

ANIMALS, AVATARS AND THE GENDERING OF NATURE

Claire Molloy

During a climactic battle scene in the 2009 science fantasy blockbuster *Avatar*, nonhumanoid animal beings on the exoplanetary moon Pandora unite in an attack against corporate security forces which threaten to decimate the land in the search for a valuable mineral, unobtainium. The animals fight alongside the Na'vi, indigenous blue humanoids who are able to connect via neural bonding with other Pandoran organisms. In these battle scenes, *Avatar* depicts an imagined alliance between animals and humanoids in the face of an impending ecological threat precipitated by capitalistic motives and the unrelenting exploitation of natural resources for reasons of corporate greed. *Avatar's* environmental politics are explicit, extolling the moral significance of nature and stressing the spiritual aspects of ecological interdependence between the indigenous humanoids and Pandora's flora.

In pursuing its eco-agenda, *Avatar* draws on various aspects of environmentalism for its ideological coherence. It critiques technologically empowered capitalistic destruction, which is conflated with familiar themes of greed, commerce, consumerism and an anthropocentric worldview. Human economic activities are depicted as intrinsically destructive and unsustainable and opposed to the Na'vi ways, which are constructed as being in complete harmony with a pristine and timeless nature. Despite being described in an early scene as utterly inhospitable for humans, Pandora is depicted, in the main, as a spectacular yet vulnerable rainforest, and nature is conceived of in both spiritual and gendered terms as Eywa, a feminised deity responsible for maintaining ecological balance and facilitating the material interconnections between the Na'vi and their environment.¹ Indeed, it is Eywa that mobilises the Pandoran animals as a cohesive fighting unit in a battle to regain ecological balance and harmony on the planet. In the context of Hollywood eco-narratives where commercialisation, capitalist greed, and power are core motives of villainous corporations and individuals, nature is variously depicted as vulnerable, dynamic, hostile or even vengeful.

This chapter explores the envisioning of nature as endangered and retaliatory and the extent to which such depictions reflect conflicted notions about human–animal and human–nature relations that rely on intersectional constructions of difference. Intersectionality refers to the critical frame used to analyse interlocking categories of difference that include gender, race, class, disability and age, which are deployed to maintain particular structures of power and oppression. I am particularly concerned with the intersections between race and gender and how these structure the various iterations of the human/nature and human/animal dualisms. There has already been much discussion of the racialised representations in *Avatar*.² Indeed, following the film's release, criticisms and counter-critiques of its reworking of the colonial 'going native' narrative raged across the blogosphere. Here, I extend the critique of the film's racialised and gendered representations from an Animal Studies perspective to propose that such colonial fantasies sustain problematic human/animal dualisms. This chapter departs from other scholarly discussions on *Avatar* that focus on the politics of race and gender and the discourse on environment by centralising animals and considering their relationship to humans, humanoids and nature-spaces. I propose that, seen through the lens of Animal Studies, *Avatar* reveals distinctions between animals and 'nature' that remain unresolved within many discourses on the environment. Animals are treated as expendable in discourses that construct particular forms of nature – discussed in this chapter as 'nature-spaces' – as vulnerable and in need of defence. *Avatar* thus gives us pause to consider the extent to which the disposability and subjugation of animals has been normalised by paternalistic forms of environmental protectionism.

In pursuing my analysis I am in agreement with Richard Twine's suggestion that Animal Studies and intersectionality can be mutually informing. He argues, 'if the point of critique of animal studies conceptually is a particular assault on human–animal dualism, and that dualism is similarly pertinent to the operation of, for example, gendered, classed and racialised relations, then we can see animal studies as productive to a broader understanding of intersectionality' (Twine 2010: 5).

In examining these intersections between race, gender and human–animal relations, I find Val Plumwood's discussion of the colonisation of nature of particular relevance. She proposes that colonisation 'relies upon a range of conceptual strategies':

The construction of nonhumans as 'Others' involves both distorted ways of seeing sameness, continuity or commonality with the colonised

'Other', and distorted ways of seeing their difference or independence . . . The excluded group is conceived, instead, in the reductionist terms established by mind/body or reason/nature dualism: 'mere' bodies, which can thus be servants, slaves, tools or instruments for human needs and projects. (Plumwood 2003: 53)

It is the range of conceptual strategies that construct nature as 'colonisable' which interests me, and I propose that *Avatar* depicts a doubling of the colonisation of nature. In the first place there is the corporate destruction of the Pandoran forest and the homes of the indigenous population in search of a valuable mineral. Secondly, there is the colonisation of 'native' bodies and animal bodies. The construction of difference and similitude is central to the colonisation of nature and, in the film, Cartesian dualism and hegemonic masculinities organise continuities between human, technology, native and animal. In *Avatar*, othered bodies are controlled by human(oid) minds: the human corporate security forces wear Amplified Mobility Platform (AMP) suits, outer machine bodies which enhance strength, mobility and fighting ability; Jake transfers his 'mind' into the hyper-muscular primitive avatar body, a genetically engineered hybrid Na'vi body; and both Jake and the Na'vi have a biological mechanism by which they are able to control certain animal bodies with their minds. Thus, the AMP suits, the Na'vi and animals are reduced to bodies which can be conquered and controlled either by technological means (transferring the rational human mind into a Na'vi body), by spiritual means (rebirth into a Na'vi body but retaining the rational mind of a white western male) or by biological means (connecting and controlling the animal body with the human(oid) mind). My intention in this chapter is to examine how fantasies of colonisation sustain, and even promote as environmentally sensitive, the subjugation of animals through the intersections of gender and race.

I begin with a short discussion of the changing depictions of nature and animals in mainstream films and how these relate to wider discourses on the environment. From here I move on to examine the range of meanings attributed to different nature-spaces, where I am especially interested in the connotations of jungle and rainforest. The chapter then explores how conceptions of nature-spaces intersect with gender and race and I relate these to the 'going native' narrative. This provides the context for a discussion of animals and how intersecting forms of difference are used as a rationale for their domination, and as a means to differentiate them from a nature that is morally considerable and in need of protection. I argue that this particular structure allows animals to function as the obstacles of masculine contest, which are

then controlled and dominated through the deployment of Cartesian dualisms that subordinate bodies to a hegemonic conceptualisation of the white rational masculine mind.

Maurice Yacowar finds a distinct type of film within the disaster genre that deals with nature as a destructive force. Within this group he identifies three types of 'natural attack': animal attack, attack by the elements and attack by atomic mutation (Yacowar 2003: 277–78). All three types, Yacowar argues, dramatise 'people's helplessness against the forces of nature'; and he notes that, 'animal-attack films provide a frightening reversal of the chain of being, attributing will, mind, and collective power to creatures usually considered to be safely without these qualities' (ibid.: 278). Eco-films certainly overlap with the natural attack type of film and indeed many fit into the disaster genre Yacowar identifies. A case in point is the revenge-of-nature cycle of horror films that emerged in the 1970s. Animal attack imagery was central to films such as *Night of the Lepus* (1972), *Frogs* (1972), *Prophecy* (1979), *Empire of the Ants* (1977), *Day of the Animals* (1977) and *Alligator* (1980), all of which reflected anxieties about some aspect of environmental destruction and pollution, issues that had been brought to the public attention by a burgeoning environmental movement. The films drew on concerns that, during the 1970s, moved onto the mainstream political agenda. At the beginning of the decade Richard Nixon's federal reorganisation plan called for an independent pollution control agency which led to the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA focused primarily on air and water pollution issues (Vaughn 2011: 62–63) and revenge-of-nature films reflected the same concerns and envisioned monstrous animals, the outcomes of illicit experimentation and environmental pollution, taking revenge against their corrupt human makers, usually scientists or the heads of irresponsible corporations. Nature, in animal form, was embodied, unrelenting and vicious.

A tendency to depict nature as a hostile jungle landscape emerged as the momentum of the environmental movement slowed towards the end of the 1970s and concerns over the costs to industry of compliance with EPA standards began to grow. There was a backlash against environmentalism in the 1980s, supported by the conservative policies of the Reagan administration, and throughout the decade environmentalism was displaced from mainstream political agendas as environmental enforcement was reduced in favour of industrial expansion. During this time a cycle of films about the Vietnam war (*First Blood* [1982], *Platoon* [1986], *Full Metal Jacket* [1987]) as well as action and horror films (*Cannibal Holocaust* [1980], *Raiders of the Lost Ark* [1981], *Predator* [1987]) incorporated various depictions of jungle, forest and

wilderness as hostile, brutal and alien landscapes onto which anxieties about masculinity could be projected, explored and played out.

The hostile jungle trope was revised in favour of vulnerable rainforest in environmentally themed narratives during the early 1990s, a move which followed the founding of the Rainforest Foundation and the formation of the Environmental Media Association in 1989, and the 1992 United Nations summit in Rio. A renewed political emphasis on the environment in the early 1990s was accompanied by a cycle of eco-films that spanned genres and reworked the trope of nature fighting back against environmental threats and in defence of ecological balance. Films from this post-1990 cycle, such as *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* (1992), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *Happy Feet* (2006) and *Furry Vengeance* (2010) depict nature as timeless and actively working to maintain a harmonious balance. In each case the narrative suggests that a particular equilibrium is desired by nature but the ecological stasis is disrupted by humans. The task of correcting the balance then falls to nature, the moral propriety of its actions being organised by or invoking some essence of Aldo Leopold's assertion that: 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise' (Leopold cited in Callicott 2004: 305). An idealised version of harmony and balance drives the narratives forward, and suggests that nature becomes an active agent when called upon to address human wrongs. In *The Day After Tomorrow*, for instance, this dynamism is imagined in the rather bizarre depiction of an instant ice age which manifests first as extreme weather in the form of hail storms, tsunamis, blizzards and tornados and which, as the film continues, compresses the effects of climate change into a period that spans weeks rather than decades. New York becomes a perilous environment which has been flooded and then frozen under enormous snow drifts. Wolves who have escaped from the zoo prowl the polar-like landscape and attack the small group of human survivors; an embodied reminder of nature's ferocity in the face of ecological catastrophe.

In *Furry Vengeance*, the response to ecological threat and environmental destruction also takes the form of animal attacks on humans, albeit for comedic value in this case. Nature is depicted as organised; a form of collective intelligence which, during battles in defence of ecological harmony, can set aside species difference. Foxes, racoons, turkeys, bears and skunks band together to fight against the impending destruction of the Rocky Springs woodland, mobilised as an organised force against a human enemy. Other films in the post-1990 cycle, such as *Ice Age: The Meltdown* (2006), *Evan Almighty* (2007), *Battle For Terra* (2007), *The*

Day The Earth Stood Still (2008), *Wall-E* (2008) and *2012* (2009), counter environmental threats with the promise of salvation through reworkings of the biblical ark trope. *Avatar*, which is, in box office terms, the most successful eco-film in the cycle, melds together these themes of environmental defence, ecological balance and salvation with spiritual rebirth. At the same time, the film reveals a range of cultural meanings assigned to nature-spaces such as jungles, wilderness and forests that operate across a continuum from hostile terrain to places of vulnerability and endangerment. I use the term nature-spaces here to highlight the extent to which jungle and forest – and we can add wilderness to this – are, at the same time, objects of discourse with differing symbolic resonances and physical places that are acted in and upon. Nature is broadly considered to be the antithesis of human production (Smith 1984). Conceptualised in this way, it is something that cannot be created but can be used, experienced, exploited or protected. Nature-spaces are, however, the products of human activity in the sense that they are both the imagined spaces of cultural narratives (filmic, literary and so on) as well as being physically bounded geographical places which are identified, classified and named. ‘Jungle’, ‘wilderness’ and ‘rainforest’ can therefore carry markedly distinct connotations, which imply different human uses, relations and types of intervention. For example, Nelson and Callicott argue that ‘the jungle idea connotes disorder and danger, a place in need of discipline by machete, chainsaw, and bulldozer; the rain forest idea connotes complexity, balance, and harmony, a place in need of nothing but wonder and protection’ (2008: 4). David Ingram proposes that the term ‘rainforest’ ‘implies a greater openness to human uses than is possible in a wilderness. “Rain forest” also implies vulnerability and, in contrast to the desire to leave wilderness alone a “perceived need for active intervention” in order to save it from destruction’ (Ingram 2008: 57). For Nelson and Callicott ‘wilderness’ is a far more complex idea than ‘jungle’ in that it, ‘connotes many different and sometimes contradictory things to many people’ (Nelson and Callicott 2008: 4). Wilderness, they suggest, may be, among many other things, a place for quiet, even reverential, solitude; the habitat of fierce predators; or, a place for challenging recreational activities (ibid.). What Nelson, Callicott and Ingram agree on is that jungle, wilderness and forest carry multiple, even conflicting, meanings. Moreover, these are historically-situated and culturally-specific and intrinsically bound to the propriety of human activities.

In the *Avatar* screenplay ‘jungle’, ‘rainforest’ and ‘forest’ are each used to describe the same setting, the home of the Na’vi Omatiyaya clan and where much of the film takes place.³ How it is named in the

screenplay is, however, less important than the way it is coded as a particular type of nature-space onscreen. When Jake becomes lost in the Pandoran jungle he is attacked by a pack of 'viperwolves' – six-limbed Pandoran animals. The environment is depicted as dark and threatening, the space is populated by the viperwolves, which take up the familiar role of an embodied hostile nature. Jake is saved by a female member of the Omaticaya clan, a Na'vi humanoid named Neytiri who kills three of the wolves and forces the rest to retreat. She admonishes Jake for behaving 'like a baby', being stupid and 'ignorant like a child' in the forest; her assessment of his actions explicitly inscribing gendered difference onto their relationship from the beginning. She is to become the 'mother' and teacher of the 'Jake-child' who will inevitably surpass her abilities in order for him to find his fully matured masculine identity and assume the role of leader of the 'natives'. It is also at this point in the film that the setting shifts from being the hostile place to a glittering landscape – described as 'phantasmagorical' in the film's script – which is illuminated by bioluminescence; the blue, green or violet light emitted by some Pandoran organisms. As Jake is about to embark on the rediscovery of hegemonic masculine identity, the nature-space acquires a new set of meanings. It is transformed from an alien jungle into a vulnerable rainforest and Jake's later interactions with the forest, particularly the Tree of Voices and the Tree of Souls, are marked out by the luminous, ethereal, glow that the flora emit; a visual reinforcement of the spiritual connection that the Na'vi have with the Pandoran trees. In this way, when the rainforest nature-space (which is feminised as Eywa) is threatened with destruction, the trees have been constructed by the narration as morally considerable and therefore the human corporate activities that involve any measure of damage against them are immediately configured as indefensible.

The principles that organise the moral structure of *Avatar* place Na'vi and human practices in opposition, with the unsustainable economics of capitalism, corporate greed and advanced technologies positioned against a hunter-gather community system that operates in harmony with nature and through small social groups. At the most fundamental level these principles function to separate the Na'vi humanoids from humans, the former living in harmony with their environment while the latter exploit nature through the use of industrial technologies. Indeed, *Avatar* relies to a large extent upon associations between pre-industrial peoples and their perceived harmonious relationships with the environment. The narrative makes it clear that the Na'vi knowledge of the forest and their interconnectedness with the environment attenuates the threat of the jungle that is experienced by the humans

who, in direct contrast, are separated from nature. For this reason, the nature-space plays a crucial role in the narrative, transforming from a jungle to a rainforest in need of protection, which in turn provides the setting against which Jake Sully's transformation from ignorant human to ecologically sensitive 'native' can take place. However, this transformation privileges colonial ideas of white Western rationality in that it retells the story of 'natives in need' of a white, male leader, which in turn sustains a myth of hegemonic masculinity. Jake becomes the saviour of the Omaticaya clan, and his spiritual and successful physical rebirth contrast with the failed attempt to transfer Grace's consciousness permanently into her avatar body. In this regard Grace is the experimental body and the expendable female character whose role as the scientist with specialist knowledge of Na'vi people is, similarly to that of Neytiri, superseded by Jake's ability to lead the clan as a warrior.⁴ Thus, the transformation of Jake can be better described as a retrieval of an idealised version of masculinity, which requires that women are dispensable bodies, and animals and natives are reduced to irrational, unstable bodies that can be conquered and controlled in ways that mesh Cartesian dualism with colonialism.

In *Avatar*, the film's construction of nature-spaces and their meanings intersects with issues of gender and race, firstly because nature is conceived of as a feminised deity and secondly because the story is a variation on the narrative of the white Western male 'going native'. With regard to this latter point, *Avatar* has been referred to as '*Dances with Wolves* in space' (Boucher 2009) and, in interviews, director James Cameron acknowledges the validity of the comparison. He also points out other key influences which include the work of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad, explaining: 'I just gathered all this stuff in and you look at it through the lens of science fiction and it comes out looking very different but is still recognisable in a universal story way. It's almost comfortable for the audience – "I know what kind of tale this is"' (Cameron quoted in Boucher 2009). From a postcolonial perspective it is perhaps more troubling than comforting to see another reworking of the white Western male 'going native' narrative and even more problematic to assume that this is a 'universal story'.

Avatar follows in the tradition of colonial stories of the adventure hero in a jungle landscape, which Sara Mills notes has been one of the backdrops against which 'the idealised and stereotypical form of colonial masculinity found within adventure novels and travel narratives was constructed' (2005: 58). She proposes, '[f]or the adventure hero it was essential to view the land as a series of challenges', wherein the

landscape is established as a backdrop 'in the working out of a self-identity' (ibid.: 56). Writing on the subject of colonial narratives Richard Dyer has observed that, '[t]he difficulty of the terrain, its unfamiliarity and its dangers (savage beasts, precipitous mountain passes, tumultuous rivers, thick jungle) provide the opportunity for the exercise of the white spirit, indomitable, organised' (Dyer 2002: 267). Being constructed as places outside of language and culture, jungles have connoted primitiveness, brutality and disorder in contest with white rational masculinity. In Conrad's ([1899] 2007) *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, the darkness of the jungle symbolises savagery, primitive power and 'the destabilisation of masculinity' (Kestner 2010: 111). The jungle is the 'othered' environment in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), an adaptation of Conrad's story, and in the 1987 film *Predator* (1987) an alien uses active camouflage to become part of the jungle and then attacks, kills and skins members of an Army Special Forces unit. The jungle has thus been repeatedly called upon to signify an alien nature-space in which men must fight for survival. Christine Cornea notes that in both *Apocalypse Now* and *Predator*, the jungle provides an environment which is governed by 'the rules of nature', and where white masculinity can recover the fantasy of the 'noble savage' and a sense of primitive authenticity (Cornea 2007: 184). Similarly, in *Tarzan* and the many screen adaptations of Burroughs' stories that Cameron claims influenced *Avatar*, the jungle plays a key role as both metaphoric parent and educator of white masculinity. As Gail Bederman proposes, 'Tarzan's perfect masculinity stems from two factors – his white racial supremacy, inherited from his civilised Anglo-Saxon parents, and his savage jungle childhood with the primitive apes' (Bederman 1996: 221). Jungle settings have thus functioned as important landscapes for the rediscovery of an idealised masculinity that has been lost or softened by civilisation, and the 'going native' narrative 'provides a fantasy of freedom' and imagery of the primitive Other which 'articulates the nostalgic impulses of capitalist society' for an alternative way of life (Huhndorf 2001: 104).

However, in *Avatar* the nature-space does not remain a hostile force and its protection becomes a key motivation for Jake to lead the Na'vi into a battle with the corporate security forces. As the jungle gives way to the connotations of the rainforest, so the propriety of human(oid) actions are measured against the meanings that are assigned to those particular nature-spaces – vulnerability, balance, harmony and so forth – and the challenges to masculinity, which are usually provided by the landscape in colonial stories, must be found elsewhere. Instead, animals are presented as a series of obstacles in *Avatar*, which must be

overcome through physical domination, rational control and killing. In this way animals are separated from a nature which is morally considerable in the sense that the nature-space becomes feminised and is thus constructed as in need of protection, while the Pandoran animals are depicted otherwise.

In *Avatar* the main antagonist in the film, Colonel Miles Quaritch, gives voice to the colonialist logic that has typically constructed the jungle and its inhabitants in adversarial terms, conflating the terrain, the animals and indigenous peoples and describing them as threatening, treacherous and alien.⁵ At one point Quaritch warns Jake Sully, the main protagonist, 'You get soft, Pandora will shit you out with zero warning'. During the briefing for new arrivals on the planet, Head of Security, Quaritch, tells the assembled group:

You are not in Kansas anymore. You are on Pandora ladies and gentleman. Respect that fact every second of every day. If there is a hell you might want to go there for some R&R after a tour on Pandora. Out there beyond that fence, every living thing that crawls, flies or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for Jujubes.

Later, Quaritch admits to Jake that he was attacked during his first day on Pandora. The scarring on Quaritch's head and face suggests that he was mauled by a clawed animal but the actual cause of his disfigurement is never revealed. Refusing reconstructive surgery Quaritch tells Jake, 'I kind of like it. It reminds me every day what's waiting out there'.

Jake, in his avatar body, accompanies Dr Grace Augustine, an exobiologist, on an exploratory assignment into the Pandoran forests. The first imagery of the Pandoran landscape is seen from a high angle as the tilt-rotor aircraft carrying Jake, Augustine and the xenanthropologist Norm Spellman, swoops over immense waterfalls and the expansive forest canopy. The forest teems with insects and animals, none of which pose any threat to the group until Jake is confronted with the territorial display of a hammerhead 'titanothere', a creature which resembles a massive rhinoceros with six legs. The titanothere retreats in the face of the greater threat posed by a 'thanator', another hexapedal animal, this time bearing remarkable similarity to a panther although the creature is far larger, armoured, and has massive distensible jaws. A chase ensues and Jake's only escape route leads him off the edge of a cliff and into a river. Later Jake is attacked by viperwolves but then rescued by Neytiri.

Jake's passage from human to Na'vi is marked by his interactions with animals. The initial state of humanness and ignorance is signified by his being responsible for the death of the viperwolves, and his first task en route to becoming Na'vi is to ride a 'direhorse', a Clydesdale-like

creature. Jake must use his 'queue', a long hair-like braid with tendrils at the end that can be connected to various flora and fauna of the planet creating a neural link that allows the Na'vi to bond with other biological forms. By connecting his queue to the direhorse Jake is able to assume control and direct the horse's movements. The next milestone in Jake's training is reached when he achieves a clean kill, moving him closer toward the status of fully fledged Na'vi hunter. After killing a deer, Jake must then catch and connect with an 'ikran', a large Pandoran bird. The process by which the connection between Na'vi and ikran takes place is suggested by the narration to approximate the breaking of a horse, and once connected the ikran is under Jake's complete control giving him the means to fly. In the same way that previous colonial narratives assert the superiority of the white male, Jake later proves his authority over the indigenous Na'vi by capturing and breaking a 'toruk', a creature similar to a pterodactyl and the most ferocious animal on Pandora. It is this final animal act that secures Jake's position as leader of the Na'vi, from where he takes them into battle against the humans and in defence of the Pandoran biosphere.

Each of the animals Jake encounters is either a threat (viperwolves, titanotheres) or subject to domination achieved by connecting and controlling with the human mind (dire-horse, ikran and toruk). Indeed, it is Jake's ability to tame the most fearsome of all the Pandoran animals (the toruk) that illustrates his superior powers of control over animal bodies. By controlling the toruk Jake assumes the identity of Toruk Makto, a highly revered position held by only five Na'vi before him, giving him the status required to become the clan's leader. Each of Jake's interactions with animals is coded in contrast to his interactions with Pandoran nature-spaces. Whereas the rainforest glitters with bioluminescence, a feature of the film amplified by the use of 3D technology, each of the scenes in which Jake encounters an animal uses naturalistic lighting.

In contrast to the conflation of spirituality, nature and the feminine with Eywa and the rainforest, animals are referred to in different, although still gendered, terms. For instance, when the titanotheres halts his charge Jake says: 'Yeah, that's what I'm talking about bitch. That's right, get your punk ass back to Mommy'. In a later scene Colonel Quaritch also uses gendered language saying, 'Come to Papa' to a 'tamed' thanator before stabbing the animal multiple times. Jake uses the vernacular expression, 'Let's dance', a euphemism that conflates traditional rituals of courtship with aggressive contest, before he 'breaks' the ikran in a scene which has been described in critiques across the blogosphere variously as a depiction of rape, homosexual rape and

bestiality.⁶ The violence of the action; the forced ‘bonding’; the close-up on the animal’s pupil, which dilates massively as Jake forcibly connects himself to the bird; and Jake’s comment as the animal lies ‘broken’ on the ground, ‘That’s right, you’re mine’, followed by Jake’s first flight on the back of the ikran that he now controls with his mind all work to reinforce, even valorise, the brutal subjugation of animals against their will. Readings of the scene as rape can be explained by referring to an earlier animal encounter when Jake is instructed to ride the direhorse, in this case a ‘docile’ female. When Jake connects queues with the direhorse, Neytiri tells him to ‘feel’ the animal, her heartbeat, strong legs and so on. This scene establishes that bonding is a sensual experience, but the boundary between sensual and sexual bonding has the potential to blur. In his *Pandorapedia* James Cameron refers to the queue and bonding in the following way:

When an appropriate mate has been selected (which can take many years), the male and female Na’vi will connect queues to create an emotional bond that lasts a lifetime. The intertwining of queues, called ‘Shahaylu’, creates a state of unified body consciousness in which both parties access the physical sensations of the other. While not erotic when used for the control of animals, during mating it creates a heightened awareness of the other person. (Cameron 2010)

Thus, bonding is both sexual and controlling. The unifying of consciousnesses also means that bonding allows Jake and the Na’vi to feel the animal’s experiences, which must include pain, fear and suffering. Yet, this does not prevent violence towards othered animals. On the contrary, sharing the animal’s experience is positioned as a defining feature of human/Na’vi difference. Indeed, the narrative goes so far as to normalise violence towards animals as part of Na’vi customs and, in doing so, appropriates a western fantasy of native–animal relations to maintain the moral legitimacy of such actions.⁷

The connections between Na’vi and animals are quite different to those made with Pandoran trees. Na’vi–animal relations are depicted primarily as being concerned with control, domination and killing. Animals are valued by the Na’vi for their utility, as modes of transport and as food, and for their symbolic value (marking the progress of Na’vi to hunter status). Interconnectedness between Na’vi and trees assumes a different type of relation; it is a spiritual experience and a way to link with their deity Eywa. The trees on Pandora form a neural network, which nonhumanoid animals cannot connect to but which give the Na’vi a link to their dead ancestors who are ‘with Eywa’. When Jake attaches to this network and asks Eywa to assist in the battle with

the humans, she responds by sending the animals to fight alongside the Na'vi. During the battle, hunter and hunted, predator and prey, are united in their defence of the ecosystem against the human corporate power. In *Avatar* nature is thus organised as an active dynamic force that favours ecological balance and harmony and emphasises inter-relatedness, although this is imagined as existing between the indigenous peoples and trees and through a networked system that excludes animals.

The film's foregrounding of the interconnectedness of Pandoran life suggests that preindustrial human-nature relations are more attuned to the maintenance of ecological harmony than the resource-focused and technologically oriented emphasis of mainstream environmentalism. The difference between human notions of value conceptualised in economic and monetary terms, are opposed to the Na'vi concept of value, which depicts life as having worth. In this way, the wasteful and unnecessary killing of the viperwolves, precipitated by Sully's ignorance of the ways of the forest, is contrasted with the 'good kill' of a deer-like creature in the subsistence hunting mode in a later scene. Thus, Neytiri is not concerned with the suffering of the animal but instead with the wastefulness of the killing. Angrily she tells Jake, 'this is sad' and reasons, 'they did not need to die'. Yet this has to be set in context with the rather more instrumental value afforded to animals in the film and reflected in the deaths that are either necessary to Jake's progress towards his goal or, in the case of the final battle scenes, constructed as a visual spectacle. Trees, in contrast, have a different type of value and the most heinous human actions depicted in the film are the destruction of the Omaticaya's Hometree and the security forces' attack on the Tree of Souls, the site of extreme spiritual importance for the Na'vi and their most direct connection to Eywa.

Hometrees are described in Cameron's *Pandorapedia* as similar to redwoods of the Pacific Northwest on Earth.⁸ On the symbolic importance of redwood trees, David Ingram writes that the Big Tree was 'a visible sign of the presence of God in nature, and of divine sanction for American national interests . . . The Big Trees thus became an early cause for nature preservationists wishing to preserve them for the access they granted to moral and spiritual enlightenment' (Ingram 2008: 15). Thus, *Avatar* draws on the discourse of rainforest vulnerability, which coalesces with the national and spiritual symbolism afforded to redwood trees to organise their difference from animals.

Marti Kheel has argued that the hegemonic conception of masculine identity has relied on sustaining a belief in the desirability of struggle or conquest and definitions of achievement that require transcending

the natural world, and that the first two occur through opposition to nature and women (Kheel 2008: 41). The hegemonic ideal, Kheel argues, underpins a particular holist philosophy that expresses moral concern for nature and promotes an ethic of protection, 'proposing human interdependence with nature as well as love and respect for it' (ibid.: 4): an ethic which maps onto the environmental agenda and moral logic of *Avatar*. However, Kheel argues that this conceptualisation of nature has embedded within it masculinist characteristics that are structured by concepts of rationality, universality and autonomy (ibid.: 3). Sustained by a view of nature as a primitive environment in need of protection, animals are used as symbols and psychological props. Kheel argues that 'these attitudes are masculinist in that they subordinate empathy and care for the individual beings to a larger cognitive perspective or "whole"' (ibid.).

Avatar provides a holist view of nature that promotes a problematic concept of interconnectedness, wherein the nature-space provides a backdrop for the contest of hegemonic masculinity to be played out and where animals function as obstacles to be defeated, dominated and controlled. In a narrative sense the deity Eywa functions as little more than a donor providing Jake with the extra firepower, in the form of the collective bodies of the Pandoran animals, so that he can succeed in his battle with the corporate security forces. Eywa later becomes the symbolic mother, taking over the role which Neytiri has begun, and rebirths Jake as a fully functioning hegemonic masculine ideal, with all the strength of the native Na'vi but with the rational white Western mind in control of the fantasy of the hyper-muscular primitive body. Gender and race intersect as othered difference, which sustains the mythic role of the white western male as defender of a pristine pure version of nature (the feminised nature-space) and as leader of indigenous people (the irrational native). The destruction of the nature-space by corporate security forces thus provides motivation for the contest which, in the end, cannot escape from the masculinist ideology and ends up pitting two versions of colonisation against one another. In doing so, *Avatar* does succeed in finding its 'universal story'. It retells the countless stories that normalise the control, domination and killing of nonhuman animals.

Notes

- 1 Apart from the carbon dioxide and hydrogen sulphide-rich atmosphere, which is made breathable for humans by the use of an 'exopack' rebreather

- an unobtrusive face mask which filters atmospheric toxins – Pandora’s initial hostility is realised in the forms of the various animals that attack the main protagonist, Jake Sully, in early scenes. The planet’s flora, on the other hand, is depicted as magnificent, dazzling, unspoiled and far from intimidating.
- 2 There are numerous individual postcolonial analyses of *Avatar* online in addition to study guides that use the film to teach postcolonial theory. For example, see Postcolonial Networks online at <http://postcolonialnetworks.com/>; <http://io9.com/5422666/when-will-white-people-stop-making-movies-like-avatar>; <http://engl243.wordpress.com/2010/01/28/avatar-and-postcolonial-theory/> and http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jared-gardner/emavata-rem-blueface-white_b_409522.html (accessed 8 March 2013).
 - 3 See *Avatar* screenplay at http://images2.wikia.nocookie.net/_cb20100826145261/jamescameronsavatar/images/f/f5/JamesCameronAVATAR.pdf (accessed 8 March 2013).
 - 4 I would argue that the narrative privileges Jake’s fighting capability, battle strategy and physical force over Grace’s empathetic understanding of the Na’vi culture, history and customs.
 - 5 Of note is the Hollywood cycle of Vietnam war films, which tended to construct the jungle and indigenous peoples as treacherous, alien and enemy. This tendency is drawn on in *Avatar* and there are numerous similarities between Quaritch and the character of Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore in *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Of note, for comparison, is the attack on Home Tree in *Avatar* and the Kilgore beach attack in *Apocalypse Now*.
 - 6 See for example: <http://challengeoppression.com/2010/02/16/domination-and-rape-in-avatar-this-is-respect-for-animals/> and <http://www.examiner.com/freethought-in-national/avatar-is-amazing-and-disturbing> (accessed 8 March 2013).
 - 7 The domination of animals is also implicitly, if not explicitly depending on your reading of the film, intertwined with sexual pleasure.
 - 8 See ‘Hometree’ entry in Cameron’s *Pandorapedia* online at <http://www.pandorapedia.com/navi/hometree/hometree> (accessed 19 April 2011).

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