

Interrogating Race and Racism

Collateral Damages Sustained in the Film *Crash*



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This article analyzes the film Crash relative to the multi-dimensionality of its imagery and the interconnections between scenes and characters that demonstrate how racialized identities are perpetuated and manifested. The collateral damages sustained by the characters demonstrate how personal insecurities, fears and ignorance agitate violent, even deadly responses, in a society where gun ownership is readily available. The essay illuminates how various cinematic techniques illustrate the disconnections between various ethnicities transposed by the interconnections between specific individuals. It also discusses the writer/director's adoption of provocative vocabulary and complex interplay between dialogue and action in order to reveal the relationship between thought and behavior. In addition to the ambiguity of characterizations, the paradoxical and corruptive influences of institutions and their agents are considered both as systemic and individualized mechanisms that sustain and manipulate a racist society.

Keywords: collateral, corruption, *Crash*, guns, racism, violence

In L.A. nobody touches. We're always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much that we crash into each other just so we can feel something.

Detective Graham Waters (Don Cheadle) says this after he hits his head on the dashboard during a car accident in the opening scene of the film *Crash* (2005), written and directed by Paul Haggis. This statement and the response of Ria (Jennifer Esposito), who is driving the car, supply the theme of the movie: "One of us has lost his frame of reference." Ria, a Latina, and Kim Lee (Alexis Rhee), a Korean woman, exchange ethnic insults as they accuse each other for being at fault for the collision; the argument between the two drivers conversely illustrates that Graham's statement is the film's thematic frame

of reference. Meanwhile, Graham proceeds to the crime scene that disrupted the flow of traffic, exchanges greetings with another police officer, gazes at a “dead kid,” and an anguished expression transforms his face. The film cuts to “Yesterday,” and the temporal framework is established.

Known for its race riots, violent and corrupt police force, youth gangs, segregated communities, and Hollywood industry, the City of Angels in *Crash* is the City of Anger on a cold, December day. This contemporary setting contains a *mélange* of ethnic and racial identities profoundly ignorant of their fellow citizens, and this unfamiliarity between various ethnicities breeds incivility that is further corrupted by crime, ignorance, race politics, and media manipulation. And yet, the film illustrates why real human connections are ultimately intimate, and why destructive projections are conversely self-destructive. In a series of interconnected collisions, the characters entangle their wrangled lives and refract their individual dilemmas and phobias, revealing crucial layers of the American psyche.

What is the collateral damage? This is the question to be posed in order to comprehend the intersection of messages communicated in *Crash*. Each incident, each “crash” inside and outside of cars, results in emotional and psychological reactions sustained by characters who lack the language and the resolve to confront the climate of racism that undermines their interactions. Through masterful crosscutting, dialogue imbued with double entendres, and a complicated *mise-en-scene*, the film weaves connections within a labyrinth of lives colliding into one another, like snap shots framed in a two-day photo album. Derogatory stereotypes that are usually expressed in private conversations or within ethnic circles infuse dialogue and racial hostility, as a series of peripheral events related to the carjacking of a Lincoln Navigator connect a number of characters, all of whom sustain some degree of collateral damage as a result of the response of the judicial system to this crime.

At the same time, the seemingly unrelated death of a Black police detective complicates the judicial handling of the carjacking, racial politics, and character development. This aspect of the film intersects with CRASH, the controversial LAPD unit, Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums, that engaged in wanton brutality against Black and Latino youth, as well as possession of narcotics, grand larceny, and drug theft. This allusion suggests larger symbolic meaning for the film, as the cover up of the detective’s corruption and the mishandling of the murder investigation reveals the cause and consequences of collateral damages sustained from events that ultimately end with a “dead kid” and a serious need to deliberate on Graham’s opening statement about the absence of daily, incidental human touch. In order to understand its thematic ramifications, the film has to be analyzed relative to its multi-dimensionality and how this interconnectedness leads the audience from the yesterday and into tomorrow.

Yesterday

The second chapter in the film occurs in a gun shop, thereby drawing a direct line from the “dead kid” to the instrument of death. Whatever the mitigating circumstances of the murder, the confusion that instigated the argument, that in turn, aggravated the fear that intensified it, would not have been resolved with such finality if a gun had not been on site. This is the most important statement in the film. Too many people have guns and the sense of entitlement and empowerment associated with guns provides an extreme response to this fear of others. The crash of conversation between the Persian shopkeeper, Farhad (Shaun Toub), and the gun dealer illustrates this syndrome.

Farhad interrupts his daughter’s conversation with the gun dealer because he does not understand what is being said and queries her in their native language, Farsi. The white



“Stop Police Brutality” 2007 © Diana Le

gun dealer yells at them: “Hey, plan the Jihad on your own time!” Farhad is infuriated because he has been mistaken for an Arab. The gun dealer is also incensed because he can’t understand what they are saying, so he shouts: “Speak English,” which of course further incites Farhad, who says: “I speak English. I am American citizen. I have rights. I buy gun.” This verbal collision reflects the correlation between white racial privilege and climate of fear resulting from the destruction of the Twin Towers and the “War on Terror.” It also demonstrates the stereotyping of persons by color into general categories. These tendencies are repeated throughout the film, even by persons of color. Farhad’s response to the racist accusations is to insist on his right to buy a gun. Caught in a deadlock of “guns and rights” in a violent society, this dichotomy is an unfortunate feature of American citizenship. As the national rationale reverberates throughout the film, it foreshadows death as a key aspect of the plot. Moreover, these deaths are “racially related.” As established in the opening scene, racial prejudice results in bizarre miscommunication in Black and white that results in “a dead kid.”

Resistance to the madness in the gun shop is illustrated through counter dialogue by Farhad’s daughter, Dorri. Instead of reacting to the insensitivity and anger of the gun dealer, she neutralizes his aggression by saying: “Give me the gun or give me back the money. And I’m really hoping you’ll give me the money.” These statements demonstrate her total disagreement with the purchase of the gun. When the dealer further insults her by making sexual innuendos in his description of bullets as “sizes of holes” and “the amount of bang you want to get,” she demands the blanks. Again, she reverses his insults by emasculating his sexual harassment and contradicting the symbolic correlation between sex and violence, another unfortunate feature of American culture. Most importantly, Dorri (Bahar Soomekh) disarms the gun dealer’s hostile vocabulary, stops an argument between the two men, and forewarns her father, who refuses to listen to her protestations about protecting his shop and his family with a deadly weapon.

Crime, Criminals, and Criminality

In the predominantly white and wealthy section of Los Angeles, “the Valley,” Peter Waters (Larenz Tate) and Anthony (Chris “Ludacris” Bridges) engage a debate about racial prejudice against African–American males just before they confirm a stereotype by carjacking a Lincoln Navigator owned by District Attorney Rick Cabot (Brandon Frazier) and his wife, Jean (Sandra Bullock). Along the collision course, the film crosscuts between two different arguments as the four characters walk toward the point of intersection. Anthony’s comments about racial perceptions and behaviors seem extreme to Peter, including Jean’s unjustified fear of them, when she clutches her husband’s arm. Meanwhile, the Cabots discuss discord in their marriage. Jean comments on her husband’s obsession with his career, and Rick interjects that he thinks she is jealous of his assistant, Karen, who happens to be African American. Despite the “conservative college attire” of Peter and Anthony, they are, as Jean suspected, criminals who steal the Cabots’ black Lincoln Navigator at gun point.

Throughout the film, cross-cutting juxtaposes dialogue and action to demonstrate the disconnections between ethnicities and the interconnections between racial perceptions and socialized behavior. The behavioral contradictions and bigoted vocabulary permeate these juxtapositions, constructing a series of unpredictable outcomes. This technique reveals private thoughts behind prejudice and how it is perpetuated and reinforced through truths and half-truths that define racialized identities. For example, Anthony’s behavior mirrors stereotypes while his criticisms contradict his philosophical arguments: “We’re the ones who should be afraid in this sea of over-caffeinated white people patrolled by the trigger-happy LAPD. So, why aren’t we afraid?” Peter’s surprising, rhetorical retort shocks the audience: “Cause we got guns?” Then, the two young men pull out their guns like cowboys about to rob a stage coach. This scene echoes the conversation and mentality presented in the gun shop. *Crash* illustrates the complexity and the ambiguity of human behavior by disrupting audience anticipation, and thereby temporarily disbanding racial identification with specific characters.

Collateral Damage

Since the carjacking confirmed Jean’s fear of young black men, she feels her racial hysteria in a subsequent scene is justified. Her rage about her husband’s insensitivity is fueled by the presence of people of color in her home, including Karen (Nona Gaye) and a Chicano locksmith. Although there are no actual scenes that confirm a sexual liaison between Rick and Karen, their professional intimacy and Rick’s disinterest in his marriage aggravates Jean’s insecurity. To suggest the underlying jealousy that fuels Jean’s tirade about her husband’s dismissive attitude, the camera cuts to Karen, which suggests a momentary self consciousness about either her ethnicity, or about her affection for Rick, or both. Jean yells at Rick for “patronizing her” while she accuses the locksmith of being a “gang banger” who will sell the keys to their house to his “homies.” Jean’s accusations coincide with the visual framing of the locksmith, Daniel (Michael Pena), between the steps of a dark staircase. Whereas his white tee shirt indicates innocence, by comparison and contrast, Jean’s white blouse and the white walls of the kitchen are symbolic of her racist consciousness and the sterility of her domesticity. The reoccurrence and the ambiguity of white imagery throughout the film indicate the connection between racialized cultural values and human behavior that extend beyond the individuality of any character as well as victimization.

Rick Cabot, on the other hand, relates his tirade to racial politics. Because the carjackers are African American, he perceives this as a political travesty in terms of his reelection.

Karen counters her insecurities and his fears with: “You have a lot of support in the African American community.” This endorsement suggests her personal commitment to him as well. Rick considers a public relations ploy—pin a medal on a fireman for valor in the line of duty. But Rick’s mistaken perception of a dark-skinned, American Iraqi named Sadaam as an African American, reveals the D.A.’s predisposition to facades and the prevailing hostility against descendants of the U.S. government’s present enemy, which is a thematic intersection with the malicious vandalism of Farhad’s store and the verbal abuse he incurs. Throughout the film, instances of mistaken identity reveal and instigate violent and dangerous behavior.

In effect, the dialogue in this chapter confirms and contradicts the previous chapter. Anthony and Peter are the criminals Jean perceived them to be; but this assessment is based on her perception of all young men of color as criminals, a prejudice she projects on the locksmith. At the same time, Jean’s perception about her husband and his obsession with his career is confirmed, and her suspicion about his emotional involvement with Karen is obliquely suggested to the audience. Jean’s paranoia prevails because she is angry with her husband and because she thinks within the limited, psychological parameters of white racial privilege in a life corralled inside the cultural divide of the “Valley.”

Race and Criminal Politics

Despite racial prejudice, Graham Waters has managed to make detective and a career in law enforcement. However, his mother is a drug addict and his brother is a thief. This family history jeopardizes his credibility as a law officer and, to some degree, explains why he has distanced himself from them. But this estrangement also affects his incapacity to affirm intimacy in his relationship with Ria, his partner and lover. In one scene, he simultaneously rebukes his mother and Ria when he interrupts their lovemaking to answer the phone only to tell his mother: “I can’t talk now. I’m having sex with a white woman.” He exacerbates this insensitivity with misidentification of Ria: “I would have told her you were Mexican, but it wouldn’t have pissed her off as much.” Ria chastises him for disrespecting her and his mother and refuses to continue their lovemaking. As a defense mechanism, Graham further insults her with an ethnic stereotype. In this instance, race is used as a wedge and a sledge to protect his emotional vulnerability. In a subsequent scene, the reason for his psychological condition is revealed, when Graham finds his “drugged out” mother sitting in the cold on the patio of her home, begging him to find his missing brother. When Graham returns to the car, he tells Ria, “She [his mother] wasn’t there,” a lie that tells the truth about her condition and his emotional despair.

But Graham’s biography does not escape the cunning John Flanagan (William Fichtner), who is enlisted by the D.A., Rick Cabot, to diffuse racial fallout from the carjacking. Behind closed doors and with no witnesses, Flanagan concocts a scenario that requires Graham’s culpability. Graham is promised a promotion if he agrees to ignore incriminating evidence found in the vehicle of another “crash,” which occurred when Detective Lewis, a Black man, was shot and killed by Detective Conklin, a white policeman with a record of dubious racial shootings. Initially, Graham does the honorable thing and refuses the bribe, but when Flanagan tells him that a warrant for his brother Peter could be issued for the carjacking of the Lincoln Navigator, the threat manipulates Graham’s moral dilemma and his guilt for abandoning his brother. Graham acquiesces because Flanagan reminds him that Peter would fall victim to the 3 strike rule for felony convictions, a “shitty law,” that disproportionately incarcerates Blacks for life.

To assuage Graham’s guilt, Flanagan, the spin doctor, further rationalizes that the white cop probably got away with two previous murders of Black men and that perhaps

“just being black in valley was reason enough to get him [Lewis] killed,” all of which could be true, in lieu of the notorious history of CRASH and other LAPD attack strategies to terrorize Black men. The latter statement is confirmed in several scenes in the film, and foreshadows the death of Peter. But more importantly, the truth of Flanagan’s statements is further proof that justice is not pursued or served in a racialized criminal justice system. Devoid of professional ethics, the district attorney’s personal agenda sabotages a murder investigation, and ignores blatant evidence of drug dealing on the part of a police detective and in order to advance political corruption in a society entrenched by racism. Rick Cabot, as the district attorney, panders to the Black community and its leadership by announcing the indictment of a white police officer for “the tragic death of a black hero.” The white detective will be prosecuted to save the D.A.’s image in the Black community, while the arrest warrant for Peter disappears, just like Peter.

This political maneuver projects a pretense of concern for the Black voting constituency in a dysfunctional, racist judicial system. Therefore “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” The token representation of minorities showcased in the administration of the police department and in the district attorney’s office supplies the illusion of inclusion to pacify voters of color. Since the D.A.’s primary agenda is reelection, he does not prosecute cases fairly because it might politically offend the citizenry; or, so he rationalizes. But the film illustrates that racism is pervasive, police and politicians are criminals, and justice is sacrificed for personal advantage, from the patrolman to the courtroom. Meanwhile, the media mediates reality and reports distortions.

The Occurrence and Reversal of Collateral Damage

The initial encounter that brings four characters together is indirectly related to the carjacking of the district attorney’s vehicle. Because Cameron (Terrance Howard) and his wife, Christine (Thandie Newton), are in a black Lincoln Navigator, the police initially take notice because it might be the stolen vehicle. Officer Hansen (Ryan Phillippe), who is white, exclaims that the license plate number is different and that this Black man is much older than the suspects, but Officer Ryan (Matt Dillon), who is also white, insists that something illegal has transpired, when Christine, a fair complexioned Black woman, suddenly comes into view. Ryan’s motivation for stopping the car is accurately assessed by Christine, who accuses him of thinking that he thought he saw a white woman giving oral sex to a Black man.

The accuracy of Christine’s accusation and her defiance of Ryan’s police authority instigate retribution on the part of Officer Ryan. He physically forces her to “assume the position,” sexually molests her during a body search for weapons underneath a white cocktail dress, and mocks her anguish when he explains that he can charge her with “lewd sexual conduct in public” and her husband with “reckless endangerment.” Cameron’s fear of police violence paralyzes him, which forces him to witness Ryan humiliate his wife; conversely, Officer Hansen’s allegiance to the police force inhibits him from intervening and arresting his partner for “sexual assault.”

The collateral damage Cameron and Christine incur from their crash with the police explodes in an acrimonious argument between them when they reach their home, a scene that parallels the confrontation between the Cabots. Christine ridicules her husband’s masculinity for not protecting her and connects his inaction to the racial compromises he makes in his profession as a television producer. In this instance, the role of race assumes another value, as Christine accuses her husband of abandoning his Blackness, and sucking up to his white boss. Cameron defends himself by insisting that he could have been killed because the police had guns; and he rebukes her personal attacks on him by mocking her pampered, isolated, upper class upbringing. Their argument presents the

ways in which class and culture diverge, especially for Blacks in a society where “race matters,” as they were so cruelly reminded when Ryan asserted his white male privilege to threaten Cameron and assault Christine with impunity. When Christine picks up the phone to report the incident, Cameron says sarcastically and matter-of-factly: “And who do you think is going to believe you?”

Belief, however, is not the issue, integrity is. Because it will adversely affect his stature in the LAPD, the African–American precinct commander, Lieutenant Dixon (Keith David) won’t support an investigation, even when Officer Hansen offers to file a complaint against his partner. This scene parallels the political motivations of D.A. Rick Cabot and illustrates that the status quo is maintained when personal interests outweigh professional ethics. Not only is the issue ignored, Hansen is humiliated and isolated because he attempted to identify it. Ryan, on the other hand, appears to have escaped unscathed. But, the collateral damage sustained by the characters from the criminal behavior of Officer Ryan during their first encounter is reflected in their reactions when they crash into each other the following day. In parallel sequences, the reconfiguration of the four characters—Christine, Ryan, Cameron, and Hansen—complicate their characterizations in scenes of reversals and inversions. In two separate, life threatening situations, Christine and Cameron must trust their persecutors, Officers Ryan and Hansen.

After a car crash, Christine is trapped in her crushed vehicle. Ryan appears on the scene, and in this moment, the travesty of their first encounter is reconciled through the reversal of his behavior. This inversion of character is illustrated by the overturned car and Christine’s upturned face looking at Ryan, who pleads with Christine to listen to him as he promises not to hurt her. He tells her: “Look at me,” in order to command her focus. This phrase is repeated in other scenes, including when Ryan forewarns Hansen: “You think you know who you are. Just wait until you’ve been on the force for a few years.” He commands eye-to-eye communication to confirm and convey his honesty in both situations. First and foremost, the imminent threat of death forces Christine to look at Ryan and to listen to him. The framing of this crash scene is especially significant because the physical intimacy between Christine and Ryan places them face to face, but turned in opposite directions, reversing their previous positions during the molestation of her body, when Ryan stood behind her and looked at Cameron, indicative of her body’s objectification and Ryan’s blatant inhumanity.

As testament to his conversion to respect her, he gently lowers her skirt before his hand crosses her lap to sever the safety belt that entraps her. Her red dress intensifies the urgency of the scene, and he manages to snatch her out of the crashed car, just before it explodes. As they walk away from the red flames and black smoke, Ryan covers her shoulders with a blanket and comforts her. This rescue redeems him because he risked his life to save hers. This turn of events allows Christine to forgive him for the rape, thereby resolving some of her suffering. By extension, she is now able to forgive her husband. But the improbability of such a reencounter under such circumstances in real life scenarios makes this a lesson in abstraction. In order to be forgiven for one’s sins, a radical transformation of character must occur. Then, forgiveness conveys a healing that transforms our collective humanity.

Similarly, Cameron and Hansen are juxtaposed in a scene that allows them to absolve the guilt and anguish for their inaction during the molestation of Christine. Cameron is the victim of an attempted carjacking of his Lincoln Navigator by Peter and Anthony, who are stunned when they realize that Cameron is Black, which is an interesting allusion to racial ambiguity that emerged in his argument with Christine. Cameron explodes, jumps out his car, wrestles Anthony down onto the street, and starts beating him, while Anthony yells at Peter to shoot Cameron. Peter threatens Cameron, but doesn’t shoot. When the ruckus attracts the attention of the police, Peter runs away, and Anthony ends up in

the Navigator with Cameron, whose reckless driving (reckless endangerment) instigates a police chase. When Cameron gets out of the car, he is infuriated as a result of an accumulation of abuses within the last 24 hours. He tucks Anthony's gun in his belt and underneath his sweater, jumps out of his car and cavalierly challenges the police.

With guns drawn and pointed directly at him, Cameron faces a heightened version of the scenario he experienced the night before. Hansen arrives just in time to intervene and save Cameron from being shot down by the police, who perceive him to be an enraged, dangerous Black man, possibly driving a stolen car. Initially, Officer Hansen's presence further incites Cameron, but when Hansen confronts his fellow officers and convinces them to lower their weapons, this persuades Cameron to relinquish his confrontational stance and to realize that his bravado will only get him killed. Hansen does save Cameron's life, but unbeknownst to Hansen, Cameron is armed. As Officer Ryan forewarned, there is so much Hansen doesn't know, including himself, and as the film insists, character complication and contradiction are not necessarily predictable.

Whereas Ryan's racist beliefs are openly expressed and displayed in the beginning of the film, Hansen initially appears weak, possibly naïve, but certainly, he is not innocent. In the second encounter with Cameron, Hansen believes he has redeemed himself for his previous inaction; however, the series of events have not essentially transformed him. Hansen's intervention saves Cameron from being shot down by the "trigger-happy LAPD," but in his negotiations with Cameron, Hansen condones the rationalizations of his fellow officers who might shoot Cameron because he won't obey their orders. It appears that lethal gun fire is the only procedure advocated by police to deal with enraged citizens; and return fire seems to be the only recourse for their consistent victims—Black males.

Criminal Conspiracies

Crime is the corruption; and corruption is the crime. This is the paradox that mitigates the culture of violence that permeates this film. The owner of the chop shop is the financial resource for carjackers, and the person behind the scenes, who is responsible for triggering the series of events because he is the one who ordered the vehicle in the first place. But Georgie refuses to accept the Lincoln Navigator because it has blood on it. He references technology that can "discover" evidence of blood, as he shares scientific knowledge gleaned from the "Discovery Channel," punctuating his monologue with racist epithets and stereotypes similar to Anthony's rhetorical style when he was so engrossed in conversation with Peter that he ran over a Korean, they call a "Chinaman." Georgie is the force behind the crime, but the police are more interested in arresting street thieves than the corporate underground that sponsors them. Concurrently, the District Attorney's office is focused on neutralizing the racial politics of the carjacking, just like the Black lieutenant, who ignores the racist and illegal actions of Officer Ryan in order to protect his professional reputation. At the same time, when Anthony violates his alleged ethics about not robbing Blacks, he narrowly escapes getting arrested and shot.

Reflecting on his fate in a bus window, Anthony appears to contemplate his humiliation because he is reduced to public transportation. Unable to reconcile his racial dilemma, when he sees keys dangling in the door lock of the battered van, he quickly returns to his profession and the chop shop, hoping for a deal on the van, when the Asians (from Thailand and Cambodia) are discovered chained to the vehicle. Georgie offers to buy them instead of the raggedy van. Georgie respects nothing; he is willing to expand his illegal enterprises to slave trading. But Anthony refuses to participate; instead, he releases them in Chinatown and gives them some money for food. An expression of satisfaction appears with a smile, which absolves Cameron's criticism of him: "Look at me.

You embarrass me. You embarrass yourself.” Anthony may be a car thief, but he is not a slave trader, which reiterates his professed social consciousness and gives him a sense of pride; there is some honor among some thieves.

The Manufacture of Stereotypes

Cameron is a television producer, and his character demonstrates that ethnic presence does not necessarily determine realistic portrayals. In a scene that intersects with Spike Lee’s film, *Bamboozled*, the executive producer, Fred (Tony Danza), debunks Cameron’s influence and perpetuates a racial stereotype, thereby feeding a vicious cycle. Cameron’s inability to stand up to his boss coincides with his wife’s accusations “that he shucks and jives for the white man;” or more accurately, forced to speak in a contrived dialect, the Black male teenagers on the show perform in *nouveau* blackface. This scene illustrates the power of popular media to create and generate stereotypes, and the false correlation between Standard English and intelligence. Cameron’s boss argues this illogic and insists that accurate enunciation and standardized syntax contradicts racial authenticity in Black characterization.

Identities mediated through television and films are more often than not constructions narrowly conceived and construed in order to accommodate preconceived notions about race. The dichotomy of these perceived and believed stereotypes is nearly impossible to resolve or dissolve because a minority of white males controls cultural programming for socially segregated audiences. Due to their limited experiences and knowledge and their unlimited control, pejorative images undermine minorities and contribute to a racially dysfunctional society.

Cameron’s “Blackness” is challenged when his boss overrules his opinion about “what rings false.” Ironically, he becomes the victim of an attempted carjacking by two young Black men, who critique cultural programming and argue against stereotypes while speaking Standard English. Cameron does not turn Anthony over to the police, but attempts to change his behavior because he views Anthony’s criminality as a reflection on him, and because Anthony’s behavior is a manifestation of a stereotype. Perhaps, Cameron does influence Anthony to rethink his behavior, but his decision not to engage in the slave trade of Asians (an important comment on the trafficking of human beings and some serious collateral damage that has contributed to the racist staging of America) can be linked to his philosophical convictions. Because it is the breaking of Anthony’s own code of ethics, not to steal from Black people, that results in a crash with a brother, who at that very moment, has broken his philosophical belief in nonviolence as a Buddhist.

Because of Officer Ryan’s combative personality and racist hostility, he is unable to secure a waiver from his HMO for his ailing father to see a specialist. He insults the African-American supervisor, who might have accommodated his request. Both encounters intensify negative reactions from both persons. Officer Ryan tells Shaniquah Johnson (Loretta Devine) that she is in the rightful position of some “qualified white male,” an assumption based on his bitterness because he blames affirmative action for ending contracts for his father’s custodial business. Angered by the accusation that she is an “unqualified-affirmative-action-hire,” she refuses to help Ryan’s father, which empowers her ego, but compounds racial antagonisms. Pop Ryan, who practiced Affirmative Action without a legal mandate, is further victimized in an ongoing racial diatribe between whites and Blacks without a language to resolve the racial argument.

American society is divided into racial, gender, and class stratifications, which often converge. In lieu of these limitations and in the absence of genuine interactions, citizens adopt stereotypes from popular culture and racial politics generated in sound bites by the media in order to navigate society. The denial of racism as a real phenomenon in

American society circumvents a social consciousness that progressively addresses discriminatory behavior in all its variegated forms; and in the absence of compassion for others, a false sense of entitlement perpetuates the cancer of racism. Even when characters aren't actively engaging stereotypes, they are in collusion with the conspiracy of racial illusions, such as Karen and Callahan, the D.A.'s assistants, who manage and manipulate the perception of race and the rhetoric of racial behavior.

Angry Language

Stereotypes abound in the dialogue, which explains the inability of the characters to communicate. The offensive nature of the vocabulary is a device to expose the underlying thoughts and beliefs of societal anger. The private language that is usually spoken within an ethnic community replaces the public vocabulary that is used in mixed company. This technique is effective because the audience recognizes the horrific racism that characterizes private speech. With few exceptions, every primary character and secondary character spews racist, ethnic, or sexist insults. The conversation about the word "nigger" between Anthony and Peter brings forward a popular subject currently debated in African–American communities; an aspect of the film that received serious attention when the cast appeared on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" after the film's release. Anthony calls rap music the culture of the oppressor because of the excessive use of "nigger" in the lyrics. Since Ludacris' rap lyrics frequently contain the "N word," an intersection of "art imitating life," as art critiques life, interrupts aesthetic distance and causes the audience to pause. Anthony reiterates his point by referencing the government attacks on articulate activists during the Black Power Movement. He accurately asserts that whites don't denigrate each other with a proliferation of pejoratives in public, such as "honkey" and "cracker," in their everyday vocabulary. Peter argues that country music is culture of the oppressor; he then composes lyrics that reflect the private conversations of racists who patronize the music.

Racist epithets and unfair accusations appear in red spray paint on the walls of Farhad's vandalized shop. These words echo the language of the gun shop owner, who accuses him of being Un-American and belonging to another ethnicity and nationality. Farhad's cumulative despair and anger lead him to erroneously conclude that Daniel, the locksmith, was in collusion with the attack and that he has profited from it. Farhad's internalizations of racist stereotypes motivates him to think like Jean as he assumes the persona that the angry white man in the gun shop projects on him by terrorizing Daniel at gunpoint, demanding payback. Throughout the film, angry people verbally attack others with racial slurs and innuendoes, reflective of internalized stereotypes that translate into hostile and violent acts. In this regard, the film comments on the power of language to corrupt thought and behavior. As the last crash in the movie illustrates, they continue to crash into each other, and the collateral damage spills over into subsequent reactions with others. But more importantly, the fear that dominates American societal consciousness results in a collective paranoia that resists and repels acceptance of others.

Jean Cabot says: "I'm angry all the time, and I don't know why." This line is a thematic indicator for the film. She overreacts to every person of color she encounters. The trauma of the carjacking releases all of her racist beliefs, but truth about her anger is not revealed until she slips in her white socks and crashes on the brown steps of the staircase and discovers she has no real life and no real friends, except Maria, the Latina housekeeper, who cares for her every day. Jean embraces Maria with the realization that class status erects false barriers between people. This scene is quite complex because it dismantles the comfort zone of racial and class privilege when she confirms her need for affection

by touching. Character determines the basis of human qualities, but privilege often corrupts and undermines character with a false sense of entitlement.

Color Coding: Privilege and Innocence

The color white is used to indicate two diametrically opposed perspectives: privilege and innocence. The color white neutralizes settings like a blank page; at the same time, it contextually frames them as social reconstructions of racial identities. Whenever the film enters the home of any of the characters, white dominates the décor. White walls, woodwork, cabinets, etc. provide a background that posits characters in a neutral or definitive space. The conversations that transpire in these environments reveal the racial consciousness associated with the color coding that mediates meaning as reflected in particular circumstances, beliefs, and conflicts. In this film, whiteness assumes multiple meanings that are more indicative of social conditioning than independent thought. In this regard, the film is not condemning any race or using any of the characters as scapegoats for racism. The characters, are not posed as all good or all bad, but rather as indicators of societal ills, inconsistencies, and possibilities.

Cameron and Christine both wear white when they argue in their bedroom. Cameron's white shirt, Christine's white dress, and the white bedspread are accented by muted gold wallpaper and African art. These symbols represent their upper-middle-class affluence and their superficial cultural identification with Blackness as they accuse each other of not being "Black enough." Their privileged background has protected them from frequent, abusive encounters with the police; hence, Christine's anger and Cameron's acquiescence mirrors how class separates them from most Blacks who endure the paranoia of the "trigger-happy LAPD" as a regular course of events. At the same time, although they are arrogant, they are innocent in their arrogance; therefore, the framing and the separation of the couple by the white borders around the glass window references their cultural divide and the fissure their racial encounter with the police has created in their marriage.

Officer Ryan is viewed at home in his white tee shirt agonizing over his father's suffering. Pop Ryan also wears a white tee shirt, which indicates his innocence and the emotional connection between father and son. The night scenes in the white and brown bathroom illustrate their victimization by the HMO system, and the darkness that bonds them. However, when Jean projects her racial prejudice onto Daniel, his white tee shirt indicates his innocence. But the whiteness that dominates this setting suggests an environment of privilege and impunity. When Jean vents with stereotypes about young Latinos as gangsters, she wears a white blouse that represents her social conditioning and racist perspective.

Daniel's daughter Lara hides under the bed because she is afraid she may be shot by a stray bullet. The white eyelet bed ruffle and white comforter create a cloud-like softness as a caring father attempts to assuage his daughter's fear. He creates a "fairy tale" to help to her get past this fear of death by gunfire and to preserve her innocence. But the blinding white light that floods the screen during Farhad's confrontation with Daniel is indicative of blind anger, and when his daughter Lara rushes out of the house to protect her father with the "magic, impenetrable cape" the lighting distorts the screen, intensifying the potential tragedy. The contextual presentation of the blinding white light seems to indicate that white supremacy envelops and determines racialized identities and inter-ethnic antagonisms. And, at the end of the film, the Asians are freed from the white van, a deliverance from slavery.

In contrast and to capture attention, the color red is a sign of warning and compassion. Christine's red dress flags her danger in the crash scene, and Ryan's compassion is ignited

by the overturned vehicle. Farhad's daughter wears a red coat in the gun shop, and selects blanks in the red box. The ambiguity of the color red hinges on Dorri's humanity and the violence associated with guns. Dorri averts her father's pursuit of violence as an answer to his problems with racist assaults on his store and often on his identity. In the same way that stop signs are peppered throughout the film, the large, red balloon Santa Claus with an upheld hand greets Cameron when he stops in the cul-de-sac with a gun in confrontation with the police. These cues underscore a statement against gun ownership and connect the overall theme of anti-violence.

Both Lincoln Navigators are black, which, according to the renowned film critic, Elvis Mitchell, is symbolic of fate.¹ Extending that connection, this fate is Black in different dimensions. Despite their personal distance for Blacks, Rick and Jean are forced to interact with two young Black men, whose fates have been scripted through systemic, white racism. Cameron and Christine are two fair-skinned Blacks, who are snatched back into a black reality as a consequence of their coincidental arrival in the area at the moment the APB for the Black Navigator is announced on the police radio. Both couples are trapped by the sterility of their affluence and become victims of their black fate.

Dead Kid

Peter Water's death brings the film full circle, and is the trajectory that illustrates how and why needless deaths proliferate. Peter foreshadows his own death when he mocks country music; conversely, he offends Hansen and aggravates his suspicions when he talks about ice skating and his interest in country music playing on the car radio. Peter also triggers Hansen's subconscious fear of Blacks and his behavior as a "trigger-happy" member of the LAPD. This cultural crash leads to a confrontation and a seemingly generous act of picking up a hitch hiker transforms into a tragic event. Assuming that Peter has a gun in his pocket, Hansen shoots him for having a plastic figurine of St. Christopher, just like the one on his dashboard, which alludes to their lack of faith and the crashing of Graham's head on the dashboard of the police car at the scene of the crime, moments later. Hansen distanced himself from Ryan, but like the lieutenant, and the district attorney, when he destroys evidence of the shooting, he distances himself from the truth and averts responsibility for the actions of his own guilty fears. Peter and Hansen lived with violence every day—a collision with death was inevitable.

Daniel, on the other hand, does not carry a gun, nor does he engage in racist vocabulary, even when Jean insults him or Farhad attacks his integrity; both of whom accuse him of collaborating with criminals that threaten their safety. Therefore, he is the most sympathetic character. His job is to secure property, to help make people safe. But fear cannot be dispelled by locks and keys, or by moving to another neighborhood. Fear lives in hearts and minds and only faith and clear thinking can dispel the power of prejudice and inhumanity that confuse conversations and cloud judgment. Through her counteraction, Dorri saves her father's soul and Daniel's daughter from what could have been another senseless murder of another innocent victim caught in the crossfire of collateral damage. This is the counterpoint of the film and its ultimate statement for a national disarmament of Americans to insure domestic peace and true homeland security. Dorri is Daniel's guardian fairy with the impenetrable cloak. She is one of the few angels in an angry city, who touches lives at the crossroads of the morgue, where an endless stream of anguished relatives come to collect their dead.

The internalization of stereotypes feeds fear that flourishes in a culture where people don't touch or feel their connection to a larger humanity. Contrived and sensationalized images define and distort identities that society regurgitates as truth. But they are actually manifestations of someone else's fears, and the ingestion of these images corrupts the

thoughts and behavior of persons ill-equipped to communicate their frustrated existences as they desperately crash into one another trying to feel their humanity. Isolated and dispassionate, ignorant and afraid, Americans are cast in a vicious conundrum, performing false identities that are dangerous and deadly. It requires informed, intellectual resistance and acute, spiritual fortitude to dispel the illusion of white supremacy and to eradicate the anger that ignites hatred.

When Graham regains consciousness after a car crash, he realizes that self-alienation results in social decimation. The temporal/spatial construct of the film is a time loop and this why he returns to the scene of the crime and clutches St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers. Graham must reconcile his own culpability and lack of faith that led to his brother's death. The film opens by returning to the past, yesterday, in order to understand the destructive cycle—this glitch in the American time/space continuum. The film ends by continuing into the future, with another car crash in Chinatown with another verbal confrontation between persons of different ethnicities, a variation on the opening crash scene. But as the camera retreats into the sky, the audience is reminded that despite our differences, we are the same species—humans struggling to survive on the planet Earth. The film *Crash* provides an anthropological study of our racialized conflicts, and serves as an opportunity to consider our demons and to resolve their deadly power.

Note

1. Derived from a lecture Elvis Mitchell gave on the film “Crash” at Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, 8 November, 2006.

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