

## Power and Resistance

### Silence and Secrecy in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

Gayatri Viswanath

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## **Abstract**

In the American animated television series, *Avatar: The Last Airbender (ATLA)*, a visually Asian-influenced world of humans, animals and spirits plays out a history of violence, trauma and resistance. This world comprises four cultural formations or communities -the Water Tribes, the Earth Kingdom, the Air-Nomads and the Fire Nation, where each society has a population of ‘non-benders’ and ‘benders’ who can ‘bend’ or manipulate the element of their community for both productive or/and destructive purposes. This world sees the domination and colonization of the Fire Nation over the other kingdoms and the ensuing violence and resistance.

In reading ATLA as an allegory to a specific kind of colonialism, i.e., of genocide, this paper aims to explore how ‘silence’ and ‘secrecy’ are used by the power group to colonize the ‘others’ but are also rearticulated as forms of resistances. By drawing on the dialogues and visual evidences from the series, the paper first examines the culturing of silence by a community as self-policing which reinforces the hegemony of the power group- the Fire Nation. Secondly, silence is understood as an erasure of a violent past which is consciously performed as a protective shield, a deliberate forgetting, carrying within itself the hope that, silence over a span of time would assuage the pain of trauma. Thirdly, silencing through brainwashing and destruction of cultural bodies, e.g., libraries, as an effect of the repressive state apparatus (RS) is explored.

Silence as resistance is looked at by extending it into the performative aspects of secrecy. This addresses the questions of developing sophisticated systems of codes which are inaccessible to the world outside, of myths of non-existence, of masking and masquerade through a harlequinesque figure, of the politics of lying, of disguise and of theatricality. Finally, the silencing that occurs in the process of representation by this animation series is examined raising questions about the absence of Africa and the black body and other modes of colonialism.

## **Keywords**

Avatar: The Last Airbender, postcolonialism, trauma, silence and secrecy, power and resistance.

In the American animated three-season television series, *Avatar: the Last Airbender* (ATLA)<sup>1</sup>, a visually Asian-influenced world of humans, animals and spirits plays out a history of violence, trauma and resistance. This world comprises four cultural formations or communities- the Water Tribes, the Earth Kingdom, the Air-Nomads and the Fire Nation, where each society has a population of ‘non-benders’ and ‘benders<sup>2</sup>’- who can ‘bend’ or manipulate the element of their community for both productive or/and destructive purposes. Only the figure of the Avatar can manipulate or bend all four elements whose purpose is to restore balance and peace in the world. This world sees the domination and colonization by the Fire Nation over the other cultural communities and the ensuing violence and resistance.

In reading ATLA as an allegory of a specific kind of colonialism, i.e., of genocide, this paper aims to explore how ‘silence’ and ‘secrecy’ are used by the power group to colonize the ‘other’ but are also rearticulated as forms of resistances.

An examination of trauma and violence, especially within Trauma Studies forces us to look at ‘silences’ against the grain. Silence is not to be generally understood as non-speech, but as another form of speech/language. It is also resistance to language itself in the very non-use of words. Silences are not monolithic, but multiple; silences are specific and situational. Silences and speeches are dialogic and conversational, and at the junctures where they meet, they visibilise the conflicts – the conflicts that are cultural, political, gendered, and racial, conflicts of language, of histories and of identities. An examination of these silences opens up questions of history – dominant, ‘official’ history and the ‘silenced’ histories, questions of power and resistance; silence

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<sup>1</sup> ATLA is an American three-season series that aired on Nickelodeon between 2005 and 2008, created by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzku; they were also the executive producers of the show with Aaron Ehasz. This paper is not talking about either James Cameron *Avatar* or Night Shyamalan’s adaptation of this series *Avatar: the Last Airbender*.

<sup>2</sup> Bending is a kind of an essential knowledge a ‘bender’ is born with. The essential attribute of bending is problematic. However, the bending is ‘natural’ but cannot be mastered without practice.

as not just an ‘effect’ of power but as ‘resistance’ to power. However, the resistance is not to be read as entirely celebratory nor should the power be read as absolute.

### **Protective Silence of the Community**

How does one respond to war trauma or colonial trauma? How does this trauma become ‘survivable’? There is a particularity to both war and colonial trauma, which allows a transaction with the trauma differently possible. They are both communal and collective in nature, a trauma that has been experienced by a community of people, a collective of people. This statement does not comment on the level of trauma nor does it aim at measuring trauma. It is not establishing a sense of gauging the equality in the suffering. The personal trauma, for instance, the loss of a family member is enmeshed within a larger collective trauma, loss of community members. One of the ways of dealing with this trauma is by ‘culturing of silence’, not in fear of the State but a deliberate ‘protective silence’. This ‘protective silence’ carries the logic that silence over a period of time would assuage the pain of trauma, of loss, of damage. Here, time as healer, ordinariness or everydayness as healer is understood as helping to cope with the trauma. For instance, one of the communities of people, the Southern Water Tribe, a group of people that the show opens with, displays its struggle with trauma through many kinds of silences. One of it is the ‘protective silence’.

The Southern Water Tribe refuses to talk about the past; the members refuse to talk about the war (‘Boy in the Iceberg’, ATLA). Visually, the camera captures the Water Tribe as an all-women community, one teenage boy, Sokka<sup>3</sup> and a few toddlers. One is tempted to make sense of it as a matriarchal community only to be terribly interrupted by the patriarchal truth that all the men of the community are fighting the war with the Fire Nation. The determined silence of these women about the masculine engagement with war, accentuated by the ‘absence’ of the men – their lovers, their

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3 One of the protagonists of the show, a non-bending water-tribe teenager, warrior.

sons, their fathers – can be read as an interrogation and tacit critique of the easy alignment of war and masculinity.

### **Power Silencing and the Destruction of Cultural Bodies**

Silencing and forcible erasing of histories and knowledge-formations through the destruction of cultural bodies is another governing method of the power-group. In the second season of the series, the episode ‘The Library’ engages with questions of repression and censoring of knowledge.

The episode shows that in the past, a hundred years ago, a certain library called the *Wan Shi Tong Library* visibly existed, which was even inscribed into maps (evidenced through Aang’s map). The present-day of the series however struggles with the very existence of the library as Professor Zei, the Head of Anthropology at the Ba Sing Se<sup>4</sup> University tells Toph<sup>5</sup>, “some say it doesn’t exist”. This library is believed to have been built by the ‘knowledge-spirit’ Wan Shi Tong, with the help of his ‘foxy knowledge seekers’, which are animals, who together collected books and other things from all over the world for the people to read with a purpose of bettering the society. However, only a minaret of the building as sketched in the ancient map is visible today, hiding itself in secrecy.

Why is it hiding in secrecy? The narrative reveals that in the past, a Fire Nation soldier, Zhao (who in the present of the narrative is an Admiral who becomes the first potent enemy of the Team Avatar<sup>6</sup>), chanced upon the Library and used some ‘Knowledge’ for the purpose of destruction. Furthermore, when the protagonists of the show seek to know about the Fire Nation history, they find out that the ‘Fire Nation Library’ is destroyed. It can be speculated that the unique destruction

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4 Earth Kingdom city.

5 An earth bender protagonist; appearance from Book 2 onwards.

6 Team Avatar includes Avatar Aang, water-bender Katara, non—bender Sokka, Air-bending flying bison Appa, earth-bender Toph, non-bender flying ferret Momo.

of the Fire-Nation Library must be orchestrated by the Fire Nation so that ‘other’ histories are not accessible. This is the State’s way of silencing ‘voices’ and ‘histories’.

Furthermore, the location of the library offers some exciting ideas. The library is located in the Si Wong desert, the ‘driest and hottest desert in the Avatar world’, a desert almost impossible to cross. Already quite inaccessible, the Library, in order to further escape the surveillance of the Fire-Nation and others, goes underground. It is an underground library, buried under the desert. In response to the destructive use of knowledge/power, the Spirit Wan Shi Tong resists further destruction of the library by sinking it underground.

Architecturally the library resembles an Islamic monument with its distinctive minarets and arabesque domes. This reading of the architectural space and the geographical desert space further corroborated by the Avatar world map roughly places this ‘house of knowledge’ in what is today the Middle East. The Library, then, could possibly be read as body which reminds the viewer, especially one from the West, of the Arab-Islamic cultural glory, reminiscent of the Abbasid ‘House of Wisdom’ - a key intellectual centre in the Islamic Golden Age (Lyons, 2009; 63).

The going underground of the library could also suggest a forcible repression of the fact that Islam has a history of a rich, cultural and progressive past. By highlighting this, the series, even if inadvertently, seems to call into question the customary and ‘common-sensical’ understanding of Islam as regressive. This is a significant intervention which is responding to a certain Islamophobia that is being cultured, especially in the post 9/11 United States. Interestingly, in this episode, the writers do not fall into the trap of eroticizing this culture or disavowing it. At the level of audience reception, the presence of Avatar Aang and his remembrance of the past, consistently establishes a sense of familiarity with and an acceptance of a culture that is different. This is because Aang, as the hero of the show is already perceived as ‘one of us’ by the audience, despite his visible ‘otherness’.

## **Performance of Silence: Secrecy**

Silence as resistance can also be looked at by extending it into the performative aspects of secrecy. This addresses the questions of developing sophisticated systems of codes which are inaccessible to the world outside, of myths of non-existence, of masking and masquerade through a harlequinesque figure, of the politics of lying, of humour, of disguise and of theatricality.

### *Uncle Iron and the Carnavalesque Resistance*

The figure of Uncle Irho is very exciting. Irho's knowledge about certain 'truths' cannot be contained within the realm of silence. He cannot occupy the space of silence. He does not have the access to 'silence'. General Irho, belonging to the Fire Nation Army, who was once celebrated and honoured by the Fire Nation as the 'Dragon of the West' (Ehasz, *The Spirit World*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*) and the brother of Firelord<sup>7</sup> Ozai belongs to the Fire Nation. In fact, he was actively involved in the colonising process, engaging with violence very closely. But, he chooses to accompany the banished Prince Zuko, his exiled nephew and teaches him 'Fire-bending'. He is the colonizer who is aware of the demonic nature of the colonising process and always makes Zuko aware of the damage the Fire Nation has done to the world and continues to do so. In spite of being the rightful heir to the title of 'Firelord', he does not claim either the title or any territory. In that sense, he is resisting any belief in the idea of the Nation or of territoriality.

On the contrary, he belongs to a secret group called the Order of the White Lotus, an ancient and formerly secret society that transcends the boundaries of the four nations, resisting violence and the imperialist war. Its members are devoted to the sharing of ancient knowledge across national and political divides. A case could be made that this references the 'White Rose', a secret society and a

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<sup>7</sup> He is the main-antagonist of the series, however makes appearance only in Book Two: Earth.



non-violent resistance group during the Third Reich in Nazi Germany, or more likely the White Lotus Society from China, which began in the late thirteenth century and was instrumental in various rebellions throughout the centuries.

‘Uncle Iroh’, as he is called by Zuko, is someone who manipulates his authority and powerful position by strategizing different forms of silence. He maintains the silence and secrets of certain truths from the Fire Nation by using speech – he ‘lies’ and he engages with a lot of ‘humour’. In fact, he is an embodiment of the carnivalesque that operates against the ‘official culture’, against the ‘powered discourse’ of the Fire Nation. It is a humour mobilized against the humourless seriousness of the State. Displaying an almost excessive corporeal embodiment Iroh is represented as always eating, pleasuring in the games (of the White Lotus), bathing, playing the Tsungi Horn and diffusing the most serious of situations with a Rabelaisian humour and laughter, much to the annoyance of Zuko. Iroh is able to brilliantly fissure the self-congratulatory, absolute sense of power from within the system/space of power. Destabilizing the understanding of power as repressive and proscriptive, the figure of Iroh calls for a Foucauldian reading of power as fundamentally productive.

#### *Zuko, the Blue Spirit and the Resistance of Liminality*

Similarly, Zuko ‘masquerades’ silence, embodied as the ‘Blue Spirit’. The son of Firelord Ozai, Zuko is ceremonially banished from the Fire Nation State for articulating dissent. In the beginning of the series, Zuko is introduced as the prime antagonist, who is always chasing Avatar Aang and his friends in order to capture him. His struggle since the beginning is for ‘inclusion’, ‘to belong’, which he narrowly understands as ‘honour’. His only desire seems to go back to the Fire Nation as ‘Prince’ Zuko. He can restore his honour by capturing the Avatar. But, he can stake a claim to this honour only from the location of liminality, banished as he is from the territorial and power centre of the Fire Nation. Interestingly, these liminal spaces allow him to see the contradictions and

violence within the heart of colonial project of the Fire Nation and he chooses to fight against his father and his 'Nation' by being a part of 'Team Avatar'.

Zuko occupies the truly 'in-between space' and an identity that is always hybrid and contested, as he tries to negotiate his way through several conflicts and categories. He 'belongs' to the Fire Nation, yet he is in exile, banished from the 'home'. In one of the episodes, Avatar Aang is already captured by Admiral Zhao and it is Zuko who rescues Aang from the 'Fire Nation' zone. This raises a number of questions about 'marginalised' identity and the nexus of silence/speech in such a space. Does Zuko have any aperture into Fire Nation territory and any means whereby he can occupy and 'visibilise' himself in such a space in order to resist authority? Can the body of Zuko use language to resist in this space? Realising that these methods would result in his arrest/capture and further scar his identity, he re-figures and re-articulates resistance through silence and secrecy. He 'disguises' and 'masquerades' in order to mask his body into the form of the 'Blue Spirit'.

Critic Tseëlon offers some 'slippery'<sup>8</sup> distinctions between 'mask', 'disguise' and 'masquerade'. Mask is concealing in the sense of 'protecting, hiding from view'. The mask represents, it can be symbolic, minimal, token or elaborate. Disguise is concealing in the sense of 'misrepresenting' (employing false elements). Disguise is meant to hide, conceal or pass as something it is not. Masquerade is assuming false appearance. Masquerade is a statement about the wearer. It is pleasurable, excessive, and potentially subversive. It is a deliberate covering. The critic clarifies that these categories are not absolute or rigid but are in fact tenuous and slip into one another. Zuko embodies the slippage and seepage of all the three- mask, disguise and masquerade. Masquerade unsettles and disrupts the fantasy of coherent, unitary, stable, mutually exclusive divisions. It also provides a hiding place for the enactment of desired scripts, dreamed of scripts, feared scripts, forbidden scripts (Tseëlon 2012).

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<sup>8</sup> Here, to be read in a positive sense.

Zuko is so acutely aware of performing this resistance that he attunes his body language and its rhythms to the agile, flexible and action-oriented body of the harlequinesque. He understands corporeality as a very significant part of the meaning-making of identities. He engages with the theatricality of this harlequinesque body. Interestingly, the character of Zuko as the 'Blue Spirit' interrogates the very 'essentialism' of bending and chooses to use swords and hand-to-hand fight as a defensive and attacking strategy. He problematises the identity conflict between 'benders' and 'non-benders' and allows scope for non-benders to resist. Zuko could not have fissured or fractured the 'power' occupying the body/identity of the 'banished prince'. In order to act, he must deliberately occupy different spaces, different ideas and he uses the body as the space for transgression and subversion. This falls in place with the understanding that masquerade is also a way of dealing with 'difference', with 'otherness'.

*Mask-and-Corporeal-Theatricality of the Kyoshi Warriors*

Another form of resistance to power and its knowledge of resistance (here, of fighting styles) is offered by a group of skilled fighters, traditionally all-female warriors called the Kyoshi warriors from the Earth Kingdom Island of Kyoshi. They incorporate a combination of masking and corporeal theatricality into their combat. Mask also has its own theatricality; this is not just a facial distortion/difference of the mask but also extends to the theatre of the body. In this context, face-painting can be read as a form of masking. The warriors of Kyoshi possess an individualised non-bending style of fighting which differs from conventional bending and non-bending styles of fighting.

The Kyoshi body performance involves the white-painted face and red-striped eyelids and wearing of a military-green kimono, inspired from the Kabuki theatre of Japan.<sup>9</sup> The very Kabukian inspiration invites a dramatic and a theatrical reading of their fighting. Their weapon of choice is the fan and their fighting style is not about strength but about using their opponents force against

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<sup>9</sup> See official website of Avatar: The Last Airbender.

them. They also use swords and wrist shields. Once again, like Zuko, they are able to question the unchallenged superiority of benders with relation to non-benders. Primarily, they act as the policing unit of the villages in Kyoshi Island, an island which has remained uncolonised by the Fire Nation and therefore maintained a neutral position in its involvement with the Hundred Year War. They locally protect the village from travellers and tourists who cause trouble in the island.

Interestingly, when Aang and his friends reach Kyoshi to fulfil Aang's desire to ride the elephant coy-fish, a fish particular to the Kyoshi waters, the Kyoshi warriors mistake them to be Fire-Nation spies and even accuse Aang of being an 'imposter' when he states that he is the Avatar (Malis), a reincarnation of Avatar Kyoshi<sup>10</sup>. The capture of Aang, Katara, Momo and Sokka by the Kyoshi warriors is significant in the context of disguise and resistance because the green kimonos of their uniforms are a camouflage in the verdure of the geography. Their attack is so swift and well-manoeuvred that Aang and his friends even fail to have a fair look at their captors.

Mask is like us, but it responds with strangeness because it is not like us (Raz 1995). The painting of faces and the theatrical clothing of the Kyoshi warriors, like the mask, acts like the uncanny. It is familiar and unfamiliar. The Kyoshi warriors occupy a very fluid embodiment that dialogues with concealing and revealing, traverses the past and present, and fissures identitarian fallacies (including those of gender).

With the Kyoshi warriors, the face-painting and the body-dressing, impersonating Avatar Kyoshi is not purposed with deception or disguise. One of the reasons for their mask-and-theatricality is to intimidate the opponents. It is also used as an identification; an identification with the Avatar, a figure that secures territorial integrity during the time of an external and internal threat. Yet, it is a mimic of the Avatar in the past, whose absence is compensated through a deliberate presence of

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<sup>10</sup> The Island is named after Avatar Kyoshi, a previous Avatar.

multiple Kyoshis. This could also be read as a response to the overall dejection and betrayal felt by them because of the disappearance of Avatar Aang for over a hundred years.

The Kyoshi warriors, especially through Suki who is the leader of this group, also make Sokka and the audience confront their pre-conceived notions about women and warriorship. When Sokka and the others are ambushed by these warriors, they are blindfolded and are tied to a large wooden pole. When the blindfold is removed, an anxious Sokka demands to know the identity of the women surrounding and questioning them and asks, “Where are the men who ambushed us?” When Suki tells him that they (the Kyoshi warriors) ambushed Sokka and the others, he mockingly rejects her statement saying, ‘There's no way that a bunch of girls took us down.’ Sokka’s notion of masculinity is yet again interrupted through Suki and the other girls.

However, Sokka does accept defeat, negotiating with his masculinity. In a very humbled gesture, he approaches the Kyoshis requesting them to teach him their fighting style. Suki agrees to teach Sokka under the condition that he must follow all their traditions. Sokka cross-dresses into the body of the Kyoshis. Sokka looks very comfortable in this ‘dress’. This is extremely interesting because the only person who is able to identify Sokka as ‘Sokka’ in the Kyoshi ‘dress’ is Aang, which is a deliberate insertion of the humour element in the episode. When Zuko and his rhinos embark on Kyoshi, a panicked Kyoshi islander, in an attempt to call the girls for to defend the island, interpellates Sokka as one of the ‘girls’. This once again disturbs Sokka’s masculinity – ‘Hey, I’m not a ...oh, whatever!’, he half-heartedly protests. Sokka’s troubled relationship with his masculinity is sustained and interrogated throughout the series, not resolved casually in one episode.

*Disguise as Backlashing Resistance to Power: Azula, Mai and Ty Lee as Kyoshis*

Despite the subversive possibilities of masking and the corporeal theatricality, these are strategies of resistance that can be appropriated and absorbed back into the operations of power. Masks shift

themselves through other meaning-making surfaces, are always in the process of slipping. This slippage is productive, but ‘productive’ need not necessarily have desirable consequences. For instance, Azula, Mai and Ty Lee, three Fire-Nation benders are very easily able to slip into the Kyoshi warriors’ body. In Ba Sing Se, they infiltrated the city disguised as members of the Kyoshi Warriors. The real Kyoshi Warriors were imprisoned following their defeat. The Kyoshi Warriors were sent to the Capital City Prison, with the exception of their leader Suki, who was taken to the Boiling Rock prison. The Kyoshi disguise of Azula, Mai and Ty Lee is a mimic of a mimic, a disguise of a disguise. This allows them an access into the plans of the Avatar and his friends.

### *Culturing a Conspiracy of Silence: Long Feng and the Dai Li*

While the episode ‘Library’ saw the process of ‘silencing’ through the destruction of cultural texts and bodies, the Dai Li<sup>11</sup> episodes stage another form of silencing through the culturing of disciplined-docile bodies. The Dai Li is traditionally supposed to be the ‘cultural authority’ of the city of Ba Sing Se<sup>12</sup>, as envisaged by Avatar Kyoshi. However, it functions as the policing unit legitimised to function secretly.

The corruption of the Dai Li reaches an apex under the leadership of Long Feng, the Grand Secretariat of Ba Sing Se and the personal advisor to the Earth King. The Dai Li and Long Feng together control the Earth King and the city by culturing a conspiracy of silence through their efficient regime of discipline. Under their regime, there is a strict injunction against any citizen of Ba Sing Se talking about the Hundred Year War being fought against the Fire Nation, mainly to keep the Earth King away from any knowledge of the world outside the Palace. In the episode ‘City of Walls and Secrets’, Long Feng tells Team Avatar, “By silencing talk of conflict, Ba Sing Se remains a peaceful, orderly utopia - the last one on Earth.” In order to effect this silencing, the Dai

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11 Dai Li is the cultural authority of the city of Ba Sing Se (Earth Kingdom) which operates as a policing unit monitoring the actions, intentions and movements of the people within the city. Any transgression of the Dai Li decree is met with severely by punishment.

12 Capital city of the Earth Kingdom.

Li operates through an efficient and sophisticated system of micro-surveillance of all refugees and new immigrants to the city, punishing/disciplining anyone who dares to transgress the code of silence.

The operations of policing and power of the Dai Li can be understood through the Foucauldian notions of surveillance and discipline. One of Foucault's significant theorisations is about the diffused and polymorphous operations of power. Further, as Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish*, power is productive – it not only functions through coercion and violence but it produces docile bodies through surveillance, discipline and regulation. For Foucault, the body becomes the site on which power plays itself out through domination, subjugation and disciplining in order to render the body useful, domestic and docile. He delineates four general types of technologies of control in 'Technologies of the Self' (1988). First are the technologies of production, which allow the controlling, transforming, and manipulation of things. Second are the technologies of sign systems, which involve the production of symbols, signs, meanings and signification. Third are the technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or dominations. Fourth are the technologies of the self, by which individuals modify their own selves, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being (Foucault *et al.* 1988).

Foucault also goes on to describe the ways in which societies of docile bodies are developed and function. Firstly he discusses the 'art of distributions' that is, the ways in which 'political anatomy' operates spatially, by the physical distribution of docile bodily subjects. Two of those distributions are broadly understood as enclosure, confinement and partitioning, a more subtle way than confinement, in which subjects are separated from each other to prevent the formation of solidarity and community which would be disturb the consensus established by the hegemony (Downing 79). The importance attributed by Foucault to space, geography and architecture in creating and

controlling docile bodily subjects allows us to read the political-strategic manoeuvring of Ba Sing Se by Long Feng and the Dai Li.

These technologies of power and control are excellently captured through the space of Lake Laogai. Lake Laogai is a small water-body located away from the Palace, on the waterbed of which exist a number of secret cells to carry out the Dai Li conspiracy, especially through brainwashing. It also functions as a secret underground prison; this is the place where Appa, Aang's flying bison, is incarcerated by Long Feng.

The spacing of Lake Laogai and the underground secret cell perhaps suggests the unconscious, therefore an unquestioning, tamed internalization of the powered discourse. This is where the 'brainwashing' takes place, shown as a hypnotic inducement of power. The spatial politics of power is interestingly mapped out in the Ba Sing Se episodes. The location of the brainwashing cell, under Lake Laogai, as a secret institution disguised underwater illuminates Foucault's observations about spatial partitioning and quarantine which disturbs and diffuses any channel of communication and dissent. Furthermore, its hiding location underwater also makes it unmappable and untraceable.

The Foucauldian 'panopticon' and notion of 'biopower' (of the specific subject human body *and* the surveillance-body of the State) are also invoked by the process of the brainwashing under Lake Laogai. The word biopower refers to a technology of power, the exercise of control and discipline over bodies-as-population at the level of biology that 'the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power' (Foucault, 2007; 16). Biopower is not just about individual management but also about producing entire populations. The magnificence of the approach, according to Foucault, is that the citizens are not forced or coerced to act in a certain way. Rather, they act out of self-interest, rendering the process of control



partly a matter of self-regulation. Thus, biopower is a process of internalized production and reproduction (Fernandes, 2008; 24-25).

This is well animated through the figure of Joo Dee. Joo Dee first appears as a tour-guide<sup>13</sup> who follows Aang and his friends in order to monitor their movements and intentions. However, in this instance, power fails since Aang and his friends consistently circumvent her strategies of control. To manage the situation and restore order, Long Feng, the ambitious Grand Secretariat and de facto power centre, steps in to punish Joo Dee for her failure to keep the power-structure intact. He simply says to her, “The Earth King has invited you to Lake Laogai.” This appears to be a code-phrase which automatically induces a hypnotic state, robbing her of any sense of self-control or free-will. The code-phrase is responded to with the dilation of the pupils and an unquestioning acceptance of Long Feng’s invitation. Indeed, the entire episode is peppered with instances of individuals being fashioned into docile bodies. For instance, much later in the episode, ‘Lake Laogai’, when Aang and his friends go to Laogai in search of Appa, they find a room in which many women are being conditioned to be Joo Dee clones. Power’s desire to continually produce and reproduce itself is captured in the horrifying visual of the production of multiple Joo Dees. Or to use the Deleuzian framework, the idea of power producing bodies as machines and these body-machines in turn producing power is interestingly mapped onto the production/reproduction of Joo Dees.

Foucault also writes about the historical practice of the setting up of observation posts at town gates and sentinels at the ends of streets. This results, according to him, in a situation whereby ‘inspection functions ceaselessly’ and ‘the gaze is alert everywhere’. It is, he writes, ‘the great review of the living and the dead’. The technologies of control described by Foucault function, then, as one means of establishing and sustaining an ordered, disciplined and governed state where every ‘body’

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<sup>13</sup> Joo Dee is an official of the city of Ba Sing Se appointed by the cultural and policing unit, Dai Li as a guide to the visitors in the city. She functions as an agent who neutralizes and diffuses any threat to the city’s decorum and order.

of the population is regulated, policed and punished (Foucault, 1977; 195-196) For instance, at the level of tourism, the non-citizens of Ba Sing Se must visit the city only through a state-agent appointed and are closely monitored by the Dai li. Joo Dees are those state-agents functioning as tour-guides physically present as body-surveillances of the state. Furthermore, the Dai Li has also developed a well-connected system of spying and surveillance with sentinels posted on every corner of the street and who inform the head of the Dai Li about the movement of the populations. Therefore, power operates deviously by controlling the mobility of bodies. It is the efficiency of these operations of disciplinary power that makes the news of the entry of subversive Team Avatar into Ba Sing Se easily accessible to Long Feng.

Another technology of power employed by the Dai Li is the collection of materials like letters, pamphlets, messages etc. of the people as a means to access the 'private' spaces. Jacques Derrida's pronouncement that "there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory" allows a deeper insight into the archiving of modes of communication by the Dai Li. Other theoretical concepts in poststructuralist rethinking of the archive, such as the return of the repressed can be similarly understood in the unearthing of many archived materials by The Council of Five<sup>14</sup> of the Earth Kingdom which was intercepted by the secret police, when they raided Long Feng's office. Foucault's thesis that the archive is not just a collection of documents but of entire discursive domains and power structures, or Derrida's point about the "house arrest" of *res publica* by the archons of power resonate well with the Dai Li's secret operations of interception personal letters, messages and materials (Vatulescu 27).

### **Silencing of the Black Bodies**

There is also another silencing that occurs in the process of representation and production by this animation series, which raises questions about the absence of Africa and the black body and other

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<sup>14</sup> The Earth King's five most trusted and high-ranking Generals.

modes of colonialism. There is a dangerous silencing happening in ATLA with respect to black bodies and black history. Though ATLA does not spell out loud its claims in representing postcolonial politics, it is clearly engaging with postcolonialism. Given this, then, how is it not able to represent the history of slavery, or the presence of ‘black bodies’? Why is it that the ‘Dark Continent’ escapes articulation, or visibility here, especially when the series displays much sensitivity towards the ‘colonised’ subject and the violence at the hands of the ‘colonisers’? Furthermore, how is it possible not to re-present and visibilise black bodies especially considering the location from where the series comes?

The ‘black body’ occupies the silent, unacknowledged place of representation, in the series. This is not to say that it is ‘outside’ of the realm of representation; it is ‘absent’ or ‘silenced’ within the realm of representation. This is surprising given the nuanced and sometimes surprisingly sensitive engagement with the brown body in the series. Not only is the brown body central to the representative schema, it is never reduced to the monolithic or homogenous ‘brown body’.

However, despite this blind spot, it would be harsh or rather arrogant on our part to dismiss this series as problematic or insensitive. As this paper has attempted to argue, *Avatar: the Last Airbender* is engaging very sensitively with postcolonial politics and also addressing a certain ‘consciousness of the colonized’. And this it does on the terrain of the ‘popular’, which is often dismissed as being trivial at best and regressive at worst. The popular, as any other cultural domain, is neither inherently regressive nor subversive but the site for continual battles for meaning.

### **Bio-note**

Gayatri Viswanath is at the Department of English, University of Mumbai.

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