Racial Dynamics in "Post-Racial" Society:

an Analysis of White Saviors and Black Representation in American Film

Chelsea Tjin-Kon-Koen

S2394146

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Leiden University

Supervisor: Dr. E. A. Steinbock

Second reader: Dr. E. Minnaard

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Introduction

At the time of writing this thesis, the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd fueled the "Black Lives Matter" movement. While for some the realities of racism in America[1] are just now becoming apparent, the deaths of Arbery, Taylor and Floyd follow a long line of innocent Black people dying at the hands of white men who felt threatened by Black skin.[2] Christina Sharpe would describe these tragic deaths as a consequence of Blacks living in "the wake." In her book, *In the Wake*, Sharpe argues that Black lives are consistently devalued and marginalized by what she defines as the lingering "afterlives of slavery" (8). She uses the concept of living in "the wake" to explain how Black lives are continuously affected by racism: "living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence" (15). Living in "the wake" also presents a paradox between this terror and Black bodies; while Black people are perceived as "carriers of terror", blackness being the weapon, they are the ones that terror is acted upon (15). The days of slavery and Jim Crow racism might be in the past, but the basic premise of Black oppression is still very much present in 21st century American society.[3]

Sharpe uses the term "the wake" in a multitude of other definitions, among others: "the state of wakefulness; consciousness" (4). The three murders sparked a national and international outcry in which they were perceived as the last straw regarding police

[1] In this thesis, "America" refers to North America
[2] Amongst many others: Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice
[3] Racial oppression is definitely not limited to Black people. Native Americans, Asians, Chicanos, and other minority groups similarly find themselves the subject of racism and negative representation in popular culture. However, in this thesis, the focus is on racism against and representation of Black people.

brutality against innocent Black people. People from all walks of life and across the world took to the streets in protest and became more aware and educated about systemic racism and the (deadly) effects of white supremacy. As such, the "Black Lives Matter" movement is, to an extent, successful in raising consciousness for Black lives being perpetually marginalized in American society. However, there are many sites of American society where this consciousness is not reflected. Black subjection in contemporary American society manifests in various ways. The cases of Arbery, Taylor and Floyd are examples of physical violence towards Black lives. However, there are several gradations of Black oppression that move beyond obvious injustices and contribute to prevalent racism.

This thesis analyzes the ways in which "the wake" is depicted in American film. Sharpe's multiple definitions of "the wake" present a paradox: it applies to both being conditioned by perpetual Black subjection and to be "woke" or conscious. By analyzing two sets of films that manifest "the wake" in its multiple meanings, this thesis examines how Black marginalization and racism are addressed in American film.

Popular culture in general and film in particular are significant aspects of society where racial dynamics are either perpetuated or challenged. Many scholars have concluded that visual media like movies have a significant influence on society. For example, Vera and Gordon noted that within our "cinematic society", movies present and represent our lives as it has become our favorite and most recurrent pastime (8).[4] As such, "the daily rhythms of our lives, what we know and what we ignore, are set by the rhythm

[4] Vera and Gordon's book was published in 2003. I would argue that since then, in addition to movies, the internet (Youtube, social media) and prominent tv series (through platforms like Netflix) have become increasingly influential as well.

of and the information contained in the screens of cinema and television" (Vera and Gordon 9). DiAngelo deemed writers and directors "cultural narrators" whose products "shape our worldview" (31). The influence of movies resides in the ideology they communicate. Visual culture and movies in particular are representative of a certain ideology within a society; they offer "views of the world in very particular ways"; they represent it through certain ideas" (Rose 2). Stuart Hall defines ideology as "those images, concepts, and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand, and "make sense" of some aspect of social existence" ("The Whites" 81). The images on screen are influential on social relations in real life. For Hall, "in modern societies, the different media are especially important sites for the production, reproduction and transformation of ideologies" ("The Whites" 82). They are also important visual representations of groups and identities. Glenn & Cunningham argue that "the images and relationships between characters impact the manner in which [audience members] perceive themselves and others" (136). As such, representations of Black characters and experiences in film are implicated in the larger structure of racial ideology.

Defining racism in a "post-racial" society

Two important, interlinked concepts that maintain racial dynamics are white supremacy and the misconception of America being "post-racial". The term post-racial became widespread in both media and the public after the election of Obama as president of the United States (Fox; Squires). The presence of a Black man[5] in the highest office of the country, was seen as proof that racism in America was no longer an issue.

[5] While Barack Obama is biracial (he has a Black father and white mother), he is generally perceived as Black

Subsequently, the notion of "colorblindness" denies the relevance of skin color on life chances. If the persistence of racism is acknowledged at all, the blame is shifted to the victims. Bonilla-Silva found that a majority of whites believe Blacks are responsible for persistent racial issues in American society; "they denounce Blacks for playing "the race cards", for demanding the maintenance of unnecessary and divisive race-based programs, such as affirmative action, and for crying "racism" whenever they are criticized by whites" (*Racism without Racists* 1). Rather than ending racism, "post-racism" and "colorblindness" ignore the historically structured racial divide between whites and Blacks. As Fox notes "not only are we not supposed to notice race, we're supposed to avoid thinking about how our racist history has imparted meanings and consequences that are strikingly different for groups of color than they are for whites" (82). A contemporary example is the criticism of the "Black Lives Matter" movement with the counter-slogan "All Lives Matter". The latter slogan completely misses the point of the original movement. Theoretically, of course, *all* lives matter. However, it is not until Black lives matter that all lives will matter. To claim that everyone is equal and should be treated equally is to ignore the systemically maintained racial divide that has killed Black lives at an alarming rate. Another problem with "all lives matter" is the apparent need to shift any attention on Black lives back to the white self.

Rather than being "post-racial", American society resides in an era of what Bonilla-Silva calls "new racism" and "colorblind racism": racial inequalities have persisted but "the dominant practices that produce it are no longer overt, seem almost invisible, and are seemingly nonracial" ("The Structure" 1363). Racism is no longer explicit like during slavery and Jim Crow and has developed into ingenuous

manifestations that are often difficult to point out. In Squires' words: they happen "under conditions of "plausible deniability"." (85). One example of new racism is the occurrence of microaggressions: "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of colour" (Cho et al. 2). While such expressions might seem innocent and non-aggressive, they are implicated in the larger societal structure of violence against minorities. Moreover, as Saloojee and Saloojee argue, these small acts of racism are deeply embedded in everyday life and public discourse (266). David Starr-Glass argued that subtle racism might even be more harmful than its more obvious counterpart:

> overt hostility is distinctly unpleasant, but it is in plain view and can be recognized and responded to. However, latent abuse […] and ambiguous prejudiced discourse […] can generate persistent self-doubt, debilitating anxiety, and personal damage that may be even more significant than overt discriminatory-based violence and explicit bigoted venom (18).

Manifestations of "new" racism are not distinct from old oppressions like slavery and Jim Crow. Sharpe positions Black lives in "the wake" as being afflicted by "the past that is not past, […] always, to rupture the present" (9). Similarly, Starr-Glass found that past and present forms of racism are linked by a process of metamorphosis:

> In metamorphic changes, the past is continuously present even though it is partially obscured by a novelty of form. In metamorphosis, there is a constant fluidity between what was and what is— both past and present are contiguous states, not separated ones. Metamorphosis provides us with a present in which the past is copresent, perpetually accessible, and incapable of being distanced— even from a past that is not apparent (22).

The common ground of all forms of racist expressions is “prejudice-based aggression as an active and palpable reality” (Starr-Glass 24). While inferential racism is successful in maintaining the racial structure that subjugates Blacks, it is, simultaneously, more difficult to prove. As such, manifestations of “post-racism” like microaggressions can be seen as being a remnant of previous racist structures like slavery and Jim Crow. “Post-racism” is a consequence of “the wake” of older forms of racism.

The ignorance around persistent racism and misconceptions around notions like colorblindness, not only continues the oppression of Blacks; they also sustain the dominance of whiteness. As Jensen argues: “to claim to be color blind [endorses] blindness when assessing the effects of color and, therefore, [lends] tacit support to white supremacy” (26). “Post-racial” narratives work alongside America’s longstanding ideology: white supremacy. Although “white supremacy” tends to be misunderstood as the term for extreme and overt racists, it is more nuanced than that. It is the complex, systemic structure in which whiteness is favored in all realms of social and political life. DiAngelo notes: “white supremacy is more than the idea that whites are superior to people of color; it is the deeper premise that supports this idea—the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm” (33). As white is the norm, non-white, by default, is a deviation of the norm. If white has privilege, non-white is disadvantaged. White supremacy is embedded in society and as such, racism is too. As Fox argues: “institutional racism doesn’t require anyone to be racist to produce a racially biased outcome; the system has developed a life of its own—“business as usual”.” (119).

The reason why racism, in all its forms, has persisted throughout American society is due to it being white-centered. Whiteness is the lens through which American society exists. It "inhabits language, common sense, codes, signs, and symbols that we use to communicate and produce knowledge. Then, through our tools to endow the world with meaning, whiteness normalizes and its privileges become invisible" (Garzon Martinez 473). These invisible privileges are known as white privilege. White privilege can be defined as the advantages of white people over Blacks "that are not a product of any individual effort or ability but are built into the structure of society" (Jensen 26). This structure is embedded into all aspects of society: state, politics, education and cultural institutions.

Whiteness seeps through every aspect of society. Popular culture is one such area. Erigha notes that popular culture industries are "sites where power structures buttressed by racial inequality are created, reinforced, and reproduced" (7). The ideological meanings in popular culture are subtle but powerful ways in which whiteness is prioritized. DiAngelo argues that media representations are "one of the most potent ways [through which] white supremacy is disseminated" and "have a profound impact on how we see the world" (31). This thesis analyzes the ways in which white supremacy is disseminated through the sub-genre of "white savior" film.

White Savior Film

The "white savior" film sub-genre is embedded in both the "post-racial" rhetoric and white supremacist ideology. Vera and Gordon define the white savior as

> the redeemer of the weak, the great leader who saves Blacks from slavery or oppression, rescues people of color from poverty and disease, or leads Indians in

> battle for their dignity or survival […]. Often the white messiah is an alienated hero, a misfit within his own society, mocked and rejected until he becomes a leader of a minority group or of foreigners (33-34).

For Hughey, the trope serves as an agent of colorblindness: "a figure who turns against his tyrannical, close-minded, and racist white community and comrades. In so doing, the character stands as proof positive of whites' ability to transcend race and become truly color-blind" (quoted in Maurantonio 1136). The less clear-cut but implied definition of "white savior" film[6] is a film that marginalizes Black while simultaneously centering white. WSF is a manifestation of perpetual racial inequalities in American society. By focusing on white and marginalizing Black, such films maintain the racial structure of "post-racial" America. As Vera and Gordan argue, these films "tell us little about those of other races but much about the desire of the white self to avoid guilt and to see itself as charismatic and minorities of needing white leadership and rescue" (50). In "post-racial" fashion, WSF attempts to fix racism but ultimately centers whiteness through a white savior character and thereby, marginalizes "others". As such, these films are built on the same premises that they deem to fight, namely: white supremacy and racial inequality.

I argue that WSF is "post-racial" film through a white lens that has white supremacy interwoven in every scene. The WSF presents racial dynamics between whites and Blacks in a way that supports white supremacist ideology. Black characters are marginalized through confining stereotypes, a lack of agency and victimization. By taking away the power of Black characters and deeming them incapable of saving themselves, the white savior's good actions are glorified. Subsequently, the focus on the

[6] "white savior" film will be abbreviated to WSF

morally upright white savior, supports the hegemony that perceives whites as superior to Blacks. Furthermore, WSF ignores the complex, systemic quality of racism in American society by depicting it as something that is easily resolved. As such, WSF is conditioned by "the wake" but does not portray it in a truthful way.

While manifestations of racism like the WSF might seem minor in contrast to more violent expressions like slavery, such "inferential" forms of racism are harmful in distinct but similar ways. While racially problematic films are not physically violent, they are indicative of a larger structure of (symbolic) violence against minority groups. Like Starr-Glass argues, inferential or subtle forms of racism are not separate from explicit ones and rather extend and encapsulate the essence of racism on which the uglier forms are based on. Additionally, the WSF redistributes images of racist notions and reaffirms a racial hierarchy in which Black is subjected. Therefore, these films have racism at their very core.

Besides elaborating upon the notion of Black lives in "the wake", Sharpe also defines "the wake" as consciousness and doing "wake work": a mode of engaging with living in "the wake". She suggests "wake work" as a means of dealing with "physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death" (17) and as "a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives" (18). As such, "wake work" can be seen as raising consciousness and critiquing Black living in "the wake". Black-focused film provides an accurate portrayal of Black lives and racial dynamics; it thereby succeeds in resisting hegemonic narratives about Black lives and creates a space for truth. By Black-focused film, I mean not only works that center around Black characters and lives, but those that

prioritize the accurate portrayal of the Black experience. Black experience, in this thesis, means Black lives being constantly conditioned by living in "the wake". Black-focused film inhabits the realities of Black lives in "the wake" to raise consciousness, thereby doing "wake work." The movies resist Black marginalization by depicting Black characters dynamically and providing rich backgrounds to their stories. As such, audience identification becomes not only a possibility, but a requirement. Furthermore, racism in society is presented as systemic. As such, Black-focused film resists against dominant narratives of "post-racial" American society.

Methodology

The main argument of this thesis is that WSF marginalizes Black characters and mitigates racist issues. Black-focused film, on the other hand, presents Black characters and systemic racism in meaningful ways that both demonstrate and critique the marginalization of Blacks in American society. Through textual analysis, common features (and differences) of the films are described, interpreted, and analyzed. Furthermore, a contextual overview will provide a link between the films and racial dynamics within society. Contextual information includes comparisons between the representation in the films and the true stories and testimonies by the filmmakers. Through a semiological analysis, I argue that white supremacy and black subjugation are "coded" in WSF. Central to this type of analysis is the meaning-making through ideological codes. Rose defines a "code" as a set of conventionalized ways of making meaning that are specific to particular groups of people" (128). Meaning in media images is not an inherent quality of the image; rather, the meaning is constructed through a series of practices. Hall defines coded meanings as "fragments of ideology":

> connotative codes are the 'linguistic' means by which the domains of social life, the segmentations of culture, power and ideology are made to signify. They refer to the 'maps of meaning' into which any culture is organized, and those 'maps of social reality' have the whole range of social meanings, practices and usages, power and interest 'written in' to them (*Essential Essays* 269).

Ideas about social structures are embedded in popular culture. Hall found that "in the analysis of culture, the interconnection between societal structures and processes and formal or symbolic structures is absolutely pivotal" (*Essential Essays* 257). Racial representations in popular culture, then, are significant due to the coding they yield in society. Shaped by white ideology, WSF produces codes that reinforce racial ideologies from its contemporary society. Racial codes in WSF include racist stereotypes and an inherent racial structure in which white is superior to Black. These codes are meaningful because they support the dominant ideology in American society: white supremacy.

The WSF analysis is conducted through three films: *The Help* (2011), *Hidden Figures* (2016) and *Green Book* (2018). All three case studies are based on true events. They all contain explicit forms of racial discrimination which are ultimately overcome through persistence and, most importantly, help from a white savior. Redeeming "white" elements were added to each storyline; most strikingly, the addition of a completely fictional white character in *Hidden Figures*.

The analysis of Black-focused film features *Fruitvale Station* (2013), *Get Out* (2017) and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018). While there are many other appropriate possible case studies in this category, I chose these three for their time of distribution; they were released within the same time frame as the analyzed WSF's and are therefore subject to the same social context. Furthermore, the three Black-focused films feature

prominent manifestations of modern-day racism, namely: police brutality, micro-aggressions and mass incarceration. The manner in which these topics are addressed differ greatly from the portrayals of racism in WSF. They are “responses to terror in the varied and various ways that our Black lives are lived under occupation” (Sharpe 20).

The thesis is divided in two chapters in which the two sets of films are analyzed. The first chapter studies three “white savior” films and argues that through Black marginalization and a white supremacist lens, the sub-genre is conditioned by what Sharpe defined as “the wake”. Black marginalization is seen in the use of racial stereotypes, Black passivity and white saving. Representation of both Black and white characters are of relevance here; the weak position of Black characters, strengthens the integrity and sense of justice of white saviors. Furthermore, in “post-racial” fashion, WSF simplifies racism by depicting it as fixable. The second chapter shifts to analyses of Black-focused film in light of “wake work”. Through truthful representations of the Black experience and Black humanity, these films both attend to and resist against Black lives living in “the wake”. As opposed to WSF, Black-focused film acknowledges racism as a complex system by connecting past to present injustices. As such, they resemble what Sharpe defines as “wake work”.

I end this introduction with two notes to clarify the stance of the thesis. Firstly, throughout the thesis, I capitalize Black and keep “white” in lowercase letters. I do so because the identity of a Black person is inseparable from the color of their skin. Race is not a matter of biology; it is a socially constructed means of categorization. However, the consequences of that categorization are very real. The effect of having a dark skin color in a white-dominant society is of such importance that it can lead to death. For whites,

this is not the case; although white is also a color, they are never a "person of color". Their whiteness does not define them within society; it is not seen because it is the norm. In other words, being white is only acknowledged in relation to those who are not. Additionally, the capitalizing of the "B" in "Black" can be seen as a reclaiming of the connotation of the word. In America, "Black" and "black" have often been replaced for the terms "African American" and "people of color" for the sake of political correctness. However, this implies that "Black" carries a negative connotation. By capitalizing, being Black is reclaimed as something to be proud of rather than something that is offensive.

Secondly and lastly, throughout the thesis I favor using the term "white supremacy" over "white privilege". While the notion of white privilege is useful in explaining how advantages in American society are unequal, it does not signify the oppressing quality of whiteness. Zeus Leonardo argued that "white privilege" as a term implies passivity:

> It obscures the subject of domination, or the agent of actions, because the situation is described as happening almost without the knowledge of whites. It conjures up images of domination happening behind the backs of whites, rather than on the backs of people of color (138).

A narrative shift to white domination and supremacy repurposes "white privilege" as a consequence of white supremacy rather than the entire issue. I definitely do not claim that every single white person is consciously racist or enjoys white privilege knowingly. However, I do think that the systemic dominance of whiteness is so consequential that the passive connotation of "privilege" does not do it justice. In Roediger's words: "it is not that whiteness is oppressive and false; it is that whiteness is *nothing but* oppressive and

false… it is the empty and terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn't and on whom one can hold back" (quoted in Vera and Gordon 190).

Chapter 1: White Savior Film in "the wake"

"*In the wake, the past that is not past reappears,*
always, to rupture the present."

The relation between society and popular culture is circular. Dominant narratives in popular culture are influenced by social structures that are guided by white hegemony. In turn, popular culture, as a site of information, reestablishes the dominant discourse of whiteness back into society. In his analysis of the WSF *Freedom Writers*, Hughey found that "racial representations in the film and the racialized audience receiving them are mutually constitutive. That is, audiences make active meaning of movies while movies are produced to engender what audiences desire and find relevant" (478). Maryann Erigha coined the term "Hollywood Jim Crow": the notion that "racial inequality and hierarchy in Hollywood take their cue from the structure of race relations in society" (9). Much like Bonilla-Silva's "new racism" and Sharpe's "afterlife of slavery", Erigha argues that racism changes with time but always persists; "Hollywood Jim Crow uses cultural and economic notions of racial inferiority and superiority as grounds for racial difference" (11). Manifestations of these claims include deeming Black films "unbankable" and Black directors being assigned smaller budgets. This racism does not only affect those within the industry itself (i.e. the creative personnel involved in filmmaking); it also influences the audiences that watch Hollywood movies. Racial stratification in Hollywood extends to what images and ideologies are consumed and which ones are unseen/unrepresented. Erigha deems this "cultural imperialism": whites' perspective dominates cinematic representations (14). When movies are produced by white filmmakers, they are able to "create and disseminate their own meaning systems for

audience consumption" (Erigha 14). Similarly, Hall sees media and cultural institutions as "superstructures" that hold up hegemony (*Essential Essays* 318). Maintenance of hegemony occurs through ideology: dominant classes "strive and to an extent succeed in *framing* all competing definitions of reality *within their range*" and make sense of racial dynamics "in such a way as to sustain the dominance" (Hall, *Essential Essays* 318). Therefore, the white-centered ideology in popular culture is one of the pillars that hold up white supremacy.

Film signals certain messages that contain certain ideologies. Hall defined "dominant or preferred readings" as having "the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings: practices and beliefs, the everyday knowledge of social structures, of 'how things work for all practical purposes in this culture'." (*Essential Essays* 270). Because white people dominate Hollywood film (in the different stages of writing, directing and producing), the outgoing signs contain predominant white ideologies. In movies revolving around themes of race and racism, like WSF, this becomes especially problematic.

The WSF takes racism as its main topic and subsequently portrays Black characters in reductive ways. One effective strategy for this marginalization is the use of stereotypes. A stereotype is a reduction of a few simplified characteristics that are imposed as the whole essence of an individual or group. For Hall "stereotyping is a key element of symbolic violence" ("Spectacle" 259). The maintenance of stereotypes is a matter of power dynamics. A stereotype is imposed onto a subordinate group by a dominant one. In popular culture this works through "symbolic power through representational practices" (Hall, "Spectacle" 259). When a stereotype is imposed on a

racial group, it works towards the "othering" of said group and creates an "us" vs. "them" dialogue. When white people create Black characters and representations, a power paradigm ensues in which white hegemony is the storyteller of Black stories. In WSF, this power paradigm through the use of Black stereotypes is evident. Stereotypes symbolically deny a person's worth and individual identity. Both *Green Book* and *The Help* draw heavily on long-standing racial stereotypes, thereby inflicting symbolic violence by marginalizing Black voices and reducing Black characters.

Black passivity and lack of agency is another way in which WSF marginalizes Black. The position of the white savior is important here. The study of "whiteness" has been developing since the 1980's (Garzon Martinez 469). The field focuses on the dominant group rather than minorities:

> it reverses the traditional focus of research on race relations by concentrating attention upon the socially constructed nature of white identity and the impact of whiteness upon intergroup relations. In contrast to the usual practice of studying the "problem" of "minority groups," the "whiteness studies" paradigm makes problematic the identity and practices of the dominant group (Doane 3).

In his book *White,* Richard Dyer studied the representation of white people in cultural productions by whites. As such, he analyzed the self-representation of the white self. Rather than stereotypical depictions, he found that whites portray themselves in repetitive "narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes and habits of perception" (Dyer 12). In WSF, white characters are often focalized; it is through their eyes that we perceive the story. Black characters, in turn, are supporting characters that serve as mere plot devices for white characters and their heroism. As Vera and Gordon found, WSF "tell us little about those of other races but much about the desire of the white self to avoid guilt and to

see itself as charismatic and minorities of needing white leadership and rescue" (50). Similarly, Dyer argued that "white discourse implacably reduces the non-white subject to being a function of the white subject, not allowing her/him space or autonomy […] except as a means for knowing the white self" (13). For Jensen "understanding race and racism requires an understanding of the pathology of whiteness that is at the core of our racial system" (21). Therefore, an accurate study of racial issues analyzes the representation of white alongside the representation of Black.

The following sections provide analyses of Black marginalization and white saving in *Green Book, The Help* and *Hidden Figures*. The first section presents individual analyses of the three films with regard to racial dynamics between marginalized Black characters and glorified white ones. Subsequently, an analysis of the representation of racism in WSF includes all three case studies, emphasizing their commitment to "post-racism."

Black marginalization and white saving

Initially, *Green Book* seems to be a classic buddy-film in which the two characters mutually impact and better each other's lives. Dr. Don Shirley, a talented pianist is about to embark on a concert tour through the Deep South. Due to Jim Crow, he needs a driver and bodyguard who will ensure his safety. Enter Tony Lip, an Italian American bouncer with a big mouth and short temper. The two set off on a two-month trip during which Dr. Shirley is the victim of multiple racist incidents. While the two start off as polar opposites, they end with a newfound respect and understanding for one another. The two men both evolve after their time together. However, the dynamics through which the transformations occur, are deeply implicated in the hegemonic racial structure.

From the very beginning of the film, Shirley's character is somewhat of a mystery; his entire background is covered by a string of vague statements and actions. In his introductory scene, he walks into the room as an almost mystical entity: clothed in a white-and-gold robe, seated in a throne-like chair. This first encounter sets up Shirley's distant, unrelatable persona that lasts throughout the film. When asked if he has any family, he answers "not really". We know he was married once and that it, allegedly, ended due to his busy schedule as a musician. Later on, we come to know that Shirley is homosexual. The revelation scene features Shirley and an unidentified white man, naked, in the showers of a YMCA building. Being a closeted, homosexual, Black man during the 1960's must have had a significant part in Shirley's life and psyche. Nonetheless, the revelation is all the film gives; it is not elaborated upon and Shirley's supposed struggle with his sexual identity is not attended to. The question marks regarding Shirley's character multiply but are never resolved.

The mystery around Dr. Don Shirley can be analyzed as a trait of a modernized version of the "magical negro" stereotype. According to Glenn and Cunningham, this stereotype emerged due to white film producers' lack of contact with Black people and culture. As such, the Black character is portrayed as unrelatable: "instead of having life histories or love interests, Black characters possess magical powers" (137). The main function of a magical negro is being the moral conscience of white characters (Glenn and Cunningham 137). Indeed, while Shirley's backstory is vague, what is properly attended to is his role in Tony's development. The plot is filled with moments of Shirley helping and/or improving Tony. He helps him write romantic letters to his wife, stops him from starting fights, and when Tony is too tired to drive them home for Christmas, Shirley

takes the wheel and succeeds in bringing Tony home in time. Most importantly, he "heals" Tony from his racist prejudices.

Tony becoming a better person is not a problem in and of itself. The problem is that Tony's character development as a kind, understanding, white man happens at the expense of Shirley's character development as a queer, Black man. While Tony evolves, Shirley is silenced. Shirley experiences instances of overt racism on multiple occasions without standing up for himself in a successful or meaningful manner. When he is not allowed to use the regular bathroom at one of his concert venues, he simply goes to his hotel to use the bathroom and returns to play the second half. In another scene he is turned away when he wants to try on a suit in a clothing store; again, he simply walks away. Of course, the racial atmosphere during that time did not allow for much lenience towards Blacks and fear was a reason for silence in most cases. However, it is not fear that drives Shirley's docility. When lecturing Tony for an aggressive tantrum, he argues: "you never win with violence, Tony. You only win when you maintain your dignity. Dignity always prevails". Although the racism towards Shirley clearly hurts him, he accepts that victimization for sake of not appearing violent and upholding his poise. His character is not only docile, it romanticizes the stereotype he represents. In magical negro fashion, Shirley helps Tony with his wisdom, at one point even assuring him that "you can do better".

While Shirley functions as the moral compass of Tony, he is unable to use his "magic" to defend himself or improve his situation. In an emotional scene, Shirley addresses his feelings about his lack of identity:

> […] rich, white people pay me to play piano for them because it makes them feel cultured. But as soon as I step off that stage, I go right back to being just another nigger to them. Because that is their true culture. And I've suffered that slight alone because I'm not accepted by my own people because I'm not like them either. So, if I'm not Black enough and if I'm not white enough and if I'm not man enough, then, Tony, tell me, what am I?!"

The Oscar-worthy scene does nothing for Shirley and only provides Tony a final revelation into racist realities. Furthermore, the climactic scene establishes Shirley's character as rooted in his victimization and being "other."

In one of the final scenes, Shirley is not allowed to dine in the restaurant where he is about to perform. At last, he seems to stand up for himself and initially refuses to perform unless he can dine in the room. When the manager tries to bribe Tony to convince Shirley to play, Tony loses his temper and throws the manager against the wall. Shirley stops the ordeal and offers a solution: "I'll play, if you want me to". This exchange strips Shirley of any agency he could have had. By asking Tony's permission to stand up for what he believes in, he loses any attempt at Black agency. Shirley is depicted as passive, docile and unable to fight his own battles. The scene could have been the climatic resolve where the oppressed character finally stands up for himself; instead, it is the key moment to white saving.

While Shirley's impact on Tony comes at the expense of his own development, Tony's white saving is embedded in a power paradigm in which Shirley's Blackness is questioned. Tony saves Shirley from physical violence by racists in a bar, from being prosecuted for sexual activity with a man at the YMCA, and from being robbed of money he openly counted in a "colored cafe". But the most important saving occurs through

Tony helping Shirley become Black. In one of the comical scenes of the film, Tony introduces Shirley to fried chicken from KFC, which the latter has never eaten in his life. He awkwardly accepts a chicken leg from Tony's bucket and openly enjoys it after the first uncomfortable bite. In another scene, Tony shames Shirley for being unable to identify Aretha Franklin on the radio. It is as if Tony introduces Black culture to Shirley in a paternalistic attempt at teaching him about himself and being Black. Tony claims "I'm Blacker than you are" (because he knows Black music) and "my world is way more Blacker than yours" (because he grew up in a bad neighborhood and struggles to put food on the table). The insinuation is that because Dr. Shirley is not poor or unsuccessful, he is not Black enough. Apart from stereotyping "Blackness" to poverty and ghettos, the confrontation shames Shirley for not adhering to this stereotype. The movie's insistence on removing Shirley from Blackness is made strikingly visual when the car breaks down in front of Black workers harvesting produce in a field. When they notice Shirley in his fancy suit, next to a fancy car, with a white driver, their looks carry both disbelief and blame (figure 1). Emotional music highlights Shirley's expression of uncomfortable guilt (figure 2). The scene emphasizes Shirley's displacement and succeeds in "othering" and mystifying Shirley even further. Not only is his character a mystery for the audience and for Tony, he is also removed from his own people and culture.

Figure 1. “Black fieldworkers look at Don Shirley.” Still from *Green Book*.

Figure 2. “Don Shirley looks at the Black fieldworkers.” Still from *Green Book*.

The real-life Shirley family had much critique on the depiction of Don and the discrepancies between the movie’s plot and his actual life. For example, his brother stated that Don was not estranged from the Black community whatsoever, and that he had definitely eaten fried chicken before (Collins). Additionally, his niece clarified that Don did not grow up in Europe; he was born and raised in the Deep South (Feinberg). *Green Book* was written by Tony Vallelonga’s son, so it is not strange that the film focuses

more on his side of the story. However, the complete fictions around Shirley's character were not made up from nothing and served as determined plot devices. By separating Shirley from Black culture and other Black people, he becomes someone who is helpless without Tony's white saving. Rather than unfolding the plot to expose his background, *Green Book* only further mystifies Shirley's character. He exists only in relation to his victimization and as the magical negro to Tony's story.

Racial dynamics in *The Help* are comparable to the ones in *Green Book*. The story centers around a white writer who sets out to write a book about the untold stories of Black maids in Jackson. Based on the 2009 novel by Kathryn Stockett, *The Help* was written and directed by Tate Taylor, and centers around Skeeter who writes a book, also called *The Help*. The three "storytellers" (book writer, director/screenwriter and focalized character) are all white. This fact is of importance when realizing that a film called "The Help" is not centered around the Black maids who the title refers to. Instead, *The Help* provides a white perspective on Black experiences. The two main Black characters, Aibileen and Minny, are supporting characters in a movie that appropriates Black voices through a white lens. The movie is focalized by a white character who succeeds with the help from Black characters who are reduced to racial stereotypes.

The film opens with Skeeter's white hands writing 'The Help" on a blank page, foreshadowing that the story will be told from her perspective. Throughout the movie, the audience is placed in Skeeter's perspective; from her childhood memories to a new boyfriend to her journalistic goals, Skeeter's story is thoroughly developed during the course of the film. Her aspirations as a writer drive her to write a book about the experiences of Black maids working in white people's homes. At one point, Minny asks

Skeeter why she wants to write their stories; she answers “I want to show your perspective. So that people might understand what it’s like from your side.” The movie never really elaborates on these perspectives. In a preview at the start of the film, Skeeter asks Aibileen “how does it feel to raise white babies while your own child is looked after by someone else?” The scene is cut off; supposedly the movie will tell us as it unfolds. Later on, when that same scene is shown in its entirety, the question is asked again, but the answer is still not given.

Skeeter is also the one who is acclaimed for the book, signified by her mother praising her courage and a prestigious job offer. While controversies around the book result in Skeeter losing some friends and her new boyfriend, these repercussions are nowhere near the dangers for the maids. The real possibilities of physical violence, incarceration and even death for the maids who speak out are glossed over. The book results in Skeeter going off to New York while Aibileen and Minny remain in exactly the same place. Aibileen is even fired so we are unsure of what will become of her and how she will manage a living. Viola Davis, the actress who portrayed Aibileen, eventually expressed regret for her part in the film:

> I just felt that at the end of the day that it wasn’t the voices of the maids that were heard. I know Aibileen. I know Minny. They’re my grandma. They’re my mom. And I know that if you do a movie where the whole premise is, I want to know what it feels like to work for white people and to bring up children in 1963, I want to hear how you really feel about it. I never heard that in the course of the movie (Murphy).

The maids speaking up and telling their stories could and should have been framed as Black agency; instead, it is used to center whiteness and glorify white saving.

Firstly, the beginning of the film dedicates many scenes to Skeeter trying to convince Aibileen to join the project, indicating that the project is to her credit. The stories that Aibileen shares for Skeeter's book are read from the former's journal. The stories are already written down so, arguably, Skeeter's involvement is redundant. The relevance of Black perspectives resides in the involvement of a white mediator/translator. Skeeter's voice in both the movie and the writing of the book makes them palpable and relevant for a white-focused society. Skeeter's point of view normalizes whiteness while the Black voices are marginalized. Additionally, it maintains the narrative that Black agency is only possible through a white savior.

Another aspect that makes *The Help* relatable to a white-centered society, is its use of familiar, racist stereotypes. Like the magical negro, the "mammy" is a prevalent stock character. The racist stereotype emerged during and gained popularity right after slavery; it represents the need to place Black women in a subservient and domesticated role. Characteristics include deep maternal instincts (signaled by a full body and bosom) and a natural aptness for domestic chores (Sewell 311). As such, Black women were given a "new" role with close proximity to their previous slave status.

Hattie McDaniel was the first Black person to win an Oscar for her role as "mammy" in the popular *Gone with the Wind* (1939). When McDaniel attended the Oscar ceremony in 1940, she was not allowed to sit with the rest of the (white) cast and was seated at a segregated table in the back of the room (Carter 116). Sewell notes that the mammy was one of the few roles through which a Black actress could succeed in Hollywood (315). As such, McDaniel's Oscar did not open up her career; as a big Black woman she was repeatedly typecast in the mammy role (Carter 118). More than 70 years

later, much has changed regarding segregation and blatant Black exclusion in American society. However, the role of the mammy is still very much alive. In 2012, Octavia Spencer won the same award as Hattie McDaniel for, essentially, the same role: a mammy in a white-focused film.

Since the beginning of the Academy Awards, a total of eight Black women have won in the Best Supporting Actress category. Winning roles include Whoopi Goldberg's magical negro in *Ghost*, Lupita Nyong'o as a slave in *12 years a Slave* and Mo'Nique in *Precious* for a role that inhabited all negative stereotypical traits of Blacks: poor, unemployed, violent and drug addicted. Oscars are the most prestigious awards in Hollywood. According to Erigha, the yearly ceremony "functions as a sounding board that calls attention to certain art works and, in doing so, labels some movies and not others shining examples of American culture" (38). As such, the Academy Awards shape the history of American film. The consistent awarding of Black actresses in stereotypical roles, attends to white supremacist fantasies. It also, implicitly, denies the celebration of Black roles that fall outside of this vision.

The importance and prevalence of the mammy's role in both the past and present is also alluded to in *The Help*'s plot. The parallels between Aibileen and Constantine, Skeeter's mammy, emphasize the permanent importance of mammies in white lives. Aibileen's character is rooted in the mammy stereotype but works in magical negro fashion. She works for the Leefolts and mainly takes care of their young daughter, Mae Mobley: the 17th white baby that Aibileen is raising. The sweet moments between the two romanticize the trope and its influence in white lives; Mae Mobley utters at one point: "you're my real mama, Aibi." Aibileen's "powers" succeed in instilling some

confidence in her, repeatedly assuring the child "you is smart, you is kind, you is important." In flashbacks throughout the film, we get to see Constantine's similar role in Skeeter's life. She is to Skeeter what Aibileen is to Mae Mobley: the kind, comforting, "magical" mammy. Both Skeeter and Mae Mobley are neglected or misunderstood by their real mothers; their mammies fill this void. The magical negro narrative for Aibileen extends to Skeeter when she agrees to help her write the book that eventually leads Skeeter to a prestigious job in New York.

The relationships between *The Help*'s mammies and the white children they nurture are romanticized to the point where Constantine, allegedly, dies from a broken heart after she is fired from the Phelan home. When she could no longer fulfill her vocation of taking care of a white family, she, literally, no longer had a purpose in life. Aibileen's storyline also ends with her getting fired and having to say goodbye to Mae Mobley. The emotionally charged scene has Aibileen chant her spell once more: "You is kind. You is smart. You is important". When Aibileen leaves the house, tears in her eyes, Mae Mobley looks at her through the window, begging her not to leave. The sentimental emphasis of the bond between white children and their mammies, ignores the reality of Black women having few choices besides this confining role.

Racial stereotypes are harmful in themselves, but their usefulness for white characters further reduces the role of Black characters; they solely exist to aid the development of white characters. None of the Black characters are presented through any other modes than their role in white lives. Aibileen does not have a partner and she recently lost her son in an accident. She is only shown in her own environment when Skeeter visits her home. Any signs of familial bonds are missing so her whole life is

dedicated to raising white babies. While Minny's home life does make several appearances, it is dominated by the stereotypical abusive Black man. The image of the dangerous, Black man is powerful. The fact that we never see Leroy's face but do "witness" the abuse (through a phone conversation with Aibileen), confines the only Black husband and father in the film to a harmful stereotype. It also adds another layer to Minny's victimization; something else to save her from. While the conditions at her job are demeaning, they are at least not violent. This contrast mitigates the racist abuse of her white employers.

Minny's white savior is Celia. Minny is fired from her job at the Holbrook home when she refuses to use the colored bathroom outside and uses the regular on. Although this action is a moment of resistance, the mammy-trope is soon reestablished when she starts working for Celia. While Aibileen's mammy focuses more on the nurturing side, Minny's mammy centers around her role as homemaker; stating, for instance: "frying chicken tend to make me feel better about life". Minny and Celia become friends, but their relationship is guided by a rigid power dynamic. While Minny teaches Celia how to cook and comforts her after suffering a miscarriage, Celia is the one saving Minny's livelihood and life. She is the one who hires Minny after Hilly fires her and ensures that no one in her circle will give her a job. The most striking white savior gesture occurs at the end of Minny's storyline. Celia and her husband surprise Minny with a home-cooked meal and offer her job security for life. In the end, it is this kindness that gives Minny "the strength she needed" to leave her abusive husband. It is not her own strength and will to survive that pushes Minny to leave a violent husband, but a home-cooked meal by a white savior. Firstly, this notion denies any agency for Minny. Secondly, it glorifies the

power of the white savior and her ability to free a powerless Black woman. The implication is that Minny does not have strength of her own and it was up to Celia to give her some.

Shortly after the book was published, a woman named Ablene Cooper sued writer Kathryn Stockett. Cooper, the nanny and maid for Kathryn's brother, claims that the character Aibileen Clark was based on her and that Stockett did so without consent (Donaldson James). Besides the similar name, both Ablene and Aibileen have a gold tooth and lost a son shortly before the birth of their white employer's first child. Cooper was never approached about the book and the ordeal left her feeling "violated, outraged and revulsed" (Robertson; Donaldson James). The case was dismissed. At the very least, it is ironic how the film centers around giving Black maids a voice (through the book) while the actual woman behind Aibileen's character was dismissed entirely.

Hidden Figures takes a different approach to the "white savior" narrative. Unlike *Green Book* and *The Help*, issues regarding racial dynamics are not embedded throughout the entire plot. Instead, *Hidden Figures* employs them in a specific scene sequence that invalidates a Black character's agency entirely. The movie is based on the true stories of three Black, female mathematicians whose work was essential in the success of John Glenn's launch into space. The film starts from the perspectives of main character Katherine Johnson and supporting characters Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson. The plot follows their personal and professional lives and the racism and sexism they face. There are definite moments of Black agency. Mary's ambition to become a NASA engineer meets resistance when the certification courses are only taught at an all-white school. She takes the case to court and successfully convinces the judge to let her

participate in the classes. Dorothy teaches herself programming for the new computer, resulting in her promotion to supervisor. However, the main story, Katherine's, is compromised by a white savior.

The writer and producers of *Hidden Figures* went the extra mile to include white heroism in a film about three powerful, ground-breaking Black women. Out of the three WSF case studies, *Hidden Figures* is the only one that is truly focalized by the Black characters. However, it is also the one case study based on a true story that includes a completely fictional "white savior" character. When her boss, Al Harrison, criticizes Johnson for her long absences, she stands up for herself in an outraged speech. Johnson critiques the racist atmosphere of the work environment (e.g. lower wages and segregated coffee pots) and reveals the reason for her long absences: there are no colored bathrooms in the building, so she has to walk half a mile to the nearest one. Her outburst almost seems to be the climax of the movie. However, the speech loses momentum in the next scene where Al's reaction results in a shift of the climactic focus. Enraged by the racism in Johnson's speech, he smashes the colored ladies' bathroom sign and announces: "there you have it: no more colored restrooms, no more white restrooms; just plain old toilets […]. Here at NASA, we all pee the same color". The scene positions Al between a Black crowd on one side and a white one on the other (figure 3). He is the white savior that can bridge the divide between Black and white by one act.

Figure 3. “Al smashing the bathroom sign.” Still from *Hidden Figures*.

In reality, Johnson refused to use the segregated bathrooms, and nobody ever tried to make her do so (Thomas). In her own words: “I don’t have a feeling of inferiority. Never had. I’m as good as anybody, but no better” (Evelyn). Writer and director, Theodore Melfi, received criticism for the completely fictional scene. He responded: “there needs to be white people who do the right thing, there needs to be Black people who do the right thing, and someone does the right thing. And so who cares who does the right thing, as long as the right thing is achieved?” The comments illustrate Melfi’s blatant ignorance. It matters who saves who and who gets to own the heroic act. By replacing Johnson’s own agency with a white savior who is “doing the right thing”, the film disregards the resistance of a Black woman who refused to abide by segregation rules.

Another “white savior” scene that did not happen in real life occurs near the end of the story. Johnson is requested to check the final numbers before John Glenn’s launch; when she delivers the numbers to the Mission Control room, the door is slammed in her face. She proceeds to walk away disappointingly, until Harrison, once again, saves the day and invites her in to have a front-row seat to the launch. In reality, Mrs. Johnson

stated that she was not allowed in the Mission Control room and watched the launch from a television at her desk (Thomas). There are two reasons as to why the filmmakers altered this conclusion: either to give the audience a happy, uplifting, satisfying ending, or to make the white savior look even better. Both of these overshadow the power of the actual ending. The real ending demonstrates the success of Johnson's calculations but nonetheless being left out of the credits.

The discrepancies between what the movie presented and what happened in real life, illustrate the need for *Hidden Figures* to uphold white heroism. Like in *Green Book*, changes were made to the true story in order to tilt the racial dynamics in favor of white characters. To accusations of white washing a Black story, Melfi responded: "these are creative choices, these are not catering to a white audience or catering to a black audience, this is making the best movie" (Blay). The "best movie" for Melfi means one where the hero is white. In addition, he appealed to the "colorblind" excuse, claiming: "I am at a place where I've lived my life colorless and I grew up in Brooklyn. I walked to school with people of all shapes, sizes, and colors, and that's how I've lived my life. So it's very upsetting that we *still* have to have this conversation" (Blay, emphasis added). Melfi victimizing himself and expressing his fatigue with racial conversations is illustrative of the problem with "post-racial" or "colorblind" people producing their versions of Black stories.

It is true that most of the film centers around the character development and experiences of Mrs. Johnson, giving insight into many details of her life. The film also embraces Black agency in the secondary storylines of Dorothy and Mary. However, as Leonardo noted: even progressive films about race "[cater] to the white imagination"

(143). The interruption of Black agency by a white savior reflects this catering to the white imagination. Regardless of what actually happened, the filmmakers of *Hidden Figures* could not escape what Erigha calls a "possessive investment in whiteness" that contributes to a racialized order" (6). Opposing her agency, Mrs. Johnson's success is depicted as made possible by a white savior.

Racism as fixable

All three cases of WSF, contain a sub-text that has the white hero saving Black victims from their racist realities. Racism is overt and can be conquered with help of a white savior who fixes racism. The implicit message is that racism is fixable and really not that bad if you have a white friend to save you. In *Green Book*, Tony starts of as an explicit racist. When his wife gives two Black plumbers a glass of water, he proceeds to throw said glasses in the trash. When he first hears Don play, he exclaims "he don't play like a colored guy!" And when he has to get out of the car while Dr. Shirley remains seated, he makes sure to take his wallet with him. However, as he spends more time with Shirley and is confronted with the racist reality he has to endure, Tony becomes enlightened. The final scene has Shirley welcomed into Tony's home at Christmas. Tony saves him from a lonely holiday and welcomes him to celebrate it with his family. It is a happy ending for everyone. However, the ending does not logically correlate with the beginning. In one of the first scenes, Tony's family members criticize him for leaving his wife alone with two Black plumbers (who are derogatorily referred to as "sacks of coal"). In the final scene, however, this extreme prejudice is completely forgotten. Tony introduces Shirley to his family who hurry to "make room and fix him a plate". The insinuation being: Tony's "permission" fixed any racist attitudes/prejudices. Similarly, in

Hidden Figures, Al's grand gesture serves as a catalyst for better treatment of Katherine. She is given access to classified meetings, finally receives credit for written reports and is even offered a cup of coffee from Paul Stoddard, a character that hitherto explicitly sidelined her.

The simplification of racism is also emphasized through the distinction between "good" and "bad" whites. The white savior's good moral character is sharply contrasted with "bad" whites who are racist in overt ways. The "bad" whites are either punished or completely abandon their racist prejudices. In *The Help*, Skeeter and Celia as "good" whites are contrasted with "bad" white, Hilly. For instance, when Hilly tries to convince her friends that the Black help should have separate toilets because "they carry different diseases", Skeeter is visibly uncomfortable. She later apologizes to Aibileen for Hilly's comments. Hilly's "bad" white functions as the polar opposite and thereby highlight the good moral character of "good" white. Rather than being a systemic issue in society, racism in *The Help* is solely attributed to Hilly. When she is punished by Minny's "terrible awful" and ostracized by her friends, it is as if the movie has conquered racism. However, overcoming Hilly's racism is not a result of agency on Aibileen and Minny's part; rather Hilly fails to marginalize Aibileen and Minny because other white women (Skeeter and Celia) had their backs.

The divide between Hilly and Skeeter is too simple and insinuates that the "good" whites will prevail and conquer racism. In *Hidden Figures*, Al's "good" white is contrasted by "bad" whites Paul Stoddard and Mrs. Mitchel. Rather than punishment, the "bad" whites become enlightened. In one of the final scenes, Dorothy encounters her white boss, Mrs. Mitchell, who utters "despite what you may think, I have nothing

against y'all". Dorothy responds: "I know that you believe that." As if that one comment changed her entire belief system, in the next scene, Mrs. Mitchell respectfully refers to Dorothy as Mrs. Vaughan.

While racism is easily fixed in WSF, this is only the case if a white savior is involved. The Civil Rights movement is largely neglected in the three films. *The Help* depicts John F. Kennedy's civil rights address and a speech by Medgar Evers. However, the Black characters are not shown to be involved in the movement. In fact, Skeeter is foregrounded in a rare moment of Civil Rights acknowledgment. During Evers televised speech, Skeeter is positioned in the front while two Black employees are seen behind her (figure 4). The film was more interested in what the Civil Rights movement meant to a privileged white woman than how it impacted the lives of Black people.

Figure 4. "Skeeter on the foreground." Still from *The Help*.

The representation of racism as easily fixed does two things. Firstly, it mitigates the sincerity and complexity of racism in the past. *Green Book*, *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* are all set in the 1960's: a time when Jim Crow racism manifested an unsafe

environment for Black people in American society. The ease of fixing this overt form of racism in WSF dismisses the conditions for Black people in this troubling time. Secondly, it gives white audience members a sense off comfort; they can sigh a breath of relief, knowing they would be the good white person doing the right thing and standing up for marginalized Black people. Their “post-racial” beliefs would successfully fix racism for the helpless Blacks.

Chapter 2: Black-focused film as "wake work"

"*Wake; the state of wakefulness; consciousness.*"

In a footnote, Sharpe cites Dionne Brand's definition of luck in relation to racism: "[…] I talk about all these interpretations that you walk into unknowingly, almost from birth. If you're lucky you spend the rest of your life fighting them, if you're not, you spend your life unquestioningly absorbing" (Sharpe 139). For Sharpe, ignorance is not bliss and those conscious of their oppression are the (relatively) lucky ones. Black-focused film is a site in which this "luck" is expressed into "wake work":

> I'm interested in ways of seeing and imagining responses to terror in the varied and various ways that our Black lives are lived under occupation; ways that attest to the modalities of Black life lived in, as, under, and despite Black death. And I want to think about what this imagining calls forth, to think through what it calls on "us" to do, think, feel in the wake of slavery—which is to say in an ongoing present of subjection and resistance; which is to say wake work, wake theory (Sharpe 20).

Black-focused film depicts what it means to live a Black life that is constantly conditioned by "the wake of slavery". WSF has a tendency to limit Black characters to stereotypes, thereby depicting them as unrelatable. In Black-focused film, Black characters are presented as dynamic individuals with rich backstories. We get to know detailed accounts of the Black characters rather than the limited aspects that aid the white characters' story. Additionally, while Black characters are victimized by their circumstances, they are not reduced to this victimization. Rather, the movies portray the humanizing back story behind the characters. *Fruitvale Station* and *If Beale Street Could*

Talk[7] lay out the realities of mundane, everyday life that can instantly be interrupted by racist intervention. In other words, what it means to live in a society that is determined to disregard Black lives. Sharpe called for "wake work" as "a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives" (18). Black-focused film inhabits "the wake" in Black lives in a meaningful way. As such, although Black-focused film is embedded in "the wake", it does so to realize "wake work".

Furthermore, unlike WSF's overly simplified solutions to racism, Black-focused film acknowledges the complexity of systemic racism. The more ingenuous expressions of racism are touched upon and there are no simple solutions. The consciousness of Black lives living in "the wake" provides the opportunity for "wake work". Sharpe defines cultural expressions doing "wake work" as those "that do not seek to explain or resolve the question of this exclusion in terms of assimilation, inclusion, or civil or human rights, but rather depict aesthetically the impossibility of such resolutions by representing the paradoxes of Blackness within and after the legacies of slavery's denial of Black humanity (14). Resolving the issue of Black marginalization is impossible because of the systemic quality of racism; this issue is amply touched upon in Black-focused film. The rest of this chapter focuses on the ways in which Black-focused film portrays the impossibilities of Blackness and the systemic quality of racism in American society, thereby doing "wake work".

Black humanity

Fruitvale Station is based on the true story of the shooting of Oscar Grant on the platform of the Fruitvale metro station. The film provides an intimate and personalized

[7] *If Beale Street Could Talk* will be referred to as "*Beale Street*"

account of the sensationalized media story. Of its 1 hour and 20 minutes running time, *Fruitvale Station* dedicates almost an entire hour to Oscar Grant's last day alive up until his murder. We come to know very detailed aspects of his character and background: for example, he has a complicated but close relationship with his mom, he want to propose to his girlfriend but hesitates due to financial problems, and he has a soft spot for dogs and especially his daughter. By no means is his portrayal romanticized; Oscar is deeply flawed. He has cheated on his girlfriend; he was in jail for drug-dealing; and he loses his patience when people do not help him. The depiction of Oscar presents a well-rounded individual free of imposed tropes and stereotypes. In fact, his close relationship with his daughter opposes the stereotype of the absent Black father. Their last conversation is shot through a close-up angle of both their faces, signifying their affectionate bond (figure 5). Not much later, Oscar is shot. When he realizes that he is about to die, he states multiple times: "I got a daughter!"

Figure 5. "Oscar and his daughter, Tatiana." Still from *Fruitvale Station*.

Additionally, while he is the victim of police brutality, his victimization does not take over the entire plot. Sharpe noted that an "insistence on existing" despite Black marginalization is essential to Black being (11). Director, Ryan Coogler, consciously set out to depict Oscar Grant as humanly as possible, ensuring the audience's attachment to him: "it's not just like you read it in the paper […]. When you know somebody as a human being, you know that life means something" (Rhodes). The film starts with footage of the actual event, then moves on to the detailed account of Oscar's last day. This juxtaposition highlights the humanity of Oscar and the subsequent futility of his death. The footage also highlights the movie's close connection to the actual events. This narrative is continued in the end credits where the further unfolding of the shooting is presented: the officer that killed Oscar spent a mere eleven months in jail which fueled national riots. Pictures of real-life Oscar and Tatiana Grant serve as a reminder that the film's storyline happened to real people.

Similarly, *Beale Street*, revolves around an ordinary couple, Fonny and Tish, whose lives are overturned by a false rape allegation that lands Fonny in jail. They seek to clear Fonny's name before their baby is born. The plot is presented in a non-linear sequence and alternates scenes from two timelines: before and after the arrest. The first narrative is essentially a love story in which we come to know detailed accounts of the two. For example, we know Fonny has been best friends with Tish since childhood, he speaks Spanish, and he likes to sculpt. The extensive scenes include the first time they have sex and a successful search for their first apartment. The second narrative follows their unsuccessful attempts to get Fonny out of jail. The contrast between the two timelines emphasizes the merciless injustice imposed on an innocent Black man. Fonny

also challenges the image of the absent Black father; he is overjoyed when he finds out Tish is pregnant and saddened by the possibility of still being in jail when the child is born. He does become an absent Black father, but not because of his own choosing. Both Fonny and *Fruitvale Station*'s Oscar are unable to be fathers to their children because they were taken by a system that dehumanizes them.

The detailed, sometimes mundane, accounts of Black characters' lives move beyond the narrative of victimization and stereotypical generalizations; they provide a personalized Black experience and destabilize the "othering" of Black characters. The impossibility of Black being is attended to when the most mundane things —grocery shopping for Fonny and a ride on the subway for Oscar— end in physical or social death. The juxtaposition of the innocent characters' ordinary lives and the futile violence imposed onto them, inhabits the consequences of Black living in "the wake". Sharpe attends to this paradox of terror and Black bodies: "Black people, become the carriers of terror, terror's embodiment, and not the primary objects of terror's multiple enactments" (15). Blackness is perceived as a weapon when, in reality, it is Black bodies that are affected, marginalized, and killed by the terror known as white supremacy. The cases of Oscar Grant and Fonny illustrate this terror paradox.

Racism as systemic

For Sharpe, Black lives are perpetually conditioned by the same racial dynamics that existed during slavery; although Black marginalization has transformed, it is imposed in all aspects of society:

> […] the condition in the post–Civil War United States of the formerly enslaved and their descendants; still on the plantation, still surrounded by those who

> claimed ownership over them and who fought, and fight still, to extend that state of capture and subjection in as many legal and extralegal ways as possible, into the present. The means and modes of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain (Sharpe 12).

Black-focused film not only humanizes Black lives that are conditioned by "the wake", it also exposes the systemic quality of racism. By (symbolically, visually and literally) connecting the past to the present, these films are the embodiment of Sharpe's claim that modern-day Black lives, like those on the plantations, are subjected to systemic exclusion. This notion is touched upon in Black-focused film through a variety of ways.

In *Beale Street* this connection is presented through the combination of visual images and Tish's perspective that functions as both narration and critique on the system. The wrongful incarceration of Fonny is depicted as related to other manifestations of Black bodies in "the wake". Black-and-white photos at the beginning and ending of the film present the many forms of Black subjugation throughout history. Alongside this visual material, Tish's voice provides powerful allegories to the perpetual racism in their lives. The first set of black-and-white images (figures 6, 7 and 8) are accompanied by Tish's simultaneous reflection on the inevitable fate of Black lives:

> Fonny had found something that he wanted to do, and that saved him from the death that awaited the children of our age. And though it took many forms, the death itself was very simple. The cause was simple too: the kids had been told that they weren't worth shit and everything they saw around them proved it.

Figure 6. “Police brutality against Black lives 1.” Still from *Beale Street*.

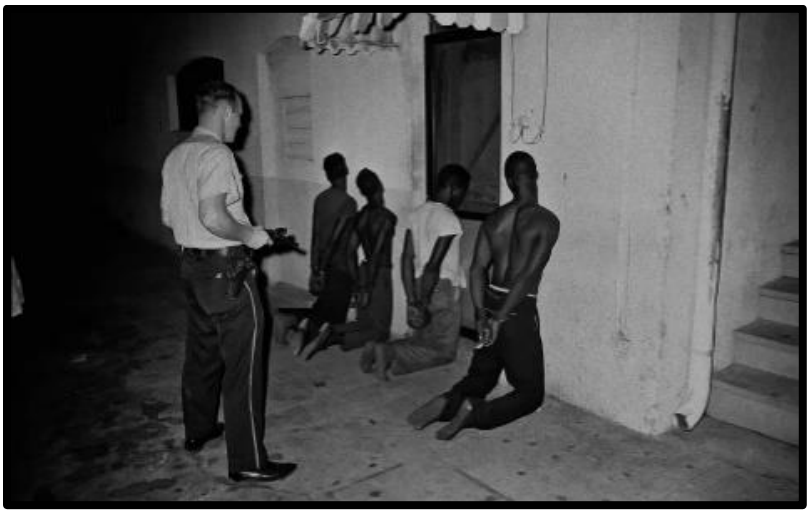

Figure 7. “Police brutality against Black lives 2.” Still from *Beale Street*.

Figure 8. “Black poverty.” Still from *Beale Street*.

The same allegory is implemented at the end of the film. Tish’s narration illustrates the impossibility of fighting the system that incarcerates Black men at a startling rate. Mass incarceration is one of the most prominent manifestations of modern-day Black subjugation and started right after the abolishment of Jim Crow laws. The Criminal Justice Fact Sheet on the NAACP website notes that African Americans and Hispanics make up approximately 32% of the US population, but 56% of all incarcerated people in 2015. Additionally, while whites have a 1 in 17 chance of ever being imprisoned, Blacks chances are 1 in 3. The 2016 documentary *13th* by Ava Duvernay is helpful in contextualizing this phenomenon and linking it to “the wake”.

The title “*13th*” refers to the thirteenth amendment[8] and the documentary links it to the current mass incarceration problem in the United States. The abolishment of

[8] The full text of the amendment: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction”.

slavery and “involuntary servitude” took effect in 1865. However, the amendment makes an exception for “punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted”. The feature outlines how subsequent rhetoric and policies by then-presidents Nixon, Reagan, Bush and Clinton caused and maintained the marginalization and criminalization of people of color. America has 5% of the world population but its inmates account for 25% of the global prison population: the highest percentage of incarceration in any country. People of color have historically been disadvantaged by laws that prey on societal fear (e.g. the war on drugs and the war on terror). What further complicates the issue are the capitalist implications: mass incarceration is profitable. For example, inmates are used in the production process for companies like Victoria’s Secret and JC Penney. Deals between correctional institutions and private businesses have resulted in “free” labor within the prison system. Thus, while, theoretically, the basic premise of the 13th amendment or, the abolition of slavery, freed Black people, the mass incarceration that followed is, in practice, modern-day slavery. Moreover, a prison sentence is never truly left in the past; voting rights, job and housing applications are all affected by a conviction. Therefore, the ramifications of incarceration last long beyond the sentence, giving another dimension to Sharpe’s notion of the past never being in the past and constantly rupturing the present. As such, the documentary *13th*, like the scholarly concept of “the wake”, links the presence of the past (slavery) to the present (mass incarceration). The imagery of black-and-white images alongside Tish’s narration presents these works in a narrative and visual manner (figures 9, 10 and 11).

> There aren’t enough hours in the day or judges on the bench to try all the cases brought against these men. The game has been rigged and the courts see it through. A trial is your right, but to bury you beneath the prison for forcing the

judge and the DA to do their jobs is the court's right too. And so, like many of these poor men, Fonny took a plea.

Figure 9. "Enslavement of Black lives." Still from *Beale Street*.

Figure 10. "Police brutality against Black lives 3." Still from *Beale Street*.

Figure 11. “Mass incarceration of Black lives.” Still from *Beale Street*.

Fonny’s fate was sealed by “the rigged game” or the impossibilities of a system that is committed to cage Black bodies. The grim ending of the film illustrates Sharpe’s paradox of “slavery’s denial of Black humanity” in an innocent man’s life (14).

Tish also alludes to white dominance in her everyday life. In a key scene she describes her experiences at her department store job behind the perfume counter. She distinguishes between a Black man who looks at her with pity and tests perfume on his own hands, and a white man who “will take your hand, he will carry your flesh to his nostrils and he will hold it there; he will hold it there for a lifetime”. This “small”, uncomfortable act of dominance of white power over a Black body links to the lifetime of marginalization that Blacks experience. The exploitation of Black bodies for white gain is apparent in central issues like slavery, Jim Crow and mass incarceration, but extends to the slight minutiae of everyday Black life.

Get Out is another Black-focused film that attends to “subtle” ways of marginalizing Black and links them to the more violent ramifications, rendering them as

originating from the same place. *Get Out* inhabits and critiques Black lives in "the wake" in a visual manner and presents the connection between past and present in its entire storyline. The movie revolves around Chris: a Black man who is about to meet his white girlfriend's parents for the first time. When Chris first meets the Armitrages, they seem to be the epitome of post-racists. Dean and Missy make sure to express their liberal, colorblind stance: they "would have voted for Obama a second time if they could" and the only reason why they have a Black maid and gardener is because they have been with the family for generations. In the next few scenes, microaggressions occur: Rose's brother asks about Chris' athletic abilities due to his " frame and genetic make-up", at a garden party, guests state "Black is in fashion" and ask Rose "is it better?", referring to Chris' lovemaking. While these instances are uncomfortable, they are seemingly harmless. The second half of the film takes a darker turn and unfolds the "subtle" racism to Black subjugation in the form of literal slavery. The "good", "post-racial" characters in the plot turn out to be the most overt racists of all.

The Armitrage family is revealed to be a modern-day slavery operation in which Black bodies are used to implant white brains. Black bodies are stolen and used as commodities to serve whites' needs. The links to slavery are frequent. Chris is sold through a practice comparable to a slave auction. Dean stands in front of a white crowd, next to a picture of Chris and through a game of "bingo", bidders can make offers on the "product" (figure 12). When Chris is restrained and about to undergo the procedure, he notices that tears in the lining of the chair expose some plucks of cotton; he uses these to stuff his ears to escape Missy's hypnosis (figure 13). In an ironic turn, picking cotton literally saves Chris from the enslavement of his body.

Figure 12. “Auction for Chris’ body.” Still from *Get Out*.

Figure 13. “Picking cotton to escape slavery.” Still from *Get Out*.

The most vivid and powerful link to slavery resides in the movie’s concept of the Sunken Place. Chris first experiences the Sunken Place when Missy hypnotizes him. When Missy commands him to “sink”, he is absorbed by the floor, falling into a vast, black space while in a complete state of helplessness (figure 14). He can see Missy looking at him as he sinks deeper into nothingness; she is completely indifferent to his distress. This is an embodiment of his mind’s consciousness. His physical body, in the room with Missy, is seemingly paralyzed with the exception of his eyes. Through an uncomfortable close-up, we witness the fear in his tear-filled eyes (figure 15).

Figure 14. “Chris in the Sunken Place 1” Still from *Get Out*.

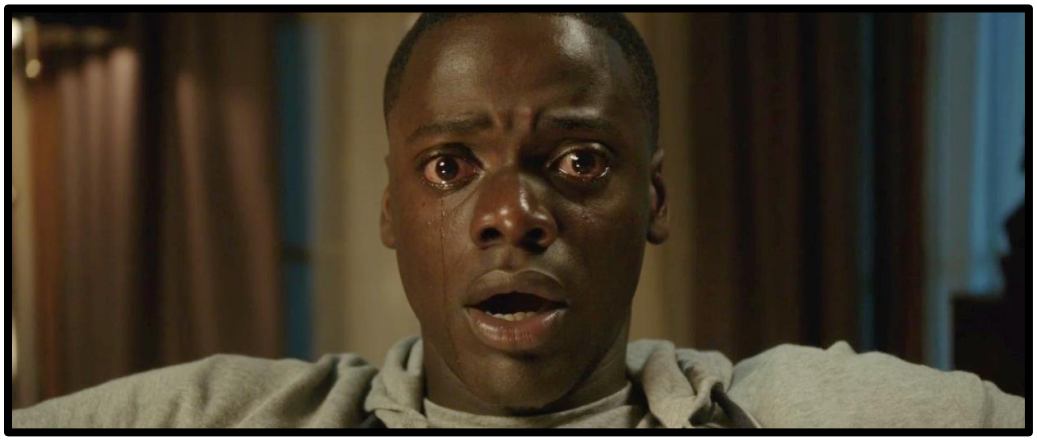

Figure 15. “Chris in the Sunken Place 2.” Still from *Get Out*.

Jim Hudson, the man who won the auction for Chris’ body, further elaborates on the concept of the Sunken Place when he explains the upcoming brain-transplantation procedure:

> [a part of your brain stays put] So, you won’t be gone, not completely. A sliver of you will still be in there somewhere, limited consciousness. You’ll be able to see and hear what your body is doing, but your existence will be as a passenger, an audience. You’ll live in the Sunken Place.

The notion of an "existence as a passenger" is embedded in the commodification of Black bodies. Writer and director, Jordan Peele, intended the Sunken Place to represent "the greater themes of the movie of neglect, marginalization, paralyzation by fear and by a system that Chris and all of us are in, specifically with regards to the racial conversation." (Peele, "Director's Commentary"). The "racial conversation" refers to the lack of dialogue around systemic racial issues that are being obscured by "post-racial" fictions. Additionally, Peele sees the Sunken Place as an allegory for the mass incarceration of Black men: "There [are] real Black people who [are] being abducted and put into dark holes, and the worst part of it is we don't think about them" (Morris). While *Beale Street* alluded to the problem of mass incarceration of Black men through narration and narrative, *Get Out* does so through an uncomfortable but expressive symbolic visualization.

Another critique on so-called "post-racial" society in *Get Out* is found in the character of Jim Hudson. He is a blind man who, in his own words, wants to inhabit Chris' body for his eyes. Jim is blind so he literally cannot see the color of Chris' skin and can be seen as the embodiment of "colorblind" racism. Yet, he is still complacent to the enslavement of Black bodies. It suggests that alleged "colorblindness" still results in the same consequences for Black lives. When Chris asks, "why Black people?", Jim answers "who knows? People want a change. Some people want to be stronger, faster, cooler. […] But please don't lump me in with that; I could give a shit about what color you are". Despite the fact that he is literally about to steal a Black man's body, Jim still denies being racist. He does not care about the color of Chris' body but, simultaneously, does not care about the wellbeing of that body, and is willing to use it as a commodity for

his own gain. This is a critique on the consequences of “colorblind” racism: not seeing or acknowledging color neglects the systemic racial divide that has constantly marginalized Black lives.

Conclusion

Films are powerful carriers of ideas that disseminate in society to mediate a certain ideology. In the case of WSF, they can maintain dominant ideas about racial dynamics. Contrarily, as seen in Black-focused film, they can also be a site of resistance against the racial status quo. This thesis has shown how the two different types of film engage with and respond to the continuous racial problems in "post-racial" American society. Although both WSF and Black-focused film address racism and racial dynamics, they do so in very different ways. Similar to the inferential quality of racism in a "post-racial" society, WSF distorts the workings of racism and the complexities of racial issues. As such, I would argue that WSF is a manifestation of so-called "new" racism. While WSF is compromised by "the wake" to the extent that it perpetuates the very notions it deems to fight, Black-focused film both inhabits and ruptures "the wake" by presenting how Black lives are conditioned by "the wake" and depicting the realities of systemic racism, thereby doing "wake work".

WSF is disguised as a film that cares about Black characters and absolves them from the racism they endure, but it is simultaneously embedded in that same racial status quo. The racist quality of WSF is not blatant and it is only after focused analysis that the codes of white supremacy become apparent. The sub-genre maintains white domination and Black subjugation through the centering of whiteness and the marginalization of Black characters and stories. Black characters are presented as stereotypical, passive and are reduced to their victimization. Systemic racism is trivialized and the racism in the movie is easily fixed. It is recognized immediately and solved completely. The "bad" whites have either changed for the better or they have been punished. There are no loose

ends and there is always a feel-good, happy ending that allows audiences to sigh a breath of relief. This simplification distorts the continuous presence of racism in American society. Furthermore, the main purpose of Black characters in WSF is to be saved by white characters. As such, the main objective of WSF resides not in the rejection or even the accurate portrayal of racism as its main subject, but in emphasizing the heroism of the white savior. In other words, WSF keeps Black characters in "the wake" for its own white supremacist and "post-racial" agenda.

While WSF inhabits racism in order to have a white savior "fix" it for the helpless Black characters, Black-focused film does so to demonstrate how Black lives are constantly conditioned by systemic racism. Victimization by racism is the main subject, but Black characters are not confined to being victims; they are presented as complex, dynamic individuals with their own personal problems, dreams and fears. As such, Black-focused film provides an antithesis to WSF subjecting Black characters to living in "the wake". The embodiment of Black lives in "the wake" subsequently creates a critique on the system that conditions them as such. Black-focused film contains paradoxes and juxtapositions that highlight the impossibilities of Black lives in "the wake" and simultaneously critiques this system. As such, these films raise consciousness for systemic racism and a critique on "post-racial" fictions. Black-focused film does "wake work" by presenting the impossibilities of Black living in a perpetually racist society. Furthermore, the representation of dynamic Black characters ruptures the symbolic annihilation of Black in dominant media, like WSF.

All three cases of WSF were produced by white filmmakers who vocalized "post-racial" and "colorblind" beliefs. It is problematic to argue that one should not write

across one's own identity categories (e.g. gender identity, sex, race). However, there needs to be ample effort behind taking on the representations of other groups of people. It is not necessarily problematic that we get to know white characters nor that they are depicted in a positive light; the problem is that they are at the center of films that depict Black stories. The white focus removes Black characters from their own stories to have a white savior intervene and save the day. While consciously or unconsciously, the filmmakers of WSF did not do the work, resulting in a form of cultural appropriation of Black stories and an investment in the maintenance of white supremacist fantasies. Sharpe defined being in "the wake" as "to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (13-14). As this thesis has shown, WSF can be read as part of "slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" while Black-focused film showed a commitment to represent and rupture this unfolding.

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