

Countering the Dominant Ideology of the Christmas Movie Genre

In the 2020 film *Happiest Season*, lesbian couple Abby (Kristen Stewart) and Harper (Mackenzie Davis) decide to spend the holidays at the latter's family home. Abby, who is initially reluctant for the trip as a result of her aversion towards Christmas, plans to propose to her girlfriend on Christmas morning. However, there is one complication- Harper is not out to her family, a cookie cutter example of well-off conservative white America. Abby, now forced back into the closet, spends the week watching her girlfriend become, in her words, "someone she doesn't recognize." Harper neglects Abby, choosing instead to spend time with her friends and ex-boyfriend, and sits by the wayside when Abby gets into trouble. The only fun that Abby seems to have on the entire trip is when spending time with Riley (Aubrey Plaza), Harper's estranged ex-girlfriend. The conflict between the couple reaches its climax when Harper is outed by her sister at the Christmas Eve party and, instead of embracing her identity and revealing Abby as her partner, claims that her sister is lying, causing Abby to leave. When Harper manages to find Abby at a gas station, she tells Abby that she is sorry, and the two of them head back home, an absolute 180 degree turn from what we expect from the film up to this point. By Christmas morning, the family has revealed all of its secrets, and they take a family photo, lesbians, divorcees, and losers included. The credits contain a chain of Instagram posts that reveal a year of immense joy for each member of the family, which now includes Abby. This complete shift in narrative is to be expected in a Christmas movie, but the specificity of this shift- from queer tragicomedy to Hallmark movie- suggests a possibility within the Christmas movie genre for legitimate social change through representation that runs counter to the normative values of the genre.

Happiest Season, in its narrative of queer acceptance, serves as an example of a positive usage of the normative structure of the Christmas movie. It does so by depicting a conservative family that accepts their queer child and then totally reorients so as to be vocal and proud of this fact. It is a unique and important usage of the climactic transformation that is a hallmark (no pun intended) of the Christmas movie genre- think, for example, of the Grinch's heart growing three sizes. However, aside from its queer narrative, most other aspects of *Happiest Season* strongly align with the more conservative values of the Christmas movie. It presents an uncritical look at an extremely well-off family, making no acknowledgement of class differences or indicating in any way that this family is not representative of the average American household. This is problematic considering that 58% of Americans live paycheck to paycheck, with extreme wealth inequality between whites and BIPOC.¹ The cast contains no principle actors of color, and the few people of color in the cast are given no personality, with their only function to stir up trouble. Until the final act, it leans heavily into nostalgia and longing for a mythical "perfect Christmas of the past" aligned with the values of 1950s America. Even Abby and Harper's relationship is set in the standards of marriage. Nevertheless, *Happiest Season's* third act transformation suggests that, while the Christmas movie genre still expresses a conservative worldview through thematic concerns, narrative arcs, and implied systems of value, recent Christmas films have started to enter historically progressive identity categories such as race and sexuality within this matrix. I argue that, though there exists this possibility for within the Christmas movie genre to express a worldview that runs contrary to its standard conservative ideology, no individual film has yet managed to challenge all four of the ideological cornerstones that constitute the genre's ideology. In addition to *Happiest Season*, I intend to look at two other

¹ Jessica Dickler, "With Inflation Stubbornly High, 58% of Americans Are Living Paycheck to Paycheck: CNBC Survey."

films – Robert Townshend’s *Holiday Heart* and Kasi Lemmons’s *Black Nativity* – as examples of Christmas movies that challenge the genre’s capitalist, heteronormative, and white supremacist ideology, though not all at once. First, however, it is necessary to detail specifically what I am referring to by “the Christmas movie genre,” outlining its narrative tropes and the four main facets of the ideology it creates.

This type of genre analysis follows the tradition of scholars such as Rick Altman and Thomas Schatz, who have, in their respective works, analyzed classic Hollywood cinema so as to elucidate the inner workings of genre. In Altman’s view, there are two primary ways by which one can go about in looking at genre. The first of these approaches is to look at the semantics of a genre. This involves looking at the “presence or absence of easily identifiable elements”; in his example of the Western, this refers to items such as “general atmosphere,” “stock characters,” and “technical elements.”² By this definition, any film which tells a story about the Old West, full of cowboys and Indians, featuring crane shots of Monument Valley would be a Western. It does not matter what the film actually says, so long as these elements are present. In contrast, the syntactic approach would focus not on these arbitrary signifiers, but instead “the relationships by linking lexical elements;” for the Western, this entails a dialectic “between the West as garden and as desert.”³ In this approach, the focus is on the meanings of the films, not just the images on screen. As for Schatz, his approach considers not just the “formal and aesthetic aspects of feature filmmaking, but various other cultural aspects as well.”⁴ Of particular note is Schatz’s writing on the film musical, which he views as having developed from its backstage form in the early years of sound cinema to the fully integrated musicals of MGM in the 1950s. As the genre evolved, “it

² Rick Altman, “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre.”

³ Rick Altman.

⁴ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*.

sacrificed *plausibility* for *internal narrative logic*, steadily strengthening its basis in fantasy and artifice and steadily expanding its range of narrative, visual, and musical expression,” the very aspects by which it is recognizable today.⁵ Its narrative tensions and musical numbers coalesce in one massive (and often uncompleted) climactic finale, resolving all tensions for, presumably, all time.

Since the time of Altman and Schatz’s writing, genre theory has been complicated and questioned in terms of its vitality for contemporary thinking; nevertheless, the two provide a useful starting point by which the Christmas genre can be elucidated. However, neither make any consideration of time of year as fulcrum for analysis. The Christmas season, spanning from Thanksgiving until the end of the year, is unique in that, during this period, holiday-themed movies are watched repeatedly and have a ubiquitous presence on streaming services, in movie theaters (both first run and repertory), and on cable TV channels. These films, from *It’s A Wonderful Life* to *Elf*, are part of the constitution of a celebratory ritual that occurs on a yearly basis, and are rarely watched outside of this period. According to a 2018 poll, at least 60% percent of Americans watch at least one Christmas movie with their family every year, indicating the prevalence of the genre.⁶ There is no other time of year to which this activity can be compared. Even if horror movies and romance movies see spikes in October and February, respectively, the popularity of these genres is not confined to these month-long periods. The Christmas season is also a time in which Christmas dominates all facets of culture – from radio to news reporting (e.g. “the terrible earthquake ruined so many family’s Christmases”) to politics

⁵ Thomas Schatz, “The Musical.”

⁶ Statista, “Families Who Watch at Least One Christmas Movie Together during the Holiday Season in the United States as of December 2018.”

– so that, as queer theorist Eve Sedgwick puts it, “all the institutions are speaking with one voice.”⁷ The Christmas movie is part of this “one voice,” and thus genre analysis is necessary.

There have been films about Christmas for nearly the entire duration of cinema’s existence. As soon as special effects had been invented, they were employed in creating cinematic versions of *A Christmas Carol*, beginning with *Scrooge; or, Marley’s Ghost* in 1901.⁸ This adaptation of Dickens’s classic story was the first step in the transition of the celebration from of the holiday from literature to cinema; as scholar Mark Connelly notes, “During the nineteenth century the family reading of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* was one of the rituals of Christmas. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the ritual television showing of Frank Capra’s film *It’s A Wonderful Life* took its place. This is symptomatic of the process by which cinema became an integral part of the celebration of Christmas in the twentieth century.” As cinema developed throughout the silent era, more versions of Dickens’s classic story came to cinema viewers, and directors as substantial as D.W. Griffith took on the subject of Christmas with 1909’s one reeler *A Trap for Santa Claus*. The film bears many of the trademarks of Griffith’s cinema – the need for temperance, home invasion, the household in crisis – and, although arbitrary in its techniques (and thus difficult to follow), the narrative has much in common with the genre that would be fully realized in the 1940s. It tells of the story of Arthur, an unemployed drunkard who decides to abandon his family in the hopes of leaving them a better life without him; after he is gone, his wife Helen discovers that she is the beneficiary of a deceased aunt’s large estate, and, with the kids, she moves into the mansion. The husband, now a robber, stumbles through the window of mansion and into a trap the kids have set for Santa

⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer and Now.”

⁸ James Chapman, “God Bless Us, Every One: Movie Adaptations of A Christmas Carol.”

Claus. The parents have a heated debate, but Helen decides that the kids need a father, and he puts on a Santa Claus outfit to entertain them. The narrative is driven by random chance (and Griffith's fixations) more than the holiday spirit, but the image of the family reunited after a miraculous transformation (drunkard into Santa Claus) is one that would become commonplace in the genre.

Despite these primitive examples, the feature length Christmas film as we know it today did not begin to take on its standard form until World War II and the years immediately following it. As H. Mark Glancy notes in his article on the wartime Christmas movie, "It was Irving Berlin's *Holiday Inn* that established the commercial viability of the Christmas film."⁹ Prior to 1942, there had been films set around Christmas and incorporating it into the plot, such as Mitchell Leisen's 1940 film *Remember the Night*, but it was not until the Astaire/Crosby led film that the idea of a movie about Christmas released (or, in this case, re-released) around Christmas became viable. *Holiday Inn* is about a show-biz hotel that only opens on holidays, and it plays two of its most pivotal scenes on Christmas, with its protagonist's longings and hopes expressed in "White Christmas," a song which has since become the best-selling single of all time. In subsequent years, other releases like *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) and *Christmas in Connecticut* (1945) continued the financial successes of Christmas releases that centered the holiday in the narrative, rather than just using it as a backdrop. It is this element – the incorporation of Christmas into the plot, where Christmas is an animating force – that separated the films of the 1940s from earlier examples. As Kris Kringle (Edmund Gwenn) says in *Miracle on 34th Street*, "Christmas isn't just a day, it's a frame of mind." These are films which deal with the *idea* of Christmas and the principles of the holiday – the importance of family, giving over

⁹ H. Mark Glancy, "Dreaming of Christmas: Hollywood and the Second World War."

greed, love for one's fellow man, and the celebration with feast, drink, and gift-giving. It is the same set of ideas that Scrooge desires to embody when he says, "I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year," in Dickens's famous story.

Before diving into the ideology of the Christmas movie, I first must clarify what I am defining as a Christmas movie. In looking at the basic narrative structures of these holiday films, I identify three main categories of Christmas movies. They are as follows: Christmas Carols, Santa movies, home for the holidays. There are some similarities in all four categories. First off, the film must be set at Christmastime and conclude on (or at least reaches its climax) on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Often, the conclusion is a Christmas Day feast, like in *Dr. Seuss's The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* or any number of adaptations of *A Christmas Carol*. Second, Christmas must be essential to the plot of the film – the characters deal with issues of what the holiday means, often trying to find the "Christmas spirit." This entails a feeling of giving, kindness toward others, love for family, and an honoring of tradition. A notable example of this is *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, where the title character is searching for an answer to the question, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" Charlie Brown finds his answer when, after initial disdain, the community gathers around the tree he has chosen – small, lacking in needles, and, in his words, "in need of a home" – for a hummed rendition of "O Tannenbaum." The community embraces the tree despite its seeming flaws, and share in the communal moment, valuing what they have and wishing for no more. Third, the film must conclude (or have as its penultimate scene) a gathering, whether it be an entire town in *It's A Wonderful Life* or the newfound family of three in *Bad Santa*. Regardless, no one is alone at the end of a Christmas movie.

Out of the four main types of Christmas movies, Christmas Carols are the oldest, as they have their origin in Charles Dickens's classic novella. In this category, the protagonist of the film is a miserly character, often obsessed with money, but always opposed to Christmas for one reason or another. In these narratives, the world seems full of life and "Christmas cheer," emphasizing the protagonist's misery. The film sees this character taken on a journey that allows them to realize the error of their ways, concluding with them embracing the Christmas spirit. In nearly every rendition of this story, there is a character who is the embodiment of innocence – the Tiny Tim. The main character is estranged from their family (if they have any), but is ultimately reintegrated into society, whether it be through found family or blood relatives. Obviously, any Dickens adaptation fits into this category – including the more outlandish *Scrooged* and *A Muppet Christmas Carol*. Other significant examples include *Dr. Seuss's How The Grinch Stole Christmas* and its remakes, and the Coen Brothers-produced *Bad Santa*. In these films, the Tiny Tim symbol of innocence role is played by Cindy Lou-Who and Thurman Merman, respectively. In both, the outcast anti-hero (the Grinch and Willie) comes to understand the meaning of Christmas by undoing a major robbery of Christmas gifts, instead choosing to share the joy of giving with the innocent child who convinces them of the Christmas spirit. Both also come to this realization while wearing a Santa outfit.

This leads me to my second category of Christmas movies: the Santa movie. This narrative is, in many ways, the inverse of the Christmas Carol, as it sees a character who is full of the Christmas spirit (usually Santa Claus) confronting a world that has no use for the holiday. This category of Christmas movie originated with the 1947 *Miracle on 34th Street*, and its main thematic interests can be summarized in the following quote from the remake's Kris Kringle (Richard Attenborough): "You don't believe in me... I'm not just a whimsical figure who wears

a charming suit and effects a jolly demeanor. I'm a symbol of the human ability to be able to suppress the selfish and the harmful tendencies that rule the major parts of our lives. If you can't believe, if you can't accept anything on faith, then you're doomed for a life dominated by doubt... If I can make you believe then there'd be some hope for me. If I can't then I'm finished." The Santa Claus category of Christmas movies deals with Santa and the overall Christmas spirit, which is representative of the ability for people to be good to one another and share in love. Similar to the Christmas Carol, the Santa Claus movie is interested in the tension between greed and giving, between heart and mindless consumerism. In the original *Miracle on 34th Street*, Edmund Gwenn's Kringle tells his co-worker, "I've been fighting against [it] for years, the way they commercialize Christmas," explicitly aligning the character against commercialization (although the film itself is using this to show that Macy's is the "good" corporation). Other examples of Santa movies include *Klaus*, *The Santa Clause*, and *Santa Claus is Comin' to Town*. Each of these three depict a character *becoming* Santa Claus, thereby emphasizing his traits that are synonymous with Christmas: kindness, giving, love for others, and joy in what one has, not what one lacks. Santa is, in many ways, a Christ-like figure, the physical manifestation of Christmas.

However, Santa is not necessarily always the main character in this category of Christmas movie. Other movies that fit into this category are *Elf* and *Frosty the Snowman*. In *Elf*, Buddy (Will Ferrell) comes to New York in search of his birth father, and finds himself spreading the innocence of Christmas cheer wherever he goes. Ultimately, his mission is to restore belief in Santa Claus, a goal which he accomplishes by totally changing the lives of those around him, most critically his father (James Caan). In this way, Buddy acts much like Cindy Lou-Who, inspiring his Grinch of a father to embrace the Christmas spirit, further illustrating the

connection between these two categories. Frosty the Snowman serves the same role as Buddy – a proxy of Santa Claus – in a TV special’s time slot.

The third main narrative category of Christmas movie is what I refer to as the “home for the holidays” model. Unlike the previous two templates, the home for the holidays movie is far more grounded in the “real world,” lacking in magic and angelic visitations. Instead, this type of Christmas movie is primarily concerned with family and familial relations. The structure is often more episodic as it gets closer to Christmas Day; a perfect example of this is *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*. The film is about the Griswold family preparing for Christmas with each day bringing new shenanigans, demarcated by shots of an advent calendar slowly progressing toward Christmas. An older example of this format is Peter Godfrey’s *Christmas in Connecticut*, which depicts a week in a bucolic Connecticut farmhouse where columnist Elizabeth Lane (Barbara Stanwyck) must keep up the illusion that she is a traditional homemaker in order to give the “classic country Christmas” experience to a returning war veteran. Hallmarks of this model include shopping for Christmas presents, cooking the Christmas meal, and engaging in nostalgic Christmas traditions; in contemporary renditions, this is often the viewing of a classic Christmas film. A great example of this model is *Home Alone*, which depicts Kevin McAllister (Macaulay Culkin) left to his own devices, forcing him to carry out these standards on his own. However, some versions of this prototype are not set over the course of a week or a month; an example of this is *Jingle All The Way*, which follows Howard Langston (Arnold Schwarzenegger) as he attempts to locate a Turbo Man action figure for his son on Christmas Eve. Overall, this is the model that is most laden with the iconography of Christmas, bringing all of its ideological biases to the forefront, and thus the three films which I focus on in my case studies belong to this model.

Before diving into the consistent ideological tenets of the Christmas movie, it is necessary to note that, though I isolate these three narrative models as the most common examples of Christmas movies, it is not my intention to deem entities such as *Die Hard*, *Black Christmas*, and any number of Hallmark holiday romances as “not Christmas movies.” However, in terms of a consistent ideology within a set of narrative tropes, these films deviate from the Christmas genre as I have presented it. This is not to say that they are not worth critical examination, nor that they do not belong as part of the holiday celebration, but simply that they are not included in my scope of interest for this assessment of the Christmas movie genre.

When viewed as a whole, the Christmas movie genre presents a consistently conservative worldview from the perspective of class, gender/sexuality, and race. In order to understand this ideology, I will explain the Christmas movie’s perspective on these three major identity categories. However, before I dive into these, I want to begin with my first tenet of the genre: nostalgia. Nostalgia is a critical device upon which the genre’s ideology relies. As Mark Connelly put it, “Nostalgia means a lot to these films, they wallow in it in order to help create the image of a golden age, an age that with a little effort can actually be recaptured and resuscitated, that is part of their feel-good charm,” emphasizing the importance of nostalgia to the narratives of the Christmas movie genre.¹⁰ In the Christmas movie, this nostalgia is particularly oriented towards a 1950s vision of America, along with its conservative values. This is primarily carried out through the usage of music. As Rowana Agajanian put it in her essay on the Christmas movies of the 1980s and 1990s, “the vast majority of these popular tunes are from the 1950s and 1960s. The regularity with which these songs appear would suggest that the Christmas film of the 1980s and 1990s has its own ‘musical’ iconography... It would seem that many of the

¹⁰ Mark Connelly, “Santa Claus: The Movie.”

traditional values invoked by the music are from America's golden period- the 1950s."¹¹ Classic tracks by Elvis, Johnny Mathis, Brenda Lee, Bobby Helms, and Frank Sinatra are used to signify a "golden age" of Christmas. In this way, the Christmas movie (and, in particular, the "home for the holidays" model) suggests its "perfect Christmas" is one that existed in the past, but, for one reason or another, no longer exists in the present.

This nostalgia has been part of the Christmas movie's DNA since the beginning of the genre. The following passage from H. Mark Glancy reveals how fundamental this was to the wartime Christmas movie:

Wartime Christmas films defined America in uniquely American terms. The setting is always a traditional home within a small town. There is usually snow falling gently outside, while inside a close-knit family has gathered. Images of the United States' humble and wholesome origins are suggested through the settings, the male characters' names and allusions to their past. All of the holiday rituals are observed. There are trees to be decorated, carols to be sung, presents to be exchanged and hearty meals to be eaten. Whether or not the audience had experienced or enjoyed such a traditional Christmas, it would recognize it as a comforting ideal. There is, therefore, all the more drama and pathos to be found when the ideal is threatened. And it is always threatened by some element of incongruity: an independent woman who has rejected the role of wife and mother, a couple or family faced with separation, characters so haunted by the past that they cannot enjoy the present, and selfish materialism at odds with the allusions to an idealized past. The happiness that Hollywood would like us to believe is inherent in the traditional Christmas is always on the verge of being undermined.¹²

The notion of Christmas under threat is critical to understanding the genre's reactionary tendencies. While the films are nostalgic for a golden Christmas of the past, this specific past is a

¹¹ Rowana Agajanian, "'Peace on Earth, Goodwill to All Men': The Depiction of Christmas in Modern Hollywood Films."

¹² H. Mark Glancy, "Dreaming of Christmas: Hollywood and the Second World War."

distinctly traditional American view of the world, one which leaves little space for deviance in any major identity category. As the genre continued to develop, the nostalgia shifted again, where, somewhat ironically, the 1954 *White Christmas* “summons nostalgia not for peacetime, but for the wartime spirit.”¹³ The entire opening sequence of the film is set during a Christmas on the battlefield, but depicts the event with patriotism and pride, not the fear and loss that marked the actual wartime experience. The conclusion of the film serves a similar function, with the musical finale being performed in tribute to the protagonists’ general during the war. The film is a reflection of the values of Eisenhower’s America, but it has nevertheless remained a stalwart of the genre. Thus, when Clark Griswold loses it in the climax of the Reagan era *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*, it should come as no surprise that his gold standard for the “hap-hap-happiest Christmas” is when Bing Crosby tap danced with Danny Kaye.

The John Hughes penned film also serves as an excellent example of the class considerations within the Christmas movie. In the film, Clark Griswold (Chevy Chase) is a suburbanite working an anonymous office job for the penny-pinching Frank Shirley (Brian Doyle-Murray). Clark’s neurosis grows throughout the film as he waits for his Christmas bonus, which will be used to pay for an inground family pool. When his “bonus” arrives – a year-long subscription to the jelly-of-the-month club – Clark loses it; after a misunderstanding leads to the kidnapping of Shirley, the millionaire has a change of heart and decides to reinstate the bonuses. Throughout the film, Clark is contrasted against his wife’s impoverished Cousin Eddie (Randy Quaid), who has been unemployed for several years because, in his wife’s words, “he’s holding out for [a management position.]” Cousin Eddie is played entirely for comedy, with his poverty explained only by his stupidity, not material conditions. Thus, *Christmas Vacation* class dynamic

¹³ H. Mark Glancy.

is structured so that the *real* struggle is that of the upper middle class, not those in poverty. It's solution to this issue, much like that in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, is that the upper class must act on their social responsibility by spreading the wealth. In the world of the Christmas movie genre, this set of class dynamics is the norm. Other examples of this "middle class in crisis" notion can be found in *Jingle All The Way*, *Scrooged*, *The Santa Clause*, and *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*, among others. The Christmas movie is concerned with the struggles of the middle and upper classes, not those who live paycheck to paycheck.

This classist ideology is built into the structure of the Christmas movie in a very subtle way. In most Christmas movies – particularly those that center on holiday shopping – there exists a critique of capitalism, wherein characters bemoan the open commercialization of Christmas with its yearly pushing of new toys and other unnecessary luxuries. However, this criticism is only an illusion, as the film inevitably finds its way back to a belief in the status quo. The issue is not that Scrooge is undeserving of his wealth, ill-gotten through the exploitation of others; the real problem is that he is not sharing it. The Christmas movie, just like the Salvation Army Santa Claus, is interested in charity, not policies of wealth distribution.

Just as with the nostalgia factor, this notion reaches back into the classics of the genre, most prominently *Miracle on 34th Street*. In that film, when Kris Kringle, sworn fighter against the commercialization of Christmas, begins letting customers know that other department stores have better prices, it actually raises revenues for Macy's. The company then begins distributing the catalogues of other companies, further increasing trust in the corporate power. The film paints Macy's Department Store as a benevolent giant, and, for their defense of Kris Kringle as the real Santa Claus, wins the hearts of consumers. This tactic is a regular tactic of the Christmas movie; as Mark Connelly notes, all Christmas movies "make reference to the nature of a

capitalist society. A critique of that society is always included but it is also always a highly contained and tightly regulated critique... The triumph of consumerist ideals in these films comes about only once they have been questioned, and so these ideals are perpetuated by being presented in a seemingly even-handed and honest way.”¹⁴ Thus, the genre always endorses the status quo, saving capitalism as it saves the traditional Christmas.

The Christmas genre has a similar relation to race as it does class. By and large, people of color are absent from the festivities seen within the Christmas movie. Out of the twenty Christmas specials produced by Rankin and Bass, only one – their most obscure, *Santa, Baby!* – has a Black character. Though the past two decades have seen a number of Black-led Christmas movies, such as *The Best Man Holiday* and *Almost Christmas*, the Christmas genre remains dominated by white characters. Furthermore, when people of color are present, they are most commonly used as comic relief (such as the staff of the Chinese restaurant in *A Christmas Story* or the Black policeman in *Christmas Vacation*) or made out to be the villain. In *Bad Santa*, Willie’s (Billy Bob Thornton) partner in crime is Marcus (Tony Cox), a Black dwarf who plays the elf in their mall Santa heist plot. While initially Willie’s best friend, Marcus decides that his partner is better off dead and attempts to kill him, thus becoming the villain. In *Jingle All The Way*, a similar betrayal occurs between Howard (Arnold Schwarzenegger) and Myron (Sinbad) when Myron kidnaps his former ally’s son while literally dressed as Dementor, the villain in the TV show whose merchandise drives the plot. After each Black antagonists has been apprehended, the hero returns to be with his respective white family. In this way, whiteness is established as the norm within the Christmas movie, pushing people of color to the margins if not outright villainizing them. This can also be said to be true of Santa Claus himself, who

¹⁴ Mark Connelly, “Santa Claus: The Movie.”

represents, as Mark Connelly notes, “a normative whiteness – the Caucasian appearance, white hair and beard, white fur trim – and reassuring masculinity – unthreatening, paternal (Father Christmas) or avuncular.”¹⁵

Once again, this whiteness can be traced back to the classics of the genre. In *Holiday Inn*, an entire music number – “Abraham” – is performed in Blackface. This music number celebrates the holiday of Lincoln’s Birthday by suggesting that all advances for Black Americans are a result of the 16th president’s actions, erasing the contributions of pioneering Black activists and politicians while having white characters literally speak, in Blackface, for Black Americans. It reinforces its message by having the film’s only Black characters, Mamie (Louise Beavers) and her children sing a verse. In the film’s loose remake, *White Christmas*, the Blackface is eliminated, but a song mourning its loss – “I’d Rather See A Minstrel Show” – is joyfully performed by Crosby and Kaye. Thus, *White Christmas* is not just nostalgic for the patriotic fanaticism of the war, but it is also nostalgic for the era of commonplace performance racism. It is worth noting that the film was released in the same year as *Brown v. Board of Education*, a landmark ruling in the Civil Rights Movement; it is entirely possible that the film was responding, in part, to a growing tide that was threatening the status quo of 1950s America.

The final ideological tenet of the Christmas genre that I will focus on is its views of gender and sexuality. As with class and race, the Christmas genre’s ideal family model is that of the nuclear family, with a strong patriarchal figure and a subservient wife who is the mother of the children. The father is the breadwinner, while the mother cooks and takes care of the children. This is true especially of Santa Claus, whose wife is almost never given a first name

¹⁵ Mark Connelly.

and referred to as anything besides “Mrs. Claus.” Often, the male protagonist’s struggle is rewarded with a subservient female mate, as is seen in *Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer* and *Bad Santa*. Likewise, Clark Griswold’s neurotic pursuit of the perfect Christmas is validated by his wife Ellen (Beverly D’Angelo) who lovingly refers to him as “Sparky.” The male is reined in by his female counterpart, and the resolution of tension always leads to marriage, or an affirmation of the heterosexual relationship.

This also works in the opposite direction wherein the independent woman is regulated by the institution of marriage. This is particularly true of the classics of the genre. Though this is common in Hollywood films in general, “Christmas offers an opportunity for a happier and less punitive ending because it can be seen to transform the heroine into a more conventional and socially acceptable woman, and to bring her back into the patriarchal fold.”¹⁶ This process is perhaps best exemplified by *Christmas in Connecticut*, where the columnist Elizabeth Lane, a single woman working a career while fully in charge of herself, has her power taken away when, in the film’s conclusion, she chooses to marry a soldier returning from the war. Another example of this is *Miracle on 34th Street* and its remake. In both, the unmarried mother (Doris and Dorey, respectively) is, by each film’s conclusion, remarried and expecting another child. It is unacceptable for her to remain a divorcee; she must be reintegrated into the patriarchal system of marriage. In a comparable way, Don Hartman’s *Holiday Affair* sees war widow and single mother Connie Ennis (Janet Leigh) pursuing a new marriage because her son will soon be grown and married, leaving her alone. Her existence is determined not independently, but by the men in her life: her son, her dead husband, and her two romantic suitors. In this way, the Christmas

¹⁶ H. Mark Glancy, “Dreaming of Christmas: Hollywood and the Second World War.”

movie pushes the notion of heterosexual marriage as essential to the family structure, and thus the perfect Christmas.

In all, the ideology of the Christmas movie is a conservative belief system that uses nostalgia to suggest that the “golden standard of Christmas” is under attack. This standard is one of 1950s America, with strong beliefs in capitalism, whiteness as superior, and support of traditional gender roles and sexualities. In a way, “The values of Christmas have become those of America, or vice versa, and Hollywood has thrown its weight behind them.”¹⁷ This is extremely problematic considering the dominance which the Christmas movie asserts for a month-long period each year. However, in recent years, some Christmas films have begun to deviate from and question these ideological standards. I isolate three examples – *Happiest Season*, *Holiday Heart*, and *Black Nativity* – as films that use the standards of the genre to present progressive alternatives to the normative Christmas movie, though we are yet to see a film that truly deviates in all categories.

The first film which I want to examine is Clea DuVall’s 2020 film *Happiest Season*. The film was DuVall’s second feature, and she co-wrote it with Mary Holland, who plays Jane. The film opens on a date between Abby (Kristen Stewart) and Harper (Mackenzie Davis), a lesbian couple. It is quickly established that they have been together for almost a year, and that Abby has a distaste for Christmas, while Harper adores the holiday season. Harper asks Abby to spend the holidays with her family, which Abby accepts with the hidden motive of proposing on Christmas morning. The following day, Abby shops for a ring with her gay best friend John (Dan Levy), who criticizes her for “engaging in one of the most archaic institutions in the history of the

¹⁷ Mark Connelly, “Introduction.”

human race” and “trapping [Harper] into a box of hetero-normativity and trying to make her your property.” Functionally, this conversation is quite similar to the critiques of capitalism present in the Christmas movie. Despite this initial criticism, John is satisfied by Abby’s assertion that marriage is nothing more than assertion of love for another person. In this way, the film generates a sort of “acceptable” queerness, wherein marriage is still the goal and norm. It is merely an enfolding of lesbian couples – namely, cis white lesbian couples – into the standards of society. Throughout the film, John’s character plays a similar role. Later, when Abby is at the first dinner with Harper’s family, he calls her to let her know that she is “standing in a country club that didn’t let women have their own memberships until the early 2000s,” a fact which is played for comedy, not leveled as a critique of the family she is spending time with. John’s character serves to critique the status quo of the Christmas movie, only to be brushed off as comedic relief. The film presents it as absurd for someone to really be against marriage, or be unwilling to spend time with a family who has a problematic past.

However, the plot of the film is not that of a simple romantic comedy. Instead, it is a story about coming out and living the closet, investigating the place of queerness within the status quo of American society. This is quickly established when, on the ride to her family’s house, Harper reveals that she is not out about her sexuality, thereby forcing Abby back into the closet with her. When they arrive, it is revealed that Harper comes from an extremely well-off family, with a sister Sloane (Allison Brie) who makes Christmas gift boxes for Gwyneth Paltrow’s company, and a father (Victor Garber) who is running for mayor. During the first dinner with the family, the parents refer to Harper’s secret ex-girlfriend Riley (Aubrey Plaza) as “such a shame” because she came out as a lesbian; it does not matter to them that she has become a Johns Hopkins educated doctor. The parents also decide to surprise Harper by inviting

her ex-boyfriend (Jake McDorman) to the dinner, generating tension between Harper and Abby. As the days move closer to Christmas, Abby begins to question how well she really knows her girlfriend as more secrets are revealed. It begins to seem an impossibility that Harper would be willing to disappoint the grand expectations of her parents.

Thus, on a basic story level, *Happiest Season* introduces a new question to the home for the holidays model of Christmas movie: what if not everyone belongs in the golden Christmas? Abby's dilemma calls into question the possibility of true love to persevere over social prejudices, as well as whether or not Christmas traditions should remain the way they are. When Abby takes her girlfriend's niece and nephew shopping for a white elephant gift, the two children slip a necklace into her purse, leading to her arrest for shoplifting. When Abby is bailed out, the family cannot believe her behavior, and even Harper seems uncertain as to whether or not she believes that Abby did not try to commit theft. All of this was caused by the need for an expensive gift exchange, something which Abby, as a person of the working class, can hardly afford to do. As the days pass, Harper chooses to spend more and more time out with her old friends and ex-boyfriend, leaving Abby to her own devices at home. The most fun that Abby has on the trip is when she asks Riley, Harper's ex-girlfriend, to help her shop for this gift; the two find themselves at a bar's drag night, where they sing along to a drag rendition of a classic Christmas tune. It is clear that Abby feels much more comfortable at an openly queer space than in one where she must pretend to be someone she is not. This scene suggests that, for queer people, the classic holiday traditions are not sufficient, and actively generate harm; the golden Christmas is a myth, as it does exist for everyone.

This tension between Abby's queer experience and Harper's falling back into traditional values comes to a head during the family's legendary Christmas Eve party. At this event, Abby

and Harper are caught kissing one another by Sloane, who storms downstairs to reveal the secret to the family; upon hearing the claim that she is a lesbian, Harper denies it, and reveals that the family should really be mad at Sloane, who is getting a divorce. John, who has arrived to rescue Abby, witnesses the event alongside his best friend and the two leave together. Harper was unwilling to tell the world about her love for Abby, thus seemingly ending the relationship after a week of events that drove them apart. After this, Abby and John have a conversation about the differing experiences of coming out for queer people, with Abby's family being accepting and John's father having kicked him out of the house. With these moments, the film seems to have completed its narrative arc; rather than being a romantic comedy, *Happiest Season* is instead a story about the inability for straight and queer worlds to mesh, with the traditional Christmas presenting no place for people who do not adhere to heteronormative standards. It is a painful story, but ultimately one that resonates for queer audience members who have been with someone who is closeted.

However, the film does not end here. Instead of rejecting the Christmas movie's standard ending of a happy gathering on Christmas Day, the film embraces the transformation element in order to suggest that these two worlds can, after all, be made into one. Harper arrives at a gas station where John and Abby have stopped and professes her love, saying that what her family thinks no longer matters. Back at the house, each member of the family has revealed their secret, two of which reject the traditional family model, Sloane getting a divorce and Harper being queer. While their mother (Mary Steenburgen) is supportive, their father leaves the room. However, the next morning, he apologizes to them for setting an impossible standard, and embraces Abby as part of the family. When a campaign donor calls to say she is still willing to support him if Harper's personal life is suppressed, he turns down the offer. In the end credits, it

is revealed that Abby and Harper got married, the father won his election, and everyone is happy. This transformation stands out from other Christmas movies, as it is not the person who disliked Christmas that had a problem. Rather, it is the homophobic family devoted to a traditional Christmas that must change. It is the people who supposedly love Christmas that must change their beliefs, thereby rewriting the meaning of Christmas for *Happiest Season*. Acceptance and willingness to see people as they are become virtues of Christmas, therefore breaking away from traditional values. In this way, *Happiest Season* turns the standards of the home for the holidays Christmas movie upside down, leaving a narrative of queer pain, then pride, in its wake.

However, this does not mean that the film fully rejects all aspects of the Christmas movie's conservative ideology. As previously noted, the film is not willing to fully engage with the issues of marriage as an institution; instead, it promotes marriage for queer people and social acceptance of divorce. It also fails to reckon with the idea of the patriarch as inherently flawed; the father is immediately forgiven once he apologizes for his mistakes. There is no restructuring that occurs in the film, nor is it implied that such an act is necessary. This is problematic when one considers that the family is of a high social class, with a great deal of wealth that most could never dream of accessing. Thus, the world that Kristen Stewart's Abby is integrated into is not one that challenges the major systems that create hardship for queer individuals.

This problematic side is accentuated by the film's relationship with race. Out of the large ensemble cast, only four somewhat substantial characters are people of color: Sloane's husband Eric (Burl Moseley) and children, and Carolyn McCoy (Sarayu Blue), a member of the town's elite. None of them are developed as characters, and their actions are morally dubious. It is Sloane's children who place the necklace in Abby's bag, causing her to be arrested. Later, Eric and Carolyn are caught engaging in a relationship before the divorce is made public. At the

film's conclusion, these are two of the only characters who have not been redeemed, and, with the divorce, there exist no more interracial relationships in the film. This is somewhat problematic when one considers that a rich white family is the center of the film. The only major differentiation from other middle/upper class Christmas movies is the film's embrace of queer characters. Nevertheless, the centering of a queer narrative where straight characters must adapt to have a happy Christmas makes this film stand out. Its employment of this character transformation renders the film far more progressive than say, *Single All The Way*, which is an uncritical look at a rich white family that wholly accepts their queer son.

A final way in which *Happiest Season* succeeds is by its irreverence toward nostalgia. Rather than rely upon the holiday songs of the 1950s, *Happiest Season* employs contemporary pop Christmas songs from queer artists for its soundtrack. In this way, the film further aligns itself with Abby and her struggle, rather than focus on her entry into Harper's conservative household. The only major moment of nostalgia comes in the film's final scene, where the family goes together to watch *It's A Wonderful Life* in the theater. Out of all of the classics, *It's A Wonderful Life* presents the most critical look at the nature of capitalist society as it never gives a Scrooge-type redemption to its antagonist, instead celebrating the community and its sharing of wealth. Out of all the classics to choose for the family to watch, Capra's classic is the one least inclined toward the "golden Christmas" and its conservative ideology.

The second film of my study is Robert Townshend's 2000 TV movie *Holiday Heart*. The film stars Ving Rhames as a devoutly Christian drag queen named Holiday Heart who befriends a single mother and daughter in Chicago. Holiday is a gay man, though he never uses any other name besides Holiday Heart. Unlike *Happiest Season*, this film is a drama with a few comedic scenes, and it focuses on characters who live in poverty, not gigantic houses in the suburbs. The

basic plot follows a few months in the life of Holiday Heart, Wanda (Alfre Woodward), and Niki (Jesika Reynolds), the mother-daughter who live in the other side of Holiday's duplex. Wanda is a recovered drug addict working on her memoirs, while Niki is an elementary school student. Their friendship begins after Holiday saves the pair from a violent boyfriend of Wanda's, who he tells to never return. Even though Wanda has issues with Holiday's sexual orientation, she is happy for the support and the love that he gives to Niki.

This peace is interrupted when Wanda starts dating the drug dealer Silas, who threatens Holiday Heart to stay away from Wanda and Niki. Silas is violently homophobic and repeatedly calls Holiday the f-slur; painedly, Holiday agrees to stay away from them and occupies his time preparing to move to Paris, which he had dreamed of moving to with his partner. However, when Wanda starts using Silas's drugs, he leaves in order to settle debts, while Wanda abandons her child to pay for her habit. Holiday becomes the surrogate parent for Niki, and, when Silas returns, he is appreciative and far more respectful towards Holiday, with the two joining forces to raise the girl. At one point, Niki runs away and encounters her mother, now a prostitute, attempting to buy drugs in alleyway; Wanda then proceeds to offer up Niki to her pedophilic new boyfriend in order to get more money, but Niki escapes. As Christmas nears, Niki tells Holiday that the only gift she ever received was a bike from a shelter, which her mother sold for drug money. After hearing this, Holiday goes out and buys a new bike for Niki; on Christmas Eve, Wanda shows up at Holiday's drag club asking for redemption, and he offers Wanda the opportunity to give Niki the bike as a gift. However, as they are leaving, Wanda's boyfriend arrives and attempts to steal the bike, killing Wanda in the process. The film ends a few months later with Holiday, Niki, and Silas standing over Wanda's grave, right next to the burial site of Holiday's deceased partner.

Though the narrative progresses toward Christmas, the traditional imagery of the holiday is often not present. This is emblematic of the poor conditions in which many of the characters live. In this way, *Holiday Heart* rejects the nostalgic elements of the Christmas movie. There is no mistletoe and holly, no classic Christmas tunes occupying the soundtrack, and, generally speaking, little reference to the importance of Christmas. For these characters, Christmas is a luxury, not an expectation; as Niki says, her only real gift was from the shelter in which she spent time with her mother. The film suggests that Christmas itself has little utility for those in poverty. However, this does not mean that the “Christmas spirit” and its values of kindness, acceptance, and giving are absent from the film; rather, they are embodied by the character whose literal name is Holiday Heart. In this way, Townshend’s film accomplishes something similar to *Happiest Season* with a gay drag queen embodying a new set of values – ones which incorporate poor, non-white, and queer people – into the Christmas celebration.

Unlike *Happiest Season*, which enfolds queerness into a white capitalist system, *Holiday Heart* exists entirely in a working Black world within Chicago. In its message of queer acceptance, the change is coming from the bottom up; there is unity between those oppressed by capitalism, racism, and homophobia. It suggests that the idea of Christmas is of little utility to those oppressed by the status quo, and that change is necessary. Critically, Wanda’s moment of redemption at the end of film ends not with her reuniting with Niki, but instead dying a tragic death. For those in poverty, addled by addiction and forced into prostitution, something as arbitrary as a single day or two of Christmas is insufficient to create change. However, the employment of a “holiday heart” throughout the year can lead to a better life, though no one ends the film wealthy. The biggest change that occurs is that Silas comes to accept Holiday for who he is, generating an untraditional family structure for Niki.

However, the film is still quite flawed in terms of its ideology. Despite the presence of a gay main character, the film is laden with homophobic slurs and stereotypes that make it a painful watch. Even though Silas eventually becomes friends with Holiday, this change occurs primarily on a functional basis; had Holiday not stepped in to raise Niki, he would have seen Holiday in the same negative light as before. His acceptance in the film is much closer to tolerance than a true embrace of Holiday's sexuality. The film seems progressive in its sexual politics for its 2000 release date, but to present eyes, it is dated.

Furthermore, despite its eventual embrace of unconventional family structures, *Holiday Heart* still reinforces notions of traditional gender roles. Throughout the film, it is claimed that Niki "needs a father," a role which only Silas can fill. As a gay man, Holiday is not legitimate as a father, and he can only be a mother to the child. The film fails to suggest that the traditional notion of "one mother, one father" and their stereotypical roles (cooking vs breadwinning, for example) are outdated and irrelevant to Niki. Furthermore, when Holiday catches Niki kissing a boy, he slaps her, then immediately regrets it. However, Holiday then changes her mind and says that it is Niki who made him slap her, and that she should be the one apologizing. It is a bizarre endorsement of physical punishment in parenting. Even the film's scene where Holiday explains homosexuality to Niki is flawed. In that scene, Holiday – a devout Christian – talks about queerness as something best left to being behind closed doors, although the new generation is more in favor of it being public. In this way, the film suggests that the best type of queerness is a mostly hidden one, deviating only slightly from the traditional views of sexuality. This is quite different from *Happiest Season's* suggestion that, for a better world to exist, it is the status quo that must change. *Holiday Heart* does succeed, however, in representing Christmas as having limited utility for marginalized communities.

The final film of my study is Kasi Lemmons's 2013 film *Black Nativity*, based on a 1961 Langston Hughes play of the same name. Out of my three examples, I view this film as most successful in subverting the standard ideology of the Christmas movie genre. Although this film is a musical, it could not be further from *Holiday Inn* or *White Christmas*. The film's plot follows teenager Langston (Jacob Lattimore) as he is sent to live with his grandparents in Harlem while his mother Naima (Jennifer Hudson) fights against eviction from their Baltimore apartment. When Langston arrives in New York City, his backpack is almost immediately stolen; while using a hotel's telephone, he notices that a customer has left behind his wallet and tries to return it. However, the man accuses him of having stolen the wallet and Langston is arrested. In jail, he meets Tyson (Tyrese Gibson), who pokes fun of him, but is taken aback when he hears that the teenager's name is Langston. After his grandfather Reverend Cobbs (Forest Whitaker) frustratedly bails him out of jail, he is shown his grandfather's prized pocket watch with an inscription from Martin Luther King Jr. A young pregnant couple – Maria (Grace Gibson) and Jo-Jo (Luke James) – comes caroling, and Langston learns that they are homeless. The following day, Langston steals the pocket watch and tries to pawn it for rent money to save his mother from losing the apartment; however, the vendor knows Reverend Cobb and refuses to take the watch.

Back at the Harlem apartment, Langston learns about why his mother became estranged from her parents – she ran away when she became pregnant – and the grandparents encourage the teenager to attend the Christmas Eve church service. Prior to the service, he arranges with Tyson to buy a gun, planning to meet in the middle of the procession. During the service, Langston falls asleep, and, in his dreams, he sees Mary and Jo-Jo as Mary and Joseph, and watches their struggle to find a place to stay in Harlem, just as their biblical counterparts did in

Judea. When he wakes, he leaves to meet Tyson, who reveals that he is Langston's father; Langston takes the gun and threatens him to turn over all of the store's money. A police officer arrives at the scene, but Tyson explains the situation as a family dispute about his son making him go to church. The police officer takes them back to church, where Naima has arrived as well. Langston confronts his grandfather, forcing him to reveal that he tried to pay off Tyson to leave his daughter, and, with this admission of sin, the broken family comes together for an embrace.

Black Nativity consistently reckons with the place of nostalgia. As a musical, it makes use of traditional hymns and folk songs while also incorporating new tracks. These traditional songs, such as "Silent Night" and "The First Noel," are adapted to the sound of contemporary R&B, making them relevant to the characters of the film. The music of the film is dominated by R&B and hip-hop, aligning it with a history of Black music, not Irving Berlin and the racism of *White Christmas*. The music numbers are also unglamorous, reflecting the fact that these characters are constantly fighting against threats of displacement; when one is concerned about paying rent, there is no place for extravagant blue dresses like those worn by Rosemary Clooney. The music numbers instead take place on city streets and back alleys, sung by characters facing much larger crises than love and the perfect Christmas gift. In this way, *Black Nativity* exists in the present; how could there be nostalgia for a past when things were even worse?

Thus, throughout the film, Black identity is constantly referenced and brought to the forefront. Reverend Cobb makes ample reference to their African American heritage, best exemplified by his watch with MLK's inscription, while Tyson quotes "A Dream Deferred" by Langston Hughes. In this way, *Black Nativity* instills the history of Civil Rights into the Christmas genre, directly countering its privileging of 1950s society. It also deals with issues of contemporary racism. When Langston attempts to return a lost wallet, he is arrested after an

accusation of theft. As a Black teenager, he is identified as not belonging inside a fancy hotel, and it is unthinkable to the white guest that he would be returning a lost item, not stealing it. In the prison cell, each other inmate is also Black, identifying the prevalence of racial profiling in arrests. At the same time, the location of his arrest suggests that, unlike white Christmas movie protagonists, the hotel is not a safe and happy place for a young Black man. Whereas Kevin McAllister engaged in fun shenanigans with the hotel staff, Langston is accused and arrested. Another critical scene is the climactic attempted robbery at the pawnshop involving Langston and his dad. In this scene, the police officer who arrives on the scene is Black; he makes a comment that, if he had been white and arrived at a scene with Langston pointing a gun at someone, it would have turned out very differently. Thus, the film calls attention to systemic police violence and excessive use of force against Black people within the United States. This is quite different than the harmless comic relief that the police play at the end of *Christmas Vacation* or throughout *Jingle All The Way*. In these ways, *Black Nativity* reveals the standards of the genre to be myths that do not hold for Black Americans.

At the same time, the film also serves to explain why people turn to crime in order to make a living. When his mother is faced with eviction, Langston will do anything to save their apartment. Though he tries to pawn the only item of value he can find, it blows up in his face. Left without any other option, he sets out to acquire a gun to find the money by any means necessary. This dispels the myth of Black men as inherently violent, instead providing empathy and an insight into the material conditions of poverty that force people to turn to crime. To have this plot line in a Christmas movie suggests that most films within the genre depict a middle-class fantasy that bears no relevance to Americans living paycheck to paycheck.

The characters of Jo-Jo and Mary continue this notion. Unlike *Home Alone 2*, where the homeless character is saved through kindness but not material change, these characters do not have a resolution. However, in Langston's dream, the two are made to play the role of Jesus and Mary in the Nativity play, thereby equating the struggle of the two. The importance of the story is lost in the modern world, where homelessness is blamed on laziness and not a product of the capitalist system. Jesus's messages of charity, which bordered on socialism, are lost in the Christmas movie which celebrates capitalism and corporate greed. Furthermore, by the film's conclusion, Naima has failed to save her apartment and has been left without a place to stay. Unlike *Christmas Vacation*, there is no benevolent capitalist to save her. The eviction proceeds as the system dictates, and the pregnant couple remains on the street.

However, *Black Nativity* is not devoid of hope. In its final moments, the family is reunited after all secrets are revealed. The community celebrates them, and the warmth that a family provides dominates the emotion of a scene. This is the comfort that Christmas can provide, even in the face of material struggle. However, this conclusion does not serve to do away with everything that proceeded; the capitalist system is not redeemed, and racism has not been solved. The miracle of a reunited family does not serve to erase or hide the structural problems faced by the characters. Rather, Christmas here serves to show that people are worthwhile, and can make life worth living, no matter how adverse conditions are. It is generative of a fighting spirit to make the world better, and, as a film, *Black Nativity* accomplishes this. It effectively deconstructs the narrative tropes and ideology of the Christmas movie genre.

However, despite all of these virtues, *Black Nativity* does not succeed where *Happiest Season* did before it. There is no queer characters, and the film privileges consistent heterosexual

relationships as a virtue. Although there is no indication that Naima and Tyson will get back together, it is suggested that Langston needs both parents in order to keep him away from crime. Naima's attempts to raise him as a single mother are not good enough, and the traditional family would be better equipped to raise the child. Even in the grandparents household, where Aretha (Angela Bassett) plays a vital role, the family is still under the dictates of the patriarchal head played by Forest Whitaker. Nevertheless, through its subversion of tropes, *Black Nativity* scorns nostalgia for the 1950s, challenges capitalism, and counters the racist ideology that permeates the Christmas movie genre.

As a whole, the Christmas genre is a yearly phenomenon that, by and large, promotes a conservative ideology that, despite its month-long grip on culture, has gone unexamined from a critical lens. Through its Christmas Carol, Santa Claus, and "home for the holidays" narrative models, the Christmas movie pushes forth an ideology that expresses a nostalgia for the golden Christmas of the 1950s, one which reflects a fundamental support of capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy within the genre. Nevertheless, recent years have seen films including *Happiest Season*, *Holiday Heart*, and *Black Nativity* that serve to challenge these core ideological tenets of the genre by subverting their narrative tropes and introducing new plotlines to the genre. Though no film has completely turned the ideology on its head, these films have used these tools to make Christmas movies that, in their yearly rewatches, do not serve to reinforce the dominant ideology of the genre. If more movies like these are released, the future of the genre may be one that presents a vision of Christmas that appeals to all Americans, not just a privileged few.

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