

The Power of Black Magic: The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film

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Abstract:

Movies featuring a “magical” or spiritually gifted Black lead character have been released for many years, and the trend continues to grow in popularity. These Black characters, often referred to as “magical Negroes,” generally focus their abilities toward assisting their White lead counterparts. At first glance, casting the Black and White leads in this manner seems to provide examples of Black and White characters relating to each other in a constructive manner; however, a closer examination of these interactions suggests a reinvention of old Black stereotypes rather than authentic racial harmony. Using a textual analysis of eight selected films: the Matrix trilogy—The Matrix (1999), The Matrix Reloaded (2003), and The Matrix Revolutions (2003)—The Legend of Bagger Vance (2000), The Green Mile (1999), Bringing Down the House (2003), Nurse Betty (2000), and Bruce Almighty (2003), this study formalizes a definition of the magical Negro and determines how these characterizations reinvent traditional Black stereotypes of mammy, jezebel, and Uncle Tom. This study reflects on the complex nature of the portrayal and acceptance of Blacks in contemporary times because these roles may commingle limited progress with traditionally racist stereotypes.

Keywords: African American | magical Negro | motion pictures | stereotypes

Article:

The unique nature and history of race relations and racial imagery in the United States contributes to the complexity of studying and analyzing communication and race. The media project images that affect the perceptions people have of one another. The movie industry especially illustrates the pervasiveness of these media-projected images. The producers of major motion pictures aim to entertain and pique the interest of the masses to generate large amounts of revenue. Millions of people flock to theaters to view the fantasy world that Hollywood has created, all the while processing a large amount of information that guides their formations and expectations in actual society. The projected images pertaining to the interaction and relationships between people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds have significant implications for audience members’ perceptions of race relations. Films generally use

exaggerated characterizations and limited roles of Black characters to appeal to broad audiences; these depictions show more positive interaction between people of different cultures, especially between Blacks and Whites. At first glance, moviegoers watch Black and White characters relate to each other in a constructive manner; however, a thorough analysis of the relationships between these characters reveals a reinvention of racist stereotypes, such as mammy, jezebel, and Uncle Tom, as well as the mainstream traditional association of Blacks with folk wisdom and spiritual insight. These associations coupled with subtler forms of racist stereotypes culminate to create a distinct Black character, which has grown in popularity in the film industry: the magical Negro.

The Impact of Mass-Mediated Images of Blacks

Although audience members watch movies for entertainment, the images and relationships between characters impact the manner in which they perceive themselves and others. Kellner (1995) asserted that “media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive, or negative, moral or evil” (p. 5). These images are based on ideologies that represent real aspects of social existence, such as race relations and stereotypes. Understanding the importance of media produced racial images requires discussing the tumultuous nature of race relations between Blacks and Whites in the United States. Rocchio (2000) stated, “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). Media images impact the way that Whites perceive Blacks. As Blacks move closer to the realm of acceptability with Whites, the images in movies can be critical to the extent of this acceptance. These images are significant because Whites have not completely accepted Blacks as equals and remain ensconced in attitudes that “confer superiority” to Whites (Mazama, 2003, p. 13).

Entman and Rojecki (2001) called this position between acceptance and rejection “liminality,” which they defined as the “unsettled status of Blacks in the eyes of those who produce dominant culture [Whites] and of those who consume it [Whites]” (p. 53). Black and White relations can be even more challenging because people use the images projected by media to draw conclusions regarding these relationships. Author bell hooks (1995) stated that many Whites who have no contact with Blacks think they know Blacks and their actual status because of the roles played while acting. Because these roles depict a utopian relationship between Blacks and Whites, Whites may believe that these ideal harmonious relationships depict current social status; therefore, racial problems only exist in the minds of Black people. The movie industry produces films that can result in the reinforcement of this liminal status.

As a result of Blacks’ liminal status, the magical Negro has emerged as a new version of traditional racial stereotypes because most Hollywood screenwriters do not know much about Black people other than what they see or hear in other media forms. Consequently, instead of having life histories or love interests, Black characters possess magical powers (Farley, 2000). Because Hollywood screenwriters often remain oblivious about Black people, they incorporate images in films that comfort and appeal to White viewers. Notable images of race exist in terms of “mythification” where the debased Black role and glorified White hero are not only isolated roles for the viewer but symbolically used so that Whites do not have to consider the moral implications or validity of these roles (Snead, 1994).

Although the magical Negro trend has gained more popularity in recent years, the underlying traits and characteristics of these characters has been present in film for quite some time. More than half a century ago, Sidney Poitier and other Black actors were placed in White worlds to help White people improve themselves. These magical Negroes were often wise, morally upright Blacks who served as the moral conscience of White characters (Kempley, 2003). Whoopi Goldberg's role in *Ghost* (1990), the spiritual assistant with powers used to assist the lead White character, helped transcend the characterization of Blacks in popular film. The film industry views Blacks through the magical Negro lens more often, leading to the growing popularity of these movies in recent years.

The Magical Negro

The magical Negro phenomenon has received little attention from published scholarship. Extant discussion and conceptualizations of this trend primarily stems from popular press and commentary. One such commentator, K. Anthony Appiah (1993), defined the magical Negro as “the noble, good-hearted black man or woman” whose good sense pulls the White character through a crisis. Appiah labeled the helpful Black characters as “saints.” He further asserted that saintly Black characters are morally equivalent to their “normal” White counterparts. This categorization serves to offset the racial stereotypes that White audiences generally aim at the Black characters as well as draw upon the superior moral nature associated with the oppressed. Entman and Rojecki (2001) noted three main purposes for the magical Negro in relation to the lead White character in the film: (a) to assist the character, (b) to help him or her discover and utilize his or her spirituality, and (c) to offer a type of “folk wisdom” used to resolve the character's dilemma. The White characters' dilemma, not the Black characters' gifts or spirituality, serve as the primary focus in these films. Denzin (2002) also offered an explanation for relationships between White lead characters and the magical Negroes. Denzin stated that interracial friendship in movies often arises out of the need for Blacks to get what they need from Whites and for Whites to get what they need from Blacks—usually, “soul” (p. 61).

Other commentators of the magical Negro characters in film have discussed their limited role and lack of depth. Film director Spike Lee commented on the absurdity of the magical Negro characters. Lee stated that the magical, mystical Negroes generally appear in the form of a spirit or angel. He further noted that the Black characters in these films use their powers to help the White characters, but do not utilize them to help themselves. Lee, who termed this role “magical nigger,” noted that these roles have been seen in movies such as *The Green Mile* (1999), *The Family Man* (2000), *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), and *What Dreams May Come* (1998) (as quoted in Crowdus and Georgakas, 2001). *Washington Post* staff writer Rita Kempley (2003) commented on the lack of character development for these roles. They do not have depth or interior lives. Like Lee, Kempley believes these characters only exist to rescue the White characters that do have more character depth. She also cited *The Green Mile* (1999) and *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000) as examples.

Traditionally Racist Stereotypes in the Magical Negro

Brief commentaries about the magical Negro describe the character but do not discuss in detail how the magical Negro embodies racist stereotypes. In addition, the aforementioned definitions

and examples limit the role of the magical Negro to Black men. These discussions overlook the images of women in these roles as well as dominant society's vested interest in fostering and maintaining oppressive controlling images for Blacks. The helpful aspect of Black roles partially has its roots in traditionally racist stereotypes, such as mammy, jezebel, and Uncle Tom, which many in the film industry have perpetuated with fervor. Consistent with the magical Negro characterizations in film, these stereotypes depict Blacks' primary function as using their gift or power to please Whites characters or aid them with their problems.

Initial controlling images of Black women include the mammy and the jezebel. Collins (2000) asserted that the mammy image stems from the era of slavery to maintain dominant society's control over the perceptions of roles for Black women. Collins further described this controlling image as "the faithful, obedient, domestic servant. Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's longstanding restriction to domestic service" (p. 72). The mammy loves her White "family" more than her own. Even though this family may care for her, she never forgets her role as the obedient servant and has accepted her subordination to White male elite power (Collins, 2000). Depictions of mammy tend to portray darker, larger Black women with no sexuality, rendering them undesirable to men (Davis, 1983). The mammy role has come to be an accepted ideal of Black women's relationships to powerful Whites in mainstream society (Collins, 2000). Unlike the mammy, the jezebel depicts Black women as hypersexualized beings. This image conceptualizes Black women as sexually deviant and aggressive, which helped dominant society relegate them to the role of reproduction during the slavery era. The jezebel embodies the belief that Black women have insatiable sexual appetites and are willing to engage in any deviant sexual behavior in order to please. Brown Givens and Monahan (2005) discussed how viewing the mammy and jezebel images influence people to characterize Black women negatively. These perceptions can negatively impact the evaluation of Black women as they pursue employment opportunities.

The Uncle Tom controlling image stems from Harriet Beecher Stowe's (1852/1998) poignant novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Originally published in 1852, the novel details Uncle Tom and his family's trials and tribulations during slavery and aimed to promote the abolitionist movement. Uncle Tom's noteworthy traits include his friendliness with one of his White slave owners, selfless assistance to White characters in the novel, and strong religious convictions. In his plight, Uncle Tom saves a young White girl from drowning, befriends her, and sacrifices his life to protect others. Caputi (1990) discussed the Uncle Tom stereotype in film, primarily in the movie *Driving Miss Daisy*. The Uncle Tom image appears through the character Hoke, a Black driver, who remains subservient, loyal, good-natured, and folksy to the White woman he works for. Caputi described Hoke and the Uncle Tom characterization as a "White dream" since he worships those who boss him around and knows his place while denying his own humanity.

To concretely define and describe the traits of the magical Negro as well as its links to traditionally racist stereotypes, the following two research questions guide this study:

Research Question 1: What are the formalities, characteristics, and conventions of magical Negroes in popular film?

Research Question 2: How does this characterization of Blacks in the magical Negro role reinvent traditionally racist stereotypes of mammy, jezebel, and Uncle Tom?

Method

Films Selected

To obtain a current representation of magical Negro movies, we selected films with magical Negro characterizations from the top-grossing movies of 2003. These movies include *The Matrix Reloaded* (Silver, Wachowski, & Wachowski, 2003a), *Bruce Almighty* (Shadyac, 2003), and *Bringing Down the House* (Hoberman, Amritraj, Shankman, & Filardi, 2003). We also studied *The Matrix* (Silver, Wachowski, & Wachowski, 1999) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (Silver, Wachowski, & Wachowski, 2003b) to get a complete picture of the magical Negro role and its development across the trilogy. We also selected movies to include in our sample that Spike Lee, a film director (as cited in Crowdus & Georgakas, 2001), and Rita Kempley, a staff writer for the *Washington Post* (2003), referenced in their commentaries of the growing popularity of the magical Negro phenomenon. These movies include *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (Redford, 2000) and *The Green Mile* (Gareri, Darabont, & King, 1999). Last, we included the movie *Nurse Betty* (Golin & LaBute, 2000) to obtain a sample that represents a variety of genres and release dates.

Film Synopses

The comedy *Bringing Down the House* (2003) chronicles Charlene Morton's quest to reestablish her good name after being wrongly convicted of a robbery. Morton targets Peter Sanderson, a lonely lawyer, to help her achieve her goal. In exchange, she helps Sanderson with his domestic troubles. *Bruce Almighty* (2003) portrays the life of a TV news reporter who complains to God about his unfavorable luck and through personally experiencing God's powers and responsibilities learns how to find meaning in aspects of life besides his own wealth and fame. The film *Nurse Betty* (2000) centers on a waitress, enamored with a soap opera and its main character, who witnesses the murder of her husband and loses touch with reality. She journeys to the set of her beloved soap opera to find her love and is followed by two men, one of which is in love with her. *The Green Mile* (1999) shows the interaction between Paul Edgecombe, who oversees death row in a 1930s prison, and one of the prisoners, John Coffey, who has been wrongly convicted of murdering two White girls. This drama details Edgecombe's transformation as he learns about life and himself through Coffey, a gentle giant with a unique gift. *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000) tells the story of a young World War I veteran who enters a golf exhibition tournament to defend his hometown's honor and simultaneously faces his fears, past, and lost love with the help of a Black caddie's spiritual guidance. Set in the near future, the *Matrix* trilogy, composed of *The Matrix* (1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), follows the tale of Neo as he realizes the world is not what it seems. Morpheus and his crew unplug Neo from the Matrix, a fictitious world created by machines, to begin his quest of freeing mankind from the machines that imprison them. Neo develops powers, which help him battle his enemies as he attempts to fulfill his mission.

Procedure

To address the two research questions, we used a textual analysis to examine each movie as well as identify the characteristics and trends when comparing the movies across emerging themes (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002; Patton, 2002). We considered the following aspects of each film in this study: character qualities, Black character(s) interaction with the leading White character(s), as well as the presence of stereotypical images or roles. We used open-coding to assign the observations into mutable categories (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). Since two researchers conducted the study, we watched the films together, but coded them separately. After watching each film, we compared notes and created a codebook to begin naming the categories, capture examples of each category, record the number of incidents, and locate these incidents in the films (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). The categories were modified and defined as subsequent films were analyzed and concrete themes emerged. After the coding and categorization process was complete, we shared our codebook and notes with a reputable third party in the field to check for agreement.

Analysis: Magical Negro Themes and Trends

The research questions identified to guide the analysis are discussed individually to illustrate the themes and trends observed in the study. The study first examines the characteristics and conventions of magical Negroes that are identified by commentators in popular media as well as other observations of the magical Negro role. These characteristics are discussed through examples from the films, and a definition of the magical Negro is formulated based on the film observations. The study then explores the ways in which this characterization of Blacks in the magical Negro role reinvents traditionally racist stereotypes of mammy, jezebel, and Uncle Tom.

Characteristics of the Magical Negro (Research Question 1)

Identified characteristics of the magical Negro include (a) using magical and spiritual gifts for the White character, (b) assuming primarily service roles, (c) exhibiting folk wisdom as opposed to intellectual cognition, (d) possessing limited role outside of magical/spiritual guide, and (e) displaying an inability to use his or her powers to help himself or herself.

Using magical and spiritual gifts for the White character. The basis of the magical Negro characterization is his or her use of spiritual gifts to assist the White lead character. In the *Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003) and *The Green Mile* (1999), the Black spiritually gifted characters use their power toward enlightening the White male leads. In the *Matrix* trilogy, for example, Morpheus leads a group, but all of the action is centered toward helping Neo, the White male lead, in his destined course to rescue humankind from the Matrix. He counsels Neo in his decision to wake up from the Matrix as well as trains him in martial arts once he has disconnected from it. In *The Green Mile*, John Coffey, the magical Negro, uses his spiritual gifts to help many; however, his actions are directed primarily toward the interests of Paul Edgecombe, the lead White character. After Coffey cures Edgecombe from an ailment, he uses his gifts again under Edgecombe's direction. Coffey cures Mrs. Morse, the wife of Edgecombe's boss, due to Edgecombe's wishes, not because of his own volition. The other beneficiaries of Coffey's gifts, two young White girls and Mr. Jingles, a pet mouse, serve to demonstrate his gifts and to explain the injustice of his confinement.

Bringing Down the House (2003) and *Nurse Betty* (2000) have female characters as one of the lead roles. In *Bringing Down the House*, Charlene Morton uses her gifts to assist Peter Sanderson, the White male lead in the film. Although her gifts are not outside the realm of “normal” abilities, she directs her energy and wisdom to helping Sanderson and his family. As with the *Matrix* movies (1999, 2003) and *The Green Mile* (1999), she does interact with other characters in the film. The nature of her assistance to these characters more closely parallels *The Green Mile* because she helps other Sanderson family members, but primarily to improve Peter Sanderson’s life. By helping his children, Sarah and George, she is helping Sanderson have a better home life and an improved relationship with his children. In *Nurse Betty*, the White lead is a female, which makes it unique in the sample. Charlie, the Black lead character who tries to assist Nurse Betty, does not have much personal contact with her as with the other movies in the sample. He has brief contact with her in the restaurant and in her apartment at the end of the film, but most of the film takes place with the characters in separate locations. His most personal contact with her occurs in his imagination, and she is primarily unaware of his assistance due to physical distance between them and as a result of her mental state during most of the film.

In the other two movies depicting male-male interaction between the magical Negro and the White male lead, the Black characters have no real role in the film outside of assisting their White counterparts. These magical Negro characters rarely interact with characters other than the White lead, and their purpose for appearing in scenes is to provide guidance. In *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), Junuh, the White male lead receives assistance from Bagger Vance, the Black male lead. Vance appears in scenes solely to assist Junuh in some way. The film *Bruce Almighty* (2003) also only shows the gifted Black male character, God, when he is guiding or assisting Bruce, the White male lead. The only contact he has with the other characters occurs when he takes the form of a White male street person.

Assuming primarily service roles. The magical Negro characters often provide services for White male characters. *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000) shows Vance’s primary purpose as serving Junuh, the White golf player. Vance not only serves as Junuh’s golf caddy, but he also assists Junuh in finding his lost swing. He refuses to accept the normal compensation given to caddies. Instead, he selflessly offers assistance to a White man. Charlene Morton, of *Bringing Down the House* (2003), provides the service role for the Sanderson family. Although she initially attempts to reject the role by telling Peter Sanderson that she refuses to pretend to be his nanny, she eventually yields to the need for her services by donning a maid’s uniform to serve the family dinner when Sanderson needs to impress a client and by nurturing the Sanderson children as they deal with the ongoing perplexities of growing up.

John Coffey of *The Green Mile* (1999) provides services for Whites in another manner; he uses his magical abilities to heal and serve. Coffey cures Paul Edgecombe’s urinary tract infection, and he gives life back to the pet mouse belonging to Dale, a fellow prisoner. Interestingly, the jailors at the prison plan to use John Coffey’s services to help the warden’s wife who has cancer; however, they neither consider nor consult Coffey when conspiring to take advantage of his magical abilities. In *Bruce Almighty* (2003), God also has a special service role. God is portrayed as a Black man, who serves Bruce most by teaching him lessons. When God gives Bruce all of his powers, Bruce learns that humility and unselfishness are most important in his relationships with God, his girlfriend, his career, and other people. God places himself in service roles in the

movie—he appears in the form of a janitor, an electrician, and an enlightening homeless person. God and the other magical Negro characters in these films exist primarily to provide services for the White characters they support.

Exhibiting folk wisdom as opposed to intellectual cognition. Entman and Rojecki (2001) identified a facet of the magical Negro characterization as offering “a basic folk wisdom that unleashes the White person’s better instincts and helps resolve his dilemmas” (p. xvii). This element exists in more than half of the films we viewed for this study. The magical Negro sometimes helps the White character(s) by using his or her wisdom, and in other instances, he or she helps the White characters get in touch with their own wisdom. In both instances, however, the magical Negro’s abilities focus on folk wisdom, not his or her intelligence.

In *Nurse Betty* (2000), Charlie consistently uses his instincts to guide his decision making, which is primarily focused on helping Betty. Charlie relies on his instincts to allow him to detect honesty and deceit in a person, and he finds Betty just by following these instincts. Charlie and his son follow Betty across the country until they find her in Los Angeles. When Charlie finally finds Betty, the audience understands a goal of finding her: to offer her his wisdom before he dies. He tells her that she does not need any man because she is special no matter what. John Coffey also provides direct assistance through his folk wisdom and powers. In *The Green Mile* (1999), he admits that he is not intellectually gifted: “I don’t know much of anything. I never have.” Coffey has another form of wisdom; for example, he knows that the new inmate, Wild Bill, will attempt to escape when they bring him to the prison. Coffey feels the souls of those he touches. He tells Paul Edgecombe that he saw Wild Bill’s heart when Wild Bill grabbed his arm. Coffey can see that Wild Bill is an evil man who was the actual murderer of the little girls whom Coffey had been convicted of killing.

Bringing Down the House (2003) features the use of powers to help and guide the White character toward his own wisdom, but again, the magical Negro’s intelligence is not foremost. Charlene Morton is well versed in legal matters; however, she does not utilize her intellect often. For example, Charlene offers Peter counsel on everything from how to treat a woman to how to be a better father. Even Howie Rottman, one of Peter’s White colleagues who expresses instant attraction to Charlene, refers to her as a “cocoa goddess.” Goddesses embody wisdom and beauty, not necessarily intellect.

Bagger Vance offers Junuh and Hardy advice based on folk wisdom, not intellectual knowledge. He uses his powers to guide Hardy and Junuh in improving their golf game by transitioning to *feeling* instead of *thinking* as they play. Vance can intuitively predict the weather with no tools other than his own instincts. Although God’s intelligence in *Bruce Almighty* (2003) is not disputed, the plot uses God’s wisdom, not his intellect, to teach Bruce lessons. God gives Bruce his own powers so that Bruce could understand God’s wisdom.

Interestingly, folk and spiritual wisdom are preferable to intellectual abilities in the magical Negro characters. These characters use these strengths in folk wisdom and spirituality to help White characters, or the magical Negroes help the White characters get in touch with their own spiritual wisdom.

Possessing limited role outside of magical/spiritual guide. Some of the magical Negroes in the sample's films have limited roles outside of their spiritual gifts. These characters tend to be one-dimensional and add little more to the story than their magical powers. Vance seems to appear out of thin air and walk into Junuh's life for no other reason but to assist Junuh in "finding his authentic swing." The audience does not know Vance's origin or identity. Vance has no relatives in the movie; he only associates closely with Junuh and Hardy, whom he helps. Vance's one-way friendships with Junuh and Hardy appear to be successful interracial friendships, but Vance does not benefit from these relationships. Because the central problems of the movie revolve around Junuh, he does not care about the depths of his caddy's personality or past. John Coffey also reveals little depth of character. Coffey has no ties other than to the White people he helps—Paul Edgecombe, Dale, and the warden's wife. Coffey has no history or relatives. Coffey's lawyer comments to Paul Edgecombe, Coffey's jailor, that he could not be traced, "like he dropped out of the sky." Like Vance, Coffey exists as a magical being that aids White people. In *Nurse Betty* (2000), Charlie has very little depth in his role outside of providing assistance. Due to Charlie's underdeveloped character, the audience does not realize until the very end of the movie that Charlie's accomplice is his son.

Charlene Morton in *Bringing Down the House* (2003) also has no family outside of the Sandersons. She has friends, but they are portrayed as stereotypical party people who do nothing but cause trouble and betray her. Ultimately, she relies on Sanderson instead of her own friends.

Morpheus, the wise demigod of the *Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003), defines his own purpose as finding the One, Neo. In the later two movies, other elements of Morpheus's life are revealed, such as a past romance and his status in the city of Zion. These components of Morpheus' life, however, remain secondary to the purpose of backing Neo. The stories in these films only required the spirituality and wisdom of the magical Negroes.

Displaying an inability to use his or her powers to help himself or herself. In their pursuit to enlighten and improve the lives of their White lead counterparts, magical Negroes cannot use their powers to improve their own lives or have the ability to save themselves. In *The Matrix* (1999), Morpheus is one of the most talented people to be disconnected from the Matrix. Morpheus guides and encourages Neo toward an awareness of self and his new role; however, Morpheus cannot use his superior talent and gifts to save himself from being captured by Mr. Smith.

In *Bringing Down the House* (2003), Peter Sanderson comments on the extensiveness of Charlene Morton's legal knowledge and intellect. Despite her intelligence, she cannot contribute to her own legal defense. Sanderson and his associate, Howie Rottman, must come to her defense and ultimately save her although they have no expertise in criminal matters. *The Green Mile* (1999) also depicts the need to rely on the White lead counterparts despite personal gifts and spirituality. John Coffey never seems to care about his wrongful imprisonment. Instead of pursuing release, he lets the use of his powers be directed by Paul Edgecombe. John Coffey helps the warden's ailing wife but does not have this same regard for his own survival. When the movie concludes, he would rather die in the electric chair as a convicted murderer than try to clear his name or understand his gifts. As with Morpheus in the *Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003),

Coffey has no sense of identity beyond his magical power to save the White characters in the film.

Nurse Betty (2000) has the most clear-cut example of a magical Negro's inability to save himself. Charlie's main gift in this film is his intuition and ability to know what course of action to pursue in a given situation. He uses his gift to find and dispense advice to Betty, but cannot save himself. Shortly after arrival in California, Charlie and his son are killed. Charlie has followed Betty all the way to Los Angeles to lose his son and then his own life.

Based on previous research and this analysis, the magical Negro is defined as the only Black lead character in a film with a predominantly White cast endowed with folk wisdom as well as spiritual and/or magical gifts and abilities. Magical Negroes utilize their gifts externally for the benefit of the White characters in the film. The magical Negro has limited depth—any other facets of the character are secondary to wisdom and magic, and he or she does not have significant contact with or ties to anyone other than the White lead characters. The magical Negro usually exhibits a blatant disregard for self, never using his or her abilities to improve personal situations. Although on the surface these characters appear to be harmless and even an improvement from the roles Blacks played in early-20th-century entertainment, some magical Negroes still resemble old, debasing racial stereotypes.

The Reinvention of Traditionally Racist Stereotypes (Research Question 2)

The character Charlene Morton exhibits many of the same qualities of the mammy image. She goes beyond the role of assisting Sanderson and she becomes a maternal character who cares for his two children as well. Although she never officially becomes the caretaker for the all-White Sanderson family, she spends much of her time in this capacity. She pretends to be the nanny for Peter Sanderson's, the White male lead's, two children, Sarah and George, so that none of his colleagues will suspect that Morton and Sanderson have any type of personal friendship or a romantic relationship. In the warm and nurturing mammy way, she teaches George how to overcome an impediment to improve his reading comprehension. His daughter, Sarah, calls Morton for help in dealing with her issues with a romantic interest. She immediately comes to her rescue and remedies the situation. As with the mammy stereotype, Morton exhibits physical and maternal strength. To resolve a problem with Sarah's boyfriend, Morton dangles him from a window and forces him to apologize to Sarah in front of their peers.

One of the most outstanding parallels to the mammy stereotype occurs when Sanderson entertains a potential client at his home. Morton must show remarkable restraint and strength in a difficult situation, as mammies are expected to do for the benefit of their White families (Collins, 1990). She wears a maid's costume, cooks, and serves dinner to the family and its guest. In addition to serving the meal, she must endure the offensive treatment of the guest who treats her very rudely and serenades the family with an old Negro spiritual. Instead of coming to her defense, Sanderson allows her to be offended and mistreated. He expects her to accept this dehumanizing treatment without standing up for herself.

In addition to the mammy stereotype, Morton's character also bears a strong resemblance to another stereotype of Black females, jezebel. Morton is highly sexualized throughout the film.

She encourages Sanderson's son to read with the use of a magazine that uses derogatory euphemisms for parts of the female anatomy. Sanderson's business associate, Howie Rottman, is sexually attracted to Morton and spends most of his time making overt sexual comments about her to Sanderson. He also attempts to seduce her as he initiates a personal relationship with her. The most blatant sexual display occurs when Morton coaches Sanderson on his sexual performance. She encourages him to "own that jungle" and tap into the animal side of his sexuality. Her lesson ends with her physically mounting him and the two writhing together on the couch.

In *The Green Mile* (1999), John Coffey is the only major Black character. Like the Uncle Tom character, Coffey is kindly, loyal, ignorant, and unable to escape his punishment (Williams, 2001). When Paul Edgecombe, the warden in the prison where Coffey is jailed, first sees Coffey, he comments that a childlike imbecile has been sent to the Green Mile (where inmates sentenced to death are housed). He has great powers but cannot even begin to understand or explain them. Just like the Uncle Tom stereotype, Coffey spends his time trying to save the White characters from their pain and troubles instead of improving his own situation. Coffey shows his subservience and dedication to the White characters when Edgecombe and Brutal, another prison guard, orchestrate his temporary escape from prison. Coffey receives no personal gain from their plan to remove him from prison. The guards do not try to free him or rectify his wrongful imprisonment. Contrarily, his primary focus is to advance the interests of Edgecombe and the other guards who want to save the life of their boss's wife, Mrs. Morse. The prison guards do not even discuss their plan with Coffey prior to its enactment. When he does learn of their wishes, Coffey goes along in his helpful, subservient way. He does not even consider escaping from prison. He completes the mission of curing Mrs. Morse's cancer and willingly returns to his life of confinement. The act of "taking back" the cancer affects Coffey as he consumes it. The guards see that Coffey is ailing, but they do not attempt to console him. This treatment of Coffey and his immediate acceptance of it embody the characteristics of Uncle Tom. He refers to Edgecombe as "boss" and seems happy to be at his service. Ultimately the burden of his gift and its use to improve the circumstances of the White characters becomes too much to bear, and Coffey would rather accept death than continue assisting others without ever attempting to correct the injustice of his own situation by either escaping prison or trying to get his conviction overturned so he can be free to act in his own best interests.

Discussion

The magical Negro phenomenon has implications regarding the liminal status Blacks have in the minds of Whites that Entman and Rojecki (2001) discussed. Certain traits of the magical Negro reflect progress toward Whites acceptance of Blacks. The positive aspects of these characters demonstrate the ability and eagerness of Blacks to share their talents with Whites as well as Whites desire to welcome a new perspective or view of their lives and problems. *Bringing Down the House* (2003) and the *Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003) demonstrate Blacks and Whites working together in a mutually beneficial manner or for a common goal. These examples suggest reciprocity in the interaction of Blacks with Whites. The limited nature of this interaction reveals the manner in which Whites perceive Blacks' talents and strengths. Even though these movies show cooperation between the magical Negro characters and the White leads, the "help" of the

magical Negro primarily exists in spiritual and/or folk knowledge as opposed to intellectual cognition, which suggests that Blacks have yet to receive full acceptance in the minds of Whites.

The Green Mile (1999), *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), *Bruce Almighty* (2003), and *Nurse Betty* (2000) do not show mutually beneficial relationships. Instead, these movies primarily show how Blacks can assist Whites. These movies also depict Blacks in more negatively stereotypically ways, such as in service roles. The magical Negroes in these films dutifully assist the White lead characters and expect little in return. "God" in the movie *Bruce Almighty* does not need assistance due to imminent power. The magical Negroes in the other movies, however, do not attempt to seek assistance from the White characters despite their sacrifice and aid to them. Furthermore, the magical Negroes lack purpose when they do not eagerly come to the assistance of the White characters. It shows that Blacks, specifically Black males, still rely on Whites to guide and direct their abilities. As hooks (1995) and Entman and Rojecki (2001) discussed, mass-mediated images of Blacks influence how Whites perceive them. Despite Blacks' talents and abilities, they do not know how to use them appropriately without someone to instruct them how to do so. The inversion of real-life power structure, the moral and spiritual superiority of Black characters, and the Whites' need to tap into this may also serve to alleviate White guilt with the current status Blacks hold in actual society or contribute to the belief that Blacks possess the ability to change society with their gifts. This allows many Whites to hold the seemingly contradictory beliefs that Blacks have the ability to improve their social status, yet they do not have the ability to discern how to use their abilities.

The analysis of how the magical Negro often reflects traditionally racist stereotypes also illustrates covert negative depictions of Blacks under the guise of talents and powers. It also has implications for the role of gender that extant commentary does not address. Farley (2000) suggested that because Whites do not know Blacks, Hollywood gives Blacks powers and abilities instead of roles with depth. This study demonstrates that the film industry at least partially relies on racist stereotypes as well. The magical Negroes in *Bringing Down the House* (2003) and *The Green Mile* (1999) reflect contemporary versions of mammy, jezebel, and Uncle Tom. When a Black woman exists as a magical Negro, she encompasses traits of the mammy and jezebel stereotypes. This suggests that Hollywood knows little about Blacks in general, but even less about Black women. *Bringing Down the House* (2003) and *Nurse Betty* (2000) also reflect comfort level with interracial love relationships. Morton's romantic interest shows a hypersexualized woman who may be desirable to White men. The lack of interaction between Charlie and Betty suggests that Black male and White female love relationships may still be taboo outside of the genre of teen movies and romantic comedies.

Despite the negative aspects of female magical Negroes, Morton's character may illustrate a type of progression for Black female roles. Morton portrays a larger female lead that departs from the norm of featuring thinner female lead characters. Morton also exhibits a type of strength and ability often missing in the roles females play in movies with a predominantly Black cast, which tend to cast strong, independent females in a negative light because they are generally told from a heterosexual male point of view. This analysis reflects the complex nature of the portrayal and acceptance of Blacks in contemporary times because these roles may commingle limited progress with traditionally racist stereotypes.

Conclusion

This study defines the magical Negro as the only Black lead character in a film with a predominantly White cast endowed with folk wisdom, spiritual, and/or magical gifts and abilities that are used to benefit the White characters in the film. The magical Negro is markedly selfless and limited in depth with few, if any, notable characteristics beyond his or her wisdom and magic. Magical Negro characters and their interaction with White characters appears to be harmless or even an improvement from depictions in early-20th-century entertainment; however, further examination of the roles in these films exposes a complex union of limited progress and traditional Black stereotypes and perceptions of race relations.

We know that magical Negroes have existed for some time now. This study suggests a steady trend; therefore, the need exists for further research to answer more questions about magical Negroes and their effects on audiences. For example, how do Black audience members' views of the magical Negro affect their perception of themselves and their status in society? This study also points out that the intermingling of limited progress with traditional beliefs about Blacks and their relationships with Whites in films featuring magical Negroes affects Blacks' liminal status in society. Because of Blacks' liminal status, are the relationships between magical Negroes and White leads perceived as beneficial? Examination of the magical Negro phenomenon remains of great importance as it continues to impact the millions of people that flock to view movies that feature them. While audience members seek entertainment, they partake of these images that remain with them long after these films conclude.

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