
Though set in 1970s Colorado, Spike Lee’s BlacKkKlansman trains a lens on the broad sweep of American history. Its cinematic bookends span the film version of Gone with the Wind (1939) and footage of contemporary white-supremacist violence in Charlottesville, Virginia. The Birth of a Nation (1915), the film that sparked and styled the real-life reformation of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), features prominently as well, juxtaposed with Harry Belafonte’s searing recounting of a Texas lynching the year after its release. Alec Baldwin’s opening cameo as the fictional midcentury demagogue Kennebrew Beauregard incorporates a pastiche of racist tropes—“Jewish-controlled puppets on the Supreme Court,” “army of Commmies,” “mongrels,” “super-predators”—that span generations of racist ideology. This broad arc provides a rich palette for Lee to present a much smaller tale writ large.

As the opening credits inform audiences, this film is based on “some fo’ real, fo’ real sh*t.” Source material, which serves more as a device here, comes from the black police officer Ron Stallworth’s memoir of his 1978 infiltration of the Colorado KKK, Black Klansman. Stallworth’s unlikely ruse begins when, while on duty and seemingly on a whim, he answers a KKK recruitment advertisement in the local newspaper. Posing on the phone as an interested prospective recruit who hates anyone who “doesn’t have pure white Aryan blood running through their veins,” he piques the interest of a local KKK officer. He subsequently infiltrates the group with the help of a white officer who poses as “Ron Stallworth” at a variety of in-person meetings while the real Stallworth continues his telephonic contact. The operation unfolds over six months, ending abruptly with a (thankfully unheeded) order from the police chief to destroy all evidence of its existence.

As Klan stories go, Stallworth’s is flatter than we might expect. Though the surreal conceit of a black man infiltrating the KKK offers a compelling hook, the real-life police intelligence operation played out mostly uneventfully. While Colorado was a KKK hotbed during the 1920s—the historian Robert Alan Goldberg’s book Hooded Empire (1981) documents the state as second only to Indiana in national Klan presence during that decade—by the late 1970s it had receded into the margins of a Klan world that, even in the South, had ceased to attract anything like a mass following.
The threat posed by the KKK in this period had not only shrunk but also bifurcated. Self-styled Klan leaders such as David Duke sought to take the group into the mainstream, shedding robes and hoods for three-piece suits. At the same time, the KKK’s terrorist impulse concentrated within a parallel track, increasingly centered on an underground network stockpiling weaponry and military expertise in support of a coming white-supremacist revolution. In the decade following Stallworth’s infiltration, such violent potential would be actualized in Colorado when the Order, a shadowy outfit whose membership had ties to the KKK world, assassinated the Denver radio personality Alan Berg. But in 1978, Colorado’s KKK mostly sought to raise its profile via endless planning of marches and cross burnings that most often did not occur, alongside the sorts of recruiting ads in local newspapers that first brought them to Stallworth’s attention.

This straight retelling of Stallworth’s life experiences would include relatively little to grip audiences. Certainly, his conversations with local KKK officials, and especially his absurdist exchanges with Duke, offer telling insight into racist mind-sets. BlackKkKlansman engagingly foregrounds these scenes, particularly in its triumphant portrayal of Stallworth convincing Duke to pose for a photo that ultimately upends and lampoons the strict racial hierarchy at the core of the Klan’s world view. That scene lays bare the seething undercurrent of violence residing beneath the surface of the smooth and civil veneer that Duke carefully cultivated as part of the Klan’s new “professional” image. The exchange also highlights Lee’s deft inversion of the historical script, through which validation of the Klan’s power relied on overt or implicit police support. Here, the authority imparted by Stallworth’s badge negates Duke’s violent predilections, humiliating the grand wizard rather than ratifying his threats.

These retellings aside, the film’s most significant triumphs result from its embellishment of the historical record. Lee’s motivation for those alterations has been the topic of heated debate, perhaps most prominently in the musical artist and filmmaker Boots Riley’s widely circulated August 2018 Twitter critique of what he viewed as Lee’s misguided impulse to “make a cop the protagonist in the fight against racist oppression.” Riley certainly is correct in his counterclaim that, rather than attacking the KKK, police agencies have disproportionately targeted black movements in their intelligence operations, just as they have black individuals in their investigative maneuvers. To take one prominent example referenced obliquely throughout the film, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)’s COINTELPRO operations worked to eliminate black leaders such as Stokely Carmichael, Fred Hampton, and Martin Luther King Jr. to neutralize their activist followings. When pressed to target KKK violence, FBI agents worked to control the Klan’s flaunting of law and order while tacitly supporting its continued presence in communities. In effect, they affirmed the Klan’s existence while working overtime to eradicate black freedom movements—an orientation with tragic echoes in the uneven policing of contemporary white-supremacist violence in Charlottesville and elsewhere.

How, then, might we reconcile Lee’s lens with the police’s anti-Klan campaign here, and especially a late scene in which Stallworth’s fellow officers engineer a sting operation designed to catch a racist cop in the act? One might read that scene as a phantasmagoric set piece, offering some degree of comfort in what could be before pulling the rug out via the looming threat of metaphorical Klan crosses and the very real burning torches in Charlottesville depicted in the film’s closing scenes. That juxtaposition, however, locates racism in a manner that hinders apprehending the thread that ties Stallworth’s struggles within the Colorado Springs Police Department with the less ambiguous hate he confronts while embedded within the KKK. A consistent lesson from the historiography of organized white supremacy is that those groups often benefit from their alignment with pillars of mainstream political, economic, and social power.

In that vein, BlackKkKlansman might have been convincingly presented as, at its core, an account of a black man navigating parallel racist institutions. Without addressing the comparison directly, Stallworth’s memoir shows how, in important ways, his infiltration of the KKK was less challenging than his entry into the previously all-white Colorado Springs Police Department. After desegregating the force
in 1974, his experiences in the department were frequently demeaning. The film highlights the belittlement, harassment, and marginalization he often shouldered as “the Jackie Robinson of the . . . force,” though shies away from directly comparing that treatment to his reception in the Klan.

Lee gets closest to this parallel when he lampoons white assumptions about race. In separate scenes, both the city’s police chief and the kkk leader Duke claim knowledge of racial difference rooted in speech patterns, a notion belied by Stallworth’s successful ruse (for his part, he claims to be fluent in both “the King’s English and jive”). In those moments, as well as others in which protagonists incredulously entertain the possibility of a figure of Duke’s ilk being elected to the presidency, the film comes closest to interrogating the connective tissue joining extremism and institutional racism.

Other embellishments allow the film to interrogate more fully and attack the foundations of white supremacy, adding pivotal texture, tension, and a measure of ambivalent hope to the source narrative. The film presents Stallworth’s double—a figure known only as “Chuck” in his book—as “Flip Zimmerman,” a secular Jew pressed to question his own presumptive whiteness in the face of the Klan’s militant anti-Semitism. A dramatic high point occurs when Flip nearly is forced, at gunpoint, to take a lie detector test to “prove” that he is not a Jew. Though fictionalized here, the Klan in this period did employ technologies such as lie-detecting machines and “truth serum,” though typically (and, in this case, ironically) to identify and weed out police informants rather than to affirm members’ racial and religious bona fides.

Lee also introduces Patrice Dumas, the president of Colorado College’s Black Student Union and Stallworth’s romantic interest. Though no such figure appears in Stallworth’s own account, Patrice’s presence brings important tensions to the fore. Her commitment to resisting racism outside of the system, through black revolutionary action, chafes against Stallworth’s sense that one can work from within to root out injustice. She also serves as the kkk’s central target, raising their ire by speaking out against police violence. In Patrice and also in Connie Kendrickson, the wife of the kkk militant Felix Kendrickson, we meet characters who convey the pivotal, complex, and counterpoised roles that women have always played in these struggles. While Patrice displays strong and principled leadership throughout, Connie’s involvement is both severely restricted by the Klan’s patriarchal orientation and eventually pivotal to their commission of violence.

Ultimately, as Lee is no fabulist, the overarching tensions explored here remain unresolved. The Lost Cause strains that inform the film’s opening scenes return in their contemporary guise, via brutal extended footage of white-supremacist violence from the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville that fill the final frames. As torch-wielding terrorists march through the University of Virginia’s campus chanting “Jews will not replace us”; as white nationalists return the following morning in paramilitary garb to attack counterprotesters and bystanders on city streets; and as a weaponized vehicle plows through a crowd of antiracist demonstrators, killing Heather Heyer and injuring twenty-eight others, the police remain on the periphery.

Such inaction opened space for the commission of racist violence and thereby extended law enforcement’s historical orientations both to the kkk and to the black freedom struggle. To Lee’s credit—and, perhaps, chagrin—their confinement to the margins of the frame also frustrates any straightforward accounting of Stallworth’s fateful decision four decades earlier to attack racism from within.

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In the introduction to his 2017 book I Am Not Your Negro, Raoul Peck quotes Toni Morrison’s personal testimony at James Baldwin’s