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Searching for the Hero's Code: Questioning (White) Hero Formation in Contemporary American Film

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Searching for the Hero's Code: Questioning (White)

Hero Formation in Contemporary American Film
(TITLE)

BY
Amanda D. McKay

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

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Abstract

The desire for heroism never wavers in the imaginations of the movie-going public. When we go to the movies, we long to see a strong character, poised to save the world (tights and cape optional, of course). However, we rarely question what the hero looks like. Hollywood perpetuates an archaic form of heroism because that is what the audience has formed long ago in their collective imagination. Much of American culture is generated by the desire to see self-starters making it in the direst of conditions.

With such a narrow construction of heroism, Hollywood has become void of equal representation of the movie-going public. A pre-packaged product is shipped to us in every canister of film. In the case of heroism, some man (it’s almost always a man) fits a list of impossible and arbitrary criteria that includes being white, heterosexual, strong, Christian, and alone. This representation is both racist and sexist, both in the constant forefronting of it instead of other heroic possibilities, and in its continual reliance on subordinated Otherness to define itself. As this thesis will explain in detail, two flaws emerge with this outdated representation of heroism: 1) The relationships that help establish the hero go unexamined, and 2) There are few heroes that challenge the current system.

Using three offerings from popular film (The Matrix, Unbreakable, and O), I analyze interracial hero relationships, specifically the pairing of African American males with white males. The Matrix (1999) and Unbreakable (2000), make
explicit use of the outdated system of interracial pairings, pitting a white hero with a nonwhite as a catalyst (as in *The Matrix*), or against one as a nemesis (as in *Unbreakable*). As this thesis will also explain, Hollywood has made a few attempts to debunk the standard white vs. black dichotomy by allowing antiheroes to be played by nonwhites, as in *O* (2001), though this film ultimately also falls back on the archaic system. However, there is hope to be found in the independent market. *Suture* (1993) presents two brothers whom the audience is supposed to believe are similar in appearance. The challenging twist for the audience is that although the characters are presented as brothers, one is played by a markedly white actor, and the other by a man who is undoubtedly black. The film forces the audience out of its comfort zone because they must actively think about the associations between race and class and how that combination effects a person's position within the hierarchy.

As a result of Hollywood's typically racist and limiting portrayal of nonwhites, stock characters are underdeveloped, even though they play an integral part in the formation of the hero. Additionally, these stock characters remain locked into a role that neither shows a full range and depth of humanity nor focuses on their potential for attaining hero status, whereas their white counterparts are developed in such ways. However, a few elements have arisen to aid in breaking open the myth that only lone white males aided by supposedly inferior black males can attain hero status, such as nonwhite Hollywood actors who demand heroic roles, the tremendous growth in the independent film market, and continued interdisciplinary research into this area.
# Table of Contents

Introduction 1

*The Matrix: (De)Constructing a White God* 8

*Unbreakable: (White) Superheroes and (Black) Supervillians* 19

*O: Dark Hawks and White Villains* 33

*Suture: Hope in Black and White?* 44

Possibilities for the Future 56

Filmography 59

Works Cited 60
In film as well as literature, race need not be an issue in order for it to be a relevant component.

Rebecca Aanerud "Fictions of Whiteness: Speaking the Names of Whiteness in U.S. Literature"

The desire for heroism never wavers in the imaginations of the movie-going public. When we go to the movies, we long to see a strong character, poised to save the world (tights and cape optional, of course). However, we rarely question what the hero looks like. Moviegoers seem to want a physically strong person, bulging biceps and all the rest, but what else does it mean to look like a hero? Pick up nearly any action video and plastered on the cover, you will almost certainly find a male toting a gun and a fierce look, and he will almost certainly be white as well. Consider the people who watch movies, and you will find few that fit this category. Hollywood did not construct this hero overnight, nor did it accomplish this feat alone. In a never-ending, circular dynamic, movies both feed and feed on our imaginations. The audience is as much affected by seeing a white hero as by its desire to see a white hero. Hollywood perpetuates an archaic form of heroism because that is what the audience has formed long ago in their collective imagination. Much of American culture is generated by the desire to see self-starters making it in the direst of conditions.

With such a narrow construction of heroism, Hollywood has become void of equal representation of the movie-going public. A pre-packaged product is shipped to us in every canister of film. In the case of heroism, some man (it’s almost always a man) fits a list of impossible and arbitrary criteria that includes
being white, heterosexual, strong, Christian, and alone. This representation is both racist and sexist, both in the constant forefronting of it instead of other heroic possibilities, and in its continual reliance on subordinated Otherness to define itself. As this thesis will explain in detail, two flaws emerge with this outdated representation of heroism: 1) The problematic relationships that help establish the hero go unexamined, and 2) There are few heroes that challenge the current system.

The forefronting of white heroism encourages racist portrayals in the movies. When whites are privileged, other races are typically left to play inferior roles that only support the racist system of Hollywood. Critical Whiteness Theory provides one lens through which to view such a racist hierarchy. In the introduction to *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed a Movement*, the editors write that Critical Race Theory "embodies a movement of left scholars, most of them scholars of color, situated in law schools, whose work challenges the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally, in American society as a whole" (Gotanda 1). Critical Whiteness Theory developed as an offshoot of Critical Race Theory that exploded within the disciplines in the late 1990's. It has become an interdisciplinary field that seeks to understand the power structure that has been created and maintained by whites and what keeps people marked as "Other" in positions of inferiority. Critical analysis of cultural elements can expose and decenter the power structure. Some works that have shaped the idea of Critical Whiteness Studies include: English Professor Mike Hill's
Anthropologist Ruth Frakenberg states that without critically engaging whiteness, there is a "continued failure to displace the 'unmarked marker' status of whiteness, a continued inability to 'color' the seeming transparency of white positionings" (2). If whiteness is left unmarked, and thus unchallenged, the power structure is maintained. The racial specificity and ramifications of whiteness can slip by undetected very easily, even in films and other visual media, which tends to make the connotative colorings of minority characters almost painfully obvious. Our brains are conditioned to accept stock characters, such as the hero, the villain, and the sidekick, without questioning the implications imposed on those characters. Even the most astute moviegoers might acknowledge that race is a factor, but they might not understand the racist undercurrents keeping these stock characters afloat. Viewers might realize that Eddie Murphy, for instance, is an exquisitely funny man whose fast mouth gets him out of volatile situations, but they usually fail to notice that he is typically cast beside a white leading man and/or as "a black rip-off artist who must prove his worth" (Bogle 283). In such interracial pairings, examples of which this thesis will examine in several recent films, formulaic portrayals of minority characters
repeatedly buttress and even define the construction of white heroes.

The racist relationships perpetuated by Hollywood, then, tend to go unexamined. The hero rarely becomes a hero without the help of someone acting as a catalyst in the periphery, often someone who is nonwhite, but always someone who does not quite meet the rigorous standards of a Hollywood hero. Benjamin DeMott believes that such relationships are supported by a “friendship” orthodoxy. These relationships, in which a white person is paired with a black person and suddenly all issues of race are erased by the virtue of their friendship, become a kind of wish fulfillment for the audience: “What’s wished for and gained is a land where whites are unafraid of blacks, where blacks ask for and need nothing from whites (whites are the needy ones...), and where the revealed sameness of the races creates shared ecstatic highs” (15). This relationship is one of the two elements typically deployed in the development of a movie hero, the other being specific forms of choice. The hero must make an active choice, aided always by the periphery character, about accepting or rejecting his heroism.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant propose using “racial projects” to help dissect and understand the invisible power that race and racism holds over culture and those who produce it. They write that a "racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (56). This thesis will be an example of such a racial project as it attempts to explicate the hidden racism found in the cinematic portrayal of
heroes. Ross Chambers also brings to light the hidden and transparent nature of whiteness in his theoretical essay on racial whiteness, “The Unexamined.” He believes that:

In contrast to those whose identity is defined by their classificatory status as members of a given group, whites are perceived as individual historical agents whose unclassifiable difference from one another is their most prominent trait. Whiteness itself is thus atomized into invisibility through the individualization of white subjects (192).

White heroes are presented as hero first, white second, or last, or not at all. By presenting white heroism as an unchanging, stable entity, Hollywood repeatedly cashes in on the stock characterizations, both black and white, that it has helped to plant in the imaginations of moviegoers.

Toni Morrison offers some excellent tools for understanding race and how it functions in the imaginations of authors in her ground-breaking *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. She proposes four areas of study to further understand the function of black characters in canonical literature. These include:

The Africanist character as surrogate and enabler... the way an Africanist idiom is used to establish difference or, in a later period, to signal modernity... the studies of the technical ways in which an Africanist character is used to limn out and enforce the invention and implications of whiteness...[and] the manipulation of the
Africanist narrative...as a means of mediation—both safe and risky—on one's own humanity (51-3).

These four areas of study begin to raise questions about race and ultimately allow for a dissection of the invisible forces that maintain the power structure. Richard Dyer, a film theorist, analyzes the implications of whiteness in White. He points out that “in Western representation whites are overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant, have the central and elaborated roles, and above all are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard” (3). Our culture continues to perpetuate this racist notion through our most powerful medium—film. This medium allows us to engage all of our senses at once while seeming to leave behind all of our opinions, judgments, and sensibilities about race.

Two recent movies, The Matrix (1999) and Unbreakable (2000), make explicit use of the outdated system of interracial pairings, pitting a white hero with a nonwhite as a catalyst (as in The Matrix), or against one as a nemesis (as in Unbreakable). Each film places the white man in a set of remarkable circumstances with a black man as his guide. In The Matrix, Neo (Keanu Reeves) is aided by Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) and Trinity (Carrie Anne Moss) as he comes to terms with his role as “The One,” the hero poised to free a post-apocalyptic world from a computer program (the Matrix) designed to control people’s minds. In Unbreakable, David Dunn (Bruce Willis) realizes that he has unbreakable bones and a super-sense for detecting evil through his relationship with Elijah Price (Samuel L. Jackson), who is his exact opposite. As this thesis will also explain, Hollywood has made a few attempts to debunk the standard
white vs. black dichotomy by allowing anti-heroes to be played by nonwhites, as in \textit{O} (2001), though this film ultimately also falls back on the archaic system. In this film, Odin James (Mekhi Phifer) attends an all-white high school where he succumbs to the manipulation of Hugo Goulding (Josh Hartnett) in a modern retelling of Shakespeare's \textit{Othello}. However, there is hope to be found in the independent market. \textit{Suture} (1993) tells the story of two brothers, Vincent Towers (Michael Harris) and Clay Arlington (Dennis Haysbert), meeting for the first time as adults. Unknown to Clay, Vincent switches identities with him by setting off a bomb that destroys his face, forcing it to be reconstructed in the only image found on him, that of Vincent's. Clay must struggle through the amnesia caused by the blow and decide if he will accept his faux-Vincent identity or retain the identity of Clay. The challenging twist here for the audience is that although the characters are presented as brothers, one is played by a markedly white actor, and the other by a man who is undoubtedly black. While boasting no characters that could be quantified as heroic, \textit{Suture} makes great strides for its unique casting of actors, which challenges the audience's perceptions of race and class.
THE MATRIX: (DE)CONSTRUCTING A WHITE GOD

Although it contains a highly visible African American co-star, *The Matrix* is one of the most racist movies from the 1990's. The audience is presented with Neo, who eventually becomes the ultimate symbol of white heroism. He comes to his position as hero quite reluctantly, as part of a general search for his identity, and stays in it with help from the crew of the ship Nebuchadnezzar. Thomas Anderson works for a software company by day, but by night, he goes by the hacker alias Neo. He spends every moment he can searching for a man called Morpheus, who eventually makes contact with him. Morpheus (who happens to be black), Trinity (a white woman), and the rest of his crew form a small group of "freed" minds that have broken out of the Matrix, a computer program designed by robots to enslave the minds of humans so that their bodies can be used to fuel the robots. The freed minds are convinced that someone will arrive from within the Matrix that will free all of the other minds—Morpheus believes it is Neo. Throughout *The Matrix*, Neo's heroism is especially defined by two elements—personal relationships and Christian symbolism.

Neo struggles to find his place in both the reality of the "real" world and the fiction of the Matrix, and his relationships with Morpheus and Trinity form the base for his search for identity. According to Whiteness Studies theorist Ross Chambers, "Identity becomes a bit like a poker hand, in which the values of the ace (whiteness) can be enhanced, if one holds a couple of face cards or another ace (masculinity, heterosexuality, middle classness) or, alternatively, depreciated
by association with cards of lower value (ethnicity, color, lack of education, working classness)" (191). Hollywood's stock depictions of white heroes feeds directly into the poker hands of traditional whiteness, reinforcing the notion that only white heroes are worthy of Hollywood's bank roll. In *The Matrix*, Neo's heroism is initially enhanced because of his association with Morpheus and Trinity, who both seem far more capable than Neo of the job he eventually undertakes, that of saving the world. Subsequently, because of their "depreciated value" in terms of race and gender, Morpheus and Trinity are trumped by Neo's white masculinity, even though he is clearly unqualified for such a massive undertaking. Morpheus and Trinity put their energies into creating a white god to be the savior of the world, even though they possess the collective talents to save the world themselves.

Morpheus and Neo's relationship is instrumental to the formation of Neo's heroism. Without Morpheus's constant challenges to Neo's identity and understanding, his heroism could never take shape. Donald Bogle calls this type of character "the black-buddy-as-mammy-nurturer" whose function is to be an "all-giving, all-knowing, all-sacrificing nurturer" (276). As one in a long line of such minority nurturers, Morpheus artfully guides Thomas Anderson through his transformation into Neo. Neo is reluctant at first—he feels comfortable in his world and how it works. He balks when Morpheus asks him if he believes in fate by responding, "I don't like the idea that I'm not in control of my life." He feels in control and secure with the world around him. However, Morpheus is there to constantly subtly guide, reassure, and relax Neo as he makes the difficult
transition from an enslaved mind to a freed mind.

In the process of Neo's developing heroism, Morpheus constantly shatters Neo's beliefs about his world and the control that he supposedly exerts on it. As always, Morpheus is aware that the Matrix exerts control over lives, and he exists, it seems, solely in order to guide Neo to this understanding. In turn, Neo's heroism is defined by his ability to set himself apart. In order to free humanity in general from the grips of the Matrix, he must break free from his simulated life as Thomas Anderson, the life controlled by the Matrix, and he must learn to accept his identity as Neo in the "real" world. Accepting his new identity is crucial to Neo's transformation into the hero. He must accept his "real" mind and learn how to use it to manipulate his projected self within the Matrix.

Morpheus repeatedly tells Neo that he is "The One," further separating Neo from the rest of the world and making him more special than the rest of the crew. After their first initial contact, Morpheus tells Neo, "You're the One, Neo. You see, you may have spent the last few years looking for me, but I've spent most of my life looking for you." After presenting Neo with the choice of two pills, a red one that will free his mind and a blue one that will allow him to keep dreaming in the Matrix, Morpheus presents Neo with the choice that will either set in motion his life as a hero, or keep his mind enchained:

You have to see it for yourself. This is your last chance. After this, there is no going back. You take the blue pill and the story ends. You wake in your bed and you believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill and you stay in Wonderland and I
show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember that all I am offering is the truth. Nothing more.

Neo accepts the red pill with only a moment’s hesitation and thereby sets in motion his hero quest. Once again, Morpheus is present, ready to guide Neo out of the drugged fantasyland of the Matrix. Ultimately, like every other stock minority character depicted in such interracial relationships, Morpheus holds the key to Neo’s redemption. Morpheus presents Neo with opportunities to break out of his standard position while he himself remains chained to the limitations projected onto him. Morpheus more than opens the door for the creation of Neo, the great white savior of all humanity—he shoves him through it.

Neo must go through a series of deaths and rebirths on his road to heroism, all of which are accompanied by Morpheus. His first death occurs after he takes the red pill and Thomas Anderson disappears. Neo is then reborn in the “real” world. He wakes up in a dark, yet strangely bright space filled with red pods. He bursts through the casing and discovers that he is plugged into some sort of system. He then breaks free and is flushed out of said system. Upon leaving the Matrix, Morpheus is the first to greet him—“Welcome to the real world, Neo.” Neo then quickly passes out. The Matrix itself is a place that seems quite normal. It has the look and feel of every other modernized city on Earth in the 1990’s. Compared to the blinding whiteness and supposed normalcy of the Matrix, the starship Nebuchadnezzar looks dingy and faded.

Further heightening the contrast between the Matrix and the real world, Morpheus and Neo have a discussion about reality in the all-white program
called the Construct, a program designed by the crew to train the freed minds. The Construct is a space that is supposed to be free of associations, a kind of visual tabula rosa. The color of the space (white) is the only visible characteristic. The Construct is designed to represent the Matrix so that minds can learn how to manipulate the space and the system. However, the Construct is tainted by racial hierarchy because of its color, or supposed lack thereof. Whiteness is set up as the dominant feature of the program, indeed the only feature. Morpheus tests Neo in this space by challenging his perceptions: “What is real? How do you define real? If you’re talking about your senses, what you feel, taste, smell, or see, then all you’re talking about are electrical signals interpreted by your brain.” Morpheus goes on to explain how and why the Matrix was created. Morpheus is again dispensing knowledge to the ignorant Neo, who must negotiate the fine line between fiction and reality with Morpheus as his guide. Morpheus and Neo’s relationship becomes a “wish-fulfillment fantasies for a nation that has repeatedly hoped to simplify its racial tensions” (Bogle 271). By placing a selflessly helpful black character in the all-white Construct with a rather helpless but potentially heroic white character, this delusion is further maintained.

Like any good hero, Neo has moments when he questions his identity and seeks the wisdom of others. Once again, Morpheus leads Neo through his difficulties. He takes Neo to see the Oracle, a black female soothsayer who lives within the Matrix, to discover the “truth” about his path:

Oracle: I’m gonna let you in on a little secret. Being the One is just like being in love. Nobody can tell you you’re in love. You just
know it. Through and through. Balls to bones...But you already
know what I’m going to tell you.
Neo: I’m not the One.
Oracle: Morpheus believes in you, Neo, and no one, not you or
even me can convince him otherwise. He believes so blindly that
he’s going to sacrifice his life to save yours...You’re going to have
to make a final choice. In one hand, you will have Morpheus’ life.
In the other hand, you will have your own. One of you is going to
die. Which one, will be up to you.
The trip to the Oracle is full of surprises for Neo. First, he believes that he
discovers what he had always suspected—he is not “The One.” What a relief to
Neo to learn once and for all that he can go back to the normal computer hacker
he always was! However, he now also has the life of his buddy in his hands. He
learns that Morpheus has such faith in his buddy that he is willing to kill himself
just to prove that Neo is the hero. The Oracle sets up a stock situation that many
black/white buddy-films must go through—the black character must set himself
up to save the “greater” of the two, the white character.

Another minority character whose relationship has an impact on Neo’s
development is Trinity. Even though she is white, she is a woman, which limits
her own potential for heroism in Hollywood’s portrayal of heroes. The
relationship between Trinity and Neo also firmly establishes the supposedly
greater appropriateness of Neo for the central heroic role. Whiteness and
masculinity are inextricably intertwined in Hollywood’s concept of heroism.
Significantly, while Trinity’s sex is clearly female, she often behaves in a very masculine way. A prominent example occurs in the scene involving Morpheus’s capture, an event that has been predicted by the Oracle. Neo makes a decision that solidifies himself as a hero and as the great white rescuer. As the Oracle has told him, he has to make a choice—his life or Morpheus’s life. Trinity knows he is not talented enough to perform this task on his own, and tells him in no uncertain terms:

Neo: I would have to make a choice...I’m going in after him.
Trinity: Morpheus sacrificed himself so we could get you out!
There’s no way you’re going back in!
Neo: Morpheus did what he did because he believed that I’m something I’m not...I’m not the One, Trinity. The Oracle hit me with that too...I’m sorry, I’m not. I’m just another guy. Morpheus is the one that matters.

By insisting that Morpheus must be the link, Neo sets himself up for the only sacrifice he is asked to make as a hero. Morpheus has the knowledge and skill for defeating the Matrix. Even Neo can see how silly it is to entertain the idea that he is the hero (which makes him all the more endearing to the audience, for who does not love an underdog?). He might not see himself as the rescuer of all of humanity, but he can be the hero for his buddy. Alternatively, while Neo is busy downplaying his role of great white rescuer, Trinity is preparing herself to go back to the Matrix and do the job that Neo cannot perform because he is too weak. He does not have the training or the knowledge of Trinity and Morpheus.
During the rescue scene, Trinity makes a mockery of the near-universal stereotype that women are weak. Neo does his part, but Trinity more than does her fair share. She carries as many weapons as Neo, protects him from flying bullets, and learns how to fly a helicopter in a matter of moments, which aids in the rescue of Morpheus. Of course, the actual rescue of Morpheus is reserved for Neo, but Trinity provides him with all of the opportunity and potential with the knowledge that she has of the Matrix.

Trinity displays, then, the sort of markedly, traditional masculine qualities that Neo initially lacks. However, because she is another subordinated Other whose ultimate role is to aid and abet another formulaic construction of white masculinity, Trinity's kick-ass nature bows down to traditional heroism and masculinity. Both Trinity and Morpheus make it out of the Matrix safely, but Neo is left behind to fight the Agents, the non-descript, white males with Secret Service-style earpieces and sunglasses. They are the only ones, apart from Zion, who know about the Matrix and how it functions, and the only real arm of the law. As the Agents pulverize Neo, Trinity rips her shirt to wipe up his blood from his “real” body. In stark contrast to her earlier, markedly masculine prowess, Trinity becomes a simpering, femenized idiot as the great white hero dies. As Neo slumps against the wall, Trinity tells the dead Neo, “The Oracle, she told me that I'd fall in love and that man, the man I loved would be the One. You see? You can’t be dead, Neo, you can’t be because I love you. You hear me? I love you!” She then kisses Neo’s dead body and tells him, “Now get up!”

Again, Neo must become “the One,” and the far more able Morpheus and
Trinity have stepped aside to push him into that role, so he cannot die here. In addition, aside from the film's formulaic use of gendered and racialized minority characters to construct white male heroism, the film also relies on Christian imagery and symbolism to further emphasize Neo's almighty One-ness. From the opening dialogue, Morpheus is clearly on a desperate search for one individual to save humanity. This one soul will save all of humanity mostly through his mere existence, though he will have to perform some tasks along the way. He will blot out evil and free those who do not even know they are enslaved. This should all sound a little bit like Sunday school now. At the beginning of the film, a voice that we later discover belongs to Trinity's says, "Morpheus believes he is the one." Immediately, the audience is clued in that there will be one savior and that the person has been found. From then on, the laundry list of Christian symbols is quite extensive. Everything from the ship's name (the Nebuchadnezzar, a Babylonian king born around 630BCE and immortalized in the Book of Daniel) to Neo's resurrection works within the audience's imaginations and existing definitions of heroism, i.e. the Christ figure, to further Neo's heroism.

Morpheus and Trinity have spent their efforts cultivating their god, and in the end, Neo delivers. *The Matrix* culminates with the wedding of the power of relationships and blatant Christian imagery when Neo is resurrected. Agent Smith shoots numerous rounds at Neo, eventually killing him, and says, "Goodbye, Mr. Anderson." And, in a sense, Thomas Anderson does die at that moment. Neo snaps back to life (with the aid of Trinity) and kills Agent Smith by
entering into Smith’s Matrix body, blowing it apart. Neo’s rebirth happens as his body appears in the dust that was Agent Smith. Morpheus then screams, “He’s the One!” Neo is reborn as the resurrected hero guided by Morpheus. Based largely on Trinity’s urging, Neo transforms into the ultimate hero. Neo’s new body is brighter than his old Matrix body (light radiates from his feet and hands). He has become the epitome of the white hero, and the excessive white light signals, to some extent, his racial status.

Ending the film is Neo, alone, maintaining the values of the Hero’s Code. He speaks to the Matrix directly, informing it and the people who control it of his intentions in his new hero role: “I know that you’re afraid, afraid of change… I’m going to hang up this phone and I’m going to show these people what you don’t want them to see. A world without you. A world without rules and controls, borders or boundaries. A world where anything is possible.” The movie ends with a shot of Neo, alone, hanging up a phone in a public phone booth in the Matrix. All of Morpheus and Trinity’s efforts to create Neo are forgotten about—he is the sole hero and protector in *The Matrix*. His buddies have slipped beyond usefulness. They have done their part and can now be discarded.

What is missing throughout the film is any mention of the possibility of Morpheus, Trinity, or, for that matter, the whole crew as the potential saviors of the post-apocalyptic world. The Nebuchadnezzar crew possesses all of the components and skills necessary to defeat the program, yet Morpheus specifically, but even Trinity, blindly believes in a white soon-to-be god who barely understands that his mind is being controlled by a computer program and
that his body is little more than a battery. bell hooks says of *The Pelican Brief* (1993), another movie that uses stereotypical portrayals of African Americans, "There is an underlying insistence throughout the film that no other system [social structure] could be as good" (86). Similarly, *The Matrix* presents Neo as the only one who has the potential to save humanity, even though he lacks the knowledge and skill to defeat the Matrix, because it relies on the social structure most familiar to the audience. The overwhelming majority of the film is spent on cultivating Neo and getting him to accept or deny his roles as "the One." Morpheus is disregarded as the potential "One," as are all of the remaining members of the crew, which include three women, two non-whites, one early teen white male, and one very silent white male. Because the filmmakers insisted on deploying a formulaic Hero's Code that persistently subordinates and relies upon racialized and gendered otherness to idealized white masculinity, all of the crew's characters fail to live up to the standards of this code and must remain in stock character positions.
UNBREAKABLE: (WHITE) SUPERHEROES AND (BLACK) SUPERVILLAINS

*Unbreakable* utilizes an archaic form of heroism similar to that constructed in *The Matrix*. However, and even more unfortunate for the film, *Unbreakable*’s racist elements take a front seat. Using the all-too-familiar dichotomy of white=good, black=bad, *Unbreakable* uses African American Elijah Price (whom the audience discovers at the end is the villain) as a vehicle for revealing white David Dunn’s heroism.

Elijah Price is a comic book dealer who specializes in theorizing about the nature of superheroes and villains. David Dunn is struggling to find his place in the world while working as a security guard at a football stadium. Their worlds collide after David walks away unscathed from a train wreck that should have killed him. Elijah, on the other hand, has a rare disease that causes his bones to break very easily. As part of an effort to explain his own fragile state, Elijah has spent his life searching for someone who is the exact opposite of him. After finding David, Elijah challenges him to consider the possibility that he possesses super-strength and an innate ability to detect evil. He then guides David through the process of testing his powers.

Consistent with Toni Morrison’s insights into typical depictions of interracial relationships, Elijah’s blackness is used to create and establish the differences between a superhero and a supervillain, and he also functions as the “surrogate and enabler” (51) for David’s heroism. David relies upon the
otherness of Elijah to establish his extraordinary abilities. He can entertain the possibility of heroism because Elijah is there to represent its exact opposite. Also, Elijah functions as a black character used to inspire change in a white character. Throughout the film, Elijah enables David on his route to heroism, primarily by encouraging him to challenge his supposedly mundane life and seek a greater calling—one does not wake up in the morning and say, “Yes, today I will be a superhero.” David would not have challenged his original identity to reach hero status without Elijah’s urging and cultivating. David needs Elijah to act as an enabler in order for this thought to form in him.

Hollywood’s simplistic portrayal of white male heroism in such relationships keeps Elijah from being the hero. From the very beginning of Unbreakable, the “otherness” of Elijah is established. Several devices are employed throughout the narrative, including camera techniques at pivotal moments of identity formation for Elijah and David, detailed descriptions (always provided by Elijah or someone close to him) of what it means to be a hero, and the insistence upon a spectrum of opposites, also articulated by Elijah. These three devices place Elijah in a position to provide information and understanding to David, but leave him in an inferior position because of his racial “otherness.”

The racially marked separateness of Elijah and the supposed normalcy of David are established in the opening scenes. The film opens in 1961 in a Philadelphia department store. A black mother with a crying newborn is shown through a mirror with two white women in the background. An African American doctor rushes in, ready to administer to the infant. The camera only briefly cuts
from the mirror, with the few exceptions being when the white female clerks are speaking. Through the mirror, the audience hears the characters’ discovery that the newborn (named Elijah Price) has broken nearly every bone in his body upon exiting the birth canal. The doctor is shocked, thinking that the white women dropped him at birth. After the revelation that Elijah was born with many of his bones broken, the camera instantly cuts away to the present time, and the audience sees David Dunn on a train. Through a rather lengthy conversation with a woman, David reveals that he is afraid of water and does not like football, which both seem like rather benign traits that many people possess.

In the opening scenes, the camera techniques are very different for the two characters. In key scenes of character exposition, Elijah is shown only through a mirror. In fact, the subsequent two scenes that involve Elijah also start off with him as a reflection in a surface. This technique creates a distorted view of him and establishes distance between Elijah and the audience. Subsequently, Elijah’s identity remains ambiguous until the final frames of the film. David, on the other hand, is shown initially in a fairly tight close-up, resulting in an immediate reduction of personal distance. The audience “sees” David as he would appear to the people on the train—there are no filters for the audience to view him through. While David is momentarily shown through a window, his reflection is in the background of the frame—the main focus is on him. Also, a window creates a different feeling from a mirror. As shot in this film, a mirror is a distorted reflection of the self, but a window functions with little distortion—the world looks basically the same when viewed from behind a window as it does
when viewed from in front of it. The opening scenes also establish Elijah's "otherness" moments after he is born. He is marked as different not only because he is black, but also because of his fractured body. David, however, is not marked as easily. He is white, and thus in racial terms unremarkable, and his abnormalities are established through discourse—he volunteers the information on his own terms, in his own time, defining himself, rather than having others define him.

Elijah, despite his racially marked separateness, is almost always the character providing information to the audience. Most importantly, he speaks frequently and eloquently about the differences between comic book heroes and villains and how to tell them apart. Taking metanarrative to the extreme, the first time that the audience sees Elijah as an adult, he is a reflection in a piece of comic book artwork, speaking about the physical characteristics of heroes and villains. Again, Elijah is not introduced as a real person, only a figure, a construction of the imagination. The camera holds tight on the frame for some length of time, and Elijah's voice is heard over the top explaining the piece as:

A classic depiction of good versus evil. Notice the square jaw of Slayer, common in most comic heroes, and the slightly disproportionate size of Jaguero's head to his body. This too is common, but only in villains. The thing to notice about this piece, the thing that makes it very, very special, is its realistic depiction of its figures. When the characters reached the magazine, they were exaggerated, as always happens.
Elijah is not only making a metanarrative comment about the presentation of comic book characters, but also about hero formation. When characters are produced for mass consumption (i.e. those in comic books and movies), they become distorted, out of line with the way things really exist. The figures and characters are expected to take on a life of their own. While establishing the depicted inherent differences between heroes and villains, Elijah is giving the audience, and ultimately David, a lens through which to construct heroism. Furthering the racist portrayal of stock characters, Elijah and David both match up with the stereotyped images that Elijah discusses. David has the standard white hero’s square jaw, and Elijah, potential criminal that he supposedly is, has a head that appears larger than a “normal” person’s (an aspect of his physique that is further emphasized by having his hair teased out into a wild Afro). Elijah is commenting on stock characters and how they become distorted through media, much the same as he and David are being distorted by the film. While the film does comment on the archaic construction of heroism that heroes and villains must look a certain way, it does nothing to challenge Hollywood’s racially coded constructions of blackness and whiteness.

At one point, Elijah’s mother also speaks in such physiognomic terms about hero/villain formation. She says to David in one of the final scenes of the movie, “see the villain’s eyes? They’re larger than the other characters'.” According to Elijah’s mother, the large eyes are the most telling, as “they insinuate a slightly skewed perspective on how they [villains] see the world. Just off normal.” This is the last specifically definitional discourse that the audience
receives about the differences between heroes and villains, and it is very telling. His mother appears to say that there is something innately wrong with her son and offers this as an excuse for her son's actions, which is a common tool used when people do not want to consider the possibility that race is a social construct. According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "there is a continuous temptation to think of race as an essence, as something fixed, concrete, and objective" (54). Elijah's evilness is so immutable that even his eyes give him away, as much as his race does, or so the formula would insist. Blackness, and particularly black masculinity, is often associated with danger, evil, and so on, and Elijah's eyes become another marker in a long list of identifying traits for detecting evil.

Throughout the movie, "Otherness" is established in two different ways, ways that are in large part dependent upon standardized notions of racial blackness and whiteness. Elijah's otherness has already been discussed—he is marked as Other from the moment of his birth, an alien-ness that is highlighted with the use of mirrors in his first three scenes. In contrast to Elijah's distinct, and distinctly stereotypical, characteristics, David's persona comes across as "normal." David embodies the average hero—by virtue of this protagonist's whiteness and masculinity, his status is assured. Further highlighting the contrast between the characters, David is given the chance to articulate (a term I use very loosely as he barely speaks in the film) his differences to and through other people, who become enablers of his eventual heroism. Through conversations with his son, Joseph, David further formulates his notions of
heroism. Joseph thinks that he will be able to win fights and be as strong as his father, but he comes to realize that he is not like his father. He cannot be as strong because his father is unique. Joseph acts as an enabler for a brief moment because it is through his lack of hero status/strength that David can be classified as a hero. For instance, as an explanation of why he got into a fight at school, Joseph says, “You can’t let bad things happen to good people, right? That’s you’re code, isn’t it, the hero’s code?” Joseph begins to articulate what it means to look and act like a hero, shedding light on the underlying characteristics that constitute a hero—goodness and justice—that he attributes to his father. David then begins testing his strength at the bench press with his son adding anything that he can find in the basement to weigh him down. However, no matter how much weight is added, David can still lift it. While David’s whiteness “normalizes” his heroism, its lack of stereotypical characteristics also allows for him to become an individual with distinctly personalized attributes, such as his superior strength and ability to sense evil through touch. When compared with Elijah, David’s individualized attributes are all the more apparent. According to Toni Morrison, “Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled... Or so our writers seem to say” (59). Whiteness needs the help and support of blackness to define it, give meaning to its existence, just as David needs Elijah to define his heroism.

Furthering the construction of the relational identities of its characters, the concept of opposites comes up with great regularity in Unbreakable. Most significantly, David and Elijah are on opposite ends of the racialized color
spectrum. This contrast alone carries many connotations, as Richard Dyer points out: "There are inevitable associations of white with light and therefore safety, and black with dark and therefore danger" (*The Matter of Images* 142). Whether using color as a marked physical characteristic or as an item of clothing, color matters, both in real life and in cinema, which is so reliant on the visual to construct meaning. Our imaginations tend to expect characters to easily fall into their supposed positions and rankings, and color is one more tool used to aid the audience. Additionally, white and black as hue exist in a strange paradox on the color wheel: "[W]hite is made up of all colors fused together: white is no color because it is all colors" (Dyer, *White* 47). Conversely, black is the absence of all colors, such as the idea of a black hole is used to denote the absence of all space. White as color carries special power because it is all things contained in what appears to be a "blank" package—contained within one color is the possibility for all colors. Think of a prism. When viewed straight on, it appears translucent and clear, but once it catches light, all of the colors of the rainbow are on display, except for black. Black as color has no such power—it can never be anything but black, absence. Similarly, the connotations of racial blackness allow *Unbreakable* to compartmentalize Elijah into a position of inferiority, and those of racial whiteness allow David to be almost anything, to develop into ways that arise among a virtually infinite range of possibilities.

In addition, David and Elijah are on opposite ends of the physical spectrum. Elijah, as always, is the first to pick up on their shared polarity:

If there is someone like me in the world, and I am at one end of the
spectrum, couldn't there be someone else, opposite of me, at the other end, someone who doesn't get sick or hurt, like the rest of us...someone to protect us?

It is at this point that David begins to think more seriously about his superhero attributes as he realizes that in addition to his inordinate strength, he has never been sick or broken a bone. He is “unbreakable.” Elijah, on the other hand, does break, and he does so very easily. His role in the spectrum of opposites, then, is twofold. First, he is used to articulate the possibility for David’s heroism through his persistent quest to find a reason for his own condition. Also he functions as a living calibrator for David’s position in the world. Through him, David’s place on the spectrum is defined. Without an opposite, neither character’s "true" nature can be defined, but it is through Elijah’s insistence that David’s heroism is reinforced. As another example of the typical, instrumental minor black character whose humanity is sacrificed to a central project of constructing the identity of a white protagonist, Elijah’s purpose is to define the goals and qualities of David’s heroism. In order for David to be a hero, he must have an opposite, an archenemy, which Elijah ultimately supplies as himself. David realizes his heroic potential because Elijah acts as the enabler by encouraging David to break out of his safe world as a security guard and by sacrificing himself for David and, in a larger sense, for white heroism.

At two points in the film, David does concede to his hero status, but not in ways that give credit where credit is due. In both instances, David tells his son, Joseph, “You’re right,” giving recognition to his son for pushing him and
challenging him to accept his hero role; however, Elijah receives no such recognition, even though he is acting as the true enabler. Through Elijah, David learns about his hero status, how to act, what to do with it, and the realization that being a superhero is what he is supposed to do with his life. Though he runs to Elijah for help, David does not once verbalize his newfound heroism to Elijah. David never concedes to Elijah that he shaped and guided him, and Elijah's facilitating role is thus erased. This erasure further highlights the racist nature of the use of Elijah as a stock black character—once his work is done, he is discarded, having been much less fully humanized than the central white character, David.

The various names of Elijah also establish his link with a comic book self, furthering his position as a stock character. The first time the audience hears Elijah speak, he tells his mother about what the kids at school call him: “They call me Mr. Glass because I break like glass.” At two other pivotal moments, Elijah recalls the childhood taunt. The third and final time comes right after David has discovered that Elijah is the villain:

Do you know what the scariest thing is? To not know your place in this world…but I found you. So many sacrifices just to find you. Now that we know who you are, I know who I am. I am not a mistake. It all makes sense. In a comic, do you know how you can tell who the arch-villain is going to be? He’s the exact opposite of the hero and most times, they’re friends, like you and me. I should have known way back when. Do you know why, David? Because
of the kids. They called me Mr. Glass.

The most important line of the movie is encapsulated in this soliloquy: “Now that we know who you are, I know who I am” (emphasis added). The choice of pronouns is most revealing. Elijah’s use of “we” implies that the discovery of David’s heroism was a joint effort with both men contributing equally. Nevertheless, David appears to take sole credit for his heroism, once all is said and done. He never discusses or credits Elijah for any of the help and tutelage that he offered David. Also, there is a dependency established on David understanding who he is before Elijah can understand his own true nature. Without David recognizing himself as the hero, Elijah cannot become the villain. Elijah functions as a sort of reversed mirror for David, a characteristic which Toni Morrison highlights as one of the major unchallenged functions of an Africanist presence. She states that “the duties of that [Africanist] persona—duties of exorcism and reification and mirroring—are on demand and on display throughout much of the literature…”(39). But this leads to a very interesting question: who wants to be the villain? Why would anyone want to know that he/she is the exact opposite of someone who is pure goodness, which would reveal him/her as pure evil? Because of racist portrayals in movies, Elijah’s role remains unexamined. Once David is the hero, it does not matter what happens to Elijah; clearly, David will take care of that, now that he is the hero. Once David has been enabled, his enabler becomes completely expendable to him.

After Elijah’s identity as a terrorist has been revealed and David has “heroically” disposed of Elijah, the last two frames of the movie reveal more
about Elijah's role as a villainous enabler. To give the movie a real-life feel, the two main characters' lives are updated. For David, the frame freezes on a shot of his face with Elijah in the background. In white letters, a sentence appears on the screen: "David Dunn led authorities to Limited Edition where evidence of three acts of terrorism was found." However, for Elijah's update, the screen goes black and in white letters, says, "Elijah Price is now in an institution for the criminally insane." This contrast creates separateness and loss of individuality for Elijah. David's face stays with the audience, but Elijah's is lost, quite literally, and ironically, in the black. Similar to the shots through mirrors, this technique creates distance not only between the two characters, but also between the audience and Elijah. David is responsible for Elijah's downfall and placement in jail, even though Elijah has sacrificed himself for David. The film's dehumanizing use of the connotations of Elijah's blackness has facilitated this sacrifice; the film itself has sacrificed development of his individualized characteristics.

In the final dramatic moments of the movie, Elijah's roles as enabler and embodiment of otherness come together when he solidifies both his own and David's roles in the world. Elijah carries out his last act as enabler when he and David shake hands, which solidifies Elijah's doomed fate. By shaking hands, David can "sense" the evil that is in Elijah. Realizing that his and David's relationship can go no further at this point, Elijah basically asks to be caught. Again, Elijah functions solely as the catalyst for David, a kind of racially coded foil. For this movie to capitalize on, rather than challenge, the comforting, profitable presumptions of typical blackness and non-particularized whiteness,
both of these characters must fall into stereotypical roles of hero and villain. Because Elijah is black and is not credited with a full range of human emotions and motives, the fact that he so blindly and rather stupidly reveals himself to David is glossed over in the movie. Both Elijah and David are constructed in typical Hollywood fashion; because of Elijah’s blackness, his motives remain obscured.

Even though the audience only discovers Elijah’s villainy at the end of the film, in Hollywood’s stock depictions of interracial relationships, development of Elijah as the villain would be frivolous at this point—he has already fulfilled his role as creator of David’s heroism. Once Elijah discloses that he caused all of the accidents in order to find David, his villainy is less than surprising. If there is a hero, there must be a villain. What is unusual about this villain, is that he is one of the most likable characters in the movie. He is multi-dimensional and a very astute observer of human nature. He is eloquent and articulate in ways that David could only imagine, given his frequently monosyllabic responses. Similar to Morpheus in *The Matrix*, Elijah possesses all of the right elements for heroism intellectually, but because of his blackness, the film forces him into a stock character slot. The fact that Elijah is so articulate does not matter once his status as the resident villain is established, which he does as soon as he offers David his hand.

Everything about David leads to his heroism. It is as if he is on a cosmic collision course with his destiny, and even though other characters aid in David’s heroism, it is Elijah who is ultimately responsible. However, Elijah receives no
credit and in the end opens himself up to being caught, all for the sake of a white hero. If a white man had been playing the role of Elijah, these differences would not be so apparent, or even relevant to David’s hero formation. However, because of Elijah’s race, differences are established that cannot be ignored. Due in large part to Elijah’s blackness, David’s whiteness is established and his hero status is assured.
O: DARK HAWKS AND WHITE VILLAINS

O presents a more comprehensive and roundly humanizing (though ultimately incomplete) picture of interracial relationships than do The Matrix and Unbreakable. Set at a picturesque prep school in Charleston, North Carolina, O is a modern retelling of William Shakespeare's Othello. The African American protagonist, Odin James, is the star basketball player at the nearly all white school, and he dates the dean's daughter, Desi. Hugo Goulding, a fellow basketball player, befriends Odin, then sets him up in an attempt to get back at his father, the "Duke," who is also their coach. O does not shirk from the fact that blatant as well as covert forms of racism still exist, and it attempts a bold reversal of the Hollywood Hero Code by depicting a potentially heroic protagonist who is black in relation to a potentially nurturing minor character who is white. However, the film ultimately fails to challenge the Hero Code because all of the same associations with racialized color resurface in the end.

Initially, Odin's athleticism defines his heroism. He is acceptable and even valued in this exclusive, lily-white environment because his athletic endeavors have achieved glory for the school. However, Odin is not ignorant of the power athletics hold over people's racial attitudes. He even questions the Duke about his role in the school. After a confrontation with the Dean (Desi's father) about a fight Odin was involved in, Odin asks the Duke, "If you was so worried about me, how come this school busted its ass to get me here?" The Duke's response is simply, "Because you were worth it." Odin becomes a commodity that can be
traded and replaced at any moment—he might be "worth it" right now, but only if he maintains the same level of neutrality regarding matters of race that the Duke and the rest of the school require of him. Athletics keeps race neutral—as long as Odin is good at athletics and does not assert the significance of race, his color does not threaten the whites. 

Conversely, Odin's relationships with white people do have the potential to threaten the white power structure, specifically his relationship with Desi (O's Desdemona counterpart), the dean's white daughter. Not only is she white, but her father is presented as the ultimate source of power within the school, making their relationship a potential threat to whites. One of the first steps Odin takes in challenging whiteness is to simply mark racial whiteness, a characteristic of those around him that would otherwise go unmarked. In Odin's relationship with Desi, for instance, his blackness functions to reveal that she is largely clueless of the fact that not only does the race of her boyfriend have significance in this setting, her own race does as well. Highlighting her blindness is the conversation that she and Odin have regarding the taboo word "nigger" and who can use it. They are in bed together and Desi wonders how they became a couple:

Odin: I pulled you cause I'm that kind of nigger. (Desi rolls away.)

Oh, don't be actin' like that. See I can say nigger 'cause I am a nigger. You can't because you ain't. Don't be jealous.

Desi: Why can't I say it? My people invented the word.

Odin: You can't even think it.
Odin tries to explain to her that his use of the word helps to desensitize and recover a term that has been used by whites to have power over those that they deem as “Other.” Desi, however, does not get it. She feels that she has a right to the word because “her people” were the originators of the term. She fails to recognize that using the word was and continues to be a way for whites to hold power over African Americans. Odin, on the other hand, shows that he is quite aware of the power of language and the implications of the misuse of that power. By using the word “nigger,” he is taking away some of the power that whites have put into place by showing Desi that her whiteness does have significance, both in his life and in hers. As Film theorist Richard Dyer points out, “whiteness is only racial when it is ‘marked’ by the presence of the truly raced, that is, non-white subject” (White 14). In O, the racial status of the characters serves as a means of establishing differences in identity between them, but to the film’s credit, it also functions to mark the whiteness of white characters, calling into question just what significance it might have. Odin is already marked as Other by virtue of his skin color, but he in turn marks Desi’s whiteness.

Odin’s other interracial relationship is with Hugo, the Duke’s son and a fellow basketball player. Hugo has a host of psychological issues, though the main one concerns his poor relationship with his father. Hugo feels slighted because of his father’s favorable treatment of Odin. In fact, the Duke appears to love Odin more than his own son. For instance, at the pep rally for the Most Valuable Player award, which Odin receives, the Duke says, “I’ll tell you something else too, and I’m very proud to say this publicly. I love him [Odin] like
my own son.” The camera cuts to a reaction shot of Hugo, showing his
disappointment and revealing that he feels distanced by his father’s adoration of
Odin. The audience gets the sense that there is something very special about
Odin, something so special that a white prep school would “bust its ass” to bring
a black basketball player into their world. Hugo, however, is unconvinced. He
sees Odin as the stumbling block preventing him from forming a better
relationship with his father, which fuels his desire to destroy Odin.

Because Odin is the only African American on campus, in the eyes of the
whites surrounding him, he represents all African Americans, though this is
specifically true for Hugo. Even though Odin’s race is rarely discussed, it does
not pass unnoticed, such as during his bedroom scene with Desi. Ultimately
Hugo’s struggle to destroy Odin becomes a struggle to destroy all blackness.
According to Film theorist Mark Winokur, “the tendency of the hegemonic culture
is to read and represent the ethnic Other as a projection of the kinds of impulses
the culture is afraid of acknowledging, but fascinated by, in itself” (193). Hugo
longs to destroy Odin and his blackness because he is envious of the skill Odin
possesses. Hugo can accomplish his goal only by forcing evil onto blackness
because Odin is set up as perfect, further upsetting Hugo because a black man
is displacing him. Hugo’s difficulty with Odin’s blackness and perfection begins
to take shape in the opening scene. The screen is black with fuzzy white shapes
that come into focus as doves. In a voiceover, Hugo, delivers the opening
speech: “All my life, I always wanted to fly. I always wanted to live like a hawk. I
know that you aren’t supposed to be jealous of anything, but to take flight, to soar
above everything and everyone, that’s living.” Through his speech, Hugo suggests to the audience that perfection is the hawk, which the audience later discovers to be Odin. However, the film, and Hugo, as he is the one observing, is saying something different—the bird shown is not a hawk but rather a white dove. For Hugo, perfection, in its visible form, should be associated with whiteness, not a dark bird like the hawk.

In order to destroy Odin, Hugo must first cross racial boundaries to befriend him by appearing to be concerned about the potential for infidelity in Desi with Michael. Hugo tells Odin, “You’re not a jealous person. I am... You know, sometimes I see things that aren’t really there... You should watch your girl, bro.” When Odin challenges him on it, he responds, “I shouldn’t have said nothin’. Forget about it, man. Mike’s a good guy.” This one exchange sets off the firestorm of doubt for Odin. Hugo plants the tiniest bit of doubt, then gets Odin so wrapped up in the possibility of Desi’s infidelity that it drives him to the breaking point. According to Annalee Newitz, “The appearance of white racial redemption [...] often takes the place of real action or self awareness intended to eliminate social injustices” (139). Hugo has taken on “the appearance of white racial redemption” by crossing racial borders to befriend Odin. He appears to attempt to atone for the sins of the white people by reaching out to Odin, but in reality, Hugo is more concerned with his own selfish desires and with destroying blackness.

Hugo constantly identifies himself with Odin as he befriends him. He tells Odin, “You’ve been everything to me, O. To me, you’re more than a friend,
you're my brother. And when a brother is wronged, so am I. I'm you, O. I'm a part of you.” In a reversal of the Hollywood Hero Code for interracial relationships, a white character, Hugo, is enhancing his status by identifying with the Africanist character. He appears to be a caring and compassionate friend who looks up to his buddy. By identifying with Odin, he sets himself apart from the white power structure and appears to place himself in a position to challenge it; however, he is doing it for his own devious purposes and because he is a member of the power structure, disenfranchised as he might think that he is. He tells Odin, “You make your own rules. The minute you figure that out, you're free.” Hugo believes that one can just do as one pleases. He recognizes that certain people are in a privileged status that allows them to make their own rules. Hugo believes, falsely, that Odin is in a privileged position because of his athletic ability, which Hugo fiercely envies; however, athleticism only provides Odin with a limited-use membership into the power structure and not the real freedom to “make his own rules.”

In contrast to Hugo's constant identification with Odin, the latter continually sets himself apart from Hugo. During his final monologue before he kills himself, Odin makes explicit the racial difference that has perhaps kept him wary of the whites around him who seem concerned with his well-being:

My life is over, that's it. But while all y'all are out here livin' yours, sittin' around talkin' about the nigger that lost it back in high school, you make sure you tell 'em the truth. You tell 'em I loved that girl. I did! But I got played! He twisted my head up and fucked it up. I
ain't no different than none of you all. My mom ain't no crack head. I wasn't no gang banger. It wasn't some head rat drug dealer that tripped me up. It was this white prep mother fucker standin' right there. You tell 'em where I'm from didn't make me do this!

Throughout the film, Odin is aware of the precarious situation his color places him in, as well as the depths of stereotypical nonsense into which the memory of someone like himself could so easily fall. Also, he is functioning as a highlighter of the implications of whiteness. Odin clearly singles out Hugo as white, and points to the consequences of adhering to a racial hierarchy. He does so by ensuring that despite what the students watching his final moments are likely to think, they must realize that his actions had nothing to do with his background or with the stereotypes associated with that upbringing, but everything to do with Hugo's manipulation. In the end, Hugo has one last chance to exonerate himself. He repeats his opening speech, but he adds to it:

But a hawk is no good around normal birds. They can't fit in. Even though all the other birds probably want to be hawks, they hate him for what they can't be. Proud. Powerful. Determined. Dark. Odin is a hawk. He soars above us. He can fly, but one of these days everyone's going to pay attention to me, because I'm going to fly too.

Odin is identified as the "hawk" that Hugo is speaking of. Hugo continues to insist that Odin is "not normal"—his blackness has set him off from the other characters. Hugo does admit that he is jealous of Odin and the status that he
had within the power structure, but he still clings to his racist agenda by insisting that he should be able to be as good as Odin. Hugo maintains his envy of Odin’s superior position on the basketball court and in the Duke’s heart, even though he has set in motion Odin’s demise.

Though O does begin to challenge Hollywood’s stereotypical Hero’s Code, the film falls back on many of the stock implications of race. First, Odin’s heroism fails because he has no racial supporting network. Odin is never shown with any other black people, except a drug dealer, a meeting that Hugo set up. Until his final speech, we learn nothing of his family or his background, and even then, we only learn where he did not come from. Donald Bogle writes, “often when a black performer appeared in a general release, he or she had no cultural identity. All ethnic edges had been sanded down” (268). Except for a few rare moments, Odin’s race is not discussed. The soundtrack to the movie might be urban, but Odin is very much removed from the ghetto or any other setting that might identify a nurturing network.

Additionally, camera and lighting techniques work to undermine the earlier accomplishments of the film. Lighting is almost always set to accentuate white faces. According to Dyer, “The apparatus [movie lighting] was developed with white people in mind and habitual use and instruction continue in the same vein, so much so that photographing non-white people is typically construed as a problem” (White 89). As a result, non-white actors end up receiving less favorable treatment with lighting and appear darker as a result. The “marked” difference in coloring between Desi and Odin becomes greater because of this
form of lighting. Additionally, the varying shades of whiteness of the "good" characters' skin color denote the relative "goodness" of the characters. The lightness around Desi almost blinds the audience at times. Even at her death scene, the room is showered in light in contrast to the dark night from which Odin has emerged. She is dressed in a pink/white slip, further accenting her "virginal/pure" status, which are common associations with whiteness. The film falls into formulaic constructions of race by associating Odin with death and darkness, while Desi is associated with lightness and purity. It also falls into formulaic constructions of interracial relationships as Odin's darkness serves to accentuate Desi's whiteness.

While Hugo might at first appear to befriend Odin, the way that the camera constructs Hugo further plays on the stereotypes used in the film about darkness. He usually appears in shadows, such as when he is in the hospital hallway, talking on the phone to his accomplice, Roger, while making plans for the first phase of Odin's downfall. Additionally, his hair and eyes are dark, he has dark shadows under his eyes, and he rarely appears in full light. His skin shows the effects of hanging around in corners too—at the few times he does get full light, he looks almost vampire like. Even though the audience is aware that Hugo is white, he is continuously associated with darkness and thus carries all of the supposed baggage that darkness brings, such as danger and destruction. Additionally, Hugo is typically shot at a distance from other characters, further accentuating his closed-off personality. The only times that he appears in close physical proximity to any of the characters is when he is plotting something.
Odin’s racialized coloring is also used to undo the good work O had originally set up. In the beginning, some additional attention is paid to Odin’s lighting as he appears with light surrounding him, similar to Desi. However, when he and Desi are shot together, Odin’s blackness is more apparent. As mentioned before, the camera constructs Desi as the whitest person in the movie, so when she is placed beside Odin, the only racialized character, he is darker than when he is by himself. Additionally, as Odin begins his descent toward crazed jealousy, his color treatment gets darker. He slips into more shadows and emerges through a window from the dark night to kill Desi. Once again, blackness is associated with danger and death. When Odin enters Desi’s room, he is slammed by the full light of her dorm room, further highlighting his racialized status. Even though Hugo is the one who ultimately forces evil onto Odin, the film itself falls into old patterns and uses Odin’s color as a marker for his potential for deviant behavior.

O can best be described as a film that almost gets it right about race. The film does not take the easy way out and use Odin’s background and stereotypes surrounding it as an excuse for his fall, but it does not challenge the way that Hugo forces evil onto Odin, and it falls into the stereotypical usage of lighting. Hugo’s jealousy is motivated in large part by Odin’s blackness. Hugo becomes the evil observer and plotter as the film develops, and he is the key reason for Odin’s fall. Thankfully, there is no clear-cut hero in this film. The audience cannot side with Hugo and think that he has done something heroic as he tries to garner the attention of his distracted father. Odin could have been the hero, but
he is given no one to support him. As the sole black person in this setting, he is disinclined to fully trust the people around him, and there are no black people in the movie for Odin to talk to, to share experiences with. He attempts to make the right choices, but comes undone by the jealousy set in motion by a white male, who plays up the negative associations commonly aroused by racial blackness.
While the former three films may seem abysmal offerings for the potential of heroes ever breaking the traditional code, there is some hope to be found in the film industry. In contrast to Hollywood, independent films have the freedom from box-office demands to examine whiteness and attempt to deconstruct the power structure of whiteness. One such film, Suture, directly challenges the stereotypical format used to develop interracial relationships through its color-blind casting of actors and its direct address of identity issues.

Clay Arlington, a working class laborer, meets Vincent Towers, an independently wealthy recluse, for the first time at their biological father's funeral. The movie leads us to believe that neither brother knew of the other's existence until this moment. The main action of Suture opens with Vincent picking up Clay at a bus station for their first weekend together as brothers. However, unknown to Clay, Vincent is the main suspect in their father's death. Vincent switches I.D. cards with Clay without his knowledge, then asks to be taken to the airport. Vincent has planted a bomb in his own cell phone, which detonates when he presses the pound button on a remote phone. The bomb explodes in Clay's face, but does not kill him, as Vincent had hoped. Instead, Clay is left with amnesia and an acquired identity that he must sort through with the help of his psychiatrist, Dr. Max Shinoda (Sab Shimono) and his plastic surgeon, Dr. Renee Descart (Mel Harris). Renee's name is clearly an allusion to the famous philosopher responsible for the statement, "I think, therefore I am," and though
the film does not make frequent overt references to the allusion, the name clearly highlights the central themes in *Suture*—identity and understanding the self.

*Suture* is not a film about heroes. As has been discussed, heroism is about choosing the right path and making the right choices under pressure that will benefit the most people. None of this film’s characters do this. In fact, they usually make the wrong choices and use cowardly tactics to survive. And yet, there is something heroic about the film as a whole. If we are expanding the traditional definition of heroism, a film itself could theoretically fall into the heroic category. Through its direct challenge of the audience’s perceptions of race and class, the film, as a whole, breaks down some of the formulaic constructions of race and heroism. It thrusts the concept of color-blind casting directly into the center and forces the audience to sort through the issue of racial hierarchy for themselves.

*Suture* most directly challenges the audience’s notions about race through the casting of its two main characters, Vincent Towers and Clay Arlington. We are supposed to believe that these two men are brothers and that they share many physical similarities. The first one is not necessarily a stretch—you do not have to be a genetic copy of a sibling to still be called a sibling, especially when you only share one parent’s DNA, as these “brothers” do. However, the second element is a bit harder to believe—the actor playing Vincent Towers (Michael Harris) is a scrawny white male and the actor playing Clay Arlington (Dennis Haysbert) is a muscular African American male. The audience almost instantly
balks at the possibility, even though filmgoers will accept pairs of white actors that look nothing alike as brothers.

Compiling the issues of race and identity, *Suture* presents a much more complicated picture of the social understanding of race to create a uniquely heroic film. According to film theorist Richard Dyer, “white people create the dominant images of the world and don’t quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image” (*White* 9). Although the film was made by two white men, Scott McGehee and David Siegel, *Suture* directly confronts race as a white supremacist social construct and examines what happens when that construction is challenged. Numerous times, both Vincent and Clay remark to each other about how similar they look, and the audience is challenged to accept the characters as brothers connected by a common father. The film is shot in black and white, further heightening the audience’s disorientation about their notions of racial identity; the stark, foregrounded visual contrast between black and white underscores the confusing racial contrast between the actors who are playing brothers.

Much of *Suture* relies on establishing the physical identity of both Vincent and Clay. Every time Vincent is shown in the first part of the film, he is in a neatly pressed white suit and possesses a demeanor that oozes upper-classness—he looks uptight and the audience can see how much he loathes being found in lower class places such as bus stations. Further completing Vincent’s appearance and marking his whiteness is his house. It is a strange, geometric house painted totally white, inside and out. Film theorist Richard Dyer
says that whiteness “is often revealed as emptiness, absence, denial, or even a kind of death” (Matter of Images 141). Vincent has not even completely moved in when Clay arrives, further accentuating the feeling of abandonment. Clay discovers that Vincent chose the house for purely aesthetic purposes, which further strengthens his position as a white upper-class male, for who else could afford to make such frivolous choices about living arrangements? When Clay is first introduced, he is wearing a flannel shirt and looking very relaxed, suggesting his contrasting social class position. Later, at Vincent’s house, Vincent presents him with a suit that matches his own. Clay, however, is not exactly thrilled to dress like his brother. Upon seeing his “twin” dressed brother, Vincent remarks, “I think the clothes are a marked improvement,” to which Clay responds, “Guess you would; now I look just like you.” Though Clay wearing the suit is instrumental to Vincent’s plot to switch identities, Clay’s comments highlight a resentment towards being associated with the upper class; it is not a position that he finds comfortable. The film’s challenge to the audience that it accept the supposed twinship of these brothers is also presented in an almost confrontational way, by having the brothers comment on their supposed physical similarity.

Much of the focus of Suture is on identity and what it means to live a life in a certain way, specifically as a rich man or a day laborer. Three times in the first twenty minutes of film, Clay and Vincent comment on their similarities. The most striking is the third time, which comes from Vincent: “The clothes are for you. I hope you won’t be offended by a small gift, a token of brotherhood. I’m sure you’re my size. As you pointed out, our physical resemblance is striking.” The
camera work is the most intriguing element of this exchange. The view constantly flips back and forth between the two men as they stand face to face. The audience gets a steady, head to toe side shot. It looks very similar to the technique used when the same actor is playing two different roles (such as identical twins) and the two characters have a conversation. This technique heightens both the concept of their interchangeability and the confusion brought about by their glaring physical and racial differences. Once again, the camera work forces the audience to acknowledge that these two men are nothing alike and yet asks that the audience to continue with the delusion.

The psychologist, Dr. Shinoda, serves as the main voice guiding the audience through an understanding of identity and what it means to take on a certain persona. The film opens with his comments over a flashforward of the end of the movie:

How is that we know who we are...We never wake up and wonder 'Who am I?' because our knowledge of who we are is mediated by what we doctors of the mind call our self-schemata—the richest, most complex and most stable memory structure we have. They are the structures which connect our past and allow us to imagine our futures. To lose that connection would be a sign of pathology, a pathology called amnesia...let me take you back to a proper beginning, to a time before identity has been confused.

Dr. Shinoda highlights the main struggle within the movie—Clay’s (and the audience’s) grapple for identity. While Dr. Shinoda is discussing the difficulty of
understanding identity, he makes no comments about the racial identity of the main characters, which proves to be the most confusing factor of identity for the audience. However, Dr. Shinoda’s comments are ambiguous enough to suggest that the film is conscious of its choice of casting and wants the audience to consider this “confused identity.” The film reveals the audience’s insistence upon using race as a yard stick for who people are.

After the accident, Clay’s demeanor, in addition to his glaring racial difference, is nothing like what people expect of Vincent (the mind and body that he supposedly inhabits), but no one seems to question it too much. Clay, who cannot remember who he is, or was, is kind and considerate to all of the people who care for him. However, his plastic surgeon, Renee, sees Clay, whom she assumes is Vincent, in a very negative light before she actually meets him: “I would have to say that my impression so far hasn’t been that positive. But all I know about him is his background. He has no job, he has very expensive tastes, he has no friends or family who care to see him, and people seem to think he killed his father.” All that she knows of Clay is the persona of Vincent and the traits that he supposedly exhibits. However, her opinion quickly changes.

Mrs. Jameson, Vincent’s family friend, appears to be the only one with a positive opinion of the “real” Vincent: “He is a very sensitive person and people tend to react negatively... Few people have taken the time to really know him.” She claims that many people “misunderstand” his demeanor. Vincent appears as cold and empty as his house, which is a reflection of his upper class upbringing, so a statement that he is sensitive seems very strange. She can also
tell that there is something not quite right about the “new” Vincent and she encourages Clay to stay in the hospital longer: “You’re going home unprepared. You don’t know what you need to know. The way you were Vincent, the way you need to be.” Clay is a much more sensitive and kind person than his brother was, which confuses those that knew Vincent. While the characters seem disoriented by the changed personality of the “new” Vincent, this point is nearly moot for the audience, who is more disoriented by the obvious racial differences between the two “brothers.” Once again, the audience is confronted with the realization that skin color is what prevents us from “seeing” the brothers as brothers. The compartmentalized notions of race standard in other films do not work here—the audience must rely on other cues given by the actors to determine identity.

Clay has a series of dreams throughout the film that his psychologist, Dr. Shinoda, uses to help unearth his identity. After one, Clay tells Dr. Shinoda, “It seems that I have a fantasy life about being poor.” Clay is already slipping into his new identity and finding money to be quite comfortable, and it scares him to think that he might be poor. While the film might not present an overt racial hierarchy, it does present a social hierarchy. Being rich is clearly more desirable than being poor. Of course, only the audience gets the joy of unraveling the irony that a black man is suddenly thrust into the upper echelons of the social strata. By not acknowledging the race of the actor who plays Clay, the film works to undermine the audience’s stereotypes of upper class=white.
Clay also has a dream in which he shoots his father (the crime that Vincent is guilty of). Renee offers him some solace by giving him an anatomy lesson:

You have far too elegant a nose to have shot anyone. You have what they call a Greco-Roman or American nose. Sleek with a small prominence at the bridge and point... physiognomists believed that people with Greco-Roman noses were inclined towards music, literature, and the arts. Definitely not deviant behavior like killing people.

What is truly strange about this, of course, is that Clay does not have a Greco-Roman nose. Once again, the actor's true identity is being confused with the constructed reality of the movie. Most importantly, the movie is also mocking traditional perceptions of what being a white (upper class) man entails. Facial features apparently exonerate murderers from suspicion, as long as they have the right bank roll and skin color. Additionally, the above exchange highlights the racialized nature of beauty standards. Race theorist Henry Giroux says of Suture, "there is also an ironic representation of 'whiteness' as both invisible to itself and at the same time the norm by which everything else is measured" (305). Renee's analysis of Clay's features shows that she is viewing him as white, the standard, and holds his facial features up to that standard. While most Americans might not be familiar with physiognomy, they do associate certain characteristics with skin color, as in the ideas that black men are dangerous, shady, etc. The film complicates the audience's associations of class and
criminality with color—according to Renee's analysis, Clay is exonerated because of his supposed facial features and the skin color that goes along with those features.

In the end, Clay fully "becomes" Vincent Towers after he and his brother have one final and fatal confrontation. Vincent, dressed in black, enters Clay's home. Clay, dressed in white, hears him, grabs a gun, and goes into the all-white bathroom to wait for Vincent behind the white shower curtain. When Vincent enters the room, Clay shoots him in the head. This is the only moment in the movie using overt racial hierarchies—the two brothers dress the part of their projected personas. However, as these are not the personas that Hollywood would traditionally force onto white and black characters, the movie once again challenges the audience's perceptions. Though evil still wears black, that evil inhabits a white body, and vice versa. In a subtle way, the film challenges Hollywood's Spaghetti Western standard of good guys in white hats (that is white skins), bad guys in black.

During the stress of his confrontation with his brother, Clay remembers the identity that he once possessed. However, while on the phone with 911, the dispatcher asks for his name, and he responds, "Vincent Towers." Clay is, in a sense, reborn as the new Vincent Towers. He has accepted the identity of a rich white man because, even though Clay knows who he used to be, he sees no way to turn back and become Clay Arlington. However, Dr. Shinoda is not convinced in a later therapy session that Clay is accepting the right identity because Clay has not attempted to reconcile his two pasts:
Clay: It's all my past... When I look in the mirror, I see Vincent Towers. When I go to the club, people call me Vincent Towers. Renee's in love with Vincent Towers.

Dr. Shinoda: Clay, we're talking about two distinct lives.

Clay: And one is gone. There's a dead body that can't be identified, and in a most real way, it's not the body of Vincent Towers. I am Vincent Towers.

Dr. Shinoda: Clay, you're burying the wrong life, one that isn't dead. This is a very dangerous solution.

At the moment of the shooting, Clay accepts his identity as Vincent Towers. He sees no alternative choice with the information that he has. The film highlights the limited choices that Clay has once he realizes that he is actually a poor man, not a rich one. However, once again, the film appears to ignore Clay's race, instead forcing the audience to sort through the complex issue. According to Giroux, "Breaking with the Hollywood cinematic tradition of presenting 'whiteness' as an 'invisible' though determining discourse, Suture forces the audience to recognize 'whiteness' as a racial marker" (306). Clay, a black man, has just taken over the role of Vincent, a white man, a move that marks whiteness as a factor for determining social success.

However, Dr. Shinoda is not convinced by Clay's newfound identity. Once again, he is the voice for the audience, but he still avoids the issue of race. He verbalizes the audience's difficulty with someone taking on the identity of
another. Dr. Shinoda closes the movie with a voiceover commenting on the nature of Clay’s decision:

It has all worked out, just as Clay said. He was right, but of course, he is ultimately wrong, for he is not Vincent Towers. He is Clay Arlington. He may dress in Vincent’s fine clothes, drive Vincent’s expensive car, play golf at Vincent’s country club, or use Vincent’s box at the opera, but this will not make him Vincent Towers. He can never be Vincent Towers simply because he is not. Nothing can change this, not the material comforts his life may afford him, not the love Renee may provide him.

While Dr. Shinoda directly comments on whether or not a poor man can take the identity of a rich man, he also indirectly comments on whether or not a black man can move into the position of a white man. For Dr. Shinoda, and indeed the majority of the audience, it does not seem possible for a poor, black man to enter unchallenged into the world of the rich white man. Dr. Shinoda sounds a lot like the people who insist that race is something essential within someone, something unchangeable. Though the film does allow Dr. Shinoda to “engage in a reductionistic moralizing by suggesting that Clay should be condemned for wanting to be white” (Giroux 306), the visual cues of the film do not completely support the doctor’s theory. Dr. Shinoda’s speech appears over photographs of Clay and Renee enjoying their life together. Clay is succeeding in the rich world with the personality that he brought with him from the working class world.
What is heroic about *Suture* is the movie itself. Through the film’s colorblind casting, the struggle of race and class becomes the audience’s struggle. They must struggle with their notions of who fits into these categories and why certain people are arbitrarily placed in positions of power. The film ultimately exposes and challenges pop culture’s construction of racial and social hierarchies and how characters typically mediate those hierarchies, thereby exposing some of the ways that we continue to rely upon fallacious notions of race.
POSSIBILITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Popular culture, specifically Hollywood, has a long way to go in presenting equitable interracial relationships. Hollywood very rarely offers moviegoers a film that challenges racial stereotypes, particularly in its portrayal of heroes. Those that Hollywood marks as Other are pigeon holed into certain categories denoting an inferior position and reduced power, even if he/she is more qualified than the white character. Movies such as *The Matrix* and *Unbreakable* reinforce stereotypes about black characters by placing them in roles subordinate to white characters. Sometimes, though not nearly often enough, Hollywood emerges with a film that challenges some of the stereotypes, such as O. However, in spite of itself, Hollywood typically reverts to old, reliably profitable standards and falls back into its standard mode of characterization. *Suture*, however, provides hope that at some point, Hollywood might make even greater strides at better representing interracial relationships. Movies such as *Suture* challenge the standard way most people think about race, and it forces audiences to see that race is a construction and that the construction creates limitations to the range of possibilities for nonwhite characters.

One person in Hollywood that might provide a boost to a more developed understanding of race, specifically the superhero genre, is Vin Diesel, an action hero who is becoming increasingly popular. According to *AlterNet*, an alternative online newspaper, “Diesel is being marketed as Hollywood’s new superhero: a self-made man unconfined by racial categories” (Thrupkaew).
Diesel's main attribute is his ambiguity about his race—he refuses to say that he is anything except "multicultural," which limits Hollywood's efforts to typecast his color into a specific category.

Another source of hope is the independent film market. Recently, there has been an explosion in the number of independent films produced and many have gained Hollywood-level stature. Movies such as *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and *One Night Stand* (1997) both deal with interracial relationships in a believable and thought-provoking way. Many independent films are enjoying a larger viewership, possibly because of the inclusion of the Independent Film Channel in the cable offerings. While IFC is not standard for many cable plans, it is usually offered in the premium movie packages.

As an area of further study, one option might be to look at the role of African American woman in the creation of heroism. While I focused mainly on male relationships, there are many movies, including *The Matrix* and *Ghost* (1990), that use African American women in the role of soothsayer/fortune teller as an aid to white heroism. Both genders are used in similar ways (i.e. enabling white heroism, encouraging the pursuit of heroism, and serving as a barometer to highlight differences between heroes and non-heroes), but the role of female soothsayer is typically pushed even further into the periphery of the film, making their treatment even more abominable. Studies such as these can serve to highlight the differences in the formation of heroes and why audiences, and in turn Hollywood, adhere so strongly to the traditional model, hopefully with the
end result that audiences can begin to see heroes that more closely reflect their own backgrounds and beliefs.
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