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TreaAndrea Russworm  
russworm@english.umass.edu

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**University of Massachusetts Amherst**

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**From the Selected Works of TreaAndrea Russworm**

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# The Hype Man as Racial Stereotype, Parody, and Ghost in Afro Samurai

TreaAndrea Russworm



treaandrea\_russworm/1/

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## CHAPTER 12

# The Hype Man as Racial Stereotype, Parody and Ghost in *Afro Samurai*

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TREAANDREA M. RUSSWORM

In *Afro Samurai*, Namco Bandai's 2009 much-anticipated video game, Ninja Ninja (voice acted by Samuel L. Jackson) is the character who speaks over — and sometimes for — the title character. In the character synopsis of the game manual, Ninja Ninja is described as “Afro’s herald, hype-man and a real shit-talker” who is “mischievous, highly-strung and dangerously irresponsible” (12). Fittingly then, the game opens with Ninja Ninja upstaging the dramatic action of Afro’s near-death. The suspension of sound in the game’s first cutscene is broken by Ninja Ninja’s off-screen dialogue as he makes a direct appeal to the gamer:

Shit. Looks like this is the end for Afro Samurai. You want to help him out? Be my guest! This has been a long time coming. I’ve done all I can. See me and him, we ain’t friends per se. I’ve just been hanging out, looking for a little action.... Only action [Afro’s] been getting is getting his ass kicked. You think I should be watching his back? Fuck you! I’ve been watching, I’ve seen everything [*Afro Samurai*].

Gamers and reviewers have been divided in their assessments of Jackson’s performance of both characters. Some have read Ninja Ninja, much more than Afro, as an intentional parody of Black masculinity, while others have interpreted him as mainly reinforcing stereotypes. Although gamers play through the story as Afro, Ninja Ninja is everywhere — providing commentary, shadowing, disappearing only to reappear seconds later. The in-game map system materializes Ninja Ninja whenever Afro needs direction. As Gamespot columnist Sophia Tong explains approvingly, Ninja Ninja appears “in the direction you need to head and then vanishes in a puff of brown smoke. If

you call on him often, he'll say things like 'I ain't your GPS, bitch!' or find other delightful ways of expressing himself" (Tong). In addition to Ninja Ninja's heavy use of profanity, the gameplay mechanics further integrate essentialized notions of blackness in the titles of special hack-n-slash moves that the player can perfect and perform, moves like "Pimp Hand" and "Dayam That Really Hurt."

While Tong and some of the gamers who wrote reviews on Gamespot, YouTube, and GameFaq found the choices of characterization and style to be consistent with the way contemporary exploitation narratives exaggerate racialized performance, other respondents found this mode of representation distasteful and regressive. In their review of the game for their popular video podcast, *The Totally Rad Show*, hosts Alex Albrecht, Jeff Cannata, and Dan Trachtenberg flag Jackson's voice acting for Ninja Ninja, as unnecessarily lewd and distracting. Cannata complains, "The love scene was so derogatory" partly because Ninja Ninja is in the background coaching Afro to "tap that ass" and "go ahead, get some pussy." Indeed, after the sex scene (and death of Afro's love interest), Ninja Ninja chides, "If every woman I stuck my dick in died a few hours later, man, I'd put that shit on my resume. Now would that go under skills or other interests?" At one point during the review of the game, Trachtenberg, in a moment of frustration, blurts out that Ninja Ninja is a "minstrel." The other two hosts laugh nervously but Trachtenberg insists, still fixated on Ninja Ninja's speech and dialogue, "I didn't even know why he was saying those things. None of it made any sense." After praising the hip hop soundtrack as "the best ever in a game," *The Totally Rad Show* hosts quickly dismiss the game as an embarrassing disappointment.

With an acknowledgement that the reception of popular constructions of blackness is typically divisive, this essay takes the limited range of interpretations of Ninja Ninja's role in *Afro Samurai* as provocation for further study. The analyses that follow embrace a ludological commitment to examining gamic elements (game narrative, player control, the mechanics of the fighting system) that make *Afro Samurai* a game distinct from other works. Just as important to reading the video game as a game, however, is the aim to post-structurally and dialectically situate the game's content in the larger context of the numerous media influences and bicultural traditions to which it belongs. Fan and journalist reactions to the game's two central characters, critical theory, and close readings of the game's two final boss battles are used to substantiate alternatives to exploring racialized performance in video games. At the core of this critical excavation are the questions: what are the cultural precedents that game developers draw on to create characters that are different and yet recognizable and marketable. Importantly, is Ninja Ninja a neo-minstrel figure? If so, what is the significance of digitizing minstrelsy via the video game?

### New Media, New Racism?

While the *Afro Samurai* video game is but one of a few narrative games to feature a Black character as the story's central player-controlled character, as a commercial video game, it seems likely that it would reinforce dominant cultural associations of blackness (as morally abject, violent, intellectually incompetent, hypersexual, etc.). Despite substantially outpacing both the film and music industries in terms of growth and sales in the United States, the video game industry is an industry of new media production that has consistently recycled very old sensibilities and conventions about race. As one recent survey of the industry reports, 85 percent of player-controlled characters in narrative games are White, roughly 10 percent are Black, less than 2 percent are Asian; Hispanic and Native American central characters are virtually nonexistent in commercial titles (Williams et al. 826). In narrative games that have not replicated the protocols of exclusion, heroes are usually White men, while minority characters are depicted most consistently as adversaries, villains, or criminals.

Mainstream commercial games like *Far Cry 2* (2008), *Resident Evil 5* (2009), and Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004) and its host of inspired clones (*Narc* [2005], *187: Ride or Die* [2005], *50 Cent Bulletproof* [2005]) have shaped substantively the academic, popular, and legislative debates about race, video games, and negative stereotypes. The scholarly consensus about racial diversity and the video game industry has necessarily exposed the ghetto-centric fascination with blackness in particular and the reproduction of racial ideology in general.<sup>1</sup> As Anna Everett has persuasively argued, "we are confronted with the resilience and tenacity of ideology and its stranglehold on a particular circuit of cultural meaning" in gaming culture (124).

Even if, as this essay will argue, *Afro Samurai*'s use of parody and "fuck you" rhetorical conventions destabilize as much as confirm dominant cultural associations of blackness, is that enough? Although it is important to not overstate the significance of *Afro Samurai*'s various interpretations and meanings, the game is an example of how popular culture most often compounds and transcends simultaneously racial typification — sometimes to productive end. Compared to its source material, the video game version of the story is distinct for the ways in which it stages the relationship between two Black characters as an invitation to play with the notion of reliable and unreliable bodies of knowledge that pertain implicitly to questions about race and identity. The game's hopeful conceit is that we cannot count on pre-constituted signs (of blackness, of authenticity, of religion, of good or evil, of real or fantasy) for any measure of cultural or collective coherence. The game's design

and key boss battles force players to hack and slash through the story's use of melancholic racial stereotypes. Blackness is coded figuratively as a violent set of chronically duplicated images and floating signifiers and as a necessary psychological crutch in the wider transnational cultural exchange. Ninja Ninja becomes the central figure in a cultural indictment of how hype, parody, and trauma are interconnected and work in contradiction in the digital age.

### Cultural Influences, Transcultural Metanarratives

Ninja Ninja and the game's presentation of stereotype are best understood in the context of three factors: the character's comparison to Afro, the franchise's numerous cultural inspirations, and the source material's tendencies to parody Eastern/Western metanarratives, despite an overt reliance on and appreciation of those popular traditions. Perhaps the best term that suits the character in the context of *Afro Samurai*'s pop-cultural legacy of Black cultural/Asian hybridity is what Robin D. G. Kelly and Vijay Prashad have called "polycultural." In contrast to Orientalism, or even multi-culturalism, polyculturalism envisions complex and less transparent subjectivities. For Prashad, polyculturalism "argues for cultural complexity, and it suggests that our communities of the present are historically formed and that these communities move between the dialectic of cultural presence and antiracism, between a demand for acknowledgement and for an obliteration of hierarchy" (Prashad 53–54; Kelley 5–7).

With an artistic background in drawing outside cultural and national hierarchies, *Afro Samurai*'s story creator, Takashi Okazaki, grew up in Japan as an avid consumer of Black American popular culture, particularly 1970s soul, 1980s R&B, and 1990s hip hop. "*Afro Samurai* is a mixture of everything I love," explains Okazaki (Okazaki). The author and illustrator's fondness for blending Black and Japanese cultures first materialized in 1999 as a *doujinshi* manga, a self-published comic, in the obscure Japanese avant-garde magazine *Nou Nou Hau*. Okazaki's original story is a conventional revenge narrative that transplants his aggrieved Black samurai into a feudal and futuristic Japan engaged in an on-going battle for justice, knowledge, and power. As the story unfolds, two headbands that all samurai warriors seek to possess come to represent this battle, and Afro's father is murdered by a character named "Justice" as a consequence. Although the original manga contains convoluted post-modernist and philosophical themes, Okazaki's story was adapted to resemble less of an obscure art comic and more of an accessible popular international multimedia franchise. The resulting adaptations for U.S. audiences include: a Spike TV television anime series (2007) and made-for-television movie

sequel (2009), a two-volume graphic novel/manga revision of the *doujinshi* translated into English (2008), and an action adventure fighting game on the PlayStation 3 and XBOX 360 (2009).

In Okazaki's *doujinshi* and manga art,<sup>2</sup> Afro is drawn crudely, in a long, lean sketch style, often without much facial detail. Afro blends into the frames of the background panels; the Japanese characters around him are etched in a similar fashion. His comparatively darker skin tone and his enormous asymmetrical hair are the primary markers of his visual difference. On the page, quite often Okazaki draws Afro in silhouette form, stressing only the outline of his form and the hair that stretches to obscure his face. The way Afro is introduced in print, then, crystallizes the emotional inaccessibility and stoicism of popular depictions of samurais while coding him as physically distinct from his adversaries. In adapting the manga into a moving image, the creative team of the anime series added additional cultural cues and drew on additional staples of American popculture traditions to make the character look and move like a Black man, despite his penchant for silence and limited affect. Animators gave Afro a "Jimmy Hendrix looking face" and "freestyle" basketball player agility. "When we were thinking of Afro Samurai's movement style, we had this cool idea that maybe he could run around and move like a basketball player," recalls series co-producer Eric Calderon. "We started downloading a bunch of clips and getting some DVDs of slam-dunk contests. The director [Fuminori] Kizaki really tried to incorporate some of that into Afro Samurai's fighting style" (Calderon).

If Afro was transcoded to look and move in ways that would signal recognizable racial difference and Black cultural authenticity to U.S. audiences, his hair and martial arts expertise place the character in proximity with the explosion of Hong Kong action films in the 1960s and 1970s and that production cycle's influence on Black action films (often called "blaxploitation" films) of the late 1960s and early 1970s. African American U.S. karate champion Jim Kelly and several of his cult-film favorites (namely *Black Belt Jones* [1974], *Three the Hard Way* [1974], *The Tattoo Connection* [1978], and *Black Samurai* [1977]) have long-help popularize the visual trope of the Black male warrior/kung fu specialist. While Kelly helped cement dominant visual associations of the Black martial artist with masculinity, natural hair, and physical deftness, the cinematic predilection for Black/Asian action films has continued in films like Berry Gordy's *The Last Dragon* (1985), *Ghost Dog* (1999) starring Forrest Whitaker as an urban samurai, the blaxploitation tribute film, *Black Dynamite* (2009), and the 2010 remake of the *Karate Kid* featuring a Black youth.

Ninja Ninja's speech and rhetorical style that are created in the anime and continued in the video game manifest the same kind of cultural bricolage or "sampling" that informs Afro's Black action film-inspired visual style. With

Samuel L. Jackson providing the voice-acting for both Afro and Ninja Ninja in the anime and video game adaptations, the most evident cultural influence on Jackson's translation of Ninja Ninja is the kind of explicit rhetoric used by iconic blaxploitation film characters like Superfly, Dolemite, or Shaft (who Jackson played in the 2000 remake). As the top-billing voice talent for the project, not only was Jackson the main attraction in the anime and video game's marketing campaign, but he also maintained an active creative influence over how the two characters would interact. As executive producer, Jackson intentionally sought to turn Ninja Ninja into more than a Greek chorus for the universe precisely because Afro rarely talks. Jackson describes Ninja Ninja as the project's "soul" who is given free reign to comment on the story's events and how they affect Afro (Jackson).

Hip hop music became an apt cultural site around which to situate Ninja Ninja and Afro for at least three reasons. First, the music has been a part of a history of East/West cultural reciprocity and appropriation. While the global circulation and consumption of hip hop has meant that Japanese artists like Okazaki were exposed to hip hop's music and culture, so too have notable Black American hip hop artists integrated Japanese and Chinese culture and Eastern philosophies into their craft from the earliest moments of hip hop's genesis.<sup>3</sup> Second, Okazaki's story became further inseparable from the sound, feel, and aesthetic of hip hop music when popular hip hop pioneer The RZA of the Wu-Tang Clan produced the music for the anime adaptation and influenced the sound direction of the game. In both the anime and game soundtracks, Afro is synonymous with a transcultural rendition of hip hop sound; rap music that samples traditional Japanese instrumentation punctuates the character's every move. Third, other characters in the anime and in the video game symbolize different musical traditions. The music tracks of the anime series and video game amplify the non-verbal contours of generational and artistic grievance as Afro/hip hop witnesses Justice (a White cowboy who is always cued by rock music) killing his biological father (who is personified by soul and funk music). Jackson's performance as Ninja Ninja is not quite Greek chorus or even traditional African American trickster figure. By the time the story is adapted for video game audiences, the character is described in musical performance terms as a "hype-man" — a high-energy crowd-rouser in hip hop stage performances. In a story universe and franchise that is replete with many layers that borrow and mimic while also riffing and disunifying, Ninja Ninja as Afro's hype man operates linguistically in a mode of excess and exaggeration that antagonizes and bemuses diegetic onlookers, spectators and gamers alike. Like Public Enemy's notorious hype man, Flavor Flav, Ninja Ninja is indeed stereotypical, and there are certainly ways in which the televisual and new media adaptations of the character traffic heavily in generic,



stereotypical, representations of Black masculinity. As a hype man, though, Ninja Ninja occupies a subversive position in the story's central conceit of grappling with what is real versus what is illusion. As a transgressive figure, Ninja Ninja is foremost a symbol of the relationship between Black masculinity and what Jean-François Lyotard has described as meta- or grand narratives of meaning. If Ninja Ninja's speech distorts and challenges as a way of hyping up story events, then the character's rhetorical style and dubious behavior cast doubt (for Afro, spectators, and gamers) on concrete knowledge in a way that supports Lyotard's suspicion that grand narratives have lost their credibility in postmodernity (37).

Since the manga and anime were both source material for the video game adaptation, the game narrative combines the manga's evident critique and parody of reliable knowledge with the anime's competing turn to the psychology of trauma as a way to define Afro's relationship to Ninja Ninja and the world around him. The way Ninja Ninja changes from manga to game and from anime to game, then, becomes instructive for understanding why the degree of philosophical contradiction that shows up in the game is nonetheless a productive one.

### From Manga to Postmodern Video Game

The manga as source material for the game introduces the interpretative possibility that Ninja Ninja is a non-literal abstraction. Much darker in tone than either the anime or video game, the manga presents Ninja Ninja as akin to a mocking deity who resists easy classification. As in the other versions of the story, Ninja Ninja follows Afro through the events of the main plot, but in this source material he also functions independently of Afro, fighting and interacting freely with others. After another omniscient character fails to kill Ninja Ninja, it becomes clear that whatever Ninja Ninja represents is indestructible. Exasperated, the dying adversary says to him: "I don't believe it ... are you the collective will of the universe?!" (vol. 2, 141). Ninja Ninja quips, "Man, quit makin' crazy shit up. I am what I am, ya dig?" Comfortably embodying ambiguity, he chides, "Don't act like you know me, bra. I ain't takin' his side or anyone else's. I just do what I want" (138).

The video game adaptation draws on the manga's non-literality positing by making the character something that is both a publicly recognized abstraction and a symbol of personal psychological grief. Only the game narrative pits Afro and Ninja Ninja against each other in combat, externalizing the conflicting images of Black masculinity. Before the doppelganger boss battle begins, a monk yells to Afro, "Discard that which binds you to this world."

Apparently, that which “binds” Afro, has much to do with Ninja Ninja because the action of the game shifts abruptly to a new venue, and Ninja Ninja appears before an ominous sky as a horde of exact of copies himself— chronic reproductions of an already unstable sign. The combat is broken into three segments that loop whenever the gamer/Afro fails to use a very precise set of combination moves. Throughout the contest, Ninja Ninja redoubles frequently, spawning innumerable duplications of himself. At last, once the gamer/Afro uses perfect slices to whittle down the representations of the signifying figures on the screen to just one image, Ninja Ninja makes a cheeky postmodernist speech about the subjective nature of reality. The fight ends with Ninja Ninja throwing a deck of cards at the camera and voluntarily vanishing.

As a part of a YouTube debate about whether or not Ninja Ninja is real, one gamer summarized the character’s construction as “complete and utter ninja mindfuckery.” On gamer/vlogger garth1222’s video walkthroughs of the game, garth1222’s visceral reactions to the Ninja Ninja battle scene are equally instructive. For example, when Ninja starts multiplying and explaining his presence as non-literal projection, garth1222 interjects, “This is freaking epic and this song is epic. I was not expecting any of this. Freaking Ninja Ninja is a part of Afro Samurai’s imagination? So I’m basically killing myself, my imagination. What is going on? This is so so very random. And it’s just so awesome at the same time.” If the game rationalizes the battle as an opportunity for Afro to address that which binds him, gamers like garth1222 mirror the difficulty of letting go of the object that is both familiar and vexing, recognizable but unreliable. To this end, garth1222 screams on camera, “What? No Ninja Ninja, no! I don’t want to kill Ninja Ninja. I hope this is all an illusion or something because I don’t want to have to kill him! Ninja Ninja is the coolest character ever, why would I have to kill him? And why are there so many of him?”

garth1222’s questions draw our attention to how, in using the image of the multiplying signifier, the game stages a battle with the analogy of how popular interpretations of Black masculinity function as a site of simulated chronic repetition in late capitalism. Making the postmodernist critique of the real even more plaintive than in the other versions of the story, the video game version of Ninja Ninja challenges Afro’s understanding of the nature of representation when Ninja Ninja says, “You think because I am imaginary, I’m less of a man than you? When it comes down to it, all of us are imaginary, at least in the eyes of others.” The notion of an authentic subjectivity is destabilized here as Afro is implicated in this meditation on the illusive nature of reality under the current conditions of technological reproduction. Ninja Ninja continues, still reproducing his image, “So let’s not start debating who is or is not real.”

As a neo-minstrel signifier of blackness, Ninja Ninja is an extension of an ideological system that produces controlling images of Black masculinity as racialized caricature. It is significant, though, that Ninja Ninja appears as such in a narrative universe that so self-consciously destabilizes the proliferation of signs in general.<sup>4</sup> As signs of blackness coded alternately as hyperbolic and cool, Ninja Ninja and Afro become a part of the video game's mechanical staging of uncertainty about what is authentic, what is imitation, and what is utter nonsense. Essentializing ideologies of racial difference are invariably implicated in this process.

### From Anime to Psychological Game

In making the transition from manga to moving image, the anime's creative talent made some subtle but important changes to Ninja Ninja at the representational (rather than behavioral) level. Unlike the manga, both the anime and the video game narratives veer toward popular derivatives of psychology to further explain Ninja Ninja's role in story events. Calderon describes the decision as collaborative, recalling:

As we went into story development, I think it was actually a combination of Sam Jackson and Okazaki together who kind of had this light bulb when they said "wow, well, what if Ninja Ninja is not a real character but rather the result of Afro Samurai's trauma. And he creates out of his own imagination a person who could say what Afro Samurai feels." You get the revelation at the end that Ninja Ninja is not real. He is a figment of Afro's imagination [Calderon].

The two sides of one person — Afro and Ninja Ninja — are integrated by the conclusion of the anime series as Afro imagines that Ninja Ninja is killed by a third character. Ever the wily ghost, Ninja Ninja slides between Afro and an exacting sword. Temporal and spatial order is suspended as Afro and a bloodied, "dying" Ninja Ninja have their final moments together. The final exchange between Afro and his shadow is animated in slow motion and the pair separate sanguinely like brothers in a classic buddy film. During this moment in the anime, Jackson's voice acting dramatizes the coming together of the two characters' speech patterns, melding them into a unitary existence and singular sound. On screen Ninja Ninja bleeds into Afro, at first with red blood, and then with green sparks that represent his non-human energy.

Despite the anime producers' decision to turn Ninja Ninja into Afro's psychological hallucination and emotional crutch, other characters in the animated series are fully — if inexplicably — aware of Ninja Ninja's presence. For example, in Episode Five, Justice calls Ninja Ninja Afro's little "imaginary friend" and applauds Afro for outgrowing the need for the projected ghost of

his past. Brother 2, a monk who uses technology to survey, record, and monitor Afro, often captures Ninja Ninja beside Afro. In fact, a bloody image of Ninja Ninja standing behind Afro is the last thing Brother 2 sees in the anime as Afro impales the surveyor. The moment creates a striking visual image: the emptied racial signifier (Afro) standing before the full, and more familiar, racial trope (Ninja Ninja), while the controlling gaze (Brother 2's camera/an imperial gaze) that polices them both is fatally ruptured. The fact that Ninja Ninja is viewable by other characters in the final script demonstrates that such tropes or ways of relating are shared public phenomena and are incapable of being reduced to the realm of the personal. As the constant surveillance of Brother 2's cameras documents, the ghost of blackness is something that belongs to the culture industry at large. Having it both ways in the anime adaptation, making him both public and private, demonstrates that popular constructions of blackness now function at the textual level more plainly attuned to conversations about performativity and constructedness than ever before.

Given that there is such a deconstructivist attitude toward traditional metanarratives, the framing of Afro's experience as traumatic and the subsequent use of psychology to explain character motivations represent a philosophical contradiction of the series. The anime and the game are invested in telling a story about the relationship between racialized otherness and psychological harm right in the middle of a tale that is otherwise dismissive of other forms of knowledge. If everything we know is being challenged, compounded, and ridiculed, what can we make of the story's very modernist retreat to and appropriation of psychology as a significant part of the story?

The video game's translation of both the manga's critique of metanarratives and the anime's reliance on psychology make explicit a connection between postmodernity and trauma. As a figment of Afro's imagination, Ninja Ninja looks similar to Afro, but it is important that he is not an exact copy. Ninja Ninja's billowing 'fro is white, his simple clothes are in dark shades of gray, and his face and skin are ashen, ghostly. In psychoanalytic discourse, ghosts and doubles are often theorized as "uncanny," as "melancholic," or as both. While uncanny doubles are figures of eerie familiarity, in "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud describes melancholia as a reaction to a lost object that falls outside the protocols of normal mourning. As Freud has famously explained, "the melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning — an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale" (245). In regular mourning the world feels empty and hollow; in melancholia, it "is the ego itself" that is emptied.

Ninja Ninja is digitized in the game as a ghostly double who is quite literally Freud's "shadow of the object" (248). Like the emotionally impoverished

melancholic ego, Afro is characterized consistently as being gripped by the totalizing grief that prevents him from laughing, playing, socializing, or expressing himself freely in the many cutscenes and flashbacks that make up the old and new media adaptations of the story. To convey this pronounced deadened affect, his only bits of dialogue are to inquire about the whereabouts of Justice or to tell Ninja Ninja to “shut up.” During their in-game boss battle, Ninja Ninja diagnoses Afro’s improvised ego as such, confirming that he has served as a container for Afro’s displaced emotions. Ninja Ninja enlightens him: “Guilt, remorse, fear, joy, anger, love: all the things I carried for you will be yours again to bear. You ready to accept the burden?”

It is instructive that two Black characters are at the center of this story that is ultimately about the inevitable persistence and burden of artifice and melancholia. Beyond Freud, several theorists, notably Anne Cheng and Paul Gilroy, have extended the concept of melancholia to think about race. As Cheng writes in *The Melancholy of Race*, “Freudian melancholia designates a chain of loss, denial, and incorporation” that “presents a particularly apt paradigm for elucidating the activity and components of racialization” (8, 10). Following Cheng, in *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Gilroy surmises that essentialist notions of race function melancholically at the level of nation and empire in ways that always perpetuate racism and oppression. Symbolically, the “burden” of full integration of which Ninja Ninja offers Afro during the boss battle is also a burden of racial representation. Any attempt at presenting an avowed, unified and authentic black subjectivity would be subject to the same measure of postmodern skepticism that other symbols of coherence are met with in the game narrative and original story. This is why, in the same moment that Ninja Ninja surrenders the burden of integration/representation to Afro, the character also stresses that neither presentation is more authentic than the other, both images are apt to serve a relational purpose when publicly consumed.

The game adaptation of *Afro Samurai* demonstrates that the predominance of simulation in contemporary culture is melancholic. Jean Baudrillard argues, “it is this melancholia of systems that today takes the upper hand through the ironically transparent forms that surround us” because “melancholia is the fundamental tonality of functional systems, of current systems of simulation, of programming and information” (162). The same hegemonic and pop-cultural “systems” of simulation (games, television, film, music, comics) that circulate racial caricature as a norm create historical moments that are invariably characterized by loss and the implausibility of ever locating certainty. So here, at the surface-level of this caricatured construction, I see in the game’s melancholic, dystopian future a good deal of hope about the durability and ultimate vacuity of race as a sign. While we do not always think about race and popular narratives in this way, the *Afro Samurai* video

game's thematic focus on race, technology, and mourning can be read as an indictment on systems of knowledge in this regard. Beating the ghost — or at least separating from him — requires precision and concerted effort. *Afro Samurai* posits that it is the very process of signification, the ready proliferation of signs and signifiers (of blackness, of postmodernity) that is itself melancholic. It is the system of racism but also of the popularization of race as a signifier that is traumatic. Ninja Ninja, as emblematic of how blackness as racialized performance circulates in postmodernity, occupies a rather uncanny position in gamic representation. This real and unreal ghost is uncanny in video game history because aspects of his performance (his voice, humor, slang) are no doubt familiar to American viewing audiences, while the competing messages about his role in a larger cultural marketplace is nonetheless indicted purposefully and subversively.

### Justice Is Dead!— And Other Endgame Revelations

In a narrative world that plays with signs, signification, and meaning, it matters that Justice is a dead White cowboy when Afro reaches him at game's end for the final boss battle. After surviving the battle of racial melancholia and simulation with Ninja Ninja, Afro discovers that the grand narrative of some unifying and fulfilling notion of justice is, in fact, dead to him, unavailable for a real or literal avenging showdown. Once again, simulation predominates as Afro stares at the skeleton of Justice and imaginatively resurrects his nemesis in his mind so that he creates only an illusion, a mimesis of a concluding boss battle that again plays out where psychology and simulation meet.<sup>5</sup> In the projected battle, Justice fights cunningly and talks a great deal in death as Afro slices and dices and ultimately dismembers the representation of his foe before a bloodied and barren landscape. This ending is a digital dramatization of Hortense Spillers's claim that the "representational potentialities for African Americans" include a "dual fatherhood" that is "comprised of the African father's *banished* name and body and the captor father's mocking presence" (80). Justice says as much, telling Afro, "You're the son of two fathers; your blood-father and me. Too bad you got your looks from him. He gave you life; I gave you direction." That the representation of White paternity is dead is another way the story plays with replicas of a racial past in order to argue for a separation from melancholic relationships with established historical legacies. The fantasized final battle offers a melancholic restaging of the American history of slavery and oppression by reanimating and dismissing what the transnational and transhistorical game story constructs as an outdated binary of black/white.

Yet, the conjured image/enemy/father that Afro engages in the battle is contextual, specifically suited to address the character's particular grievances, fantasies, fears, and desires. Justice by this point, like *Ninja Ninja* and *Afro*, is not actual or codifiable. The use of psychology is a means to this end. Any notion of what "justice" means, the logic follows, is ambiguous and open, and thus resists becoming a new meta-narrative of our time. A non-specified notion of justice, like a destabilized signifier such as race, is, perhaps paradoxically, a hopeful place at which to end. As Steven Best and Douglass Kellner explain in thinking through postmodernist conclusions about justice, "justice in each case will be the matter of a provisional judgment which allows no generalization of universal rules or principles" (163). For Lyotard, it is progressive to imagine a "multiplicity of justices" where justice "consists in working at the limits of what the rules permit, in order to invent new moves, perhaps new rules and therefore new games" (100). Afro's "fight" with Justice is only a possibility of what might happen at the end of a wholly symbolic journey. After the simulation with Justice, instead of uniting and wearing the two coveted headbands that symbolize power and unification, Afro disposes of them. The game's story ends with Afro using modernist engagements with melancholia to pose postmodernist interventions that value the possibility of contextual justice and the rejection of totalizing knowledge.

Although gamers did not turn explicitly to psychoanalytic or postmodern discourses to make sense of the many codes and paradoxes of the *Afro Samurai* story, it is nonetheless exciting to discover that popular works about race and identity are being read intertextually and dialectically in ways that extend beyond the overtly banal hack-n-slash mechanics of this particular game genre. As Justice, from deep within the recesses of Afro's mind, challenges, there is still much to do with an adaptive narrative such as this one. Continuing to annihilate the boundaries of game and open discourse, the character breaks the fourth wall as only *Ninja Ninja* has done, lamenting: "But this isn't about you; come on! Your name may be on the box, but inside? You're a novelty, a whim. In ten years, in five, who will remember *Afro Samurai*? But your story, our story, that's a different matter." Indeed the game's story and character adaptations deliberately make dilemmas surrounding stereotype, parody, and psychology relevant to discussions about race in game studies and new media criticism in ways that intervene in the scholarly precedent for chronic disappointment on these matters.

#### NOTES

1. See Brock 429–452; Higgin 3–26; Leonard 49–69.
2. When I use the term "manga," I am referring to the two volume graphic novel released in the U.S, not the original *doujinshi* published in Japanese.

3. There are many examples of this in hip hop perhaps none more applicable to this franchise than The RZA's engagement with Eastern cultures. As The RZA explains in *The Wu-Tang Manual*, "An MC battle is like that to us—a challenge of the sword. We apply that to everything we do—from the sound of it, to the competitive swordplay of the rhyming, to the mental preparations" (64).

4. In all versions of the story, The Empty Seven, a band of assassin monks further reflects a disruptive, destabilizing attitude toward the familiar narratives of religion, nation, and culture. At once, the monks signify machines, human, black, Japanese, Buddhist, Christian, Southern, Eastern, traditional, new age, copies, original. Like Ninja Ninja, they represent some of the perils of cultural hybridity and exploitation, and they demarcate how meaning and characterization in this universe is by nature convoluted and highly undependable.

5. The manga and anime endings differ from the one presented in the game. In the manga, after a nervous breakdown upon discovering that Justice is already dead, Afro reluctantly becomes a god and vows to "keep moving forward" in the final full-page panel (162). In the anime, Justice is only half-dead when Afro fights him and the story ends with Afro being pursued by others out for revenge, with Ninja Ninja and Afro together saying "and so the never-ending battle continues, on and on and on" over an inter-title.