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Costume Design in James Cameron's Avatar:
The Reinforcement of the “Other”

"Europe equals Earth. The native Americans are the Na'vi. It's not meant to be subtle," James Cameron says in an interview with *Business Insider* (Han 2022). With this statement, Cameron confirms the plot of *Avatar* is metaphor for colonialism and the attempted and ongoing genocide of American Indigenous cultures. So why, in order to make commentary about colonialism and environmentalism, must the characters be aliens — inhuman, blue, and 10 ft tall? Why must the costume design of the “indigenous” characters resemble an exquisite corpse of references from several different non-white cultures? If the answer is some variation of ‘for the sake of sci-fi/alien coolness,’ it still does not justify the exoticism of American Indigenous peoples by way of exaggeration and caricature, nor the othering of cultures which the film appropriated with little to no credit. The lack of cohesion in the film’s costume design reveals the severe absence of thorough research and collaboration. Furthermore, the flippancy in its execution perpetuates a harmful grouping of these non-dominant, non-white cultures into a seemingly primitive monolith, or an “other.” (Hawthorne, 1989, p. 623)

While *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009) would have benefited deeply from investigative research and collaboration with its respective cultural/design inspirations in all aspects of the film, costume design requires notable effort. It informs every aspect of a film's characters, individually and collectively, and in turn, acts as a crucial world-building device. It is the most visually

conspicuous facet of this film, yet remains severely underdeveloped in matters of cohesion and ascription. In an interview with *Classiq*, *Avatar*'s costume designer, Deborah L. Scott, is asked to detail the costume designer's role. "You build the character!" She replies emphatically. In this same interview, she is asked if she used any "real-life references" for the Na'vi tribe, and for the Metkayina water tribe (which are introduced in *Avatar 2: The Way of Water*). She disregards the first part of the question and answers only the latter. "Extensive research was done worldwide on clans that live on and near the water. This all informs the design from a real-world perspective." (Classiq 2023) Even with the 'extensive research' done in preparation for the costume design of the Metkayina tribe, the film still faces backlash from Indigenous people and critics alike.

One of the design choices facing criticism is the use of ta moko, a traditional Maori tattoo with cultural and linguistic significance (Figure 1). In conversation with the Washington post, 21-year-old Maori tattoo artist (then 19), Mana Tyne, discusses how the film reduces the traditional tattoos to "meaningless shapes." (Figure 2) Tyne continues, "I don't want to have to sacrifice the significance of our practices that have already lost so much through colonialism." (The Washington Post 2022)

Deborah L. Scott's swift avoidance of the question about the Na'vi costume design was not accidental. There are several real-life inspirations for the Na'vi tribe. However, the application of this "inspiration" is a careless amalgamation of archetypes. In an interview with CNN, president and CEO of IllumiNative, Crystal Echo-Hawk, states,

"It's based on what James Cameron's notion is of what he thinks Indigenous history is, what he thinks Indigenous culture is... Everyone thinks that we're a monolith. What it does is flatten who Indigenous peoples are, what Indigenous cultures, language, practices are." (CNN 2022)

Deborah L. Scott exacerbates this flattening with the seemingly random conglomeration of cultural sources: American Indigenous, Pacific Islander, African etc. She never explicitly credits any tribes or cultural groups, she simply refers to “Indigenous people” when discussing her inspirations, but that is as far as the specificity goes. She mentions in a Costume Designers Guild article, “Indigenous people tend to use what they have in their environment.” (Costume Designers Guild 2023) While this sentiment is supported by the article “Clothing of Native American Cultures” (which describes Native American dress as diverse and environmentally adaptive, confirming those in warm climates wore little clothing, like the Na’vi [Figure 3]), it remains a broad and general statement. (Paterek 2024) It does not explicate the relationship between American Indigenous design inspiration and the numerous design references to African cultures.

In the first film, Na’vi prophetess and spiritual healer, Mo’at, is seen donning a red, Dinka corset, commonly seen in south Sudan (Figure 4) (Berg 2010, p. 425). Traditionally, the corset distinguishes age, wealth, social status, gender, etc. The red corset distinguishes the wearer as a young adult between the ages of 15-25 (Figure 5). Mo’at does not fit into this category. In the film script, she is described to be “a severe woman in her 50's.” (Cameron 2009) In this case, Mo’at would have worn a yellow Dinka corset more suitable for her age (Figure 6) (Nguru and Maina 2020, p. 92). *Avatar*’s costume designers researched just enough to appropriate elaborate African designs, but not enough to appropriate them accurately.

Award-winning journalist Rosalind Cummings-Yeates notes the omnipresence of African style influence. She states, “*Avatar* joins a cavalcade of fashion trendsetters in borrowing African fabric, jewelry, and hairstyles... Fashion comes and goes but African style always manages to

remain present.” She mentions another African influence in the film’s costume design: “Neytiri, the warrior princess played by Zoe Saldana, rocks braids adorned with beads in the same fashion that African women have worn for centuries.”(Figure 7) (Cummings-Yeates 2010) And yet these influences remain uncredited. The references are recognizable to experts and critics, but go unnoticed by the majority of *Avatar*’s broad viewership.

Even after overwhelming backlash by the affected people groups, the film suffers little to no consequence for these appropriations and large-scale stereotypes. In the article *The Politics of the Exotic: The Paradox of Cultural Voyeurism*, novelist and political activist Susan Hawthorne explains why these monosyllabic portrayals remain so prominent. She attributes the success to the dominant (Western) group's assumption that the stereotype always fits. (Hawthorne 1989, p. 625) The physical appearance and dress of the Na’vi or the “alien” in *Avatar* simply becomes a vehicle for exoticization, reinforcement of harmful stereotypes, and grouping of racialized cultures into a monolith.

The inaccuracies, lack of credit, and lazy conglomeration of different (relative and non-relative) cultures permeates through many portrayals of the “alien” or “alien species” in science fiction. The depiction of a true “alien” culture is almost non-existent. Most every portrayal in popular media becomes a borrowing of histories and cultures the dominant culture deems as foreign or “alien.” (Figures 8, 9, 10, 11) Science fiction author and astrophysicist Gregory Benford states: “There are generally no true aliens in such epics, only a retreading of our own history. This underlying structure is so common in science fiction, even now, that it is difficult to know whether we should attribute it to simple lack of imagination or to a deep unconscious need to return repeatedly to the problem.” (Benford, 1980, p. 55)

Susan Hawthorne reinforces this idea and elaborates on why the popular culture relies so heavily on foreign cultures to represent the alien: “This appropriation occurs because of the emptiness of Western culture; its rootlessness arising out of its expansion into every corner of the world.” (Hawthorne 1989, p. 621) She discusses how often members of dominant groups (the audience) unknowingly contribute to the reinforcement of the idea of a “primitive” culture. This structure is so ubiquitous it is nearly impossible to dismantle. Voices from affected groups are ultimately ignored. Box office profits seem to outweigh these voices. Hawthorne states: “The pro-gressive expansion of patriarchal capitalism... is what leaves us trapped in the paradox, without any strategies for escape or even ways of making sense of our situation.”(Hawthorne 1989, p. 618)

Through character and costume design, *Avatar*, 2009, perpetuates this portrayal of primitivism. The film designates the human civilization the white, dominant culture, and the “primitive,” alien civilization the non-white, non-dominant culture, creating a hierarchy which effectively separates the dominant culture from everyone else. It maintains the idea that all the cultural references used in the film fall into this category, forcing several non-dominant cultures into one group: the “other.”



Figure 1: Ta Moko (Maori tattoo) on Robert Hohepa Hei photographed by Aaron Smale
<https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/ta-moko/>



Figure 2: Tonowari (Metkayina tribe leader) with Maori inspired tattoos

James Cameron's Avatar: The Way of Water, Costume Design by Deborah Scott

– Photo: 20th Century Studios

<https://static1.srcdn.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/avatar-metkayina-tattoos.jpg?q=50&fit=crop&w=825&dpr=1.5>



Figure 3: Na'vi in loincloths

James Cameron's Avatar: The Way of Water, Costume Design by Deborah Scott

– Photo: 20th Century Studios

<https://static0.gamerantimages.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/avatar-the-way-of-water-characters.jpg>



Figure 4: Mo'at (Na'vi spiritual leader) wearing Sudanese corset
James Cameron's Avatar, 2009, Costume Design by Deborah Scott
– Photo: 20th Century Studios

<https://www.looper.com/img/gallery/the-untold-truth-of-moat-from-avatar/moat-is-the-conscience-of-the-film-1661313672.jpg>



Figure 5: Married woman (15-25) in Dinka corset, Sudan

<https://ifamstories.org/artists/roots-of-south-sudan/>

https://ifamstories.org/wp-content/uploads/Artists/South-Sudan-Roots/South-Sudan_roots-project-mary-padar_dinka-corset-santa-fe_2012.jpg

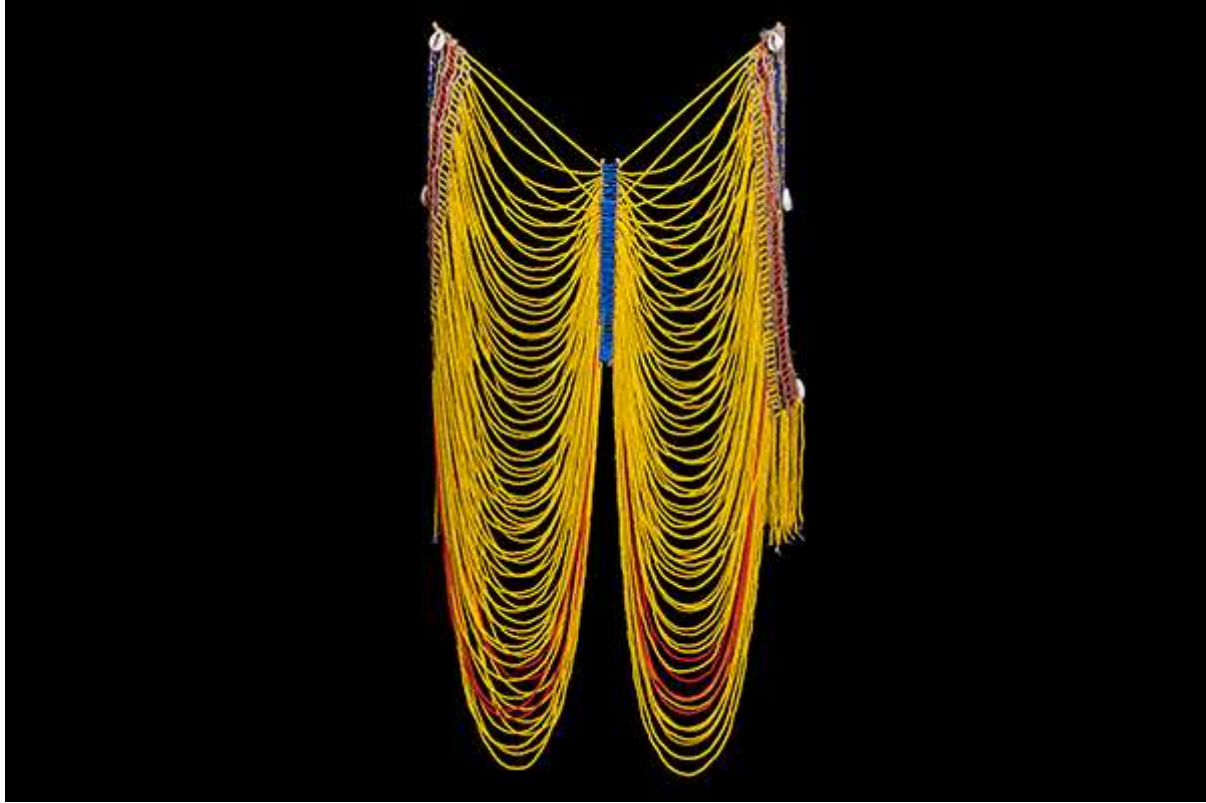


Figure 6: Dinka, traditional tribal, beaded corset with curved graduated bands of yellow, blue, and red small Glass Beads. Sudan, East Africa.

<https://pebblelondon.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/10827.jpg>



Figure 7: Neytiri (warrior princess) with a braided, beaded hairstyle.
James Cameron's Avatar, 2009, Costume Design by Deborah Scott
– Photo: 20th Century Studios

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Figure 8: Queen Genepil, last queen consort of Mongolia

https://miro.medium.com/v2/resize:fit:756/1*aOGyqSdjEvFvySMT6GNDGQ.jpeg

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fmedium.com%2Fframe-of-reference%2Fdid-the-last-queen-of-mongolia-inspire-a-major-star-wars-character-6edfece1c43b&psig=AOvVaw2CgnW01dCaiAj1bvz5eKOI&ust=1733719360619000&source=images&cd=vfe&opi=89978449&ved=0CBcQjhxqFwoTCNDirleul4oDFQAAAAAdAAAAABAP>



Figure 9: Padmé Amidala, Queen of Naboo in Mongolian inspired dress from George Lucas' *Star Wars* film series.

– Photo: LucasFilms and 20th Century Studios

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Figure 10: Lady Jessica of the Atreides in Headscarf with script written on her face from Denis Villeneuve's *Dune*, 2021

– Photo: Warner Bros. Pictures and Legendary Pictures

https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/6035144426ec817724dd37bf/d8f388ef-9b78-4521-9d9c-a3f437a4f5f8/dune_photo12.jpeg

https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dunemagazine.net%2Feng-trans%2Freview-dune&psig=AOvVaw2SskWQt2IE0q-w8cgPVdOq&ust=1733719861110000&source=images&cd=vfe&opi=89978449&ved=0CBQQjRxqFwoTCLjy6_mv14oDFQAAAAAdAAAAABAY

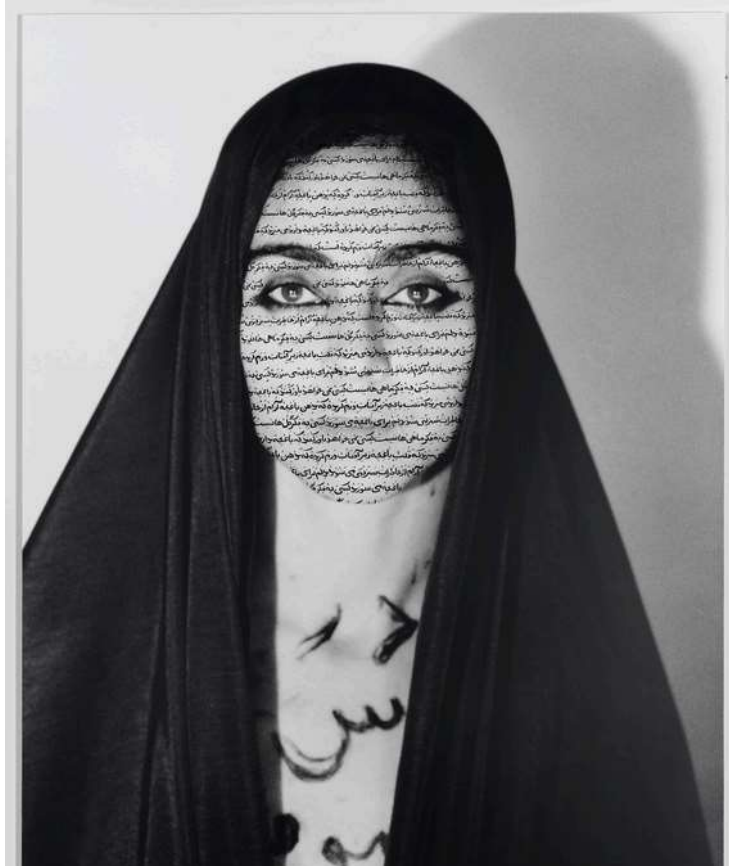


Figure 11: Shirin Neshat *Unveiling* (1993)

Woman of Allah series

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