Freeing Pandora: Militarism, Frontier-Making and US Identity in James Cameron's *Avatar* Franchise

Natalia Mirón-Florido

Abstract

The United States is well known for its interventionist policies regarding international conflicts. In his study "Frontiering International Relations: Narrating US Policy in the Asia Pacific" (2022), Oliver Turner links this behaviour to the myth of the frontier. Generally known as the frontier thesis, it was given form by Frederick Jackson Turner in *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893): he posed that a unique American identity was born in the Western frontier, by adapting but not succumbing to life-and-death situations and refusing assimilation. Oliver Turner claims that the US uses this frontier thesis to justify their military occupation, thus conflating militarism and the frontier as markers of US identity.

This strategy is not restricted to current events, but also projected into the future through narratives such as James Cameron's *Avatar* franchise. Set in the planet Pandora, the movies follow a human settlement created by the RDA. While apparently post-national and post-racial, this organisation is heavily coded as American through its members, history and relations to the US marines and army. Additionally, its military branch repetitively combines frontier and militaristic rhetoric to justify their crimes against the native Na'vis and reassert their own identity, causing a sense of self-identification both in White American and Indigenous audiences. As the story progresses the idea of the frontier and the role of the military become ever more explicit. Rather than disavow this behaviour, the narrative offers a lukewarm criticism where the righteousness of US colonialism is not universally denied, but dependent on the individual White colonist.

Keywords: US identity; frontier-making; militarism; colonialism; science fiction.

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The history of the United States' international policy is characterised for their involvement in conflicts that do not concern their territorial integrity. Most recently, Donald Trump's second ascension to the presidency was accompanied by European outrage in the face of his comments regarding territorial annexations. As Jeffrey Meyers indicates, in an imperialist twist reminiscent of nineteenth-century Manifest Destiny, Trump has expressed interest in expanding US rule to Greenland, Panama, Canada, Ukraine and the strip of Gaza (2025). Yet the nonchalance with which these desires are uttered is proof of the persistence US' imperialist rhetoric.

The United States is in an apparently paradoxical position in regards to colonial power dynamics. On the one hand, it is a nation born from very explicit colonial resistance to the metropolis. On the other, its growth into an economic and political powerhouse was enabled by the "resources and markets in underdeveloped areas" (Kushner 1987, 315). This explains the country's contradictory contemporaneous relation to colonialism: despite condemning the European colonisation of South America and committing to a non-colonisation policy, the US has inserted itself into foreign territories almost from its inception, to the point that between 2017 and 2019 the US military was present in 40% of world countries (Gilderhus 2006, 8; Savell 2019).

However, in light of the increasing difficulty in differentiating US technocrats and billionaires from politicians—a paradigm epitomized by the Trump-Musk alliance in the 2024 elections—, US role as a colonial overlord is becoming more evident. From Trump's aforementioned imperial intentions to Musk's ever-feasible attempts to colonise space, the future of the country's international relations seems to have at its centre a triad: militarism, frontier-making and US identity. Thus, the aim of this paper is to track the origins of this triad beginning whitesmith of the western frontier which Frederick Jackson Turner considered foundational of US identity. Later on, I will draw on Oliver Turner's transposition of this "frontier thesis" to current US international policies and its explicit link to militarism. Finally, these theories will be applied to analyse James Cameron's *Avatar* franchise, so as to use it as a case study of American self-image and projection of its role into the future of the Earth.

1. Frontier-Making in US Rhetoric

The formation of US identity cannot be separated from the experience of the frontier. Though Frederick Jackson Turner is often credited with introducing the idea that the Western frontier could serve as a foundational myth of the American identity, it is not his thesis per se that crystallised the connection. In fact, upon its first appearance the so-called frontier thesis was practically ignored by the academic community. Rather, it was the amount of times that the idea has been discarded, resurrected and discussed, first in academic circles and then in popular culture, that has made the frontier such an integral part of US identity (Walsh 2005, 3–19).

In the first paragraphs of *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), Frederick Jackson Turner indicated that the peculiarity of the US frontier was that beyond it laid not a different country, but a range of "free" land where to settle. All frontiers constitute a Manichean separation between the One and the Other, but while other countries' expansion was thwarted by the pre-existence of organised nations which already had a claim to the territory to be conquered, the US did not face the "resistance" of such "civilised" population ([1893] 1990, 27–9). It is this difference that allows the US frontier the distinctiveness of being itinerant, for as Anglo American settlers moved

forward into the wilderness, Native resistance was not enough to overpower American "civilisation." Thus, borders and frontiers were constantly redefined and built anew. With new frontiers, Turner argued, came new definitions of what differentiated the colonists from their European ancestors:

> The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. ... In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe...The fact is, that here is a new product that is American. (29)

As the colonist moved westwards, they repeatedly encountered the "savagery" of Native Americans which they tamed through civilising activities such as trading and farming (34). In this way, US American identity reasserted itself, for at the "edge of the free land" that is the US territory, the constant meeting and survival of "civilization" over "savagery" was a confirmation of American exceptionality as something that was neither "Indian" nor "European", but an identity that would surpass and outlive both of them (28–29).

The picture of frontier-making painted by Turner appears clear-cut but does not accurately represent reality. Already in the early 20th century his research was criticised for glorifying and romanticising the experience in the western frontier (Walsh 2005, 3–7). Indeed, his association of US identity with colonists blatantly erases the Indigenous perspective of the frontier, which more often than not implied the destruction of their societies, starvation, disease, forceful migration and death (Sy 2024, 160). Turner's dehumanization of the Indigenous populations constitutes a Whitewashing of the colonial venture that was westward expansion and contributed to a body of historiography that has tended to treat continental expansion as different from explicitly imperialist overseas expansion (Friday 2007, 271). At the same time, his definition of national identity works to exclude those with Native American ancestry from US Americanness, while simultaneously promoting the fallacy of an identity isolated from Europe. This does not match the reality that, as Werner Sollors claimed, US identity is found at the intersection between "volitional consent" to identify as American, as well as the "seemingly immutable ancestry and descent" (1986, 151).

Yet Turner was not wrong in pinpointing the importance of the frontier, since the US self-identification as a "frontier nation" is arguably the reason behind the country's preeminent role in international politics (Agnew and Sharpe 2002, 85). The conviction that US American values could be realised on a global scale and that the nation is exceptional, stems from the economic success that came with the expansion of the frontier: the occupation of new territories brought a "resource base unmatched by other empires" and

a consequent emerging national economy based on capitalist consumption that crashed as soon as expansion was no longer possible (Agnew and Sharpe 2002, 86–8). As a result, the country's ambition to serve as a global model to imitate is inevitably accompanied by the imposition of that frontier experience which, according to US ideals, would bring to other lands the richness that it had brought to the United States.

This is not to say that the conception of the frontier has remained static. As Oliver Turner (2022) points out:

> … frontiers are most clearly and consistently understood by their architects (or narrators) not in terms of space or territory, but ideas; rather than expiring when North American land "ran out," the United States' frontier-as-narrative remains ideationally ripe. This helps to explain what the oft-cited, but rarely delineated, American frontier represents in the modern US political/foreign policy imaginary. Rather than just a historical episode of continental expansionism, or a cultural-political memory to motivate policy goals, it has always been an active and evolving narrative that sets out what the United States is and how it should act at perceived peripheral borderlands of its identity. (3)

In the current geopolitical chess board, much of American frontier rhetoric is linked to its overseas military bases to the point that they are "(loosely) perceived as the contemporary borderlands of the American self" (15).These bases are a form of subtle colonisation that allows for the maintenance of US spheres of economic influence and dependence without the need of widespread geographical settlement (Agnew and Sharpe 2006, 89–91). The role of the US military is to act as a security agent that guarantees the integrity of American overseas colonisation while simultaneously designating, with its presence, potential points of conflict (Jackson 2025, 441). This association between frontier and militarism must be perceived through the aforementioned lens of the frontier discourse: classifying a territory as a frontier helps to condone and set a precedent for US behaviour.

The effects of the frontier on US identity, in particular its connectedness to militarism, are also evident in the country's self-representation. For instance, Cynthia Weber (2006) offers a reading of post-9/11 war cinema and concludes that the frontier has become strongly associated with neoliberalism (25). She asserts this provides the country "with a clear enemy that is located outside its borders and inside some other borders and against whom the United States could defend itself using its superior military capabilities" (25). Weber assesses that these recurring themes offer a sense of comfort in moments of national and international uncertainty by presenting the idea that "it is only a matter of time before [the US] restored global order and security" (25). In a roundabout way, science fiction could be argued to fulfil the same purpose: offering comfort by returning to a moment of American political dominance. Indeed, Eric Aronoff points out that in North American science fiction "the dominant template or paradigm through which encounters with 'the alien' have been imagined has been the settler colonial ideologies of 'the frontier,' and encounters with 'the American Indian'" (2025, 28). The *Avatar* franchise is no exception.

2. The Final Frontier: US Space Colonialism in James Cameron's *Avatar* franchise

Rhetorics around space exploration borrow from the Turnerian frontier thesis by presenting this "final frontier" as a source of endless progress and resources (Schwartz 2017, 167). In turn, this means that space exploration is influenced by the aforementioned association of the frontier narrative with a neoliberal policy that benefits global order by spreading "peace, democracy and increased standards of living for all" (Weber 2006, 25). But James Schwartz argues that, as the abundance of resources of the frontier is a fallacy, space exploration is more likely to evolve into economic tyranny, since, at the end of the day, economic gain is the ultimate objective (2017, 167–68; Weinzierl 2018, 173–74).

In the future presented by the *Avatar* franchise, space travel is a reality and just like Schwartz and Matthew Weinzierl have indicated it is pushed by private investors who rapidly turn into tyrants. The human settlement in Pandora, a moon in Aura Centauri A, is motivated by the mining of its natural resources. However, the Native population, the Na'vi, see capitalistic ventures as alien and consequently, conflict is inevitable. The first instalment, *Avatar* (2009), is focalized on Jake Sully, a former marine who participates in Project Avatar to achieve closer cultural relations with the Na'vi. This project is based on the use of avatar bodies grown by mixing an individual's DNA with Na'vi genetic material, so that the humans can transfer their consciousness to the avatars. The program is funded by businesses back on Earth under the perception that the Na'vi would be more willing to surrender their natural resources if a creature that looks like them asks. Thus, Jake Sully goes on to use the avatar body to bond with the Omaticaya, the local Na'vi tribe and find ways to displace them. The narrative intentionally engages with US American preoccupation with the frontier by resorting to parallelisms between the subjugation of the Na'vi and that of Native Americans at the hands of White-American settlers (Clarke 2014, 130). Indeed, Jake's emotional investment with the Omaticaya and the chief's daughter, Neytiri, has frequently been compared to the story of Pocahontas and John Smith (Knepp 2014, 215; Pop 2009, 23; Hawk 2010, 3; Johansen Richoux 2012, 69; Herzog 2013, 69). While *Avatar* culminates with the victory of the Indigenous population over the human military, the film was notorious for provoking traumatic responses because of the future prevalence frontier rhetorics and the helplessness it produces in current audiences (Martínez Falquina 2014, 122).

The second instalment, *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) follows Jake and Neytiri as they form a family and face the return of human colonisers. The antagonist of the first film and Jake's former boss, Coronel Miles Quaritch, is resurrected in an avatar body and starts to hunt the Sully family for revenge. Consequently, the family hides with the Metkayina clan. As they struggle to adapt to a different Native society, the audience is shown the change in the human settlement, with its military branch now in complete control of the colonisation of Pandora and actively intending to create a new frontier towards which

humanity can expand. The capitalist aspect of space exploration remains relevant as military operations and the progressive taming of the frontier are funded by the hunting of tulkuns, a whale-like species whose cerebral liquid is sold on Earth to stop aging. Partnering with the tulkun hunters, Quaritch finds Jake and kills his eldest son. In the end, the Metkayina and the Sullys emerge victorious. However, Jake's final declaration to actively resist indicates that the human settlements on Pandora remain intact and the planet continues to be a frontier line.

Throughout these two instalments, the conflicts between humans and Na'vi can be easily linked with frontier conflicts that the United States have experienced along its history. Thus, understanding how human identity is articulated through the lens of US identity and its interlinking with frontier-making and militarism, is relevant in order to understand the actions of humans on Pandora as well as the message that the movies may be sending should humanity continue to play under the same rules of colonialism and capitalism.

2.1. US Identity as a Proxy for Humanity

At a surface level the human characters have no overt cultural identity or origin. Yet the behaviour and rhetoric of the higher-ups is distinctly familiar for a 21st century audience. Additionally, aspects of the human settlement's logistics and *raison d'être* hint that in the narrative US Americanness functions as a proxy for humanity. The process of transforming a generic form of US identity into the representative of Earth starts with the affiliation of all humans on Pandora with the RDA.

According to the now off-line webpage for the first movie, the humans settle in Pandora under the name of the RDA "the oldest and largest of the quasi-governmental administrative entities" (Pandorapedia n.d.). Thus, the space venture is not undertaken by a global government trying to expand scientific knowledge, but by a "massive corporation involved in interests ranging from mining, transportation, medicines, weapons and communications" (Pandorapedia n.d.). In other words, the RDA as an organisation is ultimately concerned with maximizing economic gain by diversifying assets and the settlement in Pandora is but a new source of income. The RDA's interest in the planet is motivated by the existence of big deposits of a rare mineral called unobtanium. This material is of paramount importance for the business because a large part of its profits come from the fabrication of high speed trains that operate on a global network, allowing humans on Earth to commute to very distant places for work, without bothering the locals (Pandorapedia n.d.). This implies that future Earth is a planet where borders are easily crossed and perhaps even irrelevant, at least for the sake of labour.

The notion of a globalized Earth where nationality is negligible is reinforced by the sparse knowledge that the audience is afforded about the humans' cultural background. Any direct mention of nationalities is absent and instead, they are all represented as a

unit with a common identity: being human. Nevertheless, the movie does not lack ethnoracial markers, as there are characters who are not White and who, because of their names, can be presumed as being of non-White ascendance, like Trudy Chacón or Spider Socorro. Still, there is no overt human-on-human racism or xenophobia—though there certainly is towards the Na'vi—, which leads to a general impression that neither national nor ethnoracial identity is relevant in the RDA. In other words, the story takes place in an ideologically post-national society where the connecting identity factor is species, not national or cultural background. To a certain extent, this seems to indicate that the money-driven RDA is defending Earth's interests at large. However, the audience is rapidly disabused of this notion together with the focalizer, Jake. Through him, the terrestrial economic situation is exposed as practically dystopic, with prices skyrocketing and social healthcare services virtually non-existent. The apparent, if not explicit, monopoly of the RDA of all the markets on Earth hints that the corporation itself has created this dire situation.What is more, while it may not be true to the fictional reality of Earth, narratively speaking, the status of the RDA hints at US world dominance and in particular, the economic dominance of US American technocrats.

Audience reaction certainly supports this interpretation, as some right-wing sectors have criticised the movie for "manipulating them into imagining fictional worlds that are deeply anti-American, anti-human, or anti-white" despite the fact that at not point in the movie is the RDA called American, humans are on both sides of the fight as well as people of different races (Flory 2013, 51). This may come from the fact that the narrative's anticapitalist stance does not occur in a vacuum, but can be re-contextualised as referencing US American imperial actions both overseas and in their own country (Tang 2011, 660). Indeed, while it is recognised that the Na'vi are a "mishmash fictional 'faux Indigenous world' drawn from commonalities of world Indigenous cultures" (Janke 2015, 178) the movie has revived cultural trauma especially among Native Americans: to them, the genocide of the Na'vi constitutes "a direct reference to their own history of massive death through military action, the destruction of the natural environment, the separation of the people from places sacred to them, the disintegration of Native life and other dark features of the American conquest" (Martínez Falquina 2014, 123–25).

As a result, it seems that the projection of US American identity on human characters is directly linked to the representation of the RDA and its military actions on Pandora. Indeed, as Daniel Hawk asserts "*Avatar* is a variation on the America's national narrative of westward expansion and empire-building, whereby invaders with advanced technology drive out indigenous peoples and occupy their lands … the central thread of America's narrative of nation-building" (2010, 2).This projection is not without in-world fundament either: though the information is provided outside the movie, the RDA is explicitly US American. Additionally, its description as an entity that began as "little more than a Silicon Valley garage startup in the early 21st century, when its two founders borrowed

money from family members to begin the company" (Pandorapedia n.d.) is reminiscent of the the origin stories of a string of American technological companies—Amazon, Google, Apple, Tesla, etc. What is more, the characterisation of the RDA as US American, or at least US American-adjacent, is much less subtle when it comes to its private military, the Security Operations Division or SecOps. Members of this group wear American uniforms, have American accents—like most humans in Pandora—and it is formed by several marines or ex marines who use weapons obtained from the US Army and Marine Corps (Cameron and Landau 2022a, 109).

In short, while the humans on *Avatar* are not explicitly allotted a nationality or cultural identity, the only national ties they have are to the United States. This is in part because all of the human protagonists are members of the RDA, an organisation that is implied to be American and is linked to US military forces. Furthermore, the RDA's actions both on Earth and on Pandora have led the audience to widely identify the corporation as US American, in part because its military interventions strongly resemble the violent actions that took place in the American frontier. In practice, this means that regardless of authorial intention, humans on Pandora—who in the context of human-Na'vi conflict represent all humanity—are perceived as US American. In turn, this implies that in the narrative, American identity functions as a proxy for human identity.

2.2. From Defensive to Colonialist Militarism

While the RDA is a private corporation, it works closely with US military forces. Initially, militarism is effectively a security detail, a pre-emptive measure to dissuade Na'vi from expelling humans. However, as the conflict with the locals escalates, the movie shows the extent to which militarism is inextricable from capitalism and imperialism.

In the first movie, the SecOps are a relatively small section of the RDA. Indeed, even though the main antagonist Miles Quaritchis part of the military branch of the company, their power is limited as they are simply hired mercenaries subservient to corporative interests. What makes Quaritch dangerous are his ties to Parker Selfridge, the RDA's head of operations in Pandora. The primacy of corporative over military power is shown in an encounter where Selfridge encourages Jake, to "find me a carrot that'll get them to move, otherwise it's gonna have to be all stick." This shows a corporative utilitarian perspective of Na'vi life: he has no qualms to use violence as long as his objectives are fulfilled but will avoid killing the Na'vi because it is "bad press." The Parker-Quaritch collaboration constitutes a "critique of governmental/military relationships in the United States during relocation periods and gold mining eras, as well as today considering the omnipresent and increasing role of the military in American society" (Koh 2022, 39). Like in other movies in Cameron's filmography, corporate capitalism is conflated with imperialism, the industrial-military complex and technology, to form an oppressive triad (Tang 2011, 659). In other

words, criticism in *Avatar* is not aimed at militarism per se, but at the dangers of its use by the capitalist system to enable imperialism.

Indeed, while the military starts as a tool-like "stick," the Omaticaya's resistance results in Quaritch becoming the *de facto* ruler of the humans on Pandora, thus switching the power balance. Narratively, Quaritch is the face of in-world human militarism: he constitutes a "caricaturesque rendering of a violent, racist, sadistic marine commando" (Collins 2014, 105) and the "quintessence of militaristic aggressivity driven, obstinate, and territorial male, using militaristic coerciveness for sheer pleasure" (Pop 2009, 48). Dan Flory argues that such negative characterization, together with the character's strong Southern accent, are perceived as attacks by Eurocentric right-leaning audiences, who identify with Quaritch's values (2013, 53). Indeed, Matti Johansen Richoux explicitly states that the Colonel is a caricature of the American right that favours "war, intimidation and power politics in its approach to the challenge" (2012, 71). The Colonel enforces a militaristic rhetoric that invites to fight fire with fire, terror with terror, a scorched-earth policy which Hawk classifies as "stock elements of American warfare" (2010, 7). Indeed, it is reminiscent of ex-president George W. Bush's approach in the so-called War on Terror, and echoes US American actions in Afghanistan and Iraq (Tang 2011, 660; Johansen Richoux 2012, 71).

In the end, the Na'vi manage to triumph over human technology thanks to the force of numbers. This initial message that militarism is not an effective solution to intercultural conflicts is diluted by the fact that human expulsion from Pandora is enforced through military means: the final scenes depict the Na'vi threatening humans with bows and arrows, and avatars carrying weapons. This is a sign that militarism is not over in Pandora. Surely enough, by the second film the RDA and the military branch have become one and the human settlement is effectively under martial law. At the beginning of the colonisation process, the military branch of the corporation fulfilled an almost exclusively dissuasive role and any attack on the Na'vi was reframed as defensive of the RDA's economic ventures in Pandora. However, the situation is very different when the need is not for a natural resource but for what we may call a *lebensraum*. With this in mind, the RDA becomes less of a corporation and more of an army: "Humans are under the RDA'S version of martial law. The facilities at Bridgehead used to be a corporate-run operation with a security presence, but that power structure has now reversed. There is now little division between what is conceived of as military and the RDA" (Cameron and Landau 2022b, 43).

In the second instalment, the new leader of the RDA, General Frances Ardmore, makes the change of priorities clear enough when she affirms that her intention is not to run a mine—showing that the unobtanium is no longer the objective of the human settlement—but has been "charged with a greater mission". This choice of words is reminiscent of the Manifest Destiny that drove Anglo American colonists towards the Western frontier

and sure enough, Ardmore does confirm that her role is to "tame this frontier" and "pacify the hostiles" so that Pandora can become humanity's new home. However, capitalistic ventures are not unentangled from human expansion and militarism: as money is needed to run the military industrial complex, a group of humans hunt tulkuns so that they can extract from them a fluid called amrita, which stops human aging and is sold on Earth for a great profit. However, while in the first film the trips to Pandora and the SecOps were an inversion to get unobtanium, in the second film the obtaining and selling of amrita is the inversion, while establishing a military force is the goal.

The initial defeat of the human army at the hands of the Na'vi was meant to show the futility of expansive politics, both in *Avatar* and the real United States (Johansen Richoux 2012, 72). But with the needs of humanity becoming more acute and finding the current resources of Earth insufficient, the army becomes the spear-point to open a new frontier on Pandora that will provide said resources.

2.3. Frontiering Pandora

Though the first explicit mention of Pandora as a frontier does not appear until the second movie, the human rhetoric around the Na'vi is always articulated using the concepts of the frontier thesis. This is significant because the audience's direct experience of the land is limited to the characters' impressions and experiences.

On Jake's first arrival to Pandora, he and the other newcomers are welcomed by Quaritch's briefing. In his discourse, he gives the first extensive descriptive about life in Pandora:

> You are on Pandora, ladies and gentlemen. Respect that fact every second of every day. Out beyond that fence every living thing that crawls, flies or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubees. We have an indigenous population of humanoids here called the Na'vi. They're fond of arrows dipped in a neurotoxin which can stop your heart in one minute. And they have bones reinforced with naturally occurring carbon fibre. They are very hard to kill. As head of security, it's my job to keep you alive. I will not succeed. Not with all of you.

This discourse paints a hard Manichean distinction between the humans and the Na'vi, drawing from Eurocentric perspectives of Indigenous cultures (Rose and Bartoli 2021, 149). Quaritch transposes the Turnerian conception of the frontier onto Pandora, by classifying the humans as "civilised" and the Natives as dangerous "savages." This is exactly how US or Anglo American westward expansion was articulated ideologically: "When settlers encroached on these lands, colonial governments generally depicted the Native peoples, rather than the settlers, as aggressive and brutal" (Hawk 2010, 8).

By the end of the movie, Quaritch's speech is explicitly colonial, with his final actions in the frontier being characterized as directly opposed to his initial ones:

> Everyone on this base, every one of you, is fighting for survival. That's a fact. There's an aboriginal horde out there massing for an attack. Now, hese orbital images tell me the hostiles' numbers have gone from a few hundred to over 2000 in one day, and more are pouring in. In a week's time there could be 20000. At that point, they will overrun our perimeter. Well, that's not gonna happen! Our only security lies in pre-emptive attack. We will fight terror with terror. Now, the hostiles believe that this mountain stronghold of theirs is protected by their…their deity. And when we destroy it, we will blast a crater in their racial memory so deep they won't come within a thousand klicks of this place ever again. And that too, is a fact!

Once again, Quaritch imagines a humanity under siege by "uncivilised" enemies, but his military plans have shifted from reactive to active. For instance, while his initial dehumanization and racial Othering of the Na'vi was grounded on security concerns, now he explicitly refers to the Omaticaya's inferiority as a reason to commit ethnic cleansing. Quaritch's choice of words in this second speech underlies the shift from a static to an expanding frontier.

Firstly, while in the first speech the idea of fighting for survival was certainly present, it was never uttered. Yet, in his last speech Quaritch is very specific and uses the idea of survival to instil fearlessness in his troops, so that they feel justified in their dichotomic vision of the Na'vi as the Other. Fear was also present in the first speech, but it was directed at creating an atmosphere that would keep humans in a defensive stance. On the contrary, even though Quaritch indicates that theirs is a pre-emptive attack in the end speech, the fact remains that the military has transitioned from a passive to an active stance regarding the Na'vi. The audience also receives mixed messages regarding the danger that humans are facing: in the first speech the sense is that despite their superior technology, humans are helpless against Na'vi warfare and superior physical abilities; while in the second one the intention is to assert the power of the human settlement and technology, by resorting constantly to perceived "facts." Finally, the first speech's goal is either to encourage a stagnant separation in Pandora, with the frontier in a permanent position and humans and Na'vi strictly divided under pain of death. But the second speech encourages the movement of the frontier primarily through brute force, to conquer and colonise these "unoccupied" lands.

This speech is perceived as horrid, in part because *Avatar* breaks with the traditional depictions of Native Americans in the frontier by presenting them as morally and physically superior to the colonisers (Johansen Richoux 2012, 75). As aforementioned, the Na'vi are a blend of different Indigenous cultures and their characterization relies heavily on tropes that see Native populations as more spiritual and connected with nature (Collins 2014, 106). The representation of the Na'vi as a homogenous mass of "good" individuals is the result of *Avatar*'s belonging to a trend that visualise cultural contact through the stereotype of the noble savage (Clarke 2014, 133). By focalising the audiences' direct perception of a miraculous Pandora through Jake, the movie creates a parallel discourse about the frontier: while dangerous to humans, it is also an opportunity to experience

bountifulness and awe like the first European explorers once did (Clarke 2014, 107). As a result, even the human hero is simply reinforcing the myths that justify colonisation (Vugman 2014, 143). Indeed, all contact with the planet and the Indigenous cultures takes place through the biased perspective of a White colonist, who has already internalised the concept of the frontier. Consequently, the movie does not advocate for an erasure of the frontier as an outdated concept, but instead rearticulates it as "an idealized, almost Edenic" nostalgic element of the past and perhaps, the future (Collins 2014, 110). In other words, the battle between Na'vi and humans does not contrast anticolonial and colonial views of the frontier, but different approaches to colonisation.

In short, all humans on Pandora are experiencing a frontier context. While frontier conflicts are a global phenomena, *Avatar*'s version is articulated using terms and ideas inherent to the US American frontier discourse. Though this most traditional conception is appropriated by the villains of the story and presented as racist and colonialist, the narrative never denies the idea that Pandora is indeed a frontier. Instead, the franchise continues to promote a perspective of the frontier that centres the experiences and benefits it has for White colonists, rather than explore the nuanced traumas and identities of the Indigenous populations they displace.

3. Conclusion

Science fiction is recognised as a means to both explore present social anxieties and theorize on future cultures (Aronoff 2025, 271). Hence, it is particularly important to pay attention at products with the success of the *Avatar* franchise: what does it represent and what does that imply for our present and future?

The humanity of *Avatar*'s future is led by a US American-born corporation that has created dystopic living conditions on Earth and enforces colonialist and militaristic policies on the alien planet Pandora. Regardless of authorial intentions and actual depictions in the movie, it must be acknowledged that audiences' responses of various demographic groups have interpreted the humans on Pandora as US American. On the one hand, because the myth of the frontier that is central to the narrative is also a foundational element of US American identity; and on the other, because the violence that is enacted on Pandora is recognised as a reenactment of the colonisation of Native American populations. This recognition of the American frontier also extends to more recent uses of the frontier rhetoric to justify American military intervention in other countries: "One might find a clue in the similarity between Cameron's fantasy and that of George W. Bush and his neocons: to invade Iraq while being welcomed as the heroes and saviors of the Iraqi people" (Vugman 2014, 143).

At first sight, the franchise seems to condemn this frontier rhetoric by straying from traditional depictions of the westward expansion and condemning the militaristic and capitalistic motivations behind its brutality. Instead, the narrative appears to favour the

Indigenous perspective by presenting the Native Na'vi as the heroes of the story. Yet, this choice is deceiving, because the audience always perceives the Na'vi either through Jake or his enemy Quaritch, both White colonists. This results in Cameron's unwittingly reinforcing colonialist sets of beliefs, such as Manifest Destiny, and prioritizing the colonist' experience of the frontier. The frontier is thus presented as a negative notion only partially as it depends on the individual actions of the colonist. More concerning is the fact that even the version that seeks to voice Indigenous concerns ends up disavowing their ways of life: "The Na'vi have no chance against the humans if they behave as orthodox Na'vi (as their young leader would like them to do). They must adopt a human strategy, taught by the good human, Jake" (Herzog 2013, 73). Consequently, the franchise does not constitute an advocacy for pacifism in intercultural conflicts, and instead promotes a mindset based on domination through "practices of colonization, internal colonialism, neocolonialism, and enslavement that exist as structures of domination" (Rose and Bartoli 2021, 149).

As evidenced in the paper, the *Avatar* franchise parallels both past and present events of US American history and transposes them into the future. The intention appears to serve as an ominous prophecy of what should befall humanity if history continues to repeat itself. But the real narrative actively approves off certain discourses that powered Anglo or US American colonialist expansion and silences alternative histories. As of 2025, when far-right movements are internationally on the rise fuelled by the presidential reelection of Donald Trump and discourses that recycle colonialist rethorics of Manichean racism, a partial criticism of frontier colonialism feels insufficient. And yet it makes the answer to the question "how will we get to that quasi-postapocalyptic future?" abundantly clear: exactly like that.

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