

Imperial Camera Gaze and the Irony of the White Liberal Imagination in Dances with Wolves and Avatar¹

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Abstract

This essay studies the twentieth-century film Dances with Wolves (1990) and the twenty-first-century science fiction movie Avatar (2009) from textual, contextual, and cinematographic perspectives. It identifies the imperial gaze implicit under the white liberal savior's ironical fantasy through a scrutiny of the camera's Eurocentric concentration on specific characters and props in particular scenes. Unlike the critics who regard these two films as pro-Native by promoting the "more-Indian-than-the-Indians" white protagonist, this essay analyzes the imperial camera's gaze and its on-screen focus that constructs a superhero image of the white protagonist by marginalizing the Indigenous people. In both films, the camera eulogizes the Western hero at the expense of the Natives' dignity. Many film reviewers associated these two films noting their similar theme, plot construction, and characterization of Western heroes "going native." Yet, no critic identifies the camera's imperial function or the "camera's omnipresent mobile gaze" that says more than the actions on screen. Though these films are widely accepted as anticolonial films, it is important to examine how these Western films instigate neo-imperial gaze in the guise of assimilation into native culture by employing cinematic apparatus. This essay, thus, reiterates the importance of real revisionist films that resist the Eurocentric re-making of imperialist movies about Indigeneity.

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¹This article has been written without the use of any generative AI tools such as ChatGPT.

With a telescope in hand, the Civil War soldier John Dunbar, in Kevin Costner's movie *Dances with Wolves* (1990), reaches the American frontier to explore the "wild hostile country,"² inhabited by "thieves and beggars," as his company wagon driver Timmons defines the Native Indians to be.³ Being exhausted by the long troublesome journey, Dunbar takes out his telescope to have a view of the land of Lakota Indians. The camera presents Dunbar looking through the telescope and then shows the landscape through his telescope. With Dunbar, the audience sees what he sees, and the camera replaces the telescope by revealing what it wants the audience to see. The camera's neutrality gradually dissolves as Dunbar's telescope starts to orchestrate the narrative by foregrounding the wildness of the land and its people. As the movie advances, the camera gets empowered enough to marginalize the Native people's role and their screen presence and presents the Natives' simplicity as their ignorance and savagism. Thus, the camera adopts an imperialist role by establishing the white protagonist Dunbar's superiority throughout the movie. Following the same pattern, nearly two decades later, Jake Sully, the white protagonist in James Cameron's science fiction movie *Avatar* (2009), arrives at the indigenous Na'vi world of Pandora with a mission. Sully lands on the planet with a gun instead of a telescope. Both fear and hatred for Native people run through his face. The camera hones in on Sully's face and eyes first and then centers Sully from behind showing us what he observes. Sully expresses both surprise and horror at the Native land, its plants, and animals. Because of his preconceived notion of Native savagism, he sees what he wants to see and as an audience, we are drawn into his perspective by making us see and feel what the camera through Sully's eyes manifests. Hence, the camera, as in *Dances with Wolves*, shifts its role from an impartial one to an imperial observer and interpreter.

In both films mentioned above, the camera not only records visual images as a device but also actively controls, on behalf of the protagonists or the imperial-minded filmmakers, what we as an audience should see. As both films screen a white savior hero getting assimilated with Native people, these films can be called "politically correct," yet, they present "bad objects" with subtle cinematography by depicting the Natives as uncivilized, wild, and thus bad (Shohat and Stam 195). By denying the agency of the Natives on the screen, these films achieve the appropriation of stereotypes. Hence, whereas other scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Robert Stam, Louise Spence, and E. Ann Kaplan have discussed the "male gaze,"⁴ and the "imperial gaze"⁵ in various films, I examine how the camera's gaze plays a silent imperialist role in the twentieth-century film *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and the twenty-first-century science fiction movie *Avatar* (2009).⁶ The camera gaze, unlike the "imperial gaze," does not directly exhibit its imperialist attitude through the storyline and characterization. Rather the camera's focus speaks

² Dunbar was supposed to be transferred to Fort Hays, a large frontier post, which was presided over by Major Fambrough, an unhinged officer, who despised Dunbar's adventurous attitude. He posts Dunbar to the furthest outpost Fort Sedgewick, which he defines as "wild and hostile" place.

³ Quotations without parenthetical citations are from the two films under discussion.

⁴ In her 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of "male gaze" as a feature of gender power asymmetry in film. Mulvey stated that women were objectified in film because heterosexual men were in control of the camera.

⁵ E. Ann Kaplan has introduced the post-colonial concept of the imperial gaze, in which the observed find themselves defined in terms of the privileged observer's own set of value-preferences. From the perspective of the colonized, the imperial gaze infantilizes and trivializes what it falls upon, asserting its command and ordering function as it does so.

⁶ Due to *Avatar*'s commercial success, two sequels have been made: *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) and *Avatar: Fire and Ash* (2025).

and acts differently from what the characters are shown to believe or preach. My argument is set against the “Caméra-Style” theory given by French film critic Alexandre Astruc who says:

The camera fixes; it does not transcend, it looks. One has to be naive to imagine that the systematic use of an 18.5 lens will make things any different from what they are. In exchange, it never lies. What is caught by the lens is the movement of the body - an immediate revelation, like all that is physical: the dance, a woman's look, the change of rhythm in a walk, beauty, truth, etc. (266)

While Astruc refuses to accept the fact that camera and *mise-en-scène* can change the meaning of any film and influence the audience, I prove that the camera as “a weapon of imperialism,” to quote Teju Cole, plays a critical part in manipulating the meaning of the film language in *Dances with Wolves* and *Avatar*.

Critics have so far discussed both *Dances with Wolves* and *Avatar* due to their similar plots and objectives. According to Sabine N. Meyer, though both films stand against American imperialism and attempt to present the indigenous people with a positive image, they ultimately “perpetuate long-held stereotypes and myths” that run counter to their revisionist approach (17). Meyer’s analysis is limited to how *Avatar* can be called a re-making of *Dances with Wolves* and how “*Avatar* activism,” a term coined by Henry Jenkins, implies “political activism” (164). Many film reviewers also connected these two films for their similar theme, plot construction, and characterization of the Western heroes “going native.”⁷ Yet, no critic identifies the camera’s imperial function or the “camera’s omnipresent mobile gaze” that says more than the actions on screen (Shohat and Stam 164). In both films, the camera eulogizes the Western hero at the expense of the Natives’ dignity. How these two films exploit the camera’s angles and shots is essential to discern the implicit imperial attitude of the filmmakers. So, besides scrutinizing the physical gestures and activities of the performers, my essay will particularly address a few scenes where the camera’s subtle imperialist role contributes to diverting the audience’s perspective and exoticizing or marginalizing the presence of the Natives.

As part of this exotic display, the white protagonists in both films go native but neither of them adopts the native identity. Yet, while their interference does not benefit the Natives, we see the Natives worshipping the white hero for whom identification with the natives is just a fantasy. In this study, I examine these films from the perspective of the imperial camera’s gaze and its on-screen focus that constructs a superhero image of the white protagonist by undermining the Indigenous people. By the term “imperial camera gaze,” I mean how the camera focus is used and exploited to influence the visual and psychic perception of the spectators and how the *mise-en-scène* on screen is marginalized in favor of the dominant white character.

All filmmakers exercise the power of dictating where to look and what to look at through their cameras. However, the camera’s lens in the two films mentioned above plays an imperialist role while thematically publicizing the noble mission of the white hero. The camera’s Eurocentric concentration on specific characters and props in particular scenes unfolds the imperial gaze implicit under the white liberal savior’s ironical fantasy. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (2014), asserts that “Eurocentric discourse in film may be relayed not by characters or plot but by lighting, framing, *mise-en-scène*, music” (208). Taking this into account, my essay focuses particularly on these two films for their similar deliberate use of camera gaze that contributes to the politics of

⁷ See Reviews of *Avatar* by G. Owen Schaefer, J. Hoberman, Dorothy Miller. Also, see Reviews of *Dances with Wolves* by Randal A. Lake, Interview of James Cameron by Geoff Boucher, Eric Ditzian and Smackdown’s comparison between both films, and Review published in *The Atlantic*, Article published in *MyLatinoVoice*.

“playing Indian” and, thus, exposes the irony of the white liberal imagination. This requires attention because while the discussions on these two films so far have only identified their similar ironical “going native” themes, they ignore how the silent camera, as an omnipresent entity, disseminates the anti-Native tone by infantilizing the Natives. This essay, thus, foregrounds the importance of real revisionist films that resist the Eurocentric re-making of imperialist movies about Indigeneity.

Revisionist Films and Neo-imperialist Trope

Since the early 1960s, American filmmakers have been exploiting the director’s camera as a neo-imperialist trope to promote a revisionist film genre to change the traditional Western film genre. They have encouraged audiences to reject the typical hero-versus-villain dualism and applaud the heroes who can assimilate with the so-called ‘savage’ people by proving their nobility. Such revisionist films include *Ride the High Country* (1962), *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *Little Big Man* (1970), *The Long Riders* (1980), and *Walker* (1987) among others. *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Avatar* (2009) are two films of the same category that, though known as revisionist films, still maintain the same old imperial trope. *Dances with Wolves*, a 1990 American film adaptation of Michael Blake’s 1988 book of the same name, tells the story of a Civil War soldier who develops a relationship with a band of Lakota Indians. Two decades later, the 2009 American epic science fiction film *Avatar* introduced a hybrid of human and alien known as Avatar. The protagonist Jake Sully’s avatar is created to save the indigenous Na’vis of the planet Pandora from human colonizers. However, after a certain course of events, Sully is permanently transformed into his avatar. These two revisionist films carry an imperialist tone in their use of cinematic technique and camera focus is used to gloss over their implicit mission of presenting the white protagonists going native.

Many scholars identified this Euro-American fascination with indigenous people as a trope to reclaim the tribal lands and erase their violent past. Scholars such as Ella Shohat, Robert Stam, Shari M. Huhndorf, and David Brooks criticize these two films for their “going native” fantasy. For instance, Huhndorf, in *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (2001), identifies *Dances with Wolves* as a film that “seems neither original nor a radical departure from conventional depictions of Native Americans” (3). Huhndorf shows how the glorified images of Native Americans indeed articulate the continued oppression of Native Americans and the inherent politics of representation. Similarly, Shohat and Stam, in *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (2014), refute this film as “pro-Indian” because of its “colonial splitting of good/bad natives” (67). They address *Avatar* as a “colonial allegory” with “hackneyed stereotypes” (409). Moreover, David Brooks, in the *New York Times* (January 8, 2010), says that *Avatar* is the latest Hollywood incarnation of “The White Messiah Fable” that creates “a sort of two-edged cultural imperialism.” Huhndorf, Shohat, and Stam have specifically referred to different movies based on the “going native” fantasy of white heroes and listed *Dances* and *Avatar* in that category for their presentation of “more-Indian-than-the-Indians” white protagonists. In *Playing Indian* (1998), Philip J. Deloria investigates why Indians have been so crucial to establishing the identity of an authentic American. He demonstrates that tensions between “desire and repulsion” and “nobility and savagery” lie at the heart of Americans playing Indian and it is a trope to keep the Indians in subordinate social, political, legal, and economic positions.

While I agree with these scholars on the point of the “going native” fantasy of the white heroes, I do claim that the cinematography, especially the camera focus, has been exploited to play an imperialist role that not only exaggerates the Indianness of the heroes but also

infantilizes the Native characters either by marginalizing their presence or by devaluing their Indianness. These critics have already studied the paradox of Americans' taking Indian identity while being yet engulfed in their past. Critical discussions like these exclude emphasis on how these so-called revisionist films stimulate neo-imperial gaze in the guise of assimilation into the native culture by employing cinematic apparatus, for instance, by zooming only on the Natives' face that expresses hatred or suspicion and on the white hero's apparent naive actions that only affirm his nobility.

Dances with Wolves and Infantilized Natives

The camera's use as a manipulative tool, as discussed by Shohat and Stam, is noticeable in the space occupied by marginalized characters in a shot, in the angles from which they are seen, the frequency of their screen appearance, their presence as decorative props, the presentation of their body language, and their sentimentalized images (208). Through this cinematic apparatus, movies reconstruct the audience's perspective by manipulating their self-constructed connection to the characters on the screen. In *Dances with Wolves*, the soldier John Dunbar expresses his desire to see the frontier "before it is gone." With a stereotyped fantasy to explore the unknown world, he, accompanied by his horse Cisco and wagon driver Timmons, reaches the frontier to join his newly achieved post at Fort Sedgwick. He looks at the expected fort through a telescope (see *Images 1 & 2*). He commands the camera and the camera commands us to see what Dunbar sees or what this telescope shows. From this scene onwards, the camera's focus and angles transmit a tone that forces the audience to align their perspectives with Dunbar's.



Image 1: John Dunbar looking through the telescope



Image 2: The desolate land that Dunbar sees

Camera angles can minimize and maximize the gravity of a scene in any film because they are "too manipulative and judgmental" (Giannetti 16). If we analyze these two images from the movie *Dances*, we see how low and high-angle shots imply the power or vulnerability of the actor on screen.⁸ The above *image 1* is an extreme long shot taken from a low-angle presenting the actor in a god-like image. These types of extreme low angles make "characters seem threatening and powerful" while the audience and others are presented as vulnerable and dominated (Giannetti 15). Though Dunbar's physical structure is blurred in this particular moment, from then on, he remains the most visible person on the screen dominating both the Natives and the audience. When Dunbar looks through the telescope, the desolate wildland ahead is revealed in a long shot from a high angle (see *image 2*). The scene manipulates the "*mise en scène*" (the things that are "put in the scene" such as the setting, the decoration, the lighting, the costumes, the performance, etc.) to emphasize the unknown world awaiting the hero Dunbar who is gradually exposed as a noble-minded white soldier—the savior. The use of high angles presents the objects on the screen as subordinated to the onlooker. This scene prepares the spectators to sympathize with Dunbar as he moves toward the vast wildness. It displaces "the act

⁸ See "Cinematography," <https://filmanalysis.coursepress.yale.edu/cinematography/>

of spectatorship” as the camera “elides the eye and shows us how we are caught by our own look” (Freedman 1). Hence, the audience gets trapped in the imperialist presentation of the Natives.

While most of the characters in *Dances with Wolves* are real Natives playing the Native role, they are consistently infantilized and marginalized in their actions and screen presence. When the disillusioned soldier starts living on the frontier Plains and confronts the Lakota Indians, he not only succeeds in taming the wolf Two Socks named by him (see *image 3*) but also gains the Natives’ trust by offering them coffee (see *image 4*). When the Natives under the leadership of Kicking Bird and Wind in his Air come to investigate the reason for Dunbar’s arrival in their land, Dunbar succeeds in taming them too. A critical look at this scene reveals how the camera’s focus infantilizes the Natives and highlights the white hero’s generosity. Dunbar’s comic expression during the scene makes him appear more like a clown than a white innocent messiah but the camera highlights the ignorant looks of the Natives. As the camera focus keeps shifting from the Natives to Dunbar and from Dunbar to Natives, it especially draws attention to the expressions of Kicking Bird and Wind in His Air. In *image 4*, Dunbar is familiarizing the Natives with the coffee machine while they wait for this unknown liquor with pot in hand. Their faces, centered on the camera screen, highlight their ignorance and surprise (see *image 5*). As it makes Dunbar more excited, he scrutinizes their faces to speculate how much influence he has inflicted on them (see *image 6*). Dunbar’s expression is screened in a close-up shot exhibiting his earnest efforts to satisfy the Natives. The camera here foregrounds the difficult-to-convince trait of these Native people. This scene directs the audience to notice Dunbar’s sincere endeavor to assimilate with the Natives while the Natives seem indifferent. By looking at the camera work, we understand how the Natives are infantilized while the white hero is eulogized.



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6

The camera’s visual focus in this coffee-making scene directs the spectators’ attention to Wind in His Air’s funny way of throwing sugar in his coffee and Dunbar’s perplexity at the “uncivilized” behavior of the Natives. In this point-of-view shot, the camera precisely replicates the character’s eyes. “The point-of-view conventions,” as Shohat and Stam write, “consistently favor the Euro-American protagonists; they are centered in the frame, their desires drive the narrative” (120). Thus, in this scene, Dunbar’s eyes are pointed at Wind in His Air’s hand throwing sugar and the camera follows Dunbar. This type of shot exemplifies how the “audiences are encouraged to identify with characters.”⁹ Dunbar is not the only one expressing shock at the Native’s behavior, the spectators are also made to do so.

⁹ See “Cinematography,” <https://filmanalysis.coursepress.yale.edu/cinematography/>

Avatar, White Man Trapped in a Wild Land

Similarly, James Cameron's blockbuster 2009 film *Avatar* has been characterized as being a "white savior" movie by reviewers, in which a group of blue Native people is presented as helpless without the leadership of a white member. Though the *New York Times* refers to this movie as a "paradigm shift in science-fiction cinema," according to cultural critic Slavoj Žižek, "the film enables us to practise a typical ideological division: sympathising with the idealised aborigines while rejecting their actual struggle" (qtd. in Thakur 104). Critics such as Gautam Basu Thakur addresses this film as Eurocentric with its "dominant gaze" and asks the spectators whether they "can really see what's happening in the film" (104). Thakur lays the blame not only on the storyline but also on the viewers who see what they want to see. The film *Avatar* exhibits the same fanciful imagination of Eurocentric filmmakers who no longer show the indigenous Other as the vanished tribe, but rather use it as a way to gain commercial benefit. Presenting the vanishing Indian myth as a myth, this film commercializes the Euro-American fascination to attract the global audience and, at the same time, attempts to appear as pro-Indian. Whereas Thakur defines it as the proof of "global geopolitics" by declaring that "the postcolonial is dead," he simultaneously accuses this film as a "vehicle for legitimizing Eurocentrism under the guise of liberalism and multiculturalism" (10). With the same theoretical perspective, I endorse the imperial functions of the camera and special effects employed in this film carrying the imperial fantasy of the so-called liberal whites.

The protagonist, in *Avatar*, Jake Sully is a white paraplegic former Marine who replaces his deceased identical twin brother Tom Sully as an interlocutor of the Avatar program being promised to get his real legs back. Sully is appointed for RDA's Avatar program to initiate the communication between human and indigenous Na'vi people of Pandora and to bring a "diplomatic solution" by relocating or uprooting the 'savages.' Sully travels in the guise of a native Na'vi to Pandora, a planet rich with unobtainium, which the Sky People (i.e. white people) need to save their own world. With Sully's exciting entry into the planet as a gunman, the spectators following the camera enter the land and discover the Natives living in nature with bows and arrows, offering a stereotypical savage portrait of the Other. Sully loses his gun in the mysterious rainforest, yet confronts the dangers with the help of a stick when the Hammerhead Titanotheres, six-legged predator Thanator, and many other fearsome creatures on Pandora attack him (see *images 7 & 8*). The camera takes this tracking shot from a high angle centering its lens on the helpless white hero trapped in 'savage' land and yet fighting evil. While the Na'vi people are peaceful creatures living in harmony with nature, they are presented as wild, malicious, and savage in the very first scene at Pandora.



Image 7



Image 8



Image 9



Image 10

These animals' attack on the white protagonist Sully is the first trope used for creating the bloodthirsty image of tribal land by presenting the hero in an undeserved danger. Gradually, the camera comes to eye level by taking a close-up tracking shot (see *image 9*). This camera movement from high to the ground signifies that, from then on, the hero is accompanied not only

by the imperial camera eye but also by the spectators. The Na'vi girl Neytiri, for no logical reason, instantly assumes a great image of Sully as having “a strong heart. No fear.” She twice initiates throwing poisonous arrows but is stopped by white airborne holy Woodsprite and kills Viperwolves of her own land for Sully. The camera shifts its center from Sully to Neytiri's brutal killing which is “quite impressive” to Sully. Neytiri traces innocence in Sully, rescues him from Na'vi hunter Tsu'tey, and takes Sully to Hometree, the Na'vi people's residence.

The camera's manipulative techniques draw sympathy from the spectators by presenting innocent Sully surrounded by innumerable Na'vi people who initially hate this human alien and are ready to kill him. This extreme long shot from a high angle shows the central character as a vulnerable being at the mercy of wild people (see *image 10*). In this Hometree scene, the camera focuses on the white protagonist while all the Na'vi people are captured from a distance as a blurry image. Though this Hometree is the residence of the Na'vi people, we hardly see any of their faces from a close-up shot, and most of the time they work as unrecognizable props who are here only to obey or listen. In *image 10*, the faces of Sully and Na'vi girl Neytiri can be identified while others are just shadows on the screen. Their shadowy image reflects their insignificance to the dominant white man.

White Messiah's Screen Presence in *Dances with Wolves*

The film *Dances with Wolves* presents a white protagonist Dunbar reborn as a messiah by discovering the beauty of the Native people. Dunbar, who has the maximum screen presence in the film, describes the good Sioux Indians as “magnificent” and “so devoted to family, so dedicated to each other, and the only word came to [his] mind was harmony.” He gradually abandons his American traits and transforms himself into a “pro-Indian” by internalizing the new given name Dances with Wolves, putting on feathers and Sioux clothes, hunting buffaloes, and fighting with the bad Pawnee Indians, the enemy of the Sioux tribe. He even claims that the massacre of the buffalos could only be done by “a people without value and without soul,” presumably referring to the white hunters. Yet, while his narration presents him as a white metamorphosed hero of America, repentant of its past, the silent camera performs its conventional trick of presenting the Indians as bloodthirsty savages who need to be civilized by a white hero.

The camera's imperial gaze throughout the whole film contradicts the Western hero Dunbar's liberal gesture. For instance, we see Dunbar colonizing the fort, decorating it, and amassing things more than necessary for a single person. He appears as another Robinson Crusoe civilizing Two Socks instead of Friday. Within a very few days, he becomes “more Indian than the Indians.” He leads the Buffalo hunting mission with a gun in the land of experienced hunters who surprisingly end up just following the white leader (see *images 11 & 12*).



Image 11



Image 12



Image 13



Image 14



Image 15

In these images, we see Dunbar at the center while some Native people follow his track. While he acts as a professional hunter, the Natives seem undecided on how to hunt. Even the tribe leader Kicking Bird acts ignorant of his own tradition in front of white Dunbar and the camera

follows Kicking Bird from a close-up shot making it easier for the spectators to notice the bewilderment apparent on his face. Though not on focus, we see some Sioux people hunting Buffalo at the margin of the screen. We do not see any appreciation on Dunbar's face at the hunting efficiency of the Natives while we see the Natives being impressed by the white man. Dunbar's powerful authority over the Natives can also be clearly traced in *image 13* where Dunbar makes Kicking Bird see what he sees through the telescope. Thus, Dunbar turns into the white messiah who is followed and worshipped by the Natives.

Despite the film being categorized as a revisionist "pro-Indian" film, all the music and dance scenes of the Sioux people are shown in the background as a blurry shadow. The camera, however, keeps following Dunbar's expressions in a close-up shot. This indifference of the camera to the Natives' dancing and singing demonstrates how Western films erase the Native culture. On the other hand, the white hero's superiority and invulnerability get prominence on the screen. For example, in the aftermath of the hunting scene, the camera takes a low-angle long shot capturing the hero at the center with a "celebrity" image. The white man in white clothes dominates the screen but the Natives get lost in the crowd (see *images 14 & 15*). They sing of his glory as though the Native people are going white.

In the trade scene, Dunbar and Wind in His Air exchange their things, and the camera's focus silently exposes the greedy nature of the Natives. Dunbar seems resistant to wearing the heavy tribal necklace offered by Wind in His Air, but Wind in His Air's face is zoomed in to highlight the greed in his eyes for the white man's suit. The old man Ten Bears cannot resist smoking white Dunbar's pipe. Later, Dunbar trades the pipe with Kicking Bird, but we see no strong fascination in Dunbar's face for tribal clothes or accessories. One of the Sioux men steals Dunbar's hat which again presents the Indigenous people as "thieves." Throughout all these incidents, Dunbar's facial expression is highlighted to prove his nobility and kindness whereas the camera reinforces only the 'uncivilized' characteristics of the Natives. Dunbar's influence over the Native people becomes stronger when he falls in love with an Indian girl Stands With a Fist, born as white Christine, who was adopted at the age of seven by the Sioux medicine man Kicking Bird when the Pawnee people killed her American family. Ultimately, Dunbar ends up marrying a girl of white origin, thus reasserting the impossibility of an interracial marriage.

From the beginning to the end, Dunbar narrates the story. This follows, as Huhndorf says, the old "captivity narrative" genre where the dominant character tells self-justifying stories (54). When he writes in the journal, the camera zooms in on his pen, as though both Dunbar and the camera are writing their version of Indigenous history. A Native is neither allowed to be the narrator here nor do they have any agency to choose how their stories should be narrated. When the Sioux Chief Ten Bears dies in the fight scene with bad Pawnees, the death scene is presented from a distance as an insignificant background scene while the camera captures Dunbar's sad face in a close-up shot. Ten Bears' words "Now there is only a Sioux named Dances with Wolves, not any white soldier" are ultimately proved wrong when Dunbar along with his wife decides to leave the tribe with an excuse to secure their better future. He comes and takes away the last thing, the girl Stands With a Fist, that belongs to the white people. The very last scene shot from an extreme high angle reveals that the tribe also has moved somewhere, possibly to be extinct. This white man's presence brings no significant changes in their lives; rather the camera displays how he comes, sees, and conquers as all imperialists did. Throughout the film, Dunbar sees, narrates, and writes, and the camera compels us to see and believe what Dunbar wants.

Avatar as Savior for Infantilized Na'vis

The camera's active function as the imperial eye in *Avatar* portrays Sully as the savior god. The way Sioux people, in *Dances*, instantly discover a god in Dunbar, similarly, in *Avatar*, the aerial spirits, animals, and tribal people of Pandora find Sully different. Eytukan, Neytiri's father and clan leader, wants to learn more about Sully. Mo'at, Neytiri's mother and spiritual interpreter, wants her daughter to teach the alien Sully their ways of life. Mo'at says: "We have tried to teach other Sky People. It is hard to fill a cup which is already full." Though Mo'at's dialogue is significant here, the camera lens centers on Sully as he comes up with a reply, "My cup is empty, trust me" and glorifies the white hero creating the same fantasy among the spectators. Since that scene, Sully, as the so-called rational Western pioneer, dominates the plot and adopts the role of messiah. He asks Neytiri to teach him "to see," but the camera shows what Sully sees and feels. He surpasses the Nav'i people in attaining their culture and becomes the sixth Toruk Makto (a leader who manages to ride a great leonopteryx) for them. He fights mountain Banshees like a professional hunter. The camera in this hunting scene, as we see in the film *Dances*, takes a high-angle shot from above following Sully's chivalry and then focuses on Neytiri's happy face by demanding the spectators to be equally impressed (see *images 16 & 17*). The Natives sing his glory when he fights and as a subject, he starts to dominate the Native objects. The Skyman Colonel Miles Quaritch's mission of either relocating "blue monkeys," as RDA ringleader Parker Selfridge calls it or killing these mud-loving people gets sidelined by Jake Sully's fantasy of identifying with Na'vi people. As they accept his leadership, the Na'vis become the subaltern, inefficient to save their own tribe who, to quote Gayatri Spivak, "cannot speak" for themselves.



Image 16



Image 17



Image 18



Image 19

Like Dunbar in *Dances*, Sully also falls in love with a Native girl named Neytiri to be "mated for life." Gradually, we see the white man's success in penetrating the foundation of the Na'vi world. Despite having hot bodies and perfect ecological sensibilities, as David Brooks also identifies in his *NYT* article, the Na'vi need the "White Messiah to lead and inspire" their defense "when the military-industrial complex comes in to strip their homes." All of a sudden, as is typical in "white savior" movies, the Natives lose their power of judgment that saved them from Sky People for so long.

As soon as the Western hero's chivalric adventure starts, the camera becomes his loyal follower, as does the Na'vi tribe, and the "Others" remain invisible. To organize a strong protest against Sky People, Sully delivers a speech. The camera takes the whole shot at a circular angle, by showing the helpless Natives unable to protect their own land and Sully taking control against the white people. In that war speech, the camera projects Jake Sully from behind to feature the huge crowd listening to his revolutionary speech (see *image 18*). To gather all natives of the planet, Sully talks about the Sky People:

No one can stop them. Well, we will send them a message. You ride out as fast as the wind can carry you... You tell the other clans to come. Tell them Toruk Makto calls to them! You fly now, with me! My brothers! Sisters! And we will show the Sky People... That they cannot take whatever they want! And that this... this is our land!

Sully, like the neo-colonizers, utters the words “our land.” Sully, being accepted by the blue tribe, becomes their central hope, leads the tribe in war, and, as a white savior, protects their existence. The enormous crowd of tribal people remains outside the screen during this whole scene. They are marginalized, blurred, and infantilized through their shadowy body presence. Like Dunbar, Sully achieves prominence and is worshipped by the Natives (see *image 19*). Though taken from a high-angle crane shot, we identify the white hero while no other face can be recognized or named. Even in the last scene, Sully’s body is surrounded by unrecognizable Natives. In a close-up shot, Sully’s consciousness is shown to be transferred from his human body to a Nav’i figure and the film ends with the white hero’s fantasy of “going native” where the Native people remain as just props.

White Liberal Imagination, Camera Gaze, and Invisible Natives

The white hero, in both movies, acts as the messiah who wins over the Native savagery and colonizes the Native people through chivalric actions. The camera’s manipulative tricks and imperial gaze aggrandize the heroism of white heroes while the Native characters remain underrepresented. As John Dunbar and Jake Sully narrate the actions and consequences as signifiers, the subalterns are there only to be signified and defined by the dominant characters. While the Natives are portrayed as infantile not knowing what to do without their savior, the white protagonists are seen going native to lead the Natives as heroes and getting assimilated with the tribe. This “becoming” native, in Shohat and Stam’s words, is an example of the whites having the “privilege of playing at being Indian” (410). Dunbar does not go native, rather he “goes to the Natives,” as Randall A. Lake claims. Though these films claim to be anti-stereotype, they ghost the Indigenous people. Identifying the irony, Sherman Alexie states that, “All the white people will be Indians and all the Indians will be ghosts” (qtd. in Shohat and Stam 410). Moreover, the ending epitaph in *Dances with Wolves* affirms the vanishing Indian myth by showing the empty deserted Lakota prairie land.

In *Dances*, besides the camera angles and shots, other props such as the telescope, lights, cowboy hat, horse, coffee machine, dark cave-like room, Dunbar’s gun, his journal, and arrows—all contribute to communicating the imperialist intent. Similarly, *Avatar* subtly uses aerial spirits, arrows, guns, and spacecraft to convey its underlying message. In both films, the Western protagonist “goes native” without losing their whiteness. Dunbar, finally, leaves the Sioux tribe with his wife to start his “civilized” life when the Natives sing his glory. While Sully leaves his human body, he rises again as a Na’vi avatar being applauded by the tribe. None of these films shows a “‘wilderness marriage’ synthesis of European and Indian character” (Deloria 35), rather exemplifies the white hero’s superiority over the Natives.

The camera, in both films, contradicts the sympathetic-to-the-Indian story by accomplishing its neo-imperial objective. It aims to conceal what it ultimately reveals by portraying the heroes as rational leaders and the Natives as auxiliary props for the white exhibition. By presenting the white protagonists achieving glorified success, these Hollywood films, as Bruce Baum states in his review, instead “advance false hopes and political complacency” (636). Both protagonists’ imagination of “playing Indian” and being “more Indian

than the Indians” reassert the irony of the Western fantasy of assimilation while still sticking to conventional imperial trope by testifying “the impossibility of representation” through visual camera politics (Durham 125). Being produced in the Eurocentric film industry, these films reassure the powerlessness of the Indigenous Other. In *Dances with Wolves*, the Native Americans are cast to represent their community but none of them controls the plot, they rather play a subsidiary role. Similarly, in *Avatar*, Jake Sully dominates the camera screen, and the blue Natives of Pandora as black props increase the brightness of the white savior.

While this Eurocentric presentation of Indigenous people is not an unknown cinematic trope, this reasserts the importance of real resistant films. The camera has the power to resist the infantilization or marginalization of Native people and their traditions, as has been demonstrated in this essay. Though the actions and dialogues in these films do not explicitly humiliate the tribal people, the white protagonists’ all-surpassing presence on screen and the camera’s biased focus validate the age-old imperial tendency hidden in putative revisionist films such as *Dances with Wolves* and *Avatar*. These Hollywood films are the most polished version of British imperialist films where the Natives are consistently made to remain subordinate to the white man through cinematic apparatus. Hence, neither can we ignore the fantasy of Westerners nor should we ignore how the subjective camera with its imperial gaze predominates the plot by authenticating the white savior’s privilege to reimagine the Natives in their old image.

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