

Neytiriyā Waytelem: Representing matrixial entanglement as songcord in James Cameron's *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022)

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ABSTRACT

Avatar (2009) and *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) construct digital storyworlds that reconfigure liminality through a matrixial, maternal lens. Drawing on theories of immersive digital storytelling, this article situates James Cameron's Pandora as a hyperreal environment that approaches what Jean Baudrillard terms the simulacrum: a copy without origin that generates its own experiential reality. Within this digitally constituted ecology, the songcord in *Avatar: The Way of Water* emerges as a central symbolic and affective device. Whereas classical theories of liminality, as articulated by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, frame the liminal as a transitional phase oriented toward transformation, the songcord instead embodies what Bracha L Ettinger conceptualises as a matrixial borderspace: an encounter grounded in co-emergence, relationality, and shared affect. Through close analysis of the audiovisual staging of Neytiri's song in the film's closing sequence, the article demonstrates how sound, gesture, and digital imagery render the songcord an enduring, rhizomatic threshold rather than a passage to be transcended. In contrast to Jake Sully's teleological hero's journey, this matrixial logic sustains familial bonds across life, death, memory, and Eywa's planetary network, reframing liminality as ongoing relational becoming.

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Introduction

Film encompasses a rich contemporary symbolic system that draws on the folkloric tradition of multimodal, enacted storytelling. In *Filmic folklore and Chinese cultural identity*, Juwen Zhang (2005:267) defines filmic folklore as follows:

Filmic folklore, by definition, is an imagined folklore that exists only in films, and is a folklore or folklore-like performance that is represented, created, or hybridised in fictional film. Taken out of the original (social, historic, geographic, and cultural) contexts, it functions in similar ways to that of folkloristic films. Filmic folklore imposes or reinforces certain stereotypes (ideologies), and signifies certain meanings identified and consumed (as “the truth”) by a certain group of people. The folklore in filmic folklore may appear as a scene, an action, an event, or a storyline (plot), and in verbal or non-verbal form.

As Zhang articulates in his definition, filmic folklore, like traditional folklore, has a particular ideological stance it promotes. Indeed, much of what we understand about these multimodal and folkloric systems of filmic storytelling is grounded in the Hollywood-ised taxonomic models and philosophical diatribes of Western patriarchy, as well as in mythic tellings that favour a Campbellian male hero’s journey (Campbell 1956). Superficially, this would seem to be true of both James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009) and its sequel *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022).

Cameron establishes his preference for the male hero in the first film through the story of Jake Sully. The primary narrative aligns with linear, anthropocentric storytelling, focusing on Jake. Drawn towards that is a secondary, ecocentric, and cyclical narrative that promotes the capacity for humans to interact with both nature and with technology, and Cameron has been known to draw on feminist scholar Donna Haraway’s cyborg manifesto as a guide for much of his storytelling – from *Terminator* (1984 – present) to the current *Avatar* saga (2009 – present). This capacity for human-nonhuman interaction is exemplified through Neytiri’s songcord in *Avatar: The Way of Water*. The songcord may be understood as a matrixial liminal space: not a threshold to be crossed in pursuit of transformation, but an enduring, tactile-affective borderspace in which memory, maternal subjectivity, and familial bonds remain simultaneously differentiated and entangled.

Cameron’s *Avatar* saga presents the evolving story of Jake Sully, who is sent to Pandora to replace his brother, who had been part of the Avatar programme. Jake is paraplegic, but when bonded with his Avatar, finds freedom and purpose as he interacts with the N’avi and, in particular, with Neytiri, the clan chief’s daughter, whom he eventually marries. The second film, *Avatar: The Way of Water*, begins with Jake and his family having overcome the human colonial and capitalist threat and living relatively peacefully. However, this colonising and vengeful threat resurfaces, and Jake and his family must take refuge

with the Metkayina clan, who are connected to the Pandoran deity Eywa, not through the Home Tree and the Tree of Souls, as was experienced by Omaticaya clan of the N'avi peoples, but through a complex water-based ecosystem.¹ Though the Metkayina clan is led by Tonowari and is therefore patriarchal, it is his pregnant wife, Ronal, who serves as the clan's conduit to Eywa. Both Neytiri and Ronal share this profound connection to the spiritual, maternal heart of Pandora through their invocation of Eywa. Because Neytiri is the most consistent female character across the filmic saga thus far, this article will focus particularly on how she carries the legacy of her people, and her connection to family and Eywa, as embodied in the mnemonic narrative of the songcord.

Neytiri's song serves as the film's epilogue. Though sung earlier, this iteration of the songcord is the most powerful because the audience has journeyed with her into her maternal pain. The songcord enters softly, unaccompanied at first, her voice carrying a tonal fragility that contrasts sharply with the amplified sonic intensity of the preceding action sequences. The mixing privileges breath and timbre over orchestral dominance, foregrounding embodied vocal presence. As she moves her fingers along the beads of the songcord, the camera frames her hands in an intimate close-up. This gesture is neither incidental nor decorative; it is rhythmic and deliberate, aligning tactile movement with melodic phrasing. The audiovisual pairing of touch and song materialises the matrixial logic of co-emergence: memory is not narrated discursively but activated through sensorial entanglement. The beads function as tactile nodes, and the camera's lingering attention transforms them into sites of relational activation.

Drawing on posthuman, matrixial, and new materialist theories, I unpack the many ways that the literal and symbolic voice of women – as represented through their purpose as custodians of cultural and familial connection and the songcord itself – weaves its way through the story. I argue that it is through Neytiri's songcord that the lives of her family are drawn into balance: connected by a single mnemonic narrative thread of an inner, feminine unity between Eywa, Pandora, nature, and legacy. I will not only achieve this through literary and thematic analysis, but will also draw on musical theory as a means of understanding the impact of what Neytiri sings.

Positioning the songcord in digital storytelling

Digital storytelling can be understood not merely as the use of digital tools to deliver narrative content, but as a historically specific mode of cultural production in which computational processes shape narrative form and spectatorship. As Lev Manovich (2001:27) argues, 'new media objects are numerical representations' subject to 'algorithmic manipulation', foregrounding the programmable and modular logic that underpins digital

cultural forms. Extending this insight, Sean Cubitt (2016:9) emphasises that digital media operate through ‘processes of transformation rather than representation’, shifting attention from fixed textuality to dynamic, material operations. From a new materialist perspective, digital media are not immaterial but emerge through what Sean Cubitt and Paul Thomas (2013:2) describe as the ‘becoming-material of connectivity’, where relations, flows, and infrastructures actively constitute cultural form. Consequently, because digital media are structured through variability, automation, and relational materiality, narratives become mutable and hybridised rather than materially fixed.

Within this expanded framework, digital storytelling unfolds across convergent and networked systems of production and reception. Henry Jenkins (2006:2) defines convergence culture as the ‘flow of content across multiple media platforms’ and the ‘cooperation between multiple media industries’, highlighting the distributed nature of contemporary narrative. From a new materialist perspective, this distributedness is not only cultural but ontological, grounded in dynamic relations between human and nonhuman actors. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of assemblage is particularly generative in this regard: they describe an assemblage (*agencement*) as a configuration defined by ‘relations of exteriority’, in which ‘the component parts of an assemblage can be detached and plugged into other assemblages’ (Deleuze & Guattari 2004:88). This emphasis on relationality and recombination resonates with Cubitt and Thomas’s (2013:2) account of digital media as a ‘becoming-material of connectivity’, where meaning emerges through networks of interaction rather than discrete forms. Digital storytelling may thus be understood as a multimodal assemblage in which computational design, industrial convergence, and participatory circulation are contingently organised, collectively conditioning how narrative meaning is produced and experienced.

From the perspective of digital cinema studies, digital storytelling also signals a shift in the ontology of representation. Stephen Prince (1996:32) contends that digital imagery achieves “perceptual realism” when it corresponds to viewers’ expectations of visual coherence, even in the absence of photographic indexicality. This movement away from indexical trace toward simulation resonates with Jean Baudrillard’s (1994) theorisation of the simulacrum, wherein representation no longer reflects a prior reality but generates a “hyperreal” that precedes and structures the real. In such conditions, the digital image operates not as a copy but as a self-sustaining model of reality. Similarly, Janet Murray (1997:98) describes digital environments as offering ‘the experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place’, foregrounding immersion as a defining affordance of computational media. Digital storytelling may therefore be theorised as a techno-cultural formation in which narrative meaning is co-produced by algorithmic systems, simulated environments, and embodied spectatorship. Within this framework, Cameron’s world-building strategies for his *Avatar* saga exemplify the cinematic simulacrum: Pandora does

not reproduce a natural world but generates a hyperreal ecological system whose sensory coherence secures perceptual belief. Cameron's digital environments, therefore, function as immersive simulations in which narrative, ecology, and technological mediation converge to produce experiential realism rather than photographic representation.

Digital storytelling, as theorised through Manovich's logic of modularity and variability (2001), Jenkins's convergence paradigm (2006), Prince's perceptual realism (1996), Murray's immersion (1997), and Baudrillard's simulacrum (1994), establishes a framework in which narrative meaning emerges through computational interconnection rather than linear representation. Within such a paradigm, cinematic worlds are not mimetic reproductions but generative systems – networked environments that privilege relationality, immersion, and affective activation. Pandora, as realised in *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water*, exemplifies this shift: it is a hyperreal ecology, digitally constructed yet perceptually coherent, whose narrative force resides in the experiential density of its interwoven life systems. If digital storytelling operates through modular units arranged within connective architectures, then Cameron's world-building foregrounds relationality as both aesthetic principle and ontological condition.

It is precisely this logic of relational interconnection that becomes symbolically condensed in the songcord. I turn here to consider the songcord as both a material object and a metaphysical interface. In this regard, a songcord may be regarded as a mnemonic device: a conjuring of memory through song, activated through tactile engagement with a strand of beads. As Neytiri sings, her fingers move across discrete units (beads), each functioning as a modular point within a larger connective structure. The gesture does not merely accompany remembrance; it activates it. In this sense, the cord operates analogously to a technological interface: memory is not passively stored but procedurally retrieved through embodied interaction. The beads may therefore be likened to a narrative database, their activation dependent upon touch, voice, and affective intention.

Here, the rhizomatic model articulated by Deleuze and Guattari becomes particularly illuminating. The rhizome, described as 'open and connectable in all its dimensions' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004:13), resists linear hierarchy in favour of multiplicity and entanglement. The songcord functions in precisely this way: it binds together maternal memory, ancestral lineage, communal identity, and planetary consciousness through Eywa. Rather than representing a singular narrative thread, it gathers a plurality of collective stories that converge and coexist. The cord thus becomes a liminal space: simultaneously personal and collective, material and spiritual, temporal and transcendent. When situated within the broader framework of digital storytelling, the songcord emerges as a diegetic analogue of Pandora's computational ontology. Just as the film's digital environments generate a hyperreal ecology that precedes and structures perception (Baudrillard 1994),

the cord generates relational presence through activation rather than representation. It does not depict connection; it enacts it. In this way, Cameron's world-building and the symbolic structure of the songcord converge: both are organised through modularity, networked interdependence, and immersive affect. The songcord becomes, therefore, not only a narrative device within the film but also a meta-symbol of the rhizomatic, convergent, and simulacral logic that underwrites digital storytelling itself.

Posthumanism, new materialism and matrixial theory

This analysis draws on posthumanism, new materialism, and matrixial theory as intersecting frameworks through which to examine the nonhuman feminine in Cameron's digital world-building. Read together, these approaches foreground relational ontology, material entanglement, and co-emergent subjectivity, providing the conceptual grounding for interpreting Pandora – and particularly the songcord – as a matrixial reconfiguration of liminality.

Within the context of posthumanism, Donna Haraway is probably the most eminent scholar. Though best known for *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985:2016a), her later works are of particular interest in establishing the purpose of the nonhuman mother. Although she does not explicitly refer to the nonhuman mother, Haraway's terminology in *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene* (2016b) is conceptually significant for understanding the songcord Neytiri sings. She writes that all beings, 'human and not—become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding' (Haraway 2016b:97). The entangling that Haraway refers to is taken up by both Karen Barad (2006) and Rosi Braidotti (2013). Although Haraway explicitly states that she does not consider herself a posthumanist (2016b:97), her account of human–nonhuman entanglement –together with the relational ontologies developed by Barad and Braidotti – provides a productive theoretical point of entry for examining how the *Avatar* saga constructs complex, shared human and nonhuman experiences of motherhood. Furthermore, this co-constituted relation is interwoven with cycles of life and death, which will, as I will show, feed into how the sung narrative associated with each bead in the songcord functions within the narrative.

Developing from the posthumanist theoretical lens, new materialism's focus on the vitality and agency of all matter, as proposed by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things* (2010), aims to destabilise the anthropocentric ontologies and discourses that denied the nonhuman its own 'vital materialism'. Although Barad straddles the line

between the posthuman and new materialism in building on her understanding of entanglement, I adopt Bennett's work because of how she qualifies matter as having agency. She writes:

bodies enhance their power *in or as a heterogeneous assemblage*. What this suggests for the concept of *agency* is that the efficacy or effectivity to which that term has traditionally referred becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localised in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts (Bennett 2010:44, original emphasis).

Within the context of Cameron's *Avatar* saga, human and nonhuman entities are intra-connected or, as Bennett (2010) suggests, are constitutive of a "heterogeneous assemblage". From this understanding, true entanglement is revealed to be responsive in destabilising old human-derived meaning systems and in creating new systems of meaning-making through a being-with and being-in-ness: again, closely related to how human-nonhuman relationships are described and invoked through the songcord.

A relational ontological tradition, traceable to Martin Heidegger's articulation of *Mitsein* (being-with) in *Being and time* (1927), is invoked through Bennett's account of the "heterogeneous assemblage". Heidegger's account of being-in-the-world displaces the autonomous, self-grounding subject in favour of a co-constituted existence in which entities emerge only through their relations within a shared world. Existence, in this formulation, is always already relational; *Dasein* is structurally oriented toward others and toward the material world it inhabits. Although Heidegger does not theorise human-nonhuman entanglement in contemporary posthumanist terms, his dismantling of subject-object dualism provides a crucial point of departure for later theories that reconceive agency as distributed and co-emergent rather than individually possessed.

Building on this relational groundwork, Jane Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter" advances a new materialist account of distributive agency. Extending the assemblage-based framework already outlined, Bennett (2010:23) conceptualises reality as composed of 'living, throbbing confederations' of human and nonhuman actants whose capacities emerge through interaction. Agency, in this formulation, is not an inherent attribute but a relational effect of these dynamic configurations. Matter is therefore not a passive substance awaiting human inscription; rather, it actively participates in the production of effects and meanings. In this way, Bennett develops the implications of assemblage thinking toward an explicitly materialist ontology, emphasising that such configurations are contingent, processual, and materially vibrant. This perspective foregrounds ecological and technological interdependencies that unsettle anthropocentric hierarchies, enabling a reading of cinematic worlds not as inert backdrops for human drama, but as active participants in narrative becoming.

While Bennett's work promotes distributed material agency, Bracha L Ettinger's matrixial theory introduces a complementary psychoanalytic and affective dimension. In her work, *The matrixial borderspace* (2006), she outlines her matrixial theory by offering a reconceptualisation of the matrixial in relating it to its etymological origins: 'from the Latin for uterus, womb' (2006:4). Ettinger (2006:4, original emphasis) identifies it as a 'dynamic borderspace' and explains it follows:

The matrix is not a symbol for an invisible, unintelligible, originary, *passive receptacle* onto which traces are engraved by the originary and primary processes; rather, it is a concept for a *transforming borderspace of encounter* of the *co-emerging I* and the *neither fused nor rejected uncognized non-I*.

Ettinger's formulation of the matrixial borderspace challenges phallogentric models of subjectivity predicated on separation and individuation. Instead, she proposes a transsubjective encounter in which subjects are co-emergent, linked through shared affective traces and processes of wit(h)nessing. The matrixial is not fusion, nor is it dissolution of difference; rather, it is a co-affective sphere in which partial connections sustain relationality. Whereas assemblage theory maps material interconnection across ecological and technological networks, matrixial theory explains the intimate, affective transmissions that make relationality experientially resonant. When read together, these frameworks provide a layered account of how relational ecologies are both materially structured and affectively sustained.

This convergence becomes particularly illuminating in relation to Neytiri's songcord in *Avatar: The Way of Water*. The songcord functions as more than a cultural artefact or mnemonic device; it operates as a material-affective node within a heterogeneous assemblage linking mother, child, voice, breath, fibre, memory, and the wider Pandoran ecology. As a woven object that holds sonic traces of relational moments, the songcord exemplifies Bennett's distributive agency: memory and identity are not contained within the individual subject but are materially externalised and sustained through vibrant matter. Simultaneously, the act of singing into the cord – and later reactivating it through listening – enacts a matrixial borderspace in which maternal and filial subjectivities are co-implicated across time, loss, and vulnerability. The songcord thus stages relational ontology at both ecological and intimate scales, demonstrating how the *Avatar* saga renders coexistence as co-emergence through digitally mediated world-building and embodied affective transmission: invoking a *within-ness* in life and death.

The songcord as nonhuman, liminal maternal entanglement

Composed by Simon Franglen, the utterances of the songcord are not merely sung as a means of narrating maternal vulnerability; they are a guided invocation of the nonhuman forces that inform creation and familial relationships. The words reflect upon the blessings conferred by the birth of a first son, followed by the arrival of Kiri – a gift from Eywa – who represents the reincarnation of Grace’s Avatar and possesses the most profound spiritual connection to Eywa.

Three qualities need to be promoted here in terms of how identifying the songcord’s liminal positioning lends further weight to viewing its purpose through a collective posthuman, new materialist, and matrixial lens. This is specifically true of the latter’s understanding of the womb (of which the umbilical cord forms part) as a *‘transforming borderspace of encounter of the co-emerging I and the neither fused nor rejected uncognized non-I’* (Ettinger 2006:4, original emphasis).

To describe Ettinger’s matrixial borderspace as liminal, it is first necessary to clarify how the term “liminal” is being mobilised here. Anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner remain foundational to liminality theory. Van Gennep (1960:18) conceptualises the liminal as a ‘symbolic and spatial area of transition’, while Turner (1991:95) characterises it as a condition that is ‘betwixt and between’. In both formulations, liminality designates an intermediate phase within a rite of passage – an in-between state that must ultimately be traversed in order to achieve transformation. The liminal, in this classical anthropological sense, is temporary, directional, and teleological: it is a threshold one moves through in order to emerge into a new, socially recognised status.

This understanding is extended by Manuel Aguirre (2006:15), who defines the threshold as ‘that which separates as well as connects two spaces ... “betwixt and between” two spaces, touching and forming part of both but belonging to neither’. For Aguirre, as for Van Gennep and Turner, the liminal exists in relation to clearly demarcated spaces. It mediates between distinct states while remaining structurally subordinate to them. Historically, such models of liminality have often aligned with masculinised narrative structures, particularly rites of passage centred on individual achievement and social recognition. This is evident in *Avatar*, where Jake Sully’s trajectory closely follows the pattern mapped by Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey: he crosses thresholds, undergoes trials, and emerges transformed into a culturally legible hero. His former identity as a Marine, his physical prowess in his avatar body, and his orientation toward duty and conquest all situate his movement through liminal spaces as a progression toward a

benchmark of masculinised success. In this schema, liminality functions as a transitional corridor – necessary but ultimately superseded by arrival.

Taken together, the preceding theoretical strands of assemblage-based relationality, Bennett's vibrant matter, distributive agency, and sympoietic entanglement converge to reconfigure a feminine-directed, matrixial digital worldview grounded in co-emergence and interdependence. Within this ontological framework, in which human and nonhuman actors are understood as dynamically co-constitutive, liminality can no longer be conceived as a bounded transition between fixed states. To describe the songcord as liminal fits into this new theoretical paradigm. The songcord does not mediate between two discrete identities to produce transformation; instead, it holds multiple temporalities, memories, and relations in simultaneous connection. It does not separate in order to reconnect, nor does it culminate in transcendence. As a matrixial threshold, it is an ongoing space of encounter – an interwoven, affective borderspace in which self and other, mother and child, past and present remain mutually imbricated. In this sense, the songcord embodies liminality not as passage, but as enduring relationality.

The further clues we are offered when considering the liminal through the posthumanist lens are that it becomes less of a 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1991:95) space between nature and culture that one must move through to wholly embrace one or the other. As Barad (2006:136) explains:

Posthumanism does not attribute the source of all change to culture, denying nature any sense of agency or historicity. In fact, it refuses the idea of a natural (or, for that matter, a purely cultural) division between nature and culture, calling for an accounting of how this boundary is actively configured and reconfigured.

What Barad proposes is that the liminal space should not be relegated to something to move through. It is, according to posthumanist thinking, something to be embraced as a reconciliatory space that possesses qualities that do not require a transition away from it. I propose that this is the first unique quality of the liminal feminine, and one that is affirmed through the songcord. Through the songcord, culture and nature become intertwined: Neytiri's children, as her familial and cultural legacy, are drawn towards the Great Mother, Eywa, and the bond that is established does not require severing one or the other to achieve what traditional liminal theorists would regard as progress. It simply is, without fixed dimension or potential. As Neytiri's partner, the once-human Jake Sully learns that connection through entanglement extends beyond physical abilities and encompasses empathy, environmental consciousness, and meaningful inter- and intra-connections to all, as succinctly distilled in the Na'vi 'I see you' (2009).

Neytiri's children are, by extension, not regarded as being *below* her, just as Eywa is not regarded as being *beyond* her. Both are described as being *within* her: Neytiri (2022, own emphasis) refers to Eywa as the 'Great Mother *within* me' in her songcord. This is the second quality I wish to highlight regarding the liminal feminine: its *within*-ness. Matrixial theory, as stated previously, offers theoretical gravitas to this quality in describing it as facilitating co-emergence (Ettinger, 2006:4). In *Weaving a woman artist with-in the matrixial encounter-event*, Ettinger equates this *within*-ness as inextricably linked to what Jacques Lacan notes of the 'Voice'. Challenging the Lacanian view of the feminine object-voice, she promotes the qualities of the matrixial voice as follows:

The voice that emerges in a matrixial shared zone, envelops joint ontogenesis from which specificity and difference are derived, causing an-other desire and with-in-forming subjectivity. This voice reverberates between several entities, its quivering and fluctuation are received and oscillographed. It borderlinks by resonances that link the inside of several different individuals in a shareable outside. It doesn't only link multisensorial resonances to each other, it also generates trans-sensorial phenomena of synaesthesia in each participant. Thus, the 'woman'-m/Other-Encounter-Event is a support for a trans-subjective passage, producing desire not for an object but for further borderlinking and further resonances (Ettinger 2004:81).

Ettinger notes two points that are particularly relevant to the songcord. First, in referring to the matrixial voice as being resonant, she is endorsing the sonic qualities – and by extension the melodies and harmonies – that are inherent to how the voice 'speaks'. In this sense, the song that Neytiri sings is the most appropriate vehicle for functioning as the matrixial voice: its fluid movement through the various sonic frequencies that compose the art of the music promotes co-creation, entanglement, and collective agency.

Secondly, Ettinger (2004:81) describes the matrixial voice as reverberating, producing the desire for 'further borderlinking and further resonances'. The perpetual movement implied by her description is reminiscent of the qualities of water itself. The focus on the element of water in *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) is a motif of a gentler, more fluid understanding of the interrelationships forged within ecosystems through matrixial entanglements. These two points, collectively, constitute the third quality of the liminal feminine: it is melodically and harmonically resonant as a negotiative and agential tool derived, as Ettinger (2004) further notes, from emotional connection, and it has reverberations that allude to an inherently fluid quality of the liminal feminine space. However, when reading Cameron's film beyond my proposed philosophical viewpoint, there is an underlying fragility to the liminal feminine because of the prominence of a brutal masculine- and colonialist-driven filmic directive. This understanding impacts what the songcord achieves as a liminal feminine artefact, but also, rather starkly, what it fails to achieve.

Structuring memory: The form of the songcord in the context of the film

The songcord is structured to seem to affirm, to draw on the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), that the subaltern is speaking. The words seem indigenous, the ritual culturally grounded as Eywa is invoked three times at the end of each chorus repetition, but the melody and structure of the songcord are not grounded in indigenous scale systems.² Rather, they are drawn from Western harmony and counterpoint structures that resolve and move up and down in a formalised Western way. This Western type of musical composition theory makes sense in film scoring, but reveals a contradiction in terms of musical cultural influence and Cameron's overall endorsement of the anti-colonialist, anti-capitalist message he touts. Presenting the songcord as Western-familiar implies that Na'vi culture has been colonised, and denies the songcord its own natural-cultural space, serving Bennett's (2010) understanding of the Deleuzian "heterogeneous assemblage". In *Postcolonial theory and Avatar* (2016), Gautam Basu Thakur (2016:87) notes the following about the inherent hypocrisy of Cameron's approach to developing his *Avatar* filmic saga:

The anti-imperialist narrative of *Avatar* obscures a deeply Eurocentric mindset. In the guise of criticizing the West's violent appropriations of the Other, the film actually rehearses the old colonial narratives of European privilege, entitlement, and sovereign subjectivity... all these are hidden from plain sight through a narrative that critiques colonial and neocolonial expansionism and privileges the indigene other.

Thakur's scathing commentary on Cameron's approach to crafting his filmic vision extends to how the film score, of which the songcord is part, echoes this. Cameron's filmic appropriation of indigenous cultures extends to language. On closer scrutiny of the song and its lyrics, analysis of the meaning of these words may be futile because they are derived from a language that is, in essence and to quote Michel De Certeau (1996:30), a 'glossolalic fiction'. It has vocalisations reminiscent of native American and Maori, but is not culturally indigenous in the sense that it does not have real-world value through being consistently manifest as a distinct culture. In other words, Cameron has enacted a cultural-linguistic appropriation,³ and so we are left to ask whether the appropriation of multiple cultures into the illusion of a uniform fictional culture, the N'avi, is the means through a filmic colonisation is consistently reinforced, even in the songcord. I am not convinced that we should demonise Cameron outright for his treatment of a spiritually matrilineal culture. Indeed, De Certeau (1996:30) also comes to the defence of the potential of this 'glossolalic fiction'. He writes:

As an invention of vocal space, glossolalia in fact multiplies the possibilities of speech. No determination of meaning constrains or restrains it. The decomposition of syllables

and the combination of elementary sounds in games of alliteration create an indefinite space outside of the jurisdiction of a language. This vast space, artificial and entrancing, this virgin forest of the voice, is supposed to have “meaning” as a whole, as a totality, but one can circulate freely within it without encountering the limits that condition any articulation of meaning (De Certeau 1996:41).

The glossolalia inherent to the language of the Na’vi and the lyrics of Neytiri’s song gains potency, and equating the filmic saga’s language with glossolalia dissolves the intellectualities of meaning-making and distils them down to an essence beyond the structures and systems of speech. As such, it is depoliticised, and sounds are rendered, to reiterate Deleuzean (2004:13) theory, ‘open and connectable in all their parts’. Furthermore, the glossolalic fluidity that De Certeau refers to effects what Tzvetan Todorov (1975:41) refers to as ‘a certain hesitation’ between a language that is known and possessed of a negotiated series of agreed-upon meanings, and a language that is in and of itself being created in the filmic moment, never to be spoken again. This understanding affirms the songcord as a liminal space, possessed of all the qualities of the liminal feminine identified above, in which meaning-making systems are rendered unstable and subjective. In this way, an interconnectedness of multiple meanings converges upon the songcord and becomes entangled with each other. It is through this understanding of what the songcord as a glossolalic expression *could be* that Cameron is redeemed. We are encouraged to *feel with* the words as a fluid interaction between character and audience, but this negotiation of meaning is unstable and, in subsequent films in the saga, would require a more firmly established grounding through a stronger deviation from the mapped, monomythic hero’s journey that Cameron is employing.

Overall, the songcord, while demonstrating what is possible through the matrixial and posthuman lenses, fails to realise the potential it holds to recalibrate how we think about liminality. In addition, it needs to better uphold the ethos of how we should reimagine the liminal beyond being part of a colonising or colonised rite of passage through the inclusion of a liminal feminine artefact, such as the songcord. To draw on a term used by postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha, Cameron is denying the film a potent, meaningful, heterogeneous ‘Third Space’. Bhabha (1994:208) writes:

[T]he intervention of the Third Space, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys the mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is continuously revealed as an integrated, open expanding code.

Both Bhabha and Deleuze and Guattari advocate for the openness in a system, something which the songcord, as directed by Western musical theory, does not obviously seem to encompass: the songcord is a closed system of verses and a chorus; it has a beginning and an end. Entangled with the understanding of the songcord as a closed system is

the contrasting notion that songs are cyclical because they are perpetually resung. It is, therefore, indicative of the infinite capacity of the memory that conjures it into being again and again: in the case of *Avatar: The Way of Water*, it is Neytiri's. Consequently, the songcord simultaneously embodies a renewable, morphic quality as much as it defaults towards traditional, finite Western song form. And the symbolic interaction between the songcord's fixed structure and its cyclical capacity may be likened to how Deleuze and Guattari distinguish the rhizomatic from the arborescent model. Where the rhizomatic is motivated by interconnection, the arborescent is motivated by order and balance. They write:

All tree logic is a logic of tracing and reproduction.... Its goal is to describe a de facto state, to maintain balance in intersubjective relations, or to explore an unconscious that is already there from the start, lurking in the dark recesses of memory and language. It consists of tracing, on the basis of an overcoding structure or supporting axis, something that comes ready-made. The tree articulates and hierarchizes tracings; tracings are like the leaves of a tree (Deleuze & Guattari 2004:13).

I am specifically referring to the work of Deleuze and Guattari as appropriate to consider here because, as much as they are critical of the arborescent model in that it has been employed to justify a multiplicity of oppressive acts, they do acknowledge that both the rhizomatic and arborescent models contain within them the complementary capacity to hybridise and form a new way of being and doing that is very much aligned to the way in which the songcord as liminal functions. To draw this analogy back towards the film itself, the way of water is not fixed. It exists in the three states of solid, liquid and gas – fixed, fluid and abstract – just as the songcord has fixed, fluid and abstract qualities. Through this alignment between water and the songcord, we understand that the songcord functions beyond itself to promote water's agency. In this sense, the songcord not only represents the liminal feminine but also promotes nonhuman agency.

Building on this reconceptualisation of liminality as sustained relational co-presence rather than transitional passage, the final scene of *Avatar: The Way of Water* offers a particularly resonant audiovisual articulation of the matrixial threshold. The sequence is structured around stillness rather than spectacle. After the turbulence of battle and loss, the camera lingers in a subdued rhythm: pacing slows, cuts lengthen, and the visual field softens into aquatic blues. This deceleration is crucial. Instead of propelling the narrative toward heroic closure, the film suspends forward momentum, situating the spectator within an affective space of mourning, memory, and relational continuity. This is the context within which Neytiri's final iteration of her songcord is represented in the film. In this moment, guided by the mnemonic narrative Neytiri sings, liminality is not a threshold being crossed but a space being held.

Intercut with Neytiri's singing are images of her children, both living and dead, most notably Neteyam. These are not framed as flashbacks in the conventional sense – there is no visual distortion or overt signalling of temporal rupture. Instead, memory and present perception flow into one another through gentle dissolves and fluid camera movement, echoing the underwater environment in which the family now resides. The aquatic imagery reinforces matrixial symbolism: water operates as a medium of gestation, immersion, and shared containment. When Jake is shown submerging himself and encountering a vision of Neteyam beneath the water's surface, the film does not stage this as a supernatural rupture but as an extension of relational continuity. The *mise-en-scène* refuses rigid demarcations between life and death and between past and present. Rather than representing separation, the scene performs co-presence.

Viewed through Ettinger's matrixial borderspace, this sequence becomes an audiovisual articulation of transsubjective encounter. The matrixial does not erase differentiation, but it emphasises shared affective space – an interlacing of subjectivities without fusion. Neytiri's song is directed toward her children, yet it simultaneously reverberates through Jake, through Eywa, and through the spectator. The sound design subtly layers ambient oceanic textures beneath her voice, suggesting that the planetary network participates in the act of remembrance. The familial cord connection to Eywa is consequently rendered not only narratively but acoustically: voice, water, and environment intermingle. The liminal here is not a corridor toward heroic individuation (as in Jake's earlier rite-of-passage trajectory in *Avatar*), but a sustained field of shared vulnerability and continuity.

Importantly, the scene reorients the locus of narrative resolution. Whereas classical liminality culminates in reintegration and status elevation, this ending privileges relational endurance over triumph. Jake's earlier journey conforms to a Campbellian structure of threshold crossing and transformation; in contrast, Neytiri's song does not mark advancement but remembrance. The camera's gentle circular movements and the softening of focus create a visual texture of enclosure rather than progression. The family, though fractured by loss, is held within a network of visible and invisible bonds. Neteyam's presence beneath the water does not signify closure; it signifies ongoing connection within a matrixial field where separation is never absolute.

Thus, the final scene renders the songcord as an audiovisual liminal space – one that resists the teleology of masculine rites of passage and instead sustains an ethics of relational continuity. Through slowed temporality, tactile close-ups, immersive sound design, and aqueous imagery, the film performs liminality as co-affective holding. The songcord becomes not only a mnemonic device but a matrixial interface: a rhizomatic strand through which familial journeys – Jake's, Neytiri's, Neteyam's, and the surviving children's – remain entangled across life, death, and planetary consciousness. In this

way, the film's digital world-building converges with its intimate familial focus, presenting liminality not as movement beyond, but as dwelling within shared connection.

Conclusion

Within the narrative trajectory, much as in the songcord, Cameron seems to be invoking stronger, more fully dimensionalised feminine presences, the greatest of which is Eywa. Her matrixial voice is present in the earth and in the water, and is invoked in the spirit of the Neytiri's songcord: 'Ma Eywa, ma Eywa' (Cameron 2022).

Cameron's *Avatar* saga in general, and *Avatar: The Way of Water* particularly, constructs Pandora not merely as a spectacular digital environment, but as a technologically mediated world that foregrounds relational ontology. As digital storytelling, the films exemplify how immersive world-building operates as an affective and participatory framework rather than a neutral backdrop. Pandora functions as a hyperreal ecology – an experiential simulacrum in Baudrillard's sense – in which the distinction between technological fabrication and organic life collapses into a seamless perceptual reality. Yet within this hyperreal domain, Cameron embeds a symbolic counterpoint to spectacle: the intimate, tactile practice of the songcord.

If Jake Sully's narrative arc in *Avatar* adheres to the teleological structure of the hero's journey – crossing thresholds, undergoing trials, and emerging transformed – the songcord in *Avatar: The Way of Water* disrupts this paradigm. Classical liminality, as outlined by van Gennep and Turner, is transitional and directional. It presumes movement from one socially recognised state to another. The matrixial borderspace theorised by Ettinger, however, reconceives the threshold not as a corridor but as an encounter-event grounded in co-affectivity and partial subjectivity. The songcord exemplifies this alternative model.

In the film's closing sequence, Neytiri's voice is soft, breath-inflected, and rhythmically continuous. The camera lingers in close framing, prioritising tactile gesture as her fingers move across the beads. The sound design layers her melody with the ambient resonance of water and distant choral textures, sonically embedding her maternal address within Eywa's planetary consciousness. Visually, the intercut images of Neteyam and earlier familial moments are not framed as final departures but as reactivations of presence. The digital image here does not simulate loss; it stages relational persistence. Memory is not retrospective but coextensive with the present.

In this sense, the songcord also functions as a mnemonic narrative: a material-semiotic device through which memory is not simply stored but actively re-narrated in the present.

Each bead marks not a fixed past event but a relational node within an ongoing story, reactivated through touch, voice, and affective recall. Narrative here is neither linear nor closed, but woven through embodied acts of remembrance that sustain continuity across temporal thresholds.

Through this audiovisual convergence, the songcord becomes a liminal space that does not culminate in transcendence. It neither separates the living from the dead nor brings closure to grief. Instead, it sustains an ongoing entanglement of mother and child, individual and collective, material gesture and spiritual network. The beads operate as mnemonic technology, but unlike the extractive technologies of the Sky People, they activate connection rather than domination. The cord's strands figure a rhizomatic, interwoven network – simultaneously tactile and planetary – binding Neytiri to her children and to Eywa.

Importantly, this reframing of liminality reorients the ethical stakes of Cameron's digital world-building. In a cinematic landscape often dominated by masculinised narratives of conquest and mastery, the matrixial logic of the songcord privileges vulnerability, co-emergence, and shared affect. The threshold is no longer something to overcome; it is something to inhabit. Liminality becomes enduring relationality.

While Pandora may operate as a hyperreal simulacrum enabled by Cameron's cutting-edge visual effects, its deepest structuring principle is not technological excess but matrixial connectivity. The films' digital ontology mirrors their thematic investment in interdependence: just as performance capture and CGI collaborate to produce Na'vi embodiment, so too do characters exist only through relational networks. Cameron's world-building ultimately stages a shift from individuated heroism to shared becoming. The songcord, as matrixial liminal space, crystallises this shift: holding together memory and futurity, grief and continuity, mother and child within an ongoing, co-affective borderspace that redefines what transformation in digital cinema can mean.

Notes

1. Cameron's *Avatar* saga is set on Pandora, a lush, bioluminescent moon. Its landscape is defined by vast rainforests, floating Hallelujah Mountains, diverse and often formidable wildlife, and a rich network of flora interconnected through a planetary neural bond that sustains the Na'vi and their environment. The films introduce Na'vi communities such as the Omaticaya forest clan and the Metkayina reef clan, each adapted to distinct regions of Pandora, reflecting unique cultural practices, dwellings, and interactions with the moon's ecosystems. For example, the Omaticaya clan connects with Eywa through Home Tree, where they live, and the Tree of Souls, which acts as a repository for collective ancestral memory.

2. According to Bruno Nettl (2016), Western musical systems are largely organised around the twelve-tone equal temperament scale, which divides the octave into equal semitones and underpins harmonic modulation and the major–minor tonal framework. In contrast, many Indigenous and non-Western traditions employ modal or microtonal scale systems—often using intervals that fall outside equal temperament – in which pitch organisation is relational, culturally embedded, and inseparable from cosmology, ritual, and communal meaning rather than harmonic standardisation.
3. Despite the environmental and ethical messaging of the *Avatar* saga initiated in earnest in the first film (2009) and Cameron’s stated intentions to represent the impact of human colonisation on indigenous peoples and territories, the narrative still constructs the Na’vi as nonhuman, alien, or otherwise ‘other,’ while the human colonisers retain conventional human form. This framing echoes historical patterns in which colonisers depict indigenous peoples as strange or subhuman, raising critical questions about the reproduction of colonialist representational logics. While this observation is important for understanding the broader cultural implications of Cameron’s filmic narrative, the present article does not focus on postcolonial critique but rather on relationality, maternal affect, and the entanglement of human and nonhuman agencies within the films’ digital storytelling framework. The postcolonial critique of *Avatar* is elaborated on in Thakur’s *Postcolonial theory and Avatar* (2016).

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