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Mother of a New World? Stereotypical Representations of Black Women in Three Postapocalyptic Films

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Abstract: This essay explores three cinematic representations of Black matriarchs who play prophetic roles in redeeming humanity in the midst of apocalyptic change: Ika (*Quest for Fire*), Kee (*Children of Men*), and The Oracle (*The Matrix* trilogy). Not only do these courageous women resist the politics of domination, rebelling against a dying status quo, but they “give birth” to the leaders needed to rebuild a world in chaos and decay. One film ends with a pregnant woman rubbing her belly as she stands on the precipice of evolutionary change; another positions a mother and newborn adrift, waiting to be found by leaders of a new world order; in the third, a character sacrifices herself to empower resistance fighters with ideas and the means to choose their survival in a postapocalyptic world. Defying the politics of an annihilating patriarchy, these women portend a return to a naturally evolving world. However, despite their powerful influence, they can be understood, problematically, as modern-day reinventions of Black female stereotypes—Ika as Jezebel, Kee as Hagar, the Oracle as Mammy—because they, and the indices for understanding their roles in the community, are wedded to White patriarchs and to their own gendered functions as nurturing or sexual(ized) beings.

Keywords: feminism, Black literary theory, Womanist theory, Black film criticism, *The Matrix*, *Children of Men*, *Quest for Fire*

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Affirming the critical ways in which many Black viewers respond to Hollywood films, bell hooks argues that Black female spectators often “construct a theory of looking relations where cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation” (1992, 126). Such a notion, framed within the context of hooks’s commitment to feminist criticism, allows for “a radical departure from the ‘totalizing agenda’ of feminist film criticism, and the beginning of an oppositional spectatorship for black women” (Smelik 2014). Contributing to this “oppositional spectatorship” is the goal of this paper, one rooted in a gesture outlined in hooks’s earlier work, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989). In *Talking Back*, hooks addresses “the church of the home” (5), where Black women express themselves and their ideas freely, but “true speaking”—she contests—is not solely the articulation of words but discovering a platform from which speaking reflects “an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges the politics of domination” (8). Such expression demonstrates “a courageous act” that must be heard because it offers “a threat” to oppressive, hegemonic forces wielded to annihilate and silence marginalized, potentially rebellious, voices and perspectives (hooks 1989, 8, 6). “Talking back” to hooks and Womanist discourse regarding representations of and reactions to Black women’s bodies, this paper explores three cinematic representations of Black women who play prophetic roles in redeeming humanity in the midst of apocalyptic change. Ika (*Quest for Fire*), Kee (*Children of Men*), and The Oracle (*The Matrix* trilogy) all resist the politics of domination in ways that empower a new generation. These courageous women are matriarchs for those rebelling against a dying

status quo. Moreover, they “give birth” to leaders needed to rebuild a world that finds itself in chaos and decay. One film ends with a pregnant woman rubbing her belly as she and her mate stand on the precipice of evolutionary change; another woman cradles her newborn infant on the margins of a war-torn world, realizing that her child will be the key inspiration for a new world order; the third character impregnates resistance fighters with ideas and the final sacrifice needed to empower humans to choose their survival in a postapocalyptic world. Defying the politics of an annihilating patriarchy, these women portend a return to a naturally evolving world. However, despite the implicit nobility of their deeds and the fact that they seem to demonstrate political agency, the aforementioned characters must also be understood as modern-day reinventions of Black female stereotypes—Ika as Jezebel, Kee as Hagar, the Oracle as Mammy—because they, and the indices for understanding their power, are inextricably—and perhaps problematically—wedded to White patriarchs and to their own womanly functions as nurturing or sexual(ized) beings.

I have three aims for this paper. First, I am interested in looking at an image prevalent in five popular postapocalyptic films: *The Matrix* trilogy, including *The Matrix* (Wachowski 1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski 2003a), and *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski 2003b); *Children of Men* (Cuarón 2006); and *Quest for Fire* (Annaud 1981). This image involves the pairing of a leading White male father figure with a Black matriarch; together they serve indelibly memorable roles in securing (in the case of *Quest for Fire*, literally through procreating) the existence and survival of a new breed of humankind in the moment of rebirth that is instigated in the aftermath of an apocalypse—or in face of an impending apocalypse. Second, I apply a Womanist lens to my reading in an effort to problematize these representations of Black women. For although initially it may seem provocatively empowering that these Black characters provide the nurturance and/or physical means for “mothering” the descendants of a new world order, Womanist theory—along with the substantial repository of African-American literary criticism about Black women and Black women’s bodies—forces us to contend with the legacy slavery has imprinted on our American imaginings, where a privileged White male imperialist gaze was able to not only subjugate and appropriate the physical bodies of Black women but, consequently, has created restrictive, pejorative identifiers for defining these women and their roles. Third, I want to conclude my discussion with an appeal from Womanist and Black feminist critics, such as Barbara Christian, bell hooks, Angelyn Mitchell, Sherley Anne Williams, and Trudier Harris, who compel us to keep “talking back” to and about representations of not just Black women but all men and women in literature and film; for such discussions are necessary if we ever hope to better understand, engage with, and—when necessary—challenge modern-day assumptions about the societies in which we live or hope to live.

Let’s begin with the literary-theoretical definitions of the stereotypical roles that inform my textual analyses of the films.¹ In the introduction to her groundbreaking book *The Black Woman*, Toni Cade Bambara wrote: “We are involved in a struggle for liberation: liberation from the exploitive and dehumanizing system of racism, from the manipulative control of a corporate society, liberation from the constrictive norm of mainstream culture, from the synthetic myths that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly from without (reaction) rather than from within (creation)” (quoted in Mitchell and Taylor 2009, 3). Understandably, the forms needed to challenge problematic societal norms should be forged based on insight and discretion, not rash reaction, but how can one “create” such a discourse without responding (“reacting”) to the circumstances against which the author/critic resists? Moreover, such a response becomes the impetus for the very creation Bambara calls for, theoretical terms and creative texts that draw attention to a system of racism that continues to exploit and constrict gender roles in our society. Thus, when critiquing the prevalence of Black female stereotypes in modern films that seem to represent egalitarian, multicultural

societies, it is necessary to define stereotypes for women, showing how the origins for these restrictive roles began within the institution of seventeenth-century slavery—America’s earliest, and its most lucrative and exploitive, capitalist system.

In her introduction to *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacies*, Bernadette Brooten describes slavery as “an economic institution [that was] not separate from marriage, sexuality, family, and childbirth ... [because the] concept of owning another human being’s body led to the right of sexual access to that body,” which included control over “the sexual and reproductive functions of enslaved girls and women [as] central to the institution of slavery” (2010, 10). In this patriarchal institution, slaveholders not only dictated the destiny of the bodies of Black men and women but also wielded tremendous power over White woman’s bodies. In “Mammy’s Daughters,” Frances Smith Foster attempts to contextualize these dynamics by listing four categories that denote the terms and roles set forth for White women living in the pre-Civil War era in the United States, roles available to White but not Black women. They could be either a woman, a lady, a maid, or a wench: “‘Women’ were mature and comfortably settled in their rightful gender roles”; women who adhered to the “cult of true womanhood” were placed on a pedestal (Foster 2010, 269). Honored for their “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Carby 1987, 23), they were devoted to their husbands and families. However, in Foster’s assessment, the title of “true woman” was reserved for a select few, those who were “marri[ed] to men of substance and [had] significant social standing” (Foster 2010, 269). The second category, ladies, “were women of property or the property of landed men. Young ‘ladies’ were oftentimes known as ‘maids.’ All ‘ladies’ and ‘maids’ were ‘women,’ but not all ‘women’ were or could claim the prerogatives of ‘ladies’” (that is, owning property or being the property of landed men) (269–70). Wench was relegated to the lowest social orders, “and had little, if any, claim to respect, honor, or deference”; they “worked indoors and outdoors, doing dirty work ... that ... dirtied [them]” and were “routinely ... subjected to sexual exploitation” (270). Thus, “wench” was a “defiled” term, equivalent to “strumpet ... consort, or both” (270). These were the categories by which White women could be identified, roles to which most Black women could never aspire due to the prominence of slavery.² For them, the most realistic social title would be that of wench, and some mixed-race Black women were referred to in this way.³

The images made available to Black women were hypersexualized, based on the functions they (and by extension their bodies) performed in the community. They could be “wenches,” women who “worked indoors and outdoors, doing dirty work ... that ... dirtied [them]”; women “routinely ... subjected to sexual exploitation” (Foster 2010, 270), or “Mammies,” a model of submissive complicity with a racist, patriarchal order (Foster 2010, 270).⁴ Other monikers included being identified as a “Hagar” or “Jezebel,” appellations appropriate for young Black women who would eventually become, in many cases, Mammy figures. “Mammy” was a “respectable ... asexualized” (White 1999, 46) woman of African descent who “nurse[d] other people’s children” and was viewed as “a beloved paragon of practical domesticity” because she embraced—and, furthermore, embodied—her tasks as “nurse and nurturer” (Foster 2010, 270). However, the Mammy could never be “a model of maternity” because, if she was married, the matrimony was not acknowledged or legally sanctioned by society, and if she gave birth to her own children, her responsibilities to White children superseded her loyalties to her own offspring (Foster 2010, 272). Her other options, and most likely her utility before becoming a Mammy, were dictated by the Jezebel/Hagar dichotomy. Jezebel was the “vixen” or “treacherous seducer,” often the product of miscegenation and/or a willing seeker of an interracial relationship (White 1999, 34). Hagar represented “the [Black] sexual surrogate” or victim. Both Hagar and Jezebel represented “soiled sexual beings” who “[n]either [invite] our respect or admiration,” for they were never seen as “dignified, demure, or particularly pious” (Foster 2010, 271). Even if they attempted

to be seen as chaste, their marginalized status as Black women often prevented them from being understood as anything other than a “Tragic Mulatta” (White 1999, 28–29, 44). Tragic Mulattas were mixed-raced women of African descent who willingly pursued a relationship with a White man, in the hopes of protecting themselves and/or their family while aspiring to adhere to the “cult of true womanhood.” Often, Tragic Mulattas sought to enjoy some semblance of a functioning, traditional family unit, yet such efforts were generally unsuccessful, often resulting in the women choosing suicide when they or their children remained shackled to slavery.⁵ Moreover, according to rules of socialization within the plantocracy, Black women—irrespective of their identification (e.g., as Jezebel or Hagar) and only with the exception of the Mammy—were expected to service the sexual needs of White men (Foster 2010, 271). In essence, women of African descent could not escape being vilified, victimized, or considered in terms of their sexualized roles. By describing these roles as *sexualized*, I am calling attention not only to sexuality and/or sexual function per se but also to the role Black women’s “sex,” their gender—as females—was expected to fulfill. For their domestic and/or maternal tasks were essential in limiting—while also defining—their purposes: Mammy was an asexual nurturer, Jezebel was a seductress, and Hagar functioned as a sexual surrogate for a barren woman, while all were strategic pawns in a hegemonic system that they would never control.

Why do I highlight these stereotypical terms as a preamble to an analysis of the matriarchal figures depicted in *The Matrix* trilogy, *Children of Men*, and *Quest for Fire*? I find attention to these images necessary because the Black heroines in the above movies can be viewed as extensions of the historically established restrictive representations of women of African descent. Such representations are only reified by the ways in which these Black women are beholden or irrevocably wedded—pun intended—to White patriarchs and thus, by extension, to the social constraints dictated by a White male hegemony. For example, the Oracle in *The Matrix* trilogy might be understood as a modern-day Mammy due in part to her rapport with the Source; Ika in *Quest for Fire* appears as a Jezebel because of her prurient displays and acquiescence in a sexual relationship with Naoh; Kee, from *Children of Men*, can be discussed as a symbolic Hagar because she is a victim and sexual surrogate, denied control over her body, her child, and her circumstances.

Directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud, *Quest for Fire* (1981) chronicles a moment in hominid evolution that predates the existence of *Homo sapiens*. The hero, Naoh—played by Everett McGill—appears to be a Neanderthal, which some describe as a subspecies of Cro-Magnon man, a hominid group seemingly of European descent, living in a northern terrain with the climate of a European geography (Encyclopedia Britannica 2012). He has a protruding ridged forehead, broad nostrils, and the stooped stature of *Homo neanderthalensis*. Played by Rae Dawn Chong, Ika, on the other hand, belongs to the most evolved population of hominids in existence, a racialized group whose bodies appear darkened and mud-covered (certainly their complexions are darker than those of Naoh’s tribe); this community has mastered technologies not yet understood by the other hominid groups. They make fire, build housing, harvest crops, and have sophisticated weaponry. Some archeologists endow Cro-Magnons with these capabilities and suggest that such advancements enabled Cro-Magnons (who resided regionally in Northern Europe) to overpower, and overpopulate, the Neanderthals (Encyclopedia Britannica 2012). In the film, however, Ika’s people have mastered advanced technologies, unlike any of the other species, and they live in a warmer climate. The only other species we encounter are a group of cannibals who appear to represent *Homo erectus* or *Homo habilis*; their physical development is more ape-like and the fact that they eat other hominids demarcates them as less civilized and the least evolved of all the groups.⁶ Annaud depicts an apocalyptic world because clearly all the species are on the verge of extinction. Lacking the ability to make fire, Naoh’s tribe and the cannibals must find or keep embers burning in order to warm themselves and cook their food. As they

migrate in search of shelter, meals and warmth, sleeping in caves as their primary form of shelter, they carry the fire with them, and when the embers are extinguished, they must find or steal another group's fire—hence the film's name. Ika's people, as stated previously, know how to make fire, so they need not seek it. However, although they are a more sophisticated, civilized group of hunter-gatherers, members of Ika's group lack the physical strength and dominance of the Neanderthals—Naoh's tribe—and they appear to be the primary diet of choice for the cannibals. Therefore, although they do not migrate to follow their food sources, experimenting with early forms of farming and sending out hunters and scavengers to provide victuals, they are frail, diminutive, and malnourished. As a result, when Naoh encounters Ika, he is rescuing her from a group of cannibals who have captured her and another woman. Naoh and two other Neanderthals are traveling to find fire because someone in their tribe doused the embers they used to keep warm and cook their meat. In their travels, Naoh's team encounters the cannibals who have their own traveling conflagration. Using crafty strategies, outright combat, and brute force, they steal the fire and free the women. Due to the obvious strength of the Neanderthals, Ika remains with Naoh and his peers, hoping to survive and safely return to her home in the south. However, the Neanderthals are headed north, aware that their tribe's survival depends on their speedy return. Eventually, Ika leaves the group to return to her village, but Naoh pursues her; they have formed a bond and appear to be “falling in love,” although it is also possible to infer that she has seduced him—a point I will return to below. When Naoh arrives in the village, the chief invites him to procreate with women in Ika's tribe; an entourage is lined up outside the chief's hut. I think it is safe to assume that the chief hopes to use Naoh to strengthen the tribe's bloodlines. Initially, Naoh is only interested in finding Ika, a low-ranking member of her tribe who is forbidden to interact with the guest. It is only when the chieftain shows him how to make fire that a disillusioned Naoh resigns himself to living a life of excess in the village, even if it means the demise of his own people and separation from the individual he desires, Ika. He remains in the chief's hut, depressed and complacent, accepting gifts of women, food, and intoxicating drink. With Ika's help, and the intervention of his compatriots who have come to the camp to rescue him, Naoh is forced to return to his people (he is knocked unconscious and carried out of the village). Ika joins the Neanderthals, leaving her own tribe behind. She is willing to abandon her people and continue traveling with Naoh to return fire to his species. The film ends with Ika residing with Naoh's species. She teaches them how to make fire, and the last visual depicts a pregnant Ika snuggling with Naoh as they look at the moon and he rubs her belly.

I equate Ika with the Jezebel image because of the seductive ways in which she is portrayed in the film. The Neanderthal women, similar to the men, are scantily clad in loincloths, but Ika is completely nude, only covered by mud, and when she undertakes to travel with the Neanderthals, she is first desired by one of Naoh's companions, who attempts to rape her, before she begins a relationship with Naoh. She literally fights off the one and flees to the other, yet when she enters Naoh's arms, seeking protection, he forces himself on her. After this forced coupling, Naoh continues to initiate intercourse with Ika, and although she first resists, she does not attempt to flee and eventually has sex with him willingly. Their child represents an important shift in human evolution because presumably the unborn infant will be a member of the *Homo sapiens* species, a hybrid hominid that will be instrumental in shaping a new world of existence for humankind. Historically, Jezebels accepted the likelihood of being raped and often entered willingly into consummated relationships with their abusers after the first, forced encounter, hoping that such a relationship might ensure their survival and warrant some protection from the more brutal aspects of slavery.

In *Children of Men* (2006), directed by Alfonso Cuarón, Kee can be viewed as an emblematic Hagar.

Living in a postapocalyptic Europe, humans can no longer conceive and no child has been born in eighteen years. Moreover, due to the destitute nature of things—lack of resources, etc.—the society shuns immigrants and the poor and illiterate populations, pushing disenfranchised communities to the margins of society and cordoning them off in ghettos where they are expected to annihilate one another. A poor, Black woman, Kee is relegated to this group of “unwanted” social refuse, yet she has one unprecedented value: she is pregnant, naturally able to conceive when no one else can. As a result, she is discovered by leaders of the resistance movement, who hope to monopolize her as a pawn towards their political gain. Clive Owen’s character, Theo, is obligated to protect her; his ex-wife, Julian (the love of his life and mother of his deceased child played by Julianne Moore) is one of the people Kee (a lesser-known actress, Clare-Hope Ashitey) trusts, and before Julian is murdered by her fellow resistance leaders, she enlists Theo’s help and gets his promise that he will do everything (including give his life) to protect Kee and her child. In spite of the resistance fighters’ resolve to “protect”—which really means “use”—this pregnant woman, Kee never asks for their intervention, and as a result she is not only confused by the presence of these activists in her life but she distrusts them, although she consents to follow, first the group and then Theo. In the aftermath of Julian’s death and Theo’s efforts to fulfill his promise—keep Kee and her child safe—the film shows the immoral disintegration of this broken society. For example, people in mainstream society go to work every day—presenting a semblance of today’s reality: they eat, sleep, work, have relationships, etc.—but the “society” at large is plagued by terrorists’ attacks intended to create fear and instability while unveiling government conspiracies that are deluding and controlling the population. In essence, the well-to-do live in a state of social apathy while immigrants and the poor remain hidden, ostracized, and disenfranchised. The film ends with Kee and Theo fleeing a war zone in one of the ghettos, where the rebels and government military are killing civilians and combatants alike. An armistice occurs because Kee’s daughter, born the night before, cries, and as people hear the wailing of an infant, they are moved because no one has seen or heard a baby in almost two decades. Fulfilling his promise, Theo swiftly moves Kee through the mayhem, getting her to a boat and rowing out to sea, where she is to be met by separatists who have established an egalitarian community among a squadron of ships and submarines. Ironically, this group is not defined by the boundaries and laws monitored by corrupt, landlocked governments. Wounded in the battle, Theo dies before the rescue ship arrives. As a result, Kee finds herself alone with her child, awaiting further assistance from the leaders of a new hegemony. She doesn’t even hold the oars to row the boat; they rest in the hands of her deceased savior.

Kee sits as an assenting victim in this political chess match that will use her child as a pawn for (an) others’ political agenda. In essence, she has become a sexual surrogate in—literally and figuratively—giving birth to a new world order. Although she is not a substitute sexual partner or commissioned sex therapist—modern connotations for a sexual surrogate (IPSA 2014)—she can be understood as a surrogate in the context of the original biblical story about Hagar and her son. In the Christian Bible, Abram/Abraham has a barren wife, Sarai/Sarah. Upon her behest, he has sex with Hagar, Sarai/Sarah’s maidservant; the union brings forth Ishmael, Abram/Abraham’s first-born child (Genesis 16: 1–16). Because Sarai/Sarah believed that she would be unable to give Abram/Abraham an heir, she identified Hagar as her sexual surrogate, a concubine with whom her husband can procreate. In the case of *Children of Men*, Kee provides the society with an heir, someone to not only inherit but sustain the legacy of a dying humanity. Moreover, she will possibly provide the means for more children to be born, not only from her womb but also from the wombs of her children; it is significant that she has given birth to a daughter, a point that I think cannot be overlooked. Therefore, although Theo is not the biological father of this child, nor will he participate in the new world Kee’s daughter’s birth portends—one where natural childbirth exists again—he has played an

imperative role in ensuring the mother's and the child's survival. As protector and provider, he makes every decision, and Kee's acquiescence in the unraveling of events—where she is not entirely willing but certainly not defiant of Theo's control over her life and the life of the child—reveal her as a Hagar figure. Beyond the ways in which it is anticipated that she will be used as a sexual surrogate for the world, she demonstrates no agency in determining her own destiny (or that of her child's) in this film. Even as the film ends, she finds herself in the middle of the sea waiting to be coopted into someone else's political scheme, a scheme she doesn't know or understand, yet one in which she will play an important role as mother—sexual surrogate—to the first child that has been born in twenty years and to any future children she and her daughter may birth. She is the physical body through which human life will continue while all other women—including those among the resistance—are barren.

Finally, in the *Matrix* series, we meet the Oracle, an autonomous, prophetic program that is just as old as the Source program who monitors and controls the computer system that keeps humans asleep in the imagined world of the matrix. The Oracle is a matronly Black woman in her early 60s who is living in the projects (low-income, affordable, urban high-rise housing). Especially gifted humans—with the consciousness to defy the matrix—along with malfunctioning and/or no longer necessary computer programs sit in her living room or visit her as she bakes cookies in her kitchen, smoking a cigarette and offering insightful words of wisdom meant to encourage, nurture and direct. The Source is a White man in his 60s or 70s who acknowledges in the last scene of the final film, *The Matrix Revolutions*, that if he is the father of the matrix, she (the Oracle) is its mother. Thus, together they are responsible for monitoring the human children the matrix relies upon for its survival, just as much as they coadministrate the responsibilities and functions of the computer and machine systems. For, as we learn in the first film of the trilogy, *The Matrix*, humans provide the energy reserves that allow the computer systems to run; they are the batteries, if you will, that power the system. The computer programs determine how efficient the system's illusion is, keeping the humans asleep and complicit in the activities of a constructed reality while actual machines dominate the “real” world. The Oracle desires to liberate those humans who have the prescience to realize that they are living in a fabricated reality. The Source desires to sustain order, instituting proper protocols in the “real” and fictionalized worlds so that balance remains between the synthesized, created world of the matrix and the operating world of machines and sleeping humans. Their bastard child, a direct offspring of the Oracle and the Source, is Smith, the first agent created to destroy or thwart humans in their efforts to awaken from the matrix (*The Matrix Revolutions*). Hating humans and the verisimilitude of the matrix, Smith's program becomes viral; he not only seeks to destroy all humankind—those in the real and created worlds—but he also wants to rule the machine world, deposing the Source. In essence, Smith harbors anger towards his “parents,” presumably because he feels neglected by them. In *The Matrix Revolutions*, the last film of the trilogy, he infers that his mother's (the Oracle's) inability to nurture him, in part due to her affection for “the humans,” incited him to become the malevolent program he is, focused on destroying humans and the computer-generated machine world alike. This sense of neglect by his mother, primarily due to her obligations to nurture others, is only compounded by the absence of his father, the Source, who is too busy monitoring the machine world and the matrix to provide his “son” with guidance.

The Oracle can embody a postapocalyptic, science-fiction envisioning of a Mammy figure because she abandons her own child(ren) while seeking to nurture and provide matriarchal direction to those not spawned by her own womb. Moreover, although the assistance she offers may in some way be in defiance of the imperializing strictures established by the Source, she acknowledges in the final film of the trilogy—when talking with the White patriarchal Source—that she is just as much a part of the system as he is. She is

simply playing her role in securing her survival as well as the survival of all that she has helped create: human consciousness, the evolution of malfunctioning programs, and the continued existence of the machines, all of which constitute *her* continued existence that relies on the sustained confluence of these two worlds. Akin to the actual Mammies of the antebellum age, she plays a paradoxical role in her society or societies. On the one hand, she is instrumental in sustaining social cohesion, motivated by an imperative to preserve her own existence and autonomy; on the other, she subverts the status quo, often subtly, by empowering others and wielding tremendous influence within the dominant and subversive worlds. Therefore, based on the film's conclusion, one might deem the Oracle as a powerful, significant figure in the series, and I would have to agree. But keep in mind that Mammies often wielded a contradictory degree of authority on the plantation, commanding a modicum of respect from both White and enslaved communities. Moreover, they were essential in sustaining the ethos of the antebellum South, so acknowledging that the Oracle plays an important role in these films does not negate the reading of her as a Mammy figure. In addition, I might be less inclined to view her as such if she were not so often placed in a kitchen setting, wearing an apron and baking cookies for those she seeks to help.

The trilogy deals with an apocalypse because both the machine and matrix worlds are in the midst of catastrophic transformation. On the one hand, humankind is about to be extinguished, except for a handful of select individuals who will repopulate Zion, the resistance community eking out their survival in the “real” world (*The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*). On the other hand, the Source and Oracle contend with nonexistence or a new existence that involves their struggle to survive without human sustenance. For the Oracle, this prospect is not very appealing; the Source, however, is willing to accept such terms. The new world, brought about by the Oracle's steadfast commitment to keeping both worlds alive, ultimately presents the best compromise. Literally, she allows her program to merge with the malevolent Smith application in order to guarantee Smith's defeat. As a result, the matrix will remain in existence—powered by those who accept this form of reality, thus sustaining the machine world—and the people of Zion will not be destroyed. Those wishing to be freed from the matrix will be allowed to join this growing community; they can become actualized, using their own means and know-how—like the Oracle and Source—in order to survive in the postapocalyptic world that exists outside of the mainframe of the matrix (*The Matrix Revolutions*).

Whether we consider *The Matrix* trilogy, *Quest for Fire*, or *Children of Men*, these films repeat an image of a White male as provider, protector, strategist, and guardian of a new world order that can only be brought into existence via the physical body/being or spiritual and emotional nurturance of a Black woman and her mothering presence. Initially, my interest in this topic was colored by an optimism that at last Black women were being depicted as essential in the creation of a better world,⁷ but after revisiting the theory I became far more pessimistic, questioning if, yet again, popular audiences in America and the world are being bamboozled by problematic images that preserve the stereotypes of Black women as either Mammies, Jezebels or Hagars. Thus, as Trudier Harris historicizes in her *Saints, Sinners, Saviors*, these films continue an American phenomenon whereby the “black female body [is] manufactured for white public consumption” (2001, 1). Moreover, they extend a mythic story that defends a problematic perpetuation of the image of Black women as “towers of strength” (Harris 2001, 9) who, in addition to preserving traditional White commodified stereotypes, now take on the dimensions of being “extrahuman” (3) or “suprahuman” (11), “natural nurturers often capable ... of protecting others but never themselves” (4). As a result, the heroism displayed by Kee, Ika, and the Oracle and the quintessential roles they play in these films are only indicative of “the creative trap” in which these characters find themselves (Harris 2001, 10). Not only can

they be construed as modern-day representations of Mammy, Hagar, or Jezebel figures, but—using Harris’s thesis—they display the ever-present, stagnating, and paradoxical depiction of strong Black women who are not solutions to but perpetuators of the problem.⁸

Of course, having made my argument about the stereotypical roles these Black female matriarchs display in the films I’ve discussed, I would be remiss to overlook the valiant gestures of the creators of these films. For characters like Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) or Niobe (Jada Pinkett-Smith) and the multicultural Council of Elders that consists of an equal number of male and female leaders, in *The Matrix* trilogy, suggest that the intentions of its screenwriters, directors, and producers were to construct a representation of a postracial, unbiased society with equitable gender rights. The makers of *The Children of Men* seem to have had a similar aim, with actors Chiwetel Ejiofor and Julianne Moore representing the leadership of an integrated resistance force. Despite such ambitious aims, however, these films reveal what Lola Young argues in *Fear of the Dark* (1996): that it is difficult for filmmakers, no matter how formidable their agenda, to challenge stereotypical images. For example, one might argue that Morpheus is the self-sacrificing defender and best friend of the hero played by a White actor, a stock character set up opposite the protagonist only as a means for rounding out the White character’s development while assisting with moving the plot forward (Nittle 2014; Bogle 1994, 271–76). According to Nadra Kareem Nittle’s “Five Common Black Stereotypes in TV and Film” or Donald Bogle’s *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, then, Morpheus would fit the stereotypical role of the “Black Best Friend”—Nittle’s term—or what Bogle describes as the “Buddy Buddy,” the loyal Black sidekick (1994, 271–76). Morpheus also has superhuman abilities that he uses to inspire and compel Neo, his best friend, to become the people’s savior, thus displaying characteristics of the “Magical Negro” (Nittle 2014). In her outline, Nittle goes on to set forth the categories of “Thugs,” “Brash Women,” and “Domestics”; using her analysis, Niobe can be characterized as the brash, angry and aggressive Black woman, someone who challenges all male authority, including that of her love interests. In terms of Bogle’s categories, she might be likened to a modern-day “Superbadd, Supermama,” what he describes as a “Woman as Protector, Nurturer” of not only her community but the universe, someone whose identity must also be framed within the context of her sexuality and sexual relationships with powerful men (1994, 251–52). Thorough analysis of these characters needs to be the subject of another paper. However, I call attention to this information only to reiterate how difficult the enterprise of defying stereotypes can be for filmmakers today, a task that is all the more challenging for perceptive audiences who watch these films with the hope of experiencing equitable societies where race, class and gender are no longer used to marginalize or disempower individuals.

In conclusion, if nothing else, I hope this essay encourages you to (re)watch these movies, (re)reading the content for yourself. For Womanist thinking and Black feminist criticism invite a (re)reading and reinterpretation of texts that challenge our conceptions of culture, race, gender, and societal formations, and it is through the discourse of Womanist criticism (in which I include Black feminism) that we “are invited to journey to impossible destinations and situations, revealing the possibilities within the reader and the text” (Mitchell and Taylor 2009, 9). As such, my reading of the theory and films involves what Herman Beavers describes as an “interstitial site where world, reader, and text merge,” an experience whereby, “in sharing the reading [or viewing] experience,” this new community of scholars, critics, readers, and viewers can “generate ‘a culture of resistance’” (Beavers 2009, 266). Ruth Robbins credits such a way of reading to the feminist movement, underscoring how feminist literary theory endorses “the possibility of seeing things differently,” instigating a body of knowledge and ways of reading that reflect “a creative multiplicity that has many ... sides” (Robbins 2000, 266). This gesture of resistance—reading in terms of a “creative

multiplicity” that draws upon “an interstitial site where world, reader, and text merge”—offers a new way of “sharing the reading [or viewing] experience,” the crux of bell hooks’s agenda in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. For hooks, “talking back” is a communal “act of resistance,” one that needs to be “a courageous act ... [that] represents a threat [because it] ... challenges [the] politics of domination” (1989, 8). This paper has aspired to achieve such an aim, sharing a viewing/reading experience that asks moviegoers to use vigilance when watching films that seem to depict postracial societies and represent nontraditional gender roles. For despite the laudable efforts of those responsible for bringing *Quest for Fire*, *Children of Men*, and *The Matrix* trilogy to the big screen, viewers cannot ignore the ways in which Ika, Kee and the Oracle sustain stereotypical depictions of African-American women, respectively, as a Jezebel, Hagar, or Mammy.

Notes

1. It is important to note that this paper utilizes literary criticism as the means for grounding the methods and terms applied to my analyses. Of course, significant work has been done in Black film criticism on the topic of stereotypical representations of people of African descent in film. Such texts might include Donald Bogle’s *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks* (1994) or Thomas Cripps’s *Slow Fade to Black* (1977) and *Making Movies Black* (1993). My background, however, is in literary studies, not film studies, so the methodology for this paper stems from literature and literary theory.

2. Historically, several Black women have spoken to the unique struggle women of African descent have faced, fighting a status quo that stigmatizes women and people of color. Sojourner Truth expressed such a conundrum in “Ain’t I a Woman,” her prescient 1851 speech at the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio (Halsall 1997). Hazel Carby (1987) chronicles those who followed Truth’s example, women like Frances Harper and Anna Julia Cooper, who spoke at the World’s Congress of Representative Women in 1893. They continued to promulgate the double, often triple, oppression Black women faced in America due to poverty as well as racial and gender inequity. Particularly relevant to the scope of this paper is Carby’s exploration, in her *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, of the origin of Black female stereotypes as constructed within the plantocracy system, addressing the paradoxical ways in which many nineteenth-century women of African descent defined themselves against the European “cult of true womanhood,” which society prevented them from adhering to.

3. Dolen Perkins-Valdez’s novel *Wench* (2010) is a perfect example of a text that assigns this title to women of color. In the novel, plantation owners take their mixed-raced mistresses with them to summer homes, while, under the guise of traveling for work, they leave their wives on the family’s main property.

4. For more information on the “Mammy” figure, especially in terms of the history of cinema, see Bogle 1994, 9.

5. Principal texts that characterize the “tragic mulatto/a” are early American literary works such as William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853) and *Clotelle* (1867, published in four distinct versions), and Lydia Marie Child’s “Quadroons” (1842) and “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes” (1843). See also Pilgrim 2000 and Bogle 1994, 9.

6. For more information about the *Homo erectus* and *Homo habilis*, see Kemmer 2012.

7. Similarly to the Black female spectators and their response to Steven Spielberg’s rendition of *The Color Purple*, as discussed by Jacqueline Bobo in her *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995), I felt that somebody was, finally, saying something about us.

8. To better understand this point about images of strong Black women that are rife with troubling contradictions, consider the following from Harris:

Conceptualization of black female character, therefore, has fallen into the creative trap or paradox of finding a way out of traditional stereotypes by reinvigorating an old one whose myriad shades do not ultimately overcome the basic problem of limitation. The superficial attractions of strength have dominated portraits of black female characters to the detriment of other possibilities and have potentially stymied future directions for the representations of black women. This tradition of portrayal, therefore, has created as well as become its own form of stagnation. (2001, 10–11)

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