



Coordenadoria
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Língua Inglesa e suas Literaturas



Universidade Federal
de São João del-Rei

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**TRAVELING LOADED:
HAULING CULTURAL BAGGAGE
ACROSS COUNTRY**

Dezembro de 2022

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado à Coordenadoria do Curso de Letras – Língua Inglesa e suas Literaturas, da Universidade Federal de São João del-Rei, como requisito parcial à obtenção do título de Licenciado em Letras – Língua Inglesa e suas Literaturas.

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“Reading is important - read between the lines.

Don't swallow everything.”

Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks

ABSTRACT

Gwendolyn Brooks's poem *The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith* (1945) delivers a passage which illustrates the idea that African Americans are expected to enjoy only what is simple and unrefined, and that they should not take pleasure in art forms that are regarded as more complex and sophisticated. The same notion can be perceived in Peter Farrelly's movie *Green Book* (2018), which biographies the relationship between composer Donald Walbridge Shirley and his driver Frank Anthony "Tony Lip" Vallelonga during a tour they took in the South of the United States. This paper seeks to analyze some of the moments where these instances of (stereo)typed behavior occur in the movie and how this idea of a delimited and expected black experience traveled through time and culture. We investigate how the African American experience can be pictured and "read" in different media and accompany the character of Donald Shirley in his pursuit of a black "subjectivity" at the same time as we try to discover what seat black men actually take in this journey. Moreover, we navigate through history in an attempt to elucidate how this characterization of African Americans might have been formed.

Keywords: African American; Green Book; expectation; stereotype; reading; experience

RESUMO

A mensagem trazida pelo poema *The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith* de Gwendolyn Brooks (1945) é a de que a experiência afro-estadunidense implica um gosto por aquilo que é simples e comum e que os negros não devem apreciar formas de arte complexas e refinadas. Essa mesma mensagem pode ser lida no filme *Green Book* de Peter Farrelly (2018), adaptação das experiências que Donald Walbridge Shirley e seu motorista Frank Anthony “Tony Lip” Vallelonga viveram durante uma turnê pelos estados do sul dos Estados Unidos. Este trabalho é uma análise de *Green Book* que busca interpretar momentos onde as várias personagens do filme, sejam negras ou brancas, agem de modo a resumir a experiência negra a uma (estereo)tipificação de comportamentos limitados que vão na direção das expectativas criadas para a população negra. Pegando carona na jornada de Donald Shirley, investigamos como esses conceitos viajam através do tempo e de diferentes mídias e como eles podem ser representados e “lidos” à medida que exploramos a busca de Shirley por sua “subjetividade” negra. Ao navegarmos pela história, procuramos entender a posição do homem negro em sua jornada, para constatar se eles traçam seu próprio caminho ou se ele é traçado para eles, além de nos empenharmos para esclarecer detalhes que moldaram essa caracterização de expectativas em relação à população afro-estadunidense.

Palavras-chave: Afro-americano; Green Book, expectativas, estereótipo, leitura, experiência

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Mapping out

The same idea may travel across the years and media having its parts melted and recast into a different mold to fit the different times, audiences and technologies, as a romance between young lovers whose parents are against it. Another concept that traveled through media and time is the idea that individuals of a certain group all behave in the same way. Ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds are sometimes blended in a way that ends up painting protagonists with stock colors. The color black, especially the disregard for all its shades, and why black people, black men in the case of our objects of study, are interpreted based on type and the expectations around that type rather than read, analyzed and understood on their own individual terms are what we wish to explore in this paper as we analyze the 2018 movie *Green Book*,¹ directed by Peter Farrelly and starring Viggo Mortensen and Mahershala Ali, with the support of Gwendolyn Brooks's poem *The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith*.

This paper is a ramification of a research project² developed with Professor Miriam de Paiva Vieira where we analyzed the similarities between the works of Gwendolyn Brooks and Elvis Presley, specifically the poem *Sadie and Maud* and the song *Jailhouse Rock*. While collecting data to support our analysis, we encountered sources that described Elvis as a man who enjoyed simpler rhythms, such as the African American rooted boogie-woogie and blues, and that, with the participation of other white men, appropriated these rhythms and made them popular. Another issue regarding African American art comes from Brooks's poem *The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith*, which tells the story of a man who wishes for something more but is trapped into a world of poverty. The work proposes the following reflection:

Down these sore avenues
Comes no Saint-Saëns, no piquant elusive Grieg,
And not Tschaikovsky's wayward eloquence
And not the shapely tender drift of Brahms.
But could he love them? Since a man must bring
To music what his mother spanked him for (BROOKS, 1945).

¹ The full movie is available at https://www.primevideo.com/detail/Green-Book-O-Guia/0R9WCHPD29H6GQQJGPG2KM6FZ6?_encoding=UTF8&language=pt_BR.

² Research project elaborated following the guidelines of Programa Institucional de Iniciação Científica de Universidade Federal de São João del-Rei. Title: "Escolha e Julgamento - A Procura da Felicidade no Contraditório: um estudo das relações entre a poesia de Brooks e a música de Presley". Pró-reitoria de Pesquisa e Pós-graduação announcement 005/2021/PROPE.

Both the issues of a white musician making black music popular and a black poet questioning if a black person can enjoy sophisticated music made by white people led us to think about Dr. Don Shirley's dilemma depicted in the 2018 movie *Green Book*. Shirley is a black man in a social limbo: he entertains white Americans with his prowess on the piano, but he is not accepted by them; he is shunned by black Americans for being too sophisticated and not being "black enough".

Therefore, having the poem as a starting point to support our analysis, our objective is to investigate the movie to try to find the reason why this idea that black Americans are supposed to take pleasure in what is simple and popular and cannot appreciate other forms of art that are deemed more sophisticated is still reproduced, especially those forms considered to be for white people. We analyze some of the scenes where these examples of prejudice and contemplation occur in the movie to observe how the concept of a black man having to behave in a certain way traveled from a 1945 poem to a 2018 movie that depicts a tour Don Shirley went on in 1962. We wish to narrate the journey of a particular black expectation and examine what seat black men have in this voyage.

Our complementary source is Brooks's poem, which served as the spark plug to ignite our research. We used it to support our investigation of the concepts present both in the poem and the movie and as a bridge to connect the social and cultural context of American society back in 1945 and 1962 with our objects of study, particularly the Black American context. Then, to better understand the personal and cultural context into which Donald Shirley was inserted, we studied some of the interviews given by the composer while trying to identify how he interpreted his place in America, in music, and within his community. Finally, we compared what was expected of a black man and what Don Shirley expected of himself, connecting our findings to the movie's portrayal of expectations revolving around black American men and the treatment they received.

The development of this paper came from the study done for the research paper *Choice and Judgment – The Pursuit of Happiness in the Contradictory: A Study of the Relations Between Brooks's Poetry and Elvis's Music*, and since it also concerns the subject of how black culture is perceived and appropriated, especially when it comes to music, most of the theoretical background is the same. Therefore, we already had most of the supplies for our journey, as will be presented in the next section.

1.2. Checking our methodological supplies

For this final paper, our objects of study are Gwendolyn Brooks's poem *The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith* and the movie *Green Book*, directed by Peter Farrelly and written by Farrelly, Nick Vallelonga and Brian Hayes Currie. They both explore the idea that black people are supposed to follow an expected behavior. Brooks's poem, published in 1945, questions if a black man is allowed to enjoy classical music and the character of Donald Shirley faces the same predicament, wanting nothing more than to be a classical pianist while people ask him to adopt certain stage mannerisms that, according to his producer, would better fit him.

Because of this shared aspect, our theoretical starting point is a paper by Ana Luiza Ramazzina Ghirardi and Thais Flores Nogueira Diniz in collaboration with intermedial renowned specialist Irina O. Rajewsky. Their definition of intermediality being "a key trait of the transformation in contemporary communication – inter-media relations" (RAMAZZINA; DINIZ; RAJEWSKY, 2020, p. 13) marked the first relationship between poem and movie, since both present the issue we wish to explore. With regards to the shared element of behavioral expectations for African Americans, Ramazzina, Diniz and Rajewsky also offer this relevant definition:

intermediality can thus provide important insights for the analysis of cultural or artistic practices (e.g., literary texts; films; performances; paintings; installations; comics; video games; internet blogs; logos etc.) – as long as these practices, or medial configurations, manifest some sort of intermedial strategy, constitutional element or condition (RAMAZZINA; DINIZ; RAJEWSKY., 2020, p. 17).

Moreover, Ramazzina, Diniz and Rajewsky establish that technological evolution enabled the appearance of new "communicative strategies and formats having traditional genres and media as a starting point (e.g. novels, painting, photography), transforming them by means of their insertion into a new media environment" (RAMAZZINA; DINIZ; RAJEWSKY, 2020, p. 13) and make reference to Hansen-Löve when they state that "he makes use of intermediality in analogy to intertextuality to capture the relations between literature and visual arts" (RAMAZZINA; DINIZ; RAJEWSKY, 2020, p. 14). These two statements also helped us delve deeper into the connection between poem and movie because they both approach the idea that black men are some unified persona in different media, in this case, literature and cinema. Besides, they assisted us in interpreting some of the work of cultural theorist Mieke Bal in *Traveling concepts in the Humanities*, and in

developing our idea of how the concepts of type, expectation and “reading”³ might be adapted and transformed when moved from literature to a different form of art.

Bal (2002) states that “the counterpart of any given concept is the cultural text or work or 'thing' that constitutes the object of analysis. No concept is meaningful for cultural analysis unless it helps us to understand the object better on its - the object's - own terms” (BAL, 2002, p. 8). The scholar also states that “interdisciplinarity in the humanities, necessary, exciting, serious, must seek its heuristic and methodological basis in concepts. rather than methods” (BAL, 2002, p. 5). Our take on these propositions led us to work on the aforementioned concepts of type, expectation and “reading” applied to literature and film. In the case of literature, more specifically, the poem that supports our analysis, our background knowledge might trigger some pieces of information when we listen to or read the word *poem*. This genre of literature has a fixed structure that leads us to expect certain elements in the text: verses, stanzas, rhyme and paraphrases, for example. However, we can only digest the product after consuming it, after “reading” it. Therefore, it goes back to our hypothesis as to why black people, black men in the case of our objects of study, are interpreted based on type and the expectations around that type rather than read, analyzed and understood on their own individual terms.

Scholar Lars Elleström (2018) provides two relevant propositions, the extracommunicational domain and the intracommunicational domain, which are useful to analyze certain moments of the movie where type and expectation lead people to jump to conclusions when reading and interpreting the characters.

The first term, the extracommunicational domain, can be defined as:

the background area in the mind of the perceiver of media products. It comprises everything one is already familiar with. As it is a mental domain, it does not consist of the world as such, but rather of what one knows through perception and semiosis (ELLESTRÖM, 2018, p. 429).

As for the second one, the intracommunicational domain, Elleström defines it as:

the foreground area in the mind of the perceiver of media products. Coherence and truthfulness in communication. It is formed by one's perception and interpretation of the media products that are present in the ongoing act of communication. (ELLESTRÖM, 2018, p. 429)

³ We use the concept of “reading” in this paper following what is proposed by Bal (2002) when the scholar states that other forms of media, such as pictures, paintings and movies, also produce meaning. However, their meanings are not conveyed at first sight. Images demand more than a quick glance at them to be understood, just as with the words in a poem, but with different tools.

Besides the extracommunicational and intracommunicational domains submitted by Elleström, Bal's proposal puts forward a comparison that reinforces our premise that the concepts of type, expectations and reading are supposed to work together. Bal suggests that since images also speak to us, movies may also be read. In her words:

There are, for example, many reasons for referring to images or films as 'texts.' Such references entail various assumptions, including the idea that images have, or produce, meaning, and that they promote such analytical activities as reading. To make a long story short, the advantage of speaking of 'visual texts' is that it reminds the analyst that lines, motifs, colours, and surfaces, like words, contribute to the production of meaning; hence, that form and meaning cannot be disentangled. Neither texts nor images yield their meanings immediately. They are not transparent, so that images, like texts, require the labour of reading. (BAL, 2002, p. 26)

In spite of relying on intermedial studies, we will ground our analysis on Bal's notion of "cultural text". That is, we consciously use the notions of "media" for general considerations on the poem and the film, and "text" when developing our premise of reading culture through our interpretation of the movie character Donald Shirley.

We often see connections, find explicit references or make implicit connections with what we already know. Our context affects how we see, feel, and consume media, and, over time, these interactions build and mold our own mental corpus of media products that will remain silent until it is activated by an external agent that brings certain stimuli to our senses. As we read, listen, watch or feel, these ongoing acts of communication will all be connected to our extracommunicational domain, to our purpose when consuming media, to our feelings and moods. This happens in both the poem and the movie. But the product we analyze is the character Dr. Donald Shirley, who experiences the same issue as Satin-Legs Smith in the poem, as people interpret him based on his cultural background rather than by "close reading" the man.

American record reviewer for the Jazz Journal International, Peter J. Silvester (2009) explores the origins of boogie-woogie during the Great Migration. In his words, "boogie-woogie piano in its various train manifestations promised an escape to a better life further on down the line for many African Americans" (SILVESTER, 2009, p. 8). The Great Migration was a social and geographical phenomenon that lasted from the 1910's until the 1970's. During this period, millions of African Americans got away from the segregated south of the United States into more urbanized, industrialized areas, such as Detroit, Chicago, New York and Los

Angeles. This massive movement of people helped shape the country's landscape and also formed a collective black identity that strived for the advancement of black people as a community and praised the individual talents that rose from their ranks, such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Donald Shirley, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and Louis Armstrong.

Silvester's research for his book *The Story of Boogie Woogie - a Left Hand Like God* (2009) shone a light on our quest to understand and answer the question of why it seems black Americans are supposed to like what is simple and popular and are not meant to appreciate other forms of art that are deemed more sophisticated, especially those that are considered more suitable for white people.

Professor Claus Clüver (2006) enabled us to better understand what a medium is by offering a definition proposed by Rainer Bohn, Eggo Müller e Rainer Ruppert that says a medium is the transmission of a sign between humans that occurs through appropriate means and is full of meaning⁴ Scholar Werner Wolf states that the scope of intermediality ranges from a narrow to a broader sense, each defining intermediality either as an identifiable participation, direct or indirect, "of more than one medium of communication in the signification and/or semiotic structure of a work" (WOLF, 2002, p. 17) or as something that can be applied "to any transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media of communication or semiotic complex", which may occur inside the work or semiotic complex or as a consequence of comparing and contrasting different works (WOLF, 2002, p.17). Also, the work of Graz University professor Walter Bernhart illustrates in which ways music can be used to convey meaning:

In what has been labeled "word painting", or "word illustration", music can easily mirror, for instance, the rising sun talked about in the text by having the voice sing a rising melody, or suggest a girl running away by running scales in the accompanying lute; and also in "word expression", i.e., in passages where feelings and emotional states are addressed, such psychological conditions can be mirrored in the music: slow minor keys expressing sadness, falling seconds reflecting sighs, quick dance rhythms suggesting happiness, and so on. (BERNHART, 2017, p. 290).

⁴ In the original: a definição formulada em 1988 por Rainer Bohn, Eggo Müller e Rainer Ruppert, segundo a qual "mídia" é aquilo "que transmite para, e entre, seres humanos um signo (ou um complexo sígnico) repleto de significado com o auxílio de transmissores apropriados, podendo até mesmo vencer distâncias temporais e/ou espaciais", which is a slightly shorter and modified translation of Clüver's original in German "in seinem Buch Intermedialität: Formen moderner kultureller Kommunikation, das sich ausführlich mit dem Medienbegriff beschäftigt, übernimmt Jürgen Müller wörtlich die 1988 von Rainer Bohn, Eggo Müller und Rainer Ruppert formulierte Definition, die 'Medium' das nennt, 'was für und zwischen Menschen ein (bedeutungsvolles) Zeichen (oder einen Zeichenkomplex) mit Hilfe geeigneter Transmitter ver-mittelt, und zwar über zeitliche und/oder räumliche Distanzen hinweg".

Finally, as this work deals with an issue that was noticed in a poem from 1945 and reproduced in a 2018 movie, that is, the notion that black Americans are supposed to fit the mold of a perceived black identity, the field of new historicism permeates our research. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1993, as cited in BRANNIGAN, 1998, p. 33) proposes that the several human identities that exist are shaped by culture and not the other way around, which served as a road map to our examination of what aspect of the black identity people wanted Donald Shirley to fit in. Philosopher Gilbert Ryle also contributed to our analysis with his definition of “thick description”, which intends to examine actions taking into account not only the “thin description” of, for example, the muscles involved in moving an arm, but the context and probable intentions and expectations that convey meaning to the act (RYLE, 1971, as cited in GALLAGHER & GREENBLATT, 2000, p. 23).

These compose the theoretical foundation that guided us in our analysis of Peter Farrelly’s film adaptation of the relationship between Dr. Donald Shirley and his driver, Tony “Lip” Vallelonga, in *Green Book*. Furthermore, some of these propositions and definitions, especially the ones pertaining to new historicism, assisted us in identifying connections between poem, movie and the historical and racial settings of the years 1945, 1962 and 2018, an association which bore relevant weight on our analysis as both poem and movie drew heavily on the black American experience. Thus, it is required that we establish the historical background of Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks and Donald Walbridge Shirley to support such connections.

1.3. The road so far: historical context

The 1920’s saw the birth of a cultural movement like no other in the United States. In a mix of rising tensions between the African American and white communities in the South and job opportunities in the industrialized North, people started migrating from rural to urban areas across the country. One area in particular attracted many African Americans: Harlem. This neighborhood in New York became a hub for artists, musicians and writers that found themselves in a place where they were free to express their identities and to take pride in their African ancestry. Thus began the Harlem Renaissance, a movement that gave the black community a

chance to transform their daily struggles into paintings, songs and poetry.

This part of New York City gathered more than 175,000 African Americans. There were millionaires, bohemians, political activists and artists, and also regular folks who had to work commonplace jobs to make ends meet. Even some of the artists had regular nine-to-five jobs to make a living. Along with using dialects and references to their African origins to profess their identity, black poets and writers also took advantage of the life in Harlem to produce, transforming mundane actions into literary material to be discussed and analyzed by critics and scholars up to this day.

However, Harlem was not the only place the Great Migration pushed African Americans to. The city of Chicago had its Black Renaissance movement starting in the 1930's and going into the 1950's. It had characteristics akin to the movement in Harlem, like the enormous amount of African Americans that migrated to Chicago's segregated south side, being forced to live in an overpopulated area called the Black Belt, later called the "Black Metropolis." According to a document from the city of Chicago, the African American population in this residential settlement was:

predominantly confined to this enclave which was almost completely segregated. Its oldest northernmost section which encompassed the once-thriving Black Metropolis was characterized by extreme overcrowding, dilapidated tenements, high rents, and cramped "kitchenette" apartments. (CHICAGO, p. 3)

Albeit ridden with problems such as poor housing conditions, denial of citizenship rights, high rates of unemployment, poverty and crime, the area known as Bronzeville became a cultural center that encouraged people to embrace their identities and express themselves both intellectually and artistically, much like the Harlem Renaissance. Despite some critics' resistance to calling these movements Renaissance, due to their scope not bringing large-scale changes, Steven Tracy brings a different view to the definition of both the Harlem and Chicago's Black Renaissance:

each represented avant-garde political, social, and artistic thinking that eventually produced a stage upon which African American writers could redefine their relationships to American society and the world; therefore,

calling each a Renaissance is not really problematical in the sense of the term as a renewal of vigor, energy, or life produced by a newly minted but broad-ranging vision (TRACY, 2011, p. 18).

The daily struggles and liveliness of both Bronzeville and Harlem were some of the major influences in the works of several African American artists, including Gwendolyn Brooks, whose work is one of the objects of study in this final paper.

Living on the streets of Bronzeville, the desire to celebrate black culture bloomed in Gwendolyn Brooks. Born in 1917 in Topeka, Kansas, the poet watched, wrote about and inspired the population of Chicago. Having both Emily Dickinson and Langston Hughes as some of her influences, Brooks had the ability to harmonize form and all the stories her Bronzeville offered and create her own style. In the 1920's, African American writers who wanted to be published by mainstream publishing houses were "expected to adhere to 'universal' themes and to avoid 'social themes'" (WRIGHT, 2011, p. 194). But later came Brooks with poems like *kitchenette building*, *Ballad of Pearl May Lee*, *a song in the front yard* and *Sadie and Maud*, which all explore the different issues faced by black Americans in Bronzeville. The clash between the harsh reality and a dream for something prettier and more sophisticated, the violence and brutality used to control the urges of a people who wished for more, the weariness of always having to present a veneer of respect and expected proper behavior and the conflict between wanting to express oneself or sticking to an expected standard were themes that populated the poet's work, which is reinforced by Wright:

it is apparent that Brooks's relationships with her family and her community informed the poet's vision of the universe. Her works frequently focus on the lives and experiences of children, adult male and female relationships, and the day-today struggles of everyday life in the Black community (WRIGHT, 2011, p. 198)

Brooks had blackness in the center of her production. She fought for social justice and encouraged young black Americans to embrace their African heritage and use this legacy to shape their young black identities in an attempt "to move as many as possible of her people to a point of pride and self-determination" (WRIGHT, 2011, p. 198).

This bubbling cultural cauldron in the north of the United States was the basis for Brooks's work and the rise of movements such as the Chicago Black Renaissance. This movement was caused by the Great Migration, a social and geographical phenomenon that for decades drove around 6 million black Americans

to the north of the country in an attempt to find better conditions and to escape the Jim Crow laws.⁵ Millions of women, children and men left the segregated South onboard trains that rocked them up north hoping for an even-handed life. Brooks was an integral part of this social construction. She died on December 3, 2000. Her accomplishments include being the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize for her collection of poetry *Annie Allen* and being the first black woman to be the poetry consultant for the Library of Congress of the United States.

The historical figure Donald Shirley also left the south of the United States, but he moved much farther north. Before we start talking about Donald Walbridge Shirley, the information we were able to collect regarding his past came from newspaper and magazine articles and from some interviews given by the pianist. At the time of this study, there wasn't a more robust biographical work about him and most of the interest about his life came because of the 2018 movie *Green Book*, and, due to the depiction of the pianist the movie presents, some of the articles are filled with facts that either deny or clarify what the movie shows. Courtney Suci, in an article from February 25, 2019, entitled Beyond green book: who was Don Shirley? wrote for the website Proquest that "the film's warm message of friendship prevailing over racial tensions appeals to audiences in our own fraught times; some critics find fault with its soft, sugar-coated approach to the Jim Crow-era chapter in American history" (SUCIU, 2019). Therefore, although the movie serves as a good starting point to spark interest in the history of a well-accomplished black classical pianist, it should not be watched as a faithful representation of reality.

The son of Jamaican immigrants, whose mother was a schoolteacher and father an Episcopal priest, Shirley was born on January 29, 1927, in Pensacola, Florida. Shirley had three brothers, Calvin Hylton Shirley, Edwin Shirley Jr., a half-sister, Edwina Shirley Nalchawee and Maurice Shirley, who was his last living brother

⁵ Laws that made racial segregation official in the South of the United States. They were established in 1877 and were gradually removed after more than 70 years in place. The first ruling against segregation laws came on May 17, 1954, in the case *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka*, where the Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. The last major change in Jim Crow laws came in 1965 with the Voting Rights Act, which allowed African Americans to fully exercise their right to vote and to participate in American politics. Effects of the laws are still felt in 21st century America. An example is the decision of Georgia Governor Sonny Purdue to strike out a law that enabled the governor to use force in case of demonstrations at school or universities, something that was common during the civil rights movements. This decision came in 2005.

and was baffled by the story the movie tells, calling it a “symphony of lies”, as reported in a 2018 article by Monique Jones on the website Shadow and Act.⁶

Nevertheless, Shirley started out on his artistic path at an early age. At age 2 he started learning the piano with his mother and at 3 he went on to start playing the organ, which, later on, he played at the church where his father was a priest. Like millions of other black Americans, Shirley also left the south of the United States, but he went farther north. At age 9, he was invited to study at the Leningrad Conservatory in Russia, at age 10, he could already play all the repertory of the institution, and, at age 18, he performed professionally for the first time with the Boston Symphonic Orchestra playing Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat minor.

Classical music was his passion and, according to Shirley himself, the only thing he ever wanted to do. Journalists and producers advertised him as a jazz pianist, though. Jazz historian and author of the book *Rat Race Blues: The Musical Life of Gigi Gryce* Noal Cohen interviewed Shirley in 1998 during the research process for his book. In the interview, Shirley makes it clear that, although largely spread, the fact was that:

This is America, don’t forget it. And I have never known how to play jazz. I love it. Let me get that straight. I have enough enemies already. I love jazz. I love it when it’s played well and I have known everyone who has played it. Now I did have a nightclub background. Now that is where the confusion came in. (COHEN, 1998)

Shirley’s resistance to being called a jazz musician might have been reinforced by the fact that producers usually told him that he would find some resistance as a black man who played classical music. They usually tried to sell him under the umbrella of the more popular jazz, asking him to switch his persona into one more suited to the nightclub style Donald himself was very familiar with.

To start concluding our summary of who Donald Shirley was as a musician, we bring one of the musician’s declarations during an interview to New York Times journalist C. Gerald Fraser in 1982 where he justifies his opinion that jazz pianists lower themselves with their demeanor by smoking while they play and putting their

⁶ In a 2020 article, Monique Jones of the website Shadow and Act, writes how Maurice Shirley and his son, Edwin Shirley III, expressed their frustration and discomfort with the way Donald Shirley was portrayed in the movie. In the motion picture, Shirley is presented as a lonely person who seems hurt for not being close to his family. His nephew said otherwise and stated that his mother even let him skip school one time to accompany his uncle. Available at: <https://shadowandact.com/the-real-donald-shirley-green-book-hollywood-swallowed-whole>.

glasses on the piano. He said they would also get angry when admonished for this behavior and when people did not show them the same reverence they reserved for classical pianists like Arthur Rubinstein, Polish-American pianist regarded as one the great Chopin interpreters of his time. Donald said that you would not see Arthur smoke or drink on stage, which might be interpreted as dedication and professionalism to one's craft, something that Donald held in high regards.

Finally, in the same interview to Fraser, Donald stated that:

I am not an entertainer. But I'm running the risk of being considered an entertainer by going into a nightclub because that's what they have in there. I don't want anybody to know me well enough to slap me on the back and say 'Hey, baby.' The black experience through music, with a sense of dignity, that's all I have ever tried to do (FRASER, 1982).

Although the focus of our work is not to identify instances of fidelity to reality in the movie *Green Book*, this is relevant to better understand the way they portray Shirley, since he seems to act according to a code of dignity that aims at encouraging action to shape the black identity in a way that had not been associated to the black community during the white dominated Jim Crow Era. Donald Shirley died in 2013, at age 86.

In sum, each in his own way, both artists had the black experience as their inspiration and their reason for writing, composing and being the way they were. Being black left a mark on them and they also left a mark on what being black meant as they both tried to elevate and diversify the African American experience through their work. With the thought of what it means to be black in America, precisely, what people believe it signifies, we move on to our three-pillar analysis starting with the concept of (stereo)type.

2. THREE-PILLAR ANALYSIS: TYPE, EXPECTATION AND “READING”

2.1. Road markings: (stereo)type

Green Book, directed by Peter Farrelly, and produced by Participant Media and DreamWorks Pictures, is a movie released in 2018 that quickly received critical acclaim, eventually winning three Academy Awards. It biographies the relationship between Jamaican-American pianist Donald Shirley and his Italian-American driver Tony Vallelonga while touring in the South of the United States in a time when Jim Crow laws were still in place.

Although critically acclaimed,⁷ the movie also raised some controversy.⁸ It was idealized and written by Nick Vallelonga, Tony's son, in collaboration with Brian Hayes Currie and Peter Farrelly. It tells the story from Vallelonga's perspective, which brought the white savior trope into discussion. The trio won an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay. This focus on Vallelonga's perspective is curious, to say the least, since the movie's title is a reference to the *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (GREEN, 1949), a travel guide that helped black Americans find appropriate accommodation to escape prejudice and violence in segregated environments on both national and international road trips. The stellar cast has Mahershala Ali portraying Dr. Donald Shirley, who won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor, Viggo Mortensen as Tony "Lip" Vallelonga and Linda Cardellini as Dolores Vallelonga. It had a box office of almost 322 million dollars and it also won an Oscar for Best Picture.

Taking place in a still segregated United States, the movie sets off in New York and introduces viewers to Tony Lip, a bouncer at the Copacabana nightclub. Tony is respected for his expertise in solving problems and breaking up fights, but he also has a hustler side that emerges when he secretly steals a hat at the club and returns it to the rightful owner just to gain his favor later on. A clearly dishonest attitude which Tony brags about down the road in the movie.

At 6'47"⁹ we get a glimpse at the central theme of the movie. Racism shows some of the marks it has been leaving on American society when two black plumbers are at work at Tony's house. All the male members of his family gather to keep company to Tony's wife, Dolores Vallelonga, but they only do it because the workers are black, with Tony's father calling them "sacks of coal" and saying that they are stealing Italian jobs – the Monthly Labor Review from 1975 states that black men accounted for only 3.9% of a total of 279 plumbers and pipe-lifters in 1962's United

⁷ Besides its three Academy Award wins, the movie also won three Golden Globe awards. See an article written by Andrew R. Chow for time magazine: <https://time.com/5527806/green-book-movie-controversy/>.

⁸ The same Andrew R. Chow article for Times Magazine quotes an interview with Donald Shirley for the 2011 documentary *Lost Bohemia*, directed by Josef Astor, in which the pianist says he and Tony had a friendly relationship and that he absolutely trusted his driver. On the other side of the story, Maurice Shirley, Donald's brother, stated in the aforementioned article by Monique Jones of website *Shadow and Act* that his brother confronted Tony on his professional behavior regularly and actually fired the driver. He adds that the supposed 18-month business relationship between Donald and Tony never happened.

⁹ All our analysis and the timestamps mentioned in this paper are based on the movie available at https://www.primevideo.com/detail/Green-Book-O-Guia/0R9WCHPD29H6GQQJGPG2KM6FZ6?_encoding=UTF8&language=pt_BR.

States. The scene prompts our analysis and our attempt to check all instances of collective expected behavior in comparison to individual objectives and tastes as it starts branding people according to color and ethnicity. Why must they keep an eye on the black laborers? Why is plumbing an Italian job? Moreover, at 15'50" Tony expresses another belief regarding jobs that suit him or not. Shirley asks him to be his valet and he answers with a sound no, stating he is OK with driving Dr. Shirley down south but he will not iron his clothes or shine his shoes.¹⁰ Objective examples of (stereo)types about Italian and black men who are seen as fit for some activities, but not others.

Tony eventually accepts the job, and, at 24'45", he and his wife have Victor Hugo Green's *The Negro Motorist Green Book*¹¹ in hand. They are staring at it and look quite confused, incapable of understanding why black people would need such a guide. Chief editor of the website *Shadow and Act*, Brooke Obie, interviewed director Peter Farrelly, who admitted he had never heard about *The Negro Motorist Green Book* and neither had anyone he knew. Obie states that this confusion and lack of knowledge might be extended to the audience since "the Green Book, much like the film, only exists as a prop to enhance white understanding of white racism and white privilege in this country" (OBIE, 2018).

In a movie entitled *Green Book*, you would assume there would be a reasonable amount of reference to the material that inspired the name; instead, Tony Lip looks at it throughout the movie as if it were some useless absurdity, and not a material that might end up saving someone's life by making them avoid certain places. Life was hard for Tony and Dolores, but they were free to go anywhere they wished, therefore, they couldn't see why one would need a specific travel guide because they are black. Later on in the movie the spectator can see some of the difficulties and embarrassments *The Negro Motorist Green Book* wished to help

¹⁰ A 1953 issue of the Monthly Labor Review of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics signed by Mary S. Bedell, presents a table from the U.S. Bureau of Census showing that 2.7% of the white working force were private household workers. The number of female workers was higher than males, with 10.9 percent of all working women occupying those positions in 1940. The numbers for the black working force in private household positions was higher. From the total of black working force, 21.3% were private household workers, 58.6% of female workers occupied those positions in 1940. By 1950, the number of black female private household workers dropped to 42%. We can see a tendency of who was supposed to perform tasks such as ironing clothes and shining shoes

¹¹ By paying a modest fee of 10 cents to cover shipping costs, African Americans could write a letter to Victor H. Green & Co. and request a free copy of the guide that promised to "give the Negro traveler information that will keep him from running into difficulties, embarrassments and to make his trips more enjoyable" (GREEN, 1949, p. 1).

black people avoid, like when Shirley gets a beating for nothing or when he is arrested in a sundown town¹² while traveling at night.

After attending a Don Shirley Trio presentation for the first time and being surprised by Don's mastery of the piano, Tony goes on to shoot dice with other drivers and household servants, who are all black men. He is proud because he beat them at the game, but Dr. Shirley reproaches his behavior and asks Tony if his idea of being a winner is to crouch on the gravel at the servants entrance of the house to shoot dice with men way more unprivileged than him, who, contrary to Tony, had never had the chance to witness another way to survive. This illustrates how the way one interprets circumstances is affected by their personal perspective and by their proximity and knowledge of a group's cultural and social background. Tony had to hustle all his life and learned how to bend things to his advantage, but where he saw an asset, an undeniable quality that made him stand out among his peers, Shirley saw how handicapped black people were from the start, to the point that they didn't hustle simply because they were good at it, they did it because it was either that or hunger most of the times. It was typical, a social and racial mark left on African Americans.

During their conversations, at 41'50" they discuss the reasons why Tony takes pride in being a "bullshit artist" that gets people to do what he wants them to. Donald Shirley believed that black people hustled because they had no other choice and was incapable of understanding why Tony would be proud of his abilities. Shirley saw "bullshitting" the same way he saw lying; Tony saw it as an ability to bend peoples wills to his benefit. Shirley was careful with the way he behaved, with his actions and reactions, and would go to any lengths to avoid tarnishing the image of the black community. He would not lie, steal or even litter. Had a black man acted the same as Tony Lip, he would be seen as a con man, whereas Tony and his peers saw it as something desirable. Additionally, when they pull over at a roadside store, Tony steals a jade stone that had fallen from a box on a counter. Donald politely asks him to either return the stone or pay for it. He gives it back and says he does not want

¹² Sundown towns started to proliferate with the Great Migration, starting in 1910. They were whites-only towns mostly located in the West of the United States. These white-dominated places made it clear they did not want any African Americans there and black people were only allowed to travel through sundown towns during daytime, although they were constantly harassed during their stay, and had to be out by sunset. The city of Alix, Arkansas, had a sign that read "Nigger, Don't Let the Sun Go Down On You In Alix." Victor Hugo Green's *The Negro Motorist Green-Book* contained instructions that aimed at helping African Americans avoid these places when traveling long distances. HBO series *Lovecraft Country* offers examples of the dangers African Americans faced when in sundown towns.

Donald to buy it for him since the discussion took away all the fun from getting the stone from the ground. Once more, Tony is oblivious to the black experience in America. He fails to understand why African Americans need *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, gets offended when Shirley says there is no reason to be proud of being called a liar and uses the word fun to characterize a scenario where a black man would have ended up in jail, or worse, had he been the one to pick up the stone.

Tony goes on illustrating his perception of African Americans during the road trip. While in Kentucky, he spots a KFC store and decides to stop. He believes black people, as a whole, like fried chicken, grits and collard greens, but Donald says he's never had fried chicken. Donald points out Tony's limited opinion about him, reinforcing that not every black person has to be the same and to like the same things. Tony is stuck in the (stereo)type and sees no problem in reinforcing it. He fails to understand the subtlety in the way Donald tries to make things clear to him in the dice scene and when talking about food or music. Here he is, driving a man that studied at the Leningrad Conservatory, who lives atop one of the most prestigious concert venues in the world and that plays with such mastery that Tony thinks he is a genius, yet, he fails to speak to the individual and to try to know him personally. On a note, there is even a fun bit with littering when Donald Shirley is OK with throwing chicken bones out of the windows but makes Tony Lip stop the car and go back to pick the paper cup he also threw away. It is a lighthearted scene that is turned on its head when Donald's smiley face turns into a glare and Tony's sentiment of bonding is replaced by a look of disbelief. Here is another sample of Shirley's character and, consequently, his attention to how he wants others to see him and the black community.

Amidst several instances of unawareness, Tony notices why African Americans needed *The Negro Motorist Green Book* at minute 54. He leaves Donald at a shabby motel and gets surprised by the quality of it as he reads from the book that the motel is supposed to be "cozy as your own home" but it actually "looks like his ass." But that was part of the Jim Crow laws and the segregation years in the United States, when blacks were legally entitled to receiving the same services as the white population but actually got a separate, much inferior one. This was true to both public and private services.

We have analyzed some of the stereotypical perceptions people have about black people and how they expect them to act. It is sensible to say that Tony's job as

a driver, fixer and bodyguard during the trip was a necessity to try to keep Donald safe. However, in a bar scene at 56'50", Tony saves Donald from a beating and scolds him afterwards. Donald even apologizes. You may look at it either through Nick Vallelonga's lenses and see it as a dear friend fearful for his friend's safety or from Donald Shirley's standpoint in the movie, a man who simply went out for drinks, was assaulted by white men and saved by his white driver in a situation where he had done nothing wrong. His mistake was being black, not sticking to the *The Negro Motorist Green Book* and not asking Tony Lip to accompany him.

At this point, we can notice that the white savior trope is present. Shirley, although he is the boss, cannot go anywhere by himself and depends on his employees clearance to leave his room and roam the city. However, Tony's experience as a bouncer and as a man who knows his way around trouble was one of the reasons why Shirley hired him instead of the other drivers. The story makes us consider the border between practicality and condescension, between Shirley's pragmatic realization that he would need a white driver with Tony's skills down south and his anger and frustration for needing someone like him. Shirley goes a bit further down this road and turns his frustration into a question of whether geography matters or not, suggesting to Tony that even in New York the life of a black man falls into the same paradigm of knowing when and where to be pragmatic to avoid insult and resenting the fact that a black man has to weigh in those kinds of thoughts. Besides, on a note about frustration and intermediality, the movie shows Shirley playing and he is furious. It shows in his music, how hard he hits the keys, and how powerful and loud the chords are. This is an instance of what Bernhart calls "word expression" (2017, p. 290), since it is played in a way that represents the artist's state of mind and emotions without the assistance of lyrics, which is yet another example of "cultural text" that can be read and interpreted although it is not made of any written or spoken words.

Although the movie tells a steady story about Tony's evolution as a character who is oblivious to the pains and troubles of black people at first, it cannot keep from falling back to the white savior trope. Tony receives a phone call from the police saying that he should go to the nearest YMCA to deal with an issue involving Donald. He finds the pianist naked and handcuffed to a pipe, allegedly accused of being caught in the act of having sex with another man. Between bribes and shame, it is clear who is in charge: Donald is at their mercy and Tony is "bullshitting" the officers

and paying them off, most likely with the money he got from Shirley. Even to bribe someone, Shirley needs a white middle man.

Going down this money lane, we can see Donald's perspective and experience on some preconceived ideas and types. He lives in prime real estate and can afford to have a chauffeur. In this, Tony only saw luxury, but Donald sees a lonely throne atop Carnegie Hall; the educated social circles Shirley played for and that impressed Tony, in Donald's point of view are nothing but circuses where rich white people go to see the oddity of a black classical pianist and immediately bring him back "to being just another nigger" as soon as he gets off stage. He is there to make them feel smarter, but he is not part of the group.

If Donald isn't part of the white community, he complains about not being seen as black man either. He experiences all the prejudice of white people and does not have the acceptance of the black community. It is as if Donald Shirley struggles to find out who he is while everybody tells him who he must try to be. Producers tell him not to play the style he loves because of his color, his chauffeur believes he is not black enough because of the life he has and his "own people" do not accept him because he is not like them either. It seems Donald has been on the passenger seat of his journey most of his life, with people telling him what to like and how to behave. Although he finds himself on an identity crossroads, he follows the path of dignity on his journey to develop his black identity, to show that he has every right to be his own type.

Record reviewer Peter J. Silvester in his book *The Story of Boogie Woogie - a Left Hand Like God*, besides writing about how boogie-woogie draw inspiration from the rocking sound of train wheels to shape its core rhythmic elements, also mentions an aspect of the Great Migration that helped shape an African American identity but might have also been responsible for this aspect of black culture getting stuck with this group while it spread with the Great Migration all over the country.

Boogie-woogie was simple and made for dancing, it derived from blues, which in turn came from "chants and field hollers of work gangs as they sang to relieve the monotony of laying rail tracks, quarrying stone, or plowing the land" (SILVESTER, 2009, p. 4). It was made easy to make life easier, to make people dance, sing and perhaps forget about their daily struggles. We can relate two of this rhythm's features to the movie character of Donald Shirley. The first shows that this part of African American culture went the opposite way of the classical music Shirley loved. Boogie-

woogie piano players:

had to be able to play fast numbers for dancers to “stomp” and slow drags for the more sexual “belly-rubs.” Early boogie-woogie pianists who provided the music for these social activities brought an untutored approach to their playing, uncluttered by the European traditions of a learned technique or “set” compositions. (SILVESTER, 2009, p. 7)

Thus, a huge portion of African American popular culture was utterly different from the European classical piano background of Donald Shirley that the movie presents. We can add to that another fact brought by Silvester (2009):

The majority of industries were served by a largely migrant workforce, and moving around the region with them in the 1920s and 1930s, continuing an earlier tradition dating from the beginning of the century, was a group of pianists who hitched rides on the trains of the Santa Fe Railroad Company serving the region. They provided a brash musical back-drop for the gambling, drinking, whoring, and dancing that were the popular forms of entertainment in many of the isolated communities near or within the workplaces (SILVESTER, 2009, p. 17).

Donald lived atop Carnegie Hall, one the most prestigious music venues in the world. He was a virtuoso pianist trained in Russia to be one of the best musicians and composers of his time, he believed his dedication, zeal and commitment to perform black music with dignity would eventually rub off on the black community and the way they were viewed and treated by others. He also frowned upon any activity that could bring bad reputation to the black community, such as gambling and losing one’s temper to insults. His was a reality too far from hitching rides on trains to play at industrial centers packed with black migrants eager to have a soundtrack for their leisure activities. Detroit, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Washington D.C., urban centers that received the bulk of the Great Migration became black culture hearts filled with the literature of Brooks, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston and “the boogie-woogie rumble of a dream deferred” (HUGHES, 1951). On the way to these centers, each time trains stopped, people would get off to find work, to rest or to try to settle in any calm small town. Imagine this process repeated for half a century, the Great Migration went on for six decades, and we can connect the social and cultural context of American society and understand the stereotypes that were formed about black Americans and how they were not part of the character of Donald Shirley.

A century of abuse molded a (stereo)type of inferiority. This (stereo)type was then transported all over the country as African Americans continued their efforts to secure dignity. But theirs was the toughest of journeys and at every stop they tried to

lighten their burden with art. And as people and culture walk hand in hand, their art was also conceptualized as being of a certain (stereo)type and black people were expected to enjoy only that which they made.

2.2. We expect you to sit in the back of the bus: expectations

We start our exposition of the concept of expectation at 34'20" when we identify an instance of what is expected and what actually happens in the movie. When Donald Shirley and Tony Vallelonga start their journey, Dr. Shirley is worried with the way Tony speaks. He justifies they are going to meet educated people and that Tony should make an effort to avoid slang and work on his pronunciation. Here we do not see a black man using African American Vernacular English, but the standard, formal variation of the language, whereas the white Italian-American man uses language that would not be appropriate for a discussion with white people from higher social status in the southern United States. Furthermore, there is something curious here. Dr. Shirley also asks Tony if he is OK with shortening his last name to "Valle"¹³ because he thinks people will have difficulty when introducing Tony at events. There is a preoccupation with the use of English but a disregard for the fact that the supposedly cultivated American society cannot pronounce an Italian surname.

Still on the topic of language, during their tour, Tony always writes letters to Dolores, and Shirley assists him with spelling and how to bring a bit of poetry to the messages. Spectators are privy to the contents of one of them as Dolores reads it at minute 41. In Tony's words, "he don't play like a colored guy. He plays like Liberace, but better. He is like a genius, I think." Black people have a certain way to play, much like what Shirley exposes in his interview to Noal Cohen; Shirley is not like other black men, he is like a genius. The scene shows two qualities that were associated with blackness. First, African Americans were expected to be good at a certain musical genre and not at classical music, neglecting the multitude of natures that are

¹³ A curiosity here is that, in an interview with Noal Cohen in 1998, the real Donald Shirley said one of his producers decided to shorten his name and he "got stuck with Don" (COHEN, 1998). The pianist hated it for life, justifying that they either did it to save money on printing costs or to try to turn his image into more of a jazz musician, adding that this attempt to turn him into a jazz musician came not because he knew how to play jazz, after all, he was trained to play classical music, but because he was black. Donald Shirley despised the fact that people tried to make him more palatable, but the movie character tries to do the same to his employee.

present in every social group. Second, if Shirley does not play like a “colored guy” and he is like a genius, is it so that black people do not have in them that which is necessary to be great? Are all black people bound to play blues and jazz and prohibited to appreciate Tchaikovsky and Brahms as in Gwendolyn Brooks’s *The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith*?

We can get back and explore the concepts of (stereo)type, expectation and reading. Dutch scholar Mieke Bal (2002) says “the counterpart of any given concept is the cultural text or work or 'thing' that constitutes the object of analysis. No concept is meaningful for cultural analysis unless it helps us to understand the object better on its - the object's - own terms” (BAL, 2002, p. 8). Our cultural text here is the black man. (Stereo)type and expectation are only meaningful when consolidated by reading. These are like three prongs of a fine-tooth comb we have to use if we wish to go over our cultural text. Additionally, what are concepts worth for if you cannot use them to analyze a cultural object? It is a symbiotic chain of thought that can only pull some actual weight if all its links are attached. This is true to our analysis. Although we aimed at explicitly marking the instances where people expose (stereo)types and the moments where characters voice their expectations about black people or read Donald by interacting and paying attention to the man, the concepts constantly leak into each other, one generally prompts the other and, eventually, leads to reflection.

Proceeding with the topic of expectations, back on the road, Tony turns on the radio and, as he tunes it to a few different stations where black artists are playing, Donald asks who they are. Although he recognizes Chubby Checker, Aretha Franklin, and Little Richard by name, he does not know their work.¹⁴

When we think about it, it is quite a common scenario to know the name but not the work. Most of us know musicians by name but have never followed their careers or listened to their latest song. But Shirley’s ignorance regarding the work of popular black musicians came as a surprise to Tony. “These are your people”, Tony says, even though he had just asked a specific question about the song, not the

¹⁴ In a 1998 interview with Noal Cohen. Cohen and his associate, Michael Fitzgerald, were researching to write the biography “Rat Race Blues: The Musical Life of Gigi Gryce”. Gryce and Shirley grew up together in Pensacola, Florida, and occasionally met each other, with Shirley loving the fact that Gryce would call him Donald instead of Don, although he admits he knew nothing about Gryce’s career. This bit of information was not added to check for fidelity, as it is not our focus, but because it is helpful to illustrate how the concepts of type and expectation are interpreted by different people at different levels, with a jazz historian expecting a certain type of musician to know someone’s work.

artist. Donald Shirley knew his famous contemporaries in the black community, but that didn't mean he had to follow or appreciate their work. In a simple analogy, some Brazilians ages 40 or older are likely to know who Luciano Pavarotti was and can somewhat describe the kind of music he performed, but it is unlikely that the regular Brazilian citizen knows Pavarotti's songs and records.

From an intermedial perspective based on Elleström's (2018) propositions of extracommunicational and intracommunicational domains, Donald asked who they were because he had no background record of it but also because, somehow, a certain element in that product triggered his musical knowledge in that ongoing act of communication, drawing his attention to aspects already present in his musical sphere, such as Little Richard's technique on the piano or the silky voice of Chubby Checker.¹⁵ Technical and musical aspects caught his attention, but, for Tony, he should know Little Richard and Chubby Checker because they were black and popular, jumping to the conclusion that black people must have listened to their songs.

Switching from Tony's presumptions, the movie shows the expectations black men had about their own community. While sitting down outside at a motel, Donald is invited to play horseshoes with other guests but declines. The other men inquire if he believes to be better than them and say "he just afraid of getting that butler uniform a little dusty." The scene comes to its end with Dr. Shirley respectfully saying he is going to meet a friend and the other three men respond with a "thanks for nothing". Then, a fourth older black man shouts at the players "shut your ass up, man, and leave me alone!" The players do as they were told, which exposes how they answer a civil Donald Shirley with hostility and how insults are normalized between black men. It seems he is neither black enough for Tony nor for the black community. His politeness and style make him both fail to meet standards set by others and remain in his identity limbo.

Getting into another scene at a hotel, we can see an example of acting based on (stereo)type and expectations instead of interpretation. As they arrive, Tony runs into two old acquaintances who get curious about why Tony is working for Donald. The three switch to Italian believing that Donald will not understand a word they say, neglecting the fact that the composer studied in Europe and probably speaks one or

¹⁵ According to the Billboard Hot 100 list, from 1960 to 1961, Chubby Checker had 10 songs on the list. 1960's The Twist and 1961's Pony Time were both on the top of the list for three straight weeks. Available at: <https://www.billboard.com/artist/chubby-checker/>. Accessed on Nov. 15, 2022.

more European languages, he already showed he can speak Russian. They saw a black man; they did not see an accomplished pianist. This serves to reinforce Tony's inability to go past expectations even though he has been traveling with Donald for quite some time.

At this point, the reader of this paper must have noticed that the movie is loaded with moments that either exhibit the black (stereo)type or what others expect from a black man. But we must once more return to another example of (stereo)type and expectation that permeates the movie from start to finish: the white savior. It is a fact that, at any point in the story, Donald will end up being portrayed as a naive man who needs the street smarts Tony provides.

Tony's brash behavior is often praised or punished within reasonable measure, as when they get arrested because Tony hit an officer who called him "half nigger". At the time the movie takes place, black people had been abused for more than a century in the U.S. and the oppression continued. Had a black person reacted like Tony, they could have been beaten or killed. Tony is insensitive to and unaware of the reality black people had to go through in those segregation years. He felt insulted when someone called him a "half nigger" but believes he is more of a black person than Donald because of his lifestyle and because he knows black pop culture. Tony shows us that segregation trickles down to every aspect related to the black experience. It seems that African Americans must live inside a dome that forbids them to know anything different, they must stick to their own production of art, cuisine, literature and style. On the other hand, Tony, an Italian-American, also has access to black culture. He enjoys black food, black music and black games, which makes him blacker than Donald. It is an intriguing issue how Tony goes from complimenting Donald for being an unparalleled individual to putting him in a category that is supposed to represent every person in a group. Because Tony sees the black experience, he believes he can read, interpret and categorize it. However, his own Italian-American background limits his interpretation since his is a completely different context from Donald's and other African Americans, which leads Tony to jump to conclusions and repeat the mold he's been exposed to. Tony breaks the chain of interpretation by mostly sticking to (stereo)type and expectations, he seems incapable of taking the next step to actually understand the cultural object he has been traveling with.

Still, Tony's background does draw him close to the black experience in his

perspective. Tony is someone who has not had an easy life and had to learn how to take advantage of certain situations to make ends meet. For him, life is hard because he does not have money or opportunity and that is why Donald's life is easier. We might get dragged into a never-ending circle of debate about who's had it harder in life because our interpretation will always be incomplete. It does not matter how much we expose ourselves to people's work and their different experiences, our analysis will always lack something.

When interpreting any media product, we create expectations based on who the artist is, when they were born, where they from, their style, genre, movement, school, etc. But their creation will carry something of their own. Their cultural background, their "real circle" is constantly talking to their "virtual circle" while experimenting with, interpreting and creating their product. When we look at someone and start to culturally "read" them, we also start drawing conclusions that connect what we see to what we already know. As Tony witnesses Donald moving around higher social and economic circles, he comes to the conclusion that the composer's life has been easy and his own has been as hard as any other black person's. In Tony's words, he "lives on the streets" and Donald "sits on a throne", which he uses to justify that his world is "way more blacker than" Donald's. He summarizes Donald based on the (stereo)types he knows. Therefore, Donald is not black enough. On a more personal note, I was disturbed by Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*. They are both horror but utterly different. Is one more worthy of the title of a horror story than the other? Perhaps my personal preferences and cultural background will lead me to choose one over the other in regards to their ability to scare, but they both do. Tony's background and his knowledge of the widespread general black culture led him to believe his struggles were closer to the black experience than Donald's, which is absurdly ironic because Donald is a black man in a segregated United States.

We move on to examine Donald's statement that white people want him to perform and make them feel smarter. Donald is received as a guest of honor on one of their stops but, instead of receiving the treatment somebody in his position should, he is taken to a storage room that will serve as a dressing room and is not allowed to enter the hotel's restaurant. The manager tells him to go to the Orange Bird, where "they will be happy to serve" him. This part of the movie helps us answer one of our questions and also proposes another. The manager tells Tony they won't serve

Donald because that is the way things are done there. Jim Crow laws segregated the services between the ones for white people and the ones for black people. This connects the movie to the sociocultural context of the United States at the time. Brannigan (1998) writes that “texts are understood as participating in the production of ideology and culture” (BRANNIGAN, 1998, p. 21). They work as one, with no boundaries separating text and context and, when the manager says things are done in a certain way in the South, the character builds a bridge between 2018 and 1962, a bridge with its foundation on Nick Vallelonga and his partner’s perceptions of the times as they choose to represent racial segregation in the United States on a lighter tone. They include stories of black people being barred from entering some places but leave stories of extreme physical violence and abuse out.

The question it proposes, although it is not our objective to answer it in this paper, regards the development of African American English. While the manager tries to bribe Tony into convincing Donald to eat at the Orange Bird and come back to perform, he mentions the Boston Celtics basketball team and says “they was world champions”, a subject-verb agreement that usually occurs in African American English. How come they segregate everything but language? But this is an issue to be addressed in a future paper.

The manager kills Tony’s expectations reinforcing what Donald said in their conversation about what it meant to be black. Tony assumed that Donald could eat at the restaurant with him and the rest of the trio. But the manager told him otherwise, reinforcing the (stereo)type of the black entertainer who is welcome to entertain but not to participate. Even though the driver has witnessed multiple situations where Donald suffers the consequences of racial discrimination, he still expects things to happen following a definite way, that is, he fails to “read” what is happening.

2.3. The road not usually taken: reading

The way we work with the concepts of type, expectation and reading changes with time but it also changes depending on the cultural text we are analyzing. The extracommunicational and intracommunicational domains proposed by Elleström (2018) will affect how we culturally “read” an object. Everything we are already familiar with, the ways in which we have already perceived the world, will inevitably come to surface and interact with the object during the act of communication. One might see or listen to the word poem, a genre of literature, and imagine it as either

inspiring and romantic or as dull and intellectual. But poems have rarely been victims of lynching, thus, when concepts travel from absorbing light stimuli through our eyes to recognize letters, verses and stanzas in a poem to seeing and summarizing a person by their looks, categorizing them into a type and expecting certain attitudes, you should pay more attention to working on the object itself rather than focusing on the categories you tend to put it into.

An example of how one can perceive the propositions of Elleström (2018) in the movie is when Dr. Shirley frowns at a comparison Tony Lip made. After discussing their knowledge of black pop culture, they talk about family and Donald Shirley mentions his ex-wife's name, June. Tony comments that she has the same name as June Lockhart, a white actress who portrayed the mother in the 1954 TV series *Lassie*. Shirley frowns at the comparison. But maybe that was the only reference that came to mind during their conversation. Tony read the situation using the tools he had.

As previously mentioned, besides the extracommunicational and intracommunicational domains (ELLESTRÖM, 2018), Bal (2002) puts forward a comparison that reinforces our proposal that the three concepts we explore in this work are supposed to work together. She works the concept of text in two different fields, literature and film, and suggests we can "read" both. Both the words in *The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith* and the images from *Green Book* carry meaning, the concepts of (stereo)type and expectation travel between the two media and through the years that set them apart. In the dialogue between "reader" and text, we go over a poem several times to attempt to comprehend its messages, look into dictionaries to clarify the significance of its words. And when the Dutch scholar mentions that colors also convey meaning, we return to the central point of our work, which is linked to how people assign meaning to the color of one's skin. Moreover, to how people tend to ignore the fact that, as stated by Mieke Bal, visual elements do not convey their meaning immediately. It is impossible to "read" an object having in mind just (stereo)type and expectations. "Reading" is a process, it is cumbersome, it is a deliberate questioning of the cultural object to get to its message, to get to the "subjectivity"¹⁶ of the story it wishes to tell.

With the idea of hard work in mind, the movie takes us to a scene where

¹⁶ "The concept of subjectivity scrutinizes the relationship between the individual and language, replacing human nature with the concept of the production of the human subject through ideology, discourse or language" (ASHCROFT *et. al.*, 2000, p. 202).

people “read” a black man. As they continue their journey, the duo of protagonists have car problems and stop in front of a cotton field. Black workers stop on their tracks and stare at a white man who drives a black man and does all the heavy work to fix the car. African Americans breaking their backs with hoes and shovels, with nothing but their repetitive field hollers to try to ease their burdens, stare at a black man that, although knowledgeable of his ancestral roots, has the luxury of being able to show his displeasure when people mistake him for a performer of sophisticated jazz. Some rest their souls in their simple chants and the other gets restless when put in the category of an elaborate black art form. The scene allows the spectator to contemplate the collective against the individual.

The next scene provides another example of the collective versus the individual. After they fix the car and arrive at their next destination, the white host introduces Donald to his guests and proudly says they have prepared a special dinner for him. The host had asked his black household staff what a black man would wish for dinner and they answered fried chicken, to Tony’s delight. But, if you are about to receive one of the most celebrated American classical pianists, you should at least ask the individual if he would like anything special instead of assuming that because he is black, other black people are well equipped to answer for his tastes and distastes. Every group shares common traits, traditions and habits, they shape culture and culture shapes them. The problem lies in assuming that these are segregated from “subjectivity.”

The following scene serves the purpose of showing another aspect of racial dynamics in the 1960's United States. After dinner, the host finds Donald looking for a restroom and tells him he can use the outhouse. Donald finds it insulting and beneath him. British philosopher Gilbert Ryle’s definition of “thick description” invited us to read the scene beyond recognizing that Donald is displeased with what has just happened. Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000) state that “the distinction between a twitch and a wink is secured by the element of volition that is not itself visibly manifest in the contraction of the eyelid; a thin description would miss it altogether” (GALLAGHER and GREENBLATT, 2000, p. 23). Thus, analyzing Donald’s facial expression in the scene by just saying he did not like what the host proposed is the same as ignoring all the racial baggage that is behind that look. Action and context are a duo that must prompt questions such as why can’t he use the same facilities as everyone else? Why must he go out in the dark? Does he need less? Does he

deserve less? But this is our inquiry, from our standpoint.

On the other hand, Tony understands that the situation was insulting but does not understand Shirley's reaction, since, in his point of view, insult should be paid with insult and, had he been in Shirley's position, he would have gone to the bathroom right in the middle of the living room. Still Tony cannot grasp the fact that black people are seen by the majority of southerners as inferior. Tony's idea of disobedience would reinforce every negative belief related to the black community if Shirley were the one to enact it. Donald's commitment to building a dignified black identity demands that he refuse the host's offer and simply, although behind gritted teeth, ask Tony to take him back to the hotel even if it costs them time and resources.

Oleg, one of Shirley's companions, reinforces the fact that Shirley behaves and acts in a certain way because he has an idealized image of the black man, if not an ideal, one that would portray black people as individuals that must be treated with respect and seen for what they are and not as part of a collective mind. In a conversation with Tony Lip after the issue with the outhouse, Oleg tells him that Donald chose to come to the South, it was neither imposed on him by the record company nor was it more profitable than staying up in New York. Tony does not understand why someone would do that, especially a black man knowing what he would face in the South. Shirley went down south with an agenda. He wanted to prove people wrong and show them that a black man is as sophisticated, polite and talented as any white person. In fact, Tony Lip calls people from the southern part of the United States "hillbillies". According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, the word hillbilly is "an offensive word for a person who lives in the country and is thought to be stupid by people who live in town." If one takes into account Lip's derogatory definition of southerners, they can identify the social irony of uneducated people degrading an educated and successful man because of his color. A case that may serve to illustrate the irony in the relationship between artist and the southern audiences is when Shirley answers Tony's request to finish one of the letters the former helped him write with a P.S. note by saying if Tony did it, it would be like "clinging a cowbell at the end of Shostakovich's Seventh", a comparison between a rural instrument and a sophisticated piece made by a sophisticated man who plays for cotton plantation owners.

Their road trip takes Tony further down the road of culturally reading, hence,

understanding his boss. Shirley and Tony walk past a clothing store and see a sharp suit on the window and Tony comments that it would look great on Donald since the white mannequin looked a lot like him and was the same size as the pianist. Donald frowns, as if trying to figure out if Tony has any idea of what he has just said. They enter the store and are treated as any other customer would until the salesman notices that it is Donald who is interested in the suit and says he is not allowed to try it unless he buys it first. Tony read the situation from a practical standpoint: size. Tony's "thin reading" of the situation led them to an insulting conversation that, once more, made Tony witness what Donald has gone through all his life. He was already accustomed to the way Donald dressed himself and knew the individual tastes of his employer. Thus, Tony's reading of the situation was that the suit would look great on Donald. He missed one sub-textual element, he forgot context, he forgot perspective. Southerners read Donald's color, they could only interpret him based on the (stereo)type, based on the social context that black people would not be treated equally in a practical business exchange. Tony's expectations were confronted by Donald's everyday reality.

Besides the moments they shared inside the car, they also shared a moment in a hotel hallway. Donald talks about his past and tells Tony that producers wanted him to be a regular entertainer, someone who would drink whiskey and smoke a cigar while playing, told him to have a more unrefined look and demeanor. All Shirley wanted to do was to play classical music, but he would get the excuse that educated white audiences were not ready to appreciate a black classical pianist. They deliberately ignored his desires to try to fit him into the market mold. Then, Tony manifests his opinion about the musician. For him, Donald is neither a mere entertainer nor a classical pianist. Anybody can reproduce Chopin with enough practice but only Donald Shirley can do what Donald Shirley does. He is a unique mix of music, as far as being unique goes since we cannot detach our background from our minds to interpret and reinterpret media products, leading to a constant reshaping of the art we see and create every time we see and interact with the object.

Moving back and forth between compliments and unawareness, we take a closer look at the incident where Tony hit an officer for being called "half nigger". Had it been Donald the one who hit the officer, their reaction would have been quite different. Shirley asks Tony "what kind of brand new fool are you", which is

something his mother used to ask him when he was younger. A violent outburst that brought momentary relief but threw them into jail. An irrational act that, if Tony had thought about it for a second, could have been avoided and they would have no troubles completing the tour. It must be exhausting to go through life weighing every gram of your decisions to keep yourself safe and to hope for a change in public opinion. Donald sees no way out but to betray his ideals. He calls Bobby Kennedy, attorney-general of the United States, and they are free. However, this impacts Donald's efforts to improve public opinion about African Americans. In his mind, Bobby Kennedy now sees him as fool who asked for a favor because he did something stupid, and this might add to the idea that black people are inferior. For Donald, the only way to win is with dignity, not by violence, not by taking advantage of a privileged position. He believes that people who call "from some backwoods swamp jail asking to attenuate assault charges" are trash. You must constantly weigh the consequences of your actions.

With this, we close the section on how people start to "read" Donald and how he constantly "reads" the world around him.

3. FINAL THOUGHTS

3.1. Driving it home

Close to the end of the movie, the protagonists leave the hotel where Donald could not eat and head to the Orange Bird. As they exit, the manager yells to Donald "that's why you people don't work down here. You're unreliable." Yet another sample of how the African American is put in a category that is supposed to represent every black person in a negative light. This serves as a good example to reinforce Donald's belief that only through dignity, politeness and hard work things can change.

At the Orange Bird, Donald and Tony attract all eyes in the room. A black man in a tuxedo followed by a white man in a suit. On stage, a band is playing a boogie-woogie tune. When it comes to the expectations about black men sparked by Brooks's poem and brought to us by the movie, the Orange Bird was the perfect spot to wrap things up. They serve food Donald did not use to eat, but which every other African American allegedly does; people have fun as they casually drink, smoke, talk and dance to pop music, whereas Donald is an alcoholic who has no interest in the other activities; the pianist was rocking the room with his "untutored" style and Donald could play any classical piece people asked him to. This final stop had the

(stereo)types, expectations and the “reading” of a character who, albeit not fitting the characteristics attached to the first two concepts, had them assigned to him throughout the story.

While they sit at the counter, a sequence of actions that seems like a twisted redemption arc for Donald takes place. It all starts with an improvement of Tony’s character, who acknowledges Donald’s actions when he stood up to the hotel manager and refused to play for a crowd who would not eat with him. It feels like a pat on the back of a boy who did something an adult approves of, this while they eat chicken and collard greens, which were not part of Donald’s diet up until the point Tony shows him the wonders of African American cuisine. Then, as soon as the waitress is informed Donald is a renowned pianist, she challenges him to get on stage and play. There goes Donald, onto a stage filled with cigarette smoke and glasses of whiskey on the piano, just like a proper entertainer should, although he makes sure to take the glass off of the piano before he starts. After the crowd’s applause to his performance, which shows the audience that a man can bring more to music than “what his mother spanked him for” (BROOKS, 1945), the other musicians go back on stage and the room gets lively again as Donald, with a smile on his face, plays some boogie-woogie. It is as if Donald had been living the black experience backwards up to this point. To crown this moment, Tony saves Donald once again. The composer fails to read an environment that Tony is very familiar with and almost gets robbed, were it not for Tony firing two warning shots to scare off the thieves. Tony offers a final bit of knowledge to make Donald more acquainted with an environment he does not know: “don’t ever flash a wad of cash in a bar.”

The scene at the Orange Bird sums up the plot the movie tells us. It starts with a (stereo)typed reading of the characters, with a waitress judging the duo by their looks, then asking what Shirley does for a living without making any assumptions based on the color of his skin and finally showing the community how beautiful classical music can be. At the same time, Shirley sees how fun a more lighthearted environment with simpler music is, although the real Donald Shirley had a nightclub background. The end of the movie goes from reading a person by their looks and making assumptions based on the (stereo)types to interpreting the individual taking into account his own characteristics. From an intermedial standpoint, Donald Shirley connects with the black community by bringing a classic touch to a boogie-woogie environment and also expands their real circles by giving a performance to show that

there is more to black people than what is simple.

The movie's finale is on a happy note, but again in the white savior angle. They head back home for Christmas during a snowstorm and are pulled over again by the police, just this time the white officer is there to help. This time the movie shows the audience that not every white police officer is a bad person. When they arrive in New York, Tony invites Donald to come up to his apartment for Christmas Eve and he is received by the Italian-American family who saves Christmas for the lonely black man.

3.2. Mementos from the long way down

Gwendolyn Brooks drank from her own experience in Bronzeville and, from a window in her apartment, carefully watched life walk up and down the streets of the Black Metropolis in Chicago to add it all to her work. I could spot an aspect of the African American identity in the 1945 poem *The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith* that prompted a reflection about why the idea that black Americans must enjoy what is familiar to them was repeated in a different media in 2018.

Our proposal to work with Bal's (2002) concepts of (stereo)type, expectation and "reading" came from the handful of occurrences in the movie where the character of Donald Shirley is summarized as a part of a unified identity, one that "eats" the same things, a black community that is expected to consume the same kind of food, the same kind of media, and that must abide to the safety rules of Victor Hugo Green's *The Negro Motorist Green Book* to avoid being consumed by the hatred white people bore towards them.

After some research about the cultural and racial constitution of the United States, we could find in the work of Silvester (2009) information that brought light to our investigation of why black people, black men in the case of the movie *Green Book*, are interpreted based on type and the expectations around this (stereo)type rather than "read" and understood with the reader taking into account the "subjectivity" of the cultural objects, which could be explained by decades of cultural practices that traveled across the country either on trains carrying the boogie-woogie or on radio waves transmitting the "silky voice" of Chubby Checker, which is also supported by Elleström (2018) and his proposal that we constantly interact with our cultural background during the act of communication. As for our wish to examine and discover what seat black men have in the voyage that leads them to a black identity,

the movie itself served as enough evidence to show that white men were behind the wheel, showing complete disregard for basic human dignity with the Jim Crow laws and negligence to instruments created specifically to save black people's lives, such as Green's *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, going in the direction Geertz's argument that culture shapes identities (GEERTZ, 1993, as cited in BRANNIGAN, 1998, p. 33). Groups that control society will always steer it in the direction they want. This control is also reinforced by real life events as the movie tells the story of black classical pianist Dr. Donald Shirley and was written, directed and produced by white men. Brooks's work was shaped by her surroundings and the way she perceived and lived the African American experience. Bronzeville provided for her and she then provided for the black youth by writing to encourage them to constantly build and rebuild their black identities. Hers and Shirley's work are two of the many compasses African Americans can use to guide them in their journeys towards a comprehensive understanding of what it means to be black.

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