The background is a collage of four panels. The top-left panel shows a blue-tinted scene of a city on a floating island. The top-right panel shows a golden, ornate interior of a temple or palace. The bottom-left panel shows a white, multi-tiered pagoda. The bottom-right panel shows a green-tinted landscape with a city built on a plateau.

# The Politics of Life and Death in

降世神通

# AVATAR

THE LAST AIRBENDER.

By: Rami Ibrahim



<https://youtu.be/d1EnW4kn1kg>

## Introduction

"Avatar: The Last Airbender" takes place in a world of four nations: the Water Tribes, Earth Kingdom, Air Nomads, and the Fire Nation. These nations are based around the four respective elements of water, earth, air, and fire, and select individuals are born with the ability to "bend" the elements, or manipulate them through the acquisition of ancient cultural practices. The only person that can bend all four of these elements, however, is known to the world as the Avatar. The Avatar is a physical manifestation of a higher spiritual being, and exists in a cycle of reincarnation by embodying a different person after death. The Avatar upholds the duty to keep balance in the world; in essence, a being that is naturally granted with extraordinary power for the sole purpose of combatting injustice and restoring peace to the world. The right they have to this power, however, remains unknown.

The current Avatar, Aang, is first awoken by Katara and Sokka of the Water Tribes after one hundred years of being in a comatose within a glacier. Aang discovers that Fire Nation has waged war on the other nations to gain supreme rule of the world and highly regulate its populations. The Fire Nation has been conducting colonial conquests for the past one hundred years to enslave and destroy populations; the genocide of the Air Nomads began as the first necropolitical operation, thus, Aang remains as the last Airbender. The Avatar and his friends embark on their journey to save the world from the Fire Nation, ultimately facing the task of liberating populations from the construction of a global death world. This show helps both children and adults to analyze the concepts of biopolitics, necropolitics, and decolonization among fictional societies in order to help them examine the implications of these interventions in their own realities.





# Book 1

## Episode 1: Postmortem Politics

After 100 years of being frozen, it is revealed to Aang that he is the very last air bender to exist - both air temples along with all Air Nomads have been completely exterminated by the Fire Nation army. Aang returns to the Southern Air Temple and discovers the skeleton of his leader and guardian, Giatzo. Upon sight of the remains of his most trusted individual, Aang's "Avatar State" is triggered, enabling him to channel his most powerful form of existence that sends an eruption throughout the world signaling that the Avatar has returned. This depiction of the skeleton of his teacher lying lifelessly in traditional nomadic garb is significant of the display of "a political dimension that transgresses the nominalist regulations, giving voice and body to other forms of struggle and resistance, even after death" (Valencia 2019, p.188).



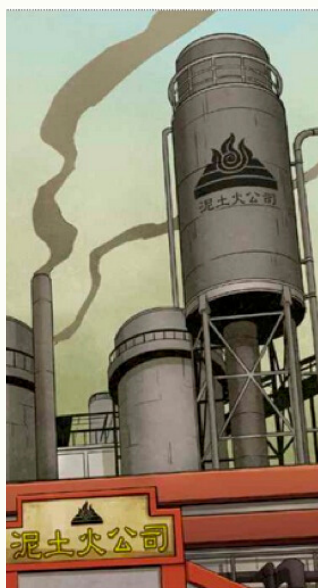
The material depiction of Air Nomad culture that transcends the physical existence of the air benders becomes a sight of mobilization and resistance for Aang, in which he digests the true devastation caused by Fire Nation settler colonialism and the absence of justice.

## Episode 6: Decolonization

In occupied territories of the Earth Nation, coal mines are being used to create capital for the Fire nation, and their citizens are heavily taxed by the colonial forces with the threat of being killed. The Fire Nation has constructed a narrative which claims that "earth bending serves no use," and it is repeatedly ingrained into the colonized. Therefore, any earth benders found bending under Fire Nation occupation are removed and forced to endure imprisonment in concentration camps, doing forced manual labor on war ships. Katara constructs a decolonial plan where she is arrested and imprisoned in order to empower the imprisoned earth benders to take advantage of the power they hold and start a rebellion. The Fire Nation convinced the prisoners to believe that they are powerless on a ship that is made of metal; however, the ship runs on coal, and Katara knows that. After Katara becomes imprisoned and asks the Earth Nation Prisoners what their plan is to escape, one responds: "The plan is to survive. I'm sorry, but we're powerless." After two failed attempts of starting demonstrations, Katara manages to send the coal to the top of the ship where the prisoners are, giving them their opportunity to fight back. The prisoners are extremely hesitant at first, backing away from their primary resource that gives them the only opportunity to revolt. It only took one demonstration of resistance, which was a stone thrown at Fire Nation guard, that initiated a full earth bender prisoner revolt, resulting in the liberation of Earth Kingdom prisoners.

## Episode 13: State of Injury

Upon Commander Zhao's capture of the Avatar, he states that killing him would be counterproductive, as the Avatar will be reincarnated if they are killed. Therefore, Zhao states: "I'll keep you alive, but just barely." The secret to eliminating the "threat" of the Avatar and more generally, the force of decolonization, is the maintenance of colonial subjects in a permanent state of injury (Mbembe 2003).



## Episode 17: Economies of Death

When Aang returns to the Eastern Air Temple, he is made aware of the new inhabitants occupying the sacred land. The new inhabitants of the territory are war refugees from the Earth Nation, who upon being later discovered by the Fire Nation, are bound to create weapons of mass destruction from the natural resources within the territory. The refugees are required to produce weapons for the Fire Nation in order to maintain the existence of their home - paradoxically, they are forced to maintain a war machine economy to keep their own homes while simultaneously participating in the construction of death machines that will further displace others, and likely themselves in the near future.

# Book 2

## Episode 5: State of Exception

Aang, Katara, and Sokka arrive at the Earth Kingdom town of Chin, which has not yet been occupied by the Fire Nation. Upon arrival, Aang is immediately imprisoned for murdering their leader “Chin the Great” in a past Avatar life over 370 years ago. The town magistrate immediately suspends Aang's political rights for a crime that he did not even commit, emphasizing the state of exception. Aang constructs his case denying the murder against the town magistrate, until the magistrate states: “I say what happened, and then you say what happened, and then I decide who’s right. That’s why we call it justice - because it’s JUST US!” Therefore, this situation further supports the theme of sovereign judicial power, where people can be left to live or be condemned to death based on the mere opinion of the sovereign - the absolute power of the sovereign will always be triumphant by superseding any legal system in place. (Agamben 1998).

## Episode 12: Biopolitics of Citizenship

After arriving to the ferry that transports refugees to the Earth Nation Capital, Ba Sing Se, the national immigration attendant grants Aang's earth bending master, Toph, four tickets for the Ba Sing Se ferry due to her “so official” passport. Thus, Toph is allowed to surpass regulations due to her “honorary” elite status, as she comes from one of the wealthiest families in the Earth Kingdom. The group needs one more ticket for the ferry in order to travel all together, however, Aang doesn’t have a passport or proper documents. Upon asking the immigration officer for a ticket needless of his status, the officer replied: “If I gave away all the tickets there would be no more order - no more civilization,” and officially denying his request to travel safely to the official city of refuge. Her comments further indicate that the Earth Nation is a state that practices exclusion in order to preserve “civilization.” Citizenship is used as a biopolitical tool by the Earth Kingdom in establishing a legal basis of exclusion to preserve the purity of the modern nation-state (Foucault 2003). The group collectively decides they will give up their tickets and guide refugees with no passport or citizenship to the city of Ba Sing Se, but through the only dangerous alternative route, the “Serpent’s path.” Refugees unable to take the ferry due to lack of proper documentation are neglected by the state and become forced to take the Serpent’s path if they ever wish to be granted asylum in the sanctuary city of Ba Sing Se, which ultimately creates a balloon effect and results in an increase in refugee deaths (Coleman & Stuesse 2014). If they survive the Serpent’s path however, they will be automatically granted asylum and refugee status upon arrival at the great wall of Ba Sing Se. Despite contemporary attitudes in regards to the modern border-wall, the great wall of Ba Sing Se signifies hope and safety, rather than exclusion and deterrence.



# Episode 14:

## Surveillance and Discipline

Team Avatar finally arrives in Ba Sing Se to discuss a plan of action with the Earth King in defeating the Fire Nation. However, the Earth Kingdom seems to have no interest in discussing or even acknowledging the colonial war: “By silencing talk of conflict, Ba Sing Se remains a peaceful, orderly utopia - the last one on Earth.” In order to take this silencing into effect, the “cultural authority” known as the Dai Li operates through a sophisticated system of micro-surveillance of all refugees to the city by disciplining anyone who dares to transgress the code of silence (Viswanath 2014).

This tight regulation of bodies manifests as a series of physical walls, with one massive outer wall and multiple internal walls that operate to segregate communities and “maintain order.” This society operationalizes extreme inequality, leaving the poor to be swept to the outskirts of the city, entrapped within a circular wall resembling a panopticon, in which Sokka comments, “this city is a prison” (Foucault 2003). The “Upper Ring,” both geographically and socio-economically significant, is meant to resemble the wealthiest community in Ba Sing Se, in which it is home to the most “important of citizens.” The spatial partitioning of social classes is determinant of whom the state identifies as important and who the state identifies as disposable. Populations are also explicitly segregated to keep classes of people from interacting, in which the rich are not hindered with facing the poor, and the poor are left to live amongst themselves in the slums (Canavan 2010).

Ba Sing Se operates as the true Biopolitical city. Thus, the Dai Li refuses a meeting between the two parties, stating that the King cannot be bothered by political squabbles and military activities, such as the safety of the people and defeating the colonial power. In Ba Sing Se, the maintenance of this biocapitalist and highly unequal “cultural heritage” of the society is more important than the threat of colonialism. Unironically, the head of the Dai Li states: “Here we are safe, here we are free.”

# Episode 18:

## Decolonization Process

Prince Zuko, son of the Fire Lord, experiences severe withdrawal-like symptoms immediately after giving up his search to capture the Avatar in order to restore his honor in the Fire Nation. His uncle, also a Fire-nation outcast, cares for him through this time and states: “You’re going through a metamorphosis, my nephew.” By stopping complicity in the Fire Nation’s colonial goals of defeating all threats of justice and liberation, Zuko’s mind and body are experiencing the process of decolonization, in which he is physically vomiting up the words and values of the Fire Nation (Fanon 1963).



## Episode 5: "Othering"

Team Avatar finally reaches the Fire Nation and tries to blend in with the local population by wearing stolen Fire Nation clothing. Upon entering the city, Aang is confronted by Fire Nation soldiers who identify his clothing as a school uniform, and sends him to a Fire Nation school. Immediately upon his arrival, the teacher states: "You're not from the Fire Nation... clearly you are from the colonies. What is your name? Or should we call you 'mannerless, colony slob.'" Before even speaking a word, Aang is othered as a colony slob due to his initial presentation. Aang is subjected to secondary status because his new teacher has deemed him as an uncivilized colonial subject. Her "othering" language and treatment towards him emphasizes the fear of being infected by his vulnerability, and ultimately killability as a colonial subject, in which Aang's positionally as an outsider is interpreted as threatening by hegemonic populations (Canavan 2010).

## Episode 20: To Let Live and Take Life

Prince Zuko reveals that his father, the Fire Lord, has plans to harness the energy of a comet flying over the earth in order to fuel the power of his Fire-bending and destroy the citizens of the Earth Kingdom stronghold, Ba Sing Se. Utilizing the power of the comet is the same Fire Nation strategy employed 100



years prior: "The last comet was used to wipe out the Air Nomads. Now, its power will be used to end the Earth Kingdom - permanently. A new world will be born, in which all the lands are Fire Nation." The Fire Nation employs pure necropower to further their colonial efforts and promote the material destruction of populations whose very existence undermines their power and authority (Mbembe 2003). Aang then realizes he must end the Fire Nation's colonial conquest through the defeat of the Fire Lord before the citizens of the Earth Kingdom are burned alive. As an Air Nomad, Aang is taught that all life is sacred and struggles with the idea of utilizing his power to end one's life. He makes a brief trip to the spirit realm to communicate with his past Avatar lives to be given advice on his authority in regards to ending the life of the Fire Lord as his only means of defeat. Almost every past Avatar responds to Aang with instances where they utilized or should have utilized the power to kill in order to prevent further colonial destruction: "Only justice will bring peace."

# Annotated Bibliography

Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. "Biopolitics and the Rights of Man." *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press. My project draws upon Agamben's use of the "State of Exception" to describe the ways rights are suddenly granted or stripped by any sovereign ruler within a nation, especially among the Avatar world, where sovereign rulers reside among each city-state.

Canavan, Gerry. 2010. "We Are the Walking Dead": Race, Time, and Survival in Zombie Narrative. *Extrapolation*. 51. 431-453. Canavan draws on the "othering" of certain populations that is central to their suspension of rights, in which those we find threatening are often only framed that way due to their positionality as "outsiders." The Fire Nation zombifies members of other nations, seeing them as realized colonial objects, in order to further subject them to colonial activity and death.

Coleman, Mathew & Stuesse, Angela. 2014. "Policing borders, policing bodies: The territorial and biopolitical roots of US immigration control." *Placing the Border in Everyday Life*. 33-63. While topographical borders are consistently policed, it is inevitable that bodies become the forefront of policing, in which migrants and refugees are surveilled before potentially becoming charges of the state. My project refers to the topological policing through fortified walls, background checks, and approval of citizenship within the cities and nations within the show.

Fanon, Frantz, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Constance Farrington. 1963. "Concerning Violence." *The Wretched of the Earth*. Vol. 36. New York: Grove Press. My project includes the colonial and decolonial attitudes mentioned by Fanon, which refer to the tactics used by the Fire Nation to subject populations, as well as the practices of decolonization by the other nations to liberate themselves from colonial rule.

Foucault, Michel, 1926-1984. *Society Must Be Defended : Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975-76*. New York: Picador, 2003. My project draws upon the biopolitical nature of nations to govern and regulate life through healing and destruction, in which the elements of life are regularly utilized as biopower by both individuals and the state within the Avatar world.



Icoz, Fulya. 2014. "Regaining the Power to Say 'No': Imprisonment, Resistance and Freedom in Avatar the Last Airbender." *Interactions* 23.1-2: 113. Icoz examines Avatar: The Last Airbender through a frame of resistance, in which major power structures have the ability to topple through mobilization of resistance and mastery of opposition.

Mbembé, J.-A. and Libby Meintjes. 2003. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture*, vol. 15 no. 1, p. 11-40. Mbembe's work is a critique of the failure of biopolitics in discussing the instrumentalization of death against "othered" groups, usually taking the form of colonial operations and genocide. My project largely refers to necropolitical practices used by the Fire Nation to subject the individuals of other nations from using their bending, as well as utilizing other natural resources as destruction for pursuing imperialism and colonization.

"Use and Abuse of Power in Avatar: The Last Airbender." 2012. *Overthinking It*, [www.overthinkingit.com/2012/03/01/avatar-last-airbender-power/](http://www.overthinkingit.com/2012/03/01/avatar-last-airbender-power/). This piece grapples between divine power and power from below that enables the actions of political systems, in which those who hold absolute physical power are able to utilize capital punishment without receiving consequences. My project largely refers to this State of Exception that is employed by past Avatar's, but is challenged by the current one.

Valencia, Sayak & Zhuravleva, Olga. 2019. "Necropolitics, Postmortem/Transmortem Politics, and Transfeminisms in the Sexual Economies of Death." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*. 6. 180-193. This piece focuses on the murder of transgender women not only for their female status, but also their social status as disobeying the biological mandate of gender conformity - their deceased bodies are thus used at a site for activism, in which the portrayal of their post-life bodies is used as a catalyst for political action.

Viswanath, Gayatri. 2014. *Power and Resistance: Silence and Secrecy in Avatar-The Last Airbender*. No. id: 5984. My project refers to this piece in examining how colonial powers utilize the destruction of knowledge and culture as the site of colonial operations, in which they are knowingly suppressing the resistance of colonized populations through an absence of knowledge about themselves and their oppressor.