

Anti-Imperialism in Cartoons: How *Avatar: The Last Airbender* Uses Critical Pedagogy to Teach Children About the Dangers of Imperialism

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Background

Avatar: The Last Airbender (ATLA) is an animated children's television series that ran from 2005 to 2008 on Nickelodeon. It takes place in a fictionalized world where the four element-controlling countries of the world—the Fire Nation, the Earth Kingdom, the Water Tribes, and the Air Nomads—are deep into a hundred-year war. The Fire Nation has imperialized the world and killed nearly all the Air Nomads, with the exception of one: a twelve-year-old air-bending master named Aang, who also happens to be the Avatar. This reincarnated mantle is held by a person who can bend all four elements and serves as the bridge between the physical and spirit world as well as a general peacekeeper. Aang wakes from a hundred-year-long coma in an iceberg with his pet sky bison Appa after he panics from the responsibility of being the Avatar, where he meets fourteen-year-old waterbender Katara and her older brother Sokka. The trio then embark on a journey to help Aang master the other three elements before the evil Fire Nation leader, Fire Lord Ozai, takes over the world by the end of the summer. The series also follows sixteen year old Zuko, Fire Lord Ozai's son, whom he brutally burned for speaking out at a war meeting and banished to find the long-lost Avatar. Zuko, with the help of his kind-hearted Uncle Iroh, realizes the atrocities his country has committed and allies with Aang to end the war (Romano 2020).

The show received critical acclaim for its narrative complexity and nuanced approach to difficult topics such as imperialism, colonization, and genocide. The series was put on Netflix in the Spring of 2020, sparking a revival in its huge fan following and prompting viewers to analyze the show's progressive themes in the wake of the United States' racial reckoning over the summer of 2020.

Synthesis

A prominent theme in my research about both *Avatar* and imperialism was hope: People must remain hopeful for there to be change. Nobody will act to change if they are only apathetic. Maria Nikolakaki (2020) outright mentions this at the end of her scholarly article, saying "In order for change to happen, one must never abandon hope. Fear and despair is the basis for an immobilized society that will passively accept the ruling class's dictums. This is something we cannot allow for the sake of humanity itself" (p. 326). This connects to Aina J. Khan's (2020) *Guardian* article where she explores the emotional impact *ATLA* had on its fans. This impact is certain to come from the show's hopeful tone in battling injustice, which Khan notes inspires and touches millions, especially since the show was put back on Netflix around the time George Floyd was killed by police. This was a period of serious introspection for many Americans, who had come to realize that racism and white supremacy were not just issues that plagued the United States, but aspects of our nation's founding that define many of the institutions we rely on every day. For many, it was an eye-opening experience when they realized their country was responsible for an insurmountable level of suffering both at home and abroad. This can lead to serious pessimism; naturally, when one realizes their nation is actually founded on white supremacy, one loses faith in change. What continues to add to this pessimism is the denial of systemic racism,

that so far has been difficult to combat even with psychology (Lesick & Zell, 2020). However, it is the very optimism that Nikolakaki (2020) described and that Romano (2020) pointed out underlies all of *ATLA* that drives us forward. People protested in the street every day for weeks on end because they were hopeful something would change.

Aside from hope, another similarity between *ATLA* and real life that I noticed in my research was the parallel between the Fire Nation and the United States. While the Fire Nation is based on Imperial Japan in its style of conquest and culture, the language used to describe the Fire Nation is clearly reminiscent of the language used to describe the United States. Both imperialized the world under the guise of “spreading greatness,” and both are either feared or hated. Zuko’s speech to his father is the biggest example of this parallel, especially when he says, “They taught us the war was our way of sharing our greatness with the rest of the world. What an amazing lie that was. The people of the world are terrified by the Fire Nation. They don't see our greatness. They hate us, and we deserve it” (“Day of the Black Sun”). This quote is connected to multiple sources that point out the world’s negative views of America. For example, Greg Price’s (2017) *Newsweek* article cites a Pew Research Center survey that shows seven countries that see the US as the greatest threat to their countries, including Japan and South Korea, both of which are close allies to America. Even before the Capitol Insurrection on January 6th, the world has been seriously concerned about the United States’ political system. People are undeniably afraid of America (Huang & Wike, 2021). Kevin Drew (2020) points out that the United States has also seen a significant drop in trust from other nations; according to the *US News* trustworthiness scale of countries, the American trustworthiness rating has dropped by half since the Trump presidency. People do not revere us as the global police we consider ourselves to be. The United States has always seen itself as a beacon of democracy and justice, but the world does not agree. Just like the

Fire Nation, the United States of America is not revered as a wonderful nation; it is feared, even hated.

A positive insight that I noticed in my research to contrast the somewhat pessimistic aspects of my research was positive representation in *ATLA*. The show is lauded as particularly excellent East-Asian and Indigenous representation. But, considering the show was still written by two straight white American men, there were missteps and oversights. While Maya Phillips (2020) does give heaps of praise to *ATLA* for its lack of tokenization of Asian/Indigenous characters and sensitivity to those cultures, she does correctly point out that the cast features predominantly white voice actors in a world “free of whiteness,” as well as the over-westernization of some concepts. This contrasts with Aja Romano’s (2020) almost completely positive review and analysis, specifically how *ATLA* is a progressive piece of media that stands the test of time and has not become “hollow” over time. This “hollowness” comes after many stories and storytellers were once considered progressive; Romano makes a particular example out of *Harry Potter*, a once-revered piece of progressive storytelling that spread a message of acceptance through the series’ many allegories to Nazism and different kinds of discrimination. However, as Romano observes, people began to point out concerning and offensive aspects of *Harry Potter*: The token Asian character has the most stereotypically Asian name, the goblins resemble age-old anti-Semitic stereotypes, and the author herself is openly transphobic. What sets *ATLA* apart is that its strengths outshine its flaws, and it provides a nuanced, educated perspective on imperialism and colonization that will withstand the test of time. While Romano describes *ATLA* as a timeless piece of progressive storytelling, Phillips would disagree and argue that, perhaps in the future, these flaws that she has pointed out will also render this story “hollow.” Perhaps sometime in the future, our standards will be even higher, and we will have such a nuanced understanding of imperialism that

even *Avatar* falls short.

Limits

While it is briefly touched upon across all sources, *ATLA* had a huge cultural impact over the summer of 2020 when it was put on Netflix right as the country began to experience a racial reckoning and a sort-of awakening to the true nature of the United States' foreign and domestic policy. What was missing for me was why *Avatar: The Last Airbender* chose to take on such heavy and complex themes all the way back in 2005, only two years after the beginning of the Iraq War. This, as well as how specifically anti-imperialism is taught (both via *ATLA* and in classrooms), is a gap in my research that I hope to fill with my scholarly argument.

Problem

The “problem,” as Savini (2011) refers to it, I will be trying to address is how *Avatar: The Last Airbender* uses anti-imperialist themes as a teaching tool for its target audience of young children as well as why these ideas were chosen in the first place. I would like to further explore the ways in which *ATLA* warns against the dangers of imperialism, colonization, authoritarianism, and genocide, and covers complicated issues of social justice within its children's television show format. To better address my problem, my project will focus more on overarching themes of anti-imperialism with a potential focus on Zuko (the colonizer) and Aang and Katara (the colonized). I will only refer back to one or two specific episodes from the third season where the anti-imperialist themes are the most obvious. The concept that I will be, as Harris (2017) describes it, “borrowing” is the concept of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is defined as a teaching philosophy “that invites educators to encourage students to critique structures of power and oppression” (Lynch, 2019). The concept itself can be traced back to Brazilian educator Pablo

Freire's 1968 work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where Freire sought to educate students on anti-authoritarianism and relational power between workers and students; he believed this type of learning that operated on critical theory was the first step of praxis, which is the process by which a theory, lesson, or skill is enacted (Freire, 2009). The educational philosophy has since been developed by American scholar Henry Giroux (2010), who is largely considered the father of critical pedagogy as an "educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop a consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action." The theory of critical pedagogy will be used to figure out my problem by relating teachings in cartoons to those that take place in a traditional classroom setting.

My work will add to the conversation I described by answering an important question about my research: So what? Why does *Avatar: The Last Airbender* choose to explore and teach the topic of anti-imperialism, and why does it matter? To me, it matters because no child should grow up living as if they were in the Fire Nation, being fed lies about their nation's history and being taught to serve their country without question. People's beliefs about their country and its place in the world begins in childhood, and teaching a child that their nation can do no wrong steers our youth down a dangerous path. My work will also add to the conversation by explaining the way American children are taught about their own nation, particularly our own imperialism and history of colonization.

Questions

How are American children taught about US imperialism in the classroom?

How much of a child's learning/moral growth takes place outside the classroom?

Why do children's TV shows, particularly cartoons, tackle such difficult themes and why do they choose to teach them?

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