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Magical Negro

The **Magical Negro** is a supporting stock character in American cinema who is portrayed as coming to the aid of a film's white protagonists.^[1] Magical Negro characters, who often possess special insight or mystical powers, have long been a tradition in American fiction.^[2]

The term "magical negro" was popularized in 2001 by film director Spike Lee, while discussing films with students during a tour of college campuses, in which he said he was dismayed at Hollywood's decision to continue employing this premise; he noted that the films *The Green Mile* and *The Legend of Bagger Vance* used the "super-duper magical Negro".^{[3][4][4][5][6]} Critics use the word "Negro" because it is considered archaic, and usually offensive, in modern English. This underlines their message that a "magical black character" who goes around selflessly helping white people is a throwback to stereotypes such as the "Sambo" or "noble savage".^[2]

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Usage

Fiction and film

The Magical Negro is a trope created by white people: the character is typically, but not always, "in some way outwardly or inwardly disabled, either by discrimination, disability or social constraint". The Negro is often a janitor or prisoner.^[7] The character often has no past but simply appears one day to help the white protagonist.^{[8][9]} He or she usually has some sort of magical power, "rather vaguely defined but not the sort of thing one typically encounters."^[8] The character is patient and wise, often dispensing various words of wisdom, and is "closer to the earth".^[6] The character will also do almost anything, including sacrificing him or herself, to save the white protagonist, as exemplified in *The Defiant Ones*, in which Sidney Poitier plays the prototypical Magical Negro.^[6]

Christopher John Farley, referring to the magical Negro as "Magical African American Friends" (MAAFs), says they are rooted in screenwriter's ignorance of African Americans:

MAAFs exist because most Hollywood screenwriters don't know much about black people other than what they hear on records by white hip-hop star Eminem. So instead of getting life histories or love interests, black characters get magical powers.^[7]

The Magical Negro stereotype serves as a plot device to help the white protagonist get out of trouble, typically through helping the white character recognize his own faults and overcome them^[6] and teaching them to be a better person.^[10] Although the character may have magical powers, the "magic is ostensibly directed toward helping and enlightening a white male character".^{[7][11]} An article in a 2009 edition of the journal *Social Problems* stated the Magical Negro was an expression of racial profiling within the United States:

These powers are used to save and transform disheveled, uncultured, lost, or broken whites (almost exclusively white men) into competent, successful, and content people within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation. It is this feature of the Magical Negro that some people find most troubling. Although from a certain perspective the character may seem to be showing blacks in a positive light, the character is still ultimately subordinate to whites. He or she is also regarded as an exception, allowing white America to like individual black people but not black culture.^[12]

In 2001 Spike Lee used the term in a series of talks on college campuses to criticize the stereotypical, unreal roles created for black men in films that were recent at that time, naming *The Family Man* (2000), *What Dreams May Come* (1998), *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000) and *The Green Mile* (1999) as examples.^[3] Talking about the time and place in which *Bagger Vance* is set, he said:

"Blacks are getting lynched left and right, and [Bagger Vance is] more concerned about improving Matt Damon's golf swing! ... I gotta sit down; I get mad just thinking about it. They're still doing the same old thing ... recycling the noble savage and the happy slave." He went on to discuss his desire to create films showing black people doing all kinds of things.^[4]

In a book published in 2004, writer Krin Gabbard claimed that the Oda Mae Brown character in the 1990 movie *Ghost*, played by Whoopi Goldberg, was an example of a Magical Negress.^{[11]:154–155}

In 2012, writer Kia Miakka Natisse, in *The Grip*, opined about actor Morgan Freeman playing parts more or less conforming to the Magical Negro form. Natisse mentioned recent roles including the doctor fitting a dolphin with a prosthetic tail in *Dolphin Tale* despite the film's origin: the film is based on a true story. Natisse continued to gripe: "[Red] an ailing CIA mentor—in both roles [Freeman] reprises the Magical Negro type, coming to save the day for his imperiled white counterparts. One could argue his gadget guru in *The Dark Knight Rises* fits under that same umbrella."^[13]

Comedian Dave Chappelle made several references to this trope in his mid-2000's series *Chappelle's Show*, including a sketch entitled "Black Pixies". Chris Rock did likewise on his own show of the same period, with another, particularly critical of *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, entitled "Migger, the Magic Nigger". More recently, Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, of *MADtv* and *Key and Peele* fame, followed suit in both shows with their own critical Magical Negro sketches.

Barack Obama

In March 2007, American critic David Ehrenstein used the title "Obama the 'Magic Negro'" for an editorial he wrote for the *Los Angeles Times*, in which he described Barack Obama's image in white American culture: "He's there to assuage white 'guilt' (i.e., the "minimal discomfort" they feel) over the role of slavery and racial segregation in American history, while replacing stereotypes of a dangerous, highly sexualized black man with a benign figure for whom interracial sexual congress holds no interest ... The only mud that momentarily stuck was criticism (white and black alike) concerning Obama's alleged 'inauthenticity', as compared to such sterling examples of "genuine" blackness as Al Sharpton and Snoop Dogg. ... Obama's fame right now has little to do with his political record ... Like a comic-book superhero, Obama is there to help, out of the sheer goodness of a heart we need not know or understand. For as with all Magic Negroes, the less real he seems, the more desirable he becomes. If he were real, white America couldn't project all its fantasies of curative black benevolence on him."^[14]

Rush Limbaugh began discussing Ehrenstein's op-ed on the day it was published. He cast Ehrenstein's column as criticizing Obama himself for not being authentic or black enough:

"The problem, Ehrenstein says, is he's not real. Al Sharpton's real, Snoop Dogg is real, but Barack Obama is not real. He's just there to assuage white guilt. In other words, the only reason Obama is anywhere is because whites are willing to support him because they feel so guilty over slavery."

He described the column as an example of the "racism of the left". He said, "The term 'Magic Negro' has been thrown into the political presidential race in the mix for 2008" and said he would "own" the term by the end of the week. He briefly sang the words, "Barack the magic negro" to the tune of song "Puff, the Magic Dragon".^{[15][16]} Shortly after that Paul Shanklin recorded a song about Barack the Magic Negro set to that same tune, which Limbaugh played numerous times throughout the 2008 presidential election season.^[17]

In Christmas 2008, Chip Saltsman, a Republican politician and chair of the Tennessee Republican Party, sent a 41-track CD containing the song to members of the Republican National Committee during the Republican National Committee chairmanship election.^{[18][19]} Saltsman's campaign imploded as a result of the controversy caused by the CD, and he withdrew from the race;^{[20][21]} Michael Steele, an African American, was elected.^[22]

In May 2015, theater and cultural critic Frank Rich, looking back at the coincidence of the 2015 Baltimore protests with the annual White House Correspondents Dinner in Washington, DC, wrote: "What made this particular instance poignant was the presence in the ballroom of our first African-American president, the Magic Negro who was somehow expected to relieve a nation founded and built on slavery from the toxic burdens of centuries of history."^[23]

See also

- Counterstereotype
- Manic Pixie Dream Girl
- Primitivism
- Romantic racism
- Stereotypes of African Americans
- Xenocentrism
- White savior narrative in film

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