



Counter Culture: Liberation in the Diner throughout American Cinema, Post-WWII to Present Day

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Counter Culture:

Liberation in the Diner throughout American Cinema, Post-WWII to Present Day

Ronald Kalani Addington

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Abstract

This thesis examines the representation of diners in Hollywood films from post-World War II America to present day and the messages in which those representations have evolved to convey a broader message of liberation amidst social upheaval and changing public attitudes that span eight decades, specifically in relation to the Civil Rights, gay liberation, and feminist movements. Through a formal analysis of specific film scenes centered in the diner, I create a framework that allows for an investigation of the relationship between commercial film and social movements and recontextualize each film to challenge historical perspectives of critics and scholars. I focus on four films in four separate decades that represented broader cinematic and social trends and then provide a textual analysis that communicates the diner as a place of liberation.

I present a concrete argument that the depictions of oppressed groups who are cinematically positioned in the diner follow a progressive, narrative arc and mirror the societal gains that were made in respective points in history. In their experiences within the diner, the protagonists of these films gain personal agency and are set loose from societal constraints that are represented in various forms, and their stories resonate with a greater public due to our collective knowledge of a uniquely American institution

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my late mother, Rose Agnes Lewis, who always stressed the importance of an education. You were raised in a male-dominated culture that didn't allow women an education past the sixth grade, yet you worked tirelessly to be a lifelong student. I remember the example that you set for me when you clocked out of your factory job to attend night classes, with eight-year-old me in tow, to attain your GED so you could pursue your passion in the nursing field. Watching you struggle and overcome in that period remains the proudest I've ever been of someone in my life.

You taught everyone around you the importance of being kind and to constantly help those who are less fortunate. Countless of hopeless, lost souls always found a place at your table.

You didn't have to be my mother in this life but most importantly, you chose to be. You were, and always will be, my best friend.

In her memory, I also dedicate this work to all the women who raised and continue to raise me.

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yet still love me as much as you did when you were toddlers. I will always provide the same love and support for your children. I hope I've made you somewhat proud.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

Diners are the places that represent many things to Americans: stability, transiency; community, isolation; progress, regression; freedom, oppression. According to Richard Gutman, “Actors, milkmen, chauffeurs, debutantes, nymphes du pave, young men-about-town, teamsters, students, streetcar motormen, messenger boys, policemen, white wings, businessmen – all these and more rub elbows at its counter” (whatitmeanstobeamerican.org). In post-World War II America, the diner transformed throughout the following decades as the domain of blue-collar and mostly seedy male patrons to first families, then to women, then eventually to include all minorities. Due to its roots in the immigrant and revolutionary histories of the United States, this enduring space has, over time, become one of the most democratized public spaces in American society as our nation constantly evolves to create a society where all people have a voice.

The aim of this work therefore seeks to answer the simplest question that one can ask: why does the diner persist in American film when their numbers have decreased amidst an increasingly isolated culture more frequently inclined to choose from a panoply of options, either through a drive-through or through a satellite signal? The frequent and reflexive choice of the diner as setting in American cinema, not typically found in other film cultures, imparts to the viewer that the appearance of this setting is worthy of deeper and more frequent research and investigation. My thesis investigates the imagery depicted in American films from 1940s cinema until present day to give examples of how

the diner, as a familiar setting specific to American culture, has become a canvas that both traces and reflects key moments of domestic crisis and change in American society – from post-World War II social mobility, through the various waves of the feminist revolution, the turbulent Civil Right movement, and the current LGBTQ+ fight for equality. Since the diner is ubiquitous in American cinema, I will demonstrate how our understanding of and relationship to the diner makes it a specific American trope and provide historical references to further support why this space is a critical part of our filmic language.

Diners stood alone, as William H. Whyte once mused, as the second great melting pot where remaining ethnic and social differences gave way to an idealized American cultural conformity. As we know from the history of our country throughout the twentieth century, an idealized cultural conformity took decades to come into fruition for women and minorities alike. The exclusion of certain groups from mainstream consumer culture and this public space would eventually form an important, if often underappreciated, inflection point for the various waves of the feminist movement and the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s. It is not by coincidence that women utilized the diner as entryway to the workforce; after all, the labor reflected their duties at home, and it became one of the first socially acceptable industries for women. It is also telling that the first mass organized protests for equal rights and services happened at a Woolworth's lunch counter – the diner and its services provided a basic service (food) that oppressed Black Americans deemed a basic right.

To fully understand the importance of the diner in American culture, one must first familiarize oneself with its spatial history and its implications that still reverberates

to this day. Scholarly work such as Andrew Hurley's "From Hash House to Family Restaurant: The Transformation of the Diner and Post-World War II Consumer Culture," Nelson Lichtenstein's "The Making of the Postwar Working Class: Cultural Pluralism and Social Structure in World War II," Joseph T. Manzo's "From Pushcart to Modular Restaurant: The Diner on the Landscape," and Dorothy S. Cobble's *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* have traced the historical origins of the diner since its infancy as places variously depicted as the denizen of drunks and gamblers (therefore, male) and as an ideal family setting; a mothering place but also staffed by women who were looked upon as prostitutes and whores. Spatially, a slow progression occurred as the patrons became less male and welcomed women then families, but the gendered spaces remained a cultural understanding, as Hurley notes

by retaining the counter, even in a truncated form, proprietors preserved a male domain within the diner. As the area where truckers and solitary workers preferred to congregate, the counter remained the one place in the diner where one could still engage in coarse banter and argue about an upcoming horse race. (1286)

Adrienne Rich's assertion that we must all "understand how a place on the map is also a place in history" (212) does well to describe the connection that Americans collectively feel towards the diner. Starting as the immigrant entry to the American dream, it has progressed through a century of turmoil and tumult in American history, changing in appearance but never in its progression towards becoming a welcoming place for all. While the diner was originally segregated based on race and gender, it was always a transgressional site where racial and gendered lines crossed. As a distinctly American institution, it grew along with the country. Often in film, it was depicted as a progressive space long before this was the social reality. Therefore, I argue in this work that the diner symbolizes not only democratic possibility but a space of potential liberation in American

film and will thus focus on the female and Black (while touching on queer) liberation in this space.

To support my claim, I analyze the formal elements of selected works and provide analysis of key film scenes where the diner is represented and show how, as an institution, it reflected changing social mores and turbulent periods in American history, furthering my claim that the diner is part of the fabric and DNA of American society. For example: the focus on the diner in a film such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) directed by William Wyler, reflects the changing nature of American society after World War II and represents the seed of a growing egalitarianism:

The two men are presented as culturally equal: the soda-jerker can call the banker's wife by her first name and eventually marry the banker's daughter; this, too, is made possible by the technique of presenting everything as a surface, for the social equality of bankers and soda-jerkers is real – on the surface. (Warshow 110)

My research is meaningful in an academic sense because it seeks to provide a scholarly interpretation that hopes to encourage more research regarding this space with the same attention and relevance that scholars and critics give to the other environments, like the American West or outer space. For a place that is familiar to Americans and non-Americans alike, the lack of critical discourse and commentary on its significance represents a glaring omission in our own cinematic field of study. By examining how visual rhetoric and semiology in American cinema has shaped our views of the diner as it exists both as a public and private space, and as a segregated or equalizing environment for Americans, this thesis offers insights into questions of representation and traces the formation of a national identity mirrored in a space that is distinctly American.

Chapter II.

Feminist Liberation in the Diner

Despite the overwhelming number of American films in numerous genres that depict key scenes in diner environments, the requirements of this thesis necessitate that the scope of my film references remain small. In Chapter One, I will focus on how female protagonists achieved liberation in the diner parallel to monumental shifts in the women's liberation movement. The two films include *Mildred Pierce* (1945) directed by Michael Curtiz and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) directed by Martin Scorsese, their selections based on specific, yet purposeful, similarities between the two: both films feature women moving through the same occupation and industry who are faced with an oppressive patriarchal mode of American society; both women achieve liberation from a patriarchal mode but in relation to its different manifestations; the two women are wives (at some point), mothers, and share deep relationships with female companions; the men are on the periphery of the film and don't drive the narrative, therefore the female is always the protagonist; and both films were released to an American public transitioning away from a national trauma, specifically: World War II and the Vietnam Conflict.

Liberation from the Patriarchy in *Mildred Pierce*

Adapted from the James M. Cain's best-selling 1941 novel of the same name, the 1945 film *Mildred Pierce* became an immediate box-office sensation – mainly due to the themes of capitalism, women's issues, and post WWII America that were already at the forefront of the national conversation. Almost eight decades later, the film was and

continues to be a lightning rod for debate in feminist theory and has also been subject to postmodern revisionism and historical criticism (Haskell 179, Rosen 208, Walsh 131). Not many films have been so controversial as *Mildred Pierce* upon their release; far fewer have been as divisive with every detail scrutinized for hidden social messaging or allegories, real or imagined, by film critics, historians, psychoanalysts, feminists, liberals, conservatives – the list is endless. For a film to receive instant box office and near-universal critical success, its status took on a life of its own and has consistently appeared in scholarly research and public debates – nearly eighty years later, we are still unpacking *Mildred Pierce*.

The film centers on the title character, Mildred Pierce (Joan Crawford), as she navigates the political and social upheaval of post WWII America. The opening sequence shows the murder of Monte Beragon (Zachary Scott) in a beach house. After her apprehension, Mildred is interviewed by the police chief where she is told that her ex-husband, Bert, has confessed to the crime. Mildred proclaims Bert's innocence, stating that he is too kind of a man to be considered a murderer. As the film mixes film noir, social drama, and family drama elements to market what was then considered a "woman's film," which feminist film theorist and scholar Christine Gledhill argues is both a product and a source of "cultural negotiation," the site of "a struggle between male and female voices" (37). The opening sequence is what the audience understands as taking place towards the end of the film; additionally, the film depicts a present-day Mildred being interrogated in the police station as she recalls events in flashbacks and in incongruous narrative sequences – aspects defining the noir genre.

Mildred is initially portrayed as the prototypical suburban housewife, although in an unhappy yet glossed over marriage with her husband Bert Pierce (Bruce Bennet), and as the doting mother of two daughters, 16-year-old Veda (Ann Blyth) and ten-year-old Kay (Jo Ann Marlowe). Bert arrives home and informs Mildred that he has lost his job due to the boom and bust of the real estate business, has split with his partner Wally Fay (Jack Carson), and that the family is facing nearly certain financial ruin. Immediately, Mildred decides that she will sell her baked pies to support the family while Bert recovers and/or finds a new job, telling him in no uncertain terms: "I'm determined to do the best I can for them. If I can't do it with you, I'll do it without you." This is our first glimpse into a key theme of the film as we understand Mildred to be action-oriented and not prone to acquiescence (unlike Bert, as we find). Bert accuses Mildred of favoring the children over her spouse, even as he receives a call from his mistress – thus, we can sense an underlying theme of the film: the exploitation and weaponization of motherhood and of a woman's agency as both the cause of and justification for men's failure.

Historically, scholars and critics have focused on 1940s American society's need to punish Mildred Pierce for her gender transgressions (Cook 41, Hollinger 39); in juxtaposition, this is the same era that celebrated and promoted Rosie the Riveter. Here, one must consider the postwar mood. There was indeed a national anxiety about how to move forward from WWII and the subsequent economic boom. During the war, the political machine of the United States – hence, the engine driving the culture – invested heavily in female participation in the labor force to achieve an Allied victory, the main reason being that most able-bodied men were shipped overseas. But there are underlying reasons to consider in context. Throughout most of the Great Depression, scores of

women had already entered the workforce as men were unemployed in exponentially higher numbers (Milkman 17, McDonald 90). After America entered WWII, this female workforce was not only repurposed for the war effort but greatly expanded. Thus, society was grappling with a new conundrum: how to mobilize a workforce in the same way that you mobilize a standing military and then go back to business as usual. As the adage goes, you can't unring a bell.

On its surface, a film featuring a strong, caring female who is left to provide for her children in a society where men are absent due to the Great Depression and a pair of world wars yet somehow manages to succeed against all odds would be considered inspirational, even be *aspirational*. Then consider these additional variables: the female lead is constellated among male characters who are unethical, oversexualized, and manipulative, the political climate is regressive, and due to a puritanical, industry-wide production code – the female is punished for her perceived sins *as well as* for the blatant sins of everyone in her orbit. In this way a moral message can be broadcast to a global audience, reaffirming that ambition, social climbing, and personhood are not things that are celebrated in American society – unless all the above are achieved by a white man. In this section, however, I argue that through the framing of Mildred and her female companions in the diner, a new mode of female liberation from a patriarchal system was signaled to women everywhere – that they could now freely choose from the status quo of being the means of production to *owning* the means of production.

Kirsten Lew, associate digital media producer at the Getty Research Institute, notes that the film's release by Warner Bros was purposefully delayed "in the hope that the war with Japan would end shortly (Germany had been defeated in May), and that the

film would fare better in a post-war atmosphere. This would inevitably embrace the anxieties and insecurities about marriage and relations between the sexes which Mildred Pierce exploited” (lfq.salisbury.edu). The armistice with Japan was signed in August of 1945, and *Mildred Pierce* premiered in October in a concerted effort to make the film and its themes central to a national conversation. The one-sided conversation thus being that our men are home and there is a need “for women to make room for them in the workplace by returning to the domestic sphere” (Corber 6).

The theme of female solidarity through labor is established in the first diner scene that appears in flashback as Mildred recounts her story. In a long shot (establishing that the focus of this space is on the action of the narrative rather than on any emotional aspects), Mildred enters the diner setting with a look of urgency after being turned away from multiple job searches for lacking any real experiences. A steady stream of waitresses crossing the frame conveys that women are in constant motion, busily catering to the patrons. Ida Corwin (Eve Arden) greets Mildred, and a tracking shot of Ida immediately crossing the frame with Mildred in tow establishes that she is the commanding presence of the diner. Ida seats Mildred, and again crosses the screen in a tracking shot to reprimand a waitress, before crossing back to Mildred. The camera pans to two women arguing across a table over a tip, with Ida rushing over in the background to settle the dispute. The following tracking shot centers on Ida amidst a cacophony of demanding customers and disgruntled waitresses before centering again on her returning to Mildred’s table, apologizing and explaining the situations are due to being short on staff. Mildred then asks for a job. Ida’s surprise at the request indicates that she assumes Mildred to be affluent due to her appearance and composure, therefore representing a

different class of women than the ones who typically performed this type of labor. The camera switches to a shot/counter-shot and shows Mildred and Ida discussing Mildred's lack of experience. This time, however, Mildred succeeds at securing work; not lost on the viewer is that this is the first instance in the movie where Mildred gets any assistance and support, and it arrives in the form of another woman. This interaction is critical in understanding the bond of sisterhood that can exist across socioeconomic classes, because as Mildred rises to become a successful businesswoman, Ida is elevated alongside her as her equal, signifying a meritocracy amongst women that stands in contrast to the underhanded business dealings of the male characters.

The following scene immediately establishes the cultural connection of the diner to the home, as well as signaling the space as a potential avenue for female liberation from the domestic sphere: a medium shot reveals Mildred donning a checkered waitress uniform while Ida voices doubt regarding her ability to survive the trade, again highlighting their class differences. As the camera dissolves, we find Mildred amidst a flurry of waitresses in the diner kitchen (note the male chefs directing the female crew), and further dissolves impart to the viewer that she succeeds at her job in quick fashion. After another dissolve, we see Mildred in her kitchen baking pies alongside her maid, Lottie (Butterfly McQueen). The camera dissolve, along with Mildred wearing a checkered dress and apron that mirrors her diner uniform, again ties the work labor and the domestic labor of the women as one and the same. In the next scene, Mildred returns home and finds Lottie wearing her diner uniform; we find that her spoiled daughter – Veda, herself a harsh critic of labor that she deems beneath their social status – has instructed Lottie to wear this to work in the home. As Mildred explains in a

voiceover, she had hidden the waitress uniform in the back of her closet to hide her occupation from her daughters. Mildred's shame of her working-class labor leads to a confrontation with Veda, which subsequently leads to Mildred voicing her newfound desire to become a diner owner versus a diner employee.

Two things of importance happen in this sequence that tie the diner to the home: the first, which we will return to in a subsequent diner scene, is the depiction of the shared labor between Mildred and Lottie; secondly, she now sets her sights on not simply being the means of production but *owning* the means of production – the first signaling of her desire for self-reliance through her liberation from the patriarchy. This ambition, not socially accepted at the time, positions Mildred's choices as the action that propels the movie.

The final scene that I present as critical in understanding the importance of the diner space is the opening night of Mildred's, the eponymous business which we learn becomes a highly successful chain across California. The scene opens as crowds enter the bustling diner space, and we hear a voiceover of Ida calling out to the cooks for "Adam and Eve on a raft" – diner lingo for two eggs and toast. This line, referencing the Biblical story of the fall of man (long accepted as due to the folly of woman), serves as an allegory and establishes the underlying requirement of the Production Code that the devious woman be punished to present a moral message to a wider audience. Mildred, now the host running dinner service to a packed house, is shown in a medium shot replete with new styling – gone are the housewife dresses and aprons purchased at Sears by the costume department (Corber 6). Now we see Mildred in broad, shoulder-padded dresses with exhaustingly cinched waistlines with the omelet roll/victory folds combo hairstyle.

The styling shift is purposeful – other than being Crawford’s trademark personal and earlier filmic style, the choice is a specific trope to mark the character as embodying a more masculine appearance in all subsequent diner scenes. This would not be lost on audiences of the day, especially the millions of Crawford female fans who had come to see themselves in her.

The masculinization regarding the styling and framing of Mildred and Ida is what preeminent feminist scholar Laura Mulvey points to as the “dichotomies of genders and their alleged corresponding passive/active, sadistic/masochistic natures” (“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 810). In her 1981 work, “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,’” she further criticizes how females, unlike men, are required to “oscillate between masculine and feminine identifications” (12-15) and how this masculine fantasy is at odds with itself, “restless in its transvestite clothes” (15). Of course, what Mulvey does not account for, that scholars like Judith Butler (“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” 527) and Jackie Stacie (“Desperately Seeking Difference: Desire between Women in Narrative Cinema” 51) recognize, is that the fluidity and performative nature of gender ensures little significance in cinematic spectatorship.

I contend that a focus on the diner in *Mildred Pierce* centers itself between these competing claims through a formal analysis of these scenes: if the effectiveness of film as meaning-maker lies in the totality of each specific piece that forms its whole, then we must look beyond a singular aspect – in Mulvey’s case, the masculinization of Mildred through wardrobe and styling – and place it in relation to the entirety of the *mis en scene*, such as placement of the characters, sound, lighting, script, and setting in order for a

more holistic reading of the scene and film. In this case, Mildred does appear more masculine in styling, but she does so in the male-dominated world of business surrounded by males who seek to undermine and manipulate her. In the flashback and current scenes, she is stylized as a heightened version of her prior feminized, domesticated self – the mother and wife are present, she’s just now wearing furs and fascinators. In each diner scene, she embodies a more masculine mode of style and appearance due to the complete lack of serious and effective males in the narrative, but that isn’t the only mode that Mildred, like most women, are asked to operate in. This ultimately does not make Mildred less feminine, as the enterprise she oversees again mirrors the domesticity of the home and she is still, after all, a woman and a mother.

A tracking shot in the next sequence shows Wally’s unease with anything closely relating to domestic labor, a theme that the picture conveys time and again to its male audience. A wide shot shows Wally following Mildred to the diner’s kitchen with a tray of dirty glasses as he immediately fumbles into departing customers, again signifying the theme that Mildred leads, and men follow. As the camera fades, a long shot places the viewer in the kitchen with Mildred, Wally, and Lottie. Mildred ties an apron around Wally and assigns him to the potatoes, to which he protests that he’s an executive and not a laborer; Mildred, as owner of the establishment, has no issues serving as both. Yet another, more critical narrative is signaled to the greater public here, which I would argue has greater social meaning than the shared labor between males and females.

That message, referencing the earlier mentioned scene in the home between Mildred and Lottie, is of the shared labor between races. In this scene, we infer that Mildred pays Lottie both as a domestic maid and as a paid employee due to Lottie

wearing the diner's uniform; she is made equal to Wally, a white man, and the other white employees of the diner. Lottie's equal sharing of the space in this scene veered from social norms of the time, as separation of races in social and work settings were not normally depicted in films. The messaging in this scene of the purposeful mixing of class and racial status, is one of equality – albeit briefly. This pattern emerges throughout the film: Mildred, Lottie, and Ida are the only characters shown constantly laboring and the work that each one does, irrespective of the hierarchy of the business or home, doesn't differentiate between the three of them regardless of class or race.

As this diner sequence closes, Bert enters the long shot frame and catches Mildred and Monty in a kiss. He pulls her aside and in a closeup shot, tells her that he's agreed to a divorce, signifying both their closeness and also the distance that has grown between them, as we are aware that Monty is sharing the same space, though off camera. This closeup mirrors the earlier scene in the home where he tells Mildred that he'd never grant this and wishes her luck in trying to get by without him, the difference here being that he recognizes her independence and success. This admission, while framed as a private moment, is also witnessed by his male counterpart. As Bert makes an exit, the camera switches to a medium shot with Bert to the left, Mildred in center, and Monty on the right – both men are shown in profile, with Mildred shown in soft high-key lighting. Ominously, Monty is shown in shadows. This foreshadows the story's ending – Monty as complicit in her downfall and Bert as the figure she (arguably) returns to.

Throughout the film, it's apparent that Mildred is surrounded by questionable and weak characters. Ben is unmotivated and unfaithful, Veda is quite frankly – a monster, Wally's motivation to help Mildred is sex, Monte loafers about with nothing to offer

anyone other than access to a fading family fortune and surname. The only strong characters are Mildred and Ida, besides Mildred's accountant who is constantly crunching numbers. More importantly, they're the only ones shown doing actual labor. If this film was intended to spark a debate about a return to gendered labor, it seems like the men didn't get the memo. The only action that men take in this world are to undermine, oppress, and manipulate Mildred. Thus, the diner conveyed to the contemporary audience that women could in fact work and succeed outside the home, something that had somewhat been a cultural norm for a decade, if only men had simply allowed them to. The crisis of the film, therefore, is centered on the male psyche and its refusal to adapt to this new landscape. It lives and rages outside of Mildred.

As the film closes, we see Mildred walking out of the police station with Bert, having ultimately failed to take the fall for Veda. Pam Cook writes that the two scrubwomen are "in the classic position of oppression, on their knees: an image of sacrifice which closes the film with a reminder of what women must give up for the sake of the patriarchal order" (Cook 81). Again, if we take into consideration the entirety of the film as a commentary of the working woman, this is purposefully narrow. The final scene shows Ben and Mildred reentering the world from the police station and the two scrubwomen can be read as symbolizing that a woman's work never ends, but the patriarchal structure confines her work to the domestic sphere. Again, the diner as extension of the home serves to position Mildred as both successful as a businesswoman and as a mother if not for the absence and uselessness of almost every male in the film. Victoria Straughn initially recognizes this crucial theme of the absent male when she notes, "Veda uses her sexuality without regard for consequences, and the firm, masculine

hand of the law is the only way to contain her socially destructive behavior” (32) Here, the masculine hand of the law acts as surrogate to the father who is absent during a crucial period of a young woman’s life – a male official replaces the father, the narrative clearly indicting the patriarchy. It is quite odd, then, that feminist scholars, noting the weakness of the male figures surrounding Mildred, continue to seek in the narrative a final indictment of the female heroine. Straughn, like other feminist scholars (Linda Williams, Susan J. Douglas, June Sochen) make their case by consistently focusing on the ending of the film: Mildred walks out of the Hall of Justice into the early morning light, which signals Bert as a reinforcement of the patriarchy and the subjugation of Mildred, whose subversive and deviant behaviors and determinations have led to the ruination of the family. If Bert is emasculated by Mildred’s strength and agency (an admission made himself in the diner), then the masculine, authoritative figure that represents the patriarchal mode is the law/interrogating investigator. Therefore, the ending scene can instead be read as Mildred walking away from the patriarchal mode amid its attempt to reinsert its authority.

As scholars have argued that the scene signals the restoration of the patriarchy through Mildred’s loss of her empire and her return to Bert, I recognized a detail in close viewing (that I have yet to see recognized in any scholarly work) that I propose upends any argument that Mildred is left reliant on the male figure at film’s end.

While this thesis centers on the formal elements presented in the diner setting, I must call attention to a crucial detail that takes place away from the diner yet still relates to Mildred’s labor. In the third act, a meeting takes place between Mildred, Wally, her accountant, and the bank representative and they discuss the financial disrepair of the

company. The group of men inform Mildred that if she cannot start paying creditors then she will eventually default in a month's time. In a brief exchange, Wally tells Mildred that their business partnership could overcome this news had Monte not forced the situation by planning to sell his share of the business (that Mildred had given to him as a condition of marriage), thereby forcing Wally to sell his third of the shares as well. Yet it would follow that upon Monte's death his shares and estate would be held by Mildred, his lawful wife. Since the meeting occurs the night of his death, Mildred would leave the police station following her interrogation the next morning again as co-owner of the business, as the meeting was informational and there was nothing signed to officially dissolve their shares.

I propose this theory in this body of work because not only does it challenge the scholarship focused on Mildred's re-subjugation, but it also serves to present Mildred, and scholars, with a new path to redemption that allows her to retain her enterprise and further liberates her from the patriarchal mode. It also allows Mildred to remain unpunished for her deviant acts of challenging gender norms and owning the means of production, something that most of the scholarship points to and the Production Code required for moral purposes. By film's end, Mildred is thus provided with a victory and an unquestionable liberation from the patriarchy.

Liberation from Male Violence in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*

Ellen Burstyn was riding a wave of critical and commercial success as a lead actress upon the 1973 release of *The Exorcist*. With every major Hollywood studio willing to fund her next project, Burstyn pushed to get a smaller film written by unknown screenwriter Robert Getchell produced because, as she recalls: "I wanted to make a

different kind of film. A film from a woman's point of view, but a woman that I recognized, that I knew. And not just myself, but my friends, what we were all going through at the time" (womenandhollywood.com). With a major studio (Warner Bros.) backing her passion project, Burstyn then approached Francis Ford Coppola to helm the film; he directed her to a fledgling up-and-comer friend of his named Martin Scorsese. Scorsese had just released 1973's *Mean Streets*, a critical debut feature that catapulted Scorsese, Harvey Keitel, and Robert De Niro into the greater public conscious. As the project hinged on her final creative choices, she ultimately chose Scorsese due to her instinct that the story needed a gritty, realistic approach to make the film reflective of the cultural shifts happening in 1970s era America.

The pairing of Burstyn and Scorsese and the resulting film, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, proved to be a critical and commercial success and ultimately earned Burstyn the 1975 Academy Award for Best Actress. We witness major character changes in a space that, as depicted in prior films such as *Mildred Pierce*, 1945's *Detour* and *Fallen Angel*, and other films in the postwar American decades, was long marked as an incubator for societal and familial regression if inhabited by women. In contrast, by placing the characters and action so firmly in the diner, Burstyn and Scorsese reclaimed the setting as an empowering and self-affirming space of liberation and mirrored the Second Wave feminist movement that had begun in the early 1960s, where few women saw sexism as the only or even the main injustice and racial, class, and socioeconomic injustices were strengthened by male dominance. An increased focus on the differences in gender was critical in the second wave because these differences show that the inequality between the sexes have social causes and consequences – chief among them,

the patriarchal acceptance and justification of violence against women and children. Feminist scholars of the period (Brownmiller 302, 423; Griffin 6, Millett 44) argued that men have a greater capacity and comfortability with violence and that male violence is an innate method of control used against women and children to maintain dominance. Thus, Burstyn's feminist point of view and influence on the film's development and production cannot be understated.

The film follows the journey of Alice Hyatt (Burstyn) and her son, Tommy (Alfred Lutter) as they seek to return to Alice's hometown of Monterey, CA. The pair first start in small-town New Mexico, where Alice is in an abusive marriage to trucker Donald Hyatt (Billy Bush). Donald expects Alice to be a submissive housewife, despite the idea becoming a fading relic at the onset of the 1970s. Even though the marriage is riddled with emotional and verbal abuse, along with the presence of an increasingly confrontational relationship between father and preteen son, Alice happily accepts the role. After a few expository scenes, the first inciting incident of the movie occurs when Donald is killed in a work-related accident. With no family or income to rely on, Alice decides to return to Monterey to realize her childhood dream of a singing career. Alice proposes that she will find work singing in bars or lounges along the way and promises Tommy that she will get him to their new home in time to enroll him in school.

After stopping for lodging and temporary work opportunities in Phoenix, we learn in failed auditions that Alice isn't that great of a singer as she struggles to turn her dream into a lucrative reality. Yet Alice eventually finds work singing in a dimly lit, seedy bar where she meets temperamental Ben (Harvey Keitel). A relationship quickly develops and Alice finds herself in another abusive relationship, later revealed to be an affair when

Ben's pregnant wife shows up on their doorstep. Upon witnessing him abuse his wife as well as threatening physical violence towards her, Alice and Tommy are again on the road before ending up in Tucson. With no immediate prospects and a son to support, Alice reluctantly takes up a waitressing job at Mel & Ruby's Café.

The film is even more powerful when viewed in context with this second wave of feminism, as violence against women began surfacing as a national debate. Through a formal analysis of diner scenes in this film, I argue that the space of the diner and placement of female relationships as the center of the narrative allows the character of Alice liberation from the historical, patriarchal acceptance of domestic violence and the emotional and physical abuse of women.

The arc of Alice's liberation in the film is centered around Mel and Ruby's Diner, a roadside establishment with dated décor with a greasy patina that is configured in the typical layout of roadside diners of the post WWII era: a dining area separated by a long counter placed in between the patrons and a fully or semi-opened kitchen (Hurley 193). The environment and its clientele are decidedly blue collar; the dishes and the food selection (hash house fare) further designate this as such. The crowd is an equal mix of male and female with the women mostly sitting in silence next to the men, the majority of whom don cowboy hats and dusty denim jeans; some patrons are shown smoking as well (a direct contrast to the ordered, refined space that we encounter in *Mildred Pierce*, depicting a decidedly different segment of society). As the camera pans, we see a couple of male patrons seated at the counter, supporting the earlier descriptions of a gendered separation of space that existed at the diner's inception (Levenstein 28).

In the initial diner sequence, Alice's inability to perform simple tasks imparts to the viewers that she must reorientate herself with and find comfortability within social spaces, her hesitation and insecure posture a result of years of domestic abuse and female subjugation. An overhead tracking shot follows Flo Castleberry (Diane Ladd) as she delivers breakfast to a dining room full of patrons. The camera shifts to a wide shot with Alice behind the counter fumbling with the coffee pot and splashing cream all over the front of her uniform, depicting Alice's initial detachment from this space. Her prior life as a submissive wife and mother is initially signaled by her isolation within the chaos of the diner – this framing of Alice outside of the interpersonal interactions of the diner runs parallel to her larger lost sense of what “home” means - she is a woman with a child and without community. The camera cuts back to the dining as Vera Gorman (Valerie Curtin) struggles to deliver multiple orders to a party of three. Alice, Flo, and Vera all wear pink waitress dresses with frilly white aprons and flowered scarfs tucked into their chest pockets, further depicting the profession as a feminine endeavor. As the camera cuts to a reverse shot to pan the counter space, we see owner and cook, Mel (Vic Tayback), in the kitchen and separated from the dining space - demarcating the area as the female domain to the viewer.

While his name is on the signage, it becomes clear to the viewer in this sequence that Flo is the commanding figure between herself and Mel, a direct rejection of the accepted power dynamic between male and female. As the camera repositions itself to focus on Alice and Flo, Alice still works to complete her coffee while Flo hassles Mel on his inability to keep up with the pace. Flo also makes a sexual innuendo to Mel (“pulling on your puddin’”) and then further questions his libido (“I heard the only way you can get

it up is to slam it in the door”) and, as she takes the order from the window and walks the order to the dining area, loudly proclaims, “I could lay under you, eat fried chicken, and do a crossword puzzle at the same time – that’s how much you’d bother me.” Flo’s brazen, comedic presence in the scene (and film) further highlights the progression of women in social spaces that is taking place in America throughout this second wave of feminism. By commenting on his sexual inadequacies, Flo rejects chauvinism and sexual harassment through the act of emasculating her male superior. She places herself in juxtaposition to Alice – she is casually defiant and therefore, not a victim. The scene ends with interspersing close-up shots of Alice, clearly in shock by the banter while the other diners, shown going about their routine in a wide shot, don’t even flinch. A befuddled Alice stands frozen in direct contrast to a liberated woman.

The following sequence depicting Alice and her introduction to David (Kris Kristofferson) further highlights the difference between the two women and their interactions with men. In a shot/counter-shot, Alice tries to take his order and David replies that he’ll give it to her as soon as she gave him a big smile, reinforcing chauvinist tendencies and tropes that the Second Wave movement was trying to extinguish from society. There is a contrast in the dynamic between David and Alice to that of Flo and Mel: while their conversation is riddled with sexual innuendo, they jest as equals and as a dynamic of their work relationship (while this wouldn’t be approved or endorsed today, it was a dramatic progress for women during this time); Alice and David, however, are stuck in the traditional male/female roles which, one could argue, is infinitely more sexist than Mel’s verbal comebacks as it initially frames David as a subjugating figure. A close-

up shot shows a reticent Alice, conveying her as wholly unfamiliar with the notion that women can voice their objections.

The following scene directs the viewer to the initial chasm between Alice and Flo (the figure of female agency). The camera shifts to a wide shot of Flo introducing Alice as the new waitress before commenting on the size of Alice's breasts and warns everyone to keep their hands off her. She then proclaims "If there is going to be any grab-assin' around here, you grab mine! You can look but don't you touch." In a reverse shot, Alice is mortified. Again, a wide shot shows the patrons paying little attention to Flo. In a medium shot to allude to a growing closeness, David reassures Alice that it'll get easier. Shifting to a comforting role, he reminds her to keep a big smile. As she leaves the table, she forces a smile – a return to form as the controlled female. The scene ends with an overhead long shot that shows Vera still situating an order around the same table (five minutes into the scene) as Alice fumbles with the ice machine, depicting her increased disorientation in the space and among its denizens.

The final sequence shows Alice slowly finding her voice and raising an objection to what she considers bullying treatment. Of important note, she must take this initial stand against another woman as her experience with men has been that of a punching bag. The diner is key to this early step into her liberation as it stands as a safe space due to its public function, but also in its cultural perception as an extension of the home and the feminine attachment that comes with such notions. A jump cut opens the scene and we see a shot/counter-shot of Flo commending Alice at the end of her first shift. Alice responds by telling Flo that she'd like to be left out of Flo's performances and jokes, signaling her displeasure with the earlier situation. Flo responds that she'd hate to have

breakfast with Alice every morning of her life. While the close-up conveys a tense, private moment, the viewer gains from the shot that there is a marked difference in how the women interact with society at large and with each other as individuals. Alice chides Flo for speaking for her in front of a group of male customers, which she sees as performative on the part of Flo. She has spent her entire adult life in a performative role for the sake of her marriage, but that was her choice. Her boundary to Flo is made clear: *do not speak for me.*

The scene is critical in understanding the trajectory of Alice and how the three women eventually form a community under the default patriarchal mode. It can also be seen in allegorical terms: though independent and with agency of her own, Flo represents the current woman; Alice represents the increasing number of women who, through the breakdown of marriage or as a result of living with abuse, didn't understand that self-actualization was a possible goal until she had no other choice; Vera typifies the current state of the youth, confused by the jarring and conflicting alternatives before her (represented by Flo and Alice) to the point where she has minimal voice. The quick transitions between private moments (formalized in the medium and shot/counter-shot) and the chaotic environment (formalized in the use of long shots) depict three women of differing personalities at various stages in their lives who are learning how to navigate a new social construct, both independently and collectively, and it's critical that their interactions in the diner, at this point an American institution, formally signals the growing pains associated with each female character at various stages of their liberation from the patriarchal mode.

The next diner sequence in this analysis again serves to reinforce the space as an extension of the home and shows how this public space allows the nurturing side of women to appear. The sequence opens with a shot/counter-shot of Alice behind the counter with David and Tommy seated opposite, again a historical reference of the counter as a male-dominated space. As Tommy moves to a table, a camera pan shows him bumping into Vera, causing her to drop her tray of food. In the background, Mel appears in deep focus and shows a quiet look of annoyance. The placement of Mel in this scene signals another critical note – the male authority figure is rarely seen crossing the line between kitchen and communal space – referencing the male disruption of the stability in Alice’s previous home life. The camera cuts to a long shot of Alice pressed against the wall as she signals to the kitchen to remind Tommy that he is in her place of work. The camera then cuts to a medium shot of Vera bringing a book for Tommy to read; her instinctive reaction as Mel appears transitions Vera into a maternal role through this interaction with Tommy. Instead of reacting in an overwhelmed manner as before when faced with chaos in the space, she is now nurturing. Given that Tommy has faced abuse from his father and has spent his life only feeling secure around a female figure, an unexpected and tender moment occurs as Vera undergoes a brief transformation in front of the viewer. Alice attempts to persuade Tommy to find his friend, Audrey (Jodie Foster), to play with until she finishes work. Audrey, as earlier shown, is also the child of a single mother, who she claims, “turns tricks at the Ramada from 3:00pm onwards.”

Alice’s suggestion to find his friend indicates that Tommy is either in the diner, alone at their motel, or hanging out with Audrey – inferring that both children are mostly unsupervised. This phenomenon of “latchkey children,” starting during WWII as fathers

were overseas and mothers went into the workforce, exploded in the 1970s as single-parent households become more common. Historically, this blurring of home and work life is something that women were confronted with more often than men. With divorce being on the rise, single mothers had to balance domestic and professional duties in the absence of fathers. For lower income and working-class women, this also meant bringing their kids to their place of employment. Writing in 1974, sociologists Thomas C. Taveggia and Ellen M. Thomas noted that “a heated debate has raged in the social science literature between those favoring maternal employment and those fearing its deleterious effects on the children of working mothers. This debate has, in turn, sparked a widespread research interest” (27). The cultural connection of this space as an extension of the home where someone like Alice could bring her kid after school represented countless of single mothers who were without close family members and friends to help share the burden of childcare, allowing them to remain employed.

In the third act, Alice is initially faced with an internal crisis because the life in front of her is a far cry from the life that she envisioned, but she ultimately finds confidence and reaches the liberation from her cycle of abuse and dependence on men to provide fulfillment. In the opening of this sequence, Alice and Flo are shown in a medium shot at the kitchen window with a crowded diner behind them. Flo asks if David is coming into the diner, which causes Alice to break down in tears. A reverse tracking shot follows as Flo leads Alice out of the diner, through the kitchen, and through the back door of the restaurant and into a tight bathroom. The camera changes between medium and shot/counter-shots to depict the interaction between the two women as they trade stories of female worries and hardships. Scorsese smartly films this sequence in a non-

frenetic manner and affords the scene a calmness and sensitivity that it deserves by having tighter control of the camera: the tracking shot is smooth and deliberate in contrast to the jarring, frenetic motions of the previous scenes in the film, marking a tonal shift. Comically, we see this moment intercut with a hapless Vera trying to manage the customers and filling orders on her own and spectacularly failing, again exasperated and in tears. Scorsese stated that he filmed each diner scene in a deliberate fashion. The camera is purposefully jarring in its movement when we are in this specific environment:

the camerawork added to the atmosphere of the movie. "I was trying to capture a number of characters who were really very much in a state of confusion and never really settling. So the camera is always shifting and moving around...When it does stop, they are usually scenes of stability, like in the bathroom scene between Ellen Burstyn and Diane Ladd." (Grist 108)

These scenes are critical in observing how women navigated this period of upheaval in relation to each other. The diner represents a place of female empowerment (the men are always on the margins of the action in the film, but especially in this space) and economic opportunity, referencing both the connection to home and domesticity and further reinforcing the diner trope as a communal environment that allows Alice to finally find kinship amongst women who hold each other up (as in *Mildred Pierce*). Therefore, the film is critical in understanding this newfound world that lie in front of women in the seventies.

These women, while contemporaries, arrive at a moment when the Second Wave feminist movement was dominating the cultural and political landscape, incongruously of each other. The conflict for Alice, as with countless of other women in this period, is what happens to her newfound agency if she returns to a cycle of abuse at the hands of men. We know by the final scene that she realizes that she can be a good mother, a good

partner, and an independent woman, finally allowing herself to take some advice from Flo: “The first thing you got to do is figure out what it is you want. And once you figure it out, you just jump in there with both feet and let the devil take the hindmost!”

Here, the diner not only becomes the entry-point for the viewer to understand how a new sense of independence affected women of the time but also depicts how this space affords the character of Alice with an opportunity to liberate herself and her child from domestic abuse that, up until this point in time, was silenced to uphold patriarchal norms which accepted violence as part of the male nature, a reasoning which has historically been used to justify domestic violence. Alice and other women had learned to stand up for themselves and the film makes a profound statement that subjugation would no longer stand. To view Alice’s ending (she never reaches Monterrey, as she stays with David in Tucson) as tragic is to shackle her with the false choice that women only have two options – freedom or marriage and motherhood – that Scorsese seeks to avoid. Alice is not what some critics would call a feminist hero, but through her work in the diner and the female relationships formed within the space, by film’s end she constructs her sense of home with her newfound family of women that is centered on the diner and finally liberates herself from being a female victim.

Chapter III.

Black and Queer Liberation Realized in the Diner

Chapter Two focuses on Black protagonists finding liberation in this space as the Civil Rights movement progressed. The two selected works include *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) directed by Norman Jewison and *Moonlight* (2016) directed by Barry Jenkins. I selected these based on four main criteria: the Black character must be the protagonist and the narrative must be centered on their experience; the impact that the film had upon its release and its cultural significance; the film in relation or response to major cultural shifts, specifically the Civil Rights and gay rights movement; the box office success and/or prestige awards achieved to indicate that the film, centered on the narrative of an oppressed group or individual, reached a mainstream audience – a critical goal of any film, but especially of one carrying a significant social message.

Liberation from Oppression in *In the Heat of the Night*

In the Heat of the Night was filmed and released in 1967, a full seven years after the Greensboro Four conducted a series of sit-ins at the F.W. Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. This led to a nationwide sit-in movement involving over 70,000 people in more than fifty cities in thirteen states that demanded the rapid integration of restaurants across the United States, becoming a critical juncture of the Civil Rights Movement. Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned the continued segregation of public accommodations and restaurants, many in the South famously refused to do so well past the movie's release date (Amy Henderson and Adrienne

Kaepler's *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*); Cicely Lewis's *Focus on Civil Rights Sit-Ins*; O'Brien's *We Shall Not Be Moved: the Jackson Woolworth's Sit-in and the Movement It Inspired.*) As the *Los Angeles Times* reported in a 2003 obituary, Lester Maddox – restaurant owner, avowed segregationist, and future governor of Georgia

first came to national attention in 1964 on the eve of a new era in America with the passing of federal laws that barred racial discrimination. But Maddox was firmly opposed to the laws, and when friends wielding ax handles drove black protesters from his Pickrick fried chicken restaurant in Atlanta, he made headlines across the country. He closed the establishment months later rather than accept a court ruling ordering him to desegregate. (Thurber)

The atmosphere in the South was so fraught at the time that initially, Poitier famously refused to even step foot below the Mason-Dixon line. Production had to move to Missouri, with Poitier eventually, albeit begrudgingly, agreeing to film a few days in Tennessee. In a cruel twist of fate, the 1968 Academy Awards ceremony that rewarded the film with Best Picture and Best Actor (Rod Steiger) statuettes was rescheduled by a few days due to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Directed by Norman Jewison, the film tells the story of Philadelphia homicide detective, Virgil Tibbs (Sidney Poitier), who finds himself leading a murder investigation in rural Mississippi. The film, essentially a murder mystery, became a flashpoint in 1960s race relations in the United States and has been historically examined more for its social messaging than for its merit as a classic whodunnit.

The Magical Negro trope has become a highly discussed topic in recent film theory and scholarship, largely due to the coining of the term by Black film director Spike Lee in 2001. In his work, "Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in "Magical Negro" Films," sociologist Matthew W. Huey defines the

Magical Negro as being an uneducated, lower-class character who possesses mystical or supernatural powers that are only used “to save and transform disheveled, uncultured, lost, or broken whites (almost exclusively white men) into competent, successful, and content people within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation” (544). The argument is thusly: for the Magical Negro to occupy any equivalency with their White opposite, they must exist on a morally superior plane to reach said equality of the plain, run of the mill white person. Entman and Rojecki qualify this further, stating that the Magical Negro must serve three purposes: 1) assist the character, 2) help him discover or utilize his or her spirituality, and 3) offer a specific wisdom that resolves the white dilemma (208). Therefore, the Black character’s innate gifts and spirituality is never the focus of white narratives, only the white dilemma.

The movie should not be seen as an equalizing commentary regarding race and class because the leading role of Virgil Tibbs is continuously depicted as superior to the white community of the fictional town. In his interactions with the Chief of Police (Steiger), his many deputies, and the townspeople, Virgil’s presence as the most educated, professional figure stands in stark contrast to the ignorant, racist attitude prevalent in Sparta. In this section, I argue that through a deeper reading of formal elements in two diner scenes, the film transcends being a feel-good tale of the ability of white people to overcome any remaining segregationist sentiments and instead, a larger visual message of the Black man’s prerogative to liberate himself from social oppression is conveyed to the viewer.

The first image of the diner that we see is the opening sequence of the film. A closeup of a fly moving across a weathered, grease-laden calendar shows us that the date

is the 3rd of the month. Geert Heetebrij, professor of Film and Media at Calvin University, argues that the screenwriter, Stirling Silliphant, intended the structure of the film as subversive Christian allegory (christianscholars.com). As the camera pans out, we witness another closeup shot of Ralph Henshaw (Anthony James) attempting to kill the fly with a rubber band, followed by a cut to another closeup of Officer Sam Wood (Warren Oates) finishing his soda. As the camera pans to a wide shot with both men in frame – Sam (as patron) on one side of the counter, Ralph (as cook) behind it – we are now firmly placed in a diner filled with grease and detritus. Sam asks for a piece of pie but Ralph, who finally kills the fly, informs him that he ate the last piece before Sam arrived. Ralph makes a counteroffer: “I’ll tell you what, Sam – being that it’s sitting in there by its lonesome, I’ll let you have it for free.” Sam forcefully reminds Ralph that he is to be addressed as his profession dictates. Ralph complies, first addressing him as Mr. Wood before correcting himself to refer to Sam as Officer Wood.

Now satisfied, Sam stands up to drop his money on the counter and exits. In this wide shot, we can see the stark differences in the characters just by their presentation and composure – Sam the professional in clean and crisp uniform, Ralph standing watch over his filthy and cluttered domain in drabby white t-shirt and stained, faded white apron. Sam exits and we see Ralph put the money in a cash register that sits next to where half of a pie happens to be placed, slightly out of the customer’s view. In a tight closeup, Ralph smiles with the satisfaction that he had pulled one over on the cop – calling the viewer’s attention that there is a dishonest nature to his character. The camera cuts to a wide shot of Sam leaving the diner and as the patrol car rolls out of frame, we see a flashing five-pointed star announcing the diner to roadside passengers. We cut to Sam in

the interior of his police cruiser as he makes his evening ride to peep into the window of nude 16-year-old Delores Purdy (Quentin Dean) and can't help but notice that Wood has a plastic figure of Christ on the center of his dashboard. After a sequence of reverse closeup shots of a nude Delores in the window and Sam as voyeur in his cruiser, we recognize a quick succession of duplicitous (and therefore, unreliable) characters in the film's opening sequence.

That the diner serves as the establishing shot is critical as it is given a place of primacy at the outset of the story; we will undoubtedly return here at some point in the film for unknown and unpleasant reasons. The space – dilapidated, cramped, filthy – serves as preview to what we eventually find out about the town and its citizens: Sparta is a backwater town, inhabited by people who cling to racist attitudes and are resistant to the social changes happening in 1960s America. The communal space of the diner being presented as an outdated relic signals to the viewer that we are in a setting where there is no embrace of progress in any form.

Indeed, we are led back to Ralph and the diner in the third act through Virgil's keen observations. Sam retraces his entire route on the night of the murder, from the beginning of his shift to the moment he comes upon a murder victim's body in the street. As Sam drives to the diner, the camera cuts to a tight closeup shot of a hand picking a lock with a knife. When the camera pans up, we see Ralph in a tight closeup shot with his ear to the diner's jukebox; the camera switches to a wide shot of him now dancing to an eerie song, aptly named *Fowl Owl on the Prowl*

There's a foul owl on the prowl tonight.

Hey, little lark, get outta the dark,

Foul owl on the prowl.

Hey little jay, stay out of his way,
Foul owl on the prow.
You just might be the quail he'll tail,
Foul owl on the prow.
You just might be the swallow he'll follow,
Foul owl on the prow.
If you hear him hoot, scoot,
If you pass his tree, flee,
If you catch his eye, fly,
Don't wait to say goodbye.

The use of diegetic music coupled with the shot choices informs the audience that something nefarious is looming in this scene. A tracking shot shows Ralph looking out the window followed by a scene cut to track Sam's cruiser as it pulls up to the diner. Another tight closeup shot of Ralph follows as he peers through the window and grins, again signaling an unease about the character; the camera then pulls back to a wide shot as Ralph slides onto the opposite side of the counter, ready to play out the routine charade with Sam. We notice that Ralph and the diner are now presented differently: he is wearing a clean, blue shirt and apron and the diner is spotless and organized, though still under a perpetual patina of grime. Ralph again hides a full pie out the customer's view, this time under the counter.

An over-the-shoulder reverse shot from Virgil's perspective has the viewer back in the cruiser with Sam as he informs Virgil that it takes him "ten minutes to finish a king-size coke and a wedge of pie." An over-the-shoulder reverse shot, now from Sam's perspective, shows Virgil jotting down investigative notes. With the shot reversed again,

Sam exits the cruiser, peers through the open window, and asks Virgil if he can bring him anything. In a tight closeup, Virgil states, “No, I’m coming in” and exits the vehicle.

Sam’s face immediately changes from a smile to an instant look of befuddlement. This less-than-second, critical expression on Sam’s face is easily missed - the interaction is so minute that viewers and critics continue to miss it. A wide shot introduces Chief Gillespie (Rod Steiger) arriving separately in his cruiser into the scene. After a terse exchange between the chief and Tibbs, who has been directed to leave town for his safety, the trio enters the diner.

In an over-the-shoulder medium shot, Ralph peers through the window and slightly changes his demeanor due to this new configuration of characters. A tracking shot from the interior corner shows Wood and Gillespie as they enter the diner with Virgil and then widens as Ralph departs from his usual tactics and announces, “I’ve got some real luscious cream pie for you tonight, Sam” as he places two cups of fresh coffee on the counter, conveying that Ralph only intends to welcome two of the three guests. Sam sits down in his usual spot, now flanked by Virgil and Gillespie, as the jukebox music fades. Gillespie, still bothered by Virgil’s continued presence in town despite his orders, asks him what he’ll be having. The camera cuts to an extreme closeup of a visibly nervous, sweating, and shaking Ralph defiantly stating, “I ain’t serving him!” Virgil, in closeup, looks up at Ralph then to Gillespie, unbothered by the treatment. After a long pause of intercutting closeups of all men displaying an awkwardness at the situation, Virgil again asks Sam about the timing of his departure from the diner on the night of the murder. In the wide shot, we can sense Ralph’s anxiousness as he clenches his mouth and grabs hold of the counter with both hands to steady himself – he watches Virgil but

doesn't make eye contact. As he makes his exit, Virgil turns to take a long look at Ralph from across the diner as Ralph stares down at the counter. Sam and Gillespie follow Virgil and the three leave to continue Sam's route.

If we are to take the religious undertone of the film, Virgil is undoubtedly depicted as a Christ-like figure but none of the characters in the film recognize him as such. Jewison's framing and symbolism is to inform the viewer, yet the characters act independently of the film's structure. While we can agree that the townsfolk are beholden to a dying societal assumption of segregation, this final diner scene proves that this isn't the determining factor of Ralph's behavior. Again, if we reference the beginning of the scene as Sam exits the car, his look of bewilderment is due to his amazement that Virgil casually stated his intention of going *inside the diner*. For Sam and for many viewers nationwide at the time, this was just not accepted practice. A Black man invoking his natural right to go into an eating establishment as an assumed equal to a white man was still culturally taboo at the time, even in 1967 but *especially* in the 1967 South. Sam's slight and usually unnoticed reaction tells us more about his understanding of Virgil and the cultural forces that were moving in society more than any other interaction in the movie. Virgil acted as an equal to a white man and his casually crossing the threshold into Ralph's diner was simply a threshold that had yet to be depicted in a mainstream studio film.

Virgil, the classic fish-out-of-water, is a Philadelphia detective who finds himself in a region struggling and refusing to accept the law of the land. Being from a northern city after the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, part of his daily life includes him walking into any space of his choosing, neither due to his profession nor to his expertise in solving

crimes but because he is an American. Not a Black America, but an American. His character has no reason to shift his actions for performative reasons just because he is in the South. Research by Chin Jou reveals that

by examining the experiences of a group of civil rights activists in New York City between 1950 and 1954—several years before publicized instances of lunch counter sit-ins in the South—one finds that while African Americans routinely encountered discrimination and segregation in northern cities, it would be inaccurate to characterize the racial milieu there simply as a Jim Crow above the Mason-Dixon line. (234)

To his credit, Ralph is never depicted as holding racist views. He is inarguably creepy and mysterious, but not once do we see him being threatened by Virgil because he is a Black man. We do not see him joining the mob that pursues Virgil at various parts of the film and he is never shown discussing Virgil in racial terms. In fact, the only interactions between the two are in the diner scene mentioned above and at the film's resolution where we learn that he is guilty of the murder. In the context of the diner scene, Ralph is only threatened by Virgil because he has rightly zeroed in on him as the suspect. Every character throughout the film knows that the police force is inept, and that Chief Gillespie is chasing dead ends without a clue as to how to solve the crime. Virgil, on the other hand, is the only intelligent detective on the case, and he has no business being in Sparta. Ralph's defiant "I'm not serving him!" is due to him wanting to limit his interaction with Virgil to remain off his list of suspects. He doesn't acknowledge or respect the authority of his local law enforcement; it is only Virgil and his singular ability to determine his fate that Ralph fears. This fear is simply self-preservation.

Due to its short length in the film, I've found that the significance of this final diner scene is often overlooked by scholars (Aram Goudsouzian's *Sidney Poitier: Man, Actor, Icon*; Ira Wells' "Don't Pray for Me, Pray for Them!": Norman Jewison's In the

Heat of the Night and Hollywood "Redneckification" of Anti-Black Racism;" Emma Hamilton and Troy Saxby's "'Draggin' the Chain': Linking Civil Rights and African American Representation in *The Defiant Ones* and *In the Heat of the Night*") which leads to a limited reading of the film. If we take the totality of the film and place this scene in its appropriate context, we can understand that there is more at play in this scene that elevates it beyond a morality lesson centered on white America's refusal to reject racism. Virgil does not inhabit space in this film to assuage the white man's guilt, nor is he here to provide redemption for the white population; he does not leave Chief Gillespie and his police force any more competent than he found them. There is no transfer of knowledge, just transaction. Had Poitier's character been shown as the sheriff's equal, there could be no signaling of the liberation of a Black man. He had to be seen as above not only the Magical Negro trope, but also as superior to all other characters in the film to serve as a rejection of their bigotry.

Virgil has his own dilemmas – namely, balancing a directive from his police chief to remain in Sparta until the murder is solved while also trying to survive in a racist town. His dilemmas only intersect with the white dilemma because of his professional skills as a homicide detective, something that Chief Gillespie's department is lacking. He doesn't lead Gillespie or the townsfolk to any discovery of their own innate gifts and spirituality – Virgil isn't even concerned with trying to convince them of the ills and folly of racism. He shows zero concern for their spiritual well-being and fights violence with violence, when necessary. None of the townspeople are changed because of his presence and not one individual is redeemed prior to his departure. The framing of the film as a detective

story does much work to prevent the trope from applying to him. He is there to complete a task and he succeeds, often as an adversary to Gillespie and never as an ally.

When we see the interaction of the four characters in the final diner scene, we are provided with a glimpse into the changing landscape of American culture at a time that the country was fractured and struggling to create a freer public for all. The diner thus acts as the key signifier in understanding this movie beyond the realms of drama and murder mystery. Without these scenes, I contend that there cannot be a full understanding of the greater social commentary of the film that focuses on the Black man's inherent right to claim space, regardless of his interaction with white society. The highest point of tension in the film is not in the mystery and detective work itself, but also in the cinematic depiction of a Black man so boldly entering this specific space *superior* to his white counterparts. While Sam and Chief Gillespie walk into the diner in search of clues, Virgil Tibbs walks in to indict a white man. In my reading of the film, this is the more provocative and subversive act than the earlier (and more famous) depiction of Virgil returning a backhand to a white businessman.

When we are first introduced to Virgil, he is being transported into Sparta onboard a train rolling into the station in the dead of night; as the train approaches the station, the camera focuses on a star above the train and blurs to transform it into a flashing cross, thereby transferring the full life cycle of Christ – birth to crucifixion – onto Virgil. By the movie's Third Act, with the duo seemingly no closer to identifying the murderer, we've come to understand the character of Virgil Tibbs in two opposing ways – he is undoubtedly depicted as a savior (his framing through Sam's front windshield with the Christ statue in the foreground and himself in the background) yet he is vilified

and hated throughout the town. Some scholars argue that Virgil goes through his Passion while suffering through three days in Sparta – a direct reference to the calendar date in the opening diner scene. Heetebrij directs the viewer to the moment that

the film then cuts to an extreme close-up of a fly creeping towards Thursday on a calendar, moments before it is killed by Ralph Henshaw (Anthony James), the diner man—foreshadowing Tibbs’ coming ordeal which, like Christ’s Passion, culminated on a Thursday night, leading to his crucifixion during the early hours of Good Friday.
(christianscholars.com)

As we analyze the diner scenes, I counter that the reading of the film as a Passion play that ends with the Crucifixion overlooks the remainder of the Easter story. As the calendar indeed reads Thursday (signifying Maundy Thursday), it is also the third day of the month. The third date on the diner calendar in the opening sequence therefore is a motif of the Easter Triduum rather than the Passion. As Christ was liberated from death on the third day through the Resurrection, so too does Virgil liberate himself from any remaining vestiges of America’s systemic oppression by film’s end.

Queer Liberation in *Moonlight*

The 2008 presidential election saw massive minority voter turnouts that resulted in the historic election of Barack Obama. Simultaneously, Proposition Eight was on the election ballot in California. A public rupture occurred between the gay and Black and Latino communities as the passage of the proposition was blamed on other minorities not supporting marriage equality for the gay community, where 58% of Black Californians and 59% of Latinos votes against same-sex marriage, in comparison to the 52% for the state; of note, Blacks were also considered the most religiously affiliated racial group in the state (Johnson 254).

Other scholars, however, hoped to reposition the vote to argue that understanding some Black opposition to marriage equality requires a consideration, too, that for many Black LGBTQI Americans marriage equality is not a priority, and that poverty, unemployment, employment, and housing discrimination are more important and pressing concerns. In the aftermath of this cultural rift between the Black, Latino, and gay communities, a small independent film rose to prominence that shone a light on the Black, gay experience in America. Adapted from Tarrell McCraney's semi-autobiographical play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, 2016's *Moonlight* is a coming-of-age dramatic film that follows the main character, Chiron (Alex Hibbert, Ashton Sanders, Trevante Rhodes), through three phases of his life – childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. The film explores key themes such as Black male identity, family structure, abuse and neglect, isolation, sexuality, and first love through his relationships with a drug-addicted mother, Paula (Naomie Harris); local drug dealer, Juan (Mahershala Ali) and his wife, Teresa (Janelle Monae); and childhood best friend Kevin (Jaden Piner, Jharrel Jerome, Andre Holland). The film was written, produced, and directed by a Black filmmaker (Barry Jenkins) and consists of an all-Black ensemble cast (there is not one white character in the film). According to Hilton Als, this was hailed as a “radical move on Jenkin’s part. Whites would have introduced a different dynamic to *Moonlight*. Jenkins’s story is about a self-governing black society, no matter how fractured” (www.newyorker.com). In 2017, the film became the first film with an all-Black cast to win the Academy Award for Best Picture, as well as Best Supporting Actor for Ali and Best Adapted Screenplay.

It is through these oppositional forces – the Black community’s historical ties to the church and the marriage equality movement’s desire to tie the gay rights movement to the Civil Rights movement – that an unspoken current runs throughout the film, namely that Black culture sees any challenge to its normative heterosexuality as foreign at best and threatening at worst. Paula shames a young Chiron because of his nature and mannerisms, acknowledging and endorsing that form of oppression within her culture. Juan comforts him by shifting the blame to those who project their insecurity and pain onto others as he simultaneously destroys their community through drug dealing and violence. Childhood Kevin acknowledges Chiron’s “difference” and advises him to appear tougher to gain the respect of his bullies, then becomes a willing partner in Chiron’s first sexual experience as teenagers. That the primary male figures in Chiron’s life publicly embrace a performative macho culture while privately allowing Chiron to exist in his truth highlights the intersecting axes of race and sexuality in the film – the inability to separate the two imparts a subversive critique of traditional masculinity in the Black community. In this section, I argue that through a close reading of the formal elements in the final scene, the social significance of the diner encourages the liberation of Black queer men from the heteronormative expectations of their culture.

In the first diner scene, we see young Chiron and Juan seated in a diner immediately following the film’s opening scene where Juan rescues Chiron in an abandoned building. The diner scene sets up the relationship that builds between the two as Juan as protector and Chiron as tragic, isolated youth. Whereas the opening sequence between Juan was filmed with a handheld camera – thus conveying a frenetic sense of immediacy – the switch to a tripod to film this moment clues the viewer that Juan is

positioned as a calm and stable presence in Chiron's life. The diner sequence opens with a wide shot of Juan asking Chiron for his personal information as Chiron eats a plate of food, then slowly zooms in as Juan's questions become more urgent. When Chiron refuses to engage, Juan pulls the plate of food away and in an over-the shoulder shot, we see a look of dejection in Chiron's face before Juan pushes the plate back, apologizes, and promises that he's a trustworthy figure. In a close up shot to end the sequence, we see Juan taking a long, empathetic look at Chiron - signaling his intention to provide support for the child.

This brief sequence features two motifs that come into play in various parts of the film. Firstly, we see a deep connection between Chiron and nourishment, both in the physical and spiritual sense. In the physical sense, his reaction to the plate being pulled away indicates that he lives an impoverished existence; in the spiritual sense, the child lacks male support and protection. Throughout the first and second act, Juan and Teresa nourish Chiron's physical hunger with home-cooked, Afro-Caribbean dinners consisting mostly of chicken and rice (Juan is from Cuba) and they nourish his spirit by allowing himself a safe space to question his sexuality. In the third act, this liberation from hunger and social pressures in Juan and Teresa's home is mirrored in Kevin's diner.

The powerful use of diegetic sound serves as a second motif that bridges the first and final diner scenes together. As the sequence shifts from the wide shot of Juan and Chiron at the table to a closeup, we can hear the murmurs of the diner patrons as well as the faint sound of "It'll All Be Over" by the Supreme Jubilees playing in the background. The song, a throwback fusion of gospel and soul, promises a triumphant moment when one's burdens are released

One of these old days, yeah, one of these old days
We ain't gon' have to cry no more
You see God's gon' wipe away all our tears
He gon' wipe the tears yeah, He gon' wipe the tears from your eyes
Do you hear me out there this evenin'?
I said "We ain't gon' cry, we ain't gon' cry no more"
One of these old days yeah, one of these old days
It'll all be over, it'll all be over, it'll all be over
And we won't have to cry no more
And we won't have to cry no more

The song quietly announces the initial moment that the child finds safety and a liberation from the hypermasculine and violent culture that he struggles to find his place in. Whereas the motif of food and song in this scene signifies the moment that Chiron experiences being seen for the first time, the final instance of these dual motifs in the diner signify the moment that Chiron experiences sexual liberation by finally acknowledging unrequited love and embracing his homosexual nature.

The film's final act opens as an adult Chiron, now a drug dealer himself in Atlanta, accepts an unexpected invitation to visit Kevin at his place of work when he returns to Miami. As the sequence depicting their reunion starts, Chiron is shown in a medium shot in the diner's dimly lit parking lot readying himself for the encounter. A handheld tracking shot follows him as he walks towards the diner – mirroring the frenetic immediacy of the opening scene – and ends with over the shoulder shot ends with him at the entrance. The camera quickly pans down to focus on his hand pulling the door open, then a quick cut to a closeup of a bell on the interior door frame, followed by a wide shot

set on a tripod, serves to take us from the coldness of the outside world into a softly lit diner filled with a few patrons occupying various booths. The jingle of the bell, which begins and ends the sequence, also bounds the diner as a physical space separate from the world depicted in the film up to this point. The harsh, bright daylight and cold, blue hues of night of Miami are replaced by a warm, intimate environment.

The tracking shot follows Chiron as he hesitantly walks through the diner and seats himself at the counter, with Kevin stepping into the background and informing him that he'll get to him soon – relaying to the viewer that the two men initially do not recognize one another after years apart. A close, over the shoulder shot as Chiron sits down and stares off-camera at Kevin's direction tell us two things: where Chiron was thin as a reed as a youth and teenager, his muscular definition is noticeable through his fitted shirt. He has grown into a massive and possibly, threatening, figure; also, his long look in Kevin's direction signifies that he's become aware of who he's come to find. A reverse angle shot leads us behind Chiron and we see Kevin attending to two patrons in a booth, which again depicts the typical diner layout: the more private space separated from an open kitchen window by the long, social domain of the counter. A tracking shot follows Kevin as he busses dishes back to the kitchen area as Chiron again follows his every move. Another significant moment happens here. Chiron places himself at the counter, which has been discussed throughout this thesis as a democratic space. This deliberate move, in contrast to Virgil not occupying a seat in *In the Heat of the Night*, represents the filmic progression of the Black male in this space.

A close-up shot of Chiron facing the kitchen follows as Kevin walks towards the camera to take his order. In an immediate, close-up shot, Kevin's face fills most of the

frame as he looks straight into the camera with a look of surprise, but also one of yearning. He stops midsentence as he finally realizes the figure in front of him. As Kevin says his name, a reverse close-up of Chiron fills the frame, and we witness tension in his face but also a quiet joy that recalls the first moment he felt being seen by Juan. A reverse angle shot follows Kevin again and the two men are soon embracing. An over the shoulder shot reveals a hesitant Chiron trying to make sense of the situation, conveying that a long-awaited moment has finally arrived for him. Chiron smiles throughout, noticeably always looking down as he does.

After their initial greeting, Kevin offers to prepare the chef's special for Chiron as he walks off camera to the kitchen. In close-up, Chiron fidgets and remains unable to hide the emotions bubbling beneath the surface. In the next sequence, we see Kevin in close-up, handheld shots preparing the dish – chicken and rice – continuing the food motif and recalling the brief, tender moments of Chiron's earlier life. The quick close-ups of his hands as he prepares individual ingredients signals another moment liberation and subversion, this time on Kevin's part, whereas the youthful Kevin advises Chiron to act tough to mask his nature, the adult Kevin lovingly prepares the food as an expression of desire and vulnerability. The domestic act, historically connected to the feminine sphere, rejects the notions of Black manhood.

A medium shot of Chiron standing at the jukebox transitions us back to main space, and a reverse angle shot shows Kevin standing at a booth, proudly holding his plate of food, and signifying that we are moving into an area designated as private in the space with the two men. As Kevin returns with a bottle of wine, the camera shows the two men in over the shoulder shots as they exchange details of their lives over the years;

the moments of Chiron eating his food is shown in a medium shot to capture the juxtaposition between Chiron's remaining hesitation to fully express himself and Kevin's immediate openness. As Kevin moves off camera to check on other customers, another close-up shot shows the longing in Chiron's eyes.

As Kevin seats himself again, the camera returns to an over the shoulder setup as Kevin pulls out his wallet and tells Chiron about becoming a father and that his relationship with the son's mother has ended. As the camera moves into a tight closeup of the son's picture, it immediately pulls back to an over the shoulder shot and this time there is a visible look of pain and disappointment on Chiron's face. When Kevin leaves the table again to check on customers, the camera shifts from a closeup of Chiron to the front door as the soft sound of waves on the nearby beach fills the space. This triggers a recollection of their sexual encounter as teenagers, quietly moving Chiron to question the purpose of this visit. As Kevin returns, the camera is repositioned in an over-the-shoulder shot as Chiron immediately asks, "Why'd you call me?"

Kevin answers that a customer played a song once that made him think of Chiron, and the camera pans to a wide shot as Kevin walks to the jukebox. In a moving sequence, Kevin and Chiron stare at each other while Barbara Lewis's "Hello Stranger" (1963) plays on the jukebox

Oh, if you're not gonna stay
(Ooh) please don't tease me like you did before
Because I still love you so
Although, it seems like a mighty long time
(Shoo-bop, shoo-bop, my baby)
Ooh, it seems like a mighty long time

We only see the back-and-forth gaze between Kevin and Chiron as the song serves as the bridge between the two characters' past and present. The wide shot establishes distance but also imparts a longing on both men as they try to create meaning and connection in this moment. The shot shows that this intimate moment is also being shared with the other patrons in the background and that regardless of the ability to share intimate moments between two people in a booth or at a table, the entirety of the space is public. In a reverse close-up shot, Kevin grins and we can note the physical relaxing of tension that overcomes Chiron, a releasing of pain both physical and spiritual. The scene is interrupted by the bell on the doorhandle, again signifying that the world outside of these two has not been frozen – it has only stood still in this space for the two men.

Some critics hold that the diner, as a heteronormative space, still creates a cultural and systemic barrier for black and queer men. Hannah Skjellum's "'Can't Be No Worse Out Here": Radical Queer Black Ecologies in Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight*" argues

whereas Kevin's diner takes on the haptic feeling and aesthetics of nature spaces but fails to allow Kevin and Chiron to speak about their feelings, Kevin's house as the final space of this film remedies the problems of cultural oppression by standing as a natural space disguised as one of culture. While Chiron and Kevin cannot fully divulge their feelings at the diner, Kevin's house breaks down the barriers to communication. (300)

Skjellum places too much emphasis on the lack of words in this sequence and doesn't credit silent interaction and skilled camerawork in film to be as effective communication as the script. There are countless examples in cinema to counter this thought, this sequence being one of them. She further posits that nostalgia becomes the center of the space in Kevin's house and therefore the barriers of repression and cultural conditioning are now broken down (287); this liberation from repression happens to Chiron when he sits in the diner. Skjellum overlooks this scene as being the moment

when such nostalgia becomes the center of the space and that by observing each other from across the diner, the two men can fully divulge their feelings.

One possible reason that scholars like Skjellum reflexively label the diner as a symbol of regression is that there is an accepted view that nostalgia typically serves no purpose other than to remind us of a bygone era. In her piece “Nostalgic nationalism and the banal Anthropocene on Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives,” Tisha Dejmancee critiques the diner and its culture as antiquated and culturally problematic, stating that postmodern diner culture establishes a nostalgic nationalism and

glorifies the post-war American ideals that accompany the historical symbolism of the diner as a democratic space offering patrons large, affordable servings of comfort food to erase memories of wartime rations and replace them with ‘the myth of unending upward mobility, economic prosperity, and American exceptionalism. (89)

Dejmancee doesn’t acknowledge the shortcomings in her argument, primarily that diners as a progressive institution in American culture and film have long preceded post-war America – with its immigrant origins and focus on profits an expansion, it was never a restrictive, conservative enterprise on its own. More importantly, she doesn’t consider works depicting Black and queer culture that have critical, riveting scenes depicted in the diner space that she sees as a symbol of oppression, further stating that diners evoke a nostalgic nationalism that promises to secure American cultural values which are only found in the American heartland (87). Furthermore, both critics disregard scholarly literature regarding the diner as a unifying space that drove integration in other public spheres. Scholars have long observed that diners contributed greatly to cultural amalgamation in American public life since they cultivated the mixing of genders, class, and various ethnic backgrounds (Andrew Hurley’s “From Hash House to Family Restaurant: The Transformation of the Diner and Post-World War II Consumer Culture,”

Andrew Wiese's "The Other Suburbanites: African American Suburbanization in the North before 1950").

Critics like Skjellum and Dejmanee often overlook or minimize the diner's potentiality as an empowering space that is available to all. Instead of reading their initial silence in the scene as a form of repression, we can find meaning in the spatial representation of the diner to give voice to what Kevin and Chiron cannot say. The difference between the diner exchange and the sexual encounter on the beach is that the latter happened in the dark of night and in isolation, reflecting the secrecy and shame felt on the part of both boys. In both form and function, the diner serves as the singular space in the story that drowns out a cultural resistance to Blackness and queerness. It's a quiet and unassuming, progressive space that betrays any notion of cultural and systemic oppressions. As a space so closely related to home and the domestic space, the quiet moments shared between the two in the diner can read as finding commonality and safety in one another and as a liberation from an oppressive shame of being Black and queer in America.

Chapter IV.

Conclusion

As our society becomes more fragmented and people are less connected in the public space (while more connected in the digital age), the diner still serves as a communal space that is available to all. Unlike other spaces such as fast-food diners and coffee shop chains, the entry point is usually minimal – for the price of a cup of coffee in almost every diner, you are considered a paying customer thus free to get comfortable for as long as you need. While this holds true for coffee chains, their spatial layout in comparison to the diner do not demarcate both public and private spaces; also, there is no connection the domestic sphere or cultural ties to a sense of nostalgia and community. In a testament to its social significance, the Federal Emergency Management Agency goes so far as to monitor a Waffle House Index, a color-coded indicator of what restaurants are open to “gauge how well an area will recover from a hurricane, tornado or other hazard” (“The Waffle House Index Returns for Hurricane”). It can be both starting point and final destination, depending on one’s schedule. It can also serve as a private space amongst a communal setting, providing the former and the potential of the latter for all. Duality and consistency are in its very DNA, and it’s why it has been held in such high esteem by the public for over a century while remaining so ordinarily ordinary that its significance to our culture is so often minimized, maligned, or overlooked. No other public space/institution provides so much comfort and potential for so little.

Diners are a place for mass consumption, which is the American mode, but also the place that encourages upward and social mobility, erasure of class, and the mixing of

cultural groups. The diner is, in essence, representative of the American Dream by the nature of its origins. Diners started during a time when immigrants (Italians, Irish, Eastern European Jews) could not find work due to local discrimination preventing their hiring in the labor force (Gutman 18). Immigrants would pull horse and carts near factory entrances and construction sites and sell their recipes to the employed, which required them to often stay operational around the clock. Ultimately, this led to the standard box structure that we know today, which was made more prevalent as the culture and way of life in America gradually shifted from producers to consumers:

It is not surprising that the development of a mass consumption economy, which W.W. Rostow has argued was in place by the 1920s, brought inevitable changes in cultural attitudes. Thus, by our own time, Americans are more prone to identify themselves as consumers and much easier to organize on this basis than at any other point in their history. (Levine 222)

The utilitarian diner has been overlooked possibly because it doesn't belong to one place and time, regardless of how critics aim to shackle it to novelty or regression. Perhaps because it is so commonly present, we fail to see that it for what it is at its basic form – a relatable public sphere of our culture. As a trope, it can either be utilized as run of the mill or featured to impart sly subversion, which further strengthens the need for more scholarly discussion. One cannot subvert an idea or view unless the idea or views are not already in the collective conscience. The diner has long been a signifier of immigration, women's liberation, and the Civil Rights movement as well as being reflected across a century of American film as signifying both progressive and conservative values. The diner is simultaneously an idea of change as well as an unchangeable institution. It is a collectively lived American *experience* and specific to our film and art culture for these reasons.

Film "sense of place," which so many of us cherish, is a particularly penetrating signpost (Frederic Jameson, Manny Farber, Yi-Fu Tuan). In films, the character is assumed to be shaped by their setting, and a transformation must happen as they transition from site to site for the narrative to be driven forward. In this case, one must understand that these sites are not random waypoints along the way. Each must give meaning and insight to character and story. The connection of character to space is overt.

Critics have amassed volumes of work on the American West in near-hagiographical terms, dissecting deep, scholarly theories on this specific setting focused on place and time. Some even go so far as to argue that the setting of the West itself is a character in specific films (1959's *Rio Bravo*, 2007's *3:10 to Yuma*, any film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's works). While it is present in almost every American film, there hasn't been intensive research on the symbolic meaning of the diner that has genuinely considered the questions of "what meaning can we infer from this space in its relation to this specific film?" and "does this setting say anything about American life and values in its relation to the period in which it was filmed?"

For much of Hollywood's storied history, marginalized groups and minorities haven't been heavily featured in the white-dominated space; therefore, there has always been less representation of said groups in the diner, not because dining in such a space is not a shared public tradition among those groups as well but because the industry simply did not focus on those characters and those stories. Those limitations have left a massive gap in this narrative that scholars have yet to fill. For example, few diner scenes portray trans characters although their lives and experiences have become more mainstream in the last decade thanks to the American public becoming more accepting of this group.

The same situation existed for Black Americans until the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which is one reason that I had to open Chapter Two with 1967's *In the Heat of the Night*. How then do we understand how this segment of the population interacts with this space? How do we know what the diner signifies them for them and for their lived experiences if we don't see these stories represented in film?

One recent example is Sean Baker's *Tangerine* (2015). The comedy-drama depicts a day in the life of two transexual sex workers in Los Angeles. Famously, Baker shot the entire film on three iPhone 5 smartphones due to a minimal budget – another direct sign that the major film studios were not interested in depicting these stories. While critical scenes were filmed in a donut shop versus the diner space (again, due to budget), the space – with its large window showcasing a busy Los Angeles intersection, booths in a compact space, and a series of various characters interacting in the environment – reads similar enough to a diner to gain a deeper meaning of the characters positioned against society and how this influences their motivations. The late Gary Hausladen and Paul Starrs, whose collective works influenced critical assessments of various cinematic landscapes ranging from the Western to film noir, argue that “settings transform character, and rarely is choice involved; film is a deterministic medium, which gives a movie maker rare and exotic power” (Hausladen and Starrs 46). These experiences remain lacking in our collective film language, and we need to transfer some of that power to ensure that all stories are being told.

This struggle exists to this day, but in a recent, hopeful move the American film industry has instituted policies to rectify this problem by stipulating that “applicant films will have to meet two of four categories that favor underrepresented ethnic and minority

groups, either by what they show on screen or through their production, advertising, marketing or distribution teams” (“New Academy Rules Require Minority Representation to be an Oscar Nominee”). If the aim of this work is to encourage more scholarly research into the significance of the diner in films to understand what the space represents, then the hope is that we have a broader and more inclusive selection of films to choose from.

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