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Kelsie E. Posey
Georgia Southern University

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Green Book (2018) and BlacKKKlansman (2018): An Analysis of White and Black Perspectives in Contemporary Films Using Critical Race Theory

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the
Department of Communication Arts

By
Kelsie Posey

Under the mentorship of Abbey Hoekzema

This research analyzes two films, *Green Book* (2018) and *BlacKKKlansman* (2018), to uncover the connections between diverse racial representation off-screen, and the presentation of non-white perspectives on-screen. This study uses CRT to frame the effects of diverse source materials and production teams on the films' narratives.

Thesis Mentor: _____

Abbey Hoekzema

Honors Director: _____

Dr. Steven Engel

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Department of Communication Arts
University Honors Program
Georgia Southern University

Representation of minorities in the media is a controversial topic in multiple disciplines; this representation in visual media (film, television, art, et al.) is the basis of this research study. By analyzing various characteristics of two films, *Green Book* (2018) and *BlacKKKlansman* (2018), this research seeks to define and interpret differing contemporary perspectives in films with narratives centered around race relationships in mid-to-late twentieth-century America.

Both films chosen for this study are social problem films. The social problem film focuses on social issues in the general population; these films often feature characters dealing with racism, poverty, abuse or other systemic issues. *Green Book* (2018) and *BlacKKKlansman* (2018) both feature relationships between black and white characters in different ways to fit each filmmaker's individual intentions for their narrative.

Greenbook (2018) is a dramatic docudrama that explores the relationship between a talented, black pianist and his white chauffeur, known for his toughness, on a tour in the deep south; *BlacKKKlansman* (2018) focuses on an undercover mission into the local Colorado Springs chapter of the KKK.

Power and Race are two individual factors that influence one's identity. Brenda Allen, in her book *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, explores how these elements can contribute to attitudes of people involved in social or work interactions, as well as influences behind power distribution. Allen bases her argument on French philosopher Michel Foucault, who argued that people who engage in acts of power do so to change "structures of communication in social practices" regardless of their significance (Allen, p. 25). Normalized social behaviors also maintain power relationships (p. 26). Allen uses the concept of Critical Theory to illustrate the

relationships between power and social structures of society. Hegemony, or the influence one dominant group may hold over another group, plays a major role in Allen's idea of Critical Theory and Power; it is discussed as a concept based on "domination/coercion, consent, and resistance/transformation" (p. 31). Hegemony, in Allen's critical analysis, exists simultaneously with the ideologies of society; ideologies are dominant ideas established when most of a group decides upon specific ideas and attitudes. These attitudes often benefit one group of people. Allen's definitions of hegemony and ideologies reinforce the idea that power relationships are based upon the social and personal backgrounds of the individuals involved.

Race is a major factor in the way most humans identify themselves, and as film and television gained momentum in the early twentieth century, race representation in entertainment media was often racist and stereotypical. Racial stereotypes center around a few main characters such as the Tragic Mulatto – a mixed race woman who doesn't fit in because of her skin color, the Black Buck – an oversexualized and dangerous black man who doesn't follow the law, and the Uncle Tom- a loyal black man to his white counterpart. Allen focuses on the idea that racial stereotypes heavily influence political, social, and economic decisions due to constructed ideas based on physical diversity and personal experiences. Allen explains that classifications for race have transformed over time, as have stereotypical representations, and that scholars now define large varieties of people based on non-universal factors (p. 65). Historically, social and political decisions influenced by race or racial stereotypes typically only benefit one portion of a group instead of the whole. When looking at the films in this study, it is crucial to acknowledge the power stereotypes and misrepresentation that media has over entire groups of people.

In addition to Allen's arguments regarding issues of power and race, Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholar Aja Martinez explores the combination of race and power in her article "Critical Race Theory: Its Origins, History, and Importance to the Discourses and Rhetorics of Race." CRT emerged from legal disciplines in the late twentieth century. This framework analyzes race relations in American culture, as well as effects any racial ideologies may produce. Martinez explains that CRT acts as a theoretical liberation, fighting against the "status quo" of institutionalized racism. CRT formed first as rhetoric in U.S. law schools after critical legal studies' (CLS) scholars did not think it important to analyze race as a factor in the processes of the legal system; CLS did not acknowledge the role of race (Martinez, p.17). CRT was established by former CLS scholars who asserted that race relations in America were inadequate and unbalanced. CRT is made up of different themes and premises; the exact number of these elements may vary depending on how the scholar defines each component (Martinez, p. 19).

The first premise of CRT is that racism is "embedded" in American culture and because of this, some people may dismiss any privileges or challenges associated with various racial backgrounds (Martinez, p. 21). The second premise is that "counterstory" and experiential knowledge push the theory forward. Martinez explains that people of color can also take part in the practices of racism and then references Solorzano and Delgado Bernal for their characterization of the CRT narrative and the overall goal of the theory of "ending all forms of oppression" (Martinez, p. 20). In addition to this, CRT challenges the structures of institutionalized racism and race-neutrality as they relate to dominant ideologies. CRT is an interdisciplinary field of research, drawing from

sociology, history, and law; this theory encourages analysis of American culture in a way that relates to both past and present circumstances (Martinez, p. 20).

Gregory Cranmer and Tina Harris in their article, “White-Side, Strong-Side: A Critical Examination of Race and Leadership in Remember the Titans,” study the role race plays in leadership positions in the film *Remember the Titans* (2000). Cranmer and Harris analyze the film through the CRT lens, focusing on “interracial interactions (i.e., player-coach, coach-coach, and coach-community)” (pp. 155-158). These scholars refer to *Remember the Titans* (2000) as a “communicative text” on which they base their argument: films, and other visual media, can be used as tools to help invalidate racial injustices that have been “normalized” based on Western traditions and ideologies (p.154).

Cranmer and Harris deconstruct *Remember the Titans* (2000), studying patterns in character behavior stemming from interracial interactions in the film (p. 158). The relationships in the film are divided into three individual categories: resistance to formal black leadership, white leadership and the helpful African American, and the influences of stereotypes in the narrative structure of the film (Cranmer and Harris, p. 158). The analysis of race in terms of leadership and power in this film is significant because it lays a foundation for other films to be analyzed under a critical lens in order to acknowledge theoretical implications of race representation in visual media.

Remember the Titans (2000) functions as a social-problem film. Social problem films serve as a filmmaker’s commentary on contemporary issues. While social-problem films have been around since early cinema, the genre came to prominence shortly after World War II, and originally focused on prominent issues at the time such as anti-

Semitism and racism; however, the term “social-problem film” has been used by scholars when referring to earlier and later films (Nochimson, p. 447). The premise of social problem films is bridging the gap between reality and societal issues; the main goal being that viewers will have a strong emotional connection to the material and encourage the idea that they should have a part in changing collective behaviors (Nochimson, p. 447). Social-problem films often follow true events or are based on a true story, allowing the audience to connect on a more personal level with the characters in the film.

Social problem films have similar themes and ideas across the genre; however, these films do not have instantly recognizable visual aspects like other genres such as sci-fi or westerns (Nochimson, p. 447). Over the history of film, the popularity of the social-problem genre has fluctuated, in the early years of cinema, when making “single reel” films was relatively cheap, many activists used the media to their advantage, getting their “message film” to as many viewers as possible (Nochimson, p. 450). One early film in the genre was *Her Defiance* (1916), a melodrama featuring feminist ideologies such as single parenthood and a woman making her own decisions in terms of love and marriage. Another film in the social-problem genre, *Within Our Gates* (1920), follows a mixed-race woman whose life is heavily affected by racism in the South, as well as the social realities connected to racism and lynching in the twentieth century. The director of the film, Oscar Micheaux, was, at the time, an internationally recognized black director and was making movies about race and the black community when Hollywood was not. As the price of filmmaking rose, so did the status of living for many citizens in the United States; this change in the “status quo” affected the movies people wanted to see.

In more recent years, there have been some filmmakers who have taken on social problem films and used their influence and status to bring attention to the cause or issue at hand. For example, *Philadelphia* (1993), a film about a man (played by Tom Hanks) who discovers he has contracted AIDS and is fired from his job due to his homosexual activities in his personal life. This film came out shortly after the widespread panic of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases during the 1980s; the film also allowed Hanks to use his status as an actor to better inform viewers about what happens to AIDS patients physically, mentally, and socially.

Both films chosen for this study qualify as social problem films; they also focus on the same theme within the genre: racial tensions during the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to *BlacKKKlansman* (2018), Spike Lee has made several social-problem films regarding race. *Do the Right Thing* (1989) follows citizens of Brooklyn as racial tensions rise in the neighborhood, eventually leading to a riot, which results in the death of a young, black man. *Chi-Raq* (2015) follows a group of women in Chicago as they work to fight violence in the city, and *Malcolm X* (1992) tells the story of the Civil Rights leader as he devotes his life to Islam but struggles with other prominent black leaders of the movement.

Green Book

Green Book (2018), written by Peter Farrlley, Nick Vallelonga, and Brian Currie, is based on the true story of Tony Vallelonga, a club bouncer from the Bronx, and Donald Shirley, a prominent classical pianist. The film centers around relationships that transcend race and class status during the racially charged time of the 1960s Civil Rights movement. This film also functions as a part of the social problem genre because of its

subject matter. The film shows multiple aspects of how race was a major influence in many parts of life during the time period, even in the less problematic northern states. In addition to relationships between white and black characters, viewers also see tensions rise in relationships between northern and southern characters, as well as characters from different socioeconomic statuses.

There has been a lot of controversy surrounding this film as some say it promotes tropes about race like “the white savior” narrative and “the magical negro” aspect of the story, both of which affect representation and skew the intentions of the filmmakers interpreted by the audience. Critics of the film say it does not accurately represent the history of racism in America and focuses more on Vallelonga’s journey instead of Shirley’s story or the actual Greenbook, a book written for black motorists traveling in the Jim Crow South (Judge, 2018). Other critics claim the film is inaccurate but still true because stories can be told through different lenses and still reach intended audiences. Ultimately, it is difficult to ignore the critical perspective even though the film experienced success with audiences (Chow, 2019).

The relationship between Vallelonga and Shirley begins when Vallelonga is looking for work after the New York City nightclub he worked at closes temporarily for renovations. The two are an unlikely pair in the beginning as Vallelonga makes racist remarks towards others in front of Shirley. Shirley explains that he asked around for someone to be his driver for a tour of the South, a job he knows will be difficult. Shirley tells Vallelonga his name came up because he is known as someone who can deal with trouble. This relationship dynamic established early in the film foreshadows Vallelonga as the one to get Shirley out of trouble.

The audience first sees Vallelonga saving Shirley at a bar after George, a member of Shirley's band, comes to find Vallelonga because he is unsure of how to help the situation. Shirley is held down by multiple white assailants as they throw him around and punch him. The men are surprised when Vallelonga and George walk back into the bar. Vallelonga threatens the men with a hidden gun and the scene escalates to the bartender flashing his shotgun to solve the confrontation. This scene enforces the idea that Vallelonga is, in fact, Shirley's keeper. After this, Vallelonga specifically tells Shirley not to go anywhere without him but Shirley does not listen. Later in the film, Shirley is caught with another man in the YMCA showers; Vallelonga bribes the officers to set the two men free. Once they leave the YMCA, Shirley accuses Vallelonga of only wanting Shirley to get to every show so he can get paid at the end of the tour. Vallelonga agrees but makes a statement that he cares about Shirley getting to the shows for other reasons, not just money; Vallelonga states that he would not be doing the job if he didn't care.

Despite the use of racial stereotypes in the film, there are some instances where characters break away from these boundaries; this typically happens as a set up for a joke, or payoff, later in the film. While on the road, Vallelonga is dumbfounded when he finds out Shirley does not eat fried chicken, a characteristic Vallelonga attributes to every black person, and although Shirley does try the fried chicken in the car, the punchline of the joke doesn't come until later in the film when Shirley and Vallelonga are at a dinner before one concert; the hosts announce that after speaking with the cooks, they were certain "they made a special menu Dr. Shirley would love" to which servants bring out a large plate of fried chicken. Shirley and Vallelonga make eye contact and Vallelonga laughs and nods his head. Similarly, Vallelonga also assumes every black person listens

to popular black musicians on the radio and is again shocked when Shirley tells him he does not listen to the same music. In these scenes, the audience sees Vallelonga, a character meant to be less open minded and accepting, interacting with and learning from Shirley, a character who breaks away from most racial stereotypes in film. Shirley, unlike stereotypical depictions of black citizens at the time, played classical music rather than jazz, was opposed to fried foods, and did not accept poor manners or attitudes from Vallelonga, regardless of the difference in their race or socioeconomic status.

In addition to this, there are multiple incidents where Shirley, not Vallelonga, is the hero of the scene. After being pulled over for being in a “sundown” town, a town where black citizens are encouraged to leave before the sun goes down or else trouble would ensue, Vallelonga punches the main officer after the officer tells Vallelonga he is “half a ni**** himself” because Vallelonga is Italian (*Green Book*, 2018). Because of this Vallelonga and Shirley sit behind bars until Shirley presses the officers to make his one phone call. It isn’t until moments later when the viewer finds out Shirley has called someone with great authority; Shirley and Vallelonga watch as the officers flail around the chief who speaks on the phone with the governor. The chief tells the officers to let the men out if they want to keep their jobs. Once in the car, Vallelonga is ecstatic when he learns the Attorney General, Bobby Kennedy, is the one that got the men out of jail. Not only does Shirley get the men out of jail, but he does it in a nonviolent way, unlike the way Vallelonga tends to “solve problems” (*Green Book*, 2018).

Vallelonga and Shirley’s relationship plays a major part of the overall narrative of the film, as do the effects each man has on the other. The audience sees Vallelonga, a close-minded Italian man from the Bronx, transform throughout the film. The first time

the audience sees Vallelonga interact with people of color, he throws cups in the garbage after the men leave; he then uses the incident to his advantage, telling Shirley that Vallelonga and his wife, Delores, had the men over for drinks when in reality, they were fixing the floor. In the beginning, Vallelonga also refuses to call Shirley his boss, instead he tells everyone he is working for the record company who manages Dr. Shirley. In addition to this, Vallelonga's actions and dialogue early in the trip show that he took the job to make money and not just to help Shirley on his tour. This prompts the conversation when the men are leaving the YMCA and Shirley accuses Vallelonga of only wanting the money. This scene is one of the turning points in the film, and in their relationship, because Vallelonga is kind to Shirley when he tells him that he understands the world is complicated, referring to Shirley's intentions with the other man in the YMCA. This is the first time Vallelonga accepts Shirley for being himself.

Shirley also changes throughout the film. As someone who finds himself alone in many ways in the beginning of the film, Shirley comes to accept Vallelonga even though Vallelonga establishes his ideologies early in the film. Instead of shutting down intellectually and emotionally around Vallelonga, Shirley tries to be more understanding and help Vallelonga come to terms with his hurtful comments and actions. In the beginning, Shirley tells Vallelonga that he needs to speak more clearly and carry himself in a sophisticated manner because they will be attending important concerts with very important people in the South. Vallelonga says he does not need help and will be who he is, whether the hosts of the venues like it or not. This mindset allows Shirley to learn more about Vallelonga's life before the tour. Throughout the tour, Shirley makes comments about Vallelonga's language skills and hygiene; however, as the tour

progresses the comments become less negative and more accepting of Vallelonga's actions. The final change for both men comes at the end of the film; Vallelonga tells Shirley that he should come upstairs and meet his family but Shirley declines and presumably goes back to his apartment. Life carries on inside of the Vallelonga apartment, when someone makes a derogatory comment about Shirley, Vallelonga instructs the man to not call Shirley by that name. Moments later, after a family friend enters the apartment, Vallelonga goes to close the door but sees Shirley outside the door. The two embrace and Shirley enters the apartment to meet the Vallelonga family.

Green Book (2018) offers a white perspective on American culture during the early 1960s. The film is meant to pay tribute to two men who allowed themselves to become close despite connotations or previous experiences with people of the other skin tones. However, the film is also intended to tell a more pleasant story of racism in America during the 1960s.

BlacKKKlansman

BlacKKKlansman (2018) follows Ron Stallworth, the first black police officer at the Colorado Springs Police Department, as he investigates the local chapter of the Klu Klux Klan (KKK). The film is a screen adaptation of Stallworth's *Black Klansman*. Set in the early 1970s, and directed by Spike Lee, this film focuses on themes of loyalty, power, and race. These themes are significant to the story arc and are shown through dialogue, character actions, and motifs. Lee has made numerous films over his career exploring racial divides and police brutality in American culture, like *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Malcom X* (1992), and *Chi-Raq* (2015). Like Lee's other films, *BlacKKKlansman* (2018)

offers a visual interpretation of today's culture in America, from a black filmmaker's perspective.

BlacKKKlansman (2018) explores brotherhood and loyalty to "family" on all sides of the narrative, the KKK, the Black Student Union at Colorado College, and the Colorado Springs Police Department. The KKK, referred to in the film as "the organization," operates on the idea that the members are "brothers" in the fight against integration because they collectively see themselves as better than people of other races. Likewise, Phillip Zimmerman, another police officer referred to as Flip, uses "family" loyalty as a reason for justifying Officer Landers's racist actions against black citizens in Colorado Springs. After hearing that Patrice Dumas, the president of the Black Student Union, was pulled over and harassed by a Colorado Springs officer, Stallworth asks Flip and Jimmy, the two officers working with him on the case, if Landers had been the officer to pull over and harass Dumas; Flip and Jimmy assure him that Landers was the one. Flip also explains that Landers has been a bad cop for a long time, informing Stallworth that Landers killed a black teenager a couple of years prior, claiming the teenager was armed. When confronted as to why they put up with Landers, Flip asks Stallworth if he wants to be the one to tell the chief about a fellow officer. This loyalty is brought into question when Stallworth points out how similar that sounded to "another group" Stallworth knew, referring to the KKK. Loyalty is questioned often by other characters too. Felix Kendrickson, a member of the Organization, constantly questions Flip's background, accusing him of being a cop, a Jew, and many more things. Walter, the president of the local chapter of the organization, even goes as far as to cut Felix's interrogations off, claiming that white-skinned Stallworth would be their "brother" soon.

These scenes show how powerful loyalty can be when questions are raised and actions are scrutinized.

Racial and socioeconomic stereotypes in the film are explored both directly and indirectly. When Stallworth and Dumas are discussing the effects of blaxploitation films, movie posters flash on the screen and allow the viewer to make connections between the films being talked about and the film they are watching. Dumas states that certain characterizations in blaxploitation films are damaging to all black people. Having Dumas discuss the negative effects of the blaxploitation movement is interesting because blaxploitation films also served as a liberating development in film history because films were finally being made for African Americans by African Americans. While some stereotypes are enforced, others are broken. Stallworth started as a “rookie” in the police records room, but he quickly moves up to working undercover in the intelligence department after showing initiative and interest in other areas of the police department, such as collecting information about the local Klan chapter. Stallworth also speaks clearly and precisely - one explanation David Duke, Grand Wizard and public representative for the KKK, gives Stallworth for always knowing when he is “speaking to a black man,” is because Duke says black men pronounce words differently, changing syllables and adding sounds - which sets Stallworth apart from those who he claims speaks “jive.”

Stallworth defies most stereotypes of black men in film; many of these characteristics are exploited within his own narrative through dialogue between himself and other characters. Modern stereotypes of black men in films often show their characters as drug dealers/users, athletes, or victims of low socioeconomic status.

Stallworth, instead of being on the wrong side of the law, is a police officer, someone whose duty is to uphold the law and protect people. He does not show much interest in sports or similar collective activities, nor do other black characters within the film. Viewers also do not see Stallworth as a poor black man. He wears nice clothes, representative of the 1970s, and lives in an apartment that draws no attention to how bad the neighborhood is. In one scene, Kendrickson, a KKK member, shows up at Stallworth's apartment, still assuming Stallworth is white, and after the real Stallworth opens the door and Kendrickson assumes he has the wrong address, there is still no talk about how bad the area or apartments are.

Stallworth's ideologies and attitudes are challenged by others because he does not make choices or act in the same ways associated with stereotypical black men on screen. When Dumas asks Stallworth if he is "for the liberation of his people," Stallworth says that he is; later in the film, the same question arises between the two characters and Stallworth explains more in depth that "just because I'm not shouting kill 'whitey' doesn't mean I'm not trying to help my people" (Lee, 2018). This ideology sets Stallworth apart from other black characters in the film. While his statement exaggerates the violence or violent thoughts set forth by other black characters, including those of Dumas, he is one of the only characters in the film who challenges Dumas's more radical thoughts about what it means to "liberate their people" (Lee, 2018). Stallworth also states when he does not agree with the things Dumas says about white people, specifically cops. Dumas, along with other characters in the film, refer to cops as "pigs," to which Stallworth explains that he does not use the word to identify cops. Unlike Stallworth, Flip, when speaking with Ivanhoe, a KKK member, about other members of the

organization, does not stop to state whether or not he uses the word, instead he looks at Ivanhoe and carries on the conversation. An argument can be made that Flip is working undercover and can not say if he is a cop; however, Stallworth gives his argument without telling Dumas that he is a police officer. This breaks away from most relationship stereotypes between black men and police officers. Even though Stallworth can continue the conversation with Dumas without revealing his career choice, he stops to vocalize his opinion on the word and defend his job title, posing as an objective viewer. Even when Dumas refers to cops as “the enemy,” Stallworth still tries to reason with her that someone could change the police force from the inside.

Viewers also see stereotypes surrounding the members of the organization. All of them, including Kendrickson’s wife Connie, use the “n” word, or other derogatory terms any time they are speaking about someone who is not white. One member, Ivanhoe, is a visual depiction of a “country hick”: he is short, overweight, drinks too much and slurs his words. These stereotypes are used for humor in the film but also draw attention to how people are depicted, and what those depictions represent. The members in the Organization are not all like Ivanhoe, some are intelligent and thoughtful, making the point that is not always easy to spot an alt-right, white supremacist.

Contemporary American culture is highlighted throughout this film, that is the contemporary culture of 2018, when the film was made. Lee references things like police brutality; in the scene with Dumas and Landers, the audience sees him inappropriately touching her while also evoking his police privilege to harass the other Black Student Union members they pulled over. Not only does director Lee show the act of police brutality itself, but he shows how other white police officers react to it, allowing Landers

to continue as a cop and cause trouble for other blacks. Characters also make comments that mirror things said in everyday society; one character goes so far as to say, “Make America Great Again,” a slogan popular among followers of the current U.S. President, Donald Trump. One of the biggest connections made to contemporary American society comes at the end of the film. Stallworth and Dumas, who jointly reside in Stallworth’s apartment, are discussing the future of their relationship when they hear a knock. They open the door and walk down the hallway to see a burning cross and a circle of men in white hoods holding torches. Like many social-problem films that end with text or photographs showing how the events played out in real life, *BlacKKKlansman* (2018) ends as the camera zooms in to the burning cross in the field, the film then cuts to footage from the Charlottesville, VA., riots in 2017. Various shots show men with torches parading down Charlottesville streets shouting and chanting; the film closes after shots of alt-right advocate, James Alex Fields Jr., is shown driving his car into a crowd of people protesting the riots and reaction shots from the people in the crowd. By making these connections, Lee relates the film to a dialogue about the current status of injustice and inequality in American culture today.

BlacKKKlansman (2018), as a social-problem film, raises questions about how far people will go in order to keep themselves isolated to their own groups. This idea has been used as the premise for other films throughout history, but Lee uses this idea to draw attention to characteristics and practices of hate groups like the KKK. By doing so, the film draws attention to unjust violence against black people as a historical problem as well as a contemporary problem. Like other social-problem films, *BlacKKKlansman* (2018) wants the audience to feel uncomfortable because it is trying to make viewers

more aware of the issues featured in the film like police brutality, white supremacy, and racism.

The film also makes a statement about police misconduct and brutality. As mentioned above, Landers, a police officer known for being unfair to black citizens, continues to get by in the department and does not face any repercussions due to his mistreatment of others, that is, until the end of the film. In Landers's last scene, after seeing Stallworth and Dumas in a booth at a bar, he slides in beside Dumas and starts making inappropriate comments about her body and looks. Dumas, already having dealt with the officer previously, asks if Landers remembers their previous encounter and if he treats every black citizen that way. The intoxicated Landers realizes who she is and tells her that he "keeps the black people in line," following with a statement about how he can do whatever he wants and get away with it due to his status as a police officer (Lee, 2018). Finally, the audience sees Stallworth reveal his hidden microphone, alerting Landers that he has been recording the conversation and intends to inform the police chief, who emerges from a room in the back of the bar, arresting Landers for police misconduct along with a stream of other offenses (Lee, 2018). This scene is crucial to the social-problem aspect of the film because police misconduct, specifically in the interactions between white police officers and black men, remains an issue in American society. From this problem, we see movements like "Black Lives Matter," a twentieth-century trend that represents the idea that black people are just as important as anyone else, no matter what the circumstances. For Lee to link this ending to Lander's storyline in the film is significant because it allows black viewers to see that there is a possibility that bad police officers can be held accountable for their actions, an idea many people do

not see in the news on a daily basis. This scene also represents an important moment because Stallworth is able to show Dumas that it is possible to “change things from the inside” as a police officer, something Dumas does not think is possible earlier in the film (Lee, 2018).

Conclusion

Ultimately, this study is meant to define and interpret differing perspectives on race relations and how those perspectives are exhibited in the aforementioned films. After laying out the framework of CRT and the significant attributes of the films being analyzed, is it now essential to address the background of each film and how the intentions of the filmmakers play out on and off screen. Both films tell personal stories of average Americans affected by race; meaning both stories will have inherent ideologies apparent from the original content creators. However, when analyzing the films through a CRT lens, *BlacKKKlansman* (2018) offers a more critical and impactful message despite its use of violence on screen and it expresses a “call to action” relevant to current political tensions in American society.

Green Book (2018) focuses on two main characters, one white and one black. Beyond these characters, there are minimal speaking roles for black characters, with the exception of a scene in which Vallelonga takes Shirley to a bar full of black patrons, while most smaller speaking roles and walk on/extras are white. Black characters with speaking roles exist in the film as a device to understand how Vallelonga feels about black people; in one of the first scenes, the audience sees Vallelonga throw glasses used by two black repairmen in the garbage after they leave his apartment. By having so little diversity among characters within this film, the main storyline has been heavily criticized

for being a “magic negro film.” That is, the narrative becomes so focused on a talented black man who is paraded around by white people as if he was a circus animal. As mentioned previously, *Green Book* (2018) was also criticized for having a white savior story; the director of the film did address claims behind his intentions and he admitted to knowing about the trope before but did try to avoid it on screen.

Green Book's off-screen statistics reflect what is seen on screen. “Above the line” roles (director, producers, screenwriters, etc.) are primarily filled with white industry workers. Of the thirteen producers for the film, only two of them were not white and only one was female. All three writers credited with writing the screenplay for *Green Book* (2018) are white, as well as the director. The book was based on interviews with the real life, Tony Vallelonga and Don Shirley. Interestingly, there were some influential black voices behind this film, like Oscar winning black actress Octavia Spencer, an executive producer for *Green Book* (2018). Despite efforts to make this film as realistic and true as possible, the filmmakers created yet another film depicting the white perspective of racism and society in the 1960s.

This study did not account for “below the line” jobs on set as workers who fill these spots often don't hold the same influence for the overall end product of the film. However, historically, below the line jobs are led primarily by white people. These roles include Director of Photography, sound, et. al. Below the line roles do have creative influence over the film but those jobs typically function as tools to help the director's vision of the film.

By contrast, *BlacKKKlansman* draws heavy influence from blaxploitation films in the 1970s but also explores a different perspective than what is normally reinforced in the

film industry. The main character is black and moves quickly through ranks at his local police station because of his initiative and persistence. In addition to this, there is a large, diverse cast list. Significant speaking characters in the film are played by a number of actors and actresses from various racial backgrounds; some storylines also explore other defining attributes like religion and character physique.

Off-screen, *BlacKKKlansman* was less diverse, with a majority of people in above the line positions being white men. The film had 13 producers, only four of them being not white. The screenplay was adapted by four men, two black and two white; the screenplay itself is based on the memoir by black author, Ron Stallworth. By having Spike Lee, an influential black filmmaker, direct this film, the audience is able to collect a more complete idea of black perspective regarding racism happening both in the 1970s and in contemporary society as we see it play out in the riots in Charlottesville, VA.

With *BlacKKKlansman* (2018), the overall idea of the film is a social commentary on violence and injustice against black people, while *Green Book* (2018) only offers a subjective satisfactory tale of a road trip between two unlikely partners. *Green Book* (2018) does not offer a call to action in the way *BlacKKKlansman* (2018) does; in *Green Book* (2018), the central idea is that people from different backgrounds can become friends if they spend enough time with each other and try to make it work, whereas *BlacKKKlansman* (2018) is upfront and less deceptive about racial issues and the social climate of the 1970s while exploring a more progressive and eventful narrative.

When deconstructing these films through the CRT lens, it is imperative to assess how the films feature attributes of the theory in each narrative. To reiterate, the first premise of CRT assumes that racism is embedded in American culture. The second, is

that counterstory is key to ending oppression of any kind. Most importantly, CRT emphasizes the idea that content creators should challenge institutionalized racism and racial privilege as it has existed in the past, primarily benefiting the white population over everyone else (Martinez, p. 20).

In *Green Book* (2018), the first time the audience really sees racism of any kind, is when Vallelonga wakes up to find the black repairmen in the kitchen and then he throws out their glasses after they leave. The audience does later hear comments from other characters about having black men in his apartment, but it does not extend much beyond that. Vallelonga does often make racist comments but most of the time they seem unintentional, as if Vallelonga doesn't understand why what he is saying is offensive. And, where racism is acknowledged on screen, rarely anything happens to reprimand the characters doing the oppressing. When looking for embedded racism in *Green Book* (2018), it is apparent as the film uses these instances to push more ideas about accepting systemic oppression and forgiving the past rather than fighting for a better future. *Green Book* (2018) does not feature characteristics of counterstory, it focuses primarily on the white character and his journey without allowing the audience to see things from Shirley's point of view. The film, and the story the film is based on, are all from the point of view of the white character and his family. *Green Book* (2018) also lacks any suggestion to changing the society that the characters live in. Even at the end of the film, after the two men separate, the burden is placed on the black character to turn around and make the decision to acknowledge Vallelonga as a friend instead of an employee.

BlacKklansman (2018) addresses embedded racism and white privilege in American culture throughout the entire film, however it is most critical not only in scenes

involving the local chapter of the KKK but also in scenes when officer Landers exercises his inappropriate advances or actions towards Dumas and her fellow Black Student Union members when he pulls her over. This later leads Landers to explicitly state that he can do whatever he wants to the black population in Colorado Springs and no one could do anything about it. Viewers also see the leniency of other officers, Creek and Zimmerman, to stop Landers or to call him out for doing the inappropriate things he does. As for embedded racism in scenes with the KKK members, they are bursting with it; the scenes are full of ideologies and dialogue discriminating against different races and religious identities.

Counterstory in *BlacKKKlansman* (2018) is used multiple times throughout the film. It is first exhibited when Dumas recounts the assault against her and her group members by Officer Landers; this allows the audience to see what happened to her through her own emotions and actions, not through what Landers tells the police department. The audience sees this device again when the Black Student Union hosts a speaking event with black activist Jerome Turner, played by Harry Belafonte, who was himself a prominent Civil Rights activist in the 1960s and 70s. Turner tells the students about the torture and lynching of a black teenager in the early 1900s; the things he tells the students differ from the main story often told about the lynching of Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas. These scenes offer another version of the stories often passed through the white American population thus being taught in schools and accepted as normal or okay. Additionally, *BlacKKKlansman* (2018) critiques the societal norms surrounding race in America. Specifically, the filmmakers make the audience acknowledge the connections with the KKK members in the film and the members of contemporary hate

groups who participated in the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA. By directly linking the two, the audience is left with an unsettling feeling; there is no happy ending because as many films in the social problem genre do, the filmmakers want the people who watch their films to be uncomfortable. They don't want acceptance, they want action.

Critically speaking, *BlacKKKlansman* (2018) and *Green Book* (2018) were both nominated for Best Picture at the 91st Academy Awards, presented annually by the Academy of Motion Pictures of Arts and Sciences, a primarily white institution known for lacking diversity in both members and nominees/winners. In 2015, after the release of Oscar nominations for the 88th annual award ceremony, tweets with the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite were one of the top trends on Twitter. While both films were nominated and received critical attention, *Green Book* (2018) was the one to take the award for Best Picture, leaving many people to question the intentions behind the Academy's decisions. While the Oscar nominations and winners, including Mahershala Ali for Best Supporting Actor for his performance in *Green Book* (2018), have become more diverse, the Academy itself has not. For the 2020 distribution of voters for the Academy, eighty-four percent of the voters were white, leaving 16 percent to all minorities (Watson, 2020). By awarding Oscars to films like *Green Book* (2018) that do not accurately represent American culture, voters are allowing the Academy to remain complacent in the face of a generation hungry for change.

This study is not meant to discount the work that went into making both of these films, it is to interpret the films through CRT in a way that forces future practitioners in the film and television industry to be more mindful of the legacy they build through their

content. In order to make cast and crews more diverse and representative in the film industry, production teams must be educated on the importance of representation and its effects on viewers across different cultural backgrounds. For further research into this topic, future researchers may want to analyze the real-world effects on representation both on and off screen. Researchers may also wish to more intricately define boundaries of white and black perspectives in content and in the film industry.

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