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ECHOES OF HISPANIC CONQUEST NARRATIVE IN JAMES CAMERON'S *AVATAR*

ABSTRACT:

One of the more intriguing aspects of James Cameron's 2009 science-fiction adventure film, *Avatar*, is a storyline that strongly resembles certain episodes from the early history of New World exploration and conquest. Cameron seemingly plunders a distinctly Hispanic terrain in his re-confection of a cluster of narrative motifs centered on such themes as going native; the role-reversing White renegade; the native princess; the advocacy of native peoples and indigenous cultures. Inspired by Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *True History* and other Hispanic accounts, *Avatar* shows a protagonist reminiscent of the gone-native Spaniard Guerrero in Díaz's history; the alien tribal princess is a Malinche who resists the outsider; there are secular missionaries who personify a pro-native advocacy similar to that of Bartolomé de las Casas; the ruthless bad guy is a sci-fi version of Cortés; the corporate entity despoiling the pristine pastoral wilderness of Pandora is a latter day version of Habsburg colonialism.

KEY WORDS: *Avatar* film; Hernán Cortés; Bartolomé de las Casas; Conquest narratives; Colonialism.

RESUMEN:

Uno de los aspectos más interesantes de *Avatar*, la película de ciencia ficción y aventuras que James Cameron dirigió en 2009, es un guión que se parece a ciertos episodios de la historia temprana de la exploración y conquista del Nuevo Mundo. Cameron parece basarse en un

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terreno netamente hispánico para su re-imaginación de una serie de motivos narrativos que se centran en los temas como la imitación de los indígenas; el renegado blanco; la princesa indígena; y el apoyo a los indígenas y su cultura. Inspirado en la *Historia verdadera* de Bernal Díaz del Castillo y otras narraciones hispánicas, *Avatar* presenta un protagonista que recuerda al español vuelto indígena, Guerrero, que aparece en la obra de Díaz del Castillo; el malo de la película es una versión ciencia-ficción de Cortés; la empresa que destruye el paisaje puro y bucólico de Pandora es una versión tardía del colonialismo de la Casa de Austria.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Película *Avatar*; Hernán Cortés; Bartolomé de las Casas; narrativas de conquista; colonialismo.

James Cameron's 2009 science-fiction adventure film, *Avatar*, is one of the biggest box office hits in the history of cinema. One of the more intriguing aspects of this megahit is the scope of its reception outside the Anglo-American sphere. The Canadian auteur, in effect, crafted a Hollywood product that entertained and appealed to audiences on every continent where movies are exhibited, with North American ticket sales of \$749,766,139, representing 27.3% of its total sales, and a foreign box performance of \$2,027,457,462, representing 72.7% of its total worldwide box office of \$2,787,965,087 (Box Office Mojo).

Avatar is a typical Hollywood blockbuster, financed by an enormous budget, graced with spectacular special effects, and supported by the usual massive advertising campaign. This Hollywood film's strangely international appeal is especially puzzling in light of its box office success in many countries which repudiate the United States's supposed exertion of hegemonic influence in Latin America and other regions. At the same time, this quintessentially Hollywood product was also extremely popular in the United States, despite the story's clear implication that the narrative's bad guys allegorize all that the United States is perceived to stand for in terms of exploitative, industrialized modernity and interventionist geopolitics. To put it simply: if there is an identifiable present-day polity embodied by the invaders and exploiters of *Avatar*'s futuristic narrative, it is the United States.

While this domestic and international market success may be difficult to explain (as is the similarly broad appeal of the same director's seemingly Anglo-centric *Titanic*), one may nonetheless note certain features of the script that seem particularly calculated to involve a broad range of audiences in the present-day globalized world. These audiences would include the inhabitants of both developed and under-developed countries. Many viewers among such audiences might well perceive analogies between the events and characters of *Avatar*'s tale of invasion and

resistance, and the reality of present-day life in many rural and urban environments variously threatened and intruded upon by globalization in its many guises.

Among the factors suggestive of such parallels is a storyline that strongly resembles certain episodes from the early history of New World exploration and conquest. The essential element of *Avatar*'s plot is a love story between an alien male and an indigenous female. The narrative basis one might expect as the inspiration of such a story, coming from a North American writer-director, is the semi-legendary and often romanticized account of the encounter between the Englishman John Smith and a young indigenous woman named Pocahontas. The young Amerindian girl's timely intervention at the moment of Smith's imminent execution has fueled voluminous speculation as to the veracity of the story; the girl's perspective on events and her motives in interceding for the outsider; the mutual perceptions of natives and colonists; the cultural and political implications of the encounter (Price 67-69).

The significance of this possibly apocryphal episode for the present essay resides not in its historical authenticity or plausibility, but rather in its protean appeal to subsequent generations of storytellers and their audiences. Recent reworkings of the basic story include the 1995 Disney film *Pocahontas*, and the 2005 live-action film *The New World*. Whether, as in the Disney film, a given version of the story portrays Pocahontas as a native girl falling in love with a European outsider, or whether, as in the 2005 film, the two characters' relationship is portrayed in more ambiguous terms, all versions convey, more or less, the same minimal narrative involving a young Amerindian girl who made friends with the Jamestown colonists in the early seventeenth century, and who may or may not have been enamored of one colonist in particular.

Cameron, however, although determined to tell a tale of miscegenetic involvement between a male outsider and an indigenous female, avoids analogizing the obvious Anglophonic precedent. Instead, Cameron plunders a distinctly different terrain in his re-confection of a cluster of narrative motifs centered on such themes as, in addition to miscegenation: the advocacy of native peoples by anti-colonialist dissenters among the colonizers; going native by a heroic outsider; cultural role-reversal in the form of this outsider's transformation into his adopted people's messianic protector.

Hollywood has provided examples that somewhat resemble Cameron's cluster of motifs, such as 1950's *Broken Arrow* and the 1970 adaptation of the novel *Little Big Man*. The first dramatized the possibility of peaceful coexistence of Indians and Whites, while portraying Apache culture in sympathetic terms (and, incidentally, flirting with the notion of miscegenation). The second tells the tale of an orphaned

white boy raised by the Cheyenne who grows up to be an adult torn between the two worlds, but distinctly favoring the indigenous perspective. Cameron, however, retells a narrative of conquest and colonization that distinctly differs from these two examples and from many other North American novels and films on similar themes.

Rather than base his story on examples from North American imperial and colonial history, Cameron creates a protagonist who strongly resembles the gone-native Spaniard Guerrero in Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*. Díaz's chronicle depicts two Spaniards captured by Indians. One, Jerónimo de Aguilar, resists assimilation into the indigenous culture and eagerly responds to the news that Spaniards are nearby, looking for him. The other, Gonzalo Guerrero, has fully assimilated into the indigenous community. Thoroughly adapting to their ways, he has married a native woman and founded a family with her; he has become a respected captain in war.

Reminding his fellow Spaniard that he has married into the tribe and now has three children by his native wife, Guerrero declares that among the Indians he is regarded as a "cacique y capitán cuando hay guerras." Moreover, he has "labrada la cara y horadadas las orejas." He demands of Aguilar: "¡Qué dirán de mí desde que me vean esos españoles ir de esta manera," while observing how beautiful his little children are ("mis hijitos cuan bonicos son"). Guerrero's native wife then berates Aguilar: "Mirá con qué viene este esclavo a llamar a mi marido; ¡os vos y no curéis de más pláticas." Ignoring the native woman's rebuke, Aguilar again urges Guerrero to abandon the natives, reminding him that, having been born a Christian, he should not risk losing his immortal soul for the sake of an Indian woman. Despite Aguilar's remonstrations, Guerrero insists on remaining with his adoptive people (Díaz del Castillo 100).

Regarding Díaz del Castillo's account of these personages and events, presumably grounded in a real-life situation, Inga Clendinnen emphasizes the psychological enigma posed by individual motivation and behavior in the context of cultural assimilation. All we can do, as we contemplate the two Spaniards' diametrically opposed reactions to similar circumstances, is to recognize that one man, determined to retain "his Spanish and Christian sense of self," withstands the pressure to assimilate, while the other just as determinedly commits to his "remaking as a Maya" (*Ambivalent Conquests* 18)

We can only speculate, affirms Clendinnen, regarding the character's assimilative predisposition. Contributing factors might have included despondency induced by isolation, followed by recuperation and adaptation to an alien environment; a talent for learning foreign languages; an exceptional receptivity to exotic ways of life. What

is certain, if we take Díaz del Castillo at his word, is the fact of Guerrero's assimilation, and his tenacious resolve in siding with his adoptive people in their conflict with "his erstwhile countrymen." Whatever the underlying causality and motivation of his going-native, Guerrero does more than merely engage in expedient role-playing to get by in a hostile environment. In his conversation with Aguilar, he implies that back among the Spaniards he would be at best an ordinary sailor, and at worst a grotesque freak and a heretic. Among his fellow tribesmen, by contrast, he is a man of importance, respected as a warrior and leader. Utterly committed to his new identity and new way of life, this obstinate assimilator has figuratively burnt his ships. For him, there is no going back. Later, observes Clendinnen, he will warn his own and other tribes of the true nature of the Spaniards and their intentions, and fight alongside the indigenous folk of the region against the outsiders (Clendinnen 18).

Guerrero is an obvious precursor, if not the consciously imitated model, of Cameron's Jake Sully. There are, to be sure, numerous differences between the two characters (e.g., Jake undergoes an epiphanic change of heart with regard to the natives, while Guerrero does not; Jake is a paraplegic, while Guerrero has no physical handicap; Guerrero has children by his native wife, while Jake does not; Jake works for a mega-corporation, while Guerrero is a shipwrecked sailor, etc.). The two story arcs likewise differ in many ways. Díaz del Castillo's minimal and anecdotal account occupies barely two pages, while Cameron's screenplay is much more complex, generating a film over two and a half hours long; Guerrero's experiences occur in a pre-conquest phase, while Jake's story begins *in medias res*, with the invaders' exploitative campaign well under way. Perhaps the chief difference between the two narratives is the reversal of moral perspective. Díaz del Castillo, recounting the episode from the viewpoint of the invaders, portrays Guerrero as a traitor and renegade, while Cameron shows a protagonist who turns against his own kind because it is the right thing to do. The *Historia verdadera*, in other words, is frankly ethnocentric: it is us vs them. *Avatar*, by contrast, narrates from a multi-ethnic perspective that unapologetically conforms to the multicultural liberalism of the present-day: all races and cultures have a right to exist.

Despite these and other differences, the film clearly retells a tale whose essential elements resemble those conveyed by Díaz del Castillo's account of the shipwrecked Spaniard gone native among his former captors. *Avatar*, in other words, builds on a basic minimal story line in the same way that adapters of the Pocahontas legend, working from a primordially anecdotal source, have constructed their own variations. Cameron's elaboration rewrites and expands the core narrative, showing an earthling intruder who starts out as the agent and informant of the invading forces. In furtherance of his covert mission, this interloper undergoes a rite of

passage in order to authenticate his native persona. His mission and his ethical sense of self are, however, undermined by his growing relationship with Neytiri, a female warrior. In the course of the story, he falls in love with this daughter of an alien clan, eventually becoming a fervent advocate and militant defender of the native cause and risking his life in defending them against his fellow terrestrials.

Cameron's depiction of the alien warrior princess confirms his deliberate folkloric revisionism. The daughter of a tribal chieftain, Neytiri can be seen as a Doña Marina who, rather than collaborate with the outsiders, personifies native resistance to their aggression and influence. Examining *Avatar's* plot from the broader perspective of the over-all program of conquest and colonization represented in Díaz del Castillo's history, we may detect other elements borrowed by Cameron from the historical Spanish context, then tweaked to accommodate his reworked version of the invasion scenario. The churchmen of the Spanish epic of overseas conquest become, in Cameron's revised world, the anthropologists, led by Sigourney Weaver's head researcher, who work to acculturate the film's native people, the Na'vis, in order to prevent a war between the natives and the outsiders. These well-meaning ethnographers, implementers of the *Avatar* program that allows earthlings to inhabit native bodies, can be seen as secular missionaries whose pro-native advocacy is pointedly suggestive of Spanish clerical opposition to the materialist intentions and violent methods of the historical conquistadors. At the same time, the film's most ruthless bad guy, the military officer in charge of a band of mercenaries, is a sci-fi version of Hernán Cortés, while the corporate entity pitilessly bent on despoiling the pristine jungle wilderness of Pandora represents an updated version of Habsburg colonialism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Reworking the basic situation of the gone-native outsider, Cameron's screenplay reverses the assimilative role-playing and gender orientation of ancient and medieval adventure fiction. In that earlier tradition, the native princess, or her analogues (e.g., Ariadne and Medea in the mythic accounts of Theseus and Jason; the *Quijote's* Zoraida in the captive's tale), falls in love with the heroic outsider, collaborates with him against her people, and thoroughly assimilates to her lover's culture. The stereotype implies not merely love between an irresistible male outlander and a high-status native female, but, as F. M. Warren long ago demonstrated (345-347), resourceful collusion and whole-hearted conversion by the indigenous woman—a "willing apostate," as Warren aptly characterizes her (358).

A prominent early-modern example of this motif is the warrior queen Calafia, in *Las sergas de Esplandián*, the continuation of *Amadís de Gaula*. Leading her female horde, a black race similar to the ancient Amazons whose home is an island nation

situated somewhere north of the Indies and close the Earthly Paradise, she joins the pagan forces besieging the Christian metropolis of Constantinople (Rodríguez de Montalvo, *Las sergas* 727-28). Despite her bravery and virtuosic battle skills, observes the narrator of *Las sergas*, this bellicose matriarch falls madly in love with Esplandián, Amadís's son. The confrontation between herself and the Christian heroes leads to Calafia's complicitous subjugation and assimilation into the Christian world, as she eventually converts to Christianity, implicitly betraying her people and their pagan allies (Rodríguez de Montalvo, *Las sergas* 783).

Evoking the same themes and motifs in his reworked version, Cameron portrays a native princess who embodies resistance rather than collaboration, and a hero who, in contrast with his ancient and medieval counterparts, succumbs to the charms of a native female and undergoes a total conversion to her way of life (and, in the film's terms, a biologically complete transformation).

Cameron's handling of these themes does not necessarily confirm his reading of *Amadís* and *Las sergas*, or of any other specific version of the basic story. Rather, he shows himself aware of a literary tradition of which they are paradigmatic and highly influential representatives. The tradition in question may be traced from Montalvo's phenomenally popular novels, through the Romantic era personified by the equally influential Sir Walter Scott—a self-conscious resuscitator of Amadisian knight errantry and a founder of the discourse of Victorian neo-chivalry—down to the enduringly popular and frequently imitated superheroic tales of Edgar Rice Burroughs (Harney, "Amadís" 302-303).

There can be no question, in any event, of tracing out the array of possible influences on Cameron's screenplay. What is intended here is not a study of source texts, but rather a discussion of the peculiar mix of themes and motifs that the cinematic auteur incorporates into his tale. This blend of elements constitutes a specific narrative template that reflects probable decisions made in the course of the cinematic auteur's confection of his tale. This delineation of elements is revealed in the story itself: in its setting and characters, in the way these factors are shepherded along a specific storyline, and in the story's conclusion. All of these factors point to a certain model of conquest, domination, and exploitation of indigenous peoples and environments. Various thematic preferences expressed by this model likewise confirm a certain interpretative bias with regard to possible historical examples informing the screenwriter's perception of personages and events.

Although Cameron is a Canadian working within the Hollywood system of production and distribution, his story's specific mix of personages and thematic

emphases reflects a tacit perception of Hispania rather than Britannia (the chief cultural reference point of his *Titanic*) as a geopolitical and cultural model of invasion, conquest, and colonization. *Avatar* is a parable of hegemonic outcomes, grounded in discernible notions of indigeneity and indigenism. The film's representation of alien invasion and exploitation seems inspired by an axiomatic perception of how invasion and conquest play out. The implicit underlying scenario conveys an image of conquest and conquerors unmistakably grounded in a version of conquest history that corresponds to the so-called *Leyenda Negra*.

The coiner of the term, Julián Juderías, defines the concept, first of all, as a negative image of the Spanish conquest and colonization of the New World. Secondly, the notion lingers as a depreciatory perception of Spain's cultural impact in history, and, in vaguely expanded form, as a profile of Iberian culture in general entertained by other European peoples (Juderías 28). The concept has provoked controversy among historians and cultural critics. The present essay does not attempt to resolve the dispute in terms of verifying an actual consensus among non-Hispanic countries. The focus here is on the existence of the *Leyenda Negra* as an idea of Spanish cultural history and identity propounded by non-Spaniards. To the degree that the legend exists as a cultural stereotype, it must involve, as Alfredo Alvar Ezquerro points out, a distortion of Spanish history originating as a multifarious propagandistic artifact. This construct, conceived and exploited by Spain's enemies and rivals, morally disqualified Hispanic civilization in order to combat its perceived hegemonic supremacy (5).

Some commentators perceive, in the context of present-day cultural politics, the legend's persistence as a Hispano-phobic interpretation of things Hispanic generated above all from within the Anglo-phonic world. According to this model, what began as an expression of hegemonic competition for ideological and economic control of Western civilization continues as a generalized contrast of motives and mentalities, conducing to "una visión un tanto esperpéntica de España, los españoles y los hispanos en general" (Maura 214-15).

None of this is to say that Cameron suffers from Hispanophobia. Rather, what he borrows from the Black Legend, wittingly or unwittingly, is a generically liberal notion of how conquest and hegemony play out as a historical scenario. This vision of conquest and exploitation is characterized by certain story elements, character types, and thematic preferences. This array of axiomatic elements includes what we might call an eco-systemic notion of the primitive. The organic integrity of the native culture is perceived to be supported by a harmonious symbiosis of indigenous culture and the native environment. Indigeneity, in this view, is an authentic autochthony,

an existential condition, a cultural determinant. Going native must thus be seen as a genuinely mutational transformation: he who goes native is thus no merely circumstantial turn-coat; rather, he is a new man, a self reborn and reconfigured.

Corollary to these factors is the notion of indigenism as an ethical and political imperative. Where indigeneity is a cultural fact, indigenism is a political orientation, an advocative response to the plight of indigenous peoples threatened by outside forces. Principal among the latter is any set of circumstances favoring commercial predation as a motive of conquest. The latter factor is axiomatically assumed to be destructive in its intentions and outcomes—a strategy pretextually aimed not at peaceful settlement but rather at utter exploitation of natives and their environment. Hence the prevalence, in pro-native discourse, of a condemnation of opportunistic materialism, especially that abetted by Machiavellian political methodology.

Sanctification of the organically primitive as the cornerstone of indigenism—an orientation and a practice most visibly maintained by pro-native advocates from within the hegemonic matrix—likewise conduces to a demonization of the outsider and to an inveterate notion of the impossibility of peaceful co-habitation. Pursuant to this concept, the native, the indigenist activist, and the right-thinking renegade, are natural allies in the fight against the predatory incursions of capitalized modernity.

The most relevant precursor of a polarized view of evil invaders and virtuous natives is Bartolomé de las Casas, the Apostle of the Indies and the founder of both indigenist discourse and, indirectly, of the *Leyenda Negra*. Casas condemns the conquests perpetrated by secular Spanish invaders and colonizers as actions “hechas contra aquellas indianas gentes, pacíficas, humildes y mansas que a nadie ofenden.” Declaring these so-called conquests to be “inicuas, tiránicas, y por toda ley natural, divina y humana condenadas, detestadas y malditas” (72), Casas characterizes the native victims as “naturales moradores y poseedores” of the conquered lands, and as “gentes inocentes” subjected to a ruthless campaign solely motivated by “la codicia y ambición de los que hacer tan nefarias obras pretenden” (73).

These natives of the New World, aboriginal occupants of an edenic world, are “las más simples, sin maldades ni dobleces, obedientísimas, fidelísimas a sus señores naturales y a los cristianos a quien sirven.” Enlarging upon his profile, Casas pointedly describes them as the “más humildes, más pacientes, más pacíficas y quietas, sin rencillas ni bollicios no rijosos, no querulosos, sin rancores, sin odios, sin desear venganzas” (75–76). Contrasting with the prelapsarian innocence of these “ovejitas mansas,” declares Casas, is the predatory villainy of the Spaniards, who

pitilessly assail the unsuspecting natives, like “lobos y tigres y leones crudelísimos de muchos días hambrientos” (77).

The ruthless and violent predation of the Spaniards is prompted by an unfettered lust for plunder, fueled by an inherent and collective perversity among the invaders. The material motivations for this cruelty are greed and the incongruous social climbing it promises to support: “solamente por tener por su fin último el oro y henchirse de riquezas en muy breves días, y subir a estados muy altos y sin proporción de sus personas, conviene a saber, por la insaciable cudicia y ambición que han tenido” (78–79).

Enunciating a theory of indigeneity, Casas insistently identifies the native peoples with their home environment: “Porque es averiguado y experimentado millares de veces que sacando los indios de sus tierras naturales, luego mueren más fácilmente” (103). This quasi-mystical association of autochthony with territoriality reiterates the opinion of Peter Martyr d’Anghiera regarding both the correlation of native cultural identity with rightful occupancy of lands primordially their own, and the inherent innocence of the peoples in question. In his *De orbe novo*, Anghiera observes how “insulares reguli, qui hactenus suo parvoque contenti tranquille quieteque vitam duxerant, quom nostros in eorum solo natali pedem figere conspicerant, graviter id ferebant” (“the kings of the islanders, who hitherto had led their lives in peace and quiet, content with the little they had, could scarcely tolerate the sight of our people establishing themselves on their native soil” (168).

The indigeno-centrism implicit in such notions has characterized much of adventure fiction over the past two centuries. *Avatar’s* pro-native storytelling may thus be understood as a throwback to late-Victorian and Edwardian popular culture, in which an idealized neo-chivalry animated both imperialist ambition and heroic intervention on behalf of native peoples threatened by that ambition. As Nancy Vagueley observes (179-184), Anglo-American Victorians, exemplified by Longfellow, Hale, and Lowell, exalted cosmopolitan chivalry as a manly furtherance of such worthy causes as militant abolitionism and vigilant advocacy of social justice. Amy Kaplan, noting the persistent appeal of such concepts, observes the effects of a two-fold American imperative propounded during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. On the one hand, America, officially standing for the liberation of enslaved and oppressed peoples, supported a media-contrived image of American resistance to cynical European imperialism and exploitation. On the other, she argues (92), this image simultaneously legitimated both “the exercise of imperial power” and the ongoing “narrative of liberation.” Jingoist yellow journalism, in particular, “followed

the script of the historical romance,” casting America in the role of “the manly hero rescuing a foreign princess and her land from a tyrannical master” (94).

The influence of chivalric romance is clearly detectable in Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Tarzan of the Apes, the epitome and paradigm of superheroes in twentieth- and twenty-first century popular culture. Motivated by an anti-modernity that at times justifies sadistic violence, the Ape Man commits to a life-long crusade to protect his primeval jungle domain, along with all its inhabitants, human and non-human, from the corruptive influence of the modern world (Harney, “Mythogenesis” 197). In furtherance of this salvific program, Tarzan joyfully goes native among his adopted people, the Waziri, becoming one of them “except for color.” Speaking their language, laughing and joking with them, joining in their tribal dance, he is “A savage among savages,” far closer to them than to European friends “whose ways, apelike, he had successfully mimicked for a few short months” (Burroughs, *Return* 130).

Burroughs’s Tarzan operates within an imaginary domain, “an American wilderness,” in Eric Cheyfitz’s formulation (4), “displaced to a fantasized European colonial Africa.” Burroughs similarly extrapolates in his creation of other exotic or extraterrestrial worlds in which American heroes become self-appointed protectors of alien persons and races. The most notable example of this pattern is Burroughs’s Mars series, the first three volumes of which establish an exiled earthling, the ex-Confederate soldier John Carter, as the planetary watchdog of his adopted world, constantly standing guard over his beloved Martian princess, and all her people, against the numerous evil-doers who populate the author’s space-operatic universe. In other adventure series by Burroughs, and in the contributions of his very numerous imitators over the past century, including many creators of superheroes, we see a multi-media continuation of the general pattern of analogical extrapolation from past narrative worlds—especially those of ancient mythology and medieval chivalry—into newly imagined universes. We could say that Tarzan and John Carter, to name two highly influential characters, are action figures very similar to those sold with toy sets and board games, or deployed as commercial tie-ins with films, TV shows, and video games. Such figures may be re-clothed, re-equipped, and re-contextualized across generic boundaries. In this sense, we could say that Burroughs’s most famous protagonists are essentially knights-errant transferred, *mutatis mutandi*, to their respective imaginary worlds.

Avatar follows the same basic narrative procedure in its portrayal of an honorable hero—a knight-errant in extraterrestrial context—attempting to right the wrongs committed against a native people who suffer under a forceful imposition of modernity. Highly territorial and fanatically protective, Jake comes to the rescue

of both a native people and the ecosystem they symbiotically inhabit. Updating Casas's vision of the native as the personification of the pristine primitive, Cameron correlates the physical purity and ecological complexity of primeval nature with the unblemished character and functional coherence of native culture.

Cameron paradoxically updates, at the same time, the Victorian ideal of the "White Man's Burden," as famously exalted by Kipling. The ideal in question propagandized the notion of the British Empire's divinely ordained mission of civilizing the benighted regions of the Earth, a charge summarized by Walter Bagehot in terms of the West's constructive mission with regard to the East. "In a word," declares Bagehot, writing in the 1870's, "we are attempting to put new wine into old bottles—to pour what we can of a civilization whose spirit is progress into the form of a civilization whose spirit is fixity" (161-162).

Reorchestrating the imperialist polyphony of a century ago, *Avatar* seems to refute the quixotic idealism that marked the Victorian era's understanding of modernity as a constructive set of values and practices which the advanced peoples should share with their less enlightened brethren. Cameron's tale, by contrast, shows that true liberation of a native people consists in saving them from civilization and its discontents. Abetted by the Na'vis' benevolently conscious ecosystem, Jake leads his adopted people's successful campaign to undo the effects of encroaching modernity. However, by making his hero a defender of native autonomy presented in such either-or terms, Cameron implicitly subscribes to a concept of the indigenous that evokes earlier versions, now largely debunked, of social primitivism as a lagging behind, as a deprivation of the advantages of progress and civilization. Adam Kuper (3-6), tracing the nineteenth-century origins of a certain idea of the primitive that came to be considered social-scientific orthodoxy for decades, attributes to E. B. Tylor and James Frazer the establishment of this standard view of the characteristic features of primeval human societies. The latter were defined, according to this model, as kin-based, and as organized into elementary descent groups relating to one other through practices of matrimonial exchange. With the advent of private property, contractual law, and the territorial state, these primitive descent groups, according to this earlier view, waned and finally disappeared, their extinction marking the threshold between primitive and advanced phases of social evolution (Kuper 6-7).

In her discussion of the going-native concept as it manifested in the Victorian literary and intellectual milieu, and in popular culture, Marianna Torgovnick (46) refers to the cultural influence and continued popularity of Edgar Rice Burroughs. She observes that the latter author's equivocal understanding of the primitive "depends on archaic and evolutionist meanings . . . [of the word primitive] as the 'original'

or ‘natural’ state of things.” In such a context, to explore or represent the primitive implies “explorations of origins and the marking of patterns that could reveal the truth about human nature and social organization.” This notion of the primitive as the true picture of the primordial social order “depends on an ethnocentric sense of existing primitive societies as outside of linear time.” This “temporal illusion” assumes the form, in high-cultural circles, of the formal beginnings of professional anthropology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In popular culture, it becomes a frequent theme in the Tarzan novels and other series by the same author, as well as in their multitudinous imitations.

The tribal society in which *Avatar*’s protagonist goes native corresponds to the kin-ordered, pre-capitalist, ahistorical world envisioned by earlier theorists of the primitive, and by their non-specialist acolytes. Jake’s heroic intervention restores his adopted people to a pre-capitalist, pre-modern normalcy very much like the traditional fixity attributed to so-called primitive societies by Victorian ethnography and its fellow travelers. Like those earlier models grounded in notions of the primitive, *Avatar* apparently regards indigeneity as an ethnically specific cultural reality potentially exempted from, or even immune to, the stresses and uncertainties of change. The notion of structural or institutional stability underwrites, furthermore, a possible turning back of the clock in the form of a full recovery of the Na’vis’ ecological independence and cultural autonomy.

Jake, the gone-native everyman, is thus a Moses leading his people back to a promised land of social and biological harmony. In its aggrandizement of the soteric role of the altruistic protagonist, *Avatar* epitomizes what David Brooks deftly characterizes as “The White Messiah fable.” The basic storyline, familiar to moviegoers, concerns “a manly young adventurer who goes into the wilderness in search of thrills and profit.” Encountering the natives, the hero “finds that they are noble and spiritual and pure.” Eventually, he becomes “their Messiah, leading them on a righteous crusade against his own rotten civilization.” Movies that typify this basic story include *A Man Called Horse*, *Dances With Wolves*, and *The Last Samurai*. Children’s versions of the fable include *Pocahontas* and *Fern Gully*. The charm of the formula largely consists of the “socially conscious allure” afforded by its narrative. Additionally, the fable expresses environmental sensitivity and multicultural awareness, while at the same time providing the dramatic satisfaction of seeing “the loincloth-clad good guys sticking it to the military-industrial complex.”

Avatar, in short, is a “racial fantasy” depicting the experience of “a white former Marine,” now handicapped and “adrift in his civilization,” who comes to work for “a giant corporation” intent on plundering “the environment of a pristine planet” and

displacing “its peace-loving natives.” The latter’s culture, meanwhile, is constructed from an ethnographic pastiche of “Native American, African, Vietnamese, Iraqi and other cultural fragments.” The hero soon shows himself “the most awesome member of their tribe”. Becoming the sexual consort of “their hottest babe,” he soon shows himself to be superlatively courageous and athletically gifted. “He flies the big red bird that no one in generations has been able to master.” The protagonist, “his consciousness raised,” comes to see that the peace-loving natives are “at one with nature.”

This plot element reveals yet another component of the Hispanocentric version of conquest: the conqueror’s supposed personification of an indigenist myth. Jake’s mastery of the reptilian-avian predator, in fulfillment of native prophecy, resembles certain readings of the Quetzalcoatl legend, whereby Cortés represents a fulfillment of divinely inspired prophecy, a personification of divinely sanctioned lordship, and the restoration of a primordial order of things. Advocacy of the Native, at the same time, enables mastery of the native from another direction: an insinuation of the outsider into the councils of the native, leading to his infiltration of their way of life and to the subsequent dominance exerted by him as their rightfully efficacious leader.

Summarizing the implications of *Avatar*’s implementation of such story elements, Brooks observes the film’s endorsement of “the stereotype that white people are rationalist and technocratic while colonial victims are spiritual and athletic.” More than that, Cameron’s plot “rests on the assumption that nonwhites need the White Messiah to lead their crusades.” It thus fosters “a sort of two-edged cultural imperialism,” whereby indigenous peoples “can either have their history shaped by cruel imperialists or benevolent ones,” so that, concludes Brooks, “either way, they are going to be supporting actors in our journey to self-admiration.”

The racially informed messianic fantasy outlined by Brooks—a story type, he notes, that may be traced far back in time—platforms the nerdish fantasy of the ordinary man transformed into an extraordinary hero. Through the technology of the avatar system, Jake literally inhabits a native body possessed of superhuman strength, agility, and endurance. Out-nativizing the native, Jake is thus transformed into the quintessence of the Na’vis’ ecosystemic integration into an organically coherent order. This fantasy of the ordinary man, very possibly an outsider or misfit among his people of origin but transformed into a heroic warrior and leader by his adopted people, is an aspect of the go-native theme enhanced, decades before, by Lowell Thomas in his glamorized account of the exploits of T. E. Lawrence.

Thomas, in his own way, is as much a writer of fantasy fiction as Cameron. Exemplifying the yellow-journalistic romance style pointed out by Kaplan, Thomas’s

media campaign in support of the Lawrence legend, a hyperbolic distortion of real-world events and personages, emphasizes the British officer's role as the heroic deliverer of a primitive people from the clutches of a modern but decadent and degenerate empire. Thomas describes Lawrence as a twentieth-century crusader (Thomas 6); a gifted warrior and tactical leader who, combining martial skill with technological sophistication, organizes colorfully primitive Bedouin nomads "against their Turkish oppressors" (8), culminating in "the most brilliant and spectacular military operation in the world's history" (272; see also Harney, "Tarzan" 65-66).

Lawrence himself, a historical personage often mentioned as an example of going native, tells, in the first chapter of his autobiographical *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, a somewhat different story. The wavering indecision, the transgressive ambivalence, of this kind of role-playing:

If I could not assume their character, I could at least conceal my own, and pass among them without evident friction, neither a discord nor a critic but an unnoticed influence. Since I was their fellow, I will not be their apologist or advocate. (29-30).

"Pray God," Lawrence writes a little later, "that men reading the story will not, for love of the glamour of strangeness, go out to prostitute themselves and their talents in serving another race" (30). Up to now, in his account, he has retrospectively emphasized self-conscious theatricality in service of military, bureaucratic, political, or diplomatic obligation, or variously jumbled hybrids of these motives. Ego-involvement, whether as self-glorification or studied exhibitionism, is not mentioned as an issue. Then, going beyond the pragmatic motivations of by-gone moments, he generalizes:

A man who gives himself to be a possession of aliens leads a Yahoo life, having bartered his soul to a brute-master. He is not of them. He may stand against them, persuade himself of a mission, batter and twist them into something which they, of their own accord, would not have been. Then he is exploiting his old environment to press them out of theirs. Or, after my model, he may imitate them so well that they spuriously imitate him back again. Then he is giving away his own environment: pretending to theirs; and pretences are hollow, worthless things. In neither case does he do a thing of himself, nor a thing so clean as to be his own (without thought of conversion), letting them take what action or reaction they please from the silent example (30).

Here complicity, reciprocal dependency, inadvertent and premeditated duplicity, smoldering guilt—in short, the elements of a deeply conflicted dissimulation—merge into a tortuous vignette. The Lawrence speaking to us in his famous memoir, however, is allegedly the real fellow, the decorated veteran and one-time functionary, not that other Lawrence, the nativized, play-acting effigy of his real self, the Frankensteinian creation of a certain historical moment. Lawrence the autobiographer, speaking with

the assumed wisdom of temporal and spatial distance from recounted events, speaks to his reader with an ostensibly confessional candor. At the same time, this most literate of autobiographers, using the Swiftian coinage “Yahoo,” conjures up the ghost of Gulliver, the most famous of parodic travelers. It is as if Lawrence is determined to reveal all the sordid and equivocal aspects of going native, while debunking the very notion of its authenticity as a human experience.

Having elicited pity for his Faustian bargain with the ethnic Other, Lawrence continues to play up the artificiality of the experience. Referring to it in vaguely depreciatory terms, as if it were a merely theatrical flourish, he emphasizes both its precarious utility and its potentially harmful side-effects. In more recent theatrical terms, we might say that he reminisces like a Method actor describing how he was, once upon a time, “in the moment”:

In my case, the effort for these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes: they destroyed it all for me. At the same time I could not sincerely take on the Arab skin: it was an affectation only. Easily was a man made an infidel, but hardly might he be converted to another faith. I had dropped one form and not taken on the other, and was become like Mohammed’s coffin in our legend, with a resultant feeling of intense loneliness in life, and a contempt, not for other men, but for all they do (30-31).

Commenting on Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Torgovnick hazards that going native (a syndrome she does not name, but whose prevalence is implied by her approach and by the title of her book) must involve “Profound ambiguities, moral questioning, the complexity of experience, the difficulty of true communion, a mysterious recognition of our opposite as our true self” (142). The most conventional version of this language will depict the native reality as “a veritable treasure house of primitivist tropes,” a “prehistoric place with no proper time of its own” (145).

Conrad’s Kurtz is the classic literary example of the colonial man gone native, in the latter expression’s sense of an individual embracing of indigenous ways, and a search for “true communion” with the exotic Other. Having “allowed himself to be worshipped by his African followers,” Kurtz then transgresses still more flagrantly—by British standards—in his violation of the “code against miscegenation” (146). Clearly the “substitute” and “inversion for” Kurtz’s “high-minded” Belgian fiancé, this story’s version of the native princess is, observes Torgovnick, “all body and inchoate emotion.” Personifying the raw physicality and inherent irrationality emphasized by Victorian models of the primitive, Kurtz’s native mistress likewise embodies, argues Torgovnick, the concept of miscegenation as a challenge to “the boundary of race” (146).

Miscegenation is only one of several emblematically transgressive themes entailed by the concept of going native, all of which violate “boundaries of love and hate, life and death, body and spirit” (147). “Africa and the Africans,” Torgovnick elaborates, are, for Kurtz, a “grand fantasy-theater for playing out his culture’s notions of masculinity and power through the controlled, borrowed rituals attributed to certain groups within Africa, perverted to Western ends” (151). In this context, “the primitive responds to Western needs, becoming the faithful or distorted mirror of the Western self.” The primitive, she concludes, “becomes grist for the Western fantasy-mill” (153).

The indigenism selected by Cameron as a principal theme in his narrative—in effect, the primary grist of his fantasy-mill—reflects a highly positive perception of the primitive, as Cameron imagines it, and a highly negative view of conquest, as he conceives of that enterprise. In aligning himself in this way, Cameron jumps on a politically correct band wagon that was set in motion decades ago. To characterize his position in this way in no way signifies a critique of either his political sincerity or his ethical acumen. Cameron, like most academics, including myself, deplors the injustice to which indigenous peoples have been subjected, and continue to be subjected, in the name of progress and its many benevolent-sounding analogues. What is interesting about *Avatar*, in addition to the sheer magnitude of its box office success and its subsequent “follow-through” in other distribution media, is its apparent affinity with a certain specific real-world invasion scenario. Although Cameron does not exclusively rely on this scenario, as we have seen from his several expressions of themes emphasized in British conquest literature, Cameron’s chief historical model, as this essay has sought to demonstrate, is the narrative surrounding early colonial Spanish history.

“Scenario” here implies an aggregate narrative far vaster than any single novel or film. The scenario in question is the deducible outline of the total sequence of events that amount to the history of New World Spanish conquest. Taken in isolation, any of the themes and motifs emphasized in Cameron’s screenplay could be attributed to any number of sources. However, seen as elements in an array that largely matches up, point by point, with the salient features of that greater but similar account, such common factors evoke the notion of narrative echoes.

These echoes include *Avatar*’s everyman protagonist, in many ways an updated and elaborated version of Díaz del Castillo’s Guerrero; a feisty and intelligent native woman; a miscegenic couple formed by a male outsider and a native female; a presentation of the conqueror’s perspective and that of the missionary (or his modern secular homologues) as coterminous and synergetic on the one hand, rivalrous and

mutually destructive on the other; a contradictory representation of the same basic events, according to the political orientation of the observer/storyteller (as when Díaz del Castillo mostly shows the good intentions and beneficial outcomes of a process summarized by Casas in terms of an endless round of heartless atrocities animated by relentless materialism). *Avatar's* depiction of a primitive people's biological integration into a planetary ecosystem can be seen as an updating of Casas's edenic views of the simplicity and innocence of New World peoples shown to be the rightful inhabitants of their respective homelands. The film's notion of indigeneity, an abstract term used within a greater discourse of racial identity, is informed by an implicit concept of indigenism, referring to political advocacy in favor of native causes (as exemplified by Casas and many other churchmen). Advocacy of the native, finally, is a quixotic, quasi-chivalric aspect of Jake's renegade profile that also characterizes many Spanish-speaking priests in history, from the time of Casas and his fellow pro-native activists, down to the recent era of Latin American Revolutionary Theologians.

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