Entwined in a complex mix of historical, aesthetic, spiritual, and ideological presuppositions, the ferment over Avatar has been diverse and contentious. This should not be surprising, since Avatar metaphorically attacks all martial, colonial, and expansionist histories, which have occurred at the expense of the world’s indigenous peoples and Earth’s biocomplexity. Both implicitly, through the film’s narrative, and explicitly, in statements made about it, James Cameron has also challenged the materialism—and thus, the lifeways and aspirations—of the vast majority of people today. He has even implicitly challenged the world’s predominant religions by offering as an alternative spiritualities of belonging and connection to nature and animistic ethics of kinship and reciprocity with the entire chorus of life, all of which could be understood either religiously (as the goddess Eywa, the divine source and expression of life) or scientifically (as an interconnected and mutually dependent environmental system). Critics quite naturally arose to defend histories, worldviews, lifeways, ideologies, and religions that they concluded Cameron had challenged in his film, contending as well that the views promoted in Avatar were misguided, if not dangerous.

Conservative Responses
Some of the strongest criticisms came from monotheists who felt that the film promoted a spiritually perilous paganism or pantheism. Typical of this response was the reaction of the Vatican’s official newspaper, which
complained that that the film promotes “spiritualism linked to the worship of nature.” Vatican Radio commented that the film “cleverly winks at all those pseudo-doctrines that turn ecology into the religion of the millennium,” and asserted that in Avatar, “nature is no longer a creation to defend, but a divinity to worship” (Rizzo 2010). A Vatican spokesman confirmed that these reviews were consistent with Pope Benedict’s views about the danger of “turning nature into a ‘new divinity’” (ibid.). Evangelical Christians affiliated with the Cornwall Alliance felt similarly, releasing a twelve-part DVD series titled “The False World View of the Green Movement” and a subsequent segment, “From Captain Planet to Avatar: The Seduction of Our Youth,” which attacked these and other programs and films as threats to the Christian faith.1 But these attacks are moderate compared to those posted at jesus-is-savior.com, where David Stewart, while agreeing that Avatar teaches a demonic, false gospel, asserts that according to the Bible (which he quotes), Cameron and the film’s actors will be “cursed” for promoting a false gospel. Stewart also criticizes the evangelical magazine Christianity Today for recommending the film.2

Whatever their differences, these reactions from conservative Christians reflect fears that their youth are being seduced by pagan and environmentalist spiritualities and that such heterodox spiritualities are growing within Christian churches.3 Such fears were even expressed in the pages of the New York Times by staff columnist Ross Douthat (2010), who perceives in Cameron’s films a “long apologia for pantheism—a faith that equates God with Nature, and calls humanity into religious communion with the natural world.” Douthat even seems to share a key part of Stewart’s critique, claiming that “pantheism has been Hollywood’s religion of choice for a generation now.” Douthat expresses a clear preference for the orthodox Christian hope of divine rescue from this world, concluding, “Nature is suffering and death…. And human societies that hew closest to the natural order aren’t the shining Edens of James Cameron’s fond imaginations. They’re places where existence tends to be nasty, brutish and short” (emphasis in original). As we have seen in this volume, however, especially in the case study on the response of Canadian Christians (Haluza-Delay, Ferber, and Wiebe-Neufeld), some churchgoers are much more positive about the film than these critics. This may be surprising to those who only read the conservative critics or who do not know how plural and internally conflicted Christianity has become, with regard to both worldviews at variance with traditional doctrines and environmental concerns and spiritualities (e.g., Taylor 2005, esp. 1:301–82, and cross references).

The reactions of conservative political pundits held other surprises. David Boaz (2010) of the libertarian Cato Institute, for example, after
acknowledging that most conservatives consider *Avatar* to be “anti-American, anti-military and... anti-capitalist,” contends that the central evil depicted in the film is the Resource Development Administration’s “stark violation of property rights,” which are “the foundation of the free market and indeed of civilization.” He concludes that rather than vilify the film, “conservatives should appreciate a rare defense of property rights coming out of Hollywood.”

A dramatically different sort of conservative, the neo-con pundit Ann Marlowe (2009), contends that *Avatar* promotes universal values that Americans cherish, even asserting that it could be the most neo-conservative movie ever because it advances “the point we neo-cons made in Iraq: that American blood is not worth more than the blood of others, and that others’ freedom is not worth less than American freedom.” She even suggests that, although “*Avatar* has been charged with ‘pantheism’ its mythos is just as deeply Christian,” reasoning that “the metaphor where one figure entered the skin of another” is akin to the incarnation of God in human form in Christian theology. Finally, she wonders, “Since when is flattening nature a conservative position, anyway? Are we supposed to be ‘against’ nature just because lefties are ‘for’ it?”

**US Military Responses**

Boaz is correct, of course, that many conservatives, including in the US Military, consider the film anti-military and un-American. The Marine Corps director of public affairs, Colonel Bryan Salas, for example, charged that the film did “a disservice” to the Marine Corps, which, he averred “prides itself on understanding host country narratives and sensitivities in complex climes and places” (“Core Official” 2010). A barrage of responses followed on the *Military Times* forum, however, showing greater diversity of opinion in the military than many would assume. Retired Marine Corps Colonel Victor Bianchini wondered if the public relations officer even watched the movie, noting (as did a number of other forum participants) that the RDA forces were “not in the service of their country, but mercenaries of a mega-corporation.” “The true heroes of the film,” he added, were former Marines, “the paraplegic Jake Sully and the heroic female helicopter pilot Trudy Chacon.” Bianchini added other details, including, “Jim Cameron is a friend of the Marine Corps, has portrayed Marines positively in many of his films and has a brother, of whom he is very proud, who served in the Corps.” Bianchini concluded his discussion by noting that “many films convey morality metaphors that are often only intended to appeal to the ‘better angels of our nature,’ and this one is no exception.” Most of the forum participants responding to the film viewed the film positively (many
explicitly agreeing with Bianchini) and thought that the true Marine spirit was represented honourably; many of the positive comments were from armed service members who described themselves as politically conservative. “Gabe078” even contended that the real hero was Trudy Chacon, “who behaved how a Marine should—standing up for what is right and helping those who cannot help themselves.” In a subsequent comment, he added praise for Jake Sully, and then, in a statement that many post-colonial critics would probably find surprising coming from a US military serviceman, he declared: “The real enemy was … colonization of a people and land for profit, greed, asserting a will and dominance on a ‘nation of people’ (an alien species in this case) who were given no choice.” In an environmental ethics class that I taught the semester after the film was released, students from military families (more than a dozen) were highly positive about the film and said their families were too; none of them thought the film was anti-American. One young man among them said that he and his buddies had been drawn to the film because of the promised special effects, and he and his friends began their discussion afterward by speaking enthusiastically about these effects. Soon, however, and hesitantly at first because they were afraid of how the others might react, he and his friends began talking about the beauty of Pandora, how much they loved being outdoors (often while hunting or fishing), and how the film reminded them of the beauty of Earth.

Of course, some service members were harshly critical of the film. One veteran who commented online wrote that “portraying our military as fanatical crazed killers who have joined a military mercenary force to destroy a civilization so that corporations can capitalize on some rare commodity prized by earthlings is disrespectful to our soldiers, especially in this time of war.” He added, “Knowing that 90% of ‘Hollywood’ is liberal … only confirms the anti military theme of this movie” (Treese 2010). Another online commentator wrote an anonymous post titled “Avatar Made Me Want to Throw Up,” arguing that Sully and Chacon committed treason, murdering “their fellow soldiers and American comrades.” After a number of respondents countered that Sully and Chacon behaved honourably, faulting the writer for failing to recognize that the RDA’s forces were mercenaries, not Marines, the anonymous author responded by defending the invaders even more vehemently:

The “Sky People” never once made the first move without due warning. They wanted the tree and so they took it. Eminent domain. I am sure the resources provided under that tree could be used to help save many American lives—why else would it be so valuable. The natives were being greedy. They did not have to die and they did not have to retaliate. If they wanted to retaliate, that
is fine, but do not expect sympathy. If all had gone according to plan, NO ONE would have died and who knows what benefits would have come. 6

He concluded that the Na’vi were “not even humans” and that, although he volunteers at an animal shelter, “you better believe I will put my human life over” that of dogs or other non-humans. These comments were met with incredulity by some of the respondents.

Which, if any, of the views expressed by current or former US military personnel will be surprising will depend on one’s preconceptions about military subcultures. The same dynamic occurs with regard to views supposedly promoted by “Hollywood.”

**Responses from Left-Wing Radicals**

Pre-existing cognitive frames seem to be no less important to the understandings of left-wing thinkers. For those acquainted with certain intellectual schools, for example, it is unsurprising that leftist, postmodern, and post-colonial theorists would criticize Cameron for promoting what they view as a destructive stereotype of the “ecologically noble savage” and for the film’s implication that the liberation of oppressed peoples depends on a “white messiah” and other saviours from the ranks of the oppressors. 7 Some feminists condemn what they consider the film’s misogyny. Some of these positions are presented in previous chapters of this volume, but some of the more extreme critics remain to be explored.

One of the most extreme voices is that of the Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek. He contends that, contrary to the film’s “politically correct themes,” *Avatar* presents “an array of brutal racist motifs: a paraplegic outcast from earth is good enough to get the hand of a beautiful local princess, and to help the natives win the decisive battle. The film teaches us that the only choice the aborigines have is to be saved by the human beings or to be destroyed by them. In other words, they can choose either to be the victim of imperialist reality, or to play their allotted role in the white man’s fantasy.” Thus, the film enables viewers to sympathize “with the idealised aborigines while rejecting their actual struggle” (Žižek 2010a). Yet Žižek does not explain why these binaries are the only possible interpretations of the film, nor does he provide any evidence that the film promotes sympathy but not solidarity with the actual struggle of indigenous peoples. Instead, he expresses a view held by some progressives and probably the majority of leftist radicals: that the film does little if anything to promote anti-capitalist action and solidarity with indigenous peoples, let alone revolutionary class consciousness. Žižek’s apparent antipathy toward contemporary environmentalism, and especially environmental spirituality, may
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help illuminate his hostility to Avatar. In a YouTube video, for example, he
denounces “ecology as religion,” calling it a mystifying ideology and “the
new opium of the masses” (2010b). According to Žižek, this ideology—
with its diagnosis of “alienation from nature” as the root of our current
predicaments and its prescription for healing (namely, seeing ourselves as
rooted in and belonging to nature)—is deeply conservative. Instead of try-
ing to return to some supposed natural balance that hubristic humans have
disturbed, he contends, we must sever our roots in nature and embrace
artificiality, including by transforming nature through genetic engineer-
ing. He concludes by admiring a pile of trash and arguing that we need
to love and embrace the real world, not an idealized one. Clearly, for such
radicals, Prometheus lives!

Radical environmentalists, however, who advance a worldview akin to
what Žižek criticizes, usually see more to praise than to criticize in Ava-
tar. Long-term radical environmental activist Harold Linde (2010), for
example, considers the film a stunning work of radical environmental-
ist propaganda that promotes a Gaian worldview as well as the view that
“destroying the rain forest for profit is morally and spiritually wrong.”
For other radical environmentalists, however, the capitalist motivation for
making the film and the immense expense of it (including the supposed
costs to the non-human world from all such filmmaking) is sufficient to
reject any claim that the film has value. Some of these radicals share the
previously mentioned criticism that the film is rooted in regressive ideas
such as the supposed white saviour theme.

Anarcho-primitivists, a subset of radical environmentalists who seek
to reharmonize humans with nature through a return to pre-agricul-
tural foraging lifeways, seem to be especially receptive to the film. Layla
AbdelRahim, a Canadian citizen born in Moscow and of mixed Somali
and Russian ancestry, for example, praised the film on her blog and on
“Anarchy Radio,” which is hosted by the best-known primitivist theorist,
John Zerzan. She contends, “The film is an overt commentary on the
historical and present-day place of anthropologists in imperialist expedi-
tions and of the role the hard sciences play in, both, elaborating the phi-
losophy of imperialism and in providing the necessary information for its
execution. As Col. Quaritch makes clear, the scientist is the carrot and the
military is the stick” (AbdelRahim 2009). In another post, she directly
counters the view (commonly expressed by left-wing critics) that Avatar
is sexist or racist, arguing that “by presenting the Human as part of the
animal world,” Cameron attacks both speciesism and humanism, which
“furnishes the philosophical foundation for all ‘isms’: sexism, racism,
animalism, etc.” (ibid.).
In two ways, AbdelRahim’s commentary is noteworthy. First, it suggests that at least some of those who have affinity with anti-authoritarian and biocentric ethics may be more likely than others to approve of Avatar. (For a contrary view from another anarchist critic, see John Clark’s scathing critique in an essay published under his pseudonym, Max Cafard [2010].) Second, AbdelRahim highlights the pernicious role that anthropologists (and other scientists) have played in the subjugation of indigenous peoples and their deracination from and the destruction of their habitats. Cameron himself has stressed that the scientist Augustine is “on the wrong side, she’s one of the invaders,” even though she eventually comes to love the Na’vi people and tries to help them (Dunham 2012, 191).

Most contemporary anthropologists, of course, understand and attempt to distance themselves from this history, including through efforts to support aboriginal peoples in their struggles against further threats to their cultures and homelands (Starn 2011; Clifford 2011). Part of this effort includes criticism of ideas they consider to be overtly or covertly colonialist. This helps to explain the strong criticism of Avatar by those who think that it promotes an image of indigenous peoples as “noble savages” and that the plot in which turncoat American soldiers successfully defend the Na’vi obscures history and is rooted in colonialist attitudes (Simpson 2011).12 What at least some in the anarchist tradition are doing, however, is extending their critique of authoritarianism to the exploitation and subjugation of non-human living beings, even identifying humanism (and its leftist variants) as part of the global problem. This helps explain why radical environmentalists, including the anarchists among them, have for the most part found more to praise than criticize in Avatar.

Evaluating the Evaluations
My own perceptions have been enhanced and complicated by the diverse commentaries about Avatar, including the preceding essays in this volume. This is one reason why I welcomed the widest range possible of perspectives about the film and its significance when issuing a call for critical reflections about Avatar. It is also why I have been especially interested in the views of those who typically do not express themselves in print and thus pursued analyses based on fieldwork that would seek out such views and voices. The fieldwork-based articles and those that analyze the many, increasingly open forums on the Internet, show how insightful and nuanced are the views of individuals who are rarely asked for their opinions.

I have, up to this point, held in abeyance my own judgments, in part because I wanted to consider carefully the diverse views precipitated by the film and possibly modify my initial views of the film as a result. While
still in an analytical mode, working back and forth between sometimes competing perspectives, I will now weave in my own views about Cameron, his film, and its significance. These views have been shaped by over three decades as a scholar and activist trying to understand what leads people to participate in movements that seek to protect Earth’s biological and cultural diversity. I have been especially focused on how the affective and spiritual (or religious) dimensions of human experience might relate to such mobilization. These are some of the lenses through which I examine nature-related social phenomena, which I provide because, to evaluate my analyses, readers quite understandably may want to know something about what shapes my perspective.

**Is Avatar (and Cameron) Misogynist, Colonialist, or Racist?**

In my view, if by misogyny we mean the hatred of women (and girls), the criticism that *Avatar* (and, by implication, Cameron) is misogynist can be quickly dismissed, for it appears to be based on weak, if any, evidence, as well as upon a remarkable ability to ignore evidence to the contrary. Cameron is properly recognized, to evidence a counter-argument, for creating powerful heroines, unlike most Hollywood directors (Keegan 2009, 225, 227). A number of articles written or co-authored by indigenous scholars, however, have raised more poignant observations and criticisms. These express both appreciation for and disappointment with the film.

John James and Tom Ute (2011), for example, strongly criticize *Avatar* and several other films that have taken up colonial themes, contending that despite their efforts to criticize colonial repression, these films “actually reaffirm the colonial prejudices they seek to challenge” (187). For evidence, they note that in *Avatar*, Sully prevails over Omaticaya natives in athletic events. This positions Sully, in their view, “not only as an unlikely Savior of the Na’vi, but as a self-indulgent one for the average theatergoer” (190). Because James and Ute do nothing to explain or provide evidence for their claim that this theme is “self-indulgent,” I do not find that point compelling. But this observation gives me pause: why does the Sully character have to be superior to the tribals in their own sports and martial arts and with the animals they customarily use in those activities? This hardly seems necessary and may provide an example of how difficult it is, as many have argued, for the beneficiaries of colonialism to “decolonize” their minds. James and Ute, and some other critics of *Avatar*, seem to be arguing that in making Sully superior in some ways to some of the Na’vi, Cameron has revealed a moral blind spot, an assumed sense of superiority. As have many others, James and Ute directly criticize what they perceive to be the “white messiah” theme, asserting that “the film only reaffirms
the colonial, social, and economic paradigms that it seeks to undermine by suggesting the natives’ inability to liberate themselves from the forces of oppression... thereby conferring power to a privileged colonizer, in this case, a white American male” (191; for similar critiques see Simpson 2011; Clifford 2011; and Douthat 2010). James and Ute conclude that filmmakers such as Cameron should stop congratulating audiences “for their pseudo-cognizant effort” and instead “hold them actively accountable for their actions” (197).

I have no idea what these critics mean by “pseudo-cognizant effort,” nor do I understand how a popular theatrical filmmaker (let alone a didactic documentarian) is supposed to “hold audiences responsible” for any action, let alone for the ways in which audiences might benefit from, or be complicit in, the exploitation of indigenous populations and nature. This is only one of many examples in which critics set an impossibly high ethical bar for a filmmaker to vault. Moreover, I think it is important to ask: Through what other means has the violent deracination of indigenous peoples by imperial forces ever been presented to a global mass public? One would think that this would draw praise, not such sharp criticism, from those who would like to raise global awareness of this long history and resistance to its continuing process.

For many critics, of course, reaching a mass audience with a pro-indigenous and reverence-for-life message is far from enough. Columbia University anthropologist and Kahnawá:ke/Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson, who is one of many who criticize the supposed “white messiah” theme, also offers a unique argument: after noting that spectacles like *Avatar* do political work, she argues that in settler, colonialist societies, such spectacles “redirect emotions, histories, and possibilities” in a way that obscures the genocidal dynamics and law-based justifications of “dispossession, disenfranchisement, and containment” (2011, 207). She finds it difficult to see how a spectacle like *Avatar* could be, in any sense, helpful to native peoples. Nevertheless, she adds in a footnote that she appreciates one aspect of the film: “Cameron’s surprise,” she writes, was to “reimagine...the familiar period in U.S. history known as ‘the Indian Wars’” as one in which the settlers are repulsed and their occupation fails. In this singular aspect, she writes, *Avatar* is “optimistic, uplifting, and perhaps absolving” (212–13n1). By “absolving,” she probably means that Cameron can therefore be forgiven for the film’s flaws, but clearly, Simpson finds something inspiring in *Avatar*: namely, the possibility of indigenous victory and of constructing a flourishing new world.16

Of the indigenous analysts of the film, I found the reflections of Daniel Heath Justice and Julia Good Fox especially nuanced and insightful. Using
an approach that complements the fieldwork-based studies in this volume, Justice (2010) notes that people in his own indigenous and intellectual circles, who are deeply engaged with issues of “indigenous sovereignty and spirituality, colonization and decolonization, other-than-human kinship, traditional ecological knowledge and environmental destruction,” have had complicated responses to the film. Given the “blistering critique online and in print from both the right and the left,” Justice expected his friends and colleagues to express “substantial indignation” if not also “sweeping dismissal” of the film. “That’s not how it turned out, not even for me,” he writes. “Our responses ranged from guarded optimism . . . to thoughtful frustration (it’s powerful in so many ways, but why do we need yet another story about Indigenous struggle told through a non-Native’s voice and perspective?), but no one dismissed it. On the whole, the overwhelming sense was, ‘Well, it’s flawed, but at least it’s getting people talking.” Justice continues, “That there’s so much commentary in the blogosphere on the film’s underlying current of ‘white guilt’ indicates to me that something is happening with audiences and critics” (emphasis in original). He then surmises, “There’s probably a good opportunity here to engage an audience on Indigenous issues that might not otherwise have been interested or receptive.”

As for the film itself, however, Justice is more critical, arguing that by creating simplistic characters that are either purely good or evil, Cameron’s protagonists are so obviously unreal that audiences can not relate to them. Justice mentions, for example, that he knows many native and non-native soldiers, adding thoughtfully that military service is very complicated for Native Americans and that it is simplistic to characterize soldiers “as brutes and bigots.” The result of these simplistic characterizations, Justice contends, is that audience members do not see themselves as part of the history, or current reality, that the film metaphorically depicts. Consequently, “the potential for actual critical commentary is diminished, and the audience is left with a self-congratulatory feeling of having grappled with major issues without having actually dealt with any of the real complexities of colonialism, militarism, reverence for the living world, or environmental destruction” (emphasis in original).

Even though I consider such claims about the affective states of audience members to be unduly speculative, I do think that Justice’s argument is plausible, that overly simplistic characters might hinder people from making connections between their own histories and actions and the deracination of indigenous peoples from their lands and the destruction of those lands. The skepticism expressed by Justice (and others) about the film’s ability to produce understanding and evoke sympathy and solidarity with indigenous peoples is certainly understandable.
Unlike the more strident critics, however, Justice acknowledges that the film has some “narrative brilliance,” as when Neytiri scolds Sully for “his casual response to the destruction of life his rescue required; the soul-crushing horror of Hometree’s destruction and the survivors’ disorientation and exile; and the adoption ceremony that remakes Jake into a full Na’vi, with both the rights and responsibilities that such a ceremony necessitates, and his subsequent betrayal of the Na’vi and Neytiri’s anguished response.” He is also forthcoming about his own emotional response to the film, reporting that in places he found it moving, although he subsequently indicates that neither this nor the filmmaker’s good intentions are enough: “For all its good intentions, for all its visual spectacle and effecting sentiment (yes, I got teary-eyed a couple of times), it’s still ultimately a story about ‘those bad guys who aren’t us.’ Sadly, as we know from example after example in the past, distant and immediate, the bad guys, all too often, are us” (emphasis in original).

Julia Good Fox also understands well any cynicism about the film in light of the long history of filmmaking serving imperial interests and the ideology of manifest destiny. Moreover, she expresses frustration at seeing yet another cinematic expression of the “non-Tribal man’s fantasy that an Indigenous woman will find him more desirable than she does all other Tribal men” (Good Fox 2010). Nevertheless, she argues that “it is a willful oversimplification” to reduce the film to “going native” or “white-saviour” themes. She insightfully notes that all of Cameron’s films wrestle with difficult, “cross-cultural intersections that occur in improbable circumstances,” where “representative individuals and cultures misconnect, disconnect, shun connection, abuse connection, and, of course, connect.” She cites indigenous studies professor Taiaiake Alfred (from the University of Victoria, British Columbia), who has observed that one of the shared traits of Native American peoples has been “the ability to appreciate and recognize multidimensional relationships,” a notion found “in such translated phrases as ‘all my relations.’” Good Fox suggests that in Avatar, the phrase “I see you” coheres with such an understanding. This notion, she writes, refers not merely to “a glance or a gaze, but rather [to] an accurate and encompassing recognition, an insightful and respectful acknowledgment.” It expresses the idea that “I comprehend our connection, our relatedness.” For Good Fox, Avatar represents a valuable exploration of what makes possible, and hinders, authentic recognition of relatedness. Moreover, contrary to many of the critics, according to Good Fox, because it is sometimes easier to communicate such realities indirectly “through the use of analogies,” the film has a chance of countering manifest destiny, “the de facto ideology of the United States.”
With regard to the “white-saviour” critique, Good Fox observes that Sully’s transformation required “the assistance and mentoring” of four women, “Neytiri, Mo’at, Dr. Grace Augustine, and Trudy Chacon.” Good Fox also insightfully notes that two of Sully’s female mentors (Augustine and Mo’at) are maternal figures: Mo’at plays a particularly powerful role as “the moral anchor of the film,” at one point denying the request from the Na’vi men to kill Sully, an intervention that gives him “a second chance at life” and makes it possible for him “to reemerge as a new man on Pandora.”

Good Fox makes another striking observation, which is all the more notable since it would have been easy for her to miss given her frustration with certain aspects of the love story between Sully and Neytiri. She comments that, despite its problematic aspects, the love story “goes beyond white people’s desire to be the object of beauty and erotic attraction for Indigenous Peoples. Colonizers also want to be forgiven for the damage they (and their ancestors) have wrought. This is most strongly suggested in the Pietà scene near the film’s end, when Neytiri holds Scully’s human form and the audience is presented with a visual of the perceived redemptive power of Native love for the non-Native.” This struck me, in part because it reminded me of one November evening in 1995 when Walter Bresette, an Ojibwe activist who fought for Indian treaty rights and against various mining projects, hijacked a conference on ecological resistance movements that I had orchestrated at the University of Wisconsin. Bresette and the Scottish author/bard and land-rights activist Alastair McIntosh used the term “hijack” when they interrupted the panel, declaring that it was improper that a conference dealing with indigenous land rights and environmental issues had no prayer or ceremony. After giving the approximately two hundred audience members time to flee if they wished (few, if any, did), Bresette led what he called a “welcome ceremony” for the non-indigenous conference participants. His stated motivation was, essentially, that if the latecomers did not feel at home, if they did not feel that they belonged to this continent, then they would continue to treat badly its Aboriginal peoples and the land itself.

For the purpose of this analysis, the details of the ceremony are less important than its emotional dimensions. Some Americans with European ancestry are aware of the devastating impact on native peoples and on the continent’s environmental systems that followed their arrival, feel guilty as a result, and would like to atone as best they can. But reconciliation can only really be achieved through the generosity of native peoples. After the ceremony, Bresette told me that it was a difficult thing to do emotionally, to welcome the descendants of the original invaders, but he considered this
sort of ritual to be essential bridge building in the cause of protecting native rights and the continent’s land and waters. Good Fox observes, it seems to me, an important parallel moment in Avatar that symbolizes the possibility (despite fraught histories and human frailties) that cross-cultural respect and reciprocity can be developed. Perhaps Avatar goes even further, suggesting that against all odds, grievances can be forgiven and respect and even love might emerge when colonial peoples acknowledge the injustices and work to change the dominant society’s course. Here, it seems to me, Good Fox illuminates important mythic and religious themes in the film, including those of repentance, redress, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

As we have seen, Daniel Heath Justice is more pessimistic than Good Fox about the film precipitating respect for and solidarity with indigenous peoples, let alone kinship feelings toward our earthly non-human co-inhabitants. Soon after the release of the film, Justice nevertheless wrote that the “jury was still out” with regard to the impact of the film. For my part, during many interviews with environmental activists over more than two decades, I have learned that no small number of them trace their activist vocations to, or at least note important influences of, artistic productions that explore and evoke outrage and sympathies regarding injustices toward people and the wider natural world. Some have cited J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy trilogy The Lord of the Rings, for example, while others have mentioned animated motion pictures such as FernGully and The Lion King, or television programs, such as the Gaia-themed cartoon series Captain Planet (Taylor 2010, 127–55). As a result of such testimonies, I am more inclined to expect that a film like Avatar will inspire some viewers to become activists or to deepen such commitments, if they are already present. Moreover, while I think Justice’s concern that the exaggerated good-versus-evil characters in Avatar could preclude some from connecting the film to trends and events in their own histories and worlds, I doubt that this is usually the case. Many statements that audience members have made about the film, including those reported in this volume, indicate that they recognize that the film is a melodrama that exaggerates characters to get audiences rooting for one side over the other. I doubt, therefore, that its oversimplifications would significantly reduce the extent to which audiences would draw the messages the filmmaker intended to convey.

Cameron’s Intentions, Strategy, and Affinity with “Dark Green” Nature Spirituality

Unlike most critics of the film, I think it is important (and a matter of fairness) to consider what Cameron has said about his intentions for the film and to note his rejoinders to the most prevalent criticisms of it.
In the prologue to this volume, I noted Cameron’s intention to use *Avatar* to help people appreciate the “miracle of the world that we have right here” and to understand that all living things are interconnected and mutually dependent (Associated Press 2010). I noted also Cameron’s biocentric sentiments, expressed in public statements of concern about anthropogenic species extinctions. These sentiments were also shown in Cameron’s delight that many of *Avatar*’s viewers took the side of nature against the destructive forces of an expansionist human civilization, even expressing support for those engaged in direct action resistance to such forces here on Earth and, on many occasions, calling for more people to become “warriors for Mother Earth.” Moreover, in his 1994 *Avatar* scriptment, Cameron expresses the respect he has for indigenous peoples and their often animistic spiritualities, lending credence to such spiritual perceptions through his character Jake Sully, who comes to respect the Na’vi people and their own perceptual horizons, including their belief that the forest “is alive with invisible dynamic forces” (Cameron 1994). In an official *Confidential Report on the Biological and Social History of Pandora*, also subtitled *An Activist Survival Guide*, these and related themes are also expressed, from the need to celebrate the “magic and mystery” and “interconnectedness” of nature to the recognition of biotic kinship (symbolized in the movie by the neural “queue” at the end of the Na’vi’s braids). Readers are also urged to “Fight for the Earth!” (Wilhelm and Mathison 2009a, xiii, xv, xiv, 72, 31).

All of these themes are characteristic of what I have called “dark green religion” and provide evidence that Cameron has affinities with at least the non-theistic forms of such spirituality. (Cameron has forthrightly stated that he is an atheist.) Additional characteristics typical of such spirituality include feelings of awe and wonder at the mysteries of the universe, peace and contentment when in the midst of relatively healthy environmental systems, and humility rooted in an understanding that like all other organisms, sooner or later, we are all part of the food chain. Cameron has expressed just such feelings and views, as, for example, when describing the peace he feels in the ocean, especially when underwater, where no one “knows who you are. You’re just part of the food chain” (Keegan 2009, 212). For many who have affinity with dark green spirituality, understanding that death is the necessary wellspring of new life also eliminates the fear of death. Cameron imputes just such a perspective to the Na’vi, who “are brave and unafraid of death because they know it is part of a greater cycle” (254).

Indeed, at the very heart of dark green spirituality are feelings of belonging and connection to nature—and the recognition that all living things belong to nature, for they all emerge from, depend upon, and return to
Earth. Cameron has often and directly expressed such feelings, as when responding to an interviewer who asked him whether changes in the natural world that he had witnessed had influenced his creation of *Avatar*. Cameron answered that his “sense of a connection to nature” leads him to want to halt the widespread destruction of the natural world and that since he is a filmmaker, he tries to make a difference through the cinematic arts (Suozzi 2010). Cameron’s often-expressed affirmation of the importance of connecting with nature was probably part of his motivation in making *Aliens of the Deep* (co-directed with Steven Quale in 2005), a documentary that introduces viewers to the wonders of the ocean’s depths. More evidence about his desire to help people connect to nature can be discerned in his response to a question about the meaning of *Avatar*. He replied that in the movie, he tried to address critical questions about our relationships to other people and other cultures, and “our relationship with the natural world at a time of nature-deficit disorder” (in Louv 2010). The phrase “nature-deficit disorder,” coined by Richard Louv (2005), reflects a common environmentalist (and dark green) belief that time in nature is essential if people are to reconnect with the sources of their being and reharmonize with life on Earth.

Cameron obviously values documentaries and understands that they can help to educate and mobilize the public in positive ways, but he also recognizes that “they’re usually watched by people who already understand the problem, as opposed to a piece of global mass entertainment that will reach everybody” (Suozzi 2010). So with *Avatar*, instead of just trying to provide information and provoke “a kind of intellectual reaction,” Cameron sought to evoke “a powerful, emotional” response (ibid.). This alone is not enough, Cameron acknowledges, for a film like *Avatar* does not tell people what to do. He does think, however, that such art can precipitate action.

Cameron wanted, of course, to remind audiences about colonial histories wherein one group invades and steals the land or resources from indigenous cultures, “sometimes wiping them out completely, to the point that we don’t have many truly indigenous cultures left in this world” (Dunham 2012, 192). For Cameron, this is not merely of historical interest but a source of outrage, as was apparent in his resistance to pressure by the studio to define “unobtanium”—I surmise because he wanted to keep its metaphorical flexibility so that the film’s message could be read as relevant to diverse historical and current events. As Cameron put it, “Unobtanium is beaver pelts in French colonial Canada…. It’s diamonds in South Africa. It’s tea to the nineteenth-century British. It’s oil to twentieth-century America. It’s just another in a long list of substances that cause one group of people to get into ships and go kick the shit out of another
group of people to take what is growing on or buried under their ancestral lands” (Keegan 2009, 253). “We do the same thing with nature—we take what we need and we don’t give back, and we’ve got to start giving back” (Dunham 2012, 192).

Put simply, Cameron’s stated goal in Avatar was to evoke in audiences “an emotional reaction to how we relate to nature” so that they will “wind up looking at things from the side of the Na’vi, with their deep respect for nature” (193). Cameron hopes that this will promote dramatic change in global consciousness and behaviour: “I’m hoping there will be a continued conversation around Avatar and around the needs and wishes that will elevate the consciousness and help us get the things done that need to be done. That’s my new mission” (201). Some of his critics, of course, are disparaging of his strategic vision. One can judge Cameron’s strategic choices to be ineffective or morally suspect, but it only seems fair to acknowledge that he has thought deeply about how best to communicate ideas dramatically at variance with the most prevalent beliefs and assumptions undergirding contemporary industrial societies.

**Cameron’s Responses to Criticisms**

Cameron has responded directly to a number of the most common criticisms of Avatar. To the charge that Avatar was extremely expensive and did nothing to challenge the consumerism that drives the destruction of native peoples and environmental systems, Cameron is unapologetic, noting that the film generates profits and in so doing helps many people to make a living (Dunham 2012, 196). But he has acknowledged that consumerism is a key problem, commenting that through our consumer appetites, “market forces cause a continuous expansion of our industrial presence, our extraction industries and so on,” which is clearly linked to the destruction of indigenous societies and the habitats upon which they depend (Suozzi 2010). Yet he also speaks passionately of the tragic, global loss of indigenous knowledge and asserts that all of humanity has much to learn from indigenous societies: “The main point is that there is a value-system that they naturally have that has allowed them to live in harmony with nature for a long time and those principles, that wisdom, that spiritual connection to the world, that sense of responsibility to each other, that’s the thing that we need to learn. It’s a complete reboot of how we see things. I’m not even sure we can do it, but if there is hope, it lies in our ability to have a sea change in our consciousness—to not take more than we give” (ibid.). Cameron has also explicitly rejected the “white messiah” critique, responding to an interviewer, “I don’t buy that…. I don’t think that any of these indigenous people that see their reality in the film felt that at all.” He added that
the reaction of the indigenous people has “been overwhelmingly positive” (while acknowledging that he could be unaware of criticisms from such peoples). He then emphasized that the very survival of indigenous people is at stake as “a highly mechanized, industrialised force” destroys their forests. “When all you’ve got to fight back with is bows and arrows, there has to be intervention from the international community. So I don’t care what race the messiahs are, but we all have to be those messiahs, we have to help these people because you can’t stop a bulldozer with a bow and arrow.”

Of course, in these statements, Cameron expresses an oversimplified view of indigenous cultures and what resistance entails: clearly, not all native peoples and cultures, all the time, live in harmony with nature, let alone with one another (Krech 1999; Harkin and Lewis 2007; Potts and Hayden 2008). Moreover, when such cultures have elected to resist invaders violently, they have often used weapons other than bows and arrows. Nevertheless, Cameron is correct that where indigenous people have secured concessions or (more rarely) territorial integrity in the face of expansionist cultures, allies, even colonial ones, have usually played important roles. Cameron also understands that such allies can come from surprising places, such as anthropologists and biodiversity scientists, who today are generally much more sensitive to the needs and rights of indigenous people than in the past (Suozzi 2010, Taylor 2012). Cameron also appears to be aware that relationships between indigenous peoples and prospective allies are typically bedevilled with mistrust, misperception, and misunderstanding. Still, Cameron believes that by raising awareness and evoking sympathy through the film and by helping to dramatize specific injustices presently unfolding through his high public profile, he can help to give a voice to indigenous leaders. Although Cameron insisted, “I don’t want to speak for them,” he was obviously pleased that by dramatizing the plight of Amazonian Indians resisting a large dam project in Brazil, he had helped to give them “a bit of a spotlight to speak for themselves” (Suozzi 2010).

The Importance of Allies

Cameron is correct about the importance of allies. Indeed, there are many Earthly examples of Avatar’s plot line, wherein someone from a technologically dominant, invading culture defends the invaded culture, sometimes even “going native.” Scott Littleton (2011), for example, points to the example of Gonzalo Guerrero in the sixteenth century. Guerrero, a soldier with the invading Spanish conquistadors, joined the Mayan resistance, and, because of his knowledge of Spanish military tactics, helped repel the invaders for a significant period of time. Littleton concludes that the resistance apparently ended shortly after Guerrero was killed, showing that the happy ending of
Avatar in these sorts of stories is “very hard to achieve in real life” (210). But Littleton also accurately notes a number of examples in which anthropologists embraced the cultures they came to study and have done their best to defend them against more powerful, impinging cultures (208–9).

My own work (including with collaborators) has documented cases in which, despite missteps and misunderstandings, activists, scientists, and other concerned people have been able to work sincerely and over the long term with native peoples; through such engagements, mutual learning and respect can develop, sometimes even leading to significant victories (Taylor 1995a, b; 1997a, b). Occasionally, these successes, which have to do with preventing some further or new injustice, are directly related to the concrete solidarity provided by actors who publicize the injustice and resistance to it, forcing changes—through public scrutiny and, sometimes, outrage—to corporate and/or governmental plans (Taylor 1995a; Adamson 2012a). Rob Nixon, who has tried to foster a rapprochement between post-colonial critics and the environmentalists who are often their targets, has spotlighted the importance of writer-activists and media “spectacle” in slowing or arresting the often invisible “slow violence” of environment-degrading imperial histories and profit-driven social systems. According to Nixon (2011), in the absence of spectacle-driven public attention, great injustices are all the more likely to occur and remain unchallenged. In 1995, for example, the Nigerian military executed the Ogoni indigenous-rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was fighting Shell Oil and government corruption in his people’s homeland. Nixon notes how little international attention his case received before the execution, which made the regime think it could get away with killing an eloquent opponent, even though most observers considered the case bogus and the trial unfair. 28 It is just such a “deficit of spectacle,” as Joni Adamson (2012a, 145) aptly puts it, that writers and filmmakers of various sorts can help to overcome.

Adamson cites, for example, the way the documentary Crude: The Real Price of Oil (2009), along with a number of celebrities and activist attorneys from the United States, contributed to the strategy and public attention that made easier an $18 billion civil judgment against the Chevron Oil Company that was filed on behalf of affected Amazonian Indians. 29 Adamson also discusses the ways in which indigenous activists have seen their own struggles reflected in Avatar and have used the film to dramatize their plights and campaigns. She notes, for example, that Cameron has joined the battle against the gigantic Belo Monte Dam in the Brazilian Amazon, which is threatening a number of indigenous tribes there (see Barrionuevo 2010). Working with the environmental justice group Amazon Watch, Cameron spoke out against the dam and helped produce an educational
film contending that its construction would violate indigenous rights and critically important rainforest habitats. As Adamson put it when summarizing one of her central contentions: “Blockbuster films and documentaries are playing an increasingly important role in global environmental justice struggles,” or as she put it elsewhere, in “indigenous cosmopolitics” (Adamson 2012a, 146; see also Adamson 2013).

Developing cross-cultural and international alliances to protect vulnerable peoples and habitats is difficult, however. Two volumes have focused attention specifically on the difficulties and possibilities of indigenous/non-indigenous alliances (Haig-Brown and Nock 2006; Davis 2010). All involved agree that developing such alliances demands deep commitment and, usually, long-term hard work. As the scholar of indigenous knowledge Leanne Simpson (Alderville First Nation, Canada) puts it in her introduction to the Davis volume, “Those of us involved in the movement for indigenous self-determination and social and environmental justice are well aware that every hard-fought victory has been a direct result of the alliances and relationships of solidarity we have forged, maintained, and nurtured with supporting Indigenous nations, environmental networks, and social justice organizations” (Davis 2010, xiii). Simpson also notes that while “building relationships with our supporters has been a key strategy in our movement for change,” despite good intentions, “these relationships do not always come easily. Too often they have been wrought with cross-cultural misunderstandings, poor communication, stereotypes, and racism” (xiii–xiv).

Despite such difficulties, the subsequent reflections in Davis’s volume demonstrate the importance of alliances across diverse scales, from global campaigns to pass the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to local campaigns to protect native territories and lands (Davis 2010). I was struck when reading this work, just as I have been with the generous tone of the indigenous elders and intellectuals on the occasions when my fieldwork has been in or near Native North American territories. In contrast, one rarely hears non-native activists or intellectuals, perhaps especially those immersed in post-colonial discourses, stress the unity of human beings or the responsibility that we have toward “all life,” let alone the importance of forgiveness and love, as have the elder and scholar Gkisedtanamoogk and several others (see especially Woodworth 2010; Swamp 2010; Gkisedtanamoogk 2010; Da Silva 2010; and Christian and Freeman 2010).

Moreover, some who have been closely tracking developments within grassroots social/environmental movements perceive a new kind of politics emerging that rejects—or at least seeks to transcend—tense relations
between peoples of the Global North and South, and between environmental and social justice activists. Instead, there are those who try to embrace what Isabel Stengers calls “cosmopolitics,” and Marisol de la Cadena “multinaturalism,” in which nature is understood to have its own value and agency, and dualistic perceptions of a disconnect between the interests of human and other organisms are considered inaccurate and shortsighted (Stengers 2005; De la Cadena 2010).35

In a striking passage that draws on Stengers, De la Cadena, Good Fox, Bruno Latour, and others, Adamson (2012a, 347) links the new cosmopolitics to Avatar:

What is astonishing about indigenous groups linking their own regionally specific movements to Avatar is not that a blockbuster film is playing in India or the Andes or the Amazon; it is that the “things” that Avatar is helping to “make public” . . . are living systems (mountains, rivers, forests, deserts) that may help inaugurate a politics that is more plural not because the people enacting it are bodies marked by race or ethnicity demanding rights, or by environmentalists representing nature, but because they force into visibility the culture-nature divide that has prevented multiple worlds and species from being recognized as deserving the right to maintain and continue their vital cycles.

The emergence of such a multi-natural, multi-ethnic, trans-national cosmopolitics—which has a religious dimension that the political theorist Dan Deudney and I have discussed as “civil” or “terrapolitan” Earth religion—is indeed coming into view.36 The most important examples of such cosmopolitics may be found in the Ecuadorian Constitution (passed in 2008) and in Bolivian legislation (passed in 2009). Drawing in part on Andean indigenous spiritualities, in a stunning innovation for nation-states, these nations conferred rights on nature.37 A long-odds effort to gain United Nations ratification for the “Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth,” which draws on Ecuador’s constitution and the Bolivian law, was subsequently proposed by Bolivia’s President Evo Morales and has been studied and promoted by the UN’s Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.38

An increasing number of scholars, likewise, seem to be gravitating toward a much more comprehensive anti-colonial perspective, one that rejects not only the domination of one human group over another but also the human domination of other organisms and environmental systems as a whole. This nascent but promising trend promotes a holistic vision that seeks to make visible and precipitate resistance to violations of the right of all living beings to live and flourish (Naess 1973, 1989; Stone 1974; Cullinan 2003; Linzey and Campbell 2009; Latour and Weibel 2005;
Truth in the Fiction of Avatar’s Cosmogony

Every work of art is subject to interpretation and critique, and I hope that Avatar and Nature Spirituality will be valued for provoking the kinds of discussions over issues of the rights of nature and of indigenous peoples that the filmmaker, and even some of those who were ambivalent about the film, had hoped might result. My perception is, however, that most of the critics, even those especially sensitive to and supportive of indigenous sovereignty, have not fully appreciated the extent to which Avatar is a true story. An exception to the rule is the progressive British commentator George Monbiot (2010), who, although he is critical of some aspects of the film (and especially the “preposterous” happy ending), nevertheless calls Avatar “a profound, insightful, important film” because it spotlights both a long history of ongoing genocidal campaigns against indigenous people that “no one wants to hear, because of the challenge it presents to the way we choose to see ourselves.” He concludes that it “speaks of a truth more important—and more dangerous—than those contained in a thousand arthouse movies.” I agree.

Although it is a work of fiction, Avatar metaphorically presents a generally true cosmogony, or narrative about how the world came to be the way it is. The steady and now intensifying erosion of Earth’s biological and cultural diversity has been, first and foremost, the result of a ten thousand–year process that began with the domestication of plant and animal species and the advent of agriculture. Since the lands that agricultures need for expansion are almost always already inhabited, agricultural civilizations are necessarily imperial, although not in every phase of expansion violently so. As Steven Stoll (2007, 56) puts it, agrarian societies generate large populations so they must expand if their subsequent generations are “to reproduce the material world of their parents.” As such societies expand, they kill or displace through threat or coercion the pre-existing gatherer-hunters, or they convert them into agriculturalists, either by convincing them of benefits (e.g., greater food security), or of the idea that their best chance for survival is to assimilate. Whatever its specific characteristics in different times and places, this process has precipitated the dramatic, global decline of both cultural and biological diversity (Amery 1976; Diamond 1987, 1997; LaDuke 1999; Lockwood and McKinney 2001; Marsh [1864] 1970; Mason 1993; Oelschlaeger 1992; Ponting 2007; Shepard 1992, 1998; Stoll 2007; Wolfe 2006; Williams 2003). This is, moreover, a process saturated with religious significance and legitimation: the now predominant
so-called world religions have fuelled and legitimated this process. In the West, for example, forests were seen as a threat to Christian civilization—indeed, as the “last strongholds of pagan worship” (Harrison 1992, 61). But the religious agricultures (agrarian societies) of Asia have been no kinder to indigenous peoples or biologically diverse environmental systems. Thus, the long antipathy of agriculture toward indigenous peoples, even if not universal, has been the general trend and continuing dynamic. (A few of the many recent examples include Barton 2010; Douthat 2010; Beisner, n.d.; and Stewart, n.d.). This antipathy is obvious to anyone who studies how the ongoing deracination of indigenous peoples from their lands continues in those regions of the world only recently reached by agricultural civilizations, which are now all the more destructive, powered by capital, fossil fuels, and industrial machinery.

*Avatar* presents but one extreme depiction of the everyday reality in which bio-cultural diversity is threatened by advancing agro-industrial civilizations. It is not didactic: it does not explicitly teach about the diverse ways in which such civilization spreads. It does not explain, for example, the ways in which the “settler colonialism” of virtually all agricultural peoples is violent (if not always obviously so). Nor does it point the finger at who has benefited, whether directly or indirectly (Wolfe 2006). Nevertheless, as Cameron and some of his critics hoped, the film opens the way for discussions of the dynamics that lead to the violation of human rights and the widespread destruction of environmental systems, and it does so by evoking sympathy, if in a metaphorical way, for the many victims of these processes. It can, therefore, provide social and environmental activists with educational openings and recruitment opportunities for their causes.

**The Mythic and Political Possibilities of Motion Picture Spectacles**

James Cameron has said that in *Avatar*, he aspired to mythic movie making, and myths, of course, orient people to their worlds and shape actions within them. It could well be that the cinematic arts provide the most powerful medium for myth making in the modern world. “Of modern art forms,” Adrian Ivakhiv (2013) insightfully writes in *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, “it is cinema—the art of the moving image—that comes closest to depicting reality itself, because reality is always in motion, always in a process of becoming.” According to Ivakhiv, film also “provides for the morphogenesis, the coming into form, of worlds.” And it is especially important to note that the “spectacle” of cinema is related to its affective power, and that cinema can thus serve an ethical function, to “revivify our relationship to the world.”

In the sixth chapter of his book, Ivakhiv provides a nuanced reading of *Avatar* that could profitably be read alongside...
the analyses in this volume. Like many of the critics whom he sympatheti-
cally cites, he is not sanguine about the film mobilizing people in the cause
of social and environmental justice. But he also suggests that the critics
may be too hasty in their judgments, because “a film is not only what hap-
pens between the dimming and the turning back up of the lights. It is also
what happens in our discussions, dreams, and lives as we work with the
images, sounds, and symbols it makes available to us.” So while Ivakhiv
concurs with some other critics that the film grossly oversimplifies the
world’s complex political dynamics, he concludes that it also “has pre-
sented opportunities for activists to stake their own cases” and, moreover,
that “fandom, once triggered, sets off on its own trajectories, which in this
case may include those that turn viewers into radical activists.”

It is quite clear that the film has not led to massive consciousness change
or a new army of indigenous and environmental rights activists. Yet it has
not been entirely without its desired impacts, either. Its fruits include not
only the attitude shifts that we’ve documented in this volume but also more
tangible results. On 8 February 2011, the Earth Day Network announced
what is probably the most concrete activist outcome: the partners involved
in the “Avatar Home Tree Initiative” had succeeded in mobilizing over
thirty-one thousand individuals in planting over one million trees. And
the previous examples of literature and film moving people emotionally
and then to action, combined with the examples of modest mobilization
following the film documented in this volume, suggests that the film is
playing, and probably will continue to play, at least some role in environ-
mental mobilization.

It would be best to make neither too much nor too little of the potential
power of the arts in general, and cinema in particular, in changing atti-
tudes and altering behaviour. After all, social and environmental activists
deploy many strategies toward just such an end—mostly they lose and
usually their successes are limited and reversible. It is better to see a film
like *Avatar* as both reflecting broad, if nascent and fragile, cultural shifts
and emerging sensitivities, as well as contributing to them. Whether one
judges such social changes as positive or negative, it will probably remain
impossible to determine their future trajectory, given that environmental
and social systems are complex and that the decisive variables, feedback
loops, and tipping points, if any, are difficult to discern. Far better, then, to
understand *Avatar* (including the envisioned sequels) as innovative ethi-
cal and spiritual cultural productions that are, as the military officer cited
earlier put it, calling people toward the better angels of their natures.

Although I cannot predict the impact of *Avatar*, I do find hopeful many
of the typical responses to it, wherein people are moved by its depiction
of a beautiful forest and a flourishing forest culture living in respectful reciprocity with the diverse biota of its surround. I am encouraged that some who see it feel outrage at the injustice and destruction wrought by the invaders and joy when the riotous chorus of life arises to repel them. I doubt that most of those who felt such things had the cognitive frames to understand the tragic and long-term histories to which the film alluded. Nor do I think most audience members realize that the battles melodramatically depicted in the film are going on right now, let alone that their own societies, and the ideologies and worldviews that undergird them, are highly complicit in these destructive dynamics. Nor do most audience members know that it is possible to support, if not directly participate in, the resistance to the ongoing reduction of Earth’s biocultural complexity. But the film can reinforce such understandings where they exist or can lead people to them where they do not. Activists of all sorts, if not all of the film’s critics, have been quick to recognize that Avatar has provided them with an unusual opportunity to educate and organize those moved by the film into communities of solidarity and resistance.

I especially find it hopeful that when a film reveals the beauties of Earth’s living systems (even if through the artifice of spectacular technology and Earth’s metaphorical displacement to another planet) and reminds audience members (or reveals to them) what is being and has been lost, a significant number of viewers are moved and wish there was something they could do to prevent or reverse the losses. Perhaps this suggests the plausibility of the biophilia hypothesis, which was discussed appreciatively by a number of the contributors to this volume. The biophilia hypothesis was originally advanced by Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson and soon afterward, by his protege Steven Kellert and a number of others (Wilson 1984; Kellert and Wilson 1993; Kellert 2007). The basic notion is that there is a universal (if sometimes weak and forgotten) human aesthetic appreciation for biologically diverse and flourishing environmental systems, and this is because we know somehow, unconsciously, from deep down in our genome, that these are the systems in which we flourish. In short, we appreciate natural beauty not just because our cultures shape our aesthetics, even though they certainly do, but because the appreciation of wild nature is an adaptive evolutionary trait. This theory, if correct, would help to explain why the aesthetic appreciation of nature is part of the emotional repertoire of our species. And if this is the case, it may be that the power of many artistic productions, including Avatar, is to be found in the diverse, religion-resembling ways that they express and evoke such feelings.

I began my effort to understand the significance of Avatar by wondering if it was another example of the increasing influence and cultural traction
of what I have called “dark green religion.” If it does exemplify such spirituality, I wanted to know whether it was a salutary or dangerous form of it. Clearly, some critics have judged it harshly. Like many other academicians, had I made the film, I would have anticipated and avoided some of these criticisms. That is easy to say, of course, as I have neither the talent nor the experience or vision to make such a film. It is clear that Cameron is unsurpassed in his ability to draw millions to his films, which evoke strong emotions and sometimes even inspire critical reflection and action. Whatever the critics may say, Avatar may be more promising as a means for revisioning our relations to nature and understanding the injustices that accompany its destruction than not only a thousand art house films but also university courses, radical political commentaries, and scholarly books. Nevertheless, Avatar did not emerge from a vacuum, so whatever genius lies behind it is not that of one man. Rather, it is a reflection of the increasing global awareness of the value of both biological and cultural diversity and of the ways in which all of today’s dominant civilizations continue to erode them. At the same time, it also reflects diverse new ways in which people today express and promote reverence for life. Avatar, as well as much of the reaction to it, suggests that a gestalt change in consciousness may indeed be emerging. How extensive and effective this will be remains to be seen… perhaps even in the forthcoming Avatar sequels and their reception.

Notes
3 An as-yet-unpublished paper by University of California, Santa Cruz, sociologist Bernard Daly Zaleha, “Our Only Heaven,’ An Investigation into the Spread and Significance of Nature Venerating Religion,” which he kindly shared with me and my students during a National Endowment for the Humanities Seminar in July 2011, provides an excellent review of research showing that in America and Europe, where we have the best data, panentheistic and other nature-venerating religions are on the rise, even within Christian churches, and that orthodox Christian monotheism is in modest but significant decline. The fears of Christian conservatives about slippage in their preferred forms of the faith appear to be borne out by existing quantitative data. See also Zaleha (2008, 2010).
4 His post was made on 15 January 2010 and, while signed with his name and rank, his screen name was “JUDGEBIANCHINI.” His comments and the fascinating and diverse reactions to Avatar were posted at the Military Times Forum, http://www.militarytimes.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-1584779.html, but have since been removed.
5 Some of this text had disappeared on 5 April 2012, as it had over three hundred comments in response to it.
7 For a good overview of the diversity of post-colonial thinking about Avatar, see Thomas (2010).
8 Literary scholar and post-colonial theorist Anthony Carrigan, who read a draft of this article, pointed out, citing Žižek (1991, 34–35) that this antipathy has been longstanding for Žižek.
9 My account here is based on decades-long research and fieldwork within radical environmental subcultures, including since the release of Avatar.
10 This reharmonization is often seen as involving the collapse possibly precipitated by insurrection of authoritarian and ecologically unsustainable industrial agricultures; see Žerzan (1994) and Jensen (2006a, b).
11 See http://johnzerzan.net/radio/.
12 Adrian Ivakhiv (2013) provides a nuanced review of the critiques of the film, including more details on the contending views of the film expressed by anthropologists.
13 One of the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript noted that here I was disagreeing with Chris Klassen’s article in this volume and wondered why, then, I included it in the volume. Klassen defined misogyny in the most literal way, as hatred of women, and I did not find compelling her contention that the deaths of Augustine and Chacon evidence misogyny. Given this definition, I also doubt her assertion that misogyny is “nearly universal,” even if it is all too common. But it would violate my expressed intention to promote engagement and debate about the film to exclude views with which I disagree.
14 Anthony Carrigan (personal communication, 12 May 2012) is probably correct that some gender commentators would probably complain that by creating characters that mirror masculine traits, Cameron does little to disrupt assumptions about conventional gender roles. I have not found such critiques published, however, and I think, moreover, that there is more complexity to Cameron’s characters than such a criticism would acknowledge.
15 For a similar argument and many other scathing and sardonic criticisms of the film, see John Clark (as Cafard 2010). Clark concludes that Avatar in no way promotes resistance to the “global system of domination” and in fact, “no message will have a salutary effect in the real world, if that message is transmitted through the dominant media.”
16 For similar views on the constructive possibilities presented by the film, see Latour (2011a) and Clifford (2011).
17 All Good Fox quotes are from this essay, which I highly recommend.
18 Rachelle Gould and her collaborators (this volume) made a similar point about analogies.
19 Several of the earlier articles in this volume noted that Sully is as much if not more saved than saviour in the film; a different argument against the “white messiah” charge is that Eywa, “the planetary mind,” is actually the saviour (Pilkington 2011, 39). Pilkington, moreover, argues that those who consider the film racist are willfully misreading the film’s plot and particularly the events in the final battle, con-
cluding, “Alas, not everyone who went to see Avatar left his or her expectations and prejudices behind” (68).

20 Bresette, an Ojibwe activist and enrolled member of the Loon clan of the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, was a co-founder of the Wisconsin Green Party, and an ardent opponent to mining in his homeland (present-day Wisconsin). The Indian-environmentalist alliance, which had significant successes during the 1990s, is detailed in Whaley and Bresette (1994); see also Gedicks (1993, 1995). McIntosh recalls Bresette saying, as part of the ceremony, “We must all learn to be indigenous now” (Williams, Roberts, and McIntosh 2011, 426; cf. McIntosh 1998).

21 Bresette’s was not the only Native American voice expressing such a view. In a way that reminds me of Bresette’s welcoming ceremony, William Woodworth (Raweno:Kwas, of Mohawk heritage) wrote: “The Hotinonshon:ni prophecy of the gathering of peoples from the four directions under the White Pine Tree of Peace appears to be coming to fruition. The time has come for Indigenous peoples to share their ancient responsibilities to welcome and host visitors to their homelands” (Woodworth 2010, 25).

22 The kind of language he used at the Golden Globe Awards ceremony (quoted in the prologue to this volume and found at http://www.accesshollywood.com/james-camerons-avatar-wins-big-at-golden-globes_article_27831) is common for Cameron. Similarly, he told his biographer: “All life on Earth is connected…but our industrial society…will inevitably lead to a severe degradation of biodiversity and ultimately to a serious blowback effect against humanity” (quoted in Keegan 2009, 254).

23 See, for example, his Earth Day speech in April 2010 at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDHkO5-Hf78, and the video introduction at the “Avatar Home Tree Initiative” website, http://www.avatarmovie.com/hometree/. Cameron attributed the success of the film to increasing eco-social consciousness, while also noting the strong resistance to such understandings.

24 Cameron has “sworn off agnosticism,” labelling it “cowardly atheism,” according to biographer Rebecca Keegan, who recorded Cameron as adding, “I’ve come to the position that in the complete absence of any supporting data whatsoever for the persistence of the individual in some spiritual form, it is necessary to operate under the provisional conclusion that there is no afterlife and then be ready to amend that if I find it otherwise” (quoted in Keegan 2009, 8).

25 Louv himself recognized Cameron’s affinity with such a view by writing an open letter to him that was published in Psychology Today, appealing to Cameron for help in creating a mass back-to-nature movement (Louv 2010). Louv was hardly the first to express the views that made him a well-known environmental writer; for those who beat him to the argument, see Shepard (1982) and Nabhan and Trimble (1994).

26 Cameron has long sought to include socially important messages in his films, criticizing class divisions in Titanic, for example (Cameron and Dunham 2011).

27 Cameron made another statement that those who want to force reparations on those who have benefited from past injustices would find objectionable: he contended that one of the great things about science fiction is that it can make us seriously “look at the human condition” without causing the kind of defensiveness that comes when charges and blame is directly assigned. As Cameron put it in an interview, science fiction “can hold up a mirror to all of us without pushing specific buttons of your
worse than—this guy’s worse than this guy, you see what I mean? Science fiction doesn’t really predict the future, that’s not what it’s there for. It’s there to hold a mirror up to the present and look at the human condition, sometimes from the outside” (Cameron and Dunham 2011, 193).

28 Anthony Carrigan (personal communication 12 May 2012) astutely observed when reviewing this point in the chapter that there is an important level of complexity here that the film does not choose to engage due to the decision to stage its colonial encounter as a moment of relatively new contact. In so many places today, one of the most enduring legacies of colonialism has been the establishment of governments co-opted by ruling class and/or military elites that work against the interests of a wider if often characteristically fractured public sphere. In short, part of the film’s more romanticized approach is to give primacy to colonial contact struggles over the even messier and intractable neocolonial realities that are much closer to the problems faced by most oppressed groups today globally.

While I agree with the facts expressed in his statement, I doubt that a film more focused in a complex way on the contemporary world would have drawn a mass audience. In my judgment, Avatar provides a unique opportunity for scholars and activists to build on the understandings and empathies that the film arouses. There is a temptation among intellectuals to want a theatrical filmmaker to make the documentary they would have made, but I think it is wiser to welcome the efforts of such artists, for these are not just matters of the head and sophisticated analyses—they are matters of the heart.


30 See “Stop the Belo Monte Monster Dam” at http://amazonwatch.org/work/belo-monte-dam, and the video “A Message from Pandora,” 27 August 2010, at http://amazonwatch.org/news/2011/0907-message-from-pandora, in which Cameron shows not only that he has worked hard to understand the issues, but also that he has—as far as can be seen—attempted to work in respectful solidarity with the indigenous people and social activists whom he met there.

31 Despite these protests, Brazil’s Supreme Court overturned lower court rulings suspending the dam’s construction in August 2012, but the battle has continued at the site. Although hundreds of fishers and indigenous people have occupied the site, halting construction for weeks at a time, as this volume goes to the press in the spring of 2013, it appears that the Brazilian government is likely to succeed in building the dam (Associated Press 2012, Hance 2012).

32 For a similar statement by the volume’s editor, see Davis (2010, 4). Simpson is of Michi Saagiik Nishnaabeg ancestry, is a member of Alderville First Nation, and has published these books on indigenous movements: see Simpson (2008, 2011b) and Ladner and Simpson (2010).

33 See especially part 2, 55–210, “From the Front Lines,” which “documents concrete examples of alliance-building,” including the “successes, tensions, and complexities” (Davis 2010, 8). Thomas (2010) mentions several post-colonial theorists who have also stressed the importance of alliances.

34 I wonder if “decolonizing” one’s mind can include incorporating these sorts of perspectives from indigenous peoples. In 1994, Edward Said described environ-
mentalism as “the indulgence of spoiled tree huggers who lack a proper cause.” It is no wonder, therefore, that so many of his progeny have had antipathy toward environmentalists and have failed to see that protecting environmental systems is critical to human well-being as well as the rest of the living world; for this quotation, see Nixon (2011, 332n69) and the related text (250–55).

35 Latour (2011a) has also used the term *multinaturalism*; I do not know who coined it.
37 Joni Adamson (personal communication, 24 July 2012), who kindly reviewed this manuscript, commented at this point that these groups were not foregrounding spirituality or ethnicity, for fear of being dismissed as “superstitious,” but instead were emphasizing rights—first civil, then non-human. She also noted that they seek a broad coalition based on these rights, regardless of whether individuals practice traditional religion. For more of her views in this regard, see Adamson (2012b).
40 As Robert Harrison (1992, ix) put it in his study of forests, which applies equally to other wildlands, “The governing institutions of the West—religion, law, family, city—originally established themselves in opposition to the forests, which in this respect have been, from the beginning, the first and last victims of civic expansion.” For further discussion, see Taylor (2012).
41 These passages are from the book’s foreword. Because I read this excellent book before final proofs, I could not provide pagination, nor am I certain there will be no changes during production, but I cite the manuscript with the generous permission of Professor Ivakhiv.

References


Ladner, Kiera L., and Leanne Simpson. 2010. This Is an Honour Song: Twenty Years since the Blockades. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring.


