# "The time loop nightmare of being a black man in the US" Black American Cultural Memory in the Short Film *Two Distant Strangers* (2020)]

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ABSTRACT: This paper is concerned with Black American cultural memory and the translation of historical experiences into 21st-century narratives. To examine this, I will analyze the American short film *Two Distant Strangers* (2020), which takes up current debates of the *Black Lives Matter* movement and problematizes racial profiling and police violence in the United States. Addressing ways in which contemporary cinematic representations may display traumatic memories and discuss existing memory processes, I will argue that films like *Two Distant Strangers* are substantial contributions to Black American cultural memory and as such both add to and challenge predominant narratives about Black American histor(ies) and identit(ies).

KEYWORDS: Cultural Memory; Trauma; History; Cultural Identity; Black American Culture; Black American Film

> "You guys over-police our neighborhoods, over-punish us, lock us up for life for some shit that white boys joke about in their memoirs. And then we're stuck in a cycle we can't fucking break."
>
> (Carter in *Two Distant Strangers* 00:22:29-00:22:40)

## Introduction

The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, lines up in the long history of police violence against Black Americans in the US and once again manifested the life-threatening danger Black Americans still face within this society. The publication of graphic video footage of the murder not only led to a massive wave of attention to the crime itself, but also to the subsequent protests and to past incidences of police violence against Black Americans (Wu et al. n.pag.). At the same time, it highlighted the impact of audiovisual media on social discourses as well as the speed and power with which (social) media enable events, discussions, and social movements—such as *Black Lives Matter*—to spread around the globe and integrate individual memories into a collective narrative of the past. The speedy release of the short film *Two Distant Strangers*, distributed by Netflix on November 20, 2020, is a prime example of the rapidity with which Floyd's death was represented and discussed within media. The film uses

cinematic strategies, such as a time loop structure or the contradistinction of violent images with buoyant music, to critically reflect on the event and similar cases of police brutality against Black Americans in the US, thus problematizing and adding to processes of remembering these events. The repercussions of the video footage documenting Floyd's murder both confirm the impact of audiovisual media on collective memory and make the medium of film a particularly striking choice for representing the murder, as it transfers the event and the mode of representation of the documentary video into a fictional narrative.

The importance of representing, discussing, and securing memories—especially traumatic ones—within fictional media contexts for processes of identity formation of communities, nations, ethnic groups, etc., has often been highlighted in memory studies.[1] In his conceptualization of cultural memory, Jan Assmann stresses the relevance of memories for the identity-formation processes of individuals, groups, and entire nations ("Cultural Memory" 13; 15). The "notorious shortage of space" (100) within cultural memory described by Aleida Assmann becomes especially relevant in the context of "struggles over injustices of recognition, over whose history and culture will be recognized" (Rothberg 20). These struggles play an important part in the consideration of Black American memory, which historically has been excluded from the discourse of mainstream American history, culture, and society (Dixon 19). Black film (as well as other Black media) take up these struggles, as Mark A. Reid argues, by attempting to "make visible the issues blacks were experiencing in their lives, [to] challenge the status quo, and [to] suggest a method for moving forward" (1) towards a society that provides space for Black experiences and memories.

The short film *Two Distant Strangers* has to be seen both as "operat[ing] as a visual negotiation, if not tension, between film as art and race as a constitutive, cultural fiction" (Gillespie 1) and in the context of the growing number of Black perspectives in social and cultural discourses emerging in the course of the *Black Lives Matter* movement. The film displays what director Travon Free describes as "the time loop nightmare of being a black man in the US" (Macabasco n.pag.). Its central claim can be read as history repeating itself, which is depicted by using the cinematic strategy of a time loop—known most popularly from the film *Groundhog Day* (1993). With its recurrent representation of police violence against a Black American individual, *Two Distant Strangers* addresses the repetitive history of institutional racism and police violence as well as the history of racism in the US on a more general level. The relevance of the short film stems from its discussion of themes that determine actual debates about race relations in and beyond the US and especially from the rapidity with which it takes up these debates originating within the short period between the murder of George Floyd and the film's release. On a narrative level, the film has both a short discourse time (of thirty minutes) and a short story time that covers the course of a single day in a potentially infinite time loop.

[1] See Erll, "Mediality of Cultural Memory"; Landsberg, "Mass Culture of Memory"; Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*; Zierhold, "Memory and Media Cultures"; Elm et al., *The Horrors of Trauma in Cinema*.

It takes up an advancing pace within the narrative, which is evocative of the speed with which actual debates and contemporary media critically engage with (traumatic) memories today and also highlights the cyclical and repetitive nature of these debates.

I will discuss the film from two different angles: In part one, I will consider the impact of collective memory on cultural and identity-formation processes and debate questions of Black American identit(ies).[2] With a focus on the main character, Carter, I want to look at how the film addresses strategies and limits of racial essentializing that are discussed, among others, by scholars of Critical Race Theory. With a focus on the White police officer Merk, I will give a short overview of discussions in the field of Critical Whiteness that point to the ways in which White identity-formation complicates the realignment of racial structures. Racial essentializing is, as I will show, a strategy adopted by Merk that becomes particularly evident through the practice of racial profiling and the encouragement of racial clichés used to secure one's own position of power. In this context, I will briefly introduce discussions of the "Blue race," which acknowledge the special role of the police within race debates, thus further complicating the tension of Black and White identity constructions.

The second part will talk about the representation of individual and collective trauma through communicative memory as well as cultural memory both on a diegetic and on a non-diegetic level. This differentiation is taken up from Jan Assmann's division of collective memory into memory that is communicated in everyday life interactions within or between groups and memory that is secured—and thus transferred into a collective narrative of the past—with the help of texts, images, or other forms of media ("Kollektives Gedächtnis" 10–11). Through analyzing *Two Distant Strangers*, I will point out how it both represents the generation of communicative and cultural memory within its narrative and can itself be seen as a media product transmitting the experiences it negotiates to the cultural memory of its global audience. With the help of this strategy, the film manages to not only transfer memories into a collective discourse by representing them on a fictional, narrative level, but also to challenge preexisting narratives by reflecting on social processes of essentializing memory on a meta-level. Closely linked to these two levels, I will examine how racial identit(ies) are renegotiated within the film by representing the state of race relations as well as the memories of racial violence in the United States and by discussing the possibility of overcoming racist social structures and achieving actual social change in the (near) future.

[2] Debates on cultural identification need to acknowledge the tension between the term "cultural identity" in singular, used to make general statements about identity-formation processes, and the use of the plural form, referring to intersecting identities that highlight the heterogeneity and fluidity within communities, which is why I chose to include both forms.

## Questions of Racial Identit(ies) in *Two Distant Strangers*

In *Two Distant Strangers*, Carter, the Black American main character, leaves a woman's apartment, where he spent the night, in order to get home to his dog. On the street, the White police officer Merk approaches him and asks questions about his cigarette and his bag, alleging a crime Carter did not commit. At the end of their interaction, Merk restrains Carter with his knee and then puts him in a chokehold, while other police officers come running to help to fixate him. Carter screams that he "can't breathe" several times and then dies by asphyxiation due to the excessive force of Merk and the other police officers helping him (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:07:25-00:08:10)—a scene aimed at evoking severe emotional reactions, not least due to its strong resemblance to the actual deaths of George Floyd and Eric Garner.[3] After having been choked to death, Carter wakes up again in the bed of the woman, Perri, with a feeling of déjà-vu. This happens several times over; eventually Carter realizes that he is stuck in a time loop in which he relives the experience of being killed in different ways—again and again—by White police officers without being able to escape this traumatic cycle.

In the dialogues between Carter and Merk, both draw a clear line between the groups they identify themselves and each other with. Carter uses the first-person plural to make statements about Black Americans and the second-person plural ("you guys") when he refers to police officers practicing racial profiling. This choice of pronouns marks an identification with the first group further amplified by a separation from the latter. Officer Merk, on the other hand, does not explicitly identify himself as either White or "Blue"—i.e. as part of the police. However, he implicitly adapts the dichotomy of Black/White—or Black/"Blue" —and conflates Black Americans into one coherent group by stating: "I guess I never spoke to *one of you* this long" (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:23:13-00:23:17; emphasis added). Noticeably, this statement has to be seen in the context of Merk repeatedly practicing racial profiling and thus encountering racialized individuals, whereas these encounters never seem to include a serious conversation but culminate in a reduction of a person to their race and their presumed involvement in a crime. The identification of *one* Black American group or community made here by both protagonists points to a central debate in the context of racial identities: that of essentializing by race, which can bring with it a stronger communal stance, but also entails the risk of generalization and diffusion. This debate on racial essentialism is taken up by Critical Race Theorists who, as Kimberlé Crenshaw states, "aim[…] to reexamine the terms by which race and racism have been negotiated in American consciousness" and thus explicitly embrace a

[3] On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner was killed by a White policeman who choked him to death while attempting to arrest him. Like the fictional character Carter, the police officer conceived suspicions about Garner's cigarettes. Like George Floyd, Garner's last words were "I can't breathe" (Bloom and Imam n.pag.)

form of racial sensitivity (*Critical Race Theory* xiv), while at the same time making a point of uniformly rejecting racial essentialism.[4]

In an essay on anti-essentialism, Aimee van Wagenen argues that the notion of racial essentialism would "falsely universalize[…] and hold[…] that all members of racial groups by definition share a common, coherent identity and a common racial experience" (159). Many Critical Race Theorists and other Black intellectuals understand themselves as anti-essentialists, who challenge the idea of a *coherent* racial group and, as a consequence, of a discrete Black American identity, and claim this idea to be racist in itself (Van Wagenen 159). The Haitian philosopher Paul Mocombe, for instance, argues "against any idea of a black phenomenon that unites all black people" (104); this criticism of a single, unified Black identity construction is also taken up by several Black American conservatives to argue for a complete elimination of the concept of race.[5] Van Wagenen, however, describes how the indispensable destabilization of the concept emerging from the rejection of essentialism would lead to "a crisis in racial identity and subjectivity" (162). She points to different potential solutions of the debate, which would make it possible to conceptualize racial subjectivity by seeking "a basis for collective struggles for justice" (165). One of these possible solutions is the use of a "strategic essentialism," a concept introduced by Gayatri Spivak and further developed by e. christi cunningham. The latter describes "the strategic use of race as an essential component in efforts to recover damages for past, present, and future effects of oppression [as] one endeavor" (cunningham qtd. in Van Wagenen 162). Van Wagenen summarizes that in this context, racial identity is solely understood as "a political strategy that seeks its own end" (163). The film *Two Distant Strangers*, as I am going to show, uses the approach of strategic essentialism in order to promote the political goal of social change through the representation of experiences and memories of systemic racism and police violence as well as its impact on racial identities.

Against this theoretical background, I want to take a look at the discussion of racial identities in the short film. In conversations between Carter and Perri, both make several references to Black American culture: they mention the names of Black football players (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:16:37-00:16:43), refer to the Black actor Tyler Perry (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:04:18-00:04:24) and the Black fictional character Jackie Brown (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:16:16-00:16:18). Furthermore, the name of Carter's dog, Jeter, could refer to the Black social justice activist Henry N. Jeter, even though Perri connects the name to the Black baseball player Derek Jeter (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:02:49-00:02:54). These references reveal how both Carter and Perri seem to assume a shared cultural knowledge. The emphasis on references to Black American culture can be seen as indicative of Carter identifying as Black American rather than mainly or exclusively as American.

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[4] Valdes et al., *Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*; see also Van Wagenen, "The Promise and Impossibility of Representing Anti-Essentialism" 158.

[5] See Steele, *The Content of our Character*; McWhorter, *Woke Racism*.

Carter is probably best described as an individual without a strong political agenda, who is confronted with structural racism in the course of the story, and thus forced to position himself within debates on racial identities. The love for his dog and the aim to get home to him mark his innocent wishes and his attempts to live a peaceful life, which makes it easy for the audience to sympathize with him. Being confronted with Merk's offer to "agree to disagree" on the existence of structural racism (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:23:20-99:23:23), Carter answers: "That's fine by me, man. As long as you take me home" (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:23:25-00:23:29), with which he reveals a tiredness of being forced into critical debates about racism. By using the pronouns "us" and "we" for references to Black Americans, Carter adopts an essentialist strategy within these debates: rather than interpreting the use of first-person plural as an indication for a self-identification with a homogeneous Black American community, Carter's wording can be understood as a strategy used to make political statements. In the film, for instance, Carter makes a statement about racial profiling in which he essentializes Black Americans ("us"), the police ("you guys"), and White people: "All I'm saying is, you guys over-police our neighborhood, over-punish us, lock us up for life for some shit that White boys joke about in their memoir. And then we're stuck in a cycle we can't fucking break" (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:22:27-00:22:39).

Even though Carter is literally trapped in a cycle he is not able to escape from, the last scene portrays him as ready to fight the system which repeatedly exposes him to traumatic experiences: in a conversation with Perri, Carter states that he will ultimately escape Merk: "I'm smarter than him, faster than him. […] So I'ma figure something out. 'Cause it don't matter how long it takes, or how many times it takes, one way or another, I'm getting home to my fucking dog" (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:27:31-00:28:03). The statement both highlights Carter's confidence when confronted with a White person inhabiting a more powerful position, and his (potentially misplaced) confidence that—even though his goals are not easily reachable—he will eventually be able to escape the systemic racism he is exposed to and simply get on with his life. His overall goal—to get home to his dog—ultimately marks him as an individual person without a particularly strong political agenda who, however, is politicized by racist social structures. With that, Carter can be seen as representative for the tension between struggles for systemic change and Black people's attempts to not attract attention and avoid violent confrontations with the police.

The officer's reaction to Carter's critique of structural racism within the police reveals an ignorance of these very structures and takes up a position popular not only in White, but also in Black American conservatism.[6] Merk states: "Come on, man, everyone's responsible for their choices. Even if their choice is crime. I mean, no one's making you guys stick your hand

[6] See Lewis, "Black Conservatism in America"; Ondaatje, *Black Conservative Intellectuals in Modern America*.

in the cookie jar" (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:22:39-00:22:46). This conservative-liberal position, which has contributed to the systematic mass incarceration of Black men[7], criticizes that Black individuals would "focus on racism and […] neglect the individual initiative that would deliver them from poverty" (Steele 16). Carter, on the other hand, takes up an argument central to Critical Race Theory, which understands economic and social disadvantages of Black people as a product of a system of institutionalized racism that is based on the "symbolic" and "material subordination" of Black people (Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment" 1377). He answers: "Some people do commit crime. But what choice do they have (…)? If we're being really real here, the system rewards you guys with the best possible prize for the only thing you had nothing to do with—being White" (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:22:46-00:23:07).

This prize that comes with being White is central to the discussions of Critical Whiteness Studies, which navigates Whiteness against the background of Black—and other BIPoC—identit(ies). While Whiteness and White racism can be seen as essential factors in the (historical) formation of Black identities, it is important, as Delgado and Stefancic stress, to critically reflect on "whether the very framework we use to consider problems of race reflects an unstated [Black-White] binary paradigm or mindset" (77). However, if one follows the concept of strategic essentialism, it is possible to use "White" as a category in order to discuss structural problems that come with central concepts of critical Whiteness, such as White privilege, White innocence, White ignorance, and White guilt.

What Merk ignores and Carter tries to point to is the systematic process with which White people are privileged while Black people are disadvantaged. In her essay on Critical Whiteness Studies, Barbara Applebaum states that

> [i]f one does not acknowledge racism as a system of privilege composed of an interlocking web of institutional, cultural, and individual practices, racism can be reduced to just the bad behavior on the part of particular individuals who need to be removed or rehabilitated, while the system within which these individuals are embedded can remain unchallenged (5).

Taking a closer look at the impact of racist concepts on White identities enables an understanding of how Whiteness impacts Black identities and of how, within the social construction of race, the existence of Whiteness and Blackness depend on each other (Applebaum 2).

Police officer Merk can be said to represent a typical White American, who, as he states, lives the "All-American dream" (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:21:13-00:21:16) and highly benefits from racist structures, while he at the same time fails to acknowledge his inherent adoption of a racist ideology. His character represents some of the basic features that mark Whiteness according to Critical Race Theory (see Delgado and Stefancic 85–92). These features include

[7] See Alexander, *New Jim Crow*.

White supremacy and privilege, which in Merk's case become obvious through his powerful position as an officer and are symbolized in the film, for instance, by him parking under a "no parking" sign and thus committing an infraction more illegal than the action for which Carter is arrested and killed without having to fear any consequences (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:23:54-00:23:58).

The privilege of inhabiting a powerful social position and not having to fear prosecution for committing infractions can be interpreted as forms of positive White privilege. This privilege, however, is not bound to White individuals, as there are many Black individuals working in and profiting from social institutions marked by structural racism, such as, for instance, the police. Within the police force, this structural racism, as the murder of Tyre Nichols[8] calls into mind, is seen as deeply ingrained instead of bound to the racial identity of individual officers. In an article about Tyre Nichols's murder, Clyde McGrady quotes law professor Jody Amour, who criticizes racist structures within the police: "It's not just a Black and white issue, but a Black and blue one. And when you put on that blue uniform, it often becomes the primary identity that drowns out any other identities that might compete with it" (n.pag.). Concerning Merk, there is no indication of him primarily identifying as either White or "Blue." He however distances himself from what he constructs as an essentialized Black race in order to interpret his own position—being White *and* a police officer—as the norm. Interpreting one's own Whiteness and privilege as normative leads, as Applebaum describes, to an ignorance of one's own position and the social structures that sustain it (2). In Merk's case, we can see a disregarding of racist structures when he advises Carter: "Well, if your past is any sign of the future, I'd get the fuck out of here" (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:18:22-00:18:28). The statement can be read as a reference to both Carter's individual experiences of being killed in an endless cycle and to the Black American past and future on a collective level. Subsequently, Merk's advice to "get out" of the traumatic cycle reveals an ignorance not only of Carter's fatal situation, but also of the racist conditions of American society and the complexity of any attempt to break the cycle of recurring traumata these racist conditions bring with them.

If the time loop Carter is stuck in in *Two Distant Strangers* is read as a symbol for social structures that prevent Black Americans from escaping racism and fighting against discrimination, Merk's approach to dealing with this time loop can be seen as symbolic for his disregarding or even enjoyment of these structures. Throughout the film, he hides any knowledge about the time loop and his role in it. He acts surprised when Carter convinces him of its existence and seems to connect with him as the story reaches its narrative climax. In the conversation I quoted above, Merk does not acknowledge racist structures and at the end wants to "agree

[8] On January 7, 2023, Tyre Nichols, 29 years old and Black, was severely beaten by Memphis police officers and eventually died of his injuries. The fact that the five police officers charged for his murder were also Black stresses how police brutality against Black individuals is not only exercised by White officers, thus opening "a complex conversation on race and policing" (McGrady, "Tyre Nichols Beating Opens a Complex Conversation on Race and Policing" n.pag.).

to disagree," but seems willing to listen to what Carter has to say about structural racism and to learn something through this change of perspective. By offering to take him home instead of killing him, Merk seems to acknowledge his guilt and to search for an easy way to compensate it. After their ride, a handshake marks their apparent mutual understanding (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:24:31-00:24:38).

However, as the ending reveals, Merk was aware of the murderous cycle they are stuck in all along, never having had any intention of changing its outcome, and even enjoying his actions as they have no relevant consequences for himself. At the same time that Merk clearly inhabits a position of White supremacy and privilege, this scene also reveals how he shows no signs of guilt. His behavior can be seen as evocative of a societal dynamic that allows Black Americans to take part in social life and come closer to their goals, without providing them with the power to secure their position. The enjoyment of a structural position enabling (White) police officers to exert power and determine the fate of Black people is depicted when Merk, uncovering his true agenda, begins to smile and clap his hands, calling Carter's final attempt to survive "a real fun one" (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:24:53-00:25:11). Without any interest in changing the status quo or questioning his privileges Merk shows no character development, and any steps towards dismantling racism are revealed as part of a game instead of being motivated by a wish for a change of social structures.

Interestingly, Merk's knowledge of Carter's fate reveals how a suppression of White memory of racial violence—based on White guilt and White innocence—does not take place here. Instead, Merk acknowledges his role as a perpetrator and transfers the events into his White memory, apparently without reflecting on their implications for the victims of his actions. With Carter being murdered for the hundredth time, the film ends with the message that even though the racist police officer seemed to be willing to question his moral and political attitude, nothing really has changed. It thus represents not only the (strategic) use of racial essentialism adapted by the protagonists, but also makes use of the strategy on a meta-level, as it ultimately essentializes the position and future of both Carter and Merk. In the next section, I will introduce different approaches of memory studies in order to discuss how the film not only represents, but also possibly essentializes Black American memory.

## Representing Black American Memory

There has been a shift in memory studies from a focus on national or ethnic contexts, which read communities such as "the" Black American community as discrete, and basically essential, "container cultures," to studying "transcultural memory"[9] and focusing on "the way narratives, images, and models of remembrance 'travel' and circulate widely with the help of

[9] See Crownshaw, *Transcultural Memory*.

media."[10] Since there is neither a homogeneous culture nor identity, cultural memory can also never be understood as being uniform or discrete. Astrid Erll argues for a perception of memory as movement instead of as bound to a "site" (as it is conceptualized in Pierre Nora's *Lieux de Mémoire*), and describes how possible contexts of such movement "range from everyday interaction among different social groups to transnational media reception" (Erll, "Travelling Memory" 16). The following analysis of *Two Distant Strangers* will concentrate on these two forms of movement: the everyday life interaction "within or between" social groups that Jan Assmann terms "communicative memory" ("Kollektives Gedächtnis" 10) and the securing of what he calls "cultural memory" within and through the film as a media product with a transnational audience.

In the case of *Two Distant Strangers*, as well as in many other representations of Black American experiences, the expression of memory is highly linked to the concept of trauma. In his work *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, Ron Eyerman describes how "as cultural process, trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory" (1). In the volume *Narrating Trauma,* the authors state how collectivities would react to traumatic experiences with the "symbolic construction and framing" of these experiences as well as with the creation of a narrative: "[A] 'we' must be constructed via narrative and coding, and it is this collective identity that experiences and confronts the danger" (Alexander et al. 11).

In *Two Distant Strangers*, the time loop can be seen as a cinematic strategy used to highlight effects of traumatic memories by destabilizing the intra-filmic timeline and enabling the film to repeat and re-enact the experienced event, which is a technique routinely used in the cinematic representation of trauma (Elm et al. 5). Through a repetition of the past resembling the flashback structures of traumatic memories, the film confronts its audience with processes of remembering trauma through re-producing the traumatic situation of Carter's murder, while it simultaneously produces new traumatic experiences with every cycle. Through the reproduction of traumatic situations which differ in their course of events but not their outcome, the film essentializes Carter's traumatic experiences as necessarily resulting in his murder. Thereby the time loop can be seen as a reference to the re-traumatization Black Americans experience by recurring acts of racist violence, which repeatedly result in the death of their victim(s). Carter and Perri reveal how their identification and behavior are highly impacted by their expectations of such re-traumatizing events. When Perri, for instance, asks Carter if he wants to use her gun, she explains why she owns one by stating: "I'm a Black woman in America" (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:16:11-00:16:16), thus referring to the expectation of acts of (intersectional) discrimination and violence based on past experiences of Black women and showing how memories of violent acts shape her present identification. Carter

[10] De Cesari and Rigney, *Transnational Memory* 3–4; see also Erll, "Travelling Memory" in the same volume.

likewise points to the difficult relationship between the police and Black Americans by stating that "the only people who are happy to see cops are White people and other cops" (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:10:50-00:10:56). He therefore highlights the racist attitudes of US-American police forces and the traumatic collective memory stemming from past encounters between Black Americans and (White) officers.

Confronted with a constant re-traumatization, Carter processes his individual memories and automatically starts to create a narrative by translating them into communicative memory. The ways in which he individually remembers the deathly encounters with Merk and communicates his memories make it obvious that he internalizes these experiences of systemic racism, which in turn further shape his memories and their future narrations. This is manifested in the way Carter directly uses his memories of past encounters with Merk to adjust his actions in order to prevent suspicion and cause violent reactions from Merk, only to learn he is doomed to fail. In the process of these experiences, Carter changes his strategy of communicating his traumatic experiences to Perri from describing them as (what he thinks is) a "traumatic, realist dream" (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:08:31-00:08:36) to giving her all the details in the end (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:27:08-00:27:27). This evolution shows the growing importance for Carter to communicate his memories in order to process the traumatic experience and find a solution for future actions.

Next to the communicative memory generated within its storyline, the short film itself can be seen as a media product that functions as "cultural objectification" of memory, transmitting the represented events to the cultural memory of its global audience. The concept of cultural memory, coined by Jan and Aleida Assmann in 1988, is based on the idea that memories which are not transmitted in interpersonal communication are secured within collective memory with the help of "cultural objectifications" in the form of texts, images, rituals, and memorials (J. Assmann, "Kollektives Gedächtnis" 11) and transferred beyond the limited time interval of communicative memory (J. Assmann, "Kollektives Gedächtnis" 12). While the concept of cultural memory functions as a crucial basis for contemporary memory studies, its original conceptualization does not do justice to the impact of (mass) media on today's memory landscape. The possibility to create a media representation such as *Two Distant Strangers* only months after the addressed events took place points to the ability of modern media to create cultural memory in a relatively short timeframe. These acceleration processes of modern media make obvious, as Martin Zierhold argues, "that the coordinates of time for social processes of memory have shifted" (401). This point is especially relevant in the context of media products such as *Two Distant Strangers*, which offers a good example for collective memories that are translated into cultural memory while at the same time being discussed as communicative memory.

The film cannot only be interpreted as a cultural objectification in itself, but also includes cultural objectifications, such as symbols, that transmit cultural memories within its narrative. One of these symbols, for instance, can be found in the form of a puddle of Carter's blood whose shape resembles the map of Africa (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:26:39-00:26:49) and thus

evokes memories of the ancestors of Black Americans who died in the Middle Passage or on slave plantations. With that, it both calls into mind the cultural memory of past traumata and strengthens the assumption that the film attempts to discuss and essentialize a part of Black American cultural memory that is highly impacted by the traumatic experiences of slavery. As the memories of slavery and racial violence are, however, not only part of Black American memory, but also integral to the experiences and memories of White people, who (actively or passively) contribute(d) to racial violence, the film represents not only Black, but also White memory. At the same time, its representation is not limited to the memories of discrete Black or White communities. Reaching a transnational audience and thus moving across and beyond communal and national borders, the film can be said to represent memories that are "*truly* transcultural" (Erll, "Travelling Memory" 15; original emphasis).

The impact of a media product that secures such transcultural memory in (social) media is also discussed within the film's storyline, as it depicts the creation of a video that captures Carter's experiences on camera: In the first two time loops, we see a passer-by who notices the brutality with which Merk attempts to arrest Carter and immediately starts to film the arrest and murder (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:06:46-00:06:00:07:27; 00:11:13-00:11:35). The film technique used in the arrest scenes evokes an unsteady, hand-operated camera work, which creates the impression of watching the scene through the camera of a smartphone and, through this imitation of a spontaneous filming instead of a professionally designed set-up, contributes to a feeling of authenticity of the scene. The filming of the passer-by evokes the videos made of both Eric Garner's and George Floyd's murders, which were important documents for the range of the discussions and protests following their deaths. At the same time it shows the speed with which Carter's individual experience and memory is translated into an image that—if transferred to a (social) media context—creates both communicative and cultural memory.

The choice of using a time loop to represent the traumatic events is also interesting considering the way in which the videos of Garner's and Floyd's deaths were incessantly reproduced in (social) media, thus confronting audiences with traumatic encounters and a potential re-traumatization. While the story does not present any impact of the video of Carter's death on the proceeding plot, the film itself can be said to provoke an unexpected confrontation of the audience with traumatic experiences. With its overall use of vivid colors, bright lights, and dynamic music, the film initially creates a lighthearted and positive atmosphere set against the traumatic depiction of Carter's murder. The contrast of Carter experiencing a really good day that ends abruptly when he encounters Merk functions as an analogy for the unpredictability for Black Americans of being confronted with racist behavior and, transferred to the confrontation with traumatic images on social media, highlights the contrast of beautiful images and (re-)traumatizing representations of violence that occurs in contemporary social media feeds.

Analogous to this dichotomy, the song "The Way It Is" by Bruce Hornsby and the Range, which is played both in the beginning and in the last scene of the film, uses a light tone while discussing heavy themes such as racism and poverty. The song was adapted by Tupac Shakur (also known as 2Pac) in his song "Changes," whose lyrics gave the short film its title. In "The Way It Is," the text is pessimistic about an existing possibility for progress, as the refrain states that there are some things which would never change (00:01:08-00:01:16). Interestingly, 2Pac's adaption seems to be more ambivalent about the possibility for change: While it declares the need for a change of the status quo (00:00:47-00:00:50), its refrain states that things would never be the same (00:01:01-00:01:08), before the last line goes back to stating that they would never change (00:04:26-00:04:27). This simultaneity of hope for a change and resignation about a persisting status quo points to a central question that is discussed in the short film: is it possible to change social structures and transcend the current state of systemic racism, or is the status quo ultimately fixed and Carter's death, subsequently, inevitable? In his final conversation with Perri, Carter adapts an optimistic perspective on a future in which he is going to make a change, so that he will ultimately be able to get home to his dog instead of being forced to politicize himself and fight against racist violence. Through the cinematic use of the time loop the film offers a range of different possible futures in which Carter gets the chance to actively impact the events, thus creating hope that there is a way out. However, with every version of his day ending with him being murdered, the film ultimately essentializes his fate as irrecoverable. If we understand this ending as a metaphorical statement, it offers a fatalistic perspective on the fate of Black people and the state of race relations in the United States.

At the same time, both Carter's optimism and the representation of memory generation within and through the film can be seen as an argument for the ongoing engagement with the current social system, as carried out by social movements such as *Black Lives Matter* or through the "Say their names"-campaign[11]. The film ends with the refrain of "The Way It Is," telling its listeners to not believe "them" (00:02:11-00:02:14), which presumably refers to the importance of keeping one's own perspective in the face of unchanging, dominant structures of systemic racism. The film offers a new perspective not only on the fate of the fictional character Carter, but also on other recent homicides of Black Americans, to which the film makes several obvious references in a textual form: In an air shot, we see the names of murdered Black individuals written on the rooftops of houses along with the slogan "Say their names" (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:23:36-00:23:48). The closing credits provide an extended list of

[11] The slogan "Say their names" ("#SayTheirNames") represents a statement central to the *Black Lives Matter* movement. In an article about the movement, Wu et al. describe how *Black Lives Matter* makes use of the rhetorical strategy "to connect and repeat the names of past Black victims of police violence" in order to foreground racial injustice as an ongoing pattern. The authors demonstrate how "activists and allies have used attention and amplification as a recurring tactic to lift and memorialize the names of Black victims of police violence," ("Say Their Names" *Abstract*) thus transferring the memory of both the victim and the crime into collective remembrance.

names of murdered Black Americans and add the everyday situations in which they were killed by police forces, which in part have been taken up in the film.[12] The credits end with the declaration: "A few of the many. Say their names. Remember their names" (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:29:20-00:29:37). With its paratext, the film adds a non-fictional level to its representation of cultural memory and is evocative of a memorial. Through these representations of memories in the form of communicative exchanges between the protagonists and in the form of cultural objectifications, *Two Distant Strangers* challenges the limitation of memory space for Black communities and thus counters the marginalization of their perspective with a powerful counter-narrative.

## Conclusion

As an American media product reaching transnational audiences, *Two Distant Strangers* can be seen as a contribution to the transcultural memory circulating within and beyond Black American culture(s). The film can be assumed to have an impact on cultural debates exceeding the US, as it not only won prizes at both the 93rd Academy Awards and the 12th AAFCA Awards, but was also subject to critical reviews by different international newspapers.[13] Assuming that the film aims for social change through its depiction of traumatic experiences and memories, its way of representing Black American identity can be read as an essentialist strategy to highlight the traumatic nature of recurring homicides of Black Americans by the US police. The film shows both the necessity and impossibility to change structures of systemic racism. By using a time loop as a central cinematic strategy, it highlights the recurring status of traumatic events motivated by racism that take place in the US and shows how "history repeats itself." The time loop also displays the difficult process of transforming traumatic experiences into memory.

*Two Distant Strangers* represents the generation of communicative memory and cultural memory within its storyline and can itself be seen as a media product adding to the cultural memory of its audience. With its strategy of essentializing Black American identities and memories it makes a strong political statement about the current state of race relations. Thereby, its short discourse time and the speed which the story time takes up while Carter is being murdered a hundred times correspond to the speed of actual debates and how they are represented in media products. Thus, *Two Distant Strangers* can be seen as a contribution to substantial representations of Black American cultural memory that transcend the limits of

[12] One scene, for instance, shows how Carter is shot in Perri's home after the police forces have mistaken her address with another one and forced entry into her flat (*Two Distant Strangers* 00:12:28-00:13:18), which mirrors the killings of both Bettie Jones and Breonna Taylor, who have been killed in their homes by police forces.

[13] See Macabasco, "'Worst Version of Groundhog Day Ever'"; Norris, "We're Stuck in a Loop of Death Until We Address Policing"; Carras, "Short 'Two Distant Strangers' Makes Oscars History".

communities, nations, or distinct cultures, and, with that, change predominant narratives about Black American histories and identities on a transcultural scale.

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