

# Examining race-related aspects of james cameron's avatar



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Examining The Race-Related Aspects Of Avatar While evident that many who saw the film Avatar were more than satisfied with it visually, I found it interesting that I heard little about the plot or characters. After all, as a writer, these elements, to me, are what make or break the outcome. After going to see the critically acclaimed film, I was left with a blatant feeling of injustice regarding the film's race issues. The problem I had with the film is the concept of a white male entering into a world of ethnic people (in this case, aliens), with the sole intent of using them for his own personal gain.

Not only has this all too familiar story been used again and again, but also, the outcome is always the same. While I do not believe that the film endorses racism, I do believe that certain racial ideologies play a major role in the film. Whilst some may argue against that point, by simply breaking down the story, it is simple to make the connections. Regardless of if it was intentional or not, there are some obvious racial undertones in Avatar, and they should not be ignored no matter how impressive the graphics are.

In the specific clip I have chosen to analyze, Jake, the human who joins the Na'vi to fight against his own kind, has returned to Pandora after being labeled a traitor and losing the trust of the Na'vi. To gain it back, he immediately tames a Toruk, a red dragon who the natives are very fearful of. The dragon had never been tamed by anyone from the Na'vi clan. The ability and heroism just spewing from Jake makes it seem as though he is the only one with the answers that the Na'vi need to save Pandora. The scene transitions to the clan praying to the Hometree, despite their knowledge of the tree having never "taken sides".

In the midst of all of this, Jake comes flying down on the red dragon, the sun beaming behind him, illuminating his path. Then comes the very demeaning imagery of Jake dismounting the dragon in front of the Na'vi, while they practically bow to and worship him as if to say, " You are superior to us, after all! " Jake certainly assumes as much, because he soon starts yelling about how this is " our" land, and they need to do what he says to save it. While watching the film, I first began drawing a lot of parallels to class discussions of how Columbus and the Spaniards conquered America. In Avatar, human corporation is mining a valuable mineral on Pandora, an Earth-like moon that is inhabited by the Na'vi, an " alien" race. In the late 1400's, despite also having discovered an entire race of people, the Spanish found gold in America and began mining.

Once it became difficult for them, they enforced slavery upon the natives of the land, and mercilessly killed them upon resistance. In the article Sex And Conquest: Domination And Desire On Ethnosexual Frontiers, Joane Nagel reminds us of the " relative powerlessness of many native women, and reports that sexual exchanges were often coerced, involving rape, forced prostitution, and slavery. In Avatar, the human scientists uncover that underneath Hometree, the Na'vi clan's dwelling, lies the richest deposits of the mineral that they value, and by the end of the film, are ready to destroy it and its' inhabitants. This, to me, is an example of racism in how the humans were willing to treat the Na'vi (kill them) in order to acquire more " gold". While elements are different, Columbus' conquest of America strays not so far from the plot that drives Avatar: a " civilized" race relentlessly compromises what they deem to be an " uncivilized" race.

It can even relate to how American factories are built in foreign countries to avoid specific labor laws. As Americans, how can we justify that the people working in foreign countries assembling our iPhones are equal to us? If so, wouldn't we demand that they deserve equal pay? The ideology of the self-righteous, superior race and their ultimate disregard for all others is, sadly, an overused theme present in this film and our audiences should be seeing less of it.

Despite all "humans" being expelled from Pandora in the end, a white male, in this case, Jake, Avatar's protagonist, gets to be the boss in the end. In exchange, he gives up his body, his culture, and every "human" aspect about him. The one thing he fails to let go of is his superiority. With the film ending like this, and not allowing one of the original Na'vi to ultimately prevail, a subconscious message is being delivered. Just like in *Dances With Wolves*, a white male goes native and soon ends up as the great leader.

In just three months of immersion in their culture, Jake learns enough about the Na'vi (their folkways, their animal-taming skills, and even the secret to their ultimate test of warrior prowess, something no other Na'vi has mastered in five generations) to become their leader in their struggle against genocide by his own former allies. Hometree even answers a prayer of Jake's, and she had never answered prayers of the natives, her own people, even once before then. An interesting contrast is set up to disguise the fact that Jake's character is representative of racism.

On one side, there are the power-hungry, militaristic humans who show no moral restraint against the Na'vi. Their opposition is Jake and the rest of the humans who want peace with the natives. While the first group is presented

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as obviously racist, most would draw the conclusion that the second group, the protagonists, must not be. While the characters themselves are not racist, the age-old “white Messiah” fable is. This story has played out in American race politics several times. Progressive, liberal white males were responsible for Indian “removal” and “schooling” replacing Indian genocide, and segregation replacing slavery.

Each time, it seems that supporters of progressive policies just have to say, “Look, I’m progressive. I’m not like those old-fashioned racists,” and then they simply cannot be deemed as racist. This is the trend in our society that the outcome of Avatar is glorifying. Forms of racial supremacy have been changed over time, but have never been ended altogether. To be fair to the “humans” of Avatar, the Na’vi and their entire planet ended up regarding the humans as a disease with which there can be no peaceful existence.

Their solution is, simply, the expulsion of humanity from the planet, or in Jake's case, culture transfusion. Forced assimilation with the native culture in Avatar is almost too familiar to how there still exists an ideology in America that “foreign” residents must assimilate to the “white” culture. Forgotten is that every white citizen of America is descendant of some foreign culture. America should be a melting pot for all cultures, and if James Cameron, the director, producer and writer of Avatar, had truly agreed, perhaps the outcome of the film would be different.

So did James Cameron write and direct this because he is a racist white male? No. But does James Cameron even acknowledge that his film carries racist undertones? No. The casting for the film had his seal of approval, so why were actors of color used to portray the Na’vi people? The Na'vi may be <https://assignbuster.com/examining-race-related-aspects-of-james-camerons-avatar/>

tall, blue aliens, but they seem to resemble the noble savages in older Hollywood movies: they're played by actors of color, they live a primitive lifestyle in harmony with nature, they sport tattoos and dreadlocks and exotic jewelry, and they have courage and athleticism but not necessarily rationality or ambition.

Most importantly, why does white Australian Sam Worthington star as the cultural infiltrator? Cameron has more than once stated that Avatar is meant to encourage people to respect each other's cultures and differences, and while that may be the overt meaning, he fails to touch on the issue of racial superiority. Again, Cameron did not sit down and consciously make a decision to write a racist film. However, he did indirectly use the film to express his white liberal understanding of anti-racism. Really, his views are just a kinder, gentler, more patronizing racism.

If not, perhaps the Na'vi would have saved Jake instead of being incapable of saving themselves. Avatar doesn't ask the moral question of "Should the natives be conquered?" It asks, "How should the natives be conquered?" Had the film been written and directed by a person of color instead, there may have been an opportunity to avoid this. Columbia College professor Kristin Pichaske's excerpt, Historical And Political Framework: Race, Colonialism And African Cinema discusses how most filmmakers are Western white males who control the portrayal of Africans, or minorities, in cinema.

In addition to holding the purse strings, Western interests controlled the production infrastructure. As recently as 1993, Diawara would write that Africa lacks film-processing laboratories, sound-dubbing and synchronizing studios, and editing facilities, a fact which significantly limits an African

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director's ability to complete a film on his own terms, in his own country and within a reasonable period of time (1993: vii).

While this is not universally true at this point (the facilities he describes now being available in South Africa and also rendered somewhat obsolete by the development of high-definition video), it is certainly true that most of Africa suffers from a dearth of film infrastructure and that this creates yet another form of dependence on the West. Having to rely on the West for the skills that they cannot afford, the absence of African directors involved in the depiction of their culture is blatantly apparent.

Perhaps James Cameron was not the right person to direct *Avatar*, as he cannot truly understand the racial ideology that his film is perpetuating. However, if an African director were given the opportunity, a white Western moneylender who demands that he cater the story to white audiences will undoubtedly be funding him. Present day racist ideologies are best understood when comparing them to Magic Eye images: bizarre images concealing a seemingly hidden, 3-D picture.

While some people see the 3-D image right away, others have to look for a while before they can find it. Some people never do find it. However, once you know that the 3-D image is there, you end up wondering how you didn't see it in the first place. The racism depicted in this film is a lot like a Magic Eye image. It is a fantasy story about race told from a white man's perspective, for white people. I believe this to be true after simply looking at the history of Cameron's films: *Titanic*, *Aliens*, and *The Terminator* all contained predominantly white casts.

Had he intended his films to be seen by a racially diverse audience, I'm sure he would have had enough common sense to diversify his cast of characters. Avatar is also at the end of a very long history of similar films. Avatar's storyline has been compared to that of Dances With Wolves and Pocahontas. In all three films, white male characters realize they are unhappy with the treatment of the "others," but go beyond assimilating and skip to leading the people who they so recently oppressed.

Since there have been so many films pning all genres telling the same story, when will the white directors begin to use the issue of race in a different light? African-American scholar Donald Bogle, who literally wrote the book on how black people have been portrayed throughout Hollywood history (Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies ; amp; Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films) says that while not overtly racist, it is " a movie that hasn't yet freed itself of old Hollywood traditions, old formulas. If I were to have written a film like Avatar, I would have made the Na'vi completely capable of saving themselves by reversing the power roles of Jake with the clan. It would mean straying from an age-old format, but also, challenging the racial insecurities of the white audience that the film was intended for. Would the film be as popular if the natives of Pandora did not possess traditional, savage-like qualities? The juxtaposition of the film Avatar with historical events such as Columbus onquering America, and also, overused tales of the white protagonist bringing a race of " savages" to victory predates most steps towardscivil rightsequality. Filmmakers of minority races are far and few between, and are often funded by white Westerners when directing. With every film in Hollywood being produced by the " white



man”, will our society ever see things from the point of view of a minority race? If no, then Hollywood’s inability to realize that the decision to continue producing the same point of view is interfering with our society’s ability to think outside of racial boundaries. | | | | |