Major Research Paper


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Dedication

To my parents, who have supported my education and research and who have given me the opportunity to follow my deepest passions without question. To my friends, who have continuously engaged with me in critical discussions of social justice as we continue to fight for an equitable world. Lastly, to the Black Lives Matter Movement protesters around the world, who continue to push a global movement of racial equity forward using their voices, bodies, and empathy.
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Trigger Warning

This research discusses themes that may be sensitive to some, such as racism, abuse, self-harm, and sexual violence. Please be aware that these topics are key to the research presented.
Introduction

This research was conducted in the immediate aftermath of at least two police-involved deaths. First, George Floyd was murdered by Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis police officer, on May 25th, 2020. Chauvin was seen on video kneeling on Floyd’s throat long enough to asphyxiate him. Shortly thereafter, Regis Korchinski-Paquet died after falling from the twenty-fourth floor of her building in the presence of Toronto police on May 27th, 2020. On June 10th, Robert Fuller’s body was found hanging from a tree in LA. There was little to no investigation into the possibility of this being a brutal hate crime. Protests have broken out worldwide to call attention, once again, to the rampant and lethal racism that has been deeply rooted within the United States and Canada for centuries. These systems of oppression must be brought to light and addressed through all available means.

This research is linked specifically to the racially unjust nature of the prison system. Intertwined with a number of institutions in society, prison has systemically and systematically continued to oppress people of colour. According to Davis (2003), “the ideologies governing slavery and those governing punishment were profoundly linked during the earliest period of U.S. history” (Davis, 2003, p. 28). With freedom from slavery came other forms of enslavement, such as prison labour. Soon, prisons were filled with Black people and other people of colour, some for the most minor offenses (Davis, 2003). Davis (2003) claims that it is because of this history that people have correlated race and criminality with one another. It is imperative that we delve into the contributing factors of carceral oppression, one of which is media. It is equally as important to seek to discover the ways in which media may alter perceptions of this oppressive
system of punishment that was formulated to confine, diminish and destroy the lives of people of colour.

The focus of this research is to examine the ways in which media representations of racialized criminality affect the public’s perceptions of race and its connection to criminality, authority and punishment. This is done methodologically through the deep critical analysis of the films *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *Just Mercy* (2019). Many forms of media are readily and constantly available to the public, for some more than others based on a number of intersecting social factors. Because of its prevalence, the media and the stories they tell are important to analyze and should not be ignored. The films *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *Just Mercy* (2019) were chosen for their depiction of racialized characters in and related to the context of the prison. In addition, the passage of time between their release dates allows for a thorough investigation of possible evolution of these representations. It is imperative that this research be approached from an intersectional point of view, allowing it to accurately expose the ways in which oppression, as it relates to race, may or may not be present in the films and affect the public’s perceptions of racialized criminality. These films represent people of colour and their interactions with white people, in positions of power and submission in each film. As well, there are intersections of race, gender, and sexuality as they relate to criminality, authority and punishment.

Through the use of a qualitative critical analysis of the films and the application of the gaze and cultivation theory, the current research deconstructs a number of themes that emerge in the presentation of stories about racialized characters and explores possible implications. The major characters included in the current research are Red and Andy from *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and Walter and Bryan from *Just Mercy* (2019) as well as other characters
with whom they interact throughout the films. Cultivation theory, which explains the ways in which the public’s understandings of concepts stem from the frequency of viewing media, is applied to this research to discuss the ways in which these representations may alter perceptions of racialized offenders and punishment in society (Gerbner et al., 2002).

The gaze is an essential component of this research, highlighting the viewer’s positioning. When examining relationships among characters as well as between characters and viewers, Foucauldian origins of power relations and the gaze must be incorporated. The gaze encompasses both the experience of looking and the context within which the viewing takes place (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018). In order to conduct research such as this, the research must be reflexive and incorporate the researcher’s positioning.

**Reflexive Statement**

As a formally educated white female-presenting person, but more importantly as an ally, it is my responsibility to examine the ways in which I can use my privilege to work against systems of oppression such as the (in)justice system, and to critically examine constructions of racialized offenders in media. I, along with other non-racialized folks, must analyze and actively oppose media representations that serve to foster support for the prison industrial system as a whole. The gaze is an integral part of the research process. My experience of viewership might differ from that of folks who are positioned in social groups that are affected in intersectional ways. Therefore, this research questions the variables that are included in the process of creating racialized representations of offenders.

To further the current literature, critical race theory, gaze theory, Foucauldian power relations, critical film theory, feminist theory, and cultivation theory are applied to the films *The*
Shawshank Redemption (1994) and Just Mercy (2019). This framework will be used to highlight the types of characters that are constructed in the fictionalized context of the prison system and to discuss how these films may or may not lead the public to acquire particular perceptions of the experiences of racialized offenders.

For social justice work to be effective and significant one must appeal to people’s emotions. Because of the immersive nature of film, it intrinsically draws out a multitude of emotions from a complex plurality of viewership. Therefore, there is a deep connection between the emotionality in the act of viewing and the emotionality in the deconstruction and analysis of media. The focus of this research is on the images and script material of the chosen films as they relate to the context of the prison and the experiences of Black people who are incarcerated as well as servants of the law. Thus, it is imperative to deconstruct what images and language actively make up the human experience of the prison and the various interactions that occur within and related to its context.

Britzman (1991) urges researchers to deconstruct how knowledge is created, interpreted and how this material “becomes the measure of convention” (Britzman, 1991, p.43). The current project is organized to deconstruct the ways in which material representations of criminality alter perceptions of real criminality. It can be used in further work related to media literacy, wherein assumptions about the connections between race and criminality could be challenged and critical thinking skills developed. My projected future work with youth who have encountered the (in)justice system could also be deeply informed by this research, situating it as groundwork for community organized media production. Finally, it could be put toward deterrence from dealing with crime within spaces that are devoted to law and instead in practices of restorative justice. In
this system, social contributions to the crime that has taken place are incorporated into restorative justice as rehabilitation of both the offender and victim.

A decision has been made to capitalize the letter ‘B’ in ‘Black’ when referring to Black characters and people within the current research. When describing white people, the ‘w’ in ‘white’ is not capitalized. This is to pay homage to the connectivity of the African diaspora. W.E.B. Du Bois did this with his letter writing campaign to capitalize the ‘N’ in ‘Negro’ in order to give power to himself and his people. The current research respectfully takes part in this practice, giving power to those for whom power is long overdue.
The current research is intersectional and extends from several knowledge bases, including critical race theory as well as the study of power relations and the gaze. Each of these theories contribute in ways that confront inequality and inequity as well as the power relations that stem from them. Taken together, these theories provide a framework that allows for deep-rooted analysis of the themes that will be explored.

Critical race theory is inherently activist. Grounded in its historical ties to the study of law, the theory not only works to understand racial hierarchies in society, but also attempts to abolish racism entirely (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This theory focusses on racism at the structural and institutional levels as well as at the interpersonal level. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) point to the nearly endless ways in which racism can take form, emphasizing that it can be overt, through speech or physical interaction, but also covert and insidious in nature, through institutionalization and policy. Critical race theory is an integral part of this research as it examines racism in an intersectional manner at every level in accordance with other forms of oppression including sexism and homophobia.

At its core, the current research analyzes power relations among characters within film as well as power relations among viewers. Thus, the gaze is an indispensable theory to incorporate. Born from the psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship, the gaze is most concerned with perspectives that are afforded to some and not others through varying levels of intersecting privilege (Mayne, 1995). Judith Mayne (1993) notes that “the responses to film involve an entire range of processes, unconscious and conscious, immediate and long-term, individual and social” (Mayne, 1993, p.146). Therefore, it is not solely the construction of the characters and their story
lines, but the interrogation of viewership of these representations by racialized and white viewers that affects the social implications of these films.

By interpreting distribution of power amongst institutional authorities such as the prison system and its representatives (eg. the police, prison correctional officers, and wardens, and their “counterparts”, offenders, and those imprisoned), the examination of the Foucauldian theory of power relations is necessary. Foucault (1982) asserts that the relationship of power is only relevant if there is an element of freedom. Therefore, according to Foucault (1982), power relations operate outside of film for the viewer more so than within. This freedom in spectatorship may be afforded to some viewers more than others due to intersecting social factors. For example, later discussion about the reception of certain images that may pertain to race delves into the ways in which media is a form of socialization, which may be received differently by people of colour than by white people.

This research also focusses on concepts derived from feminist theory, which aims to identify structural inequalities based on sex and gender (Wanzo, 2016). Feminist theory is an essential component to the proposed research as intersectional power relations among gender, sex, and sexualities are present within the prison system and cannot be ignored. Because this theory is rooted in gender studies, LGBTQIA2S+ studies, and race studies, the theory can be placed in a number of different interdisciplinary fields (Wanzo, 2016). In the current research, it will be placed in the field of media studies in combination with the previously mentioned intersectional studies.

In what follows, I offer brief highlights of these theories and I add to them as I explore related research. The previous literature is explored in order to situate the research for a thorough analysis under the themes taken up as intersectional image and script-based representations of
criminality as they relate to race. The themes begin with a discussion of the broad research that investigates the role of media which includes media as a mode of presenting experiences of criminality. In addition, previous research includes cultivation theory, which focuses on the cultivation of opinions, as well as power relations, which include the gaze. Lastly, race, criminality, gender, sexuality, authority and punishment are used as guiding themes throughout the review of previous research.
Literature Review

Media is often accepted by the public without deep critical analysis. Research about the effects of viewership is often taken up in a positivist manner, wherein inferences are made about the interpretations and effects of media on public audiences. It is imperative to break down the intersectional representations of characters in films specifically relating to criminality in order to understand the ways in which members of society form their perceptions of incarcerated people. To fully investigate the representations of criminality in both films, The Shawshank Redemption (1994) and Just Mercy (2019), themes such as race, gender, sexuality, authority, punishment, and resulting power relations must be examined carefully among characters so that inferences can be made about viewers’ perceptions. Further, investigating the studies which explore responses to media portrayals of those who are imprisoned and their behaviour can help formulate arguments about the racialized characters in The Shawshank Redemption (1994) and Just Mercy (2019). The goal of this literature review is to interpret and compare the evidence presented about the representations of racialized offenders as they intersect with these themes in media and their effects on public perceptions.

The Role of Media

Media

Welsh, et al. (2011) implore us all to take note of the ways in which we construct our expectations of justice. Munro-Bjorklund (1991) illuminates the truth that members of society are not willing to treat imprisoned offenders as human beings, and instead treat them as sub-human and animalistic. In their investigation of a specific case study on George Bush and Willie
Norton in 1988, Munro-Bjorklund (1991) shows that the ways in which the media demonized Black people who are incarcerated in order to gain public support of punitive measures solidifies the argument that the public has difficulty differentiating between racialized imprisoned individuals when they are presented as extreme examples of predators upon the public. This dehumanization in the media and by state officials during the riots at Attica Prison highlight the longstanding racist attitudes of American culture (Munro-Bjorklund, 1991). As later works show, the positive shift in media representation of the pleas for better conditions in the prison later affected the perceptions of the inmates’ quality of life, clearly indicating that the personification of those that have committed crimes can greatly affect public attitudes toward the prison environment (Oleson, 2015). Privileged perceptions of criminality that come from stereotypical representations in media are a consequence of the images presented, as Flax (2003) elaborates on the internalized nature of white citizens creating a racialized ‘other’ as a response to historical power imbalances stemming from slavery. For Flax (2003), there is a process of internalization of the images of criminality in media for racialized viewers because they are constantly presented with limited representations of what constitutes an offender.

Interestingly, McQueen (2010) enriches this research with their findings that perceptions of prison culture and offenders will change due to the films that people watch, irrespective of the positive or negative changes to the prison system itself. They found this through their examination of students who took part in a course designed to interrogate students’ understandings of criminality and prison in film. The “centrality of mediated messages in shaping conceptions of power, coupled with the cultural tendency to legitimate police power, imbues police with a substantial degree of control over the discourse and a tremendous platform by which to perpetuate narratives that serve the interests of the powerful” (McNair, 2011, p.11).
McNair’s (2011) research explores the relationship between portrayals of policing and the public’s responsive support for policing. McNair (2011) and other contributors have found that the perpetuation of racialized crime and punishment targets marginalized communities in television such as the show *COPS* (1989), wherein policing is focussed on socioeconomically depressed communities (McNair, 2011, Harris and Mushtaq, 2013).

*Cultivation Theory*

Cultivation theory, created by George Gerbner, asserts that constructions of the social world are molded by the media and “predicts that the consequences of television exposure are most pronounced for its most frequent viewers” (Gerbner et al., 2002 in Martins and Harrison, 2012, p.343). Reiner (2007) indicates that cultivation theory is concerned with shared understandings that could be applied to criminal activity and justice through media representations. Holbert et al. (2004) found that “viewing television news and reality police [television] shows is associated with greater support for capital punishment” (Holbert, et al., 2004, p.354). These representations can have a substantial impact on serious misinterpretations of the (in)justice system and can lead to increased fear of the world (Holbert, et al. 2004). Further, the activation of stereotypes related to gender, sexuality, race and socioeconomic status are due to the high exposure to particular images of offenders that are fed to the public through various media outlets (Dixon, 2007).

*Power Relations and The Gaze*

In the context of the current research, the investigation of power relations must remain at the forefront, both within and outside of the films *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *Just
Mercy (2019). Foucault (1982) asserts that these power relations are linked to identity, both at the institutional and the interpersonal levels. Power relations encompass struggles against forms of domination, “ethnic, social, and religious”, against forms of exploitation, and against forms of “subjugation and submission” that tie a subject to themselves and others in these “ethnic, social, and religious” groups (Foucault, 1982, p.781). For Foucault (1982), what is most important about relations of power is not simply the relationship between subjects in society, but rather how the imposed actions of certain subjects affect others. Some of these actions include the surveillance and over-policing of communities of colour. These actions may be exemplified in various ways throughout the chosen films as Foucault (1982) points to the ways in which forms of institutionalization can customize hierarchical power relations and create what they refer to as a specific “loci” (Foucault, 1982, p.792). These “loci” are particular regulations within complex systems, which in the case of the prison, aim to survey and regulate the actions of those incarcerated (Foucault, 1982, p.792). Therefore, the analysis of power relations must be included in this research in order to infer the ways in which the chosen representations both affect and are affected by viewer experiences and perceptions.

The gaze acts as an extension of power relations in the current research. Gaze theory is characterized by the individualized practice of viewing as well as by the resulting relationship that the viewer develops with what they are gazing upon (Berger, 1972). Williams (1997) concludes that gaze theory has challenged the “unitary spectator” that was once historically represented in cinematic studies (Williams, 1997, p.4). Spectatorship has grown to emphasize “the plurality and paradoxes of many viewing positions” (Williams, 1997, p.4). Hansen (1997) furthers the notion of multiplicity of viewership by including both sociological determinants and the influence of mass culture’s creation of complex and conflicting identities. In the context of
this research, the gaze relies on the various spectator relationships that may be formed through the presentation of both racialized and non-racialized characters, particularly as they relate to gender, sexuality and power relations both within and outside of films.

**Racialized Identities in Media**

In their investigation of the racial objectification and resulting violence that took place at Attica prison in 1971, Munro-Bjorklund (1991) identifies how and why this isolated incident became an example of the longstanding problematic representations of offenders in media. Their examination of multiple forms of media including newsprint, magazines, televised news, films and music, serves to strengthen the reality of the pervasiveness of a racist culture, and the production and perpetuation of offender identities. Their work calls attention to a marginalized group that fights for decent and humane treatment. In order to appeal to the public and instill support among citizens for policies of institutionalized punishment, fictional media, particularly films, portray Black and other racialized inmates in limited roles as offenders that “exclude them from any real position of power or heroism” forcing them into “emasculated positions[s]” (Munro-Bjorklund, 1991, p.60) where they do not pose a threat to the greater public. Though it is the punishment that removes the threat, the constant portrayal of punishment as a singular response to crime solidifies support for systems that continually impose carceral punishment onto racially vulnerable populations. Flax (2003) furthers this argument through the use of Cheng’s (2001) interpretation of “melancholy of race”, with which “the privileged degrade the racialized others and internalize this degraded subject” (Flax, 2003, p.59). White viewers separate themselves from what they see onscreen and pity the racialized, ignoring the privilege that they inherently have over racialized offenders.
The media often distort and overlook white collar crime. As Oleson’s (2015) findings on the function of punishment in contemporary film show, prisons in the United States are filled with young, Black males or males of Hispanic descent, but fictional media depicts more white criminals as being “mature” and “of high social status” (Oleson, 2015, p.615). Generally, their research focusses on racialized identities in fictional media directly related to crime and/or punishment and the results show both support for the prison system as punishment and how media secures privileged and racist understandings of what constitutes criminality (Oleson, 2015).

Criminality’s Intersections with Race

Despite the low socioeconomic status of most individuals who are incarcerated, according to Oleson (2015), media criminality, particularly in fictional television and film, is often depicted as being representative of mature, white males of high social status. They are portrayed as “urbane masterminds”, who are “motivated by pathological greed, incorrigible psychopathy, or a thirst for revenge”, while their racialized counterparts are often not afforded these emotional characteristics (Oleson, 2015, p.615). This, therefore, creates unrealistic expectations in the minds of viewers that can sway voting to support matters related to punishment and the (in)justice system (Oleson, 2015). McNair (2011) agrees that this racial difference, coupled with overrepresentation of racialized crime and police response can lead to celebrated and uncritical support for police and punishment.

Through their study of university students’ perceptions of crime and punishment, McQueen (2010) indicates that the manner in which the offenders are presented in film influences positive, negative or neutral responses to the (in)justice system. Students who
participated in their study consequently exhibited empathy toward those who are imprisoned depending on the types of incarcerated individuals presented to them. Through the use of Garland’s (1990) model for culture and punishment, which discusses the ways in which “cinematic themes in prison films are the key elements in shaping perceptions of prison culture [including prisons, prisoners, and prison staff]” (McQueen, 2010, p.24), McQueen (2010) was able to demonstrate that “the images depicted in the prison films [used in their study] are very instrumental in shaping the social perceptions of viewers” (McQueen, 2010, p.56). These results were preceded by the work of Munro-Bjorklund (1991), who examined the sources of popular culture that illustrated the rebellion at Attica Prison in 1971 as reflective of the social climate of the time, highly embellished with racist assumptions about criminality.

**Criminality’s Intersections with Gender and Sexuality**

In order to thoroughly investigate the unjustified inequalities in media representations of racialized and non-racialized offenders, one must not overlook the intersecting factors that make up media representations of social behaviour. Flax (2003) speaks to conventions, “which are culturally and geographically specific” (Flax, 2003, p.61); conventions that mold how gender identity is assigned and received. This indicates that media follows these conventions in order to uphold understandings of gender as they relate to certain racial identities. Specifically in regards to race, throughout history, cinema has depicted Black males as hypermasculine, aggressive and lacking in character development (McNair, 2011). This is echoed by Oleson (2015), who points to the male focus of prison life and the ways in which white male offenders are depicted as having high social status and high maturity, directly opposing the lack of character depth that is often afforded to Black male characters.
According to Butler (1990), gender and sexuality are intertwined; therefore one must examine them both when discussing race-related issues to grasp socially constructed understandings of concepts such as hyper- and toxic masculinity. Welsh et al. (2011) point to a study conducted by Schiappa et al. (2008) that found that exposure to episodes of the television sitcom *Will And Grace* (1998) among university students who had reported little or no exposure to gay men was correlated with “reductions in sexual prejudice toward homosexuals” (Schiappa et al., 2008, p.459). The resulting change in perception of homosexuality was specific to white males and indicated that the presentations of homosexuality by *Will And Grace* (1998), were positive. There was no indication that these findings related to racialized men in society as this research did not include them, exemplifying a gap in the current research.

**Authority and Punishment**

Although certain media depictions create positive outcomes, such as that provided by *Will and Grace* (1998), others aim to misrepresent and foster negative perceptions of those accused of crime and positive support for the prison system, for example. To further explain this link between media and support of policy, Munro-Bjorklund (1991) maintains that images of criminality are often created and distributed irresponsibly, creating misrepresentations and, in turn, certain perceptions about real offenders. Oleson (2015) and McNair (2011) agree that it is the emphasis on violent criminal images in both fiction and non-fiction media that promote the culture of fear and a moral panic among members of society. The anxiety that results from media coverage of incidents such as the uprising at Attica strengthen authoritative positions of law enforcement and prison officials (Munro-Bjorklund, 1991). Public opinions of crime and criminality are contingent upon how characters are framed (Welsh et al., 2011). Examined
through an intersectional lens, Flax (2003) contextualizes this in their analysis of the film Monster’s Ball (2001), indicating that power relations between authority and racialized offenders are heightened in fictional films because of the presence of race difference.

Adding to the preceding contributions, resulting data from a study explored by McQueen (2010) shows that it is easier for fictional film makers to portray prisons negatively even though “taxpayers continuously contribute millions of dollars to support punitive institutions” (McQueen, 2010, p.55). They found that those who participated in their study felt negatively or indifferent about the prison, therefore indicating that the public is on the fence about prisons and need more accurate representations of the treatment of offenders in order to fully develop an understanding and opinion of prison life (McQueen, 2010).

Concluding Thoughts

The contributors of the preceding research on racialized characters, criminality, the (in)justice system, and power relations have effectively presented the preliminary investigations for this media analysis. Building on that work, the themes of the character representations examined in the films The Shawshank Redemption (1994) and Just Mercy (2019) will be of race, gender, sexuality, authority, punishment and power relations among characters.
Research Methodology

The Shawshank Redemption (1994) and Just Mercy (2019) have been chosen for this research because of their general content, which relates to the experiences of Black people during their incarceration. The films allow for an exploration of representations of criminality as they relate to race and other intersecting identifiers such as gender and sexuality. The focus of this research is on the representations in the films and the subsequent effect that these representations may have on public perceptions of racialized criminality. Therefore, a critical content analysis has been employed, wherein both dialogue and images are coded under the themes: race, gender, sexuality, criminality, authority and punishment. In order to effectively discuss the relationships and various power imbalances within and outside the films, the coding has taken into account the general themes of the films which depict Black males and their interactions with their white counterparts, both within and outside of the prison.

First, The Shawshank Redemption (1994) was viewed with specific attention to the visual representations of the above themes. The film Just Mercy (2019) was then watched with the same intention. The films were critically and repetitively viewed for visual themes three times each, before the coding was switched to script-based material for three more viewings, where the same themes were coded. Codes were time stamped in order to be easily recoverable for further analysis.

A qualitative critical content analysis provides freedom for the researcher to engage with images and texts in order to uncover themes or patterns through interpretive means (Short, 2017). Because the current research requires careful attention to racial inequalities and power relations among characters within the prison context, an anti-racist research methodology must be
employed. This methodology “places the minoritized at the center of analysis by focussing on their lived experiences” and the intersectional nature of oppression (Dei, 2005, p.2). Reflexivity is a significant component of anti-racist research, according to Dei (2005), as it forces the researcher to become situated within it. It is imperative to cyclically return to the research analysis and ask oneself how our own experiences have affected our perceptions of media representations of criminality and deviance more generally. Anti-racist research is inherently built on the notion of social action. The current research is meant to bring to light the inequalities in filmic stories, specifically in the context of the prison.

Coupled with anti-racist research, deconstructionism is essential to this critical content analysis. Introduced by Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), deconstructionism “aims to uproot, decompose, undo, dismantle and overturn Western relationality through the sustained and multiple textual analysis of (seminal) writings” (Kelemen and Rumens, 2008, p.4). Kelemen and Rumens (2008) argue that this method does not claim to locate ‘truth’ within the texts, but instead focusses on the power that the creators of these texts, or films, have over their outcomes. One’s positionality in relation to these artefacts is key to understanding the interwoven racial interactions portrayed in the films.

Critical film theory will be used to assess the representations in each film as well as to discuss the ways in which representations may affect the public’s understandings of reality. This research stems from film theory’s psychoanalytical background, which is concerned primarily with gender, power relations and the gaze (Sturken and Cartright, 2018). Comanducci (2018) claims that film theory and spectatorship work cyclically to produce meaning. The cyclicity of critical film theory and spectatorship for Mayne (1993) creates a point of “tension”, which in
tandem with race, the critical focus of the current research, can urge white viewers to actively reflect on their positionality and privilege (Mayne, 1993, p.76.)

Cultivation theory is used to achieve a full understanding and interpretation of viewership and the construction of assumptions about particular images. Explained through the research of Gerbner et al. (2002) and Reiner (2007), the public cultivates shared understandings of particular themes and people according to what they are presented with. When assessing various aspects of societal power relations, it is imperative to locate representations that replicate these inequalities based on race, gender, sex, and sexuality, and how they may be problematic. These themes are the focus of this research as they are essential to situating the subjects of these films in curated roles. While cultivation theory’s focus is primarily on the outcomes of viewership as it relates to the frequency and quantity of content consumed, the use of cultivation theory in the current research is necessary to indicate that there are common themes frequently represented in The Shawshank Redemption (1994) and Just Mercy (2019) that may affect perceptions of racialized criminality and punishment (Gerbner et al., 2002).

Throughout the analysis, the focussed-upon themes will be the representations of race, gender, sexuality, authority, punishment and power relations among characters within the films. Both films provide a range of characters that have intersecting points of hierarchical power and marginalization. The decision to focus on characters in The Shawshank Redemption (1994) and Just Mercy (2019) was based upon the length of time between the films’ releases to see if there might be differences in their portrayals of racialized offenders. Ulin’s (2013) scholarship informs this research with their previous investigation of biracial escape films, one of which is The Shawshank Redemption (1994). Their focus on Black characters as secondary characters to their white counterparts formulates a context wherein the power relations between the characters can
be further explored. Ulin’s (2013) research allows this critical content analysis to delve into these representations both within *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), based on the 1982 novel by Stephen King, and *Just Mercy* (2019), which is based on the true story of Black attorney Bryan Stevenson’s fight for wrongfully accused Black man Walter McMillian’s freedom from death row.

In *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) the following characters are analyzed: the lead, Andy, a white, middle class, heterosexual male, Red; a Black heterosexual, fellow incarcerated male, The Sisters; a group of white, homosexual males, Warden Norton; the white overseer of the prison, Captain Hadley; the white head of corrections, and various other intersectional members of the storyline. Extraneous characters were deemed unnecessary for this research as they were static representations that were not significant parts of the storylines.

In *Just Mercy* (2019) the following characters were analyzed: Walter McMillian, a Black male detained on death row in Alabama; Bryan Stevenson, a Black male defence attorney; Eva Ansley, a white heterosexual female and local Alabama advocate who assists Bryan with his cases, as well as other characters. These characters were chosen over others due to their significance in the storyline just as characters were chosen in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994).
Findings

PART 1:
Intersections of Race and Criminality, Including Gender, Sexuality, Authority and Punishment in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994)

*Introduction*

Set in Portland, *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) opens to the sound of a classical song playing on a static-ridden car radio with the words “my breath begins and ends with you” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994), sweetly alluding to the crime that jumpstarts the storyline. Andy, a young, well-dressed, white man sits in a car, drunkenly distraught. Parked outside of a home at night, Andy downs the rest of his whiskey as the voice of a prosecutor can be heard describing the crime that took place. In a change of scene, Andy now sits on the stand of a courtroom, changed in the deaths of his wife and her lover. The court finds him guilty, even though he is innocent, and he is condemned to serve two life sentences at Shawshank State Prison.

Andy’s lengthy experience of Shawshank Prison is narrated by fellow inmate and eventual friend, Red. Played by Morgan Freeman, Red is the only Black character with a dominant role in the film. Red acts as Andy’s confidant through the years, as Andy comes into contact with a multitude of personalities. The first is a tall, burly, white male; Hadley, the head Corrections Officer at the prison, who mentally and physically abuses all detainees when he can. Accompanying him is Norton, the power-and-money-hungry warden, who employs a strict use
of the Bible to keep order in the prison. Many more characters appear throughout the years, such as Brookes; the elderly librarian, and Tommy; a young, white male, who joins Andy and his cohort a number of years into Andy’s sentence. In addition, there are characters such as The Sisters, who persistently prey on Andy, sexually assaulting him throughout his sentence. Each character brings forward important components to the story that *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) attempts to tell. This film is based on the Novel written by Stephen King.

**Race**

*Race Made Invisible.* Frank Darabont, director of *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) injected race into the film without explicitly placing it in the script. Except for one verbal interaction in which Red makes a joke of his race, there are no discussions to acknowledge the racial inequities within the (in)justice system. When asked why he has the nickname Red, he replies, “maybe it’s ‘cause I’m Irish” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994). What most audience members would take as a joke, is in fact the true answer given by the white Ellis Boyd Redding in the original novel written by Stephen King. While the film is based on King’s novel, Red’s change in race has a significant impact on the storyline. This will later be explored as a comparison to the film *Just Mercy* (2019).

**Red’s Role as a Narrator.** ‘Ellis Boyd Redding’, otherwise known as ‘Red’ works as the narrator of the story, commenting predominantly on the happenings associated with ‘Andy’ and the interactions that he has with other characters. Always present for others’ experiences, ‘Red’ advances the storyline of his white counterparts, with limited focus on himself, his journey
through and his previous life outside of prison. The way that ‘Red’ is portrayed situates him as a secondary character. The film’s focus on ‘Andy’s’ experiences with the use of ‘Red’s’ narration contributes to ‘Andy’s’ mysteriousness. This prepares the audience for the realization of ‘Andy’s’ creative and secretive exit from ‘Shawshank Prison’. Watching characters’ experiences from ‘Red’s’ perspective brings ‘Red’ and the audience together, further allowing them to see the inequities felt by ‘Red’ throughout his sentence, without the explicit understanding that race may play a part.

**Andy’s Escape Versus Red’s Release.** One of the most significant differences between Red and Andy’s experiences of the (in)justice system, is their interactions with legal authorities. As previously mentioned, Andy’s trial exemplifies his privileged experience, although he is found guilty. Andy sits on the stand in the courtroom, accompanied by a white prosecutor, a white defence lawyer, a white judge, jury and audience. The scene that follows directly juxtaposes the previous image as we are shown Red’s parole hearing taking place in a small room of the prison. Surrounded by a white parole board, Red sits with his hat removed and an air of deference. When asked if he feels he has been rehabilitated, Red regurgitates the same few lines that have seemingly been said before: “oh yes, absolutely sir”, almost beggingly adding, “I can honestly say I’m a changed man” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994).

The inequity between Red’s treatment in the legal system and Andy’s culminates at what would be considered the climax of the film. A guard performs a regularly scheduled cell check throughout the prison and when Andy Dufresne is not present and accounted for, the officer reports to Warden Norton. Upon inspection of Andy’s cell, Norton throws a meticulously whittled chess piece carved by Andy with the rock hammer acquired by Red at a poster on
Andy’s wall. An echoing noise disturbs the quiet cell as it bounces down what sounds like a tunnel. Discovering that the piece actually continues through the poster, Norton rips it from the wall, only to realise that over the nineteen years that Andy was at the prison, he had dug himself a small tunnel and escaped. A montage of Andy’s escape includes a maneuver in which Andy switches Norton’s financial statements with a mutilated Bible and a walk through the hallway during which the camera pans to Andy wearing Warden Norton’s shoes that he was assigned to shine. Red stands in his dark cell, his face still in the shadows of imprisonment, looking down at Andy’s slow walk. Upon Andy’s escape, Red narrates his visit to a bank during which he collects The Warden’s laundered money and sends news of the latter’s schemes to the local newspaper.

Andy’s escape greatly differs from Red’s departure from the prison years later. In one of the final scenes of *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), Red relives another parole hearing. This time, Red responds differently, claiming he does not know “what rehabilitation means, it’s a politician’s word” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994). He goes on to elaborate in his own way that rehabilitation is not achievable. In response, the parole board releases him. Red can be seen exiting the prison, wearing an old tattered brown suit that sat waiting to be worn for forty years. Red proceeds to live his life outside of the prison, trying to keep up with the fast-paced world, eventually reuniting with his long-time friend Andy. Employed at the local grocery store, just as Brookes the elderly librarian was before him, Red is visually overwhelmed by modern and hurried daily life. Hesitantly approaching his boss one day at work, Red can be seen asking for permission to use the washroom, something that he had done for most of his life but is not required to do as a free man. These final scenes exhibit the ways in which the connotations associated with experiences of white people in prisons versus those of their Black counterparts can vastly differ based on privilege acquired through race.
Andy manages to use his privilege as an educated young man to help his fellow inmates in a number of ways during his sentence. One of the largest projects that Andy takes on is that of expanding the prison library. Upon being assigned to the library, Andy meets Brookes, an elderly lifer who delivers the limited selection of books to inmates in their cells. Andy begins by organizing the books. Over the years, Andy acquires a significant number of books for the prison by writing letters to local politicians. In a scene in which Andy and his family of inmates unpack the books for the new library, Andy educates them on the titles and storylines of well-known stories. Small acts of privilege reveal themselves throughout the film, wherein Andy uses his knowledge, acquired through a good education, to better the lives of others.

One of these lives is that of Tommy, a young, white male who enters Shawshank Prison in 1965. A young father, Tommy approaches Andy in hopes that he would help him get his General Education Development Diploma. Andy dedicates his time to teaching Tommy all he may need for the final exam. Tommy is afforded, as the young, white character, the opportunity and desire for an education. This, in and of itself, depicts the image of privilege. Audiences are graced with the story of a young, white, man, ready to better his ways and become a responsible father, guided by a white, well educated, and well-intentioned, older male.

**White Privilege and Brookes’ Death.** Brookes’ death is significant as a point of privilege in the film as well. It is important to note the depictions of death in film as, Brookes, a white male, takes his own life. Brookes is released after a fifty-year long sentence, only to suffer the unknown world of the 1950s. In a letter to his Shawshank family, Brookes describes the world as new and overwhelming, clearly indicating a decision to commit suicide. He stands, helpless before a chair. As the camera pans up, Brookes struggles to reach up with his tired arm
to write on a wooden beam; “Brookes was here” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994). A last attempt at making a mark on the vast world that Brookes feels he was only minutely a part of. With merely the view of his tattered brown shoes, viewers watch Brookes slowly shuffle off of the chair and swing in the air. Careful attention is payed to the way his death is portrayed, as the camera pans backwards. This kind of death denotes a sense of control, one that is not afforded to characters of colour in Just Mercy (2019), for example.

Criminality

Red’s Criminality. Red is known as the one who can get things done around Shawshank. On a regular basis, Red engages in low level crimes such as smuggling contraband into the prison for his friends, or using his ability to bargain, whispering to the guards to get his and his friends’ names in the draw for a roofing job in the summer. Such an activity takes their minds off of the dark monotony of prison life. In fact, without knowing it, Red even provides Andy with the tool to obtain his freedom, a small rock hammer. There is a significant difference between Red’s deviance and Andy’s as one is knowingly committing small crimes, whereas the other does no such thing until he is forced by Warden Norton to become a pawn in his money-laundering scheme. This is later explored as a condition of Andy’s privilege as a learned, business-savvy, white man. Solidifying his representation as a proven and convicted criminal, Red refers to himself as “the only guilty man in Shawshank” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994), contradicting the running joke throughout the film that all of Shawshank’s inhabitants are innocent either because of faulty representation, bad evidence/wrong place wrong time mentality, or many other excuses presented throughout the film.
Andy’s Criminality. Andy enters the prison as a young, educated, well established, white, banker. Though he faces his own struggles throughout his long sentence at Shawshank Prison, Andy learns to use his privilege in his favour and in the favour of his newly found family of Shawshank inhabitants. In contrast to Red’s ability to get things done through illegal means such as the aforementioned smuggling of contraband, Andy uses his education and status as a banker; one afforded to him because of his privileged status as a wealthy man, to help the guards and the Warden financially. These schemes range in level of criminality such as the scheme that was fabricated by Andy after overhearing Officer Hadley complain about the tax on money that he had inherited. Andy establishes himself as the stand-in prison accountant doing guards’ taxes and eventually launders money for Warden Norton under duress. As Red narrates, “behind every shady deal, behind every dollar earned, there [is] Andy, keeping the books” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994). Furthering the narrative that white collar men, in the position of privilege that Andy inhabits, are innocent and unproblematic in society, Andy explains to Red that “on the outside [he] was an honest man, straight as an arrow. [He] had to come to prison to be a crook” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994). This positions Andy as the innocent, white, male who was wronged by the system, convicted for the murder of his wife and her lover, only to be forced into laundering money for The Warden. Though he is rightfully innocent, the various aspects of his privilege help to give basis for his innocence for audiences. Andy is a character held by a strict moral understanding of what is right and wrong. He goes along with Norton’s laundering schemes, knowing that he will set things straight with what Red refers to as Andy’s “shitty pipe dreams” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994). This is a comical reference to Andy’s literal escape, wherein he must crawl through the sewers in order to free himself from Shawshank’s confines.
He eventually uses his freedom and educated understanding of the schemes that he took part in to hand over proof of Norton’s criminal behaviour to the authorities.

**The Warden’s Criminality.** Warden Norton acts as the highest authority at Shawshank Prison and with the use of religious passages and lessons, he positions both himself and Christianity as specifically white authorities. However, his criminal actions blur the lines of his authoritarian status. His criminality ranges from unlawful treatment of the population at Shawshank, to the laundering of money with the help of educated and knowledgeable Andy, to the shady deals with local business owners in order to use prison labour to benefit himself financially. Eventually, his many abuses of power lead to the death of one inmate; Tommy. When the film presents the fact that Tommy is aware, through a witness, that Andy is innocent, audiences are given a sense of hope for Andy. Andy eagerly and naively brings forward the new information about the witness, his innocence, and the hope for his own freedom, but is met with the threat of what detainees at Shawshank call ‘The Hole’. Norton throws Andy into a cold, dark, windowless cell for two weeks. Additionally, in order to keep his many schemes afloat, Norton coaxes Tommy outside the prison walls for a smoke. Tommy stands under the only lit light post, watching as Norton emerges from the darkness. Norton takes what he believes to be the necessary measure and orders Officer Hadley to shoot Tommy and frame him for attempting to escape. Visiting Andy only to deliver the news that his Shawshank friend has died, Warden Norton leans down to the cowering, hungry, mentally deprived Andy, with an evil grin stamped across his face. Without a second thought, The Warden leaves Andy in the cold darkness, slamming the hole’s heavy door behind him. This is one of the many ways in which the film
displays white legal authority as criminality, defying what we would understand to be moral and ethical.

**Gender**

*The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) focusses predominantly on the male experience of prison. With the exception of the victim, Andy’s wife, the film’s focus is on the lives of the incarcerated. This environment presents a multitude of interactions that are fraught with toxic masculinity. The performance of masculinity is exhibited in a number of exchanges between characters in the film, both through imagery and script material. Additionally, gender and race intersect in this prison environment.

The beginning moments of the film display the most dangerous aspects of toxic masculinity. A subset of hegemonic masculinity, toxic masculinity “is characterized by a drive to dominate and the endorsement of misogynistic and homophobic views” (Parent et. al, 2018, p.278). Andy is painted as a man wronged by two people and embarrassed by his wife’s infidelity. As he describes his wife’s affair on the stand of the courtroom, he appears noticeably uncomfortable, arguably due to the fact that this affair is being used as his motive for the murders of his wife and her lover, but even more deeply due to the fact that he is a wealthy, white, male, banker, who has been publicly humiliated and unjustly framed for the killing.

As previously explored, Andy is subjected to various types of violence, some of which are inflicted onto him by The Sisters, who sexually assault him. Through Red’s narration, the audience comes to understand the impact that these attacks have on Andy, despite his unwillingness to open up and talk about these encounters with his incarcerated family. Nor do
they attempt to invite such discussion. A montage of scenes depicting Andy’s violent encounters with The Sisters displays not only the constant fight that Andy must be prepared for, but as well the consuming fear that over time can be seen on Andy’s exhausted and defeated face. Later, when Andy is thrown in ‘The Hole’ for confronting Warden Norton, he leaves referring to ‘The Hole’ as “the easiest time [he] ever did” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994). This, for viewers is merely a front for what they previously witnessed of Andy in The Hole just a few scenes earlier. The image of him balled up on the floor of a cold, dark, cell, without proper food and water connotes a vulnerability that is not acknowledged by Andy when he recounts his experience to his incarcerated family at Shawshank.

**Sexuality**

Sexuality is intertwined within the story at Shawshank as well, most notably through The Sisters. Early on in Andy’s sentence, The Sisters display an obvious interest in him, encroaching on his personal space in the showers and touching him in numerous ways throughout the film. One day, Andy’ stands in the courtyard, speaking to Red as he plays catch. Looking across the prison field, Andy inquires whether or not “it would help if [he] explained that [he] is not homosexual” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994). Red’s response exposes the commonality of homosexuality in the context of prison when he looks over to them with a disgusted squint in his eye and replies they do not identify as homosexual either. *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), uses The Sisters to personify homosexuality as predatory and violent. Red’s indication that they “take by force” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994) works to further the narrative that incarcerated homosexual individuals have no respect for consent and only seek to assault. There
is a grooming nature to their predatory behaviour, as The Sisters begin with an approach in the shower, while one calmly tells Andy, “we all need friends in here, I could be a friend to you” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994). As Andy walks away, seemingly uncomfortable, the leader of The Sisters, Bogs Diamond, adds, “hard to get, I like that”, alluding to the need for forceful attacks that follow in later scenes (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994). Strikingly, none of the scenes depicting the attacks by The Sisters are ever fully shown, but rather are implied. No nudity is exhibited by The Sisters, but the forceful overpowering of Andy and his torment is only seen for a few moments before the rapes occur. This contradicts the scene which opened the film of Andy’s heterosexual wife and her male lover passionately engaging sexually in his home. Harassment and rape are shown as a means to gain power, more so than the desire for sex.

**Authority and Punishment**

*The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) depicts many acts of violence in the name of punishment. These acts of violence are often performed by authority, whether that be correctional officers or other imprisoned people. It is imperative to shed light on the data that reflects patterns of authority and punishment as they are linked to race. It is clear, in this film, that the prison is not an institution created for the purpose of rehabilitation, but rather as a punishment for one’s crimes. Even Red notes in his last parole hearing that “rehabilitated is just a made-up word”, claiming that he does not understand what it even means because of the forms of punishment that he has both witnessed and been subjected to (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994). This comes after multiple hearings, wherein Red’s only understanding of the parole
process is his regurgitation of the same words “I have been rehabilitated” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994).

Throughout the film, viewers are presented with various levels of authority. Most obvious are those that include the legal authority personified by Officer Hadley and the other correctional officers at Shawshank. Above Hadley is Warden Norton, who controls all operation within and associated with the prison. The positions of authority held by those imprisoned are less overt, yet still acknowledged.

**Red’s Authority.** Red’s position of authority is linked to his reputation as the one who can get anyone anything. Sneaking in various items for his family of detainees as well as making deals with correctional officers in order to benefit his family is a regular occurrence and affords Red leverage over others at Shawshank Prison. His demeaner visually differs when he is not in the presence of guards, carrying himself with an air of knowledge about the experience of prison life. This type of authority is afforded to Red predominantly because of his forty-year sentence that began when he was just a young person. Aging within the prison walls, Red used the environment in which he acquired his learned behaviour to benefit himself.

**Warden Norton’s Authority and Punishment.** Warden Norton and Officer Hadley’s authority differ from that of Red’s as their authority is more overt. It is clear through his actions that Norton is the puppet master at Shawshank and uses the brutal force of his correctional officers as the physical authority. Except for the scene in which Norton throws rocks at Red in anger over the discovery of Andy’s escape, Norton is not seen physically brutalising anyone
himself. Instead, Officer Hadley does the dirty work. Hadley performs unlawful acts of violence using brutal beatings as scare tactics, sometimes leading to death.

**The Use Of Religion As Authority And Punishment.** Interestingly, religion is used by Warden Norton as a tool to lend weight to his authority throughout the prison. He is constantly alluding to the power that God has over those who have sinned, namely those at Shawshank Prison. During a cell visit, Warden Norton unknowingly holds in his hand the key to Andy’s escape, claiming “salvation lies within” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994). Andy’s use of the Bible to hide his rock hammer indicates that the statement rings true; his freedom is within the holy book forced upon the incarcerated people at the hand of a corrupt, white, privileged, and self-titling moralist. Interestingly, the power of his moral authority is completely undermined by the fact that his own criminality is literally hidden behind his religious morality. In Warden Norton’s office hangs a tapestry with the words “His judgement cometh, and that right soon” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019), which hauntingly alludes to Norton’s own confrontation with the police at the end of the film. Behind it sits a safe, wherein lies proof of his money laundering. Andy’s switching maneuver leaves Norton with merely Andy’s mutilated Bible, a witty joke on his part. The Warden sees this before he runs to his shoe box, finding Andy’s tattered, old, prison yard boots in place of the ones Andy was meant to shine. As police sirens begin to sound closer and closer, The Warden stares down at the boots, ones that he will eventually need for his own future sentence. Of course, Norton does not accept his fate, and instead takes his own life by gunshot.
PART 2:

Intersections of Race and Criminality, Including Gender, Sexuality, Authority and Punishment in *Just Mercy* (2019)

*Introduction*

With the sound of leaves in the wind, the opening scene of *Just Mercy* (2019) gives its viewers a sense of serenity. Across the screen, words appear: “1987, Monroe County, Alabama”. Trees are chopped by a middle-aged Black man, Walter McMillian, who, with an air of calm, gently brings his head to the sky to admire the beauty of the forest. As he drives home, a soulful song plays on the radio delivering the words “I was out chopping cotton and my brother was bailing hay” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019). What follows is a scene rich with intensity, obviously linked to race, as Walter stops his truck before a roadblock of police cars. Officers stand behind their vehicle doors, aiming their guns at Walter’s face. One officer approaches as Walter slowly raises his hands on the wheel of his truck. Walter is arrested as a reporter is heard narrating “Rhonda Morrison was found dead at Jackson Cleaners” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019), stating that the victim had been strangled by Walter.

*Just Mercy* (2019) recounts the story of Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer whose goal is to free wrongfully convicted, predominantly Black men from prison. He relocates to Alabama to start an organization, The Equal Rights Initiative, with which he represents those whom he feels have been unjustly sent to Death Row. Despite Walter McMillian’s initial skepticism and resistance, Bryan works closely with Walter, who has been wrongfully convicted. After a trial, followed by an appeal and a retrial, Walter is found not guilty and is set free. He has spent six years on
The construction of racIALIZED criminality in film

Alabama Death Row. Many characters are introduced throughout the film, all of whom exhibit various representations of the themes at the basis of the current research. Bryan and Walter are the most pivotal characters, along with Eva, a young, white, woman who is passionate about the work that Bryan is doing. In addition, there are the local authorities such as the District Attorney, Sherriff Tate, and Meyers, a key witness in the case, along with many of Walter’s family members and fellow inhabitants of death row Herb and Anthony. This film is based on the real lives of Bryan Stevenson and Walter McMillian.

Race

The Dichotomy of Race. Unlike The Shawshank Redemption (1994), Just Mercy (2019) dives deep into the racial tensions of the American South in the 1980s. From the moment that Walter is stopped in his truck and the officer utters the words, “after what you’ve done, I’m looking for any excuse to get this over with” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019), it is clear that this film delves into the blatant and corrupt maltreatment of Black folks in the United States. Just Mercy’s (2019) context is different from The Shawshank Redemption’s (1994) but the imagery of racism is delivered once again when we are introduced to Bryan Stevenson. Bryan stands behind metal bars, the camera close to his stern face. He is a young, well dressed, Black, law student who visits Walter, his client, for the first time in prison. The image that is used to introduce Bryan alludes to the limits of his freedom as a Black man. From then on, viewers understand that this image foreshadows the racism felt by all Black characters. Upon his arrival at the penitentiary, the correctional officer who greets him does not recognize his name and abruptly insists on strip searching Bryan. Bryan states that attorneys are not searched for legal visits with
their clients, to which the officer replies “you ain’t gonna visit shit unless you get in that room and strip” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019). This line connotes a sense of higher authority that this officer, one with less qualifications that Bryan, feels he has, arguably based on his race. The pervasive racism present in the U.S., both in the 1980s and still rampant today, allows the officer to feel that this humiliation is necessary in order to reinstate the power dynamic that he believes is right.

Additionally, this interaction exhibits Foucault’s concept of power relations. Though they are two law officials, arguably meant to serve the same purpose; to keep society safe, the officer’s intention to humiliate and diminish Bryan’s stature is clear. The disturbing ease with which the officer is able to utter what he believes to be a joke, “bend over and spread” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019), further degrades both Bryan’s freedom and humanity. Bryan stands nude in front of the officer, astonished by his disgusting behaviour, unable to stand up for himself for fear of accusations of overreaction. This ties strongly to his identity as a Black man and the weight of society’s assumptions about aggressive Black males.

Because this film is explicitly based on the Black experience of both sides of the law, there are a multitude of moments provided by the film that connect Walter’s and Bryan’s daily life. Upon their first meeting Walter is skeptical that Bryan can provide any help, claiming that lawyers have come before him many times putting minimal effort in to save him from death row. He sees Bryan as a young and naïve Black man who thinks that he can make an impact on the deeply racist judicial process that has been in control of the South, not having experienced the level of racism that Walter has withstood for all of his life. Bryan takes a moment before responding, “my grandfather was killed over a black and white TV. Nobody cared, because to them it was just another Black man killed in the Projects” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019). He goes
on to say, “I know what it’s like to live in the shadows, that’s why I’m doing this” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019). This is the first and deepest verbal connection provided by the film, cementing their race as a bridge that gives hope to Walter’s judicial process. This exchange delivers a clear message to viewers, if they hadn’t already known, that lawyer or perceived offender, if one is Black in the American South, one is bound to experience the same racism no matter their title.

A scene that highlights the deep connection that Bryan has to the work that he is doing is that of his jog through Monroeville. He runs by the Church, the local courthouse and homes. As he strides past them, the ominous quality of the courthouse juxtaposes the comfort of the church that Bryan previously discussed with an inmate on one of his first visits as their legal representation. One scene that follows later in the film, parallels this connection, as Bryan looks out onto the port and tells Eva in a moment of defeat in his case, “nobody wants us to remember that this is where thousands of slaves were shipped in and paraded up the street to be sold” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019), a constant reminder of both the symbolic and physical proximity that Bryan has to this fight for justice.

**The Use of Religion as Connection and Comfort.** Religion in this film is not used as a form of authority, but rather as a comfort and a deep connection among Black folks. It is first discussed in Bryan’s first visit to a client during his time as a law student. The young Black offender enters the room with an officer and as they look at one another, similar in age, the dichotomy of their positions is clear to them both. After Bryan tells the man that he will not be executed anytime soon, they embrace as the man cries and thanks him for his work as he is eager to see his family before he is executed. They sit together for hours and talk as though they have
been friends for some time. They reminisce about their time in church, both having sung for the church choir as children. When the officer bursts through the door and throws the imprisoned man against the wall, claiming that their meeting had gone on too long, the young man begins to sing a church song. Bryan can hear him singing through the hallways and joins in song to show his solidarity.

Bryan later joins the congregation in Alabama during the toughest moments of Walter’s case. The camera pans throughout the church over the heads of the singing congregation. Bryan watches at first, looking around in awe at the comfort, unity and happiness this brings to those around him. Slowly, he begins to join in song and smiles as though his faith in himself and Walter’s case has been renewed. Religion, not as a subject, but rather a vessel of connectivity and community for Bryan and his Black counterparts is essential to his belief both in his ability and the ability of the community to support Walter.

**Blatant Racism and Gaslighting.** Just as there was a moment of connection between Bryan and Walter based on their experiences of Blackness, there are other examples of horrific treatment of fellow Alabama death row inmates. For example, Anthony Hinton, held on death row for twenty-eight years, speaks to his cell neighbours Herb Richardson and Walter every day. One day, Anthony recounts his experience with the officers that arrested him; “when I told the cops…I was innocent, do you know what they said?..One of you n*****’s did it and it and if it wasn’t you then you’re taking one for your homies” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019). Racial profiling has drastically changed Anthony’s life and illuminates the ways in which interpersonal, systemic and systematic racism within any field, but particularly in law enforcement, can not
only be devastating but also murderous. This corrupt system is built on a complete disregard for human life, as it will unlawfully and unjustly convict an entire race.

A parallel incidence of gaslighting occurs when Bryan approaches the District Attorney and Sherriff Tate, following the arrest of Darnell, a key witness in Walter’s case. The witness is arrested for perjuring himself when he provides an alibi for Walter, despite the fact that he is telling the truth. Used as a scare tactic to ruin the defence’s case, Sherriff Tate tells Bryan, “I know how desperate you must be to fulfill your fantasy of who you think we are down here, just a bunch of Southern racists framing n*****’s for murder” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019). This belittles Bryan’s work against what is, in fact, a racist system that has knowingly curated a case against an innocent man based on the colour of his skin.

**Criminality**

**Vilification of Blackness.** From the beginning of the investigation, Walter is painted as a brutal killer. Layers of racism unfold through the discussions that Bryan has with local authorities, particularly the District Attorney, about the evidence that is provided. They chat colloquially about the case, while The DA displays a relaxed sureness about his opinion of Walter. Questioning why Bryan has made his way to Monroeville to take part in the defence, The DA states that local “people just want to know what [his] intentions are” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019). He continues to say that Bryan’s work of providing legal assistance to those that are not able to afford it, greatly differs from the DA’s view of his work of “putting convicted killers back on the street” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019). This statement works to further vilify an innocent man and push the narrative of the Black killer in a town of white family values that
seeks safety. Visually, Bryan’s anger and discomfort are clearly apparent. He stands determinedly by the door of the Sheriff’s office, while the other two sit back in their chairs. The DA claims that it his “job to defend the conviction” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019), yet he has no desire to seek more information after being told that Bryan has found a number of inconsistencies. This is a clear indication that the worth of Walter’s life, like those of countless other people of colour, is of no interest to authorities due to the assumptions that they have made about Walter and other people of colour in Alabama. This story has broader racial systemic ties to the way that closure is sought for a crime such as the one that Walter is accused of committing. This story can be replicated as Walter McMillian is one of thousands of Black men wrongfully convicted and imprisoned.

Dehumanization of Convicted Death Row Inmates. Much like The DA’s opinion of Walter, many other locals have made up their minds about those on death row. Responding to the case, Bryan and local assistant Eva try to find an office for their organization. Upon arrival, they are met by the landlord of the building, who tells them both that “nobody told [him] it was for murderers on death row” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019). While it is one’s knee jerk reaction to vilify those that have been convicted of crimes, as the above example shows, we must recognize that representations of perpetuation of hatred toward those that are meant to be rehabilitated and may be innocent. Otherwise we risk continuing the cycle of ostracization and crime because of the difficulty of their reintegration into society. Crime creates a dichotomy of the good victim and the bad perpetrator, and it is opinions which dehumanize those that may have committed crimes that stunt the progression of prison abolition, work in which Bryan is deeply involved.
Herb as ‘The Only Guilty Man’. Herb, a fellow inhabitant of Death Row, has a uniquely different experience of prison than his friends Walter and Anthony. Paralleling Red, who is the self-proclaimed “only guilty man in Shawshank” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994), Herb is convicted of murder by planting a bomb on the porch of a young woman’s home and subsequently taking her life. He admits to having committed the crime and awaits his approaching execution. While his fellow inmates are innocent victims of racial profiling, Herb is not innocent. The palatability of a Black criminal does not apply here as it does in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), instead there is a sense of mercy and guilt as the details of Herb’s case emerge. These details will later be discussed in their connection to his sentence as punishment.

**Gender**

Gender plays a role in the film *Just Mercy* (2019), although it is not the focus of the storyline. The ways in which it intersects with race are important to note as well. Gender performance in this film differs slightly from that of *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), wherein toxic masculinity is rampant. *Just Mercy* (2019) provides an interesting perspective of the ways in which the Black men imprisoned on death row in Alabama work through their anxieties and deep depression. The way that gender is expressed through the deviation of having to stay strong and hide their complete defeat throughout the film indicates a change in representation of criminality from those of *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994).
**Herb’s Distress.** Herb is in distress about his execution date and bursts into tears. Derailing into a full-blown panic attack, his friends Walter and Anthony step in to help a man with whom they have spent several years building a connection. Herb sniffs and struggles to breathe at a normal rate, growing more and more agitated. Walter proceeds to use calming techniques to help Herb breathe slowly through his fear. Describing the treetops that he once admired while he worked, Walter tells Herb to close his eyes and picture a beautiful day in nature. With the sound of the trees swaying in the wind and sensation of the heat of the sun on his skin, Herb slowly calms down. The sound of his quiet sighing can be shared by the audience for a calm that is universal to all those who have felt helpless in a moment of overwhelming stress.

**Walter’s Expression of Emotion.** Of course, just as many would expect, the end of the journey for Walter is one that is emotional and celebratory. His wife, Minnie, is not often seen being emotional throughout the film, presumably to stay strong for their family and community who have all shown their continuous support. When Walter’s verdict comes through and he is found innocent, the reunion with his family is one that brings many tears of joy. This moment frees Walter from the shackles of hegemonic masculinity, when his emotional state can be shown as a release after years of being held behind bars for a crime that he did not commit. It is powerful to see a family and a man who has been perceived as a criminal for the majority of his trial be humanized in such a way as he is caressed by his children.

**Eva’s Positionality.** Eva’s role in the film also highlights the strength and perseverance of women in the context of equitable treatment of those who are incarcerated, specifically as it
relates to people of colour. As the film progresses, Eva outgrows her role as the secretary and takes on parts of the investigation of Walter’s case, approaching townspeople of Monroeville to find any missing witnesses. As a mother, she acts as a role model for her son, telling Bryan after a bomb threat was placed on her home that she does not want her son knowing that she stopped her meaningful work because she “was scared of some bigot” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019). As a white woman, Eva is more than her job title, displaying her allyship and extending her human decency to those she feels are most marginalized and deserve it most: wrongfully accused Black folks in the American South.

**Sexuality**

A significant detail in the story that is pieced together throughout Walter’s journey is one focussed on his infidelity. Walter’s town, including his own wife Minnie, knows of his affair with a local married white woman. Black men have been historically vilified for their assumed infidelity and womanizing, as exhibited in the beginning of *Just Mercy* (2019). The officer who stops Walter claims that he seems to be taking his time getting home, to which Walter replies jokingly, “not if my wife’s got anything to say about it” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019). Referring to his infidelity, the officer states, “I heard that ain’t stopped you before” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019), alluding to the notion that his infidelity could link Walter to a murder. When Bryan goes to Walter’s home to discuss Walter’s case with Minnie and the community, one man chimes in by saying that “everybody knows they went after him because of that woman” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019), illuminating the ways in which racial tensions and assumptions created by white folks are lethal toward Black communities.
Authority and Punishment

There are images of authority, intertwined with race, riddled throughout *Just Mercy* (2019). An early image of Bryan’s visit to Alabama death row situates the environment as a deeply racist one. Bryan drives up the road edged by fields that are filled with Black inmates working on the land. Overseen by a white officer holding a large rifle atop a horse, the workers in jumpsuits peer into Bryan’s car as they cross before him. The lengthy moment of silence as they make eye contact digs deep into Bryan’s heart as evident by the troubled reaction on his face. The officer looks over as well; a different look comes from his eyes. Without any verbal interaction, the officer still manages to communicate his disdain for Bryan.

This same type of intimidation is later used as a tactic by authorities in Walter’s case. As previously mentioned, Darnell, a key witness in Walter’s case, is arrested under the suspicion that he had perjured himself with his statement that Walter had been with him on the day of the murder. Upon hearing of his arrest, Bryan goes to the local police station to post Darnell’s bail and to plead with him to testify. It seems that the authorities’ tactic is successful as Darnell worries for his life and refuses to take the stand, affecting the possible success of the case. It is clear that at every step of the way, authorities use whatever means necessary to impede the investigation that Bryan has taken on in order to instill fear in him. In the dead of night, Bryan is even pulled over by officers. Aggressively ripped from his vehicle, just as Walter was, the officers rustle through his paperwork, hold a gun to his head and eerily threaten Bryan by telling him, “we’re letting you go, you should feel lucky” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019). He is visibly emotional, understanding the weight of his battle against a racist (in)justice system, one that does
not see his authority as a learned lawyer, but rather the colour of his skin, just as those of Black inmates disproportionately filling prisons.

Punishment is also used against Herb, as he is convicted of murder and put to death. However, the details of his case are important to the injustice that he is met with after his act of violence. Herb is a Vietnam veteran, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder as evidenced by his many panic attacks throughout his imprisonment. A clear example of the ways in which society is more willing to punish than to rehabilitate those that have fought for their country, Herb is thrown into a cell to await the day that he will be executed. Bryan decides to represent him as well, finding in his legal documents that his previous lawyer had not adequately represented him. After failing to bring attention to his service in the military and his PTSD, a component that is pivotal to his case, Bryan finds that the previous lawyer was later disbarred for misconduct. He immediately moves to request a stay of execution, but it is swiftly denied. Herb sits in his cell, exclaiming to Walter and Anthony, “I ain’t like you guys, I deserve what’s coming” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019), not understanding that he most definitely does not deserve the injustice of death, but rather should have been given the respect of rehabilitation and support after his service. It is the disregard for people like Herb, veterans and people of colour, that shows the true injustice within the so-called justice system.
Discussion

Introduction

This research, focused on the cultivation of opinions as they relate to the experiences of Black people and people of colour within the (in)justice system, requires the analysis of media. Deconstructing representations of criminality in an intersectional manner allows us to understand whether certain depictions may be problematic and therefore influence the public to cultivate particular perceptions of carceral punishment. The chosen films in this research *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *Just Mercy* (2019) present a number of significant characters and interactions through the directors’ choices of imagery and script-based material. *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) includes characters such as Andy, the main character of the storyline, his close friend Red, Hadley the head of corrections, Warden Norton, Brooks the elderly librarian, Tommy the young late addition, and The Sisters. *Just Mercy* (2019) presents characters such as Bryan the young lawyer, Walter, who is wrongfully convicted, Eva, the helpful assistant, the District Attorney and Sherriff Tate, Meyers a key witness in Walter’s case, Herb and Anthony, both on Alabama death row, as well as Walter’s family.

The images and script-based material were analyzed in order to achieve a full understanding of the beliefs that may be formed due to their presentation. Both the gaze and cultivation theory contribute to this research and are incorporated in order to deconstruct how the representations of race, criminality, gender, sexuality, authority and punishment presented by *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *Just Mercy* (2019) differ from one another and affect the ways in which they can be received by viewers. This discussion focusses on the data that was
Race

The significance of the outcome of Frank Darabont’s decision to cast Morgan Freeman as Red in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) is explored by Ulin (2013). In their media analysis and comparison of biracial escapist films *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *Huckleberry Finn* (1960), Ulin (2013) brings to light the fact that nowhere in the film is race mentioned. The film is based on the 1982 novel by Stephen King, wherein the character of Red is a white Irish man. The director’s choice to cast a Black actor, Morgan Freeman, for the role of Red is an important point in the analysis of the effects of racialized characters and their portrayal in a carceral environment, particularly in relation to Andy, his white, male counterpart. This, for Ulin (2013), “mystifies the issue of race in America by seeming to avoid it altogether” (Ulin, 2013, p.8). The images provided by *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) could allow a false sense of racial equity and unity among white and Black people. Ulin (2013) claims that this could have played a role in the success of the film as it grossed 58.3 million dollars US (InternetMovieDatabase.com, 2020). *Just Mercy* (2019) is in close second, having earned 50.4 million dollars since its release in 2019 (InternetMovieDatabase.com, 2020). The success of both films demonstrates the great appreciation for storytelling as it relates to injustice. In particular, the significance of their earnings signifies a love of stories that are deeply connected to representations of race and criminality. This could be attributed directly to the discussion of how race affects those who are experiencing incarceration and the many recent media outlets
dedicated to educating the public on the history and lived experiences of racism and the prison system.

_The Erasure of Race in The Shawshank Redemption (1994)_

While Red’s race is not explicitly discussed, his race impacts the ways in which his character may be received. As previously discussed, Flax’s (2003) use of Cheng’s “melancholy of race” (Flax, 2001, p.59), can be applied to _The Shawshank Redemption_ (1994) as privileged, white viewers establish their position of privilege by degrading racialized characters. In other words, the degradation lies in the white audiences’ pity of racialized offenders in film by rationalizing their punishment as dependent on their race. Viewers do this in order to make the suffering of a character more palatable for themselves. Therefore, the suffering endured by Red could be attributed, for many white viewers, to his race even though it is not outwardly acknowledged in the film. Ulin’s (2013) critical examination of biracial escape films finds that it is the films’ complete erasure of race and its “refusal to be a parable about races getting along, that has made biracial escape films so successful as an account of the way white [viewers] like to believe that races get along in their presumably colour-blind world” (Ulin, 2013, p.17). For many, the incorporation of a Black portrayal of Red could be an indication of the irrelevance of “race casting”, but for Ulin (2013), the change in race contributes to the success of _The Shawshank Redemption_ (1994) “by offering…white viewers evidence of racial harmony not readily found on the streets or in the headlines” (Ulin, 2013, p.17). Red’s race and role as the narrator layers the ways in which the character could be received, without doing the work to make race a topic of discussion.
The gaze contributes to this interpretation of racialized characters, as it is part of the cyclical nature of creating and receiving media. The social context within which we find ourselves, especially now as we are experiencing the Black Lives Matter movement, allows us to see the disparities between representations of white and Black offenders. According to Nellis’ (2016) study of the racial and ethnic disparities in the (in)justice system, Black people are incarcerated at a rate of ten to one in US prisons (Nellis, 2016, p.4). Therefore, it is imperative to have representations that accurately portray the proven mistreatment of Black people who are imprisoned. This is a social justice issue. Mayne (1995) stresses the notion that readings, or the viewership of media (as it relates to the current research), will very unlikely be received in either a fully dominant or oppositional manner (Mayne, 1995, p.172). In other words, the ‘negotiation model’ of the gaze, which allows viewers to either support or oppose what they are viewing, can only be applied to films that make room for “the very activity…of a resistance to dominant ideology” (Mayne, 1995, p.172). The Shawshank Redemption (1994) does not allow its viewers to actively take part in the negotiation of how race is presented because it is not purposefully placed in the script material, but rather quietly posited as an image.

The Dedication to Race in Just Mercy (2019)

Just Mercy (2019) differs in its attention to race as the film is dedicated to the differentiation between white folks’ and Black folks’ experiences at every level of the (in)justice system. With the story anchored to Walter’s journey through trial after trial and life within a cell on Alabama’s death row, the film illuminates the ways in which deep-seated racism ostracises and murders Black citizens. In fact, the film explores the racism, not only felt by Black offenders, but those in legal standing as well. Bryan must constantly battle racism aimed at him
throughout the course of his work in Alabama, fueling his investigation with the knowledge that he must play a part in dismantling a legal system that is built on the groundwork of racist carceral founders. As most blatantly evident in the scene wherein Bryan must strip naked before an officer in order to be let into the prison to visit his client, race is at the root of power dynamics among white and Black servants of the law. This image directly corresponds with an image early on in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), wherein the offenders are brought into the prison and deloused. The whiteness of the powder on their naked, humiliated bodies, stands in contrast to that of Bryan, a free, Black, highly educated lawyer, with no reason other than his race to give in to a degrading experience of removing all of his clothing for an officer who has no intention of procedurally searching him. The storyline sticks tightly to the racialized experience of the (in)justice system, both through its imagery and through its script material.

**The Saviour**

This directly correlates to the overall depiction of Andy’s escape in comparison to Red’s release from Shawshank Prison. Audiences know Andy as the innocent, white man, who has a moral right to escape due to the fact that he has been wrongfully convicted and has spent almost two decades incarcerated. Though justice seems to be served through this courageous and diabolical act of escape, there are privileges in it that must be acknowledged. Andy’s ability to escape with a change of Warden Norton’s clothes and proof of Norton’s criminal behaviour could have only been achievable due to Andy’s education, career status and therefore racial privilege. Whereas Red is forced to endure the bureaucracy of a racist (in)justice system through his many failed parole hearings, the public is given the image of Andy as a hopeful, intelligent hero who eventually gives his friend Red a purpose, to work for freedom. Before his escape,
Andy tells Red to meet him in “Zihuantanejo” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994), a small fishing village in Mexico that Red has not heard of before. Upon his release, Red follows Andy’s instructions and eventually the two deeply connected friends reunite. This positions Andy, not only as the hero of the story but specifically as the white saviour. Contrastingly, as a Black offender, Red is represented as being incarcerated due to his own actions but cannot use his own actions to find freedom. Instead, he must be rescued.

Arguably, Just Mercy’s (2019) Walter is also saved by Bryan. The beauty of the story that incorporates Bryan’s fight for Walter’s justice is one rooted, not only in the service of releasing a wrongfully convicted man, but a wrongfully convicted Black man, from a deeply racist judicial system that continues to persecute innocent people for the colour of their skin. The white saviour trope does not qualify here as the work that Bryan does is in the service of eliminating an entire system of racially biased punitive laws. The dismantling of this system benefits an entire race of people, himself included. Bryan’s deep desire to connect with Walter through their racial experiences of the world is lacking in The Shawshank Redemption (1994). Not only this, but the truth in the former story, though loosely based on the factual interactions that took place, helps to strengthen the effect that the depiction may have on audiences. The friendship cultivated by Red and Andy is fraught with Andy’s privilege, due to the experiences that Andy would have exclusively had access to. Just Mercy (2019) adequately positions Bryan’s privilege, but is careful to represent the connection between Bryan and Walter due to the racism of which they have both been victims their whole lives. While Red and Andy are just two friends who seemingly transcend race, Bryan and Walter are friends who have experienced the same racially charged trauma that has affected their ability to be a part of a racist society.
Criminality

Red’s Criminality Versus Andy’s Criminality

Red’s position as a notable criminal among fellow inmates at Shawshank is different than that of his white counterpart Andy. Image and script-based material from *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) indicate that Red’s continuing participation in petty crime by smuggling in contraband and bribing the guards for personal favours positions Red as an unrehabilitated offender. The difference between Red’s deviance and Andy’s deviance, for Harris and Mushtaq (2013) is race. Harris and Mushtaq (2013) emphasize that the image portrayed by Red is one that “further exploits Blacks to solidify the white identity and its dominance of representation” (Harris and Mushtaq, 2013, p.34). Andy is innocent until his entrance into Shawshank, wherein he is forced to take part in Warden Norton’s money laundering and tax evasion schemes under the threat of abuse and isolation. Ulin’s (2013), research adds that “Andy’s success is due in large measure to his facility with cultural capital unavailable to Red or the other working-class criminals, whether he is building a library, impressing The Warden with his knowledge of the Bible, or enthralling the other inmates with *The Marriage of Figaro*” (Ulin, 2013, p.11). The latter is a scene created entirely by Dabaront, which solidifies Andy as the white, learned teacher. Viewers can interpret Andy’s abuse at the hands of Warden Norton as unjust treatment toward an innocent white man, who must unlawfully participate against his own will.

Red’s self-titling criminal status has an impact on how the story may be received by viewers. Creating the image of a Black offender as the only admittedly guilty man in Shawshank allows viewers to see criminal behaviour as performed predominantly by people of colour and excuses all white offenders even within the context of the prison. The placement of racialized
characters, particularly in a position of criminality allows white viewers to make assumptions about the connections between these characters’ races and their criminal behaviour. They are viewing not just any criminal behaviour, but racialized criminality that connotes deeper racially-related struggles. This type of representation is dangerous and incredibly problematic because it completely erases the systemic and systematic social implications of these assumptions and does not openly acknowledge the disparities between the experiences of Black individuals and other people of colour in the (in)justice system as opposed to their white counterparts.

*Assumed Criminality in Just Mercy (2019)*

The important difference between the portrayals provided by *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *Just Mercy* (2019) is evident in the race-specific struggles lacking in the former but a focus in the latter. As previously discussed, there is no mention of race in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994); therefore there is no overt focus on the inequity that Red faces in relation to his white co-inmate Andy. *Just Mercy* (2019) provides clear and specific examples of the ways in which not only Black offenders, but also how Black citizens are treated in the (in)justice system, including those that are incredibly well educated. The suspicion that lingers in every question that both the DA and the Sherriff pose to Bryan about his intentions to free Walter, his ability as a Black lawyer, and his correct assumptions that they are racists intentionally gaslights Bryan’s insistence that racist foul play occurs within the (in)justice system. These law-enforcement officials insist that their community is one concerned with traditional, white implied values and see Bryan’s reopening of Walter’s case as a direct attack on their community members.
Bryan is constantly made to feel like an outsider, threatened and humiliated on multiple occasions. As previously described, one late evening driving home, Bryan is pulled over by the two officers. The clearly unlawful manner with which these white officers conduct themselves solely for the purpose of instilling in him fear and intimidation has multiple layers. As a Black man in the South of the United States, Bryan knows he is at risk. As a lawyer whose goal is to free a perceived murderer, Bryan knows he is at risk. As an outsider, who is seeming to be coming into Monroeville to go against a traditionally, white, Southern, racist community, Bryan certainly knows he is at risk. The ways in which the film illuminates the racism felt, not only by Walter but also by Bryan are key to understanding the impact that this film may have on audiences. At every step of the way, the authorities try to disrupt Bryan’s case. That evening, while one officer aggressively holds a gun against Bryan’s head, the other can be seen rummaging through his files, ripping through them and taking a few key documents. The emotionally charged moments that follow the departure of the officers instantly bridges for viewers both Walter and Bryan’s interactions with the (in)justice system. The fight within Bryan of defeat or continuance can be seen on his face as the officers leave him in the night.

No matter their position in society, Black men are seen as dangerous and suspicious and it is the obliviousness to race in Shawshank Redemption (1994) that makes the clarity of its existence in Just Mercy (2019) so well represented. In addition, it is Just Mercy’s (2019) ability to tackle racial profiling that not only sheds light on the experiences of Black people, but as well on the experiences of police. McNair’s (2011) image-based research found that it is the general media’s overrepresentation of racialized crime and police that has had an influence on “celebratory, uncritical depictions of police” (McNair, 2011, p. 14). Just Mercy (2019) actively works against this, showing a true and impactful interaction between Bryan and officers of the
law, who are part of a racist institution, wherein the officers take complete advantage of their position of power.

*Just Mercy’s (2019) Humanization of Walter*

The humanity that Walter is given as a character works in the favour of the story. This is precisely the type of representation that moves away from the trope of angry Black offender, making Walter a multi-dimensional human being. He is remorseful for the pain that he has caused his wife and family due to his infidelity. He sits with Bryan, telling him that after some time of enduring the public’s perception of who he is, Walter begins to wonder whether he is guilty or not. Knowing that he did not commit the murder, Walter realizes the larger connotation of ‘guilt’ as it relates to his race. He has been made to feel guilty as a Black man his whole life, watching and experiencing injustice on a regular basis. *Just Mercy* (2019) is intentional in its focus on the intersectional ways in which Walter is marginalized. This type of representation echoes research done by McQueen (2010), which specifically focusses on racialized representations of criminality. Their study required students in a film course to watch films that portrayed people of colour in a prison context. Their findings show that “the empathy displayed for the [incarcerated individuals] in the films viewed…is consequential of the type of characters portrayed in the films” (McQueen, 2010, p.56). *Just Mercy* (2019) tells the story of a Black man who needed empathy, justice and equity, and as evident by its monetary success as well as by its multiple NAACP awards, the story was told successfully.

Arguably, the ‘negotiation model’ of the gaze could be positively applied to this representation of racialized criminality. *Just Mercy* (2019) can be received as an intentional depiction of the deep-seated racism at the root of the (in)justice system, therefore the very act of
viewing the film shows an act of solidarity against its racially oppressive nature. Of course, the nature of the practice of viewing assumes that there will be some opposition to the representations in the film, however the care and humanity that is given to the characters, specifically Walter, should play a large role in appealing to the emotions of audiences.

Gender

Gender and Display of Toxic Masculinity in The Shawshank Redemption (1994)

As previously touched upon, there are multiple scenes in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) which depict toxic masculinity. The focus of the film, specifically on the experiences of male inhabitants of the prison, makes no inclusion of women. Although ‘Shawshank’ is a male prison, the exclusion of female correctional officers is questionable, considering the decision made by Dabaront to include Morgan Freeman as Red. In addition, the humiliation that Andy faces in the first moments of the film, sitting in the witness stand, exhibits one of the many unfortunate side effects of gendered norms and toxic masculinity. Viewers are made to believe that Andy has committed the crime, only later learning of his innocence. This, for audiences, positions Andy as a killer, and therefore his experience of humiliation due to his wife’s affair is somehow deserving. In fact, *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) uses this perceived humiliation as a motive for the murder. After all, how could a well-educated, “hot-shot banker” as the real killer titled him, not take justice into his own hands after finding his beloved wife in the arms of another man? (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994). Later in the film, a glimpse of Andy’s remorse weakens the hardness that he has held onto for his lengthy sentence. Andy sits with Red after his trip to ‘The Hole’, quiet, reflective, and clearly distraught. Andy acknowledges that he may not
have been responsible for the death of his late wife but examines the ways in which his position as a male in society, with the challenge of providing for her financially, had eventually pushed him to be a cold, and disillusioned partner. The film allows viewers to peek into Andy’s emotions, getting a glimpse of the weight of the remorse that he has carried for years. There is significance in the ways that emotion is displayed by the characters at Shawshank prison. The lack of overt emotion, other than that of anger, indicates that the representations of the males adhere to toxic masculinity, only allowing Red to simply exclaim: “I just miss my friend” after Andy’s escape (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994). This is problematic and works to solidify images of both white and Black males as hardened and unemotional.

The significance of this conversation between Red and Andy is Red’s interpretation of what Andy discloses. Red worries for him, assuming that his mental health is poor and that he may do something dangerous. Red shares this news with the rest of his Shawshank family, and they each show concern for Andy’s safety. In a subtle way, the film shows audiences that no matter the strength in outward displays of masculinity, the care and warmth that is cultivated for one another among the family of imprisoned men shine through. This is a significant representation of an aspect of criminality, showing that they are not all hardened, aggressive offenders that look out only for themselves.

**Gender and Race in Just Mercy (2019)**

One particular example of representation of Black, male incarcerated individuals that has been rightfully critiqued as a trope is that of the aggressive offender. McNair (2011) points to this in their research of portrayals of Black male and female characters, claiming that throughout cinematic history, Black males have not only been portrayed as “deviant” but as “intrinsically
dangerous and aggressive” (McNair, 2011, p. 98). While Red, a Black male in Shawshank Prison may not ever show any signs of aggression, Walter in *Just Mercy* (2019) becomes enraged on multiple occasions. Walter’s case is unique and understandable, due to the fact that his portrayal holds a specific pain. This pain and anger are linked to the centuries of racism that has been placed on the shoulders of every Black person since their enslavement. His anger toward Bryan is in frustration for lack of previous adequate legal representation, lack of attention to his case, and lack of ability to claim his innocence and be trusted by the public. It is justified and humanizes his experience of being wrongfully convicted of a crime.

Walter, like those imprisoned at Shawshank, generates a deep friendship with his fellow death row inmates Anthony and Herb. As a man who has experienced many hardships throughout the film, Walter exhibits the emotionality that is not often represented by films that portray Black men in prison. His response to Herb’s panic attack after receiving his execution date exemplifies this genuine depth of care and empathy. The hardness that is often stamped onto Black men who are locked up, does not leave them room to display softer emotions. They are imprisoned within their own gender and race, just as they are in the carceral system. This is a major contributor to the creation of the animalistic racialized offender character. Walter exhibits a calm, controlled, but, most importantly, loving attention to Herb’s wellbeing. His technique of visualizing the beautiful trees that he once found himself working amongst, does wonders for Herb’s ability to regain control of his mind and body. This is a unique representation of criminality, one that highlights the humanity and care that is not often afforded to people of colour, let alone those who are perceived offenders. The filmography of this scene plays a role in the quality of reassurance with which both Herb and the audience are gifted. As images of swaying trees are shown, Herb’s breathing can be heard, guiding the viewers into a relaxed state.
The significance of this small moment in the film, can be carried throughout the remaining moments of Herb’s life. As he is brought to his execution, his fellow inmates cry and sing for him, to calm him one last time. Audiences need to see representations of love and friendship among folks who have often been represented as merely dangerous and aggressive (McNair, 2011).

Eva’s role in the film is powerful and necessary. As a white woman, who withstands many threats, she understands the dangers of associating with an organization that aims to free Black men who have been incarcerated in the South. Arguably, this film highlights the strength of women in general, positioning Minnie as a forgiving wife who struggles to accept Walter’s infidelity but acknowledges his role in their family. As Bryan weeps in her car after attending Herb’s execution, Eva sits quietly and sternly, extending her hand to rub his back. Moments throughout the film exhibit Eva using her privilege for the benefit of the work, holding in her white tears to allow space for the people of colour that surround her to feel their sorrow in its entirety. Eva shows viewers that allyship and basic human decency are the foundation for an equitable society. She is strong willed and supportive of Bryan’s fight, reminding him of his purpose throughout the film. Her gender and experience of marginalization does not stop her from diving into the social justice work that Bryan has begun, but rather strengthens her perseverance.
Sexuality

Race and Homophobia in The Shawshank Redemption (1994)

The choice to make Red’s character Black impacts the storyline through his interactions or perceptions of The Sisters. There are historically and racially linked understandings of homosexuality that are unknowingly packed onto Red’s perception of The Sisters that, in turn, impacts the storyline. The ostracization of homosexual men that can occur in Black communities is greatly linked to Black culture and scriptural adherence found most frequently in the church (Loue, 2014). This deepens Red’s response to Andy’s claim that he is not homosexual: “neither are they. You have to be human first, and they don’t qualify” (Glotzer, Lester and Marvin, 1994). This alludes to the term “on the down low”, coined by the Black community out of fear and suspicion of Black men who present themselves outwardly as heterosexual, but who engage in homosexual behaviour (Glenn and Spieldenner, 2013). In their media analysis of television programs which depict this dichotomy of presenting sexuality, Glenn and Spieldenner (2013) discuss the ways in which the taboo quality of homosexuality in the Black community has forced Black men to keep their sexuality a secret in order to feel accepted. This stigmatization continues to be connected to the spread of HIV/AIDS research, “particularly how it connects to risky sexual practices and transmission among partners...social awareness, and acceptance of Black male sexuality” (Glenn and Spieldenner, p.403). While ‘Red’s’ sexuality is never explicitly acknowledged in The Shawshank Redemption (1994), his demeaner toward The Sisters carries weight because of his race that may have been represented differently, had they cast a white actor to play the role. This exemplifies a homophobic perspective that supports the historical cultural views of homophobia within the Black community.
When examining how the gaze applies to *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), the film presents the possibility of both outward and internalized homophobia among viewers. Berenstein’s (1995) focus on the “conflation of identification with desire” problematizes the representation of ‘The Sisters’ (Berenstein, 1995, p.253). Their constant need to attack and take control of Andy solidifies their predatory quality and provides them with a lack of character depth, which can be problematically received. Queer people of colour are then impacted by and internalize the given representation of homosexuality as it relates to race. Glenn and Spieldenner’s (2013) evaluation of the historical nuances of homosexuality build upon Foucault’s (1982) conception of power relations by situating the relations of power between people of colour and the limitations of the representations of their queerness presented back to them. Although The Sisters are white, it is Red’s response as a Black, heterosexual male that impacts the delivery of lines and therefore the ways in which they will be received. This is furthered by the lack of imagery of homosexual sex in the film. Arguably, this could be due to the nature of the act. While one is a forceful and horrific attack and rape of an unwilling participant, the other is a passionate act of heterosexual sex between two consenting partners, Andy’s wife and her lover. The narrative of homosexual sex as predatory could be problematic to viewers who may internalize these negative representations. As well, the lack of imagery as it relates to the scenes of rape could have been a directorial decision to keep the triggering nature of sexual assault as an illusion.

*Race and Sexuality in Just Mercy (2019)*

The film *Just Mercy* (2019) represents the American South as a place where racial frictions are still openly felt. Racists would not be in favour of a Black man having an affair with
a white woman and might find ways to vilify him for his actions. *Just Mercy* (2019) humanizes Walter by displaying an interaction between him and Bryan, wherein Walter explains that he has no excuse for his infidelity. He wonders why “[his wife’s] standing by [him]” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019). This humility and remorse are imperative to the story as Walter is just as human as anyone else, making mistakes and being owed the time and space to show his repentance is crucial and needed.

The sexualization of Walter and the correlation that the officer makes between Walter’s infidelity and the possibility that he is guilty of rape and murder is absurd but shows the danger of weaponized assumptions. Although the police officers many not be able to prove Walter’s guilt, they channel their racist assumption toward punishing Walter for the consensual decisions between him and the woman with whom he had the affair. *Just Mercy’s* (2019) director undoubtedly did the right thing presenting the audience with an exchange between a white officer and an innocent Black man, wherein the latter is labelled guilty for a completely unrelated involvement with a white woman. It is clear, in this interaction, that these assumptions are born from a feeling of white entitlement held by the officer. A white man and officer of the law, with knowledge that a Black married man engaged sexually with a white woman, echoes one of the earliest and most memorable racial attacks in history; that of Emmett Till in 1955. Wrongfully accused of simply cat-calling a woman, Emmett Till was viciously abducted, brutalized, and his body was thrown violently into The Tallahatchie River (Kolin, 2009). It was not until later that Emmett Till was proven posthumously innocent as the accuser confessed to making false claims (Kolin, 2009). This illuminates the ways in which white fragility and the threat of lowered social standing as it relates to Blackness and its interaction with whiteness is deadly and it continues on in many forms today. It is the perceived threat by white citizens of Black citizens that leads to
the over policing people of colour on a regular basis. *Just Mercy* (2019) did the work to illuminate the danger that is associated with these types of interactions, especially when it is linked to the sexualization of Black males in America.

**Authority and Punishment**

*Religion as a Means of Punishment or Comfort*

As evident in the data, there are some similarities and differences between aspects of the intersections of race, authority and punishment in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *Just Mercy* (2019). One interesting component to consider is the significance of the use of religion in each film. In one, *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), religion is used as a tool of authority, keeping those incarcerated in line under the gaze of God. Contrastingly, *Just Mercy* (2019) presents religion as a form of comfort and support. As it relates to this research, race plays a large role in both depictions of religious affiliation. Warden Norton carries his Bible with him throughout *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), using scripture to police the imprisoned people as a white authority. The venomous quality of his character overlaps with Christianity, positioning The Warden as a powerful, all-knowing being. Of course, with the incorporation of Hadley as the muscle of his authoritarian operation, The Warden is aware of all the happenings on the grounds of Shawshank Prison.

*Just Mercy* (2019) juxtaposes this use of religion with one that signifies a deep connectivity among community members. Although it is not a significant theme within the film, religion is peppered throughout to represent a strength both within Bryan and among the Black community in Monroeville. From the moment that Bryan interacts with the first inmate he sees
as a legal representative, it is clear that there is a deep significance to their past experiences in the church. They both experienced it as a family-oriented, loving space, where they both describe a sense of unity. Jokingly, they discuss their position as part of the church choir, each in a different part of the United States, but both very similar experiences that unify them through their race. Exhibiting this representation as positive, shows that religion must not always be received as a threat, a form of suffering, and a strict guide to perfection as *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) has depicted it. Rather, *Just Mercy* (2019) offers a depiction of religion to its viewers as a source of hope and strength in times of need, such as that of Walter’s case.

*Authority or Perceived Authority*

Red’s position as an authority figure in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) is in constant flux. Scenes in which Red is not amongst prison CO’s, with The Warden, or before the parole board, depict him as being a streetwise inmate. So, while there are a number of indicators of inequity between Red’s prison sentence and that of Andy, Red does in some way hold power. This is linked to his race, as alluded to in the previous section. It is the years that Red has spent in Shawshank Prison that have allowed him to acquire such high standing among his fellow incarcerated people, as well as a few guards. His street-wise nature gives him opportunity to acquire contraband and favours at the other inmates’ request. Of course, because of this ability, he is regarded as an authority.

The differentiation of authority and perceived authority is made clear in *Just Mercy* (2019). Bryan, as a Black, well-educated, lawyer, is perceived differently by a number of people in the film. When Bryan is first introduced, his interaction with a Black incarcerated individual illuminates his status as a learned man. The imprisoned man is astonished by Bryan’s
accomplishments, exclaiming “You went to Harvard? That’s white boy status!” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019). Knowing that he is in good hands with Bryan, the man continues to praise Bryan’s abilities, education, and perceived authority. Emphasis is placed on this scene as it connotes a sense of internalized racism. It could represent either the assumption made by the man in prison, that Black folks and other people of colour rarely attain the goals that Bryan has, or more likely that the incarcerated man is astonished by the many racial obstacles that Bryan has overcome.

This differs from the reactions of the District Attorney and the Sherriff, both white, who often scoff at his passion and focus. During their meeting, Sherriff Tate accuses Bryan of assuming that race has played any role in Walter’s conviction at all, and as previously stated, Bryan is gaslit. How could race not have a part to play in what the film has represented as, a racist system that has racially profiled countless Black men? Anthony, Walter’s fellow inmate, is the best example. Over the course of the film, Just Mercy (2019) displays the many ways in which Bryan has to prove himself as a legitimate defence lawyer, an example of the many that are delegitimized because of their race. The dichotomy of authority presented by Just Mercy (2019) is more effective than that of The Shawshank Redemption (1994), as it is clearly depicted as relating to Bryan’s race and the authorities’ intention to inflict racist assumptions onto him.

The gaze could cause an audience member of colour to internalize Red’s image as the unrehabilitated criminal, the convict who never learned his lesson, and instead knowingly participates in petty crime throughout his stay at Shawshank. Because his authority is acquired through the length of his stay and the knowledge of petty crime that he has involved himself in throughout the years, audiences are presented with a very shallow representation of criminality that does not adequately acknowledge the change in race. There are loopholes left by this
representation that are present but not fully examined by the director of the film *The Shawshank Redemption* (2019).

**Authority and Punishment Used In The Form of Criminality**

Those in positions of legal authority in both films, often white, engage in multiple criminal acts against their marginalized counterparts. Parallel to this research, Ulin’s (2013) analysis of *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) indicates that Warden Norton acts as the face of “the institution’s Orwelian power to erase the past” by murdering Tommy, framing his death as an escape, and throwing Andy into solitary confinement (Ulin, 2013, p.17). This, coupled with the abuse that he inflicts onto the inmates at his own hand and at the hands of his CO’s, presents to audiences that the Warden, himself, is a well-established criminal. Of course, his money laundering schemes are the reason for his eventual warrant for arrest, adding to his already tarnished reputation as a God-fearing man. The illegality of his actions, while he is positioned as the guiding figure of a penitentiary, highlights the ways in which correctional facilities, often dehumanize their inmates, seeing them as merely cogs in the Prison Industrial System. Munro-Bjorklund’s (1991) examination of a rebellion that took place at Attica Prison in 1971, when incarcerated individuals protested against their inhumane treatment, supports this notion of the dichotomic image of the prison as a law-abiding institution. It acts as an illusion, claiming to lead its imprisoned people through rehabilitation, yet further confining them to solitary for the behaviour that it births and facilitates. Warden Norton’s dehumanization of the prisoners, telling them “you eat when we say you eat, you shit when we say you shit…your ass belongs to me” (Glotzer, Lester & Marvin, 1994), constrains their every liberty. This scene echoes the actions of authorities at Attica prison, who treated imprisoned men as “subhuman” (Munro-Bjorklund,
1991, 52) until they rebelled to gain their humanity. Had they been treated ethically and arguably lawfully, they would have not had to fight for basic human rights.

*Just Mercy* (2019) exhibits the use of authority for abuse in a number of previously discussed scenes. All but one seems to straddle the legal line. The scene wherein Bryan is stopped in the dead of night by officers, frisked with a gun pointed to his head and told that he is “lucky” (Goldstein and Jordan, 2019) that they let him off with a warning, is a clear depiction of criminality masquerading as police authority. Due to the nature of the stop, clearly related to Walter’s case and both Bryan’s race and status in the town, it is obvious that not all stops are performed lawfully. This brings to light an unfortunate reality for many people of colour in North America.

This is otherwise known as police brutality; so rampant today throughout North America that it has triggered the worldwide movement rightfully dubbed Black Lives Matter. This movement aims to illuminate the injustices of police brutality as unlawful and disgusting criminal acts. It pushes to defund, perhaps completely, the institution of policing and remove it from communities of colour that have been over-policed for decades. Of the countless police brutality cases, a few of the most recent examples are, first, Breonna Taylor, who was murdered in her bed by police gunshot under the presumption that she was a drug dealer. Second, there is the case of twelve year-old Tamir Rice, who was shot in the back by a police officer, for holding a toy gun. Thirdly, but sadly not the last by far, Philando Castile, who was stopped while driving. He made it clear that he had a legal weapon on his person and was shot at close range seven times by the police officer who stopped him, all before the eyes of his wife and four-year-old daughter.
Just Mercy (2019), once again exhibits an interaction between a Black citizen and a white authority like that which has been experienced by countless people of colour. Through the gaze of marginalized folks who have experienced a traffic stop, this emotionally dense, life-threatening interaction feels impactful and well executed by the film.

Punishment as It Leads To The Deaths of Brookes and Herb

The comparison between the deaths presented in each film illuminates both the ways in which the carceral system’s many pitfalls affect its inmates within and outside of the prison system. In The Shawshank Redemption (1994), Brookes, the librarian is released without any reintegration support, is released into a society that is very different from that of fifty years earlier. A montage of scenes in which Brookes is shown shuffling through life, struggling to keep up with the fast paced, new-age world, deepens the impact of his sorrowful suicide. Shawshank acts as a representation of the many prisons who have failed its inhabitants that they have vowed to rehabilitate. Although Shawshank is responsible for Brooke’s death, it is the nature of his passing that is significant. Brookes, a white man, is shown taking his own life. The power that one has over this decision must be acknowledged. The previous claim is not made in any way to belittle the many reasons that one might take their own life. Brooke’s made the decision based on the fact that he could no longer function in a society that had once thrown him away.

The contrasting image of death that is portrayed by the film Just Mercy (2019) is that of Herb’s execution. Yet another victim of the system, Herb is executed after being convicted of killing a woman by placing a bomb under her home. While the failure of the (in)justice system to properly support, care for and rehabilitate its offenders is a point of similarity between the two
representations that are provided by the films, the difference lies in the distinct fact that Herb is given no control over the matter of his death. He suffers greatly up until the moment of his execution, where he is put to death at the hands of the authorities, not his own.

It is likely that any viewer might feel a sense of powerlessness and guilt in this moment, watching as a man who is guilty by the law is put to death by the state, which is arguably just as guilty as he is. McQueen (2010) adds to this research with their study of representations of carceral institutions. Their resulting data shows that it is easier to portray prisons as “a negative institution” even though “taxpayers continually contribute millions of dollars…each year” and that “people are still on the fence about prisons” (McQueen, 2010, p. 55). This connotes a sense of passivity in audiences who watch films about the prison system. It also indicates that representations such as those in Just Mercy (2019) which actively condemn the (in)justice system as a current form of rehabilitation, using deeply rooted racism as case studies, are positive steps toward prison abolition.

Cultivation Theory Contextualized by The Shawshank Redemption (1994) and Just Mercy (2019)

Cultivation of Perception

Cultivation theory is focussed on the formulation of understandings of the social world as they relate to the accumulation of exposure to specific media representations (Harrison and Martins, 2012). George Gerbner, its creator, was concerned with the ways in which the media played a role in society, predicting that there were consequences to the high saturation of media in one’s daily life (Gerbner et al., 2002). Gerber’s research began in 1967, at which point a team
of researchers began to conduct empirical tests to explain the outcomes of the theory (Potter, 2014). This field of study has since grown significantly, inspiring Potter (2014) to critically analyze the literature provided by cultivation scholarship. Potter (2014) explains that Gerbner’s focus was not on the specific themes that were presented to viewers, but rather was “exclusively concerned with the influence that a much broader scope of messages gradually exerted onto the public as people were exposed to media messages in their everyday lives” (Potter, 2014, p.1016). Though the current research examines specific themes present in the films, cultivation theory works as the vessel through which these representations could, with time, affect perceptions of the (in)justice system. Holbert et al. (2004), as previously mentioned, provides research which supports Gerbner’s’ (2002) assertion that heavy exposure to television shows focussed on law enforcement foster greater support for capital punishment. In many reality television programs such as COPS (1989), which ran for thirty-two seasons, race is not acknowledged as a significant component of arrests and incarceration, much like The Shawshank Redemption (1994). The quiet injection of race and the subtlety of stereotypes that are employed by The Shawshank Redemption (1994) sit in sharp contrast to the confrontation of race that is embodied by Just Mercy (2019). In their analysis of news media and its correlation to cultivation theory, Dixon (2007) agrees that the study of frequency effects is imperative as it is linked to the “exposure and activation of stereotypes” (Dixon, 2007, p.272). They claim that the more exposure that the public has to these stereotypes in news media, “the more likely they are going to be used in the future” in other forms of media (Dixon, 2007, p.272).

While the current research is focussed specifically on the themes of race, criminality, gender, sexuality, punishment and authority, they are used to situate the difference in representations in the films The Shawshank Redemption (1994) and Just Mercy (2019) over time.
In order to discuss the ways in which particular representations of the prison system as it relates to race nurture particular understandings over time, we must first understand whether these representations change over time. Representations of criminality as they relate to race may be received differently based on the manner in which they are presented. In addition, if they are frequently employed, according to Gerbner’s (2002) research, they would affect societal perceptions of the carceral system. The current research effectively examines, in an intersectional manner, the ways in which certain images provided by *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) are problematic and perpetuate racist stereotypes, while actively not addressing them. In contrast, *Just Mercy* (2019) confronts them head on in an obvious, yet weighted way in order to illuminate the how our carceral system has been and continues to be racist. The film’s roles in cultivating perceptions of the (in)justice system as a whole is more effectively and genuinely represented by *Just Mercy* (2019).

**The Problem of Representation**

This research has deconstructed the representations of criminality as they are linked to race and other intersectional factors. The findings show that there are great disparities in the images and script material put forth between *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *Just Mercy* (2019). Beginning with the erasure of race in the former and the confrontation of race in the latter, there are other significant components of the films that differ. These include the gender specific nature of the characters and their depiction of emotionality. The depth of emotion that is lacking in *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) presents a one-dimensional understanding of masculinity, giving its audiences no opportunity to humanize the experiences as they relate to
'Red’s’ race. *Just Mercy* (2019), however, uses race to interrogate the ways in which the (in)justice system so deeply affects people of colour both physically and emotionally.

This dichotomy is further present in the films’ depictions of criminality, with one again quieting the notion that the experiences of racialized offenders differ from those that are white, and yet challenging them in the other. This continues with each theme, sexuality, authority and punishment, illuminating religion as a new dichotomy. A surprising addition, *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *Just Mercy* (2019) highlight the ways in which religion can be used as a device of fear and authority, as well as consolation and inspiration. It is important to examine the differences, noting that *Just Mercy* (2019) depicts a rich correlation between race and criminality, while *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) does not recognise its existence and misleads its viewers.
Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this research lie in the range of material used for analysis. No human participants were incorporated into the investigation, therefore the causation of script and image-based material included cannot empirically conclude that the representations of race and criminality provided by *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *Just Mercy* (2019) encourage or discourage particular perceptions of the (in)justice system. However, the two films include components of each of the explored themes (race, criminality, gender, sexuality, authority, punishment, and religion) and represent a change in representation of racialized criminality over the course of twenty-five years. The intersectional quality of the films’ representations of criminality are key to formulating conclusive evidence of correlation between viewership and cultivation of perceptions. This research is retrospectively conducted to analyze the existing media material, however future research could build on what has been provided to find new representations of criminality, which could help to foster support for forms of rehabilitation outside of carceral punishment. In addition, human participants could be incorporated to identify the perceptions that may be cultivated.
Concluding Thoughts: The Importance Of Storytelling

Stories matter. Storytelling has been employed by cultures around the world for centuries. Arguably, media has become a form of storytelling, whether it be fiction or nonfiction. By understanding the ways in which stories affect members of society differently based on intersectional factors, we can learn to understand the ways in which stories cultivate certain opinions of the (in)justice system and its treatment of marginalized folks in particular. The use of various theories within this research, critical film theory and cultivation theory in particular - help to illuminate the ways in which the stories provided by The Shawshank Redemption (1994) and Just Mercy (2019) affect perceptions of the intersections of race, criminality and punishment. Critical film theory discusses the components of the films, themselves, focussing on the images and script material provided by them, while cultivation theory makes claims about the frequency of exposure to particular media representations, the ways in which they are presented and how they may affect the responses and perceptions of criminality and punishment in society. This research points to the significance of the manner in which stories are told, people are represented and the ways in which these stories may be received. It is imperative to be critical of the depictions of the intersections of race and criminality in order to understand how we can change both our deeply entrenched perceptions of the (in)justice system and in turn, the system itself.
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