

## **Ways of Decoloniality by The Painted Lady: *Avatar: The Last Airbender's* Katara Demonstrates How to Revive a Community in Ecological distress Brought by the Colonial Expansion of the Fire Nation**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

In the third episode of *Avatar: The Last Airbender's Book 3: The Book Of Fire*, The “Gaang” consisting of Avatar Aang, Toph, Sokka, and Katara chanced upon a fishing village on stilts, ravaged by the pollution of its waterways. The pollution comes from the industrial activity of the Colonial Masters’ Fire Nation which greatly affected the village. This animation is from Nickelodeon, a channel geared for children’s entertainment, thus implicates humorous asides in what purports to be a serious epicurean reclaiming of a lost balance through indigenous visual culture, solidarity, media studies, and ecocriticism. Katara disguises herself as “the Painted Lady,” a folkloric figure of the village to help in healing the sick and providing food, which proved not to be as effective until a direct confrontation with the polluters had taken place. Katara dons the appearance of the Painted Lady as a benevolent force (to rival the Fire Nation’s industrial foment) and eventually worked with the villagers to seize their village’s wellbeing by the ousting of the Fire nation. This paper explores connective nodes relating this episode with other local environmental concerns that are at the forefront of increased geopolitical tensions in the region.

**Keywords** Avatar: The Last Airbender, Katara, waterbending, Fire Nation, coloniality, decoloniality, animation studies, ecocriticism, popular culture, praxis

*The Painted Lady* (Hamilton and Spaulding 2007) episode of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* offers sharp ecocriticism in an extractive dominant culture that is very much a real-world issue with fraught calls of climate emergency. Though the cartoon highlighted in this paper is situated in a fictional world based on many Asian cultures, this episode offers a poignant look at coloniality and its attendant violence of ecological degradation and community oppression. In this episode, the character of Katara powers through the guise of a folkloric spirit to accommodate the belief system of a fishing village's indigenes. In the process, Katara and the Gaang fight the mechanical might and modernity of the dominant group. In this regard, the paper interweaves its critical lens of indigenous visual culture with indigenous beliefs and solidarity from the margins, and looks at how coloniality can be combated as evidenced by media studies delving into real life experiences uttered from the margins through the arts and popular culture. To uphold ecological justice is to trouble the hold of the dominant culture over those with much lesser power but with higher stakes through the empowerment of those who are subject to domination via decoloniality, which also involves an insurgent praxis to anticipate and allow for enunciation. This enunciation not only empowers the colonized with a means to an utterance, but also adheres to an emergence of visibility. This is also evidenced by real-life acts of defiance from many cultures across the world that seek to undermine the wanton extraction and exploitation of resources. Solidarity works with arms akimbo and linking with people that may be different from you but have shared concerns in terms of encountering and countering oppression and devaluation. Decoloniality means seeing through the lens of the smaller dominated culture, which extends the legibility of the cultures via solidarity. Furthermore, this episode shows the capacity of popular culture icons such as Nickelodeon cartoons to be informative about such issues, and potentially inspire a course of direct action.

Nickelodeon cartoons have the connective thread of using humor and goofiness in their stories which perhaps, at face value, are to tickle the primary audience which are children. But humor/goofiness can be reflective of a transgressive manner to emerge a different point of view to look upon a situation. This is informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque wherein he critically dives into 17th century author Francois Rabelais's works to provide a lens of humor through carnival energy, which proves to be transgressive and has the capacity for inversion and provides an exposure of the tenuous nature of power. In Nickelodeon's cartoons, humor may be seen as aspects of silliness and a source of narrative disruption, but in *The Painted Lady* episode, humor and goofiness are crucial coping mechanisms as are disruptions in the figure of the boat man who shifts through different personas invoking his brothers. This shifting of bodies can be seen through Katara's donning the Painted Lady persona but it goes beyond goofiness as a transient way of becoming that can help her operationalize and shift through solidarity.

In this episode, Katara, a water bender, or somebody who can manipulate water, is on a quest with her friends called "Aang Gang" by the fans of the show to confront the Fire Lord, who is the leader of the Fire Nation that has colonized the other Nations (Water, Earth, Air). Katara and the Aang Gang come from tribes and are of bodies that are oppressed, underestimated, and besmirched. During their journey, they chance upon a fishing village that has been sickened by a polluted river (*The Painted Lady*, 00:02:32). The pollution comes from the Fire Nation's military facility and weapons factory. Katara, who has the capacity to heal (Katara is one among a more talented and skilled water benders who are adept with manipulation of helping energy flow like water to afflicted areas), sneaks into the village to cure some of the villagers and provide them with food. The villagers think she is the Painted Lady, their revered river spirit. Katara proceeds to dress up as the Painted Lady (copying from the statue she saw in the fishing village which is that of a woman with a wide-brimmed hat with diaphanous silken veils at the rim and wearing white flowing robes and streaks of red paint on the face) in order to go about saving the villagers (*The Painted Lady*, 00:08:36). Yet, as the root of the ills is the factory, she sneaks into the factory with Avatar Aang and destroys it (*The Painted Lady*, 00:13:36). The Fire Nation soldiers go to the village in retaliation, but Katara, still dressed as the Painted Lady, thwarts

them. The villagers are initially jubilant, until they find out that their Painted Lady is Katara in disguise. They become angry and castigate her for “tricking” them. One of them asks, “How dare you act like our Painted Lady? (*The Painted Lady*, 00:21:01)” Katara apologizes but argues that the question about the Painted Lady’s authenticity is beside the point, as the villagers have real practical and material problems that they need to address. She tells them that the solution to their problems starts with reviving the river. Katara and her friends help the villagers clean the river. The closing shot of this episode (*The Painted Lady*, 00:23:09) shows Katara at nighttime, standing alone by the shore of the newly rehabilitated river. Then the Painted Lady appears before her, thanks her, and disappears into the mist.

In animation, the “in-between” is drawing the movement connecting one action frame to another to make it look like there is smooth action and transition. This segment of the “in-between” consists of a carefully thought out flow of frames that lead to action itself. I situate the in-between as a locus of anticipation in which one act will inform the next; or such an act will bring us from one frame to another, a synecdochic approach of taking us from an instance of abuse and exploitation to possible avenues of countering and liberation. Anticipation moves through a network of engagement, and encounters, bracketed by the political values of emotion. As Sara Ahmed (2015) writes, emotions are that which impression leaves behind or “has impressed upon the body” (Ahmed, 2015, loc 685 of 6419). This paper aims to point out how bodies that are oppressed are animated against their oppressors via the linkages of anticipation, which I argue are cognizant to praxis or thinking-doing. This paper weaves through operations of components, what David Harvey (2006) writes as blighted violence strewn across uneven geographic development which is operationalized by coloniality and its attendant crass capital accumulation via resource extraction which leads to displaced people. A proposed countering is accomplished via decoloniality and insurgency praxis (which is to work *with* the people according to their terms and not what you think is best for them, to speak *with* the people and not speak *for* the people), as discussed by various scholars, which is evident in this particular episode. This paper explores such issues via textual analysis of the episode, and by connecting it with analyses from articles on Indigenous visual culture, solidarity, media studies, and ecocriticism. The paper argues for listening to the Indigenous communities when it comes to their concerns on identity and cultural articulation. Though this paper is primarily focused on an episode of a cartoon show, it is argued that popular culture can be employed in registering dissent. Such creative aspects on identity and positionality are vital to community cohesion which is explored via examples of solidarity and creative practice. This paper demonstrates how popular culture is instrumental for protest and possible direct action to negotiate, trouble, and jockey for a counter-utterance, and how it has been used by marginalized people and communities in distress.

## WHAT IS COLONIALITY?

In Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano’s *Coloniality of Power, Ethnocentrism, and Latin America* (2000), modernity for dominant colonizer European nations is achieved through coloniality. Coloniality is the field in which colonialism happens and is still present despite “independence (this is the enduring presence of colonial powers enacted on the former colonies that make up the Global south through protracted institutions of globalized capitalist extraction and through oppressive debts incurred by the poor nations in finance institutions controlled by the wealthy nations that are former colonial masters. This troubles the notion of independence when one is still leashed by the wealthy nations of the Global North).” It is an operation to propagate and sustain their modernity (for the colonizers or dominant culture) in which resource extraction is justified by ethnocentrism, which is to mark the colonized as incapable of self-rule, and incapable vanguards of their own resources.

Throughout the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* series, the Fire Nation's leaders and its military elite overestimate their own superiority. Coloniality justified by ethnocentrism enables the Fire Nation to relegate the fishing village as an entity that is merely in the way of their military industrial complex. As such, the fishing village's cultural identity is practically discarded. The Fire Nation weapons factory near the village fits into this domineering view. The fishing village is in the way of the Fire Nation's military ascent. Furthermore, since the fishing village is not inhabited by Fire Nation people, harmful factory chemicals were dumped near the village. This is what Robert Bullard (2019) writes as "environmental racism" wherein the dominant body (colonizer) sees its duty via might as the right to extract the resources from the colonized, who are incapable of doing so, and are not as technologically adept (read: backwards) to "deserve" these resources. "The association of colonial Ethnocentrism and universal racial classification helps to explain why Europeans [or, in this case, the Fire Nation,] came to feel not only superior to all the other peoples of the world, but, in particular, *naturally* [emphasis added] superior" (Quijano, 2000, p. 541). In this regard, coloniality is a means to manifest modernity, which is a lived experience operating in the perspective brought by historical experience. This perspective in turn generates an understanding of the world. The way the Fire Nation sees the world is that it is there for their taking. Modernity brings physical, material technological innovation by way of an industrial revolution that has people and goods moving faster. Colonialism is a mobile project in which it takes time and the space acquired by the dominant culture to manifest and maintain its modernity. The depiction of a fishing village built of flimsy, combustible materials and supported by stilts stands in contrast to the Fire Nation's massive imperial architecture and intricate urban design. "Thus, all non-Europeans [in this case, the Fire Nation,] could be considered as pre-European [pre-Fire Nationeans] and at the same time displaced on a certain historical chain from primitive to civilized, from the rational to the irrational, from the traditional to the modern, from magic-mythic to the scientific (Quijano, 2000, p. 556)." Coloniality is thus what happens to the fishing village when it is exploited in the name of the military might of the Fire Nation that is convinced of its superiority. Thus, it extracts resources from the village and maintains its dominance. Coloniality involves controlling people's domain and their enunciation. The fact that the fishing village is otherwise ignored is evidence of its being silenced in the name of Fire Nation modernity. Katara, in the guise of the Painted Lady, offers a way to seize this silencing and to enable others to speak up.

### WHAT IS DECOLONIALITY? WHAT IS PRAXIS INSURGENCY?

Walter D. Mingolo and Catherine Walsh in *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* discuss that only through the realization that coloniality exists can decoloniality be delinked from it. The word "link" situates coloniality as a mesh of systems which can be thought of as the colonial matrix of power. The dominant colonial power dictates the content, manner, and location of such utterances. The colonial matrix of power which enables the modernity of one culture can be weaponized and used to control the domains of others and manage their mobility and existence. Thus, to disturb this coloniality is to expose this exploitative and abusive system through decoloniality. The ways of decoloniality are not just to realize that one is in the colonial matrix of power, it is then to delink from it and to relink somewhere else. Relinking, as dramatized in *The Painted Lady* episode, involved empowering the fishing village through their connection to the river.

Katara's act of summoning the Painted Lady has reminded the villagers that there is still "worth" or "power" in the river. Katara has thus aligned her power to the belief system and resources of the fishing village. As Mingolo and Walsh state, "Decoloniality, without a doubt, is also contextual, relational, practice based, and lived" (2018, p. 19). The emergence of the Painted Lady was, arguably, the crack that caused the Fire Nation to lose its grip over the fishing village. The praxis is being undone; "It is praxis that makes the path" (Mingolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 19). Katara undoes the dominance of the Fire Nation: "Undoing is doing something;

delinking presupposes relinking to something else. Consequently, decoloniality is undoing and redoing; it is praxis” (Mingolo 2018:120). Katara’s experience with the Fire Nation’s atrocities towards the Southern Water Tribe provides her an arsenal for decolonizing and disruption as a means of weakening the grip of the Fire Nation. In her donning the Painted Lady, she is transmuting her informed ways of defiance to suit the needs of the fishing village.

For Walsh and Mingolo, praxis does not come after theory/critical thinking, nor is it praxis that informs theory/critical thinking; but it is an act of *thinking-with* and *thinking-from*. This situates praxis *side-by-side* with theory/critical thinking. This is *thinking-doing* of insurgent praxis. This is to demand to go beyond the simple task of merely thinking *about* issues and to directly address these issues via confrontation, engagement, and the recalibration for a solution. Insurgent praxis is to expose coloniality, oppose the colonial matrix of power, and to *think-with* or *think-struggle-with* people alongside their knowledge production and culture. This is to delink and to disturb the Fire Nation’s insistence of its own modern narrative. However, Katara did not think this through before donning the revered spirit of the village. She may have enacted immediately for faster results but this became a sticking point for the villagers.

It is also necessary to note that Katara donned the Painted Lady not just as a costume but as a system of belief that is connected to the fishing village and to the health of the river system. By doing so, Katara has reminded the sick and weakened villagers that the Fire Nation is not the only power present—there is power in their traditional belief systems and in their ways of life and worldview that opposes the mechanistic and modern dominant worldview of the Fire Nation - Katara pretending to be the Painted Lady is an act of insurgent praxis. She understands the ways of a culture that is not hers and integrates this with her power capacities to help the afflicted. Katara as the Painted Lady is a means of drawing away power and might from the Fire Nation. In defeating the Fire Nation, Katara and her companions have disrupted the “universality” in which it depicts their own culture as the powerful one. In this episode, Katara as the Painted Lady destroys the factory and the villagers subsequently see the Fire Nation soldiers scrambling away from them.

Yet, the initial negative reception of Katara’s pretending to be the Painted Lady may create some tension among those who are in the margins as well. This is to prove that solidarity will not produce a monolith of struggle but a careful and thorough approach to link with others that are not similar in their ways of being and becoming. Katara is not just an outsider in the eyes of the villagers, but also an interloper with a different ethnoclass and positionality. Katara is not from their tropical littoral near the near river’s edge and the shore of the sea. She is from the Southern Water Tribe, with darker skin color than both the villagers and her own friends. It is a very telling detail that at the end of the episode where Katara meets the real Painted Lady, the Lady has iridescent pale skin. In this scene, the Painted Lady exists. Why did she not save the village herself? Indeed, the pollution of the river has driven this spirit away. The brownness of its water is equated with sludge and degradation. Why did she give her thanks to Katara when there was nobody to witness this exchange? The paintedness of the Painted Lady becomes even more apparent when the painted patterns show up even brighter on her pallid skin. This is the perceived dominance of whiteness which the Fire Nation use (and perhaps even the villagers) to denigrate those who are not *like* them, yet the “whitest” of them all, the Painted Lady shows her gratitude to Katara, whose browner body is a mark of her ethnoclassed reality as perceived as inadequate and barbaric. These shifts of identity are in comparison to the boatman Doc who switches head gears and claims to be his brothers (which Doc claims to be Xu or Bushi) offer a glimpse on the problematic aspects of Katara’s actions. The boatman shifts laterally, that is, still within the fishing village’s culture that is known and familiar, and thus comforting, despite the unsettling aspect of him donning different personas. His transformations are befuddling but goofy. Katara’s shift is crosswise, coming in from a different, if not opposite direction. This proves to be transgressive because the villagers’ littoral tropical environment is a contrast to her Antarctic one. This shows the intricacies and overlapping notions of identity and politics that

make solidarity not simplistic and easily transferrable. The villagers show their displeasure until the Avatar Aang has intervened and mentioned Katara's insurgent praxis as the chief reason for the ouster of the Fire Nation. The villagers find it problematic that a "colonial girl" tricks them and almost incites a riot until Sokka speaks for Katara. This intervention paves a way for Katara to take off the Painted Lady costume and speak directly to the villagers. The villagers have no bending power and yet find it distressing that a water bender has "tricked" them.

## **TROUBLING MODERNITY**

Katara's move to help the fishing village and infiltrate the military factory of the Fire Nation is situated in an ecocritical insurgency. Such an attack targets the Fire Nation's claim to a universal modernity. With this centrality, the Fire Nation corrals "newness" and to be its arbiter. This positions the Fire Nation ethno-class to formulate global order according to their image. Modernity is a linear narrative which marks people and cultures that are non-Fire Nation to be lagging, ergo primitive. The claim to modernity enables the Fire Nation to exploit the present to ensure their future. Decoloniality is to delink from this and to relink to the identity of the fishing village and assert it.

Katara reaches back into the fishing village's "past," which is represented by the lived lives and belief system of the fishing village, to defeat the Fire Nation's insistence on their version and vision of modernity. This is very much a demonstration of praxis: intentionality and mindfulness. It is a form of self-fashioning that allows others to realize their own capacity for self-fashioning. This is delinking away from the colonial matrix of power. To delink is to allow the re-existence of other voices, other lives. Praxis allows us to realize that modernity is how dominant cultures control enunciation and to foster, generate, and enlarge our own enunciation, our own voices. In a way, Katara demonstrates how to trouble coloniality by taking a dive into the comparative epistemic situations of the fishing village compared to those of the Fire Nation. Katara has induced and used "...insurgent praxis — that is, in multiple contexts, manifestations, and hows of political-epistemic-existence-based resistance, rebellion, struggle, action and prospect ..." (Mingolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 35). This means there are other ways to fight back.

### **Ecocritical Insurgency**

The ecological distress of the fishing village from the chemical debris of the Fire Nation's Industrial Military Complex is a component of "imperial underpinnings" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, p. 3), which has enabled the dominant culture's ascent and maintenance of its self-ascribed superiority and modernity. To delink from this is to embark on an "epistemic decolonisation — what the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls the 'decolonisation of the mind' — as with more directly physical forms of social struggle, and with theorizing the ideas of a political practice ..." (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, p. 14), which is what Katara's insurgency demonstrates. Katara's use of the belief system of the fishing village in assuming the identity of the Painted Lady is a form of epistemic decolonization that led to the destruction of the Fire Nation's factory. In her insurgent praxis, Katara uplifts other lives, other voices, and other beliefs, thus facilitating the seizing and enabling of this cultural enunciation. This episode is a depiction of eco-criticism which is "...bringing to light these alternative knowledges and knowledge-systems, [this] emphasizes postcolonial communities' sense of their own cultural identities and entitlements, which often represent the ontological basis for their territorial claims to belong" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, p. 20). This episode speaks of territorial claims not just as a means of geography and cartography, but also as a claiming of the spirit of the place. The very last scene of the episode is the actual Painted Lady appearing before Katara thanking the water bender for her help. Then, the Painted Lady dissolves back into the mist of the river that cradles the fishing village. The mist may be a nebulous mystery which can be symbolic of insurgent praxis which is to go through great lengths to unveil and reveal

the weak spots. Perhaps this victory for the tiny fishing village heralds the substantial victory to come for other tiny villages around the world who are threatened by dispossession or already displaced and fractured by such violence.

Such dispossession is what Harvey (2019) describes as a result of accumulative capitalism that is supported by the politically dominant that are backed by their military and economic might. The sickened and polluted fishing village in the episode is but an aspect of such imperialist ways of extracting resources whilst dividing the world into subservient modes to cater to the hegemony. Harvey's work offers a blueprint on how the world is bracketed into spaces of uneven development by infiltration and invasion, which leads to displacement and dispossession. Harvey's ultimate point is to put theory to task: to combat the constantly shifting social processes of embedding and its consequent dispossession. He notes, "Theory should be understood instead as an evolving structure of argument sensitive to encounters with the complex ways in which social processes are materially embedded in the way of life" (Harvey, 2019, p. 79). Such an "evolving structure" is an anticipatory mode essential in combating accumulative capitalism, which Harvey positions as being adaptable to new conditions. Harvey makes an interesting point in his discussion on common sense as an implement of conformity in that it leads to a way of not seeking direct action. Citing Gramsci (1971), Harvey elaborates that common sense enables a sense of political passivity and a weakened morality. To counter this, "good sense" is insurgent praxis in which to think with relationality; that we are a part of an "ensemble of relations," as per Gramsci. To alter the environment, one changes oneself to affect such an ensemble of relations. Harvey then connects Gramsci's thoughts on Lefebvre's (1991) notions of space which provide a possibility of transformation. Lefebvre's work situates the way we navigate through everyday life through a critical lens of relations and power structures. Thus, for Harvey, such materials from everyday life—be it belief systems, media products, consumption—have "meaning that derive from commodification and its associated fetishism's" (Harvey, 2019, p. 114). For political action to be effective, it is imperative that the daily life issues in the web of life are addressed.

David Harvey invokes Marx and Engels (1975): "in transforming our environment we necessarily transform ourselves" (Harvey, 2019, p. 88). Environment may mean ecological surroundings, but it can be situated in spaces, perhaps to expand or to reclaim what was dispossessed. Transformation here may be an operation of changing. It may be as drastic as warfare and invasion, or it could be transformation via generative and creative arts.

Theatrically, Katara as the Painted Lady confronting the Fire Nation soldiers involved creativity, art production, and being responsive to materials present in the immediate surroundings. She was acting as the Painted Lady and employed her friends the Aang Gang, who are from oppressed ethnoclassed bodies (Aang is from the Airbending tribe wiped out by the Fire Nation, and Katara and her brother Sokka are from the Southern Water Tribe) and marked with disability (Toph), to use their power and skill to impart a menacing warning to the Fire Nation soldiers. Toph the Earthbender moves a boulder to generate a foreboding stomping sound. Aang the Avatar uses his air-bending ability to create a veil of fog snaking across the lake enveloping the fishing village. The sky Bison Appa provides guttural growls behind the scene. And to add to the eeriness, Sokka plays a mournful tune with his flute. The thick fog parts to show Katara standing at the surface of the lake, who then proceeds to attack and defeat the Fire Nation soldiers. This is a demonstration of how creative practice, collective action, youth culture, solidarity with indigenous issues can be a ballast for political engagement. This dispute results in the bracketing of the network of operations to confront the inequality and abuse brought about by the deeply embedded capital accumulation enacted by the imperial Fire Nation which has resulted in the dispossession of the fishing village. A confrontation with dispossession in this episode may have involved brute force between Katara and the Fire nation, but it is necessary for her to initially inculcate the faith system which is part of the "web of life" as David Harvey (2017) writes of the power of the quotidian and the creative.

Creative work can not only expose and discuss such inequalities, but they can ameliorate the unevenness and inequalities in a manner that is shared and involves non-traditional political engagement. *The Painted Lady* episode demonstrates how to practice insurgency when engaging in the quotidian. Belief systems clash with industrialist-militaristic science that extracts resources, displaces Indigenous people and endangers their community. Childs (2019) writes of the communities in Papua New Guinea that are aware of the commercial deep-sea mining (DSM) occurring on their territory and its ramifications to the environment and to their culture. To counter the might of industry and the state bureaucracy which backs it, the communities engaged in the arts as “other forms of political contestation” (Childs, 2019, p. 118).

### Enunciation

The fact that the fishing village in this episode has been ignored and just allowed to be laid to waste by the Fire Nation is a problem of many marginalized peoples regarding their enunciation or lack thereof to stave off the dominant coloniality. Katara carves an insistence of visibility wherein she anticipates a rallying to a cause situating the indigenous people’s possible emergence and maintenance of their identity. This enunciation is discussed in Laura R. Graham’s *Image and Instrumentality in a Xavante Politics of Existential Recognition: the Public Outreach Work of Etenhiritipa Pimental Barbosa*. This asserts the “real world” connection of the Painted Lady episode in its capacity to reflect Indigenous people’s concerns and lives amidst the global march of coloniality-inflected modernity. Graham writes of the attendant issues of one of Brazil’s Indigenous tribes the Xavante, describing how they are perceived and recognized by the non-Xavante. The “instrumentality” operationalized here is the cultural show staged by the Xavante to be consumed by outsiders (outside the community and the nation of Brazil). Though Graham opines that these cultural shows may be kitschy and not really emblematic of the Xavante’s concerns (such as Brazil’s hydro-engineering project directly impacting the community), this does not mean that there is nothing to politically assert by the Xavante’s cultural show. It is the position of the “image” which the Xavante deploys and demonstrates their agency. The young male leaders see this as a means of managing perception. For the elder leaders, the image is hinged upon recognition that the Xavante exist. In this case, the use of the image takes a vertical path (the lateral movement within the community) as well as a horizontal path (beyond the Xavante community). Katara’s operation of delving into the cultural show which demands to be seen is similar to that of the Xavante.

This “image instrumentality” is seen in *The Painted Lady* episode. After the first night, when many of the villagers were healed and fed, the fishing folk were all fired up and excitedly talking about the Painted Lady. A storekeeper tells Katara and her companions about their cherished river spirit, displaying a small statue of the Painted Lady that is lovingly and reverentially wiped clean. Later, after the appearance of the Painted Lady (Katara in disguise), the villagers want to install a massive statue at the center of their complex. Hence, if the Xavante have their cultural performance, this shift from a tiny statue hidden from view to a monument in the middle of the village is what Graham refers to as a means of “...placing themselves in a public sphere of their own terms ...” (Graham, 2005, p.637). At the start of the episode, the villagers are seen wandering through the dilapidated village. Once Katara has enacted her insurgent praxis by embodying the Painted Lady, this eventually enables a relinking or a return of the revered river spirit as the crux of village life itself.

As mentioned above, after having defeated the Fire Nation soldiers and seeing them flee from the fishing village, it is revealed that Katara was pretending to be the Painted Lady. This initially angers the villagers until it is pointed out that it was Katara as the Painted Lady who caused the fall of the Fire Nation in the area. The ruse had given the villagers a chance to “reclaim” the sacred river and restore its health. Katara apologizes for pretending to be the Painted Lady, but then states that the villagers do not actually need the Painted Lady. Katara said “It does not matter if the Painted Lady is real or not, because your problems are real; and this river is real. You can’t wait around to help you. You have to help yourself (*The Painted Lady*, 00:21:34).” She says that it is up to them to fix their situation by cleaning up the river. Katara is not belittling the Painted Lady but is



speaking from her own experience as a victim of the Fire Nation's violence. Though they are cartographically and culturally different, Katará's own village and the fishing village have a shared experience involving the Fire Nation.

### **Historically Informed Violence**

Katará's many painful memories and violent encounters with the Fire Nation sustains her cache of emotions which informs her particular anticipations. Violence and extraction are encounters that have been implicated in the daily existence of Indigenous communities. This historical and systemic type of violence is how the communities in Papua New Guinea anticipate the severe manner of depletion and diminution brought about by the multinational corporations in collaboration with state forces. In Childs' (2019) research on how Indigenous communities of Papua New Guinea dealt with a multinational company engaged in DSM, their participation and the malleability associated with working with a direct environment to source materials are crucial in registering their wariness. It is the history of many of these Indigenous communities that have been displaced and dispossessed that inform their distrust over the government's partnership with commercial mining. The proponents of DSM argue with science and reason that such an activity occurring at the Bismarck Sea of Papua New Guinea, for example, is too far from the community's immediate environment and too deep to have any impact on the communities. The communities counter this with their belief system that all are interconnected. Perhaps this is where Bullard's (2019) "environmental racism" offers a crucial operation on how resources are viewed by those with dominant powers. Bullard offers a reason for the emergence of environmental racism via the development of the United States of America:

Western culture perceives nature as something to be exploited and dominated... Communities are viewed in the same context. When certain lands are seen as exploitable, the people that happen to be living there are viewed as expendable. Hence the (White supremacist American) genocide of Native people and the exploitation of slaves. At the same time, pollution is seen as just a byproduct of moving to the highest level of the economy. Smoke, air pollution, water pollution... that is the smell of progress (Bullard, 2019, p. 239).

The DSM proponents argue that the depth of the source is distant from the location, ergo physically distant relative to the position of the natives, and thus should be grounds for extraction. This complicates what Bullard mentions as "that happen to be living there" as beyond cartographic pinpointing but in the native cosmogony. *Where* is the native? Is it where they live physically or should their manner of organizing the world be taken into consideration? Childs asks a vital question "whose knowledge counts in contesting it as a site of resource extraction?" (2019, p. 118). Such a confrontation of epistemic violence is demonstrated in how Childs compares two images, the first being a scientific illustration rendered by the DSM company which highlights the levels of depths of the sea. Each layer rendered in a different color seems to suggest a demarcation of space. Whereas the second image, the drawing rendered by participants from the communities shows the deep sea as seamless space for sea creatures as well as their mythological beings, some of whom they believe directly affect them. The scientific illustration renders the depths as empty whereas the indigenous people insist it is occupied by spirits that are connected to them. Childs posits that their "relational cosmology (Childs, 2020, p.122)" impacts their political worldview. In the *Painted Lady*, the sculpture and theatrical works are the villagers' means of intervention, both of which are participatory. Childs notes that these communities "don't creatively articulate their cosmopolitics without intimate understanding of their historic dispossession in the name of growth and institutions that they 'perform against' (Childs, 2020, p. 127). Such a worldview is not naive for the communities that have had experience with extractive capitalism. Some of their members work for these companies, and this has further informed their political worldview. Such exposure and engagement

have placed these communities into a heightened anticipation of ecological destruction which will put their people under duress, with a risk of displacement, and even of death.

In an uneven geography of development, indigenous communities are seen as distant from modernity. This marked difference sadly provides a justification for their violent dispersal or a leeway for their dispossession. However, if one were to work with the web of life or the Indigenous quotidian, there are possibilities of pushback via articulations of movements informed by indignation and the anticipation of solidarity.

### **Solidarity via Pop Culture**

This paper also argues for the pedagogic possibilities of popular culture in terms of informing and forming resistance. The expansive reach of popular culture elucidates a crucial possibility of shared interests which can be transposed to local concerns. This positions that the anticipation of transnational solidarity among people from different sectors can be implemented. Popular cultural artifacts such as cartoons, films, Warholian portraiture, or anticipatory projections for solidarity which

does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the theme lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground (Ahmed, 2015, loc. 4358 of 6419).

The arts are a vital channel to enact such engagements and are also a fount of inspiration for protest action. Popular culture has a wide grip given Hollywood's massive machinery. Hollywood as an industry is within dominant capitalist imperialist ideology" (Loshitzky, 2012, p. 13). Yet, there are still individual opportunities for inspiring resistance. James Cameron's *Avatar* (not related to the abovementioned Nickelodeon cartoon) has inspired "bottom-up resistance for the Palestinians to protest against Israeli land-grabbing (Loshitzky, 2012, p. 153)." Popular culture allows youth culture to utilize media products that seem to be outside of their culture, yet still vital and accessible enough to integrate it to their reinvigorated protest actions. For the youth, popular culture becomes a means for the collaborative and the creative. It links youth culture's possibility of "textual poaching", and performance vis a vis collective art that can refashion direct action for those who have met with authoritarian silencing (Diaz Pino, 2019 as cited in Jenkins (2012). The connective point of all these protest actions, be it real or fiction, is the political salience of emotion; "we need to consider how emotions operate to make and shape bodies as forms of action, which also involve orientations towards others" (Ahmed, 2015, loc 134 of 6419). To navigate the limited space accorded by the dominant power to those who have less, or who are diminished, or left behind have to amass and direct their emotion as productive, creative, and generative as counter-utterance.

In Tara Daly's *Claudia Coca's Chola Power: Pop Art as Decolonial Critique*, the Peruvian contemporary artist Claudia Coca is discussed as a means of bridging seemingly disparate (i.e. cartographically and culturally distant) elements to demonstrate and criticize the foment brought about by globalization's colonial matrix of power to trivialize people in a fraught categorization. Coca embeds the figure of the "Chola" in her portraits (some of which are self-portraits) that are informed by Western Pop Art and by the European Renaissance. Chola is the label ascribed to Indigenous people, in Peru's case, the Andean identity, which does not fit into the idealized notion of beauty and modernity insisted on by ethnocentrism. In an interview, the artist posited, "The cholo is the other, that's a way of putting ourselves down. That chip is so ingrained that we're afraid to recognize ourselves as Andean" (Coca, 2010; Daly, 2019, p. 422).

Coca utilizes "oppositional aesthetics" to confront the violent hierarchy of ethnoclass definition of beauty wherein mainstream culture brands the Chola as inadequate, indecent, and inelegant. Identifying herself as Chola, her work is a means of "reclaiming the term for oneself and in solidarity with other 'cholos' [which] tells an altogether different story: one about self-empowerment, self-actualization, and social critique"

(Daly, 2019, p. 429). Coca's solidarity with other cholos is enacted by Katara deciding to help the fishing village via the lens of their shared marginality. Katara shares a border (distinct from Fire Nation modernity) and parallel positionality with the villagers in a similar way to how Coca fights for other cholos in her oppositional aesthetic to critique the racism and exploitation in Peru's prevailing conditions. This also demonstrates that *The Painted Lady*, though an animated fictional cartoon, still holds a solution that can be applied and related to the real-world violence against marginalized communities. Decoloniality means having the ability to course through such shared borders.

Katara is "...border dwelling, thinking, doing is [which informs her] ...decolonial direction ..."(Mingolo 2018:108). Besides, the entire point of the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is decoloniality itself, to take out the Fire Nation's supremacy over others, over them. This is solidarity that brings the group together in their quest. This is the solidarity which Katara felt with the fishing village. Instead of portraying herself as the savior of the fishing village, Katara uses the belief system of the fishing village to help the village. Ultimately, the ones who have actually saved the fishing village are the villagers themselves working in tandem with the group who are familiar with their oppression. This is solidarity.

It must be noted that Katara and her friends are young people who have effectively routed the Fire Nation soldiers. The inflections of youth cultures are occasionally informed by pop culture. Ergo, she and her friends engage in recognizable tropes as part of their rules against the fire nation. This route is very much informed by anticipation in the same manner as was done by Chilean students to make their protest less confrontational and agitated by invoking a cartoon. Working with other groups, the students utilized a popular cartoon to embark on a creative protest action that will spark recognition and solidarity for their cause. Youth-led action is central to Diaz Pino's (2019) article on Chilean students protesting against neoliberal policies that have cut state support from education leading to increased student debts in 2011. Utilizing the anime (Japanese animation) *Dragon Ball Z* situated collective action based on the "long held quotidian impact of anime in many regional mediascapes—Latin America included (Diaz Pino, 2019, p. 205)." Not only is this protest media-informed, it is a multimedia performance. A video clip of the lead character, named Goku, seeking help from others to lend him their *qi* or energy so he can harness it to defeat the enemy has been repurposed by the Chilean protesters. The protest took place in the major plaza in the capital where, in the clip, the crowd is addressed directly and requested to focus their energy to deflect the enemy. In the anime, this focus energy becomes a glowing ball of light, which was then refashioned by the Chilean protesters into their own version of collective energy which appears as a gigantic ball made of plastic secured over an internal frame. This giant ball crowd surfs from one end to the other then to the middle. As the ball moves, the protesters perform a transfer of their energy to make the ball "grow" as a political communication of their collaborative act to show their resistance and determination to defeat evil, in this case the neoliberal clutch on education. Diaz Pino also aligned this aversion for neoliberalism with the seeming ease of adopting the anime, particularly *Dragon Ball Z*, into Chilean media consumption. Anime is not seen as a neo-colonial implement from U.S. media. Diaz Pino writes of this textual poaching to resituate *Dragon Ball Z* "to become overt text, connecting it to specific aims of the protest itself" (Diaz Pino, 2019, p. 211).

This textual poaching is seen by Loshitzky (2012) as how some protesters have appropriated James Cameron's 2009 film *Avatar* to protest against land grabbing and its attendant ecological and cultural destruction. The film depicts neo-colonial capitalist research on possible resource extraction in outer space. This science fiction film shows an edenic planet named Pandora with lush foliage marking it as a possible site for resource extraction for humans, specifically U.S. capitalist accumulation. A scientific team is led by military personnel which depicts the problematic connection between scientific rationality, research, violence, and colonial expansion. The planet is noxious to humans, so to explore it and to infiltrate the indigenous Na'vi population, the scientific team needs a mechanism to transport human consciousness temporarily to an

engineered Na'vi vessel — an Avatar. A human in a Na'vi body infiltrates the tribe, which causes trouble for the human interlocutors. The said human falls in love with a Na'vi woman and with Na'vi culture and thereby becomes their protector. As a consequence, the humans stage an attack at the Na'vi “soul tree” which is the center of Na'vi belief. The humans are eventually defeated by the Na'vi, despite their relatively “primitive” weapons. The incursion of a heavily armored militarized people invading paradise and destroying cultural artifacts important to the indigenous people resonate with many peoples, particularly the Palestinian people. The planet Pandora, as an Eden is aligned with how many Palestinians viewed their land before the Zionist land grab. This has been reflected in Palestinian art and literature. Loshitzky (2012) writes that *Avatar* has captured the Palestinian imagination since the movie resonates with their resistance literature as well as actual images of their own conflict being reflected on screen. Loshitzky (2012) shows some protesters dressed in costume looking like the Na'vi to show up in contested sites to confront the settlers. The most provocative part of the article is the comparison of the armored vehicle in the film demolishing the spirit tree with that of an Israeli settler's bulldozer in a landscape of felled olive trees, trees which are vital to Palestinian cultural identity and economy. Such images of destruction and foment connect “to local resistances of the dispossessed” (Loshitzky, 2012, p. 162). Despite it being a Hollywood blockbuster, and one which has been critiqued for perpetuating a white savior complex in some readings, protesters resituate it to their daily web of life. The images of the Na'vi, who are at risk of being displaced and having their resources dispossessed is read as a parallel to the dispossession of Palestinians. Loshitzky shows how popular culture emanating from the Hollywood behemoth, which is often criticized for being an implementation of U.S. American imperialism can be appropriated to enable marginalized people to see themselves and show how “cultures can resist their erasure” (Loshitzky, 2012, p. 162).

These erasures are testament to Harvey's (2019) uneven geographical development being brought about by capitalist accumulation. The above-mentioned examples are what Sara Ahmed (2015) writes about with regards to the ways emotions can confront one body due to complications via encounters and generate an impression to generate a series of affects in which it enables courses of actions. Emotions, for Ahmed (2015), are not an operation of externalization (inside-out), nor internalization (outside-in). Rather, emotions entail movement, contact, and the accumulation of an effective value. Emotion as accumulation thus situates it and operates across time which can be historicized. Emotion is also spatial in that it is engaged through contact zones (i.e. Military takeover, suspension of Democratic institutions, land-grabbing, crass resource exploitation, weakened representation in the name of profit and marketability) which have the capacity to reshape the surface (i.e. landscape) and the bodies (i.e. displacement of Indigenous groups). “Feminist and queer scholars have shown us that emotions ‘matter’ for politics; emotions show us how power shapes the very surface of bodies as well as worlds. So in a way we do ‘feel our way’” (Ahmed, 2015, loc 321 of 6419). Ahmed (2015) aligns emotions as being no less than rationality which demands distance, but as part of our relational network that needs to be investigated for its possibilities to take a look at power structures and work towards social justice. To invoke emotions as part of a network means it cannot be and should not be segmentized and diminished as the currency of emotions encompasses circulation and contact that are not just from impressions left by others but are crucial in informing, forming, and reforming societal norms. This demonstrates the performance of emotions which are situated in daily lived experiences and are embedded in what Harvey calls the “web of life.” Precisely because of this embeddedness and circulation, emotions are political or can be marshaled for political acts, as they are informed by the histories of such contact zones. Emotions are not merely reacting to the past, but are modes of anticipation: “emotions also open up futures, in the ways they involve different orientations to others” (Ahmed, 2015, loc 4660 of 6419).

In *The Painted Lady* episode, Katara acts upon the suggestion that helping out the fishing village by providing food and medicine is not enough; that she must get to the source of the problem. To recognize

the Fire Nation's capitalist accumulation via its military industrial complex as the reason for a protracted environmental degradation endangering the Indigenous communities is an act of anticipation. The protest actions presented here are indicated in anticipation: that the issues must be exposed and then opposed for, if not confronted, it will lead to worse conditions to those who are marginalized and to those who are endangered by such issues. Be it Chilean students fighting against scaled back support for education, or the loss of land, life, and destruction of culture for Palestinians, anticipation is an irruption to the violence of uneven geographical development. With Indigenous communities' historical engagement with multinational resource extraction and with Hollywood's record of whitewashing and the diminishing of minorities, protests are an anticipatory act to stave off a worsening condition. Anticipation is how marginalized identities resort to a pop cultural gesture to counter their diminution. In sum, anticipation animates direct action in a blighted landscape made uneven by forces that seek supremacy of space and bodies and unjustly direct the web of life according to their preferred image.

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