



RACIAL INJUSTICE ON SCREEN: A CRITICAL RACE THEORY ANALYSIS OF RESISTANCE IN AMERICAN SKIN

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ABSTRACT

This study examines racial injustice and forms of resistance represented in the film *American Skin* (2021). Using Critical Race Theory, a post-nationalist perspective, and Douglas Kellner's Popular Culture framework, the research addresses systemic racism within U.S. policing and legal institutions. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, key scenes, dialogues, and narrative strategies are analyzed to reveal representations of institutional racism, legal inequality, racial profiling, and media framing. The findings show that *American Skin* constructs a counter-narrative of resistance through counter-storytelling that amplifies marginalized Black voices and exposes structural oppression. Analysis of audience responses on Rotten Tomatoes indicates polarized reception, demonstrating how popular culture operates as a contested ideological space. Overall, the film functions as both media representation and cultural resistance, contributing to public discourse on racial justice

INTRODUCTION

Racial discrimination is a social issue that has long been embedded in the history

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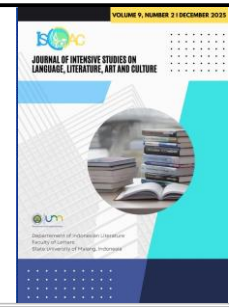
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of American society. Racial inequality, especially against African-Americans is evident in many aspects of life, including the legal and police systems. Cases such as the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor show that the violence experienced by black citizens by police officers does not occur by chance, but is part of a systemic pattern rooted in American social and legal structures. According to Costello in his journal he asserts that the criminal justice system in the United States systematically reinforces racial inequality through discriminatory policies and practices, which are a continuation of a long history of segregation and discrimination. In this context, media including film as a representation of popular culture has an important role as a means of reflecting and criticizing these social realities, so as to raise awareness and strengthen efforts to overcome systemic and sustainable racial injustice (Costello, 2011).

As a part of popular culture that has a global reach, the Hollywood film industry plays a central role in representing various social dynamics that occur in the United States. Public media, including films, can construct thoughts that influence the way people understand and respond to social issues (Rifshandya & Kalaloi, 2024). Movies not only function as entertainment, but also as a reflective medium that is able to voice social issues, including racial injustice experienced by the black community. Therefore, film works can be a means to criticize unequal social structures while building public awareness of realities that are often ignored. One of the films that straightforwardly displays this social criticism is *American Skin*, which in this film raises the social context that occurs in America especially regarding discrimination against black citizens.

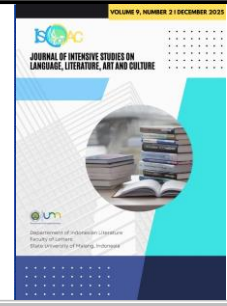
The movie *American Skin*, directed and acted by Nate Parker, tells the story of a Black father named Lincoln Jefferson who lost his son due to the brutal actions of a white police officer (Bjornson, 2021). When the legal system fails to provide justice, Jefferson takes extreme measures by taking the police station hostage and holding his own court to demand the truth. The film's narrative illustrates the feelings of frustration, trauma, and anger felt by the Black community when the justice system consistently fails to protect them. As discussed by Delgado and Stefancic (2017), the law is not neutral but often

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operates in ways that reflect and perpetuate racial hierarchies. *American Skin* can be read as a cinematic response to the historical and ongoing criminalization of Black bodies in America.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been widely applied in media studies to analyze racial representations and systemic oppression. For example, Erdem, Balaban, and Sungar (2024) employed CRT and deconstruction to examine the TV series *Them*, revealing how structural racism persists in everyday life through both explicit and symbolic narratives. Similarly, Cappiccie et al. (2012) used CRT to critique Disney films, uncovering subtle racial microaggressions and stereotypes in seemingly neutral children's media. These studies demonstrate CRT's versatility in exposing racial power dynamics across different media forms, from overtly traumatic depictions to covert ideological messaging.

Alternative theoretical approaches have also been used to study racial discrimination in film, though with different emphases. Siskarimah and Afiyati (2023) applied Genetic Structuralism to *Just Mercy*, analyzing racial oppression as a product of historical and social structures rather than through CRT's systemic lens. Meanwhile, Asrita et al. (2024) utilized semiotics and racism theory to dissect visual and textual representations of racism in *Till*, categorizing forms such as institutional and internalized racism. While these studies contribute valuable perspectives, they lack CRT's explicit focus on institutional power and ideological critique, leaving room for further research that centers these dimensions.

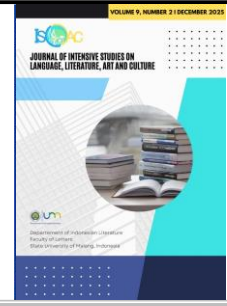
This study bridges that gap by applying CRT and a post-nationalist framework to *American Skin*, emphasizing its resistance narrative against systemic racism in the legal system. Unlike prior works that either analyze subtle racialization in children's films or historical discrimination through non-CRT lenses, this research highlights CRT's capacity to interrogate media as a site of ideological struggle. The film *American Skin* was chosen as the object of research because it offers a strong and emotional narrative about the injustices experienced by the black community, especially in terms of the relationship between black citizens and law enforcement officers. In the midst of many racism-themed

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films, *American Skin* stands out because it displays direct resistance to the legal system through the perspective of the main character who is also a victim of this injustice. Based on this, this research will discuss how the film *American Skin* represents racial injustice and forms of resistance to an unequal legal system. The main focus of this research is on how the film's narrative shapes discourses on race, power, and justice.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to explore in depth the representation of racial discrimination and systemic injustice in the film *American Skin*. The qualitative approach is selected because the research focus lies in interpreting meaning within a socio-cultural context using non-numerical data (Creswell, 2009). This approach provides an opportunity for researchers to explain and understand the cultural meanings and ideas in the movie in an organized way, without having to use numbers or statistics. Descriptive qualitative research helps researchers to examine research topics in more depth, with an emphasis on the precise and structured presentation of phenomena. Since the source of data in qualitative research can be documents such as films, this method does not require interviews or observations in the field to produce meaningful analysis (Sahir, 2022). The primary data source consists of the film's textual and visual elements such as dialogue, scenes, storylines, characterization that portray issues of racial inequality. The film is analyzed as a cultural text that conveys ideological messages about the relationship between race, law, and social resistance.

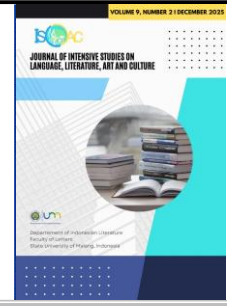
The post-nationalist American Studies approach is central to this research as it enables the analysis of a character like Cruella within a broader cultural and global context, moving beyond the constraints of a traditional nationalist framework (John Carlos Rowe, p.23, 2000). This paradigm shifts the focus from a singular conception of national identity toward a more inclusive and critical perspective that acknowledges a multiplicity of voices including those historically marginalized within dominant American narratives, such as ethnic minorities and women. By combining this approach in the

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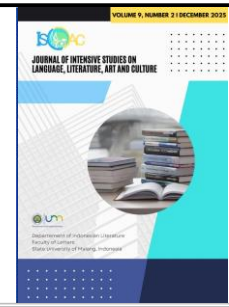
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method section, the qualitative descriptive method becomes more complete and based on the existing situation.

In addition, this study employs Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the primary conceptual framework to examine the representation of racial discrimination and systemic injustice in the film *American Skin*. Developed by scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado, CRT posits that racism is not an aberration or an isolated event but is deeply embedded within the legal system, social institutions, and cultural practices of American society (Stefancic, 2001). As Dowie-Chin, Cowley, and Worlds (2020) argue, applying a critical race lens to media analysis uncovers the ways racial narratives are constructed and contested in popular culture, thereby revealing the underlying systems of power operating within visual storytelling (Dowie-Chin et al., 2020). CRT in this context is not only used as an analytical tool, but also as a lens to understand how films can be a space to articulate resistance and social justice discourse. In a descriptive qualitative research design, CRT acts as a tool for analysis as well as a way of thinking that helps in understanding the data. CRT reduces the possibility of personal bias by providing a clear structure for finding patterns of racial power and injustice within institutions. In this way, the film *American Skin* is interpreted as a critique of a social problem that shows the weakness of the legal system in providing racial justice and elevates the voices of marginalized communities that resist the dominant legal power.

Moreover, this research also draws on Douglas Kellner's (2003) *Popular Culture and Cultural Studies* framework to deepen the analysis of how the film operates within broader social and political contexts. Kellner argues that popular culture functions as a site of ideological struggle where media texts reflect, reproduce, or contest dominant power structures, thereby shaping public consciousness and social debates. Integrating this framework into the methodological approach allows the present study to move beyond scene-based interpretation and examine how *American Skin* participates in, and contributes to, ongoing public discourses on race, policing, and systemic injustice. This theoretical lens is particularly useful for analysing the Broader Social Impact and Public



Reception of the film, as it explains why audiences from different sociopolitical positions respond divergently, some experiencing the film as an urgent call to racial justice, while others dismiss it as manipulative or anti-police. By situating the film within the cultural politics of representation, this underscores that the reception of *American Skin* is not merely a matter of personal taste, but a reflection of competing ideologies circulating in American society.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study based on scene analysis, dialogues, and audience reception of the film *American Skin* (2021). The findings focus on how racial injustice, systemic bias, and resistance are represented through narrative events, character interactions, and public responses to the film.

Legal System Failure Represent Racial Injustice in *American Skin*

a. Institutional Racism

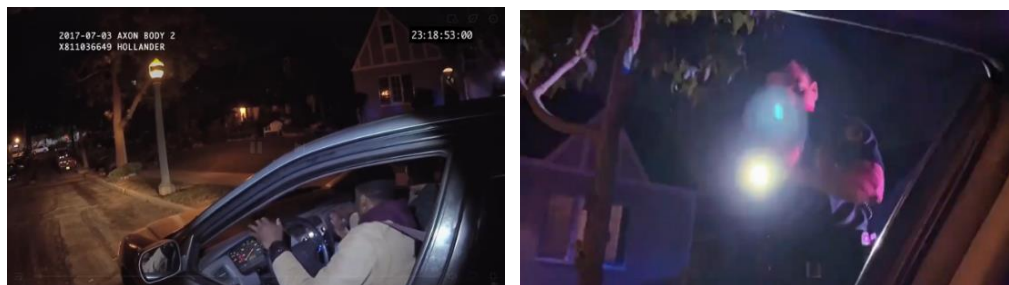
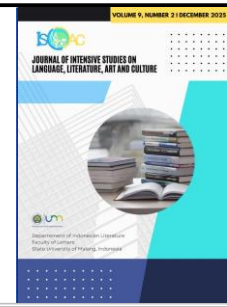


Figure 1. Jefferson stop by police because speeding

Dialog:

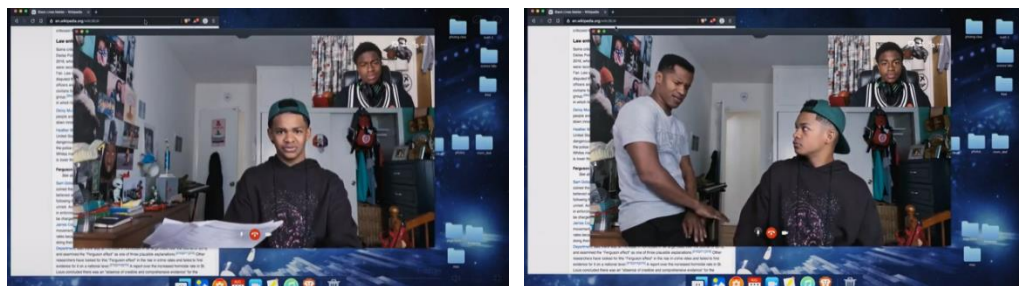
- Police Officer : “Put your hand on the dashbord right now. Drop the whatever you have in your hand!”
- KJ (Jefferson son) : “it’s my phone, it just a cellphone”.
- Police Officer : “Put the phone down!”
- Jefferson : “Officer please he’s just a kid, I can talk to him. Please he’s just a



kid”.

The scene show that Jefferson and KJ are stopped by the police, who force them to get out of the car without taking anything with them. In that situation, KJ continues to hold onto his cellphone. Despite Jefferson’s explanation that Kajani only held a cellphone, the officer’s immediate use of violence reflects racial bias embedded in policing systems. This pattern of disproportionate response reveals how Black bodies are constructed as inherent threats within institutional frameworks.

b. Color Blindness and Legal Inequality



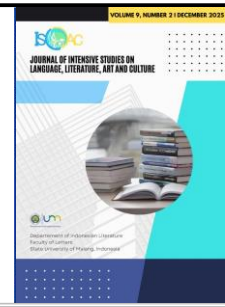
Figures 2. KJ Talking About Law That Will Protect Liberty with His Friend

Dialog:

KJ (Jefferson Son) : “The US Supreme Court. One has unalienable right to protect his life liberty or property from unlawful attack or harm. Therefore it’s not an offense to liberate”.

Jefferson : “When your dealing with police, you don’t think of laws you don’t think of right. You just do whatever they say. That’s way we live”.

In the second scene, Kajani questions his constitutional right to self-protection, while Jefferson replies that such rights are meaningless when facing the police. This exchange reveals how the law, though claiming neutrality, fails to protect Black citizens equally. Through this dialogue, American Skin critiques the color-blind ideology that masks systemic racial injustice within U.S. legal institutions.



c. Interest Convergence and Legal Failure



Figures 3. Grand Jury and Police Department Announce Final Decision About Police Shooting

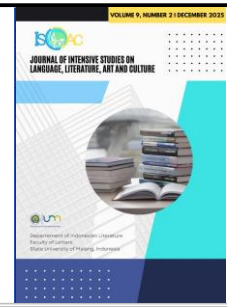
Dialog:

Demonstration : “What do we want? Justice! when do we want it? Now!”

The Grand Jury : “After their exhaustive review of the evidence the grand jury deliberated over two days making their final decision. They determined that no probable cause exist to file any charges against officer Randall. They returned a no true bill on each of the five claims”.

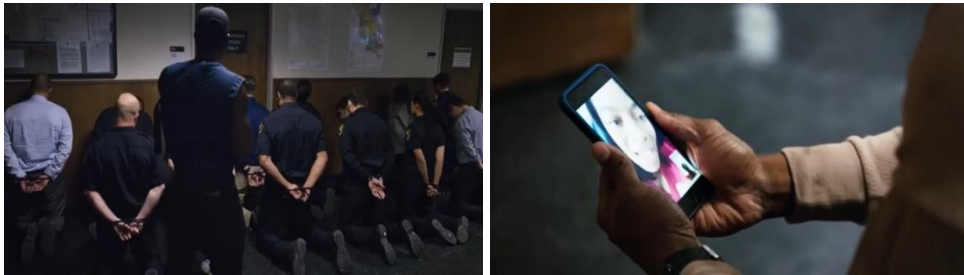
Police department : “Officer Randall will be returning to service effective immediately according to standart protocol in such cases”.

Scene three shows the grand jury's decision not to indict Officer Randall despite public protest. The announcement emphasizes procedural closure while ignoring public demands for justice. The officer’s immediate reinstatement illustrates how institutional processes prioritize stability and authority over accountability.



American Skin Narrative Shapes Discourses on Race, Power, and Justice.

a. Structural Determinism and Double Standards

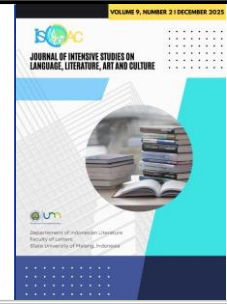


Figures 4. Jefferson Hostage Police and Being Called by His Wife

Dialog:

Jefferson : “ Why are we the only people in this country that are expected to do things without violence? You know what white people do when they’re cross? They kill people. They don’t march. They don’t do protest. They don’t ask for permission. They don’t ask no question. They react with force. I served, I know. I know how it goes for everybody except us. We’re the only people expected to take it on the cheek and to take it on other cheek and walk it off”.

In this scene, Jefferson overwhelmed by despair, holds several policemen hostage and questions why only Black people are expected to endure injustice peacefully while white individuals freely express anger or violence. His words reflect the structural trauma of racial oppression and expose how social institutions impose patience on the oppressed while tolerating aggression from the privileged. This dynamic exemplifies structural determinism, the design of legal and cultural systems to preserve existing racial hierarchies and limit transformative change.



b. Institutional Racism and Counter-Storytelling



Figures 5. The Prisoner Tell About Their Opinion While Jefferson doing his court to the officer

Dialog:

The prisoner : “Why is it so hard for you to empathize with black people”

Officer : “Because you guys make it hard”. “I’m just saying, you guys wanna cry race? But a lot of the things that black people have to deal with is based on the way black people act. Look at hip hop music, what is it? Drug the hoe, get the hoe, shoot the bitch do the.... and you think I want my daughter to hang around with people think that way? The things that separate us isn’t race. It’s class. It’s education.

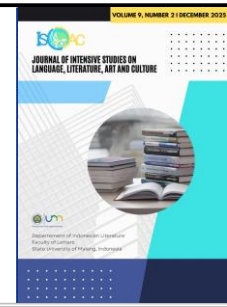
Jefferson : “You have kids?”

Officer : “ Yeah I got two girls”

Jefferson : “They go to public school?”

Officer : “No. I work my ass off so they don’t have to”

Jefferson : “Why? Why not public school? You know why? Because private school are built like college and public school where little brown and black kids are they’re built like prison. So, it’s not surprise when private school kids go to college and public school, like where I grew up they don’t



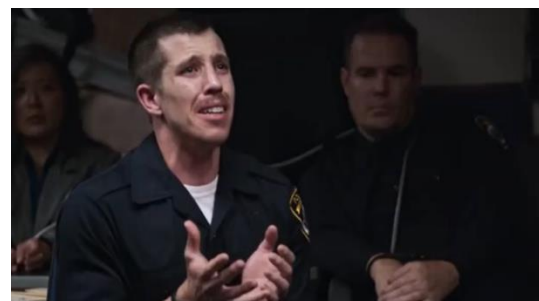
even graduate kids on their way to locking them up. And that is race problem, Officer. But that's America, right? We don't fix the system. Just put a premium on the way to get around it"

Officer : "and why couldn't he have just complied? None of you never comply"

Jefferson : "Cause we're fucking tired! We're tired of being stalked and intimidated and getting our asses kicked whenever you feel like it. That attitude is why that shit happens. If you all just took a second to think then maybe you'd avoid all that shit. If all of you took a second to think, maybe you wouldn't kill so many of us".

Scene five presents an argument between a prison inmate, Jefferson, and one of officer Randall's friends who is one of the police officers working there as well. The police officer blames black culture, including hip-hop music, as the main cause of discrimination. He claimed that all the incidents Jefferson experienced were not about race, but class and education. However Jefferson countered by pointing out that the education system itself was biased. He asserted that the education system there was not just failing, but was designed to trap them. What Jefferson said was an attitude at the root of the cultural racism and racial stereotyping that he and black citizens had experienced.

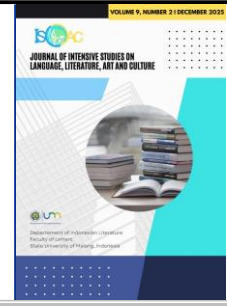
c. Racial Profiling and Systemic Bias



Figures 6. Jefferson argue about Reason why his son

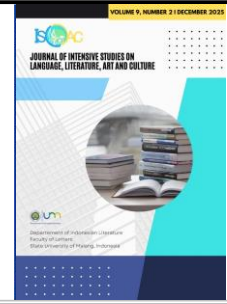
Dialog:

Officer Randall : "Why can't you just accept that responsibility, that you put your



- son in that situation by breaking the law and going over the posted speed limit?”
- Jefferson : “You pulled us over cause we were speeding, right?”
- Officer Randall : “I don’t know”
- Jefferson : “We were crossing Virginia at Lombardi, residential area 25 miles per-hour posted. We were not speeding up, were we Officer Randall? we were slowing down. Just long enough for you to see two black men driving through that prestigious neighborhood”.
- Officer Randall : “Race has nothing to do with it”
- Jefferson : “Officer Randall! Are you standing by your story that we were speeding?”
- Officer Randall : “What do you expect? You were driving in that neighborhood in that crappy car, which is suspicious. You went there after midnight. Who’s driving around in that neighborhood after midnight? People are coming home, but most of the people driving around in that situation are bad people, looking to do bad things”.
- Jefferson : “So, you profiled us?”
- Officer Randall : “You are damn right, I did”.
- Jefferson : “So, if the officer didn’t profile that man and his son... that man and his son make it home at night and Kajani Jefferson might be alive today”.

In the sixth scene, Jefferson interrogates Officer Randall over the shooting of his son. Randall is initially evasive and blames Jefferson for breaking the speed limit, but eventually admits to not knowing the speed of the car at the time. Jefferson proves that they were not going fast and that the accusation was just the result of racial profiling. Randall later admitted that he suspected them of being black and driving an old car in an elite neighborhood at night.



d. Voice of Color and Critical Patriotism

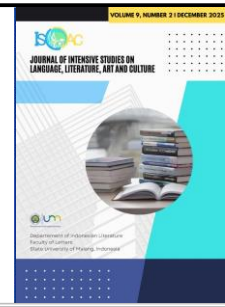


Figures 7. Jordi gives argument that tell race is problem why KJ being killed

Dialog:

Jordi : “Can I say without a shadow of a doubt that race was the driving force around Kajani Jefferson being Killed? I look around this precinct and I see stickers and banners that say ‘Back the blue’ and ‘Support our police’. Things left over from backlash of Kajani getting killed. But I haven’t seen anything acknowledging that a kid lost his life. This history of pain and poverty and subjugation be expected to be a patriot. Proud to be an American only to be shot down because of their American skin? and how could anyone patriotic ignore these killings and yet pride themselves on being a part of a great nation? Great nations aren’t great, because they oppress but because they liberate, not because they kill but because they heal. Police and soldier should be the gatekeepers of that truth and should protect it with their lives. I don’t wanna hear another story of a black kid killed by a cop”.

In the seventh scene, Jordin the student who recorded the entire Jefferson incident, is asked to express his opinion and vote on whether Officer Randall should be punished. Jordin rejected



the “for the good of the country” narrative and called for a reinterpretation of justice and nationhood from a black perspective. Jordin not only conveys facts, but also rejects silence and false neutrality, calling for a reconstruction of the meaning of justice and nationhood.

e. Media Framing and Revisionist History



Figures 8. Jefferson being shoot imediately after he realised policer

Dialog:

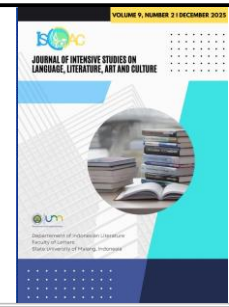
Jordin : “ So all of this was to make the cops see?”

Jefferson : “No. Just to make the world see”.

Officer Randall : “You know for the first time in my life, i feel like... I’m the one questioning everything. If it’s okay i’d like to walk out with you. Not as an enemy. I’m walking out with Lincoln Jefferson. He’s unarmed, I repeat he’s unarmed”.

News Presenter : “Authorities have confirmed that ex-marine Lincoln Jefferson was killed just minutes ago when he attempted to exit the downtown police department while holding several hostages. Unconfirmed reports on social media that Lincoln Jefferson may have had contact with islamic extremists. Information that many say further suggests a suicide mission. He was clearly suffering from some sort of mental illness.”

The final scene in this film depicts the media’s brief yet distorted report of Jefferson’s



death. The news frames him as a potential extremist with mental illness, omitting any mention of his son's death or his pursuit of justice. This selective framing exemplifies how racism shapes dominant narratives, aligning with CRT concepts of revisionist history and interest convergence, which reveal how media discourse protects institutional interests while silencing Black struggles.

Broader Social Impact and Public Reception of American Skin



Owen Gleiberman
Variety
★ TOP CRITIC



It's a good movie: tense, bold, angry, empathetic, provocative, observant, morally engaged. And also, to be honest, a trifle gimmicky. Yet that's tied to its power as a racially charged, socially urgent gut-punch drama.



Kimberly L



Apr 18, 2021

The movie brings out the reality of what we are facing today. The wrong of some actions and conditions and issues that many American Citizens face daily. This is a MUST SEE movie.

Audience responses from Rotten Tomatoes show polarized interpretations of the film. Positive reviewers describe the film as emotionally powerful and reflective of real social conditions. One viewer stated, "This film shows the reality we face today."



Nicolas Rapold
New York Times
★ TOP CRITIC



Instead of lending immediacy, the padded-out documentary conceit only spotlights the stiltedness, and Parker falls short of building credible drama out of urgent issues.

[Full Review](#) | Jan 14, 2021

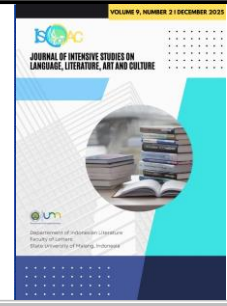


Tim Grierson
Screen International
★ TOP CRITIC



Infuriatingly manipulative and insufferably preachy, "American Skin" examines the cultural issues tearing apart our nation and reduces them to cheap theatrics.

Conversely, critics such as Nicolas Rapold and Tim Grierson describe the film as manipulative or preachy. These contrasting responses demonstrate that American Skin



generates contested meanings among viewers and critics.

Discussion

The findings presented above demonstrate that racial injustice in *American Skin* is not depicted as an isolated event, but as a recurring and systemic condition embedded in legal, social, and cultural institutions. This discussion examines how these representations align with the core principles of Critical Race Theory and how the film functions as a form of cultural resistance within contemporary American popular culture.

Institutional Racism, Legal Inequality, and Interest Convergence

a. Institutional Racism

The scene where Jefferson and his son Kajani are stopped for speeding illustrates institutional racism within law enforcement. CRT sees that the officers' actions cannot be separated from their training, policies, and entrenched institutional ways of thinking. Institutional racism focuses on policies and practices that have unequal consequences for minorities (Putri & Saleh, 2022). As Crenshaw (1989) and Delgado & Stefancic (2017) explain, systemic bias in law enforcement dehumanizes Black individuals by treating them as inherent threats. The officer's quick resort to violence illustrates how legal institutions sustain racial hierarchies under the guise of public safety.

Finally, the power dynamics exemplify CRT's examination of legal systems as instruments of racial control. The officer's unchallenged authority mirrors what (Alexander, 2010) describes as the racialized nature of police governance. This micro-interaction reflects broader institutional patterns that normalize police violence against Black communities while avoiding accountability (Harris, 1994). The dialogue thus reveals how CRT exposes systemic racism operating through everyday encounters, highlighting the urgent need for structural reform in policing and racial justice systems.

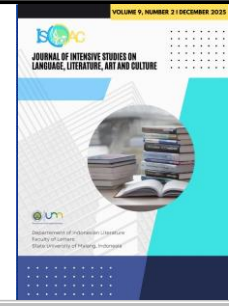
b. Legal Inequality

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CRT suggests that traditional legal doctrines often ignore the historical context of racism and structural inequalities experienced by black communities (Tran & Paterson, 2015). The experiences of figures like Jefferson confirm that the law is not always neutral, but rather a tool that can be used for good or evil depending on who is in power. Under white domination, the law has often been a means of oppression against African Americans (Chin, 2019). In the second scene when Jefferson said that he was only trying to survive, not fight for rights, it reflects racial realism in CRT-the view that racism is a permanent part of American society and true change can only occur if this reality is recognized, not hidden behind the slogan “all citizens are equal before the law.”

Furthermore, the dialogue between KJ and Jefferson demonstrates CRT's critique of color-blind legal ideology. KJ cites the US Supreme Court's principle of “the right to protect life, liberty, and property,” which reflects a belief in the neutrality of the law. However, CRT argued that the seemingly neutral law was laden with racial biases that disadvantaged black citizens. Jefferson's response-“when dealing with the police, you don't think about the law, you just obey” emphasizes legal inequality and the struggle for survival under systemic racism. In contrast to KJ's idealistic view, Jefferson illustrates the reality that for black people, compliance is often a survival strategy, not a form of rights enforcement.

Ultimately, this conversation confirms CRT's central view that rights do not automatically apply in a racially stratified society. KJ represents the myth of color-blind justice, while Jefferson's experience reveals structural violence in the legal system. The dialogue criticizes the illusion of legal neutrality and shows that racial hierarchies persist despite the principle of equality. According to CRT, true justice demands the elimination of systemic racism that still denies black people their rights.

c. Interest Convergence

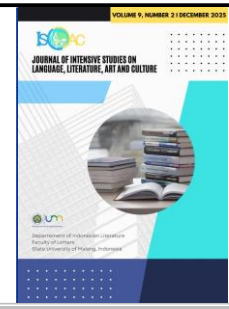
The scene depicts the Grand Jury's unfair decision regarding the punishment for the police officer, showing that the law favors white privilege, even in a narrative that should highlight discrimination against African Americans (BOND, 2010). Public protests were

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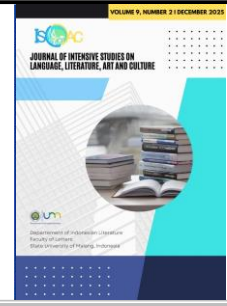


ignored, and the decision reflects the concept of interest convergence, where police acquittals protect institutions rather than victims. The liberal legal system again failed to respond to black injustice despite clear evidence of violence. In the CRT's view, racial progress only happens when it aligns with the interests of the white majority; in this context, preserving the image and power of the police takes precedence over upholding justice for black victims.

The protesters' demand for immediate justice ("What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!") starkly contrasts with the grand jury's decision not to indict the officer, exemplifying CRT's principle of interest convergence. This concept argues that racial progress occurs only when it aligns with dominant power structures' interests. Here, the legal system's refusal to prosecute ("no probable cause... no true bill") demonstrates how institutional mechanisms protect law enforcement rather than marginalized communities. The officer's immediate reinstatement ("returning to service effective immediately") further confirms that systemic interests maintaining police authority and avoiding institutional accountability override demands for racial justice, revealing the conditional nature of legal reforms under white supremacy.

The grand jury's decision reflects CRT's critique of legal failure, where procedural justice masks systemic injustice. The claim of a "thorough review of evidence" follows a pattern of impunity in police violence against black people. CRT asserts that such decisions are not neutral, but reinforce racial hierarchies. The term "due process" is used to disguise the law's function as a tool of racial control that prioritizes institutional stability over justice for marginalized groups.

Ultimately, this dialogue confirms CRT's view that racial inequality is maintained through a seemingly neutral system. The protesters' ignored demands demonstrate the limitations of the law within racist structures, while the quick reinstatement of police positions illustrates the normalization of injustice by institutions. CRT reveals the paradox of racial justice in the liberal legal system: while claiming neutrality, the result protects dominant power and demands forms of resistance outside formal legal channels. While the



legal system is shown to reproduce racial inequality through institutional mechanisms, the film also shifts its focus toward forms of resistance and counter-narratives that emerge from marginalized voices confronting these structures.

Structural Determinism, Counter-Storytelling, and Racial Profiling

a. Structural Determinism

In this scene Jefferson's explicit comparison between the expectation for blacks to be peaceful and the tolerance of violence from whites shows how the system sets unequal standards of behaviour. This is what CRT calls double consciousness, where black people have to constantly navigate two worlds where they have to be citizens, but also have to be people who are always under surveillance and suspicion. The film presents a moral and social dilemma that reflects the failure of the system to provide a space for true justice.

In addition, Jefferson's statement highlights CRT's central concept of structural determinism that legal and social systems are designed to maintain racial hierarchies. He compared the demands placed on black people to the freedoms afforded to white people, revealing how systemic racism regulates permissible forms of resistance. Black communities are expected to passively accept oppression and seek justice through peaceful means such as protests, whereas white citizens are free to react even violently without social censure.

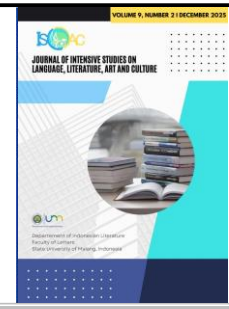
This disparity underscores the double standard in racialized justice, a key CRT critique. Jefferson's reference to his military service ("I served, I know") emphasizes the hypocrisy in how violence is legitimized for whites but criminalized for Blacks. Historical and contemporary examples from lynch mobs to police brutality demonstrate that white violence is often framed as self-defense or patriotism. Meanwhile, Black resistance, even when peaceful, is met with state repression, as seen in the violent crackdowns on civil rights and BLM movements. These unequal standards reveal how the law operates as a tool of

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racial control rather than impartial justice.

Jefferson's frustration also challenges the myth of racial progress through nonviolence, a narrative imposed on Black communities while whites face no comparable moral burden. His words align with CRT's rejection of liberal incrementalism, which assumes oppressive systems can be reformed from within. Instead, Jefferson's argument suggests that true justice requires dismantling structures that normalize white violence while suppressing Black defiance. This perspective reinforces CRT's emphasis on systemic change over appeals to a rigged system.

Ultimately, Jefferson's monologue serves as a radical indictment of America's racial order, illustrating CRT's central arguments. Structural determinism ensures that Black resistance remains constrained, while double standards in justice perpetuate white dominance. His words demand recognition of these systemic inequities and call for transformative, not performative, change. Through a CRT lens, this dialogue exposes not just individual prejudice but the foundational racism embedded in law, culture, and power.

b. Counter- Storytelling

The dialogue in scene 5 shows how the prisoners argue with the police officer, ultimately revealing the fact that the one of police officer statements starkly illustrates institutional racism, a central tenet of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which examines how systemic policies perpetuate racial hierarchies. The officer's assertion that racial disparities stem from "class and education" rather than race reflects colorblind ideology, a discursive strategy that obscures structural inequities. Jefferson directly counters this by highlighting how underfunded public schools in Black communities are designed like prisons, reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline, a systemic issue CRT scholars have extensively critiqued. The officer's ability to opt out of this system by sending his children to private schools underscores CRT's argument that racial privilege operates through institutional access, not just individual bias.

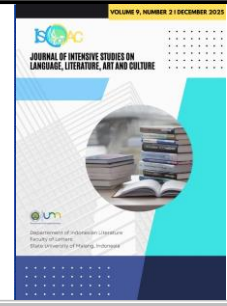
The officer's reliance on hip-hop stereotypes ("Drug the hoe, shoot the bitch")

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exemplifies cultural racism, where dominant groups use distorted representations of Black culture to justify discrimination. CRT challenges such narratives by exposing how media and societal discourse reinforce racialized criminalization. The officer's framing ("you guys make it hard") employs victim-blaming, a rhetorical tactic that shifts responsibility for oppression onto marginalized groups while ignoring historical and systemic violence. This aligns with CRT's critique of how dominant narratives pathologize Black resistance while legitimizing state violence under the guise of maintaining order.

Jefferson's response ("We're tired!") functions as counter-storytelling, a CRT methodology that centers marginalized voices to disrupt dominant narratives. His frustration "None of you never comply" exposes the presumption of Black criminality, a stereotype that rationalizes excessive policing. By contrasting the officer's individualistic meritocracy ("I work my ass off") with systemic barriers (e.g., prison-like schools), Jefferson dismantles the myth of equal opportunity, a key CRT intervention. His lived experience challenges the officer's detached perspective, illustrating how CRT prioritizes subjugated knowledge. The truths derived from racialized lived experiences over abstract, dominant narratives.

Bell argues in his book *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* that racism is not simply a moral deviation or an individual problem, but a permanent and embedded aspect of the social and legal fabric of American life. This can be evidenced in the scene where the dialogue shows Jefferson exposing the disparity in the education system between white and black children as evidence of the institutional racism embedded in the education system (Bell, 1992). Jefferson then exposes the disparity in the education system between white and black children as evidence of the institutional racism embedded in the education system. Jefferson's description of public schools being 'built like prisons' is a form of counter-storytelling, an important strategy in CRT that presents alternative narratives from those who directly experience structural injustice and shows how the system limits the future of black children from the start.

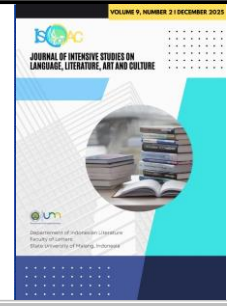
Finally, the officer's demand for compliance ("Why couldn't he have just complied?")

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reveals the legal system's racial double standards, where Black obedience is expected yet rarely ensures safety. CRT scholars like Derrick Bell (1992) argue that even adherence to the law does not protect Black individuals from state violence . Jefferson's exhaustion ("We're tired of being stalked") reflects racial fatigue, a CRT concept describing the psychological toll of systemic oppression. This exchange encapsulates CRT's core argument: racism is not merely interpersonal but structural, embedded in institutions that normalize racial inequity while silencing dissent (Seputri et al., 2022). The dialogue thus serves as a microcosm of America's racial hierarchy, analyzed through CRT's lens of systemic critique and counter-narrative resistance.

c. Racial Profiling

In the scene where Officer Randall admits that he suspects Jefferson and his son because they are black, it shows that such negative labels arise from common patterns that lead to generalizations about individuals based on their groups. These labels are formed through the influence of social environments such as family, school, media and society, which then trigger discrimination when the prejudice is translated into action (Ridwan & Aslinda, 2022).

This dialogue CRT central argument about racial profiling and systemic bias in law enforcement. Randall's initial denial ("It's not about race") to his admission ("Yes, I did") shows how racist policing operates behind claims of neutrality. His reasoning-that Jefferson's old car in an elite neighborhood looked suspicious-demonstrates the intersection of race and class bias that criminalizes black identity. CRT asserts that these practices are structural, not isolated incidents, as black citizens are often targeted due to the association of race with criminality. Randall's explanatory shift highlights how institutions both deny and enact racial bias, reinforcing systemic oppression in the name of objectivity.

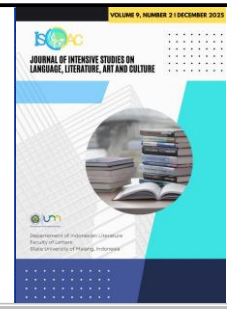
The dialogue highlights CRT's focus on the deadly impact of racist policing practices. Jefferson's statement that his son might still be alive if not for profiling emphasizes how

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routine interactions with the police often end fatally for black citizens. CRT scholars argue that cases like this are not anomalies, but rather consequences of a legal system built on racial hierarchy. Randall's assumption that black men who drive at night are "looking for trouble" reflects stereotypes that position black people as a threat. This is in line with CRT's critique of legal and media narratives that construct black criminality, thus legitimizing violence and excessive surveillance of marginalized groups.

Jefferson's resistance acts as counter-storytelling that exposes the contradictions in Officer Randall's reasoning. His forced admission of profiling confirms CRT's claim that the state apparatus operates through racial logic rather than objectivity. By revealing that suspicion of 'Black bodies' is institutionalized, the scene demonstrates that racial profiling is not an anomaly but a systemic mechanism that legitimizes preventive violence against minorities.

Media Framing, Revisionist History, and Voice of Color

a. Media Framing

The selective framing presented in the final scene of *American Skin* demonstrates how racism operates through dominant media discourse, confirming Critical Race Theory's assertion that media institutions function as ideological apparatuses rather than neutral conveyors of information. CRT emphasizes that dominant narratives especially those produced and circulated by institutional actors such as mainstream news media are deeply embedded within structures of power that privilege state authority and social order over the lived realities of marginalized communities. In this context, media framing becomes a mechanism through which racial hierarchies are reproduced discursively.

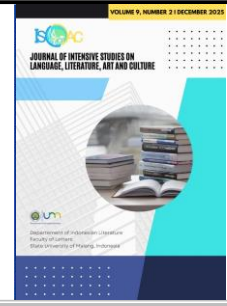
In the scene, the news report systematically redirects attention away from the structural injustice experienced by Jefferson as a Black father whose son was killed by police violence. Instead of foregrounding the failure of the legal system, racial profiling, or the broader historical pattern of police brutality against Black communities, the media reframes Jefferson's final act as a security threat. This discursive shift exemplifies what CRT

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scholars identify as interest convergence, wherein narratives that might otherwise challenge racial power structures are reformulated to align with institutional interests here, the preservation of police legitimacy and national stability.

By portraying Jefferson as a dangerous individual rather than as a subject shaped by systemic injustice, the media narrative converges with state interests by neutralizing potential public critique. The emphasis on public safety, extremism, and disorder displaces structural questions about racialized state violence and transforms a political act of resistance into a matter of criminal pathology. Consequently, media framing functions not merely as representation but as ideological protection, shielding dominant institutions from accountability while reaffirming their authority. Moreover, the erasure of Jefferson's stated intentions "to make the world see" illustrates how media framing systematically strips Black resistance of its political meaning. Rather than interpreting his actions as an act of protest against systemic injustice, the media narrative reduces them to irrational aggression. In doing so, the media reinforces a racial hierarchy in which Black dissent is pathologized and delegitimized, while state violence is normalized as a rational response to disorder.

b. Revisionist History

The scene exemplifies revisionist history, a central concept in Critical Race Theory (CRT) that explains how dominant institutions actively rewrite events in order to preserve racial power structures. Within CRT, revisionist history operates as an ongoing ideological process through which "official" narratives are produced, privileging institutional legitimacy while marginalizing structural critiques. In *American Skin*, this process becomes visible immediately after Jefferson's death, demonstrating that historical meaning is not neutral but constructed through institutional discourse, particularly media representation.

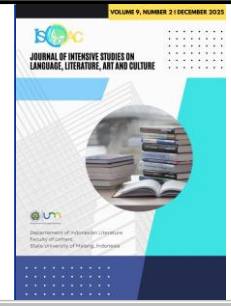
Jefferson's actions throughout the film function as counter-storytelling, a methodological cornerstone of CRT that centers marginalized voices to challenge dominant accounts of racial violence. By publicly confronting law enforcement, Jefferson disrupts the

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prevailing narrative that frames police killings of Black individuals as isolated or justified incidents. His stated aim “to make the world see” reflects an epistemic intervention, seeking to expose the structural conditions racial profiling, legal failure, and institutional impunity that shape Black vulnerability to state violence.

However, the media’s immediate reframing of Jefferson’s death enacts a process of historical revision that erases the political and moral dimensions of his resistance. Through references to a “suicide mission,” “hostage-taking,” and alleged extremist affiliations, the media reconstructs the event as an instance of individual deviance rather than systemic injustice. This narrative strategy mirrors historical practices in which Black political resistance has been discredited through tropes of criminality and extremism, ensuring that challenges to white supremacy are remembered as threats to social order rather than demands for justice.

The selective omission of Officer Randall’s moment of moral reckoning further underscores the revisionist function of the media narrative. By eliminating narrative complexity and foregrounding institutional authority, the media produces an official version of events that restores moral certainty and legitimizes state violence. In doing so, revisionist history operates as a form of ideological control that delegitimizes Black resistance, silences counter-stories, and stabilizes racial hierarchies by transforming structural injustice into individual pathology.

c. Voice of Color

Through Jordi’s testimony, the film articulates knowledge rooted in lived racial experience, affirming Critical Race Theory’s (CRT) claim that marginalized groups possess distinct insight into systemic oppression. Jordi’s perspective does not function as personal sentiment but as counter-knowledge that exposes the moral contradictions of institutional responses to police violence, particularly the normalization of Black death within state discourse.

Simultaneously, the scene advances critical patriotism by rejecting uncritical

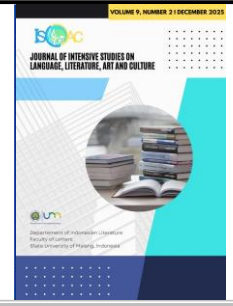
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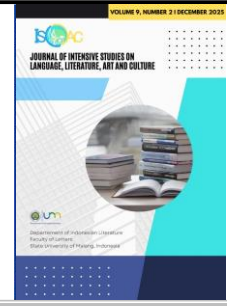


allegiance to state institutions and redefining national loyalty as ethical accountability rather than institutional obedience. Jordi's assertion that "great nations liberate, not oppress" destabilizes dominant nationalist rhetoric that equates patriotism with support for policing structures. Within CRT, this form of patriotism resists ideological control by exposing how appeals to unity and security are often mobilized to silence racial critique and protect institutional authority.

Although the film momentarily depicts Officer Randall's emerging empathy as a sign of moral awakening, this transformation remains structurally inconsequential. CRT emphasizes that racism is embedded in institutions rather than individual attitudes; therefore, personal remorse does not disrupt systemic racial power. The rapid erasure of Randall's recognition through official media discourse demonstrates how institutional narratives override individual conscience, ensuring the continuity of racial injustice despite moments of personal doubt.

The media's narrative closure operates as a form of ideological containment, reframing Jefferson's death as the result of personal instability rather than structural violence. By emphasizing allegations of extremism, mental illness, and security threat, the media depoliticizes Jefferson's resistance and redirects attention away from racialized policing and legal failure. This process exemplifies CRT's critique of how dominant narratives transform systemic oppression into individualized pathology to preserve institutional legitimacy.

Ultimately, this scene illustrates how ideological control functions through claims of neutrality and objectivity. By presenting its account as factual and security-oriented, the media conceals its role in reproducing racial hierarchies and legitimizing state violence. CRT argues that such neutrality is itself a racialized discourse that masks power relations. Through selective framing and omission, the media not only justifies Jefferson's death but also forecloses structural critique, demonstrating that racism is sustained not only through coercive force but through the control of meaning.



Popular Culture and Audience Reception of American Skin

Drawing on Douglas Kellner (2003) Popular Culture and Cultural Studies framework, the diverse audience responses to American Skin reveal how popular cultural texts function not merely as entertainment but as key ideological battlegrounds. Kellner argues that popular culture is deeply embedded within the political sphere because cultural texts encode dominant and oppositional meanings that audiences actively negotiate. The reviews collected from Rotten Tomatoes illustrate this dynamic clearly: viewers' interpretations are shaped by their social positions, lived experiences, and ideological orientations. These responses demonstrate that American Skin operates as a politically charged cultural artifact, one that cannot be divorced from the broader racial tensions permeating U.S. society.

According to Kellner (2003), popular culture produces meaning within a matrix of power relations, and audiences' emotional engagement is a key indicator of how cultural texts circulate affectively within society. Positive audience reviews that describe profound emotional resonance particularly among viewers who have personally experienced racial injustice, demonstrate the film's success in mobilizing effect as a form of political pedagogy. For Kellner, media texts are pedagogical instruments that teach audiences how to interpret social crises; thus, the empathy evoked toward Jefferson as a grieving father becomes a mode through which the film exposes the moral urgency of systemic racism. This aligns with Kellner's assertion that cultural artifacts can stimulate critical reflection when they foreground marginalized experiences.

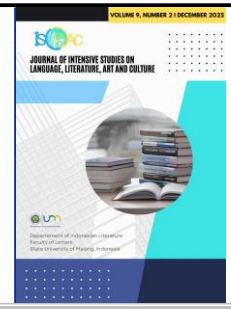
The praise from film critic Owen Gleiberman further illustrates what Kellner (2003) identifies as the emergence of counter-hegemonic readings within popular culture. Gleiberman's depiction of the film as morally engaged and socially urgent underscores how American Skin challenges dominant narratives that sanitize police power. In Kellner's view, aesthetic choices, such as heightened emotionality or dramatic excess can function as rhetorical strategies that disrupt hegemonic frameworks. Thus, elements that critics find "stylistically excessive" may deliberately serve to intensify the film's ideological

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message, compelling audiences to confront the gravity of racialized violence. Such responses suggest that the film mobilizes cultural critique in ways consistent with Popular Culture & Cultural Studies principles.

Beyond criticism from experts, different interpretations also emerged from positive audience comments. Kimberly L said, "This film shows the reality we face today. Mistakes in various actions, circumstances, and problems experienced by many Americans every day. This is a film that must be seen." This review illustrates what Kellner (2003) said about the power of popular culture to connect with everyday life experiences, especially for those who are aware of the great injustices in their society. By stating that the film reflects "what we are facing today," the viewer's perspective places *American Skin* within the ongoing social and political struggle, making it relevant as a cultural work that touches on current racial issues.

The statement that this film is a "must-see" also serves as an invitation to share experiences, a way of educating the public that encourages more people to confront the patterns of discrimination depicted in the story. In the context of Kellner's thinking, this kind of response shows a counter-mainstream engagement, where viewers use cultural works to voice critical social awareness and challenge common narratives that downplay or hide racial violence. Therefore, these comments reinforce the view that *American Skin* is more than just entertainment because it moves viewers to understand and question the systems of injustice that affect marginalized communities.

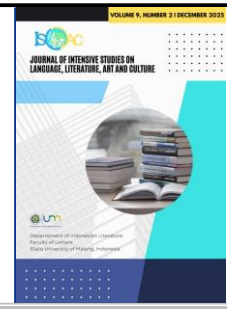
Conversely, negative critiques from Nicolas Rapold and Tim Grierson illustrate Kellner's contention that cultural texts elicit divergent interpretations based on audiences' ideological investments. Kellner (2003) emphasizes that dominant groups often resist cultural products that challenge established power structures. Critics who accuse the film of being "manipulative" or "preachy" may be articulating a hegemonic reading that rejects the film's confrontational stance toward police violence. These responses reveal an ideological discomfort with narratives that foreground racialized trauma, confirming Kellner's argument that cultural criticism is inherently political, often mirroring social

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resistance to transformative discourses.

Within Kellner's framework, such polarized reception underscores the notion that popular culture is a site where hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces collide. Positive reviews acknowledge the film's success in challenging viewers to rethink racial inequalities, while negative reviews attempt to delegitimize the narrative by framing it as overly emotional or theatrically excessive. This ideological struggle is central to Kellner's view that media representations are never neutral; rather, they are invested with power, desire, and competing narratives of truth (Kellner, 2003). The reception of *American Skin* illustrates how media texts circulate within contested ideological terrains, shaping and reshaping public discourse on race.

The film's release amid heightened national debates surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement intensifies its cultural significance. As Kellner (2003) maintains, popular culture must be analyzed within its historical context, where cultural texts both shape and are shaped by the political moment. *American Skin*'s alignment with ongoing protests against police violence amplifies its interpretive stakes, transforming the film from a narrative artifact into a catalyst for public reflection. Its reception ranging from admiration to hostility reveals how cultural products participate in broader struggles over institutional legitimacy, racial injustice, and civic accountability. This confirms Kellner's claim that popular culture contributes to public consciousness formation.

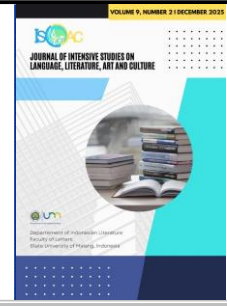
Furthermore, the defensive reactions from certain groups demonstrate what Kellner (2003) identifies as ideological resistance to narratives that threaten dominant power structures. Viewers who perceive the film as anti-police articulate an ideological stance aligned with state power, thereby reaffirming hegemonic discourses that frame police institutions as neutral protectors rather than agents within racialized systems. Kellner argues that such defensive responses are symptomatic of cultural politics, in which dominant groups reject counter-narratives that destabilize their authority. In this case, the rejection of *American Skin* reflects a societal reluctance to confront structural racism, reinforcing Kellner's theory that cultural interpretations are inseparable from power.

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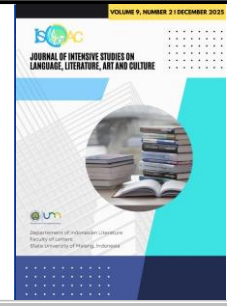
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The use of Rotten Tomatoes audience reviews as data aligns with Kellner’s insistence on examining audience reception rather than relying solely on textual analysis. Kellner (2003) stresses that meaning is co-produced through the interaction between texts and audiences, who bring their own ideologies, experiences, and cultural identities into the interpretive process. The diverse responses from empathy to skepticism, demonstrate how *American Skin* circulates within everyday discourse, generating differentiated public meanings. This reception data also reveals how the film extends beyond the cinematic sphere into social spaces where individuals articulate, debate, and negotiate racial politics.

Moreover, the film’s impact on public discussion exemplifies Kellner’s view that popular culture plays a central role in shaping democratic discourse. Cultural texts such as *American Skin* do not require direct policy influence to be politically significant; rather, their power lies in their capacity to stimulate collective dialogue, surface marginalized narratives, and challenge institutional power structures. Popular culture can function as an arena of resistance, enabling audiences to imagine alternative social realities. The film’s ability to provoke conversations about police violence, racial profiling, and systemic oppression confirms its role as a culturally potent text embedded within ongoing political struggles (Kellner, 2003).

Ultimately, the reception of *American Skin* demonstrates how media texts become sites of ideological negotiation, validating Kellner’s argument that popular culture reflects and produces broader social conflicts. The film’s divergent reception—admiration from racial justice advocates and dismissal from more conservative or institutionally aligned groups, illustrates how cultural artifacts embody contested meanings within the public sphere. Conflicts reveal the cultural politics of representation, where media shape collective understanding of race, justice, and power (Kellner, 2003). Thus, *American Skin* functions not only as a cinematic narrative but also as a cultural intervention that contributes to ongoing struggles over racial knowledge, institutional accountability, and social transformation.



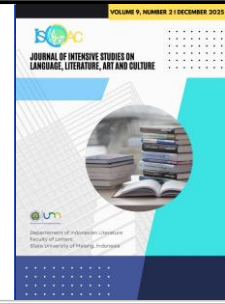
CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The analysis of American Skin through Critical Race Theory (CRT), post-nationalist perspectives, and Kellner's Popular Culture and Cultural Studies framework reveals that racism in the United States functions as a deeply rooted structural system rather than a series of isolated incidents. The film illustrates how institutional mechanisms law enforcement, courts, education systems, and media collectively perpetuate racial hierarchies that disadvantage Black communities. Key scenes depicting legal failure, racial profiling, structural determinism, and cultural stereotyping demonstrate the persistence of systemic racism embedded in everyday practices and institutional norms.

Moreover, the incorporation of audience responses shows that American Skin functions as an ideological battleground within contemporary culture. Supportive viewers read the film as a morally urgent critique of racialized violence, whereas critics who oppose its message often reproduce dominant narratives that minimize or deny systemic racism. This polarized reception aligns with Kellner's argument that cultural texts are sites of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggle, where meaning is negotiated through social positions, lived experiences, and political ideologies.

The film's release amid the Black Lives Matter movement further amplifies its cultural resonance, transforming it from a cinematic narrative into a catalyst for public reflection on issues of state violence, racial inequality, and institutional accountability. The media's revisionist framing of Jefferson's death in the film reinforces CRT's central claim that dominant institutions actively reshape narratives to protect existing power structures while marginalizing Black voices.

Overall, American Skin serves not only as a representation of racial injustice but as a form of cultural resistance. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of Black individuals who are often excluded from mainstream narratives, the film contributes to broader struggles for racial justice and invites viewers to critically examine the structures that maintain systemic oppression. Future research may explore how films like American Skin influence public attitudes toward policing and race, further demonstrating the power



of media as a tool for ideological critique and social transformation.

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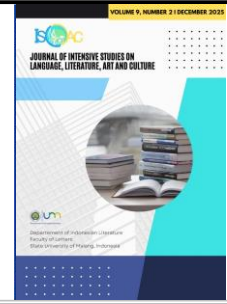
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