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## When the Fire Nation Attacked: A View of the Colonialism and Imperialism Within Avatar: The Last Airbender

Jared M. Christian

Eastern Kentucky University, [jared\\_christian48@mymail.eku.edu](mailto:jared_christian48@mymail.eku.edu)

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Eastern Kentucky University

When the Fire Nation Attacked: A View of the Colonialism and Imperialism Within

*Avatar: The Last Airbender*

Honors Thesis

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

Of The

Requirements of HON 420

Fall 2021

By

Jared Michael Christian

Faculty Mentor

Professor John Strada

Department of Communication

When the Fire Nation Attacked: A View of the Colonialism and Imperialism Within  
*Avatar: The Last Airbender*

Jared Michael Christian

Professor John Strada, Department of Communication

**ABSTRACT:** Within this project, the thematic representations of colonialism and imperialism within *Avatar: The Last Airbender* are explored through the topics of genocide, environmental imperialism, propaganda, and imprisonment. Through primary source analysis and literature review, events from the series are compared to historical examples during expansion such as Manifest Destiny, the Scramble for Africa, and apartheid. Similarities are cast between the Fire Nation and different imperialistic governments to determine whether *Avatar* is a good representation of these themes and how its portrayal could impact children's media when displaying historical concepts.

**Key Words:** *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, colonialism, imperialism, genocide, propaganda, imprisonment, indigenous groups

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## Introduction

Exploring the representation of colonialism and imperialism in media such as cartoons, television or novels can be difficult because having accurate portrayals of how events occurred in historical contexts can be tedious and hard to pitch to companies. This is especially true of children's shows that are commonly focused on positive storylines and avoid exploring too gruesome of events. Throughout various stages of history, there are examples of genocide, imprisonment, propaganda, nationalism, and oppression that are difficult conversations to discuss with children; however, the cartoon *Avatar: The Last Airbender* offers a digestible view of imperialism. In the show, a young boy named Aang is the avatar, an individual who can control the four elements: air, fire, water, and earth. The world is separated by the elements into the Fire Nation, Air Nomads, Water Tribes and Earth Kingdom. The plot of the story follows Aang as the only surviving member of the Air Nomads by a hundred years following the genocide of the Air Nomads by the Fire Nation as he attempts to return balance to the world as the Fire Nation continues to plan their spread to the Earth Kingdom and the Water Tribes for domination.

This thesis focuses on answering some key questions about the historical accuracy and themes represented in the series: What common themes can be found between historical examples and *Avatar*? Is *Avatar: The Last Airbender* an accurate representation of colonialism and imperialism? How can this impact children's media? Is *Avatar* an accurate representation of the themes discussed: genocide, environmental imperialism, propaganda, and imprisonment? This was done through primary source analysis and the

grouping of episodes based off similar themes as well as literature review of articles that discussed historical examples of colonialism and imperialism.

There have not been many articles written about *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, so finding articles that discussed the historical context was slim; however, they can give a background into other aspects of the show. In Megan Jackson's article, "(Gender)Bending in the Animated Series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*" there is a focus on Third-Wave Feminist Theory and Gender Theory within *Avatar: The Last Airbender* that gives a context of Japanese comics and these theories. The exploration of how the shift from individual episode's plot to an overall story help create the image of oppression against the Air Nomads, Water Tribe and Earth Kingdom. Jackson argues that the characters of the show "upholds ideals of third-wave feminism" through their departures from normal characteristics of gender and embracing traits that are societally determined as stereotypical.

Lori Kido Lopez's article, "Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in *The Last Airbender*," demonstrates the possibilities of protest and activists within fans of television shows. When the roles of Asian characters were given to non-Asian actors in the live-action film based on the first season of the cartoon, the fan base of the television show create an uproar in attempts to bring light to the issue of a lack of true representation in the roles. Lopez uses this resistance to the casting to explain how there have become new levels of "fan-activism" to argue for their expected version of commercial productions. Lopez uses the examples from the live-action movie of casting non-Asian leads to the four main characters to explore the "radicalized" movement of the fanbase. While this article is sound in its argument for greater representation for minority portrayals in the

film industry, it can be useful in providing background information on *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and possibility showing a connection between the unfair casting in Hollywood to the treatment of some of the characters in their series. Even though it does not relate directly to colonialism and imperialism, it can provide a context of discrimination and the series.

One article that helped develop arguments and was the closest representation of work that was fruitful was Fulya İçöz's "Regaining the Power to Say 'No': Imprisonment, Resistance and Freedom in Avatar the Last Airbender." İçöz demonstrates that the aspects of resistance are represented in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* due to the recognition of the growing rebellion against the Fire Nation. The Fire Nation initially saw Aang as a miniscule obstacle against their colonizing empire but developed as a threat throughout the series because of more characters realized the opportunity for a choice. The study provides a basis of how the creation of a hegemonic government in, and a history of oppression explores the sparks of resistance that can lead to freedom. The article explored how Firelord Ozai and Aang represented the two sides of the oppressor and the oppressed. While Firelord Ozai was trying to disable the other nations with "harsher and crueler" attempts of control, Aang tries to create a positive environment with individuals from multiple backgrounds, nations, and livelihoods.

After an initial analysis of the source material, there were four main themes found throughout the series that were chosen to be reviewed in this project and explored more in-depth: genocide, environmental imperialism, propaganda, and imprisonment. *Avatar's* depiction of these events by the Fire Nation explores these topics in a child-friendly

version and allows for a digestible understanding of these historical events during wartime.

## Genocide

There are comparisons to be made between the action of genocide to the Air Nomads in *Avatar: the Last Airbender* and historical examples. Because of the colonialists and Fire Nation's desire to remove the native and the drive to expand, the removal of indigenous groups occurred.

In the first episode, "Chapter One: The Boy in the Iceberg," Katara and Sokka are fishing and discover Aang and Appa, his air bison, frozen in an iceberg and he is dressed in traditional airbender clothing and explains that he is an Air Nomad; however, this is confusing for Katara and Sokka since the airbenders were thought to have gone extinct 100 years prior. It is revealed that Aang was not aware of the war the Fire Nation began and it is deduced that he was frozen in the iceberg for the entire period.

In the third episode, "Chapter Three: The Southern Air Temple," the trio visits the Southern Air Temple because Aang was raised there and to hopefully find more information on the Air Nomads. Aang is optimistic about finding other Airbenders before arriving and talks highly of his mentor, Monk Gyatso. Upon arriving and reminiscing on his past, Aang finds the temple desolate and begins explaining past traditions such as games and statues. In flashbacks, an abundance of air bison, airbenders, and culture was shown before the Fire Nation attacked. When Aang begins chasing a lemur, Momo, he follows him into a tent where he discovers the skeleton of Monk Gyatso surrounded by deceased Fire Nation soldiers. Prior to this, Aang had been protected from the knowledge of the extinction of the airbenders.

These episodes illustrate to how the Fire Nation decided to go forth and conquer different areas of the world through genocide. Since the next Avatar was to be born into the Air Nomads, the Fire Nation chose to attack that civilization first to remove the possible power of an individual being able to bend all four elements and communicate with the spirit world. The attack on the Southern Air Temple was premediated thoroughly by Fire Lord Sozin and the date was chosen since Sozin's Comet, a comet which gave the firebenders greater fighting abilities, was going to be in the sky. In the final episodes of the series, the Fire Nation led by Fire Lord Ozai, attempted to wipe out the Earth Kingdom one hundred years later during the return of Sozin's Comet.

The events from *Avatar* can be related to previous historic events of genocide. In their article, Patrick Wolfe demonstrates a cross-examination of colonial thought towards native perspectives during European expansion. Wolfe explores the understanding that when colonists are entering a society or nation to create their own, they must first "destroy" the original (401). In various examples across the globe, the colonialists were taking control of various countries to expand their own original thought, even if they were trying to escape their own persecution. While searching for a location to have a sanctuary for beliefs is valid, the destruction of another way of life counteracts the safety in pursuit. Wolfe also argues that the understanding of "discovery" itself should be reevaluated in colonial perception since the natives that were present before were given no credit to their livelihoods. Many of the properties and cattle of natives were seized upon, which created a reliant relationship on the European colonizers. The author dissects the definition of the word genocide to better given context of how it reflects an attempt

against a certain ethnic group to remove them while mass murder is a large amount of murder.

While Wolfe gives a broader view of colonialism and genocide, the events can be compared to those within *Avatar*. The removal of original thought through genocide as Wolfe explained can be seen in historical examples and the show. This can be related to the genocide of the Air Nomads mentioned through the first season and the attempted genocide of the Earth Kingdom at the end of the series. Wolfe gives multiple examples of groups such as Native Americans and Aboriginal Australians who were removed in hopes of creating new life (387). Similarities can be seen between the Air Nomads and Earth Kingdom to the Native Americans and Aboriginal Australians. Instead of trying to create a new way of life that could incorporate both ways of life and allow for the expansion of the Fire Nation, Fire Lord Ozai and the Fire Nation leaders determined that they were going to kill all the individuals in the Air Temples and Earth Kingdom. The action of destroying the original to create a place for the new within colonialist societies is a pattern that was represented in the cartoon.

One people group that historically was a target of genocide was the Indigenous Americans. When Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas during his second voyage, his treatment only began the negative treatment of native people that would lead to the death of millions (Fixico). Due to European's expansions due to their "Right of Discovery" and "Right of Conquest," there was a combined danger towards individuals who already lived in those areas (Fenelon and Trafzer 5). Since the native populations already had a culture and lifestyle in the Americas that was common, the colonialist

populations determined to remove the original to create room for their own beliefs, identity, and traditions from Europe.

When colonist began to seek refuge from religious persecution in Europe, they began to expand across the Americas and were willing to remove the indigenous tribes to create a space for their own ruling and culture. Russell Thornton estimates that 12 million Indigenous Americans died between 1492 and 1900 within the United States (Smith 12). Through events such as the Indian Removal, Trail of Tears, the California genocide, and the American Indian Wars, the killing of Native Americans was used to remove their culture and traditions to create a land and resources for the colonizers.

The Pequot War was between English colonists and the Pequot tribe was an example of a genocide that can be compared to *Avatar*. Before the war, there were tensions rising between groups because of resources and the colonists lack of experience in the Americas. When the Great Colonial Hurricane of 1635 occurred, the agricultural yield was low; therefore, both groups begin to compete for supplies as famine became prominent (Grandjean 83). The English colonist created ties with other indigenous groups against the Pequot tribe. The Narragansett and Mohegan tribes joined during the war because of their allegiance to the English in trade. The major battle was the Battle of Mystic Fort or the Mystic Massacre on May 26, 1637. Captain John Mason organized Connecticut colonists along with the Narragansett and Mohegan to “end the Pequot danger” (Cook 6). A total of seven hundred Pequot were “slain, shot where they stood or cooked to a turn as they fled through blazing brush and burning grain” while only two English were killed (Sanford 52). During the conflict, the attacking Native American

groups traded body parts to express their cross-cultural relations and negotiations with the colonists while the English demonstrated their dominance (Lipman 4).

The genocide of the Pequot tribe from the English colonists with the Narragansett and Mohegan tribes can be compared to the genocide of the Air Nomads by the Fire Nation. Both the English colonists and the Fire Nation wanted to expand their reach and overtake other groups by alliance or dominance to allow for the prosperity of their own. The English colonists wanted to take control of the trade in the northeast. By creating tension and turning different indigenous groups against each other, the English colonizers were able to swoop in and emplace their more European traditions. The Fire Nation believed that the expansion of their values after a period of affluence proved they were the superior nation. If the Fire Nation was successful in eliminating the Avatar, then the Air Nomads would not have a chance of leading an uprising while if the English colonists were successful then they would be able to take easier control of the area. Both the Air Nomads and Pequot tribe were snuck up on in a surprise attack to prevent from their prepared defense against fire attacks.

In the Pequot War, Captain John Mason led the charge against the Pequot tribe when he declared that “we must burn them” (Karr 876). John Mason wrote his version of the conflict in the *Brief History of the Pequot War* and was published posthumously. In his introduction, he describes why the Pequots were a problem in the area for the English colonists. Mason writes that “The most terrible of all those Nations were then the PEQUOTS; who with their depending Tribes soon entered on a Resolution to Destroy the English out of the Country” (Mason iv). Mason’s sentiments can be related to Fire Lord Sozin (Karr 876). Sozin wanted to create colonies and expand the empire of the Fire

Nation through military conquest when he expanded the army and navy to wage war against the other nations. Both Mason and Sozin wanted to establish their culture and society was the dominant force in their narrative to have political power and influence. Both genocides allowed for the disruption of their political rivals. The Pequot were unable to survive since any surviving members were hunted down or absorbed into other tribes while the Air Nomads were wiped out except for Avatar Aang.

The large-scale death of indigenous people groups was not the only way newcomers wanted to limit the population and rationalize the death of the indigenous populations. Incoming colonizers began to make laws to remove the cultural heritage and influence of the local populations through “culturicide” or cultural genocide. In their article, Fenelon and Trafzer describe the effects of culturicide to Native California Americans. When new populations, such as the Spanish, Russians, and Americans, began to arrive in California to work during the California gold rush, they began to create new laws and regulations that prevented the practice of traditional indigenous practices:

Agents of the federal government sought to destroy Indian agency and the autonomy of the many Native nations, making sovereignty a legal concept under federal law rather than a spiritual concept born of ancient stories and songs of creation. Thus sovereignty is indigenous to the Americas and not a gift of the United States, which limited Native sovereignty legally without consent based on the Right of Conquest. Furthermore, the federal government employed religious domination as a central rationale in declaring the indigenous as “savage” from 1492 to 1892, and therefore outside the realm of legal and moral responsibility (Fenelon and Trafzer 11-12).

This allowed for a larger amount of persecution against the Californian populations and validated their deaths. Even though the colonists had no legal validity over the Native American populations, their implementations of laws against “Indian agency” and employing “religious domination” allowed for a continued belief that the indigenous populations were savages.

In their article, “Understanding Genocide in California under United States Rule, 1846–1873,” Benjamin Madley estimates that the number of native Californians decreased from 150,000 to 30,000 (449). After slowly removing the rights of native Californians, an interpretation of a law allowed for the government to sanction military conquests against tribes. Madley argues that this “made California Indians particularly vulnerable to kidnapping, slavery, assault, and murder” (455). There were multiple attacks to remove the native population since the government supported and funded operations to perpetuate the genocide. One example in California is from 1856 to 1859 in Round Valley with the Yuki people. In another article, “California's Yuki Indians: Defining Genocide in Native American History,” Madley focuses on the “cataclysmic population decline” of the Yuki people as the United States government allowed for their destruction. The massacre of the Yuki tribe resulted in over a thousand deaths from white settlers wanting to “exterminate the Indians” (Madley 319).

The genocide of the Yuki people from California can be related to the Fire Nation’s genocide of the Air Nomads and the attempted genocide of the Earth Kingdom. The laws and regulations that allowed for the elimination of the Yuki people stems from the colonists view that the two beliefs could not overlap and coexist. The Fire Nation knew that if they allowed for the Avatar to grow older, the Air Nomads and other nations

would have an advantage when the Avatar was able to master all four elements. With the California government enacting laws that supported the destruction of indigenous people and the Fire Nation's attempt to eliminate the Avatar while young in the Air Temples, both the colonist government and the Fire Nation took advantage of a culture that was more removed and threatened their own future and plans.

The topic of genocide is rarely mentioned in children's television because those themes are believed to be too mature for the audience. *Avatar's* ability to touch on the theme without directly showing the death of the individuals allows for children to see the negative aspects of colonialism such as genocide. While the Air Nomads were portrayed in a positive light, there is a belief that a "meaningful coexistence between" the two groups seem impossible before genocide occurs (Schaller and Zimmerer 195). The comparisons between the genocide of the Air Nomads from the Fire Nation to indigenous groups, such as during the Pequot War and the California genocide, from colonizers show that there is an accurate and education representation of genocide for children to watch and learn from.

## Environmental Imperialism

Another historical period that can be compared to *Avatar*, is when more developed countries began to expand through imperialism. As industrialized nations fought for new land to discover, that “could only come at the expense of the rights of... the Indigenous people” (Spurway 96). While colonialism represents groups entering a new space to create a new community, sometimes creating tension and violence against other groups, imperialism is when incoming groups create policies to overtake power in another country or area for their influence or gain. In *Avatar*, there are examples of imperialism and colonialism. In this section, environmental imperialism will be the focus. This involves instances when a group will enter an indigenous group’s area and extend their power to use environmental resources or disrupt their ecosystems for gain.

In the seventh episode, “Chapter Seven: The Spirit World (Winter Solstice, Part 1),” Aang, Katara and Sokka travel into an Earth Kingdom village that continues to be attacked by an angered spirit monster. The spirit, Hei Bai, will enter the village and kidnap different people from the village, including Sokka. After trying to fight Hei Bai, Aang enters the spirit world where he connects with his predecessor, Avatar Roku, where he learns that Hei Bai is upset because of the deforestation that the Fire Nation has caused. The forest surrounding the Earth Kingdom village was the spirit’s home, so its destruction of the village was out of frustration. When Hei Bai returns at sunset the next day, Aang offers the spirit an acorn in a symbolism of hope. Hei Bai is satisfied and regresses into the forest and returns the villagers and Sokka that were kidnapped.

In the forty-third episode, “Chapter Three: The Painted Lady,” Aang, Katara, Sokka and Toph are traveling on Appa through the Fire Nation when they stop to get food in a small fishing village. The river has become dangerously polluted due to a local Fire Nation military factory and the villagers have become sick due to their contaminated food and water. The village has a sacred spirit, The Painted Lady, that cares for the river village. Because of Katara’s healing and water bending abilities, she disguises herself as the Painted Lady and prevents the group from moving on to help the village. Aang discovers her actions and assists in eliminating the main cause of problems, the military factory. The Fire Nation attack the village, but the team saved the village and the true Painted Lady reveals herself to Katara to express her gratitude.

In the fifty-third episode, “Chapter Thirteen: The Firebending Masters,” Zuko is attempting to teach Aang fire bending so he can face Fire Lord Ozai but realizes that his own ability and Aang’s are struggling since both need new sources for their fire bending instead of rage and anger. The duo decides to visit the ancient Sun Warrior civilization to learn about the original fire benders- dragons. Upon arriving, they explore the area and discuss how the dragons went extinct because there was a period where hunting and defeating a dragon brought glory to the individual. Entering a room with dancing posed statues, Zuko and Aang begin to perform the dance and are caught in a trap. Surprisingly, the still present Sun Warrior tribe arrives and questions the duo on their intentions. After explaining that Aang is the Avatar and he needs to learn fire bending, they agree to allow Aang and Zuko to complete a ritual where they travel up a mountain while keeping a flame alive in their hands to present to the firebending masters. Close to arriving to the top, both have lost their flame and have nothing to present to dragons, Ran and Shaw.

Aang and Zuko, unsure of how to continue, decide to perform the dance portrayed in the statues. Ran and Shaw accept their dance and surround them in a tunnel of flames where they learn that fire bending's original source was the concepts of life and energy, not anger. The Sun Warrior tribe allows them to leave their civilization if they do not inform anyone that the dragons are still alive to protect their existence since they were assumed and almost hunted to extinction.

In all three of these episodes, there is an environmental impact from imperialistic actions. Whether that be the deforestation from the Fire Nation, the pollution of a small fishing village, or the hunting of a rare species, there are comparisons to be made to historical examples of imperialism. Throughout various periods of imperialism, there were detrimental impacts to the environment because of their acquisition of resources for their benefit. While their actions negatively impacted the indigenous groups, there were implications that would prevent the growth of the local civilizations for a long time.

One example of environmental imperialism is the hunting of species for trophies or prestige. Trophy hunting for animals in imperialistic manners, such as elephants, has been referred to as "an ongoing rehearsal of Western imperialist history" (Batavia et al 3). Even while some of these animals have been marked as endangered or are important to indigenous people's cultures, individuals from more developed countries sought the recreation of hunting exotic game. Anti-imperialist writer George Orwell wrote an essay "Shooting an Elephant," which depicts an elephant lose in Burma and a British officer is conflicted on whether to kill the animal. Scholars believe the elephant represents the less developed countries who have been invaded and unfairly tried to be tamed while the British offer is the more developed countries with technology and advancements that are

taking advantage of other areas (Alam 56). This can be related to *Avatar* through the symbolism of Hei Bai and the elephant in “Shooting an Elephant.” In both stories, there were two wild animals that represented cultures without as much technology or strength that were taken over by an imperialistic government, the Fire Nation or the British.

Elephants are not the only example of animals hunted during the imperialistic period. When the Europeans were expanding in Kenya and India, they were hunting tigers and lions because media romanticized “hunting’s role in colonial society” (Storey 135). In their article, “Big Cats and Imperialism: Lion and Tiger Hunting in Kenya and Northern India, 1898-1930,” William Storey examines how there was not an expedition or hunting tradition in European history in the same representation as when European colonizers would enter less developed countries and hunt their exotic game. Many indigenous groups had hunting rituals and were conscious of conservation to ensure their hunting would not impact the ecological balance. Storey argues that the newfound interest in big-game hunting was a method of removing native cultural traditions while expressing their strength over the indigenous groups (137). This can be related to *Avatar* since the hunting of dragons were to bring glory to the individual who would potentially receive a new title of dragon killer. The Fire Nation had believed that killing dragons strengthened their fire bending abilities and colonizers in India and Kenya believed that hunting lions and tigers was an exhibition of their power. Plenty of animals including wild elephants, tigers, lions, dodo birds, and American bison have all been close to extinction due to unstable amounts of hunting.

As different empires were expanding, they would commonly search for areas that had resources that would be beneficial for their development. One major resource was

silver which would lead to lead poisoning from mining. During the Yuan Dynasty, the Mongols created a silver mining site in China where lead pollution was found in heavy amounts that poisoned the local area. Scientists were also able to find higher amounts of lead pollution in South America when Spanish colonizers became interested in mining for silver (Weiss 15). One city that became important during the scramble for Africa was Kabwe, Zambia when lead and zinc deposits were found in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a study published in 2020, the blood lead levels (BLL) in Kabwe were drastically above the standard 5 µg/dL. 74.9% of the studied population had a higher BLL with the mean being 11.9 µg/dL (Yamada 9). Even decades after the intensive mining have concluded, there are still major health problems with the population because of European and Australian interest in its lead and zinc. Lead exposure has been associated with “anemia, kidney damage, hypertension and cardiovascular disease” (Mathee 34). This can be related to the military factory in “Chapter Three: The Painted Lady” of *Avatar*. The nearby military factory has been producing weapons for the war, so there are probably many toxic metals that have been placed in the community’s water supply. Because of this, many residents of the village have become sick and requires healing. While the episode ends with a positive turn that the village can be healed due to their bending and the destruction of the military plant, that is not possible for other areas of mining from European imperialism who still face health problems, such as lead exposure, from years ago.

There are some arguments that ecological imperialism is still occurring in modern times. Instead of nations having complete control over other less developed areas, they are using companies and production sources for lower wage workers and cheaper resources. One example is the coral reefs. In their article, “Scaling up the global reef

restoration activity: Avoiding ecological imperialism and ongoing colonialism,” Gibbs et al explain that these ecosystems have been over exploited, faced acidification, and raising global temperatures put them in danger (2). Coral reefs are important for biodiversity and cover “hundreds of thousands of square kilometres and are believed to be the habitats of over a million species” which is important for ecology and medicine (Dormer 70). As more developed countries are producing a higher amount of carbon emissions and actively taking part in other countries’ economies, their involvement has a direct correlation the degradation of biodiverse environments.

The destruction of coral reefs due to ecological imperialism can be related back to *Avatar* because of the endangerment of species and loss of ecosystems. When there is greater isolation, the species richness increases in tropical and temperate reef areas (Jones et al 166). When the Fire Nation attacked the Earth Kingdom village in “Chapter Seven: The Spirit World (Winter Solstice, Part 1),” Hei Bai, the spirit, became angry because its habitat was being destroyed. The loss of the ecosystem negatively impacts the villagers and the local flora and fauna. The inclusion of Hei Bai in the series is an advocacy for environmental conservation and an awareness of the species during the destruction of resources.

*Avatar: The Last Airbender* offers a representation of imperialism and colonialism through the lens of the environment. The actions of Hei Bai can be related to the hunting and destruction of elephants and the loss of ecosystems, the hunting of dragons for sport and honor can be related to the endangerment of lions and tigers while the illness of the Fire Nation fish village due to pollution from the new military factory shares similarities to the dangers of lead poisoning today from remnants from the years of exploitation.

While all aspects of colonialism and imperialism have affected the populations that still live there, the environmental health of the native populations, human and otherwise, still struggle to regain their balance from being exploited. The coral reefs across the world and blood lead levels of the Kabwe, Zambia show the ongoing residue of expansion.

## Propaganda

Another part of imperialism and colonialism is the introduction of propaganda to support nations as they begin their control over others. Without beliefs or motive that support their reason to expand, nations would not have the citizen's support to overtake indigenous groups. In *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, the Fire Nation produces propaganda to support their expansion to the Earth Kingdom and destruction of the Air Nomads. This can be compared to propaganda against native groups that perpetuated stereotypes and influenced nations.

In the forty second episode, "Chapter Two: The Headband," Aang, Katara, Sokka, and Toph enter a village and steal Fire Nation clothes to blend in with the local citizens. Aang tries to fit into traditional Fire Nation customs and unknowingly, chooses a school uniform and is taken by soldiers to the school. He is placed in a classroom where the teacher assumes that he is from one of the Fire Nation colonies in the Earth Kingdom. In his history class, the teacher asks a question referring to when the Fire Nation defeated the Air Nation army which confuses Aang since the Air Nomads had no army and are a mostly peaceful culture. After facing disciplinary action with the headmaster due to outbursts and inappropriate actions in their culture, Sokka decides that it is best if Aang does not return to the school but allows him to throw a party for his classmates to reintroduce them to some of their past cultures in a form of dancing.

In episode forty-six, "Chapter Six: The Avatar and the Fire Lord," Aang receives Avatar Ruko, his predecessor in a dream, that informs him to travel to his previous home on a volcanic island while Zuko receives a scroll saying he should inquire about his great

grandfather's death, thinking it referred to Fire Lord Sozin. Through the two of them learning about their past, they separately discover that Avatar Ruko and Fire Lord Sozin were best friends. When Ruko married, Sozin was his best man and the two stepped aside to catch up and discuss the Fire Nation. Sozin believed that due to the prosperity the Fire Nation was having and Ruko being the Avatar, they could expand and assist in the development of the other nations. Ruko was uphauled by the idea and told Sozin to not pursue the idea. Many years later, Ruko learns that Sozin had created Fire Nation colonies in the Earth Kingdom and had continued his pursuit of an empire. The duo fought and Ruko showed his abilities and threatened Sozin that if he continued down this path, he would kill him. After decades of no contact, the volcanic island village where Aang dreamt to go began to erupt when Ruko was still the Avatar. Sozin arrives and assists Ruko in rescuing the other citizens, but when given the chance Sozin leaves Ruko to die.

In the show, one of the main ways that the Fire Nation can retain control over other people groups is through the propaganda that portrays the Fire Nation and their actions as superior while causing any resistance to seem weak and insufficient. There are many examples of attempts of the Fire Nation to change history to suit their needs, downplay the abilities of the opposition and up play the strength of their military. Some of the most relevant examples are from the fifty seventh episode, "Chapter Seventeen: The Ember Island Players," in which Aang and his friends attend a play written and performed by a Fire Nation company. Each of the characters have been altered to make them seem nonthreatening to the tyrannical Fire Nation. Aang was portrayed by a female actress, even as the Avatar, to allow the audience to believe that he was no match for

their powerful Fire Lord Ozai. Instead of showing the strength and capabilities of Aang as a dedicated master of elements and skilled leader, the actress demonstrates weakness and ignorant. Katara, a female Southern Water Tribe bender who assists Aang, was shown as emotional and unstable while Sokka, her brother, is shown as only comic relief. Throughout the cartoon, Katara is a powerful water master and Sokka as an innovator and strategist. The Fire Nation actors belittles their abilities to create a belief for the Fire Nation that the growing resistance is not to be a worry.

Creating a system of propaganda was difficult until mass production of press was created. Russ Castronovo argues that when individuals are unsure of how to think about a situation, they look for ways to determine how to think (184). Castronovo expands that through authors such as Thomas Paine and Jacques Ellul writing their beliefs, the American push for nationalism was accelerated through the imprint of their own views that become the views of others.

This type of societal spread of beliefs can be shown in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* because of the Fire Nation's control over ideas. In the fifty first episode, "The Day of Black Sun, Part 2: The Eclipse," Prince Zuko, the son of Lord Ozai, confronts his father on all the propaganda that he had been taught throughout this life. Zuko and the Fire Nation citizens "were taught that the Fire Nation was the greatest civilization in history" and "the war was our way of sharing our greatness with the rest of the world" instead of viewing the other groups as living different lifestyles. Throughout his life, he had been taught that the Fire Nation's war was valid and acceptable because they were trying to improve the lives of the other groups, but he when saw the world for himself, he learned that his father and other leaders were killing and abusing their power for their

own gain and not the benefit of others. The mass production and group think that Castronovo demonstrates can be applied because without being banished from the Fire Nation, Zuko would have never been able to see how the propaganda he was informed within his society placed the lives of others at risk.

When European settlers were coming to the Americas, they were expanding onto indigenous lands and taking advantage of their more advanced technology. Since publications were through printing presses, Native Americans could not publish their own narratives of their experience. Colonists used this to their advantage to create their own narrative around western expansion. In Devon Mihesuah's book, *Ned Christie: The Creation of an Outlaw and Cherokee Hero*, Mihesuah explores how Ned Christie was portrayed as an outlaw in the media to further the advancement of the white settlers since he was an influential Cherokee statesman. Newspapers would write about the "formula of good triumphing over evil" in reference to the indigenous groups and settlers (3). Many of the stories of Native Americans were produced by white males that had insufficient knowledge of Indians for an audience that only received possible insights from newspapers that were commonly misconstrued in favor of the law. New articles arrived that made reason for Christie to be "vicious and driven by hatred of all white men," while the deputy marshals were praised for their valor (86).

This portrayal of Native Americans can be compared to the portrayals of characters in *Avatar* during the play on Ember Island. While Aang, Katara and Sokka are portrayed as weak, ditzy, and inefficient, they are unable to explain their true capabilities to the Fire Nation citizens. While Sokka was able to discuss with his actor about some of his lines in the play and change his comedic style, the play ends with the team being

defeated and the Fire Nation victorious. Ned Christie was a preventing factor in the encroachment on indigenous land and rights. Newspapers created a negative persona about him that riled citizens and he was refused bail but was able to evade authorities for five years until his death in 1892. The negative perceptions of Aang, Katara, Sokka, and Ned Christie were unfairly given but allowed for the Fire Nation and settlers to create perceptions about the rebellions.

In their article, Adam Beach argues that the standardization of the English language can be attributed to the “theory, practice, and propaganda of Britain’s imperial dominance” (119). When previous linguists were discussing Native American languages, they were determined as “savage languages” due to their large usage of body movements (119). Beach expands on the fact that as Britain was expanding, linguists, such as Adam Smith, Hugh Blair and James Burnett would relate the formation of the languages of Native populations to the sounds of animals and that their language is simplistic because that is what the population could handle. Beach presents the idea that through their own discussion of Native languages during European expansion, the linguists were establishing superiority and pushing imperialism. Beach has plenty of quotes from various linguists that demonstrates a fascination with languages that stem from a Greek and Roman background and some selected phrases from mostly James Burnett, Lord Monboddo and some other linguists that show a discussion that inputs their own personal bias in their research on the languages of Native populations. Later, when Beach explains that English was presented as a civilized language that will be a cultural influence it reinforces the idea that British expansion is to share their great ability and success with the rest of the world, even if that means snuffing out the discoveries and culture of others.

The portrayal of the English language as superior and as a civilized language supported the need for Manifest Destiny which allowed for colonizers to use the bible as a reason to migrate (Wilsey 15). In their article, “The Bible and the Redeeming Idea of Colonialism,” Michael Prior compares how the literature in the bible supported colonialism. They wrote that “The Bible has been, and still is for some, *the idea* that *redeems the conquest of the earth*” (Prior 131). Without the propaganda, usage of the bible, and the created image that indigenous groups are inferior to the colonizers, the expansion of the Europeans would not have been as successful. This can be compared to the Fire Nation. In “Chapter Two: The Headband,” Aang’s history class is being taught an inaccurate representation of the Air Nomads to let the children and society feel more comfortable in the war. Their literature and teachings, like the bible, became the written acceptance that their actions were acceptable and rationalized. In “Chapter Six: The Avatar and the Fire Lord,” Fire Lord Sozin made remarks like the rhetoric behind Manifest Destiny:

Our nation is enjoying an unprecedented time of peace and wealth. Our people and happy, and we're so fortune in so many ways. I've been thinking. We should share this prosperity with the rest of the world. In our hands is the most successful empire in history. It's time we expanded it (“Chapter Six: The Avatar and the Fire Lord”).

Since the Fire Nation has been fortunate recently, Fire Lord Sozin wanted to expand and overtake the other nations including the Water Tribes, Earth Kingdom and Air Nomads. This mirrors European and colonial expansion because of their sharing of their prosperity and God. John L. O'Sullivan, a writer who championed the idea of Manifest Destiny,

“cast American democracy as the most ideal society on earth” similar to Sozin’s remark that the Fire Nation “is the most successful empire in history” and should expand (Wisley 2; Avatar). The danger of spreading misinformation to others through writing and spread messages of expanding to share prosperity but truly destroy cultures and civilizations is propaganda. While it seems that Sozin and O’Sullivan both want to enhance the world, their methods while in practice lead to the genocide of Air Nomads and Native Americans.

Within *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, the Fire Nation promotes propaganda to extend their reach on the world and can be compared to other periods of colonialism and imperialism. When American nationalists were able to push for western expansion despite the indigenous groups in writing and the Fire Nation were able to rewrite the tale of how the war against the Air Nomads occurred, a positive view of the destruction of civilizations was created. The opportunity to make your opponent or rebels, such as Native Americans or the uprising against the Fire Nation, look weak, inferior, or unrefined was taken to ensure that the Fire Nation citizens and settlers did not see the true danger of their actions.

## Imprisonment

Within imperialism and colonialism, a common occurrence was the imprisonment of indigenous group leaders to quell rebellions. This is seen in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* as many leaders of groups including the Southern Water Tribe, the Kyoshi Warriors and some Earth Kingdom villages are placed into prisons since they were determined to be dangerous. This can be seen in historical examples of indigenous groups being placed into prison to prevent uprisings and their influence from creating havoc for imperialistic governments.

In the sixth episode, “Chapter Six: Imprisoned,” Aang, Katara and Sokka stop outside of an Earth Kingdom village where earth bending has been outlawed. They find a young earth bender named Haru, and despite it being outlawed, convince him to save an elderly man from being crushed. The older man turns him into the authorities and Haru is arrested. Feeling upset, Katara decides to get herself arrested for “earth bending” and gets placed into the same metal prison. She meets Haru’s father and many other prisoners who have given up hope for escaping since the prison had been created so that earth benders could not use their bending. After much convincing, the earth bending prisoners, along with Katara, Aang, and Sokka, were able to overtake the prison and escape to save their towns.

In the fifty-fourth and fifty-fifth episodes, “Chapter Fourteen: The Boiling Rock, Part 1” and “Chapter Fifteen: The Boiling Rock, Part 2,” Sokka is upset by his recent struggles and decides to try to find his father. Zuko and Sokka travel to the Boiling Rock, the Fire Nation’s most secure prison. Upon arrival, they learn that Suki, Sokka’s

girlfriend and leader of the Kyoshi Warriors, is kept there. While some other prisoners attempt to escape with Sokka's plan, Zuko, Suki and Sokka decide to stay behind and find Hakoda arriving. The group escape by creating a prison riot and kidnapping the warden as leverage. One last battle occurs as Azula, Ty Lee and Mai arrive to inspect the prison, but Mai turns against Azula because of her previous feelings for Zuko and Sokka, Suki, Zuko and Hakoda can escape.

Another focus on the oppression of groups in imperialism should be on the imprisonment of potential leaders and organizers that could cause for enough uproar for an overthrow. In Fulya İçöz's article, there is a discussion of the resistance against the Fire Nation. İçöz argues that for the Fire Nation to retain their strength, there could be no potential for an overthrow, so he is seeking "absolute power" throughout the series (115). If individuals believe that you have been able to remove their abilities to fight against the power, then there will be no rebellion against the overall power. Within *Avatar The Last Airbender*, characters visit prisons multiple times where the number of prisoners outnumber the guards, so an overthrow is possible; however, their belief and faith has been minimized. Many great leaders and warriors of the Earth Kingdom and Water Tribes who have fought for freedom are prisoners and have been psychologically conditioned to believe there is no escape such as in "The Imprisoned." By imprisoning the leaders of rebellions, the Fire Nation was able to squash rebellions quickly because without organizers, a resistance would not be sustainable. This can be related back to historical examples of influential leaders of minority groups being arrested and imprisoned to prevent them from operating as easily against the system.

Within countries that had settlers, there has been a bias in the judicial system, especially during colonial times, that allowed for indigenous groups to be targeted. In Robert Nichol's article, "The Colonialism of Incarceration," Shaughnessy correlates colonialism and the incarceration of indigenous groups:

In the history of Anglo-American settler colonialism, for instance, the extension of criminal jurisdiction has long been central to the subjugation and displacement of indigenous polities. Existing in the "third space of sovereignty," indigenous nations have always subverted foreign/domestic distinctions, as well as attempts to distinguish war decisively from crime management (Nichols 446).

While this article focuses on how the European settlers in the Americas would create their own method of law that promoted their growth and the destruction of other cultures, the concept can be applied to any settler-indigenous group setting where there was a technological advance. When settlers entered California during the gold rush, the state government passed laws that propelled and supported not only the genocide of Native Americans, but their imprisonment as well. By making indigenous politics up for subjugation, their policies and procedures would be deemed insignificant.

This can be compared to *Avatar*, in "Chapter Six: Imprisoned" in the Earth Kingdom village. When the Fire Nation has control over the village, they ban earth bending to control the local population. When Haru is caught, he is sent to prison among many other earth benders. The law was most likely put in place unfairly and unequally since fire benders are still able to practice. There was a "displacement of indigenous politics" in the Earth Kingdom village because the leadership of the village would have never approved a law that banned earth bending unless it was forced by an oppressive

power (Nichols 446). The change in laws depending on the needs of the colonizers is a shared characteristic in the Earth Kingdom village and Native American cultures that lead to imprisonment.

One common occurrence during political tension and warfare is placing political rivals and wartime rivals into prison to prevent them from having influence and gaining support. When Africa was overtaken through imperialism during the scramble for Africa from European powers, South Africa was filled with systems that oppressed the indigenous population through apartheid. Apartheid was a series of laws and regulations that allowed for divisions to arise. While apartheid officially began in 1948 with the election of the national party, there were multiple policies that created an atmosphere that festered further prejudice (Worden 96). The National Party “applied apartheid in a plethora of laws and executive actions” that separated the population into four groups: white, colored, Indian, and African (Thompson 184). When anti-apartheid speakers and advocates, such as the African National Congress, would try to change the system of discrimination that had been in place, there would be military retaliation, deaths, and incarceration. One individual who fought for the abandonment of apartheid was Nelson Mandela who was seen as “a ‘radical’ liberal humanist who fully embraced the ideals of ethics, democracy, equality, freedom and human rights” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 908). Because of his non-violence and fight against the imperialistic forces, Nelson Mandela was arrested in August 1962 for conspiring to overthrow the state and was not released until 1990 (Evans 13). Due to his ability to insight political change and uprising against the government that support apartheid, he was placed into prison for decades to quell his ability to enact change.

Nelson Mandela's incarceration as an advocate for human rights and a change to the discriminatory government system can be mirrored in the treatment of uprising leaders in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. In "Chapter Six: Imprisoned," the earth benders had been arrested for breaking the law, but more importantly because they could cause more civil unrest and potentially disrupt the imperial efforts of the Fire Nation. In "Chapter Fourteen: The Boiling Rock, Part 1" and "Chapter Fifteen: The Boiling Rock, Part 2," Sokka visits the most secure Fire Nation prison. The two individuals who they rescue are Suki and Hakoda, both leaders of their own resistance against the Fire Nation. Suki, the leader of the Kyoshi Warriors, has been traveling around the Earth Kingdom in hopes of preventing the acquisition of more Earth Kingdom territory but was captured and separated from the rest of the Kyoshi Warriors. Hakoda, the tribal chief of the Southern Water tribe, was originally taken to other prison but was separated due to his status as a leader in the group. By removing leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Hakoda, and Suki, imperialist governments can prevent further rebellion through imprisonment. If the Fire Nation or South African government had decided to execute these individuals, there would be greater civil unrest; therefore, keeping them alive keeps the imperialist government in a power position.

While there have been some improvements in equality in the judicial systems around the world, some scholars argue that the laws and standards set in place during colonial eras are still having a legacy on indigenous groups. In their article, "Unsettled Times: Indigenous Incarceration and the Links between Colonialism and the Penitentiary in Canada," Vicki Chartrand exhibits the example of how colonialism has continued through the number of indigenous individuals being placed behind bars due to bias. In

Canada, there continues to be a higher rate of incarceration for indigenous populations and Chartrand argues that this is due to continued implications from colonialism (68). They continue that “Indigenous incarceration is not the result of a colonial past but rather a part of the colonial process itself” (Chartrand 69). In *Avatar*, there continues to be the unfair and unequal arrest of Earth Kingdom and Water Tribe members throughout the show. The war the show is set in, The Hundred Year War, has occurred and there are still constricting the Fire Nation colonies in the Earth Kingdom.

By including the representation of imprisonment in *Avatar*, audiences can more greatly see a connection between historical examples of a colonizing government that creates laws that are discriminatory to better control the indigenous populations. When European forces were expanding in the Americas, laws were created against Native American’s traditions and cultures to allow for greater incarceration and sentencing like how the Fire Nation created laws banning earth bending in an Earth Kingdom village to cage the potential of an overthrow. By arresting political and activist leaders such as Suki, Hakoda and Nelson Mandela, the Fire Nation and European settlers prevented the progression of a civil destruction. Colonialism “claimed legitimacy through a rule of law” which was enforced through the prison system and the removal of potential uprising threats (Buntman 220).

## Discussion

When developing children's media, there is the opportunity to portray educational messages to increase their knowledge and development. In Aley et al's article, "What Does Television Teach Children? Examining the Altruistic and Egoistic Lessons in Children's Educational Television," the authors argue that children's media can be an "effective supplement" to traditional learning methods (107). Some students do not connect with some teachings methods and the learning that could happen in the classroom may be helped by productive media that assists in a child's understanding of those same concepts. The development of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and inclusion of themes focusing on genocide, environmental imperialism, propaganda, and imprisonment allows for a depiction of imperialism and colonialism by the Fire Nation in a child-friendly version that will help children better understand these historical events and concepts.

In the series, the actual genocide of the Air Nomads is never shown directly but there are lots of references to the event. Instead of showing the destruction of the Air Nomads, the previous life within the Southern Air Temple is shown in Aang's memories while the desolate area is shown in the present. The most vivid image was when Aang discovered Monk Gyatso's body surrounded by deceased Fire Nation troops. As there has been more recognition to the genocide of indigenous groups and the harm to their culture and livelihood, individuals have been able to reflect on the aspects of colonialism and imperialism that lead to the deaths of millions of individuals. By using media, such as *Avatar*, when discussing genocide, there can be a greater understanding from the effected individuals. Since the settling and development of some American governments were

done at the expense of indigenous populations, there has been a lack of understanding in education on the effects such as genocide. This representation explores the impacts of expansion while being cognizant of the target audience to offer a digestible version.

*Avatar: The Last Airbender* adequately portrays imperialism and some of the actions within the show can be traced back to historical examples of European expansion. When discussing environmental imperialism, there has not been a major focus on this topic and how the impacts of expansion continue to affect populations. The episodes including the burning of the forest surrounding the Earth Kingdom village, the military plant polluting the river, and the almost extinction of the dragon allow for viewers to understand the experiences of indigenous groups that have struggled to be sustainable as their cultures, land, and traditional practices were taken away from them. While these conditions were able to be resolved by the end of the episode and give hope for the continuation of ecosystems and species, the emphasis that there continues to be impacts based on historical examples of expansion can be greater understood.

When explaining the mindset of an entire nation that allowed for actions that would be deemed unthinkable today, it can be difficult for a child to understand. When describing war, genocide, and the rationale behind slavery to children, there can be a disconnect since those events do not align with today's standards for human rights; therefore, the inclusion of how the Fire Nation used propaganda and the opportunity to write their own story into the narrative gives children a better chance to understand why colonizers and imperialistic governments believed it was acceptable to destroy cultures and civilizations. While the Fire Nation are portrayed more simplistically as the antagonistic empire, the glimpse into lesser-known stories of those being overtaken allow

for a view that is not always described in history classes, giving children the chance to ask questions.

The section on imprisonment shows a correlation between the radicals who are willing to stand-up against governments and the characters in the show. Throughout history, many advocates for civil rights and suffragettes were placed into prison to quell rebellions and the uprising against potentially unfair treatment. This may allow viewers to understand that governments may not always be in the right on a human rights perspective and some people are trying to advocate for their own rights. If an individual is thrown in prison or being treated negatively by the government, they may be trying to fix a broken system and will allow children to think more critically.

Overall, *Avatar* gives children the opportunity to see the side of the oppressed which offers insight into other narratives than the western nations during colonial and imperialistic eras. In classrooms across the globe, there may be a disconnect from the lessons children are being taught and one way to offer another understandable version is through media. By creating and advocating for more works that explore themes that are difficult to cover in children's social studies and history classes, the representation of events from indigenous lenses can be seen.

## Future Work

When developing this thesis, there were a total of six themes that could be related back to historical examples but this project focuses on the four most prominent. The two themes not discussed in this project are rebellion and immigration. In the series, there are examples of a growing rebellion against the Fire Nation from the Water Tribes and Earth Kingdom. During colonialism and imperialism, there were groups that fought against the incoming settlers such as some Native American groups. This can be seen in some episodes including the Kyoshi Warriors and the Freedom Fighters where different groups would organize themselves against the Fire Nation. The other theme, immigration, dealt with many individuals fleeing different areas of the Earth Kingdom to find safety in Ba Sing Se, one of the last major Earth Kingdom cities free from Fire Nation control. Throughout history, different indigenous groups have moved or migrated for protection or were forced to travel by their oppressors. The themes of rebellion and immigration within the show could be an area for future research when compared to different groups throughout history.

After the series ended, there was a sequel entitled *The Legend of Korra* that focused on the next Avatar, Korra as she begins her final training and faces uprisings against benders and the established government structures. This series also has many positive lessons and references to political unrest, protests, and extremists. There is the potential for more themes to be found in this work that relate back to historical examples and can be viewed as potential models for children to view to better understanding themes. Future research can work to uncover correlations between *The Legend of Korra* and progressive movements.

## Conclusion

This project offers insight into how a children's cartoon can accurately portray events from history like genocide, imperialism, colonialism, and oppression in cartoons. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* explores serious themes normally untouched by children's media and should be praised in its attempts educate on actions of violence without creating further trauma. There are conversations on how to teach about oppression, terrorism, and violence to children in a way that is enjoyable and will not cause trauma from the experience of teaching itself. By taking examples of events from cartoons that have good representations of similar events in history then children will be able to have age-appropriate entertainment that will allow for them to understand the dangers of oppression and tyranny. Individuals are more likely to learn from media they find entertaining whether that be television shows, music, or books, so new media should challenge themselves to educate and create storylines that will reflect the past in a meaningful way.

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