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The segregated gun as an indicator of racism and representations in film

Julie M. Aultman[1]✉, Elizabeth Piatt[2] & Jason Piatt[3]

Film emphasizes an ironic history of racism in gun control and ownership and a justification for seeking justice among the Black community, but film also perpetuates structural racism and bias, segregating Black from White, and failing to promote equality, solidarity, and progress. The gun is both a symbol of structural racism, and an expression through which critical attitudes and political statements can carry greater meaning and lead to positive action, empowerment, and desegregation. The symbolic meaning of guns in the hands of Blacks as violent, exceptional or some other stereotypical character trope is illustrated using three selected films including: Django Unchained, John Q., and Proud Mary. This paper is divided into three acts: Act I: The gun as symbol of structural racism in film; Act II: Stereotypical characters and their guns; Act III: Desegregation of the gun in film. These sections illustrate the meaning and representation of the gun as a theatrical object in film, and when in the hands of stereotypical character tropes, has perpetuated racist beliefs and attitudes that have not been adequately addressed in the film industry. To desegregate the gun in film, filmmakers need to critically examine the overt and hidden film texts and how the gun, and the characters wielding it, are perceived among audiences.

[1] Northeast Ohio Medical University, Rootstown, OH, USA. [2] Kent State University, Kent, OH 44240, USA. [3] Independent Researcher, Stow, OH 44224, USA. ✉email: jmaultma@neomed.edu

Introduction

The intersections of philosophy, sociology, and film theory bring to light visual representations and meaning of the gun and its impact on the Black community. Film not only emphasizes an ironic history of racism[1] in gun control and ownership, and a justification for seeking justice among the Black community, but also perpetuates structural racism and bias, segregating Black from White, and failing to promote equality, solidarity, and progress. Whether it be the gun's image or physical appearance, the character's hand who wields its power, or its overall utility and purpose, the history of film and its more contemporary industry contributes to the reality of social injustice and oppression despite recent awareness of stereotyping, racism, and White privilege. In this paper we identify stereotypical racial character tropes throughout the history of film and how the brandishing of a gun as a theatrical thing broadens these negative stereotypes in the 21st century, and, by extension, is a representation of structural racism.

The first part of this paper, *Act I: The gun as symbol of structural racism in film*, delves into specific representations of the gun and its meaning and impact on the Black community. The gun, we argue, is both a symbol of that structural racism, and an expression through which critical attitudes and political statements can carry greater meaning that lead to positive action, empowerment, and desegregation. We argue that gun-wielding Black film characters broaden existing stereotypes and thwart any attempt to recognize the gun as a positive representation of freedom and equality in gun ownership practices and protections. Structural racism is responsible for the historical barriers to gun ownership and intensifying gun violence in Black communities living in the United States, and while the film industry has made an attempt to address racism and improve diversity and inclusivity on the silver screen by increasing the number of Black directors, writers, actors, among other film experts, and presenting the lived experiences of Blacks, such efforts have failed to examine the continued use of stereotypical character tropes. In particular, fictional film narratives depicting "heroic" figures seeking retributive justice through gun theatricality have perpetuated racial stereotypes and have failed to address racism in film at its core. The gun is a symbol of that failure.

In *Act II: Stereotypical characters and their guns*, we describe three contemporary films in which famous Black actors well-received by diverse audiences, played stereotypical Black character tropes wielding guns. On the surface, the guns in these films, including *John Q.* (2002), *Django Unchained* (2011), and *Proud Mary* (2019), are symbolic representations of righteousness, liberty, equality. Through a deeper analysis of these films and the stereotypical character tropes within, when a gun is placed in the hands of some of these characters, it emerges as a symbol of violence, criminality, untamed power, and an overall acknowledgement of how these films perpetuate structural racism and serve as barriers to addressing White privilege.

Our final section, *Act III: Desegregation of the gun in film*, provides guidance in desegregating the gun in film, to start breaking down structural racism, and to call attention to social injustice with greater purpose. Film theories such as media representation theory and reception theory guide our exploration into the processes and products in film production and reception that have traditionally constructed and represented the Black identity as other (e.g., tokenism), but could be useful approaches that mindfully avoid stereotypical tropes and negative representations of the gun in the creation of films.

Act I: The gun as symbol of structural racism in film

Guns as theatrical things. In her examination of the 2014 standoff between Cliven Bundy and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Lindsay Livingston (2018) explores the contexts and rituals of gun ownership and display through the use of theatricality. She explains:

> Using theatricality as a paradigm for understanding how and why people perform themselves the ways that they do can be particularly helpful in explicating the complicated politics and rituals surrounding gun ownership and display, and the afterlives of these actions, in the United States. Theatricality forces us to confront the fact that all embodied behaviour, just like all language, is a performance involving repetition or citation. Unravelling the citationality of performances of gun ownership—the ways in which owning, displaying, brandishing, and firing a gun are influenced and conditioned by theatrical reproduction—reveals how guns function as potent transmitters of both real and representational violence (Livingston, 2018, p. 345).

Cliven Bundy, a cattle rancher, engaged in a standoff with law enforcement over a 21-year-old legal dispute that required him to pay over a million dollars of cattle grazing fees for his use of federal land without a permit. The BLM and local law enforcement attempted to round up and impound Bundy's cattle, but an organized militia and armed supporters of Bundy interfered in a standoff. Negotiations to prevent escalation were made by the BLM and they eventually retreated and halted the cattle impounding. Following the standoff, Bundy continued to trespass and use the land without a permit.[2] Bundy, his sons, and supporters insist they have a right to the use of this property, and in their brandishing of guns "as theatrical things" in public, these vigilantes are "in a state of performative becoming, balancing between the promise of violence to come and an insistence on violence past" (p. 348) To add, Livingston writes:

> Cliven Bundy's views on private and public property exist on a foundation of White supremacy, one that implies, if not explicitly states, that white-owned property is as valuable as some people's lives. This relational logic—that the fundamental to being American—is rooted in the dehumanization of people of colour, particularly Black and Indigenous people, throughout US history. Bundy's racist views moved from implicit to explicit shortly after the standoff at Bunkerville, when he gave a rambling news conference articulating his views on 'the Negro' (Livingston, 2018, p. 350).

Guns, in general, are symbols of independence, affiliation, identity, and power, and can shape the identity of the person or group who is brandishing or firing the symbolic object. The accompanying values of freedom, loyalty, courage and respect are desired by persons, and those who have access to guns often assume these values can be obtained by gun ownership and possession for purposes of survival, protection, resistance to authority, play, and social and political membership. The use of guns in war (gang wars, wars against countries, intergalactic wars) to hunting and entertainment (e.g., gun artistry), to policing and protection of self and other, can be seen throughout history and have become symbolic representations in the film narrative that attempts to reflect reality and express a worldview.

The symbols of guns are not distinct, however, and may overlap in any given film or character who possesses the gun. For example, the gun in the hand of a soldier in a war film may symbolize patriotism, independence, group identity, affiliation to the military, strength, courage, and respect. From the type of gun being used, to how it is being used, by whom, and for what purposes brings context and meaning to the symbolic object.

Guns as theatrical things, then, are nearly indistinguishable objects of performances in the real world from those in the fictional film narrative. And, as such, it is important for the future of the film industry to grapple with those stereotypes and theatrical things that embody structural racism, while supporting a "performative becoming" in which the gun is a representation not of violence and disempowerment but of equality and justice. And while the use of stereotypical Black character tropes in and of themselves arguably reinforce structural racism, we argue that by adding a gun and the theatricalities of its use, this further complicates existing Black stereotypes.

The theatricality of gun-wielding Whites like Cliven Bundy in the name of property rights and preservation of one's position in society are at the opposite end of the spectrum to those upholding an honour culture within the Black community, whereby there is violent retaliation to acquire, rather than sustain, social control and avoid further victimization (Felson and Pare, 2010, p. 1357). Racial segregation isolates Blacks from "mainstream society, social and economic institutions, and the legitimate opportunity structure by which to attain universal American success goals" and thus, the use of guns is an effective means of addressing a threat and deterring future victimizations, while simultaneously earning respect on the streets (Burgason et al., 2014, pp. 374–375). There is a type of theatricality of brandishing a gun on the streets that is more about status and respect rather than self-preservation or expressions of (ownership) rights and entitlements. Supporting this claim, Anderson (1999) describes guns as symbols of "toughness, status, and respect within communities in which the street code is entrenched" and further explains that those who "victimize Blacks within structurally disadvantaged communities are especially likely to utilize firearms due to the symbolic power of the weapon and because a firearm should decrease the probability of victim resistance" (In Burgason et al., 2014, pp. 376–378). In addition to the symbolism of guns on the streets in Black communities, possessing or owning a gun is about claiming a right that historically was not afforded to the Black community.

The gun as a symbol of structural racism in film. Following the height of race films (e.g., *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), produced for Black audiences, using Black actors) in the first half of the 20th century, there was a steady decline of film production by non-Hollywood studios and a general absence of Black filmmakers until the 1960s. Post-World War II, Black actors were recruited by Hollywood such as Sidney Poitier, whose first film, *No Way Out* (1950), focused on themes of bigotry and racial tensions. Such themes continued during the Civil Rights Movement with films such as *Raisin in the Sun* (1961) *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967). However, as Earl Sheridan (2006) describes, many of these films were criticized for "their velvet glove handling of racism". Whites in film were depicted as noble, intelligent, and heroic as they rescued or befriended the "saintly negro", who was well-mannered, vulnerable, and a victim in need. Actor Sidney Poitier was, according to many Black critics, "White America's vision of what a Black man should be rather than a real flesh-and-blood man who was allowed to be angry or sensual" (Sheridan, 2006, p. 180). Not every film during this time period aimed to examine race relationships and racism through the use of saintly Black characters, but one could be hard pressed to find a gun-wielding Black actor.

The *absence* of the gun as a theatrical thing in films that touch on themes of racial discrimination and the Black experience is, arguably, a symbol of structural racism and the historical significance of gun ownership. Despite the Civil Rights Movement, America's 1960s vision of the Black man remains calm and does not own a gun. For example, one might expect to see a gun in the film *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) where Sidney Poitier plays a Black detective, Virgil Tibbs, from Philadelphia who becomes involved in a murder investigation in Sparta, a small, racist town in Mississippi. The Sparta police have guns (props contained in the holster), but Tibbs, who is a lead detective from one of the most dangerous cities in America at the time does not carry a firearm. In one scene, Tibbs attempts to defend himself against a group of racist men with a metal pipe before the sheriff intervenes. In another scene, as Tibbs uncovers the murderer, several White men point their handguns and shotguns at Tibbs, who defensively holds up his hands. And while assumptions can be made about Tibbs' journey down South without a gun, the film depicts an empty-handed, stereotypical Black character trope—a soft-spoken gentleman—among a righteous group of White racists with a full artillery of firearms (police and townsmen). It was not until the blaxploitation film genre where we see an attempt to challenge the aforementioned Black character trope and empower Black characters with a voice —and in some cases, the power to wield a gun.

The blaxploitation films in the 1970s, which were mostly B-grade, inexpensive films, such as *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), *Shaft* (1971), *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972), *Superfly* (1972), *The Spook Who Sat By the Door* (1973), *The Mack* (1973), and *Foxy* Brown (2018) were arguably responses to the Black Power Movement. And while some films during this era were violent action films aimed at Black youth and focused on racism and its effects, these films were raw and illustrative of life in the inner city. From civil rights, to Black militancy, and hyper-tokenism, filmmakers wanted to show the realities of racism, while encouraging their Black audiences to take a stand. Blaxploitation films featured Black actors, and although there were a handful of Black filmmakers, many films were produced and directed by White filmmakers. Michael Washington and Marvin J. Berlowitz (1981) write, "Any semblance of revolutionary struggle is characterized by adventurism, tactics of "revolutionary suicide", and the most wanton decadent forms of violence and appeals to the basest, one-dimensional macho instincts" (p. 45).

The resulting effect of this genre of film was not of empowerment or a call to action, but the emergence of new stereotypical tropes and attitudes, and a clear message of racial group inequity as these films were primarily shown in Black community theatres with very few White audiences. The gun, widely used in blaxploitation films, then, became a symbol of segregation between Black and White film audiences and the communities in which these films were released. While Black youth might be able to relate to these film depictions of racism, how can they take a stand when such messages are hidden from mainstream America?

In the 1980s, the Black Arts Movement resurfaced with a new generation of filmmakers who wanted to call attention to the effects of The New Right under the Reagan and Bush administrations that "reversed the economic, educational, and political entitlements of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s" by making race "visible in new ways…coding violence with race, Black youth, gangs, drive-bys, rap music, and hip-hop culture" (Denzin, 2003, p. 27). Racism, oppression, and a self-help tradition from a lack of access to the legal system are additional factors contributing to violence (Felson and Pare, 2010, Black, 1983). These contributing factors of violence and victimization are not limited to disadvantaged Black communities. Burgason et al. (2014) write: "Black victims in disadvantaged communities do not face a greater risk of being victimized by gun wielding offenders compared with Black victims in more affluent

communities. While guns may hold a symbolic value among alienated individuals in disadvantaged communities in which violence is endemic, this does not exacerbate the likelihood that Black victims will be assaulted or robbed by gun wielding offenders" (p. 387).

By the end of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, racial tensions and violence became more prominent in such films as Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) where elements of the earlier blaxploitation films were incorporated without the magnitude of exploitive stereotypes such that the shocking realities of urban life were depicted, i.e., life in the hood. The gun represented anger, violence, and unfortunately had an adverse effect in empowering Black characters—such weaponry set in urban America diminished its possessor to something "less than human", even animalistic, or barbaric and uncontrollable.

This emergence of street gang films or "hood movies" depicted "one-dimensional views of Black life", typically with characters with an arsenal of guns and other weapons, with little reference to race or racism (Sheridan, 2006, p. 185). As Norman K. Denzin (2003) explains, hood movies "framed a particular version of the violent, gendered, cinematic racial order. This cinema of racial violence was shaped by a politics of representation that valued Whiteness and a new conservative cultural racism" (p. 23). This genre of film, then, appealed to conservative young Blacks who saw racism as an anachronism "no longer culpable for the degraded plight of Black people", or, alternatively, "impermeable" and "irrelevant to their current condition" (Sheridan, 2006, p. 191).

Despite widespread criticism for creating the stereotypical character trope of the young Black man in the hood with a gun, Black filmmakers created hood films to take a stand against the New Right, assuming that "an objective reality was out there, that it existed, and that it could be captured cinematically" (Denzin, 2003, p. 28). Such films included violent, social-realism films that called attention to the drug wars in the ghettos and the subsequent police surveillance (e.g., *Menace II Society*), as well as, action-comedy, interracial, cop-buddy films (e.g., *Die Hard*). However, because Blacks were depicted as stereotypical thugs, animalistic and violent, this heightened racial bias in the White community, and justified segregation in Black urban communities and a stronger police presence. As Denzin explains, "this cinematic realism contributed to its own deconstruction;" the reality presented by filmmakers was not necessarily the same version of actual life in the community (p. 29).

At the turn of the 21st century, the hood films were phased out and replaced with films that attempted to break racial barriers and included more opportunities for Black actors besides typecast roles. Although, films and actors who were "successful" at the Academy Awards (e.g., *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *The Help* (2011)) are either reinforcing stereotypical character tropes or present narratives at the periphery of the Black experience (i.e., slavery films and servitude). Success may be measured by whether the stories told are genuine representations of Black lives—stories that are understood with greater clarity and a perceived awareness of social and racial injustice among White audience members. But even for those films that are not purposely created to tell genuine stories of race and racism, the success may rest on simply recognizing the Black experience rather than contrived experiences of stereotypical character tropes, or by calling attention to such tropes as cultural representations of structural racism. And it is here, the 21st century, where we will delve deeper into the films specifically depicting gun wielding Black actors and illustrate how stereotypical racial character tropes contribute to the negative representations of guns, which, as theatrical things, become symbols of racism and can further reinforce racial biases and segregation of film audiences.

Act II: Stereotypical racial character tropes and their guns

There are several pervasive stereotypical character tropes throughout film history including, but not limited to, Uncle Tom (e.g., *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1927), Mammy (e.g., *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Pinky* (1949)); Mandingo or Savage (e.g., *The Birth of a Nation* (1915); Jezebel (*Jezebel*, 1938); Coon (*Hearts in Dixie* (1929); Sambo (*The Sambo Series* 1909–1911); and Tragic Mulatto (*Scar of Shame* 1926). These historical, stereotypical character tropes continue to reinforce racial discrimination and bias (Jewell, 1993) and are identifiable throughout U.S. film history. In this section, we illustrate how these and other stereotypical Black character tropes continue to be used in 21st century film, and when guns are placed in their hands, such representations further contribute to structural racism, particularly when the underlying values, e.g., freedom, are unachievable and lead to the marginalization of Blacks and other underrepresented minorities.

The following three selected films, *John Q.* (2002), *Proud Mary* (2018), and *Django Unchained* (2011) were selected following an extensive review of film genres and films with Black characters who wielded a gun in three diverse film genres (Drama/Thriller, Blaxploitation/Crime, Blaxploitation/Drama). We decided to focus our attention on lead characters who were Black, who were wronged in some way, and whose guns were a way to express authority or power, or a means to achieve justice. These films were also selected because of the filmmakers' attempt to address racism and racial discrimination and heighten audience awareness (e.g., racial disparities regarding organ transplantation in John Q.). We selected these criteria because we wanted to prove our thesis *wrong*—despite efforts in the film industry to address racial discrimination and racism, guns as theatrical things in the hands of Black lead actors continue to reinforce racial stereotypes and are symbolic representations of structural racism in the 21st century. What we found was that there were few contemporary films with gun-wielding, lead Black actors, particularly in genres such as science fiction, horror/thrillers, adventure, Westerns and war films; our three selected films fall under the genres of drama/thriller (*John Q.*), blaxploitation/crime (*Proud Mary*), and blaxploitation/drama/revisionist Western (*Django Unchained*) and were selected because the character tropes gave us pause in determining whether they were stereotypical or a response to the marginalization of Blacks in film and cinematic racism and, by extension structural racism.

John Q.: The gun as symbol of freedom and independence. The gun as a symbol of freedom and independence can be seen in a variety of contexts from the protection of self and others, including one's community (local, national, global) and property. The goal of the possessor of the gun is to achieve justice, based on their conception of what constitutes justice and what structures, if any, can help achieve justice. Protection of self and others is itself a complex concept that places the gun in various contexts to achieve one of two interrelated elements of freedom: freedom from intrusion and freedom to preserve life, bodily integrity, and all that is of vital importance for human flourishing. Freedom from intrusion is related to a person's right to privacy and the right not to be harmed. Intrusion may come in many forms from governmental and authoritative interferences (e.g., military, police) to those seeking something of value such as power or resources (e.g., gangs, robbers). In many films, we bear witness to the intrusion, followed by the freedom fighter seeking personal justice and "taking justice into their own hands". In regard to the freedom to preserve life, bodily integrity, and basic human needs, guns may be used for purposes of hunting for food, for play and entertainment, for social justice, and so forth. Unlike the actions

of a defender in the presence of a threat, this form of freedom prompts offensive (as opposed to defensive) actions to acquire resources and other interests (e.g., respect).

The gun in the hand of John Quincy Archibald (Denzel Washington) in *John Q.* (2002), directed by Nick Cassvetes, is, for him, a means to seek justice for the structural barriers to organ transplantation for his son, who unexpectedly collapses at a baseball game due to a heart condition that cannot be resolved without a transplant. Due to the high cost of a transplant and health care insurance that will not cover the expenses, John holds hostage a number of health care professionals and patients in an emergency department at his 10-year-old son's treating hospital in Chicago. As a means to challenge the broken health care system, and the racial barriers to transplantation, the unloaded handgun that John brandishes is, for him, the only way to be heard and to secure his son's freedom to live. While he does not intend to hurt others given his gun does not contain any bullets (which audiences are unaware of until nearly the end of the film), he is using the unloaded gun as a threat to life. *John Q.* challenges audiences to look at the deeper social justice issues beyond what lies on the surface, i.e., the threat to kill several people for the sake of a single child, and to think critically about the barriers to health care, and the reality of racial disparities in the delivery of limited resources such as organs. However, as Philip French writes in *The Observer* (Sunday 28 April 2002), "…Denzel Washington reverts to his saintly mode, and the movie in characteristic Hollywood fashion loses sight of the vital matters of politics and principle it initially raises"…as the film "descends into implausible melodrama and sentimental bathos". And, in many instances of the film, in addition to the Saintly Negro trope, which is described below, we also see the Vigilante trope as John Q. takes justice into his own hands and threatens the lives of innocent health care workers and bystanders.

The "Magical Negro" or "Saintly Negro" character trope features a "magical or spiritually gifted Black lead character" that, according to Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki (2001), serves three purposes including, assisting the (White) character, help them identify and employ their own spirituality, and offer 'folk wisdom' to aid in conflict or resolve a dilemma. This trope has been widely used throughout film history, for example from *Defiant Ones* (1958) to *Green Book* (2018) because, as Cerise Glen and Landra J. Cunningham (2009, p. 137) describe, "As a result of Blacks' liminal status, the magical Negro has emerged as a new version of traditional racial stereotypes because most Hollywood screenwriters do not know much about Black people other than what they hear or see in other medial forms".

Glen and Cunningham (2009) explain that while there is cooperation between Whites and Blacks in films that use this trope, "the 'help' of the magical Negro primarily exists in spiritual and/or folk knowledge as opposed to intellectual cognition, which suggests that Blacks have yet to receive full acceptance in the minds of Whites" (p. 149), and a "reinvention of old Black stereotypes rather than authentic racial harmony" (p. 135). For example, the 1980 classic horror film, *The Shinning*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, depicts magical negro Dick Hallorann (Scatman Crothers), who is the cook at the haunted Overlook Hotel. He is able to communicate telepathically with young Danny Torrance (Danny Lloyd), explaining that what he and Danny share is "the shining"—psychic abilities that allow them to know each other's thoughts, see the past, and sense what is to come. Dick not only helps Danny to identify his abilities, but offers advice to aid him (e.g., advises him to stay away from room 237). Although Dick has a gift, he is murdered by Danny's deranged father, Jack Torrence (Jack Nicholson).

Philosopher Anthony Apiah explains that "saintly Black characters are morally equivalent to their "normal" White counterparts…This categorization serves to offset the racial stereotypes that White audiences generally aim at the Black characters as well as draw upon the superior moral nature associated with the oppressed" (In Glen and Cunningham, 2009, p. 138). One could also argue that because Magical Negro Dick Hallorann is murdered by Jack with an axe, White audiences may feel sympathy for him, however this character trope often dies in films to give the protagonist the spotlight if not reveal their greater abilities or future opportunities. Glen and Cunningham (2009) in citing James Snead (2004) add, "Notable images of race exist in terms of "mythification" where the debased Black role and glorified White hero are not only isolated roles for the viewer but symbolically used so that Whites do not have to consider the moral implications or validity of these roles (p. 137). In Hughey's (2009) extensive examination of films that constitute "cinethetic racism" or what he describes as "a synthesis of overt manifestations of racial cooperation and egalitarianism with latent expressions of white normativity and anti-black stereotypes" (p. 543) he describes the Magical Negro trope and how this seemingly powerful character is representative of mystified forms of contemporary racism obscured by the cinematic rhetoric of numerical increases in non-white representations, interracial cooperation, superficial empowerment of historically marginalized subjects, and movies as cultural phenomena (p. 551).

The Vigilante trope, often portrayed by a character wielding a firearm, is typically valued among film viewers and seen positively, as this trope shows good people seeking justice for some wrong perpetrated against them or someone close to them. Blaxploitation films in the 1960s and 1970s used this trope to breakdown stereotypes of Black people and connect to the Black Power Movement. In Melvin Van Peeble's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), characters "expressed the unadulterated anger and alienation that is a by-product of racism". While these films empowered Black men and women through violent acts, and offered expanded opportunities to Black actors beyond the "saintly Negro" image, they were criticized among both White and Black critics "for its glorification of violence and the unsavoury aspects of inner-city life" (Edleman, 1994, p. 442: In Sheridan, p. 181).

The saintly vigilante Denzel Washington sends film viewers the message that such character roles are unrealistic or exceptional, particularly since John Q. survived a precarious police standoff unscathed and his son received the transplant he needed (achieving "justice" in the end). The unloaded gun in the hand of John Q. becomes a symbol of "empty" threats to those persons (e.g., doctors and patients) who are minimally able to change health systems and biased organ procurement policies and processes due to structural racism, and not a symbol of righteousness or justice. John Q.'s criminal sentencing at the end of the film, although reduced given the testimonies of his sympathizers, is simply a reminder that structural racism is resolute. He is a Black man with a gun—someone to fear—and not simply because a pull of the trigger can end a life, but because John Q. is angry, irrational, and unpredictable. It is the fear of being controlled by a violent Black "savage" that becomes an allowance for racism just as it did in early America.

Alternatively, when we see guns in the hands of White actors who seek social or personal justice to challenge broken social systems and save or honour the lives of others, gun wielding characters are perceived as courageous, heroic, patriotic and helpful. Films such as *The Patriot* (2000), *Inglorious Bastards* (2009), and the *John Wick* Series (2014–2019) emphasize the retributive justice those lead characters seek after their loved ones are murdered by British Redcoats, Nazis, a Russian mob, or any number of villains who are relevant to period film narratives, popular culture, or political interests (e.g., war). This is not to say

these films are void of racial and ethnic stereotypes, however the lead White characters (mostly male) are emulated as realistic heroes, especially if the film narrative is based on or loosely based on historical events, real concepts, or persons and groups. Furthermore, when the gun is simultaneously viewed as a symbol of freedom and as a symbol of loyalty and affiliation, there might be a greater propensity for audiences to identify with the characters and film narrative.

Proud Mary: the gun as symbol of loyalty and affiliation. As a symbol of loyalty and affiliation, the gun brings people together such as soldiers, gang members, hunters, or gun enthusiasts. From war films to Westerns we see character groups learning how to use guns, brandishing their weapons, and using them—often times in unison. The gun is a symbol of belonging, of loyalty to individuals and groups (e.g., brotherhood or sisterhood) even when there may be varying intentions or goals for using guns among group members (e.g., protection vs. murder). And in situations when one member of the group does not hold, carry or use the gun such as in the case of Desmond Doss in *Hacksaw Ridge* (2016), a Seventh Day Adventist who joins the U.S. Army despite his personal and religious convictions to not commit murder (even to defend oneself, fellow soldiers or country), such individuals are often ridiculed and excluded. Based on a true story, Doss becomes a well-respected hero in World War II after saving the lives of 75 soldiers without ever touching a gun. However, before his heroic feat, he was subjected to criticism and torment by his commanding officers and fellow peer soldiers. While there are such exceptions, when individual characters are singled out by either possessing a gun or not, we question their affiliation or belonging to that group, why they might be different than other members of the group, and what message their difference(s) send to an audience. In Doss's case his loyalty to the Army and his country was questioned because he refused to be like his fellow soldiers and carry a weapon. And while Doss was eventually permitted to continue in the armed forces as a Conscientious Objector with the assistance of his Veteran-of-War father, if Doss were Black would he have had the same opportunity to serve as a Conscientious Objector, or would he be identified as lazy, defiant, and unfit—a malingerer, and imprisoned for his resistance? We suspect the latter.

Alternatively, when a member of the group carries a gun and others do not, the values of trust and loyalty are questioned due to the power differential, i.e., the person with the gun is in control and a potential threat. For example, the film poster and trailer for *Going in Style* (2017) depicts actors Morgan Freeman, Michael Caine, and Alan Arkin, playing lifelong friends who rob a bank that absconded their hard-earned money. On the poster, Black actor Freeman is centred between White actors Caine and Arkin and is the only one of the three holding a gun (despite all three actors having guns in the film). Is Freeman more dangerous? Should we trust his loyalty to his fellow "gang" members? What we see is a visual example of a Black actor being singled out not because he is exemplifying empowerment, leadership, or "style" (as the movie title suggests). The gun, here, is a symbol of difference, violence, Blackness, inequality. If this movie poster were to have shown guns in the hands of all three actors, this would have sent a very different message about affiliation and loyalty as the gun-wielding power and responsibility is distributed equally.

In the contemporary 2018 blaxploitation film, *Proud Mary*, directed by Babak Najafi, the gun in the hand of assassin Mary (Taraji P. Henson) represents a conflict in her loyalties to an organized crime family versus her loyalty to young Danny (Jahi Di'Allo Winston) after killing his father, Marcus Miller (James Milord). At the start of the film, audiences get a sense that Mary is a powerful, independent, "bad ass" woman. However, it becomes clear that Mary is not so powerful or independent as she is controlled by all of the men in the film: from Benny (Danny Glover), who saved her from the streets as a child to Tom (Billy Brown), Benny's son and her ex-boyfriend, to the men she works with in the crime organization. Arguably, however, because Mary kills all of the men in her life with the exception of Danny, she is able to gain control and independence. After taking Danny in, Mary desires getting out of the assassination business, and succeeds only after killing all of those she worked with and who she once considered "family". Here the gun represents freedom and her loyalty to Danny, and in many ways, audiences can identify with these values. Unfortunately, this film is not without stereotypical character tropes. Mary, who is the lead female character with a mostly all-male cast (with the exception of Benny's wife (Margaret Avery)), assumes the Black Mammy archetype. The emotional toll of killing people and the desire to be a caregiver reveals an interesting shift from a gun-wielding assassin to a protective, yet sassy mother. Although her gun symbolically transforms from a source of identity, power, and group affiliation to a means of freedom and protection of self and other, critics may interpret that she becomes powerless for the sake of becoming a nurturer. Thus, instead of young Black female audiences imagining themselves as empowered "bad ass" women, who cannot be controlled by men or forced into disingenuous group affiliations, they might only see the stereotypical role of Black women carrying for someone else's child. However, even the "bad ass" role has racial connotations given they are linked to the aforementioned blaxploitation films of the 1970s, as Nancy Yuen explains (2019, p. 70). And while such typecasting might have been intentional for this contemporary film, both actors and viewers might simply experience and bear witness to racism rather than empowerment.

Here we also see the vigilante trope where Mary is motivated by trying to do right by Danny after killing his father, which concurrently sets her apart from the others, destroying what solidarity she had with the crime organization, and calling attention to her now caregiver role. She does not kill out of revenge or for purposes of seeking justice for the crimes committed by her once "family"; instead she kills out of guilt, a way to achieve justice (i.e., paying for past wrongs), and a desire to nurture.

Proud Mary is stylistically similar to *Foxy* Brown (2018), one of the original blaxploitation films with a lead female actor (Pam Grier), particularly in the opening credit images and film score, and with comparable plots as Black female vigilantes seek justice (Foxy seeks revenge after her boyfriend is murdered), the two films diverge with respect to the portrayal of stereotypical character tropes. Foxy Brown assumes the Jezebel role (further described in next section), using her body to get what she wants, while Mary assumes the Black Mammy role. And perhaps the little sexuality we see in Proud Mary (e.g., opening shower scene) is due to past criticisms of Grier's character and her own involvement in blaxploitation films that objectified rather than empowered Black women. In *Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black Action Film Heroine Changed American Popular Culture*, author Yvonne D. Sims (2006) examines the portrayal of Black women actors such as Pam Grier, and the contradictory images they created for themselves and Black audiences. Such contradictory images of a vigilante-mammy in *Proud Mary* may actually confuse audiences and prohibit them from seeing an empowered female character. In some ways, Foxy and Mary share a similar dedication in caring for another person in their retributive

pursuits and are best understood as caregivers seeking justice; perhaps this is what audiences will see—a less stereotypical character trope (i.e., Black Mammy) and simply the stereotypical gender role of (sensitive) caregiver.

In examining violent female action characters (VFACs), Katy Gilpatric (2010) explains the target of VFAC violence was usually a male or group of males in 61.1% of films. Furthermore, VFACs often maintain "feminine stereotypes of submission and affection, especially in relation to male heroes present in the films" as evidenced by the type of secondary roles played, e.g. the sidekick, and a lack of primary, heroine roles (p. 743). In addition, the motivation for VFAC violence is often "guided by or serves the interests of a dominant male hero" (p. 744). While Proud Mary arguably maintains such feminine stereotypes in the pursuit to protect young Danny, the VFAC in this film does successfully contradict the typical profile aimed at youth audiences—young, White, unmarried, and highly educated. Mary is an older Black woman from the streets, and while young viewers, in general, do not identify with the VFAC typical profile, "they identify with the normative social codes that are embedded in these films—social codes that reflect what is valued in American culture" (p. 744). Mary's pursuit to save a young man, expressing guilt for causing his father's death, and killing "the bad guys" are generally valued in American culture, and perhaps audiences can relate and appreciate a heroine despite the Black Mammy archetype, which continues to impact U.S. culture and social policy (Jewell, 1993).

Django Unchained: the gun as symbol of identity and power. As a symbol of identity and power, the gun is a means for persons to assume positions of authority and acquire respect (even if that respect is disingenuous and motivated by fear). Also, the more skilful one becomes in using their gun, so does the amount of power one possesses over another. From police to soldiers to gang members, the gun represents power differentials between those who possess the gun and those who do not. As previously stated, we see this power differential throughout the history of gun ownership as Whites could rightfully own (and use) guns while Blacks were not afforded this right.

Django (Jamie Foxx) in Quentin Tarantino's spaghetti western film, *Django Unchained* (2011), is a free slave in the 1850s, who sets out to save his wife, Broomhilda von Shaft (Kerry Washington) from plantation owner, Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio). Django is on a mission to secure his wife's freedom, and, at first glance, fight against the very structures of injustice (i.e., slavery, unequal social positions for free 'slaves'). Arguably Django's guns represent not simply his power to reclaim his wife, but the freedom from being owned, oppressed, and dominated, the freedom from physical and emotional harm, and the freedom to possess property, e.g., the object of the gun.

From riding a horse, to wearing extravagant clothing, to brandishing weapons, Django resists social norms and is presented to be on equal par with his friend, dentist-turned-bounty hunter, Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz). Dr. Schultz states, "I must remind you, Django is a free man. He cannot be treated like a slave. He…within the boundaries of good taste, he must be treated as an extension of myself". However, Dr. Schultz is representative of the "White saviour" archetype who has a need to take care of Django at every step of their journey, and it is questionable whether Django is truly viewed as an equal or Dr. Schultz' project. Of note, Actor Will Smith turned down the opportunity to play Django, thinking that Dr. King Schulz was the lead character, since he ultimately kills bad-guy Calvin Candie, and because of this White Saviour trope (Child, 2013). Christoph Waltz, however, received an Oscar for best *supporting* actor.

Other stereotypical character tropes are presented throughout the film, such as Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson), the senior house slave of Calvin Candie -an Uncle Tom figure—who is fatally shot by Django and is used "as the outlet for viewer's moral outrage over slavery" (Jackson, 2013). The Uncle Tom character trope can be traced back to abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (1851), who aimed to illustrate the brutal realities of slavery and the humanization of slaves. Her tragic character, Uncle Tom, is killed after his refusal to reveal the location of two slave females, hiding from their sexually and physically abusive master, and unfortunately, his courage and self-sacrifice were not the characteristics that identified the emerging Uncle Tom character trope in film. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the most-filmed narrative of the silent film era from 1903 to 1927 with mostly White actors in blackface. Minstrel depictions, exotic slave customs, and unsympathetic slave roles modified Stowe's Uncle Tom, leaving audiences with a stereotypical character trope that persisted even when films started to portray the novel more accurately (e.g., Universal Studio's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1927) and Black actors played lead roles. Folklorist Patricia Turner writes, "They grossly distort Uncle Tom into an older man than he is in the novel, a man whose English is poor, a man who will do quite the opposite, who will sell out any black man if it will curry the favour of a white employer, a white master, a white mistress. It's that distorted character that is so objectionable to African Americans" (2008, NPR Podcast). Jackson's character, Stephen, is the epitome of the Uncle Tom stereotype, who sees his fellow Black people beneath him and ultimately becomes the main antagonist of Django.

The Mandingo character trope is also prominent throughout the entire film as Django's quest to save his wife is masked by a ruse to purchase a Mandingo from Calvin Candie, appealing to his ego and hobby of slave-fighting. Able to purchase a Mandingo from the reward money, Django and Dr King Schultz receive from their bounty collection of dead, White criminals challenge the very racist structures of 19th century U.S. slavery and property rights. Of note, the Mandingo is a stereotype of an animalistic, sexually rapacious, savage who is often depicted with muscular physique and oversized genitalia. Film depictions of the Mandingo, including the 1975 film *Mandingo*, have portrayed the Mandingo character trope as a "prize-fighter", and someone who could be used to breed other slaves. Mede, the Mandingo character trope in the 1975 film, is portrayed as a well-endowed slave, purchased by Hammond Maxwell. After summoning him to her room, Blanche Maxwell, the cousin and wife of Hammond, threatens to accuse Mede of rape if he does not have sex with her, and he complies. Besides the physical abuse slaves endured, the sexual and emotional abuse was particularly prominent with this character stereotype as Mandingo (1975) "portrays the private sex act between masters and slaves as an intense paradoxical site of sexual pleasure and racial domination" (Bernardi, 2008, p. 218).

The female version of the Mandingo, the tragic Mulatta/Jezebel character trope is arguably identifiable in *Django Unchained* when houseslave, Broomhilda, a light-skinned, sexually attractive slave and wife of Django is prepared for an assumed sexual encounter with Dr. King Shultz, who summons her to his bedroom as a ploy to bring her and Django together. Although Broomhilda is not a sexually voracious slave as the Jezebel stereotype suggests, slave women were identified as Jezebels to justify rape and the of use of their bodies to sexually satisfy slave owners and their male family and friends (Pilgrim, 2002).

Finally, a stereotypical Black Mammy figure is also presented in this film, who is often seen with other female slaves and directed by Stephen rather than Candie himself. It was clear that Tarantino was bringing attention to a number of these racial stereotypes, and while the Mammy stereotype is not a prominent

figure, the servitude to Candie and his family is observed throughout the film. Of note, the Mammy—usually an older, overweight, submissive woman—is identifiable in Harriet Beecher Stow's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Aunt Chloe), and this may be one of the first uses of this stereotype, which was borrowed for D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) (which also borrowed the Uncle Tom character trope). While these stereotypical character tropes in *Django Unchained* do not wield guns themselves, their presence amplifies our awareness of Django's resistance and our curiosity about his transformation out of slavery. However, as Nancy Yuen writes, "Actors of colour can experience double trauma when asked to portray stereotypical roles. The first trauma is when they have to embody roles that pivot on racial degradation" (p. 75). And, all of these stereotypical character tropes in *Django Unchained* can have a serious impact on the actors assuming those roles where maintaining "an emotional boundary between fiction and reality" can be a challenge (Yuen, 2019, p. 77). As Yuen explains, "Playing racial stereotypes can trigger racial traumas that actors of colour experience in their everyday lives" (p. 81). And although Tarantino and others would argue that such a film portraying slavery cannot occur without typecasting stereotypical roles, and actors can choose whether to participate or not, the reality is that Black actors are underrepresented in the film industry and the "choices" to act in films are quite limited.

Paul Gormley (2005) writes, "Tarantino's films and their effect on the aesthetic shifts in Hollywood film should not be underestimated in the sense that they do represent a clear shift in Hollywood's cinematic engagement with race—which was (and still is) perhaps the most pressing political site in US culture" (p. 25). In describing Spike Lee criticisms of 'wannabe Black filmmaker' Tarantino's screenplays and his overuse of the term 'nigger' (the word is used 110 times in *Django Unchained*), Gormley explains "the underlying critique of his comments is that Tarantino's dialogue is a kind of 'Black voice' which like Blackface, is a White symbolic construction based on 'the power to make African-Americans stand for something besides themselves" (p. 33), which can further traumatize Black actors having to assume stereotypical roles. Blackface in the U.S. dates back as early as the pre-Civil War era where it was commonly used in minstrel performances among both White and Black performers (who wore makeup to make their skin even darker). It became popular practice in early 20th century films (e.g., *The Birth of a Nation*, 1915, *The Jazz Singer*, 1927, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, 1942) where White actors in black face paint played a range of stereotypical behaviours (ignorant, hyper-sexual, aggressive, lazy, incoherent) with embellished features (large lips and nose, untamed hair), and assumed the roles of those aforementioned stereotypical character tropes. Blackface and Black voice are cinematic features of racialized stereotypes and ideologies about racial authenticity; whether Blackface actors enact racial stereotypes or linguistic representations of Blacks are used by White film writers and directors, such stereotypes reinforce White supremacy and privilege over Blacks. Tarantino's response to his critics rests on keeping his dialogue 'real' by using phrases his characters would use and their varying meanings.

Despite its entertainment value, *Django Unchained* fails in telling the story of Black people with more complex character roles and places Black actors in the shadows of "White superiority" given the stereotypical saviour archetype and reinforces Black actors' vulnerability and powerlessness as they are typecast in stereotypical roles. Furthermore, viewers lack a genuine understanding of Django's identity due to a lack of character development; his transformation out of slavery and his freedom—represented through the gun—lacks depth and fails to inspire viewers' whose own oppression feels inexorable. The guns he skilfully shoots are a means to acquire power and freedom for his wife; they do not seem to be part of an identity (e.g., gunslinger, vigilante, or freer of slaves). Nevertheless, given the history of gun ownership even among freed slaves, perhaps Django's guns are symbolic of the freedom of ownership and the resistance to White supremacy rather than just another Black man to fear. Unfortunately, this message is masked by the overt and hidden racism present in the dialogue and typecasting of this film, and the stereotypical tropes that diminish Django's heroism, power, and position (e.g., the subject of the White Saviour).

In each of the three selected films—*John Q.*, *Proud Mary*, and *Django Unchained*—prior to our examination of stereotypical character tropes and the symbolism of the guns used by each of the lead characters, we were hopeful the film industry today would be making great strides in breaking down structural racism. And while more Black actors are playing lead characters, receiving nominations and awards for their efforts, and telling imaginative or inspiring stories to Black audiences, such films are few in number and, as we have examined, still use stereotypical character tropes that marginalize, dehumanize, and segregate persons of colour from White America. The representation of the gun in each of these movies symbolizes important values such as freedom, yet when placed in the hands of stereotypical archetypes, the gun becomes an extension of past historical abuses and injustices, characterizing its possessor in a negative light or someone to fear. In each of these movies our heroes used guns to save another person—a son, an orphaned teenager, and a wife—and for such actions, audiences can relate to and applaud. Yet, the saintly savage, caring mammy, and White saviour-saved slave character tropes, diminish these heroes and the symbolic value of guns in White America. To break down structural racism in the film industry, it is imperative that filmmakers incorporate the real lives and experiences of minorities in film and challenge audiences' steadfast attitudes and beliefs by eliminating stereotypical character tropes and focus on complex character development. The following section presents these recommendations through the lens of our theoretical framework.

Act III: Desegregation of the gun in film

> The media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power. Because they control the minds of the masses.
>
> Malcolm X.

The media theories of representation and reception provide a broad understanding of the relationships among filmmakers (writers and producers), the film narrative, and audiences. These theories challenge our thinking of film as a representation of reality, and the implications of such a representation on filmmakers and audiences. Specifically, media representation theory examines how identities (e.g. race) are represented within texts, throughout media production processes, and as they are received, even critiqued, by audiences whose identities may be different than those represented. And when identities are represented as stereotypical character tropes, media representation theory illustrates how they can perpetuate racist attitudes and injustices in American society. Matthew Hughey (2010) explains that Hollywood movies provide a "context in which whiteness—whether victimized or valorised—is framed as ultimately superior and normative" (p. 478).

Reception theory suggests that texts such as film are encoded by producers and then decoded by audiences (Holub, 1984). What was intended by producers, based on their cultural

backgrounds and personal experiences, may be interpreted differently by audiences. This theory, developed by Stuart Hall (1980), included an encoding/decoding model of communication. Encoding and decoding can involve both verbal (e.g., words) and non-verbal symbols (e.g., body language). Hall explained that the process of communication is complex and has various interdependent stages (production, circulation, use, and reproduction of media narratives) (Proctor, 2004; Holub, 1984). For example, audience rejection, or "oppositional reading", to the intended text may be attributed to complex or controversial narratives, prompting audiences to create their own meaning. Such oppositional reading can also be attributed to audiences' unwavering belief systems and resistance to accepting other perspectives. So, while filmmakers may aim to break down structural racism through the film narrative, audiences may interpret the film quite differently and maintain racist attitudes.

Under Hall's theory we also find a "negotiated reading" in which audiences accept some of the intended text and producer perspectives, while developing their own perspectives. More relevantly, Hall's work delves in the connections between media and racial prejudice, illustrating that identity is an ongoing product that is continuously being shaped by history and culture (Proctor, 2004). Thus, the film industry can be instrumental in empowering Black audience members to see value in themselves for who they are and who they aspire to be and telling a story that prompts Whites to recognize their own privilege and learn about someone else's lived experience absent of such privilege. And critics and filmmakers might be more motivated to work together to uncover hidden messages and contexts that prompt different perspectives and experiences of audiences under a negotiated reading. We argue that a "negotiated reading" goes beyond the text and how that text is immersed in a sociocultural setting, e.g., blaxploitation films that were shown in segregated neighbourhoods to attract Black audiences, sending a message of inequality despite the text that aims at empowerment.

The use of guns in the hands of particular character tropes are likely to lead to oppositional and negotiated readings among audience members due to the history of Black characters in film and what audiences are experiencing in the real world. Thus, it becomes a challenge for filmmakers to appropriately represent Blacks wielding guns without tokenism or stereotyping, and without promoting violence as a method for breaking down structural racism. The goal then, which can be guided by media representation and reception theories, is to tell a story that speaks to the lived experience of audience members while challenging unwavering belief systems and injustices that contribute to racist attitudes and beliefs.

While we do not suggest that filmmakers should eliminate the use of guns or of violence from their films, we do suggest that the film industry should be cognizant of the overt and hidden film texts and images that are being conveyed to audiences. The coding/decoding model of communication is an important approach for determining what filmmakers intend to convey to audiences, and what is actually being interpreted and why. A film with a Black vigilante with a gun is likely to send the message to some viewers that he is violent and to be feared even if he is a "good guy". It is imperative that the film industry takes a closer look at how characters are represented and received prior to the release of a film, as well as take stock in the reviews of critics and moviegoers alike. Without identifying the possible stereotypical character tropes that are being used, the underlining messages that are sent to audiences, and whether the film narrative is a realistic representation of people and their lived experiences, symbolic and structural racism will continue. Instead of placing so much emphasis on the quality of a film based on how entertaining it is or how much money it makes at the box office, we need to be more critical about the elements of the film narrative, the production processes, advertisement and delivery to audiences, and the film's reception by critics and others.

When we look historically at the 1927 film *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, Universal was so concerned with the White public, particularly White Southern audiences, certain scenes from the film were cut including those that depicted the realities of slavery (Railton, 2018). Media representation and reception theories prompt us to ask what if the scenes were not cut from this film? What effects would the scenes have on its viewers if anything? Were these decisions made because of political, financial, or aesthetic reasons? How do such decisions affect the Black actors and their racial identities? What would be the historical, sociocultural, and political impact if a White character was swapped with a Black character in a given film narrative? Although we recognize the socio-political and financial motivations for cutting this film in the 1920s, when scenes are cut or changed it is important to ask why and what the implications are with respect to contributing to or eliminating structural racism. In some cases, it is simply asking these types of questions that can prompt persons in the film industry, including advertisement, to consider how Blacks are represented and in what ways might these representations perpetuate stereotypes and racist attitudes.

In selecting *Proud Mary* (2018), we came across this film in our research because of the critical press surrounding its underpromotion, including a lack of screenings, difficult to find trailers, and few Thursday night premiers to showcase this Black woman-led action film. As one critic wrote:

> Sony intentionally sabotaged this film, and hurt its own box office numbers. There were no critic screenings held or Thursday night premieres, both of which have become standard at this point. Most egregiously, the few Thursday night premieres that *were* scheduled were hastily cancelled only an hour before the film was set to be screened for early audiences after they had already purchased their tickets. This not only impacts the box office, but also ratings (Sherronda J. Brown, January 15, 2018).

Granted, *Proud Mary* is not a great stylistic film due to a number of problems ranging from a poorly constructed plot to unrealistic action scenes, as well as the presence of stereotypical character tropes. However, if given the proper resources to create a quality film with a good promotion plan, this film would be a step in the right direction. Nevertheless, it seems to be a challenge for Hollywood to create action films in which the gun does not represent racial stereotypes. There are, however, some recent successful films that address racism and do not utilize stereotypical character tropes to represent Blacks; interestingly though, the Black actor does not wield a gun.

In Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), we see the emergence of a successful film that addresses the issues of racism through a horror genre. With a Black film director, a Black lead actor (Daniel Kaluuya who plays Chris Washington), and a White lead actress (Allison Williams who plays Rose Armitage), the film addresses fears among Black people regarding segregation, White privilege, and slavery told through a novel horror story. Rose especially plays into audiences' biases as they fail to see the evilness of her character until late into the film; what many audiences see is a concerned girlfriend who appears to be "woke" simply by having a Black boyfriend. Interestingly, the only gun in this film is a shot gun used by Rose, who goes after Chris once he realizes her and her family's desire to enslave him through mind control just as they have done with her previous significant

others. Chris is able to defeat his evil girlfriend without a gun as he strangles her to death. Prior to its public release, the initial ending of the movie showed Chris being arrested after strangling Rose, however Peele changed the ending to have a more positive outcome based on information acquired by early screenings and his awareness of the increase of police shootings of Black individuals in the U.S. Even with a happier ending, the realities of racism were very much present throughout this film and did not require an ending that would reinforce its message with a jail scene, possibly perpetuating structural racism rather than calling it out and breaking it down through the film narrative. We can appreciate, however, the critical thought that went into creating an ending that did not diminish the realities of racism, while considering the reception of a representative audience unmotivated by politics or finances.

To improve the film industry and include more films like *Get Out*, it is important to continue to ask probing questions: Why are Blacks still underrepresented throughout the industry? Why are Black actors framed in stereotypical ways? How do we address the racial biases among critics and the general public? How might bias among filmmakers (writers and producers) and reviewers/critics contribute to structural racism? How might gaps in communication, including filmmaker coding and audience decoding be resolved so that we have a better understanding of the intended film narrative and how it is being interpreted? It is also critical that Black movie critics and layperson viewers have more opportunity to weigh in and be heard within the film industry; although blogs and unsolicited reviews are on social media and can easily be accessed via the internet, formal critical review and analysis in non-academic forums, voices that speak to the general population, are essential for understanding how we can do better to address these stereotypes and create film narratives and characters that speak to audiences.

By answering these and similar questions prompted by this theoretical framework, and taking steps to reflect on past actions that contributed to racial stereotypes and racism, perhaps we can metaphorically desegregate the gun in film whether it is critically looking at the images placed on a film poster or trying to understand why actors may reject the opportunity to play a role in a film due to racial stereotypes. It is imperative that Blacks and other minorities have more opportunities to weigh in at every stage of film production and that their voices are clearly heard and understood. Perhaps, then, the gun can emerge as a symbol of equality and inclusivity in the rights and responsibilities of gun ownership and use rather than as a symbol of inequality, racism, and segregation.

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Notes

1 We use the sociological definition of race throughout this paper, which while referring to groups of people who have similar physical characteristics such as hair texture, skin colour and eye shape, is understood not to be biological. The racialization of groups—what markers constitute who belongs to what group—has changed over time and location; race is socially constructed. While not "real" in the biological sense, race shapes every aspect of lived experience. This is evidenced by mortality and poverty rates, employment and criminal justice statistics, educational outcomes, and housing data. In nearly every case, people of colour do less well than Whites.

2 Of note—his sons led another standoff at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon in 2016. Bundy was arrested on his way to Oregon, although all charges were eventually dropped in 2018 due to "flagrant misconduct by prosecutors and the FBI" such that they failed to provide evidence in a timely manner. Available online at: https://www.oregonlive.com/oregon-standoff/2018/01/cliven_bundy_standoff_case_thr.html

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to J.M.A.