

BlackKlansman reverses film's historic power narrative between Blacks and Whites



Spike Lee's new film about the infiltration of the KKK by a black police detective in the 1970s, [BlackKlansman](#) was released this month. [Christine Gallagher](#) writes that not only does the film make allusions to the America of Donald Trump, it also reverses the previously powerful historic film binary where whites are sympathetic and blacks are portrayed negatively.

Released to coincide with the one-year anniversary of the Charlottesville riots, Spike Lee's new film [BlackKlansman](#) creatively adapts the true story of police detective Ron Stallworth who was able to infiltrate the KKK in Colorado Springs in the 1970s by posing as a white man over the phone. Aside from being a historical piece, the film makes obvious allusions to Trump's America. What it also does, though more subtly, is to reverse depictions of white people and black people in cinematic history.

In the film, white people are almost all variations of one dimensional deviant: either extremely sleazy, stupid, violent or conspiratorial. There are a few sympathetic white characters but, other than Stallworth's colleague who goes undercover in the investigation, these are mostly token or peripheral roles. Sound familiar?

In the 1915 silent film [The Birth of a Nation](#) the Ku Klux Klan is shown to be a heroic force with a just cause whilst individual black men are crudely depicted (by white men in black face) as buffoons and sexual aggressors. In *BlackKlansman* it is black power activists who have a just cause and white people who are deviants. There is a memorable scene in which Black Power members gather around an elder (played by Harry Belafonte) to solemnly hear the story of the torture and lynching of Jesse Washington whilst Ku Klux Klan members gather around a screening of *The Birth of a Nation* to cheer at images of such violence.

In *BlackKlansman*, articulate intellectual black power leaders are contrasted with ignorant white power followers who speak in racist catch-cries. Ku Klux Klan members carry and shoot weapons whilst Black Power activists appear to be non-violent with only a passing nod to militarism in the movement. Historical narratives with binaries of good and bad, civilised and barbaric, progressive and backwards have been used as justifications for oppression of peoples by political elites and imperial powers. Spike Lee brilliantly uses a similar technique of constructing binaries to reverse the narrative.

My academic studies have covered American history and politics and imperial and global history. Across two theses my research has focused on the construction of political myths and the development of powerful discourses. In other words, I have been engaged in critical analyses of politics and power. And yet I was confronted by my reaction to the film which for a moment had me questioning whether the contrasting treatments of Black Power and White Power movements was fair.

It saddened me to be questioning the fairness of the treatment of a racist movement which I wholeheartedly condemn; it had me contemplating the meaning of this latent desire to see more admirable white characters; and it made me thankful to be uncomfortable with these feelings. Whilst academia has improved my critical thinking about the external—cinematic art was making me self-critical about the internal.



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Watching this film helped me to better understand my naivety about racial injustices as a white person—something which I had begun to recognise in conversations about race and other issues with individual African-Americans.

In New Orleans, I met Windex Pete who plays zydeco beats on a washboard percussion instrument. We met in the Tremé neighbourhood on the street where he appears in the Cee Lo Green video for [“Music to My Soul”](#). Pete told me about a time in the French Quarter when being black meant you had to wear an identity badge and when a black musician could be jailed for jamming with a white band. Although I knew about segregation policies, I had been naïve to these more recent lived realities.

In Austin, I met Carolyn Davis – a doctoral researcher and one of the only black people in her postgraduate program. Carolyn helped me to better understand contemporary racial injustices in the US including the social impacts of gentrification in black neighbourhoods and problems with policing and prison systems. Although I knew of these issues, I had been naïve to the realities of African-American parents instructing teenagers about how to respond when pulled over by police in order to avoid getting arrested or shot.

In Memphis, I met Miss Joyce – an independent soul/RnB singer. Miss Joyce shared some of her personal hardships including a period of homelessness and losing friends to gang violence. She sang an acapella rendition of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” – also known as the “Black National Anthem”. This was soon after San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick had kneeled pre-game during the “Star Spangled Banner” in protest of racial inequalities and police brutality. Although I knew of the protest, I had been naïve to the existence of an alternative anthem.

White people warned that it would be unsafe for me to go to a music venue in a black neighbourhood in Memphis. Attending a free daytime gospel concert, I was surprised to be the only white person there. It was a large family picnic with seniors dancing and children playing. Witnessing this told me I had been naïve in believing that segregation had ended by discovering that it still exists informally through social divisions.

Watching *BlackKkKlansman* moved me beyond having an academic perspective and beyond recognising my naiveties to facing truths about my own privileges and subconscious biases. It gave me a visceral experience which provoked an emotional response simply by being confronted by unforgivable white characters. *BlackKkKlansman* is a historical dramatization. The subject is undoubtedly significant and relevant but it is the reversal of a powerful narrative which makes this an especially impactful film.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

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