

Power of Whiteness: Critical Race Theory and Words in *Get Out* and *Detroit*

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Abstract

Race relations have always been a large part of media and communication. The establishment of the Black Lives Matter movement has brought the discussion of racial divisions to the forefront of media (Mattson, 2016). Political conversations, social media feeds and movies have exacerbated the role of race relations in mass media (Mattson, 2016). There have been a number of racially charged movies created since the start of the Black Lives Matter movement. Two movies, *Get Out (2017)* and *Detroit (2017)*, offer interesting views of racism in America. This study employs Critical Race Theory to examine the power structures portrayed in popular racially controversial movies, focusing on *Get Out* and *Detroit* and uses that information to make a judgment on the current and possible future of race relations.

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Power of Whiteness: Critical Race Theory and Words in *Get Out* and *Detroit*

Race relations have returned to the focus of 21st century media and communication. The controversial ruling of the Florida Trayvon Martin vs. George Zimmerman case and resulting establishment of the Black Lives Matter movement have brought the discussion of racial divisions to the forefront of media (Mattson, 2016). The case began when Zimmerman called 911 to report a suspicious character near a convenience store. The character was found to be Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American high school student staying with his father for the weekend. He was leaving a convenience store and making his way home when Zimmerman spotted him. The 911 operator told Zimmerman to not engage with the character and wait for authorities, but he did not listen. Reports said that Martin called his girlfriend and told her that he was being followed. Shortly after the phone call ended, Zimmerman shot Martin in the chest. When accused of murder, he claimed self-defense (Staff, 2012). The public never figured out exactly what suspicious acts Martin had committed to make him a target or threat. The public believed that Martin became a target because he was black and traveling alone at night. That belief combined with the 911 calls that were riddled with racial slurs, added a strong racial overtone to the case. Zimmerman won the case and was acquitted of all charges. This case became a catalyst for the public refocus on race relations (*Black Lives Matter*).

This fact is evident in the establishment of the Black Lives Matter movement, a movement inspired to combat police brutality and overall racial injustice. Protests and riots have been performed all across America in the hope of ending police brutality and racial injustice against people of color. In August of 2017, protesters were met with racist

aggression. A set of students surrounded the statue of Thomas Jefferson in order to push the city to take down the statue. The protesters believed that the racial history of the statue should not be celebrated. They were met with Nazi sympathizers and Ku Klux Klan members that chanted “White Lives Matter” and harassed the protesters (Heim, 2017). Weeks later, the beginning of the 2017 NFL season became a controversial topic after many of the athletes kneeled during the national anthem to protest police brutality (Garber, 2017). These are just two of the many events that have occurred in the name of racial protest.

Political conversations, social media feeds and movies have exacerbated the role of race relations in mass media (Mattson, 2016). The movie industry, as one of these media outlets, has always been one to either reflect the attitudes of the public or change them (Guida, 2015). There are two movies of note in the middle of that dichotomy: *Get Out* and *Detroit*. *Get Out* (2017), directed by Jordan Peele, depicts a fantasy/horror storyline where a group of white aristocrats, called the Coagula, have been kidnapping black people in order to steal their bodies to live longer. They target African Americans because they believed that African Americans had physical advantages that would make their second chance at life better. The main character, Chris, realizes that he is the next target and must fight his way out. The movie has racial undertones and shows what racism looks like in today’s 21st century “post-racial society.” As an incredibly popular movie that held a 100% on Rotten Tomatoes for the first weeks of its release (Mettell, 2017), this movie offers a wonderful opportunity to see how the public views race relations presently and in the future. *Detroit* (2017), directed by Kathryn Bigelow, offers a more historical view of racism in its depiction of the racially charged Detroit rebellion

in the summer of 1967. The film, a true story, depicts the beginning and escalation of the riots, but focuses on the events that occurred within the Algiers Motel. Police officers believed there was a shooter based at the motel and went to the hotel to apprehend the criminal. Unfortunately, the police officers and National Guard were unable to find the gun or the shooter. Efforts to question the motel patrons quickly escalated to the white police officers torturing all of the patrons and killing three of the African American patrons. When the police officers that were the perpetrators of the crime were taken to trial, they were all acquitted. The ruling was due to a technicality where the officers were not read their rights before confessing to the crime. *Detroit* discusses multiple reactions to these acts of racism and the repercussions from those acts. This movie combines the facts of the past with the opinions of the present, thus offering another text for study.

Get Out and *Detroit* have interracial power structures at the root of their conflicts and thus create fascinating texts for study. The themes within these power structures will be advanced through the Critical Race Theory. The researcher will then apply these themes to its rhetorical model in order to give insight into the present and future state of race relations in America. The choices of *Get Out* and *Detroit* are important because they are popular films with innovative views of racism and discuss communication within interracial power structures in these different time periods. Both time periods and genres offer a wider application of the theory and thus more information to indicate the state of race relations. In addition, due to the influence of personal creative license, it is difficult to make a general judgment on the present and future state of racial relations on one film. This discussion of both films will assist in cross-referencing the results.

Literature Review

Both the Critical Race Theory and the relationship of mass media with society are at the foundation of this study. The researcher will outline previous works within these two topics, finding an area in which to contribute to the scholarly conversation through the justification of the core of this study.

Critical Race Theory

The Critical Race Theory began as the movement of a group of lawyers to illustrate their belief of the bias of law. They believed that the law and its practice are subject to racial bias (Olmstead 1998). They considered their belief grounded in history and its treatment of people of color. Before the Civil Rights Act, people of color were treated very differently in the eyes of the law, and this difference was established through rhetorical measures. The ruling class, non-people of color, created rules that distinguished themselves from blacks. They created ways for people to define their whiteness and kept blacks from that ideology of whiteness (Crenshaw et al. 1995). These rules began with the ability to own property. Blacks were considered to be property and therefore could not own anything. The only group that was able to own and expand their land was whites. Whites could expand their property and thus their power in multiple ways; the main avenue was through wealth. During slavery, the more slaves a person owned, the more access he had to the ability to gain wealth. If a slave master had female slaves, the master would not have to buy more slaves due to the slave's ability to procreate. Their property would expand on its own, gaining more wealth for the plantation owner. In addition, since slaves could make money for slave masters, slaves were considered to be currency. People could make large purchases or pay off debts with the exchange of slaves. *Jobson v*

Butler (1815) was one of the first of many cases where there was a dispute in the monetary value of a slave. Slaves became both currency and property (Crenshaw et al. 1995). Slavery was contingent on skin color; whites were never slaves, to be bought and sold. With the repetitive focus on the difference between the races, the concept of whiteness began to embody all of the rights to which a man should be entitled. Whiteness came to mean freedom. Those that were of color were treated differently because they were seen as slaves without freedom. These practices added a value to “whiteness” that was reflected in law through segregation laws and the need for the Civil Rights Act. (Crenshaw et al. 1995).

The CRT group of lawyers tied this idea into rhetorical ideologies and created four defining characteristics of CRT. These are:

1. Racism is endemic and normal in American life
2. Both people of color and Caucasian people support racism
3. Words are powerful and should be used to create counter-accounts of reality
4. The individual experiences of people of color should be recognized and made public (Olmstead, 1998)

The integral part of the theory that will be addressed in this paper is the concept that CRT can be used to examine imperialistic structures that empower whites (Cranmer & Harris, 2015). The power structures within *Get Out* and *Detroit* are also structures of white empowerment. Olmstead (1998) consolidated many of the interests of the Critical Race Theory and considered its ability to be a rhetorical construct. He believed it was a communication theory because language is at the core of creating and resolving racial injustice, thus laying its faith in the power of language and its ability to construct reality.

CRT has been applied to a number of other situations that give insight to the power of this theory and the possible extensions. A group of Duke University scholars combined CRT with colorism, discrimination based on skin color. Colorism occurs within the black community, as those with lighter skin tones are seen to be more privileged than those with darker skin tones (Burton et al. 2010). Skin color has become a type of capital that results in opportunities to grow and expand. Those with more “white capital” and thus lighter skin tones had greater access to opportunities, like jobs. This study reiterates the power of skin tone that was created when the power of “whiteness” came to be during the peak of slavery. Rossing (2014) applies this theory to parrhesia, a courageous criticism, and applies it to Richard Pryor’s racial humor. Communication about race has turned to a distinction of racism as a “thing of the past” and racial humor offers an illustration of that mistake. Racial humor creates an environment where one can explain the truths about racism in a fairly safe and palatable way. Rossing (2015) returned to the intersection of CRT and humor in order to study emancipatory humor. This humor takes a pointed stand against the status quo. He focused on humor that confronted the racial bias within the criminal justice system. Both studies looked into the power of racial rhetoric. Anguiano and Castaneda (2014) were some of the few researchers that did not focus on African Americans in their studies. They looked at the progression of Latinx communication through the lens of CRT. These last few studies explain many possibilities of intersection with CRT, thus giving light to the fact that the theory is flexible. Though many of these studies applied CRT to more literary situations and interactions within Latinx groups, the application of CRT to movies is possible. Cranmer and Harris (2015) conducted a similar study to the focus of this paper in their

study of the leadership structures in *Remember the Titans*. The racial undertone of the movie offered an interesting opportunity for the researchers to study interracial leadership structures. This study was conducted on interracial structures as well, but does not speak to the possible future applications of the power of the themes depicted.

Movies

The choice of a movie as a medium for the study of communicative themes within interracial power structures is an important one. Studies have shown that media consumption has an influence on a person's perception of the real world (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). The amount of influence media has on society is almost immeasurable because media is ubiquitous. Movies are an element of media consumption and thus can influence perception of reality. Another study states that movies serve as a socialization agent (Stockwell, 1997). Socialization is the process that describes the way people develop their sense of self. Audience members internalize some of the values and beliefs depicted in films. Both the power of movies to influence reality and a person's sense of self offer the opportunity to study the values and attitudes of society through film (Croteau & Hoynes, 2013). Other studies expand on the concept of movies and its influence on society. In a study about the relationship between Asian culture and Asian romantic movies, the study found that the role of Asian romantic movies is to serve as a record of cultural debate (Khairah, 2013). They also capture social shifts within the Asian culture. Movies are shown to have an impact on audiences and also serve as a record for the cultural concerns of a nation. This concept assists in the ability to extend the racial interactions within the *Get Out* and *Detroit*. These films can capture the shifts in the

societal judgment of race relations in America and can be extended to speculations about the future.

The influence of media on the public and the political climate surrounding the creation and premiere of these films make CRT the perfect tool for the extraction and examination of the interracial communicative themes within *Get Out* and *Detroit*. CRT is a versatile theory with which many scholars and researchers have taken creative license. They have applied it to a number of texts and situations, with few looking at movie media. Movies have been considered to be an element of mass media that influences and is influenced by society. *Get Out* and *Detroit* are two movies that have race as the integral aspect of communication interactions and thus offer a new focus for CRT. The movies offer a number of opportunities to study the portrayal of communication in interracial power structures in varied time and political periods. Both films are necessary for study due to their distinctive depictions of these communicative themes. These films offer two completely different views that will round out the discussion of the themes. These directorial choices can be indicative of what viewers believe the real world to be, due to the influence of mass media on society, and thus can be an insight into the present and future state of race relations. The combination of past research and the application of CRT to *Detroit* and *Get Out* allow two research questions to arise:

RQ1: What does the portrayal of communication in interracial power structures in *Get Out* and *Detroit* imply about the current state of race relations in America?

RQ2: What does the portrayal of communication in interracial power structures in *Get Out* and *Detroit* imply about the future state of race relations in America?

Method

Critical Race Theory functions on four aforementioned defining characteristics that all result in the overall idea that racial divisions are exacerbated in judicial law. This study will focus on the third characteristic of CRT; words are powerful and should be used to create counter accounts of social reality (Olmstead 1998). The communicative themes within the power structures depicted in Peele's *Get Out* and Bigelow's *Detroit* offer an opportunity to see the power of words. The intersection of the words and social reality will be explained in a discussion of the social reality created as a result of themes within these power structures. However, the researcher will first define the communicative themes portrayed within these movies. These themes will be defined through repetitive viewing of the films. In order to determine the present and future of race relations, the researcher will apply these themes, focusing on word choice, to the CRT rhetorical model and focus on the intersection of its three stages: naming, instituting and enforcement (Olmstead 1998).

Naming is a function of defining one's social reality. For instance, the stereotype of African Americans being lazy and violent is an instance of defining and naming social reality. This stereotype defines the way that African Americans are considered. This concept begins with one or two people spreading the idea. Instituting occurs when an act is accepted into the wider social reality and others know it. This stage occurs when more people begin to accept the idea of African Americans being lazy and violent. This idea could result in people being unwilling to hire African Americans for fear of a poor work ethic. People could also avoid African Americans on the streets, for fear of being attacked. The concept is repeated and spread, until it is almost inescapable. Enforcement

is when that speech act has true consequences. Law enforcement would enforce these rules to anyone who did not agree with the new social reality (Olmstead 1998). Enforcing could be seen when police officers start to incarcerate African Americans at a higher rate because they are expected to be violent. There was also a time where a person could lawfully not employ an African American due to a possible poor work ethic. The researcher will watch these films and extract instances of all three stages. These stages could result from the events depicted within the film or be an element of the movie's setting. Each of these stages will give insight into where race relations are in terms of solidifying the turmoil.

Results

The researcher viewed both *Get Out* and *Detroit* multiple times in order to develop a full understanding and record of the communicative themes within interracial power structures. The analysis will be organized by film and the power structures within each. The communicative themes will be discussed within those power structures.

Analysis of *Get Out*

Get Out begins with a kidnapping. An unnamed African American male is walking home from a party and is accosted by a masked assailant that was driving a white car. The scene becomes important later. The film continues with an introduction of Chris, an African American photographer, and his white girlfriend, Amy. They are preparing for a weekend at Amy's parent's house. As an interracial couple, Chris is concerned that Amy's parents do not know that he is African American. She dismisses his concerns. On their journey to the house and throughout their stay at the Armitage's, there is consistent racial undertone. During the first night of their stay, Amy's mother, Missy hypnotizes

Chris in an effort to get him to quit smoking. The hypnosis results in him feeling like he is in a “sunken place,” where he is inside his body, but unable to speak. He wakes up after the encounter in his bed. The next day, the family and couple realize that there is a big party planned that weekend. Throughout the party, many of its patrons try to connect with Chris, noting his physical form and the fashion trends of skin color. Chris meets the guy that was kidnapped in the first scene; however, there was now something odd about him. The party conversations and strange man make Chris completely uncomfortable and, as a result, the couple goes to a private area in order to decide whether to leave. While they are gone, the patrons of the party hold a silent auction for Chris. A blind man wins the auction. Though the couple decided to stay, Chris changes his mind that night. Unfortunately, all pretenses fall away and Chris realizes that the family will not let him leave. He is attacked and wakes up in the basement. A television in the room turns on and explains the goals of a group called the Coagula. They aim to use African Americans to live forever by taking over their bodies. This process is completed through a combination of Missy’s hypnosis and a complicated brain procedure. The blind man that won Chris at auction wants to be able to take pictures the same way that Chris does. During the time that the victims are being used, they are trapped in the aforementioned “sunken place.” Fortunately, Chris uses his wits and is able to escape and run to safety.

This analysis will concern multiple characters within the film, focusing on the main character, Chris, an African American photographer that is targeted as a future host for the Coagula group. Though for most of the film many of the characters were “playing a part,” their word choice and communicative themes still give insight to race relations. Each interracial power structure will be summarized prior to the discussion of the results.

Jeremy and Victim.

Jeremy is the brother of Chris's girlfriend and it is implied that he kidnapped the first victim of the movie. The power lies with Jeremy because he is the aggressor. The first victim of the film was André Hayworth and he was kidnapped in the middle of the night on an empty street. The kidnapping was almost completely silent, but the publicity and manner of the kidnapping indicated many of his attitudes about the crime and victim. Jeremy made no efforts to hide the act, other than staying quiet. The nonexistent effort to hide the crime speaks to the assumption that he is confident in his ability and apathetic about the possibility and consequences of getting caught assaulting an African American.

Amy and Chris.

Amy is Chris's girlfriend and the catalyst for the film. Viewers find out later in the film that she serves as a type of host hunter for the Coagula. She does this by dating or befriending the possible hosts and bringing them home. Amy has a predatorial power within this structure. She is the hunter and Chris is the prey. Throughout the film, Amy is leading Chris to the "slaughter." When Amy enters the first scene, Chris shows concern that Amy has not told her parents that he is African American. She downplays his concern, saying, "My father would have voted for Obama a third time if he could" (*Get Out*, 2017). She says this in efforts to make Chris feel safe and build further trust. Studies have shown that trust can be built through communication efforts that "bridge differences" (Nagda, 2006). Amy is using this strategy to build further trust with Chris, knowing that this information is not true. Throughout the film, Amy downplays and disregards many of Chris's concerns about the racist communication that he encounters throughout the visit to her home. When Chris comments on the obsession that the family

and Coagula seem to have with his physical advantages as a black person, she downplays his concern by calling them ignorant and old. There is one instance where one of the Armitage's black servants kept unplugging his phone. Chris believed it was because the servant did not like that Chris was dating outside of his race. Due to the treatment of black people by white people, there are those within the black community that do not agree with dating non-black people (Yancy, 2009). He was concerned and wanted the problem to be addressed in some way. Amy believed that it was simply that the servant wanted to have Chris for herself and forced the servant to apologize. Amy dismissed the fact that race could be an influencing factor in the interaction. Her continual dismissal of his concerns speaks to her opinion of race relations.

Armitage Family and Chris.

The communication between the Armitage family as a whole and Chris has many opportunities to find themes that speak to the state of race relations. The Armitage family has the power within this interaction because they know more about the situation and is hunting Chris collectively. The first instance of note is when Chris first meets Amy's parents, Dean and Missy. Dean, Amy's father, says, "My man" and "Atta boy." These terms are completely different from the way that he addresses anyone else in the film and can be assumed to be an effort to relate with Chris. There are differences in the way that people speak within races and between races. It can be assumed that Dean was trying to act the way that he believes African Americans do within races. However, this is an uneducated effort because Chris never indicates to Dean that this change would make him feel more comfortable. When Amy and Chris talk about how they hit a deer, Dean goes on a short monologue about his hatred for "black bucks." "Black buck" is a racial

slur that was said to describe black men that did not stay “in their place” White Americans believed that African Americans were animals by nature and this slur was used to reinforce that stereotype (Jardin, 2016). In his monologue, he talks about how these bucks are taking over and destroying the ecosystem. He is thankful for every dead black buck. With the knowledge of the racial slur, the monologue is very aggressive and hostile toward the idea of black people. Dean considers African Americans to be blemishes on society that need to be eradicated, according to the themes within this monologue.

Coagula and Chris.

The Coagula describes the group of aristocrats that endeavored to capture Chris and take over his body for their own purposes. Though the Armitage family is an integral part of the Coagula, their communication with Chris will be separated from this section of analysis. Much of the Coagula communication with Chris is objectifying and ignorant. Chris’s first interaction with the Coagula was mainly about his body type and form. One woman touched his arms without permission and mused about his strength and possible sexual prowess. Another Coagula member spoke about the fashion of skin color. He believed that fairer skin was going out of style and now “black was in.” He saw skin color as a trend to be followed. The Coagula organization is based in dismissive and objectifying ideas about African Americans. The founders wanted to live longer and realized that African Americans were often faster and stronger than Caucasian Americans. The solution was to create a procedure in which one person’s brain can take over another’s body. In order to accomplish their goal, they had to kidnap or hunt for

African Americans. As mentioned before, Jeremy Armitage was the violent hunter while Amy Armitage brought her victims in with honey rather than vinegar, so to speak.

While many of the communicative themes are exposed through dialogue, there are two poignant themes that are communicated nonverbally. The first scene that shows Chris alone in his apartment portrays a nonverbal communication tactic that speaks to the communicative themes within the interracial power structures in this film. Chris makes sure to be clean-shaven for the future visit to Amy's family home. This is in an effort to seem clean and, more importantly, non-threatening. When Andre is first kidnapped, he is unshaven. When we see him again later in the film as a victim of the Coagula, he is clean-shaven and non-threatening. This speaks to the ideal picture of African Americans. Facial hair is associated with masculinity and therefore dominance and aggression (Muscarella & Cunningham 1996). African Americans are considered to be more aggressive than their white counterparts and thus play a large part in interracial relations (Ferber, 2007). Chris shaves in order to exude a less threatening and more favorable image. Andre's unshaven face is seen as aggressive and threatening; this image is changed when he is seen once again as a victim of the Coagula. Andre's image is regulated down into a less threatening image in front of the members of the Coagula, in order to assist in his assimilation into the group. Later in the film, when the Coagula wanted to find out who would take over Chris's mind, they held a silent auction. The Coagula held up a picture of Chris and Dean used his hands to denote the numbers. It was unknown as to whether the numbers were measured in the thousands or millions. This auction was reminiscent of a silent slave auction. The "slave" for sale was at the front of

the group, while the white Americans bid on this human being. The Coagula had already checked Chris's form and mental ability throughout the party.

Many communicative themes reoccurred many times throughout the film that altered Chris's social reality. These themes included: advantages of being black due to their genetic makeup and overall objectification. Both themes named and instituted the idea that African Americans had less power than white Americans in the film. This power structure was repeatedly exemplified throughout many character interactions and was enforced in the climax of the film, Chris's capture and escape.

Analysis of *Detroit*

Detroit depicts the events surrounding and included within the Algiers motel incident of 1967. The rebellion during the summer of 1967 began as a way to take back the city from perceived oppression by the police and government. With the ink on the Civil Rights Act still drying, civil rights issues were a hot button item as people were still adjusting to the changes. Random murders of African Americans were now more likely to be investigated, but many people were resistant to change. This dichotomy was at the root of the rebellion and the city was destroyed as a result. The time is especially remembered due to the Algiers incident and resulting judicial action. Police were called to the Algiers because they had heard shooting coming from the area. They brought all of the patrons together and questioned them as to the whereabouts of the gun and shooter. None of the patrons provided valuable information. As a result, the police officers beat and further questioned the patrons. Unfortunately, by the end of the night, the police had unjustly killed three of the African American patrons. There was an in-depth investigation. All of the people that were at the incident were questioned. Unfortunately,

since the police officers were not read their rights before confessing to the crimes, all evidence was thrown out and they were acquitted of all charges. Victims of the crime moved on with their lives.

This analysis will concern multiple characters in the film, focusing on the interactions portrayed in the climax of the film, the Algiers Motel Incident. Each interaction within the power structures will be summarized prior to the discussion of the results.

Future Rioters and Police Officers.

At the beginning of the film, police officers break up an illegal party. The law enforcement officers had power over the attendees. Law enforcement loads the offenders into large police vehicles to expedite the process of moving them to the station. Throughout this interaction, police officers grope black women and harass the black men. Onlookers question the officers as to the crime committed by the offenders. The interactions between all parties are very impersonal. The police officers treat the African American offenders like objects. This type of treatment is evident in the forced loading of the offenders and the language surrounding the act.

Officer Krauss and Grocery Victim.

During the riot, a police officer's job was often to deter and watch for looters. The officers were asked specifically to not shoot the citizens. The power lies with the white police officer for the following interaction. In a particular scene, a partnership of police officers patrolled the streets for looters. They found an offender that was stealing groceries. When the grocery looter realized that the police had spotted him, he started to run. The police officers chased after the looter and yelled at him to stop. When the looter

continued to run, one of the police officers, Officer Krauss, shot the looter twice in the back with a shotgun. The looter got away and crawled under a car to hide from the police officers. Viewers find out later that he bled out and died from his wounds. When Krauss was confronted about the death, he called it self-defense, though he was not in any danger. When his commanding officer threatened to hold charges, Krauss was more irritated at the fact that he was getting reprimanded and ignored the severity of his crime. The apathetic response to murder speaks to the racial opinions during that time. Though the Civil Rights act had been signed, black people were still being mistreated. Throughout the movie, Officer Krauss never had to face consequences for the murder of the grocery victim. The death was swallowed up by the chaos of the riot.

Police and *The Dramatics*.

The riot's pandemonium made it difficult for the city to run smoothly and, as a result, the city enforced a curfew. There was a scene that depicted an up and coming musical group, *The Dramatics*, which was about to make its first public debut at a local club. However, right before the group was about to go on, the event ended due to the riots and curfew. The group was forced to return home well after curfew. The streets were full of looters and people trying to get home. The group tried to take a bus in order to stay off of the streets, but it soon became too dangerous for the bus driver to continue. All of the passengers were forced to continue on foot. *The Dramatics* tried to avoid the chaos, keeping their head down and staying out of the way. On their way home, the group was stopped by a few police officers. These officers yelled at the teenagers and held up their batons, ready to fight the members. The rough treatment of the group was reminiscent of police treatment of a criminal. The police officers treated them like criminals because

they believed that they were criminals. Throughout the film, African American citizens were assumed to be criminals, while white Americans were assumed to be victims. This was believed, even though white Americans were also taking advantage of the riots with looting and other crimes without consequences, as depicted in the film. *The Dramatics* were stopped due to the color of their skin. The police officers did not see them commit a crime, but still treated them like criminals.

Dismukes and National Guard.

Dismukes is an African American male that works both at a factory and at a corner store as a night watchman. The night of the Algiers incident, he was asked to work that night and guard the corner store. Near the store, some National guardsmen were gathered around their tank and watching for trouble. Dismukes decided to take some coffee to these men in efforts to build up a rapport. He felt that he needed to distinguish himself from the rest of the public. He knew that the National Guard had the power to truly hurt him and the people he loved. The true power lied with the national guardsmen within this interaction. The verbal interaction was relatively short. The interaction began with introductions and small talk about the coffee. The subject of the riots eventually came up. The National guardsmen asked Dismukes, "How long until these Negroes-- people quit?" Dismukes answered, "How the hell am I supposed to know?" The guardsmen asked Dismukes this question as if he would know the opinions and tendencies of all of the African Americans in the area. This question lumped all African Americans into one being, with a hive mind. In addition, the guardsman called African Americans "Negroes" before calling them "people." Throughout the interaction, it was evident that the term Negroes came more naturally to the guardsman. He considered

African Americans to be something other than people. Dismukes' response was an effort to distinguish himself from the people that were destroying the city.

Carl and Girls.

Two members of the musical group, Larry and Aubrey, were separated from the rest during the bus ride and were forced to go to the Algiers motel for the night. The streets were quickly becoming too dangerous for travel. During their stay, the two met two girls that offered to introduce them to their friends. The two girls were Caucasian. The group members and the friends were African American. The scene began in the main room of studio apartment. The main interaction in this scene is between the girls and Carl, an African American friend of these girls. The point of the conversation was to illustrate some of the interactions that occur between police officers and African Americans. Carl takes the power within the interaction and points a fake pistol (the girls do not know that the pistol is fake) at one of the African Americans in the room and threatens to shoot him. Carl treats the guy like a stranger and acts like a police officer. Throughout the interaction, he is trying to illustrate to the girls how it feels to be black. He mentions the fact that often police officers seem to take ownership of the city in their language. Police officers often call the street theirs, for example, "what are you doing on my street?" This language choice takes something away from the African American person yet again. The action is reminiscent of slave times in America. Slaves had to fight for their rights and freedoms. However, even though the fight was long and arduous, many Caucasians believed that they were giving these concepts to the African Americans and could be taken back. When a police officer claims the street as theirs, they are showing their power in their ability to continue to take from African Americans.

The Algiers Incident- Police Officers and Algiers Victims.

Carl wanted to scare the National Guard that was protecting the street. He decided to shoot his starter pistol out of the window. Unfortunately, this resulted in the National Guard believing that there was a sniper at the Algiers motel. National Guard and police officers were sent to the motel to apprehend the alleged shooter. This event collected all of the important characters into one place and began the climax of the film. As law enforcement and the National Guard stormed the motel, they asked all of the patrons to freeze and stay down. Unfortunately, the chaos terrified Carl and he ran downstairs so that he could get away. Officer Krauss shot him in the back as he ran toward the side door. As he lay dying, Krauss and another officer corroborated their story so that they would not be charged with his murder. Krauss placed a knife next to Carl's body so that it looked like he was armed. The treatment of Carl's death is reflective of Krauss's opinion of black people. Rather than focus on the fact that he had murdered yet another person, he only looked to cover up the incident. He did not believe that he deserved consequences for his actions and knew how easy it was to seem to fall in line.

After the cause of Carl's death was sufficiently covered up, the police officers brought all of the residents to the bottom floor of the hotel for questioning. They were all told to go against the wall. The residents consisted of five black people, including Larry and Aubrey, members of *The Dramatics*, and the two white girls. The two girls had been found playing cards with another African American patron. Immediately, the police officers accused the African American patron of being a pimp to the girls. They believed that the only reason that white women would be in the company of a black man alone would be that they were his prostitutes. The police officers were angry at the thought of

the women lying with the black man, even though the girls said that the accusation was unfounded. They tried to get any of them to confess to that crime while trying to find the shooter. The accusation of being a pimp is a communicative theme that speaks to interracial relations within the film and that time period. Interactions between people of different races were few and far between. Many people believed that the races would only interact in times of duress or to prove some civil rights issue. The police officers believed that the women had to have been forced into the company of the black man. In reality, they were simply friends that were spending platonic time together.

The questioning and treatment of the victims fostered multiple communicative themes within the power structures that were defined through the police officers and the victims. Krauss told the victims that he had nothing against “you people.” This choice of words separates him from the victims. He seems to be only talking to the African Americans in the crowd, which implies that he is actually separating himself from the African Americans and lumping them into the same category. He further distances himself from them by considering them all to have criminal records. He used this assumption to justify his treatment of them throughout the event. He and the other police officers try to beat the answers out of the victims. At one point, he forces them to pray to God for salvation. He wants them to sing some of “that Gospel shit” (*Detroit*, 2017). All of these themes occur in efforts to create division and humiliation.

This fact is most evident in the last element of the Algiers Motel incident. In an effort to scare the patrons into giving up the shooter, Krauss begins randomly choosing victims and pulling them into side rooms. He would question and beat the victim, then shoot the ground. The rest of the victims would believe that the officer had just killed

someone for not giving up the shooter. The act terrified the rest of the victims. The game was reflective, yet again, of the officer's opinion of the victims. He considered the psychological harm that he inflicted on the patrons to be necessary to find a shooter and gun that was not in the hotel. The game hit its peak when he asked another officer to "kill" a patron. Unfortunately, the officer had not been in the hotel when the game had begun and, as a result, did not know to shoot the ground. He shot an African American patron in the stomach. When Krauss found out, he realized that he would not be able to cover up the crime. He had too many witnesses. His solution was to let the rest of them go, as long as they promised to forget the event. A few of the victims agreed to the arrangement, but one did not. That final patron was murdered for his refusal.

Many communicative themes reoccurred many times throughout the film that strongly influenced its social reality. The treatment and objectification of African Americans moved through all three stages of CRT. The police officers did not believe African Americans to be people and treated them like they were less than human. Many African Americans were unjustly beaten and killed within this film.

Discussion

The communicative themes portrayed within the interracial power structures within both *Get Out* and *Detroit* have much to say about the current and future state of race relations in America. This discussion will use the social reality created within the films and the implications behind different communicative themes to answer the research questions.

Get Out took a fantastical approach to the idea of race relations, but portrayed realistic themes. There were multiple instances of naming, instituting and enforcement.

All three of these stages came together to create a social reality within the film that indicates the present and future state of race relations. The act of naming African Americans as targets was the first step of changing the social reality of the film. The Coagula treated African Americans like animals and groomed them for their own purposes. This grooming was evident in shaving the first victim and the smoking hypnosis of the second victim. This act was instituted as Coagula gained more members that believed in the mission. The belief that African Americans were simply objects to be used spread as the Coagula gained members. With each new addition, the idea of African Americans as targets for this new way of life spread. The film focuses on the enforcement of the idea, through the hunt and capture of Chris and other African Americans in order to live forever.

There are a number of recurring and complex communicative themes within *Detroit* and many of those themes were instances of the three stages of creating social reality. The first stage, naming, occurred as African Americans were named as inferior beings as a result of the setting of the film and the events within the riot. *Detroit* is set in the summer of 1967 in a city that is known for its strong racial divisions. African Americans were coming out of the laws of segregation and “separate but equal.” 1967 was only a few years after the signing of the Civil Rights Act and people were still coming to terms with the amendment and its enforcement. Though the idea of African Americans as lesser beings was instituted in history through law, within the film, this idea moved to the second stage by the treatment offered by the officers and the events of the riot. Since individuals within law enforcement were not completely in support of the Civil Rights Act, officer reluctance created an unsafe environment for both law

enforcement and African Americans. When the riot began, African Americans were named as threats to the safety of the town. It became acceptable to consider African Americans in the area as dangerous and intimidating. Police officers began to shoot African Americans for simply running away. The enforcement of the idea of African Americans as lesser culminated in the Algiers Motel incident. The officers beat the patrons and played a game of psychological torture during this incident. Those responsible for killing three of the patrons never served jail time for their crime. The lives of the fallen African Americans were left behind due to a technicality. The combination of all three stages created a social reality. African Americans were not treated like humans within the film. They were beaten and killed by their supposed protectors without consequence. The two basic interracial communicative themes were dehumanization and objectification of African Americans. The latter theme is evident in both *Get Out* and *Detroit*.

This similarity can be attributed to the time in which both films were conceived. The director of the *Get Out* film came up with its basic premise during President Obama's first term and the rhetoric surrounding his induction (Keegan, 2017). This rhetoric was racially charged as people were deciding the value of race in regards to presidential elections. The production journey of the movie, from spark to premiere, was in the beginning of the establishment of race relations in the 21st century. This means that present race relations influenced much of the film's creation and its themes can address both present and future race relations. *Detroit* is a retelling of the Algiers Motel Incident of 1967 and thus the timing of the film has a strong influence on its ability to speak to the

state of racial relations. *Detroit* was created around the same time as *Get Out* and within the same universe of racial rhetoric and events.

The present state of race relations is indicated through the choice of themes and the justification for those themes. The repetition of ideas speaks to the perceived prevalence of a certain issue within race relations. The overall subject within both films, as discussed, was the overall objectification of African Americans. Within these films, African Americans were treated as if they were less than human. This idea of African American inferiority is evident through the unabashed kidnap and torture of the victims in *Get Out*. African Americans were reduced down to their physical abilities and were sold and traded within the group. The victims in *Detroit* became playthings in a morbid game of death. The motel patrons never received justice for the abuse they suffered. Studies have shown that there is a strong relationship between films and society. As discussed earlier in this study, movies can capture social shifts within a culture and thus can assist in answering the research questions. The power structures within these films always had white Americans in positions of power and African Americans as the victims of that power. Though *Detroit* was based in a time where white Americans regularly had power over African Americans, the use of that power is indicative of race relations. Rather than use that power to bridge racial divisions, these white Americans used their power to bully and torture many African Americans. The choice to use their power negatively speaks to the fact that relations between the races are also negative because of the recurring need to show dominance through such actions. This reflects the rhetoric surrounding the film, where the media focus was on the Black Lives Matter movement and police brutality against African Americans. These films indicate that the present state

of race relations is not positive. This is because African Americans within these films are still fighting against oppression and struggling to reach a place without discrimination and the ability to coexist with other races positively.

While the present state of race relations can be determined from the issues presented within the film, the future state can be concluded from the responses to those issues. The issues are presented as the director sees them in the contemporary world; the solutions represent his or her determination of what the public wants. While the main theme of these films was the objectification of African Americans, the victims never stood silent in the face of adversity. The overall response to instances of oppression and challenge was a fighting spirit. In *Get Out*, Chris fought his way out of the dangerous home. In *Detroit*, a victim refused to let a police officer bully him, even though it cost him his life. The responses to the instances of oppression and objectification had a new energy. These responses indicated that the future of race relations has the capacity to be positive. The desire to fight against the oppression means that there is still hope within the races.

Limitations and Future Implications

Throughout the analysis of both of the films, there were many interactions within the races that spoke to the state of race relations within the film. The communicative themes may have had input into the present and future state of race relations in America. Though communication between the races can be more evasive and have implied messages, communication within the races are often more honest and truthful. Within the races, there is often an understanding of equality and camaraderie that results in an ability to speak truthfully about their issues with a common enemy. This concept was especially

evident in *Detroit*. During the film, communications between the races was short and often filled with violence. However, within the races, they spoke about racial injustice due to police officers and the law.

Another limitation deals with the limitation of the medium. Though films can influence and be influenced by society, the effect of that influence is limited. In McLuhan's (1964) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Media*, he coined the phrase: the medium is the message (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). This concept means that the choice of medium has an effect on the understanding of the message. Focusing on film can possibly leave out more indications to the present and future state of race relations, such as public opinion on such matters.

The limitation of the medium speaks to a number of possibilities of future research. An in-depth study of movies, society and literature during the time of the creation of these films would assist in getting a 360 view on racial relations and future implications. Further research could also include the application of the intra-racial communicative themes of these movies to other aspects of the Critical Race Theory. These themes could be applied to both: individual experiences of people of color should be recognized and made public and both people of color and Caucasian people support racism. During the analysis of the interracial communicative themes, themes within intra-racial communication were very interesting. Themes of racial opinions and injustice seemed to recur and could offer further insight into state of racial relations and how race relations are created and perpetuated. These themes could involve further information about the intricacies of the interactions between races and would thus complete the picture of race relations.

Conclusion

With news stories about repeated instances of police brutality and protests, race relations are once again at the center of the social conversation. New instances of possible racial prejudice are covered on a daily basis. It was only a matter of time until this focus moved to the world of entertainment. Films are supposed to connect with audiences and often that is done through discussing interesting topics of the time. *Get Out* and *Detroit* are two films that took vastly different approaches to the topic of race relations. Both were intended to wake society up and help audiences to realize that the 21st century is not post-racial and racism is still a contemporary issue that affects millions of Americans. The relationship between movies and society offered an opportunity to study society. The Critical Race Theory served as a perfect tool to study communicative themes that would be indicators of society's opinion of race relations. CRT allowed the researcher to study communicative themes within interracial power structures. These power structures are already at the core of race relations in society and served as a microcosm to study for wider application. Both films created social realities where African Americans were objectified and dehumanized. White Americans always had power over African Americans. The recurring theme of dehumanization and the power structures indicate that the opinion about race relations today is very negative. There seems to be an overall belief that White Americans are in power and they do not consider African Americans to be human.

As for the future state of race relations, there seems to be a fighting spirit that speaks to the positive hope for race relations. African Americans in these films have not given up in the face of oppression. This means that they will not stop fighting for

equality. This study gives light to the possibility that the increase in rhetoric about race relations speaks to the resolution of these issues, rather than their perpetuation. These films illustrate the problem of racism for those that might not realize its gravity. The hope and fighting spirit creates a light at the end of the tunnel for those facing similar issues. The state of race relations can have a rippling effect on education, social reform, government and much more. The present opinion of race relations is not as important as the hope for the future. These films give insight to the idea that one day skin color will not be an indicator of worth or power.

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