Sample Film Analysis

The Racial Politics of *Avatar***:** Avatar is being derided as another "white savior" film. It's deeper than that. By [**Mikhail Lyubansky Ph.D.**](https://www.psychologytoday.com/experts/mikhail-lyubansky-phd) [Between the Lines](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/between-the-lines) Posted Dec 28, 2009

Avatar is so visually stunning it seems almost a [shame](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/embarrassment) to break it down and analyze the micro components. I saw it in 3-D, and a day later, I still recall the sensation of being surrounded by grasses and ferns in the jungle and ducking my head during battle. This isn't just a movie you'll want to see again -- [Ebert wrote (link is external)](http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091211/REVIEWS/912119998) "it is predestined to launch a cult" -- it is a movie you'll want to see again in the theatre, especially if you had the misfortune to originally see it in 2-D.  In between viewings, you might want to [learn the Na'vi language (link is external)](http://www.learnnavi.org/). No doubt it will come easy if you already speak Klingon, and it might help you kameie (please pardon the conjugation; I'm still learning) the Na'vi in an entirely different way. On the other hand, don't let your mono-lingualism stop you. The action scenes speak to geeks and non-geeks alike, and though the Na'vi do speak in their own language, their dialogue is considerately subtitled for those of us who have yet to master it. Point being: this film has something for everyone.



All that said, Avatar is more than mere entertainment. The racial allegories are so prominent that even casual viewers cannot ignore the obvious, at times even heavy-handed, pro-environmental and anti-war missives. On a more subtle level, the film holds a mirror up to humanity and shows us both the folly of our greed and disregard for human life and what our own planet might have been like if its indiginous peoples were allowed to retain their cultures rather than being overrun by European colonialization.

If this sounds a tad familiar, it should. Other films, most notably Dances With Wolves, had similar aims and the similarities are not lost on the critics, many of whom have compared the two films in ways that are not entirely favorable to either.  More specifically to the context of racial [politics](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/politics), the buzz I heard about Avatar prior to seeing it was that it was a sci-fi version of Dances With Wolves: White men invade natives, one particular [and handsome] white man stays to learn the native ways, grows to like them, falls in [love](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/relationships) with beautiful native girl, and eventually winds up rescuing the tribe.



You can read Avatar that way, and, for good reason, many critics have, but to simply dismiss this film as yet another "white savior" film is, I think, to miss some very important points about both Avatar and contemporary racial politics. Below are five observations I think most critics have missed.

**1. Jake Sully serves a vital role.**

Some [bloggers have asked (link is external)](http://remingtons.wordpress.com/2009/12/17/avatar-totally-racist-dude/) why the Jake Sully character is even necessary:

By the end of the film you're left wondering why the film needed the Jake Sully character at all. The film could have done just as well by focusing on an actual Na'vi native who comes into contact with crazy humans who have no respect for the [environment](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/environment). I can just see the explanation: "Well, we need someone (an avatar) for the audience to connect with. A normal guy [read, a white male] will work better than these tall blue people."

I actually agree that Jake's main function is to serve as the connection between the audience and the Na'vi culture, but unlike the blogger above, I don't dismiss that as yet another manifestation of white privilege. The avatar allows Jake to see, hear, and otherwise "sense" the Na'vi culture, and the audience needs the same conduit to the Na'vi. Jake is OUR avatar. He allows us (and by "us" I mean "humans") to experience what he experiences and, in that process, to appreciate the Na'vi the way he does.

Moreover, Jake offers moviegoers an opportunity for redemption. Just as Jake turns his back on corporate greed and exploitation, so can we all. Without Jake, all we have is the alien (or racial) Other. We might be able to enjoy THEIR triumph, but we (and I'm talking here about a multiracial "we") can't share it, not even vicariously. To the extent that this film might actually inspire personal growth and change and offer the possibility of redemption, Jake is necessary.

**2. Jake is more than just a (white) outsider.**

By far the most common critique of Avatar is that it patronizes the racial other. Will Heaven articulates this sentiment in his excellent [review (link is external)](http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/willheaven/100020488/james-camerons-avatar-is-a-stylish-film-marred-by-its-racist-subtext/)

As Left-wing conceits go, this one surely tops all the others: the ethnic Na'vi, the film suggests, need the white man to save them because, as a less developed [race](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/race-and-ethnicity), they lack the [intelligence](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/intelligence) and fortitude to overcome their adversaries by themselves. The poor helpless natives, in other words, must rely on the principled white man to lead them out of danger.

I don't disagree with this analysis. To the contrary, I think it's very much on target, but I also think it misses some important elements that at the very least make the relationship between Jake and the Na'vi more complex than described above and perhaps even give it some redeeming qualities: Jake may be human, but the avatar whose consciousness he inhabits is, according to the film, a "genetically engineered hybrid of human [DNA](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/genetics) mixed with DNA from the natives of Pandora...the Na'vi." On the surface, this linking of consciousness may seem like a form of conquest, or even collonialization - the scientists even refer to the process as "driving", but Jake describes it as a rebirth, and I think that's exactly what it is from his perspective. In his Avatar form, Jake IS Na'vi, not just culturally (though by the end of the film he is clearly that too) but biologically, at the DNA level. Thus, if we are to read the film as a racial metaphor (and I think doing so is appropriate), the protagonist is not so much White as Biracial.

**3. Jake embodies multiculturalism.**

It has become fashionable to rail against white ethnocentrism, privilege, and lack of cultural sensitivity. Again, for good reason. But if there are poor and insensitive ways to interact with racial minority groups, isn't there an implication that there are also appropriate and positive ways? Multicultural scholars and activists suggest that the appropriate way is to approach another group hermeneutically. According to the principles of [hermeneutics (link is external)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermeneutics) "it is only possible to grasp the meaning of an action or statement by relating it to the whole discourse or world-view from which it originates." In other words, one must approach a cultural group by trying to understand its various cultural practices and traditions from that group's own perspective, rather than from the perspective of an outsider.

This is precisely what Jake does, and not just because he is supposed to do that as part of the scientific [team](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/teamwork). Though he was supposedly spying for the Colonel and working with the scientists to learn about the Na'vi, Jake clearly establishes his disdain for both. He follows Neytiri, not because he is supposed to but because he is curious to learn about her and her people. He follows her because he wants to. It is this "wanting" that has been described as a manifestation of privilege. And it is privilege in the sense that Jake is leading a double life. If the "native thing" doesn't work out, he can always go back to being human. The Na'vi (and, by extension, people of color) don't have the option of not being who they are.

But Jake isn't approaching Neytiri from a privileged position. He is approaching her partly out of genuine curiosity and partly out of desperation. He had become separated from the other scientists and doesn't know how to survive in the Pandora jungle. Moreover, he takes to his Na'vi body from the start, and it is clear that he much prefers it to his original one. When a short time later, he tells the Na'vi chief that he is "empty" (meaning that he has let go of human ways and is ready to be filled up with the ways of the Na'vi), it has emotional truth. Jake isn't there as part of a job or as some exotic experience. He is there out of a sincere desire to not only understand but to learn the Na'vi ways. Isn't this the way we want outsiders to approach a cultural group?

**4. Jake is an immigrant, not a tourist.**

Extending the multicultural theme still further, I believe that, among other things, Avatar is a quintessential immigration story. At the start of the film, Jake was obviously human, but he felt betrayed by humanity, which withheld from him the technology to restore his legs. He came to Pandora for a new start, not knowing what he'd find but prepared to embrace something different. I think that when he arrived on Pandora, he was already "empty" or open. He didn't at first have any allegiance to the Na'vi, but nor did he have much loyalty to his country, certainly not to its corporate and military face. In many ways, he was like an immigrant arriving at a new shore, not knowing what future it will hold, but committed to building a life there, with no intention of ever returning to the old one.

**5. The Na'vi rescue themselves.**

It is true, of course, that Jake becomes a super-version of the Na'vi, taming and riding the red flying beast that is recognized as the most ferocious of the jungle. When he swoops down from above, he becomes not just a mythical hero, he practically becomes the messiah. This is problematic and entirely unnecessary to the story.  But by this point (as I've argued all along), Jake is Na'vi, in every sense of the word, and the methods he and the other Na'vi use to fight off the humans are entirely Na'vi. Other than sounding the warning, Jake brings in no "outside" knowledge or expertise. He uses Na'vi methods to gain trust and unite the tribes, and communicates with the Pandora life-energy through a method accessible only to the Na'vi. And at the end of the day, Pandora isn't rescued by anyone. Ultimately, and appropriately, the planet saves itself.

**Conclusion.**

Don't get me wrong. For all that it gets right (and I do think some of the criticism is misguided), Avatar is still sociopolitically flawed, and the flaws are not minor. Most of the characters are stereotypical caricatures, traditional [gender](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/gender) roles are (mostly) reinforced, and there is that uncomfortable messiah undertone. I'll take up these and some other flaws in [Part 2](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/between-the-lines/200912/the-racial-politics-avatar-part-2), which I will post tomorrow.

**Note: Minor changes were made to the first two paragraphs on 2-18-2014 to improve readability. The substantive content was not altered.**

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/between-the-lines/200912/the-racial-politics-avatar>