

# SPIKE LEE CONSTRUCTS THE NEW BLACK MAN: MO' BETTER SHARON ELISE ADEWOLE UMOJA

## Introduction

Motion pictures are indeed profound and curious phenomena. They are instruments for *socialization*, mass propaganda, historical vehicles, outlets for aesthetic expression, entertainment, and commercial endeavors. Their significance is derived from the manifold purposes to which they may be put and the fact that the ends sought can be accomplished with minimal social discord. Films can just as easily reinforce the status quo as usher in revolutionary ideas and expand consciousness. The intrinsic power of this medium can be observed in the propaganda films used by Nazi Germany and the United States as both attempted to legitimize their war efforts in order to arouse their populations to greater sacrifices. In the United States this propaganda was pointedly directed at Blacks:

*We've Come a Long, Long Way* (1943)...was a documentary made in cooperation with the U.S. War Dept....to convince Blacks that they were better off here than under Hitler, and their patriotism was requested in the segregated Army....The NAACP labeled the film "disgusting"....(Sampson and Sharp, 1982, p. 80)

Though ostensibly technical and neutral, filmmaking is inextricably linked to the sociopolitical purposes to which it is employed. The objectives and/or perspectives of the filmmakers invest the specific work with its orientation. The orientation of the film, in turn, directs society's gaze, thus impacting the collective viewers' social consciousness. Although the viewing experience can contribute to social transformation by a relatively benign process, it cannot be assumed that film viewing is passive. What occurs is an interaction between the

filmmaker's consciousness and the viewers' perspectives, born of experience, which are brought to bear as an intrinsic part of the act of viewing.

Film is not a medium which is merely dictated by social structure and directed upon a passive audience: the audience also imbues the product with meaning. Audience interpretations will diverge, elevating film to social contest, when there are fundamental doubts and differences regarding the basic premises upon which the social order rests. Audience ambiguity reflects the opposition to prevailing norms and creates a context for the transference of ideological struggle to the screen.

The struggle for ideological transformation is just as profound as the struggle for control over material resources. It is the resolution of the struggle of ideas that determines the dominant norms which legitimize the pattern of resources distribution in society. As long as dominant ideas are challenged, the struggle is ongoing. Thus, the battle to control meaning is fundamental to the larger political struggle.

The battle to shape meaning is pivotal to the transformation of predominant norms and perspectives. Since the inception of filmmaking there has been an ongoing struggle to wrest this illusive weapon from the inherent conservatism of the status quo and to harness it for social change. The significance of this ongoing struggle to the Black community lies in the quest for Black self-definition, a crucial building block for the construction of Black self-determination. For Black people, then, films are inherently political and potentially transformative.

In truth, *each* characterization of Blacks by this medium is a salvo in the battle for racial justice. For African American viewers, characterizations of Blacks are never neutral; each characterization either advances or retards the struggle for self-determination and empowerment. Films and those involved in their creation, then, become logical targets of Black collective critical analysis. There is no escaping the essential political dynamic at work; there is then, no meta-world of the aesthetic where art exists only for art's sake. In this vein, then, the Black artist is held responsible to contribute towards the transformation of Black America.

Spike Lee is on a quest to effectively use film to capture the texture of Black life and to direct African Americans' attention to the subtle shadings of their existence. In so doing, he is moving beyond the White one-dimensional

representations of Blacks, Blackness and Black life. Lee's work proclaims the existence of a dynamic, multi-faceted Black society peopled with personalities possessing the entire range of human emotion, experience, aspiration, and intelligence—all of which are brought to bear upon their lives in the crucible of America. He has entered the fray to contest the meaning of Black life in America. Like his predecessor, Melvin Van Peebles, Lee seeks to ensure that "White standards will no longer be imposed on the Black community" (Jaehne, 1990, p. 7).

In the course of his pursuits, Spike Lee casts a gendered gaze upon the Black communities he portrays. By doing so he consistently delimits a role for Black women which is peripheral and, thereby, subordinated to the Black man. Spike Lee is a work in progress; he promises to capture the transformational potential of Black film but in order to do so he must traverse the chasm of Black patriarchy. Until Lee's work reflects the realization that Black women are inherently valuable and not merely auxiliary to the liberation of Black men, it will fall short of its potential to galvanize the entire Black community.

### Lee's Mode: "So Black"

Spike Lee has a distinctive approach to filmmaking, one that celebrates, while simultaneously analyzing, Black culture. For Blacks, it is simply that he is:

so black/does not aspire to be white/works hard to stay black/think black/love black/taste black/teach black/bitchblack/inkblack/wants to pitch his voice midnight/drumout his name/say i've known rivers instead of i pledge allegiance/sing god bless the chile/instead of america. (Kwelismith, 1989, p. 119)

Spike Lee's films have flavor; they tantalize the senses using a combination of Black art forms. Black music is as integral to his films as Black dialogue and familiar community settings. In addition, Lee uses the emotional release of humor as the device which allows Blacks to turn a critical eye upon themselves and their surroundings without becoming defensive or derisive. He uses Black foibles to deepen his characterizations of Black people: as such, they become mechanisms for collective introspection rather than tools for destruction.

This is a significant departure from the use of humor as a tool to reinforce the stereotypical notions predominant in earlier film productions. This problem is pronounced in movies such as *Green Pastures* (1937), where one is presented

with an all-Black cast place in what purports to be a Black version of heaven. This film oozes with the perversity of White racism: one sees perpetual fish fries, singing, and cavorting. Whites have even sought to invade the only promised land—the afterlife—with their “ethnic notions.” As Ethel Waters once lamented, “Darkies don’t dream”; White people have arrogantly abrogated our right to a vision of the afterlife. Their version of the Black afterlife reasserts our inferior status. And as they define our position in heaven, they also reassert their own position of supremacy. As Countee Cullen wrote:

She even thinks that up in heaven/Her class lies late and snores/White poor black  
cherubs rise at seven/To do celestial chores (Hughes, 1970, p. 231).

These White notions also invade *Stormy Weather*, now considered a classic, wherein humor is a vehicle for the presentation of similar debilitating racial stereotypes. African Americans grit their teeth through the *antics* of Black embodiments of White fantasy—characters which include “Zip Coon,” shuffling Blacks, avaricious Black women, minstrels in Black face and a female dance troop which parades a denigrating darky’s smiling face on the backs of their bonnets. The images are the same as those in *Green Pastures*; only the locale differs from the ethereal to the secular! This humor reveals nothing of Black people or Black life, and does nothing to illuminate pressing social issues. The humor is significant, however, for its affirmation of White racist notions of Blacks. In both *Green Pastures* and *Stormy Weather* the humor, unlike that of Spike Lee, does not advance the plot, does not bring greater sensitivity to the plight of characters, and does not engender examination of volatile social ideas.

Not only do White filmmakers use humor in their attempt to steal Black dreams; they also knowingly exploit the most talented Black representatives in undertakings which ultimately undermine their collective sense of self-worth. Instead of receiving acknowledgment for their intellectual merits and artistic talents, individuals who, in reality, refute White stereotypical notions are coerced into complicity with the purveyors of African American humiliation. For example, Rex Ingram, who played “de lawd” in *Green Pastures*, possessed a medical degree and a Phi Beta Kappa key before undertaking a theatrical career. So too, was Paul Robeson, a multi-talented personage, constricted to feeble roles and, later, total ostracism by White image-makers (Sampson and Sharp, 1983).

Despite the obvious debasement of Blacks in these and other films, their subordination in society prompts a deep desire to see any reflection of Black life. Unfortunately, this reflection has been grossly distorted through the lens of White America. Blacks have been fed a steady diet of stereotypes which merely reinforce the perverted perceptions of the status quo. In her commentary, "Blacks' Media Burden," Beverly Shepard summons childhood memories which resound familiar: "Among my childhood memories is that of my image-starved family rushing through the house shouting. 'Black people on TV! Black people on TV!'" The same scenario relates to seeing Black people in the movies, perhaps even more so, because it is the "Big Screen."

In contrast to the films discussed above, Lee evokes a humor born of the familiar which elicits collective recognition of obstacles and internal shortcomings. It is humor which, because it is shared, reinforces the sense of community and raises the hope of resolution. Simultaneously, it is used as an anesthetic to blunt the pain of the incisive edge of truth.

The presentation of the "dogs" in *She's Gotta Have It* elicits laughter from audiences who recognize the vacuousness of these familiar "come-on's," and, given the camera angle, view this as it is: a barrage of "bull." Underneath the laughter is the acknowledgement of the need to rectify the bases on which Black men and women come together. In *School Daze* humor is consistently used to diffuse tensions. When the "brothers" question Dap's challenge to give up all for protest, it seems their camaraderie is doomed; however, this likelihood is dissipated by their humorous response to Dap's frustration. Here, humor is not used to evade the issue but is a vehicle whereby friends can hold diverse and opposing views without jeopardizing their relations. Similarly, humor is interjected to indicate the underlying love between Mookie and his sister Jade in *Do the Right Thing* in the midst of Jade's criticism of Mookie's shortcomings. When he discusses Sal's overtures toward Jade, a potentially caustic situation is averted by his teasing. And in *Mo' Better Blues*, Bleek's love life is a source of comic relief. The camera shows his quandary in trying to meet the demands of his two lovers. The exasperation that results is aptly captured by the camera. One sees him making love first with Indigo and then with Clarke, back to Indigo, back to Clarke. His head swivels before the camera and he says the wrong name to each. He turns to the camera to beseech the spectators; he is a mess.

Given what has transpired in Hollywood films, Lee's work is Black social commentary, conceivably a new genre of Black films. Lee is an astute observer of Black life; he uses the insider's intimate knowledge of Black culture to infuse his films with Black music, his characters with Black words, and his plots with Black sensitivities—giving voice to the voiceless. Each of these elements—the music, the language, and the sensitivities—is essential to the presentation of Lee's agenda.

In this era of the "Pop Top 40" where White music moguls create stars, indigenous Black music is usually relegated to the fringes of pop culture. However, the Black community asserts its own orientation to music. African Americans celebrate their own stars and styles regardless of their appeal to the White market, or lack thereof. It's not Springsteen, it's James Brown; it's not Barry Manilow, it's Luther Vandross; it's not Kenny G., it's John Coltrane; it's Bessie and Billie and Dinah and Sarah and others who have *no equivalent or parallel in the White community*. Lee uses the magnetism of Black music and the statements embodied therein to harness our attention.

In *She's Gotta Have It*, Nola's theme is woven throughout the text of the film, lending magnitude to the character herself by making her omnipresent. In *School Daze* the music comes forward to clearly delineate the many themes explored in this film. The film opens with a song of deliverance, "I'm Gonna Build Me a Home," conveying the quest of Black people for a place of their own. And it is "Homecoming Weekend at the College" where "Homecoming" represents more than a football game and the crowning of a queen; it is the quest of the characters for self-realization and belonging. The musical sparring between the "jigaboos" and the "wannabees" is used to define the conflicts of class and color that retard the construction of the collective home. "Da Butt" is an infectious celebration of youthful sexuality and Black physique. The haunting ballad sung during the Homecoming Coronation calls for Black self-acceptance, "You can only be you; I can only be me."

Lee opens *Do the Right Thing* with the Negro National Anthem and then immediately beckons Blacks to "Fight the Power" repeatedly throughout "one hot summer day." In *Mo' Better Blues* he woos Blacks with Coltrane's "Love Supreme" and seduces them with the sensuous strains of Branford Marsallis and his father, Bill Lee. The music he uses is purposefully chosen because it elicits powerful emotional responses and because it reinforces the thematic

direction of his films. He goes beyond mere usage of music to revere the artists that create it, as in the “roll call” of Black musical contributors proffered by the “We Love Station” in *Do the Right Thing*, and in his thematic focus on the jazz quartet in *Mo’ Better Blues*. Thus, he reaffirms the magnitude of African American creativity while creating an environment compatible with the transmission of his ideas.

Lee’s text includes not only the written screenplay but a visual text which includes excerpts from speeches, Black literature, newspapers, and graffiti. Zora Neale Hurston’s words from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* provide the opening theme in *She’s Gotta Have It*. Men and women dream different dreams; those of men are often elusive, those of women are “true.” This sets the stage for the conflicts which ensue between Nola and her lovers.

Even the collage in Nola’s studio apartment carries a message to the viewer: that society, with Nola, remember the victims of injustice. The scrawled name of Tawanna Brawley on the wall in *Do the Right Thing* strikes a similar chord of recognition. In his use of graffiti Lee takes a contemporary image which is more often used to connote gang violence and thereby, maligns the Black community and he uses this familiar image to project Black sensibilities.

Lee’s characters speak to Blacks directly. He often uses a series of vignettes which focus viewers on issues of particular import to the Black community. While other filmmakers use this technique, the manner in which Lee does this is unique. The viewer is focused upon his characterizations of Black individuals; Lee views Blacks as people who have problems but who are not, themselves, problems.

Through Lee’s use of vignettes one comes to know and empathize with individual characters as they confront the everyday drama of Black life in America. Through his use of the camera Lee beckons the audience to participate. He establishes intimacy between the actors and the viewing audience. Blacks are not merely observing these actors going through fictitious scenarios; they share their lives. The actors look into Black eyes, speaking and grappling with problems Blacks share. Thus, Black interaction is assumed assured and essential. Lee, then, is not speaking *for* Black people; he is speaking *to* Black people.

The creation of this intimacy between the screen and the viewers is significant because it is used to focus viewers on the fundamental issues which plague

Black communities; the questions raised in the films discussed below are questions which Lee, through his characters, asks of Blacks. What is he asking African Americans to consider? He raises questions about the most basic Black values regarding love and beauty, Black political choices and their consequences, inter-generational cleavages, and about what Blacks see when they actively regard themselves. He forces examination of the issues some African Americans would rather bury from public scrutiny; the divisiveness of class differences, the struggle to define Black sexuality in the face of the perversity of racialized society, Black mimicry of White aesthetic and the impact of internalized oppression on Black individual self-worth and, therefore, on Blacks' ability to value each other.

Spike Lee's films have become public events because they serve as a contemporary town meeting: He has set the agenda but it is not immutable. He calls the meeting; but it is African Americans who, in coming together, assess their lives and determine the future agenda—both of which are essential ingredients for Black empowerment. Lee's works present his diagnosis but it is Blacks who affirm it and move to perform the operation that initiates the healing process.

Malcolm X's statement "by any means necessary" applies to Lee's use of everything at his disposal to convey his message. Thus, Lee does not subscribe to the artificial barriers that delimit the appropriate use of various mechanisms for various pursuits; these are not just movies. Lee consciously weaves music, poetry, graffiti, still shots, and an assemblage of the familiar objects of Black lives into a subtext which involves the totality of Black senses. This subtext also projects a decidedly political agenda.

### **Lee "Works Hard to Stay Black/Does Not Aspire to Be White"**

White society would have one believe that drug addiction, fratricide, and social dependency are the characteristic features of the Black community. These characteristics are used to further define and delimit the extent of Black personality. Lee refocuses on the oft overlooked reality that Blacks know. While not ignoring the social ills that beset African Americans, he reminds viewers that the social problems emanating from the oppressive social order do not define Blacks. While African Americans remain distinctive by history, culture, and orientation, Blacks are not a monolith. African Americans are a diverse, vibrant people who love those things which remind them of the Blackness in



each other and yet delight in and encourage self-assertion. Herein lies a crucial characteristic: diversity in the Black community is not a cause for cleavage but is a celebrated aspect of Black life. Such a diverse community is a marked departure from Hollywood depictions.

By presenting characters within this context, Lee empowers them and thus provides the hope for the positive resolution for their problems. The Blacks in Lee's films, then, have neither to be defeated nor to be *extricated from their Blackness* to resolve the issues that confront them. The White option is, therefore, not indicative of success, but represents social blindness and abandonment of the struggle to define one's existence. Therefore, Blacks who choose this option, such as the piano player in *Mo' Better Blues* with his French White lover, are viewed as pretentious anomalies who, though tolerated and understood, do not possess viable answers to the question of self-definition that confronts African Americans.

The reason such an option is rejected is based on the fallacy of the application of White universalism to the Black experience. Those who would decry the particularism of Black culture as confining fail to see the universal truths and emotions that are explored within this context. These same individuals have no problem finding the universal message put forth by Whites who use *their* particular national and cultural experience as the basis of their work.

Lee uses the particular cultural experience of Black Americans to inform the direction of his works. He draws on the universe of Black life in America which results in depictions of African Americans that reveal a wide range of personalities, styles, language, and aesthetics—all within a Black context. He makes *no* attempt to situate these Black images within the "larger" framework of White society. Because of this, he establishes, within his works, a Black norm—it is Whites and White sensibilities which are presented as aberrant within this framework.

The difference between Lee and White-oriented filmmakers is that the White view is that of a commuter passing through foreign terrain. Lee views the Black community as a resident and participant. The commuter gets, at best, surface impressions while Lee, as the resident, is a participant and an observer. He is acutely aware of the nuances of his community because he is indicating those with whom he is intimate on a daily, interactive basis. As a resident, Lee can explore parts of the Black community that Whites dare not enter. So, too,

can Lee explore aspects of the Black psyche that Whites cannot comprehend and fear to encounter.

A prime example is shown in Lee's strategic use of photos and quotes from Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X in *Do the Right Thing*. To Whites, this was at best ambiguous and, at worst, potentially volatile because it pitted non-violent integrationist ideals against the opposition of violence and the maintenance of separatism.

For Blacks, such a dichotomy is artificial. It does not address the Black political dynamic. In fact, such a dichotomization is antithetical to Black culture. In truth, both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X are warmly embraced by the Black community. King's ideal of racial harmony and ultimate integration is upheld and understood while Malcolm X captures a deeply rooted sentiment among Black people as well. Blacks understand that their strategic objective is to attain human dignity. The competing questions of non-violence and self-defense are tactical questions for this achievement. Yet, they also represent vital aspects of the Black psyche; Blacks are caught in a dilemma of desiring unanimity and harmony while being ever aware of the need to protect and defend their person and integrity.

Lee legitimizes Black political thought and action, not only in relation to Blacks' oppositional stance to White society, but also in their internal struggles to define themselves individually and in relation to one another. In *School Daze*, Lee extols Black activism with the opening collage which shifts from the cutaway exposing the hold of a slave ship and its human cargo to Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, Mary McLeod Bethune, and more contemporary figures such as Muhammad Ali, Stokely Carmichael, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Jesse Jackson. Lee rallies Blacks to political action as the collage gives way to the Mission College motto, "uplift the race." The film closes with the admonition to "wake up" and the ringing of an alarm clock. Between the opening and the denouement the film is devoted to an intense examination of various political elements at play in the Black community, including Black institutional support for divestiture from South Africa, Black support for Black colleges, and genuine Black control of those self-same institutions. The "wake up" call bespeaks the fact that it is time, as Du Bois said, for Black people to awaken from the slumber of ignorance and to acknowledge our place and thereby our plight.

These symbols are repeated in *Do the Right Thing* which opens with more classic symbols of Black rebellion which include the Black National Anthem, Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" and a dancer wearing boxing gloves. Then the alarm clock goes off, and the "We Love" DJ tells his listeners, "Wake up!...The color for today is Black!" The use of these symbols is significant because these are symbols which are not commonly presented in any mass medium. They represent what White America wants to forget, while at the same time embodying the Black collective ethos of resistance. For example, Adam Clayton Powell is represented in the collage though forgotten by the White community after being expelled from Congress on trumped-up charges only to be vindicated posthumously.

Lee's political discourse is not always explicitly stated in the form of definitive ideological pursuits. Rather, the overarching polemic is one in which Black norms are presented as natural, viable and oppositional. Black viewpoints are mutually understood without engaging in the formal discourse necessary to render them visible to Whites. They are embedded in everyday life—subtle as each breath taken, and just as vital.

In this context, then, all facets of African American lives take on political meaning: sport is not merely a contest between two teams or individuals, but is a struggle for Black affirmation in the face of White supremacy. When Lee refers to Larry Bird vs. Michael Jordan, he is recognizing Black prowess that is always challenged with the raising up of a mythical White hope. It is not simply Ricky Marciano vs. Joe Louis or Randall Cunningham vs. Jim Kelly; it is Black self-assertion and proficiency vs. the maintenance of White hegemony. Lee recognizes this and presents it to Black people without polemics because it is clearly understood. As such, it demarcates those Blacks such as Greer Childs from Mars Blackmon and Whites as Sal and his sons from the Black community.

A rejection of White norms is implied in Lee's disclosure of Black norms. This is aptly captured by Ntozake Shange in *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*:

we deal with emotion too much/ so why don't we go ahead & be white then/ & make everythin dry & abstract wit no rhythm & no reelin for sheer sensual pleasure/ yes let's go on & be white/ we're right in the middle of it/ no use holdin out/ holdin onto ourselves/ let's think our way outta feelin....(Shange, 1977, p. 47)

The tension embodied in the struggle to avoid capitulation to whiteness is omnipresent in the lives of Blacks and in Lee's films. It need not be overt. What Lee depicts in his films succinctly conveys Black awareness and rejection of the reification of White standards, particularly as they are applied to Black people.

"Thank God for lips," thank God for "de butt," thank God for the presentation of Black men and women resplendent in their representation of the variety of their Africanness and for the Black sensuality presented in Lee's rendering of Black images. This Black sensuality bespeaks Blacks' attraction for and to each other, embodied in every character Lee presents from the spindly-legged Mars and Mookie to the self-possessed Jamie, from the shallow beauty of Greer to the passion of Dap, from the contained rage of Radio Raheem to the self-absorption of Bleek. It is seen in the pouty "kitten," Jane, and the stoic majesty of Mother Sister, in the singularity of *Indigo* and *Clarke* and *Nola Darling*.

### **The Phallacy of Lee's Sexual Construction: "It's a Dick Thing"**

Lee's films are significant in their presentation of new images of Black men and women. These images are new as objects for mass consumption, but because they are "news" for Blacks. They generate new images of Black men and women for mass consumption. Yet what he brings to the screen is not a surprise to Black viewers; it reflects what they have known all along: their humanity. Love is the persistent theme underlying Black humanity; a theme boldly expressed as a sexual love, and more subtly rendered as a deep devotion to each other—a love supreme. Lee brings Black sexuality to the screen in a manner not seen heretofore. Since White definitions of Black sexuality have served the heinous purposes of destruction of African Americans' conjugal, parental, and community relations and, more pointedly, have threatened their very existence, this is a momentous undertaking. Lee attempts to transform the presentation of Black relationships, and Black men in particular. For Lee, Black men are sexual beings, not brutes: vulnerable to their passions, not victims of them. They are not the sexual predators portrayed in White mythology. Lee shatters Whites' illusions of their desirability. His portrayal of Black on Black intimacy raises the specter of an Afrocentric world independent and unconcerned with Whites.

Lee's explicit portrayals of sexual love are unabashedly male-oriented and heterosexual; for Lee, "it is a dick thing." The "dick thing" returns the genitals to the Black man; interestingly, this White-depicted sexual omnivore who has been branded as a sexual terrorist was rarely depicted in male-female sexual encounters. Ironically, it was White men who portrayed the Black sexual brute (c.f., *Birth of a Nation*, 1905).

When Black men entered the film industry they were denied their sexuality and relegated to roles as buffoons and loyal eunuchs. They died early in the plot—clearly expendable—and were without any meaningful love interest, defined solely in terms of their service to Whites. If a serious relationship developed, particularly if it involved a White woman, she had a serious defect such as blindness (c.f., *A Patch of Blue*). If a Black female was involved, her role was marginal, asexual and undeveloped or marginal, supersexual, and undeveloped!

Examples of the above include *Lilies of the Field* where Sidney Poitier, as a eunuch in the service of White nuns, does not care about "none" and surely does not get none. And in *Driving Miss Daisy* her "best friend" is content to keep his hands on the steering wheel—a situation lampooned by *In Living Color's* skit, "Ridin' Miss Daisy" where "best friend" services Miss Daisy in the back seat of the car. In *Silverado* Danny Glover is the only major character left at the conclusion with no conjugal love interest (he goes off with his sister!). In *Lethal Weapon II*, even though Danny Glover is never depicted in sexual intimacy with his wife, his mentally unstable sidekick, Mel Gibson, attracts the sexual attention of the young, blonde Boer.

In rare instances where Black women play protagonists, they are generally denied the sexual companionship of Black men. This is true in *Sounder*, where Cicily Tyson's husband is whisked off to jail in the first ten minutes of the film for the duration, in *Mahogany* where Diana Ross disappoints Black female viewers by choosing a small White man over Billie Dee Williams, and in several Whoopi Goldberg's films where she is matched with strange, unattractive White men—and still does not get any!

When a Black man is depicted with skills, intelligence, and/or material affluence, he worships at the shrine of the White Madonna, as does Sidney Poitier in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. A notable exception is found in Eddie Murphy's *Coming to America* where the Crown Prince actively seeks an intelligent, auto-

nomous Black woman to be his wife. Yet, it was necessary to go all the way to Africa to find a Black man possessing wealth *and* stature *and* respect for Black women. Unfortunately, Murphy's exceptional treatment of Black conjugal relations is confined to this film and aborted in *Harlem Nights*, where Black male brutality against Black women is unabated.

Lee's depictions of Black men differ sharply from the images cast by Hollywood. He presents men who inhabit a sexual universe. Released from the celibacy to which they had been confined, they now revel in their sexuality. They have been freed to develop relationships with Black women. While these are relationships which fall, finally, outside the purview of Whites, they are mediated solely in male terms, thereby failing the test of mutuality fundamental to equality.

Lee's relationships are, indeed, a "dick thing" because they are defined exclusively by the Black male's sexual orientation—genital and phallic. While Lee has grasped the clear need to protect Black genitalia literally and figuratively, he does so by defining Black genitalia as the property of Black men. Long the object of the lynch mob and the subject of coercion and manipulation at the hands of privileged White women, Black male genitalia were literally severed from him. Simultaneously, Black male power, personality, and familial ties were subject to severance at the hands of White society.

Lee attempts to negate the work of the lynch mob and to contravert the effects of subjugation by explicitly placing Black male sexuality at the forefront of his characterizations where it becomes a thematic centerpiece. Like "Sweet Dick Willie" who is defined in terms of his sexual prowess, Lee invests Black male sexuality with power and freedom, depicting Black male sexuality as an integral component of community life. He attempts the rejuvenation of Black male self-esteem by placing them center stage.

In returning sexuality to the Black man, Lee also defines the sexuality of the Black woman, as the preferred sexual partner of the Black man. Yet, Lee does little to transform their relationship beyond the purely sexual. Clearly, Lee's view of Black women differs from that of White filmmakers—hence his criticism of Murphy's treatment of Black women in *Harlem Nights*, where Murphy punches the older Black "madam" played by Della Reese (Lee, 1990, p. 34).

However, Lee's portrayals of Black women fail to capture their essence. While it is extremely problematic for Black women that he fails to set them at the center of Black life, it is even more problematic that he, having cast aside White stereotypes, fails to cast aside patriarchy with them. He, therefore, substitutes White male hegemony with Black male supremacy. Only Bleek sits in the center of the camera's eye while the world revolves around him; the Black woman is allowed that place at the core only when she is with her man, as part of him.

Sitting center stage, the Black man is allowed to *dick*-tate the movements of the Black woman who is essentially a prop on the stage that he dominates. On this stage, it is only his desires which are validated. Hence, in *She's Gotta Have It*, Nola Darling relates that she has been characterized as a "freak" for her frankly stated sexual desires. Thus, Jamie disdains Nola because *she* defines the parameters of the relationship, contesting his primacy in establishing control. She initiates sex: he rapes her. In Lee's films, while men are allowed to have their "dick thing" they are also the possessors of the "pussy" and women are forbidden the comparable autonomy.

For Lee's men, the women are merely:

snap crackle pop/ pussy/ born to serve/ born to serve/ snap crackle pop/ pussy/  
born to serve/ born to serve... (Kwelismith, 1989, p. 501)

"Doin the mo' better" might beat celibacy but it falls far short of meeting Black needs for intimacy, emotionality, and the reciprocity that belies mutual respect. Lee's Black men are certainly no longer eunuchs. They are paid homage by Lee and his camera through his depictions of them as virile, intelligent, and essential.

In defining his male characters, Lee employs a variety of means to assure their masculinity. They are men because they are *not* women and *not* female, and because they have mastery over women. Their greatest insults embody feminizing each other or questioning each other's heterosexuality and/or virility. Thus, typical taunts include "pussy," "fag," "virgin," and put downs for being unable to control their women. As the young man who receives the greatest homage in *School Daze*, "Big Brother Almighty" Julian exerts the greatest control over a woman; he commands her to surrender herself to another man—in his terms, a less-than-a-man, the virgin "half-pint." He gives his woman's pussy—which is

really his—to another man. Thus, Lee’s man is defined in terms of having a dick and a pussy to put it in. His women are unfulfilled.

Lee presents Black men in all of their humanity, complete with weaknesses and strengths. He abandons the one-dimensional presentation of the Black man as a macho hero, eunuch sidekick, amoral pimp/hustler/thug, and the buffoon. Lee’s Black man does not exist as the aberrant vision of the White man; he exists for himself, his woman/women, and his community.

The counterpart of Lee’s Black man is the Black woman (or *women*). Gone is the premise that the Black man wants what the White man has—the White woman. Lee’s phallacy lies in his construction of the Black woman as a receptacle for the Black man’s phallus. He, as a male director, fails to envision her as the true partner—in struggle—of the Black man. She is background, color, prop to his struggle. Thus, Lee’s principle weakness is his failure to envision the Black woman with all of *her* complexity and potential, as he envisions the Black male:

somebody/ anybody/ sing a black girl’s song/ bring her out/ to know herself/ to know you/ but sing her rhythms/ carin/ struggle/ hard times/ sing her song of life...sing her sighs/ sing the song of her possibilities/ sing a righteous gospel/ the makin of a melody/ let her be born/ let her be born/ & handled warmly... (Shange, 1975, pp. 2-3)

The failure of Lee’s films to “sing a Black girl’s song” mirror the shortcomings of the larger Black community to attack patriarchy with the same vigor as racism. The failure to recognize to the inextricable linkage of the two portends the collective failure to mobilize the totality of Black human and intellectual resources against Black oppression.

### Conclusion

Clearly, Spike Lee plays a pivotal role in the construction of a Black aesthetic and ideological framework that is oppositional to the dominant culture. This is an important contribution because it heralds the potential for the mass emergence and legitimization of progressive Black ideologies. While Lee’s works contribute to the dismantling of White supremacist definitions of Blacks and Black life, they fail to transcend the strictures of Black patriarchy which bind better than half our population. Lee is, himself, bound by Black patriarchy



which distorts the lens he wields. Until he examines this shortcoming and rectifies it, his work—although promising—will provide succor only to those who share his limitations.

We reach for destinies beyond  
 what we have come to know  
 and in the romantic hush  
 of promises  
 perceive each  
 the other's life  
 as known mystery.  
 Shared. But inviolate.  
 No melting. No squeezing  
 into One.  
 We swing our eyes around  
 as well as side to side  
 to see the world.

To choose, renounce,  
 this, or that—  
 call it a council between equals  
 call it love.

“Beyond What,” [Alice Walker, \*Revolutionary Petunias\*, 1973, p. 69.](#)

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