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Evaluating the *Avatar* film franchise through a decolonial lens: Indigenous representation communicated as Popular Culture

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Master of Science in International Relations

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Declaration:

I, Snow Rose, declare that this thesis project is the result of my own research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been attached for review. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university or academic institution for award of any type of academic degree.

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Abstract:

The objective of this master thesis is to evaluate representations of Indigenous communities in the blockbuster films *Avatar* (2009) and *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) and in what way Indigenous representation may influence decolonial conversation in society. This project will feature qualitative analysis and an interpretivist approach as it explores targeted themes using a decolonial lens. Themes to be explored include environmental justice and activism, space and place-based relationship significance, and white savior complex in the *Avatar* film franchise. Utilizing discourse analysis, these themes will be examined using examples in the films and how they illustrate and intersect with real-life Indigenous communities. Additional sources used for discourse analysis include media interviews and court documents from the film franchise's Director and Creator James Cameron. The research project also cites the economic, social, and political relevance of the *Avatar* films and evaluates in what ways power is then communicated through popular culture as a medium and popular culture as a tool.

#Indigenous #avatar #community #environmentaljustice #placebasedsignificance #whitesavior
#popularculture

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Chapter 1 Introduction:

As of submission of this thesis project, the *Avatar* film franchise has generated a lifetime gross amount over \$5.2 billion worth from standalone ticket sales and has permeated spheres of influence throughout the world (Box Office Mojo, 2023). While attending a cinematic film may have traditionally been seen as a leisure hobby, film production is now recognized as having considerable power. The objective of this master thesis is to evaluate representations of Indigenous communities in the blockbuster films *Avatar* (2009) and *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) and in what way representation may influence decolonial conversation in society. The themes to be explored using a decolonial framework include environmental justice and activism, space and place-based relationship significance, and white savior complex in the *Avatar* film franchise. In examining these themes, this project will evaluate how they reflect and contribute to conversations and concerns of Indigenous communities.

1.1 Terminology Clarification:

It is important to note that when referring to Indigenous in this research project, I am not hastily grouping together all Indigenous communities all over the world. I acknowledge that there are numerous and wonderful differences in Indigenous communities with no singular knowledge. Rather, the term is reflective of power as observable in societies all over the world, that regulates minority Indigenous communities to the margins of society. Similarly, when referring to the Na'vi clans in the *Avatar* films, it recognizes that there are numerous clans, and like Indigenous groups, are all unique and different. I will clearly identify a specific clan when referencing a specific example from the film for the sake of clarity.

1.2 Research Questions:

This research thesis will strive to answer the following research questions:

To what extent does the *Avatar* film franchise portray and challenge the dynamics of environmental justice and activism, space and place-based relationships, and the white savior complex, and how does this portrayal influence perceptions and engagement with Indigenous communities?

1.3 Thesis Outline:

With fictitious planets, Indigenous communities, and characters, it is important to provide readers with accessibility to the cinematic *Avatar* environment for the sake of participating in the research analysis. Following this outline, a thorough, although not in-depth, description of each of the *Avatar* films is provided for readers that may be unfamiliar with or have not viewed one or both of the *Avatar* films. With each film around three hours, many more details from the film's storylines could be added, however only relevant characters to the analysis were included. These character descriptions should allow any readers

unfamiliar with the films to be provided context and an understanding of what characters and storylines are developed especially when discussing them as examples of the three themes of environmental justice, place-based significance, and white savior complex. The descriptions produced were intentionally succinct in an effort to not overwhelm readers that have not seen the films. Furthermore, more lengthy film descriptions offered the risk of confusion for the reader.

This project includes great efforts to illustrate why this research project is relevant. In particular, this project highlights economic, societal, and political relevance. In this section, the research aims to demonstrate the scope and influences that the film franchise can have. Again, there was effort to keep this section brief while adequately demonstrating the degree to which the *Avatar* films were relevant beyond a cinematic experience. To conclude the introductory chapter, I tie in the relevance on an international scale. As a student of International Relations, I wanted to clearly demonstrate how an examination of arguably the biggest movie franchise of all time is, in fact, international relations. With only two films released, the third in post-production to be released December 2023, and *Avatar* 4 and 5 tentatively scheduled to be released before the end of the decade, the *Avatar* films will continue to be a relevant economically, societally, and politically in the future.

Chapter 2 is a theoretical framework chapter that includes discussion and subpoints on justifications of colonization, decoloniality, and globalization. Articles by Eve Tuck and K. Yang's *Decolonization is not a metaphor* as well as *Discourse on Colonialism* by Aimé Césaire will aid in analyzing in what ways decolonization influences the film and how the film has influenced decolonization. In addition, I will use Glen Sean Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks*, and Audra Simpson's *Mohawk Interruptus* to examine issues of power and sovereignty of Indigenous communities and in how these concepts are reflected in the films. These points are central of any Indigenous and non-Indigenous points of conflict. This is demonstrated not just in the *Avatar* films, but also analyzed in additional sources in the project. While there is a clear decolonial basis in my research, I also explore how power is deployed by colonizing entities that minimize or completely disregard sovereignty of Indigenous communities. I also focus on examination of Daniel Nexon and Iver Neumann's exploration of how popular culture is a mirror of society and thus implicates world politics and global power, which is important to the central themes of this research project. The framework of popular culture and its consumption is discussed and how this then creates and reproduces societal and historical hierarchical structures that uphold colonization.

Next, I will move into the methods section of my research in Chapter 3. Being qualitatively grounded, in this interpretive research project I want to be sure to be as transparent as possible to describe the data

collection and analysis methods I participated in for this thesis research. To accomplish this, I clearly share the formation of codes to approach the films for discourse analysis. Understanding that examining my themes through numerous methods would help with the triangulation of my analysis, although marginalized communities, I did make an effort to seek participants from Indigenous communities to participate in a semi-structure interview that was composed of questions which were targeted toward the project's specific themes. To assist with analysis of the film, I used court documents produced by creator and Director of the *Avatar* film franchise James Cameron. The usage of this material was as valuable and numerous points were made which related to the themes of this project. In addition, to the court documents, discourse analysis was conducted on a short documentary produced by James Cameron titled *A Message to Pandora*. This documentary included interviews with James Cameron, as well as clips of him being interviewed by media at locations in Brazil. Again, using the themes for guidance, these sources were valuable in affirming the tie between the *Avatar* film and colonization.

For this thesis project, I have identified three themes to focus my discussion and analysis on which are featured in Chapter 4. I wanted to be sure that the themes of environmental justice and activism, place-based significance, and white savior complex were carried throughout and could be discussed in both films. In addition, there are many subpoints that I bring up under each specific theme.

Environmental justice and activism constitute the first theme to be explored in this project. To examine the first theme, I will pull from many different sources including Emma Mitchell's 2011 *Seeing Blue* master thesis. The thesis project examines the use of activism approaches by Indigenous communities as a result of the film *Avatar*. As a social science student at a life science academic facility, I was able to take elective courses that prioritized ecological and environmental examination. As such, my understanding, appreciation, and dependence of the interconnectivity of social and ecological ecosystems has grown considerably. However, my social studies background allowed me to understand that immeasurable power (oftentimes economic power) can be the dominant force of decisions that impact the environment. This resulted in the decision to align and discuss environmental degradation and activism together and explore Indigenous resistance and eco-terrorism and the politics of *Avatar*.

Being a global citizen and an international relations student that follows developments in relations between states and its citizens, I have been exposed to several 'Land Back' campaigns by Indigenous communities that stress the place-based significance, which is the second theme of this project. The theme of space and place-based relationship significance will be examined by reviewing existing literature from Audra Simpson and Jami Adamson. Each source has spent time developing and researching the

relationship between Indigenous communities and how land is significant to them. Specifically in International Relations, there is an undercurrent of political change in which local and state governments are moving to include new legislature that is supportive of Indigenous communities and significant environmental spaces. For example, in 2017 the New Zealand government granted legal personhood status to the Whanganui River, a move which recognized the Whanganui River as an extension of the Indigenous Māori people, critical in developing a sense of self, and as Māori ancestor tupuna awa (Charpleix, 2017).

While continually reevaluating past research, it became evident that there are ontological differences in the sense of space and place-based significance between Indigenous communities and the non-Indigenous. In my mind, there is clearly demonstrated as a significant theme in the *Avatar* films that served as a catalyst for conflict between the humans and avatars. Knowing that many Indigenous communities continue to value the significance of a specific place not just as a physical space of residence, but as a component of culture, society, ancestry, and an immeasurable (and unexplainable to most non-Indigenous individuals and communities) component of identity construction. As a product of Western education and Western societies, I am only able to understand this to an extent. While I have likely experienced more interactions with Indigenous individuals than many Westernized individuals due to time spent in specific geographic locations and interactions with Indigenous communities, researching place-based identity across many continents and Indigenous communities has shown me that I can only understand place-based identity for Indigenous communities to an extent. Despite this, spatial significance is still highlighted in the films and important to discuss.

The last theme that I explore in this thesis project is white savior complex. This theme specifically is how the *Avatar* films came to be a part of the thesis project. Interested in Indigenous identity theft, the film franchise has several intricate illustrations of white savior complex in which a white 'savior' behaves to promote the well-being of marginalized non-white individuals or communities. Interestingly, I can see this present in each of the *Avatar* films currently available, and in promotion of the films off screen. While quite critical of observations of off-screen white savior complex, I remain open to accept that my interpretations of their motivations are simply that, interpretations, and truth. However, it is necessary to be critical of public figures and their participation in their non-native communities-especially any marginalized communities. It is the responsibility of citizens to inquire on these motivations especially if there is financial profit to be gained. In fact, much of academia relies on questioning why. So, the section does ponder the ramifications of white savior complex in the film, and the motivations of the white savior complex personified outside of the film by *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water* Director James Cameron

and how he portrays himself as a white savior of Indigenous groups, specifically those along the Xingu River in Brazil.

This project concludes in Chapter 5 with a conclusion section. In this section I wrap up the findings and reiterate the importance of the *Avatar* film franchise in terms of economical, societal, and political relevance, especially in regards to Indigenous communities. I strive for this thesis to be insightful and to inspire reflection. I want it to engage both individuals that have and have not viewed the films. I hope that the thesis may be of interest to both those that enjoy and loathe the film franchise. It is my hope that even if an individual reader would begin reading this thesis staunchly entrenched in one camp or the other, insightful points can be extracted from this thesis that, at the very least, would allow for a re-examination of the films through a different lens.

1.4 Film Descriptions

To assist reviewers of this project in understanding the analysis, I have included succinct descriptions of *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water* films. I have also included a character reference table with each film to serve as a quick reference guide and provide relevant character descriptions in each *Avatar* film. Undoubtedly, the *Avatar* films have additional characters and storyline points, however I wanted to make content relating to the research topic as accessible as possible in this document. While many of the characters are referenced in each respective table, they do develop throughout the franchise. As a result, their identities develop and intersect. As a result, it felt appropriate to elaborate on how their character evolved and developed to aid any reviewers in processing the analysis of this project. Additionally, some characters may have a different physical appearance between the films which was important to highlight as it contributes to identity development.

1.4.1 *Avatar* Description

Set in the year 2154, the first film, *Avatar*, begins with Jake Sully, a wheelchair-bound former marine, recruited to replace his deceased twin scientist brother on an expedition to the foreign planet of Pandora. Featuring the same genetic makeup, Sully will be able to use his brother's avatar as an employee of the mining company RDA, short for the Research Development Administration. With resources depleted on earth, RDA is tasked with not only extracting valuable resources, but researching a potential new home for humans. Under the supervision of lead scientist Dr. Augustine, Sully will assist with sample collection and analysis of Pandora elements. Shortly after arriving on Pandora, Sully is recruited by Quaritch, head of the human military attachment, to use his time and access to Pandora as a scientist in an avatar form to 'learn these savages from the inside. I want you to gain their trust. I need to know how to force their

cooperations or hammer them hard if they don't.' While on his first expedition, Sully is separated from the rest of his group and must spend the night on his own. Sully quickly becomes vulnerable as he tries to apply his human survival skills from earth to the Pandorian world. The Pandora environment is lushly vegetative world, with many luminescent plants, insects, and animals, all of which obviously favor native Pandora species. Attracting unwanted attention, Omatikaya clan warrior and princess Neytiri has her arrow drawn set to kill Sully. Sully is then spared by a woodsprite, a creator associated with the deity Eywa, which lands on Neytiri's arrow. Understood as interference from divinity, Sully is eventually saved from the elements by Neytiri. Neytiri takes Sully to Hometree, the sacred home of her clan. Hometree is built in a large singular structure, with interwoven roots connecting vast network of trees, similar to mangroves. Neytiri is then required to teach Sully the Omatikaya ways and to learn from him what humans ultimately want from Pandora. As Sully becomes engulfed in Omatikaya society, he and Dr. Augustine begin to experience and understand the connectivity of all elements on Pandora. Especially designated as significant is the Tree of Souls in which the clan can realize their closest connection to Eywa, the All-Mother or central deity of all Pandora. While Dr. Augustine fights the resource extraction side of RDA, that ultimately controls the military attachment, Sully grapples with an internal conflict of wanting to save the Omatikaya clan but knowing that humans will keep coming to destroy the Omatikaya way of life. Sully and Neytiri's close friendship develops and they, inevitably, fall in love. When RDA pushes into the forest to destroy Hometree and mine a highly valuable mineral called unobtainium that is located deep beneath Hometree, Sully confesses the background of his time in Pandora and that he was sent to learn the Omatikaya ways so that they would trust him, and he could deliver the message to abandon Hometree because it will be destroyed. Hometree is ultimately demolished and the clan retreats to the Tree of Souls to mourn and connect with their ancestors and the deity Eywa. After a grand entrance, Sully convinces the Omatikaya to fight and foretells that humans will keep coming, 'like a rain that never ends'. After an epic final battle involving many creatures from Pandora, the film concludes with the death of Quaritch at the hands of Sully and Neytiri and humans being removed from Pandora, except for a few selected loyal scientists. Dr. Augustine is killed and placed into the roots of the Tree of Souls. Neytiri and Sully are married, and Sully is elevated to chief of the Omatikaya clan.

***Avatar* (2009) Character Reference Guide:**

Character	Description
Avatar	-10-foot-tall -blue-skinned -humanoid

	-close interconnectivity to natural world and environment
Pandora	-distant lushy vegetative planet
Jake Sully	-human -protagonist -former marine -recruited to replace his deceased twin brother as an avatar driver and security escort for RDA -Neytiri's love interest
Neytiri	-avatar -Omatikaya warrior -Omatikaya princess -Sully's love interest
Omaticaya Clan	-Na'vi forest clan
Dr. Grace Augustine	-human -Head Scientist for RDA -tasked with researching the flora and botany on Pandora and developing relationships with the Na'vi
Research Development Administration (RDA)	-prioritizes the mining of mineral unobtainium from planet' for capitalistic wealth -antagonist
Unobtainium	-mineral valued at \$20 million per kilogram which finances RDA's presence on Pandora -mined from planet's core
Quaritch	-human, -former marine -commander for RDA's military attachment forces tasked with security enforcement -antagonist
Eywa	-Na'vi deity
Hometree	-spiritual and physical home of Omatikaya clan

Great Leonopteryx	-large flying predator of great significance to Na'vi -one will present itself to Na'vi in times of uncertainty and sorrow -have linked with Na'vi on five instances
Toruk Makto	-title and name given to the five Na'vi that have linked with Great Leonopteryx -only links with chosen Na'vi with pure souls to unite Na'vi and overcome time of difficulty

Table 1. *Avatar* character reference guide

1.4.2 *Avatar: The Way of Water* Description

The second film, *Avatar: The Way of Water*, takes place fifteen years later and features a slew of new characters. Sully and Neytiri are now parents to four children that feature both human and avatar DNA, sons Neteyam and Lo'ak, daughter Tuk, and adopted daughter Kiri, who is the daughter of deceased human scientist Dr. Augustine. A mystery conception, Kiri's father is not revealed in this film, it is safe to assume that it will feature a storyline in a later *Avatar* film. Additionally, a human, Spider, left behind on Pandora when humans were removed at the end of the first film, also plays an important role. Spider is the human son of Quaritch.

In this film, humans return to Pandora with a vengeance, with their aircraft scorching the surface of Pandora prior to touching down on the planet. After a first line of military personnel disembarks the aircraft, bulldozers offload set in bulldozing mode and clear large paths of the forest to instill settler establishments. With Earth dying, the formation of a human settlement on Pandora is the motivation for the return of humans to the planet. The film then skips ahead a year in which humans have developed a settlement and, intending to protect the Omatikaya clan, Sully's family seeks asylum with an oceanic clan, the Metkayina clan. This film does feature much more of a storyline and character arch for Sully's family, their issues of identity crisis, and their relation to the Metkayina clan. These character arcs are important because they also directly recognize ways in which colonization results in the erasure of Indigenous communities. At this point, Quaritch returns as a villain in this movie after his human consciousness is preserved and merged into a permanent avatar body, referred to as recombinant, along with a recombinant military attachment. A city structure has taken shape with buildings being completed in six days' time and more construction taking place in one years' time than in the previous 30 years by humans on Pandora. Needing to tame the frontier for humanity, Quaritch and his attachment are tasked

with ‘pacifying the hostiles’ and ending the insurgency of ecoterrorist disruptions in human developments caused by Sully and the Omatikaya clan. This attachment seeks to destroy Sully and his family and after a skirmish in the forest with Sully’s family, takes Spider captive. After interrogation and torture by human scientists, Spider is used as a teacher, guide, and translator for Quaritch’s attachment as they track Sully’s family through Pandora. Despite slight physical characteristic differences and part-human genetics causing Sully’s family to be initially treated as outcasts, the family settles into oceanic clan life.

Kiri does emulate her mother in that she is very interested and engaged with the aquatic ecosystem that is her new home. Lo’ak also develops a very deep relationship with a tulkun, a creature somewhat similar to a whale, a species which plays a key point in the film. Continuing as a film franchise highlighting environmental degradation and resource overharvesting, much of the film is spent developing the relationship between Lo’ak and the tulkun. In this film, the resource that is cited for extraction is a serum named amrita located in the brain of the tulkun. RDA returns as the evil capitalistic machine intent on harvesting amrita that serves as an expensive human anti-aging serum. Brutal tulkun hunts that are successful result in the extraction of the amrita, with the rest of the animal being discarded, essentially as bycatch. However, the film highlights that not only is the tulkun destroyed, but the Metkayina clan suffers great distress as the tulkun are viewed as their sisters and family. Toward the end of the film, the Sully family does successfully stop a tulkun hunt in which Sully and Quaritch fight with the intent to kill one another. Unfortunately, oldest son Neteyam does not survive the battle and is laid to rest by his remaining family and the Metkayina clan in the Cove of Ancestors which serves the same significance as the Tree of Souls did in the first film, a critically important space for the development and relationships within the clan both past and present. Neteyam is buried in the cove and as Sully and his family inform the Metkayina clan of their intention to leave to protect the clan, Sully is told that his family is buried with their ancestors, and he is a part of them.

Avatar: The Way of Water (2022) Character Reference Guide:

Character	Description
Avatar	-10-foot-tall -blue-skinned -humanoid -close interconnectivity to natural world and environment
Recombinants	-permanent avatars developed by RDA using a mix of human and Na’vi DNA

Pandora	-distant lushy vegetative planet
Jake Sully	-avatar -former human -former soldier -former leader of Omatikaya clan -husband of Neytiri -father of Neteyam, Lo'ak, Tuk, and adopted daughter (of deceased scientist Dr. Grace Augustine) Kiri -protagonist
Neytiri	-avatar -Omatikaya warrior -Omatikaya princess -wife of Sully -mother of Neteyam, Lo'ak, Tuk, and adopted daughter (of deceased scientist Dr. Grace Augustine) -Kiri
Neteyam	-avatar -teenaged oldest child of Sully and Neytiri -strong and confident
Lo'ak	-avatar -teenaged middle child and youngest son of Sully and Neytiri -impulsive and brave
Tuk	-avatar -daughter and youngest child of Sully and Neytiri
Kiri	-avatar -teenaged daughter of Dr. Grace Augustine -adopted by Sully & Neytiri's family, has a strong connection to the environment and Eywa
Spider	-human -biological son of Quaritch

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -raised by Omatikaya clan on Pandora -close friends with Neteyam, Lo'ak, Tuk, and Kiri
Metkayina clan	-Na'vi oceanic clan
Research Development Administration (RDA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -prioritizes the mining of serum amrita from brain of tulkun for capitalistic wealth -antagonist
Tulkun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -whale like oceanic creature that lives in family pods -close connection to Metkayina clan
Amrita	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -serum valued at \$80 million per vial -per ounce is the most valuable substance to man -harvested by RDA to halt the effects of human aging -extracted from the brain of tulkuns
Quaritch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -recombinant permanent avatar encoded with all human memories -commander of recombinant attachment forces tasked with eliminating Na'vi insurgence -former commander for RDA's military attachment forces tasked with security enforcement -former marine -antagonist
Eywa	-Na'vi deity
Mauri	-physical home of Metkayina clan resembling mangroves

Table 2. *Avatar: The Way of Water* character reference guide

1.5 Relevance of the *Avatar* Film Franchise:

The first film, *Avatar*, is the highest grossing film of all-time with a lifetime gross of \$2.9 billion and the second film, *Avatar: The Way of Water*, has climbed to the 3rd largest grossing film all-time on the lifetime gross list with over \$2.3 billion generated from ticket sales alone (Box Office Mojo, 2023). As such, the film franchise is capable of significant influence on society and its perceptions and agendas. I will utilize Iver Neumann and Daniel Nexon's discussion on the study of popular culture and world politics to

examine the extent to which representation in the films impact Indigenous communities. More thoroughly discussed in the theoretical frameworks section, I will evaluate how the films serve as mirrors that in turn influence world politics and international relations (Neumann & Nexon, 2006). In terms of the relevance section, I hope to establish three main points of relevance to counterpoint audience members that may dismiss academic research into the *Avatar* films claiming they are ‘just a film’. First, I will briefly touch on the economic relevance the films have and demonstrate how the economic reach of the *Avatar* films goes beyond just gross ticket sales. Secondly, I will move into the societal relevance of the films. Again, referencing briefly Neumann and Nexon’s argument that film, as popular culture, is an important component of politics. Lastly, I move into examining political relevance. In this final section, I elect to highlight another recent example of how Indigenous activism in playing a role in politics. I will focus more closely on *Avatar* as a means of political activism later on in this thesis project.

1.5.1 Economical Relevance:

The economical relevance of the *Avatar* films is significant in that the franchise not only provides job security in the production and transportation of commercial products, but it also is important in the promotion of natural resource protection. The films are significant because they not only produced billions of dollars’ worth of ticket revenue, but also generated untold profit for movie theaters through accompanying snacks to consume while watching the films. Furthermore, the production of *Avatar* themed goods and merchandise that were manufactured for lovers of the films is also significant. Dolls, stuffed animals and action figures, clothing apparel, books and coloring books, stickers, toys, Lego sets, cards, party decorations and games, bracelets, watches, keychains, buttons, napkins, plates, cups and bowls, puzzles, bow and arrows, movie posters, drones, kite/gliders, calendars, Halloween costumes, make-up, tapestry, tablecloths, and towels are only a handful of available *Avatar* merchandise available for purchase after a quick search on Amazon. There is obviously substantial money and profit in the manufacturing of these goods, but also the worldwide distribution of the products. Transportation means are also an economic benefactor of the film then with shipping taking place likely through many means of freight whether it be via ship, plane, train, or automotive. Lastly, the fuel necessary to power all these freight methods stimulates many different countries throughout the world economically.

Locally, the sites of the film’s production also benefited financially, while the influences of *Avatar: The Way of Water* are still being measured, \$307 million was infused into the New Zealand economy following release of *Avatar* according to the Economic Development Minister of New Zealand (Brownlee, 2010). These funds benefit and stimulate the economy on all levels, including consumer purchasing habits but also the use of local labor for employment in the film production. Lastly, while

specific figures contributed to *Avatar* weren't available, tourism of New Zealand has increased greatly due to the production of large-scale film productions. Tourism stimulates all areas of a state's economy including transportation and hospitality, restaurants, locally produced goods consumption etc. which has a trickle-down effect that can benefit anything from the need for quality infrastructure to increased investment in the education system and schoolhouses.

1.5.2 Societal Relevance:

The objection that the film franchise is simply fiction or science fiction can easily be dismissed. Not only are the images on the screen invocative of living, breathing, speaking human entities, but the environment is also reflective of the environment and the resource depletion and resource crisis that is currently ongoing. As a result, it is problematic to dismiss the claim that the clans in the films are not meant or do not serve as a representation of any other real-life correlations of Indigenous communities, either historically or present-day. As Leavitt et al discusses, media plays a significant role in how groups are understood within society and oftentimes then perpetuate harmful stereotypes (2015). Thus, films are not passive mediums of communication, in fact, they are contributing to humans' understanding and knowledge of society. Much of this human knowledge is not derived from direct experience, but rather from other sources, including film, all of which leads to stereotypes, generalizations, and preferences (Neumann & Nexon, 2006). As Neumann and Nexon write, 'Popular entertainment not only commands a larger audience than the news or political events, but it frequently has a more powerful impact on the way audiences come to their basic assumptions about the world' (Neumann & Nexon, 2006). So, one of the largest grossing film franchises all time can be credited as responsible for teaching how to communicate ideas, 'accepted' means of interaction, and even spaces specific groups of people are included in.

The *Avatar* films, in fact, label the Na'vi Indigenous and makes use of long-standing derogatory terms that dismiss Indigenous standing that may inadvertently harm Indigenous perception and individual well-being (Leavitt et al., 2015). They may also provide a representative history of Indigenous communities and resources being harvested and destroyed. The films exemplify the ongoing struggle by Indigenous communities today, as well as the imbalance of power and sovereignty from colonization. As a result, Indigenous communities have both boycotted and objected to the appropriation of the films but have also used the film franchise as a catalyst for political discourse and Indigenous activism. Furthermore, James Cameron clearly advocates for this with his production of the documentary *A Message from Pandora* (2010) which will be evaluated in the three central themes of this research project.

The *Avatar* film franchise has transcended borders and languages to become an immeasurable figure in popular culture around the globe. One notable example that showcases the move beyond just fan forums and conventions, is the development of a formal Na'vi language. This language was developed after the success of the first film in which the main Na'vi clan is the Omaticaya clan. As confirmed by Joshua Izzo, Vice President of Franchise Development at Lightstorm Entertainment at OmatiCon 2023, an *Avatar* fan convention, with no 'C' in the official Na'vi language, the spelling of clan's name is changed between the films. Thus, the clan's name is now spelled Omatikaya in the second film, *Avatar: The Way of Water* and in subsequent promotional material (Avatar Wiki, 2023). This takes place despite there being no written language amongst the Na'vi clans in the film franchise itself. Rather, the Na'vi language was created outside of the films and then redefined in support of the social relevance of the films.

1.5.3 Political Relevance:

The relevance of the *Avatar* films influences the political sphere as well. Economic importance helps to increase political power on a global scale. As previously mentioned, New Zealand enjoyed economic stimulation from the production of *Avatar*, and the production was attracted to film in New Zealand due to the Large Budget Screen Production Grant which awarded a grant as financial incentive (Brownlee, 2010). This New Zealand grant was developed to compete along other states vying to attract film productions, specifically Australian efforts to be a haven for film productions (Brownlee, 2010). This acknowledges the large influence and power that comes with large scale film production. Economic stability and power contribute to the global political order. However, relationships can certainly be strained as the competition between countries to attract films through financial incentives increases. Considering the livelihood of citizens, increased economic stability, and billions of dollars available through film production, this tension must certainly be in the minds of officials when acting amongst other government representatives. Not only does New Zealand compete against nearby neighbor Australia, but Canada, the United Kingdom, and South Africa are also significant players on the international film sector, with Hollywood and Bollywood also commanding billions of dollars of revenue each year (Watkins, 2022).

Additionally, the political relevance of the films has helped to revitalize eco-centric activism and inclusion of Indigenous viewpoints in spaces where political discussions and decisions are taking space. While surely some methods of governments to be considerate of Indigenous viewpoints have appeared to more closely resemble an illusion of inclusion, they still are able to generate substantial attention to concerns of Indigenous communities. To give a recent example, in October 2021, the Norwegian government's Supreme Court unanimously ruled that Europe's largest onshore windmill farm was in fact

a violation of the rights of Indigenous Sami reindeer herders in that it threatened not only their livelihood, but their traditional way of life, and revoked the operating license for the 151 windmills (Buli & Solsvik, 2021). However, the windmills are as of this writing 16-months later, still operating despite the ruling. In March 2023, internationally renowned environmental activist Greta Thunberg joined activists and protestors in Oslo to highlight the complete disregard of the court ruling and continued exploitation and dismissal of the Sami land rights (Fouche & Klesty, 2023). Norwegian officials did apologize to the Sami parliament and agreed to a meeting the week following the protests.

1.6 How is this International Relations?

It is a valid question how this research is applicable in an international sense. To develop this, I lean heavily into Paul Keal's evaluation of European Conquest at the expense of Indigenous communities, as well as Iver Neumann's development of film serving both as an artifact and mirror of popular culture and how films production can result in a reproduction of Indigenous misrepresentation and erasure. Again, I've stated the scope of the popularity of the *Avatar* films and the significance of their reach and influence on consumers and society is immeasurable. With an international reach, international society accepts the legitimacy of states and the manner in which they were formed, thus accepting the destruction of Indigenous communities as a byproduct of state formation (Keal, 2003). It is crucial then to find out how the *Avatar* films can shape society, whether it be for good or bad. The films are about colonialism as a product of state expansion, as well as capitalism as a main driving economic factor for states. Whether the films are labeled as science fiction or not, the methods of colonization, the framing and dismissal of an 'other', and the trickle down effects or subjugation are all witnessed in the film. The film franchise does reproduce a specific product of the story of colonization, as confirmed by the producers and director (Cameron, 2012). Academic scholars are beginning to explore the influence that film, as a medium of popular culture, and what they are then communicating. Popular culture helps humans to understand the world, and how they then fit into the world, including amongst government forces and different societal groups, including marginalized minority communities (Madsen, 2013).

Additionally, there is a growing call to lean into Indigenous Knowledge Systems developed by Indigenous communities as a way to preserve the environment against degradation at the hands of humans and attempt to reverse the effects of environmental degradation. As will be discussed in the themes section, the *Avatar* films were developed to highlight the reciprocity of Indigenous relationships with nature in stark contrast with non-Indigenous communities that rely on consumption of natural resources for capitalistic gain. Furthermore, the United Nations recognize Indigenous Knowledge Systems as encompassing many of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals that target to improve

conditions on issues such as health, education, equality, economy, climate change, and the preservation of natural ecosystems such as forest, oceans, and rivers (United Nations, 2023).

Chapter 2-Theoretical Framework

The chapter will outline the theoretical framework for this research project. It begins with a section on religion and colonial expansion. Although religion is not the main factor behind humans visiting Pandora in the *Avatar* films, the growth of Christianity is historically a main justification for colonialism. Situated in this section is a discussion which references the project's theme of white savior complex. Next, a section on decoloniality and covert colonization will feature decolonial theory as guided by Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (2001) which affirms that colonialism is a fundamental problem requiring attention that calls for action. Césaire's message is based on the importance of self-reflection of complicity in colonizing structures, and that colonization does not equal civilization (2001). Furthermore, his writings necessitate that capitalism was predicated by colonization. Also used for evaluation will be Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's *Decolonization is not a metaphor* (2012) which challenges that decolonization must be painstakingly done without recentering the colonizer. These workings engage with Indigenous rights and the opportunity for Indigenous communities to utilize self-determination; in addition, they challenge how interwoven colonization is in humanity. Glen Sean Coulthard, Audra Simpson, and Edward Said are all used for discussion on power and sovereignty in section 2.3. In this section, I will discuss both soft and hard power as observable in the real world and the *Avatar* films.

Additionally discussed is how colonization and advances in transportation and technology allowed for increased connectivity around the world. I examine this globalization focusing on Iver Neumann's work on discourse analysis as it is deployed in the study of instances where power is maintained with minimal challenge by the aid of culture (2008). While not contributing to the decolonial theory framework of this project, discussing Neumann allows for the evaluation of the reproduction of 'reality' and what structures are disseminated and reinforced through popular culture in a digital age of globalization. Discussion of the theme of environmental justice and activism for this project will be included in this section. Also included is a section discussing cross-cultural confrontation which allows for discussion of the place-based significance theme for this project. This chapter will conclude with a brief section detailing researcher challenges.

2.1 Religion and Colonial Expansion:

Religious expansion of Christianity has historically had massive economic, social, and political influence on the global political order. While it is possible to build an entire separate dissertation on religious

influences on Indigenous communities, it will be approached in this project in relations to colonization and how it interplays with the three themes of environmental justice and activism, place-based significance, and white savior complex. Although, the colonization of Pandora is not religiously motivated (so far) in the *Avatar* film franchise, there are notes of religious inferences in the films. For example, there is a brief mention in the first film from the head of RDA venting his disgust that the Omatikaya clan will not submit to the humans after they've been so kind as to build them churches. Additionally in *Avatar*, the base and landing area under control by RDA is referred to as Hell's Gate. Insinuating that the colony is the arrival point for humans to a hellscape that is Pandora. The Hallelujah Mountain's which are floating mountains in the film, is an important environmental setting for the film's plot. In *Avatar: The Way of Water*, the recombinant Quaritch briefs his recombinant military attachment by stating, 'for the sins of our past life, we have been brought back in the form of our enemy'. The films' blasé use of religious separation between human and the Indigenous Na'vi showcases that religious differences are so engrained within colonization that they are accepted without objection. The *Avatar* films do provide the tools to establish that humans acknowledge religion, whereas Indigenous communities favor spirituality. However, the justification for colonization in the *Avatar* films is for exploitative capitalistic purposes and in which state security is the most important priority.

To discuss religion as a motive for colonization, discussion should include the Doctrine of Discovery. Although, the Vatican rejected the Doctrine of Discovery in March 2023, they were formal statements attributed from the Catholic Church in the 1400s that served as legal and moral justification for the colonization of Indigenous communities (Assembly, 2018). The dispossession of Indigenous land warranted colonization to exploit land and all its resources in the name of the state. In order to protect the security of their elevated power, it was necessary for states to distinguish and conquer areas that would provide the homelands with incoming revenues of wealth. Just as British, Spanish, Portuguese, Belgium, and French European powers secured incoming wealth, whether it be physical resources in the form of goods or people, the *Avatar* films feature economic imperialism but also move beyond to colonization and include its' stages of exploration, expropriation, appropriation, exploitation, and justification (Madsen, 2013; Mengara, 2019). Colonization is a political operation, that is perpetuated by discourse and other communicative methods. It is a way in which a state can extend its national borders, which will then include the resources within the newly acquired territory for economic, religious, or political gain. As Keal highlights, the expansion of state formation into unclaimed (according to European) lands, directly resulted in the annihilation of Indigenous communities and cultures. (2003). As the international society developed and accepted a colonizer, Eurocentric worldview, Indigenous communities and their lifeways and modes of being and knowing were marginalized, silenced, and ignored.

Colonial expansion does develop a superiority of the colonizer. This contributes to the white savior complex, a syndrome in which white colonizing superiors seek to save inferior colonized communities. Whether ordained by the church or not, colonizers striving to be a white savior for colonized communities can do so whether or not they are corroborated by those they seek to save. Colonization has enabled white saviors to assume they have the authority to intercede and act on behalf of Indigenous communities (Tuck & Yang, 2012). White savior complex rejects power and self-determination of Indigenous communities which will be discussed more thoroughly in the analysis of Chapter 4, which is complimented by examples in the *Avatar* films.

2.2 Decoloniality and Covert Colonization:

The *Avatar* film franchise denotes instances of colonization that is indoctrinated into society. By subliminally normalizing these standards, the hierarchical power positioning between colonizer and colonized is produced. The humans in the film franchise are overwhelming Westernized, mostly Americans which immediately signifies and capitalizes on the position of power the United States enjoys in the global political order-not to mention the military capabilities. Which will acknowledge the degree to which Indigenous communities have been decimated by colonization on the plains of North America. Additionally, the military personnel in each of the films are identified as Marines which is an American military unit, although the film franchise does begin by prefacing that the personnel are ‘hired guns’ and not an official military unit. Though many states do distribute dog tags to their military members, many stipulate they are only to be worn during times of military combat. Yet, in each of the *Avatar* films, dog tags are portrayed on the body of military personnel-both as humans in *Avatar* and as recombinant avatars in *Avatar: The Way of Water*. While there are more non-American human characters introduced in *Avatar: The Way of Water*, they also originate from colonizing states such as Australia and New Zealand. These characters are either scientists or private contractors that are working for RDA. The exclusion of representation of citizens from other countries is a nod to the global political order, which is a result of colonization.

The first *Avatar* film features another interesting point which centers around the head of RDA. At times in the film, he appears to wrestle with the demand from his stakeholders to extract unobtainium at the expense of the decimation of the Na’vi communities. Interesting though, in his office several non-human Na’vi artifacts are displayed. An avatar spear, bow and arrow, and what appears to be a dreamcatcher are all carefully included in his office, which makes a careful viewer wonder what they signify? While this could be presented as terms of reverence and admiration, they more align with and signal decorative

trophies, as proud accomplishments. What does this communicate to viewers of the film, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous? In the films, RDA continually prioritizes the opinion and mission of military personnel over that of the scientists, which signifies the prioritization of colonization.

2.3 Power and Sovereignty:

In discussing Indigenous representation, it would be reckless to overlook core issues of power and sovereignty for Indigenous communities. As an International Relations student, power is an architectural component in societal structures and interactions amongst individuals, communities, societies, and states. For this research project, power is considered to be the ability to make an entity do something they do not want to do or would not have otherwise done without outsider pressure (Wilson III, 2008). It is discussed not necessarily as a theory but as a required term in international relations studies, and as a relevant factory to colonization. Often demonstrated as diplomacy in the international world order, there are illustrations of both hard and soft power in the film demonstrated across the avatars versus humans and amongst the avatars and humans.

Power and sovereignty are massively empowering terms and concepts in International Relations and in the global order whether it be politically, economically, or socially. Power is used to examine how Indigenous individuals and communities, as an 'other', are intentionally removed from spaces where relevant decisions are being made and how lack of recognition and sovereignty continues to persist today. Just as the Na'vi clans struggle with the recognition of their sovereignty by humans on the imagined world of Pandora, Indigenous communities all over the world face the challenge of being recognized as equals by non-Indigenous communities. Colonizing states would extend recognition and sovereignty to similarly established states, indicating that the only way to be granted sovereignty would be on colonizing terms inequitably forcing Indigenous communities to alter their identities to portray acceptable colonizing standards (McGlinchey, 2017). By forcing Indigenous consciousness and identities to be defined and oriented in relation to the colonizer, power is further striped from Indigenous communities (Said, 1978). With the consequences of rejecting the politics of sovereignty and recognition leaves many Indigenous communities vulnerable to further subjugation (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson 2014). Political and cultural recognition of Indigenous communities focuses on membership, borders, and a sense of belonging. Rejection of colonial efforts for political order (by way of treaties or reservations) by Indigenous communities may further marginalize them from colonized society. Audra Simpson illustrates this by sharing an example of the Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse Team's disqualification from the World Lacrosse League Championship in England in 2010 due to the United Kingdom's refusal to recognize the Haudenosaunee passports and respect their autonomy (Simpson, 2014). Although not explicitly stated as

such, the significance of the clans in *Avatar* fighting to protect their natural world and their refusal of the human colonial recognition parallels how the historical consequences of colonialism that are being fought by Indigenous groups today despite an ‘end of colonization’.

Furthermore, in addition to the Doctrine of Discovery, colonizing states also used their sovereignty and authority as justification for claiming ‘unclaimed’ land (meaning land not associated with other likeminded, colonizing states). In order to build up their resources and protect the rights of their citizens, colonizing states encroached upon those that they didn’t recognize as equals to secure land, resources, and labor. These efforts would further secure the future success of the state. This is clearly identified as a motive in the storyline in each of the films, firstly on the expansion of land to secure the preservation of humankind from a resource depleted earth, but also in the resource extraction efforts of RDA and the construction of semi-permanent compounds or bases on Pandora. Repeatedly throughout the films the sovereignty of the Omatikaya and Metkayina clans weren’t acknowledged, recognized, or respected, whereas humans exercised their settler sovereignty over the ‘unclaimed’ Pandora world (Tuck & Yang, 2012). In addition to sovereignty, Indigenous communities were often disregarded as people with cultures, traditions, and social structures, instead colonizing states approached Indigenous communities as a problem to be solved so that their land and its resources may be acquired for land and resource gain (Said, 1978).

Throughout the films, RDA uses power to manipulate the Na’vi clans. First RDA used soft power methods but when that produced unsatisfactory results, RDA adopted hard power actions. Soft power is the ability to persuade others into a desired outcome (Wilson III, 2008). Soft power methods in settler colonization include the awarding of ‘gifts’, which would often be used for manipulation in the future, the building of churches, schools, or promises of important positions. Teaching the colonizer’s language to the Indigenous communities and offering positions of importance through treaties that go unfilled or seek only to give an illusion of inclusion. Coercive tactics that also fall under soft power that were mobilized during colonization include extending ‘gifts’ such as guns, money, food and drink, cars, etc. or granting access to resources that were confiscated from the Indigenous communities as a gesture of goodwill. Essentially soft power serves as barely detectable tools of manipulation that reaffirm the colonizer in control through coercion or convincing. The scientists employed by RDA are there to deploy soft power and ‘diplomacy’. As discussed previously, individuals that are tasked with developing rapport with the colonizer society run the risk of rejecting the task-or even revealing and joining forces with those being manipulated by soft power, such as Sully and Dr. Augustine in the *Avatar* films. Much less abrasive than

hard power, it is most definitely a form of diplomacy and a tried-and-true practice of state governments to control and influence citizens and society-including Indigenous communities.

On the other hand, hard power unmistakably uses force to seek compliance of others, including in the form of military intervention (Wilson III, 2012). Hard power is unmistakable in the *Avatar* film franchise and is exercised not by a state's military, but by RDA's 'hired guns' which are military personnel. It is evident in the human usage of guns and other weaponry to kill and wound avatars and native animals on Pandora, construction equipment clearing large areas of lands without consent for the construction of roads, schools, and military bases, and the use of explosives and bombs to clear large areas of the environment for the purposes of mining and resource extraction. Cameron explains,

The European destruction of native peoples, using military force, in order to acquire their land and resources, is the obvious basis for the *Avatar* story, as has been pointed out in numerous reviews. *Avatar* has its roots in clash between colonial European forces, with their superior technology of muskets, cannons and horses, and the native Americans with their more primitive technology and nature worshipping culture. The underlying history is well known to all of us. These are widely known historical facts, documented in thousands of books. It is our inescapable shared history in this country. And the references in the movie are deliberate and obvious, some critics would say to the point of cliché' (2012, p 93).

Each of these actions in the films, whether they be illustrations of soft or hard power, were highly invasive of the sovereignty of the Na'vi.

2.4 Globalization:

I also present this research project as an international relations student. By that I mean, that *Avatar* as a film franchise shared internationally, which serves to communicate and reinforce colonizing structures. In that, the *Avatar* films can serve as a mirror of popular culture and thus influences relations among colonizing powers and Indigenous communities, dominant and non-dominant groups, both within states and across states globally. I make use of both standalone and collaborative research works from Iver Neumann which focuses on popular culture as a communicative tool of power.

Just as social media is now a considerable tool in politics, the *Avatar* film franchise as popular culture can influence politics and social order. As Keal said, 'international society is a powerful and important idea with increasing relevance to world politics' (2003). As the result of connectivity and interdependence among states, globalization allows for the migration of ideas and notions beyond state borders. Neumann and Nexon maintain that the transmission of popular culture increasingly relies on globalization rather

than direct, first-hand interaction (2006). As a product, the *Avatar* film franchise has adapted for mass consumption by different languages and cultures, thus increasing the distribution capabilities of ideologies from the *Avatar* film franchise as popular culture. Popular culture transmits ideas and notions about social and political life which in turn constructs hasty generalizations or stereotypes of ‘others’ and about the world and political life (Neumann & Nexon, 2006). Information about the world and how to operate within it amongst other communities is collected through second-hand methods, of interaction with peers, familial system, scientific sources, or religious sources rather than personal experience (Neumann & Nexon, 2006).

This underlines the significance of the *Avatar* film franchise and its immense global popularity. For individuals or societies unable or unwilling to rely on first-hand experience with marginalized Indigenous communities, there is an increased reliance on popular culture to construct reality second-hand. For example, a Canadian never having traveled to South Korea, must rely upon popular culture and second-hand methods of interconnectivity and globalization to construct an understanding of South Korea and all that it entails socially, economically, culturally, and politically. This may include listening to and watching popular K-pop singing artists like Blackpink to construct ideas on South Korean fashion and beauty standards. Or consuming South Korean television show *The Squid Game* (2021) or the cinematic film *Train to Busan*, (2016) to construct South Korean social standards and values. With state borders more stable now than during times of extensive colonization, citizens orient themselves through influences of popular culture. As a result, interpretations of Indigenous communities from the *Avatar* film franchise may supersede other second-hand methods such as scientific sources or educational references to construct understandings of Indigenous communities in the world and political life (Neumann & Nexon, 2006). This means that the status of development as it currently is placed, is a result of colonization. Colonization experiences of the past have dictated state development the world over, whether it be in a developed or undeveloped, colonizer or colonized state. As such, the global society is so entangled with colonization that the two cannot be separated. As Cameron states in court documents, ‘it is our inescapable shared history’ (Cameron, 2012, p. 30). As foundational societal structures, colonization cannot be reversed. Césaire then highlights it is thus imperative to let suppressed communities establish and develop, to affirm and define themselves, in relation amongst the colonized and to the colonizer (2001). In turn, this would insulate protection for colonizing societies. The current capitalist structure focused on consumption relies on the existing structure of racism and in which a framework of the suppression of others, including Indigenous communities, reinforces colonial power through an organizational structure (Cumes, 2022).

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith explores, in spaces of colonization efforts, Indigenous communities are often first highlighted as noble savages, portrayed with a distinct closeness to and appreciation of nature, which then transitioned into barbaric and animalistic, stances which have contributed to the relegation of Indigenous communities as inferior, incapable, and uncivilized (1999). The space to which Indigenous groups find themselves visible and represented in mainstream media is limited and, as a result, reinforces stereotypes. This faulty representation forces Indigenous communities to place themselves amongst stereotypes to negotiate their identities (Leavitt et al, 2015). This negotiation must be end with an acceptable Indigenous identity that meets colonizing standard of what it means to be Indigenous. For example, on 28 April of 2023, Brazilian President Lula de Silva announced the formal recognition of six Indigenous tribes, which protected their lands from mining activities and requires specific authorization for logging or farming activities (Al Jazeera, 2023) While this does illustrate that ongoing efforts to protect Indigenous communities can be successful, it reaffirms that the Indigenous communities rely on recognition from the Brazilian government in order to be ensured or rights. Colonization requires an ‘other’. Regarded as the ‘other’, Indigenous communities were then thought to be of inferior intellect and discounted as human (Said, 1978). Colonization had direct and indirect, immediate, and long-term results on Indigenous communities. Conditioned on the assumption of the ‘other’ as inferior and incapable of human emotions, members of colonizing societies were able to disconnect and become desensitized to colonization’s effects (Said, 1978). Colonizing forces are associated with military, economic, and cultural power that elevate them above any others (Said, 1978). The colonizer is superior and the standard and supersedes any Indigenous existence (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

In this case, the Indigenous avatars are the ‘other’ on Pandora. Although not humans, they are capable of human emotions. In telling the film’s stories from the perspective of the Na’vi, including humans that have undergone avatarization and linking into Pandora in an avatar frame, the films work very hard to get the viewers to sympathize with and become invested in the Na’vi clans. Including in this investment is Na’vi societal and family structures, the Na’vi way of knowledge collection, and connectivity amongst all Pandora. In turn, RDA and humans are seen as the antagonist villain serving a capitalistic society bent on over-consumption. Beyond the white savior outlined in Chapter 4, each of the *Avatar* films features a handful of humans (mostly scientists) that have not linked into an avatar frame yet are very aware of the implications of the presence of the non-native on Pandora. In many of these characters, it is possible to observe the complexity of the critical consciousness struggle of colonization. They are hesitant or appear remorseful when participating in acts that directly harm elements of Pandora, understanding that the success of their job is directly correlated to the suffering of a Pandorian element. Tuck & Yang state that performing sympathy such as this is critical to settler innocence, which mitigate colonizer guilt (2012).

The film follows the white savior global Hollywood template in which representations of the Na'vi 'other' are projected as exotic to the well-known colonized world, which reinforces marginalized (including Indigenous) communities as distant yet uniform in how they have been portrayed by the colonizer and there is a distinguishable divide between the good Na'vi and the evil humans (Giovanni, 2014). With the stark physical contrast (colors, textures, and lighting) between human materials and the Pandorian world, paired with music cues, the audience is meant to view humans and their presence as bad. In sympathizing and aligning with the Na'vi, viewers of the films are manipulated into following a specific narrative that recognizes the destruction that colonization causes. Said Cameron,

Avatar is a science fiction retelling of the history of North and South America in the early colonial period. Avatar very pointedly made reference to the colonial period in the Americas, with all its conflict and bloodshed between the military aggressors from Europe and the Indigenous peoples. Europe equals Earth. The native Americans are the Na'vi. It's not meant to be subtle (Bonsorte, 2019).

How then, do human audience members disassociate what they are seeing in the films, and what is currently happening to the environment and continued atrocities to Indigenous communities? Proving that while the *Avatar* films are a mirror not only to society but representative of political points of contention all over the world.

As such, globalization is an important factor in environmental justice and activism for Indigenous communities. Campaigns and media coverage are used that capitalize on globalization and rely on a bond between Indigenous communities as people heavily influenced and an acceptance of their rights (Ødemark, 2015). As Madsen emphasizes, while the *Avatar* films are indicative of popular culture and society, many viewers disassociate the themes associated with colonization in this instance place-based significance and white savior complex, as processes and problems of the past, thus relieving them of any relevance to the current state of society (2013). It is then at this point that it is important to note that inclusion matters. A lack of Indigenous representation in spheres of influence and modes of societal information exchange such as mass media and popular culture, allows for the reproduction of colonizing structures the stereotypes they may reinforce.

2.5 Cross-Cultural Conflict:

A cross-cultural conflict is the result of different groups disagreeing over cultural boundaries or standards (Chaudhary & Yadav 2018). There are strong cultural differences between colonizing and colonized societies, both in the *Avatar* films and the real world. Primary among those differences is land. Land is

critical to the creation of state development and increases capital and political power, which was a main driver for colonization. Thus, colonization and capitalism are securely linked together. In contrast, land is an instrumentally significant factor for Indigenous communities. In fact, Glen Sean Coulthard's detailing the significance of Indigenous communities' deep roots to land in his book *Red Skin, White Masks*, is a big help in exploring the relationship of space/land as presented in the *Avatar* films. As Coulthard writes, 'for Indigenous nations to live, capitalism must die,' (2014). Internalizing a capitalistic culture with ideologies of colonizer supremacy is one way in which colonial structures are reinforced. A capitalistic approach understands nature and its resources as property, that can be exploited for the advancement and comfort of those who successfully manage it. Meaning that all modern conceptions of knowledge, understanding, science, and society itself have present-day implications from past internalization of a colonizing, capitalistic approach. In regard to the identified space/time theme, Blaser states the significance of and relevance to place-based perspectives for Indigenous communities is immeasurable (2004). The transfer of land contributes to the dispossession of Indigenous identity as demonstrated in the films by the loss of Hometree in *Avatar*.

Pertaining to the *Avatar* film franchise, the interconnectivity of globalization has allowed for methods of traditional colonization to be presented through a popular culture medium. It has allowed for the opportunity the unification of Indigenous causes and created spaces of reflection. Capitalizing on the popular culture messaging, activists have appropriated the blue Na'vi to bring attention to causes seeking environmental justice and the protection of Indigenous rights. Additionally, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which prioritize the environment and rights for all, point to a space within society that is open to and focused on examining colonization's attributes and how they can be remedied. By striving to overcome and rectify these generalizations, decolonial theory works to create opportunities in which Indigenous communities can recover identities lost by colonization. In working to confront Indigenous cultures interrupted by colonization, the *Avatar* films as popular culture illustrate that globalization allows for the reflection of culture dynamics and historical methods of colonization (Giovanni, 2014).

2.6 Researcher Challenges:

Growing up in a Westernized country and the product of multiple Western education systems, the researcher has been long exposed to the ontology that places humans at the center of and highest priority in the world. In which, life is lived in a manner that is meant to maximize human comfort and security. Similarly, the researcher's approach and evaluation of each of the films will be subject to some degree of colonized bias that has been institutionalized through interactions within and consumption of

Westernized, colonized society. Much effort was made to neutralize this bias and engage with sources and content from an open and honest place. However, it is important to acknowledge that exposure to various colonizing structures and recognize that, as an outsider to most, if not all, Indigenous communities, I can only understand the perspective of Indigenous communities to an extent.

Chapter 3: Research Project Design Methods

This chapter will illustrate and justify the methods used in the research project through several sub-sections. The main purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with an understanding of how the data was gathered, analyzed, and used to reach a conclusion. To begin, the first section in the methods chapter showcases the progression of developing the three main themes of environmental justice and activism, place-based significance, and white savior complex for analysis that pertained to the films *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water*. Next, the chapter will explain the efforts undertaken and motivations applied to support qualitative interpretive research through various sources, including the consideration and attention given to secure credible informants. This chapter also includes sections that describe the project's usage of media interviews, documentaries, and court documents as resources for analysis for empirical research that is based on observing the three central themes of the project (Bell et al, 2022). These resources helped to analyze what effects the central themes in the *Avatar* films had in Indigenous communities. The chapter will conclude with a section acknowledging limitations and the influence of colonization is included to provide context on the approach for analysis and a brief discussion on ethical considerations involved with the research design.

3.1 Film Analysis of *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water*

In this thesis, I have conducted analysis of the films *Avatar* (2009) and *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) to examine Indigenous representation within the film and examine whether this contributes to colonization. According to Bryman, content analysis focuses on communication artifacts that include video, audio, or picture formats (Bryman, 2016). The research has focused on signs, codes, and conventions from the *Avatar* films that create meaning for Indigenous communities. Having seen each of the *Avatar* films, I began by using four different codes to examine and analyze the films:

- environmentalism
- significance of space
- political ecocentrism
- white savior complex

The popularity of the films and thus the power any messaging had (whether subliminal or overt) was what primarily attracted me toward analyzing the films. After much consideration, I have elected not to

examine the language used throughout the films by the characters. While language used can largely be debated as appropriate or not when contributing to the affirmation of colonialist structures, I sensed that it was more used as a manner as to distinguish the biases the characters had in the films, whereas the signs, codes, and conventions of the film created and communicated meanings and connotations in a more subliminal manner (Bignell, 2002). However, Neumann points out that the examination of film can be understood as text (Neumann, 2008). The task then, is to analyze/explore how Indigenous communities are socially constructed in the film (Neumann, 2008).

As my research progressed, I saw a thin line develop between environmentalism and political ecocentrism. I realized that the interpretations I was making for each were quite similar. As a result, I moved to combine the themes into the definitive environmental justice and activism theme. This action would allow for a more robust, thorough examination of the theme with appropriate subpoints, and would mitigate any opportunities of confusion amongst the final three themes for review in the project of which were environmental justice and activism, place-based significance, and white savior complex.

After initially developing the central themes, I used discourse analysis, which focuses on how meaning is produced and what it is meant to accomplish, to assess how the films influence environmental and political conversations regarding Indigenous communities (Bell et al, 2022). Deploying discourse analysis on the films themselves, but also on the documentary *A Message to Pandora* and James Cameron's court document allowed for interpretations of the resources and the context as popular culture in which they are perceived. More specifically, the court document produced by James Cameron allowed for examination of the motivation of the *Avatar* films and why the specific themes were included within the films. pertaining to the environmental justice and activism theme,

3.2 Semi-structured interviews

To round out my research, I set out to conduct qualitative interviews in which I sought to measure the perceived influence of the *Avatar* films on the Indigenous communities at the heart of the film. This would allow for the triangulation and cross-checking of the interpretations across multiple methods, increasing the trustworthiness, dependability and constituency, and credibility of the research project. I specifically crafted questions focused on the three themes of environmental justice and activism, place-based significance, and white savior complex. An interview guide was constructed based off a literature review. Informant recruitment began the first week of February 2023 and was conducted through online platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, as well as email. Interviews were targeted to be Computer Mediated Communication and be accomplished in the form of an email questionnaire so the

informant could complete the interview in their own time, at their convenience. Informants were also given a digital face-to-face interview option as well should that be more comfortable or accommodating to their schedule. To allow time for analysis interviews were to be completed by 1 April 2023.

The interviews conducted digitally were semi-structured and featured open-ended questions. Questions were fashioned so that informants could participate whether they had seen both films, one film, or neither of the *Avatar* films. Again, the perspective of the informants would be of value due to the popularity of the film and its interwoven connections in the economic, political, and social spheres. Questions were designed to relate to at least one of each of the themes to allow the informant to address the subject in the manner which they were most comfortable. I also ended the interviews with the open-ended question, ‘Is there anything you’d like to discuss that I have not included in this interview?’ so that informants could expand upon or raise specific concerns that may have been relevant to the research but may not have necessarily fit into their response to planned questions.

All four informants appeared to be quite comfortable and enthusiastic to participate in the interview and provide insight into their perception of Indigenous representation in the *Avatar* films. Questions were shared via the interview guide at least 24-hours in advance of the interview in an effort to be transparent of the objective of the interview. Each of the digital interview informants agreed to have their interview recorded and appeared to be well-versed in digital interactions and interviews. All correspondence and interviews were conducted in English. Despite being made available to the informant numerous times prior to their interview, there was a delay from each of the informants in receiving their signed consent form. However, there provided feedback was not thoroughly analyzed until after the signed consent form has been completed and returned.

3.3 Media Interviews and Court Documents

As has been disclosed in the previous section, considerable efforts went into finding informants to provide insight surround the thesis topic. However, from the beginning of my research I sought the use of alternate sources of information. This was intentional, mainly because as I was curious on the topic, I did not want to place the burden of the research on informants of a marginalized group. Research should not solely rely upon a community that has been traditionally diminished by any society that has not practiced transparency or acted in good faith in the past. As such, I switched approaches and looked toward more nontraditional sources to which content analysis could be conducted. Using a film franchise for analysis in this research, similar communication sources were pursued.

Assuming potential informant James Cameron would not be available for participation, I conducted a discourse analysis of his *A Message from Pandora* documentary in which he participates in interviews. I find these sources to be extremely invaluable for a number of reasons. Firstly, due to the power James Cameron has, he is inaccessible to me as someone without ties to the film entertainment industry. Having direct quotes attributed from him allowed for evaluation in reference to this project. Second, these quotes come directly from him, are valuable assessments of his vision and satisfaction of the film, including portrayals of Indigenous communities. Lastly, as previously mentioned, as someone with enormous power, the messaging that is attributed to Cameron has likely been carefully, thoughtfully crafted. As such, as a prominent public figure, the word choice is intentional and significant when it pertains to the three main themes of the project. As interpretations of a primary source conducted by another, these interviews by Cameron were secondary data (Bell et al, 2022). These interviews were incredibly valuable to the research and provided many in-depth discussion points for the chosen themes. Rather than asking questions that were carefully crafted in structured interviews, the media interviews revealed the motivations of the themes and how they were interpreted by the production team for Indigenous communities.

In addition to James Cameron's media interviews, I used a sworn declaration affidavit from James Cameron and his Lightstorm Entertainment production team filed in the United States District Court in November 2012 as a resource for discourse analysis. As a primary data source, this document provided many important quotes directly from Cameron that reveal the motivation, mindset, inspirations, content construction, and creative processes behind the *Avatar* film franchise production. Specific outlines and references to colonization and the central themes of environmental justice and activism, place-based significance, and white savior complex are made in the court documentation. Having this court document as a resource, justified the analysis of the themes and the bearing the analysis may have on perceptions of the *Avatar* films as popular culture. As sworn testimony and public record, the source was valuable as the content was directly attributed to James Cameron and the *Avatar* franchise production process.

For the interviews from the *A Message to Pandora* documentary and court documents, I conducted a thematic analysis on the data. Specifically, data that identified the themes of environmental justice and activism, place-based significance, and white savior complex in regard to the *Avatar* film franchise were analyzed. Patterns were developed and a summarization of the analysis was then interpreted. This analysis was latent in that it identified intrinsic assumptions and ideologies beyond the specific words, and explored deeper meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, the goal of identifying repeated patterns would account for a Freudian slip, or an unintentional error regarded as revealing subconscious feelings,

in regard to the neutrality of confirmability of the trustworthiness (Nickerson, 2023). In using multiple sources for analysis, the project was able to practice triangulation on the respective themes to test the validity of the research.

3.4 Collection of sources

Potential informants for a semi-structured interview were engaged in purposive sampling, meaning that participant recruitment was intentional and not random and consisted of Indigenous community members that were recognized as prominent, identifiable figures (Bell et al, 2022). These potential informants were specifically pursued because they had previously advocated for Indigenous communities and may have been more willing to participate. Additionally, all informants were encouraged to share my contact information with others they thought may be interested in participating in the research. Capitalizing on the rapport with informants, I was able to establish contact with other potential informants through their recommendations, also known as snowball sampling (Bell et al, 2022). Informants consisted of college professors, authors, artists, social media activist figures and journalists.

As a researcher, seeking informants from many Indigenous communities would influence credibility, dependability, confirmability, and/or transferability, all of which contribute to the trustworthiness of the project. If consistent insight was shared by informants from various Indigenous communities, the reliability of the research would have been increased. I made a concerted effort to ensure that informants were from different Indigenous communities and may be more likely to observe similarities in the depictions of the Indigenous community in the *Avatar* films and their own respective Indigenous community. Furthermore, having informants from different backgrounds and communities would increase the reliability of the study. As a result of this effort, the four research informants are members of numerous different tribes, that originate from three different colonized countries, which include both the plains of North America and Oceania. This representation was important to me as a researcher as the producers of *Avatar* revealed they modeled the Omatikaya clan after the tribes of the plains of North America in *Avatar*, and the Metkayina clan after the Polynesian and Māori tribes in *Avatar: The Way of Water* (Chitwood, 2002). The informants currently reside in three different continents; thus, they interact with a larger variation of societal norms surrounding *Avatar* and its public consumption. That is not to say that the informants were speaking on behalf of all Indigenous members of all Indigenous communities, rather, that they may provide a larger scope of perspectives than if I had interviewed informants from one Indigenous community in one geographic location.

For a project examining popular culture reproduction of the colonization of Indigenous communities, the sources felt relevant and valuable for discussion. Just as academic articles and scholarly research were valuable resources, so too were cast interviews and documentaries. Perhaps my thesis has more new media resources compared to other research projects, however that is indicative of popular culture as well. While these new media resources perhaps lacked the branding and backing by a long-standing established academic institution or publication, as an actor in the digital age where media is shared and reshared instantly across a myriad of platforms for public consumption, accurate information is important to remain credible. Sources required accuracy as the accessibility of media also guarantees many reviewers looking for errors to label as misinformation. As with any collateral produced by organizations, I am aware that documentaries can be biased and propagandic in nature. Thus, I worked to confirm the trustworthiness of any facts or figures from resources across a myriad of outlets.

3.5 Limitations and Colonization's Influence

Locating informants was an anticipated challenge and, with a total of four participating in the semi-structured interviews, did factor in the research project. Difficulties in securing potential informants to be interviewed for the project can likely be attributed to two main reasons. First, I was seeking recognizable Indigenous activists in the entertainment industry active in the realm of popular culture to share their insight. Undoubtedly there could be hesitation and concern that participation in the research project, even if anonymized, could complicate any future career opportunities in the entertainment industry, especially given the economic, societal, and political power of *Avatar* and various influential stakeholders in the industry. Another minor obstacle I encountered was Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) from the film's production. Snowball sampling led to a connection that knew several *Avatar: The Way of Water* set members in Aotearoa New Zealand. Unfortunately, they politely declined participation citing the NDAs and echoing the concern that participation could complicate any future career opportunities in the entertainment industry, as well as legal repercussions.

Secondly, historical distrust by Indigenous communities as subjects of studies in research inquiries certainly factors in, despite the success in securing two Indigenous Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) professors as informants. This distrust was observable in the route to secure participation of one informant, in particular, which further demonstrates the havoc of colonization and its various methods of expungement of Indigenous communities. The informant asked numerous questions of the researcher, the motive for research, and what ties there may be to Indigenous communities. Understanding that it is paramount for the researcher to remain objective for the findings to be reliable, without leading toward fan or critic of the film franchise, I explained the motivation for examining the three themes of

environmental justice and activism, place-based significance, and white savior complex as observable in the *Avatar* films in relation to Indigenous representation and popular culture. I transparently shared that my grandfather was a member of the Algonquin community in upstate New York, but that I grew up in Wyoming near the Wind River Indian Reservation and was not included as a member in any community. The informant shared that their Indigenous community did not consider blood quantum, card carrying status, or reservation residence as factors that superseded Indigenous ancestry, and agreed to participate in the project as an informant.

Understanding that many Indigenous communities have boycotted the *Avatar* franchise, I sought informants for semi-structured interviews that both had and had not seen either of the movies. Although open to criticism, I believe it necessary to include perspectives of those that had *not* seen one or either film because their perspectives were still critically important as a member of society that was exposed to promotional propaganda from the film. While potentially not as thorough as sitting through the three-hour films, previews and trailers for the films were cut from the full-length film and served as a representation of the film, so opinions could still be established. Furthermore, any informants that had not seen the films would still have an opportunity to be exposed to any type of film merchandise manufactured for mass distribution and consumption, as well as new media of the film. Thus, I believe that the insight from informants that had not seen the films would also be of value to help me frame my research and research questions.

While I only succeeded in securing four completed semi-structured interviews from informants in total, I believe the insight to be valuable and representative of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewers of the films. However, the low number of completed interviews could significantly influence the transferability or external validity and credibility of my research findings. Recognizing that having a low sample size would significantly influence the trustworthiness of the project, the analysis of the semi-structured interviews was omitted from the project.

3.6 Ethics

This research project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), and all personal data collected from the informants was handled according to the guidelines of the NSD and the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU).

As referenced above, distrust by Indigenous communities to research and study is understandable. As such, I understood the ethical dilemma faced by potential informants and sought to remain professional,

transparent, and communicative about the objective of the research project. Research should never place harm to participants, whether it be physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, etc., thus informants were requested to give informed consent and were able to withdraw from participation at any point in the project, as well as pass on answering any interview questions. Potential informants were contacted twice asking to participate in the study but no further in order to avoid being harassed. Informants that had agreed to participate but were delayed in providing their interview responses or the research consent form were reminded three times, but no further, again in order to avoid being harassed.

Chapter 4: *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water* Analysis on Indigenous Relations Themes

Rather than subjecting the four informants and their interview participation to questions of project applicability and the level of trustworthiness due to the low total number, analysis of informant participation was omitted. Instead, each informant contributed to the project in a different, surprising manner. Unprompted by the researcher, after their respective interviews each informant circled back to provide additional resources that they thought to be of interest to the research project. These resources were evaluated and are included in the reference list when appropriate.

As a result, this chapter will deploy discourse analysis to examine three observable themes from *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water* and how each theme is representative of issues facing Indigenous communities today. The themes that have been identified for discussion in this project include environmental justice and activism, place-based significance, and white savior complex. I will describe how each theme is apparent in the films, and then move to establish the concerns of representation in relation to Indigenous communities. This chapter will reference the Belo Monte Dam construction on the Xingu River in Brazil as a situation that exemplifies each of the three themes.

4.1 Environmental Justice and Activism

This section includes an exploration of the degree to which *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water* have been used to further advocate for environmental justice by Indigenous communities. While environmental protection is not solely an Indigenous concern, it does seem to be particularly of importance in remaining Indigenous communities whether they be intact or displaced by past colonization efforts. In fact, there are cases of Indigenous communities all over the world that use the *Avatar* films as a tool to further advance their advocacy efforts in relation to the environment and environmental needs, such as protests in support of Arabunna land in South Australia or protests in London over the land rights of the Dongria Kondh tribe in India (Mitchell, 2011; Jenkins, 2010; Survival 2010). With much of the world's population living in urban areas disconnected and removed from nature that hasn't been greatly modified by human's

landscape architecture efforts, *Avatar* directs attention to nature that deserves recognition. While city parks and greenways are important city landscapes, they are carefully manicured to acceptable human standards. Whereas the films identify living systems such as mountains, forests, lakes, deserts, etc., that are highlighted to audiences as being important and significant characters in the film (Adamson, 2012).

In fact, following the success of *Avatar*, Cameron was joined by some of the film's stars in the Brazil to bring attention to the Belo Monte Dam construction along the Xingu River that would impact thousands of Indigenous community members. While the dam was just one of dozens planned by the Brazilian government, the Belo Monte Dam specifically generated immense interest due to the involvement of individuals associated with *Avatar* (Bonsorte, 2010; Experts, 2009, International 2012). Released shortly after the first *Avatar* film in November 2010, a valuable resource to examine in relation to the case study is a short documentary, titled *A Message from Pandora*, produced by Cameron regarding his efforts to bring attention to and influence the Brazilian government to stop dam construction plans which would distribute power throughout Brazil due to the environmental and Indigenous destruction in Brazil. Originally available on Amazon Watch, the documentary was removed from and added to the extended Collector's Edition Blue-ray and DVD box sets for *Avatar*, perhaps in an effort to further capitalize economically on the popularity of the films. However, there are a handful of streams available to view the documentary which features Cameron and *Avatar* stars Sigourney Weaver (Dr. Augustine) and Joel David Moore (Norm) with Indigenous communities in Brazil.

The documentary's concern is the construction of the Belo Monte Dam on the Xingu River which would displace over 20,000 Indigenous people and completely alter their way of life, cultural identity, and relationship with nature both present day and for future generations. Environmental justice and activism are on display in two ways. First local and international individuals and organizations objected to the dam's construction, echoing objections on similar plans from the 1980s that were abandoned when The World Bank revoked its funding of the project (Southgate, 2017). As a result, extensive long-term campaigns have been created advocating for protection of the Amazonian rainforest. These campaigns capitalize on the establishment on a bond between people living 'there' and a global connectivity and humanity in what understood as acceptable for humankind is formed (Ødemark, 2015). So Indigenous communities as those 'living there', become more than ambassadors or protectors, they become activists, helpers, and guardians. Having to overcome notions of their existence only being part or history of the past, 'the survival of local cultures, in a particular environment, safeguards against global warming, while Indigenous peoples, serve as mediators between life and death by preserving the forest, a life-sustaining force, and thus barrenness and death.' (Ødemark, 2015). Secondly, activism is generated not just locally,

but internationally due to the ability to capitalize on the *Avatar* popularity and include parallels from the film and the situations in the Brazilian rainforest. Something echoed by *Avatar* star Moore in Cameron's documentary, "the parallel of what is going on here, with what went on in our movie," and by Cameron himself, "I wound up going to Brazil and all of a sudden I was living in Pandora," (Bonsorte, 2010).

Furthermore, the resulting deforestation and large-scale change to the forest ecosystem is another chief concern for environmental activists. Not only will flooded areas of the forest area no longer be accessible due to water levels, but surrounding areas of the forest are subject to deforestation as areas are cleared for roads and other supplemental dam support spaces such as parking lots and storage areas. The diversion of the river's natural flow will also impact fish migration and breeding grounds (Southgate, 2017; Fearnside, 2017; Heiskel, 2016). Additionally, the claim that the Belo Monte Dam is a source of clean energy has been hotly contested. Specifically, the emission of greenhouse gas methane emitted by the large water reservoir negates any benefit of 'clean' energy (Fearnside, 2017). This greenhouse gas directly contributes to global warming.

Environmental justice was cited as a specific motive for the production of the *Avatar* film franchise by Cameron in court documents that, "the corporate bad guys are destroying the virgin rainforest of Pandora... They will stop at nothing, including the use of high-tech military force against Indigenous people armed only with bows and arrows, in order to get what they want" (Cameron, 2012, p. 33). With the film's antagonist villain RDA having exhausted traditional colonizing methods (language, religion), more aggressive means of subjugation are taken with the Omatikaya clan being forcibly removed from Hometree under threat of fire. In this, Indigenous communities have witnessed reflections of decimation to their communities and have thus adopted *Avatar* as a tool for activism. As Emma Mitchell examines in her 2011 thesis *Seeing blue: negotiating the politics of Avatar media activism*, Indigenous communities have mobilized the film as a popular culture phenomenon to bring their issues, concern, and voices to mainstream focus. One such example is in 2010 when members of the Indigenous Solidarity Rides demonstrations elected to paint themselves blue in acknowledgement of *Avatar* popularity, to protest the mining of uranium in southern Australia on Arabunna land (Mitchell, 2011). Using a painted blue appearance to generate political activism and discussion concedes the value of *Avatar* and with it the representation or in the ways that it parallels Indigenous communities.

One noted obstacle that must be overcome though, is the historical portrayal of Indigenous as inefficient, outdated, uneducated cultures that are inferior to the enlightened, Westernized colonizer (Mitchell, 2011). Although colonization is oftentimes classified as over, the effects are still evident, and the subjugation of

Indigenous communities are often woven into the very structure of the colonizing state. Colonization is not a tool of the past, nor are Indigenous communities and their way of life. Thus, hasty and dangerous generalizations which place Indigenous communities on the perimeter of society ensures that they also receive peripheral governmental and societal consideration and media attention. Mitchell calls films that feature exploration of Indigenous worlds through the eyes of a non-Indigenous savior such as *Avatar* as ‘redemptive influence for a disillusioned colonizer’ that ensures Indigenous communities are defined only as they relate to the colonizer (Mitchell, 2011). Therein lies the concern that many Indigenous communities have, how can they capitalize on the relevance of *Avatar* to share the activist message while maintaining agency that doesn’t rely upon white savior dependency and white savior perceptions of the Indigenous other?

4.1.1 Indigenous Resistance and Eco-terrorism:

What is clear is that the intention of *Avatar* was to make viewers think. As Cameron said in his 2010 documentary about the Belo Monte Dam,

Really pretty much right at the inception of *Avatar*, it was going to be an environmentally themed film. I was making a kind of historical comment, if you will, on what had happened in North America in recent history but, you know, a hundred years ago, a hundred thirty, a hundred and fifty years ago, and back through the whole colonial period and, you know, I wound up going to Brazil and all of a sudden I was living in *Avatar*’ (Cameron cited in Bonsorte, 2010).

The films *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water* are thematic art in which they are imitating life, colonization and attempted extermination of Indigenous communities and Brazilian Belo Monte Dam construction disregarding Indigenous sovereignty. The films are representative of the current issues with resource depletion on planet earth, but also that in 150 years’ time, Earth may be entirely depleted, and humans will be forced to explore elsewhere. Popularized by Ron Arnold’s 1983 article, eco-terrorism is the deliberate destruction of the artifacts of industrial civilization in the name of environmental protection (1983). Several weeks after the first *Avatar* film release, Cameron agreed the film was ‘the perfect eco-terrorism recruiting tool’ in an interview with Entertainment Weekly (Svetkey, 2010). Although, the connotation of the word terrorism now carries a much different significance and threat than it did in the 1980’s. In fact, Oxford defines terrorism as ‘the use of violent action in order to achieve political aims or to force a government to act’ (Oxford, 2023). Rather than interpret the acts as violent per se, a more appropriate term would be Indigenous resistance.

There are observable acts of Indigenous resistance that can be witnessed in the films. When Sully first arrives at Pandora and the military plane is being offloaded, he wheels down onto the jetway, and

numerous large excavation vehicles drive past that feature several arrows stuck in the side of tires and other non-metal parts. Indicating a clear attempt by the Na'vi to stop the encroachment of human development on Pandora. Additionally, later in the film Sully himself participates in acts of resistance against the humans in his avatar form when he destroys an exterior camera on a military vehicle advancing into the forest on bulldozers. An act that essentially blinds the humans to ground level and thus forces them to abandon their mission. In *Avatar: The Way of Water*, Sully and the Omatikaya clan are clearly participating in acts of disruption against human settlement efforts. In one scene, the Omatikaya blow up train tracks which results in the derailment of a human train carrying military supplies, construction materials, and weaponry which is then seized by the Omatikaya. They become so successful at ecoterrorist disruptions that Quaritch is redeployed in an avatar form with his human knowledge and superior avatar size, strength, and speed to end the avatar resistance.

Just as the Na'vi clans in *Avatar*, Indigenous community members and activists conducted several acts of resistance at the Belo Monte Dam construction site. The lack of recognition of Indigenous agency and sovereignty by the construction companies resulted in a lack of Indigenous involvement in the construction decision. Frustrated, this created a sense of desperation among the Indigenous communities that engaged and encouraged incidents of Indigenous resistance and acts of ecoterrorism at the building sites. Occupation of construction sites by Indigenous group halted construction on numerous occasions (Southgate, 2017). The disruptions in construction created an opportunity for a polarizing effect on non-Indigenous Brazilians that relied upon the construction as their source of income. As a result, Indigenous groups and their activism efforts caused a major point of contention among non-Indigenous Brazilian supporters, viewed once again standing in the way of progress and as a threat to the state.

To combat Indigenous resistance acts of ecoterrorism that halted construction progress, the construction group created a team that was tasked with working with Indigenous groups to mitigate work stoppages. The tactic deployed by the construction group was in the form of material products. Accepted as gifts (cars, oil, gas, televisions, etc.) from the construction companies working to secure their own interests, the team's tactics led to divisions amongst the Indigenous groups and disrupted the Indigenous resistance efforts (Southgate, 2017). In a capitalistic view, this was the cost of doing business rather than an effort of societal advancement and corporate social responsibility. When not all Indigenous communities agreed to accept the gifts, division amongst Indigenous communities gave additional leverage to the construction groups and mitigated construction interruptions. However, these tactics are now the subject of lawsuits that lawyers with the Federal Public Prosecutor's office are referencing as deliberately destructive acts against an ethnic Indigenous culture, or ethnocide (Southgate, 2017). With a complete and total alteration

in the way of life for Indigenous communities among those that were displaced by the Belo Monte Dam, the United Nations has investigated the construction efforts by the Brazilian government.

Over 24 court cases filed against the Belo Monte Dam project were dismissed using regulations remaining from the dictatorships of the 1960s arguing ‘that the construction of Belo Monte is an issue of national security that means it takes precedence over laws protecting human rights and the environment’ (Southgate, 2017). Relying back on the colonization pillar that justify colonization to protect national security. However, without consultation of Indigenous groups as required by Brazilian law specifically Chapter VIII Indians Art. 231 Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil Paragraph 3 that reads:

Hydric resources, including energetic potentials, may only be exploited, and mineral riches in indian land may only be prospected and mined with the authorization of the National Congress, after hearing the communities involved, and the participation in the results of such mining shall be ensured to them, as set forth by law.’ (Biblioteca, 2010)

Cases continue to be filed to restore rights, services, and restorations as promised to Indigenous groups by the Brazilian government and the construction group.

Does the film franchise include angles which paint Indigenous communities and knowledge as the savior for environmental degradation on planet earth? Messaging that may be apparent in the end of the first film as the use of Na’vi healing environments and rituals on Pandora allow for Sully to become wholly able-bodied in his avatar form (Ødemark, 2015). This reconciliation isn’t possible on earth or using modern science developed by humans, suggesting the burden of human salvation falls on Pandora and Na’vi resources. Cameron confirms in his court documents that Sully, ‘achieves transcendence, by shedding his human body and permanently inhabiting his avatar form’ (Cameron, 2012, p. 8). Additionally, the first film *Avatar* begins by revealing that humans have destroyed Earth’s ecosystems and have made it inhabitable, and that Pandora would be a utopian oasis for the salvation of humankind. Indicating that the Na’vi would be responsible for saving humankind by sharing their knowledge of Pandora so that humans may flourish there. Relying upon this, and assuming that the Na’vi would blindly accept their role is an echo of colonization.

While the *Avatar* films have drawn strong objections by many Indigenous communities, others insist that they can serve as a catalyst for conversation to address degradation of the environment, especially those that are closely linked with Indigenous communities (Adamson, 2012). Recognizing the popularity of the film, Indigenous advocates and protesters have taken the step to paint themselves blue in acknowledgement of the parallels between the Na’vi cause to protect their way of life and connectivity to

the environment, and their own current Indigenous conflicts, instances such as the beforementioned Arabunna protest in South Australia or protests in London against mining companies and the plan to mine in mountains sacred to the Dongria Kondh tribe in India (Mitchell, 2011; Jenkins, 2010; Survival 2010). Along with the visual spectacle of blue protestors, capitalizing on *Avatar* popularity for Indigenous activism places its success on white perspectives and the romancing of the untamed (Mitchell, 2011).

Using the film as a popular culture tool catered to a non-Indigenous experience, necessitates that the activist message be manipulated and presented in a lens that would appeal to non-Indigenous perspectives. The use of *Avatar* techniques such as blue body paint or Pandora references by Indigenous activists is a continuation of Indigenous struggle to be seen and acknowledged despite colonial structures that sought eradication and extermination of Indigenous communities before being shifted to the peripherals of society. As Mitchell notes, Indigenous activists making use of an anti-colonial product of the notoriously male and white film industry is ironic in that it is a continuation of Indigenous fight for sovereignty and recognition by the non-Indigenous (2011). Thus, the use of the films by activists capitalizes on the spectacle of *Avatar* and its power to draw publicity and attention as an artifact of popular culture. This works to use mass communication as a medium to communicate threats to Indigenous communities, including their livelihoods, cultures, and knowledge systems, using relevant popular culture symbols. Acknowledged as emulating the Na'vi as a symbol of resistance against colonizing imperialists (Mitchell, 2011). Although most activists advocating for Indigenous communities do not rely upon or participate in painting themselves blue.

Ramifications of settler colonization are responsible for Indigenous activism toward self-determination. This is predicated on a dispossession of land from Indigenous communities by settler colonial powers. As Wolfe points out, land is life for Indigenous communities (2006). The films clearly demonstrate settler colonization efforts in the language usage, relationship building methods, and power construction. This dispossession is responsible for loss of identity, loss of culture, and loss of relationships (Coulthard, 2014). In response to various court cases filed against Cameron, he underscores the intention of the film and what historical accounts he drew on for inspiration of the film. Cameron reveals insight in court documents such as, '*Avatar*...is a plea for understanding of what we have done, and continue to do, to our own natural world and its Indigenous people... the bad guys are going to be big business,' (Cameron, 2012, p. 31).

4.1.2 Drawbacks:

There are significant drawbacks to using films such as *Avatar* to propel Indigenous activism into the mass public consumption sphere. First, it may undermine the messaging and fight of Indigenous activism and focus more on the methods of activism emphasizing activists are painting themselves blue to make use of *Avatar* popularity rather than emphasizing the reason behind the activism efforts. Relying on mass media, which has a lengthy history of perpetuating Indigenous stereotypes and colonizing structures, to not manipulate or misrepresent Indigenous communities in activist spaces is challenging (Barras, 2004). In fact, the efforts of activism may be completely disregarded and overshadowed by the theatrics of popular film imitation. For example, in 2010 two protestors painted themselves blue to protest the mining of a sacred mountain in India. Headlines and photos promoted the two protestors with the headline reading “Avatar’s Na’vi in London to stop Vedanta mine”, and specifics of the protest were not available until the 3rd paragraph, which risks minimizing the importance of the cause and may be passed over as clickbait by many (Survival, 2010).

Secondly, it moves to acknowledge the means by which to garner attention of the colonizing society, is to rely upon credibility generated by colonizing film story production, which appears to further diminish the Indigenous contributions to the respective cause (Mitchell, 2011). It essentially questions who is empowered to share the activism story. Negotiated in media, struggle and visibility are cultural production, which does not often favor Indigenous communities (Mitchell, 2011). Appendix A is a specific example from the above-mentioned article and produced by non-governmental organization Survival International. It helps to represent the issue for Indigenous communities of agency when engaging in the non-Indigenous public sphere. Decision-making authority is often withheld from Indigenous communities, even by supportive institutions such as NGOs, which force the communities to accept the attitudes of their supporters, as the institutions ‘speak in specific ways...of Indigenous peoples and their developmental needs’ (Blaser et al., 2004) As Barras shares,

Who better than Indigenous peoples to defend our rights? What would be properly respectful is that we, Indigenous people, become the protagonists of our own future instead of having someone else speak on our behalf. Any other way of doing things diminishes us’ (2004).

4.2 Place-Based Significance to Indigenous Communities

In this section, I will examine the ways in which space is valued and plays a considerable role as it relates to Indigenous significance in the *Avatar* film, as well as how it illustrates the real challenges in epistemological worldviews by Indigenous versus non-Indigenous groups. Space can be examined in *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water* through many different approaches, I cite space as not only distant

space located above the earth's atmosphere, but also the spatial land that is occupied or sought. Space is addressed and serves as an underlying connection or underlying tone of the storyline throughout the films in a myriad of ways.

First, space is recognized in the distance that humans must travel in search of a new livable planet with available resources due to the resource depletion and ravaging of earth as a planet and the finite resources it contains. This essentially forces humans into settler colonialism because planet Earth is quickly becoming unlivable. As a result of environmental degradation that has been compounded, humankind must advance into space to explore other potential spaces for living options other worlds that may be hospitable. As Tuck and Yang explore, land is directly significant to wealth (2012). This division is also apparent in everyday life; as Indigenous communities are being awarded reparations from colonization Indigenous communities are demanding that land be included.

The *Avatar* film franchise taking place on such a distant planet cannot be understated in the film. It shows the lengths that humans must go to in order to preserve the consumption patterns of humankind. What isn't revealed in the film is if Pandora is the first planet that the human race has explored. Assuming that RDA is in search of the specific unobtainium and then the amrita serum, it is likely that expeditions into other planets have occurred. However, audience members are armed with knowledge of the extent to which humans have been able to explore the depths of outer space to date, which indicates that exhaustive measures were taken to develop technology that would allow humans to travel, mine, and explore such a distant world. There is great significance in the fact that the human race had to travel so far through space to find a somewhat hospitable planet on which they'd be able to mine and potentially inhabit. This perhaps contributes more to the environmental justice and activism theme in that it underscores the importance of protecting the remaining natural resources on earth, and also reversing some of the harm humans have done to bolden the resiliency of earth. Nevertheless, humans having to travel great distances through space in the storyline to arrive at Pandora serves as an important marker of how far humans will go to quench the capitalistic consumption mindset.

Second, the significance of land and the physical space one is occupying is of importance in the *Avatar* films. In the first film, the Omatikaya community tries to impress upon the human scientists how sacred and meaningful Hometree is to their community. Cameron iterates this in court documents saying that, 'the idea of nature as a single sentient being,' is difficult to be successfully translated or comprehensible for the humans, and their scientific ontology (Cameron, 2012, p. 12). Only after Sully and Dr. Augustine are able to spend meaningful time in their avatar bodies interacting with the Pandorian environment

(which includes, animals, plants, rivers, air, mountains, etc.) are they slowly able to acknowledge and realize the significance of Hometree. Sully and Dr. Augustine work to convey this importance to RDA but are ultimately unsuccessful. However, hell-bent on mining the unobtainium, RDA continues to act with a capitalistic mindset with complete disregard for any consequences in pursuit of the mineral. Space is also advanced as an imperative importance to the Omatikaya clan, as well as the Metkayina clan in *Avatar 2: The Way of Water*, thus it is assumed that all Indigenous Na'vi communities emphasize, connect to, and understand the world and their place in it is through their spatial settings within Pandora. The physical space the Indigenous Na'vi clans live in creates community, a connection to past and present, and a sense of belonging. This is witnessed in both *Avatar* films through both the Omatikaya and Metkayina clans. The way they interacted with the environment and formed their identity around it is illuminative of Indigenous communities around the world today. Place and the environment contribute to the creation of identity, but also include the struggles suffered on the landscape by Indigenous communities at the hands of non-Indigenous communities (McGregory, 2004). As the colonized minority, Indigenous communities advocate for place-based significance from an automatic suppressed space and in arenas unfit to receive the message (Blaser, 2004).

In the film *Avatar*, the Omatikaya community recognizes and emphasizes the significance of Hometree. Not only does this tree serve as a focal point of the community it also extends beyond that to be considered an ancestor, a knowledge base, and a living entity of the Omatikaya community. This significance is shared with Sully who then in turn reveals it to RDA and the human scientists. Due to ontological differences, the westernized human knowledge can't seem to acknowledge the tree is anything other than a tree, and available for human consumption to be profited from. The relationship to land for Indigenous communities is epistemic, ontological, and cosmological (Tuck & Yang, 2012). It is a critical component of self and community identify formation. Land and place-based significance serve to reinforce knowledge sharing and community bond formation. Land can teach not only what to think about the world, but how to think about the world, in which land is central to communities and not a margin of a cosmopolitan system (Felt, 2004). It reaffirms ideas of reciprocity and appreciation. Ecosystem has been referenced as a more accurate term in that it infuses spiritual and biological with the physical component of land for Indigenous communities (McGregory, 2004). To Indigenous communities the relationship with land may be,

‘an accumulated body of knowledge that is rooted in the spiritual health, culture, and language of the people and handed down from generation to generation. It is based on intimate knowledge of the land, water, snow and ice, weather and wildlife, and the relationships between all aspects of

the environment. It is the way people travel and hunt. It is a way of life and survival'
(McGregory, 2004).

Reducing Hometree to only a tree results not just in the loss of meaning, but dismissal of the Indigenous agency. Similarly, in the second film, *Avatar: The Way of Water*, has a similar point of reference in the Cove of Ancestors that is a specific place of immeasurable importance to the Metkayina clan. These spaces of immense importance are beyond areas of just religious, spiritual, or educational practices.

4.2.1 Epistemological Space

Space can also be noted in the distance between Western colonizing epistemology and Indigenous epistemology. Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains that space is a Westernized concept that measures and influences society, whereas some Indigenous communities have no words or place no significance on time or space (Smith, 1999). Furthermore, she simplifies the colonization efforts as 'they came, they saw, they named, they claimed', and highlights that Indigenous communities were treated as research objects, just as we see in the films (Smith, 1999). To explore the difference in understandings between Indigenous and non-Indigenous of the surrounding world, I examine Bruno Latour's work in *We Have Never Been Modern* and Aimé Césaire's, who taught Frantz Fanon, *Discourse on Colonialism*.

Space and land were utilized by the humans on Pandora and then gifted back to the Omatikaya clan in the form of a school, which taught English, and presumably colonizing human knowledge. Ideas constitute reality, so learning, and social environments that promote only colonizing ideas are damaging to colonized societies. Colonizers were able to mass produce stereotypes and what is 'real' through written mediums. Research was considered any observations by any visitors to Indigenous lands that recorded their findings, and then written word went on to become understood as fact. Thus, the colonizer viewpoint came not just from researchers (Smith, 1999). Just as the words of explorers, traders, missionaries, and military personnel from colonizing states became recorded as fact, in the *Avatar* films, facts about Pandora and the Na'vi come from scientists, military personnel, miners, and RDA officials.

Science is then, a colonizing social construction that assumes no connection between material and spiritual and does not necessarily compound upon itself. It is more objective and quantitative in that variables can be isolated or even controlled (Mazzocchi, 2006). There stands to be a disconnect and that assumption that one event does not influence another. Whereas Indigenous understanding values the intersection of the environment and society and underscores the interconnectivity of existence, thus being more subjective and qualitative (Mazzocchi, 2006).

This results in reinforcement the colonizer occupation of superiority in that only human can properly determine what is science and modern and that the goal of resource extraction supersedes any Indigenous or ‘others’ claim to a complete knowledge and understanding of Pandora. As Césaire writes that only the, “West alone know how to think; that at the borders of the Western world there begins the shadowy realm of primitive thinking, which, dominated by the notion of participation, incapable of logic, is the very model of faulty thinking.” (2001, p. 69). Acknowledgement and acceptance of the Na’vi relationship with the environment is something not understood by the human, colonizing mindset. Indigenous communities all over the world emphasize their location and relationship to the surrounding environment as a valued relationship. Titled grounded normativity, Coulthard cites the significance of this and notes that it is a manner in which Indigenous communities reproduce societal practices and informs relationship to space that is based on how to live one’s life in relations to both human and non-human objects in a manner that is ‘nonauthoritarian, nondominating, and nonexploitive’ (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016). The *Avatar* films clearly display this disregard for Indigenous epistemology, and it is apparent with many Indigenous communities refusing to move from their ancestral grounds or demanding land back after forced removal by colonizing powers. Just as the Indigenous communities along the Xingu River that had their life completely altered with completion of the Belo Monte Dam construction, place-based significance is far more embedded in Indigenous life than just the space one is literally occupying.

4.2.2 Nature as Science

Bruno Latour illustrates the methods in which humans build justification for exploitation of the environment in his book *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). Latour explores science as a distinct product of colonization and a main instrument in the colonial expansion into what is labeled The Great Divide between Us (Westernized) and Them (non-Westernized) (Latour, 2012). The ‘Us’ are supported by history and superior to ‘Them’. The ‘Us’ are human and recognize the opportunity to take advantage of the exportation and exploitation of nature and the nonhuman (Latour, 2012). Saying, ‘if Westerners had been content with trading and conquering, looting and dominating, they would not distinguish themselves radically from other tradespeople and conquerors. But no, they invented science, an activity totally distinct from conquest and trade, politics, and morality’ (Latour, 2012 p. 97). Nature was not a manmade creation, not a result of Us, instead, it is an object and tool for science to shape society (Latour, 2012). By this I mean that science has a financial cost and is open to pressures from the powerful, whether they be governments, politicians, or corporations like RDA. This is reflected in the *Avatar* films as the presence of humans are solely as scientists, military personnel, or RDA staff. Thus, no matter what Sully and Dr. Augustine were finally able to comprehend from their experiences in their avatar bodies, no matter how articulately they would have been able to explain it to RDA and the military personnel, the fate of the

Na'vi and Pandora may have been sealed long ago with the history of colonization on earth—regardless of the acknowledgement of human rights' violations and the contribution to the devastation of earth. Alan and Vijayasekaran speculate that science is used as a tool for colonization in the film (2021). In court documents Cameron plainly states that, 'in order to colonize Pandora, the humans had to be able to exist there' (Cameron, 2012, p. 40), suggesting that without science and the technological advances it created, science would not only have been used as a tool for colonization, but colonization would not have been possible without science.

Furthermore, in the second film *Avatar: The Way of Water*, when Kiri falls ill after having been connected to the Spirit Tree Sully brings Western scientists into the Metkayina clan community to examine and diagnose her. After scans by various electronic equipment, the scientists diagnosed the fit as epilepsy. Without any improvement on Kiri's condition, Neytiri kicks the scientists out and the Metkayina clan takes over the treatment, Kiri then awakens revived by application of local knowledge practices. Creating a nature versus science narrative that is supportive of Indigenous communities capitalizing on *Avatar* storylines for political activism. The idea of science superseding nature is built into the foundation of colonization itself, whether it be in Asia, Europe, Oceania, North America, or South America. Colonization accepts that science is fact and that is determined by the civilized, colonizing power, and the inferior 'other' cannot possibly be credible.

Examining the Belo Monte Dam case again offers a unique opportunity to review how issues in *Avatar*'s storylines are not just a fictional science fiction story, but rather quarrels taking place in Indigenous communities in areas all over the world. Place-based significance is also stressed in Cameron's documentary, although it runs the risk of falling on deaf ears of viewers that may be unknowingly indoctrinated with the effects and structures of colonization. Viewers that would most likely be coming from a Westernized, colonial viewpoint that emphasizes an anthropocentric ontology in which humans (and their comfort) are centered as the main consideration in value systems and thus justifies the exploitation of nature. These such viewers may only be able to understand to a degree and struggle to internalize the how and what it means to be connected to a specific environmental place, much as Sully and Dr. Augustine experienced in the first *Avatar* film.

The documentary and numerous articles and reports, stress that construction of the Belo Monte Dam would undeniably alter the lives of Indigenous communities in the Brazilian rainforest (Bonsorte, 2010, Southgate, 2017). Beyond just losing their ancestral homes, it is a continuation of settler colonialism efforts to dispossess Brazilian Indigenous communities of their land and displace their identity. The

identity of the communities will be obliterated along with entire knowledge systems, culture, and spiritual links as well as loss of land, fish for dietary standards and livelihoods and transportation methods (Poirier, 2010; Heiskel, 2016). Attempting to accurately describe how such a decision by the colonizing entity (the Brazilian government or RDA), using colonizing language that can't accurately portray the duress beyond saying it is an abrupt destruction of everything. Says Cameron,

The human race needs to wake up... We've severed the connection to the ancient knowledge, necessary to do that. We have to transform ourselves...into...a techno-Indigenous people. To use high technology and science to provide us with the energy that we need. Nature is not our enemy, it is our sustenance' (Bonsorte, 2010).

The issue with this suggestion is that it relies upon technology and science, products of colonizing influence that disregard Indigenous knowledge and agency. The first move to preface transformation of humankind is to acknowledge and embrace the inherent value that Indigenous communities have in the face of continued long-efforted acts of removal. These colonizing endeavors force the translation of Indigenous ideas and processes into non-Indigenous terms, which can result in a loss of meaning (McGregory, 2004). The invisible dynamics of colonization would require equal power distributions, which seems to be a difficult first step when colonization is conditioned into society. Transforming into a 'techno-Indigenous people' would appear near impossible with different perspectives and ontologies of Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

It is immeasurably difficult to evaluate to what degree one can understand a different ontology, if at all, because it is such a radical alternate worldview. Thus, while efforts are often made by Indigenous communities to non-Indigenous communities, there is a disconnect to the degree that it can be understood, which is evident in the films as Sully and Dr. Augustine work to relay to the other humans in the film. The construction of the Belo Monte Dam completely disregarded the sovereignty of the Brazilian Indigenous communities that would be disproportionately, and more negatively, impacted by the construct as had been protested since initial plans were introduced in the 1980s. In ignoring the sovereignty of the Indigenous communities, the Brazilian government directly demonstrated colonial power hierarchies that disregarded Indigenous insight as justifiable according to the authoritative power. The move reinforced that the colonizer is the sole authority in determining the boundary of acceptable actions by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities (Madsen, 2013).

This has been stressed by activist group and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have worked to advocate for the Indigenous communities. In an appeal letter to Brazilian President Lula da Silva, 143 NGOs highlighted the 'unethical process' to approve the construction plans without allowing an

opportunity for open debate, specifically with the exclusion of Indigenous communities along the Xingu River that would be more greatly impacted by the decision (Poirier, 2010). This exploitation illustrates the colonizing hierarchical mindset in which the non-Indigenous disregard Indigenous objections as a hinderance of state progress (Madsen, 2013). While the construction of the dam costs much more than projected at approximately \$10 billion, the social and environmental costs are still being tallied (Southgate, 2017). How do you tally the obliteration of an Indigenous group? Those forcibly moved received little compensation and were forced to adopt new ways of living with various degrees of success. The Belo Monte Dam was revealed to be part of the Brazilian state's largest event corruption scandal which included, politicians, government officials, and private construction Belo Monte Dam stakeholders Camargo Correa, Andrade Gutierrez, and Odebrecht (Southgate, 2017).

4.3 White Savior Complex

In this section, I will examine the white savior complex and how it is featured in *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water* and the resulting influence it had on Indigenous representation in the film. The film franchise has been criticized as more films discussing race from the white perspective. White savior complex emphasis the contribution and salvation of Indigenous communities as realized by the leadership and efforts of a white hero. It allows the white non-Indigenous hero to revel in their position of dominance and use the benefits of their whiteness to lend toward advancement or preservation of Indigenous communities and ideas. As a precursor to creating an environment in which white savior complex is possible, colonialism first laid the groundwork for the acceptance of a hierarchical ordering of races. As I will discuss more thoroughly later, colonialism sought to create an 'other', distinctly separating settlers and native adopting an 'us' versus 'them' narrative (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

The first *Avatar* film features the white, male Sully literally link into an Indigenous avatar body. From there he researches and becomes engulfed in Omatikaya clan life. With minor objections from the clan, Sully is shown and able to participate in all the distinct checkpoints of becoming an adult Omatikaya clan member. Initially, Sully shared this information with RDA military personnel which had the ultimate agenda of removing the Omatikaya from Hometree and to 'force their cooperation' so that RDA could harvest the highly lucrative unobtainium beneath it. Predictably, Sully begins to have a change of heart and not only sympathizes with the Na'vi way of life but falls in love with Neytiri. When the RDA military and mining personnel move into the forest to destroy Hometree, Sully works to convince and maneuver the clan away in order to save lives. In a speech to the whole clan, in which Sully reveals the true motivations for formerly working for RDA. By doing so, Sully is labeled a traitor and silenced by the clan. After Hometree is destroyed, Sully regroups with the Omatikaya and speaks unchallenged and with

authority as Toruk Makto. He reveals he has the tactical knowledge to defeat RDA and preserve what is left of Na'vi life. Sully's plan ultimately succeeds, and he is proclaimed a hero as essentially all humans are removed from Pandora. The film concludes with Sully marrying Neytiri and he is elevated to chief and leader of the Omatikaya clan.

The tone that the Na'vi couldn't possibly have defeated the humans without Sully is overtly obvious and the film paints him as a true savior. The Na'vi were no match with their bows and arrows to RDA's superior weaponry and advanced warfare knowledge. This storyline immediately drew comparisons to the film *Dances with Wolves* (1990). In fact, *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Avatar* were noted by audiences for their explicit similarities except that one was set in a fictional world otherwise unobtainable without the use of advanced special effects. In *Dances with Wolves*, white, American soldier John Dunbar finds himself on a military post on the American frontier and develops a friendship with the local Lakota community, falls in love with a woman of the tribe, participates in battles against other tribes, partakes in Lakota rites of passage, and is adopted into the tribe (IMDB, 2023). After a climactic battle, like Sully, Dunbar chooses to remain with the Lakota communities and faces ongoing pursuit by the military as a traitor. Dunbar shares his military training, materials such as explosives and guns, and knowledge with the Lakota to defeat the enemy Pawnee tribe and become a white savior. There are also parallels in that Dunbar, like Sully, shares the true intentions of the military and that they cannot be defeated without his guidance and superior knowledge. Films that follow this white savior design clearly suggest that Indigenous communities are unable to defend themselves due to inferiority and would not be able to survive at all without the good will and assistance of a white savior hero. This is obvious and explicit in the storyline of the *Avatar* film that Sully is the white savior and is accepted as such with minimal objections from the Omatikaya clan.

Sully's white savior status is bolstered through several instances of almost divine selection in the film. First, Sully is 'chosen' by the Na'vi deity Eywa. A woodsprite intervenes on behalf of Eywa before Sully can be killed early in the first film. On his first mission out into the Pandorian environment in his avatar frame as a security escort for RDA, Sully becomes separated from his unit and is surrounded by dangerous foreign entities as night approaches. With Neytiri's arrow squarely aimed to kill Sully, a woodsprite floats down from the sky and lands on Neytiri's arrow. This immediately identifies Sully as 'being chosen' and deserving of favoritism and special consideration. Neytiri accepts this as an intentional act by Eywa and begins to follow Sully as a bodyguard. She then saves Sully's life as he is being attacked by a pack of predators by killing and injuring several of the animals. Neytiri then takes

Sully back to Hometree and explains the entire series of events to her parents and the community who also decide that he is to be spared at the will of Eywa.

The second instance in the film to booster Sully as the white savior is the taming of a creature known as the Great Leonopteryx. Considered the apex predator of the sky, with no natural enemies, the creature only presents itself in times of great distress and uncertainty to the Na'vi. After the fall of Hometree, outcast from the Omatikaya and disgraced from the humans, Sully is left optionless and alone and using his sense of white entitlement reference to the Omatikaya proclaims in the film, 'Outcast. Betrayer. Alien. I needed their help, and they needed mine. But to ever face them again, I was gonna have to take it to a whole new level.' Sully then sets out to link with a Great Leonopteryx, a creature the Omatikaya clan hold great reverence for as one of Eywa's greatest creations and which a link had only happened five times in Na'vi recorded history. After Hometree had been destroyed and with the remaining Omatikaya clan sheltered in mourning at the Tree of Souls, Sully tames the creature and links with it before proceeding to ride into the clan. Ascending from the skies above, Sully as Toruk Makto, and the Great Leonopteryx land gracefully among the Omatikaya that have regrouped to mourn at the Tree of Souls. This is clearly meant to restore Sully's credibility as an authority among Na'vi culture, linking with a creature previously bestowed upon a select few chosen Omatikaya. Sully then speaks, unchallenged, unquestioned, and without objection about how the humans must leave Pandora, for 'this is our land', and on how he has the adequate knowledge and plan to defeat the humans. In this, he establishes his authority as the white savior while simultaneously using the Omatikaya as a means to secure victory over RDA. Sully alludes to his awareness as a white savior as he indicates that even the 'most badass animals in the sky wouldn't look up', which indicates that only he among all the Omatikaya would be of a capacity to attempt such a feat. That only he can be the hero with his knowledge of Pandora and human military tactics. Finally, fully engulfing himself as an Omatikaya clan member, Sully uses decisive language to engrain himself as hero to the whole Omatikaya clan saying, 'we will send them a message...and you fly now with ME. My brothers, my sisters. And we will show the Sky People...that this is our land.' This message is then shared with various Na'vi clans, and no objections are featured.

A final example of Sully acting as a white savior includes, Sully appeals to Eywa by uploading his memory of past human destruction of planets into the Tree of Souls and asking for protection and assistance to defeat the humans to protect Pandora. Neytiri insists that Eywa will not pick sides and will not interfere. Sure enough, in the film's final battle, as the Omatikaya are retreating and the humans are advancing deep into the forest, hearing Sully's plea, Eywa sends Pandora's animals stampeding and swarming into the fight. With superior animal characteristics designed for survival on Pandora, the

animals are able to pierce and crush the military attachment's manmade protection armor. With the conclusion of the first film, humans are sent back to earth with the exception of Sully and a handful of friendly humans-mostly scientist allies. As with settler colonization, all these human remnants left behind are, in-fact, changing the landscape (Ødemark, 2015).

In the second film, although no longer white, Sully's white savior story continues as the savior of not just his family, but in defeating RDA and Quaritch's recombinant attachment again. In addition to the continued story of Sully as a hero in his now permanent avatar form, this time as savior of the Metkayina and the tulkun, I ponder if Spider isn't cast as a white savior as well. Although, not as clearcut from the first film in which humans would link their consciousness between humans and avatars, Spider is critical in that he can be anything. Spider can physically be accepted in the human world because of his genetic make-up, yet he is accepted as part of the avatar world due to his entire upbringing taking place there; signaling that the human can be human, whereas the Indigenous remain artifacts, forever part of the colonized. Colonization treated and continues to treat Indigenous communities as an item of the past to be studied, an artifact. This strips away humanity, emotions, and rights. So, any characteristics or perspectives Spider had could be stamped out as he was genetically human. Whereas Sully's children, with partial human and Na'vi genetic makeup, could not be accepted as humans as they were artifacts representing the Indigenous communities. When captured by Quaritch's attachment, Spider was not only subjected to forced indenture but coerced to work with the recombinant military attachment and against Indigenous Na'vi clans. The methods used by this military attachment were similar to those used by colonizing forces in the past as recorded both by Indigenous records and colonizing records.

In the film, these methods include the destruction of animals, again a resource, and homes. Although initially appearing to appreciate the time and attention spent with his father Quaritch as a scout, teacher, and translator, Spider does eventually recognize the destructive techniques to capture Sully's family are cruel. In fact, he acts as a white hero when Quaritch's recombinant attachment catches up with Sully. By destroying mechanical controls and attacking human crew members, Spider uses his position under military attachment control to distract and misdirect attention. Spider is then able to escape capture and goes so far as to free his adopted avatar siblings from a brief imprisonment by Quaritch near the end of the film's climatic conclusion, cementing his position white savior status. A final example is witnessed at the end of the film, after a stunning underwater defeat of Quaritch at the hands of Sully, and in a final white savior moment, Spider saves his biological father from drowning by retrieving his avatar and bringing it to the ocean surface. After Quaritch wakes up and begins to evacuate on an RDA military vehicle, he implores Spider to come with him. Spider ignores his pleas and appears to reject the human

way of life and swims to be reunited with Sully and his family, representing his true embodiment of white savior status.

4.3.1 Outside the Avatar-A Real Life White Savior?

A Message from Pandora serves as an opportunity in which the white savior complex is also observable in that Cameron himself is embodying the white savior using his resources, power, and credibility as leverage against the Brazilian government and capitalistic interests to save the local Indigenous tribes. Mimicking Sully in *Avatar*, Cameron moves to emulate the film's savior, even going so far as, adorned with facial paint, to be proclaimed via translation to be 'the newest warrior' and even to be included to speak in a meeting between local Indigenous tribal leaders (Xipaia, Kuruiaia, Juruna, Araweté, Assurini, Parakanã, Xikrin Kayapo) that would be impacted by the dam's construction in Brazil (Bonsorte, 2010). Cameron goes in front of Brazilian President Lula da Silva to implore him to reconsider construction of the dam (Bonsorte, 2010). While ultimately unsuccessful, the campaign still demonstrated each of the three themes examined in this thesis. Cameron said,

We fought the battle, the battle was public, it did create a lot of dialogue around it which hadn't been happening. So, I think we did good but what it means is the battle is ongoing, you know. There are still many moves to be made. Their plea to the world is not being heard. So, this is an opportunity, you know, for me to take the success of *Avatar* and take the goodwill that has been created around it, around the world' (Bonsorte, 2010).

However, just as the *Avatar* films are told from the perspective of a white male, Cameron's efforts with the documentary have been scrutinized as further marginalizing Indigenous resistance and agency as Cameron's efforts are the center of the documentary and Indigenous perspectives are noticeably missing (Mitchell, 2011).

The telling of the stories from the perspective of a white male hero are important and representative of how Indigenous stories are often told through the white perspective. The *Avatar* films allows viewers to become an avatar, without becoming an Indigenous avatar. So, viewers are able to experience life as an avatar from a white male hero's perspective, and then remove themselves from responsibility of Indigenous subjugation and any results of colonization. Meaning at the completion of the films, viewers can return to operating in the world. However, in participating as a viewer and witnessing life as an avatar against the evil humans and RDA, they can experience a move to innocence (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This research project has been motivated by two main interests, the first being the intersectionality of *Avatar* (2009) and *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) as popular culture. With monumental financial considerations, I was also interested in the societal and political relevance of the films and what may have been communicated by the mass consumption of the films. Unable to include a second area of interest in the project on the influence of the *Avatar* film franchise on Indigenous communities due to low semi-structured interview participation, it certainly leaves an opportunity for future research, especially considering there are many more *Avatar* films forthcoming. Future research may examine if the recent recognition of six Indigenous communities by the Brazilian state was a result of the totality of the three themes examined in this research project (Al Jazeera, 2023). Additionally, it would be interesting to research if globalization and connectivity allowed for the political and societal relevance of the *Avatar* films and the documentary *A Message to Pandora* to influence or contribute to the decision by President Lula de Silva to formally recognize the Indigenous communities.

5.1 Post Avatar Depression Syndrome

The *Avatar* films are critically important in the relevance they have economically, socially, and politically for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. It is well documented that after viewing the films audience members may be left with a feeling of sadness or a feeling of depression due to the utopian fantasy that the screen has revealed, otherwise known as 'Post-Avatar Depression Syndrome' of PADS (Bergthaller, 2012; Harmon, 2022). As cities are continuously developed and the world's population grows and density in urban areas rises, there is a real lack of the ability to connect with a sense of space. By this I don't mean that city parks or greenways are inadequate, especially pertaining to mental and physical health, rather what instead is a noticeable parallel between Pandora and the *Avatar* universe and humankind. Societies that have been built today on Earth are laden with manmade, artificial, structural buildings or vehicles that have been created for the comfort of humankind. In the *Avatar* films, for example, the humans and their tool such as vehicles, are mechanical and built for protection. They are constructed of very hard harsh structural elements, which very starkly contrasts the environment on Pandora which is focuses on the environment and nature, and seeing, hearing and smelling the nature that is around you. The world moving toward cityscapes and consuming the environment for capitalistic gains disrupts the formation of identity amongst Indigenous communities.

5.2 Closing remarks:

Perhaps viewers do not think of Indigenous representation in the *Avatar* films because they have never interacted with Indigenous communities or consumed materials that feature Indigenous inclusion. This

failing reaffirms that colonization and the subjugation of Indigenous communities is an obstacle of the past and is no longer culturally relevant. When in reality, Indigenous communities are suffering today in a myriad of ways that non-Indigenous cannot identify with nor fully understand. If a viewer is a member of an Indigenous community, if a viewer has interacted with or studied Indigenous communities and cultures, or if a viewer has engaged with Indigenous perspectives and knowledge systems, then the manner in which they will subsequently analyze the *Avatar* films is that with a lens that is likely more considerate of and critical in the usage of Indigenous communities. However, it is important that Indigenous communities not be solely regarded as victims of colonization (both past and present), but to also acknowledge the sovereignty of Indigenous communities and the efforts (both past and present) in sharing their story (Crevels, 2022). Society is so conditioned on colonization that merely recognizing the manner in which films such as *Avatar* communicate Indigenous representation and inclusion is an afterthought. In this research project I was able to identify three themes of environmental justice and activism, place-based significance, and white savior complex in the *Avatar* films and how they present and engage with real-world perceptions of Indigenous communities. Individuals are responsible for consuming popular culture messaging with a critical lens that acknowledges the power imbalance between Indigenous communities and dominant, colonizing nations that work to depower all things Indigenous in order for Indigenous communities to heal and flourish in the future.

By examining the themes of environmental justice and activism, place-based significance, and white savior complex within *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water*, I have demonstrated that, as popular culture, the *Avatar* film franchise allows for the opportunity of reflection of the colonization of Indigenous communities, land, identity, culture, and knowledge. In turn, this can perhaps give non-Indigenous viewers an opportunity to reflect the way in which they consume their world perspectives.

Chapter 6: References:

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Appendix 1:

Environmental activists dressed as avatars at a protest in London



Sources: (Survival, 2010)

Appendix 2:

Interview Question Guide:

Indigenous Representation & the *Avatar* film franchise

Propose: This interview is specifically designed to focus on themes from *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water* and how they relate to Indigenous communities. Specifically, I am interested in measuring; environmental justice and activism, space/land relationships, ecocentrism and the politics of *Avatar*, and white savior ideology.

Have you seen either *Avatar* film, why or why not?

YES (if no, please answer questions under No heading below)

EJ-In what ways can the films serve to reflect society's crisis of resource depletion and the significance of Indigenous ties to the environment?

EJ-Some governments have rewritten constitutions (Bolivia, Ecuador) or written laws extending human rights to non-human entities (New Zealand, India). How can the films promote further non-colonizing approaches to living systems (mountains, rivers, trees)?

SP-What is the relevance of the character's relationships to their spatial surroundings and land in the films both, in regards to humans and the Indigenous communities in Pandora? (For example, is Hometree a structural home or an ancestor)

EP-Activist groups have painted themselves blue to draw attention to the disregard of Indigenous communities for the exploitation of the environment, what is the significance and implications of using the *Avatar* films for Indigenous activism?

WS-If any, what is the significance of *Avatar* being told from Jake Sully's viewpoint? How would the film differ if it had been told from a perspective of an Indigenous character?

WS-What reflections do you have on the struggles of identity by the characters in the film (*Avatar*-Sully, Dr. Augustine/*Avatar 2*-Sully, Lu-ki, Kiri, Spider)?

WS-How do the films allow for audiences to experience a move to innocence (relieving viewers of feelings of guilt or responsibility from colonization and its enduring benefits for non-Indigenous) of Indigenous communities by allowing them to become avatars without becoming Indigenous?

If anything, what did you find problematic about the film?

Is there anything you'd like to discuss that I have not included in this interview?

NO

You mentioned you have not seen either of the films, why is that?

EJ-In what ways can film serve to reflect society's crisis of resource depletion and the significance of Indigenous ties to the environment?

EJ-Some governments have rewritten constitutions (Bolivia, Ecuador) or written laws extending human rights to non-human entities (New Zealand, India). How can films promote further non-colonizing approaches to living systems (mountains, rivers, trees)?

EP-Activist groups have painted themselves blue to draw attention to the disregard of Indigenous communities for the exploitation of the environment, what is the significance and implications of using the *Avatar* films for Indigenous activism?

WS-Would you have watched the film(s) had it been told from the viewpoint of an Indigenous character?

Is there anything you'd like to discuss that I have not included in this interview?



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