

# Wounded Warriors of the Future

## Disability Hierarchy in *Avatar* and *Source Code*

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The article analyzes the representation of disabled veterans in James Cameron's *Avatar* and Duncan Jones's *Source Code*. The argument is that these two films use the figure of the heroic, technologically enhanced, white disabled veteran man to alleviate cultural anxieties, fears, and guilt about veterans and disabled people in the contemporary United States. In doing so, however, *Avatar* and *Source Code* perpetuate a disability hierarchy that reinforces a variety of oppressive cultural norms. The article, therefore, demonstrates how the films reflect the differential valuation and treatment of different kinds of disabled people in American culture at large via the genre of science fiction and its technological imaginative possibilities.

### Introduction

In the post-Global War on Terrorism era, there are increasingly more representations of contemporary disabled veterans. These representations reflect a cultural desire to integrate and appreciate veterans while at the same time expressing larger anxiety, animosity, and fear about both disabled veterans and disabled people in general. Concerns about the integration of veterans into civilian life, due to military gender restrictions,<sup>1</sup> has also typically also been tied to masculinity. These anxieties are all similarly represented in two contemporary films: James Cameron's *Avatar* and Duncan Jones's *Source Code*. Both are science fiction (SF) films which revolve around a white heterosexual veteran man who saves people through use of futuristic technology which allows the hero to leave his disabled body behind in order to operate a non-disabled body with his mind. Given that advances in technologies for people with disabilities have historically occurred in conjunction with the return of disabled veterans before becoming more widely available and given that the SF genre is frequently used to imagine the possibilities of technology

1. In the United States, women were not admitted to military service academies until the 1970s and were not permitted in combat until the 1990s (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation).

in the future, exploration of the relationship of disability, veteran status, technology, and the SF genre in these films is warranted. Within this article I detail how the films' representations of white, heterosexual, disabled, veteran men using futuristic technology to be heroes perpetuates an existing social hierarchy of disability.

James Cameron's *Avatar* is set in 2154 on the extra-solar moon of Pandora. Former Marine and current wheelchair user Jake Sully goes there to work with scientists, security forces, and others learning about Pandora, its people (blue humanoid aliens called the Na'vi) and its resources, namely unobtainium, a mineral that can assuage the Earth energy crisis. Jake participates in this effort through the Avatar Program which uses Na'vi-human avatar bodies controlled by genetically linked humans to engage with the native population. Jake was recruited into the program because his twin brother died and Jake's genetic match allows him to operate his brother's avatar. Throughout the film, Jake moves from acting as a spy for Colonel Miles Quaritch to befriending the Na'vi, seeking to save them at all costs. *Avatar* is the highest grossing film of all time and was nominated for nine Academy Awards (Cameron). There are plans for multiple sequels. The scholarship on *Avatar* is substantial and is focused primarily on environmentalism, religion, colonialism, and indigenous cultures. Several scholars, however, have discussed disability in the film.<sup>2</sup> For this article, I analyze the extended collector's cut of the film rather than the original theatrical release because this version of the film contains sixteen minutes of bonus footage, including opening scenes on Earth which represent Jake as disabled. Discussion of the extended version allows for fuller consideration of the representation of disability in the film. It should be noted, however, that most theater audiences saw even less of Jake in his wheelchair than those who viewed the version discussed here.

Duncan Jones's *Source Code* is set in an undetermined near-future America in which Captain Colter Stevens awakens on a train to Chicago, seemingly in the body of another man, eight minutes before a bomb explodes. Colter then awakens inside the capsule, a small space with elements like a window or monitor which change throughout the film. In the capsule, Colter is informed by Captain Colleen Goodwin that he is inside the Source Code, a new technology that allows him to experience the last eight minutes of a person's life with the ability to act in ways that alter those eight minutes. Unlike Jake who willingly takes on the avatar body, a confused Colter participates under duress, failing to find the bomber and "dying" over and over again.

2. See Palmer; Fore; McReynolds; Ellis 71–78.

Captain Goodwin and Dr. Rutledge, the creator of the Source Code, however, assure Colter that nothing he experiences is real because the bombing already occurred; Colter is in the Source Code to find the bomber and prevent the next bombing. It is not until late in the film that Colter learns he has been with the Source Code project for two months after being reported killed in action. Viewers learn Colter was nearly killed in combat, but his brain remains intact. He is surviving on life support alone with much of his body amputated. *Source Code* was less of a blockbuster than *Avatar* (though still relatively successful), so there is substantially less scholarship on this film, however, a few scholars have discussed disability in the film as well.<sup>3</sup>

Both *Avatar* and *Source Code* use the figure of the future disabled veteran to alleviate cultural anxieties and fears about contemporary disabled veterans and they do so by perpetuating a disability hierarchy. I define disability hierarchy as the differential cultural valuation of disabled people which uses multiple social norms to distinguish between types of disabled people. Those toward the top of a disability hierarchy are deemed more deserving of accommodation and celebration while those toward the bottom are considered difficult or impossible to integrate. In the first two sections of this article I place *Avatar* and *Source Code* in the context of the Global War on Terrorism and explain my central concept of a disability hierarchy. I then demonstrate how these films attempt to alleviate anxieties about disabled veterans by perpetuating a disability hierarchy via the representation of technically enhanced disabled soldier-heroes who maintain and affirm a variety of social norms, including, ultimately, able-bodiedness. In the conclusion I discuss how the SF genre reflects and refracts cultural concerns and therefore is an important area of popular culture that warrants further engagement in disability studies.

### Disabled Veterans and the War on Terrorism

*Avatar* and *Source Code* represent a particular cultural moment in regard to veterans and disability. Released in 2009 and 2011 respectively, these films were created during the latter half of the Global War on Terrorism, a worldwide combat mission begun by George W. Bush in 2001 and ended by Barack Obama in 2014. When these films were released, support for the war had waned significantly and concerns about how to care for and integrate disabled veterans were making headlines regularly as “the state agencies charged

3. See Hairston; Allan 1–2; Agosto 8–9, 16–17.

with caring for disabled vets [were] plagued by scandal and stories of woeful incompetence, lack of resources, and exclusionary discrimination” (Samuels 135). This context influences how veteran status is employed in each film to perpetuate a disability hierarchy.

Disabled veterans have long been a source of national anxiety. John Kinder traces “the Problem of the Disabled Veteran” in the United States back to the Civil War because it “included both the largest cohort of disabled veterans in American history” and the first national efforts for a veteran care system (17). Following every war thereafter, disabled veterans, who until recently were exclusively men, have been focal points of cultural concern as well as symbols of national pride and masculinity. For example, after the Civil War “many postwar Americans adopted an idealized view of disabled veterans. Steeped in chivalric myths of martial valor, they viewed war injury as a sign of manly courage and physical endurance” and after the Second World War the war department “expunge[d] all painful images of wounded or dead soldiers from the popular media” thereby creating “ideological links [...] between public exhibitions of disability, heterosexual masculinity, and patriotic commitment” (Kinder 28; Serlin 28, 33). Aspects of these idealized, masculine views of disabled veterans remain today. However, these sentiments exist alongside views of disabled veterans as expensive, potentially dangerous liabilities in civilian life. These latter views emerged most prominently after the Vietnam War due to uncertainty about the righteousness of the war and concerns about mental disability, especially post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Boyle 99). In *Avatar* and *Source Code* these conflicting perspectives play out in relation to contemporary veterans.

Two things distinguish disabled veterans of the Global War on Terrorism from disabled veterans of other wars: their incredibly high numbers and their increase in mental disabilities. First, advances in vest, helmet, and other combat technologies “have radically reduced the incidence of death at war since the Vietnam era, increasing the proportion of veterans living with combat-induced injuries” (Achter 47). Likewise, “improvements in battlefield medicine have allowed veterans to survive horrific injuries that would have been fatal in earlier wars, and more of these injuries involve TBI [traumatic brain injury] than in earlier US conflicts” (Fore 8). In short, due to advances in combat and medical technologies more veterans are returning home and a larger percentage of them are returning home disabled. Surviving such severe injuries, however, has also meant an increase in PTSD often in conjunction with TBIs. In 2010 the Senate Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Mental Health was created specifically to address concerns about veterans and

mental disability. Ellen Samuels argues that cultural perceptions of disabled veterans are often mapped differently upon physically versus mentally disabled veterans, distinguishing between “the figure of the amputee—whose wound is visible, incontrovertible, and prosthetizeable into a semblance of normalcy—and the ‘mentally ill’ individual—whose wounds are invisible, nebulous, and a persistent threat to normalcy and social reintegration” (135). This perception of threat with mentally disabled veterans stems from the stereotype that people with mental disabilities are unstable and potentially violent.<sup>4</sup> This fear of violence redoubles in regard to mentally disabled veterans who have been trained to kill. As Brenda M. Boyle argues, “In American mythology, war is supposed to produce masculine male heroes, but [when it comes to mental disability] it becomes more difficult to assign those veterans to the traditional ‘heroic’ status of victimized warrior, since mental disabilities are so low in the hierarchy” (99). *Avatar* and *Source Code* attempt to alleviate cultural anxieties about contemporary disabled veterans by representing protagonists who exist at the top of a disability hierarchy and can therefore be more easily integrated into society.

### Disability Hierarchy

As stated above, disability hierarchy is the differential cultural valuation of various types of disabled people. On a basic level this occurs by valuing some disabilities over others. In 1970 John L. Tringo surveyed 455 individuals to determine a “hierarchy of preference toward disability groups” (295). Tringo had participants pick the kind of relationship they would be willing to have with a person with a specific disability, such as spouse, family member, neighbor, friend, or colleague, with the ability to choose no relationship options like “would keep away from,” “would keep in an institution,” “would send out of my country,” and “would put to death” (298). Tringo found the most accepted disabilities were non-apparent, treatable, and less severe physical disabilities such as arthritis, asthma, and diabetes, while apparent, permanent, and more severe physical and sensory disabilities such as amputation, blindness, deafness, and paraplegia were ranked in the middle. The disabilities ranked least acceptable were non-apparent, mental disabilities such as “mental retardation,” “alcoholism,” and “mental illness,” with mental illness coming in as least acceptable of all (300). In 2000, Adrian Thomas performed a follow-up

4. See Price *Mad at School* or Desmarais et al.

study and found Tringo's hierarchy remained fairly consistent thirty years later with only people with cancer receiving a notable increase in acceptance since 1970. Notably, evidence also suggests that disabled people themselves also hold beliefs which uphold a disability hierarchy (Deal).

Building on Tringo, I argue that disability hierarchy is not about disability type alone, but rather it is a complex, intersectional differential valuation of disabled people regarding who can and cannot or should and should not be accommodated and integrated into society based on a variety of factors. Within a disability hierarchy, therefore, are other social norms so that those who most approximate the ideal of white, male, heterosexual, able-bodiedness, and able-mindedness are positioned toward the top. Furthermore, disability hierarchy also incorporates moral judgements about attitude and behavior with those perceived as hard-working, positive, and inspiring valued over those considered lazy, self-pitying, or faking. These moral judgements include veteran status as a consideration because society views disability due to combat injury much differently than disability resulting from birth or illness creating "hierarchies of value" beyond disability type alone (Serlin 35). Lastly, it is essential to understand disability hierarchy as a circulating set of values which remains context dependent rather than a fixed set of rules in which type of disability trumps race or gender trumps attitude and so on. For instance, although studies show the rankings within a disability hierarchy regarding disability type have remained mostly consistent, Tringo found that women were generally more accepting of people with disabilities than men (303). A disability hierarchy in any given situation or representation therefore may be impacted by the identities of the people involved as well as time period, culture, and location.

*Avatar* and *Source Code* attempt to quell concerns about disabled veterans by perpetuating a disability hierarchy reflective of the films' cultural location, time period, and genre. First and foremost the films focus on protagonists who can generally be read as physically, rather than mentally disabled as they operate non-disabled bodies with their minds to save people. Although Colter's experience within the *Source Code* is reminiscent of PTSD flashbacks and could be read as traumatic in and of itself, he is represented overall as being able-minded by being determinedly heroic, smart, and creative throughout the mission. Although more disability studies scholars are using the term *bodymind*<sup>5</sup> to challenge the simplistic mind-body divide, this distinction is foundational to the films' attempts to soothe cultural anxieties about disabled

5. See Price "The Bodymind Problem."

veterans. Despite the fact that more contemporary veterans have mental rather than physical disabilities (and many have both), *Avatar* and *Source Code* represent disabled veterans whose minds are non-disabled in order to banish the specter of the potentially dangerous mentally disabled veteran from the picture. The choice of physically disabled protagonists is foundational to the films' disability hierarchy and layered on top of this is the position of the protagonists as soldier-heroes, their dominant social identities, and their use of technology to approximate and eventually achieve able-bodiedness. Each of these issues shape the total disability hierarchy expressed in the films.

### **"No Such Thing as an Ex-Marine": Soldier-Heroes and Dominant Identities**

Military rhetoric often positions veterans as perpetual soldiers, warriors, and heroes. This is demonstrated in the names of non-profits like the Wounded Warrior Family Support Network and the Fallen Heroes Project. Soldier-hero rhetoric is intended to honor the service and sacrifice of veterans, but it tends to be used unilaterally so that anyone who is/was a soldier is automatically a hero and that equation becomes unquestionable. In the period in which *Avatar* and *Source Code* were released, the US and its allies were ready to end the Global War on Terrorism, questioning its effectiveness and validity. Yet people also anxiously still sought to appear to unquestionably support the troops. This tension is apparent in the films with Jake and Colter's roles as soldier-heroes which are particularly emphasized in their interactions with the films' antagonists. In *Avatar*, the antagonist is Colonel Quaritch, another veteran and in *Source Code* the antagonist is Dr. Rutledge, both of whom could be read as disabled themselves, though less severely disabled than the protagonists.<sup>6</sup> Both antagonists try to take advantage of the soldier mentalities of the protagonists in order to use Jake and Colter's technologically created non-disabled bodies for their own purposes: spying on the Na'vi and identifying the bomber.

Jake's position as perpetual soldier is established early in *Avatar* as his voiceover states "No such thing as an ex-marine. You may be out but you never lose the attitude." This concept of "once a soldier, always a soldier" is further reified in Jake's interactions with Colonel Quaritch in which he always responds with "sir," in his interactions with Dr. Augustine in which she frequently calls him "Marine," and when he introduces himself to the Na'vi as

6. Quaritch is scarred on his head and upper body from being attacked by a creature on Pandora. Dr. Rutledge walks using a cane. For a discussion of Rutledge as disabled, see Agosto 8–9.

“a Marine, uh, a warrior, of the Jarhead clan.” In *Source Code*, Colter is even more clearly positioned as still a soldier since he is being held at a military base. Colter also initially interprets the Source Code as a training simulation and at one point demands to speak to a commanding officer. Unlike Jake who is no longer in the military, Colter is still in a form of active duty. This is particularly apparent when Dr. Rutledge attempts to play on Colter’s soldier mentality, stating, “Many soldiers would find this preferable to death, the opportunity to continue serving their country.” As these details suggest, the films establish each protagonist as a perpetual soldier which also culturally marks them as unquestionably heroic.<sup>7</sup> The soldier-hero role is particularly emphasized midway through *Source Code* when Dr. Rutledge, after exhausting Colter with back to back stints in the Source Code, rouses him to action by stating, “You can do this [...] You’re a born hero, son. Even your father thinks so. Saving people is what you do best.”

The films represent Jake and Colter as soldier-heroes in order to demonstrate their morality and deservedness: they are always soldiers at heart, willing to sacrifice it all for a good cause. By equating veteran with soldier and soldier with hero, the films draw upon the idealized view of disabled veterans that Kinder traces back to the Civil War. The films are only able to maintain this perspective unsullied, however, by demonstrating Jake and Colter’s able-mindedness through their persistence, reliability, intelligence, and creativity throughout their missions, thereby banishing anxieties about PTSD and TBIs. Their role as physically disabled soldier-heroes is foundational to the disability hierarchy perpetuated in the films. Jake and Colter may be disabled, but they are mentally stable and dedicated; we can trust them to do what is right and protect us all. They are positioned as disabled people who deserve, who have in fact earned, accommodation and integration.

Whereas Jake and Colter’s soldier-hero statuses play into the moral judgements of a disability hierarchy to emphasize their deservingness, their dominant social identities aid in assuring audiences that they can indeed be easily integrated into society—a cultural concern about both veterans and disabled people in general. Both Jake and Colter are white heterosexual men. As such, both are positioned at the top of other social hierarchies and this influences their position in a disability hierarchy as well. Jake and Colter are, with the exception of their disabilities, the epitome of the idealized norm.

7. Although both Jake and Colter were disabled during combat, the wars, and the protagonists’ actions within, are never on screen. This allows viewers to never encounter the many civilians, mostly people of color, who are also disabled by war.

Although the films do not directly comment upon the characters' race, gender, or sexuality, Jake and Colter's positions as white disabled veteran men stand out within the films' casts and their sexualities are emphasized by the romantic sub-plots. In both films there are no disabled women veterans or disabled veterans of color. Representing only white men as the disabled veterans allows for better easing of cultural anxieties because they occupy dominant race and gender identities. Further, heterosexual men are standard cinematic heroes, especially soldier-heroes. An integral part of the happy ending of a hero's story is not merely saving people or defeating the bad guy, but also winning over a woman. In *Avatar* and *Source Code*, both protagonists save and end up with their female love interest. Collectively, therefore, Jake and Colter's whiteness, masculinity, and successful achievement of heterosexual romance serve to supplement and support their position as soldier-heroes and further perpetuate a disability hierarchy which values veterans, physical disability, and dominant identity groups. What ultimately secures Jake and Colter's positions at the top of a disability hierarchy, however, is their use of technology to approximate and attain able-bodiedness, suggesting that, in the end, the best disabled person is the disabled person who stops being disabled at all. This is also where the role of SF as a genre is most important for the interpretation of disability in these films.

### Technology and the Pursuit of a Disability-Free Future

*Avatar* and *Source Code* address cultural anxieties about disabled veterans by positioning their disabled veteran protagonists at the top of a disability hierarchy through type of disability, soldier-hero status, and white heterosexual masculinity. The films' perpetuation of disability hierarchy is most apparent, however, in the use of technology first to hide the disabled body from view and then, ultimately, to get rid of the disabled body entirely. I refer to these two uses of technology as erasure and elimination respectively. The use of technology in both films participates in the cultural fantasy of a disability-free future.

Alison Kafer writes that in American culture a good future is understood to be a disability-free future and the value of such a future is seen as obvious and common-sense. Technologies which prevent or cure disability are an important part of the fantasy of a disability-free future and are therefore "met with widespread praise and support because they are assumed to mark progress toward a better future" (Kafer 20). The belief that a good future is one where all disability can be prevented or cured is based upon the ableist

assumption that non-disabled life is inherently better than life with a disability. The fantasy of a disability-free future also does not consider that technology might produce more disability not less. For instance, as discussed above, one of the reasons there are significantly more disabled veterans of the Global War on Terrorism is because advances in combat gear and medicine (each a form of technology) has allowed more people to survive injuries from which they would have previously died. Nonetheless, representations of technologically created disability-free futures and body-altering technologies are common in SF literature and film.<sup>8</sup> Disability studies scholars have explored the implications of these disability-free futures in texts such as Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang*, Marge Piercy's *Woman of the Edge of Time*, and Andrew Niccol's *Gattaca* (Cheyne; Kafer 73–83; Meekosha 27). Depictions of disability-free futures participate in the disability hierarchy by placing disabled people who use technology to approximate an idealized or even enhanced bodymind near the top while the disabled person who uses technology to cease to be disabled is the most preferred disabled person of all.

The fictional technologies of *Avatar* and *Source Code* allow viewers mostly to avoid seeing disability on screen, erasing the disabled body from sight. In *Avatar*, Jake's body and wheelchair appear in numerous scenes in the film for a total of just over thirty-six minutes of the 178-minute extended version of the film. The scenes of Jake in his disabled human body are no longer than about three minutes each, averaging about one minute in length. Shots vary from wide pans with Jake and his entire chair visible as he moves through a street or corridor, to medium frames with Jake's entire body visible, both in and out of his chair, to close shots of his upper body or face. As Fore notes, the choice of shots in *Avatar* move away from many ableist trends in film by depicting Jake among other people rather than in isolation, by showing him moving around on his own and keeping up with others, by framing shots at Jake's level so the camera is never looking down on him, and by never showing Jake's legs in close up or full light, thereby refusing to allow the audience to stare (Fore 4–5). Further, during the film Jake makes comments such as "I don't want your pity" and "Maybe I was sick of doctors telling me what I couldn't do." These sentiments reflect themes in the disability rights movement which rejects pity, paternalism, and medical models of disability, but they also draw on the moral judgement aspects of a disability hierarchy which prioritizes disabled people who are perceived as hard-working and uncomplaining. As much as *Avatar* represents Jake's disability in some potentially empowering ways, the fact that

8. See Allan or smith.

Jake as a disabled human appears only in brief, intermittent scenes—several of which avoid representing his wheelchair—allows viewers to ignore disability and focus on the exotic Na’vi avatar body instead. Indeed, the majority of the film’s excitement, heroism, and romance all occur for Jake while in his avatar. Jake may be a disabled protagonist, but one has to think very little about disability when he is on screen.

Whereas *Avatar* immediately introduces Jake as a disabled veteran within the first two minutes of the film, in *Source Code*, viewers don’t know Colter is disabled until more than three-quarters of the way through. Colter’s disability status is gestured toward with glances by Captain Goodwin toward a large metal box in another room and the reveal that Colter is not actually speaking, but rather the Source Code translates his thoughts into text on Goodwin’s screen. However, for nearly the entire film we only see Colter as non-disabled inside the Source Code train scenario or in the capsule—always mediated by technology. Colter’s disabled body is partially on screen six times in the last eighteen minutes of the 93-minute film for four to six seconds each time. Colter’s entire body is revealed just once. This medium shot lasts for about three seconds before focusing in on his face for another two seconds. In the full reveal Colter is missing all of his body below the waist, all of his right arm, and half of his left. The lower part of his torso is dark, appearing scorched or scarred, while the back of his skull has been removed, his brain connected to wires. Colter’s disabled body appears on screen, therefore, for a total of less than twenty-five seconds whereas his virtually created non-disabled body is shown throughout the rest of the film. The choice to reveal Colter’s disability status so late into the film allows for the suspense to build and for viewers to share Colter’s confusion about what is going on. However, the late reveal aligns with what Ato Quayson calls the “disability as epiphany” trope in which a character’s disability is revealed late in a narrative in order to provide an explanatory revelation for a non-disabled character and/or the audience (45). In *Source Code*, the revelation of Colter’s disabled status helps viewers understand the earlier events of the film. The brief shots of his disabled body provide the explanatory lens through which viewers are encouraged to interpret and agree with Goodwin’s pity for Colter, Colter’s request to be allowed to die, and Goodwin’s compliance with his request.

While disability is not (yet) fully prevented in the fictional futures of *Avatar* and *Source Code*, the films nonetheless promote the fantasy of a disability-free future as both inherently valuable and within reasonable reach. This is particularly true in *Avatar* in which it is revealed that there is a surgery to reverse paralysis. While Jake cannot afford the surgery on veterans’ benefits

(a clear commentary on the treatment of disabled veterans), Colonel Quaritch offers to pull strings to get Jake the surgery if he acts as a spy. Though the surgery is not depicted in the film, its off-screen existence is a reflection of the cultural fantasy of a disability-free future being achievable through science and medicine. *Avatar* and *Source Code* each use technology to erase the disabled body from sight and thereby perpetuate a disability hierarchy that most values disabled people who seek able-bodiedness at all costs. Importantly, the technologies in the films provide access to operating non-disabled bodies for the purposes for military-industrial complex labor. The futuristic technologies appeal in part because of their abilities to return disabled people to the labor force and here specifically return veterans to a type a labor which allows for the heroism of the soldier-hero role. The films most directly reveal their complicity in a disability hierarchy in their strikingly similar endings. At the end of each film, each hero uses technology to attempt to permanently leave disability behind, viewing death as a risk well worth taking.

*Avatar* ends after Jake and a few other humans help the Na'vi defeat the corporate hired guns and force them to abandon Pandora. In the penultimate scene, Jake records his final video log stating "whatever happens tonight, either way, I'm not going to be coming back to this place." The possible results implied in Jake's phrase "either way" are not immediately clear. The final scene occurs at the Na'vi's sacred place, where Jake's nude avatar and human bodies are placed on the ground beside one another and prayed over in the hopes that Eywa, the Na'vi goddess, will move Jake's consciousness from his human body to his Na'vi one. The "either" suggested by Jake earlier, therefore, is either this transfer of consciousness between bodies works or he dies. Either way, he will not be returning to the company facility, let alone Earth, again. The final scene culminates with an increasingly zoomed-in shot of Jake's avatar. The shot tightens until only Jake's Na'vi eyes and nose are visible. The eyes then suddenly open, suggesting the transfer was successful, and the film cuts to black. This ending permanently eradicates Jake's disability, presumably leaving his disabled body to die. It is the "cure" that finally erases disability entirely with our hero now "fixed" and "whole" as we expect all heroes to be. This curing, however, occurs not through technology alone as one might expect in SF but through leaving the human body behind entirely to enter a scientifically created alien body, with a transfer solidified through the power of a Mother Nature-type deity. Here *Avatar* diverges slightly from the norms of the genre by introducing a non-technological or scientifically explained element to the final transformation, suggesting there are limits to human technology or forces beyond our current understandings.

*Source Code* ends with Colter identifying the bomber. Prior to this, Colter had asked Dr. Rutledge to allow him to die after he completes the mission and Rutledge agreed with the full intention of not keeping his word. After providing information about the bomber, Colter asks to enter the Source Code one last time, not merely to identify the bomber, but to stop the bombing and save everyone on the train before Colter is taken off life support as he earlier requested. Though Goodwin reminds Colter that he cannot change the past or the present in the Source Code—that is it all merely virtual reality—Colter insists he wants to do it anyway. Goodwin agrees, sending Colter back in and then moving to the room with his body to press a large red button that apparently stops life support. This choice is essentially a choice for death with the potential to die satisfied in some way as Colter uses the last eight minutes in the Source Code to disarm the bomb, handcuff the bomber, call the police, call his father, e-mail Goodwin, pay a comedian to make everyone laugh, and, of course, kiss Christina, his romantic interest in the film. The final twist in the film is that Source Code is not, in fact, mere virtual reality, but a method of accessing alternate realities. Therefore, by being disconnected from life support and the Source Code at the exact end of his eight minutes, Colter ultimately lives on in another timeline, non-disabled and happy on a date with Christina. Although this ending is obtained via the futuristic technology of the film, it is an unintended and previously unknown effect. This indirectly suggests that technology has possibilities and effects we cannot know in advance or control, especially in relationship to human bodyminds.<sup>9</sup>

These representations of a technologically created disability-free future underscore how both *Avatar* and *Source Code* perpetuate a disability hierarchy to alleviate cultural anxieties about disabled veterans. By keeping the disabled bodies of the veteran protagonists mostly hidden, the films provide viewers with the bodies they culturally expect of perpetual soldiers-heroes. The disabled body in each film is only brought to the fore in order to elicit emotional reactions and bring the film to a dramatic climax. This occurs in *Avatar* when Colonel Quaritch tries to kill Jake by attacking his human body inside the avatar connection equipment and in *Source Code* when the extent of Colter's injuries are revealed. Shortly after the vulnerability of the disabled body is highlighted in each film, the technology which initially only visually erased disability is then used to eliminate disability entirely, by the choice of the protagonist, at risk of death. In each film able-bodiedness and death are

9. For further discussion of the potential effects of technology in SF see Chapter 3 of Schalk.

the only possible endings permitted, because a good future is a disability-free future.

Throughout both films Jake and Colter are positioned toward the top of a disability hierarchy as physically disabled white male heterosexual soldier-heroes. Their near achievement of the norm alleviates cultural anxieties about failures to integrate disabled veterans and fears of the unpredictability and/or violence of veterans with mental disabilities. The films assure viewers that the protagonists are normative, reliable heroes whose disabilities are of minor importance in the context of future technology. The endings of the films suggest, however, that no matter how high Jake and Colter are in a disability hierarchy, what provides the most closure and assurance is the eradication of disability—a full return to the normativity audiences tend to seek which can release them from the guilt, anxiety, and fear surrounding integrating and accommodating contemporary disabled veterans.

## Conclusion

James Cameron's 2009 *Avatar* and Duncan Jones's 2011 *Source Code* represent a particular cultural moment in which anxieties about returning disabled veterans ran high—anxieties that have arguably lessened, but not disappeared. The films attempt to assuage these anxieties by positioning their protagonists at the top of a disability hierarchy. Jake and Colter's near achievement of the norm allows audiences to feel more comfortable with disabled veterans and confident in the possibility of integrating them back into society. This disability hierarchy is established by focusing on physically rather than mentally disabled veterans, positioning the protagonists as soldier-heroes, emphasizing their normativity as white heterosexual men, using technology to erase their disabled bodies mostly from sight, and, finally, by eradicating disability entirely with a technological cure. This final aspect suggests that the most valued disabled people are those who would do anything, including risk death, to be non-disabled. Overall, the films assure viewers that the protagonists are normative, reliable heroes whose disabilities are of minor importance in the context of future technology.

The concept of a hierarchy of disability is not one which starts and ends with these films. Indeed, it is important for disability studies scholars to consider how disabled people are differentially valued in contemporary culture based on not only type of disability, but also race, gender, sexuality, veteran status, and moral judgements. As more disabled characters appear in popular

representations, it is incumbent upon scholars to continue to interrogate these representations for what they say about differential treatment of disabled people in the real world. Further, it is important for scholars to consider both how, as Alison Kafer argues, “the futures we imagine reveal the biases of the present” and how “imagining different futures and temporalities might help us see, and do, the present differently” (28). As Walidah Imarisha writes: “Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction” (Imarisha 3). Indeed, much recent work on science and speculative fiction and media demonstrates that non-realist and particularly futuristic representations are strongly political despite their reputation as being juvenile and escapist from real world concerns.

*Avatar* and *Source Code* are therefore examples of how SF media participates in contemporary political and social discourses. The films are reflective of cultural concerns at the time of their production and release around contemporary veterans. They perpetuate a disability hierarchy through which one can always distinguish the good, deserving disabled people who want to integrate and be as “normal” as possible—like the protagonists Jake and Colter—from the bad guys, the con artists, the unstable “mentally ill,” and the rest of those *other* disabled people. This hierarchy particularly emphasizes disabled veterans as somehow differently disabled than other people with disabilities, disabled for a cause and therefore more deserving than other disabled people of our respect and accommodations. The cultural urge to distinguish between types of disabled people was clear even in my research for this article. I initially struggled to find articles on contemporary disabled veterans until I stopped using the search terms *disability* and *disabled* and instead used *wounded* or *injured* and the names of specific disabilities like PTSD. Many of the articles I read rarely used the word *disability* except when discussing access to disability benefits. The disability hierarchy of these SF films and the dream of a technologically-created disability-free future which they perpetuate are real political issues which warrant our attention and critique so that we may begin to imagine new, more radically inclusive futures.<sup>10</sup>

10. This has already begun in independent SF literature, but remains rare in mainstream SF media, especially film. See Al-Ayad and Allan, Imarisha and Brown, or Solomon.

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