THE RESURGENCE OF BLAXPLOITATION IDEOLOGIES IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK FILMS

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

April 2023

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ABSTRACT

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In this thesis, I examine the resurgence of Blaxploitation ideas in contemporary Black films, with a specific focus on *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) and *Judas and the Black Messiah* (2020). I argue that these two recent films draw on historical events and Blaxploitation films of the 1970s to depict a continuum of Black resistance to anti-Black racism and social injustice. I assert that just like the Blaxploitation films served as the pop culture expression of Black social justice organizations like the Black Panther Party in the 1970s, *BlacKkKlansman* and *Judas* also articulate the importance of contemporary social justice movements like Black Lives Matter.

In the introductory chapter, I establish the historical background, ideological motivation, and aesthetic signifiers of Blaxploitation films. The chapter reveals that Blaxploitation films emerged as a response to the racist representation of Black people in early mainstream Hollywood films, as well as to anti-Black racism in the wider culture.

In chapter two, I interpret Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* as a film that yokes historical events with Blaxploitation tropes, such as Black cultural expression and collective struggles, to depict a continuum of Black resistance to anti-Black racism.

In chapter three, I argue that Shaka King's *Judas and the Black Messiah* celebrates Black resistance to social injustice by valorizing the self-defense ideology and social organization of the Black Panther Party. I conclude by drawing an ideological connection between the Black Panther Party and Black Lives Matter, emphasizing the importance of both groups to Black social justice struggles.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Glory be to Almighty Allah for bestowing me the divine grace to complete this journey. I appreciate the support of Professor Erin Labbie for accepting to chair my thesis committee within a short period of notification. I especially cherish the support of Professor William Albertini, whose invaluable comments and suggestions helped me to achieve clarity of thought and expression in my research. Special credit is due to Professor Khani Begum for her intellectual mentorship and passion-driven teachings that inspired the ideas expressed in the thesis. Finally, I thank my family and friends for their inestimable love and support.

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CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I examine the resurgence of Blaxploitation ideas in contemporary Black films, with a specific focus on Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* and Shaka King's *Judas and the Black Messiah*. I argue that both *BlacKkKlansman* and *Judas* draw on Blaxploitation tropes such as self-defense, mass protests, and Black cultural expression to depict African American resistance to anti-Black racism and social injustice.

Since their release in 2018 and 2021 respectively, these two films have been praised for connecting America's racial past and present. Film critic Mark Kermode argues that *BlacKkKlansman* "efficiently conflates the struggles of the past and present into a powerful cinematic continuum" (Kermode). Similarly, Benjamin Lindsay praises *Judas and the Black Messiah* for retelling the horrible experience of Black people with police in the 1960s in a way that provokes reflection on contemporary American policing.

While these critical appraisals are true about the films, they seem to have focused only on anti-Black racism without paying adequate attention to the centrality of Black resistance in both films. This thesis argues that beyond the depiction of anti-Black racism, *BlacKkKlansman* and *Judas* also celebrate Black resistance by valorizing Black community organizations, cultural expression, mass protest, and self-defense. In addition, both films echo the styles, subject matters, and aesthetic features of the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. Just as Blaxploitation films served as pop culture expressions of Black politics and the style and substance of groups like the Black Panther Party (BPP), these two recent films assert the need for contemporary protest movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM). *BlacKkKlansman* portrays Black resistance through cultural expression as well as individual and collective struggles, while *Judas*

articulates the importance of self-defense and community organization against police brutality and other forms of social injustice.

In depicting Black resistance to social injustice, *BlacKkKlansman* and *Judas* fall into the category of contemporary Black films such as *Hidden Figures* (2016), *Get Out* (2017), and *The Woman King* (2022). This set of films challenges Black stereotypes and valorizes Black resistance to anti-Black racism in diverse ways. *Hidden Figures* portrays the struggles and extraordinary contributions of three African American women to US space exploration in a way that belies the racist representation of Black people in mainstream films and media. *Get Out* narrates a riveting account of Black resistance to the historical exploitation of Black body that is often perpetrated under the deception of white liberal love. Similarly, *The Woman King* celebrates the collective struggles of a group of Black women who defend their kingdom against colonial incursion. Like each of these contemporary films, *BlacKkKlansman* and *Judas* depict African Americans' resistance to anti-Black racism and social injustice.

Since I argue that *BlacKkKlansman and Judas* are modern-day Blaxploitation films, I discuss the historical background, tropes, and aesthetic elements of Blaxploitation films in this introductory chapter. I also review related literature on Blaxploitation films to situate my argument within a larger scholarly conversation.

Blaxploitation Cinema: Historical Background and Thematic Signifiers

In his introduction to the book *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s*, Novotny Lawrence traces the racist representation of Black people to the early days of the American motion picture industry. Lawrence observes that since the emergence of the motion picture industry in the 19th century, "the medium has presented Blacks in a manner that reflects their socio-political status in America'' (Lawrence 1). Lawrence also argues that mainstream films demonized Black people

and misrepresented Blackness as an existential threat to the safety of the white race. He reiterates that "when the motion picture emerged as a popular form of entertainment, the medium also functioned as a vehicle for perpetuating white supremacist ideologies, consistently reaffirming, and reminding blacks that in the United States, they were second-class citizens" (Lawrence 9). Lawrence's argument corroborates the view of postcolonial critics like Frantz Fanon and Chinua Achebe who argue that Black is often portrayed as a negative antithesis to the white race. This negative representation of Blackness provided a motif for the historical repression of Black people. Black racial repression, as used in this thesis, takes different forms such as police brutality, physical and emotional harassment, and social economic marginalization. Blaxploitation films emerged as a response to this repression in the 1970s. The films advocated for individual and communal resistance against anti-Black racism through the depiction of Black heroic figures who resist injustice in their communities.

Lawrence further argues that Blaxploitation films responded to mainstream films like D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) that demonized, criminalized, and racially misrepresented Blacks. While the racism in *The Birth of a Nation* is particularly well-known, Lawrence notes that it is just one among many early films that reprehensibly misrepresent African Americans. According to Lawrence, other early films that perpetuate Black racial stereotypes include *Dancing Darkey Boy* (1897), *A Nigger in the Woodpile* (1905), and *For Massa's Sake* (1911). These films "depict blacks as the objects of ridicule not to be taken seriously unless they are sacrificing themselves for their white masters" (Lawrence 2). Lawrence adds that the contributions of these racist films stretched far beyond the periods noted above. The films served as a foundation for the clownish, stoic, and brutal black representation in films and TV programs for decades (Lawrence 3).

The trope of communal struggles in Blaxploitation films often manifests through the combined efforts of two or more individuals who work as a team to defend Blacks from harassment and intimidation. Two Harlem detectives, Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones, work together to rid the Black neighborhood of harassment and financial exploitation of Reverend O'Malley in *Cotton Comes to Harlem.* Similarly, in the early Blaxploitation film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), the protagonist Sweetback receives help from the Black community to escape persecution after killing a racist cop. Some members of the Black neighborhood harbor and feed him in the true spirit of communal support.

Regarding the idea of social organization in Blaxploitation, we see an organized group of militants fighting white villains in films like *Foxy Brown* (1974). This militant organization serves justice to the bad and protects the Black community from white villains. The group is headed by the eponymous heroine, Foxy Brown and operates with short guns and other combative instruments.

Drawing on the self-defense ideology and liberating struggle of the BPP, Blaxploitation films celebrated "Black characters defeating white opponents" through acts of valor (Cowans 35). More significantly, Blaxploitation films encouraged the assertion of full Black humanity and agency by casting Black protagonists who deployed wits, strength, and sexuality as instruments of revenge against social injustice (Lawrence 3). Lawrence reports that the making of Blaxploitation cinema thrived on low-budget production. In the essay "The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation," Ed Guerrero asserts that the trope of Black resistance presented in Blaxploitation films were inspired by the "rising political and social consciousness of Black people, taking the form of a broadly expressed black nationalist impulse at the end of the civil rights movement" (Guerrero 5). Guerrero refers specifically to the social consciousness

inspired by the BPP, a militant political party and self-defense organization that replaced the civil rights movement in the 1960s. The group was combative in resisting anti-Black racism and police brutality, unlike its non-violent civil rights predecessors. Blaxploitation films borrowed this combative, self-defense ideology of the BPP and turned it into a vital cinematic trope. Just like the BPP from which the films derived their self-defense ideology, Blaxploitation films have met with torrents of negative criticisms from individuals and groups since the 1970s.

The president of the Bever Hill branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Junius Griffin, was the first to use the name "Blaxploitation" to describe these radical films (Waddell 174). Griffin's Blaxploitation label was inspired by the misconceptions that greeted the emergence of Blaxploitation films, especially by critics with reservations about the deviant behaviors depicted in the films (Wright 64). However, Fred Williamson, a Blaxploitation actor, asserts that the argument that Blaxploitation films only celebrate deviant behaviors is a "political maneuver designed to discredit these vernacular films in favor of greater political autonomy for the middle classes" (qtd. in Koven 2).

Mikel Koven adds that the Black pride and cultural expression depicted in Blaxploitation films are used to challenge the ideological and cultural "hegemony of white aesthetics in cinema" (10). As a result, Blaxploitation films often express specific styles and features that signal Black cultural and ideological resistance to anti-Black racism. Joshua Wright provides a vivid description of these features in his essay "Blaxploitation Films." According to Wright, these films express topical and aesthetic elements like:

> (1) An urban geographic setting (the ghetto) in the North, Midwest, or West, (2) an over-emphasis on outwardly expressive acts of blackness, (3) a soundtrack of contemporary soul or rhythm and blues music, (4) Black protagonists and white antagonists, (5)

promiscuous men and women, and (6) an ample supply of action and violence. (Wright 66)

An important Blaxploitation feature that is central to this thesis is the emphasis on expressive acts of Blackness, which implies the celebration of Black humanity and expressive culture. *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970) provides a veritable reference to the racial and ideological politics of the Blaxploitation films. In the book *Beyond Blaxploitation*, Novotny Lawrence reports that Samuel Goldwyn, the white producer of *Cotton*, hired a black director, Ossie Davis, to write the screenplay (Lawrence 12). This was to give the film a desired ideological appeal to the target Black audience. As a culturally sensitive director who understands the filmic urge of different audiences, Davis visited Harlem and conducted a survey to know what the Black audience wanted to see in *Cotton* (12). The survey enabled Davis to meet the filmic desire of Black people in the production of film.

Other Blaxploitation films that followed *Cotton Comes to Harlem* include Melvin van Peebles's *Watermelon Man* (1970), *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Shaft* (1971), and others. *Watermelon Man* is a comedy that discusses the pervasiveness of anti-Black racism in the 1970s. The film centers on the life of Jeff Gerber, a white man who wakes up on a fateful morning and finds himself transformed into a Black man. The color transformation renders Jeff vulnerable to unspeakable racial animosities in the same degree that he had enjoyed white privilege.

By building on Jeff's racial transformation, *Watermelon Man* paints a grisly picture of racial imbalances that defined the 20th-century American society. The film ends on a note of racial assertion, with Jeff giving up on the struggle to gain acceptance in a white community. Jeff eventually ignores the shaming effect of his Blackness and settles in the Black neighborhood

where he starts self-defense classes with other Black people. Jeff's actions echo the essence of Black nationalism and racial agency, which are central to Blaxploitation films.

Van Peebles's *Sweetback* serves as a watershed moment in Black cinematic autonomy. Using the façade of filming pornography to attract low-cost Black actors, Van Peebles was able to finance, produce and direct *Sweetback,* establishing himself as the father of "liberating cinema" (Wiggins 31). In the film, the eponymous character, Sweetback, kills a cop in the process of preventing a Black man from being lynched by racist police and struggles to escape from police persecution, using his masculinity as an instrument of survival.

Despite their primary focus on depicting Black resistance to anti-Black racism, Blaxploitation films like *Sweetback*, *Shaft*, and *Super Fly* faced strong criticisms in the 1970s. The films were criticized for promoting racial violence, immorality, drug trafficking and related vices. However, pro-Blaxploitation critics like Joshua Wright argue that the deviant behaviors depicted in Blaxploitation films are indicative of the socioeconomic emasculation of Black people in the United States (Wright 64).

Critical Receptions of Blaxploitation Films: A Review of Related Literature

The Blaxploitation movement has remained an important topic of inquiry among scholars of Black films since the genre emerged in the 1970s. Some recent scholarship in this area includes Richard Benash's review of *Black Panther* as a Blaxploitation film, Samual McMillen's examination of Black masculinity in *Luke Cage* and Tom Symmon's sociopolitical investigation into the emergence of Blaxploitation films.

Discussing the socio-political significance of Blaxploitation films, Tom Symmons argues that Blaxploitation films of the 1970s differ from the 1920s race films and the post-war social problem cinema because Blaxploitation films valorize Black resistance against anti-Black

racism. According to Tom Symmons, the race films of the 1920s only depict Black suffering, unlike the Blaxploitation films where Black heroic avengers often record triumphs over oppressive white power structures (Symmons 278). Symmons further argues that Blaxploitation films typically advocate for social justice by depicting individual and communal resistance.

The trope of Black resistance is further illustrated in Joseph Valle's analysis of *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*, two films that dwell on the theme of vengeance against white supremacy. Pam Grier acts the eponymous characters in both films and leads the charge against white villains who terrorize the Black community. Valle compares the depiction of suffering and resistance in these Blaxploitation films to that of melodrama. He argues that the melodramatic mode is the primary address of Blaxploitation cinema (Valle 137).

According to Valle, melodrama is an "elastic system that redistributes the visibility of suffering to the community" (138). As a dramatic genre, melodrama is usually a sensational piece which appeals to the emotion of the audience through overt depiction of suffering. The visibility of suffering accounts for the spectacles of violence suffered by Black people in Blaxploitation films. As a result, Joseph Valle traces the origin of the melodrama to the French Revolution of 1789 "when the Third Estate overthrew the monarch due to their interest in establishing a democratic government" (Valle 138). As Valle explains, the French Revolution manifested in the form of vigilante resistance against hitherto unscrupulous state law, which had granted absolute power to the monarch and relegated the French masses to the lowest rung of the social pyramid, a situation that resonates with the social realities of Black people in America. Koel Banerjee poignantly adds that "in a world bereft of moral absolutes, melodrama offers an ethical direction to everyday life" (Banerjee 200). This implies that melodrama offers

an alternative way of imagining solutions to social injustice. In the same way, Blaxploitation films challenge racial injustice by depicting Blacks' spirited triumph over white supremacists.

Beyond establishing the ideological influence of melodrama on Blaxploitation, Valle also describes the aesthetic influence of the melodrama on Blaxploitation films. He echoes what Peter Brooks has identified as the stylistic elements of melodrama. For Brooks, melodrama is fundamentally accompanied by music and such musical accompaniment is intended to alert the audience to an emotional moment when a character is seized with pathos. (139). This account captures the feeling of pathos often evoked by the soul music soundtracks in Blaxploitation films. The soul soundtracks are used to trigger the audience's sympathy. For instance, characters like Sweetback and Foxy Brown attract sympathy from the audience, not only through the visual display of their sufferings but also through the musical articulation of such sufferings.

Ed Guerrero asserts that Blaxploitation films were "made possible by the rising political and social consciousness of Black people which translated into a large black audience thirsting to see their full humanity depicted on the commercial cinema screen" (Guerrero 1). Indeed, Black full humanity manifests in many ways in Blaxploitation films. Sometimes, it manifests through the depiction of Black physical and intellectual abilities as in films like *Shaft* and *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, and some other times, through the projection of Black beauty and sexual virility as in *Foxy Brown* and *Sweetback*.

As established above, Blaxploitation films were criticized for preaching violence. In reaction to this criticism, Joshua Wright argues that Blaxploitation films only "served as the microcosm of the struggle of Black people to achieve power, agency, and find their self-identity in an American society that had attempted to disenfranchise and emasculate them since the period of slavery" (Wright 63). Wright dismisses the negative criticism that Blaxploitation films

promote racial violence and deviant behaviors. The negative criticism against Blaxploitation films particularly targeted *Super Fly* (1972). The film was specifically criticized for encouraging the use and trafficking of narcotics (Wright 64), However, critics like Mikel Koven insist that films like *Super Fly* were, in fact, depicting the difficult social conditions of Black people and the different methods with which they survive the harsh realities (Koven 52).

The outrage against *Super Fly* led to the condemnation of Blaxploitation films by groups like the NAACP, People United to Save Humanity (PUSH), and Black Against Narcotics and Genocide (BANGS) that came together under the umbrella of Coalition Against Blaxploitation (CAB). The coalition accused Blaxploitation of endorsing drug abuse and perpetuating negative stereotypes against Black people (Wright 66). Wright, however, insists that Blaxploitation films only signal Black resistance to the historical marginalization of Black people. To solidify this point, Wright argues that throughout the 20th century: "Black men fought for their rights through a variety of methods. Many joined the military and served in the major wars in Europe and Asia and saw their enlistment as a way of justifying their citizenship and proving their manhood, patriotism, and self-worth" (Wright 64). However, this display of patriotism did not come with the citizenship rights that Black people had envisaged.

The main moment for Blaxploitation films seems to have ended in 1975, but Blaxploitation cinematic ideology has continued in various iterations of filmic representation. In other words, Blaxploitation has remained a strong ideological motivation for race-conscious Black filmmakers in the contemporary time. Scholars have examined several contemporary Black films as modern-day Blaxploitation films. While some scholars extol these new Blaxploitation films for celebrating Black racial assertion, others have negative perceptions about the films.

Most recently, Richard Benash and Samual McMillen have discussed contemporary films like Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* and the super-heroic series *Luke Cage* respectively from the perspective of Blaxploitation ideology. While McMillen examines *Luke Cage* as a modern-day version of Blaxploitation film that celebrates Black physical and mental resistance in the face of racial repression, Benash's criticism leans towards the conservative view that Blaxploitation films "place less emphasis on authentic representation of Black and more emphasis on box office profit" (Benash 2). My analysis of *BlacKkKlansman* and *Judas* aligns with McMillen's argument. I contend that both films celebrate Black communal, ideological, and cultural resistance to anti-Black racism and social injustice just like the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s.

The next part of this chapter takes a panoramic look at Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework for the thesis, with a focus on such terms as "perpetrator's perspective," "intersectionality" and "interest convergence" that form the keywords in subsequent chapters on film analyses. These key terms explain complex ideas about race relations and covert manifestation of racism, all of which are depicted in *BlacKkKlansman* and *Judas.*

Critical Race Theory: Critical Assumptions, Tenets and Application

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the works of legal scholars who held the law complicit in the process that produced racial injustice in America. For Cornel West, CRT champions the idea that the "edifice of contemporary legal thoughts and doctrine from the viewpoint of law's role in the construction and maintenance of social domination and subordination" (West xii). The leading proponents of CRT include Derrick Bell, Alan David Freeman, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado.

Derrick Bell's essays "Serving Two Masters" and "Interest Convergence*"* laid the foundation for the ideas espoused in CRT. Bell describes the American legal system as the foundation of social injustice that masks itself as an impartial arbitrator of social conflict. One important argument reinforced by Bell is that the idea of color-blindness is both hypocritical and anathema to the social progression of people of color. As Bell argues, color-blindness impedes the application of affirmative action. In other words, color-blindness prevents Blacks from accessing the privileges they deserve as historically marginalized people.

Similarly, CRT scholars argue that racial integration does not automatically translate into racial liberation for the people of color. To justify this view, CRT scholars cite the Supreme Court ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education* to illustrate the limitation of integration in solving the problem of racial imbalances. Bell, particularly, opines that while school desegregation was enforced following the Supreme Court ruling in 1954, "Black children still attend public schools that are both racially isolated and inferior" (Bell 20). By identifying this kind of limitation in *Brown*, scholars of CRT maintain that racial integration does little to end Black marginalization. The scholars reiterate that there is more to racial equality than color integration, especially in a country whose law is rooted in the legacy of racism. Indeed, in *BlacKkKlansman*, the recruitment of Ron Stallworth and Flip Zimmerman into the state police force does not protect both characters from racist and anti-Semitic assaults.

Racial equality, according CRT scholars, cannot be achieved "without displeasing whites" because to achieve racial equality, "something that can be called white privilege must be impaired" (22). Bell's assumption is that racial equality is only achievable through affirmative action. Affirmative action is a form of social reparation where special provisions are made by the government for underprivileged and historically marginalized minorities (22). But as Bell further

argues, it is quite difficult to "envision the personal responsibility and potential sacrifice inherent in Black's conclusion that true equality for Blacks will require the surrender of racism-granted privilege by some white citizens" (22).

In addition, CRT scholars suggest that the victory of Blacks in legal struggles like *Brown v. Board of Education* should be viewed from the perspective of interest convergence. Interest convergence is a term used to explain a situation where the interest of people of color receives institutional approval only because it serves the purpose of white elites. CRT scholars opine that the "interest of Blacks in achieving racial equality is accommodated only when it converges with the interests of the whites" (22). Derrick Bell offers a lucid illustration of interest convergence in *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, where the desegregation of public schools in 1954 became an iconic political maneuver to appeal to the newly independent countries in the Third World in the battle against the communists (23).

Another key phrase in CRT is the perpetrator's perspective. The Perpetrator's perspective is based on the arguments that beneficiaries of white privilege usually dismiss the existence of racism. In his essay "Legitimizing Racial Discrimination through Antidiscrimination Law," Alan Freeman extensively discusses the notion of racial injustice from two broad perspectives: the victim's perspective and the perpetrator's perspective. Freeman argues that the victim's perspective occurs when victims of racism see themselves as subordinates and not full members of the society because of their marginalized social status (Freeman 29). On the other hand, the perpetrator's perspective is a situation where a beneficiary of white privilege attempts to absolve himself from the guilt of racism. The concept of perpetrator's perspective further suggests that racism is never admitted in a society where it is perpetrated. Rather, it is conceived as the "usual way that the society conducts its business" (Stefancic and Delgado 8).

Furthermore, Stefancic and Delgado explain other key concepts of CRT in their foundational book *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. They explain that CRT, though derived from legal studies, borrowed ideas from other disciplines and philosophical ideas of great thinkers and theorists like Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida "and American radicals like W.E.B. Du Bois, Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Power and the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s" (5). By discussing critical race theory beyond the limited perimeters of its legal origin, Stefancic and Delgado added some other keywords to those discussed above.

Finally, another key term used in CRT that is relevant to this thesis is intersectionality. Intersectionality describes individuals who occupy more than one site of oppression within the minoritized groups. For instance, a Black woman is likely to experience double prejudice of racism and sexism. Similarly, an African American Muslim/Jew may face intersecting persecution based on race and religion. Thus, intersectionality accounts for the multiple prejudices experienced by individuals with plural minority markers.

This introductory chapter has established the historical background and cinematic tropes of Blaxploitation films. The chapter reveals that Blaxploitation films emerged as a pop culture response to the racist representation and social injustice suffered by Black people. It is also established that Blaxploitation films were inspired by the rising political consciousness championed by Black social justice organizations like the BPP in the 1960s. This accounts for the theme of Black resistance against social injustice and anti-Black racism in Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. The next chapter centers on the analysis of Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman*, with a specific focus on how the film deploys Blaxploitation elements to depict Black resistance to social injustice.

CHAPTER TWO. BLAXPLOITATION IDEOLOGY IN SPIKE LEE'S *BLACKkKLANSMAN*

In this chapter, I examine Spike *Lee's BlacKkKlansman* (2018) as a film that draws on Blaxploitation tropes such as Black community struggle and cultural expression to depict Black resistance to racial injustice. Film critic Mark Kermode has described *BlacKkKlansman* as a film that weaves the American racial historical past with contemporary anti-Black racism against Black people to create a "cinematic continuum." I argue that while Kermode's appraisal of *BlacKkKlansman* is true to a large degree, it misses a point that is vital to the film: the valorization of Black communal resistance to anti-Black racism. In other words, *BlacKkKlansman* portrays not only the racial repression of Black people but also Black resistance – individual and communal – to racial victimization, in a way that echoes the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s.

In this analysis of *BlacKkKlansman*, I echo Joseph Valle's argument that heroes of Blaxploitation use their "superior intellect and physical prowess to fight villainy because the white antagonist functions as the personification of racism" (Valle 140). Indeed, *BlacKkKlansman* depicts Black racial triumph over white villainy through the application of individual intellect and collective struggle against anti-Black racism. I draw attention to the elements of Blaxploitation films in *BlacKkKlansman* to foreground Black cultural and ideological resistance to anti-Black racism as depicted in the film. Also, I deploy some keywords of CRT such as interest convergence, intersectionality, and perpetrator's perspective to analyze the film's depiction of how racism has been normalized.

***BlacKkKlansman*: The Synopsis**

BlacKkKlansman narrates the story of Ron Stallworth (John David Washington), a Black police officer who joins the Colorado Springs Police Department and infiltrates the state's chapter of the KKK. The film yokes different historical events and timelines to depict America's racial past that is not yet past. This implies that *BlacKkKlansman* connects America's deep historical time with the moment in which the film is set (1970s) and the moment it was produced (2018).

BlacKkKlansman opens with a scene from the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*, as wounded white soldiers call on God to save the Confederacy. *Gone with the Wind* has been criticized for celebrating slavery and "portraying the slaves as purely docile" just like many early Hollywood films that perpetuate Black racial stereotypes (Bradshaw). *BlacKkKlansman* then moves from the 1939 films and focuses on Dr. Kennebrew Beauregard (Alec Baldwin), a white supremacist who utters racist remarks against Blacks and people of other races. Beauregard expresses dissatisfaction over racial integration in the US, which he blames on an "international conspiracy" between African Americans and Jewish people. Beauregard hints that white school children have come under the attack of racial integration with inferior race because the supreme court declared public school segregation unconstitutional in 1954. Beauregard is suggesting that the desegregation of public schools is detrimental to the cause of keeping America white. This makes Beauregard describe Black people as an "inferior race, lying monkeys, rapists, murderers craving the pure virgin flesh of white women" and seeking racial equality with the whites (02: 27 - 03:26). He further accuses Black people of conspiring with "high ranking blood-sucking Jews" to overtake "God-commanded and biblically inspired" white rulers (03:33 - 54). While Beauregard's tirade lasts, scenes from *The Birth of a Nation* appear on

the screen with racist depictions of Black people. These scenes corroborate the argument of Frantz Fanon that Black people are always represented as the negative antithesis of white people. In his article, "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," Fanon asserts that not only must black be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (Fanon 90). As indicated in Beauregard's racist comments in *BlacKkKlansman*, anti-Back racism is often predicated on the spurious imagination that Blacks are existential threat that must be destroyed to ensure the survival of the white race.

In *BlacKkKlansman*, the KKK members espouse the same idea of Black criminalization to justify racial violence on Black people, with baseless allegation of rape and murder. By relating the past with the present, *BlacKkKlansman* provokes the audience's reflection on America's racial past and present. The film also presents Black cultural and ideological resistance to anti-Black racism. In his book *Blaxploitation films of the 1970s*, Novotny Lawrence argues that one major function of Blaxploitation films is to affirm Black humanity and cultural agency (Lawrence 3). Viewers witness the affirmation of Black humanity through the assertion of Black expressive cultures, as reflected in the Afro hairstyle and leather jacket costumes of the Black characters in *BlacKkKlansman*.

The protagonist, Ron Stallworth, has joined the CSPD, and his first assignment is to infiltrate a rally organized by the Colorado college Black students' union. The students have invited activist Kwame Ture (Corey Hawkins), formerly known as Stokely Carmichael. Ture's invitation prompts the police to infiltrate the rally, due to the activist's Black power ideology, which the police have interpreted as promoting racial violence. The rally provides an opportunity for Black self-assertion and cultural pride, which the police have deemed as terroristic. Ture's rapturous speech at the rally is the first instance of Black cultural assertion that viewers

encounter in *BlacKkKlansman*. At the rally, Ture speaks passionately on issues affecting Black people, particularly on the need for African Americans to assert their racial agency. As Ture explains in the film, asserting racial agency implies that Black people must embrace their Blackness and dismiss the shaming effect of anti-Black racism. While condemning the scourge of white supremacy, Ture argues that humanity transcends color differences or facial appearance. Through Ture's speech, *BlacKkKlansman* advocates for Black cultural consciousness and sensitizes Black people to define their beauty by their Blackness and not by "narrow nose," "thin lips" or "white skin." This cultural advocacy, as espoused by Ture in *BlacKkKlansman*, does not only speak to the students. It also speaks to Black audience, to take pride in their identity and resist racial stigma. According to Ture, it may take time, but Black people must liberate their minds from the shaming effect of Blackness. Ture emphasizes that Black people must reject the lies that Black cannot thrive without the help of white people. This makes Ture reiterate the importance of Black power to Black self-dependence, sounding and requesting his listeners to echo the slogan: "Black power to all the people!" (15:21-32).

Ture also tells the Black students to resist police brutality and safeguard their own right to live. This is a vital message in the film, given the prevalent incidence of police brutality against African Americans in contemporary times. Ture tells the Black students that there is a moral justification for killing racist police. Through Ture's articulation of Black power and authority, *BlacKkKlansman* reinforces the necessity of radical resistance to police brutality, in a way that speaks to the current experience of Black people. With such names as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and George Floyd and other unreported events, the list of Black victims of the racist policing system continues to grow. Ture's advice to the college students to assume the responsibility of self-defense from police aggression is, by implication, an appeal to Black

people to rise against racial injustice and protect themselves against institutional assaults. Kwame Ture's passionate speech ends with some thought-provoking questions that reinforce the need for Black community struggles and self-defense ideology against racial intimidation. Ture asks: "If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am for myself alone, who am I? If not now, when? And if not you, who?" (16:56 - 21:48).

In addition, Ture hints that a government that takes part in perpetrating injustice against its citizens through police brutality, cannot be relied on for protection. Meanwhile, the deployment of vigilante self-defense in combating anti-Black racism has always polarized Black activists and intellectuals. For some, such as the civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr., racial liberation can be achieved through non-violent means. But there are many Black activists who believe King's nonviolent ideology has not and cannot ensure Black racial liberation. In fact, in 1966, Kwame Ture (the real Stokely Carmichael) questioned the effectiveness of King's non-violent ideology in combating social injustice. In his open criticism of King's nonviolent approach, Ture argued that "for nonviolence to work, your opponent has to have a conscience. The United States has no conscience" (Bates). This idea that racial liberation can only be achieved through self-defense is reinforced in *BlacKkKlansman*, with Ture's insisting that liberation from police brutality and racial violence requires spirited social organization and commitment to self-defense.

Returning from the rally, Ture and the Black students are pulled over and harassed by Andy Landers (Frederick Weller). The harassment is one instance of police intimidation that Ture insists must be resisted by Black power. The report of Landers's misconduct is of little concern to Chief Bridges (Robert John Burke), who is more interested in implicating Ture for "radicalizing" Black students because he (Ture) has told the students to defend themselves

against police violence. The Chief's dismissive attitude toward the report about Landers's harassment of the Black students lends credence to the argument that Black people cannot rely on the government or any of its agencies for protection against social injustice. Bridges has interpreted Ture's self-defense warning as a preparation for racial war against the police. Bridges uses Ture's statement as a validation for the long-held but baseless notion about the potential of Black people for criminality.

As the film progresses, Stallworth's request to be moved from the record department – where he has endured racist assaults from fellow police officers – is granted. Having moved from records to intelligence, Stallworth spots a coded newspaper ad inviting new members to join the Colorado chapter of the KKK. Stallworth sees this as an excellent opportunity to infiltrate the Klan and expose the group's covert activities. Disguised as a white supremacist, Stallworth calls to express interest in joining the group. He is eventually recruited into "the organization" after delighting his recruiters with hate speeches against "Niggers, Jews, Spics and Micks, Dagos and Chinks" (29: 47- 29:54). The mission seems to have fallen through when Stallworth realizes he has revealed his real identity to the KKK during the phone conversation. But he quickly improvises an alternative plan to save the situation. Stallworth suggests he will maintain phone conversations with the KKK, while Phillip "Flip" Zimmerman (Adam Driver), a Jewish colleague, should meet the group in person as Stallworth's alter ego. Thus, as noted in the memoir, Stallworth becomes the mouth and Zimmerman, the face. Stallworth, who has maintained impressive call contacts with the KKK, gets even deeper into the ranks of the organization.

As viewers, we see a striking difference between the Black students' union and the KKK in terms of structure and organizational objectives. While the KKK members are hellbent on

destroying various minoritized groups, the Black students are only vested in ensuring the safety of Black people. Ironically, the criminally inclined KKK members operate with impunity while the Black students are hounded like criminals by the police. This situation illustrates the argument of CRT scholars about institution's involvement in the process that produces racial injustice.

With the decision of Walter Breachway (Ryan Eggold) to step down as the President of the Colorado branch of the KKK, Stallworth is chosen as the ideal replacement by Walter and sanctioned by the Grand Wizard of the KKK, David Duke (Topher Grace). However, the decision does not sit well with Felix Kendrickson (Jasper Paakkonen), who has been suspicious of "Stallworth" (Flip in the real sense) as a possible undercover detective. But the KKK Grand Wizard, David Duke has become enamored of Stallworth, who seems to have mastered the craft of faking hate for other racial groups. As part of the plots to destroy the Black community, members of the KKK embark on a large-scale terrorist attack on the Black Students' Union, specifically targeting Patrice Dumas (Laura Harrier), the president of the union. Patrice has been mobilizing Black students and championing group resistance against social injustice. While Stallworth's activities within the CSPD represent individual struggles, Patrice and the Black Students' Union stand for communal resistance. Through these individual and collective struggles, the Black community defeats racial violence. Stallworth's infiltration of the KKK and his timely intervention help forestall the assassination of Patrice and other Black students. Within their limited capacity and through group mobilization, the Black students muster courage and verbally resist the intimidation of Landers and other police harassment. These individual and collective actions echo the cinematic ideology of Black liberating efforts in Blaxploitation films (to be discussed later in this chapter).

While it is an open secret to Stallworth and the police that KKK members are planning a devastating attack on the Black students, it comes as a shock for Stallworth when informed that he has been deployed as a special security aide to the Grand Wizard David Duke "because of the reports of several threats on his life." By implication, Stallworth, a Black police officer, is to be attached to David Duke's security details, indicating that white supremacy has found sanctuary under state protection. David Duke, an agent of destruction is being shielded by the police, while vulnerable Black students are being threatened by the KKK and harassed by the police.

In a moment of poetic justice and through a timely intervention of Stallworth, the two KKK members assigned to destroy the Black students blow themselves up in the process of bombing Patrice's home. Thus, the story ends in a situation of good over evil. Blacks triumph over white supremacists, as typical of Blaxploitation films. Blacks' victory in *BlacKkKlansman* is specifically facilitated by Stallworth's commitment to defend the Black community and motivated by the Black students' protests. But there are other critical issues that Spike Lee raises in *BlacKkKlansman* beyond the theme of Black racial triumph. As the film closes, scenes from a protest by a far-right group appear on the screen as postscripts. This far-right protest took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, with white youths chanting slogans like "Jews will not replace us," "Whose streets? Our streets!" among others. These slogans illustrate how white supremacy has been perpetrated under the deception of patriotism. Interestingly, such hate-motivated speech has a precedent in American history. *BlacKkKlansman* blends the history of racial hate with related news footage of the 2017 white supremacist campaign in Charlottesville to depict a continuum of racial tension.

Showing how close Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* is to reality, Louis Nelson presents an account of a similar radical protest in 1917 calling for the lynching of two Black men who were

wrongly accused of killing a white police officer. By Nelson's report, the event culminated in a protest with people chanting white supremacist slogans also in Charlottesville. These related accounts of violence collapsed temporal gaps to show that the horrible American racial past is not yet past.

The next part of this chapter examines *BlacKkKlansman* as a Blaxploitation film while paying attention to vital tropes like individual and community struggles against anti-Black racism and social injustice.

Black Heroism Versus White Supremacy: The Blaxploitation in *BlacKkKlansman*

In a particular scene in *BlacKkKlansman,* Ron Stallworth and Patrice Dumas discuss the nuances of Blaxploitation films, each expressing preference for and displeasure with different Blaxploitation characters. The scene raises a vital question about the double consciousness of being a Black American. This particularly applies to Ron Stallworth, who must endure a racist policing system while serving his country. Stallworth and Patrice argue whether it is possible for a Black man to be part of the established system of racism while still being committed to the Black liberation struggle. While Stallworth believes this is possible, Patrice thinks otherwise. According to Patrice, it is hard to fight "a racist system from within." Patrice's argument represents the opinion of critics who feel that a Black person cannot do much to address racial inequality within the American institution of racism. The belief is that, even if a Black person wishes to facilitate racial changes, it may be impossible for them because the American institution is rooted in racism. For example, scholars have argued that Obama's emergence as the first African American president did not mark the "transcendence of race" for Black people in the United States (Sundiata 201). Based on the incidence of police brutality against the Black community in recent years, there is always the question of whether the election of the first Black

man into the White House has improved the condition of Black people and the way they are treated in the United States. For many scholars like Sundiata, Obama's election only illustrates the idea of interest convergence because, as a candidate, Obama is rarely imagined as Black by White Americans. Bettina Love and Brandelyn Tosolt corroborate this argument by stating that the kind of vision Obama articulated during his campaign aligns with the type of America commonly envisioned by whites (Love and Tosolt 21). This is the argument advanced by Patrice when she insists that it is impossible to fight racism from within, more so with a Black president whose election converges with the interest of white elites.

Patrice and Stallworth digress towards the question of Black representation in Blaxploitation films. The conversation seems like a conscious attempt by Spike Lee to provoke audience's reflections over the debates on Blaxploitation films. Blaxploitation films are often easily viewed as a cinema of exploitation that promotes Black racial violence (Lawrence 3). But *BlacKkklansman* attempts to correct this notion when Stallworth and Patrice talk about the ideological dynamics in the roles of Blaxploitation figures like Richard Roundtree (as John Shaft), Ron O'Neal (Youngblood Priest), and Pam Grier (as Coffy and Foxy Brown). For Stallworth and Patrice, characters like Richard Roundtree and Pam Grier are African American heroes who defend the Black community against intimidation. These characters were created as models of Black resistance against social injustice and anti-Black racism. Stallworth and Patrice agree that Ron O'Neal's role as a drug peddler in the 1972 film *Super Fly* is a harmful representation African American community as the film promotes Black racial stereotypes. However, as established in the previous chapter, this view is not the only one, as other scholars have argued that *Super Fly* is just a filmic depiction of Blacks struggling to survive their difficult social conditions. Despite having differing opinions about the reality of

fighting racism within the system, both Stallworth and Patrice resist Black repression in many ways in *BlacKkKlansman*. Stallworth's cultural resistance is depicted through body language. He is seen many times tapping his Afro-hair and adjusting his leather jackets. Patrice engage in youth mobilization and protests.

As a culturally assertive Black police officer within the CSPD, Stallworth advances full Black humanity and resists anti-Black racism. Stallworth's Black cultural assertion and ideological resistance are evident in his Afro hairstyle and leather Jacket and other actions that recall the physical features of earliest Blaxploitation films like Shaft, Ed, and Gravedigger. These characters – with the exception of Shaft who is a private detective – are Black cops in early Blaxploitation films. Like Ron Stallworth, Shaft, Ed and Gravedigger fight injustice, specifically anti-Black racism in Black communities in *Shaft* and *Cotton Comes to Harlem* respectively. Stallworth's response about the way he treats people during his interview with the CSPD is also worthy of attention. Stallworth responds: "If they treat me right, I treat them right." With such a blunt response, Stallworth is making a critical point that reflects the defense ideology of the Black Panthers. The Panthers do not strike if not struck and they do not attack without provocation (Harris 412). Similarly, most heroes in Blaxploitation films only struggle to punish white villainy while defending the Black community against racial repression. Stallworth expresses displeasure with the racial slur used to describe Black offenders in the record office. Stallworth does not tolerate anyone referring to Black felons as "toads." For instance, when requested by Sergeant Landers to provide a file on a "toad," Stallworth responds: "No toads here, I said. I don't have any toads. I do have human beings. You give me their names; I'll get you the file" (09:38 - 46). With such a response, Stallworth humanizes Blackness and condemns Black racialization.

In his essay "Black Outlaws and the Struggle for Empowerment in Blaxploitation Cinema," Joshua Wright discusses the styles and aesthetic features of Blaxploitation films. This includes the use of an urban geographic setting where viewers witness overt expression of Blackness. Also, Blaxploitation films are usually accompanied by contemporary soul music, that triggers viewers' reflection on the racial conflicts between Black protagonists and white antagonists. Finally, Blaxploitation films often involve ample supply of action and violence, usually targeted at Black people. But particularly, Blaxploitation films usually depict Black resistance against such violence (Wright 66).

Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* articulates many of the tropes identified above. One key element that deserves emphasis in particular is the centrality of racial injustice in Blaxploitation films and the attempt by the Black community to challenge such injustice. *BlacKkKlansman,* for instance, projects ample examples of Black social marginalization and the struggle by the Black community to overcome the challenge. In one open manifestation of social injustice, the police prioritize the safety of David Duke, a white supremacist, above that of innocent Black citizens by assigning Ron Stallworth to ensure the security of David Duke amidst the reports of an imminent terrorist attack on the Black Students. At this point, Stallworth is torn between his profession as an American police officer and his Black racial identity, a situation that evokes W.E.B Du Bois's double consciousness – "two warring ideals in one dark body" (qtd. in Bruce 299).

Also, as with other Blaxploitation films, *BlacKkKlansman* is set in Urban West Colorado in the 1970s, the years when the state became notorious for the nefarious activities of the KKK. In his foreword to the memoir *Black Klansman*, the real Stallworth documents the spate of racial violence suffered by minority groups in 1960s and 1970s. According to Ron Stallworth, the state

of Colorado recorded an estimated number of 24,000 to 30,000 members of the KKK (Stallworth 8). Coincidentally, it was during this period that Blaxploitation gained popularity for challenging Black racial repression. This underscores the intensity of racial hate recorded in Stallworth's autobiographical account. Furthermore, *BlacKkKlansman* articulates what Joshua Wright describes as "outwardly expressive acts of Blackness" which is often deployed as a tool of Black cultural resistance in Blaxploitation films. This is specifically depicted in the scene where activist Kwame Ture charges the Black students' union to be proud of their Black racial identity. Ture reiterates the need for Black nationalism while de-emphasizing Black racial stigma. He illustrates his point with a striking anecdote about his going to watch the Saturday matinee as a young boy. Ture describes the moment as his age of ignorance, as he was always rooting for a white Tarzan to kill the Black one. He compares his support for the white Tarzan to that of a Jewish boy cheering Nazi police for dragging a Jewish prisoner to the concentration camp. Such racial awareness and the celebration of Black physical and cultural identity as depicted in *BlacKkKlansman*, are major aesthetic tropes in early Blaxploitation films. A good example of such film is *Watermelon Man*, which culminates in the resolution of the protagonist to give up the struggle to get accepted in white neighborhood and moves to Black neighborhood to take self-defense classes with other Black men. He also adjusts his lifestyle to suit his new Black identity.

As part of the ways in which *BlacKkKlansman* articulates Black resistance to racial humiliation, Kwame Ture points to the pervasive idea of objectifying and criminalizing the Black body, which often results in the desire of a Black person to escape his racial identity. Ture encourages the Black students to dismiss such racial stigma. In his book *Embodying Black Experience*, Harvey Young argues that the historical violation of Black body has always resulted

in a racial stigma from which Black people struggle to escape (Young 10). Such racial stigma is usually fought through the celebration of Black culture and racial assertion in Blaxploitation films. This is evident in Ture's emphasis on Black beauty and his reference to the many physical features of Black people in *BlacKkKlansman*.

Also, the film depicts Black cultural resistance through the narrative around Kwame Ture's name change. Ture has changed his name from Stokely Carmichael to Kwame Ture, the name he has adopted from two African nationalists Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Sekou Touré of Guinea. These two political figures were reputed for their struggles against social injustice in Ghana and Guinea respectively. Patrice explains this to Stallworth who instantly respects the change. However, due to racial arrogance, the racists among the white police fail to reckon with Ture's name change even after the explanation by Stallworth.

Like the early Blaxploitation films, *BlacKkKlansman* uses soul music as soundtracks with songs like "Oh Happy Day" by the Edwin Hawkins Singer, "Say it Loud – I am Black, and I am Proud" by James Brown, "We are Gonna be Okay" by Dan Whitener, "Ball of Confusion" by The Temptation, "It's too Late to Turn Back Now" by Cornelius Brothers (Tunefind 2018) and a host of others that provide lyrical commentaries on the sociopolitical issues addressed in the film. The use of soul songs as soundtracks is one of the aesthetic features of Blaxploitation cinema. But the songs are not deployed only for their aesthetic purpose but also to reinforce the theme of Black cultural pride and to invite the audience to sympathize with Black victims of racial injustice in the film.

In his essay on Blaxploitation film, Joseph Valle explains that music performs the function "of directly alerting the audience to an emotional moment when a character is seized with pathos" (Valle 139). The invitation to the audience to sympathize with victims of suffering

is evident in *BlacKkKlansman*. For example, Jerome Turner (Harry Belafonte) narrates the sad ordeal of Jesse Washington, a Black boy, who was brutally killed by the KKK. Simultaneously, the KKK are projecting *The Birth of a Nation* with its anti-Black violence to delighted members. At this point, soul music is used to transport the agony of Black suffering to the audience.

Another important Blaxploitation trope depicted in *BlacKkKlansman* is the film's representation of Black protagonists versus white villains. The resistance by Ron Stallworth and the Black students contrasts the villainy of KKK members who espouse the idea of white supremacy in the film. Though, members of the KKK constitute the main antagonists in the movie, characters like Sergeant Landers, the racist police officer who racially abuses Stallworth and sexually harasses Patrice, cannot be excluded from the list of villainy.

Furthermore, *BlacKkKlansman* depicts ample scenes of racial violence against people of color. Black characters and other minority groups suffer untold physical and emotional violence in the story. Violence against Black people is displayed as in the scene where Inspector Landers harasses Kwame Ture and members of Black students. It is also narrated as seen in the account of Jerome Turner about the lynching of Jesse Washington, a Black man who was falsely accused of raping a white woman. The story aptly illustrates the popular myth about Black males' sexual obsession towards white women.

Both Stallworth and Flip endure intersecting violence of racial and anti-Semitic slurs in their policing duties. Police chief Bridges leads the pack in perpetuating racial stereotypes against Stallworth. In a particular scene, Bridges racializes Stallworth with the phrase "CP time," drawing on a stereotype about Black people's supposed habit of arriving late at events. Similarly, Flip experiences a situation akin to double consciousness as a Jewish American police officer.

He reveals to Stallworth that his Jewish identity was never a concern until he finds himself in the den of the KKK. As Flip explains: "I'm Jewish, yes, but I wasn't raised to be. It wasn't part of my life. I never thought much about being Jewish. You know, I wasn't going to a bunch of Bar Mitzvahs… I was just another white kid" (10:08:25 - 38). Flip is forced to come to term with his Jewish identity through the racial intimidation of the KKK. At this point, he realizes what Stallworth has told him about the need to embrace his Jewishness and think less of himself as an America. This revelation prompts Flip to further commit himself to the mission of infiltrating and exposing the KKK with Ron Stallworth.

Another critical element of the Blaxploitation ideology in *BlacKkKlansman* is the theme of community support. This is well expressed in the spirited attempt by Ron Stallworth and the Black students to defend the Black community from the KKK and racist police like Landers. While Stallworth uses his intellect and professionalism as a cop to help the Black community, the Black students engage in protests and rallies to resist police harassment and other forms of intimidation. Despite the demand of duty and conflicting interests as a Black detective in a racist police department, Ron Stallworth frenetically stands in the way of the KKK to ensure the safety of his Black community. He exudes the communal spirit exhibited by the 1970s Blaxploitation characters like Ed and Gravedigger in Ossie Davis's *Cotton Comes to Harlem,* where the characters help to resist police harassment and criminal activities within Black community.

As common with Blaxploitation films, *BlacKkKlansman* ends with the triumph of the Black community over the evil of white supremacy. The film climaxes in the destruction of the villains and justice for the oppressed community of color in a circumstance that reinforces Joseph Valle's melodramatic description of Blaxploitation in which "the humble of the earth stand up to overbearing tyrants and express home truths…in the essential moral equality of all

and the fraternity of the virtuous, and win through to see villainy punished, and the virtue rewarded in a spectacular version in the last act" (Valle 139).

Politics of Race and Racism: *BlacKkKlansman* from the CRT Perspective

BlacKkKlansman echoes key ideas espoused in Critical Race Theory regarding the issue of racism. The film depicts how racism has been normalized, as argued by CRT scholars. Perpetrators and beneficiaries of racism often deny the existence of racism. This idea of denying racism is foregrounded in Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman.*

Ron Stallworth's interview with the CSPD provides an excellent example of subconscious racism. Stallworth is quizzed on questions about womanizing, drinking, drug dealing, and other actions that signify Black racial stereotypes. One of the interviewers asks to know Stallworth's reaction if addressed as a nigger by any of his colleagues in the police. When Stallworth asks whether such racial slur is possible within the police, the response he receives is affirmative. Rather than offer Stallworth an assurance of protection against racist abuse, the interviewers advise Stallworth to act like Jackie Roosevelt Robinson if racialized by a fellow police officer. Jackie Robinson was an African American Baseball star who endured racist abuse when he was the first Black player Major League Baseball in the United States. Stallworth's interview with the CSPD suggests that racism functions as the usual way that the society conducts its business (Stefancic and Delgado 8).

Also, while it may be argued that the lead interviewer, Mr. Turrentine (Isiah Whitlock) is a Black man like Ron Stallworth, it is important to note that Turrentine is only Black to the extent of serving the racist purpose of the police institution. His character exemplifies the "voice of the minority" notion, which sometimes accords a minority person the license to normalize racial repression of other people of color while serving the interests of white elites. This is what

Cornell West refers to as “the shadow of Jim Crow” that has hidden under the subterfuge of ‘superficial diversity’ (Levenson and Lemon). Analyzed from the perspective of CRT scholars, there are two issues about Mr. Turrentine’s performance during the interview with Ron Stallworth. One, assigning Turrentine, a Black man, to perpetuate racial stereotypes against another Black man, complicates any assumption of racial prejudice. But it takes a shrewd observation to understand that Turrentine is only voicing the ingrained racist ideology in the policing system. Two, the appointment of a racial sellout like Turrentine aptly exemplifies what Derrick Bell explains as interest convergence. As a recruiter for the police, the position of Turrentine may be welcomed as a social elevation for the Black community, it is obvious that such token appointment is only allowed so far it becomes a shield to cover the racist prejudice of the police force. In other words, Turrentine’s privileged role is tied to the racist purpose it serves in the police department and in giving the CSPD a colorblind image when the force is, in fact, rooted in systemic racism.

Another concept of critical race theory that is articulated in *Klansman* is the notion of differential racialization, a concept that explains how different minority groups are racialized and imagined at different periods. Delgaldo and Stefancic have argued that different racial groups are imagined differently at various times. In the era of slavery, the Blacks were considered as chattels and commodified elements that were only fit for sugarcane plantation and later as criminals and rapists. *BlacKkKlansman* captures this oscillating racialization of Black people. During the initiation of new members, the KKK delights its members with a few clips from the 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, a film that stereotypes and casts Black people in a dehumanizing image. Similarly, David Duke dehumanizes Black people by evoking William

Shockley, a Physicist whose Eugenic theory espoused the superiority of the white race over other races (Fair).

Simultaneously, in a different scene, a Black activist Jerome Turner (Harry Belafonte) is relaying a devastating story of his Black friend Jesse Washington, who was lynched on a trumped-up allegation of rape. To show the magnitude of racial violence committed on the young Jesse over racist criminalization, Turner narrates to his Black audience:

> He was 17, I was 18, we kind of looked at Jesse and called him slow, today you 'd call him mentally retarded. They claimed Jesse raped and murdered a white woman by the name Lucy Fryer. They put Jesse on trial, and he was convicted by an all-white jury, after they deliberated for only four minutes… I was working across the street at the shoeshine parlor, after the verdict, the mob grabbed Jesse, put a chain around his neck and dragged him out of the courthouse…they marched Jesse though the streets, they stabbed him, and beat him and finally in a blood heap, they held him down in the street and cut his testicles. (01:33:39 – 35:52)

The account above indicates one instance of indiscriminate Black criminalization and extra-judicial killing of Black people. It also exemplifies the idea of differential racialization in which Black people have ceased to be imagined as chattels (as described during slavery) but have now come to be misrepresented as rapists and criminals. The scene also functions as one way by which Lee establishes the continuity of anti-Black racism. Turner is relaying a chilling history about Black criminalization to the Black students who are also faced with the same reality of Black criminal stereotypes as of the time the story is being relayed.

One last idea of critical race theory depicted in *BlacKkKlansman* is intersectionality. CRT scholars explain intersectionality as a situation in which a person belongs to two or more

identities within the minority groups and invariably occupies multiple sites of oppression. The idea of intersectionality is represented in the character of Patrice, who suffers double prejudice of race and gender due to her identity as African American woman activist. For being vocal and standing against racial oppression of the Black people, Patrice becomes the target of aggravated physical and sexual assaults. She suffers physical attack from the KKK and sexual harassment from a white police officer, Sergeant Landers, who believes he has the prerogative to do the unspeakable to Black people. Patrice's multiple minoritized identities as a Black woman activist illustrate Maya Angelou's view that Black women are engulfed in the "tripartite crossfire fire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and black lack of power" (Angelou 273). While *BlacKkKlansman* is silent on Black masculine prejudice, we see how white illogical hate and black lack of power contribute to the harassment of Patrice. Indeed, it is a tough task for the Black characters – including Kwame Ture – to stop Landers from assaulting Patrice because they lack the power to wrestle the police during the harassment.

Patrice becomes a major target of the KKK as a Black woman activist. This sexist hostility is depicted in the KKK's malicious reference about Patrice body during the plot to attack the Black students. This results in the attempt by the KKK to bring her to destruction. But Patrice remains persistent in the struggles for racial liberation of the Black community. This is evident in her determination to fight when it seems that she and Ron Stallworth are under the attack of the KKK in the final scene. Both grab their guns in preparation to defend themselves from an imminent threat, as the camera closes with slow motion. These instances show the sensitivity of Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* to the Black social justice struggles, discussed from the intersection of Blaxploitation ideology and critical race theory. The next chapter of the thesis

examines the themes of Black resistance and community empowerment in Shaka King's *Judas and the Black Messiah*.

CHAPTER THREE. *JUDAS AND THE BLACK MESSIAH*: THE LEGACY OF BLACK POWER AND SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

In this chapter, I examine Shaka King's *Judas and the Black Messiah* as a film that valorizes Black resistance to racial injustice through the social programs and self-defense ideology of the Black Panther Party (BPP). I argue that *Judas* celebrates the BPP's social struggles, which have been ignored due to the history of negative portrayals of the BPP in the news and entertainment media. I also argue that films like *Judas* invite the audience to appreciate Black resistance to police brutality and social injustice protests championed by groups like BLM in the present time.

Indeed, the BPP has been the most demonized group among Black social organizations as the activities of the group have been misconstrued "as an attempt to overthrow the government" (Harris 416). This misconception is largely due to the media misrepresentation of the BPP's self-defense ideology against racism. The negative media representation of the BPP is rooted in the famous statement by the then Director of the FBI, Edgar J. Hoover, that the BPP was "the greatest single internal security threat to the US" (Williams 7). However, recent scholarly evaluations of the BPP indicate that Hoover's assessment was off the mark. Contrary to Hoover's incriminating assessment of the group, Jessica Harris argues that the BPP was only invested in the provision of adequate protection for Black people against police brutality and did not engage in unprovoked attack (Harris 412). Corroborating Harris's argument, JoNina Abron adds that the BPP emerged in response to the "numerous murders and brutal beatings and bombing of blacks by white racists – police, KKK and others" (Abron 33). Shaka King's *Judas and the Black Messiah* has provided a cinematic addition to these positive portrayals of the BPP and the impact of the group's welfare programs and self-defense on the Black social

emancipation movement. *Judas*'s addition is even more important since films travel farther and connect with wider audience than academic writings.

As a historical film, *Judas*'s cinematic depiction of the police harassment and intimidation of Blacks resonates with contemporary reality in the United States, specifically regarding the experience of Black people with police brutality. Therefore, in the concluding part of my analysis, I draw an ideological connection between the BPP and Black Lives Matter (BLM) to establish a historical continuum in Black struggles against anti-Black racism and social injustice in the United States.

***Judas and the Black Messiah*: A Chilling Account of Anti-Black Racism**

Judas opens with reports of violence against Black people. Captions from newspapers and magazines reveal events like the assassination of Martin Luther King and the mass incarceration of Black people. Further institutional repression of Blacks is depicted as the co-founder of the BPP, Huey P. Newton, is shown in detention with other incarcerated African American youths. This cinematic depiction transcends historical revelation, as it reflects the contemporary reality about Blacks and the American prison system. Scholars have argued that the recent mass incarceration of young Black people has undone the social progress achieved by the civil rights movement (Taylor 200). *Judas* travels back to the 1960s, with Huey Newton speaking to the media about the essence of rebellion as a recipe for liberation. Reacting to the allegation of racial rioting for which Black people have been accused, Newton states that "Those are not rioting; those are rebellions. People are rebelling because of conditions and not because of individuals. No individual creates rebellion. It is created out of the conditions" (*Judas*: 01:40-48).

*Judas'*s dramatization of varying degrees of Black suffering such as police intimidation and deprivation of citizenship rights in the introductory scenes, effectively establishes the social conditions that necessitate a series of Black protests witnessed later in the films. As mentioned above, while *Judas* portrays Black suffering, the film also indicates that communal organizations are practical tools for combatting anti-Black racial violence. In one of the introductory scenes, Fred Hampton (Daniel Kaluuya) clearly articulates the BPP's manifestos in fighting injustice. As Hampton explains to his Black audience, within the BPP "we don't fight fire with fire; we fight fire with water. We don't fight racism with racism; we gonna fight racism with solidarity. We don't fight capitalism with capitalism. We gonna fight capitalism with socialism" (3:18 –27). These statements convey sincerity of purpose and a genuine commitment to the cause of social justice. In another scene, Hampton tells his Black followers that revolution is the solution to social injustice, not reformation. Speaking to the Black students of a fictional Wright Junior College in *Judas*, Hampton asserts that: "reformation is just a master teaching the slaves to be better slaves" and that only revolution can ensure social justice (10:32-35).

Meanwhile, *Judas's* central conflict is built around the warning by FBI Director Edgar J. Hoover (Martin Sheen) against what he calls the rise of a Black messiah, a reference to the outspoken chairman of the Illinois chapter of the BPP, Fred Hampton. Hampton's statement about fighting racism and capitalism with socialism has been interpreted by the FBI to threaten the American internal security structure. The FBI chief orders that Hampton and his group be stopped by every means. To destroy Hampton and the BPP, the FBI and Chicago police blackmail William O'Neal (Lakeith Stanfield), to infiltrate the BPP and obtain the information that will help destroy the group. The informant, O'Neal, is under police investigation for stealing a car and impersonating a federal agent. Agent Roy Mitchell (Jesse Plemons) offers O'Neal

freedom in exchange for supplying information that will lead to the assassination of Hampton. In a situation of convergent interest, O'Neal agrees to work for the FBI and infiltrates the BPP, disguising himself as a passionate member. Hiring an informant to spy on a social justice group indicates the desperation of the FBI and Chicago police to destroy the BPP and sabotage the group's social justice programs.

According to the FBI's plan, O'Neal is to act as an agent provocateur within the BPP while inciting group members to violence. Agent Leslie (Robert Longstreet) reveals to Roy that the rationale behind such scheme is to present the BPP as an organization of social pariahs. Portraying the BPP as a violent group gives the FBI a reason to invade the organization's facility under the pretext of maintaining order. For example, George Sams (Terayle Hill), another FBI informant, runs to the BPP's headquarters in Chicago after killing a member on the false allegation of snitching. In another scene, Hoover reveals to Roy Mitchell that George Sams's action is part of the FBI's grand scheme against the BPP. With this, *Judas* offers a filmic revelation about the institutional conspiracy against the BPP. It also explains how the police have often engineered the negative media portrayal of the group. For example, the report after the police invasion of the BPP reads: "Cops Torch Terrorists' Haven" (1:03:40-54).

As part of the FBI's plots against the BPP, informant O'Neal advises Hampton to blow up the city to prove his (Hampton's) sincerity about dying for Black liberation. O'Neal alludes to Hampton's radical speeches about giving up his life for Black freedom if necessary. Truly, Hampton pledges to sacrifice his life for Black liberation but not to the extent of destroying the city or bombing the people. Hampton's idea of dying for liberation, as he explains during a BPP rally, is to fight the system of oppression and provide social support for the needy. According to Hampton, it is unjust for Black people to visit hospitals because of minor illnesses and return in

body bags due to poor medical facilities in Black communities. For Hampton, resisting injustice means fighting "a nefarious, racist government." However, he understands that the established system of oppression will not allow this to happen without fighting back. Hence, he promises to give up his life for people's social liberation if that is what freedom requires. Hampton's idea of dying for Black liberation is clearly articulated when he declares that "I don't believe I'm gonna die in no car wreck! I don't believe I'm gonna die 'cause I got bad heart! I believe I'm gonna die for the people, 'cause I live for the people!" (1:18:02-19). Playing to the scripts of the FBI, O'Neal attempts to convert these radical statements into emotional blackmail by inciting Hampton into a serious crime that can lead to the destruction of the BPP by the state security agents.

Fred Hampton dismisses O'Neal's suggestion of bombing the city and explains that dying for Black liberation does not translate into committing violence. Hampton adds that bombing the city would only validate the wrong perception of the BPP. This humane response to O'Neal is one of the ways by which *Judas* refutes the disinformation and demonic representation of the BPP and the group's collective struggles. Renegades like Bill O'Neal and George Sams help the FBI and Chicago police to create reasons for the continued arrest of the group members. They achieve this by causing dissension among members, while also inciting them to commit violence. Research shows that the FBI arrested members of the Chicago BPP 111 times in the Summer of 1969 over trumped-up allegations (Williams 175).

As part of the FBI's schemes against the BPP, Roy reveals to O'Neal that some racist police conspired to perpetrate racial violence against three African Americans for attempting to register Black voters. Roy adds that the police arrested the Black men and delivered them to the KKK. But Roy only uses the horrible narrative as a decoy to further discredit BPP's social

justice cause by telling O'Neal that the Panthers and the KKK are two sides of the same coin. He also uses the specious comparison to further convince O'Neal on why he needs to assist the FBI in destroying the BPP.

Beyond its self-defense cause against police brutality, *Judas* also depicts the BPP as a group that is committed to the social progression of marginalized groups, regardless of their color. In the film, the BPP invites people from other Black organizations and racial groups to its social programs. The group's collective struggle is best visualized in the scene that follows the police invasion of the BPP's headquarters. The attack has left the facility devastated. But when Hampton returns from Menand prison, he sees a well-rehabilitated facility. Responding to the revelation by Bobby Rush that the devastated headquarters had been rebuilt by the "neighborhood, the pushers, the grannies, and the Crowns. Everybody!" Hampton says: "Power. Anywhere there are people, there is power" (01:12:10-43). This joint effort illustrates the BPP's belief in collective struggle as a practical tool for people's liberation. However, these efforts are easily frustrated by the FBI's criminalization of the BPP. Fred Hampton is arrested over a ludicrous allegation of stealing ice cream, a charge that results in his incarceration at Menand Prison. Other Panthers are criminalized and killed with impunity.

Regarding the criminalization of the BPP, Yohuru Williams asserts that the most misunderstood group among Black social justice organizations is the BPP because "people know about their image and their guns but not their community organization" (Williams 4). In *Judas*, Hampton explains the misconception about the BPP's fight for the citizenship rights that America has denied its Black citizens. He notes that when the poor demand citizenship rights, such demands is often interpreted as a threat of violence. As a result, Fred Hampton insists that BPP's primary mission is to establish a "noncapitalistic state" and save African Americans from

a system that has placed them on the margin for over 400 years. In *Judas*, we see an attempt to create a "noncapitalistic state" through the BPP's provision of educational materials and breakfast for Black school children. Hampton explains that the essence of free education is to give Black children the essential social power for better life prospects. But the BPP's social justice struggles are not only about Blacks. They extend to other racially repressed groups. This accounts for the BPP's Rainbow Coalition with other minority groups, including the Puerto Ricans, the Young Lords and the Young Patriots. The multiracial alliance is to create a more potent force against the common enemy of social injustice. This cross-racial solidarity and community organization is rarely reported in the mainstream representation of the BPP.

Judas bridges this gap by presenting an accurate image of the BPP and the situations that necessitated the group's social justice movement. For instance, Bill O'Neal, the metaphoric Judas, is a product of the social inequality that African Americans have endured for centuries. The struggles to survive a problematic social condition turns O'Neal into a petty thief and eventually an informant to the FBI. During a visit to Roy Mitchell, O'Neal remarks that Roy is lucky because of his privilege as a white man and FBI agent. We see O'Neal observe Roy's well-furnished home with envy and admiration. Roy's home accentuates the luxury that comes with white privilege, which Bill and thousands of other Black people cannot access. It is also easy to see that Bill O'Neal's proclivity for criminality and his betrayal of the BPP is motivated by the struggle to survive the American system of social injustice. Roy asks O'Neal why he has opted to rob with a police badge rather than a gun. O'Neal replies that he decides to use the badge because "a badge is scarier than the gun" (07:11- 27). By giving this kind of response, O'Neal reveals the destructive tendency that has made the American police so dreadful to Black people.

Lakeith Stanfield, who stars as Bill O'Neal in *Judas*, reflects on O'Neal's role in the death of Fred Hampton and notes that "people are not just as simple as villains or heroes" (McClintock 72). This is true if one considers the manipulation and blackmail that turned Bill into a police informant. Agent Roy Mitchell manipulates O'Neal by making him believe that destroying the BPP is both noble and patriotic. According to Roy, the BPP and the Klans are two sides of the same coin and are both bent on sowing hate. This false comparison presents O'Neal with a distorted reality about the BPP as he considers his role in destroying the group as a patriotic act. To Bill, helping the FBI will help him to escape prosecution for stealing and impersonation. These filmic depictions of Black reality corroborate Joshua Wright's assertion that the bad men (African Americans seeking racial justice) and the "baad men" (those striving to survive racial repression through unethical means) are all products of America's system of oppression (Wright 65). Hampton and other members of the BPP represent the *bad men* who fight racial injustice through community organizations. On the other hand, Bill O'Neal represents the *baad men* who aim to survive social injustice through unethical means.

Beyond historical revelation, *Judas* reflects America's present reality regarding Black resistance to racial violence. The movie invites viewers to witness and appreciate the importance of Black social organizations of the past and their influence on contemporary social movements like BLM. Like the BPP in the 1960s, BLM has also emerged in response to the problem of police brutality and other social injustice suffered by Black people in recent years. Marietta McDonald has argued that racial tension in the United States is rooted in law enforcement's historical involvement in the oppression of Black people (McDonald 210). In *Judas*, Black oppression manifests in various forms, including police brutality, unjust detention, socioeconomic disparities, and state-sponsored assassination, as evident in the murder of Fred

Hampton. By presenting these disturbing accounts of America's racial past, *Judas* creates an awareness about the present, specifically concerning the police brutality suffered by Blacks and the need for social movements like BLM to challenge the injustice.

The BPP and BLM: A Legacy of Black Social Movement in *Judas*

The Black Panther party emerged in 1966 as a group vested in Black resistance to social injustice. It started as a social justice organization against open and institutional racism. The BPP became the lead liberating vanguard of Black people in the 1960s, following the demise of the civil rights movement (Harris 411). But unlike the Civil Rights Movement that focused solely on seeking racial justice, the BPP combined political activism with community organization and provision of social welfare in the Black community. Founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale on a ten-point agenda, the BPP primarily focused on gaining justice for Black people in the face of the American racist system (412). According to Jessica Harris, the ten-point agenda upon which the BPP was founded are:

> (1) Freedom or power to determine the destiny of the Black community; (2) full employment of black people; (3) an end of robbery by white men of the Black community; (4) decent housing; (5) education that exposes the true nature of the American society; (6) the exemption of all black men from military service; (7) an end of police brutality to black people and murders of Black people by police officers; (8) the freedom of all black men held in federal, state and county prisons and jails; (9) that black people have the privilege of being tried in courts by juries of their peers (people from the black communities) as defined by the constitution of the United States; (10) the possession of land, bread, housing, education, justice, and peace. (Harris 412)

All the programs highlighted above are reified in *Judas.* But the most prominent in the film is the BPP's resistance to police brutality in Black communities. Harris reports that the BPP set up patrol teams that monitored police harassment of Black people in Black communities. This was to curtail police brutality against Blacks and to ensure that Black people's rights were not violated (414). This work by the BPP is depicted in *Judas* when Jimmy Palmer (Ashton Sanders) challenges some police officers who attempt to harass and intimidate Black people in a grocery shop. Although Jimmy's faceoff with the police eventually leads to his death, he saves the Black men from the harassment of cops. Almost immediately after the murder of Jake and Jimmy, another Panther, Jake Winters (Algee Smith), goes to the street to avenge the death of his comrade by killing a few among the racist police. The scene reinforces Hampton's remark that racist police can only kill revolutionaries but not revolutions. Indeed, Jakes and Palmers are killed but both die fighting and resisting injustice.

The BPP's commitment to social justice found its way into Black artistic expressions in the 1960s and 1970s. Specifically, the self-defense ideology against racism inspired the radical theme in Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. As Jon Cowans explains, Blaxploitation films borrowed from the self-defense ideology of the BPP and turned into a cinematic trope in which Black characters challenge oppressive white structures, especially within Black neighborhoods (Cowans 35). In other words, the trope of Black resistance to white supremacy depicted in Blaxploitation films was inspired by the armed self-defense ideology of the Black Panther Party. It is not surprising that the BPP was the first and the only group that endorsed Blaxploitation films amidst heavy criticisms. Joshua Wrights reports that Huey Newton, the co-founder of the BPP, "dedicated an entire issue of the organization's newspaper, *The Black Panther,* to praise Blaxploitation films (Wright 71).

However, the BPP's philosophy of self-defense did not sit well with the establishment and was met with ferocious resistance by the FBI. As dramatized in *Judas*, the party was framed as a terrorist group and the biggest security threat to American society. As a result of this framing, Chicago local police conspired with the FBI to initiate a counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) that was used to frustrate the BPP's social justice protests and intensify assaults on members of the group (Roman 20). BPP members became victims of random police arrests over falsified charges. In *Judas*, O'Neal explains to Agent Roy that Fred no longer drives himself because "the pigs are always following him around, giving him bullshit traffic violations" (18:29 -43). This indicates the institutional criminalization and witch-hunt that are often targeted at Black social justice activists. As already mentioned, Hampton is remanded at Menand prison over an absurd allegation of stealing ice cream. Similarly, the party's headquarters becomes a regular site of police invasion and vandalization. As seen in the film, the vandalization of the BPP's facility is part of the grand scheme to weaken the group psychologically and financially while distracting it from its social justice cause.

In 1969, Chicago police, through the assistance of informant William O'Neal gained access to the Panthers' facility. They killed Fred Hampton in cold blood beside his pregnant wife and injured other Panthers. From the postscript provided at the end of the film, the police argued that the Panthers had opened fire first, but investigation revealed that only one shot was fired by a member of the BPP who had been shot by the police (Williams 12). Hampton's death was just one but the most iconic of the many instances of police brutality against the BPP and Black communities. Today, the BPP's struggles for social justice remain a vital reference point in Black resistance to anti-Black racism. By understanding the social justice efforts of groups like

the BPP through films like *Judas*, viewers may appreciate the relevance of contemporary Black movements like BLM in the struggle for Black social liberation.

Like the BPP of the 1960s, BLM also emerged as a response to the continued police assault on Black people in an era that many have termed a post-racial America. Regarding the racial violence committed against Black people in recent times, Bettina Love and Brandelyn Tosolt challenge the view that, after the emergence of Barrack Obama as the president of America, racism is no longer a social barrier in the United States (Love and Tosolt 20). In their article "Reality or Rhetoric? Barack Obama and Post-Racial America," Love and Tosolt argue that racism has remained a permanent reality in the United States "because Americans seldom have real conversations about race" (29). Indeed, the spate of police brutality against Black people in recent times indicates that post-racial America is more of a rhetoric than reality. Just like the BPP constituted the major resistance force to police assaults on Blacks in the 1970s, BLM has risen as a social justice movement, championing Black resistance against police brutality and other social injustice in present time.

Apart from being a social justice movement, BLM is also as an affirmation of Black humanity. Started as a Twitter hashtag by Patrice Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi, BLM movement was inspired by the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who had killed Trayvon Martin in Florida. According to Russell Rickford, the slogan became even more popular after the murder of Michael Brown by a police officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014, in the city of Ferguson, Missouri (Rickford 35). Brown's death was one in a lengthy list of Black casualties at the hands of racist police and white supremacists. The list has become even longer with other Black victims of police brutality such as George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, among others.

Prompted by this long list of Black victims of police brutality, people took to Twitter to express dissatisfaction over the unjust killing of Black people. This social media activism led to the BLM protests, with which Black racial oppression and police brutality are being challenged. Alexandra Hartmann asserts that "social movements influenced one another, and this has been the case in the history of Black resistance" (Hartmann 248). Indeed, the BLM has drawn inspiration from protests like Occupy Wall Street and previous Black organizations like the BPP regarding the philosophy of dignifying Black humanity. However, while BLM has derived motivation from Black organizations of the past, the group has been able to modify its approach and modus operandi. Russell Rickford suggests that contemporary social movements like BLM "must draw on and modernize the creative traditions of popular insurgency" (Rickford 35). BLM has indeed modernized the traditional insurgency by occupying government highways and facilities and mobilizing global support through social media.

As a matter of fact, there is an established ideological connection between the BPP of the 1970s and BLM, in terms of social mobilization against police brutality and anti-Black racism. However, BLM has ignited a novel approach to fighting police brutality (Ransby 35). In his article "Black Lives Matter: Toward a Modern Practice of Mass Struggles," Russel Rickford reveals that while the Black Panther Party of the 1960s relied on self-defense in the fight against police brutality, members of the BLM have adopted the technique of occupying open spaces and government facilities to express their grievances (Rickford 36). Also, while the BPP used guns and other combative measures to fight police brutality, BLM has embraced the philosophy of civil disobedience and hashtag campaigns on social media to advance its cause to the global community (Rickford 22). Like the BPP's Rainbow Coalition depicted in *Juda*s, BLM has received support and drawn its members from racially diverse groups, primarily working-

class people who are victims of socioeconomic disparities and racial marginalization in the United States (Rickford 38). Regardless of these varied patterns of struggles by the past freedom fighters like the BPP and contemporary social justice movements like BLM, films like *Judas* continue to sensitize us on the importance of the legacy of Black resistance to police brutality and social injustice faced by African Americans.

CHAPTER FOUR. CONCLUSION

The point established in this thesis is that *BlacKkKlansman* and *Judas* are two recent films that draw on historical events to articulate the importance of social justice movements in the struggles against anti-Black racism. Historically, Black social justice organizations have been criminalized and disparaged to serve dominant narratives. But films like *Judas* and *BlacKkKlansman* seek to stimulate people's reflection about the value of social organizations like the BPP by dignifying Black social justice groups and presenting their activities from different perspectives other than the mainstream media misrepresentations**.**

By interpreting both *Judas* and *BlacKkKlansman* as films that valorize Black communal activism and collective resistance to racial victimization, I establish how the movies connect America's historical past with the present to establish a continuum in the racial repression of Black people and a continuum of resistance to that repression. By also connecting the two films to recent events of police brutality, I argue that both *BlacKkKlansman* and *Judas* align with the cinematic tropes of the Blaxploitation films of the 1960s to depict Black resistance to anti-Black racism. While establishing the films' depiction of Black resistance to social injustice, I draw ideological connections between the BPP of the 1960s and BLM, emphasizing the social programs of both groups. More importantly, I argue that just like the BPP influenced the cinematic styles and substance of the Blaxploitation films of the 1960s, contemporary films like *BlacKkKlansman* and *Judas* echo the protests and ideological resistance of BLM. In other words, BLM's protests have continued to inspire the trope of resistance to anti-Black racism in contemporary Black films. *BlacKkKlansman, Judas, The Woman King* and *Get Out* are few of the new films that are invested in Black individual and communal resistance to social injustice.

As a matter of fact, films in the category above are now listed in the BLM collection on various film streaming platforms, just like the activities of the BPP inspired the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. The categorization of these films into the BLM cinematic collection underscores the visibility and recognition of BLM as a timely intervention to the challenge of anti-Black racism. While some may read this listing as a form of financial exploitation of Black audience and an attempt to profit from a popular struggle, it is worth emphasizing that many of the films so named in the BLM collection have continued to inspire Black racial assertion, while articulating the need for social empowerment and racial justice for Black people.

Finally, *Judas* and *BlacKkKlansman* are only two of the many Black films that draw viewers' attention to the importance of Black social justice movements as alternative ways of imagining solution to anti-Black racism and Black marginalization. These films are necessary to make audiences distinguish between resistance to social injustice and terroristic acts. Also, people may understand the need to resist injustice in their communities by drawing inspiration from films like *Judas and the Black Messiah* and *BlacKkKlansman*.

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