

2012

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### Recommended Citation

Paliy, Anna (2012) "The Spirituality of Nature: Indigenous Tradition in James Cameron's *Avatar* and Western Mentality's Failure to See Within," *Kino: The Western Undergraduate Journal of Film Studies*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino/vol3/iss1/8>

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# The Spirituality of Nature: Indigenous Tradition in James Cameron's *Avatar* and Western Mentality's Failure to See Within

## **Keywords**

Avatar, indigenous culture, aboriginal culture, colonialism

## **Cover Page Footnote**

This paper was originally written for “The Transatlantic Hispanic World in Text and Film,” an undergraduate course taught by Dr. Victoria Wolff at the University of Western Ontario in 2011.

## **The Spirituality of Nature: Indigenous Tradition in James Cameron's *Avatar* and Western Mentality's Failure to See Within**

by Anna Paliy

“Did you know that trees talk?” asks Tatanga Mani, a Stoney Indian. “Well they do. They talk to each other and they’ll talk to you if you listen. Trouble is, white people don’t listen. They never learned to listen to the Indians, so I don’t suppose they’ll listen to other voices in nature” (qtd. in Brown 83). This statement of dismay regarding the “white” race by Mani should resonate as an echo in the ears of any reader who has viewed the epic action film *Avatar* (2009) by James Cameron: Neytiri pronounces almost the exact same words. The Na’vi princess says: “Sky people do not learn. You do not See. No one can teach you how to See.” Is the white population of the world truly so blind as to provoke such remarks? As it turns out, the blindness spoken of here is not the literal inability to discern what is visible, but it is rather the lack of Seeing with a capital ‘S’—the seeing of essence—which Cameron employs as a focal theme of his environmental narrative. The higher notion of perception is not exclusive to the fictional blue humanoid beauties, however. The film borrows from a rich tradition of real practices by indigenous tribes, and spiritual beliefs that transcend far into the lineage of their ancestry. These concepts emerge from ancient roots that are permanently cemented in the native soul, all throughout the South and North American continents (some overlap geographically far into the nations of the Pacific, and to Africa). There are hundreds, if not thousands, of variations of such beliefs. For the purpose of coherence, this discussion will focus on three of the broadest ideas, which apply to almost all indigenous cultures of the Americas: interaction with the animal kingdom, the circular idea of reciprocity, and the sacredness of language.

The indigenous frustration that is so evident in Mani’s words, and in Neytiri’s encounter with Jake Sully, seem to stem from the white man’s inability to grasp concepts like the ones listed above, or rather his inability to attribute *value* to such ideas. The Western mind is very quick to dismiss, a reaction that can be attributed either to political or personal motive (conquest, or simple idleness of thought, among other possible reasons). Through the narrative of the film, and in several literary works from indigenous and non-indigenous writers, the modern mainstream perception of nature is challenged, variably in ways that are either subdued or quite blatant. Most prominently, this cultural confrontation occurs in the inspirational accounts of Quiché Indian humanitarian Rigoberta Menchú Tum and in the colonial tales of Cabeza de Vaca, explorer of *la Florida* and indigenous disciple. The struggles in these realistic historical articles are mirrored years later in *Avatar* by its presentation of a cultural antagonism between the human and the Na’vi. Cameron’s manoeuvre is to propose a metaphor of the encounter between the colonizer and the native upon the former’s arrival to the Americas in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the consequences that followed, and to do so in a package that is as contemporary as can be. Through

*Avatar*, the official narrative of colonialism perpetuates – a biting reminder that the same types of offenses the white man committed against the native five hundred years ago, are still very much relevant to his psyche in the year 2154, and therefore at all times in between. As the quest for gold continues into the future, the ambition of seeking *new* New Worlds has no intention of dissipating. In Cameron's vision, Pandora becomes the next victim of the Conquest; when the human no longer has means of maximizing power in his own realm, he will always find means to move further in search of new Utopias to conquer and claim. It is a testament of the human tendency to fall into egocentrism, personified by Cameron in the character of the bureaucrat Parker Selfridge (his very name a play on the word "selfish"), and his associates, both military and corporate.

The role of the now notorious 'gold' is quite cardinal in the 16<sup>th</sup> century picture of the voyage to the Americas. It is not merely a sign of material prosperity. More so, it is an emblem of the 'civilized' human's constant dissatisfaction with the present, and, subsequently, his incessant search for *more* (read: a better future). More *what?* This mysterious ideal will remain an unquantified enigma as long as personal possession thrives in society. In the real world of today, humanity has replaced gold with green-hued paper, and on Pandora, the figurative gold is the incredibly expensive (and fictional) mineral *unobtainium*. The film tries to enlighten the viewer: 'gold' can be virtually anything the human sets his mind upon, and in the end, it is this very nature of interchanging for the sake of novelty that uncovers the simple truth that its price is nothing more than a fleeting illusion. However, *Avatar* poses a more radical scenario, because the 'gold' of the film is not merely a resource for commerce and material gain as it superficially appears in our reality, but happens to be the fundamental pillar upon which rests a whole *way of being*. If the human strips the land of this mineral, he will confiscate Life along with it. It is not a tangible gold, but a spiritual gold – it is the spirit of the Na'vi, and of Pandora. Joseph E. Brown states in his book that "many tribes believe in the sustaining power of land. Indeed, according to most Native American traditions, land is alive" (23). Similarly, within the planet of Pandora, there is a direct relationship between the survival of the spirit and the earth beneath – unobtainium is the substance which upkeeps this bond. So, the "taking over of land," and the demolition of its resources, will result in "a slow, spiritual death" for the Na'vi race, a degradation that is considered to be much worse than physical departure (Brown 24). The human's perception of unobtainium as a mere, well, *object*, is this very blindness mentioned earlier that must be overcome in order to achieve a higher state of thinking and existing by the white man. The natives have no regard for nearsightedness, and have created a "continuity that brings together the past and the present, providing a social cohesion with their ancestry" (Rice 24). In the movie, the emblem of this unity is Eywa, the Mother. By establishing natural landmarks for spiritual stimulation, the blue tribes of Pandora guarantee the perpetuation of their co-humanity, and of their survival as a species. Much can be learned from their ways.

The first realization must be that belonging is not to be seen in terms of “to whom,” but rather “with what”: we are not the sovereigns of nature but rather her extension, children who belong in her midst, as the native faith testifies. Virginia Pole says of the indigenous vision of flora and fauna: “We said we’d watch over it, because that’s our responsibility. You just take care of the land, and it takes care of you” (qtd. in Brown 91). The Na’vi exhibit the same kind of mentality through their trust in a theory called *reciprocity*, whereby everything is a part of one unified entity personified by the intangible Eywa. In *Seeing the World with Aboriginal Eyes*, Brian Rice describes reciprocity as “the process by which, if one receives or takes away, one must also give back. This is a living statement of the importance of the cycle that permeates all of life: the cycle of life and death, of life leading to old age and then coming back to life again... Relationships follow a circular pattern...” (84). It is the ebb and flow of the universe that is so seldom acknowledged in First World discourse. This kind of special homage applies to plants, animals, and humans – it is the union of the earth, the sky, and the underworld in one single entity, from which the human is not discounted. Rice also mentions that

In some Aboriginal cultures the linkage of these realms is via a cosmic pillar whereas in others, the connection is by a great celestial tree [...], the World Tree of Life, [which rests] at the center of the dimensional worlds and acts as a channel. Thus, it is the channel that connects the physical realm of existence with the metaphysical realms of existence for its parts exist in all the worlds. (12)

As it appears, the view of Pandora’s nature is a (simplified) compilation of these elaborate nuances. Eywa, the Seeds of the Sacred Tree, and *utraya mokri* (The Trees of Voices) all borrow from the idea of reciprocity to achieve a single effect: to denounce the human impulse to take from the Earth without giving anything back in return. When Jake Sully is exposed to this reality in his avatar form, he scoffs at the seeming absurdity of such a mystical mindset. As he is integrated into the Na’vi community, though, he begins to grasp its profound frame of thinking, as he narrates in his diary: “I’m trying to understand this deep connection the people have to the forest...She talks about a network of energy that flows through all living things. All energy is only borrowed; one day, you have to give it back” (Avatar). His journey inspires a re-evaluation of the death of the body, and of the value of life, which is presented to be cyclical rather than linear. In a parallel occasion, the account of Spanish explorer Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, in its film rendition (Echevarría, 1991), depicts a progressive path toward closeness with nature. The protagonist becomes a member of the indigenous community in which he is stranded, and gradually adopts their frame of mind. He arrives to the realization that to live truly is to *be one* with nature, not to battle against it. Eventually, he becomes a shaman healer, and upon his return to the Spaniard settlement, he proclaims that there is only “one faith,” The Faith. Just as there is one Faith, there is only one Eywa – Life is a singular concept, and a common denominator between all beings. Once it is destroyed, it cannot be replaced. It is not

fragmented as the Western mind has grown accustomed to believe. Now, the colonizer's relentless search for a New World (and a new life) becomes utterly irrelevant, because it is the same life both here (Old World, Earth) and there (New World, Pandora)—Life with a capital “L”—which binds all beings together on a spiritual level.

The unity that reciprocity generates is directly tied to a notion of native thought that is illustrated in the constructed Na'vi culture: it is the bond with the animal kingdom, or *tsahaylu*. Rice says that

Aboriginal people learned they owed a sense of gratitude to the animals for providing the means to live on earth. The animals gave means to sustain life and people reciprocated by showing their gratitude in specific ways. Today [it] is shown in hunting rituals and ceremonies followed after slaying an animal. Care is taken with the animal bones and prayers are offered prior to and after the killing. (30)

When encountering the “beast,” the human's intuition is to strike, or to “fight fire with fire,” as Jake Sully literally does with a torch while circled by the wolf-like creatures in the night-time rainforest. When the animal is defeated, a self-relishing sense of pride sets in. Neytiri's intervention instantly uncovers the senselessness of such a spiteful demeanour. After rescuing the clumsy stranger, she says that he is “stupid, ignorant like a child,” and abhors his gratitude (“You do not thank for this!”), because in Pandora there is more to the bond with the animal than what pertains to the food chain. The Na'vi's reaction reprimands the human's witless resistance against nature, and his fear of it. To the indigenous mind, the animal kingdom is just as elevated in the hierarchy of nature as the human, if not more so. In her biographical account, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, a strong advocate for the rejuvenation of respect toward nature, explains the transcendence that creates a meaningful bond between the two realms: “The *nahual* is like a shadow, [a] protective spirit [...] representative of the earth, the animal world, the sun and water, and in this way the child communicates with nature”; she continues by explaining that “Although we love all the natural world, we often are drawn to one particular animal more than to others. We grow to love it. Then one day we are told that it is our *nahual*” (*I, Rigoberta Menchu* 18-19). This *nahual* figure and *tsahaylu* introduced to Jake by Neytiri are one and the same in essence. Furthermore, the bond appears in episodes of the film in which the princess stumbles upon the so-called Seeds of the Sacred Tree, pure spirits that guide the path of her choices by providing timely ‘signs’. The pairing of the native with his or her own *nahual* (i.e. the *ikran* in *Avatar*) seems to be an organic development within the souls of both creatures, rather than a deliberate rite of passage by the human that might be deemed bogus and/or forced by the uneducated eye. According to Menchú Tum, all beings lead parallel lives, and are part of the same single world – again, the modern white man's tendency to compartmentalize everything in his society comes to mind, this time in a rather sour undertone. We do not think that animals understand us,

and we do not want to hear them; our languages are foreign to one another and we avoid the contemplation of a possibility that perhaps there is a way of union, and of mutual comprehension, between the two. As a matter of fact, many believe that animals do not have a language at all – this kind of view of speech is clearly a very literal one, and incredibly limiting. “A sacred pact is forged among all beings of the world, who, instead of emphasizing their material differences, focus on their inherent commonality,” contrasts Brown as he speaks of the native mentality (85). When Neytiri exclaims “Eywa has heard you!” in the end battle sequence of Cameron’s epic, it is evident that the bond is truly mutual, and that speech is not equated to letters. Upon making his first “clean kill” while hunting with his new mentor, Jake pronounces: “I See you. Thank you, Brother. Your spirit goes to Eywa. Your body stays behind to become part of the people.” This communication with the animal is not one of words, but of vitality – it is the sharing of Life between beings. When he begins to shelter the beings of Eywa, Eywa begins to shelter him. Speech as a ritual of spiritual heightening is a vital component of the Na’vi culture created by Cameron, and also within the Native American oral tradition. It is an outlook that reaches beyond the literal and into the metaphysical.

The initial moments of Jake’s immersion in the rainforests of Pandora, and his first encounters with his future mate, depict the immaturity of his mindset clearly, particularly in his way of speaking. He complains about Neytiri: “She’s always going on about the flow of energy, the spirits of animals... I really hope this treehugger crap isn’t on the final.” The word choice here immediately suggests the inhibition of Jake’s open-mindedness when it comes to spiritual freedom. He takes his surroundings very literally, and therefore has trouble understanding them. However, as he learns the Na’vi language and speaks to the blue tribe with increasing proficiency, he becomes more and more aware of the exploitation of nature committed by the colonizers at the military base, and the perversion of language that accompanies it. Cameron makes a very relevant subtle commentary in the discrepancies between the brute speech of humans (such as Selfridge, Colonel Miles Quaritch, Trudy Chacon) and the majestic, eloquent communication methods between the “aliens” (Neytiri, Mo’at, Tsu’tey, and so on). In contrast to the latter, the verbal interaction of the colonizers amongst each other, as well as with their environment, becomes not only vulgar but innately destructive (and *self*-destructive). They do not appreciate their environment, and their careless use of words is proof of it. In a return to Rigoberta Menchú Tum’s take on modern society, it is worth mentioning the appearance of a similar issue concerning the perversion of language as a precursor to the destruction of nature: “I had gone to find out what their idea of the earth, plants, and nature might be, and what I found was a commercial version of ecology [...] They prostituted the thoughts of the indigenous people” (*Crossing Borders* 172). To Menchú Tum, the Western way of behaviour is not an effective way to upkeep co-humanity between people. It is said in the book of her life that her culture attributes a meaning to every gesture, and a pre-established purpose to every word (*I, Rigoberta Menchu* xii). The introductory narration

goes as follows: “As we listen to her voice, we have to look deep into our own souls for it awakens sensations and feelings which we, caught up as we are in an inhuman and artificial world, thought were lost forever” (xii). This is the very effect that Neytiri projects upon Jake. Interestingly, the pivotal moments of the film revolve not around actions, but around a short recurring phrase loaded with tremendous meaning: “I See you.” To the average white middle-class viewer, this may instantly provoke amusement, and nothing much beyond that – it is outright corny, we think. But, we fail to realize the construct of the native mind: it is that “... words and names are understood not as metaphors but as conveyors of spiritual realities” (Brown 43). Here we see a reference to the very limitation of the spirit that Jake experiences in his initiation period in Pandora. We fall under its trap. “I See you” are simple words, but they are words that have a direct link not only to the Na’vi soul, but also the entire web of Life personified by Eywa. To say “I See you” is to expose the soul to the recipient of the words, and to admit a profound understanding of the other’s “heart” (essence). It is an act of vulnerability that maintains the balance of integrity between the Na’vi. Such a principle has the potential to apply to our world too, if only we would learn to accept it, and to truly learn its value. The politic-driven human language system is perverted – its lexicon is often used for warfare, conflict, and indecency. The Na’vi language and many remaining indigenous dialects on Earth, however, have a special respected place in the assembly of the culture puzzle as a unit of identity, and “given this sacred nature of language, it is impossible to engage in profanities,” says Brown (46). Here, language is used for beauty, spirituality, and communication with the earth, sky, and sea. Perhaps that is why so called “ululations” (cries of exertion/exasperation) are Na’vi substitutes for harsh words (cursing and blasphemy) used impulsively by the human characters in the battle episodes of the film. Meanwhile, the esteem of *silence* as a means of spiritual illumination is equally as powerful as vocalization. Joseph Brown describes its role very well in his book’s chapter on linguistics:

For many Native American cultures, words are not the only mode of communication, for silence itself constitutes language. In Western culture, we often fear silence. We are so uncomfortable with it that we fill it up with all kinds of insignificant noise and words. We do not let the power of inherent silence communicate with us. Cultures based on oral transmission, however, recognize that without silence, there cannot be language. They recognize that in silence there are profound modes of sacred, humanizing communication. (48)

There can indeed be beauty in silence: it is a chance to listen to the rustling of leaves, birdsong, rainfall, and many other elements of nature that are dismissed as soon as the din of petty conversation takes over. In the comfort of silence (seen in Neytiri’s behaviour throughout the movie), the dimension of communication becomes ever more intimate. It is mastered by Jake Sully as he repents for the offenses of his human clan, in a confession to the Tree of Voices: “If Grace is with you, look into her memories. See the world we come from. There is no green there. They killed their mother. And they’re

gonna do the same here.” This is Cameron’s act of imploring the viewer, particularly the American demographic, that there is a way of being that does not involve perversion. However, since the year of occurrence is 2154, the message infers that *there is still time*, and that it is not too late to re-adopt the mindset that allowed nature to thrive in pre-Columbian America. The universal White identity has annihilated an earthly Paradise while digging for gold in its soils, but because the native tradition has been intrinsically conserved until this day, we still have the opportunity to revitalize it, through gratitude to the cycle of life, through the respect of animals, and through language. That being said, it must not be a fleeting fancy, a “fad that may not last” (*Crossing Borders* 173) as Menchú Tum fears it to be, but a solid inner conversion of mentality – a shedding of inhibition that will lead to freedom of mind and spirit, in the examples of both Cameron’s Na’vi and the remaining indigenous cultures of the world. Also, gold must fly out of the picture. In the 2006 Mel Gibson film *Apocalypto*, a Mayan storytelling scene paints a grim picture of human tendency: “I saw a hole in the man. Deep like a hunger he will never fill. It is what makes him sad and what makes him want. He will go on taking and taking, until one day the World will say: I am no more and I have nothing left to give.” The message here is: as long as the search for gold continues, sadness will prevail. Instead of seeking it, we must instead begin to seek each other, and to try and See each other. Most importantly, we must open our eyes to our Mother. First, the white man must realize that there is thought beyond his own. Then, he must begin to see that the “totality in which the individual transcends himself is not society as an immemorial static entity but an inherently transitional community perpetually in the process of realization” (Torrance 10). Society is an ever-evolving phenomenon, and to categorize and compartmentalize every bit of it will only result in its fall like a toy block pyramid (recall Classical empires, Byzantium, etc). Rather, we must seek to unify our culture’s elements, claims the film, and to include ourselves as a component of this union, not as its almighty creators. Menchú Tum urges: “Government agencies have to realize that our people can contribute knowledge, techniques, wisdom, and labour. We could perhaps work on projects together, ones that are more humane, sensitive, and respectful to the environment” (*Crossing Borders* 177). That is a first step. The second is to realize that earth is not vulnerable – we are. It does not want to be protected, but rather yearns to protect us. All we have to do to earn this is to respect it as a spiritual reality, shared among all people, in the spirit of Rigoberta, Cabeza de Vaca, and Neyriri’s tribe. If we become these exemplary children of hers, would our own Mother have the heart to let us down? Let’s bet on it – for five gold coins.

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