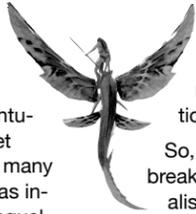


COP CITY IS THE FUTURE THEY WANT

Over this past weekend I went to see the new Avatar movie. I had seen the first one and, although it had flaws, I saw the overall message as compelling. Fair warning, here is a small spoiler: Simply put, the plot is one where humans in the future, with the help of gargantuan and lethal military might, attempt to colonize a planet called Pandora light years from earth which possesses many extraordinary and rare minerals and resources, as well as incredible biodiversity and Indigenous societies. In the sequel, the humans of earth have returned, and their goal is nothing less than total colonization of the planet for the purpose of resettlement. Earth, as one cold-hearted military general says, is dying.

Hollywood produces a lot of rubbish. I mean, a LOT of it. And we are living in an age where fast-paced computer-generated graphics and imagery have taken the place of meaningful dialogue, acting and plot development. Much of this is nothing new: the film industry has long collaborated with the Department of Defense, the Pentagon and the CIA in its productions. How else could a blockbuster movie have access to so much military hardware? Major box-office money makers, like the braindead "Top Gun" series, rely enormously on the US military industrial sector.

Thus, much of the messaging in today's blockbuster movies is in lockstep with that of modern American imperialism. The military is almost always portrayed as a flawed, yet thoroughly heroic force for good in the world. Foreigners, especially if they



are in the Global South or from Arab or Muslim countries, are *othered*. They are often depicted in racist stereotypes, stripped of their humanity, and given the role of a sinister or backward troll bent on the destruction of all that is good in the world.

So, watching the new Avatar film provided a refreshing break from such racist and ludicrous plot-lines. Here, imperialistic military forces are portrayed in the more accurate light of world destroyer. One scene is reminiscent of the American military's murderous assault on Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 70s. Giant starships make landfall on parts of Pandora's pristine rainforests, setting everything and every living being ablaze. It is scorched-earth policy seen for what it is: ecocide.

Without a doubt, Avatar has many flaws. It is still very American-centric. And there is still the stench of "white savior" mythos haunting many of the scenes. But it is visually stunning. And it is a departure from most of the films generated by the film industry these days. I cannot imagine most people coming away from the movie with anything other than disdain for militarism and all its nauseating jingoistic platitudes. What struck me the most is that while I was watching this movie about an assault on the ecosystem of a fictional planet and its Indigenous peoples, another was unfolding on a real forest and on the people attempting to protect it from destruction. That forest is in the city of Atlanta, Georgia.

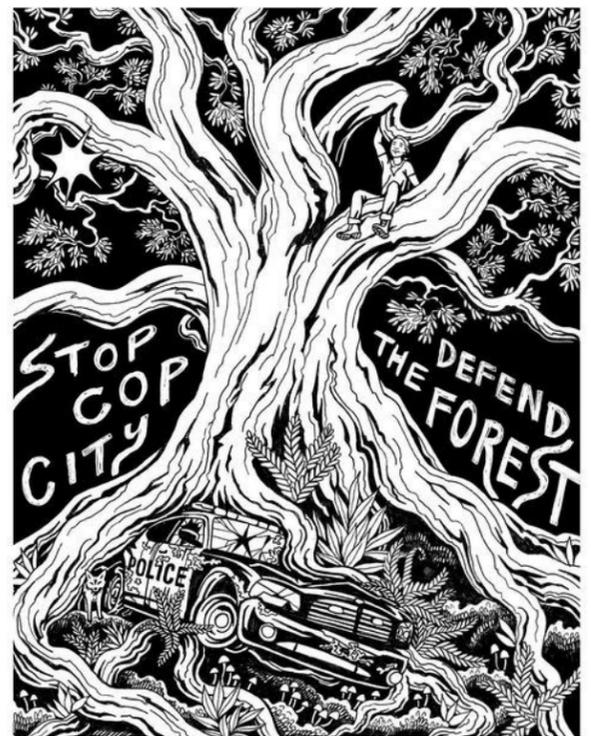
On January 18th, the Atlanta police assassinated one of those defenders. Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, affectionately known as "Tortugueta" or "Little Turtle", was gunned down in cold blood by a stormtrooper raiding a peaceful encampment. The defenders have been in the Weelaunee Forest (also known as the South River Forest), south-east of Atlanta, for nearly two years protesting the construction of a massive \$90 million dollar, 85-acre, police training facility. According to Truthout, the project has the backing of major corporations like Coca-Cola, Home Depot, Delta Airlines, UPS and Cox Enterprises. The latter owns the Atlanta Constitution-Journal which has published endless articles in praise of the Cop City project and demonizing anyone who dissents or protests it. The citizens of Atlanta, where a majority has opposed the facility, will nonetheless be paying for a third of its cost.

The Weelaunee Forest was land stolen from the Muscogee people who were marched westward, many to their deaths, in the infamous Trail of Tears. It is also located in a predominantly working-class Black neighborhood. And it had been slated as a much-needed greenbelt for the city and to mitigate the damage from climate change. It has been aptly named "Cop City" by many protestors and critics alike.

With all these characteristics, the assault on this forest and its defenders is one of the best analogies for our current predicament. It also parallels the ongoing war against Indigenous peoples in the Amazon or in Central America, where scores have been murdered by armed militias and illegal loggers and ranchers who have been decimating the rainforests for decades. But it also signifies something even more chilling.

The authoritarian state, now in the most dangerous and destructive phase of late capitalism, is ramping up its efforts to suppress any meaningful dissent. With each passing year it becomes more brazen. So sadly, in all likelihood, the Weelaunee Forest will be razed, and Cop City will be built. The state is already unleashing its arsenal and declaring protestors "domestic terrorists," a term which has been made meaningless with each passing year as it is applied to virtually anyone who exposes or opposes state violence, mindless militarism, rapacious consumption and corporate ecocide.

Police forces are now being trained, not to protect people from harm, but to protect state and corporate power. And this marriage is classic fascism. They will be trained in urban warfare against civilians, primarily the poor, working class and people of color, and all under the guise of "fighting crime and keeping people safe." The real purpose is far more ominous.



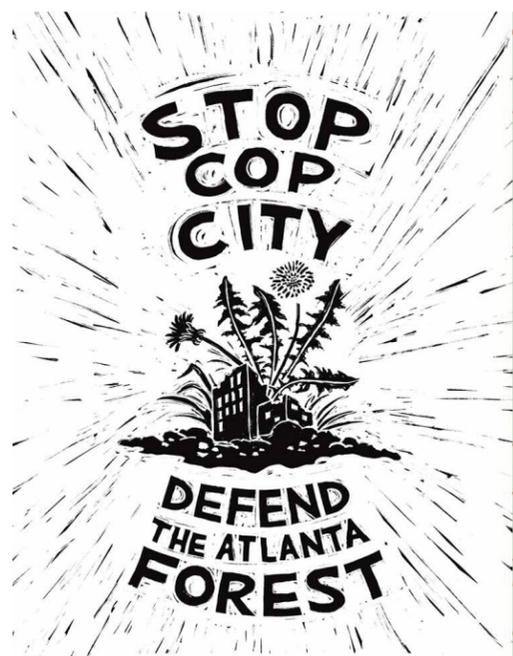
As our climate becomes more precarious and erratic, social and economic tensions will continue to be exacerbated. Instead of dismantling the planet-killing arrangement of power currently in place, those on the top are seeking to bolster its defenses. And they will defend this racist, ecocidal and untenable fortress at all costs. But does it need to be this way? And how complicit are we in this scheme?

As I watched Avatar, I found myself thinking of this unfolding drama in the Weelaunee Forest. I thought of the two Indigenous Pataxó land defenders who were just murdered in Brazil. I thought about the protests happening in west Germany to oppose a mine, where Greta Thunberg and others were just arrested. And I felt myself grieving that many of us seem a bit too comfortable with the theme of abandoning our precious home world within the realms of science fiction movies. I understand that the broader message of films like this may be to defend what we have left here, but how often is this understood by the larger audience? How often do they recognize that they represent the fictional "Sky People" or at least tacitly support their destructive policies and projects by their silence?

The species on fictional Pandora aren't more wondrous than the real ones who inhabit our fragile and beleaguered biosphere. Not by a long-shot. I've been fortunate to witness so many of them when visiting various places around the world. From bioluminescent algae in the sea in Panama, to marsupials in Australia, to howler monkeys in Argentina, to sequoias in California, to glow worms in New Zealand, to sea turtles in the Caribbean Sea, to lynxes here in my native Nova Scotia. And the Indigenous peoples and cultures of that fictional world are no match for the real ones who still live among us, in our times, and who are at the forefront of this ongoing war being waged for profit, against the biosphere on which we all depend.

Resistance to colonialism, militaristic state violence and ecocide isn't fictional. Cop City is the future they want, but there are courageous people pushing back against that nihilistic narrative everywhere. It is a resistance that is happening now, in big ways and small, on this world, and in places not far from where you live. But it needs all of us, or it will fail. And this wondrous, real world, and all that rely on it, will be lost forever.

Kenn Orphan
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May 31st

A SWAT team, guns drawn, raided the **Atlanta Solidarity Fund**, and arrested three people who had been raising money to bail out protesters opposed to the construction of Cop City.

Marlon Kautz, Adele Maclean and Savannah Patterson were charged with one count each of money laundering and charity fraud. Warrants allege the three were, "misleading contributors ... to fund the actions in part of *Defend the Atlanta Forest*, a group classified by the United States Department of Homeland Security as *Domestic Violent Extremists*."

As proof of money laundering, the warrants cite reimbursements from April 2021 to March of this year that total less than \$7,000 and were for "forest clean-up totes, COVID rapid tests, media and yard signs." The Atlanta Solidarity Fund issued a statement that it's existed for seven years, quote, "with the sole purpose of providing resources to protestors experiencing repression." To be clear, none of the arrested Cop City activists have been designated as domestic violent extremists, nor have they been convicted, just charged.

In March, prosecutors charged 23 forest defenders with domestic terrorism after clashes between police and protesters, less than two months after Atlanta police shot dead Manuel "Tortugueta" Terán, a 26-year-old environmental activist. An autopsy concluded they were sitting with their hands raised up in front of their body when police shot them 57 times.

In response to the arrests, the National Lawyers Guild issued a statement, quote, "in firm solidarity with the *Atlanta Solidarity Fund* and all of the *Stop Cop City* activists unjustly targeted by law enforcement." They noted, "Bail funds exist to protect people's right to dissent. They are necessary, legally sound resources that help people more safely access their constitutionally protected rights to speech and assembly by lowering the risks of financial ruin or indefinite jail time."

The arrests come just days before the Atlanta City Council voted 11-4 in favor of giving \$67million to the project, following 14 hours of public comment against the idea. City policies made public participation in the council meeting more difficult, and after several council members decided to reject postponing a decision on the money, apparently because they were tired of facing public questioning.

These were only the latest in a series of developments highlighting the project's lack of transparency, including the recent revelation that it will cost taxpayers more than twice what the city has said for nearly two years.

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