

## The Triumph of Eywa: *Avatar*, Pantheism, and the Sign of a Green Ecumene

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In “Heaven and Nature,” an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* that arrived close to the eve of Christmas, 2009, columnist Ross Douthat, a Roman Catholic, characterized *Avatar* as James Cameron’s “long apologia for pantheism — a faith that equates God with Nature, and calls humanity into religious communion with the natural world” (Douthat n.p.).<sup>1</sup> Though Douthat’s analysis fails on its own terms—*Avatar* is not pantheistic, it never disputes the existence of God, and it depicts humanity as severely compromised in its ability to commune with nature—his argument typifies the conservative Christian repudiation of environmentalism as a betrayal of monotheism and its idea of a Creator who rules the universe from beyond.<sup>2</sup> The notion of environmentalism as a New Age competitor for American souls did not originate with Douthat, which is one reason he can assert it without justification: this meme has circulated since the moment Rachel Carson was denounced in *Time* magazine as a “priestess of nature” for her opposition to pesticides (Lear 430).<sup>3</sup> Critics must do more than trace the history of Douthat’s position, however, because the fear that the defense of the earth is a betrayal of God carries political and ecological consequences in the present. In this essay, I will explore the roots of that fear by explaining where Douthat goes wrong, metaphysically and theologically; by testing the idea of *Avatar* as pagan, not pantheistic; and by demonstrating how Eywa, the goddess of the Na’vi and the planetary intelligence of Pandora, can be explained by contemporary science fiction and its ancestor, the more expansive theism of the Middle Ages. I will argue that the reinterpretation of *Avatar*’s religious significance can shield us against the danger that contemporary monotheists will fail to defend the earth from destruction in order to preserve an impoverished idea of monotheism itself. By framing its story as an alternate

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<sup>1</sup> The author is also Roman Catholic; the argument is with Douthat’s understanding of theological terms, Christian history, and film criticism, not with Catholicism as such.

<sup>2</sup> For a history of the problem of American environmentalism and its uneasy relationship with Christian orthodoxy, see Dunlap.

<sup>3</sup> Though “environmentalism” is not one thing, and reflects multiple philosophies and activism even within a limited North-American context, the tradition Douthat has attacked is the Anglo-American, middle-class movement that grew out of nineteenth-century Progressive movements in wilderness conservation associated with such figures as Gifford Pinchot, George Perkins Marsh, and John Muir, among others. For a critique of this tradition’s limitations and contributions to contemporary movements for environmental justice, see Shellenberger and Nordhaus.

history in which earth is already dead, Cameron's film hopes to avert this future, and spur the defense of the only world we really have. In the short time since the film's release, there is evidence that this message has resonated with a universal audience.

Douthat's essay attempts to interrupt that resonance by accusing Cameron of a thought crime. He believes that, by calling *Avatar* a work of pantheism, he can delegitimize its message and slow the spread of its ideas. As I discuss in more detail below, his project forms part of an attack on environmentalism as heresy, an unjust challenge to human dominion over the earth and other creatures. This position strongly implies that there can be no such thing as a Christian environmentalism, and that such a stance would be tantamount to paganism, understood as the enemy of Christian truth. I want to be clear, then, that my immanent critique of Douthat's position, and the attempt to offer another reading of *Avatar*, proceed from the assumption that film, like other forms of art, is polysemic, thus capable of interpretation from multiple religious and philosophical standpoints. I do not assume that pantheism, as such, is the enemy, or that it would be bad to understand *Avatar* in pagan terms. From my proposal for an interfaith, environmentalist Ecumene, informed by stories like *Avatar*, I hope to have made clear that I regard the plurality of religions as a sign of divine plenitude rather than an ideological threat. I also believe that the attempt to enforce theological purity in the arts while the world faces ecological catastrophe amounts to a dangerous form of blindness and an abandonment of the ethical imperative to love God and neighbor. By the same token, I do not presume to speak for Neopagan or pantheist interpreters of *Avatar*, or to offer a defense of the film from those perspectives, though I am keenly interested in learning from them. In demonstrating that one need not view *Avatar* as a danger to Trinitarian monotheism, I am not trying to "save" it from other religions or ontologies. Part of the point of alliance is an epistemic modesty that leaves room for the voices of allies. This essay is intended as a search for the religious, aesthetic, and political significance of *Avatar*, and an invitation to ecumenical dialogue on these questions of mutual concern.

In order to begin to clarify *Avatar*'s message, we should be clear about what it is not, and, in this regard, Douthat's claims are a good place to start. His foundational objection to the film claims that it constitutes "an apologia for pantheism" (Douthat n.p.). *Pantheism* comes from the Greek *pan*, "all" + *theos*, "God," indicating a belief that the universe and God are one. The term arose during the European Enlightenment: first as a description of Spinoza's idea of *Deus sive Natura*—"God or Nature"—as equivalent terms for a divine universe, and later becoming prominent in Romanticism's attempt to provide an alternative to classical theism, as found in the writings of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Hegel, and Emerson, among many others (Parkinson 449). Though theists, who insist that God must be a person, sometimes confuse pantheism with atheism, pantheists conserve the idea of divinity without the necessity of

personality (Levine 4). Pantheism is a form of what Robert Oakes calls “extreme immanentism,” the view that God is everywhere and in everything; a view that irks classical theists by threatening divine transcendence and the distinction between Creator and Creation (Oakes 171). Is it accurate to characterize *Avatar*’s worldview as pantheistic? No, because pantheism denies personhood or agency to the universal being:

Where pantheism is considered as an *alternative* to theism, it involves a denial of at least one, and usually both, central theistic claims. Theism is the belief in a "personal" God which [sic] in some sense is separate from (transcends) the world. Pantheists usually deny the existence of a personal God. They deny the existence of a "minded" Being that possesses the characteristic properties of a "person," such as having intentional states, and the associated capacities like the ability to make decisions. Taken as an alternative to, and denial of, theism and atheism, pantheists deny that what they mean by God (i.e. an all-inclusive divine Unity) is completely transcendent. They deny that God is "totally other" than the world or ontologically distinct from it. (“Pantheism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* n.p.)

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913), a source at theological odds with pantheism, concurs with the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on the non-personal nature of pantheism’s God (“Pantheism,” *Catholic Encyclopedia* n.p.). One key departure of pantheism is the futility of prayer, because there exists no person who could answer prayers or be addressed by ritual. In *Avatar*, however, Eywa, described in human ethnography as the Na’vi “goddess,” is clearly an intelligent moral agent. At the moment before the final conflict, the human hero, Jake Sully, approaches the “Tree of Souls” to ask for Eywa’s assistance against the military-corporate invaders. He says, “You chose me for something,” a request that Eywa fulfill her original intention by helping him defend Pandora. Further, the indigenous leader Mo’at holds the title of *Tsahìk*, the interpreter of the will of Eywa. When the animals of Pandora come to the aid of the rebels during the final battle, the Na’vi princess, Neytiri, exclaims, “Jake, Eywa has heard you!” On the brink of her own death, the scientist, Grace Augustine, who had declared, “I don’t believe in fairy tales,” affirms, “I’m with her, Jake. She’s real.” The film goes through some trouble to portray Eywa as the intentional ally of the human protagonists, who see her as a planetary mind produced by neuronal connections in the Pandoran biosphere. Therefore, *Avatar* is not a work of pantheism. Most significantly, hundreds of readers responded on the *Times* site by correcting Douthat on this point.<sup>4</sup>

The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists a secondary, and rare, definition of *pantheism*: “Worship or tolerance of all or many gods” (“Pantheism” *OED Online*). This meaning originated in nineteenth-century Britain, and often refers to the Roman tolerance of the deities of conquered peoples, as in *pantheon*, a temple dedicated to all the gods. Understood in this way, pantheism has been used, infrequently, as a synonym

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<sup>4</sup> See Douthat 2009. The comments appear below the online essay.

for polytheism. This, too, makes no literal sense applied to *Avatar*. Pandora cannot be equated with a pantheon, and, even if we accept Dr. Augustine's use of the term "goddess" for Eywa, the Na'vi culture is not polytheistic because there appears to be only one deity. However, this semantic slide from pantheism to polytheism characterizes conservative Christian critiques of environmentalism and their secularist counterparts. For example, Fr. Robert Sirico—of the Acton Institute, a free market think-tank—argues that "eco-religion proposes a new god to take the place of the Creator in the religious tradition of Christendom. Thus, misguided Christians have been backing away from the central articles of faith that environmentalists have attacked as harmful to the earth" (Sirico ix). Kevin L. Clausen, a professor of Government at Liberty University, founded by evangelist, Jerry Falwell, agrees that "'the environment' is the latest object of worship by many in the Western world," and that contemporary environmentalism offers "simply a re-packaging of old pantheistic errors combined with a much more dangerous set of public policy proposals than previous versions of environmentalism" (Clausen n.p.). Joining these strange bedfellows is novelist Michael Crichton, who—in the name of science and secularism—laments that "[t]oday, one of the most powerful religions in the Western world is environmentalism," borne by a "romantic view of the natural world as a blissful Eden" provided by the universe rather than God (Crichton n.p.). Douthat's understanding of *Avatar* may be confused, but that confusion arises from a larger cultural conflict whose depth we should not underestimate.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding Douthat's second claim, that *Avatar* represents "a faith that equates Nature with God," the film offers neither a conflict between nor a conflation of these two agents. The words *nature* and *God* are used rarely in the dialogue, and when Norm Spellman, a young scientist, describes Eywa as a "goddess, made up of all living things," one hears a rote lesson repeated from mission reports. The Na'vi themselves do not appear to have an idea of nature separate from culture, and the humans are split between the participant-observers, the avatar "drivers," who interpret Eywa as a biological phenomenon, and the military-corporate characters, who think of Pandora as a set of resources to be exploited. The classic Anglo-American Protestant conflict between nature and culture becomes interpolated into a text that does not contain it. It is more accurate to say that *Avatar* appears not to be interested in dualistic metaphysics; therefore, if one wishes, like Douthat, to import these terms, one must explain why. Of course, as many Indian critics have pointed out, the use of the term "avatar," and the blue skin of the Na'vi, frame the film in terms of Hindu theology. The term *avatar* comes originally from the Vedic milieu, and indicates a manifestation of a god in human

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<sup>5</sup> For a more complete account of Christian conservative resistance to environmentalism in the United States, see Gibson.

form—the blue of the Na’vi evokes the color of Krishna as an avatar of Vishnu, sent to aid Arjuna in his battle with demonic forces in the *Bhagavad Gita* (Wadhvani n.p.). This implicit Hindu frame of the film brings up the issue of pantheism from another angle, because it is acknowledged that the *Gita* and other Hindu scriptures influenced Emerson’s work, including the foundational essay “Nature,” in which Emerson becomes, famously, “a part or parcel of God” (Emerson 6).<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the Vedic theology underpinning this American adaptation is theistic: avatars are not manifestations of “the universe,” but of Devi, Ganesha, and Vishnu. Though Hindu metaphysics does identify the individual soul, or *atman*, with Brahman, the Absolute, this denotes the union of a small self with the Source—itself conceived as personal and impersonal by various schools of thought—not dissolution into a purposeless flux. In any case, the Hindu background of *Avatar* cannot be marshaled in defense of a Spinozist unity between Nature and God.

Finally, there is Douthat’s claim that the film calls us into “religious communion with the natural world.” On the face of it, this claim seems so general and innocuous—evoking images of Boy and Girl Scouts hiking through the woods—that it is difficult to see, at first, the invidious truth to which Douthat points. What it accidentally implies, however, is a misunderstanding of the science fiction framework of the film; and the way this framework affects the interpretation of the plot. Pandora is another world—specifically, an earth-type moon orbiting a gas giant in another solar system. This gas giant prominently features in the opening scenes and continues to loom in the night sky throughout the film. Indeed, the “alien sky” comes across as a familiar trope in science fiction films; one that marks the setting as another world, especially when that world, like Pandora, corresponds so clearly to an alternate Earth, with cloud forests, intelligent hominids, primates, and lizard, horse, and wolf equivalents, as well as giant palm trees and other familiar flora. Nonetheless, Pandora is an alternate Earth with a difference: a biosphere in which plants form a planetary neural net, with animals as plug-and-play peripherals. *Avatar* stands in the tradition of first-human-encounter-with-an-intelligent-planet narratives, such as Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* (1961) and Ursula Le Guin’s “Vaster Than Empires and More Slow” (1975). Unlike those stories, in which the encounter drives humans crazy, *Avatar* depicts a meeting that renders some of the humans sane. Mo’at, the shaman-queen, refers to this process when she says, “Learn well, Jake Sully, and we will see if your insanity can be cured.” The critique of a colonial agent by a native subject implies that the actions of the “Sky People” up to that point—leaving their home to collect rocks on someone else’s world through violent means—appear inexplicable within the Na’vi worldview. Cameron has been criticized for the use of the

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<sup>6</sup> The scholarship on Emerson, Transcendentalism, and Hinduism is voluminous. For a good epitome, see Goodman.

noble savage stereotype in constructing the Na'vi culture (Frank n.p.), but they are not ciphers of primitive innocence.<sup>7</sup> They do not stand aside as another civilization takes their world; they critique and resist empire actively. The greed, violence, and stupidity of the Sky People obviously yields an inferior way of life relative to the Na'vi's joy as parts and parcels of Eywa. Following Graham Harvey's definition of animists as "people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others," it makes sense to see the Na'vi as animists who cannot understand the human lack of respect for other, non-human, persons (Harvey ix). That is why the idea of "communion with nature" in *Avatar* reveals itself more complicated than Douthat's objection will allow: Pandora is not "nature," but a world of persons with different ecocultural arrangements than Earth. Its atmosphere proves lethal to humans, its inhabitants larger and stronger than we are. Indeed, this is the only opinion Dr. Augustine and Colonel Quiritch share: in his words, "You get soft, and Pandora will shit you out with zero warning." Humans cannot survive direct exposure to Pandora, much less commune with nature, which is why the avatar-bodies have become necessary in the first place. Though Jake is rewarded, in the end, with incorporation into the planetary community, most of the human characters do not enjoy this opportunity. As Jake's over-voiced narration tells of the Sky People being forced back to their "dying planet," narrative closure operates to deny rather than allow communion *en masse* with either available world. These facts trouble the claims that *Avatar* is a guide to communion with nature or a vehicle of pantheist propaganda.

It should now be possible to construct a more accurate account of the film based on its narrative, ideological, and visual characteristics. As many critics have noted, *Avatar* echoes prior Hollywood stories of the white-man-gone-native, such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and various versions of the Pocahontas narrative. The dialogue gestures to this heritage when Jake asks, upon his first encounter with native fauna, "What do I do, dance with it?" The ethical objection to this plot structure is that indigenous cultures are used as a tool for the salvation of the white protagonist in a manner that bears no resemblance to the actual traditions of adopting outsiders as practiced by the First Nations of North America, both before and after European contact. Many of these nations adopted extra-tribal and European individuals through conventional ritual means, a fact that undercuts the sense that any one adoptee has been chosen for a special destiny.<sup>8</sup> Interpreted this way, Jake Sully appears hardly unique, though his drama of adoption gets refigured, typically as a quest for healing at the hands

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<sup>7</sup> Critiques of the noble savage and going-native elements of the film are endemic to the popular reviews of the film. See the review aggregator Metacritic.com: <<http://www.metacritic.com/movie/avatar>>.

<sup>8</sup> The tradition of the North American captivity narrative, in which Anglo-American writers recount their time among American Indian nations after capture, attests to the presence of "Indianized" Europeans adopted by and assimilated into indigenous cultures. See the narratives in *Held Captive by Indians: Selected Narratives 1642-1846*, edited by Richard VanDerBeets.

of primal culture. Despite the element of escapism here—Jake’s broken human body is replaced by a healthy alien hybrid body—it is important to note that the going-native fantasy tends towards a post-colonial, liberatory end. Jake’s acculturation to the Na’vi is meant to drive out the imperial invaders. Though *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and Disney’s *Pocahontas* (1995) tried to use their male protagonists like this, these attempts were subverted by the actual outcome of European colonization, in which native polities, populations, and ecosystems were destroyed or overwhelmed. The frame of *Avatar* as a future history on another world sufficiently frees the anti-imperial plot from the weight of the past, thus allowing it to succeed in its own right. There is another narrative factor at work in Jake’s plot as well: the story of the Davidic messiah. For all the worry about *Avatar* as a work of pantheism, Jake’s identity as *Turuk Mak Tao*—“Rider of Last Shadow”—is messianic in the original Jewish sense of a royal war leader who liberates the people from imperial oppressors through a unification of the tribes. Jake also takes on the Christian messianic pattern of the suffering savior who dies and is raised to new life in the world to come; an identity that is visually reinforced by the Pietà-like image of his broken human body cradled in Neytiri’s lap after their battle with the colonel. If one were going to object to the cultural politics of *Avatar*, this messianic component, which drives the plot to its conclusion, would be the point to interrogate.

Such a critique of the White Savior is evoked by the fact that Eywa anoints Jake to fulfill a sacred destiny. This brings us to a more legitimate angle of religious critique: not the pantheist, but the “pagan” problem with Eywa, whose name, interestingly, forms an anagram for “Yahweh,” and suggests a super-human eye in an indigenous culture that equates sight with spiritual understanding. Eywa is worshiped by the Na’vi as a goddess, at least in Dr. Augustine’s terms. Here, defenders of monotheistic views might object—feminist theologies of the last fifty years notwithstanding—that *Avatar* promotes the worship of a goddess who is not the Heavenly Father of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. From an orthodox, patriarchal perspective, the problem with the film is idolatry, not pantheism: Eywa embodies a female idol who falsely triumphs in defense of a people who are, through worship of her, trapped in barbarism. It is not clear, however, that the film advocates the worship of Eywa. In fact, there are three main interpretations of Eywa offered to viewers: the Na’vi vision of her as All Mother; Grace Augustine’s perception of her as a biological intelligence formed by a neural network; and the military-corporate conception of Pandora as a resource. Though the antagonists’ theory is made undesirable by their cardinal sins of Avarice, Pride, and Wrath, this still leaves two quite different views of Eywa for the audience to consider: deity or creature. Everything that Eywa does can be explained by Dr. Augustine’s hypothesis: a planetary intelligence formed by a material, ecosystemic medium capable of will, communication, and self-defense. The Tree of Souls looks like

nothing so much as fiber-optic cables arranged in the shape of a weeping willow. So, in one sense, Eywa can be considered a biological computer that has attained sentience and self-awareness. For instance, Dr. Augustine speaks of Pandora's "true wealth" as an information system that stores the dead as data, a fate she eventually shares. The film does not require us to choose between a materialist and a religious explanation of Eywa. To most audiences in North America, though, the idea of an iPlanet might be easier to swallow than a maternal Tree of Life.

However, a real case for the religiosity of *Avatar* can be made through attention to the visual aspects of what might be called the *ecological sublime*, the overwhelming appearance of a vast biological system.<sup>9</sup> With his avatar body, Jake is able to pass through a series of encounters with the real presence of other creatures on Pandora. These encounters begin in death—when, through his ignorance, he forces Neytiri to kill the wolves—proceed through life—when the floating seeds cluster around him, and he bonds with a horse, a dragon, and finally, with Neytiri herself—and end in resurrection into his avatar body. At each of these junctures, spiritual illumination appears as an overwhelming aesthetic force of the bio-luminescent creatures of Pandora. The Neoplatonic synecdoche of heavenly light becomes transfigured into a light that the organisms create themselves. The Tree of Souls is only the most intense example of light-as-Spirit, with maximum brilliance equated with maximum connectivity, as in the scenes when the entire tribe "plugs in" to the ground to support Eywa's attempts at healing. Jake's transformation from broken human soldier into Na'vi warrior is presented as repentance and conversion towards the living lights of Pandora. For this reason, one might say that the aesthetic logic of the film partakes of both Christianity and animism: all living things on Pandora exude soul, *anima*, and the ecological connections between them climax in the light of Eywa herself. The unprecedented 3-D special effects of the film serve to surround the audience with this light, to make viewers feel that they are moving into a deeper connection with other creatures as Jake does. The Pandoran forest becomes, paradoxically, a "green cathedral" one can only experience indoors. This effect is not the same as "communion with Nature,"<sup>10</sup> because the emphasis lies on individual creatures and the connections between them, not on a personified whole. Though Cameron can be said to have invented a new cinematic technique to convey a certain sense of the ecological sublime in the theater, he did not

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<sup>9</sup> There are, of course, many treatments of the sublime in nature writing, and the "ecological sublime," a rather fluid concept, continues to evolve. I use "ecological sublime" here to refer specifically to an awe at a biological *system*, a sense which, to my knowledge, has not been attributed to this expression by others so far.

<sup>10</sup> Communion-with-Nature is a Romantic trope presupposing a personified agent that embodies and unites the non-human world. In Western cultures, this figure was once a goddess—see below—and retains the characteristics of one in colloquial usage (e.g. "Mother Nature"). Therefore "Nature" and "the environment" are not the same. Douhat relies on this trope without explaining what he means.

invent the experience itself. The encounter with the more-than-human world as epiphany is, arguably, the central trope of Anglo-American nature writing, television, and film, from Emerson to Annie Dillard, *Wild Kingdom* to *Whale Wars*, *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983) to *Grizzly Man* (2005) (Marx 37-62). Trying to fight this tradition is like trying to fight apple pie, Walt Disney, and the Baby Jesus all at the same time.

If it cannot be fought, is there a more productive way to understand it as part of tradition rather than orthodoxy's enemy? Here, I propose three alternative understandings of Eywa within a Christian theological framework: as a creature; a version of the medieval, Christian goddess Natura; and a survival of the Greco-Roman gods in Western literature and art. The first option, Eywa as creature, is made available in the film though the film does not explore this possibility. It is Grace Augustine's theory of Eywa as an intelligent network of plants, recontextualized as part of the Creator/Creation relationship elaborated in the Abrahamic monotheisms. Simply put, Eywa is another being that God makes: larger than the humanoid protagonists of the story, revered by the indigenous people of Pandora, but a creature nonetheless. In a post-Darwinian framework, one might prefer to see Eywa as a creature made by the allopoietic processes of natural selection, which God set in motion. This interpretation depends on the science fiction frame of the narrative, in which the Creator would be the maker of the entire universe, with Eywa as the biosphere of one moon in one solar system.<sup>11</sup> This is another reason why the pantheist interpretation will not stand: it requires a willful forgetting of the film's setting, which makes it clear that Eywa is limited in space and time, not omniscient or omnipotent, and not the maker of any other world. By the same token, Eywa also proves vulnerable to environmental destruction, as any creature would. The stewardship interpretation of the Genesis cosmogony, in which humans become agents of God's care for Creation, would require a collaborative rather than an exploitative relationship with Pandora. Unsurprisingly, a number of readers take Douthat to task on this point, expressed in Comment 42 by "mattcsmith": "In our efforts to stand over and above nature, we have forgotten God's life/Holy Spirit freely willing all of creation to be and to live. We have become dark overlords of God's providence rather than stewards. Perhaps a return to seeing all creatures as sibling like Francis of Assisi is just what our 'Mother' needs more than anything right now" (Smith n.p.). From such a perspective, *Avatar* is a story about the failure of stewardship driven by concupiscence, the lust for sexual and economic domination of Nature, understood as a female figure.<sup>12</sup> Though the film does not require this interpretation, it winks at it,

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<sup>11</sup> Pantheism presupposes the oneness of its naturalistic god; therefore, there cannot be multiple planetary divinities in a pantheist system (see the definition from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* above). This distinguishes pantheism from polytheism as such.

<sup>12</sup> The connection between the domination of women and the domination of female-identified Nature has been extensively theorized by ecofeminist philosophers and theologians. See especially Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* and Plumwood.

since Augustine of Hippo is the source of that idea, and the scientist-hero is named after him.<sup>13</sup>

The second possibility—seeing Eywa as a figure of Nature—places Douthat in the ironic position, as a Catholic, of vilifying a film that offers a vision not unlike the medieval Catholic idea of Natura as God’s daughter (Newman 53). Douthat’s critique presupposes a cosmology in which there are no intermediaries between God and humanity. Instead of bringing to mind Catholicism, such a dualism is actually more characteristic of nineteenth-century Calvinism in its quest to distinguish nature from grace, and its desire to extirpate the Catholic veneration of Mary.<sup>14</sup> This conflict was Americanized by Henry Adams in his *Education* when he contrasts “the Dynamo and the Virgin,” Mary and industrial technology, in his elegy for the organic world modernity destroyed.<sup>15</sup> In *Avatar*, Cameron deconstructs this idea, presenting a Virgin who *is* a dynamo, a numen as information network. From this vantage point, Eywa was presaged by Natura, a figure found in medieval texts, who presides over “making” as an organic process that is also a technology. In *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages*, Barbara Newman explains:

Natura first emerges as a mediatrix between God and the world, or, in more strictly Platonic terms, between formless Matter and eternal Mind. Her intervention sets the cosmogony in motion, and her perpetual labor assures the orderly process of *creatio continua* through procreation. Although Natura’s domain embraces the whole of the cosmos, her activity is often restricted to what medievals called the sublunary world, what we now call the biosphere. As the goddess of biological life, and specifically of sexuality and reproduction, Nature bestows a certain autonomy on this realm, representing ethical values geared toward the continuation of life rather than ascetic discipline. By extension, she authorizes the scientific and philosophical study of “nature” [...] [y]et Nature remains God’s daughter. (Newman 53)

This figure of Nature was hardly marginal, appearing in the theological work of Bernard Silvestris, Guillaume de Deguileville, and Alan de Lille, as well as in the literature of Geoffrey Chaucer, Jean de Meung, and Christine de Pizan (Lewis 34-40). What this means is that medieval Catholicism contained, in both elite and popular forms, a Christian goddess, conceived as God’s daughter, who does many of the things on earth that Eywa does on Pandora. It is therefore unnecessary to condemn Eywa as anti-monotheistic. Instead, we can see her as a gesture toward a more generous monotheism, full of “primal creatures,” as Dante called them, surrounding the Three-in-One in a vision uncompromised by the defensive posture of the Counter-Reformation.

The final approach takes into account that Christian civilization did not erase so much as transform the cultures of pre-Christian Europe, preserving other religions as

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<sup>13</sup> Augustine discusses the problem of concupiscence, and the origin of all human sin in sexual lust, in “On Marriage and Concupiscence.”

<sup>14</sup> On the opposition between nature and grace in Anglo-American Protestantism, see Oliver.

<sup>15</sup> “The Dynamo and the Virgin” is Chapter 25 in Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*.

“mythologies” that continue to inform art and philosophy to the present day. (On the revival of these lifeworlds in diverse, contemporary Neopaganisms, and their relevance to *Avatar*, I defer to critics from these traditions.)<sup>16</sup> Greek, Roman, Norse, Irish, and other pantheons survive as narrative, tropological, and imagistic traditions inside Christendom and post-Enlightenment Europe, the Americas, and Commonwealth countries. As Jean Seznec explains in *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*, “it is now recognized that pagan antiquity, far from experiencing a ‘rebirth’ in fifteenth-century Italy, had remained alive within the culture and art of the Middle Ages. Even the gods were not *restored* to life, for they had never disappeared from the memory or imagination of man [sic]” (Seznec 3). Eywa can be treated much as we treat the presence of planetary angels in the fiction of C. S. Lewis or witchcraft in J. K. Rowling: as a means to disrupt the facile anthropocentrism of contemporary culture, which has difficulty remembering that there are more things in heaven and on earth than humans and our artifacts. As Lewis points out in his explanation of Christian belief in the planetary gods of antiquity: “We might expect that a universe so filled with shining super-human creatures would be a danger to monotheism. Yet the danger to monotheism in the Middle Ages came not from a cult of angels but from the cult of the Saints. Men when they prayed were not usually thinking of the Hierarchies and Intelligences” (Lewis 120). But celestial creatures, both in science fiction and nature writing, revive a sense of cosmos, a larger-than-human order, in popular discourse. Seznec names one particular tradition that is of special value in the discussion of *Avatar*: the *psychomachia*, or spiritual drama, in which the gods represent philosophical and other abstract ideas, such as Wisdom or Vice (Seznec 5). *Avatar* is easy to read as environmental allegory, as the struggle of a living world against greed and ignorance. There is every reason to believe, from popular appropriations of *Avatar* thus far, that its global audience favors this way of reading the film, especially as a critique of neoliberal empire. On March 4, 2010, the Sierra Club Canada, on behalf of a coalition of First Nations, ran an ad in *Variety* about Canada’s “Avatar Sands,” a reference to the tar sands that the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers strip mines for oil (Walsh n.p.). In a press release, the group explains:

The ad shows a 797B Heavy Hauler, one of the first trucks used to mine the Tar Sands, which is identical to some of the trucks used in *Avatar*. It also shows the vast open pit mines and tailings ponds that cut across what was once pristine Boreal forest—the same forest that stretched across Cameron’s hometown in Ontario. “We want Hollywood, and the powerful thought leaders there, to know *Avatar* does a great job of exposing the Tar Sands,” said Dr. Rick Smith, Executive Director of Environmental Defence Canada, one of 55 groups that signed the ad. “It’s the world’s most destructive project—Pandora’s obnoxiousness is Canada’s Tar Sands. (Sierra Club n.p.)

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth mentioning here that modern Neopagans hold a diverse set of views on the ontological status of their deities, some favoring more symbolic and others more personal models of the gods and goddesses. See Hutton, Adler and Eller.



**JAMES CAMERON & AVATAR...YOU HAVE OUR VOTE!**

**CANADA'S AVATAR SANDS**

... Where Indigenous Peoples in Canada are endangered by toxic pollution and future oil spills.

... Where Shell, BP, Exxon and other *Sky People* are destroying a huge ancient forest.

... Where giant *Hell trucks* are used to mine the most polluting, expensive *unobtanium* oil to feed America's addiction.

James Cameron, a Canadian born and raised near the majestic boreal forest, has shined a light on a dark reality. Help us stop tar sands development and the pipelines that will lock us into 30 more years of tar sands oil instead of transitioning to a clean energy future.

**JAMES CAMERON, WE SEE YOU. Go to: [dirtyoilsands.org](http://dirtyoilsands.org)**

Sierra Club, US T. Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation, Canada Sierra Club, Canada Gitga'at First Nation, Canada Northwest Institute, Canada World Wildlife Fund, Canada Corporate Ethics International, US Dogwood Alliance, US Public Information Network, US Calumet Project, US International Rivers, US Earthworks, US Dogwood Initiative, Canada Frente Civico de Mexico Institute for Ecology and Action Anthropology, Germany	International Campaign for Responsible Technology, US RAVEN, Canada Friends of the Earth, Europe Center for Health, Environment and Justice, US People & Planet, UK World Development Movement, UK Environmental Defence, Canada National Wildlife Federation, US BankTrack, Netherlands Rainforest Action Network, US ForestEthics, US Les Amis de la Terre, France Platform, London UK Global Community Monitor, US Climate Action Network, Canada	Pacific Environment, US Polaris Institute, Canada Keepers of the Athabasca, Canada International League of Conservation Photographers, US Canadian Indigenous Tar Sands Campaign, Canada Indigenous Environmental Network, US Urgewald, Germany West Coast Environmental Law, Canada CounterCorp Anti-Corporate Film Festival, US Greenpeace, Canada Seventh Generation Fund for Indian Development, US Raincoast Conservation Foundation, Canada	Living Oceans Society, Canada Cultural Survival, US Beaver Lake Cree Nation, Canada Friends of the Earth, US CRBM, Italy GegenStromung-CounterCurrent, Germany Western Organization of Resource Councils, US Haisla First Nation, Canada Coastal First Nations, Canada EarthJustice, US Honor the Earth, US CPAWS Northern Alberta, Canada Environment America, US
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Figure 1. The Sierra Club Canada "Avatar Sands" advertisement.

In another example, on February 12, 2010, Palestinian protestors in the West Bank town of Bil'in painted themselves blue and donned tails and pointed ears, making themselves look like the Na'vi to protest an Israeli fence that separated them from their farmland:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Chw32qG-M7E&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Chw32qG-M7E&feature=player_embedded)

Figure 2. YouTube video of Palestinian protesters dressed as Na'vi.

The video quickly went viral, and was reported by such mainstream American news sources as the *New York Times*, AOLNews.com, and the *Huffington Post*. This demonstrates *Avatar*'s success in creating a visual shorthand for "colonial oppression," and over all these appropriations, one can hear Jake's defiant cry, "We will show the Sky People that they cannot take whatever they want." This shorthand reflects the film's capacity to transmit a contemporary spiritual drama. The question is not whether the film is being read allegorically, but whether the terms of its psychomachia properly apply to particular political events on earth:<sup>17</sup> one may question, in the above examples, the identification of Israelis and oil companies with the Sky People. Nonetheless, in a self-fulfilling prophecy, it was reported on April 10, 2010 that James Cameron used some of the profits from the film to finance resistance to a dam on the Xingu River in Brazil, a dam that has threatened traditional ways of life among indigenous nations of the Amazon basin (Barrionuevo n.p.). Researching and creating the film refined his environmentalism, and now he invests its proceeds into the defense of an actual rain forest.

Though it is tempting to see *Avatar*'s political consequences as its true meaning and the metaphysical debate as an academic sideshow, the theological dimension of environmentalism cannot be dismissed. We appear to be living through a tipping point in the relationship between traditional Christian authorities and the environmental crisis. The Vatican—which shares Douthat's fears of pantheism in *Avatar* (Rizzo n.p.)—is now led by a "green pope," as *Newsweek* called Benedict XVI ("The Green Pope" n.p.). Benedict believes that the Creation must be revered as the sacred meeting place of God and humanity (Silecchia 235). The Orthodox Church is led by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople—the first leader of a major branch of Christianity to declare environmental degradation a sin (Stammer n.p.)—who has since declared the Deepwater Horizon oil spill a "sin against nature and God" (Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew n.p.). American Evangelicalism has produced an Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN), an offshoot of the progressive group Evangelicals for Social Action, and more recently the Evangelical Climate Network. The EEN's "Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation" was a milestone in the effort to reframe environmentalism as biblical stewardship for Christians suspicious of secular Greens ("On the Care of Creation" n.p.). These leaders, understandably, found their

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<sup>17</sup> This question is explored in detail in Joni Adamson's essay "Indigenous Literatures, Multinaturalism, and *Avatar*: The Emergence of Indigenous Cosmopolitics."

environmentalism on an orthodox account of humanity as the *imago dei*, as viceroys of God over Creation based on the Genesis cosmogony.

The understanding of dominion as stewardship, however, leads to the conclusion that humanity is doing a very bad job of keeping God's world safe. As Matthew Scully observes in *Dominion*, his book on cruelty to animals, "Such terrifying powers we possess, but what a sorry lot of gods some men are" (Scully 9). Among Christian theologians who count ecological theology as central to their work, this critique of dominion theology connects the resistance to ecocide to the struggle against sexism, racism, and imperialism. Contemporary ecotheology rejects metaphysical dualism as social hierarchy, with the God/world dualism standing at the apex of the problem. Following Feuerbach's lead, process, feminist, and post-colonial theologians have opposed the idea of an absolutely transcendent Lord poised over a helpless Creation as a ruling-class projection of the will to dominate "lesser" orders of being such as workers, women, natives, and animals (Ruether, "Religious Ecofeminism" 362-375). In response, ecotheology has developed a number of sources for a new model of the God-universe relationship, such as pneumatology, sacramentality, and contemplative traditions, which it claims are more faithful to the witness of scripture and tradition, and more productive of justice toward Creation. Jürgen Moltmann, first of all, revives the theology of Creation as the dwelling place of Spirit, placing human salvation history decisively within cosmic salvation history (Moltmann 1993). Mark I. Wallace, then, advocates a model of "transcendental animism," in which the Spirit infuses all of nature with God's presence, an approach that descends from Cambridge Neoplatonism, the Eastern fathers of the Church, parts of the Pauline corpus, and the Wisdom literature of the Bible (Wallace 16). Rosemary Radford Ruether, John Chryssavgis, Beatrice Bruteau, Matthew Fox, and Denis Edwards, among others, emphasize a sacramental-liturgical model in which the cosmos is the primary vehicle of God's grace (Ruether "Religious Ecofeminism"; Chryssavgis; Bruteau; Fox; Edwards). Following Latin American liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff and Ivone Gebara, Catherine Keller and Lois Lorentzen connect the Reign of God to the liberation of the poor and the earth, a truly grassroots eschatology (Boff; Gebara; Keller; Lorentzen). Examples could be multiplied, but the clear trend is toward models of the God-world relationship that conserve transcendence and immanence in a vision of salvation offered to all creatures.

How can these other models help us to understand *Avatar* in a manner that embodies what Joni Adamson calls a "multinaturalist" account of planetary politics, an account that includes not merely multiple cultures, but multiple creatures and ecological systems (Adamson 15)? In answering this question, I enter a constructive mode that recognizes critique as only the first step beyond "the place the eye does not see," as Jake says in the catastrophic moments after the felling of Hometree. The conservative Christian willingness to sacrifice the earth in the name of theological purity cannot be

answered solely by negative judgment. It must be answered by an alternative that better accounts for the nature of *Avatar*, the demands of environmental justice, and the need for an ethic of planetary guardianship. If Jean-François Lyotard was correct, in *The Postmodern Condition*, when he characterized the *postmodern* as “incredulity toward metanarratives,” it may be time to tell stories about civilization that can be believed in an era of planetary destruction (Lyotard xxiv). Ecocritics have already begun to turn in this direction, as Lawrence Buell urges us to pay attention to “ecoglobalist affects,” feelings of environmental loyalty beyond the nation-state (Buell 227), and Ursula Heise investigates *eco-cosmopolitanism*, a neo-Kantian project for a planetary peace among nations, elements, and species (Heise 50). If, as Timothy Morton claims, ecology thinks quintessentially about interconnectedness,<sup>18</sup> we have in *Avatar* a film in which connection—*tsaheylu*, the Na’vi word denoting the cybernetic link between people, biota, and Eywa herself—serves as the central trope. Christians have imagined planetary interconnection before: an *Oikumene*, the world as the House of Humanity. This vision was corrupted, however, by a triumphalism that figured the Church as absolute empire. But *oikumene* and ecology share a root: *oikos*, household, and we can follow this root to an ecology of spirit, a rhizome of religions, an ecumenical alliance that repudiates empire in the name of earth.

It is no accident that *Avatar* presents the destruction of Hometree in visual and musical terms that evoke the fall of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, and the Vietnam War film *Apocalypse Now* (1979): both conflicts embody the *telos* of empire as Armageddon. Yet the Book of Revelation tells of the fall of empire, not into perpetual war, but as the growth of a tree whose leaves are “for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22: 2). There is no doubt that imperial exegetes have interpreted this moment as the apotheosis of Christianity, but the text does not require this. Revelation is the story of the destruction of Rome as overlord, which includes a cosmic dimension of renewal, a condition embodied by the Tree of Life. Interpreted as an ecological thought, this story points to a common ground for Christians beyond the necrosis of doctrinal purity: the care of Creation, understood as a household of Spirit. As Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller affirm, the Spirit “did not in the Bible signify a way out of the creation, but rather as a way to live gratefully *within* it” (Kearns and Keller 3). If Christians united in an *ecumene*, a planetary order, based not on a renewed Christendom, but on the imperative to defend the poor, and other creatures, from pollution, mass extinction, and climate change, there would come a great sign of the New Earth. The eschatological vision of a radiant city ruled by the Lamb of God could be taken as the emblem of Christian efforts to ensure environmental justice for the cosmos. This idea of the New Earth as the dwelling of the Spirit with the people would require,

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<sup>18</sup> See Morton.

at the planetary level, an acceptance of religious difference that the eschaton would not erase. The promise that all tears will be wiped away must include the tears caused by intra- and interreligious hatred and warfare. A Green ecumene should embrace an ecosystemic approach to planetary flourishing that sees each tradition as an organism with its own niche, a node in the network of spiritual knowledge. If this ecumene fostered an alliance of indigenous and world religions, environmental philosophies and activist networks, like an Earth Charter with an explicitly religious dimension, the power of worldviews to organize material life could be harnessed in defense of the entire human *habitus* (Earth Charter Initiative n.p.). *Avatar* could then take its place in the narrative commons of the world as a resource for creating such an alliance. If we read the film as a myth about the power of conversion, mutual understanding, the network as a model of knowledge, and affinity as a model for politics, we can move past the fear of *Avatar* as pantheist propaganda. If, according to Grace Augustine, the real wealth of Pandora is its networked intelligence, we can take Eywa not as a model of God, but as a signal transduced through the roots, a sign of what we could become as a planetary civilization: our own best defense against the end of the world. On an earth we have not killed—yet—this would complete the triumph of Eywa.

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