Hallmark Whiteness and the Paradox of Racial Tokenism

Sean Brayton

At the risk of belaboring the obvious, Hallmark's made-for-television Christmas films likely have approached peak popularity in North American media culture. In 2018, Hallmark's tenth annual "Countdown to Christmas" film marathon drew more than seventy-two million viewers in the U.S. alone and has since received widespread attention in national media outlets like *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and even *Saturday Night Live* (Larson par. 4). The series, along with its "Miracle of Christmas" companion on Hallmark's "Movies and Mysteries" channel, is chockablock with formulaic storylines of (mostly) white women who first struggle to balance their corporate careers and misguided relationships, then often retreat to bucolic settings to find not only corny heteronormative love but also a new career or promotion. Incidentally, love and upward socioeconomic mobility are inseparable in such stories. Hallmark is, after all, the network "intentionally branded as the happy place," a mantra that might explain why Hallmark rebroadcasted the 2019 Christmas film lineup to "help battle the COVID-19 blues" for viewers quarantined in March 2020 (Abbott, cited in Long par. 9; Dreier par. 2). In *The New Yorker*, Sarah Larson explained how "the familiarity of the films is essential to their success," trading heavily on nostalgia by casting celebrities of the early 1990s like Candace Cameron Bure of *Full House* (1987-1995) and Danica McKellar of *The Wonder Years* (1988-1993) that are roughly the same age as the program's target audience (par. 9). In *The Walrus*, Soraya Roberts wryly described the series as "clean" and "wholesome"; each film is set where "the houses are cut out of catalogues, the kids look like young Republicans, and Happy the dog gets top billing" (par. 2). In *Esquire*, Justin Kirkland opined how the success of the Hallmark Christmas franchise indicates that "we are now living in the golden era of so-bad-they're-good holiday movies" (par. 1).

Whereas many popular commentaries engage with Hallmark's postfeminist politics, others draw attention to the Christmas series' lack of diversity, which has reportedly been addressed by Crown Media (Hallmark's parent company) in recent years (see Murray; Nettleton; Vanderwerff; Keane). Headlines like "Hallmark Channel's Diversity Problem" (Weiss), "Hallmark's . . . Trumpian Holiday Cheer" (Freiburger), "White! Christmas!" (Jason), and "The Unwatchable Whiteness of Holiday Movies" (Roberts) point to a racial uniformity of Hallmark Christmas films that is difficult to overlook. In 2018, however, Hallmark seemed to make a more conscious effort at diversity and inclusion, commissioning four of twenty-two Christmas films with lead characters of color. Although Hallmark is often described by network executives as uninterested in social issues or identity-based politics that might alienate its target audience, the inclusion of black-led Christmas films in 2018—including *Christmas Everlasting*, *A Majestic Christmas*, *Memories of Christmas*, and *A Gingerbread Romance*—was warmly welcomed in popular press as an important step towards inclusion and diversity (see Melissa; Ellenbogen).

Despite the complaints of critics and viewers, characters of color are relatively widespread in the Hallmark universe, though less so in leading roles. In 2019, although only three films across Hallmark's "Countdown to Christmas" and "Miracle of Christmas" series featured non-white leads (*A Christmas Duet, A Christmas Miracle,* and *A Family Christmas Gift*), characters of color with speaking roles appeared in thirty-four of thirty-eight films produced. Such casting will not earn Hallmark any diversity awards, but it does not present an entirely whitewashed television landscape either; instead, Hallmark offers a perfunctory brand of multiculturalism and tokenism with myriad contradictions, which emerge from an analysis of the ways in which characters of color are represented. In fact, very few Hallmark Christmas films can depict white normativity (the bane of many viewers) without the diegetic jobs and narrative work of racialized characters. To this end, the Hallmark Christmas marathons uphold racial hierarchies at the level of plot development rather than merely

in casting where critics have directed most of their attention. Such meanings evolve when we read (rather than count) for race.

During research into these films, a textual analysis was used to read Hallmark's Christmas 2019-broadcast films, paying attention to the ways that characters of color are depicted and the storylines they enable. The Hallmark series clearly fits within a wider discussion of racial tokenism outlined in some detail. To complicate the white plotlines of the Christmas films, Edward Said's "contrapuntal reading" practices are explained as a potentially valuable way of unpacking Hallmark's "diversity problem," particularly how minor(ity) characters are marginalized but indispensable to the Hallmark series. Indeed, minor characters, particularly characters of color, perform pivotal roles as not only personal assistants and office workers, for example, but also as "matchmakers" of white courtship throughout both the "Countdown to Christmas" and "Miracle of Christmas" series. Essentially, white upward mobility, happiness, and ultimately love are facilitated not by white characters alone, as audiences are often led to believe, but rather primarily by racial tokens, a fact overshadowed by white romance in most Hallmark Christmas films. In other words, the myth of the "self-made" white character is upheld only if viewers overlook the various types of work done by characters of color as both wage labor and multicultural "matchmaker." As a veiled or an accidental critique, the films present a paradox of tokenism wherein minor characters of color provide labor through their diegetic jobs and skills as well as narrative work in the plots, both of which are instrumental to white storylines that are generally uninterested in multicultural romance. As a strategy of representation designed to placate the material demands of identity politics by assigning the multicultural characters visible but minor roles, racial tokenism potentially backfires in Hallmark's Christmas films where characters of color perform essential work (and narrative services) in maintaining predominantly white bourgeois comfort. In a way, Hallmark's tokens are not unlike the racialized retail and service workers during the COVID-19 pandemic when the Christmas film marathons were rebroadcasted (see Al-Gharbi). The work of minor(ity) characters may

indeed "lubricate the turn of the plot," but it is minimized by the romantic interests of the lead white characters who are usually rewarded with career success (Morrison 13); in the Hallmark world, romantic love is inherently productive with an economic imperative. Although Hallmark may suggest that the only Christmas stories worth telling are white ones, an inference made by multiple critics, it also unwittingly reveals how such stories cannot unfold without the jobs, skills, and narrative services of characters of color. Herein lies one of the formative contradictions of how Hallmark practices racial tokenism.

Racial Tokenism and the Supporting Cast

Developed in the late 1970s, the theory of "tokenism" is widely credited to Rosabeth Moss Kanter and her pioneering study of women's experiences working at a Fortune 500 company. Kanter was particularly interested in how the hiring and promotion of women in the workplace functioned to assimilate them into the dominant gender order, even though these actions were presented as evidence of "equality." As she explained, the gender (or racial) "token" is used to defuse criticism against companies that seem to reserve certain occupations for (white) men while more or less maintaining the gender (or racial) status quo (Kanter 967). The improved visibility of women *qua* tokens, however, exacerbated performance pressures at the workplace and left women feeling increasingly isolated (Kanter 970). For Kanter, one primary solution to tokenism was to simply increase hiring and promoting of women to balance the number between the relatively few tokens and the majority group, which is now recognized as a highly questionable practice; dominant groups in the workplace tend to react with aggression and further discrimination when what they perceive as their domain is encroached upon by a growing number of visible minorities (Yoder 180).

Several sociologists and organizational theorists have adopted Kanter's framework of tokenism in relation to race and ethnicity (see Stainback, Kendra, and Walter). WM Phillips, Jr., and Rhoda Blumberg explain racial tokenism in organizational settings as "a technique

of resistance to change in the relationships between dominant and minority groups" in which a white status quo is maintained (34). As the highly-visible inclusion of select racialized individuals, racial tokenism is central to the maintenance of white liberal ideologies and institutions in the U.S. (Phillips and Blumberg 36). Under the purview of what Jodi Melamed calls "neoliberal multiculturalism," the presence of a few people of color in positions of socioeconomic power and with cultural capital—from Oprah Winfrey, Kumail Nanjiani, and Sandra Oh to Condoleezza Rice, Andrew Yang, and Barack Obama, for example—is proffered as evidence of the vast opportunities for upward mobility in a late capitalist mode of production that allegedly no longer supports racist discrimination (1). Incidentally, the depiction and performance of racial difference must correspond to the logic of the market in ways that reflect rather than reject the dominant socioeconomic order (Gent 220). As such, racial tokenism is particularly compatible with ideologies, politics, and practices of neoliberalism in which responsibility for one's economic well-being is placed squarely on the individual, regardless of structural barriers and systemic racism (Goldberg 4). Herein lies a shift toward "antiracialism" in which race ceases to exist as a social identity inflected by power relations but remains an individual asset to be utilized for social and economic gain in education, the workplace, politics, and popular culture (Gent 221).

As a representational practice premised on the visibility of "difference," racial tokenism abounds in Hollywood (see Cloud; Eschholz, Bufkin, and Long; Gray; Khanna and Harris). On network television, it typically assumes the form of the black best friend, sassy Latinx, or Asian-American co-worker and has sweeping historical purchase. It has been prevalent in sitcoms like *The Facts of Life* (1977-1988), *Silver Spoons* (1982-1987), and *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019); medical dramas like *Doogie Howser, M.D.* (1989-1993), *ER* (1994-2009), and *House* (2004-2012); teen series like *Saved by the Bell* (1989-1993), *Felicity* (1998-2002), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003); primetime dramas like *Knots Landing* (1979-1993), *Magnum, P.I.* (1980-1988), and *Melrose Place* (1992-1999). In these and other television

series, racial tokens are well-nigh ubiquitous and too abundant to index here. In discussing the personae of early 1990s media icons like Oprah Winfrey and Bill Cosby, for instance, Dana Cloud explains how a racial token is often "celebrated, authorized to speak as proof that the society at large does not discriminate against members of that group" (123-124). Lest audiences assume racial tokenism has been consigned to the dustbin of television history, the more recent guest appearance of Donald Glover in *Girls* (2012-2017) suggests otherwise. In Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's balanced review of the series, the basketball legend and cultural commentator quipped that Glover's character "is introduced as some jungle fever lover, with just enough screen time to have sex [when] a black dildo would have sufficed and cost less" (par. 6). He lamented that racialized people seem to be "shaken indiscriminately into every [television] series like some sort of exotic seasoning" (Abdul-Jabbar par. 7).

Primetime television is also fond of using token racialized women (Monk-Turner et al. 110). Many of these characters appear in predominantly white settings, such as Lucy Liu's Joan Watson in *Elementary* (2012-2019), Vella Lovell's Heather Davis in *Crazy Ex-girlfriend* (2015-2019), Hannah Simone's Cece in *New Girl* (2011-2018), and Maya Lynne Robinson's Michelle in *The Unicorn* (2019-present). While Asian-American and black women in each series receive uneven backstories and biographical details, they are all embedded in white workplaces and neighborhoods and are ostensibly used to signify not only network "multiculturalism" but also the seemingly "woke" values of lead white characters. Although racial tokens have become more developed in recent years—from Mindy Kaling's role in *The Office* (2005-2013) to headlining her own (less self-reflexive) series—they are predictably outnumbered by their white cast members. As such, the presence and narrative contributions of racialized women are typically meant to supplement and sometimes satirize the moral and social development of lead white characters. Racial tokens are depicted without referents to lived experiences of black, Asian-American, and Latinx communities and the complexities of racialization in the U.S.

(Guerrero 238). Instead, the token becomes televisual shorthand for perfunctory inclusivity and neoliberal multiculturalism.

The political importance of the racialized supporting cast, however, can be excavated by using what Said called "contrapuntal reading" practices (also see Rosen; Mortimer; Wilson; Asghar and Butt). [Said famously examined the works of Austen, Conrad, Dickens, and Kipling to tease out the colonial imaginary and "give voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented" in the novels (66).] For Said, literary (non)representation of the colonized was symptomatic and constitutive of political (non)representation. This premise was critical to his analysis of Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), in which British wealth and lifestyle were derived from the profits of a Caribbean sugar plantation and colonial relations that the novel itself minimizes (Said 88). Said encouraged readers to "understand concretely the historical valences in the reference" to Antigua and how "the right to colonial possessions helps directly to establish social order and moral priorities at home" (89, 78). A contrapuntal reading, then, unpacks "small plot lines or . . . peripheral elements with an avowed purpose to find out how literary texts are deeply embedded in the matrices of imperial ideologies" (Asghar and Butt 146). It is particularly sensitive to the various contradictions within a text, including the ways in which dominant themes and characters develop only at the expense of an alterity consigned to the background of a novel or popular cultural text. Essentially, Said's contrapuntal reading is a version of deconstruction, one that identifies and inverts central binaries of imperialism that include not only colonized and colonizer but also labor and capital. As such, there may be a curious connection between Said's approach to a predominately bourgeois literary canon and Hallmark's "lowbrow" love stories, both of which illustrate the hidden work of racialized characters. Indeed, the Christmas film marathons are rife with "small plot lines" and "peripheral elements" in which racial tokens—as secretaries, personal assistants, cooks, carpenters, and matchmakers—are pivotal to the career development and romantic relationships of lead white characters (Said 51).

The Narrative Work of Minorities in Hallmark's Christmas Film Marathons

In many ways, racial tokenism abounds in Hallmark's original content. From *Hailey Dean Mystery* (2016-present) and *Murder, She Baked* (2017) to *Ruby Herring Mysteries* (2019) and *Newlywed and Dead* (2016), black sidekicks provide witty remarks and comic relief but are rarely given top billing. Hallmark's made-for-television Christmas films of seasons past also trade heavily on racial tokens in which "people of color are usually periphery characters like the sassy friend or the fun co-worker [that are] easily replaceable and often unimportant" (Marian pars. 3, 5). Films like *I'm not ready for Christmas* (2015), *A Nutcracker Christmas* (2016), *Rocky Mountain Christmas* (2017), and *The Sweetest Christmas* (2017), for example, are rife with multicultural friends, office assistants, and even a jocular sous chef. Such texts illustrate what Ed Guerrero calls the "biracial buddy" narrative, which not only limits African-American, Latinx, and Asian-American characters to predominantly white settings but also bolsters the purported benevolence of select white folks (238). It is not a narrative, however, without important contradictions. Hallmark films like *Entertaining Christmas* (2018) and *Christmas Joy* (2018), while relying on racial tokens, unwittingly portray Latina and Asian-American office assistants as instrumental to the careers and love lives of lead white characters.

Racial tokenism and its contradictions are particularly concentrated in Hallmark's Christmas series, which (again) is routinely lambasted in popular press for a lack of diversity. Evidently, the three films with multicultural lead characters in the 2019 Christmas marathons are tokens unto themselves as "minority" texts produced and broadcasted to quell public criticism of network discrimination. However, the seasonal motif of the Christmas film genre is less interesting or notable than the repetition and regularity of minority character roles like the "black buddy" or "Asian-American assistant" in the "Countdown to Christmas" and "Miracle of Christmas" series. Although all multicultural films of the 2019 lineup feature more than

one character of color in major roles and focus on the romantic prospects and career opportunities of black women (all of whom are lighter skinned), the storylines of *A Christmas Miracle* and *A Family Christmas Gift* are perhaps most representative of the paradox of tokenism across Hallmark holiday fare and thus deserve closer consideration.

Both *A Christmas Miracle* and *A Family Christmas Gift* are set in Colorado and present leading black women as overworked and underappreciated writers for lifestyle and culture magazines. Much as Emma's proposal for a novel holiday story is scooped by her white editor in *A Christmas Miracle*, Amber's lucrative promotion to lead journalist is snatched by her white co-worker in *A Family Christmas Gift*. In response, both Emma and Amber prove their professional worth by fostering family reunions around the holidays. Whereas Emma's work helps to reunite a white jazz musician with his estranged daughter and Amber's work helps to personalize her singer-celebrity aunt (played by Patti Labelle), both central characters are integral to the success of their respective magazines and workplaces. Wittingly or otherwise, then, the films foreground the importance of black intellectual and creative labor (also a key theme of the third black-led Hallmark film, *A Christmas Duet*), which is appropriated or overlooked by white magazine editors early in the stories. Although the racial identities of the central romantic couple may change in these "multicultural" films, the relations between white and black characters essentially remain the same in the Hallmark world. In other words, white characters in positions of cultural and economic power benefit from the heretofore "hidden" work of black women, which is a storyline staple of Hallmark Christmas films with racial tokens. Within this framework, racialized characters perform an abundance of narrative work, which includes everyday jobs in the storylines as well as the affective labor of multicultural matchmakers who are *sine qua non* to white courtship. The paradox of racial tokenism is such that Hallmark films place characters of color in ostensibly minor roles that end up undermining the myth of white normativity and self-deliverance.

Racial Tokens as Workers

Most Hallmark Christmas films are guided by a distinct economic imperative, one that presents heteronormative romance as an "obvious" solution to class conflict between affluent urbanites and small-town working folks. Typically, lead women and men confront one another from different sides of a political-economic spectrum but work to resolve issues like corporate predation, downsizing, and austerity cutbacks in large part by falling in love. Although economic struggle may be diluted and equivocated, it is no less present in the Christmas film marathons. Within this model, characters of color are mostly peripheral tokens who perform a variety of jobs like secretaries and personal assistants in *Nostalgic Christmas, Christmas Love Story,* and *It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas*; an interior decorator in *Christmas Wishes and Mistletoe Kisses*; a romance novelist in *Angel Falls: A Novel Holiday*; a cook and baker in *Holiday for Heroes;* a dance instructor in *The Christmas Club*; carpenters and "handymen" in *Christmas in Evergreen: Tidings of Joy* and *Holiday for Heroes;* small business owners in *Christmas Under the Stars, Check Inn to Christmas,* and *Christmas in Montana;* and town mayors in *Christmas in Evergreen: Tidings of Joy* and *Check Inn to Christmas*. In each of these films, the narrative focuses on the courtship of white women and men but employs black, Asian-American, and Latinx characters to fill in the supporting cast. The work of such characters, however, is oftentimes indispensable to the career development and livelihoods of white protagonists as well as the plots. Racial tokens, in other words, perform work that is more than merely representational.

In *Holiday for Heroes*, the budding romance between army veteran Matt and café owner Amy is realized in their efforts to host a homecoming celebration for military service personnel returning from Afghanistan. However, the entire celebration and courtship hinge on the work of racialized characters like Pete, the black carpenter who plays Santa Claus and builds Amy the café of her dreams; Jane, Amy's black friend and co-owner of the café that bakes twelve dozen "snickerdoodles" for the soldiers; Meredith, the Asian-American school

principal who hires Matt to teach high-school history, enabling him to stay in Connecticut for Amy; and Carlos, the Mexican-American restaurateur who caters the homecoming with his famous tamales and Mexican eggnog. Unfortunately, racial "differences"—especially culinary and linguistic signifiers—are used not to challenge white supremacy or Anglocentrism in the U.S. at a time of heightened anti-immigrant politics but rather to bolster the myth of multicultural meritocracy and an existing social order apparently brimming with equal opportunities. Here "to be a token, one must be different enough from dominant norms to demonstrate that 'anyone' can achieve but must also be recognized as having similar enough values and/or characteristics to the dominant culture" (Gent 220). Although Amy's homecoming celebration and Matt's career achievements are purportedly born of white ambition, many key plot developments—from providing white employment to facilitating the homecoming and feeding its patrons—are made possible by the jobs performed by characters of color even as they receive diminished screen time in their roles as racial tokens.

The importance of racialized labor is also evident in *Christmas in Evergreen: Tidings of Joy*. The film is the third installment of a white-led series based on a town's magical snow globe that apparently grants romantic wishes, but black labor is paramount to the plot. After the snow globe is accidentally broken, it is Elliott, the mixed-race repairman of Turner's Tinker Shop, who restores it to its former glory; the life-sized advent calendar/time capsule that mesmerizes the town's residents and anchors the plot was not only built by a black couple decades earlier, it is also unlocked by a hidden key discovered by the son of Evergreen's black mayor. Again, racial tokens provide visible differences that are "'acceptable' representations of dominant culture" (Gent 220); white privilege is neither acknowledged nor challenged in Hallmark's narratives, especially when the town in the story has a black mayor (played by Holly Robinson Peete). Racial tokens are seen to "demonstrate loyalty to the system's values," but their presence in Evergreen's white Christmas narrative is hardly innocuous (Phillips and Blumberg 38). Whereas the film may be preoccupied

with realizing white love between Katie and Ben, there are no "tidings of joy" without the mixed-race handyman who repairs the magical snow globe or the black teenager who discovers the key that unlocks the giant advent calendar built, of course, by a black couple. Basically, the film has no plot without the work of characters of color, whose own love interests and livelihoods are merely secondary to those of the white leads.

Evidently, the role of the racial token—especially the assistant—should not be understated. In *Christmas on My Mind*, for example, Lucy slips on ice and is stricken with amnesia, but Anna Hepburn, the Asian-American personal assistant, guides her through the workday and plans important events and meetings with investors in the Lovett Art Foundation. Anna even cracks subtle jokes about race and tokenism when she sarcastically clarifies for other characters that she has "no relation to Audrey [Hepburn]." In addition, Lucy's memory and love for Zach are recovered primarily through the prognosis, therapy, and guidance of her black physician, Dr. Caroline Albright (played by Jackée Henry). Similarly, in *It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas*, the white mayors of rival towns compete to secure the location of a new candle-distribution center only through the organization and planning of their Asian-American and Latino assistants—Kendall and Yale—whose own love interests are eclipsed by the romance between Mayor Liam and Mayor Sarah. These central white characters are initially opposed to any cooperation but are ultimately convinced by Kendall and Yale to work together in securing the lucrative candle retailer. Here the racial tokens may assume increasingly important roles but are still "operating on the turf of the dominant group, under license from it" (Laws 51). Although Anna, Kendall, and Yale perform work essential to the careers of their white employers and prosperity of their towns, only Anna is rewarded with her own romantic relationship, which is predictably overshadowed by the courtship of white co-stars. Although romance may be a bizarre recompense for the work performed by racial tokens, it is the dominant currency in film marathons based on heteronormative love and reflects the diegetic (un)importance of characters of color. To find love in these films, then,

is to be validated with subjectivity in the storylines, a theme not often extended to racial tokens.

However, racial tokenism presents some latent disruptions to Hallmark's white Christmas narratives and may closely align with what Alex Woloch calls a "labor theory" of character development (26). In his overview of classic British nineteenth-century novels and their characters, Woloch distinguishes between the "worker" who is "smoothly absorbed as a gear within the narrative machine" and the "eccentric" or "fragmentary character who plays a disruptive, oppositional role within the plot" (Woloch 25). In Hallmark, characters like Pete, Jane, Meredith, and Carlos in *Holiday for Heroes*; Anna and Dr. Albright in *Christmas on My Mind*; or Kendall and Yale in *It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas* are "workers" who are comparatively flat and underdeveloped but have an "essential formal position" in "performing a function for someone else" (Woloch 27). While they are clearly "absorbed" into the plot, especially as racial tokens, they might also be considered, in Woloch's words, "the proletariat" of the storylines (27). If read contrapuntally, however, racial "workers" become "disruptive" to Hallmark's Christmas narratives of white self-deliverance where white characters are predominately responsible for their own economic and romantic success (Woloch 27).

The myth of the self-made white character, of course, is not exclusive to Hallmark and has wider applications beyond the Christmas film marathons. As Toni Morrison observed, "The imaginative and historical terrain upon which early American writers journeyed is in large measure shaped by the presence of the racial other" (46). In works by Faulkner, Hemingway, Melville, and Twain, she argued, "Africanist" characters are used to "limn out and enforce the invention and implication of whiteness" (Morrison 52). In other words, the imagined autonomy and self-made prosperity of white characters is achieved only by selectively forgetting black and brown labor, a myth recently deracinated by the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the quarantine period, the dependence of a predominantly white "professional-managerial class" on the work of delivery drivers, restaurant

staff, and fulfillment center operators (i.e., Amazon workers) became glaringly obvious. As Musa al-Gharbi pointed out in *The Baffler*, "the relative ease and comfort that many in the professional-managerial class are experiencing during the pandemic . . . is actually the product of thousands of low-paid 'invisible' workers" who are "disproportionately people of color" and are "paying the costs and exposing themselves to considerable risk, on behalf of those who are better off" (pars. 3, 2). The comfort and productivity of the self-isolating affluent, then, is subsidized by the "hidden" labor of black and brown bodies in the retail, restaurant, and service industries that also carry a greater risk of exposure to viral strains. Similarly, the image of the self-made white woman in Hallmark Christmas films is developed only by minimizing the contributions of racial characters, or what Morrison calls a "purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty" of the texts, which can be teased out by contrapuntal reading practices (6).

If the modus operandi of a contrapuntal intervention is to read "against the grain" of a popular text from the perspectives of colonized or marginalized characters, the messages of Hallmark's Christmas films become rather muddled and unwieldy. Indeed, the myth of white self-deliverance and "normativity" in such films emerges only by neglecting the work of characters of color. In *Christmas at the Plaza*, local historian Jessica and decorator Nick are hired to commemorate New York City's landmarked Plaza Hotel, which seems to function only by the tireless work of the Asian-American concierge, Kenny. Although the character is presumably used for "cute" comic relief, Kenny is often shown agreeing to capricious demands of hotel guests that include "a dozen cherry tomatoes, three almonds [and] one bottle of champagne." As Jessica is informed, "Anything you need, Kenny's here to help." In *Christmas Under the Stars*, white former financial advisor Nick is hired to sell Christmas trees alongside the sage black veteran, Clem (played by Clarke Peters of *The Wire* and *Treme* fame). As Clem confides, "I saw someone that was lost [i.e., Nick]. I know what loss feels like and the need to work." Under Clem's tutelage, Nick is able to learn the "true" spirit of Christmas and eventually help a

single mother *cum* love interest restructure her outstanding medical debt. Similarly, in *A Christmas Love Story*, Katherine's Christmas choral concert is difficult to imagine without her black pianist, Brian, and the nameless multiracial youth who provide the harmonies to the white lead singer. As Morrison might suggest, racial characters in such Hallmark films are used "strategically" to "enrich creative possibilities, . . . define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters" (38, 52). Although characters of color find themselves in predominantly white social settings, requisite of racial tokens, their presence is clearly essential to both the narrative and development of white characters, a theme embellished by the role of the "multicultural matchmaker."

Racial Tokens as Matchmakers

Much as Hallmark Christmas films involve white women "following their dreams," reinventing careers or earning lucrative promotions in the workplace, they are also keenly interested in romantic heteronormative love. With a target demographic of (white) women aged twenty-five to fifty-four, Hallmark films are perhaps first and foremost romantic family fare, trading on the early struggles of (mostly) white women to juggle demanding careers and dull relationships with rapacious fiancés only to reward them with new job prospects often in new locations and always with new beaus. Usually this trajectory unfolds in plots that position leading women and men against one another in approaches to the work-life balance. While love often "blossoms" when lead characters are forced to forego their differences and work together to resolve a social or an economic problem, suggesting that the serendipity of the modern workplace is somehow responsible for successful courtship, white love is often facilitated by the caring work of racial tokens who assume the role of "multicultural matchmakers."

Typically, the multicultural matchmaker is a co-worker of a lead white character. In *A Nostalgic Christmas*, Alicia is the middle-aged black secretary at a local lumber mill on the brink of bankruptcy, but she somehow finds time to goad her white manager and wannabe

lumberjack, Keith, into pursuing Anne. In multiple scenes, Alicia casually but persistently reminds Keith of Anne's romantic availability. Likewise, in *The Christmas Club*, Olivia's black Jewish co-worker and fellow ballet instructor, Carrie, encourages her to find time for love. Carrie even casts a Christmas wish on Olivia's behalf for someone with "dark hair, blue eyes, a great sense of humor and [who is] . . . good with kids," a wish that is predictably granted in the film but oddly attributed to a white stranger rather than the black Jewish co-worker. The racial co-worker/matchmaker is perhaps most explicit in *It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas*, where Kendall and Yale not only organize various events for their respective employers but also force the mayors to work closely (and sometimes in confined physical spaces) with one another in an effort to ease workplace stress. In each of these films, racial tokens act as both co-workers and enablers of white love, often without any sustained attention to their own emotional needs. To this end, Alicia, Carrie, Jane, Kendall, and Yale provide an unpaid form of affective labor.

Though *affective labor* is a term usually reserved for caregiving, domestic work, and the service industry (broadly conceived to include education, communications and public relations, financing, and health care), it is ultimately geared towards the production of emotion *in others* and fits rather neatly with Hallmark's multicultural matchmaker. As Michael Hardt explains, affective labor has become increasingly commodified in creating "a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community" (96). It is often "invisible" work done to maintain happiness in others and is a key component of the immaterial labor widely reified in and by a late capitalist mode of production (Hartley 5). Incidentally, affective labor is also historically gendered and racialized work, consigned to women of color—particularly migrant domestics—and often denigrated as such (see Chang; Hondagneu-Sotelo). This is not to suggest that Hallmark's racial tokens and migrant domestics face analogous working conditions; instead, it is to illustrate how different forms of affective labor converge in sustaining a white bourgeois social order at both material and discursive levels. Such

caring work is, of course, unremunerated in Hallmark Christmas films (though less so in the network's Valentine's Day content) and typically performed by token racial women in addition to their roles as secretaries, dance instructors, physicians, and personal assistants. Here the affective labor of racial tokens produces not only "social networks" and "forms of community," as Hardt suggests, but also the conditions of possibility for white love, romance, and ultimately social reproduction (96). In the Hallmark world, where romance is given an economic imperative, inspiring love connections seem to stand in for the generation of capital. Although affective labor in Hallmark's Christmas films is not automatically alienating, it usually serves the interests of white romance, which is often analogous with the achievement of career dreams and financial gain, without disclosing many details about the interior and exterior lives of the multicultural matchmakers.

In *Holiday Date*, Brooke and Joel's courtship is largely the result of an Asian-American friend, Megan, who incessantly pleads for Joel to pose "as the boyfriend [to] bring home for the holidays." In *Christmas on My Mind*, Dr. Albright not only treats Lucy's amnesia and head injuries; she also provides dating advice and encourages Lucy to reconnect with Zach. She tells Lucy to "tell Zach your feelings" and "hang out with him . . . Doctor's orders!" Whereas viewers occasionally see Megan with her own boyfriend in *Holiday Date*, the audience learns very little if anything of the relationship status of Dr. Albright, who seems perfectly content with reconnecting Lucy with Zach in *Christmas on My Mind*. Apart from the occasional token black-led film or television episode, Hallmark rarely recognizes the emotional needs and desires as well as the romantic and vocational dreams of its racial tokens. Instead, characters of color perform a type of affective labor that is imperative to white character development and romance but routinely is downgraded by final scenes of white couples embracing and exchanging a rather innocuous kiss. The white couple is clearly the center of the story but would not *exist as a couple* without the affective work of characters of color that are "thoroughly serviceable [and] companionably ego-reinforcing" (Morrison 8). When not employed directly by white characters, then, racial tokens often work

toward the romantic happiness of their white co-stars in ways that resemble a rather vexing Hollywood trope.

Racial tokenism often incorporates what Spike Lee calls the "magical negro" trope (Fuchs). Famously found in films like *Ghost* (1990), *The Green Mile* (1998), *What Dreams May Come* (1998), and *Family Man* (2000), as well as television series like *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *Dexter* (2006-2013), and *The Outsider* (2020), the "magical negro" character—typically an angel, clairvoyant, or sage advisor—is imbued with mystical powers or insight used to provide guidance or salvation to white characters. Lee excoriated *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), a film that dabbles in equal parts tokenism, biracial buddy story, and "magical negro" trope to the point of absurdity:

> This is a film set in early 1930s, Depression-era Georgia . . . one of the roughest states for black people [where] a lot of Negroes were castrated, lynched and whatnot . . . . And if this magical black caddie has all these powers, why isn't he using them to try and stop some of the other brothers from being lynched and castrated? Why is he fucking around with Matt Damon and trying to teach him a golf swing? I don't understand this. That is insane. (Lee, cited in Fuchs 205)

Whereas Hallmark's racial tokens rarely possess mystical powers—though a black angel appears in *Angel Falls: A Novel Holiday*, and Carrie's Christmas wish hints at an enchanted vision in *The Christmas Club*—they perform similar roles as the "magical negro." In each case, characters of color possess and bestow inimitable insight and find themselves in overwhelmingly white social settings, more or less in the narrative service of white characters. In other words, the formal function of racial tokens in Hallmark's Christmas films is to supplement white storylines, often as the multicultural matchmaker.

Conclusions

Lee's indictment of the "magical negro" trope speaks to the discord between "reality" and motivated representations as well as the political possibilities and limitations of a contrapuntal analysis. On the one hand, a contrapuntal reading reveals little of how a cultural text is interpreted, accepted, or rejected by an audience, particularly one that identifies with the racial tokens. On the other hand, to read contrapuntally is to explore how competing narrative perspectives, including disruptive ones, percolate and interact with "larger sociocultural framings" (Asghar and Butt 146). If, as Said suggested, popular culture (in his case, literature) reflects and reacts against wider discourses of race, nation, and economy, often in the service of colonial or white supremacist institutions, what might Hallmark's Christmas film marathons tell us about whiteness, multiculturalism, and late capitalism today?

One of the many criticisms of Hallmark Christmas films is the apparent estrangement from multicultural realities of contemporary U.S. culture, a trend that is hardly limited to the conservative network (as the #OscarSoWhite campaign of 2015 attests). Hallmark's use of racial tokens, however, can be understood in a variety of ways, some of which are informed by the network's rebroadcasting of 2019 Christmas films during the outbreak of COVID-19. While the pandemic revealed myriad depravities of late capitalism—from a failure to provide universal health care and basic income in the U.S. to the inability of flexible production systems to stockpile personal protective equipment and medical supplies—it also compelled the professional-managerial class working from home to realize the importance of heretofore "disposable" service workers. In March 2020, striking workers at Amazon, Instacart, and Whole Foods drew nationwide attention to the unsafe working conditions of order processing and delivery during a pandemic as well as the indispensability of labor in the service economy. As Al-Gharbi explains, these workers are "disproportionately people of color, often undocumented immigrants and

typically paid poorly" to "make life under quarantine bearable and productive" for the professional-managerial class (par. 3). In other words, key elements of a predominantly white bourgeois social order are sustained by the work of racialized people who are historically overlooked by the class that benefits most from their labor, a situation that is not entirely removed from the discourse of race and labor reiterated in Hallmark's Christmas films.

Clearly the risks and rewards are vastly different between workers at Amazon and Hallmark's racial tokens, but the logic of servitude remains relevant; predominately people of color perform types of work that are critical to the maintenance of the dominant social order but are basically "absorbed into the narrative machine" of late capitalism and a larger discourse of white bourgeois normativity, that is, until the COVID-19 crisis and quarantine turned "minor characters" into "essential workers." In some ways, it is difficult to watch Hallmark's Christmas films without noticing the abundance of racial tokens and, moreover, how such characters are central to plots, even in their marginality. If one objective of tokenism is to give the public the impression of inclusion by presenting people of color in highly-visible positions of relative cultural and economic power or in dominant media narratives, Hallmark's cursory version of "diversity" and multiculturalism conveys some contradictory messages, which can be read against the intended theme of white love and romance. The various meanings of Hallmark's Christmas films emerge alongside ideological currents and themes within a wider political, economic, and cultural milieu, one in which racialized disparities and the myth of white self-deliverance, for instance, become magnified by a pandemic. Although Hallmark's Christmas films may indeed be "unbearably white," it is not only a matter of casting, as critics and viewers contend; instead, racial inequities appear in the storylines, particularly with the use of racial tokens who perform types of work and affective labor in the service of white characters and plot.

Works Cited

Abdul-Jabbar, Kareem. "Girls Just Want to Have (White) Fun." *The Huffington Post*, 31 Jan. 2013, www.huffpost.com/entry/girls-review_b_2593756.

Al-Gharbi, Musa. "Disposable People." *The Baffler*, 1 Apr. 2020, www.thebaffler.com/latest/disposable-people-algharbi

Asghar, Jamil, and Muhammad Iqbal Butt. "Contrapuntal Reading of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*: Theorizing the Raj Through Narrativity." *NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2017, pp. 144-201.

Chang, Grace. *Disposable Domestics*. South End Press, 2000.

Cloud, Dana. "Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in Oprah" Winfrey's Rags-to-Riches Biography." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1996, pp. 115-137.

Dreier, Natalie. "Coronavirus: Hallmark Channel to Air Christmas Movies During Pandemic Self-quarantines." *Kiro 7,* 19 Mar. 2020, www.kiro7.com/news/trending/coronavirus-hallmark-channel-air-christmas-movies-during-pandemic-self-quarantines/RE6RI3WXEBDT7IVOMXZFTW2BMI/.

Ellenbogen, Rachael. "Hallmark Casts First Christmas Movies with Black Leads." *International Business Times*, 12 Sep. 2018, www.ibtimes.com/hallmark-casts-first-christmas-movies-black-leads-christina-milian-jerrika-hinton-2715980.

Eschholz, Sarah, Jana Bufkin, and Jenny Long. "Symbolic Reality Bites: Women and Racial/Ethnic Minorities in Modern Film." *Sociological Spectrum*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2002, pp. 299-334.

Freiburger, Calvin. "Slate: Why Hallmark's 21-movie Orgy of Trumpian Christmas Cheer's a Huge Hit." *The Federalist Papers*, 15 Dec. 2017, thefederalistpapers.org/us/slate-hallmarks-21-movie-orgy-trumpian-christmas-cheer-huge-hit.

Fuchs, Cynthia. *Spike Lee Interviews*. University of Mississippi Press, 2002.

Gent, Whitney. "Tokenism and Cultural (Mis)recognition in the 'Man with the Golden Voice.'" *Howard Journal of Communication*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2017, pp. 217-233.

Goldberg, David Theo. *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*. Wiley Blackwell, 2008.

Gray, Herman. *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*. University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

Guerrero, Ed. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Temple University Press, 1993.

Hardt, Michael. "Affective Labor." *Boundary 2*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1999, pp. 89-100.

Hartley, Gemma. *Fed Up: Emotional Labor, Women, and the Way Forward*. Harper One, 2018.

Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette. *Doméstica*. University of California Press, 2001.

Jason, Zachary. "White! Christmas!" *Slate*, 12 Dec. 2017, slate.com/arts/2017/12/hallmarks-21-movie-christmas-countdown-reviewed.html.

Kanter, Rosabeth Moss. "Some Effects of Proportions on Group Life: Skewed Sex Ratios and Responses to Token Women." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 82, no. 5, 1977, pp. 965-990.

Keane, Erin. "All Hallmark Christmas Movies are Horror Films in Disguise." *Salon*, 19 Nov. 2018, www.salon.com/2018/11/19/all-hallmark-christmas-movies-are-horror-films-in-disguise/.

Khanna, Nikki, and Cherise Harris. "Discovering Race in a 'Post-Racial' World: Teaching Race Through Primetime Television." *Teaching Sociology*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2014, pp. 39-45.

Kirkland, Justin. "We are the in Golden Age of So-bad-they're-good Holiday Movies." *Esquire*, 21 Nov. 2019, www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a29832570/bad-christmas-movies-golden-era/.

Larson, Sarah. "How Hallmark Took Over Cable Television." *The New Yorker*, 16 Dec. 2019, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/12/23/how-hallmark-took-over-cable-tv.

Laws, Judith Long. "The Psychology of Tokenism: An Analysis." *Sex Roles*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1975, pp. 51-67.

Long, Heather. "The Feel-Good Hallmark Channel is Booming in the Age of Trump." *The Washington Post*, 21 Aug. 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/08/21/the-feel-good-hallmark-channel-is-booming-in-the-age-of-trump/?utm_term=.0d59b25a159c.

Marian. "Whitewashing Christmas: 3 Reasons a Lack of Minorities in Hallmark Movies is a Problem." *State of Affairs*, 16 Nov. 2015 www.

statelyaffairs.blogspot.com/2015/11/whitewashing-christmas-3-reasons-lack.html.

Melamed, Jodi. "The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism." *Social Text*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2006, pp. 1-24.

Melissa. "Hallmark Channel is Finally Producing Holiday Movies with Black Leads." *Nice Girls TV*, 19 Sep. 2018, www.nicegirlstv.com/2018/09/19/hallmark-channel-is-finally-producing-holiday-movies-with-black-leads/.

Monk-Turner, Elizabeth, Mary Heiserman, Crystle Johnson, et al. "The Portrayal of Racial Minorities on Prime Time Television: A Replication of the Mastro and Greenberg Study a Decade Later." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2010, pp. 101-114.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination*. Vintage Books, 1992.

Mortimer, Mildred. "Edward Said and Assia Djebar: A Contrapuntal Reading." *Research in African Literatures,* vol. 36, no. 3, 2005, pp. 53-67.

Murray, Noel. "The Overlooked Feminism of the Hallmark Channel." *The Week*, 3 May 2019, theweek.com/articles/836549/overlooked-feminism-hallmark-channel.

Nettleton, Pamela Hill. "An Unlikely Antidote for a Male-centered World? Hallmark Movies." *US Catholic*, Dec. 2018, www.uscatholic.org/articles/201812/unlikely-antidote-male-centered-world-hallmark-movies-31576.

Phillips Jr., WM, and Rhoda Blumberg. "Tokenism and Organizational Change." *Equity and Excellence in Education*, vol. 20, no. 1-2, 1982, pp. 34-39.

Roberts, Soraya. "The Unwatchable Whiteness of Holiday Movies." *The Walrus*, 11 Nov. 2017 (updated 20 Dec. 2019), thewalrus.ca/the-unwatchable-whiteness-of-holiday-movies/.

Rosen, Jeremy M. "Minor Characters Have Their Day: The Imaginary and Actual Politics of a Contemporary Genre." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2013, pp. 139-174.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. Columbia University Press, 1993.

Stainback, Ken, Jason Kendra, and Charles Walter. "Organizational Context and the Well Being of Black Workers: Does Racial Composition

Affect Psychological Stress?" *Race, Identity and Work,* edited by Ethel L. Mickey and Adia Harvey Wingfield. Emerald Publishing, 2018, pp. 137-164.

Vanderwerff, Todd. "The Hallmark Channel's Relationship to Fox News." *Slate*, 21 Dec. 2017, slate.com/culture/2017/12/the-hallmark-channels-relationship-to-fox-news.html.

Weiss, Norman. "Hallmark Channel's Diversity Problem." *The Washington Post*, 23 Dec. 2019, www.primetimer.com/item/Hallmark-Channels-diversity-problem-quot-It-s-the-TV-demographic-equivalent-of-trying-to-become-the-No-1-coal-mine-of-the-21st-century-quot-olS5RK.

Wilson, George M. "Edward Said on Contrapuntal Reading." *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1994, pp. 265-273.

Woloch, Alex. *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton University Press, 2003.

Yoder, Janice D. "Rethinking Tokenism: Looking Beyond the Numbers." *Gender and Society*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1991, pp. 178-192.

Sean Brayton is an associate professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. His research interests include representations of race and ethnicity in popular film and television with a particular focus on narratives of work and labor. Brayton's research projects have examined a wide spectrum of popular culture, from children's cartoons, stand-up comedy, and ethnic exploitation films to dystopian fiction, reality television, and sports media. His work has appeared in *Social Semiotics, Social Identities, International Journal of Cultural Studies, Feminist Media Studies,* and *Science Fiction Studies.*