

Reflections on "*Green Book*": Friendship Under Racial Discrimination and Thoughts on Binary Opposition

ABSTRACT: The paper explores the cultural and racial significance of racial discrimination and binary opposition theory through the film *Green Book*. The story is set in the segregated South of the United States during the 1960s and tells the tale of African American pianist Don Shirley and his Italian-American driver Tony Lip on their journey through the South. The film highlights the cultural logic of binary opposition, where White people are seen as the "Self" and Black people as the "Other," thereby exacerbating racial inequality. The film emphasizes the breakability of this binary divide, showing that despite Don Shirley's exceptional musical talent earning him respect, he is still marginalized due to his race. Over the course of their journey, Don and Tony's friendship gradually develops, challenging and transcending these racial boundaries. The article argues that this transformation underscores the importance of friendship-based interactions in addressing racial prejudices and fostering understanding between different racial groups. It also explores the possibility of transcending binary opposition.

KEYWORDS: *Green Book*; Binary-Oppositional; Friendship-Based Interactions; Transcending Binary Opposition.

1. Introduction

In recent years, racial tensions have intensified globally, representing not only unresolved historical legacies but also complex phenomena closely intertwined with contemporary global economic and political dynamics[1]. In the United States, significant disparities exist among different ethnic and racial groups in areas such as education, employment, housing, and the justice system. For instance, the United Nations has pointed out that “systemic racism continues to pervade” U.S. policing and judicial institutions, as reflected in practices such as disproportionate police stops, detentions, and the use of force against Black individuals and other minority groups[2]. In addition, a 2023 report by the European Union Agency

for Fundamental Rights (FRA) indicates that among nearly 6,800 respondents of African descent across 13 EU member states, as many as 77% reported having experienced racial discrimination. The report further notes that since 2016, discrimination, harassment, and violence against people of African descent have been on the rise in European countries[3]. This indicates that racial discrimination is not an isolated phenomenon but a systemic problem and a significant part of the ideological foundation underlying this systemic problem is the logic of binary opposition.[4].

Binary opposition theory is regarded as a tool for explaining human thought, culture, and language. It divides all things into two mutually exclusive categories, such as good and evil[5]. However, what constitutes “good” or “evil” is subjective and varies from person to person. In the context of racial discrimination, due to historical, political, and economic factors, Black people have come to be constructed as the “Other evil” in European and American cultural narratives, while White people have been positioned as the “Self good”[6][7]. As a result, White individuals are placed in a superior position, whereas Black individuals are relegated to a secondary status. Valuable resources disproportionately flow toward White populations, while various forms of prejudice are directed toward Black populations[6][8][9].

Under the binary framework of the “Self” and the “Other”, *Green Book* reveals the deep cultural logic underlying racial discrimination in the United States. Set against the backdrop of racial segregation in the 1960s, the film follows the journey of Black pianist Don Shirley and his white driver Tony through the American South, exposing how the societal structure that equates “Whiteness with the Self” and “Blackness with the Other” is continuously reproduced through institutions, spatial arrangements, and patterns of resource distribution.

The exclusive access that white people enjoy in upscale hotels, restaurants, and public spaces in the South, contrasted with the exclusion of Black individuals, illustrates an institutional tendency for

resources to flow toward the “Self” while systematically marginalizing the “Other.” The existence of The Negro Motorist Green Book further represents the materialization of this binary division; it delineates the limited places where Black travelers could safely stop, thereby reinforcing the socially constructed boundaries of race.

The film also highlights the superficial nature of this binary opposition through the contrast between the two central characters. Don Shirley’s cultural refinement and social sophistication sharply differ from Tony’s lack of education and lower-class background, demonstrating that racial identity does not determine an individual’s true worth[10][11]. As the journey unfolds, their interactions gradually blur the previously rigid boundary between the “Self” and the “Other,” illustrating the fluidity and variability of interracial relationships in reality and showing how such relationships can challenge entrenched prejudice[12].

Therefore, this paper, drawing on the emergence of friendship within the context of racial discrimination shaped by binary-oppositional thinking in *Green Book*, as well as the contrasting character design in the film, examines the fragility of binary oppositions and highlights the importance of friendship-based interactions between different racial groups in challenging racial discrimination.

2. Introduction to *Green Book*

2.1. Plot Summary

Green Book is a 2018 American biographical road drama film directed by Peter Farrelly. The film is based on the true story of the friendship between African American pianist Don Shirley and his Italian-American driver Tony Lip during a concert tour through the segregated American South in the 1960s. The title *Green Book* refers to The Negro Motorist Green Book, a guidebook that listed safe places for African American travelers during the era of Jim Crow laws.

2.2. The Poster of *Green Book*

The poster of *Green Book* is shown in Fig. 1. The poster was designed by Polish designer Karol Rogoz. It features a green lake, a piano keyboard, and a green car driving upward on the poster. The car drives over the interwoven black-and-white piano keys, while the piano keys in front of the car are shown separating to the sides. The overall composition of the car and piano keys resembles the closing motion of a zipper.

In the poster, there is a diagonal black-and-white piano keyboard, which represents Don's identity as a pianist. The car, on the other hand, corresponds to Tony's role as a driver. The black and white keys themselves are symbolic of the two main characters' races in *Green Book*—the black keys represent Don Shirley, who is Black, while the white keys represent Tony Lip, who is White.

3. The Deeper Meaning of the Poster

3.1. The Importance of Friendship-based Interactions in Racial Issues

The reason why this poster has received such praise is largely due to its ability to convey the deeper meaning of the plot through extremely simple elements. In the poster, the black-and-white piano keys are "pulled" by the Cadillac DeVille, a key element of the film, from the bottom right corner, merging the separated keys into one. This reflects the road movie nature of *Green Book* and also symbolizes the identities of Don and Tony as "travelers." If the events that unfold during Don and Tony's journey serve as a catalyst for their relationship to evolve from opposition to mutual understanding and tolerance, then the blue-green Cadillac DeVille in the poster acts as a concrete representation of these events. Furthermore, as Don and Tony are in the same car, the car's movement and the "stitching" of the black-and-white piano keys require their joint effort. In reality, this reflects the need for people of both Black and White races to work together and actively engage in friendship-based interactions across racial boundaries[13][14][15].



Fig. 1. Two Hearts Willing to Communicate

Interracial friendship plays a significant role in reducing prejudice, alleviating racial tension, and promoting social cohesion[16][17][18]. Contact theory suggests that under appropriate conditions, interracial contact can ease tensions between racial groups[19]. When people form friendships with individuals from different racial backgrounds, they are more likely to accurately perceive each other's feelings, which is crucial for developing close relationships and maintaining positive interpersonal interactions[20]. For example, research has found that, for White individuals, those who make an effort to appear unbiased in interracial interactions are more liked by Black individuals than those who do not make such an effort, indicating the importance of controlling biases and striving to understand the other during interactions[21].



Fig. 2. The Scene of Friendly Interaction Between Don and Tony in *Green Book*

However, establishing and maintaining interracial friendships is not without its challenges. For instance, White people's beliefs about the malleability of racial bias affect their strategies in interracial interactions: those who believe bias is malleable tend to adopt learning-oriented strategies, such as perspective-taking and attempting to understand the challenges in interactions, while those who view bias as fixed tend to adopt performance-oriented strategies[22]. Furthermore, studies show that people of color

perceive higher levels of support and acceptance in same-race relationships (rather than interracial relationships), possibly because they face racial stigmatization daily[23]. For Black, Latino, and Asian students, forming relationships with same-race friends provides greater support and acceptance.

As the film demonstrates, although Don and Tony face numerous difficulties and challenges along their journey, their relationship evolves through gradual adaptation and active friendship-based interactions. Both of them shed their biases and no longer view each other through the lens of prejudice and hostility. When racial issues are scaled down to the personal level, they often come down to a lack of equal communication. Although at first, their interaction was forced into equality under material exchange, through their ongoing communication and interactions, they came to respect and understand each other, achieving true equality and becoming friends who transcended both class and race. After all, it is only through the interweaving of black and white keys that a pianist can create beautiful music from the piano. The fast-moving car in the poster reflects the film's optimistic vision for the future of racial issues, while also emphasizing the power of respect, understanding, and love.

Although challenges and difficulties exist, just as the film shows, Don and Tony went through many trials and tribulations along their journey. Through their gradual adaptation and active friendship-based interactions, they both ultimately let go of their prejudices and no longer viewed each other through biased or hostile lenses. When racial issues are scaled down to the personal level, they ultimately stem from a lack of equal communication. Although their initial interaction was one of forced equality through material exchange, over time, through communication and mutual respect, they achieved true equality and became friends who transcended both class and race. After all, it is only through the interweaving of black and white keys that a pianist can produce beautiful music from the piano. The fast-moving car in the poster reflects the film's optimistic vision for the future of racial issues, highlighting the possibility and importance of mutual understanding and tolerance between different races through friendship-based

interactions.

3.2. The Fragility of Binary Opposition

The fragility of binary opposition refers to the idea that the way we categorize the world and society, especially in terms of stark oppositions such as “Black” and “White,” is not fixed and immutable, but rather can be deconstructed, challenged, and even broken down. This binary framework often confines individuals to stereotypes, preventing the recognition of the complexity and multidimensionality of people or groups. However, when we examine social reality, we find that this opposition is not invulnerable and often reveals its fragility and instability in practice.

In that era, the boundary between Black and White seemed clear, yet in reality, this boundary was not as firm as it appeared. Although Don, through his talent, gained recognition and respect from wealthy White audiences by playing piano for them on stage, this recognition did not alter his fundamental position in the face of racial prejudice. As Don said, “When rich white people pay me to play piano for them, it's because it makes them feel cultured. But as soon as I step off that stage, I'm still just another nigger in their eyes.” This statement reveals the deep-rooted issue of binary opposition: even in seemingly tolerant and accepting cultural spaces, racial labels are still hard to overcome, and the identity of Black individuals remains fixed in a marginalized position.

However, the fragility of binary opposition is precisely reflected in the inherent tension of this phenomenon. Despite the ingrained societal views on race, each individual and group has the potential to create new modes of understanding by challenging these divisions[14][16][19][20][21]. For example, although Don is labeled within White society, his musical talent grants him the potential to transcend racial boundaries. His recognition in certain cultural domains reveals the incompleteness of the binary opposition framework. When individuals break through inherent boundaries through their own efforts and creativity, the rigid ideas of binary opposition begin to erode.

At the same time, the relationship between White and Black people is not fixed. Despite the strong presence of racial discrimination, certain members of White society may still break down the original racial divide due to their appreciation of Black culture. For instance, Don's music is not just a tool for serving White people; it also has the power to inspire White audiences to reassess and understand Black culture. This potential for cultural exchange hints at the possibility of breaking the binary opposition[21].

From a broader perspective, the dismantling of binary opposition is not something that can be achieved through individual effort alone[24]; it requires more extensive social change. This transformation may stem from advancements in education, a more open-minded way of thinking, or even through cross-cultural communication and integration that reshapes traditional cognitive patterns[5][25]. It is precisely because binary opposition often overlooks the complexity and diversity of individuals that societal progress and development can be achieved by deconstructing this opposition, leading to a more inclusive and diverse future[26].

In conclusion, the fragility of binary opposition highlights the flexibility and potential for change in social cognition. It challenges entrenched ideas and reveals the potential for individuals to redefine their identities in a diverse society. Although historical racial divides have profoundly impacted social structures, through continuous reflection and challenge, we can observe the gradual deconstruction of this opposition, ultimately moving towards a more equal and diverse society.

It is precisely for this reason that Green Book also introduces individuals who make efforts to address racial issues and contribute to the advancement of civil rights for Black people. As Oleg, a member of Donald Shirley's trio, commented on Don's southern tour: "You asked me once why Dr. Shirley does this? I tell you. Because genius is not enough. It takes courage to change people's hearts." This reflects the underlying purpose of Don's actions. After being treated rudely and unfairly, Don chooses to "smile and shake their hands" instead of "piss right on their living room floor." This is Don's form of resistance and

expression. Although he struggles with the question “What am I?”, he does not cease his journey south. It is precisely because of individuals like Don that the civil rights movement for Black people advanced.

While Don’s southern journey in the film does not bring about significant change in the deeply divided South, it does lead to a transformation in Tony. Through his demeanor, talent, and character, Don earns Tony’s respect. This shift is further reflected when Tony stops his family from using derogatory terms like “tootsoon” during a family gathering.



Fig. 3.The Final Ending of Green Book

4. The Possibility of Transcending Binary Opposition

Behind binary opposition lies an artificial delineation and classification; in reality, there is no inherent opposition between entities[5][27]. When we perceive someone as neither entirely good nor bad, or as both virtuous and wicked, does it truly mean that part of that person is good and part of them is bad? As the ancient saying goes, "Viewed from the front, it looks like a ridge; seen from the side, it forms a peak. The mountain appears differently depending on the distance, perspective, and angle." This does not mean that the mountain simultaneously has both ridges and peaks; the mountain remains the same, but for humans, it can be seen as either a ridge or a peak. The existence of the mountain itself does not change based on how humans perceive it; rather, it is the differing perspectives that create different "appearances." As the Diamond Sutra says, "All appearances are illusions," emphasizing that these "appearances" do not

truly alter the existence of things.

Bourdieu argued that multiple interpretations can break the monopoly of discourse power. However, the formation of dominant discourse is not based on the cognition of a single individual, but rather on the perspectives of certain people or even the majority[28]. As mentioned earlier, for a signifier, everyone has their own interpretation, and within these monopolized discourses, there are already multiple interpretations. Using multiple perspectives to combat multiple perspectives does not seem feasible, and using an even larger multiplicity to challenge multiplicity might lead to greater confusion, resulting in a battle to determine which version of multiplicity holds the most power. Baudrillard believed that symbols and their concepts should be criticized and abandoned in order to break the hegemony of symbols. However, such a unilateral deconstruction does not truly resolve the issue. If we discard symbols, we will need new signifiers to help us understand the world. While Buddhism may have its limitations and shortcomings, such as an excessive pursuit of detachment in thought, it generally observes the world through the Middle Way, replacing judgment and definition with interpretation. In this way, it avoids binary opposition to some extent, offering a new approach to breaking the hegemony of symbols and truly transcending binary opposition.

5. Conclusion

The paper explores the role of friendship in overcoming racial divides in the film *Green Book*, providing an analysis of the binary opposition framework that often defines racial relations, and also discusses the possibility of transcending binary opposition.

- (1) Racial discrimination in the film reflects a broader societal issue, where systemic inequality is perpetuated through binary opposition.
- (2) The role of friendship-based interactions between individuals of different races is central to challenging these prejudices, as seen through the evolving relationship between Don and Tony.

- (3) The fragility of binary opposition is illustrated by the way personal connections can dismantle rigid racial categories, showing that racial identity does not determine an individual's worth.
- (4) The film 's message emphasizes that positive social change and racial reconciliation are achievable through mutual respect, understanding, and effort to transcend entrenched prejudices.
- (5) The limitations of binary opposition are revealed through the analysis of differing perspectives and interpretations. While binary opposition seeks to categorize the world, these categories are artificial and flexible. Theories like those of Bourdieu and Baudrillard suggest that dominant discourses can be deconstructed, but the challenge lies in how these systems of meaning are replaced.
- (6) Transcending binary opposition requires moving beyond rigid categories and embracing a more fluid, interpretive approach, as seen in the Buddhist Middle Way, which avoids fixed judgments and fosters a more inclusive understanding of the world.

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