

# Race in the Construct, or the Construction of Race: New Media and Old Identities in “The Matrix”

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“The Matrix is a world pulled over your eyes  
to blind you from the truth.”

“What truth?”

“That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else,  
you were born into bondage.”

The preceding dialogue occurs between Neo (Keanu Reeves) and Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) in the 1999 film “The Matrix.” In it, Morpheus reveals that Neo has been living in a dream world created by a sinister Artificial Intelligence (AI) which has reduced humans to organic power sources to fuel their own processors, and most importantly, has constructed a digital representation of a “real world” so convincing that most humans take it for real. This Matrix, or “neural-interactive simulation,” is a digital construct indistinguishable from the real. The danger lies in the exploitation of the human race, at least of those still enslaved by its simulated reality. The connections between the Matrix depicted in this film, and the Internet as it exists today, all have a common root in cyberpunk fiction, specifically William Gibson’s novels, from which both the terms “cyberspace” and “matrix” originated. Gibson coined the term “matrix” to describe a network of computers which had achieved sentience, and the word “cyberspace” as a means to describe a “consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators.”<sup>1</sup>

Hence, the film “The Matrix” can and should be read as a narrative about the Internet and its possibilities and dangers.

Like Gibson’s novels in particular, and cyberpunk in general, “The Matrix” both celebrates technology and critiques it. The cyber-utopian or celebratory strain often advances the notion of technology as a social equalizer that levels out race and gender inequities, since bodies are supposedly left behind in cyberspace, or at least are invisible when using it. This line of thinking depends upon a mistaken notion of race as solely a somatic or bodily feature, one which can (and should) be conveniently edited out or eliminated by the use of the Internet. “The Matrix” is all about visibility, however, and thus cannot elide the question of race, though at times it tries to, with important repercussions, as I will show. On the contrary, I posit that the film envisions a vexed multiculturalism as a corrective to the dehumanizing excesses of modern machines, which promise so much but end up delivering so little.

Though the film has been called “equal parts Luddite polemic and seeker of truth,”<sup>2</sup> its “truth” couches a critique of technology within a deeply raced narrative. In this narrative, humans must learn to master the machines, not abandon them. Race functions as a means for humans to hack into the machines; it represents a “pirate signal” which affirms racial diversity and stakes out its place in the global landscape of the future. Utopia, or “Zion,” as it is termed in the film, is the last refuge of “100 percent pure homegrown human beings,” as the black character Tank terms himself. This future-world is emphatically multiracial; rather than depicting a world in which race has been “transcended,” or represented solely by white actors (who command more money at the box office), we are shown a world in which race is not only visible but necessary for human liberation.

Neo’s dialogue with Morpheus, one of many that contribute towards the Orientalized sensei/student relationship which they share, employs the term “slavery” which can never be separated from power relations and race in the United States. Morpheus’s efforts to school Neo, to first convince him that he is a slave exploited by machine culture and later to help him to “free his mind” so that he can defeat the machines and rewrite, or hack into, the Matrix, reverses

the usual order of things in a film of this genre. Firstly, it constructs a black character as a leader in a cyberpunk film, and, in fact, as more than a leader. As the character Tank says while delivering an elegy to the Morpheus who he thinks will be shortly unplugged, or killed: “You’ve been more than a leader to us, you’ve been a father.” Previous canonical cyberpunk films have depicted minority characters, particularly Asians, as window dressing symptomatic of a post-apocalyptic pastiche of cultures; in “Blade Runner” (1982), the viewer can tell that the apocalypse has come and gone because there are so many minorities running around speaking in foreign languages, or mixtures thereof. The same can be said of “Strange Days” (1995). In both of these films, people of color are supporting characters at best.

In noticeable contrast, “The Matrix” is a truly multicultural cyberpunk film. Perhaps this, in part, has had something to do with this film’s “regenerating the sagging cyberspace genre,”<sup>3</sup> a genre that had been “left-for-dead” in the words of a *Newsweek* review.<sup>4</sup> However, though the review refers to the “combination of Chinese martial arts and American special effects” which have created the spectacular hybrid fight scenes which most viewers remember after they view it, it says nothing about race and the casting of the film, much less the ways that race is constantly referenced in the narrative. It seems as if the film’s critical reception exists in another matrix or frame of reference, one in which race is invisible, overshadowed by the conflict between men and machines. However, in the film, machines are racialized and so are men (and women; though the treatment of women is another story). A black man leads the resistance or slave revolt against the machines, who are visible to us as Anglo Saxon “agents” wearing suits.<sup>5</sup> They all look the same, as one would expect machines to do, but most importantly they all look white and middle class in a way that no one in the resistance does.

The black Morpheus is a father to his multicultural crew of rebels, which is impressive in its diversity; in addition to Morpheus, it contains two black characters, Tank and Dozer; an adolescent white boy, Mouse; a Latino figure, Apoc; and a white woman, Trinity. There is even a queer character, Switch, signified as such by familiar tropes such as spiky hair, minimal makeup, and a matter-of-

fact way of speaking. However, her queerness isn't flagged by the characters pointing it out via dialogue, just as race isn't constructed in that way either, as it is taken for granted that by 2199, the year when the film's "real" action is taking place, racial diversity as well as tolerance *vis a vis* sexual identity has become accepted enough to go uncommented upon. However, the discourse of racism has been re-purposed in this film. At times, it is projected onto machines, as when Morpheus is beaten and abducted by the white agents; his reply to learning Agent Smith's name is "You all look the same to me." Primarily, the presence of people of color in the film lets us know that we are in the realm of the Real;<sup>6</sup> machine-induced fantasies and wish fulfillment, which is what the Matrix is, are knowable to us by their distinctive and consistent whiteness.

The machine in its worst incarnation, the sinister face of technology run amok, the hegemonic, cyber-spatial, cold regime that has reduced all humans to slaves, is shown to us in the film as being distinctively and conventionally white and male, in contrast to the warm living multi-raciality and gender-bending of the rebels. These agents are the visual manifestation of a system of domination which is technologically enabled, and appear in suits, which signify a critique of corporate imagery in general as well as capitalism-as-usual. The agents also manifest themselves as cops, clearly also allied with the hegemonic machine, and the scene in which they gather in a circle and beat the black Morpheus invokes images of Rodney King, images indelibly coded as being about the oppression of blacks by whites.

The only four Anglo-Saxon characters in Morpheus' crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar*—the warrior-heroine Trinity; the androgynous Switch; the hacker-boy Mouse; and the betrayer Cypher—are positioned either in opposition to or in alliance with this version of whiteness. Cypher, the only adult white male on the crew, is on the side of the machines; he is their "agent." Mouse, as well as Switch, the queer female character, and Trinity, the other female crew member, are emphatically against the machines. Both Switch and Trinity, in particular, unite a cyberpunk style of femininity and a formidable role as a warrior; Trinity's is the first combat scene in the film. Trinity and Switch stand outside traditional gender definitions of woman as nurturer and

ones-to-be-defended. While the machine defends traditional gender roles—there are no female agents—Trinity and Switch challenge them, which exempts them from the taint of whiteness-as-inhuman and preserves femininity as an opposing force to technology as oppressor. This racing of the machine itself identifies whiteness as part of the problem, not the solution, a problem which multiraciality—the alliance between blacks, as shown to us by Morpheus, Tank, and Dozer; Latinos like Apoc, and interracial characters like Neo—is positioned to solve.

The multiracial position of Neo, as played by Keanu Reeves, is occluded to some extent in the film. However, it is a significant casting choice to have placed him in this role precisely because of his actual mixed racial status. (Early journalistic writing on Keanu Reeves always takes note of his mixed Asian and white heritage.) Significantly, the decision was made in 1999, the same year as the film's release, to make the choice "other" available in the race category of the National Census. This official recognition that people who don't fit into one racial "box" do exist in demographically significant numbers represents a significant paradigm shift in our national conceptions of race, one which this film recognizes by making a character of mixed race its hero, literally "the One," humanity's only hope against oppressive whiteness and the enslavement and eventual eradication of humanity which it represents in the film.

Neo unites within himself the rainbow of races which have come to stand for "the human" in the film; like the stunning special effect termed "recursive action," or as John Gaeta, the effects coordinator of the film calls it (in the DVD edition), "the fist bouquet," Keanu makes visible all the different varieties of color including white; his hybridity is marked as the only available corrective to the agents of whiteness.

Machines take on the onus which previously belonged to racial "others" and unite non-white men and white women against a system or matrix of white purity and privilege as exemplified by institutions such as the law and the corporation, specifically high tech corporations. Here, the film's critique of information technologies and their alliance with capitalism is particularly apparent; the company that Neo works for, Metronex, is staffed almost

entirely with white men, as is the digital Construct which is part of the rebels' training program.

The idea that all whites are, unwittingly or not, "agents" of the racism-machine to some extent, relates to George Lipsitz's notion of the "possessive investment in whiteness."<sup>7</sup> In his book of the same name, Lipsitz explains the dynamics by which whites often unknowingly consent to the perpetuation of their own entitlements and privilege in relation to non-whites. Lipsitz is anxious to note that not all whites participate in this system, indeed many whites have resisted it strongly and continue to do so, but the fact that there are an array of ready-made institutions or machinic systems designed to produce white privilege provides them with that choice, a choice lacking to non-whites. The fact that the possessive investment in whiteness is often unconscious gestures towards the nature of racism in the age of multiraciality and multiculturalism, a time when claiming such privilege overtly classes one in a socially undesirable category, that of white supremacist or racist. As Morpheus says of the business-suited whites peopling the Construct, or world which enslaved humans think they are living in, these plugged-in people think they are living in the real world, but instead are experiencing a hallucination, and thereby have been made "so helplessly inert, so dependent on the system, they will fight to protect it." It is not possible to "liberate" such humans; like the majority of whites as described in Lipsitz's work, they are dependent on the system of privilege which allows them to be on the winning side of information age capitalism and the machines which underpin it. To unplug them from their dream of whiteness and its attendant comfort would be to kill them. This may explain the lack of white men among the Rebels; theoretically, non-whites and women are the ones who would *want* to wake up from this particular dream.

Cypher betrays the other crew members precisely because he wants to jump the ship of multiculturalism and reclaim his possessive investment in whiteness.<sup>8</sup> He negotiates with Agent Smith, who addresses him as Mr. Reagan—a fine jab at the trickle down capitalism of the 1980s which perpetuated white privilege—to be "replugged" into the system, where he can eat steak and drink red wine in a fine restaurant. The fact that he knows that this privilege is

an illusion (the steak and wine are digital simulations provided by the agents) and that he must kill his crewmates to get it signifies the ways in which the virtual have colonized the real, to the detriment of the real, and most importantly, the ways in which white maleness is always constructed as suspect in the film. In the scene where he kills Apoc, Switch, and Dozer, and almost kills Tank, he relates that his grievances have specifically to do with the lack of privilege and entitlements he feels in the real world. He cries “I’m tired of this ship, tired of being cold, tired of eating the same goddam glop every day.”

He wants to be the “One,” feels entitled to be the One, but the multicultural logic of the film will not allow it. In order for the critique of whiteness to be completed he must be the Lu(Cypher) of the story and his white hubris must be punished by death. Indeed, his claims to be oppressed while he is receiving no less and no more than any other crew member—we are pointedly shown that everyone eats the same glop, which issues from a tube in the ship—invokes the ways that a lack of white privilege can be experienced as oppression. Lipsitz notes the case of Allan Bakke and the ways that it mobilized protest against affirmative action; in this case the “language of liberal individualism serves as a cover for collective group interests,”<sup>9</sup> the interests of whites. In the DVD version of the film, this section is entitled “Dealing for Bliss,” a title which takes note of the deals that whites can make, with themselves (i.e. denial or incomprehension that a deal has even taken place), and with the institutions and practices which underpin racism.

“The Matrix” constructs a new discourse of race in the digital age, one which plugs us in to our own dream-worlds about cyber-utopias and cyber-futures. And like any dream, it is conflicted. It opens a window into our cultural anxieties, fears, fantasies, and desires, about the Internet and the roles of blacks, whites, machines, and all combinations thereof. Like the Internet, the Matrix looks the way we want it to look or have made it look; it is symptomatic of our visions of utopia. It is a construct, a wonderland of sorts, as the film’s frequent reference to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* signal broadly. As Morpheus says to Neo about the Matrix, “Your mind makes it real.”

Indeed, cyberspace engenders particular questions about what is “real,” and

the implications of these questions are increasingly unavoidable today; as pundits of digital culture debate such problems as the reality of on-line relationships, chat room identities, and the status of the self on the Internet, we are faced with a radical interrogation of the nature of personal identity. Millions of users create on-line identities via email, chat rooms and web-construction which may vary quite a bit from their Real Life identities. This signifies the desire for elasticity in identity-construction; it gestures towards a sense that we are more than we appear, or wish to be read differently than we are, and that we can use cyberspace to create versions of ourselves that look, and in some sense, are, different from ourselves. Much research has been done on this phenomenon of gender (and to a much lesser extent racial) cross-dressing or masquerade on the Internet, and the jury is still out on whether this should be viewed as a progressive aspect of the Internet, one which liberates users and encourages democratic social relations, or whether it simply re-duplicates old gender and race hierarchies.<sup>10</sup> The Matrix is an embodied cyberspace, meaning that in order to be there you have to have a body, albeit a digital body. This body, which is created by the mind, is known in cyberspace literature as an avatar.<sup>11</sup> The avatar is described by Morpheus to Neo as “residual self-image...it is the mental projection of your digital self.”

Thus, while the real Neo is wearing a tattered sweater, his head is shaved, his skin is pale and unhealthy looking, and his body still bears the marks of the plugs and ports that connected him to the sinister machines, the Neo-in-cyberspace has coiffed hair, stylish black clothing, and looks as glamorous as only Hollywood lighting and excellent makeup can make him look. Indeed, all of the rebels undergo this transformation while they are in the matrix fighting the agents; they wear full length leather coats, natty Prada-ish suits, painfully stylish haircuts, excellent sunglasses, and high tech PVC fabrics and silks.<sup>12</sup>

This transformation, like the changes in self-presentation which Internet users execute when they create a visual “self” to deploy in cyberspace, says a great deal more about what users *want* rather than who users *are*. Or rather, in cyberspace it boils down to the same thing. The striking aspect of the way the

Matrix's avatars look has to do with the solidity of race. Avatars can look any way you want them to: They are aspects of "residual self-image." The term "residue" seems to signify that the mind "re-members" the body only partially, when it constructs itself in the Matrix aspects of it are left out. Race is part of this residue, it is that which the mind identifies as belonging to itself, an essential and indispensable part of itself. Hence, none of the characters are differently raced when in the Matrix. Instead, they create versions of themselves that are differently classed: Glossier, better dressed, more powerful. They upgrade themselves and the accouterments of class identity: Their clothes, their abilities, their hair (lots of hair gel in the Matrix), their weapons and cars. But their race stays the same throughout. In a world where you can download special abilities, such as Kung-Fu, Ju-Jitsu, and the ability to fly a B-211 helicopter, knowledge is a fluid thing, yet race remains solid; it is inseparably part of the self in a way that mere class cannot be.

However, in contemporary Internet practice, users change their gender and race all the time. Why does the film leave this more radical transformation out of the picture? (Highly publicized stories about men on the Net who really turn out to be women are fodder for talk shows.) While the critique of whiteness and machines together seems to affirm multiculturalism and hybridity as correctives to the alienation and exploitation of most humans today, the film passes up a prime opportunity to question the monolithic nature of race more radically. Race is not a fluid in this film but rather a solid in the sense that while hackers into the Matrix can change just about any aspect of themselves, they cannot or, significantly, do not choose to change their race.

I read this move as an affirmation that race matters: Racial diversity is depicted as a source of the hero's strength. (And, of course, there is the matter of movie stars needing to get their proper amount of screen-time. Since Keanu Reeves' name is above the title on the promotional material, we can expect that film goers' expectations to see him during most of the film must be indulged.) Non-whiteness is what makes the real humans different from the artificial agents. Race serves to anchor the viewer in the real, a crucial function in a film which sets out to bend viewers' minds regarding the status of the real,<sup>13</sup> a

status which is changing at a vertiginous rate in our world as well.

Neo's nausea and vomiting when he discovers that what he thought was the real him is simply a version or digital avatar of him, signifies that sense of nausea which goes along with rapid and unexpected movement. Vertiginous shifts in cultural, physical/ontological, and epistemological points of view are engendered by digital identity-switching. In a sense, his nausea mirrors our own in the face of radical instability regarding personal identity. Race in general and blackness in particular stabilize this cyber-vertigo of identity; as Neo wakes from his pod-induced trance, his first sight in the real world is the face of a black man, Morpheus. The first words that Neo hears as a real person are "Welcome to the real world." These particular words, coming as they do from Laurence Fishburne's character, signify that the real world *is* black, solid, to-be-trusted, and worthy of being defended.

In fact, the only two characters who have never been exploited by the machines are Tank and Dozer, two black men who are "100 percent pure home-grown human" since they were born in Zion, the last outpost of human civilization. The traditional colonial mission of civilizing the disorder and disarray of savages has been retrofitted and revamped to fit this movie's multicultural politics: The Great White Hope of the last humans on earth are black men and women, at least until this point in the film.

The position of black women in the film is far more vexed, however. The Oracle's authority and power as a black woman and a source of knowledge are undermined by her depiction as a woman baking cookies, wearing an apron, and living in a housing project. In a film so much about visual style and beautiful futuristic couture, her dowdy appearance and position securely in the lower classes seems to signify the place of black women in the future as well as the present. While the film envisions a multicultural crew resisting the white hegemony, as embodied by the Agents and their agent, Cypher, it can't yet incorporate black women into this group of real humans except as supporting characters. Indeed, the Oracle's function as the nurturer of "potentials," or candidates (most of whom are children) for the position of the One, continues the familiar trope of black women as mammies or supportive and willing domestic

workers. The Oracle's apparent satisfaction with her traditionally racialized role as a glorified child-care worker and giver of advice to the hero represents the limits of this multiculturalist fantasy of inter-human democracy. Perhaps women of color represent the real "potentials" in this film, a potential that remains untapped and unrealized in this narrative of the future.

The crew of Morpheus's hovercraft *Nebuchadnezzar*, resembles the population of Los Angeles as it is projected to look in the near future: That is, whites are a minority. However, in the face of dire anxieties regarding the future of multicultural cities and white flight from them, the ship is depicted as an ideal community, a hopeful and determinedly un-glamorous coalition of oppressed workers fighting the machine. This model of community is diverse, real, gritty, dense, warm, close, and caring. They seem happy to be eating their gruel together, and united in their purpose. (Cypher is the exception to this rule, and, hence, the traitor.) However, the plot kills them one by one, leaving only Morpheus, Neo, and Trinity—a trinity composed of a black man, a multiracial man, and a white woman.<sup>14</sup> The disturbing aspect of this resolution has to do with the eradication of community as the solution to machine-induced slavery and exploitation, and its replacement by the cool imagery of Neo's sun-glassed face in the film's closing scenes as he assumes his mantle as the One.

This notion of there only being One who counts in struggles against white oppression redoubles the rhetoric of heroic individuality which has haunted civil rights movements since the martyrdoms of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Trinity and Morpheus are reduced to girlfriend and sidekick-mentor, effectively turning them into support-staff for the One. Morpheus in particular is shunted off to the sidelines and turned into a Tonto to Neo's Lone Ranger; he is rendered "serviceable" in Toni Morrison's use of the word to describe the function of blacks in American fiction.<sup>15</sup> Morpheus's presence makes Neo even more the One, even more a lone hero, since he stands for those things which Neo is not: Bounded, limited, vulnerable, defeatable by whites. He and Trinity, whose only purpose in the plot, at this point, is to confirm Neo's status as the One by being in love with him (an all-too-familiar reminder of the uses to which female characters are put in Hollywood generally), are discarded entirely in the

film's final scene in which Neo delivers a monologue into a pay phone.

This film's ending is frustrating because it seems to take back the progressive images of race and multiracial communities, which had been advanced from the beginning, and replaces them with an anti-communitarian figure of authority and power—the lone hero. Its ultimate message about multiculturalism in the future is to assert the solidity and abiding presence of race as a “real” thing, a serviceable thing, as well as construct a hero whose race is so ambiguous as to be readable as white or not.

Keanu Reeves is a stealth minority; many viewers do not know that he is multi-racial.<sup>16</sup> His casting reflects the notion of race as “residual self-image”: Reeves is read in ways that reflect viewers' own preoccupations and notions of race more accurately than they reflect anything about the actor himself. Perhaps this makes him a perfect type to become a hero by dominating machines; half-machine himself, at least according to some film reviewers' writings about his (lack of) actorly affect and style, his position on the boundary of white and “other” calls attention to the status of race as a matrix, no more real than viewers' perceptions of it. But, as we know from observing hiring practices, mortgage terms, the prison-industrial complex, and the continuing segregation of neighborhoods, race doesn't need to be real to accomplish things in the world. As Morpheus says in reference to the Matrix, “Your mind makes it real.”

Neo's final monologue, which is directly addressed to the viewer, asks us to “imagine a world without limit or controls, borders or boundaries.” One could read it as an echo of Morpheus's exhortation to Neo while he is training him to believe in himself enough to leap from one building to another: “Free your mind.” The difference has to do with the rhetoric. Both of these commands ask their interlocutors to challenge authority, but with a crucial difference, a *racial* difference. “Free your mind” has long been a staple phrase of funk and popular music, much of which has an anti-racist bent. Bootsy Collins' and En Vogue's iterations of the phrase ask the listener to “free your mind and your ass will follow.” En Vogue follows this up with another verse: “Be color blind, don't be so shallow.” Freeing your mind of racism is a task as hard as learning to fly from building to building, it would seem. Neo's challenge to imagine a world

without limits echoes an infamous MCI commercial from the mid-nineties entitled, "Anthem," which tells the viewer to "imagine a world without boundaries...Utopia? No! The Internet!"<sup>17</sup>

This is the rhetoric of commercial digital utopianism.<sup>18</sup> The appeal to a corporate/commercial discourse is opposed to the discourse of civil rights and multiculturalism. Its promise is to bridge the digital divide<sup>19</sup> by setting up a hero who will "free the minds" of others. This leaves out a scenario in which others might free their own minds. The multiracial and multicultural community has been sacrificed to produce this leader, and, most significantly, they have been depicted as eager to do so. Morpheus's determination to sacrifice himself for Neo (his cry to Trinity to take Neo away from the agents, while he stays behind is: "He's the only one who matters now!") is disturbing in that it constructs him, in all his blackness and, in the logic of the film, attendant realness, as an ancillary character, an adjunct or assistant to the One, and as accepting of life on these terms. He truly is a "supporting character" despite Fishburne's superior abilities as an actor at making the character of Morpheus seem "like a real person," verisimilitudinous in a way that Reeves never is.

Neo's promise to construct a world without boundaries places the responsibility for leadership in this quest upon the figure of the lone hacker.<sup>20</sup> This utopic vision of a world in which humans regain their control over machines glosses over disturbing questions about mastery in the digital age. To return to Lewis Carroll, and cite his sequel to *Alice in Wonderland*, *Through the Looking Glass*, the question which Humpty Dumpty directs to Alice in her travels through Wonderland, the virtually real, is, "Who is to be master?"<sup>21</sup> This question is indeed the one to consider, and in the context of this film and our culture today, it can be broken down as follows: Can whites continue to be master in the face of globalization and racial/cultural hybridity? Must whites, or institutionalized investments in white privilege, continue to structure access to information and media? Will the machines win by making us their agents? Does global capital make us all agents of the hegemony in ways that we can't resist or even see? Whose interests are being served in the world of the Internet? Must there be a Master, a One, or can the notion of heroic and lone leadership be

replaced by community and consensus instead? What is the place of the Real and the place of race in the world of the virtual?

While cyberspace may be touted as a world without boundaries or limits, the real is ineluctably bounded. Just like the hovercraft *Nebuchadnezzar*, where all the real action in the film occurs, it is a *place* rather than an unbounded space. The quest to understand this place, to recognize the raced and gendered cultures and people which occupy it and make it real, needs to be undertaken by the many, rather than the One. Beneath the great look of the film, the sleek and telegenic images of technology and machines, lies the insight that we are in much the same position of the enslaved humans trapped in their pods, dreaming that they are living lives of privilege which do not exploit others. This matrix of racism is the thing from which we must free our minds. While it is tempting to “deal for bliss,” to buy into the prepackaged vision of the cyber-society as a democratic, race-less, free space, doing so means engaging in a deal which perpetuates the digital racial divide. Inequities of access, power, and representation are real. And the means of addressing these problems: Community networking, funding for public technology education, better support for families and children, etc., will not come from machines and networks, but rather from people who are willing to all eat the same “glop,” so to speak. Only then can the promise of cyberspace and the Internet to democratize social relations move from the realm of Wonderland’s dreams to the lived realities of humanity in all its diversity. ★

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- 1 William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984), p. 51.
- 2 Ted Anthony, “At the Movies: The Matrix,” *Entertainment News*, March 30, 1999, Internet.
- 3 N’Gai Croal, “Maximizing the Matrix.” *Newsweek*, April 19, 1999, p. 64.
- 4 The directors’ commentary on the DVD version of “The Matrix” also omits the topic of race entirely, as do the actors’. There are no references to race at all in the wealth of additional and supporting material provided on this state-of-the-art DVD.

- 5 This is another cautionary reference to the Internet: In 1996, digital agents were celebrated in *Wired* magazine as the next new thing in cyberspace. These software programs were supposed to do the tedious work of searching out information in cyberspace; in this film they've acquired sentience, rebelled, and taken over the system.
- 6 In the DVD commentary to "The Matrix," Laurence Fishburne says that "Morpheus is a person who lives in the real world."
- 7 George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), p. vii.
- 8 Cypher also has a possessive investment in maleness; as he says to Neo while looking at the monitor of coded signs that represent the software of the Matrix, "all I see is blonde, brunette, redhead." This is the only invocation of sexist language in a film which depicts women as formidable warriors and computer hackers. Trinity is both a fighter and the person who "hacked into the IRS D-base." Part of Trinity's role in the film is to school Neo and the viewer that women can "hack it" too. When Neo comments "I thought you were a man" when he learns of her software expertise, she responds by saying "most men do," a clever acknowledgment and rebuke of gender stereotypes.
- 9 Lipsitz, p. 22.
- 10 See Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); Allucquère Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); and Lynn Cherny and Elizabeth Reba Weise eds., *Wired Women: Gender and New Reality in Cyberspace* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1996) for discussions of cross-gender role-playing in cyberspace. See Lisa Nakamura, "Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet," in *CyberReader*, 2nd edition (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000) for an examination of cross-racial passing on the Internet. See also *Race in Cyberspace*, eds., Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gil Rodman (New York: Routledge, 2000).
- 11 The term "avatar," used to describe a visual digital representation of a self in cyberspace was first coined in popular literature by Neil Stephenson in his novel *Snow Crash* (New York: Bantam, 1992). He writes "your avatar can look any way you want it to, up to the limitations of your equipment. If you're ugly, you can make your avatar beautiful. If you've just gotten out of bed, your avatar can still be wearing beautiful clothes and professionally applied makeup." p. 36.
- 12 *In Fashions of the Times*, "The Matrix" is cited, along with the film "Gattaca," as a "fashion show." Mitchell, Elvis, "Character Assassination," *The New York Times Magazine* (special supplement) Part 2, Spring, 2000. While wardrobe is a necessary component of the visual field which signifies to film viewers that the action is taking place in the future rather than now, the article's author claims that the cutting-edge fashions actually overshadow the plot.
- 13 When at the beginning of the film Neo is shown extracting black-market recreational software from a hollowed out volume entitled *Simulation and Simulacra*, these issues are being foreshadowed fairly overtly.
- 14 The black character Tank, though left for dead by Cypher, does manage to survive and in fact kills Cypher. This allows him to continue as the crew's "operator," and to eventually pull the heroes out of the Matrix back into the real world, thus reinforcing the connections the film has built between "raced" characters and the Real. However, his role in the film is somewhat effaced; he operates behind the scenes, much like the Oracle, and never participates in any of the telegenic battles with the agents which contain most of the film's narrative high points.
- 15 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (New York: Vintage, 1992), p. 64.
- 16 It seems that this "open secret" is constructed primarily by viewers' own residual self-images or identifications; while Asians tend generally to know Reeves' inter-racial status, whites do not.

- 17 *Anthem*, 1997, produced by Messner Vetere Berger McNamee Schmetterer for MCI.
- 18 See Lisa Nakamura, "'Where Do You Want to Go Today?' Cybernetic Tourism, the Internet, and Transnationality," in *Race in Cyberspace*.
- 19 See Donna Hoffman and Thomas P. Novak "Bridging the Digital Divide: The Impact of Race on Computer Access and Internet Use," Project 2000, Vanderbilt University, Internet, 29 January 1999. Available: <<http://www2000.ogsm.vanderbilt.edu/papers/race/science/html>> for a discussion and explanation of low usage of the Internet by minorities compared to whites.
- 20 This is very much a convention of cyberspace narrative since its inception. See Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
- 21 Lewis Carroll, *The Lewis Carroll Book* (New York, Tudor Publishing, 1939), p. 238.