

# What's Fact and What's Fiction in *BlacKkKlansman*

Here's how closely Spike Lee's new movie sticks to Ron Stallworth's memoir.

[Jasmine Sanders](#) Aug 10, 2018 7:56 PM



Ron Stallworth in 2018, John David Washington as Ron Stallworth in *BlacKkKlansman*.

Photo illustration by Slate. Photos by Gary Gershoff/WireImage and David Lee/Focus Features.

[BlacKkKlansman](#), Spike Lee's latest joint, tells the story of Ron Stallworth, the first black officer to work for the Colorado Springs Police Department, who launches a covert investigation into the Ku Klux Klan. It is an adaptation of [Stallworth's memoir](#), an account of the undercover operation, and an on-screen title early in the film notes that it's "based on some fo' real, fo' real shit." How closely does the movie stick to Stallworth's real-life operation, as it's been described in both his memoir and in the press? We break it all down below.

## Ron Stallworth (John David Washington)

In the memoir, Detective Stallworth enrolls in the police academy after high school because he sees it as a plausible segue into a career as a gym teacher. Movie Stallworth is hard to read but seems to have more high-

minded motives, worrying about whether his employment as a cop is counterproductive to the fight for black liberation. Both struggle to reconcile their identities as black men and police officers, however. As Stallworth puts it in the memoir, black officers were stuck in a “phantom-like void” in which they were “too black” for some of their fellow officers and “too ‘blue’ for their racial brothers.” The movie evokes W.E.B. Du Bois’ theory of “double consciousness” to describe the predicament, albeit more pointedly than Stallworth does in his memoir.

In the memoir, Stallworth has been working as an officer for four years, three of them spent undercover, when he begins the Klan infiltration. Just as in the movie, he talks to the Klan on the phone after spotting an ad in the local newspaper, and though he had a few years’ experience, he still made the mistake of giving his real name. The real Ron Stallworth also did indeed succeed in becoming a card-carrying Klan member, and in fact he still has the card and often brandishes it in interviews:

As for how accurate the movie is to his character, the real-life Stallworth

has said, “The movie captured the essence of me at 25, going through this investigation.” They did take “some liberties,” though, he says, noting that his afro was “[about an inch shorter](#).”

## “Flip Zimmerman” (Adam Driver)

Adam Driver as Flip Zimmerman.

David Lee/Focus Features

In the film, the white cop who aids detective Stallworth and infiltrates the Klan is an “unobservant” Jew, a bit of artistic license that raises the stakes, since Flip himself must work to hide his true identity from the Klan. In the memoir, Stallworth keeps the officer’s identity somewhat obscured for his own protection, referring to him only as “Chuck,” but he is a willing if wary participant in the investigation.

The memoir, like the book, portrays several close calls and instances where the cop’s cover is nearly blown. Unlike in the movie, another officer, named Jim, is chosen to go undercover as well. However, there was no lie detector scene, as Chuck, who is white and not Jewish, does not receive as much scrutiny as Flip does in the movie.

## “Patrice” (Laura Harrier)

The character of Patrice, Stallworth’s love interest, seems to have been invented for the film. However, Stallworth does mention an unnamed young woman he was dating.

## The racist patrolman, “Landers” (Frederick Weller)

The racist patrolman who harasses Stallworth and gropes Patrice appears to have been largely invented for the movie as well. However, the memoir does describe a patrolman named “Ralph” who, like Landers, “shot and killed a teenaged boy” and was only able to hold onto his badge because of the loyalty of others in the justice system. Unlike in the movie, there is no scene of Stallworth and the others eliciting a taped confession and getting the patrolman arrested.

## **Kwame Ture, born Stokely Carmichael (Corey Hawkins)**

Corey Hawkins as Kwame Ture, Kwame Ture in Washington in 1970.\*

Photo illustration by Slate. Photos by David Lee/Focus Features and Bettmann/Getty Images.

In the memoir, Stallworth's first undercover assignment is portrayed much as it is in the film. He is ordered to attend an event at a local black nightclub where Kwame Ture, who in the late '60s changed his name from Stokely Carmichael, is speaking. As in the film, Stallworth eagerly accepts the assignment and at times felt himself swept up in Ture's speech, muttering in agreement with him. He compliments his skill as a fiery orator and does briefly meet with Ture after, though he does not make any meaningful connections with any other black attendees.

## **David Duke (Topher Grace)**

Topher Grace as David Duke, David Duke in 1978.

Photo illustration by Slate. Photos by David Lee/Focus Features and Bettmann/Getty Images.

Stallworth's interactions with Duke are mostly true to the memoir. Stallworth did actually speak to the Grand Wizard via telephone and inquire how he would know whether he was speaking with a black person. Duke did indeed say that he was capable of discerning a black person's voice by the pronunciation of the word *are*. And Stallworth does indeed write that he was eventually charged with working as one of Duke's armed bodyguards, accompanying him when he visited Colorado Springs, during which time he really did snap a chummy photo with Duke. (Stallworth says he [lost the photo in a move.](#))

## **The Klan in Colorado**

The movie's depiction of the local chapter of the Klan is pretty true to the memoir, though some of the names are changed. Many of the most unbelievable details come straight from the memoir. The local leader (identified in the book as Ken, instead of Walter) does indeed seek to have "Ron" become a new leader in the group. As in the movie, Stallworth

blames the different sound of his voice on a cold or allergies.

## **The initiation ceremony and counterprotests**

In the memoir, both Chuck and Jim attend the ritual that formalizes their Klan citizenship. Stallworth writes that, as in the movie, the ceremony was attended by Duke, who chose to screen D.W. Griffith's racist epic [\*The Birth of a Nation\*](#), the film that helped inspire the Klan's early-20<sup>th</sup>-century resurgence.

The anti-Klan protests described in the memoir are more scattered and less tense, with the Black Student Union and other leftist groups, including predominantly white ones, showing their opposition to the white supremacists. The character of Jerome Turner, played in the film by Harry Belafonte, seems to have been invented for the film, but the gruesome murder he describes, the [lynching of Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas](#), is 100 percent real, as are the infamous photos taken by Fred Gildersleeve that are shown in the film. *The Birth of a Nation* had been released just one year before and may have partially inspired the killing.

## **The ending**

No planned attack on the Black Student Union is described in the memoir. Stallworth does write, however, that the Klan was planning to firebomb gay bars in Colorado Springs, in addition to cross burnings. As in the movie, all the Klan's plans for domestic terrorism are thwarted by Stallworth and the CSPD.

The detectives were indeed eventually ordered to [shut down the investigation](#), destroy all the evidence, and slip back into their prior roles. The final phone call between Duke and Stallworth, in which the detective relishes his dramatic reveal of his true identity to a stunned Duke, is invented for the film. In real life, Stallworth has said in interviews, [David Duke didn't find out that he was black until 2006](#), when a reporter called the Klan leader to fact-check Stallworth's story.

Correction, Aug. 11, 2018: Due to a production error, this post originally

used an incorrect photo for Corey Hawkins. The photo has been replaced.