

# Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in “Magical Negro” Films

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Recent research on African American media representations describes a trend of progressive, antiracist film production. Specifically, “magical negro” films (cinema highlighting lower-class, uneducated, and magical black characters who transform disheveled, uncultured, or broken white characters into competent people) have garnered both popular and critical acclaim. I build upon such evidence as a cause for both celebration and alarm. I first examine how notions of historical racism in cinema inform our comprehension of racial representations today. These understandings create an interpretive environment whereby magical black characters are relationally constructed as both positive and progressive. I then advance a production of culture approach that examines 26 films that resonate with mainstream audiences’ understanding of race relations and racialized fantasies. I find that these films constitute “cinethetic racism”—a synthesis of overt manifestations of racial cooperation and egalitarianism with latent expressions of white normativity and anti-black stereotypes. “Magical negro” films thus function to marginalize black agency, empower normalized and hegemonic forms of whiteness, and glorify powerful black characters in so long as they are placed in racially subservient positions. The narratives of these films thereby subversively reaffirm the racial status quo and relations of domination by echoing the changing and mystified forms of contemporary racism rather than serving as evidence of racial progress or a decline in the significance of race. Keywords: African American, cinema, media representation, racism, whiteness.

“Because most Hollywood screenwriters don’t know much about black people other than what they hear on records by white hip-hop star Eminem . . . instead of getting life histories or love interests, black characters get magical powers.”

—Christopher J. Farley, *Time Magazine* (2000:14)

“Had I read that right? I read it again with redoubled attention. From the opposite end of the white world a magical Negro culture was hailing me . . . Was this our salvation?”

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* ([1952]1991:123)

“Perseus wore a magic cap so that the monsters he hunted down might not see him. We draw the magic cap down over our own eyes so as to deny that there are any monsters.”

—Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1* ([1867]1976:91)

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In the fall of 2006, the famous African American actor Morgan Freeman appeared at the Virginia Film Festival to present a sneak peek of the anticipated sequel to *Bruce Almighty* (2003), appropriately named *Evan Almighty* (2007). The theme of the festival, entitled "Revelations: Finding God at the Movies," fit well with Freeman's character as he played "God" in both films. Freeman's manifestation at the film gala was hailed as a grand success and local papers ran headlines such as "Morgan Freeman's Second Coming" and "God is Coming to the Virginia Film Festival." Not long ago, the thought of an African American playing the role of the Divine would seem impossible at worst and highly improbable at best. On the surface, the advent of such a character, and the ease and celebration of it, suggests that strong rather than subservient African American characters are now accepted in the white mainstream. As *New York Times* writer Stephen Holden (2003) wrote: "For Mr. Freeman, playing God is a piece of cake. With his quiet, measured drawl, which implies depths of good-humored wisdom, he may be the most convincing screen sage Hollywood has these days." According to Holden and many others, powerful and charismatic black characters are everywhere, and the majority of white viewers seemingly accept their visibility.

However, neither this visibility nor this acceptance is unconditional. While African American characters are now more than stereotypes of "mammies," "coons," and "bucks," as they currently portray lawyers, doctors, saints, and gods, they seem welcome only if they observe certain limits imposed upon them by mainstream, normative conventions. As Laurence Gross (2001) notes, "when previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interest of those powerful people who define the public agenda" (p. 4). Visibility and acceptance is not a guarantee of legitimacy or decency, but it is a precondition of regimes of surveillance. The dominant features of previous social orders—restrictive Jim Crow folkways and *de jure* racism—were clearly articulated through media images. Today, media exercises no less an influence in promulgating and protecting *de facto* racism through the patterned combination of white normativity and antiblack stereotypes under the guise of progressive black-white friendships that supposedly indicate improving race relations.

Within this milieu, I note the emergence of an explicitly positive, but latently racist character in Hollywood film—the "magical negro" ("MN"). The MN has become a stock character that often appears as a lower class, uneducated black person who possesses supernatural or magical powers. These powers are used to save and transform disheveled, uncultured, lost, or broken whites (almost exclusively white men) into competent, successful, and content people within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation. I examine how this dynamic pervasively informs ostensibly "black friendly" and racially "progressive" films such as *The Green Mile* (1999), *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), *The Family Man* (2000), *The Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003, 2003), and both of Morgan Freeman's appearances in *Bruce Almighty* and *Evan Almighty*. This is a phenomenon I call *cinethetic racism*.

Specifically, the typical MN film resonates with audience expectations that are formed within a dominant logic of the "new racism" as articulated by various scholastic approaches (Bobo, Kluegel and Smith 1996; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Gaertner and Dovidio 1986, 2005; Gaertner et al. 2005; Hughey 2006, 2007; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Meertens and Pettigrew 1997; Sears 1988; Sears and Kinder 1971). The new racism supports the social order while seemingly challenging the racial inequality constitutive of that order. I point out that new racism reinforces the meaning of white people as moral and pure characters while also delineating how powerful, divine, and/or magic-wielding black characters may interact with whites and the mainstream. In so doing, these on-screen interactions afford white people centrality, while marginalizing those seemingly progressive black characters. In this vein, I neither contest the empirical evidence that more African American representations are breaking into mainstream media outlets, nor do I debate whether dominant cinematic images of African Americans are largely "negative" or "positive," because "One person's positive stereotype is another person's negative stereotype and vice versa . . ." (Nama 2003:27). Instead, I focus on how MN films

resonate with dominant meanings of post-civil rights race relations. Hence, while the explicit readings of these visual texts may be progressive and emancipatory, they may implicitly function to reify dominant racial discourses and narratives concerning white identity (Bell 1993; Bernadri 1996, 2001, 2007; Crenshaw 1988; Delgado 1995; Doane 1997).

### Background and Development

The history of American popular culture is permeated with media images and events dealing explicitly with the meaning of racial difference, especially blackness and whiteness, from the classic D. W. Griffith film *Birth of a Nation* (1915), the Alex Haley narrative converted to television miniseries *Roots* (1977), to the critically acclaimed and supposedly antiracist film *Crash* (2004). The first televisual representations of African Americans were stereotypical images that validated separate and unequal social worlds (Bogle 2001). From the flat ink of print ads to the luster of the silver screen, caricatured images of blackness were one of only a few forms of African American visual representations up until the civil rights movement. David Draigh and Gail Marcus (2001) of the American Museum of the Moving Image write:

In 1933 African American poet and critic Sterling Brown described these stereotypes as falling into seven categories: the contented slave, the wretched freeman, the comic Negro, the brute Negro, the tragic mulatto, the local color Negro, and the exotic primitive. Add to these—from the popular myth that music and dance and rhythm were the Negro's natural strengths—black singers, dancers, and entertainers and the list is complete (p. 2).

In 1944, Dr. Lawrence Reddick, the curator of the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature of the New York City Public Library surveyed 100 films from the beginning of silent films to the 1940s, finding over 75 percent of them to be "anti-Negro" (Leab 1975:3). During the end of the 1940s, "racially aware" cinema began to touch on the subject of racism. Films like *Home of the Brave* (1949) and *Pinky* (1949) showcased white actress Jeanne Crain as a light-skinned black woman, thus making simultaneous plays on the racist and counter-hegemonic politics of racial "passing."<sup>1</sup>

After the minstrelsy thematic loosened its grip on black actors, an assimilationist agenda of sanitized African American characters emerged during the late 1950s and early 1960s as a response to demands for more "positive" characters. This trend headlined the "ebony saint" character, dominated by Sidney Poitier, who championed the cause of assimilation through the repeated portrayal of a friendly, desexualized black man that was little more than a nonthreatening confidant to virginal white women. The ebony saint became, "a new stereotype, albeit a mostly positive one, a stereotype that historians and even many contemporary critics have referred to as 'the Ideal Good Negro,' 'the Noble Negro' . . . 'Saint Sidney,' 'Super Sidney,' and 'Superspade'" (Draigh and Marcus 2001:3).

As a riposte to this image, "blaxploitation" films marketed a more ambivalent "bad-ass" image of African American confrontations with white racism, from Pam Grier's performances as "Foxy Brown" to Richard Roundtree as the indomitable "Shaft." By the mid-1970s, the genre ran its course and whether as "Sambo" or as Superspade the humanity of black people [was] still being denied in the movies" (Leab 1975:263). In the 1980s, the "black-as-cool" image profited from the success of blaxploitation and was a component in what Albert Johnson

1. Racial passing usually describes a member of a disadvantaged racial or ethnic group who is successfully accepted as a different race or ethnicity, especially in the case of a person of mixed race or ethnicity being accepted as a member of the racial or ethnic majority. It is usually used derisively and is not considered politically correct to aspire or attempt to pass, or to accuse another person of aspiring or attempting to pass. I refer specifically to these films as both racist and counter-hegemonic because they both reinstalled the notion of assimilationist attempts to "pass" but also demonstrated the obvious social construction of race in a time when vulgar biological determinism reached its height in Europe with the "Third Reich" and in the United States in the form of eugenics.

(1990) describes as “a quest of novelty, a new ‘hipness’ that linked the perceptiveness of the aesthetic and sophisticate with the streetwise humor of the common man” (p. 13).

By the mid-1980s, mainstream black images underwent another transformation as evidenced by the success of *The Cosby Show*. Writers for the show avoided storylines that had anything to do with race or racism. In addition, other television shows and films often portrayed ultra-positive black characters, and many networks and film studios tried to reproduce situation comedies or dramatic films of the same ilk (Gray 1995). By the late 1990s and into the new millennium, black characters entered a new stage of racial representation in what Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki (2001) called a “utopian reversal” of black representation. In film, black characters gained modes of representation on par with, or in command of, whites. Race was far from being ignored, but was instead specifically addressed. A proliferation of “race films”<sup>2</sup> broke into the mainstream, leading some scholars to view televisual media as a dynamic medium receptive to public demands for diversity and empowerment (Gray 1995; Nama 2003:24). However, even with such “utopian reversal” characterizing some African American representations, Robin Means-Coleman (2000) labels the 1990s retention of negative and demeaning African American characters as “The Neo-Minstrel Era.”

As demonstrated, the intersections of cinema and blackness constantly change in terms of character, but remain relatively consistent in their ability to attract audiences. As Ed Guerrero (1995) writes:

The bewitching allure of black men runs deeply through the historical trajectory of mainstream culture. This includes cinema from its inception with Gus the “renegade negro” and molester of white women, in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), through the minstrel antics of Stepin Fetchit or even Eddie Murphy’s resurrection of “Buckwheat,” right up to the contemporary moment with the much debated cinematic interpretation of “Mister” in *The Color Purple* (1985), or the parade of “New Jack” gangstas crowding our screens, dismissing women as “bitches and hos” (p. 395).

It is out of such a milieu that the MN surfaced. And it is surprising that the character has been largely ignored. According to film critic Audrey Colombe (2002), “This latest figuration in mainstream film, the magical black man, slipped into the ‘90s lineup without much popular comment” (2002). As only a few scholars have examined this phenomenon, several gaps within the literature exist. First, many landmark media texts (Guerrero 1993; Hunt 1999, 2005; Reid 1993; Rocchio 2000; Snead 1994) simply ignore the MN trope. Second, those that do cover the character either conflate or reduce the racial component. For instance, Donald Bogle (2001) views the MN as a manifestation of the classic “Uncle Tom” character, and Heather Hicks (2003) sees the character as only a cinematic manifestation of economics forces: “the films recurrent focus on the status of white men also underscores the central irony attached to the concept of magic in the films: the magical ‘power’ of black men in the films actually serves as an expression of their economic vulnerability” (p. 29). Third, the few scholars who do study the racial dynamics of the character (Entman and Rojecki 2001; Gabbard 2004; Glenn and Cunningham 2007; Okorafor-Mbachu 2004) use a humanities-based textual reading, rather than a sociological framework.

### The Resonance of the Silver Screen: A Production of Culture Approach

The expansive reach of movies makes them a particularly important site for examining popular constructions of race relations in U.S. society. The average citizen spends about

2. I refer to the race film as a specific film genre in the United States from approximately 1915 to 1947. These films, approximately 500 or so, consisted of films produced for a black audience, featuring all, or almost all, black casts. By “modern race films” I reference the 1990s increase in films that explicitly address race, racism, and/or racial conflict as a theme or major subplot of the film.

thirteen hours a year at movie theaters, half of all adults watch movies at least once a month, and sixty percent of people ages 9 to 17 watch at least one movie a week (Media Campaign 2002). In addition to visiting theaters, more people are watching movies at home. By 2006, 81.2 percent of all U.S. households reported owning at least one DVD player, 79.2 percent owned at least one VCR, and 73.4 percent owned at least one computer (Nielson Media Research 2006). Movies are also now available online and through the mail via services such as CinemaNow, Movielink, NetFlix, and Starz! Ticket on Real Movies. Internet downloads of films (both legal and illegal) are growing at an exponential rate (Adkinson, Lenard, and Pickford 2004). The popularity of movies as a source of entertainment and cultural expression means that they reach further than many other discursive forms (Entman and Rojecki 2001; hooks 1992; Wilson and Gutierrez 1985).

Due to the racially segregated character of the United States, many within its borders spend little time interacting with people of different racial or ethnic groups (Massey and Denton 1993). This point is particularly true for whites. Eighty-six percent of suburban whites live in a community where the black population is less than 1 percent (Massey and Denton 1993; Oliver and Shapiro 1997), and "According to the 2000 Census, whites are most likely to be segregated than any other group" (California Newsreel 2003:19). As a result, popular films about race and racism offer people, especially whites, narratives for experiences they may not have in real life. In fact, in the absence of lived experience, films are often understood as "authentic" reflections of "real life." George Lipsitz (1998) notes that films about past race relations "probably frame memory for the greatest number of people" (p. 219). Further, Daniel Bernardi (2007) writes: "Cinema is everywhere a fact of our lives, saturating our leisure time, our conversation, and our perceptions of each other and of self. Because of this, race in cinema is neither fictional nor illusion. It is real because it is meaningful and consequential; because it impacts real people's lives" (p. xvi). In view of the vast growth in the production and consumption of films over the past two decades (the same period in which the MN film appears), it seems reasonable to examine these films to see if they reveal something about the racialized culture that produced them.

The production of culture perspective focuses on how symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught, and preserved (Peterson and Anand 2004). In this sense, films are "cultural objects" (Griswold 1986, 1992) that resonate with the larger society (Schudson 1989, 2002). As Michael Schudson (2002) writes:

The relevance of a cultural object to its audience, its utility, if you will, is a property not only of the object's content or nature and the audience's interest in it but of the position of the object in the cultural tradition of the society the audience is a part of. That is, the uses to which an audience puts a cultural object are not necessarily personal or idiosyncratic; the needs or interests of an audience are socially and culturally constituted. What is "resonant" is not a matter of how "culture" connects to individual "interests" but a matter of how culture connects to interests that are themselves constituted in a cultural frame (p. 145).

Such an approach differs from those that see culture as societal "values" in a Parsonian sense, as Williams's notion of a "structure of feeling," or as Marxist ideas regarding "dominant ideology." Rather, cultural objects are produced, distributed, consumed, and reproduced in reference to various cultural, technological, and/or social factors that are central to the navigation of everyday life. The films in this sample have an "aura" of resonance that is neither a private relation between cultural object and individual nor a social relation between cultural object and audience.<sup>3</sup> Rather, these films are a "public and cultural relation among object, tradition,

3. Schudson (1989) writes that any given cultural object, as a valued symbol of representation, can come to have an "aura." "The aura generates its own power and what might originally have been a very modest advantage (or even lucky coincidence) of a symbol becomes, with the accumulation of the aura of tradition over time, a major feature" (Schudson 1989:170). Such an approach to cultural objects also coincides with Lynn Hunt's *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (1984) and Edward Shils's *Tradition* (1981).

and audience" (Schudson 2002:146) that resonates with audiences' understanding of race and reflects back to them racialized aspects of the "American character and experience" (Griswold 2002:189).

How do these movies resonate? These films all possess a mutual resemblance regarding how the positive and progressive attributes of strong, magic-wielding black characters are circumvented by their placement as servants to broken and down-on-their-luck white characters. This on-screen relationship reinforces a normative climate of white supremacy within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation whereby whiteness is always worthy of being saved, and strong depictions of blackness are acceptable in so long as they serve white identities.

MN films first appeared in the early 1990s, a time in which the country was becoming "hyper-segregated" (Massey and Denton 1993) and portrayed as racially "polarized" (Tuch and Martin 1997). As Jennifer Fuller (2006) writes:

In the 1990s, fears of racial fracture and desires for racial reconciliation converged . . . Clearly the nineties was not the first era in which people feared the nation was somehow "falling apart." . . . The rediscovery of racism and a racial divide between blacks and whites threatened America's new sense of itself as a successfully integrated nation (pp. 167, 169).

The past two decades, via the production of various racialized media spectacles, display a nation bitterly divided by black and white. In 1991, there was the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill controversy of a "high-tech lynching,"<sup>4</sup> as well as the videotaped beating of Rodney King that was followed in 1992 by the acquittal of the accused LAPD officers, which in turn sparked the Los Angeles race riots. In 1994, O. J. Simpson was accused of a double homicide of his wife and friend (both white), and in 1995, the courtroom finale was broadcast to an estimated 150 million people (approximately 57 percent of the U.S. population at the time<sup>5</sup>) that was complete with split-screen views of predominately black and white audiences so as to "capture" their vastly different reactions upon news of the verdict (Hunt 1999). That same year, Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam held the "Million Man March" on the National Mall in Washington, DC. Just one week after the march, journalist Howard Fineman (1995) observed:

In entertainment, advertising, sports and most workplaces, integration is the order of our day. In films, Denzel Washington commands millions for roles that having nothing to do with skin color . . . But in politics, the ideal of integration is a spent force. Americans of all colors seem exhausted by the effort to come this far, and embittered by the new brand of race-based obsessions that have developed along the way (p. 32).

Throughout the 1990s, several media outlets framed the issue of "affirmative action" as a power-keg. The May 6, 1991 issue of *Newsweek* stated, "The problem today is shattered dreams . . . people on both sides of the color line feel they've reached an impasse, and that things are getting worse" (Whitaker 1991:29), and the April 3, 1995 issue of *Newsweek* ran a cover showing two black and white fists pushing against one another underneath the headline of "Race and Rage." *NBC Nightly News* (July 19, 1995) anchor Tom Brokaw said, "Affirmative Action: two words that can start an argument just about anywhere in America . . . We'll be hearing a lot more about this in the months leading to the 1996 election." Accordingly, in 1996, a "white backlash" against affirmative action activated Proposition 209 in California, that effectively

4. Thomas stated: "This is not an opportunity to talk about difficult matters privately or in a closed environment. This is a circus. It's a national disgrace. And from my standpoint, as a black American, it is a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks who in any way deign to think for themselves, to do for themselves, to have different ideas, and it is a message that unless you kowtow to an old order, this is what will happen to you. You will be lynched, destroyed, caricatured by a committee of the U.S. Senate rather than hung from a tree" (Hearing of the Senate Judiciary Committee on the Nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court," *Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library*, 11 October 1991).

5. The U.S. population in mid-1995 was estimated at 263,064,000 (see [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)).

abolished racial preference programs, a political action that would continue to reverberate in later years in other states.<sup>6</sup> Also in 1996, then President Bill Clinton reactivated the Reagan discourse of "black welfare queens" in order to "end welfare as we know it." At the same time, media reports of "epidemic" black church arsons led Congress to pass the Church Arson Prevention Act in 1996. Frequent news stories throughout the 1990s centered on the supposed "pathology" of black-on-black crime and gang warfare that was exacerbated by a moral panic over the popularity of gangsta rap and the war on drugs. The 1990s and early 2000s witnessed an increasing outcry for an end to Hollywood racism via more films that would headline positive characters of color (Hunt 2005). Consequently, this time frame saw a proliferation of modern race films like Mario Van Peebles' *Panther* (1995), Rob Reiner's *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996), and Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997), to a slew of unapologetic race films from black directors and writers, like John Singleton's *Boyz in the Hood* (1991), *Poetic Justice* (1993), *Higher Learning* (1995), and *Rosewood* (1997), and the ultra-racialized films of Spike Lee such as *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Malcolm X* (1992), *Clockers* (1995), *Get on the Bus* (1996), *4 Little Girls* (1997), *Bamboozled* (2000), and *A Huey P. Newton Story* (2001).

This confluence of factors gave rise to the MN film phenomenon. As Vincent Rocchio (2000) states, "The contemporary status of race in mainstream American culture is intimately bound to the process of representations within and through the mass media" (p. 4). Hence, these films resonate with the nation's "raced ways of seeing" (Hunt 2002) *vis-à-vis* a preoccupation with race relations, growing narratives that whiteness is under assault, and the recognition by Hollywood producers and writers that they must combat their own history of racist film-making. As Diana Crane (1992:47) writes, the culture that an audience receives is "designed as much as possible to reflect their tastes, interests, and attitudes . . . [and] reflects back to the consumer his or her own image." And, according to Robert Wuthnow (1989), "if cultural products do not articulate closely enough with their social settings," then their audiences will see them as "irrelevant, unrealistic, artificial, and overly abstract" (p. 3). In this sense, the meanings of these films are produced by the interaction between "the symbolic capacities of the object itself and the perceptual apparatus of those who experience the object" (Griswold 1987:1079) so that audiences are "co-authors, 'writing' the texts they read" (Schudson 1989:168).

The recent arrival of MN films is particularly striking when one considers that the limits of Hollywood writers and directors regarding narrative structure, plot, and character development are self-imposed. Much of the structured continuity of MN characters across different production houses, distribution centers, directors, writers, and casting agents (i.e., there is no apparent pattern in modes of production, except that almost all the writers, producers, and directors are white: see Appendix Table A1), can be explained by what Wendy Griswold (2002) calls "the imperatives of the genre" (p. 195). That is, watching a movie requires an investment of time and money, and must be made appealing for someone to spend both. The goal is to interest the potential viewer on an engaging aspect that will arouse the viewer's emotions and curiosity while satisfying them both by the film's conclusion. According to Krin Gabbard (2004), "Needless to say, the people who run Hollywood studios do not want to exclude a

6. *Gratz v. Bollinger* (539 U.S. 244) was a U.S. Supreme Court case regarding the University of Michigan undergraduate affirmative action admissions policy. In a 6 to 3 decision, the Supreme Court ruled the university's point system was too mechanistic and therefore unconstitutional. *Grutter v. Bollinger* (539 U.S. 306) was the case in which the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the affirmative action admissions policy of the University of Michigan Law School by a 5 to 4 decision. Also, the "Michigan Civil Rights Initiative" (MCRI), or Proposal 2 (Michigan 06-2), was a ballot initiative in Michigan that passed into Michigan Constitutional law by a 58 percent to 42 percent margin on November 7, 2006. By Michigan law, the Proposal became law on December 22, 2006. The subject of the proposal has been hotly debated, with the very definition of what it encompasses at the center of the controversy. Proponents argue that it bans programs in public hiring, public employment, and public education that "give preferential treatment to" or "discriminate against" individuals on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, or national origin. Opponents argue that Proposal 2 bans all affirmative action programs in the operation of public employment, education, or contracting.

large paying audience of African Americans. Nor do they want to enrage the audience with the old appeals to white racism" (p. 174).

When black actors are constantly cast as angels, spirits, gods, and other incarnate supernatural forces, they displace the realities of history into more viewer-friendly narratives. That is, the various filmmakers create scenes of trouble-free and uncomplicated black/white reconciliation. When racial, social, and cultural formations remain unmentioned and unquestioned, these reconciliation scenes are most effective. On the one hand, this basic narrative appeals to feelings among whites and blacks alike that there can be racial reconciliation and accord. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1997) argue that the appeal of such films touches "something deep within the national conscious, a historically conditioned longing for interracial harmony" (p. 236). On the other hand, these films resonate with a racial crisis in the United States so unpleasant that it must be replaced by fantastical stories of magic. In order to understand this process we must think of the "field" (in a Bourdieuan sense) in which these films are embedded: the post-civil rights era that is defined by the dominance of the new racism.

### **Real to Reel: From New Racism to Cinethetic Racism**

MN films resonate with the dominant logic of race relations in a post-civil rights era—what many scholars deem the "new racism" (Bobo, et al. 1996; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Gaertner and Dovidio 1986, 2005; Gaertner et al. 2005; Hughey 2006, 2007; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Meertens and Pettigrew 1997; Sears 1988; Sears and Kinder 1971). The new racism approach focuses on racial ideology as a group-level phenomenon rather than on (individually generated) racial attitudes (Bobo 1999; Jackman 1994). Many scholars now argue that ideas about race and racism need to be understood in regard to social structures, institutional and cultural practices, and discourses, not simply as something that emanates from individual beings. Racial ideologies provide ways of understanding our lives and how we fit into specific social relations. In this regard, racial ideologies provide narratives about, and explanations for, both the causes and solutions to personal and social problems. Part of this new racial ideology is the presumption or assertion of a race-neutral and color-blind social context (Bobo et al. 1996; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Doane 1997). As Bobo and associates (1996) argue, color-blind ideological assertions stand in the face of "substantial and widening racial economic inequalities, high levels of racial residential segregation, and persistent discrimination experienced across class lines in the black community" (p. 40). Not ironically, this form of color-blind racism still transmits the ideology of white supremacy and normativity, but in a subtle, symbolic, and polite way.

Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders (1996) and David Sears and Donald Kinder (1971) show that antiblack attitudes have blended with traditional Western values such as meritocracy and individualism to form "symbolic" or "modern" racism. This is analogous to Roel W. Meertens and Thomas F. Pettigrew's (1997) notion of "subtle prejudice," which explains a similar racist phenomenon in the United States and throughout Europe. In their theory of "laissez-faire" racism, Bobo and associates (1996) demonstrate that whites outwardly favor equality, but disapprove of programs that force its achievement and will often exhibit antiblack attitudes when feeling "forced." So too, Joel Kovel (1970) and Samuel Gaertner and John Dovidio (1986, 2005) find that unlike symbolic racism or laissez faire racism, that is linked to conservative politics, "aversive racism" explains racism among liberal whites. While aversive racists are well intentioned and publicly support policies that promote racial equality, they also possess negative feelings and beliefs about blacks. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2002, 2003) finds that whites today justify the continued second-class status of nonwhites (especially black and brown populations) through the ideology of "color-blind racism" (2003) that allows them to "talk nasty about blacks without sounding 'racist'" (2002). My own research demonstrates



that even white antiracist organizations unintentionally rely upon racist ideologies and assumptions in order to relate to their own and others' whiteness (Hughes 2006, 2007).

The aforementioned findings demonstrate that racism has not disappeared, but has changed its form to inhabit complex and hegemonic structures whereby there is public, overt favoritism of racial equality coupled with a covert and/or social-psychological discomfort with, and even hate of, nonwhites. Using these studies as a foundation, I find a similar but unique dynamic in modern cinema and advance a testable analytic framework I call cinethetic racism. I purposely use the nomenclature "cinethetic" as a homophone of "synthetic" in order to identify how MN films demonstrate a *cinematic synthesis* between two dynamics: (1) The reproduction of violently stereotypical and racist black representations, and (2) the normalization of white (especially male) representations. What makes this form of racism distinctive and semi-autonomous is that it occurs within a context in which racist representations are obscured by the cinematic rhetoric of: (a) numerical increases in nonwhite representations, (b) interracial cooperation, (c) the superficial empowerment of historically marginalized subjects, and (d) movies themselves as a cultural phenomenon, which audiences want to believe reflects progressive race relations within the larger society. Cinethetic racism's clout relies on the central economic, social, and cultural place of movies in people's lives as a gauge for, and credible evidence of, racial reconciliation and positive portrayals of African Americans.

### Data and Methods

In an effort to discover more consistent and illuminating aspects about the MN in modern cinema, I adopted a research design comprised of the strengths of traditional content analysis while attempting to mitigate its weaknesses. While there are various strengths of quantitative-based content analysis, inclusive of the ease of reporting numerical correlations as "findings," its weakness is that numerical categories do not necessarily capture the meanings encoded in a given image or narrative. As a consequence, this work incorporates a qualitative approach in place of a purely quantitative examination.

The choice of subject for this study was prompted by observations of popular Hollywood films made over a 12-year span (1996 through 2007). Through these observations, the presence of the MN character was detected. To structure the methodology, I developed a study population from the total population of Hollywood-produced, mainstream, feature films over the twelve-year span.<sup>7</sup> The study population ( $N = 500$ ) was drawn through a systematic sampling method (Babbie 2004; Strauss and Corbin 1998) from the available population of 5,535 films. Therefore, the population of films (5,535) was divided by the sample size (500) to achieve a sampling interval of 11.07 that was rounded to 11.0 (with a sampling ratio of .090).

Once the 500 films were selected for the study population, a three-tier analysis was implemented. First, I analyzed plot and character synopses (scripts when synopses were not available)<sup>8</sup> of the 500 films in order to rule out whether or not the film could be classified as a MN film. Such a sweep of the study population yielded a subsample of 43 possible MN films. Second, the subsample of films was observed over a period of nine months (August 2006 through April 2007). With such restrictions in place, the investigation of the 43 possible films

7. A feature film is a term the film industry uses to refer to a film made for initial distribution in theaters. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the American Film Institute, and the British Film Institute all define a feature as a film with a running time of 40 minutes or longer. The Centre national de la cinématographie in France defines it as a 35mm film that is longer than 1,600 metres, that comes out to exactly 58 minutes and 29 seconds for sound films, and the Screen Actors Guild gives a minimum running time of 80 minutes. Generally, a feature film is between 90 and 210 minutes.

8. synopses and scripts for feature films were made available through the Internet Movie Database ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)), the Internet Movie Script Database ([www.imsdb.com](http://www.imsdb.com)), and the Moving Image Archive ([www.archive.org/details/movies](http://www.archive.org/details/movies)).

**Table 1 • Sample of “Magical Negro” Films, 2007–1996**

Genre	Film	
Drama	<i>Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil</i> (1997)	
	<i>City of Angels</i> (1998)	
	<i>What Dreams May Come</i> (1998)	
	<i>The Green Mile</i> (1999)	
	<i>Meet Joe Black</i> (1999)	
	<i>The Family Man</i> (2000)	
	<i>Unbreakable</i> (2000)	
	<i>The Legend of Bagger Vance</i> (2000)	
	<i>O Brother, Where Art Thou?</i> (2000)	
	<i>Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest</i> (2006)	
	<i>Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End</i> (2007)	
	Sci-Fi	<i>Blade I</i> (1998)
		<i>Blade II</i> (2002)
<i>Blade III</i> (2004)		
<i>The Matrix I</i> (1999)		
<i>The Matrix II</i> (2003)		
<i>The Matrix III</i> (2003)		
<i>The Time Machine</i> (2002)		
<i>The Punisher</i> (2004)		
Comedy	<i>Happy Gilmore</i> (1996)	
	<i>Holy Man</i> (1998)	
	<i>Dogma</i> (1999)	
	<i>Bedazzled</i> (2000)	
	<i>Down to Earth</i> (2001)	
	<i>Bruce Almighty</i> (2003)	
	<i>Evan Almighty</i> (2007)	

yielded a final sample of 26 ( $n = 26$ ) films that fit the criteria of a MN film (see Table 1).<sup>9</sup> Third, the research assistant and I analyzed the films and scripts in the final sample. Notes were taken from both the observations of the films and the readings of the scripts. During this last tier of the analysis, each film was coded in two stages.

First, the films were watched and scripts read (April and May 2007) in their entirety in order to obtain deeper insights into the plot, character development, and racial meanings of each film. Second, the film and script notes were reviewed again and coded (November and December 2007) to determine whether ten elements of cinethetic racism were present (0 = no, 1 = yes).<sup>10</sup> The elements were coded under two different overarching themes and are as follow: *antiblack stereotypes* inclusive of: (1) economic extremity, (2) cultural deficiency, (3) folk wisdom, (4) (dis)appearing acts, and (5) primordial magic; *white normativity and superiority* encompassing: (6) socioeconomic mobility, (7) moral lessons, (8) white sexuality/romance, (9) hegemonic whiteness, and (10) spirituality/material detachment. These themes were based on a detailed examination of new racism as applied to film. This testable

9. The sample yielded 20 films. However, several of these were part of a trilogy or sequel of which I included in the final analysis to yield a total of 26 films. The six films that were added were: *Pirates of Caribbean III*, *Blade I* and *III*, *The Matrix I* and *II*, and *Evan Almighty*.

10. Such coding was operationalized via coding for each theme every 30 seconds of film. The 26 films totaled 3,224 minutes (mean = 124, median = 118.5, mode = 113) or 6,448 segments of 30-second coded sections. It is important to note that some of the themes were present multiple times during any given 30-second span but were recorded only once.

framework enabled an analysis of each movie that included a detailed plot summary and relevant quotations from the movie's dialogue.

The data was coded judiciously, identifying one of the elements only when it was clear that the film was in possession of such a dynamic. Many of these elements are intimately linked so that, in instances in which films employed more than one at a time, each was acknowledged to capture their overlapping nature. Third, to access inter-coder reliability, an independent research assistant coded each film from December 2007 through January 2008. The research assistant had no knowledge of my calculations. Agreement percentages were tabulated, which reflect how often the research assistant and I agreed that there was a presence of one or more of the ten aspects of cinethetic racism. While the percentages vary by theme, they do so only slightly and suggest an overall strong agreement: economic extremity (89 percent), cultural deficiency (95 percent), folk wisdom (84 percent), (dis)appearing acts (82 percent), primordial magic (80 percent), socioeconomic mobility (90 percent), moral lessons (87 percent), white sexuality/romance (81 percent), hegemonic whiteness (88 percent), and spirituality/material detachment (94 percent).

While this form of nonprobability sampling disallows inferences from the final sample ( $n = 26$ ) to the general population ( $N = 5,535$ ), the work aims to delineate transferable, rather than generalizable, conclusions.<sup>11</sup> This form of qualitative content analysis consists of reflexive movement between concept development, sampling, data collection, data coding, data analysis, and interpretation. The aim is to be systematic and analytic, but not rigid. Although categories derived from the new racism literature initially guided the study, others emerged throughout the study. Thus, such content analysis is embedded in constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings, and nuances. The empirical results reflect a deeper cultural code about mythologies concerning blackness and whiteness and adopts the contention that analysis of racial media representation is one of the most fruitful areas of study for not only discreetly measuring social life, but is also a rich repository of ideological meaning and cultural significance.

### Cinethetic Racism

There is much to applaud in MN films, such as the increased visibility of African American actors who play powerful characters that possibly reinforce positive representations of race relations. Also, these films appear to challenge predominant conceptions of white innocence and power with what Gwendolyn Foster (2003) terms the "bad-white-body"—cinematic representations of white identities associated with general instability, self-hatred, and irresponsible behavior. However, this relationship demonstrates how MN films can be contained through subversion and hegemony. Of greatest critical concern is how MN films advantageously shore up white supremacist and normative orders while ostensibly posturing as an irreverent challenge to them (see Table 2). As the data shows, I found the sample films to contain an overall high frequency of each of the ten themes (from 5 to 38 percent). One can expect with 95 percent confidence that any one of the ten coding themes would occur at least 2.18 times to as many as 28.27 times in a MN film not included in this sample (see Table 3). In what follows I provide examples for the themes that are drawn from the sample films.

11. Although generalizability usually applies only to certain types of quantitative methods, transferability can apply in varying degrees to most types of research. Unlike generalizability, transferability does not involve broad claims, but invites the readers of research to make connections between elements of the particular study in question and related studies and experiences. For instance, while the dynamics between magical blacks and broken whites in this sample are possibly limited to a relatively small total population ( $n < 200-100$ ), one might transfer the outcomes and conclusions of this study to that of television, literature, and other media forms, as well as that of society writ large using a "production of culture" perspective.

**Table 2 • Frequency Distribution of Cinematic Racism**

Film	Antiblack Stereotypes (n = yes)				White Normativity and Superiority (n = yes)				Row Ratio and Percentage		
	Economic Extremity	Cultural Deficiency	Folk Wisdom	(Dis) Appearing Acts	Primordial Magic	Socio-Economic Mobility	Moral Lessons	White Sexuality/Romance		Hegemonic Whiteness	Spirituality/Material Detachment
<i>Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil</i> (1997)	13	0	8	3	6	9	7	0	11	13	70/3,807 (2%)
<i>City of Angels</i> (1998)	0	0	4	4	0	0	9	25	0	21	63/3,807 (2%)
<i>What Dreams May Come</i> (1998)	0	0	16	7	23	0	38	16	11	27	138/3,807 (4%)
<i>The Green Mile</i> (1999)	23	21	28	8	18	14	19	22	25	33	211/3,807 (5%)
<i>Meet Joe Black</i> (1999)	3	0	7	6	4	0	6	18	13	19	76/3,807 (2%)
<i>The Family Man</i> (2000)	16	15	0	8	14	0	42	35	12	38	180/3,807 (5%)
<i>Unbreakable</i> (2000)	0	0	33	5	6	18	0	0	28	12	102/3,807 (3%)
<i>The Legend of Bagger Vance</i> (2000)	25	34	41	6	22	36	56	44	33	56	353/3,807 (9%)
<i>O Brother, Where Art Thou?</i> (2000)	23	17	14	9	16	27	35	46	35	16	238/3,807 (6%)
<i>Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest</i> (2006)	5	0	5	2	5	0	0	0	0	13	30/3,807 (1%)
<i>Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End</i> (2007)	18	0	24	11	15	25	16	20	4	18	151/3,807 (4%)
<i>Blade I</i> (1998)	0	0	32	5	27	0	14	0	16	11	105/3,807 (3%)
<i>Blade II</i> (2002)	0	0	41	6	36	0	12	0	16	8	119/3,807 (3%)
<i>Blade III</i> (2004)	0	0	27	4	33	0	18	0	18	9	109/3,807 (3%)
<i>The Matrix I</i> (1999)	8	14	18	7	13	0	19	15	26	16	136/3,807 (4%)
<i>The Matrix II</i> (2003)	7	16	12	9	19	0	15	19	34	22	153/3,807 (4%)
<i>The Matrix III</i> (2003)	9	17	16	8	27	0	25	24	39	23	188/3,807 (5%)
<i>The Time Machine</i> (2002)	0	0	9	5	15	0	13	4	0	11	57/3,807 (1%)
<i>The Punisher</i> (2004)	8	9	8	2	4	13	9	8	26	7	94/3,807 (3%)
<i>Happy Gilmore</i> (1996)	0	0	19	11	0	24	23	34	0	14	151/3,807 (4%)
<i>Holy Man</i> (1998)	19	0	26	8	20	36	54	44	37	45	278/3,807 (7%)
<i>Dogma</i> (1999)	16	0	14	13	14	0	21	2	0	20	126/3,807 (3%)
<i>Bedazzled</i> (2000)	8	4	0	6	10	18	14	3	40	11	100/3,807 (3%)
<i>Down to Earth</i> (2001)	0	0	0	0	0	0	35	57	12	32	150/3,807 (4%)
<i>Bruce Almighty</i> (2003)	20	0	8	3	39	37	34	30	21	41	238/3,807 (6%)
<i>Evil Almighty</i> (2007)	0	0	8	2	45	0	47	27	22	36	191/3,807 (5%)
Column Ratio and Percentage	221/3,807 (5%)	147/3,807 (4%)	418/3,807 (11%)	158/3,807 (4%)	431/3,807 (12%)	257/3,807 (7%)	581/3,807 (15%)	493/3,807 (13%)	529/3,807 (14%)	572/3,807 (15%)	

**Table 3 • Totals, Percentages, SD, CI, and Range for Coding Themes**

Code	Antiblack Stereotypes					White Normativity and Superiority				
	Economic Extremity	Cultural Deficiency	Folk Wisdom	(Dis) Appearing Acts	Primaldial Magic	Socio-Economic Mobility	Moral Lessons	White Sexuality/ Romance	Hegemonic Whiteness	Spirituality/ Material Detachment
"Yes"	221	147	418	158	431	257	581	493	529	572
Mean	8.5	5.65	16.01	6.08	16.58	9.88	22.35	18.96	18.42	22
Standard Deviation	8.61	9.03	11.9	3.09	12.15	13.07	15.4	16.7	12.97	15.6
Confidence Interval (95%) +/-	3.31	3.47	4.57	1.19	4.67	5.02	5.92	6.42	4.99	6
Range for True Population Mean	5.19–11.81	2.18–9.12	11.44–20.58	4.89–7.27	11.91–21.25	4.86–14.9	16.43–28.27	12.54–25.38	13.43–23.41	16–28

### *Antiblack Stereotypes*

*Economic Extremity* Many of the central black characters in these sample films occupy a position of lower socioeconomic extremity ( $n = 16$ ). For instance, “Bagger Vance” (Will Smith) in *The Legend of Bagger Vance* is an unemployed golf caddy that works for just “five dollars guaranteed” and a pair of old shoes that “Rannulph Junuh” (Matt Damon) no longer wears. Audiences are introduced to “Cash” (Don Cheadle) in *The Family Man* as a tattered and uneducated man in a convenience store who argues over the authenticity of a lottery ticket. In *Bruce Almighty*, Morgan Freeman, although playing the character of “God,” is first introduced as a janitor, mopping floors in an unoccupied building. And although he takes on a number of different positions throughout the film, by the end, he is returned to the station of a Christ-like sacrificial servant/janitor, leaving audiences with the suggestion that this placement is his “authentic” earthy form. In *O Brother, Where Art Thou* (2000), the only two black men in the film are both MN characters: The first is “Tommy Johnson” (Chris Thomas King), a young, out-of-work hitchhiker whose magical prowess with a guitar is due to a pact with the devil, and the second is the “Blind Seer” (Lee Weaver), who is a blind and tattered railroad push-car operator who offers spiritual and sage advice.

Such placement of MN characters as members of the extreme lower class, commits in the words of Stuart Hall (1997), a certain “labor of representation” for the white populist imagination. For instance, the assumption that most black people are poor, uneducated, and occupy the lower rungs of society lends “authenticity” to the placement of MNs in these films. By making MNs resemble welfare queens, uneducated voodoo priestesses, the mentally challenged, impoverished janitors, prisoners, and the homeless, the films both produce and solidify a marginalizing discourse.

In order for the MN to dedicate his mission to white redemption while enduring his own economic depression, these films draw upon the idea that black folks are, underneath all the politically correct discourse, simple and unsophisticated people that desire an uncomplicated life of servitude. Despite the MN’s economically vulnerable situation, his or her only joy appears in helping white people, not him or herself. This characterization fits well within an era in which whites “see themselves as victims of the multicultural, pc, feminist onslaught [which] . . . would be laughable if it were not for the sense of mental crisis and the reactionary *backlash* that underpin these beliefs (Gallagher 1995:169, emphasis added). Central to this backlash is a sense of confusion over the meanings of race and progress altogether triggered by the perceived loss of white male privilege. These films rest on friendly, helpful, bend-over-backwards black characters that do not seek to change their own impoverished status, but instead exhibit a primordial, hard-wired desire to use their magical power to correct the wrongs in a white world. Hence, filmmaker Spike Lee said of *The Green Mile*: “Michael Clarke Duncan tongue-kisses cancer out of a white woman and cures her. And in the end Tom Hanks offers to set him free, but guess what? He refuses to leave Death Row. He’d rather die with Hanks looking on. Get the fuck outta here! That’s old grateful slave shit” (quoted in Crowdus and Georgakas 2001:5).

The films’ constant fixation on the poverty of MNs, while they concurrently assist white people to become upward mobile, reinforces a nouveau form of the happy-go-lucky “Darky” character (this time, sans tap shoes). Hicks (2003) suggests that such a cinematic story:

invites the fantasy that black men exist in a childlike relation to economic matters and would gladly cede their own rare material gains in order to be in a more certain—and nostalgic—set of social relations, one in which white men are always already heroes who have merely misplaced their capes, temporarily forgotten their innate power (p. 36).

The interracial cooperation between broken whites and MNs with exceptionally safe and happy attributes may appear progressive to some. If they are, then they concurrently represent

a desire for audiences to solve interracial tensions via individual acts of black servitude, rather than through a rearrangement of racialized social structures or the contestation of dominant racial narratives.

*Cultural Deficiency* From Stanley Elkin's (1959) slavery-infantilization thesis, the "Moynihan Report" (1965), Kenneth Clark's (1965) "dark ghetto" posturing, Oscar Lewis's (1966) "culture of poverty," Orlando Patterson's (1982) "social death" thesis, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1994), to the Reagan/Clinton rhetoric of welfare queens, blackness has been associated with various forms of cultural deficiencies and self-destructive behaviors. The dominance of this discourse actively serves as strategies of obscuration—effectively mystifying what structural factors (from joblessness and discrimination to a lack of health care and white violence) make conformity to the cult of whiteness impossible (even if desired). Instead, evoking a powerful antiblack rhetoric of bad values is a powerful tool for the demonization of black racial formations. Accordingly, the MN is "in some way outwardly or inwardly disabled, either by discrimination, disability or social constraint," (Kempley 2003) and is "prone to criminality and laziness" (Persons 2005:137).

As a consequence, the popular white imagination has effectively married blackness to various "pathologies": criminality, hostility, a child-like demeanor, a lack of mental capacity, a poor work ethic, and a desire to exploit the social system for unearned "handouts." Such a relationship between culture and identity is understood as natural and normal. When reflected on the silver screen, no matter how amicable the relations between the races are, or how positive the representations of blackness seem, black people are still represented as culturally inferior to their white counterparts. Such a depiction results in a picture of blackness that is culturally dysfunctional and sentimentally authentic.

For instance, all three of *The Matrix* films rely upon such ideological framing for the presentation of the MN—"The Oracle" (Gloria Foster and Mary Alice). Throughout the trilogy, the audience is treated to many scenes of what "the Matrix" looks like: from clean and bright downtown landscapes, bustling with a proliferation of white business people, to simple and sanitary apartments again filled with white, presumably middle class people. However, when "Neo" (Keanu Reeves) meets The Oracle, the audience is suddenly introduced to a high-rise apartment building reminiscent of Chicago's Cabrini Green. After the audience is treated to the sight of a seemingly homeless, blind black man sitting beside a pushcart of his belongings underneath a graffiti-filled wall, Neo steps into a small and rickety elevator. Stepping off the elevator, Neo enters a narrow hallway of cinder block walls, interspersed florescent lighting, and abundant graffiti. Upon entering The Oracle's apartment, the audience is shown a small room filled with a cadre of young children. When Neo first sees The Oracle, she is chain-smoking and baking cookies—all too reminiscent of a kind of welfare queen social positioning—while Duke Ellington Orchestra's 1944 recording of "I'm Beginning to See the Light" plays in the background.<sup>12</sup> The "deficient" living conditions stand in stark contrast to the other white and bright areas of the Matrix. Such a setting helps to prepare the audience for The Oracle's solitary function to prepare the white hero for his impending success, as well as his personal growth from materialist cynic to man of faith.

The theme of black pathologies is repeated in *The Green Mile*, as "John Coffey" (Michael Clarke Duncan) plays a child-like simpleton on death-row, in *The Punisher* (2004) as a local impoverished "witch doctor" named "Candelaria" (Veryl Jones) nurses "Frank Castle" (Thomas Jane) back to health, and in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, in which Tommy Johnson and the Blind Seer are impoverished and sick characters.

12. I am indebted to Gabbard (2004) for the insightful observations regarding background music in many of these films.

*Folk Wisdom* Entman and Rojecki (2001) identify a facet of the MN as “a basic folk wisdom that unleashes the white person’s better instincts and helps resolve his dilemmas” (p. xvii). So also, Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu (2004) writes that the MN is patient and wise, often dispensing various words of wisdom, and is “closer to the earth.” This element exists in more than half of the films in this study. The MN sometimes helps the white character(s) by using his or her “natural” folk wisdom, not his or her intelligence. For instance, in *The Green Mile*, John Coffey admits that he is not intellectually gifted: “I don’t know much of anything. I never have.” Yet, Coffey has other forms of unexplainable knowledge, such as predicting that a new inmate, nicknamed “Wild Bill,” will attempt to escape when they bring him to the prison. Coffey also connects with the souls of those with whom he touches. He tells “Paul Edgecombe” (Tom Hanks) that he saw Wild Bill’s “heart” and that he is an evil man who murdered the little girls for whom Coffey was convicted. Such a stereotype is also evident in the form of spiritual advice from women acquainted with a folk knowledge of voodoo as indicated in both *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2006, 2007) films, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1997), and even from a West Indian woman (Lois Kelly-Miller) in *Meet Joe Black* (2001), who can tell that “Joe Black” (Brad Pitt) is really “Death” incarnate. In *City of Angels* (1998), “Seth” (Nicolas Cage) falls from heaven and renounces his angelic status to pursue the love interest of “Dr. Maggie Rice” (Meg Ryan). Although formally an angel, Seth is forced to seek spiritual advice from the only black angel in the film, “Cassiel” (Andre Braugher). Even within the science fiction genre of *The Matrix* films, The Oracle’s spirituality and folk wisdom blends with, and is reinforced by, references to Eastern mysticism as one child in her apartment sits behind a book with Chinese characters that translates as “esoteric” and “wisdom,” while another child occupies himself with telekinesis. Gabbard (2004) refers to such scenes as “Hong Kong action meets Blaxploitation” (p. 167).

In *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, Will Smith plays the MN character that offers both Rannulph Junuh and “Hardy Greaves” (J. Michael Moncrief) sage advice based on folk wisdom, not intellectual knowledge. He uses his folk instincts to guide Hardy and Junuh in improving their golf game by transitioning from a cognitive approach to an emotive one:

Bagger: I think it’s time.

Junuh: Time for what?

Bagger: Time for you to see the field.

Junuh: The field? I see the field, but it’s 445 yards long, it’s got a little red flag at the end of it, it’s 12 strokes ahead of me.

Bagger: That ain’t it. ‘Cause if you see’d the field, you wouldn’t be hacking at that ball, like you was chopping weeds out from under your front porch.

...

Junuh: All right, what’s the field?

Bagger: Fix your eyes on Bobby Jones. Look at his practice swing. It’s like he’s searching for something. Then he finds it. Watch how he settle hisself right into the middle of it. Feel that focus. He got a lot of shots he can choose from: dufts ‘n tops ‘n skulls. There’s only one shot that’s in perfect harmony with the field. One shot that’s his . . . authentic shot. And that shot is gonna choose him. There’s a perfect shot out there trying to find each and every one of us, all we got to do is get ourselves out of it’s way and let it choose us . . . You can’t see that flag as some dragon you got to slay. You got to look with soft eyes. See the place where the tides, and the seasons, and the turning of the earth all come together, where everything that is becomes one. You got to seek that place with your soul Junuh. Seek it with your hands, don’t think about it. Feel it. Your hands are wiser than your head ever gonna be.

Junuh’s cognitive approach of control, linearity, measurements, and scores clash with Bagger’s emotionally guided folk wisdom of “seeing the field” in terms of “searching,” “authenticity,” “soul,” and “feeling.”



Such folk and spiritual wisdom is often preferable to intellectual abilities for MN characters. In many ways, this characterization is simply an updated version of a stereotype whereby whites have long regarded blacks as highly spiritual, at least since enslaved Africans first embraced Christianity. Versions of this white mythology often presents blacks as more spiritually faithful and skeptical of materialist readings of life, effectively allowing blacks to speak with greater authority on spiritual and emotional matters. As Gabbard (2004) writes, because blacks "have endured greater hardships than the typical white person, blacks are represented as more effective at coping with misfortune and with dispensing soul-healing advice" (p. 166).

*(Dis)appearing Acts* The sudden appearance and disappearance of MNs in these films plays an important role in establishing cinethetic racism. Most films begin with the sudden and rapid integration of the MN character into a white man's personal life, and conclude with the MN's sacrifice, and disappearance, for the betterment of white men. These events ritually emphasize the provisional nature of the MN's forays into the white normative world, and underscore the fact that they are harmless and temporary trespassers. As Rita Kempley (2003) emphasizes, "It isn't that the actors or the roles aren't likable, valuable or redemptive, but they are without interior lives." They are never permanent fixtures in the white world. Indeed, if MNs were regarded as a full character equal to the white character, there would be no need at the beginning of each film to so visibly enter a world to which they already belong, and no requirement that they leave that world by film's end. That the MN's "world's a stage" in which they have "their exits and their entrances," speaks Shakespearean volumes about their provisional placement in a white normative and supremacist world.

In the comedic film *Dogma* (1999), the broken white character is named "Bethany" (Linda Fiorentino).<sup>13</sup> She is a lapsed Catholic that has been charged with the divine mission of stopping Satan from ending the world. The MN takes the form of "Rufus" (Chris Rock), the "thirteenth Apostle" who literally plunges from heaven, completely naked, onto the asphalt of a lonely highway:

Bethany: Where exactly did you fall from?

Rufus: Some might say Grace.

...

Bethany: You know, normally I'd have a hard time with this, but somehow you falling out of the sky seems to go hand in glove with some of the other stuff I've been dealing with.

Rufus: Believe me, you ain't seen nothing yet . . . You know all about the other twelve Apostles . . . white boys, I might add. But no mention of Rufus. And why? 'Cause I'm a black man. But that's just my pet peeve. I mainly want to correct a major error that you people are basing a faith on.

Rufus first expresses distaste for a "whitewashing" of the Bible that has kept out of the Gospel due to racial prejudice. Yet, Rufus's job in the film is "to help a white woman stop two white male angels and one white male demon from destroying the plans of a white female god" (Gabbard 2004:169). Moreover, by the film's end, Rufus's theological advice and biting sarcasm redeems Bethany, while he abandons his racialized quest and returns to heaven in anonymity.

In *Holy Man* (1998), the MN character "G" (Eddie Murphy) is given no backstory or point of origin. Rather, his entire presence in the film circulates around the disturbing premise of exploiting spirituality in the interests of capital, specifically so the struggling television shopping network executive (played by Jeff Goldblum) can get his life back on track. Even the

13. *Dogma* is the only film in this sample in which the broken white character is a woman. The overwhelming usage of white men as the counterpart to magical negro characters speaks to the intersectional nature of this phenomenon. That is, the narratives of white loss and redemption in the U.S. context are almost exclusively stories about white men's lives, thus reflecting a dynamic in which quests for masculine dominance motivates these stories.

other characters in the film are baffled by G's ahistorical presence. The following dialogue capitalizes on the sense of mystery and holiness that MN characters often possess:

Scott Hawkes: That doesn't peak your Sherlock Holmes brain cells? My God, the man has no history, no social security number, no driver's license, voter's registration, birth certificate, nothing. "G" isn't even a name. For crying out loud, you don't find that curious?

Detective: Yes I do. I just don't find it illegal.

In *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, Bagger waits until the climax of the movie to suddenly decide that it is time to leave his white partner's side. In so doing, he passes his caddy duties along to a white child named Hardy. Bagger's egress from the film, coupled with his mentoring of a future white man (Hardy), ends the film on the note that even up to his last moments of cellophane existence, his sole purpose is to advise white men in matters of morality and maturity.

Junuh: You're leaving.

Bagger: Yes, sir. Yes, I am.

Junuh: I need you.

Bagger: No. No, you don't. Not no more. There is a small matter, around about five dollars. It was guaranteed.

Junuh: Yes, it was.

Bagger: 'Spect you won't be needing these shoes back now that I done broke 'em into my feet and all . . . Thank you, sir.

Bagger: This man is yours, Hardy. Take him on in.

Hardy: You want me . . . to take over for you? You leaving me?

Bagger: Only for a little while. You pick up Mr. Junuh's bag. You tote it real straight, you hear?

Hardy: But what if something comes up . . . and I don't know what to do?

Bagger: I got a feeling you'll figure it out.

In *Bedazzled* (2000), the MN (Gabriel Casseus) is first seen as he leans out of the shadows of a lower bunk bed. Dressed in a conventional prison-issue, blue denim outfit, he lights up a cigarette and takes a deep drag. He informs the broken white man in question, "Elliot" (Brendan Fraser), that he cannot sell his soul to the Devil because it does not belong to him, but instead belongs to "that universal spirit that animates and binds all things in existence," after which he continues to give Eliot familiar religious advice about keeping his mind and heart open to God's plan. When Elliot asks, "Who are you?" he replies, "Just a friend, brother. Just a really good friend," and then disappears back into the shadow from which he originally emerged.

MNs are required to "walk off into the sunset" because the black and white characters have become so emotionally close that a continued friendship would unsettle the racial status quo. If the MN does not disappear, a slew of unresolved questions and problems would emerge from their interracial friendship, engendering a social problem that the film's plot could not resolve without a significant shift in narrative structure. If such a resolution was tackled in these films, it would invariably lead to their undesired designation as race movies.

*Primordial Magic* As Herman Gray (1995) writes, "Unlike the historical stereotypes of blackness—figures as inferiority and loyalty to whiteness—in earlier generation of Hollywood cinema . . . contemporary films in the age of multiculturalism begin with the figure of blackness and difference" (p. 169). On-screen racial differences and interactions work to "balance" the white men. Such balance is achieved through the MN, who is symbolically constructed from two distinct concepts: magical powers and primordial naturalness. The magic is what gives the black character knowledge of the white ways of the world and enables him to teach,

guide, and instruct the white man on how to reclaim his social positioning, mental keenness, and material success. But this facet is not enough. Exploiting the idea that whiteness is deficient in key areas, the blackness of the MN is designed to "naturally" fill in whiteness's gaps, making whites more well-rounded and complete human beings. In this sense, blackness becomes the magical spice to a dull whiteness. As noted by bell hooks (1992):

Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture . . . fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited, and that such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the *status quo* . . . frank expression of longing, the open declaration of desire, the need to be intimate with dark Others. The point is to be changed by this convergence of pleasure and Otherness (pp. 21–22, 24, emphasis in original).

While new media technologies and imaginations open up more and more spaces for diverse and progressive forms of black representations, there is a failure to acknowledge the underlying fetishistic needs that shape cinematic blackness into the form of fantastic magical powers that transform black-white friendship into a use-value commodity for white characters' salvation. As Hicks (2003) suggests, "black characters must be assigned saint-like goodness to counteract the racism white audiences automatically direct toward a black character on screen. That is, for white audiences, a saintly black character is the moral equivalent of a 'normal' white character" (p. 28). Black magic, and its incarnation in MN characters, is attractive as long as it can be regulated to the servitude of whiteness. Black agency in this sample of films is possible only in a magical, metaphysical level, whereby black "self-determined" actions represent acts of loyalty, devotion, and caring for "good white folk."

At this moment of politically correct movie-going, underpinned by a rampant feeling of reverse racism and endangered Eurocentrism, Hollywood is re-appropriating (and thereby trying to tame) black alterity through modernist strategies of magical primitivism. Despite these films' chic or progressive look, such strategies in the wake of postcolonialism and rediscovery of "authentic" black subcultures are still complacent within the framework of Anglo cultural imperialism. In this Gramscian sense, the fetish of these films and characters is hegemonic; the characters impinge on commonplace assumptions regarding the "proper place" of blackness and its role in relation to whiteness. As Abdul R. JanMohamed (1986) writes of the Western "fetishization of the other":

The power of the "imaginary" field binding the narcissistic colonialist text is nowhere better illustrated than in its fetishization of the Other. This process operates by substituting natural or generic categories for those that are socially or ideologically determined. All the evil characteristics and habits with which the colonialist endows the native are thereby not presented as the products of social and cultural difference but as characteristics inherent in the race—in the "blood"—of the native. In its extreme form, this kind of fetishization transmutes all the specificity and difference into a *magical essence* (p. 96, emphasis added).

As referenced in the final epigraph to this article, Marx notes society's willingness to blind itself to its own monstrous words and deeds. In the contemporary cinematic moment, the MN is the "magical essence" (in the words of JanMohamed) and the "magical cap" (in the words of Marx), which blind us from the uncomfortable realization that such films reproduce white supremacy.

From this perspective, it is apparent that the MN is an acceptable identity in mainstream Hollywood films because it rests upon a racial salvation and redemption motif of the American myth that, in the end, reinstalls the centrality of whiteness and leaves it unchallenged. It is the MN as a form of visual rhetoric, which bonds to the history of race relations. Sacvan Bercovitch (1993) connects history and rhetoric by arguing, "conquest by arms and conquest by the word" go hand in hand, and that "these two kinds of violence are entwined; how metaphor

becomes fact, and fact, metaphor; how the realms of power and myth can be reciprocally sustaining; and how that reciprocity can encompass widely disparate outlooks" (p. 71). Redemption is deeply rooted in our social history and the logic of it draws upon our propensity to justify recent and ongoing violence though appeals to our collective belief in an idyllic happy conclusion, and the joy and relief we find from gazing at a black figure who is not defamed or denigrated, but who is afforded magical powers.

### *White Normativity and Superiority*

*Socioeconomic Mobility* These films promote the idea that individual acts of hard work cure broken white characters' impoverished socioeconomic positions. Through exploitation of growing white fears regarding an unstable labor market and economic infrastructure, the MN is glorified by teaching white people how to save themselves from socioeconomic devastation. Whether helping them find buried treasure in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, curing illnesses not covered by costly insurance plans in *The Green Mile*, or assisting elderly and disabled white men to carry out their antivampire plans in the *Blade* trilogy, the MN works tirelessly to give white men the tools needed to ensure that their status will not fall further or to guarantee their upward mobility. In so doing, MN films strengthen the belief in the morality of individualistic solutions to social problems.<sup>14</sup>

Instead of exploring the social causes or solutions to economic inequality, these films show how impoverished MNs impart conservative, "bootstraps" solutions, making the MN's logic and thinking that much more attractive to broken white men; if they simply put forth a little effort, they are nearly guaranteed reinsertion into a social world in which they are in control of their future, family, friends, and finances. Of course, the use of emotionally touching, interracial stories obscure this logic because the films' narratives rely upon the collectively shared, liberal-humanist fantasy that heart-to-heart interactions across the color-line can result in social transformation. As Morgan Freeman's character God puts it in *Evan Almighty*: "You want to know how to change the world, son? One act of random kindness at a time." MNs work on the assumption that white men are just down-on-their-luck temporarily because they do not have the bad values of their darkened peers. Hence, white men can simply decide to change by looking inward, rather than outward at their social conditions.

For instance, in *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, World War I veteran and former golf champion Rannulph Junuh is a washed-up, impotent drunk who hangs out in seedy, backwoods shacks, playing cards with impoverished and drunken black sharecroppers. In fact, besides Bagger Vance, these are the only other African Americans with whom Junuh comes in direct contact. His life seems a waste and is spiraling out of control due in large part to the economic depression of the 1930s. Such a backdrop invites audiences to understand that Junuh—a person of money, talent, and breeding—is strangely and improperly out of place. In this regard, the movie takes some of the great tragedies of the twentieth century such as the "war to end all wars" and the Great Depression, and portrays them as mere stumbling blocks for white social mobility. Such social catastrophes are repositioned as individual hurdles, which temporarily disrupt the spiritually guided, "manifest destiny" narrative that can only be set back in place by the enchantment of the MN. The movie takes these great tragedies and attempts to make white audiences feel good about them, anesthetizing their ugly horror into a kind of individual, meritocratic prettiness.

14. In defining "the sociological imagination," C. Wright Mills ([1959]2000) invokes the interrelationship between history and biography: "the personal troubles of milieu and the public issues of social structure" (p. 8). In this vein, the dominant narratives used to interpret these films are illuminated as antisociological; they disconnect personal troubles from public issues while simultaneously valorizing individual agency decoupled from social structures.

*Moral Lessons* As Kwame A. Appiah (1993) writes of the film *Grand Canyon* (1991) and the character "Simon" (Danny Glover) in "No Bad Nigger: Blacks as the Ethical Principle in the Movies," "only Simon and the inevitably black woman he meets and starts dating seem simply descent. And when one white character, played by Kevin Kline, is going through a crisis, it's the good sense of this black saint that pulls him through" (p. 81). Akin to Appiah's insights, almost all of the MN characters in this sample ( $n = 24$ ) represent a kind of healing morality. For example, in *The Family Man*, the MN Cash, now magically transformed into a convenience store clerk, takes a \$1 bill from a white teenage girl who has purchased a drink for 99 cents. Upon taking the \$1 bill, Cash states, "Outta ten" and then precedes to hand her nine dollars and a penny in change. The girl takes the unearned profit and heads out of the door as Cash shakes his head in disgust. Of course, this action is common for MNs as they give every opportunity to a white character to be morally redeemed—while never raising the possibility that the MN might offer a similar opportunity to an African American. In fact, none of these films show MNs helping other blacks, only whites. Of substantial concern is that the sudden appearance of the MN in the 1990s (a time in which we were told there were uncounted *interracial* hostilities) and that despite its wide variety of forms, the MN is disconnected and segregated from other African Americans, thus disallowing the use of morality lessons in black, *intra*-racial interactions.

The teaching of morality lessons to whites is repeated in many of the films. Yet, it is in *The Green Mile* that this morality lesson is most disturbing. As the film reaches its end, Paul and the other prison guards are nearing the scheduled execution of the MN character John Coffey. While engineering Coffey's escape would not be beyond the realm of possibility, as earlier in the film, the guards took Coffey out of the prison to heal the warden's wife, they decide to follow through with the execution. Still, the film goes to great length to convince the audience that they should feel happy and satisfied about his unjust and impending execution.

Coffey: Hello Boss.

Edgecomb: Hello John. I guess you know we're coming down to it now. Another couple of days . . . Now, what about a preacher? Somebody to say a little prayer with?

Coffey: Don't want no preacher. You can say a prayer, if you like.

Edgecomb: Me? Suppose I could, if it came to that . . . I have to ask you something very important now.

Coffey: I know what you gonna say. You don't have to say it.

Edgecomb: No, I do. I do. I have to say it. Tell me what you want me to do. You want me to take you out of here? Just let you run away? See how far you could get?

Coffey: Why would you do such a foolish thing?

Edgecomb: On the day of my judgment, when I stand before God, and He asks me why did I . . . did I kill one of His true . . . miracles, what am I going to say? That it was my job? It's my job.

Coffey: You tell God the Father, it was a kindness you done. I know you're hurting and worrying. I can feel it on you. But you ought to quit on it now. I want it to be over and done with. I do. I'm tired boss. Tired of being on the road, lonely as a sparrow in the rain. I'm tired of never having me a buddy to be with . . . to tell me where we's going to, coming from, or why. Mostly, I'm tired of people being ugly to each other. I'm tired of all the pain I feel and hear in the world . . . every day. There's too much of it. It's like pieces of glass in my head, all the time. Can you understand?

Edgecomb: Yes John. I think I can.

Coffey insists that the burden of experiencing the evil in the world has made him "tired," so he seeks a release that only death can afford. Since Edgecomb and the audience now know that Coffey is innocent of his charges, the film neither frames the death scene as a spectacle of an innocent man being executed, nor does it suggest problems with the U.S. legal system that regularly executes innocent people (with a historically much higher rate for African

Americans than whites). Rather, Coffey is transformed into the classic “white Man’s Burden” in which Edgecomb’s benevolent paternalism is able to free (murder) Coffey and then release (condemn) Coffey to the death penalty. Rather than inviting a collective distaste for Edgecomb, the audience is left feeling that he has learned a valuable moral lesson, and that he has in fact repaid Coffey for the assistance that was given to him. John Coffey and the forces that brought him to death in the electric chair are framed in rather opaque spiritual/religious terms rather than sociopolitical, historical, or racial terms. This dimension of the MN serves as the personification of redemptive suffering and violence that is a central aspect of the MN—the anguish and cruelty endured by the MN’s sacrifice labors to transform the white character into a morally improved person. Edgecomb takes such morality and applies it, the audience is told, toward a new career. Looking back on his life, an elderly Edgecomb states, “It was the last execution I ever took part in. I just couldn’t do it anymore after that. We both transferred out, took jobs with Boys’ Correctional. It was all right. ‘Catch them young’ became my motto.”

Audrey Columbe (2002) notes that in this cinematic formula, “The magical black man’s power is absorbed by someone else’s focus; he apparently doesn’t need it himself . . . the extremes in characterization amount to the same thing: safety for the white men.” The MN always leaves the status quo preserved rather than challenged. His morality is limited to an individual level. The MN is often put in a kind of ahistorical vacuum so the characters’ status can be easily transmuted into an abstract moral signifier for an individual broken white character.

In many ways, today’s correlation of blackness as a moral principle is built upon the historically entrenched discourse of the “Noble Savage.”<sup>15</sup> In the Eurocentric imagination of the eighteenth century, Africans and indigenous “new world” peoples were said to have noble qualities: harmony with nature, generosity, child-like simplicity, a disdain of materialistic luxury, moral courage, natural happiness even under duress, and a natural or innate morality. The romantics developed this idea via their belief that artificial, pre-industrial society was navigating away from its traditional roots, thus losing touch with the necessary precepts of humanity’s true and primitive condition of passion, emotion, or moral instinct. Public discourses concerning the inherent and primordial nobility of dark-skinned savages served as both a reflection of, and a rationale for, the burgeoning ideas of renaissance humanism, classic liberalism, and the romantic philosophy of sovereign individualism. As the growing colonial contact and imperialism of Europeans and Euro-Americans extended in breadth and depth, violently over-simplified (mis)understandings of dark-skinned cultures were structured by the assumptions of romanticism.

*White Sexuality/Romance* In most of these films ( $n = 20$ ) white men need remedial advice regarding love, romance, and sex. Such a dynamic is most often accompanied with a closely related gender component of white supremacy—the “emphasized femininity” (Connell 1987) of white womanhood that is objectified through a heteronormative order. That is, MN magic is often used to make white men more desirable to their wives or girlfriends, who are typically marginalized as accoutrements to white masculinity. For example, in *The Family Man*, “Jack Campbell” (Nicolas Cage) is a materialistic, overworked corporate executive consumed with material pleasures. When the MN Cash intercedes, Campbell is magically transported to an alternative life where he is married to his ex-girlfriend, inclusive of a hyper-sexual relationship, with all the trappings of a white normative ideology: two children, a dog, a house with a picket fence, and a minivan.

15. The term first appeared in Dryden’s *The Conquest of Granada* (1672) as an idealized picture of “nature’s gentleman,” a character thought worthy because it was authentically civilized and unspoiled by material developments. Such dualism separating savage and civilized was best expressed in the opening lines of Rousseau’s *Emile* ([1762]1993): “Everything is good in leaving the hands of the creator of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.”

In the case of *The Green Mile*, the interactions of the MN (John Coffey) with Paul Edgecomb are often geared toward his sociosexual revitalization. In one scene, Coffey (a prisoner on death row who is watched over by Edgecomb, the head guard on the cell block) reaches through the cell bars, and violently grabs Edgecomb's crotch against his will. Using his magical powers, Coffey removes Edgecomb's ailment (alluded to earlier in the film as an urinary tract infection), thus allowing full use of his sexual organ. Shortly thereafter, the scene changes to Paul arrival at his house, where his wife "Jan" (Bonnie Hunt), is preparing dinner, while the sounds of African American jazz singer Billie Holiday's 1937 recording of "I Can't Give You Anything but Love" plays on the kitchen radio. The scene suddenly changes to an exterior shot of a bedroom window accompanied by the sounds of the couple making love. During the morning after, Jan remarks, "Not that I'm complaining, but we haven't gone four times in one night since we were nineteen." Although far from unusual, such a scene is a blatant example of how Hollywood uses particularly myopic constructions of blackness (from the magic of fantastic characters to soulful and spiritual musical hits) to raise the levels of romance and sexuality for whites. In another scene Coffey saves the wife of Edgecomb's boss, a cancer-riddled white woman, by kissing her on her mouth. Per Gabbard (2004), the film "assures white people that a huge black man who acts out forbidden moments of interracial sex is in fact put on earth to heal white people. The only time that John Coffey deploys his miraculous healing powers on something other than a white person is when he restores life to an inmate's pet mouse" (p. 146). In *The Green Mile*, the humanizing, sexualizing encounters between blacks and whites literally takes place within the sphere of magic.

In the comedy *Happy Gilmore* (1996), the MN is a deceased golf tutor named "Chubbs" (played by Carl Weathers) who speaks to the title character (played by Adam Sandler) from beyond the grave. Chubbs gives Gilmore advice that wins him the love of the golf tournament director (Julie Bowen). In *City of Angels*, the black angel Cassiel helps Seth transform from angel to human so he can obtain the love of Dr. Maggie Race. In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the Blind Seer supplies advice to "Everett" (George Clooney) so he can become an acceptable husband to his fiancé who is unimpressed with his constant foul-ups.

The MN ritually takes advantage of stereotypical white deficits in matters of love, emotion, and sex in order to critique what is normally disallowed from black evaluation: white intelligence. In *The Matrix* (1999), upon meeting The Oracle, Neo is closely examined in order to discover whether or not he is "The One" who will save humanity. In so doing, The Oracle gently critiques Neo's lack of sexual sophistication and awareness:

Oracle: You're cuter than I thought . . . I can see why she likes you.

Neo: Who?

Oracle: Not too bright though.

Such ritual practices exemplify the MN's attempt to teach and instruct the broken white man in question. This practice ritually codes white men as having fallen from perfection (read: an artificially made, modern civilization that is the antithesis of sexuality and carnal desires) and by extension, that black men are uncivilized, natural, and essentially over-sexualized beings. The MN's magic makes him a worthy teacher and elevates his crass carnal state just enough to interact with a derelict white man as "equals." As Darnell Hunt (2005) notes:

blackness is rooted in a profound sense of loss among whites . . . in an all-out effort to affirm the superiority of European civilization, [whites] projected their worst fears about themselves onto Africans, blackness inadvertently became the repository for all of the prohibited qualities that signify communion with nature, that oppose the (English) ideal of civilization (p. 6).

The MN teaches the white character about style, sexuality, and all things coded natural, authentic, primitive, and pre-modern, which civilization takes from the hapless modern (white) individual. In *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, Junuh's "loss of his swing" takes on vast

sexual metaphors by the film's end. In a quest to seduce Junuh back onto the golf links, his former fiancé "Adele" (Charlize Theron) strips down to her underwear to the tune of Duke Ellington's "Mood Indigo." However, Junuh is unable to both return to golf and to consummate his relationship with his former fiancé. Shortly thereafter, Junuh takes out his intertwined sexual and sport frustration by driving golf balls off into a field in the middle of the night. It is in this scene that the MN character of Bagger Vance first appears. He explains to Junuh:

Yep . . . Inside each and every one of us is one true authentic swing . . . Somethin' we was born with . . . Somethin' that's ours and ours alone . . . Somethin' that can't be taught to ya or learned . . . Somethin' that got to be remembered . . . Over time the world can rob us of that swing . . . It get buried inside us under all our wouldas and couldas and shouldas . . . Some folk even forget what their swing was like . . .

Such advice gives Junuh just enough spiritual-sexual mojo to get his swing, and his fiancé, back.

Through such a discourse of black primitivism and sexual potency, the otherness of blackness is not simply controlled, but is used as a remedy. For instance, while blacks were repressed and murdered under the Jim Crow lynchings of the 1920s, they were also renowned for what the potential of their "natural rhythm" and sensuality meant for whites. As the *New York Herald Tribune* printed in 1925:

The African with his love of color, warmth, rhythm and the whole sensuous life, might, if emotionally liberated, do interesting things to a "Nordic" stock, so bustling and busy, so preoccupied with "doing things" in the external world, as almost to forget sometimes, that it has any senses (quoted in Lemke 1998:117).

And along these same lines, Mariana Torgovnick (1990) writes that discourses of black primitivism often obscures "sexual desires or fears . . . masking the controller's fear of losing control and power" (p. 8), and thus argues that we should unpack the white Western discourse as a "rhetoric of desire, ultimately more interesting, which implicates 'us' in the 'them' we try to conceive as the Other" (p. 245). The aforementioned Noble Savage trope became one end of a racial dialectic whereby blackness was prefigured not only as a personified moral critique for forms of white identity that had "gone bad," but as a remedy for whites that are sexually passionless and relatively impotent.

*Hegemonic Whiteness* In 21 of the films in this sample, MN characters were found to both (1) help the main broken white character reclaim a position of cultural authority so that other whites in the film looked up to him, while (2) simultaneously distancing himself from traits and people coded as nonwhite. Such a dynamic resembles what Amanda Lewis (2004) calls "hegemonic whiteness":

a shifting configuration of practices and meanings that occupy the dominant position in a particular racial formation and that successfully manage to occupy the empty space of "normality" in our culture. Collectively, this set of schemas functions as that seemingly "neutral" or "pre-cultural" yardstick against which cultural behavior, norms, and values are measured . . . As part of a central force in the functioning of white supremacy, hegemonic whiteness is not a quality inherent to individual whites but is a collective social force that shapes their lives just as it shapes the lives of racial minorities (p. 634).

In this sense, many aspire to a normative ideal. For whites, that ideal is not necessarily the most prevalent form of white identity, but is rather the most socially endorsed and valued. Characteristics associated with contemporary U.S. hegemonic whiteness are a balanced sense of emotion, moral purity, intellectualism, authority, self-reliance, objectivity, and possession of a highly individualized work ethic.



Many of the MNs assist the disheveled white character to obtain the valorized position of the white ideal. For example, in the third installment of *The Matrix* (2003), not only does The Oracle help Neo become the ultimate Christ-like savior among his peers as he morphs into "The One," but he is also constantly helped to reign victorious over the hordes of white male "Agent Smiths." Neo is constantly taken away from "Zion" (a setting that has an abundance of people of color relative to Hollywood's standards) due to The Oracle's advice to plunge into the white space of the Matrix in order to vanquish the flock of white male agents. Only then can he return to Zion as a leader deserving of the people's adoration.

In *The Green Mile*, John Coffey is able to help Edgecomb establish his place as a valorized ideal among his peers by not only vanquishing his work colleague and constant thorn in his side, "Percy" (Doug Hutchison), but also the disrespectful and rambunctious inmate "Billy the Kid" (Sam Rockwell). In *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, the MN is particularly well versed in helping Junuh shun the aforementioned cadre of drunken, card-playing black sharecroppers, and assists him in literally beating his white competition on the golf links to become the most valorized, "pride of Savannah." Even, amidst the strange science fiction vampirism of the *Blade* trilogy, the MN "Eric Brooks" (Wesley Snipes) assists the broken white character "Abraham Whistler" (Kris Kristofferson) to claim a position of authority among other vampire hunters while laboring to save whites from incurring the wrath of the undead. With the predominant symbolism of vampires as metaphors for moral laxity and rampant sexual depravity, Snipes's role as the MN also relates to his guardianship of Anglo-Puritanical notions of sexual restraint.

The various performances of whiteness in these films work in distinct ways and are embodied quite differently: from New York corporate executives (*The Family Man*), those that have passed on to the next life (*What Dreams May Come* [1998]), Southern, depression era, shell-shocked golfers (*The Legend of Bagger Vance*), eighteenth-century pirates in search of treasure (*Pirates of the Caribbean*), and descendants of Christ seeking to stop the devil from destroying creation (*Dogma*). Yet, in all these films, the audience is informed that in each historical moment and particular fantastic context—from virtual realities in *The Matrix* the metropolitan setting of Los Angeles in *City of Angels*, to the pastoral landscapes of rural Virginia in *Evan Almighty*—certain forms of whiteness are dominant. The MN's assistance to these broken white characters thus demonstrates a configuration of various racial practices that embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of white supremacy, thus securing the dominant position of whites in each and every film.

**Spirituality/Material Detachment** In all of the films in this study ( $n = 26$ ), the MNs go to great lengths to teach the white character to eschew rampant materialism and to embrace a spiritual attitude toward the world. In *What Dreams May Come*, "Chris Nielsen" (Robin Williams) dies to find himself in heaven. His wife however, having committed suicide, is in hell. Thanks to the MN of this film, "Albert Lewis" (Cuba Gooding, Jr.), Nielsen is assisted in his quest to enter hell and save his wife's immortal soul. In so doing, Nielsen learns the true meaning of heaven as an attitude of material detachment rather than a place. In *The Family Man*, Cash teaches Jack Campbell a harsh lesson so he can realize that his rampant materialism and womanizing has detracted from a life he once desired and with which he has now lost. This theme is repeated again in both *Bruce Almighty* and *Evan Almighty* as "Bruce Nolan" (Jim Carrey) and "Evan Baxter" (Steve Carell) are instructed by God to, in the former, stop wishing for material things and to help others and, in the latter, give up a life of corrupt politics and material wealth in order to guide others to a spiritual life.

The redemption of broken white characters via material detachment is perhaps best exemplified in *Holy Man*. "Ricky Hayman" (Jeff Goldblum) is the producer of a slumping home shopping network and "Kelly Preston" (Kate Newell) is a fellow employee brought in to shape things up, thereby jeopardizing Ricky's status at the firm. As the film progresses, Ricky and

Kate nearly run over the MN character of G with their car. Feeling horrible, they decide to take him with them, thus establishing a friendship. G offers his help to save Ricky's job. In so doing, G ends up in front of the camera, viewers identify with him, and they buy every item he hocks. However, G soon learns that the network is using him and he refuses to be a part of perpetuating such an unchecked "spirit of capitalism." Toward the end of the film, after G's incessant implorations to stop worrying about materialism, Ricky breaks down in an emotional appeal to a live television audience:

Of course, I'm not G. I'm just a . . . a regular, a regular type, but, um . . . I think I'm finally getting it. That you never . . . feel more whole . . . and right . . . than when you love . . . another person . . . and when you know that that other person loves you back. And I had that. But I might have messed it up just a . . . just a little bit ago. Her name's Kate, and, uh . . . she made me wanna do better . . . to do what was right. And I didn't listen. And I'm real, real . . . sorry . . . that I didn't do this before.

Combining aspects of the aforementioned reclamations of white romance with detachment from materialism, and a kind of take-no-prisoners, unfettered capitalism, Ricky learns from G how to achieve a life of love and spiritual fulfillment.

### Conclusion

This article examines the magical negro and his or her relationship of servitude to broken and disheveled white characters that sojourn after redemption and salvation. Specifically, this work analyzes such films as a significant social problem. That is, while the black/white interactions may appear as harmless, or even as a marked improvement considering the legacy of overt Hollywood racism, they are also indicative of a complex relationship of antiblack stereotypes and narratives of white normativity and supremacy that together form a significant cultural structure—cinethetic racism. Such a dynamic demonstrates the necessity to critically interrogate the claim that these films are racially progressive. While such a position may appear as intentionally provocative, the notion of MN films as a social problem is neither designed as an attack upon those who see these films as containing progressive instances of interracial on screen interactions, nor upon those who claim that these films are a reflection of positive social change toward equality and away from overt prejudice. Rather, it is precisely because of these shifts in the racial landscape that such films are so problematic. As Ashley W. Doane, Jr. (1997) states:

Despite American ideals of equality, the United States in the 1990s is marked by significant gaps between whites and peoples of color in terms of wealth, poverty, income, unemployment, control of positions of political and economic power, education, and virtually every other indicator of social and economic well-being. The lack of awareness of white privileges outlined above produces a distorted view of American society in which whites view racism as a "thing of the past" (except for the "abnormal" racial incident—such as the Rodney King beating) and opportunities for all groups as equal (p. 155).

That is, these films do resonate with the 1990s discourse of contradictory race relations—that of an extensive and dominant favor for abstract principles of racial equality, coupled with specific instances of antiblack and white normative rhetoric—as well as a disregard of material inequalities organized along racial lines.

This study suggests a steady trend in cinethetic racism that first appeared in *Ghost* (1990) and continues on in many other media outlets not included in this sample: whether in Hollywood films like *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Because of Winn-Dixie* (2005) or television shows like *Battlestar Galactica* and its MN character "Priest Elosha" (Lorena Gale). Hence, the need exists for further research about MN characters and cinethetic racism. Future attention to these subjects should illuminate the synthesis of patriarchal and white supremacist discursive

regimes. That is, while I concentrate on the racialized meanings of the films in this article, it is imperative to consider that narratives of American redemption have almost exclusively been stories about white men's lives. As such, all but one of the films in the sample are accounts of white male redemption from the atrocities of sexism, economic exploitation, and white supremacy that eddies off of the erasure of white masculinity's national history and implication in a racist social order while it displaces black subjects from their struggles for equality. Hence, recent headway gained by intersectional analysis should guide the examination of cinematic racism in which gender is not merely an addendum to white supremacy but is an intertwined component.

Additionally, we should examine how audiences negotiate these films. For example, how do various racialized, classed, and gendered audiences (whether southern Latino immigrants, black middle class northerners, or white working class women) view and make active meaning of these films? Prior work on audience reception (especially in the tradition of Ang 1985; Hunt 2002; Radway 1984; Shively 1992) has laid a firm foundation, but it is one that leaves unresolved a host of questions. Not the least amongst these questions is the tension between the Scylla of romanticizing the power of media consumers that are continually engaged in a form of "semiological guerrilla warfare" (Eco 1986) and the Charybdis of presumptuous idiocies of political fundamentalism (of both the left and right), which posit mass media as little more than "bread and circuses" thought up by the powerful to dupe the masses.<sup>16</sup> Also, we are faced with questions of cultural power, global media, transnational audiences, new media technologies, and problems of essentialism facing the conceptualization of categories of audience members that could be taken up by scholars wishing to illuminate the usage of MN films by, and the effects of cinethetic racism on, the audience (Morley 2006).

Finally, and in piggybacking off the latter, future work should extrapolate the effects of MN films and cinethetic racism on material conditions. Empirical work should investigate how such films and forms of racism work to (re)create, justify, and buttress lived inequality within a U.S. context that is steadily marked by processes of racialization via hyper-racialized surveillance from police, immigration, and national security profiling, the juggernaut of the mounting prison-industrial complex, the continued dismantling of Keynesian economic ideology, the abandonment of (and nationwide commitment to forget) post-Katrina New Orleans, the strengthening of white nationalist and nativist movements, and the continuation of U.S. domination of darker-skinned nations on the "underside of modernity" (from the Middle East to South America) that together represent the continued significance of white normativity and supremacy within a color-blind paradigm.

The films in this sample can be understood as a bold refusal to settle for the kind of invisibility and "shucking and jiving" that had once been so routine (and which still exists) in much of Hollywood films. However, just as challenges to patriarchy are "articulated in the context of masculinist ideologies" (Gamman 1989:18), the challenges posed to white supremacy by these films draw from, and are situated within, a popular culture permeated by white normative ideologies and the pervasive, strategic rhetoric supporting it. These films can reaffirm the status quo in a subversive, mystified way that makes them all the more dangerous and insidious. In this sense, the racial ideologies of cinethetic racism are always produced and rearticulated in relation to material circumstances. Although these films can be incredibly entertaining, these media products do important ideological work and are, "meaning in the service of power" (Bonilla-Silva 2003:25–26) that rationalize systems of inequality and relations of domination. The on-screen relations revolve around the fact that even though the

16. "Bread and circuses" (*panem et circenses*) is a Roman metaphor for those that choose good and fun over their own freedom. Such pronouncements often appear in commentary that accuses people of giving up their civic duty to follow whatever political leader offers to satisfy their decadent desires. In this vein, it is ironic that whether neo-Marxist or neo-con, the "masses" seem to represent "othered" people (children, women, people of color, the poor, the working class, the uneducated) that are seen as outside the realms of maturity and transcendent consciousness that the critic happily inhabits in judgmental solitude (for further discussion Morley 2006).

MNs are the films protagonists and “stars,” their broken white “clients” are at the center of each story. As white men they are the focus of admiring gazes, the perfect exemplars of white boys, the desire of white women, and the incarnation of the complexities of human society. As white women they are exemplars of the “cult of true womanhood,” demure yet strong willed, and allegiant yet independent. In spite of their social *faux pas* and sexual inadequacies, the broken white characters are framed as the natural and normal paradigm and archetype of what it means to be human.

It is important, therefore, to critically engage cinematic representations of race in order to chart the contours of the strategic rhetoric that supports (and draws support) from such representations. Given the contemporary “crisis of whiteness” (Winant 1997), the charting of this rhetoric will remain an on-going project. It is now ever more germane to unpack supposedly “positive” representations of blackness in an era in which “Jim Crow is dead, [but] James Crow, Esq., is alive and well” (Battle and Bennett 2007). We must turn more attention to the fundamental principle of relationality that defines the Western racial order, as it often serves the interests of those atop that order, despite sociopolitical constructions of whites as victimized and wrecked characters deserving of empathy and assistance.

Appendix

Table A1 • "Magical Negro" Film Figures, 2007–1996

Film	Theaters (#)		Worldwide Release History		Worldwide Admissions (millions)		Relations of Production				
	Opening Weekend	Widest	Days	Theaters	U.S.	International	Writer(s)	Producer(s)	Director(s)	Distributor	
<i>Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil</i> (1997)	25	824	1,312	286	1,655	5.46	1.00	John Berendt (book), John Lee Hancock (screenplay)	Clint Eastwood, Arnold Stiefel	Clint Eastwood	Warner Bros
<i>City of Angels</i> (1998)	78	2,212	2,433	240	4,132	16.70	15.92	Wim Wenders, Peter Handke, Richard Reitinger, Dana Stevens	Charles Roven, Dawn Steel, Charles Newirth	Brad Silberling	Warner Bros
<i>What Dreams May Come</i> (1998)	55	2,526	2,531	286	4,150	11.75	8.53	Richard Matheson (book), Ronald Bass (screenplay)	Stephen Deutsch, Barnet Bain	Vincent Ward	PolyGram
<i>The Green Mile</i> (1999)	136	2,875	2,875	212	4,871	26.93	19.53	Stephen King (book), Frank Darabont	Frank Darabont, David Faldes	Frank Darabont	Warner Bros
<i>Meet Joe Black</i> (1999)	44	2,500	2,527	135	4,581	9.47	13.39	Ron Osborn, Jeff Reno, Kevin Wade, Bo Goldman	Martin Brest	Martin Brest	Universal Pictures
<i>The Family Man</i> (2000)	76	2,388	2,441	491	4,249	14.16	4.66	David Diamond, David Weissman	Armyan Bernstein, Thomas A. Bliss, Andrew Z. Dais, James M Freitag	Brett Ratner	Universal Pictures
<i>Unbreakable</i> (2000)	95	2,708	2,708	143	5,668	17.76	29.07	M. Night Shyamalan	Barry Mendel, Sam Mercer, M. Night Shyamalan	M. Night Shyamalan	Touchstone Pictures
<i>The Legend of Bagdad Vance</i> (2000)	31	2,061	2,162	244	2,998	5.47	1.04	Steven Pressfield (book), Jeremy Leven (screenplay)	Jake Eberts, Robert Redford	Robert Redford	Dreamworks
<i>O Brother, Where Art Thou?</i> (2000)	46	5	847	331	1,888	8.51	4.91	Joel Coen, Ethan Coen	Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Ethan Coen	Joel Coen, Ethan Coen	Touchstone Pictures

(continued)

Table A1 • (continued)

Film	U.S. Gross (millions)	Theaters (#)		Worldwide Release History		Worldwide Admissions (millions)		Relations of Production			
		Opening Weekend	Widest	Days	Theaters	U.S.	International	Writer(s)	Producer(s)	Director(s)	Distributor
<i>Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest</i> (2006)	423	4,133	4,133	238	12,177	58.79	114.06	Ted Elliot, Terry Rossio, Stuart Beattie, Jay Wolpert	Jerry Bruckheimer	Gore Verbinski	Walt Disney Pictures
<i>Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End</i> (2007)	794	4,362	4,362	147	20,232	42.97	116.00	Ted Elliot, Terry Rossio	Jerry Bruckheimer	Gore Verbinski	Buena Vista
<i>Blade</i> (1998)	70	2,322	2,389	520	3,939	14.86	8.50	Marv Wolfman, Gene Colan (comic book), David S. Goyer (screenplay)	Peter Frankfurt	Stephen Norrington	New Line Cinema
<i>Blade II</i> (2002)	82	2,707	2,707	223	4,996	13.17	9.78	Marv Wolfman, Gene Colan (comic book), David S. Goyer (screenplay)	Peter Frankfurt, Patrick Palmer, Wesley Snipes	Guillermo del Toro	New Line Cinema
<i>Blade Trinity</i> (2004)	52	2,912	2,912	234	6,031	7.82	13.82	Marv Wolfman, Gene Colan (comic book), David S. Goyer (screenplay)	Avi Arad, Peter Frankfurt, David S. Goyer, Lynn Harris, Wesley Snipes	David S. Goyer	New Line Cinema
<i>The Matrix</i> (1999)	171	2,849	2,903	514	7,366	33.74	50.70	The Wachowski Brothers	Joel Silver	The Wachowski Brothers	Warner Bros
<i>The Matrix Reloaded</i> (2003)	282	3,603	3,603	165	8,184	43.31	50.64	The Wachowski Brothers	Joel Silver	The Wachowski Brothers	Warner Bros
<i>The Matrix Revolutions</i> (2003)	139	3,502	3,502	112	7,896	21.24	31.30	The Wachowski Brothers	Joel Silver	The Wachowski Brothers	Warner Bros

<i>The Time Machine</i> (2002)	57	2,944	2,958	230	5,188	9.14	4.78	H. G. Wells (book), John Logan (screenplay)	Walter F. Parkes, David Valdes	Simon Wells	Warner Bros
<i>The Punisher</i> (2004)	34	2,649	2,649	181	3,587	5.03	1.20	Jonathan Hensleigh, Michael France	Avi Arad, Gale Anne Hurd,	Jonathan Hensleigh	Lions Gate
<i>Happy Gilmore</i> (1996)	39	2,022	2,069	201	2,452	8.77	.18	Tim Herlihy, Adam Sandler	Robert Simonds	Dennis Dugan	Universal Studios
<i>Holy Man</i> (1998)	12	2,013	2,013	412	2,976	2.56	2.21	Tom Schulman	Ray Murphy, Rebekah Rudd	Stephen Herek	Touch- stone Pictures
<i>Dogma</i> (1999)	31	1,269	1,292	133	2,025	6.03	1.35	Kevin Smith	Scott Mosier	Kevin Smith	Lions Gate
<i>Bedazzled</i> (2000)	38	2,568	2,571	314	4,490	7.08	7.06	Larry Gelbart, Harold Ramis, Peter Tolan	Trevor Albert, Harold Ramis	Harold Ramis	Twentieth Century Fox
<i>Down to Earth</i> (2001)	64	2,521	2,521	209	3,169	10.90	.94	Chris Rock, Lance Crouther, Ali Le- Roy, Louis C. K.	Sean Daniel, James Jacks, Michael Rotenberg	Chris Weitz, Paul Weitz	Parmount Pictures
<i>Bruce Almighty</i> (2003)	243	3,483	3,549	250	6,635	37.32	28.72	Steve Koren, Mark O'Keefe, Steve Oedekerck	Gary Barber, Roger Birnbaum	Tom Shadyac	Universal Studios
<i>Evan Almighty</i> (2007)	100	3,604	3,636	125	7,005	13.92	12.41	Steve Oedekerck	Gary Barber, Roger Birnbaum, Michael Bostick, Neal H. Moritz, Tom Shadyac	Tom Shadyac	Universal Studios

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