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Reframing Sympathy for Indigenous Captives in

Avatar: The Last Airbender

PETER WOOD

The animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* plays as a response to the broader tradition of American captivity narratives, a genre in which one “captive” character or group is emotionally or physically constrained by a “captor.” Captivity narratives have historical roots in American colonial accounts, especially those by white women, of being captured by mostly male, or at least masculine-coded, American Indians. *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, commonly referred to as ATLA, takes place in a world of four nations: the Water Tribes, Earth Kingdom, Fire Nation, and the Air Nomads, which are based on Inuit, Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan cultures respectively. It details the journey of a young nomad named Aang and his friends to end a century-long war with the technologically advanced Fire Nation. As the series progresses, it most noticeably incorporates the captor-captive dynamic into its protagonists Aang, Katara, and Sokka, who are fleeing and, at times, captured by Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation. It is worth noting that Zuko fills both roles, hoping to convince his father to reverse his banishment from the Fire Nation by trying to capture Aang.

The series also includes elements of the intercultural “moving encounter” found in American captivity narratives, as defined by Laura L. Mielke in her book *Moving Encounters: Sympathy and the Indian Question in Antebellum Literature*. Mielke’s concept focuses on an interaction between different nationalities or ethnicities with significance to the overall story. She describes this in greater detail in her book as any scene “in which representatives of two ‘races,’ face-to-face in a setting claimed by both, participate in a highly emotional exchange that indicates their hearts have more in common than their external appearances or

political allegiances suggest” (Mielke 2). This is especially true when we consider Aang and his title as “Avatar,” one who is reincarnated throughout history to relearn the element-based art form of each nation, as an intermediary between the colonizers and colonized characters (Mielke 4).

That said, ATLA uses many of these captivity tropes with a critical perspective toward the genre. In doing so, the series challenges how we use sympathy and sentimentality for indigenous people in the captivity narrative tradition. For example, although we can view Aang as an intermediary between cultures, making the moving encounter possible, we may also note that the show’s writers and producers do not remove him from his identity as coming from a colonized culture. Perhaps more noteworthy is the fact that his relationships with other characters are based more around building empathy and solidarity among the Fire Nation’s victims rather than working to draw sympathy from colonizers and the audience. Additionally, the series allows scenarios in which indigenous people are not ubiquitously vanishing or victims of colonialism, but have flourished during a century of war. This opens readings of ATLA to consider how the series recognizes pluralistic identities among indigenous people instead of a more rigid, monolithic representation with the protagonists as the exceptional “good Indians.” Despite the writers and producers calling for empathy over sympathy through the protagonists, they still include unambiguously sympathetic and sentimental portrayals of indigenous people. This reduces many of the indigenous characters to symbols of victimhood and the risks of the world; however, these characters serve to depict the threat of a vanishing culture as opposed to a future that excludes indigenous people. Thus, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* critically uses tropes associated with captivity narratives to broaden indigenous representation. This action also helps to decouple indigenous representation from strictly sympathetic and sentimental portrayals.

Avatar: The Last Airbender’s Place in the Captivity Narrative Tradition

In order to argue that ATLA critiques and reshapes the

captivity narrative, we cannot ignore the need to show that the series works within and responds to the genre. For example, in the second episode, “The Avatar Returns,” we explicitly see the episode’s conflict center around rescuing the protagonist, Aang, from captivity at the hands of Prince Zuko. Despite the dark gray and red backgrounds and gruff voice-acting from Zuko’s henchmen, the writers quickly defuse tension by playing the captivity scene for laughs. Aang comments, “So, I guess you’ve never fought an airbender before. I bet I can take you both with my hands tied behind my back,” beginning his escape almost as quickly as he is captured (“The Avatar Returns”). The animation at sixteen minutes into the episode supports the playful tone of the captivity when it portrays the firebenders as constrained by their uniforms and rooted by gravity while Aang manipulates the air to run along the walls and ceiling, and Aang’s bright yellow and orange outfit standing out against the gray and red walls of the ship (“The Avatar Returns”). Both scenes subvert captivity to show off Aang’s wit and childish, cartoonish confidence, creating a disconnect between the real harm that potentially awaits him and his rejection of his captors’ terms. In later episodes, like “The Siege of the North, Part 2,” we see transculturation upon learning of Moon and water spirits, Tui and La, who choose to remain in the physical world as koi fish.

Transculturation specifically plays a role after Fire Nation Admiral Zhao kills Tui, destroying the Moon and leading the Water princess, Yue, to take her place and give up her mortal body (“The Siege of the North, Part 2”). This conflict forces the audience to consider the ways in which the physical and spiritual realms interact and influence one another over the course of the show, encouraging the impression that transculturation between spirits and humans is painful yet valued and necessary for the cultures involved. If we consider that this conflict takes place in a fictional indigenous setting as a way for the characters to recover from colonial violence, we can see how the show uses transculturation to represent solidarity and to restore tradition. Little scholarship is present on ATLA, let alone its place in American storytelling

traditions, but the show’s self-published online reviews and critiques since the series’ end can also shape our understanding of the show’s place among captivity narratives. For example, Nerdy POC, an online publication for fantasy and sci-fi fans of color, hosted by the blogging and social journalism platform Medium.com, tries to fill this gap. Brittney Maddox, one of the publication’s contributors, comments in her article “Avatar: The Last Airbender: A Feminist Work of American Animation” that, “I’ve read a lot of feminist text [sic] over the course of my undergraduate career and to be honest I find the texts boring, as there are examples of media more comprehensive and interesting. . . . I believe media can introduce the feminist theory and a good example which comes to mind is the hit series *Avatar the Last Airbender*” (Maddox). The series arguably does less work as its own comprehensive introduction to feminist theory than it does to respond to and synthesize broader themes. This applies similarly to ATLA’s place among other captivity narratives. The show may introduce and challenge many of the genre’s themes, but it ultimately accomplishes this in a manner that situates itself within the captivity narrative tradition.

In a third tie to the captivity genre, the show utilizes Laura L. Mielke’s concept of the “moving encounter” between “representatives of two ‘races,’ face-to-face” with high emotional stakes (Mielke 2). Before continuing, it is crucial for us to also note that, while Mielke criticizes sentimental language and the moving encounter “in particular, its use by . . . [Indian] removal apologists,” she argues they have a place in the political sphere: “Rather than reject all sentimental treatments of the Indians in [the Nineteenth Century] as complicit with the ideology of removal, we should consider how images of mediation between non-Natives and Natives may be harnessed in the name of both cultural pluralism and American Indian sovereignty” (196). Her point that authors can potentially use the moving encounter to empower indigenous voices is crucial because it helps us to better understand how ATLA critiques and refashions the concept for itself. In the first moving encounter between Aang and Zuko, we hear Zuko say, “I’ve spent years preparing for this encounter. . . . You’re just a child,”

only to hear Aang say, “Well, you’re just a teenager” (“The Avatar Returns”). This scene calls attention to both characters’ immaturity when compared to their personal conflicts: the expectation that Aang must save the world and Zuko must restore his honor. Thus, the audience is encouraged to look for similarities in how they handle their circumstances, even if this encounter fails to generate lasting sympathy. We can compare this to a successful moving encounter in the “The Siege of the North, Part 2,” in which the protagonists work with one of the antagonists, Zuko’s uncle Iroh, upon the understanding that any harm to the Moon Spirit Tui would affect all life on Earth (“The Siege of the North, Part 2”). Although Zhao ultimately kills Tui, this encounter proves vital to reviving her and the show’s theme of empathy, specifically Iroh’s decision to support the Avatar over the Fire Nation Navy. Hence, *ATLA* frequently situates itself within the captivity narrative tradition while also critiquing its tropes about the captor-captive relationship and sympathy.

Avatar: The Last Airbender and Indigeneity Without Sympathy

By creating space for its indigenous characters to perform indigeneity differently, *ATLA* rejects the doomed, rigid stereotypes of the genre historically associated with American Indians. We see this clearest in how the series portrays the Northern and Southern Water Tribes, the nation located at the north and south poles, based on Inuit cultures. One of the more prominent examples of representation is in the landscape seen in the visuals and architecture of the two tribes. For example, when Yue asks Sokka, “So, they don’t have palaces in the Southern Tribe?” Sokka answers, “Are you kidding? I grew up in a block of ice; it’s not exactly a cultural hub” (“The Siege of the North, Part 1”). Even within one indigenous civilization, the show depicts prejudices and standards of whom is more “civilized” than whom among the tribes. The scene serves to cement our image of Yue and Sokka as from vastly different social classes, although both are the children of chiefs, and the anxieties that this may carry for Sokka and Katara (“The Boy in the Iceberg”; “The Siege of the North; Part 1”). The audience

would see this in how differently the animation depicts water in the two tribes. Snow and ice in the south are various shades of slate, off-white, and tan, as if they were mixed dirt; almost every structure is a tent (“The Boy in the Iceberg”). Compare this to the Northern Water Tribe, where snow and ice take on purple, blue, and occasionally white hues, and we find homes and bridges built from ice overlooking canals (“The Siege of the North, Part 1”). The show does this to create a sense that colonization has robbed the Southern Tribe of its culture and art form, whereas the Northern Tribe pushes the limits of what water can be and creates a dynamic setting out of a single element.

That said, the show also addresses this difference between the two tribes as the result of the Southern Tribe’s colonization by the Fire Nation, to which Katara alludes with the fact that she is “the only waterbender in the whole South Pole” and that “the Fire Nation’s first attacks” were 80 years before (“The Boy in the Iceberg”). In doing so, the show recognizes different privileges and societal responses that stem from colonization. This attitude that indigenous societies can change or survive by their own merit stands in contradiction to many representations of sentimentality in captivity literature, if we follow Michelle Burnham’s interpretation of the genre. In her book, *Captivity and Sentiment: Cultural Exchange in American Literature, 1682—1861*, we can use her reading of John Marrant’s *A Narrative of the Lord’s wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black, (Now gone to Preach the Gospel in Nova-Scotia)*, in which he lives with a Cherokee tribe, to see one difference in how the two stories use captivity: “Marrant crosses the boundary to a new world, which he gradually colonizes through the deployment of evangelical Christianity. . . . The condition of captivity and hence the necessity of or desire for escape ceases with the captors’ religious conversion, after which the ‘poor condemned prisoner had perfect liberty, and was treated like a prince’” (Burnham 126-7). Although Marrant situates the Cherokee as his captors, his momentum of religious conversion, an act of colonization, continues beyond his actions. As his audience, we only receive information about how it shapes their interactions

with settlers, as opposed to other indigenous nations. The Cherokee in Marrant's account have no resistance to conversion and, by extension, no way to resist colonization. This says less about Marrant's place in anticolonial African-American literature than it does about how he delimits power and sympathy between the "fading" Cherokee and "rising" colonizers. ATLA uses these same themes of captivity, such as when soot mixed with snow is a sign of a Fire Nation invasion, but provides the audience with a perspective on how colonization can damage social and diplomatic interactions between indigenous peoples ("The Siege of the North, Part 1").

With respect to indigenous representation, we can also look at how ATLA rejects "positive" stereotypes tied to gender and people of color. Yet again, this is an angle that is nonexistent in scholarship on the series itself but that has been explored through social media and amateur or self-published reviews. In the user AvatarCarter's Medium.com article, "'Positive' Stereotypes in The Last Airbender," he explains this concept with the example of "the stereotype that Asians are good students. . . . If they struggle with school or find more interest in other areas of life, they may feel they are losing some racial authenticity or that they might be deficient or weird" (AvatarCarter). He writes about the Water Tribe:

the stereotype that female water benders are skilled healers. . . . Because of their perceived affinity for healing, female water benders are often denied the chance to prove themselves in combat and are viewed as too frail to go to war. Katara was one of the first women to go against this limitation, and in a spectacular display of skill she was able to change the attitudes of the patriarchal water tribe leadership. (AvatarCarter)

His article focuses on how such stereotypes shape children's anxieties and on the benefits of depicting characters acting against the stereotypes that many children of color grow up facing; however, we can build from his reading to understand what ATLA's portrayal of indigenous people says about the show's attitude toward stereotypes in captivity narratives. When Katara chooses to use waterbending for both healing and combat, the screenwriters allow her to cross the gender norms of her culture. They also allow for someone from

the less "civilized" Southern Water Tribe to promote social justice and change in the north, arguing that indigenous cultures do not become less valid simply because their customs change. In effect, the screenwriters recognize that even "positive" stereotypes, in this case being a skillful healer, still limit how their characters and audience perform gender and race. Ultimately, through these visual cues and challenges to stereotypes, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* broadens the ways in which actors and writers can perform indigeneity on television.

Re-appropriating Indigenous Sympathy in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

Although ATLA broadens indigenous representation in this respect, it is vital to also acknowledge how the series still clings to sympathy to manipulate and elicit responses from its audience. When the audience views the indigenous characters in a sympathetic light, the show encourages them to view these scenes as threats of a vanishing culture and not as signs of a future without it. This ties back into Mielke's perspective that the sympathetic voice and moving encounter found in nineteenth-century captivity narratives are employed "in particular . . . by American Indian activists and removal apologists alike," which she goes on to say, "suggests that the image of white-Indian exchange and sympathy has been revised and refigured according to contemporary concerns" (196). ATLA is no different here. We see this perhaps most clearly in the first episode when Katara says cheerfully, "Aang, this is the entire village. Entire village, Aang," and the camera reveals 19 people with solemn or confused faces standing in tan snow in the sunset ("The Boy in the Iceberg"). When the villagers do speak to Aang, they do so while either cowering behind someone else or bringing attention to what has been lost, like when Aang asks "Why are they all looking at me like that?" and Gran Gran, one of the solemn villagers, answers, "Well, no one has seen an airbender in a hundred years. We thought they were extinct" ("The Boy in the Iceberg"). The imagery surrounding the tribe plants the notion that this culture faces its own sunset, and the landscape reflects their poverty; however, the screenwriters place

much of their focus on Katara as the only girl capable of continuing the Southern Water Tribe's art form. This becomes apparent through her relationship with Aang, such as when she says, "I told you. He's the real thing, Gran Gran. I finally found a bender to teach me," only to be told, "Katara, try not to put all your hopes in this boy" ("The Boy in the Iceberg"). Between this and the knowledge that the Northern Water Tribe has flourished during the war, the show shifts the tribe's conflict from how it will be saved by Aang to how indigenous art forms can be restored or adapted to a new tribal life, without presenting the tribe as entirely lost.

Mielke comments on how some authors, namely the Transcendentalists, elicited sympathy for American Indians from their audiences without requiring that they "vanish." She writes that "Although Fuller and Thoreau do not fully transcend the myth of the doomed Indian, their engagement with both the moving encounter and the idea of correspondence prompt them to consider a future inclusive of, rather than vacated by, American Indians" (114). More specifically, she describes how Thoreau depicts an American Indian man named Joe Polis: "Polis's economic independence enables him to move freely between the wilderness and the city; this Indian intermediary adapts to Euro-American society and retains the language and much of the cultural practice of American Indians. Thoreau, then, proposes that the Indian, degraded or otherwise, is not fated to disappear" but treats their knowledge and languages as "endangered" (113). In the sympathetic language Thoreau uses, American Indians are fated to adopt some Euro-American norms but still to remain inexplicably "Indian." While he argues that American Indians are not disappearing and should be protected, ATLA builds on his ideas in how it represents indigenous cultures by detaching "progress" from Euro-American culture while still including indigenous peoples in the future. Hence, ATLA works within Mielke's vision of sympathy and the moving encounter toward indigenous peoples by using imagery that shows a culture in decline, but provides a context and worldview that rejects the idea that it is "doomed." The show presents the view that both tribes are fluid and capable of changing on their own terms.

Conclusion

Avatar: The Last Airbender works within the captivity narrative tradition while also critiquing it in order to broaden indigenous representation and decouple it from sympathetic and sentimental portrayals in American literature and television. When working with the genre's conventions, the series establishes early on that the Fire Nation functions as the captors and colonizers in the vast majority of its conflicts and the protagonists, while Aang, Katara, and Sokka function as captives. The series then subverts captivity by using it in early episodes to simply introduce the threat of captivity and the captor's weaknesses. Over the course of the series, the screenwriters weave between portraying captivity as a plot device for introducing new conflicts and the real threat of colonization and social isolation. When the series does use techniques associated with sentimentality, like the moving encounter, it makes a distinction between drawing similarities between the characters and, more favorably in the eyes of the screenwriters, empathy and solidarity against a common threat.

In relation to representation, the series uses the Northern and Southern Water Tribes to depict intracommunity prejudices within indigenous civilizations and the uneven trauma dealt by colonization. Perhaps more intriguing is the fact that when social justice and progress occurs in these tribes, the show does not present it as part of a slow but inevitable loss of indigeneity, but rather the result of calls for change within these communities. While there are scenes that do resort to sympathetic depictions of indigenous cultures in decline, particularly when they are first introduced in the series, these scenes depict the threat of a vanishing culture to the world overall rather than a future without indigenous people. Hence, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* critiques the captivity genre from within in order to broaden portrayals of indigenous peoples beyond sympathy and sentimentality to account for desires and changes driven from within these cultures.

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Peter Wood graduated in May 2018 with a major in English and minors in Geography and Spanish. This research paper was completed in the Fall 2017 Senior Seminar, *Captivity in American Literature and Film*, under the instruction of Dr. Emily Field (English). Peter completed a directed study in the spring of 2018 under the mentorship of Dr. Fernanda Ferreira (Global Languages and Literatures).