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# People Want To Know Who We Are: Contestations Over National Identity Through Film

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PEOPLE WANT TO KNOW WHO WE ARE: CONTESTATIONS OVER NATIONAL  
IDENTITY THROUGH FILM

by

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
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"The past isn't dead. It isn't even past." William Faulkner

"A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots." Marcus Garvey

One reason we study our history is to learn about who and what we came from. A family tree looks to trace back lineage through time, to make connections and learn about our ancestors. History is in the same vein; we look to our forefathers and attempt to understand what they stood for. Each story we tell ourselves is crafted, each narrative handmade by the people who tell it. On the surface, *Remember the Titans* (2000) is about the Civil Rights Movement's goals and successes. Set in 1971, it stars Denzel Washington as Coach Herman Boone and his newly integrated high school football team. A deeper look reveals the film to be about an interpretation of the Civil War and how that weighs on our national identity. Although many film critics found the film to be over the top (one reviewer called it "washed in on the flood tide of a thousand violins"), they nonetheless accepted that if you have a heart, "you'll also find a lump in your throat and an overwhelming urge to cheer."<sup>1</sup> Film critic Roger Ebert notes, "It is more about football than race relations, and it wants us to leave the theater feeling not angry or motivated, but good." Moreover, "we cheer the closing touchdown as if it is a victory over racism."<sup>2</sup> *Remember the Titans* does a very particular kind of work with a backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement and a story of the civil war. The deployment of both leads to a story of reconciliation based in colorblind brotherhood, predicated on a memorializing of the

Civil War. Reconciliation and affective politics are closely intertwined in making an argument about how black and white men feel about one another. The fundamental question is one of racial national identity. We ask for stories about those who came before us in hopes that they tell us who we are. National identity and race are intertwined in the founding of this country. How do we align our understanding of the present with a vision of the past? How do we explain slavery, black codes, and Jim Crow in an era of racial tolerance? What story do we tell so that we can be proud of our history?

*Remember the Titans* is both a biographical sports drama and a contestation over the legacy of the Civil War, and to a lesser extent the Civil Rights Movement. What is at stake is our historical memory and racial ideologies. Released in 2000, the film is set in 1971. It follows the successful season of the T.C. Williams Titans football team, which has just been integrated. Herman Boone, played by Denzel Washington, coaches the newly integrated team while the former head coach, Bill Yoast, played by Will Patton, is demoted to defensive coordinator. Ryan Hurst and Wood Harris portray Gerry Bertier and Julius Campbell respectively, two respected players who lead the team on and off the field. The tagline of the film, “Before they could win, they had to become one” foreshadows the theme of reconciliation and reunion that precedes their successes. In section I of this paper I highlight the critical work that has been done in relation to the Civil War and Civil Rights Movement, both through history and through film. David Blight’s work, *Race and Reunion*, is most salient to the claims I am making about how *Remember the Titans* operates as a reconciliation narrative repurposed for race. In section II I lay down the framework for both the film and the paper. The film hinges on a scene at Gettysburg, and to fully understand we must look at Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” and

“Second Inaugural Address.” Section III follows the team’s private and public commitments to their racial reconciliation. Without these reaffirming gestures the team’s union is in danger of being fractured by both internal and external forces. Lastly, Section IV serves as a bookend to section II, in that the core of the pivotal speech is realized and the meaning of nation recognized.

## I

David Blight, the renowned Civil War scholar, offers two competing visions: reconciliation versus emancipation. His work *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* opens with the premise: “the forces of reconciliation” had “overwhelmed the emancipationist vision” (Blight 2). Reconciliation recognized the mutual sacrifices and valor of all the white individuals, stressed what the North and South had in common, suppressed an understanding of the causes of war, and abandoned attempts at racial reconciliation. Reconciliation “locked arms” with the “white supremacist vision... of terror and violence”, as the white soldiers of the North and South sought common ground, ground which excluded black Americans (Blight 2). This reading left behind the unsavory issues of Emancipation, Reconstruction, and race. The emancipationist vision is best described as seeing the “war as the rebirth of the republic in the name of racial equality” and Reconstruction as a “political and moral challenge to save the emancipationist” ideology (Blight 97, 106). As Republicans retreated after attempts at legal and political equality for former slaves, and the assassination of Lincoln, the white South’s narrative gained traction. This ideological contestation over the meaning of the Civil War, connected with the meaning of the Civil Rights Movement, is the *Remember the Titans* narrative.

Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall explains the pitfalls and consequences of containing the Civil Rights Movement in *The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past*. The movement is typically confined to the South and to non-economic objectives. Within this dominant narrative, the Civil Rights Movement can be “contained and appropriated” (Hall 1234). The goals of the Civil Rights Movement are reduced to black people’s assimilation and adherence to white norms and white institutions. In containing the narrative, we overlook “racial capitalism” and the fact that “...white supremacy entailed not only racial domination but also economic practices” (Hall 1243). Part of this containment is a continued fixation on interpersonal interactions and attitudes. What we lose when we focus on the interpersonal relationships and who sits with who in the cafeteria is that activists were “transforming institutions and building an equitable, democratic, multiracial, and multiethnic society” (Hall 1252). Hall gives us a robust picture of how neoconservatives posit themselves as the true inheritors of the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement. She writes how the “moribund” conservative movement based in large part on the “interiority of blacks... reinvented itself in the 1970s.” They embraced an ideal of “formal equality,” and touted “color blindness” as the ultimate goal of the Civil Rights Movement. Racism was reworked as “individual bigotry” located “in the distant past and primarily in the South.” Finally, in the “absence of overtly discriminatory laws... American institutions became basically fair” (Hall 1237). Remedies such as affirmative action were seen as going too far because they were “creating resentment among whites [and] subverting self reliance among blacks...” (Hall 1238). This connects back to the idea of seeing or recognizing race as bad, and a claim of colorblindness as the answer to racism. Hall pinpoints the end of de jure segregation as a

nail in the coffin for anti- racism. With everything “basically fair” common sense dictates that “formal equality” has been achieved. This sort of argument is intelligible because of the ideological victories stemming back to the Confederates.

The extent and significance of conservative narrative victories of the Civil Rights Movement is articulated by Charles Payne in *The Whole US is Sothern*. He writes:

“What the initial misreadings of Brown tell us is that national discourse about race had become thoroughly confused; the nature of racial oppression had been effectively mystified. A part of that mystification process was the reduction of the systemic character of white supremacy to something called ‘segregation’” (Payne 84).

The spotlight of conversation was “address the presumably all- important issue of how blacks and whites were to interact as individuals” (Payne 88). He explains this fixation on the interpersonal through *Brown v. Board of Education* and school integration. With “separate but equal” struck down, the rest of the battle was social equality, and the law cannot legislate feelings. *Remember the Titans* follows this outline and thus can be read as celebratory and post- racial. The film clearly condemns prejudice through a progress narrative, an evolution from hatred and ignorance to brotherly love. With segregation as the evil of racism, the players in the film surpass simple integration and become a family. Within this interpersonal framework the film can be celebrated as post racial in its theme of overcoming prejudice. With a revision of the Civil War as doing the work of racial reconciliation in *Remember the Titans*, this interpersonal coming together carries newfound significance. What we have is a Civil War brought black and white men together but since then they have drifted apart, with no one in particular to blame. Hatred

and prejudice from both sides makes integration difficult but as they eat lunch together and fraternize each other's merits become clear. The hailing of *Brown v. Board* reflects the magnitude of the interpersonal and reconciliation narrative; nothing can stop us if we can just come together and meet in the middle. Law does not make them brothers, history does. As Blight and Payne make clear, much of the language and common sense we operate under can be attributed to conservative articulations. The film is a testament to the ideological victories of conservatives despite historic victories of liberals.

Renee Romano and Leigh Raiford add another dimension to this project of memory and remembering in their contribution to *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*. They argue, "...remembering the movement...is an ongoing- and frequently contested- political project, as well as a historical one" (Raiford xvi). These acts of remembering recur in the film, in that we are remembering the Titans, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement. The threads of these three are interwoven within the narrative. We simultaneously celebrate the progress and condemn the racism. "Memory" is used "as a tool of nation-building and of fostering and fomenting hegemony through consensus" (Raiford xvii). In this work, Jennifer Fuller highlights the problem of the interpersonal framing of the Civil Rights Movement in "Debating the Present Through the Past." Like Hall, Fuller is concerned with "the belief that persistent racial problems such as discrimination and economic inequality are caused by personal attitudes" (Fuller 171). She argues that this fallacious belief "became 'common sense' in the nineties" and "was endorsed by the left as well as the right" (Fuller 171). Again, the interpersonal links to "racial reconciliation discourse" in that racism is located in attitudes and interactions (Fuller 173). Fuller, Hall, and Payne all recognize the erasure of

structural racism in the tale of racial reconciliation. Institutions and policies are reduced to how black and white people feel about each other, which makes for a picturesque progress narrative and tell us very little about white supremacy.

The last question is how this all plays out on the big screen. Mark Golub writes about a handful of films in “History Died for Our Sins: Guilt and Responsibility in Hollywood Redemption Histories.” What he deems “Hollywood redemption history” is a long history of movies centering on a white protagonist as an entry point into anti-racism (Golub 23). He writes, “In the 1990s, white guilt is relieved by hopeful images of white-black reconciliation” and the audience identifies with this guilt but is exonerated by the end of the film (Golub 29). Golub delves into the psychic needs of whiteness and argues, “What the identification accomplishes...is the overcoming of guilt through an act of imagination” (Golub 30). The affect that these types of films accomplish is often thanks to saccharine plots and symbolic gestures. The imaginative world that films create and bring us into is where the conversion of guilt to absolution occurs.

Golub is particularly interested in how films depict race relations, which ties into Blight’s concerns about emancipation versus reconciliation. Golub, in his discussion of the film *Glory*, finds “racial conflict is easily grafted onto a nationalist narrative, and the reconciliation of whites and blacks occurs symbolically by re-affirming a common nationalist bond (Golub 31). In the film this racial conflict is grafted onto a football team, which is a stand in for family and nation. Instead of a battalion against a common enemy it is a team against a common enemy. Victories in war and football become interchangeable for reconciliation within the nationalist bounds. *Remember the Titans* follows the template of reconciliation step by step in what Golub notes in *Glory*: “both

sides of the conflict must learn to talk to each other, both sides must learn to work together, both sides must make sacrifices, both sides must learn to trust one another” (Golub 31). Golub is critical of this tendency to view “resisting racism in one’s heart...the same as resisting racism in political acts” that occurs when excluding “the institutional or structural mechanisms of racial oppression” (Golub 32). As others have noted, the erasure of systemic and institutional oppression makes racism a matter of beliefs and attitudes, which can be swayed. Friendship and brotherhood became solutions for racism.

This is not a discussion of or intervention in the historical accuracy of the film. It should be noted that many of the people depicted have disputed certain scenes and portrayals.<sup>3</sup> Looking at *Remember the Titans* will tell us very little about 1971. Instead, I’m interested in what ideologies and narratives the film pushes in regards to the past, particularly in the stories we tell about the founding of our nation and national identity. The themes of the Civil Rights Movement are transformed into universal messages that transcend time. In fact, the Civil Rights Movement is reduced to scenes of school integration, a white mob epitomizing massive resistance, one off remarks about the KKK and Martin Luther King Jr., and lastly a black power poster. As Thomas Cripps puts it, movies tell us about “the culture of the time in which they were released rather than of the era they were about” (Cripps 155). What *Remember the Titans* attempts to offer is a meaning of our nation’s past. So in 2000, what are we telling ourselves about the past and what narrative form does the story take? For this particular film, it takes the form of an inspiring progress narrative loosely based on events that transpired. This is, as Robert Burgoyne notes in *Film Nation*, an “attempt to rearticulate the cultural narratives that

define the American nation” (Burgoyne 2). The film is grounded in remembering; it is a call to the past in order to form a team identity that works as a stand in for national identity.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s work, *Racial Formation Theory*, gives us a basic understanding of how race is constituted within hegemony in society. First, race is a socially constructed category to differentiate human bodies (Omi 54). According to Omi and Winant, racial projects involve “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (Omi 56) This process links the meanings people attach to race to the structural experiences of race, and it can happen on both the macro and micro levels. This sociological theory focuses on the connections between how race shapes and is shaped by structures. The meaning of race is rooted in context and history, and thus is something that is fluid. Racial categories are represented and given meaning through imagery, media, language, ideas, and everyday common sense. Additionally, the media we consume are racial projects. All of this happens within hegemony, or the power structure playing field where everything takes place. The dominant group wields their power through ideas, beliefs, explanations, and values that the rest of society accepts. This leads us to common sense, akin to the status quo, which is deployed in coping with everyday life. For the most part, common sense goes unquestioned and subliminal within people’s minds. It is something that shapes our everyday understandings without us having to consciously think about it. *Remember the Titans* is a racial project that seeks to explain the nature of race throughout multiple historical contexts but is ahistorical in part because it fails to account for the changing nature of race. It also falls short because the

film imagines a historical moment and structures itself around remembering as a trope. It attempts to paint a linear progression of our views on race without interrogating the fluidity of race as a social construct. It projects a year 2000 understanding of race, one of interracial brotherly love, into 1863 and 1971. The film fails to take a comprehensive look at how laws and policies structure race and how race is constituted through the specific time period.

Herman Boone, a black coach from North Carolina, is tasked with coaching the newly integrated T.C. Williams high school football team of Alexandria, Virginia in 1971. The former head coach, a white man named Bill Yoast, frequently clashes with Boone. Boone has to prove himself qualified in everything he does, as Yoast and others see his hiring as a suspect affirmative action decision. Tensions between the football players are high, and Boone's first attempts at uniting the team fall short. Gerry and Julius, the team captains, engage in multiple fights, both physical and verbal. After Boone gives a rousing speech at the Gettysburg battlefield the players start to see past their differences. Gerry and Julius become best friends, the team bonds, and Boone and Yoast come to respect each other as coaches and as people. Along the way Yoast gives up his chance at the hall of fame when the committee attempts to rig a game to have cause to fire Boone. Gerry is forced to cut his white friend from the team due to the latter's racism and refusal to block for the black quarterback. Together, they become the state champions after having a perfect season. In the end, they are brought together ten years later for Gerry's funeral, where they reflect on their amazing season and newfound friendships.

## II

The meaning of the Civil War is still contestable and the film builds its foundation on an articulation of the “true meaning” of the war. Boone’s speech about the Civil War on the Gettysburg battlefield is where sectional reconciliation is transformed into racial reconciliation. Up until this point, the players have self-segregated in the cafeteria. They are integrated in their dormitories and were tasked with learning information about the players of the other race, but only because Boone had mandated it. There are multiple physical and verbal altercations between the black and white players. After yet another fight during practice, Boone wakes all the players up at three in the morning. The entire team, even the coaches, runs in the rain and mud to a graveyard. At the graveyard, Boone speaks to the exhausted men, behind him the graveyard covered in mist.

“Anybody know what this place is? This is Gettysburg. This is where they fought the Battle of Gettysburg. Fifty thousand men died right here on this field, fightin' the same fight that we're still fightin' amongst ourselves today. This green field right here was painted red, bubblin' with the blood of young boys, smoke and hot lead pourin' right through their bodies. Listen to their souls, men: 'I killed my brother with malice in my heart. Hatred destroyed my family.' You listen. And you take a lesson from the dead. If we don't come together, right now, on this hallowed ground, we too will be destroyed - just like they were. I don't care if you like each other or not. But you will respect each other. And maybe - I don't know - maybe we'll learn to play this game like men.”

The scene at the Gettysburg cemetery, although less than five minutes long, is the underlying thread of the film. Boone’s speech gives us interesting material to work with, in regards to what is and is not included. There is no mention of the terms of the war- and

thus no indication what the “fight” was about and no references of the sides and goals of the combatants. The lack of historical context, of both the Civil War and the Battle of Gettysburg, allows for acquiescent viewers. We are likely to accept whatever meaning is mapped onto this graveyard since our collective memory offers no preconception or correction. This call to remember is paradoxically also a call to forget. He makes the claim that the team, as a microcosm for society, has lost its way and forgotten where we have come from. Boone gives a stirring and inspirational reminder of who “we” are and who died for “us.” The North and South are mapped onto black and white in this interpretation of the Civil War. So, instead of reconciliation between the white North and white South, as in Blight’s reading of the Civil War, we have a story of white men and black men coming together. Similarly, Boone uses the word “brother” in a way that transcends racial differences. He invokes brothers of the North and South that found themselves on opposing sides of the war. He reminds the players that families were torn apart, like their football family will be if they continue to fight over racial differences. To better understand the symbolism of this scene, we must turn to Abraham Lincoln and David Blight and the competing meanings of the Civil War.

Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” from 1863 recognizes the original acts of exclusion in the Declaration of Independence and offers America a chance of rebirth and redefinition in the blood of the Civil War. First, he offers a reminder of “the proposition that all men are created equal”- as opposed to the reality. The original proposal was not one that had come to fruition just yet. He leaves it to the living to continue the “unfinished work” of the dead, which can be understood as continuing the freedom and equality that the men in Blue and Gray fought for. The Civil War was a test and the

outcome found the “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” Boone positions the players as not having listened to the message of the dead, and of not fulfilling their “unfinished work.” He predicts, “We too will be destroyed - just like they were” if the players continue to refuse integrating. But what, for them, is being destroyed? What are the stakes of their union or disunion? They are a football team, not a militia. Are the stakes simply friendship or their town?

Lincoln’s “Second Inaugural Address” from 1865 adds another dimension to the Gettysburg scene. Sacrifice and redemption comes via “every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.” America’s sin of slavery is assuaged through the spilling of blood in war as compensation for every lash. Moreover, it is not just the spilling of blood, but the spillage of white men’s blood. Salient here is Golub’s argument that redemption is found through suffering. It is white sacrifice, white men laying down their lives for black men that is the absolution. In his address, the conflict is between the white North and white South, as slavery was not solely the sin of the South. Lincoln sought “to bind up the nation's wounds” in bringing the Union back together. In the film his message become a vehicle for reconciling a white nation to its black population. The cultural work of Boone’s speech allows modern audiences to lay claim to the legacy of the Civil War, to say since we are no longer segregated and we have overcome prejudice we must be doing the good work that men died for.

In light of the continual invocation of the Civil War, it is impossible to overlook the battle drums and American flag in scenes before and after the Gettysburg scene. When the black players and white players meet face to face for the first time, a light drumming is interspersed with the music. As the white players stand toe to toe with the

black players, the camera pans past a large American flag in the background. It is clear what two groups need reconciling. The men are lined up as if they are preparing to go to war, a clear parallel between football and combat. Both are sites of masculinity and physical prowess. In both, groups of men are united against a common enemy. Both are about “victory, defeat, struggle, and survival” as Boone describes it. To make the parallel even clearer, the father of a new player admits he chose the Titans because Coach Taber, the coach of a neighboring school “...won’t let blacks play on his team.” The father, a military colonel, explains, “The way I see it, if these boys can fight a war together, they can play football together.” The unmarked nature of “war” in his explanation allows the remark to be fluid. Any number of wars can be attached via the historical imagination, especially the Civil War. This pushes the idea further that it has always been black and white men fighting side by side, a sort of egalitarian rewriting of the past.

### III

After the pivotal scene at Gettysburg, the team engages in a series of reaffirming their union in both public and private. Their unification is put to the test repeatedly, and these “reunions” as I will call them serve as a reminder of their team strength and resilience. These scenes are reminiscent of Horace Greely’s calls to “clasp hands across the bloody chasm” as a part of his vision of white supremacist reconciliation (Blight 126). Greely’s calls to reconcile the white race over the bodies of black soldiers is here reappropriated as a “clasping of hands” between black and white men. The first important scene to note is the nighttime practice the day after the Gettysburg scene. The team is practicing a play and Gerry calls out Ray for not blocking properly. Earlier in the film, Julius accused Gerry, the team captain, of not holding his “white buddies” accountable on

the field. Gerry shows he is willing to put the team first, as opposed to putting men of his race first in an olive branch moment. Gerry then compliments Julius and engages him in friendly banter, which Julius reciprocates. The team looks on in admiration of the burgeoning friendship, hopeful of what the future for may hold for them if they are to reconcile. Some time later as the players are changing in the locker room, Blue, a black player, lobs a “yo mamma” joke aimed at Gerry. Gerry, unaware of the joking nature of the exchange, grows increasingly angry. Julius restrains him and responds with a joke about Blue’s “momma,” with a wide grin across his face. Julius’ response indicates to Gerry the genial nature of these jokes and he catches onto the opportunity for male bonding through exaggeration and insults. This segues directly into the team singing “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough.” The singing and bonding shows the playful nature of the team in light of their racial reconciliation. It is intriguing that these scenes occur in a locker room, a place of vulnerability and openness on many levels. Camp ends in harmony, fun, and growing camaraderie.

After leaving their training camp and starting school, the pressures of their town start to break the team apart. Scenes include the massive resistance to school integration, Gerry’s girlfriend refusing to shake Julius’ hand, and a fight in the hallways after a black player talks to a white high school girl. The “real world” proves to be a much bigger obstacle to their newfound reconciliation. After a divisive incident, Gerry comments, “They--they like to show off, and that's what they do.”

Julius: “Wait, wait, wait. 'They'?”

Gerry: “Yeah. What?”

Julius: “I heard you say 'they.'”

Gerry: “Yeah, they. Them. Them over there.”

An issue of semantics seems to set Julius off on Gerry. Julius understands the comment as an invocation of racism, in that “they”- meaning black people- like to “show off.”

This, compounded with some of the black players denied seating at a local restaurant, causes the black players to regroup and leave. Tensions are clearly running high and the jovial interactions they had at camp seem to be a thing of the past. They go on to win the second game of their season, but it is clear that they played with “no heart.” The players meet in the gym again, where Blue gives a rousing speech:

“Yeah, we came together in camp. Cool. But then we're right back here, and the world tells us that they don't want us to be together. We fall apart like we ain't a damn bit of nothing, man.”

This particular reunion is important, because it takes place where they first faced off. However, instead of being toe to toe, lined up white against black, they are integrated and in a huddle. They recognized a need to be stronger than ever, as their town still faces racial strife. Blue’s calls for unity hark back to Boone’s words of needing to “come together.” Blue sees that the team “fell apart” at the slightest resistance posed by friends and families. Louie, a white player, and Rev, a black player lead the team in singing a Bible verse about overcoming against all obstacles. For their next game they decide to warm up a “little different” than usual. They come out in a square formation while chanting and synchronized hand movements. Once they arrive on the field they begin doing synchronized dance moves while chanting “Everywhere we go (x2)/ People want to know (x2)/ Who we are (x2)/ So we tell them (x2)/ We are the Titans (x2)/ The mighty, mighty Titans (x2).” This is an important, public show of solidarity, a display of

their racial reconciliation whether the world likes it or not. Rhetorically the dialogue moves away from using the pronouns “them” and “us” to a united “we.” Their reconciliation is a process and not something that is simply achieved. They renew their commitment repeatedly, and interestingly this work is done via blackness. Dancing, singing Marvin Gaye or Diana Ross (the film is not clear on which version of “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough” it is covering), trading yo momma jokes, and call and response huddles are all coded through black players. Racial reconciliation partly comes through the leveraging of black culture and its status as “cool” and “hip.” This opens up a larger dialogue about the commodification of racial difference in regards to diversity and multiculturalism.<sup>4</sup>

#### IV

The scene in the hospital, with Gerry and Julius, shows the potential future of their racial reconciliation. After Gerry’s car accident during a celebration of another Titans win, the team visits him in the hospital. Gerry specifically requests to see Julius, and even Gerry’s mom has not seen him. As Julius approaches the room the nurse stops him, saying, “Only kin’s allowed in here.” Gerry responds, “Alice, are you blind? Don’t you see the family resemblance? That’s my brother.”

The nurse concedes, and what follows is Gerry’s emotional plea to Julius:

“I was afraid of you, Julius. I only saw what I was afraid of. And now I know I was only hating my brother. I’ll tell you what, though. Um, when all this is over... me and you are gonna move out to the same neighborhood together. OK? And, um... and we’ll get old, and we’ll get fat. And there ain’t gonna be all this black-white between us.”

There is effectively no more “black and white” between Gerry and Julius, as they now look at each other as brothers. The peak of racial reconciliation, according to the film, is achieving color-blindness. While their days of playing football together may be over, they still have bright futures ahead. The reach of their reconciliation means that they are brothers on and off the field. Gerry offers a promise for the future, one of living as neighbors and growing old together. What he offers is a proposal, a commitment to their long-term reconciliation that will take them into old age. Again, this magnification on feelings, and how Gerry and Julius feel about each other, overlooks structures of racism, which are bigger than individual subjects. What goes unnoticed, though, is issues of red lining, housing segregation, and other racist policies that effectively created and maintained geographical boundaries. The vision that Gerry offers is a dream based on transcending laws and policies that Hall, Payne and others point to.

During the final game, Yoast tells the team, “You've taught this city how to trust the soul of a man rather than the look of him.” This hails the achievement of color-blind interpersonal interactions, and obscuring all power dynamics and structures. This is the final condemnation of the Southern racism, which in this case is shown as hatred and misunderstanding by both whites and blacks. The film tells us we need to look past skin color and only focus on the qualities and characteristics of each other, and most importantly that perceiving race is the problem. The hatred arises when each side judges based on stereotypes and outdated misconceptions. After the final game, Yoast admits, “You were the right man for the job, coach!” to which Boone replies, “You're a Hall of Famer in my book.” They then raise the game ball in the air together, bridging the remnants the chasm between them. Suspicions of affirmative action are put to rest, as

Yoast recognizes Boone as the “right man for the job.” Yoast humbles himself and overcomes his earlier resentment of Boone, based on his thinking that Boone was not qualified. Boone, who knows that Yoast will not be inducted to the Hall of Fame, shows his respect and appreciation to all that Yoast has done. It is this redemption that enables the audience to feel a sense of achievement. The coaches have finally come together, and overcome their earlier distrust and resentment. The audience is left feeling like they have done worthwhile anti-racist work. They have gone on this tumultuous journey and have come to the conclusion of “trusting the soul of a man” as opposed to the “look of him.” We are invited to condemn racism through refusing to see race, because pointing out our differences is part of the problem. Instead, we unite along our commonalities, like a love of football, or music, or dancing.

Narratively, the film sets up racism in interpersonal and depoliticized terms. The white men and black men are equals. Visually the film does similar work, as shown in one of the opening scenes. The camera pans up and the audience sees a white mob versus a black mob, and the only thing that separates them is police and patrol cars. This works to visually assert a false equivalency: the problem is mutual difference, not domination and power, which is Payne’s argument. We overlook any thoughts of unequal housing, schooling, and access to other resources, and see men with good souls. As Payne shows, “One has to conceive of race relations in a way that does not include violence, exploitation, or the deprivation of effective citizenship for millions of people” (88). The fixation and continual deployment of the character foils limits us to seeing race as strictly interpersonal. This echoes back to the Gettysburg speech, and entrenches the idea of interpersonal racism as the main evil. Racism is nothing more than outmoded and

outdated attitudes. It is calling black men “coon,” “animals,” and “boy,” refusing to shake a black man’s hand, and throwing a brick through a black family’s house window. The audience easily and quickly identifies and then distance themselves from these blatant racist acts. There are no allusions to the broad based political and economic power that black activists fought for. Hall also writes, “...racism has been bound up with economic exploitation, [so] civil rights unionists sought to combine protection from discrimination with universalistic social welfare policies and individual rights with labor rights. The struggle was also for “workplace democracy, union wages, and fair and full employment, educational equity, and an enhanced safety net, including health care for all” (Hall 1246). These issues would implicate us all as guilty in the structures of power and inequality. Engaging with the multiple fronts on which the Civil Rights Movement was fought makes it difficult to contain and erase.

*Remember the Titans* is a film that sanitizes history and engages in the realm of the interpersonal and obscures broader political and economic goals. What is unique is that the film reaches into the historical depths of the Civil War in order to depict the racial reconciliation of the Civil Rights Movement. The film lays claim to the Civil War through Lincoln’s vision of the war as a rebirth of the nation. In this film, the Civil War was fought to reconcile the black population to the white population, and in doing so finally completed the promise of “all men are created equal.” The film claims since the Civil War we have strayed as a union, we have lost our way. We stopped listening to the message of the Civil War, and once that happened, the men who died at Gettysburg died in vain. The problem arose when white students did not want to play football with black students, nor did the black students want to play with the white students. But once they

were reminded of the bloody path that was paved for them, they came to their sense. What is at stake is clearly not just a game of football, nor a perfect football season. What the film asks us to consider is the extent of the success of the union. Lincoln pictured the Civil War as a chance of rebirth, a chance to live up to the promises made in the Declaration of Independence. Our national identity, one founded in freedom and liberty, is always in conflict with our history of slavery and racial oppression, not to mention gender. A utopian history would not have such continuous dissonance to account for. *Remember the Titans* attempts to solve this by reinterpreting the past. The Civil War becomes a story of racial reconciliation, where black and white men saw each other as brothers for the first time. In this scenario, white men died for black men's freedom and equality. The white sacrifice was enough to "bind the nation's wounds." The Civil Rights Movement becomes a vehicle to shore up that reconciliation and finally overcome the divisive race problem. Racism is reduced to the level of the interpersonal, to bad attitudes, all of which can be changed by appealing to people's hearts and minds. But clearly prejudice and segregation are symptoms of a much deeper and systemic problem. The film has to rewrite history in order to avoid the depths of racial injustice. Although feel good and inspiration the film tells us very little about our current conditions, because the past painted in *Remember the Titans* simply does not align with the present. The film asks us to engage with a past that is not ours; it is an alternate history that vindicates each and every failed promise of the United States of America.

Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Scott, A.O. "Film Review; How the Goal Line Came To Replace the Color Line." *New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 29 Sept. 2000. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.
- <sup>2</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Remember The Titans Movie Review (2000) | Roger Ebert." *All Content*. Ebert Digital LLC, 29 Sept. 2000. Web. 13 Dec. 2016.
- <sup>3</sup> Merron, Jeff. "Reel Life: 'Remember the Titans'" *ESPN*. ABC, 8 Aug. 2002. Web. 13 Dec. 2016.
- <sup>4</sup> I, unfortunately, do not have time to engage with this phenomenon of using blackness as social currency.

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