

Avatar and the Movements of Neocolonial Sentimental Cinema

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***Avatar* and the Movements of Neocolonial Sentimental Cinema**

Kyla Schuller

Modes of literature, art, and film animate the body and acculturate its movements. Sentimentalism, an Enlightenment epistemology and aesthetic mode that remains a viable form in commercial cinema, makes the audience's embodied connection with the characters onscreen central to the pleasure of viewing. In the present moment, something is often dismissively called "sentimental" when its flagrant and seemingly feminized indulgence in emotion appears rather more cliché than heartfelt. Sentimental approaches to knowledge production position self-reflective feelings as the individual's most reliable indicator of truth. As an aesthetic mode, sentimental texts seek to elicit emotional and physiological feelings in audiences that mirror those of the characters, most famously in the form of melodrama's shared tears.¹ Yet while sentimentality in cinema serves as a particularly useful resource for thinking about how images move the viewer's body, all modes create patterns of sensory and motor response. Building on Kara Keeling's notion of cinematic "common sense," a set of habituated sensorimotor movements and collective images shared by contemporary consumers of film, I suggest that modes function as a political organization of the senses.² Modes train sensorimotor responses in the context of specific social relations such that they function as a political organization of affective response.

In this essay, I turn to James Cameron's blockbuster film *Avatar* (2009) to explore how and to what ends contemporary sentimental cinema moves the bodies of its subjects and audience.³ The highest-grossing film yet released, *Avatar* combines the emotional intensity of a tearjerker with the suspense and stimulation of a violent action film. This familiar and profitable combination of sensation and sentiment provokes us to consider how the pleasure of predictable cinema consists of the emotional satisfaction not only of met expectations but also of performing a habitual repertoire of physical sensations.⁴ The synchronic "pulse beats and sobs" of the bodies of viewer and actor in sentimental texts transpire through the exercise of sympathy, an imaginative projection into the hearts, minds, and bodies of another.⁵ Typically in U.S. nineteenth- and twentieth-century iterations of the mode, the objects of sympathy have been marginalized by the social processes of race, class, and/or disability. The viewer thus simultaneously experiences the relief of an emotional catharsis, the munificence of an affective rescue, and the gratification of a newfound position of status vis-à-vis the abject position of the object of viewer sympathy.⁶ I examine how Cameron marshals existing patterns of sensory-emotional movement typical of the sentimental mode while also adapting the form to contemporary political and technological conditions. Synchronically moving the bodies of characters and viewers on the level of content, production, and reception, Cameron creates a neoliberal iteration of sentimentalism that markets sensory stimulations, emotional movements, and affective responses. Through both plot and 3-D formal composition, *Avatar* extends the sentimental premise that the modern subject can animate the bodies of racial and sexual Others through imagining to feel and move as their bodies do. While generations of liberal reformers have argued that the experience of shared feeling elicited by sentimental texts produces a powerful affective bond that can be harnessed into social change, recent work in feminist criticism underscores the degree to which sentimentalism depends on asymmetrical power relations.⁷ *Avatar* brings into stark relief the degree to which sentimentalism stimulates the sensation of the audiences' own responsive, sympathetic body through dismissing the sovereignty of movement of the "savage."

Focusing on the centrality of movement to sentimental dynamics helps clarify the role of movement in affective responses and emotional relations. In what follows, I explore how sentimentalism functions as a key rhetoric of movement, one intertwined with the logic of racialization and colonialism, by briefly addressing the nineteenth-century heyday of sentimental popular culture in

the United States. In this period, to be racialized was to lack the capacity for progressive movement, to be permanently incapable of moving forward through time. I turn to *Avatar* to explore the politics of sentimental movement as it persists in the twenty-first century, analyzing how movement, both physical and emotional, becomes a resource for the protagonist as well as for Cameron himself. On the level of plot, the film tracks Jake Sully as he transitions from a paralyzed ex-marine, whose body problematically symbolizes the degenerate state of this dystopian future world, to someone who moves and feels as a Na'Vi, whose resistance to modernity now serves an important resource for colonists fleeing a forward and destructive march of time. I also examine the film's production and reception, showing how Cameron's computer-generated imagery (CGI) team isolated the movements that comprise emotion and thereby created new ways to incorporate viewers and actors in the embodied dynamics of sentiment and the sensory pleasures of late capitalism. In this juxtaposition of two moments in the history of popular sentimentality, *Avatar* revisits the nineteenth-century motif of the savage to suggest a new kind of twenty-first-century sentimental fantasy in which the overcivilized subject occupies the virile body and vital movements of the savage, availing himself of her uncorrupted ontological, affective, and epistemological resources.

Sentiment as Movement

In the Western racial imaginary, movement helps qualify a body for agency. As Denis Diderot explained in the eighteenth century, sensibility is the capacity "to perceive impressions of external objects," and sentiment, in turn, is "an emotional 'movement' in response to a physical sensation."⁸ When someone remarks that a film was "moving," he or she draws on the ongoing legacy of sensibility and sentimentalism. "From eighteenth-century literature through twentieth-century cinema," James Chandler asserts, "the sentimental spectator [who functions both as part of the plot and as witness to the plot] proves to be a figure in motion. Able to assume multiple locations in narrative space, this figure is defined in no small part by its capacity to pass virtually into other points of view."⁹ Feminist literary criticism has hotly debated the ends to which sentimental texts move their audiences and characters. Here, I think about the premise of sentimental movement itself, asking how the mobility of the sentimental spectator is construed. What functions in the

role of the static, the empty, and the permeable through which the vehicularity of the sentimental spectator comes into view?

Affect theory and sensory studies help us to appreciate the importance of the physiological dimensions of feeling to sentimental discourse. In turn, underscoring the centrality of movement to the discourse helps clarify its political valences. Sentimentalism emerged hand in hand with the modern discourse of racial difference, a spatiotemporal logic about a body's physical, mental, and psychic capacity for progress. As Dana Luciano has shown in her astute analysis of nineteenth-century sentimentalism as a discourse about time, to be civilized was to have achieved a temporal triumph over the body's physical and emotional impulses, to have the self-control to domesticate the impulsive sensations of the present into reflective sentiments that will secure the race's millennial future. In contrast, as Luciano analyzes, writers and scientists argued that people of color experienced only fleeting and impulsive sensations, a kind of floundering movement that exhausted itself rather than precipitated into sentiment, thus failing to carry an individual or a race forward through time.¹⁰ Most white scientists saw people of color as animated fossils, forever doomed to repeat the experiences of prehistoric societies and incapable of self-directed progress.¹¹

Thus, the prevailing ideas about race, particularly in the nineteenth-century U.S. context shaped by African American slavery and de facto and de jure wars against Native American populations, stressed that only the bodies of the civilized could transform sensory experience into corporeal *and* emotional movement. Adapting John Locke's theory of the infant body as a tabula rasa, racial thinkers posited that Anglo-Saxons alone, and especially their children, possessed plastic, malleable constitutions capable of absorbing the impressions made upon their senses and conjuring an appropriate emotional movement in response.¹² While sentimental writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lydia Maria Child contested the idea that people of color would remain static, their texts represent movement through imitation rather than self-initiation.¹³ Sianne Ngai has analyzed writers and scientists who argued that people of color in U.S. racial formations, lacking sovereignty over their own movements, were instead characterized by "animatedness."¹⁴ The alleged impulsiveness and animatedness of nonwhites serves as the proxy through which the predictable rhythms of sentimental feeling—for protagonists as well as audiences—cohere.

In the nineteenth-century United States, the emotional stirrings and gestural responses elicited by sentimental fiction and visual art helped bring the middle-class body politic into being through and against the allegedly torpid existences of the racialized, colonized,

disabled, and imprisoned. Glenn Hendler aptly characterizes the “sentimental structure of feeling” of nineteenth-century middle-brow culture, in which the goals of sympathy and right feeling functioned as an emergent public consciousness. Adapting Raymond Williams’s notion of structure of feeling, Hendler emphasizes that the significance of sympathy was less an edict to individual behavior and more a shared affective register important to the formation of the middle class.¹⁵ In the contemporary moment, sentimental modes no longer register public sentiments *in process*. Instead, as Berlant argues, sentimental films evoke a centuries-long tradition to assemble and reassemble “intimate publics” with which women viewers “*already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge” gleaned from shared historical experience.¹⁶ Sentimentalism no longer precipitates a class in formation but rather rehearses the emotional and affective responses of a feminized viewing public that returns again and again to its stimulations, regardless of critics’ declamations of its triteness and inauthenticity.

Sentimentalism is hardly the only mode that creates, over time, a repertoire of emotional and physical reactions, one that may be recognizable in certain genre formations such as melodrama, science fiction, and fantasy. In the shift from the nineteenth-century novel to the contemporary Hollywood film, sentimentalism has become part of the collective “common sense” of the mass-mediated public, in Keeling’s sense of the term. In this generic shift from literary text to moving image, popular sentimental texts now train the eye as much as they cultivate emotional effects such as tears, sympathy, and the glow of good deeds. For Keeling, common sense refers to both a “shared set of motor contrivances that affect subjective perception *and* to a collective set of memory-images,” experienced by viewers acculturated to popular images, both generic and medial.¹⁷ From a perspective that underscores the role of movement in sentimental discourse, the frequent denigration of sentimentalism as cliché is no accident, for clichés trigger both familiar cognitive patterns as well as habituated physical movements. According to Keeling, a filmic “cliché” reestablishes a preexisting relationship between a familiar image and the viewer’s “motor contrivances,” or the body’s repository of stored actions of the past. Clichés thus motivate the repetition of habituated movement.¹⁸ Sentimental visual tropes such as a dying child, a pretty girl in love, or an affluent woman dedicating herself to helping the less fortunate train the affective and corporeal dimensions of the body for particular repertoires of feeling. Sentimentalism, then, is not unique in cultivating habituated physiological and psychological response but instead is only unusual for the transparency with which it operates.

While sentimentalism has become part of the common sense of those exposed to the U.S. culture industry, the form itself is not static. I now turn to *Avatar* to examine how the imaging technology engineered by Cameron's production team provides novel ways for the viewer to experientially move as the (racialized) Other, thereby updating the sentimental mode for the aesthetic and economic conditions of late capitalism wherein affective encounters and sensory stimulations are prized. *Avatar's* postapocalyptic CGI world brings the biopolitical aspects of sentimentalism into relief, such that the (over)civilized subjects—including producer, protagonist, and viewer—project themselves into the bodies of the Na'Vi “noble savages,” whose inability to move forward through time is now perceived as a resource.

Paralyzed Modernity

The storyline of *Avatar* combines the colonialist romance narrative of a white male explorer's union with an attractive royal native woman familiar since Malinche with a white savior/race traitor plot along the lines of *Dances with Wolves*.¹⁹ An offscreen mugging-turned-murder dispatches *Avatar's* hero, the ex-marine Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), to the occupied planet Pandora in the year 2154 in the place of his now-deceased twin brother. Jake's twin had been a trained scientist, for whom a team of ethnobotanists (or xenobotanists) employed by the multinational corporation the Resources Development Administration (RDA), headed by Dr. Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver), grew a matching avatar in the distinct three-meter tall, blue, catlike personages of Pandora's Na'Vi people. Unlike the Malinche myth, these avatars mask visible difference so that the scientists can conduct fieldwork freely among the Na'Vis. It isn't until Jake's spacecraft lands on Pandora that we see that gravity forces him to use a wheelchair; his narrative flashback announcing his refusal to be an object of pity accompanies a full-body shot of him alone in the frame—the last to leave the plane. We have thus been introduced to Sully as a normative white male subject; the jump to a full-body shot later reveals that the specter of the degenerate violence of the war-torn, resource-depleted planet Earth haunts Sully's body as well—a shot in the back during an assignment in Venezuela has left him paralyzed from the waist down. The viewers' surprise at learning that he uses a wheelchair consolidates the notion that this is a senseless injury, something ancillary rather than integral to Jake's subjectivity. Indeed, Sully will soon function as the avatar of our own heroic impulses to rescue the less fortunate

and will cease to be the marginalized target of our sympathy. The pursuit of bioprospecting among the Na'Vis provides Sully with an opportunity to participate in the normalized movements of progress, granting him reprieve from the repeated, cyclical motions of his wheelchair.²⁰ As Augustine and her team are collecting data on Na'Vi culture and Pandoran flora and fauna, RDA, the funders of the enterprise, seek to move the Na'Vis off their land so RDA can access the mineral deposits below. Soon Jake is playing for both teams, despite their contrary goals.

Continuing a long-standing colonialist and evolutionary trope, *Avatar* associates movement with vitality, progress, and naturalness and the lack of movement with degeneration and decay. Movement signifies progress and civilization; stasis thus characterizes *overcivilization*, the era following an empire's peak. If shallow, unreflective movement characterized savagery as prehistorical in late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century accounts, then the once lithe but now limp limbs of the paralyzed symbolize the degeneration of whiteness and the arrest of the mobile sentimental spectator constitutive of the epoch *after* civilization in this twenty-first-century account. Sully's paraplegic body—framed as at once virile and unnaturally still—has been arrested in time, signaling the toxicity of life on Earth. Cameron employs disability as a “narrative prosthesis” in which disability serves primarily to “shore up normalcy somewhere else,” in this case the halcyon days of yore.²¹ The gray-blue pallor of the mercenary compound on Pandora similarly evokes an empire past the state of health, one in which advanced weaponry does not so much augment the virile body as serve as its proxy.

Nineteenth-century sentimentalism developed within an emergent biocultural discourse of civilization that dovetailed with U.S. and European imperial conquest and Protestant visions of the impending joyous second coming of Christ on Earth. *Avatar* reinvigorates these earlier conventions of sentiment in order to capture a quite different millennial moment than that eagerly awaited by the nineteenth-century Protestant faithful: an epoch in which impending ecological collapse and the post-9/11 reality of stateside threats to U.S. imperial hegemony have dampened the teleological fantasy that moving forward through time and accelerating technological mastery necessarily will bring about progress. While nineteenth-century sentimentalism developed within an emergent discourse and practice of imperial expansion that celebrated movement, the biopolitics of twenty-first-century sentimentalism captures a middle-class fear that time has been moving too fast, ushering in an epoch of *overcivilization* in which modernity becomes toxic to the bodies of its seemingly rightful inheritors. In contrast, the bodies

of the Na'Vis—characterized in the film as noble savages innocent of the corrupting influences of modernity—cannot move forward through time and thus retain a vital force in this dystopian future by virtue of their ahistoricity.

Avatar's imaging technology creates new ways to incorporate viewers and actors in the embodied dynamics of sentimental projection and the sensory pleasures of late capitalism. Particularly in its 3-D versions, including Dolby 3-D, RealD, and IMAX (the film was also released in a standard 2D version), *Avatar* enacts the sentimental dynamic in which the audience experiences sensory movements that are similar to those of the protagonists. The viewer not only watches Sully don the perceptual apparatus of the Na'Vis; through the 3-D lenses, the viewer too is offered an avatar body, roaming through a world in which 70 percent consists entirely of CGI.²² Due to the millions of dollars that cinemas have invested in installing 3-D technology—and indeed *Avatar* was instrumental in getting theaters to invest in new digital projection systems—the viewer also experiences a new sensory capacity of depth, texture, illumination, and movement as the eyes take in two overlapped images instead of the traditional single image of the screen. The viewer functionally has a new set of eyes, however nausea-inducing the 3-D goggles might be for some. When Sully first awakens in his avatar body, he immediately enlivens it with the risk-taking movements and quick responses of a trained fighter. Rejecting the medical team's command to "take it nice and slow" and perform a series of "sensorimotor reflex tests" before rising from the gurney, Jake wiggles his toes, rolls his ankles, and jumps into wobbly but decisive action. In this sequence, an early point-of-view shot of his hands rising up to meet his eyes encourages the viewer to identify with his joy over this new body's motion. The scene's only close-up shots focus our attention on Sully's newly vital limbs, revealing his supple feet peeling off the ground in a gleeful sprint and digging into the soft ground, dirt streaming between his toes. Sully's virile love of movement compels him to pursue his own pleasure-oriented sensory-reflex tests despite the scientists' threat of immediate sedation, and we see him rapturously explore each of his five new sensory faculties.

As Sully learns to live in the dynamic forest, leaves coddle his body, plants burst in colorful light, and luminescent flying creatures spiral away from him in 3-D CGI, rendering new image patterns that immerse the viewer in new sensory experience. Immersion in Sully's gradual abilities to navigate the utterly dynamic and radiant Pandoran landscape are awash in the verdant hues of blue and green, which stands in sharp contrast to the muted gray military-bureaucratic palate of the RDA compound, and provides much of

the film's pleasure. As Deborah Levitt has argued, "Where older 3-D films tended to achieve their most striking affects in projectiles—objects moving toward the spectators—*Avatar* uses its 3-D to create the experience of moving into and navigating through an ornately rendered deep-space cinema. . . . The film is thus as much *about* the spectator's training regimen as it is about Jake's."²³ Extensive use of a handheld and consistently moving camera, rapid widening of the frame, tracking shots, quick vertical ascents, vertiginous downward shots during flying scenes, rapid cuts between overhead shots and point-of-view shots, and other techniques surprise the eye and attempt to render palpable the freedom of movement felt by Sully and Neytiri, the daughter of the Na'Vi leaders as well as Sully's teacher and romantic interest. The underwater setting of the first sequel, currently scheduled for a 2015 release, will similarly enable Cameron to capitalize on the viewers' joy of experiencing a new kind of sensory faculty alongside weightless movement.

Yet these technologized visual and motile stimulations work carefully within the sentimental mode, which cultivates a particular pattern of affective response to sensory input. Such modes condition the body as well as mental responses, creating the pleasure of continued, if not quite fulfilled, movements. Indeed, the ways that culture more generally trains the body's sensorimotor faculties provides Cameron with a significant plot outline. Positioned as an outsider to field research, to intellectual pursuits more generally, and to the Na'Vi language and culture, Sully is rendered an impressible blank slate. Life as a Na'Vi in the forest immerses him in sensory experience; the process of scientific study enables a distanced reflection. Under Neytiri's increasingly tender instruction, Sully learns how to sleep, run, hunt, fly, navigate, and have sex in his avatar body. Meanwhile back at the camp, Sully learns that "good science is good observation," a pursuit that depends not only on the visual but on multisensory engagement with the world followed by a structure for reflection—a process that reveals the continued legacy of sentimental epistemologies. Indeed, both modern scientific practice and sentimental popular culture have shared origins in the Lockean approach to empiricism as knowledge derived from the senses. Sully is informed that at the end of each day in the field they must keep a video log describing "what they see, what they feel," and his ethnobotanic account serves as the film's narration. Science is Sully's mechanism for reflecting on his new sensory experiences and is rendered flatly on a small video monitor; the resplendent 3-D world of *Avatar*, meanwhile, is ours. True to the sentimental ethic, Sully's contemplations on the sensations of his Na'Vi body propel a significant political shift. Feeling as

a Na'Vi soon aligns Sully's politics with the Na'Vis, and he switches his allegiance to what the film constructs as a sanctified indigenous life in utter harmony with the forces of life itself. Soon, he fights the RDA corporation's mercenaries as a Na'Vi warrior and eventually as a once-in-a-millennium Na'Vi leader.

Yet following the nineteenth-century racialized logic of movement, not all bodies can be trained to adopt a new sensory pattern of response. When Sully's boss Augustine remarks that "no one can teach you to see," the emphasis is on teaching—some bodies are predisposed to learning, while others are destined to be static. In the racial economy, the bodies of the (over)civilized are always already capable of absorbing new embodied experiences, of possessing a certain sensory and emotional mastery that ensures that Sully will in fact learn anew how to see with his Na'Vi set of eyes. "I have to trust my body to know what to do," he says, reinvigorated through his experience of animating the Na'Vi body. Sully's physical fluency exists in part in his ability to step outside his body altogether and project himself into the corporal form of another. In the U.S. racial imaginary, the figure of the person of color is not only permanently saddled with a body, in contrast to the abstract, disembodied subjectivity of the prototypical white male; this body is also functionally inert, unable to carry the individual toward the future. In *Avatar*, this inertia guarantees that the bodies of the primitive race—which can be occupied and driven by the colonizer—are an untapped ontological resource that the civilized and worn-out from modernity can exploit. Indeed, following the Na'Vi defeat of the RDA's army, Neytiri's mother, the Na'Vi spiritual leader, permanently relocates Sully's soul from his disabled human body into his avatar form. The last shot, of Sully opening his Na'Vi eye, underscores the role of sensory mastery in his occupation. Frederick Jackson Turner famously argued in his Frontier Thesis that the closing of the U.S. frontier at the end of the nineteenth century threatened the evolutionary potential of the national body, dependent as it was on invigorating and redemptive contact and battle with "primitive" native inhabitants unsoftened by the ways of civilization. In *Avatar's* twenty-second-century future, the settlers do not just wear the clothing of the natives; instead, the settlers clothe themselves with the *bodies* of the natives.

The Technology of Affect

True to the sentimental mode, complicit with both nineteenth- and twenty-first-century discourses of race, *Avatar* presents Sully's

relocation to a Na'Vi body as redemption rather than colonization on account of the emotional sympathy and political allegiance he has demonstrated for Pandora's residents. If right feelings guide his actions, the logic goes, then the actions must be right. For the affective political premise of sentimental texts to be successful—that audiences too will experience political transformation—the viewers must feel and move in alignment with the characters.

Adapting the sentimental mode to late capitalist conditions, Cameron in the production process found emotional movements as being the key to forging new affective connections between humans and CGI and to rendering the shapes of the racialized population resources for a new kind of immersive spectacle.

Anthropomorphized forms are often thought to inspire revulsion, rather than affinity, in audiences when they resemble typical human morphology and movement too closely. Cameron's production team's method of traversing this "uncanny valley" was through creating CGI characters whose emotional expressions triggered cascades of recognizable facial and bodily movements, transforming these fictional beings from automated graphics into affectively reassuring "emotional creatures."²⁴ Animators at Weta Digital, a studio that employed nearly nine hundred people, first developed two custom software applications to render the Na'Vis' cartography of emotion, one to simulate the movements of the body's muscles and the other to simulate the movements of the face.²⁵ Following Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen's widely used FACS (Facial Action Coding System) protocol of measuring facial behaviors, up to seventy dots painted on each actor's face enabled cameras to record "a map of muscle firings," capturing the collisions of "tissue layers [and] tendon sheets" that make up "the dynamics of flesh as it moves."²⁶ In preproduction, animators then translated this data into as many as fifteen hundred mobile "blendshapes" composing each character's face.²⁷ On set, new performance-capture techniques functioned in real time, enabling actors to animate their CGI characters and enabling the crew to observe the digital avatars moving through Pandora's 3-D environment.²⁸ When Worthington smiled, for example, his image simultaneously animated Sully's mouth on the green screen behind him. This rendered the *Avatar* set a twenty-first-century sentimental text, one in which the characters do not merely imaginatively project themselves into the bodies of the characters with whom they sympathize. Instead, the actors and the animators together literally animate the bodies of the Na'Vis.

Yet just as the aesthetics and robotics theory of the uncanny valley posits a normative body that comprises the human, Cameron relied on a popular scientific model of human emotion that

assumes the universality of facial expression. As literary theorist Daniel M. Gross writes about the FACS method, “Emotions cannot be broken down into basic units—whether that means molecules, brain images, or facial expressions—without losing track of the phenomenon at hand.”²⁹ Emotion, Gross stresses, is inherently rhetorical. Approaches such as Ekman and Friesen’s and applications such as Cameron’s neglect the ways that culture trains the brain, the body, and its affective responses, whether through the sympathetic stirrings of a familiar romance plot or the repeated muscle firings stimulated by linguistic patterns. The expressions of the Na’Vis do not capture the essence of human emotion but instead provide a surface for the projection of the corporeal and affective norms of Hollywood.

Cameron rendered his computer-generated Na’Vi species as affectively palatable through norms of emotional movement mapped onto the visage of racial difference. Many reviewers have aptly noted *Avatar*’s horrifyingly racist depiction of the Na’Vis.³⁰ The Na’Vis are given the long tails, expressive and pointy ears, and hissing and clawing movements of felines and are portrayed not only as intimately coexisting with Pandora’s creatures but also erotically so. Directed by Cameron to create an exotic figure whom the audience would “want to fuck,” the concept artist who developed Neytiri explained that his “inspiration” for the female lead was “a kind of ethnic face”; while working for Cameron, the concept artist adorned the walls of his studio with pictures of Mary J. Blige, Q’Orianka Kilcher (who played Pocahontas in Terrence Malick’s *The New World* [2005]), and other “really beautiful ethnic women.”³¹ *Avatar*’s creatures depend simultaneously on the fiction of universalizable emotional expression with the specifics of racialized animation.

As with many other science fiction and fantasy franchises, the affective power of a mythical race in *Avatar* created for the pleasure of the viewer produces a robust fan culture. More than five thousand members had posted nearly six hundred thousand posts to the forums at LearnNavi.org, for example, by the summer of 2013; on this March weekday more than four years after the film’s release, eighty-nine members had logged on concurrently. The film’s efforts to twin the movements of the audience with those of the characters onscreen acculturated some viewers to an emotional environment that only Cameron could provide. Within months of the film’s release, fans posted more than three thousand comments on an Internet forum devoted to what film scholar Matthew Holtmeier has termed “post-Pandoran depression”; the Urban Dictionary less graciously offers the neologism “avaturd” to describe

suffering fans.³² As a fan named Mike wrote, “Watching the wonderful world of the Navi made me want to be one of them. I can’t stop thinking about all the things that happened in the film and all the tears and shivers I got from it. I even contemplate suicide thinking that if I do it I will be rebirthed in a world similar to Pandora.”³³ Mike details the sensorial stimulation of sentimental cinema: the new images and the identification between the viewers’ perceptive apparatus and that of the film’s characters produce a familiar emotional reaction that trembles the frame and stimulates the passions. Other viewers bemoan returning to a daily life that suddenly seems “gray,” “meaningless,” and “dying”—characteristics not dissimilar from the RDA station where Sully’s paraplegic body is bound.³⁴ The end result of the new sensory engagements that parallel Sully’s experience on Pandora is less a feeling of sympathy than a sense of sensorial and emotional deprivation. The trauma of the response suggests a body that has been conditioned by the text to need precisely this form of sensorial stimulation and affective engagement. Forum suggestions for combating this depression include rewatching the movie, purchasing and listening to the soundtrack, purchasing and playing the video game, and making connections to real-life humans. Cameron’s cultural productions are less an escape from the pressures of life in late capitalism than a strategic commodification of sensory and emotional movements.

While the plot suggests the evils of capitalism and stages Na’Vi resistance to neocolonial brutality, the film itself is a stunning example of the neoliberal culture industry. Neoliberalism commodifies the affective links between individuals, turning human bonds into new opportunities for profit (as in the case of social media such as Facebook) and making cultural consumption an important part of demonstrating sociability.³⁵ Critical consumers of culture are not somehow resistant to capitalism but instead form a key market for its products. As Wanda Vradi argues, “the communicative and affective competencies demanded by the ‘new economy’ have done more to solidify the stronghold of neoliberal ideology than erode it.”³⁶ Furthermore, what these cultural texts and forms of human connection—such as Facebook—often are selling is not a static product that sits on a shelf but rather the sense of being alive, of being connected to others, of intense emotional experiences. This sensation is tied to what occurs in Keeling’s *The Witch’s Flight* on the horizon of social change. For Keeling, the possibility of social change occurs when perception is overwhelmed and breaks the habituated motor response; then mindful thinking happens, and with it comes the possibility of creating new kinds of thoughts and responses. In contrast, *Avatar* seeks to hold the mind in suspension,

in part through its seamless suspension of the viewer's sensory faculties within the movements onscreen. As Cameron told Discovery News, "from a director's standpoint, I don't want to be constantly reminding you that you're sittin' in a movie theater with a pair of glasses on watching a 3-D film. I want you to be absorbed *into* the movie."³⁷ Immersion, which has long been a part of mass spectacle dating back to the eighteenth-century phantasmagoria, proves in its contemporary form to be enduringly profitable; *Avatar* grossed \$2.78 billion as of December 2012.³⁸

When Cameron is not behind the camera, he fashions himself as a contemporary explorer and an environmental hero. Recently he became the first solo person to reach the ocean's lowest point, traveling on a vertical torpedo to the bottom of the Marianas Trench; Cameron intends to shoot footage for *Avatar 2* in the trench's deepest crevice.³⁹ The real movement that the *Avatar* franchise celebrates is that of Cameron and his production team—the movement of manipulating time, isolating, translating, and recomposing the movements of the emotional body. *Avatar* extends the sentimental premise that the civilized progress through their emotional movements for the less civilized, figuring a modern neoliberal subject who animates the bodies of a mythical race. Such an ability, the film posits, will enable the primitive to save the over-civilized from themselves, this time offering their very bodies and spirits—not just their planet—as the natural resources that the colonizers need. Several months after *Avatar's* release, the *New York Times* ran a photo of Cameron striding purposefully alongside a coalition of indigenous residents of members of Brazil's Xingu River region, face painted and head adorned in colorful cloth (though, unlike the other men in the shot, wearing a shirt and long pants). The accompanying story praises Cameron's efforts to "emotionalize' environmental issues" and help the tribe oppose the construction of what would be the world's third-largest dam, which would alternately flood and desiccate hundreds of square miles. Cameron explained to the indigenous coalition that "the civilized world slowly, slowly pushes into the forest and takes away the world that used to be." Afterward, he "danced haltingly, shaking a spear," with Xingu River tribe leaders, including José Carlos Arara.⁴⁰ Once again, liberal sympathy takes the form of animating the racialized body whose location outside of time ensures a primitive, virile resource that late capitalism threatens to destroy.

In the twenty-first-century sentimental narrative, the mobility of the creator and the audience continues to depend on the abject motility of the racialized suffering. Just as Cameron adopts ethnic drag in his photo shoot and approximates the gestures of the

Araras and other tribes, *Avatar* invites the viewer's body to move along with that of the protagonists onscreen. Cinematic modes engage and acculturate a range of sensory capacities, unconscious affects, and physical movements. Sentimentalism orchestrates this response for particular political ends, namely a moral discourse in which sympathetic feeling should direct social relations. The politics of the sentimental mode include not only the ends to which audience sympathy is elicited, but also the mode's deep reliance on the process of movement itself, which it trains to imaginatively inhabit the bodies of the suffering and marginalized. The sympathetic repertoires of *Avatar* arouse the mobility of the audience through occupying the bodies of characters of color, a dynamic at work on the level of plot, production, and reception.

Notes

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¹ For a rigorous explanation of sentimentalism as a mode or "disposition," including the role of self-reflexivity in sentimental texts from the eighteenth century to Frank Capra films, see James Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). On the notion of shared tears in melodrama, see Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 2–13.

² Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 14–15.

³ *Avatar*, directed by James Cameron (Twentieth Century Fox, 2009; DVD, 2010).

⁴ On the interdependence of the sentimental and sensational modes in the context of mid-nineteenth-century popular culture, see Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 28–31.

⁵ Karen Sánchez Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 36.

⁶ Lauren Berlant argues that the construction of "women's culture" through mass media depends on sentimental performances of the suffering of African American and working-class characters. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 6.

⁷ For example, see Lora Romero, *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

⁸ Qtd. in Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1.

⁹ Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy*, 176.

¹⁰ Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 1–24.

¹¹ For an analysis of Western anthropologists' denial of the temporal coevalness of their subjects and the taxidermic function of the cinematographic in preserving such "primitive" populations in their premodern state—a narrative adapted for popular cinema in the film *King Kong*—see Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

¹² Kyla Schuller, "Taxonomies of Feeling: The Epistemology of Sentimentalism in Late-Nineteenth-Century Racial and Sexual Science," *American Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2012): 277–99.

¹³ On Stowe, see Ezra Tawil, *The Making of Racial Sentiment: Slavery and the Birth of the Frontier Romance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 152–89. For Child, see Lydia Maria Child, *A Romance of the Republic*, introduction by Dana D. Nelson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), xvi.

¹⁴ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 91.

¹⁵ Glenn Hendler, *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 12.

¹⁶ Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, viii.

¹⁷ Keeling, *The Witch's Flight*, 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹ The Malinche refers to the Nahua woman who served as the interpreter, secretary, and mistress to Hernán Cortés. She stands as an ambivalent figure of racial and sexual betrayal but also of hybridity. See Sandra Messinger Cypess, *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).

²⁰ On bioprospecting, the practice of marketizing indigenous plants and knowledge practices, see Cori Hayden, *When Nature Goes Public: The Making and Unmaking of Bioprospecting in Mexico* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

²¹ I quote here Michael Davidson's interpretation of the concept, which was proposed in David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependences of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000). See Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 176.

²² Claire Walla, "Avatar's Cinematographer on Lighting a Non-Existent World (in 3-D!)," *Vanity Fair*, February 24, 2010, www.vanityfair.com/online/oscars/2010/02/avatars-cinematographer-on-lighting-a-nonexistent-world-in-3-d.

²³ Deborah Levitt, "The Subject of the Phantasm: Affect, Immersion, and Difference in *Avatar*," *Scholar & Feminist Online* 10, no. 3 (2012), <http://sfoonline.barnard.edu/feminist-media-theory/the-subject-of-the-phantasm-affect-immersion-and-difference-in-avatar/2/>.

²⁴ “Avatar: Motion Capture Mirrors Emotions,” Discovery Channel, December 24, 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wKlIxr-UmM.

²⁵ Leonard Teo, “The Making of *Avatar*,” TechRadar.AV, December 17, 2009, www.techradar.com/news/video/the-making-of-avatar-658031?src=rss&attr=all.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Barbara Robertson, “CG in Another World,” *Computer Graphics World* 32, no. 12 (2009), www.cgw.com/Publications/CGW/2009/Volume-32-Issue-12-Dec-2009/CG-In-Another-World.aspx.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Daniel M. Gross, “Defending the Humanities with Charles Darwin’s *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872),” *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 1 (2010): 42.

³⁰ See, for example, Jesse Washington, “‘Avatar’ Critics See Racist Theme,” Huffington Post, January 11, 2010, www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/10/avatar-critics-see-racist-theme_n_418155.html, and David Brooks, “The Messiah Complex,” *New York Times*, January 7, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/01/08/opinion/08brooks.html?_r=0.

³¹ Lauren Davis, “Avatar’s Concept Designer Reveals the Secrets of the Na’vi,” io9, <http://io9.com/5354315/avatar-concept-designer-reveals-the-secrets-of-the-avi>.

³² Matthew Alan Holtmeier, “Post-Pandoran Depression or Na’vi Sympathy: *Avatar*, Affect, and Audience Reception,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2010): 415; Urban Dictionary, www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=avaturds.

³³ Jo Piazza, “Audiences Experience *Avatar* Blues,” CNN.com, January 11, 2010, www.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/11/avatar.movie.blues/index.html.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Wanda Vrasti, “‘Caring’ Capitalism and the Duplicity of Critique,” *Theory & Event* 14, no. 4 (2011), http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/theory_and_event/v014/14.4.vrasti.html.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “Avatar: Motion Capture Mirrors Emotions.”

³⁸ On the history of immersion in mass spectacle, see Laurent Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2001); Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siecle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013). Regarding *Avatar*’s box office figures, see “Avatar, 2009,” LATimes.com, www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/movies/la-box-office-billion-dollar-avatar-20120502,0,4668885.photo.

³⁹ Rebecca Boyle, “James Cameron Heads for Mariana Trench to Film *Avatar* Sequel and Capture X Prize Simultaneously,” *Popular Science*, September 17, 2010, www.popsci.com/science/article/2010-09/james-cameron-seeks-worlds-toughest-sub-hoping-film-avatar-sequel-and-capture-x-prize.

⁴⁰ Alexei Barrionuevo, “Tribes of Amazon Find an Ally Out of ‘Avatar,’” *New York Times*, April 10, 2010, A1.