AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER
PEAMUN XII | November 8, 2020
Dear delegates,

Welcome! My name is Daniel Zhang, and I will be your chair for the Avatar: The Last Airbender crisis committee. I’m a junior here at Exeter, and outside of MUN, I sing in a cappella, help edit our literary magazine, and write for the school newspaper The Exonian. Recently, I’ve been listening to a lot of Swae Lee, Eerie Summer, and Still Woozy. I’m excited to meet you all!

Avatar is, at heart, a children’s cartoon. This description is not a knock on its complexity or nuance — it’s a good framework to look at the didactic commentary of the show. There are serious themes of colonialism, genocide and cultural/ethnic identity, but they would be impossible to present to the primary audience of children/young adults without the compelling personal narratives and empathy-inspiring storytelling of Avatar.

As you read about the central premise of this committee, you will realize the primary axis and framework upon which the conflict lies: the idea of intervention vs. sovereignty. The United Nations posits itself as having a duty to intervene at the inhumane or unjust. But who defines such broad descriptors? What might be abominable to one country may be culturally ingrained or even revered in another. An increasingly global world poses these difficult questions. Delegates must consider ethnocentrism, or “the evaluation of other cultures according to preconceptions originating in the standards and customs of one's own culture.” Consider what experiences have informed what you see as “right”, and then consider that it may not be universal.

Avatar conspicuously draws inspiration from the dynamism of modern Asia, a region rife with a history of war, identity conflict, and imperialism. Of course, the narrative is told from a deeply personal rather than observant, historical perspective. We see in Aang a fathomless but all too real loss: the genocide of his people. We see in Katara a generational trauma of the colonized south Water Tribe and her understandable distrust of the Fire Nation. We see in Zuko the complicit citizen, struggling to account for his own guilt and agency. And through so many other characters, Avatar brings forth a rich world perfect for Model United Nations to parse.

Don’t get me wrong, I picked Avatar as a committee because it’s fun and nostalgic, especially with the show’s recent Netflix revival. But my hope is that this committee instills within you a deep sense of empathy for views and people you may not understand. I urge you to think critically on what personal experiences inform and influence each character’s perception of right and wrong; in other words, how the personal becomes the political. Looking forward to November 8!

Best,
Daniel Zhang
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I. READING

Delegates and advisers will find attached to the end of this background guide a PDF copy of the reading “Defining Colonization” by Sheila Cote-Meek, from Colonized Classrooms: Racism, Trauma, and Resistance in a Post-Secondary Education. Delegates are encouraged to read this short passage before committee — although the document will not be explicitly referenced in committee, the story of Avatar is told through the central lens of colonialism, and a rigorous understanding of its definition, dimensions, and impacts will be necessary to a successful and meaningful experience at this committee.

II. WORLD

The world of Avatar is divided into four: the Fire Nation, the Water Tribes (north and south, which differ both culturally and politically), the Earth Kingdom and the Air Nomads. Each sect represents its own national, cultural and ethnic identity. And from each nation, certain citizens are imbued with the power of “bending”, a supernatural power to control the element of their country.

Only one person, however, can bend all four elements: the Avatar. The Avatar is born a citizen of one of the four regions, and reincarnates after death in what is called “The Avatar Cycle”. The Avatar Cycle is the ordering of nations in Air → Water → Earth → Fire → Air, and dictates that the newly born Avatar shall belong to the nation next in the order (e.g Avatar Roku belonged to the Fire Nation, and after he died, his reincarnation Avatar Aang belonged to the Air Nomads). The reincarnation of the Avatar is guaranteed except for one circumstance: if the Avatar dies in the Avatar State, a temporary but godlike assumption of power, the cycle is ended.
“Fire is the element of power. The people of the Fire Nation have desire and will and the energy and drive to achieve what they want. Earth is the element of substance. The people of the Earth Kingdom are diverse and strong. They are persistent and enduring. Air is the element of freedom. The Air Nomads detached themselves from worldly concerns and found peace and freedom ... Water is the element of change. The people of the Water Tribe are capable of adapting to many things. They have a deep sense of community and love that holds them together through anything.” - Iroh

III. SYNOPSIS

100 years prior to the beginning of the series, the young Avatar, a 13-year old Air Nomad named Aang, enjoys his childhood. Aang is a prodigy of airbending, but resistant to the
responsibilities of the Avatar, which obligate him to train rigorously. He is frequently distracted (or just being a kid) rather than attending to all of his duties. That playfulness eventually results in his separation from a mentor/father figure named Gyatso, who endorsed the idea that Aang should be allowed to enjoy his childhood -- Aang was to be separated from Gyatso in order to better perform his duties. Knowing that he would likely never see Gyatso again, he flies away from his home of the Southern Air Temple (one of four Air Temples located in the cardinal directions) over the South Pole. He is struck out of the sky by a storm, and in a last-ditch attempt to save himself, Aang encases himself in an iceberg.

Days later, the sovereign of the Fire Nation, Fire Lord Sozin uses the proximity of a fiery comet which empowers firebending abilities to attack the Air Nomads (without provocation). Sozin’s objective is purely imperial: he seeks to colonize the three other nations and create a world of fire. Knowing the primary adversary to his plan would be the Avatar, he turns to the Air Nation first, seeking to kill all Nomads to ensure the Avatar’s death. Though faced with noble resistance by the Nomads, Sozin’s forces with the aid of the comet (thus called Sozin’s Comet, which returns every one hundred years) carry out a genocide among all Air Nomads. Aang, frozen in the ocean and thus safe, becomes the last of his race. The world believes that the Avatar is dead.

One hundred years later, there has been no reincarnation of the Avatar in sight (because Aang has been hidden but alive), and it is assumed that the Cycle has been broken. The Fire Nation has turned to a conquest of the Earth Kingdom and the Water Tribes. The Earth Kingdom, for its part, loses many rural settlements in its vast territory, but its giant (no really, it’s like a good third of the entire territory) megacity Ba Sing Se still stands after years of siege.
The Northern Water tribe is relatively untouched; the Southern Water tribe, however, suffers great losses and is almost completely destroyed.

Brother-sister duo Sokka and Katara (the latter a waterbender) are teenagers of one of the last Southern Water Tribe villages. They stumble upon Aang’s iceberg, and Katara accidentally frees Aang, who wakes up to a changed world: 100 years later, with all of his countrymen dead, and the Fire Nation encroaching on their location as they speak.

Zuko, a disgraced young prince of the Fire Nation, is tasked with finding the Avatar (as some believe the Avatar lives on, an existential threat to the Fire Nation), and firmly believes the Avatar is somewhere by the South Pole. He is proven correct when he sees a dramatic beam from Aang’s iceberg as he awakens, and attacks Sokka and Katara’s village in order to capture Aang. And thus, as Aang, Katara and Sokka escape, the journey begins.

Aang, Katara, and Sokka pursue masters of each element to begin Aang’s education towards becoming a fully realized Avatar (an Avatar capable of commanding all four elements). Throughout the story, they are pursued by Zuko, who wrestles with the justness of his actions and the Fire Nation. General Iroh advises Zuko throughout the series, knowing Zuko will eventually realize his true destiny is with the Avatar, but never directly interfering or directing Zuko. Aang, Katara, and Sokka are eventually joined by a prodigious twelve-year old Earthbender, the sarcastic and blind Toph; at the same time, they are pursued by Zuko’s more powerful and ruthless younger sister, Azula, and her trademark blue flames. Aang masters waterbending from Katara and earthbending from Toph, and is confronted by the final obstacle of learning fire. Zuko, who has finally figured out his own personal identity and morality free from his father Ozai’s suffocating grasp, offers to help Aang. Together, the four (aided by side characters along the way) confront Ozai and Azula, and successfully end the Fire Nation’s
regime. Zuko becomes the new Fire Nation king, welcoming Aang at his coronation as a symbol of collaboration between the four nations and peace towards the future.

Note: if you haven’t seen the show, be sure to browse the official YouTube channel Avatar: The Last Airbender for information about your character or any plot points you’re confused about! There is a plethora of curated content to aid your research.

IV. PROBLEMS AT HAND

This committee begins at the conclusion of Avatar: a beautiful and personal resolution to the series, but an unfinished political story. What becomes of the Fire Nation and their crimes—monarchy and citizens alike? What becomes of the two Water Tribes, separated by oceans and vastly different cultures? What becomes of the Earth Kingdom, after the corruption of Ba Sing Se was exposed? And the Air Nomads, who must be remembered and honored?

This committee will seek to answer such questions, along with others as conflicts arise. As a note, some delegates will be familiar with the sequel series The Legend of Korra and the answers it provides. For the purposes of this committee, Korra will be considered non-canonical— but nothing is stopping you from drawing inspiration! The emphasis of the committee will be on Topic A, with Topic B as a symptom of the problem to keep in mind. Of course, as with the nature of crisis, the axis this committee follows will be heavily dependent on delegates— the chairs encourage you to take initiative and think out of the box. Bring us the stories you want to tell through directives, crisis notes and personal actions.

A) The Corruption of Ba Sing Se
The monarch of the Earth Kingdom, King Kuei, was revealed to be head-of-state in name only; the true heads-of-state, the non-elected, authoritarian and extrajudicial body of the Dai Li were revealed to hold the true power. The citizens of Ba Sing Se are in open revolt, casting chaos and violence across the city, while the Dai Li refuse to compromise. Ba Sing Se, a city renowned for its impenetrable walls, finds its demise from within.

Overwhelmed with conflict, the inept leader Kuei called for the greatest standing military in the world (aside from the Earth Nation’s) to intervene: the Fire Nation. Unsurprisingly, the former military state had a surplus of soldiers and army resources right after the war. As of now, Fire Nation soldiers enforce peace in the south half of Ba Sing Se. Their presence has proven effective— the subdual of violence has cleared the path for diplomatic conversations on peace.

However, Earth Kingdom citizens refuse to let Fire Nation soldiers into the north half of the city— and for good reason. For many citizens, the sight of Fire Nation soldiers is a traumatic and fearful experience. Many still understandably hold great distrust for the Fire Nation and freely letting them roam the city, much less grant them the authority to arrest and detain citizens.

However, Fire Lord Zuko is adamant in his intervention plan. Torn apart by guilt after the war, he constantly questions how the Fire Nation can be of the greatest use to humanity and the four nations, and firmly believes he is spreading peace. Zuko is not entirely wrong— peace follows the Fire Nation army, and temporary martial rule has enabled diplomatic and productive conversations.

War hero Toph Beifong is the leader of the north half of Earth Kingdom citizens, and consistently points out the resemblance of Fire Nation intervention to Fire Nation imperialism. Earth Kingdom affairs should remain within the Earth Kingdom, she argues. Her amicable relationship with Zuko has allowed for a peaceful standoff at the border, but tensions run high.
Northerners harass and pelt soldiers, prompting violent reactions. Toph grows impatient with Zuko’s “self-righteous” desire to intervene. The city threatens to give way to disarray.

Central to this committee is the theme of domestic sovereignty vs. international intervention. Zuko sees the state of Ba Sing Se as an injustice of the world and believes the Fire Nation has a duty to help with as citizens of the global world; Toph sees the “humanitarian” efforts of Zuko as imperialist imposition, disrespectful to the Earth Kingdom’s right to manage its own sovereign affairs.

B) Fire Nation Nationalists

Fire Lord Ozai did not just exist as a ruler— he existed as a national identity, a symbol of the exceptionalism of the Fire Nation and its divine right to rule. Though Ozai was ultimately defeated and deprived of his powers, his legacy did not vanish overnight. Former Fire Nation soldiers and citizens are loosely organized as rebelling nationalists, angered by Zuko’s new administration and the recession of the Fire Nation to equals rather than superior to the other three elements.

As alluded to at the end of Avatar, the new foreign policy of the Fire Nation is one of diplomacy, invitation and partial deference. Major Fire Nation cities have become diverse metropolises, welcoming citizens of all elemental creeds. Fire Nation nationalists assume a conservative, nostalgic view of when nations were firmly divided by elements, and seek to drive non-Fire citizens out of the Fire Nation, counteracting Zuko’s goal of integration.

Aside from Zuko, their greatest enemy is the Avatar, the embodiment of equality and unity amongst elements. Their primary objectives will be to disrupt goals of
integration/intimidate foreigners, incapacitate Zuko and Aang and ultimately to seize rule of the Fire Nation.

However, it is important to note that these are not all jingoist terrorists without reason. Many are simply nostalgic for the nation they once knew, and are uncomfortable/intimidated by the new changes. Many feel like they are being replaced or are now being ignored (although in reality, they are adjusting from a position of supremacy to equality). Delegates must first consider peaceful, empathetic communication while not compromising the condemnation of nationalist Fire Nation sentiments.

V. CHARACTERS

AANG

He’s the main character. The singular most powerful entity in the Avatar universe, Aang is diplomatic, kind and sometimes distracted. His storyline is the Avatar storyline itself; important to note is Aang’s desire to remember and restore Air Nomad culture and legacy above all else. Post-war, Aang is frustrated by the geopolitics and conflicts of the Avatar universe, and is torn between Zuko and Toph as they struggle over the torn Earth Kingdom. Aang introspects on whether the Avatar should interfere at all, but sensing another violent conflict, feels a strong urgency to make a decision. His views have been greatly changed by the war— he now questions whether the Avatar should have the freedom to meddle and interrupt
foreign affairs in the interest of the Avatar’s personal conception of goodness. The existence of
the Avatar as a being more powerful than any nation, free to interrupt citizens’ lives without
restraint, seems like an infringement on the freedom of people to exist peacefully; he empathizes
with the people he has hurt along his journey. As a result, he has withdrawn from public life and
refuses to intervene in any of the current crises as a matter of principle, to the chagrin and
condemnation of every other delegate. Aang currently resides in Omashu and is present at
committee only at the request of Bumi, but for now, refuses to take any substantive stance or
opinion— unless convinced otherwise.

KATARA

Sole waterbender in the Southern Water Tribe, Katara is one of the heroes who
defeated the Fire Nation—specifically becoming the most powerful healer as well as
taking down Azula at her coronation to become Fire Lord. She joined Avatar Aang
and her brother Sokka to defeat Ozai after the Fire Nation attacked her village. Previously,
the Fire Nation had hunted and imprisoned all Southern waterbenders and killed Katara’s mother in a raid— this led to her vendetta against
everything in the Fire Nation. She struggles to accept Zuko after he rejected his family and tried
to atone for his actions. After the 100 Year War, Katara entered a relationship with Avatar Aang,
and along with Sokka represents the interests of the Southern Water Tribe. They are also strong
allies with the Northern Water Tribe and Earth Kingdom. Katara is diplomatic and kind, but strongly opposes Fire Nation intervention in the Earth Kingdom, remembering her own traumatic experiences with Fire National imperialism. She controls all Southern Water Tribe forces, and is an experienced warrior herself. Katara is frustrated with Aang’s sudden retreat from public life, and although understanding his reasoning, sees his reluctance to intervene as the Avatar as cowardice—of course, this is informed by her own personal feelings for Aang.

**SOKKA**

Sokka is a non-bending warrior who traveled with Avatar Aang to defeat Fire Lord Ozai. He came from the Southern Water Tribe along with his sister, Katara, after his village was attacked by the Fire Nation. The Fire Nation had also killed his mother, and Sokka’s father Hakoda had left with the military to fight in the Earth Kingdom, leaving Sokka as the de facto leader of the Southern Water Tribe during the 100 Year War. Sokka, Suki, and Toph notably took down the entire Fire Nation air fleet during Avatar Aang’s battle with Ozai. As a character, Sokka tends to be non-judgmental despite the Fire Nation’s attacks against him—he even receives training from a sword master within the Fire Nation to improve his skills. After the war, Sokka now represents the interests of the Northern Water Tribe, and is especially strong allies with the Earth Kingdom—in part due to his current relationship with Earth Kingdom Kyoshi Warrior Suki. Close friends with Zuko,
Sokka approves of Fire Nation intervention and trusts Zuko’s judgement. He controls all Northern Water Tribe forces, and is an experienced bender himself.

**TOPH**

Toph is regarded as the most powerful earthbender of all time. Known as “the blind bandit”, she was one of the heroes who traveled with Avatar Aang to defeat Fire Lord Ozai. She comes from a wealthy family in the Earth Kingdom, so she holds a grudge against the Fire Nation for their colonization of her country. She notably took down an entire Fire Nation air fleet along with Sokka and Suki during Avatar Aang’s battle with Ozai, and invented the practice of metalbending. Toph generally despises politics, in part because of her upbringing, and did not take a leadership role for the Earth Kingdom after the 100 Year War. Toph tends not to care where others are from— as she only dislikes the Fire Nation government, not its people— and judges based on their strength and character. She has many feuds with Katara over personality differences, but collaborates with her for the independence of the Earth Kingdom. While previously respectful towards Zuko, she has grown exasperated with his self-righteousness in “bringing peace to the Earth Kingdom”, and believes all affairs can be resolved domestically. She sympathizes with Fire Kingdom nationalists in the sense that she understands the desire to
keep nations clearly divided as four, but is on the fence about their violent tactics. Her ongoing conflicts with Zuko do not help. In the committee, she begins as the de facto leader of the Earth Kingdom, controlling the figurehead of King Kuei. Her ultimate goal is to reform the Earth Kingdom into a constitutional democratic republic, but this cannot be done without peace first—and the only thing in her way is the Fire Nation’s constant intervention. Toph argues that although the Fire Nation has succeeded in bringing “peace” to the southern half of Ba Sing Se, the imperialism of the Fire Nation necessary to bring this “peace” is an act of violence itself. To this, she points to examples of a traumatized, disenfranchised Earth Nation, its government and people crippled by the actions of the Fire Nation in the past war. Ozai himself thought he was doing the right thing by uniting the world, she reasons. She asks Zuko: what makes you any different?

ZUKO

Zuko was a disgraced Fire Prince during the 100 Year War, but became Fire Lord after the defeat of Ozai. For a long time, Zuko acted as a colonizer and led many attacks across the world while he searched for the Avatar to regain his position in the royal family. He notably led attacks against the Southern Water Tribe and Kyoshi Island, leading to long-term resentment from Katara, and judgement from Sokka and Suki. Zuko’s role in the Fire Nation royal family also led to
anger from Avatar Aang; however, the two ended up developing a strong and lasting friendship. Near the end of the 100 Year War, Zuko realized his wrongdoing thanks to the wisdom of Iroh, and turned against Azula and Ozai to join the Avatar and train him in firebending. Zuko also notably helped Katara defeat Azula at her coronation. As Fire Lord after Ozai’s defeat, Zuko seeks to atone for the Fire Nation’s sins, and actively seeks opportunities to keep the peace and help others. After seeing the chaotic and violent unrest of the Earth Nation rebellion, he recognized it as the perfect opportunity for the Fire Nation to assume its role as peacekeepers. However, Zuko’s actions are often propelled by guilt rather than productivity— he does not empathize with the Earth Kingdom citizens who do not welcome the Fire Nation, and only sees intervention as a morally righteous and necessary act. He would not be entirely wrong— the Fire Nation’s intervention in the south half of Ba Sing Se has enabled peace, allowing for diplomatic conversations on the future of the Earth Kingdom to occur. Zuko wrestles with his own political philosophy: is peace at the cost of colonization and forceful intervention peace at all?

MAI

Raised in a wealthy aristocratic family, Mai was the daughter of the Governor of Omashu after the city was taken from King Bumi and became one of the Fire Nation colonies. She tends to be reserved as a result of being treated as a trophy child—only meant to look pretty and support her father’s political career. Her resentment towards her family life led her to join
both Azula and Ty Lee to track down the Avatar and his co-conspirators after Omashu was retaken by the Earth Kingdom. However, following an interaction with her childhood crush and then ex-boyfriend Prince Zuko, she betrays Azula with the help of Ty Lee to let the Avatar and the Fire Prince escape the Boiling Rock Prison—which she is then thrown into as punishment for her treason. After the defeat of the Fire Nation in the 100 Year War, she was released and married now Fire Lord Zuko; however, she remains generally disinterested in politics despite her familial role in helping colonize the Earth Kingdom. At the end of the day, she does what she wants—regardless of what role she might currently be or had been filling.

**IROH**

Once a fierce military leader of the Fire Nation’s imperial campaign, Iroh is a savant of tea, peacefulness, and the culture of the four nations. He was famed for leading a long failed siege of Ba Sing Se while serving in the military, which ruined his once-glorious reputation for being an undefeated general. But it is revealed that his failure at Ba Sing Se did not stem from military ineptitude, but rather grief—his only son, Lu Ten, died midway through the campaign. As a result, he retreated from public Fire Nation life and travelled the world, learning about each of the four elements. Iroh is the wisest and most experienced of all characters, with keen insight onto the politics of each nation and personal advice to help each character find their path. He sees Zuko as his son,
nurturing Zuko’s growth throughout the series and helping him reconcile his identity as a Fire Nation prince and someone who wants to do the right thing. However, despite his connection to Zuko, he remains neutral throughout this whole affair— he recognizes there is no moral absolute on whether the Fire Nation should intervene. As an empath, he will lean the side with the most compelling personal arguments.

AZULA

Perhaps the most powerful teenage character in the series, Azula is the younger sister of Zuko, and a firebending prodigy. Cruel, ambitious, and relentless, throughout the series she pursues the Avatar and Zuko and usually finds success, responsible for the penetrating lightning that incapacitated Aang at the end of Season 2. However, after a betrayal by her two closest friends, Ty Lee and Mai, she devolves into insanity. While Zuko would normally not be able to approach defeating her (as he himself confessed), her distraught conditions allows him and Katara are able to stop her in the season finale (https://tinylink.net/j1Urf). After the final battle, she is incarcerated. However, her legendary blue flames and unrivalled power make her a symbol for the Fire Nation nationalists, who seek to free her. She herself is not passive in her own cell, and though she will begin this committee
from her jail cell, she is plotting her own escape— easier while the Fire Nation is distracted with Earth Kingdom politics.

TY LEE

Ty Lee is a charismatic, bubbly non-bender who accompanied Azula and Mai in their journey to track down Zuko and the Avatar. Though not blessed with elemental powers, Ty Lee is a formidable combat threat, being able to incapacitate any bender’s power for a limited amount of time—a crucial and game changing ability considering the volatile and powerful benders in this committee. After the war she trained with the Kyoshi Warriors, and is loyal to Suki. However, although the Warriors have not taken up an official stance, she longs for combat again, and works for an assassin for hire, regardless of her official political neutrality. Ty Lee will be a highly coveted asset by all delegates in the case that the already highly tense conflicts present explode into violence.

KUEI

Kuei is the official sovereign of the Earth Nation, although it is revealed that his title is just in name—in reality, he has no control over the domestic and international affairs of the Earth Nation, and was simply a puppet for the Dai Li and their leader, Long
Feng. After the war, he is distraught by his ineptitude, and feels directly responsible for the conflict and unrest of the Earth Nation. He has mixed feelings towards Long Feng, whom he also blames for the rebelling northerners, but still considers a friend. Kuei heavily empathizes with the northerners’ dissatisfaction with the Earth Kingdom government, and although he is still officially the head monarch, he wonders whether to abdicate the throne and begin a transition to democracy (coincidentally, Long Feng’s worst fear!). Kuei has mostly been dragged along by Toph and Long Feng in negotiations with the Fire Nation, but secretly harbors a desire to independently lead his nation again, and may technically overrule Toph on any major diplomatic decisions.

**LONG FENG**

Long Feng was the long time shadow leader of the Earth Kingdom through the cryptic and authoritarian government agency the Dai Li. However, exposed for his manipulation of King Kuei and extrajudicial kidnapping of political dissidents in Season 2, and losing the loyalty of his Dai Li followers to the far more assertive Azula, he begins this committee disgraced and disrespected. Through long time connections, he arrives at this committee as a diplomat of the Earth Kingdom (though aside from the Fire Nation soldiers, he is one of the most hated figures in the country). While he himself does not have any amicable feelings towards Toph, Long Feng recognizes that Toph is the hope of the people— a
powerful symbol of Earth Kingdom nationalism and pride. He has no goal other than to salvage his own reputation among the Earth Kingdom people— and he recognizes the most efficient way to this goal is to emerge as a leader of the anti-Fire Nation intervention movement. However, his goals are mutable— collaborating with Toph to drive out the Fire Nation simply happens to be the best choice right now.

SUKI

Suki is the highly skilled and fierce leader of the Kyoshi Warriors, a band of all-female non-bending Earth Kingdom fighters. Throughout the series, Suki accompanied and aided the Avatar’s quest to defeat the Fire Kingdom. After the war, she is an intelligent and capable leader, wary of dragging the Kyoshi Warriors into partisan conflicts. However, her friendships with the rest of the committee, especially her romantic relationship with Sokka, draw doubts onto how much longer she can stay neutral. Suki is officially undecided, but can be convinced. Her first priority at all times are the independence and safety of the Kyoshi Warriors, who have recently had minor scuffles and violent encounters with both Fire Kingdom soldiers and rebelling northerners. Suki is an advocate for peace first before violence.
JEONG JEONG

Jeong Jeong was a famed Fire Nation general, regarded as one of the most powerful benders in the series, but deserted the military once recognizing Ozai’s cruelty and the oppressive nature of the Fire Nation’s imperialism. The only known living defector of the military, he is a legendary figure among the Fire Nation people, and a despised enemy of nationalists. Now, he is the de facto head of the Order of the White Lotus, an international non-governmental organization with powerful political influence. Jeong Jeong is deeply distrusting of the Fire Nation as an entity, and the volatile tendency of fire to be destructive. For this reason, he intervenes from behind the scenes, holding connections to at least one government official from each nation, empowering him to subtly manipulate the political dialogue. In rare instances, he can also call for forceful intervention by the Order.
BUMI

A childhood friend of Aang, this Earth Nation king was reunited with the Avatar after 100 years as an old man. Despite his age, Bumi is the agile and powerful king of Omashu, a major Earth Nation city (yet still dwarfed by Ba Sing Se). While not directly politically involved in the conflict between the Fire and Earth nations, the violent rebellion has created a refugee crisis, where thousands of citizens fearful for their lives have fled to Omashu hoping for safety. Bumi, empathetic to their cause and right to safety, has warmly welcomed them, but finds his resources spread thin. Omashu cannot accommodate the growing number of refugees, and he desperately seeks foreign aid for resources and the restoration of peace to Ba Sing Se, so refugees may comfortably return home. However, the refugee crisis is the last thing on everyone’s minds—the focus of the committee has primarily been directed towards the heated conflicts within the walls of Ba Sing Se. Bumi has one trump card—ever since Aang’s retreat from public life, he has been the only person able to reach the Avatar. Many committee members believe Bumi may be the only person capable of convincing the Avatar to take a stance—something every side wants for themselves. Bumi’s first priority remains simply the wellbeing of Omashu and all people within its walls.
VI. NOTES ON COMMITTEE

The personal is the political here. The central political theme of intervention vs. sovereignty will be the overlying framework of arguments, and what the chairs expect the most dialogue on, but delegates should not leave their arguments in the abstract or theoretical. Avatar is a deeply personal show; the characters are arguably the story’s greatest strength. All actions should come from a personal perspective— we don’t want to just hear delegates lecture about colonialism as an academic historical concept, but we want characters to tell their own personal stories and see how their past experiences inform their view of what is right and wrong. Use the rich storytelling of Avatar to your advantage— here, the greatest arguments are emotional and personal. And one final note— we appreciate puns, even if they’re bad! Give it a shot at least once in committee.

VII. CONTACT

Please feel free to reach out to the chair Daniel Zhang at dzhang@exeter.edu for any reason at all— questions, concerns, and Spotify recs all welcome.
Chapter Two

CONCEPTUALIZING THE IMPACT OF THE COLONIAL ENCOUNTER

CONCEPTUALIZING COLONIZATION AND ITS IMPACT

Defining Colonization

Colonization is conceptualized as having four dimensions — it concerns the land, it requires a specific structure of ideology to proceed, it is violent, and it is ongoing. Both Memmi (1965) and Said (1993) theorize that colonialism and imperialism require a specific structure of ideology about colonized peoples in order to advance. They also believe that colonialism is very much about the quest for economic resources, including land. Memmi’s (1965) initial analysis of colonial relationships is rooted in his personal quest to deepen his own understanding of his identity. However, he also realized that his work would have far greater implications for adding to the general understanding of colonization. Through his own experiences, Memmi came to understand that the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized actually “chained the colonizer and the colonized into an implacable dependence, molded their respective characters and dictated their conduct” (1965: ix). In essence, Memmi came to realize that the colonizer cannot exist without the colonized.

Memmi also clearly articulated that “privilege is at the heart of the colonial relationship — and that privilege is undoubtedly economic” (xii). However, he is also quick to point out that this privilege is not solely economic, noting that “even the poorest colonizer thought himself to be — and actually was — superior to the colonized” (xii). Thus, while the quest for economic resources, including land, has been at the centre of colonization, Memmi’s definition does point to the notion that there was more to colonization than merely setting up colonies for economic purposes. He also notes that there is a unique, complex and hierarchical relationship that is locked in place between the colonizers and the colonized that extends beyond classism.

Similarly, Said’s (1994) definitions of colonialism and imperialism broadly implicate the metro or the centre as the colonizer. He defines imperialism as the “practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory; colonialism, which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory” (Said, 1993: 9). Said makes two very explicit points in these statements that are particularly important. One is that colonization was about the quest for the land and the resources; the second is that, like Memmi (1965), Said views colonization as requiring a specific set of ideologies. As he notes:

Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination: the vocabulary of classic nineteenth-century imperial culture is plentiful with words and concepts like “inferior” or “subject races,” “subordinate peoples,” “dependency,” “expansion,” and “authority.” (1993: 9)

These words add another dimension to colonialism and imperialism: the fact that Indigenous peoples inhabit that land is of little consequence to the colonizer as they are merely viewed as an impediment and require control. Similarly, in a discussion
about the dilemma that the colonizer finds him/herself locked into, Memmi notes: “A Witticism which is more serious than it sounds states that ‘Everything would be perfect ... if it weren’t for the natives.’ But the colonist realizes that without the colonized, the colony would no longer have any meaning” (1965: 66).

On the one hand, the colonizer is frustrated by the fact that Indigenous peoples inhabit the lands; on the other, the colonizer quickly realizes that he is nothing without the colonized. As a result, the colonized are constructed in very specific ways to uphold the notion that they are inferior to the colonizer. This construction of the “other,” the colonized subject, stands against the construction of the white colonialist as superior, all-knowing, civilized and capable of holding in place ongoing colonial, imperial and racist practices that become normalized. As a result, the colonizer sets out to debase the colonized at every opportunity to further the distance between them (Memmi, 1965: 67). The maintenance of this distance requires the body of the racial “other” to be marked in very specific ways and with very specific meanings. Through producing images and imaginations of Indigenous peoples as inferior, subordinate and dependent, the making of the white colonist as superior and in control emerges. In the words of Memmi:

The colonist resorts to racism. It is significant that racism is part of colonialism throughout the world; and it is no coincidence. Racism sums up and symbolizes the fundamental relation which unites colonialist and colonized. (1965: 70)

Further, the racialized hierarchy that emerges situates Indigenous peoples at the very bottom of the hierarchy. The result is that the quest for land places any Indigenous person in their country of origin at risk, and Aboriginal peoples of Canada are no exception. This is an important point because it affects how Aboriginal peoples in Canada are constructed as somewhat different than people of colour, who actually have no real or imagined Indigenous ties to this land. Colonizers are most concerned and threatened by Indigenous peoples of the land because Indigenous peoples have real ties and claims to land and resources. Therefore, as peoples, they represent a significant threat to the colonial empire, and in the minds of the colonist, they must be debased.

Said also theorizes that culture played a significant role in European imperial expansion and the demise of Indigenous identities:

At the heart of European culture during the many decades of imperial expansion lay an undeterred and unrelenting Eurocentrism. This accumulated experiences, territories, peoples, histories; it studied them, it classified them, it verified them ... above all, it subordinated them by banishing their identities, except as a lower order of being, from the culture and indeed the very idea of white Christian Europe. This cultural process has to be seen as a vital, informing, and invigorating counterpoint to the economic and political machinery at the material center of imperialism. This Eurocentric culture relentlessly codified and observed everything about the non-European or peripheral world, and so thoroughly and in so detailed a manner as to leave few items untouched, few cultures unstudied, few peoples and spots of land unclaimed. (1993: 222)

Canada was no exception to these actions; in fact, Aboriginal peoples were subordinated here in a number of ways.

The third dimension that I discuss is that colonization is violent. Here I turn to the work of Fanon (1963, 1967), who examined the process of colonization. His work is useful in understanding how the hierarchy of the colonizer/colonized is established and held in place. He also provides a psychological analysis of the impact that colonization has on the colonized. However, what is particularly useful in this discussion is that Fanon writes about the violence associated with colonization.

In The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon (1963) draws attention to colonialism in a very profound and real way — he names it as an act of violence. In Fanon's view, violence was an intentional act committed upon the body of colonized peoples, and it is only through that same body that colonialism will be defeated (105). The violence inherent in the process of colonization is something that often gets left out of conversations. Episkropos concurs: “Despite the growing body of evidence to the contrary, the Canadian myth does not acknowledge that the nation was founded on a practice of psychological terrorism and theft” (2009: 5). Personally, I think it is too easy to mystify colonialism as being only about the quest for land and resources. I have heard many people discuss colonization as an act of merely setting up colonies on foreign lands, which, in my opinion, totally obscures the violence associated with the process. Fanon's work shows that colonization did not proceed innocently. In fact, according to Fanon, white colonists became implicated in committing acts of violence and genocide.

In the preface to The Wretched of the Earth, Jean-Paul Sartre starkly challenges Europeans and white settler society who locate at the centre of society to read Fanon because they are implicated in acts of violence. They are not as innocent as we would be led to believe. Sartre is quite direct in the following statement:

Our victims know us by their scars and by their chains, and it is this that makes their evidence irrefutable. It is enough that they show us what we have made of them for us to realize what we have made of ourselves. But is it any use? Yes, for Europe is at death's door. But, you will say, we live in the mother country, and we disapprove of her excesses. It is true, you are not settlers, but are no better. It is true, you are not settlers, but you are no better. For the pioneers to you; you sent them overseas, and it was you they enriched. You warned them that if they shed too much blood you would disown them, or say you did .... You, who are so liberal and so humane, have such an exaggerated adoration culture that it verges on
affective, you pretend to forget that you own colonies and that in them men are massacred in your name. (1963: 14)

Sartre (1993) notes that Fanon’s work is important for a number of reasons: first, the book shows what colonizers did to the colonized, but, secondly, it shows what the process of colonization has made of Europeans themselves. He goes on to acknowledge that the violence was very specific and targeted:

Violence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm’s length; it seeks to dehumanize them. Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours. (Sartre on Fanon, as cited in Fanon, 1963: 15)

As Sartre continues:

We [the colonized] only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us. Three generations did we say? Hardly has the second generation opened their eyes than from then on they’ve seen their fathers being flogged. In psychiatric terms, they are “traumatized” for life.... You say they [the colonized] understand nothing but violence? Of course; first, the only violence is the settler’s; but soon they will make it their own. (Sartre on Fanon, as cited in Fanon, 1963: 17)

These words present another important dimension to this work: that acts of violence have an impact, one that is traumatic. This is discussed in a subsequent chapter.

I turn now to the fourth dimension of colonization — that it is ongoing. For Aboriginal peoples in Canada, colonialism has not ended. As Alfred contends:

There is no post-colonial situation; the invaders our ancestors fought against are still here, for they have not yet rooted themselves and been transformed into real people of this homeland. Onkwehonwe must find a way to triumph over notions of history that relegate our existence to the past by preserving ourselves in this hostile and disintegrating environment. (2005: 38)

A case in point is that the quest for land is still contested territory. White settler society continues to fight for the land and the resources with little regard for Aboriginal peoples, as evidenced by the ongoing land claims. For example, the outstanding land claim by the Teme-Augama Anishnabai has never been settled. Their original traditional lands stretched some 4,000 square miles; they were reduced to a small reserve of one square mile in 1972 (Ontario Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, 2009). The former chief, Gary Potts remarked, “For 112 years, we, the people of