

Bron Taylor, editor
Avatar and Nature Spirituality
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Introduction: The Religion and Politics of *Avatar*

BRON TAYLOR

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

Synopsis

Avatar is set on Pandora, a stunningly beautiful, often bioluminescent, and lushly vegetated moon circling a gaseous planet in the Alpha Centauri star system. There, in the year 2154, humans from the Resource Development Administration (RDA), a corporation with great political, economic, and military might that operates with the authority of Earth’s Interplanetary Commerce Administration, has established a mining colony. The RDA seeks a rare mineral called “unobtainium,” which is the most efficient superconductor known and is thus critically important to advanced energy systems and galactic economic enterprises. In a metaphorical allusion to the ways in which colonizers have often pursued the lands and resources

of colonized peoples, *Avatar* quickly establishes that human beings have been waging a campaign to subjugate the Na'vi—tall, blue, humanoid (but tail-wagging) hunter-gatherer creatures who are the moon's indigenous inhabitants. The Na'vi stand in the way of the RDA's exploitive plans and ultimately mount a violent resistance against the invaders.

The RDA employs two entwined strategies in its campaign: one social, one military. The social strategy is scientific and is led by Dr. Grace Augustine, whose discipline is never clearly specified but resembles that of an anthropologist with a specialty in ethnobiology; when the film begins, she has already been studying Pandoran biology and Na'vi culture for some time. Although her primary passion is to learn about the moon's environment and the Na'vi's environmental and social systems, she is also there to provide information that may be useful to the RDA so that the corporation can gain the co-operation and pacification of the Na'vi, and thus access to the coveted energy conductor. If this strategy fails, the military strategy will take precedence: the RDA will then subjugate the Na'vi by force and take the unobtainium without their consent.

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

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

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

Na'vi spirituality also involves what could be called relational animism. With such animism, respect toward all other organisms, even dangerous prey animals, is obligatory. The Na'vi's animism is rooted in their belief that Eywa is "the author and origin of the vital interconnectedness of all its living things" (Wilhelm and Mathison 2009, xiv). But a special intimacy and bonding is also possible via a braid-resembling neural "whip" or "queue" that the Na'vi can entwine with other individuals and animals to deepen communion and communication with them. This sort of bonding enables Na'vi warriors to mind-meld with these animals and then hunt or engage in battle as though they were one being (8). They can establish this bond with creatures such as the direhorse and two flying creatures, the banshee and the Great Leonopteryx (in biological terms, an apex aerial predator), which the Na'vi call the *toruk* or flying king lion.

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

will of Eywa, orders her daughter to teach Sully the Na'vi ways. Sully proves to be a courageous and astute student, and he is eventually initiated into the tribe, enters a romantic relationship with Neytiri, and mates with her.

In their own ways, especially as made possible viscerally through their avatar bodies, Augustine, Sully, and Spellman each come to love the Na'vi and to respect, if not embrace, their holistic ecological spirituality. This leads to a difficult situation, however, since they know of the RDA's plans and are complicit in pursuing its social strategy to pacify the Na'vi. Knowing that the RDA is on the brink of a military operation and having been initiated into the tribe, Sully desperately tries to convince the Omaticaya to leave their Hometree. (Each Na'vi clan has a Hometree, where they live and share their lives; the massive plant actually comprises a number of individuals of the same tree species that have grown together over time into a strong, interrelated organism.) While pleading with the Omaticaya, Sully reveals how he knows the RDA's military intention. In this way, he confesses the role that he and Augustine have played in the RDA's objectives. Having mated with Sully, Neytiri feels anguish and betrayal, and her entire clan rejects the human avatars. Shortly thereafter, the RDA forces—led by another former Marine, Colonel Miles Quaritch—attacks. Despite the efforts of Sully and his avatar comrades, and even though the helicopter pilot Trudy Chacon refuses orders to attack the Hometree, Quaritch's forces launch missiles that obliterate the Omaticaya's Hometree and kill many Na'vi, including Eytukan, scattering the survivors in agony and terror.

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

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

praying, at least to Eywa—beseches Eywa at the Tree of Souls for help defeating the RDA, even though Neytiri has told him that Eywa will not take sides in a battle.

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

Although Quaritch can see that the battle has turned against him, he fights on, now in a desperate and direct battle with Sully and Neytiri. Quaritch injures Neytiri and is about to kill her when Sully saves her, although in doing so, he is himself injured and his consciousness leaves his avatar and returns to his human body. Neytiri then saves Sully twice: first, by killing Quaritch with arrows just before he can deal a final blow to Sully and second, by providing him with a breathing apparatus after she finds Sully's human body and recognizes that he is suffocating in the Pandoran air, to which he has been exposed by Quaritch's attack. As Sully regains consciousness, he says to Neytiri, "I see you"—a Na'vi greeting that reflects a deep feeling of connection. Neytiri, relieved and crying, reciprocates, fully recognizing her mate even though he is then in his weak and fully human form. In another important event of the battle's denouement, Tsu'tey passes on his own leadership to Sully before dying from his wounds.

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

Overview of Essays

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

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

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

the Canadian director of *Avatar* have appropriated the film to challenge tar sands mining in Alberta, Canada, as well as the ways (that some will find surprising) in which Christians from two different traditions in that region have responded to the film's spiritual and environmental themes.

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

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

While all of the preceding articles engage the spiritual dimensions of the film, the next contributions make these their central focus. Engineering and computer science professor Bruce MacLennan, showing remarkable interdisciplinary range, advances an innovative perspective of the film with lenses rooted in Jungian archetypal psychology, evolutionary biology, and (like Munday) theories suggesting that *Homo sapiens* has an innate, albeit weak, tendency toward biophilia. For MacLennan, understanding biologically rooted archetypes and affective states can bring an appreciation of both culture and nature as important, entwined variables that are essential to understanding phenomena such as *Avatar* and its evocative power over its audiences.

Literature, religion, and environmental studies scholar David Barnhill demonstrates the continuities and discontinuities between *Avatar* and the work of American novelist Ursula Le Guin, who, in 1972, published *The Word for World Is Forest*. He examines the dystopian and utopian themes and the Gaian and animistic spiritualities in both works, building to an

argument that, despite the problematics that inhere to both dystopian and utopian genres, both of these works provide a salutary focus on the ecological and social virtues needed to move *Homo sapiens* toward utopian visions while avoiding dystopian realities. Lisa Sideris concludes this section with a lucid exposition of the role of empathy in interspecies ethical concern and the way in which *Avatar* puts such affective states into play.

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

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

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

Family Resemblances, Religion, and Spirituality

Scholars have long debated the definition of religion and, more recently, have wrestled with the term *spirituality*. No consensus has emerged. Along

with a growing number of scholars, I follow what we are calling the “family resemblance” approach to the study of what people have in mind when they use terms such as *religion* and *spirituality*. Such an approach leaves aside the fraught quest to demarcate where religion|spirituality ends, and where that which is not religion|spirituality begins. Those who take the family resemblance approach endeavour instead to explore, analyze, and compare the widest possible variety of beliefs, behaviours, and functions that are typically associated with these terms, without worrying about where the boundaries lie.

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

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

Notes

- 1 In a mock *Confidential Report on the Biological and Social History of Pandora*, which purportedly draws on Augustine’s research, Eywa is said to be “a kind of biointernet. She’s a memory-keeper, a collective consciousness.... She logs the thoughts and feelings of everything that thinks and feels. Her function is to bring balance to

the systemic whole, one that is perfectly interdependent, biodiverse, self-regulating, and unified. But more than a network, she has a will. An ego. She guides, she shapes, she protects. . . . [But] Eywa does not take sides; Eywa will not necessarily save you. Her role is to protect all life, and the balance of life. She is, quite literally, Mother Nature” (Wilhelm and Mathison 2009, xv).

- 2 The Na’vi terminology was invented by Paul Frommer, a linguist from the University of Southern California hired to create the new language for the film.
- 3 In addition to the sources cited previously, in checking facts and details, I found this online source helpful: *Pandorapedia: The Official Field Guide* at <http://www.pandorapedia.com/>.
- 4 The family resemblance school began with Wittgenstein ([1953] 2001). For the most lucid exposition of the approach with regard to religion, see Saler (1993). For a short version of the approach, but longer than here, see Taylor (2007). For an even shorter version, see chapter 1 in Taylor (2010), also available online at http://www.brontaylor.com/pdf/Taylor--DGR_ch1.pdf. For a clear statement typical of those who object to the approach in religion studies, see Fitzgerald (1996).

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