify their political messages. The Internet has genuinely enhanced the possibility of horizontal communication and the formation of coalitions for peoples and groups who are separated by space and excluded from the processes of dominant media production. However, cyberspace is also shaped by the politics of race, a fact that is often elided in liberatory discourses about the Internet (Kolko et al. 2000; Nakamura 2002). Activism that appropriates *Avatar* is not reducible to the media practices it mobilises. To do so obscures the motives of such activism within the rubric of conventional discourses about new media, as well as the ways in which race functions to figure technology in such discourses.

Nor is the activism that mobilises *Avatar* reducible to the readings that the film invites. However, as this thesis demonstrates, it cannot be severed from such meanings either. By drawing on the enduring trope of 'going native', the film gives away its lineage within an ongoing history of colonialist representational practices. These representational practices are echoed in some of the media activism that deploys the film. Nonetheless, there is a difference between the way politics is rendered in the film and the way the film is used to enliven political activism. On the one hand, *Avatar* aesthetically resolves real tensions through the fantasy of transcendence and redemption it offers. Embodying the ecologically noble savage *and* the 'digital native', the Na'vi function as an idealised vision of interconnectedness that underpins both techno-utopian and neo-primitivist discourses. By permanently transferring his consciousness to his Na'vi avatar body at the end of the film, the protagonist Jake is

morally and racially regenerated. Fulfilling both a techno-utopian and post-colonial fantasy, he simultaneously transcends the destructiveness and alienation of post-industrial capitalism and the political baggage of colonialism. On the other hand, activists use *Avatar*—its currency, spectacular imagery, and emotive appeal—to highlight and animate real struggles, which exceed the Manichean oppositions that structure the film.

I want to draw to a close by insisting that this project does not aim to expose the ‘truth’ behind fetishised images of white heroism and Indigenous primitivism. The representational practices that inform *Avatar* media activism are inherently ambiguous. Their effects can be simultaneously hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. Moreover, denouncing such images as merely Western fetishes denies the complex ways in which Indigenous peoples may identify with and relate to such representations, as well as reducing the significance of Indigenous agency in their strategic use. Finally, denunciation alone fails to grapple with the recurrence of fetishism as an obstacle in First World activist discourse (Deslandes, 2010:3).

In an attempt to ethically negotiate this impasse, Ann Deslandes (2010) theorises ‘activism as fetishism’ by foregrounding the idealism that informs both activism and fetishism. Following Anne McClintock’s feminist postcolonial reading, the fetish is understood more generally (than in the lexicon of commodity or psychoanalytic fetishism) as the ‘impassioned object’ (McClintock, 1995:202) onto which contradictions are displaced. Given that the fetish by definition recurs, Deslandes explores ‘how activists might relate to the fetish differently’, rather than merely trying to avoid it (2010:11). This involves recognising that fetishes are a manifestation of ideals about ‘how we want the world to be’. Likewise, activism is constituted by an investment in idealism. Deslandes therefore argues that activists must relate to the



fetish as the shared fantasy of the world we are fighting for: 'as a (reductive) expression of our (expansive) ideals' (ibid.).

This understanding is enabled by the recognition of the ambiguity of the fetish that postcolonial analysis offers. In postcolonial analysis,<sup>25</sup> the fetishising gaze is oppressive when it fixes the fetishised other as object, overlooking the 'the fetish object's history and conditions of production' (2010:8). However, postcolonial analysis also acknowledges the ambiguity and movement of the fetish, which can be 'wielded by both coloniser and colonised at multiple points in time and space' (10). Drawing on the creative and cathartic function of the fetish in queer theory, and the transformative features of the fetish in radical anthropology, Deslandes argues for the ironic and self-reflexive project of 're-appropriation', which works alongside that of 'denunciation and revelation' (ibid.). She thus seeks to mobilise the imaginative and creative work that fetishism involves. An ethical relation to the fetish requires activists to negotiate *how* they identify with their fantasies, 'thus attempting to ally with the ideal more than with the fetish' (15).

By drawing on Deslandes' work, I am suggesting that there is more to the texts analysed in this thesis than a critique of representation alone can account for. To begin with, Deslandes signals the potential ambiguity of such representations and the attachments they engender. Power relations are not exclusively exercised through the representational practices I have critiqued, but also through the relationships that such representations elicit. Foregrounding the fantasy work that the fetish performs indicates that fetishised images of Indigenous struggles are not only *reductive* but also potentially *productive*. This point warrants the attention of future research.

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<sup>25</sup> Deslandes identifies the fetish as it is theorised in the work of McClintock, Franz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Sara Ahmed.

This thesis focuses on ‘the fetish object’s history and conditions of production’, which, according to Deslandes (2010:8), the postcolonial fetish overlooks. In an effort to move beyond a project of revelation—which is anyway bound to recur—it also signals the creative alliances that representational practices can engender. Following Deslandes’ (2010) conceptualisation of ‘activism as fetishism’ and Oliver’s (2001) model of ‘response-ability’, the question for a First World spectator and activist such as myself becomes *how* one relates to the fetishised spectacles of Indigenous resistance that *Avatar* media activism trades in. Both of these models calls on the spectator to take responsibility for how they relate to the object of fetishism or spectacle, emphasising the imperative of ethical identifications and ways of seeing. I have only gestured toward the possibilities of such an approach here. Nevertheless, acknowledging the asymmetrical power relations that operate through the representational practices that mediate this engagement, as this thesis does, is a precondition of such an ethics.

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