Introduction

When Cameron's *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009) was released, it quickly became one of the most profitable films on record. This American epic science fiction film won numerous accolades, including three of nine Academy Awards and two of four Golden Globe Awards it was nominated for. The film has generally received positive reviews, contributed by its stunning visual effects and overarching themes of environmentalism.

The story revolves around Jake Sully, a paraplegic ex-marine who takes place of his deceased twin brother in the 'Avatar' project, an exploration of the biosphere of the land of Pandora, a utopian planet inhabited by blue-skinned aliens called Na'vi. Using genetically engineered human-Na'vi hybrids called "avatars," Jake goes on an expedition with Dr.Augustine only to get lost in the forest inhabited by wild animals. He is then saved by a Na'vi princess, Neytiri, who sees an auspicious sign and takes Jake into her society. Initially, Jake provides the RDA (Resources Development Administration), Earth's mining corporation that is interested in obtaining the rich deposit of minerals lying beneath the Na'vi's Hometree, the information about the Na'vi and their clan but switches allegiance as he falls in love with Neytiri and, in her guidance, becomes enamoured with the Na'vi's holistic worldview. He regains trust from Neytiri and the Na'vi and unites all clans of Pandora to battle against the destructive and genocidal RDA.

The film has left many audiences deeply engaged, enough to leave some fans feel legitimately depressed (Piazza, 2012; Thomas, 2010) after the movie. However, observers from a diverse range of sociopolitical perspectives put forward a number of interesting critiques for the film's obvious depiction of Indigenous tribes and its anti-imperialism approach. The film provoked a backlash from conservative commentators as clichéd and simplistic (Nolte, 2009;

Podhoretz, 2009) as well as being "the perfect cinematic embodiment of anti-Americansim" (Fulford, 2010). The storyline of *Avatar* parallels considerably with Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (Wilson & Costner, 1990), however, there is a significant difference in the roles of the protagonist in the final segment of the two films. Although the two protagonists are similar in terms of bonding with the Indigenous tribe, the protagonist of *Avatar* assumes the role of racial leadership to battle against the invading enemy. This caused *Avatar* to become another instance of a "white-saviour film", which is a cinematic trope "in which a white messianic character saves a lower- or working-class, usually urban or isolated, non-white character from a sad fate" (Hughey, 2014).

Nevertheless, the film's great success is an indication that many audiences sympathized with the message of the film – the invaders, who have already depleted their own resources, are now driven by a compulsive lust for the resources of the spiritually enlightened indigenous tribes. The marked success of this film and the profound effect its message has on the audience demonstrates non-Indigenous people's yearning for the already lost nature in contemporary society. However, this superficial and simplistic worship of Pandora is an environmentalist fantasy emerging from the idealization and idolization of Indigenous peoples through a Western point of view. This paper will examine the "white saviour" narrative found in *Avatar* to address the issue of romanticization of indigeneity and will further discuss the purpose it serves for non-Indigenous viewers as well as the consequences it has for the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

The Noble Savage Stereotype in the Media

There has been a number of scholarly books and articles that have examined contemporary media representations of Native people, including those found in popular films, television programs, and newspaper articles (Costner, Wilson, & Costner, 1990; Fryberg, 2003; King, 2012; Merskin, 1998; Pentecost, Gabriel, & Goldberg, 1995). A scholarly article suggests that the Native peoples are represented as stereotypes which are characterized by both noble and ignoble subgroups (Burkley, Durante, Fiske, Burkley, & Andrade, 2016; see also *Reel Injuns* by Bainbridge, Fon, Ludwick, Bainbridge, Diamond, & Hayes, 2009). One stereotype is the *'bloodthirsty' savage*, which involves a negative portrayal of the Native peoples in the media. Historically, these ignoble – yet common – depictions portray the Native peoples as those "who rode around wagon trains, burned settlers' cabins to the ground" (King, 2012, p.34), and "harm innocent women and children" (Burkley et al., 2016, p. 2). An example is the portrayal of the Pawnee in Costner's *Dances with Wolves*. This stereotype also includes contemporary depictions of the Native peoples as "alcoholics, drug addicts, slackers, poor thieves, or greedy casino operators" (Burkley et al., 2016, p. 2).

On the other hand, there is the positive media portrayal of the Native peoples. Termed the *'noble' savages*, this category of stereotype portray the Native peoples as "wise, spiritual, one with nature, and honorable warriors" (Burkley et al., 2016, p.2). An example of the 'noble' savage stereotype can be seen how the Sioux members are portrayed in *Dances with Wolves*. The emphasis of the 'Indian princess' image on Aboriginal women (seen in Disney's *Pocahontas*) also fits in this category. These stereotypes are problematic since they remind the Native peoples of

"the limited ways others see them and, in this way, constrain how they can see themselves" (Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, & Stone, 2008).

The portrayal of the Na'vi has many symbolic similarities to the Indigenous peoples of North America such as their high reverence for all living things, characteristic ornamental attire, and spirituality. In addition, the presence of Neytiri as Jake Sully's mentor as well as the film's heavy focus on tribal rituals and the blurred distinction between the environment and the supernatural is a substantial indication that the 'noble' savage stereotype is an essential element in *Avatar*.

There is a history of Native people being fictionalized in films to be consumed as mascots or scapegoats by the non-Indigenous consumers and their depiction transforms according to the interest of the majority group of the time (usually the White, non-Indigenous population) (Bainbridge et al., 2009). When Native Americans first appeared in Hollywood movies, they were often portrayed as spiritual, noble, and free. The tragedy of the genocide was romanticized and the Native American peoples were mythologized by the pop culture. However, when the Great Depression came, the interest of the White society came into focus. Audiences lost interest in noble Native American warriors and needed a new type of hero. During this period, a White cowboy-like hero gained popularity and the Native Americans were reduced as a caricature ("identified as props" with headdresses and headbands) and portrayed as the '*bloodthirsty' savage* that opposes the White hero. During the Sixties era, hippies imitated Native Americans by ornaments and hair decorations. The fictionalized notion of Native society, supported by films, became an allegorical tool for all oppressed people. The Native peoples' media representation embodies the majority society's interest that is closely tied to the economics and historical context.

The Noble Savage Stereotype in Avatar and the 'White Saviour" Narrative

The Na'vi are depictions of Indigenous peoples and their portrayal in the film resembles the noble savage stereotype. However, Cameron adds an interesting twist to the plot of the film by also caricaturizing the opposing force, the RDA. The two central figures of the RDA are Colonel Miles Quaritch, the head of the mining operation's security force, and Parker Selfridge, the corporate administrator of the RDA mining operation. Miles Quaritch is portrayed as a commander who is fiercely loyal to the military code but can be brutally cold-hearted at the same time. He has a profound disregard for the Na'vi, which is evident in his words and actions, and shows chilling persistence to kill Jake and Neytiri during combat. Parker Selfridge, though not as violent as Quaritch, also shows disregard for the Na'vi as he is blinded by the rich deposit of unobtanium under the Hometree and authorizes Quaritch to attack the Na'vi. The two figures are the polar opposite of the Na'vi. The Na'vi are holistic and has high reverence for all living things whereas the RDA men are materialistic, anthropocentric, and ecocidal. It can be argued that *Avatar* is a film depicting the colonial world (Eckstrand, 2014), with the Na'vi being the colonized and the RDA the colonizers. However, it is narrated in the first segment of the film that these future Earthlings came from resource-depleted Earth in 2154. Given the current state of our planet (global warming, disappearing animals, water and air pollution) and the rapid industrialization and commercialization that still takes place, we are unmistakably on our way to devastating not only the natural resources but the planet itself. If we were to speculate that Cameron illustrated the aftermath of the Earth, it may be more accurate to argue that the RDA are the ugly representations of the current state of our capitalist society.

Then what kind of significance does the similarity between the Na'vi and the Indigenous peoples have? Aforementioned, the Native peoples' representation in the media are often in response to the majority society's demands. With a growing concern over environmental issues, indigeneity are used to create an illusion of a long-lost utopia to serve as a cinematic escapism. In the past, indigeneity in films were manipulated to serve as an outlet for the majority population's frustration during the Great Depression and fictionalized as an allegorical mascot for oppressed groups during the Sixties (Bainbridge et al., 2009) while their needs were ignored. Indigeneity in *Avatar* is manipulated to serve as an environmental escapism which clearly had a profound impact on some viewers (see Piazza, 2010; Thomas, 2010) and is the contemporary bias held toward the Indigenous peoples. The noble savage stereotype of the Indigenous peoples are personified as the Na'vi and their spirituality to depict a life harmonious with the nature. The lush biosphere of Pandora is an illustration of the environment that modern society has lost in exchange for what capitalism has brought them. The clash between the Na'vi and the RDA is the battle for perseverance between the environment and ecocidal material practices.

Although the story ends with the triumph of the Na'vi, leaving some hope for the viewers, it must be stated that *Avatar* is not a celebration of Indigenous sovereignty. This is evident in 'white saviour' narrative embedded in the film's formulaic storyline. The film characterizes the protagonist, Jake Sully, as a defector from RDA who takes on the responsibility and the role to the ultimate salvation of the Na'vi, making him a quintessential White messianic figure. Jake Sully is the figure that we want to believe that we are. We want to be the one who realizes that an act was wrongful and, if possible, compensate for that act. This is an egocentric way of

thinking that disengages us from the reality, subjecting the Na'vi and (because the line between art and political is slippery) the Indigenous peoples to benevolent prejudice.

Psychology identifies several defence mechanisms. Two of them are introjection and identification. Introjection is when we internalize others' beliefs and is the mode to identification, which is where one assimilates another individual's aspect and is partially or wholly transformed. These two mechanisms take place so that we enjoy the temporary psychological escape from the colonial history and the consequences of capitalism whilst still holding on to its luxuries. Green (1998) makes an argument that "the living performance of 'playing Indian' by non-Indian peoples depends upon the physical and psychological removal, even the death, of real Indians" (pp. 31) yet "these impersonations, for the most part, often believe deeply that in doing so they admire and respect Indians, the First Americans, the Noble Savages, the First Ecologists" (pp. 48). She concludes by stating:

> It may be too hard to face the consequences of history; it may even be harder to change them. As long as the substitute impersonation works to shield from truth, playing Indian serves its deadly purpose, and, as I have said elsewhere, Indians are in effect, loved to death through playing Indian, while despised when they want to act out their real traditional roles on the American landscape.

Unfortunately, this erroneous belief is more common than we hope to believe. The dissonance between the admission of the wrongful invasion and the dependency on capitalism may underlie why we are compelled to fall under this 'Jake Sully' pitfall. We consciously or unconsciously admit that colonization was wrongful but we cannot live without benefitting from its legacy. Therefore, we take on the burden of racial leadership, which serves us as a convenient atonement, a gentle slap on our wrist, although it merely is a fantasy coming from psychological compensation –

which is another psychological term whereby one (un)consciously covers up their weaknesses, desires, or frustrations in one area through fulfillment in another area.

Conclusion

How did *Avatar* become so successful regardless of its conventional storyline? It is because the 'white saviour' narrative, complimented by the noble savage stereotype, distracts us from the growing environmental concerns, and, to some degree, the guilt of cultural genocide, while we still hold on to the luxuries of capitalism. We want to hang on to our iPhones and still hope that the environment will somehow work its way out. There is little need for complexity since only clichéd, superficial understanding is required to enjoy an environmental fantasy. However, this escapism comes at a price of neglecting the issues faced by the Indigenous communities as well as "missing important opportunities to engage the complexities of injustice and more thoughtful relationships with one another and the natural world" (Justice, 2013, pp. 348). A New York Times writer contends (Brooks, 2010) that *Avatar*:

> …rests on the stereotype that white people are rationalist and technocratic while colonial victims are spiritual and athletic. It rests on the assumption that nonwhites need the White Messiah to lead their crusades. It rests on the assumption that illiteracy is the path to grace. It also creates a sort of two-edged cultural imperialism. Natives can either have their history shaped by cruel imperialists or benevolent ones, but either way, they are going to be supporting actors in our journey to self-admiration.

Such stereotypes can also limit the ways "in which Indigenous peoples are given space to represent themselves, or at least to have their representations taken seriously by non-Indigenous peoples" (Klassen, 2013, pp. 152). Oppression is, "by definition, hidden from you, because part of becoming a member of an oppressor group is to be cut off from the ability to identify with the experience of the oppressed" (Bishop, 2002, pp. 112) and the act of oppression is often done

through mundane activities, even something like having a favorite blue-skinned alien character, since it depersonalizes the oppressed group. Such portrayal is a re-enactment of disenfranchisement through the media. A scholarly article (2005) states that when minority group engages in strategy to garner support, the most common tactic used by the majority group to maintain the status quo is "to construe the minority group as the same as everyone else and thus undeserving of any preferential treatment" (pp. 208). It is this active limitation of actions and passive confinement of expectations, conscious or unconscious, that leads to the oppression of the Indigenous communities.

I would like to make a final statement that the step to reconciliation is neither a benevolent admiration nor defensive guilt, but to feel an appropriate anger about the advantages of the non-Indigenous communities. Anger proves to be a much stronger predictor for political action than guilt (Leach, Iyer, & Pedersen, 2006). Realization of a wrongful act is not inherently harmful. However, as Justice (2013) states, distancing ourselves from the problem by believing in a comforting lie fails to make a lasting change.

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