FTV365 - John Lente - Final Paper on the Magical Negro Trope

1. *Client service comes first.*
2. *Be acceptable to Whites while remaining authentically Black.*
3. *Show the clients only the parts of yourself that make them feel good.*
4. *The happier they are, the safer we are.*

These are the rules given to new recruits of The American Society of Magical Negroes in Kobi Libii's 2024 film of the same name. This intelligent social commentary wrapped in a rom-com takes a 20-year-old racial trope and makes an entire film out of it asking, "What if it were real?" David Alan Grier drags a reluctant Justice Smith into this enchanted organization dedicated to easing White discomfort for the sake of Black lives everywhere. Members are required to forgo any desire, goal, or personal satisfaction if it conflicts with those of a White person, and in exchange the members of this society are granted nearly limitless magical powers. The catch is they can never use their powers to benefit themselves. To do so is to disempower all the Magical Negroes and place all Black lives at risk with no one appeasing White Americans.

It was 1969 that Clark established a four-stage model of minority representation in film and television. First is Non-Representation in which there are no non-White actors on screen at all. Second is Ridicule, in which token actors of color are included in the cast, but only to serve as the punchline for a White joke, to be mocked, or to fulfill a stereotype. The third stage is Regulation in which actors of color are placed in character roles of authority: judge, police officer, lawyer, principal, etc. While seemingly an improvement to have non-White actors in roles with such social power, they can also be seen as enforcing the rules of a society that typically disenfranchises and discriminates against them. The final stage is Respect. This is the

elusive zone in which people of color are appropriately characterized, authentically portrayed, and naturally integrated into diverse roles.

While the first two stages are rarely seen in modern film and television, the last two of Clark's stages come and go in varying degrees of quality. Poor representation usually comes from a lack of diversity in the writing room of television programs and from lack of familiarity with "the other" when there is a single writer. In the absence of thorough research and education, the ignorant writer relies on stereotypes and cliche. For Black characters, this has taken the form of the Jezebel or the Buck who is always sexually aroused and available, the Mammy who wants only to take care of the darling White children, and The Angry One who is cannot express himself or herself without shouting and swearing and is prone to bursts of violence.

In a 2001 interview, filmmaker Spike Lee coined a new term for a Black character stereotype he identified as infiltrating American media: the Magical Negro. Citing *The Green Mile* (Darabont, 1999), *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (Redford, 2000), and *The Family Man* (Ratner, 2000), Lee derided "these magical, mystical Negroes who show up as some sort of spirit or angel but only to benefit the white characters" (Crowdus & Georgakas, 5). Despite the Magical Negro entering the film student's lexicon, being taught in film classes, discussed in lectures, and even addressed in Netflix specials (*Attack of the Hollywood Cliches*, 2021), it still persists in some of the biggest film franchises of the 21st century, even in unexpected ways.

The Magical Negroes of *The Matrix Franchise*

The Matrix (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) is an undeniable blockbuster and Hollywood phenomenon. Using revolutionary film techniques and computer-generated special effects, it took fight scenes, action sequences, and the blurring of the lines between reality and fantasy to entirely new levels, grossing more than $465 million worldwide. Perhaps the biggest reason for its success is the palatable appeal to the mainstream White male audience which dreams of being the prophesied Chosen One. "If I become exceptionally skilled at manipulating

an artificial, digital environment (video games, computer games, Reddit discussion boards, whatever), then hot women like Carrie-Anne Moss will fall in love with me and super cool Black men like Laurence Fishburne will validate my feelings as ~~The Special~~ The One and I won't have to deal with my numbingly ordinary life."

Setting aside the White Savior trope, paranoid conspiracy theories about artificial realities, and a stomach-churning "saving the world through the power of love" schtick leaves one to consider Laurence Fishburne's role as the Magical Negro, Morpheus. On the surface, he is a revolutionary trying to liberate mankind from their Artificial Intelligence overlords. The entirety of his screen time, however, is wrapped up in Keanu Reeves' character, Neo (a not-even-trying-to-hide-it anagram of "One"). Morpheus narrates the expository film-within-the-film that explains to Neo their dismal reality and the bleak Matrix world the rest of humanity occupies. Morpheus teaches Neo how to fight, which is really about manipulating the artificial space, matter, and time of the Matrix more than it is about landing punches and kicks, though punches and kicks never go away because big fight scenes make for happy viewers.

In all these ways, Fishburne's Morpheus lives up to Lee's description of the Magical Negro. Anastasia Kanjere made the additional observation that "the black male characters act as a chaperone: that is, they facilitate an excursion away from normativity—an excursion that would not be possible without their presence and that ends at the conclusion of the film with their inevitable departure" (Kanjere, 91). This often means the Black character escorts the White characters through hostile territory (the inner city slums, the underground club scene, a literal jungle, etc.) and leaves them safely on the other side. In *The Matrix*, this is escorting Neo out of the digital fantasy world and into the ~~Rebel Alliance~~ Resistance.

Citing author and film critic Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu, Kanjere identifies "that the character of colour disappears or even dies at the finale of the film, clearing the way for the white protagonist as the main focus of the film, the "true" star of the movie" (Kanjere, 91). In *The Matrix*, there is a suspenseful sequence near the end in which Morpheus is tortured by

agents of the AI Matrix and the audience is given every expectation that he will die in accordance with his trope. Maybe it was a deliberate attempt to subvert expectations, maybe it was because he had already signed on for the sequels, but either way Neo rescues Morpheus and keeps his Magical Negro alive.

Morpheus isn't the only Magical Negro in *The Matrix*, unfortunately. The Wachowskis wrote a much more straightforward Magical Negro character in The Oracle, played by Gloria Foster in the first two *Matrix* films and by Mary Alice in the third. She has powers of foresight and understanding, so Neo comes to her in each film for the sage advice he cannot get elsewhere. In the third movie, a rogue AI program-turned-virus played by Hugo Weaving kills The Oracle in order to acquire her prescient powers, fulfilling Kajere's and Okorafor-Mbachu's decree that the Magical Negro must die or be removed so audience attention can focus on the White characters. Gladly, Laurence Fishburne's Morpheus grows out of his Magical Negro role as his character arc progresses, and by the third movie he is on his own quest to fight the machines and has little interaction with Neo aside to repeatedly affirm his faith and belief in the White Savior.

The Magical Negro of the *Mission: Impossible Franchise*

Ving Rames has the distinction of being the only actor aside from Tom Cruise to appear in every *Mission: Impossible* film since it migrated from television to the big screen in 1996. He started out as a strong, independent character recruited by Cruise's Ethan Hunt for his skills and expertise but film by film slipped into a secondary Magical Negro role.

In 1996's *Mission: Impossible*, Ving Rhames doesn't appear until 50 minutes into the film. His Luther Stickell is wooed by Ethan Hunt who praises him for his previous criminal work and notorious reputation. Beyond whatever payment they get for stealing the "profitable information" from Central Intelligence Agency headquarters, Luther stipulates that he gets to keep the top-of-the-line computer hardware they'll use on the job. This all goes to show that Luther is a well-rounded character with a past and with plans for the future that don't necessarily

involve Ethan Hunt. Luther continues his role of technological expert in the absurd 2000 sequel directed by John Woo. This cinematic mishmash of chase sequences, melodrama, forced relationships, and ridiculous fight scenes doesn't connect to the rest of the *M:I* franchise except for the presence of Rhames and Cruise, so it's easy enough to skip when doing an *M:I* marathon.

Mission: Impossible 3 & *Ghost Protocol* share a continued storyline with the usual rotating team members, but with the introduction of Simon Pegg's Benji Dunn. Luther is still the expert in computer-assisted weaponry and remote surveillance and communication, while Benji is the office-bound computer forensics expert they both turn to for additional help. Pegg is on screen for less than three minutes, but his arrival is the death knell for Rhames. In the fourth movie, *Ghost Protocol*, it is Benji in the surveillance van providing hi-tech support to Hunt's clandestine operation. Benji accompanies Hunt as they infiltrate the Kremlin and on a score of other missions, and Rhames has a mere 40 seconds of screen time in the film's denouement wherein he is nothing more than Hunt's old friend and drinking buddy.

The duality of the tech support role played by Rhames and Pegg is put up front in the next film, *Mission: Impossible - Rogue Nation*. Benji and Luther are both in the field, though in separate locations. Benji calls for Luther's assistance, but it is ultimately Benji that both Cruise and the home office are looking to for the success of the mission. Rhames disappears for a full 45 minutes while Pegg helps Cruise in his adventures around the globe, and doesn't return for any significant acting or dialogue until only 30 minutes remain in the film.

Rhames' descent into full Magical Negro comes in the sixth film, *Fallout*. When Ethan and Benji try to recover plutonium stolen by terrorists, it is Luther who is captured and held at gunpoint, forcing Ethan to rescue him at the loss of the plutonium. He is no longer the star player Hunt recruited in the first film. He is the token Black member of the team the hero must protect. He disappears for more than hour until he resurfaces to explain the terrorists' bomb technology, though his explanation is interrupted and stepped on by Benji. With his position as

expert and valued team member thoroughly decimated, Luther adopts a slow, gentle voice to explain Ethan's romantic backstory with Michelle Monaghan from movies three and four to Ethan's new love interest, Rebecca Fergusson's Ilsa Faust. This matchmaker role fulfills Brayton's identified quality of the Magical Negro. "[C]haracters of color possess and bestow inimitable insight and find themselves in overwhelmingly white social settings, more or less in the narrative service of white characters. In other words, the formal function of racial tokens…is to supplement white storylines, often as the multicultural matchmaker" (Brayton, 41). In completely redundant fashion, Rhames repeats this scene almost line for line in the seventh film, *Dead Reckoning, Part 1* (2023), when he explains Hunt's relationship with Faust to the new-new love interest, Grace, played by Hayley Atwell.

Conclusions

As disappointing as it is, some tropes never die. At least, they do not die in our lifetimes. We still see all-White casts in film and television, but rarely do we see the minstrelsy and humiliation of others for their race that our grandparents witnessed. We must be ever diligent at rooting out and identifying racist tropes when they surface, though they may arise in unconventional ways. In *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), it could be argued that the Keymaker, played by Korean-American actor Randall Duk Kim was a type of Magical Negro in that he is not White, possessed unique and magical skills the White heroes needed for their quest, and he dies in their service.

Even a film that has virtually no White actors can fall prey to pernicious tropes. In *Monkey Man* (2024), written, directed, and starring Dev Patel and set in India, he goes on a hero's journey of self-actualization, revenge, and social justice. Who is the Magical Negro when the entire cast is people of color? The other "Other": the LQBTQ character. Patel's character receives shelter, martial training, spiritual advice, and combative support from Vipin Sharma's trans woman character, ironically named Alpha. This all goes to show that the Magical Negro isn't always magic and isn't always Black, but is a cheap trope nonetheless.

References:

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