A New Black Aesthetic" and not "A New Blackness": An Analysis of Spike Lee's Do The Right Thing

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines race, politics, culture, and class in the cinematic representations developed by Spike Lee through the lens of African American aesthetic values. Scholars have classified Spike Lee as the most important (and certainly most successful) African American filmmaker in American history. Critics and scholars alike have extensively examined Lee's often-controversial productions since his first film, *She's Gotta Have It*, was released. In this work, I explore Spike Lee's most controversial "joint," *Do the Right Thing*, (DTRT) through a historical, communication studies lens. I critically examine Lee's work within the broad historical framework of African American cultural history and in terms of his engagement with controversial social, political, and economic issues in American society. Through a reading of Trey Ellis's Platitude & The New Black Aesthetic (1988), I interrogate how Lee complicates the formation of "New Blackness."

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Introduction: A New Black Perspective: Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing Featuring A New Black Aesthetic

One of my earliest memories of being introduced to Black popular culture was seeing Duane Jones play the role of Ben in George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1969) or the distinct sound of Motown greats such as the Jackson Five, Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, and the Supremes blasting through my dad's speakers. Visual representation of Black family life became one of the ways in which I could think consciously about my own Blackness. Take for instance, television shows starring Black casts such as *Good Times* (1974-1979) and the *Cosby Show* (1984-1992). *The Cosby Show* introduced the world to African American's "first Black family" of primetime television and fractured the stereotypes of absent Black fathers by showing a Black cohesive, successful, well managed household on television.

Black popular culture does not exist in isolation but in contrast to white mediated culture. Considering the distorted, inclusive, and forged ways in which Black people and Black communities and practices are integrated into mainstream white popular culture, we see the influences of Black cultural representation challenging how whites construct Blackness. My dissertation takes up these important issues. In chapter one, I use Black popular culture to discuss how conversations around Black identity get taken up because it destabilizes Western European formations of class, culture, and civilization.

Black culture is articulateness, musical composition, delivery, in its wealthy, profound, and diverse dedication to language, in its rich construction of counternarratives, and most of all, in its symbolic use of the musical lexis, something that empowers change. In other words, Black popular culture serves as more than just an intervention in response to racialized stereotypes of

Black people or counternarratives; it also influences the ways in which whites discuss or write about Blackness. Then, to provide a definition of the "Black" in Black popular culture, I must consider doing so by framing it within the cultural influence and inheritance of whiteness. This means the construction of Blackness by whites in film or other forms of popular culture perpetuates notions of difference. As Dr. Ralina Joseph argues in "What's the Difference With "Difference" (2017)? difference, according to Derrida (1968), is not simply the construction of opposites through language; it is about the construction of binaries, "good" and "bad "opposites. Joseph continues, "Thus, Black gains its meaning because it is not its ostensible opposite, white" (p. 3315). In other words, Blackness destabilizes biases and offers new ways of seeing the world in opposition to whiteness.

Considering Joseph's conceptualization of difference and Stuart Hall's argument that "Black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a site of strategic contestation" (Hall, What Is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture?, 1993, p. 108), I center these two ideas in order to read Spike Lee's highlighting of stereotypes, systemic and social issues in *Do the Right Thing.* The contradiction of Black popular culture that Hall speaks of remains dynamic and complex. Regarding dualistic framing that often confines Blackness in popular culture as Hall contends; "high and low; resistance versus incorporation; authentic versus unauthentic; experiential versus formal; opposition versus homogenization" (p. 108), the struggle for cultural terrain is constantly present, however, within the struggle, popular culture remains elusive. In line with this thinking, I define Blackness in Black popular culture as resistance to white mediated versions of Black culture, and as a complex notion, transformative, innovative, and impossible to pinpoint. It must encompass the layered connections between the transatlantic slave trade, displacement, African

roots, and the irretrievable pieces of the diaspora. Blackness, in this sense, is deconstructed and reconstructed outside of the boundaries of whiteness.

The Achilles heel of Black popular culture which I aim to examine throughout this project, is how its repertoires emerged as a form of resistance to exclusion from mainstream popular culture but never fully made a clean break from its ideology and practices. My analysis is particularly concerned with interpretations of "New Blackness," a phrase that comes from Black elites. Most interpretations of new Blackness assume a clean break from how white society has always defined Blackness; however, by doing so ostracizes other Blacks in the process. The mobilization of the "newness" in Blackness suggests something wrong with the "oldness" in Blackness. Consider the Black film movement of the 1960s for example. Although Black film producers were deeply concerned with challenging exclusion and ostracism, their attention shifted to other issues.

In this dissertation, I argue that the New Black Aesthetic (NBA) pushes boundaries of Black identity by asking Black people to consider how the social and racial make-up of multiracial Blacks or Black people in multicultural or white communities construct their own sense of Blackness. The NBA is a theoretical viewpoint that measures a specific period in the awakening of Black consciousness. Specifically, what Nelson George (2004) argues is the post-Soul era following the Civil Rights Movement spanning from the early 1970s-1990s. Nelson describes post-soul as the twisting, troubling, turmoil-filled, and often terrific years since the mid-seventies when Black America moved into a new phase of its history" (p. 9).

Spike Lee's intervention with DTRT directly challenges fixed identities through a series of responses to vastly shifting social and cultural issues stemming from policing and anti-Black violence. In this dissertation, I focus on four key components of DTRT: first, the overall

production of the film itself, the aesthetics and organization of multiple worldviews. Second, the musical composition, in which Bill Lee, Branford Marsalis and Terrance Blanchard carefully construct a storyline that runs parallel to the film's transitional storyline. Third, the strategic use of graffiti which captures the heightened political and social struggle present. Lastly, the tension between variations of Black representation. For example, when Buggin Out approaches Mookie and Jade about boycotting Sal's pizzeria, Mookie replies, "you're wasting my time" and walks off. In response, Buggin Out shouts "stay Black Mookie." NBA remains central in destabilizing one uniformed way of constructing Blackness and Spike Lee provides a visual representation of the complexity of these shifts. In this work, I provide a reading of *Do the Right Thing* and how Spike Lee responds to notions of 'New Black.' During the late 1980s Lee emerged as a significant Black popular culture and film trailblazer raising new sets of questions through his work. Black popular culture remains a keyway in which Blacks challenge stereotypes but as much, develop innovative ways to retailing history.

Rearticulation of Culture: Formations of New Blackness in Cinema

This new turn, which was Afrocentric in focus, involved the expression of a truly Black independent film culture and the sculpting of a meaningful film dialect that pulls on and addresses the Black experience in very detailed ways. New significant methods to approach Black film also surfaced, which corresponded with the coming of age of Black film and the construction of a significant body of highly celebrated films. This analysis included advancements in linguistics, psychoanalysis, structuralism, Marxism and Black cultural studies to produce an increasingly complex theoretical framework. Mbye B. Cham and Claire Andre Watkins define this movement as one of the major shifts, involving "a study to awareness of self, rooted in individual and collective memory, vision and operations, as well as the other, now

decoded and recoded anew" (Cham & Andrade-Watkins, 1988, p. 9). Additionally, this strategy produced a multilayered artistic, cultural, social, and political technique which functions "as a reading of the imaginative, the cultural and the social political experience and challenges of individuals and societies linked by common heritage and history of struggle against similar, and in many ways in many cases the same forces of oppression and domination" (1988, p. 9).

Cham "explicates that this study to awareness is a plan to revive and assume the multiplicity of the Black experience in order to structure the innovative, more true sense of identity" (1992, p. 4). Jim Pines (1992) notes the urgency for new Black cinema to move away from the old-style problematic of race relations in multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is the manifestation of, or encouragement for, the presence of several distinct cultural or ethnic groups within a society. One issue with multiculturalism is that national collectiveness could become difficult if people see themselves as members of ethnic or racial groups rather than as citizens of a common country. The second is that multiculturalism destabilizes the concept of equal individual rights, thereby diminishing the political value of equal treatment.

He suggests that Black filmmakers acquire a larger, more critical approach, which would strain that entirely different set of political and cultural apprehensions, such as their reclamation and re-representation and of Black people's own histories through archival quarry. It would also require the use of film language to build a filmic meaning that carries a more intricate sense of present Black experience is from a Black perspective (1988, pp. 26-27). The goal for Blacks was to use media to create their versions of society and reconstruct their images differently outside the racially charged one white society had manifested. For many Black creators, filmmaking became what Roscoe C Brown Jr. (1973) described as a tool for liberation, sketched out of the context within which Black film was developing. He described the 1960s and 1970s as "the years

of Black Awakening from years of accommodation, a reawakening of Black pride and concern for our heritage and awakening. To the need for massive political and social action to change the conditions affecting Black people in the nation and the world" (p.53). In emphasizing the needs for freedom, he saw a key role for Black arts in helping to raise the social and political consciousness of the Black community.

What is most significant about film as a form of Black popular culture during the 1970s was a point of view of film not solely as art, but also as business. Albert Murray (1973) offers "it took a revolutionary film that dared white patrons to walk into the theater, to crystallize the image of substantial Black audiences" (p. 147). "In 1971, Melvin Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Badass Lovesong* became the first substantial Black created feature film since the 1930-period of men such as Oscar Micheaux to draw audiences that were consistently in excess of 80% Black. And within a week, a stampede in the ailing industry, which had lost hundreds of millions of dollars, was on" (Murray, 1973, p. 26). With contributions such as Melvin Van Peebles' first major independent film since the 1930s, Black Independent cinema was defined as challenging the institutions of traditional cinema and the social understanding on which it was based, and the best Black cinema explored cinematic molds and content outside the conventions of the classic Hollywood cinema. The Black experience was conceived as a rich cultural matrix upon which to build an alternative Black cinema. As Yearwood (1982) notes:

> Because of the subordinate position of Blacks in relation to the system of power in society and the particular, history of oppression visited upon Blacks in New World societies, many believe that the Black experience offers a vantage point from which special insights on society and the human condition could be gleaned. Related to this is the view that Black film, (much like Black literature) is capable of functioning as a

vehicle for expressing the unique aesthetic sensibilities that it meant in name, it from the Black experience" (p. 10).

As Cornel West (1990) notes in *The New Cultural Politics of Difference*, the reliance on Black popular culture as one of the sole performative safe havens left, was unascertainable in two keyways: "they were partly determined from their inheritances; but they were also critically determined by the diasporic conditions in which the connections were forged. Selective appropriation, incorporation, and re-articulation of European ideologies, cultures, and institutions, alongside an African heritage" (p.105). In other words, being that Black Popular culture relies heavily on Eurocentric theories and ideologies, it is also confined within them and tainted by their presence.

As I argue throughout the chapters of this project, "the post-soul era" between the 1970s and the 1990s provided us with a rubric in which to read the contradictions Black popular culture had and continues to be plagued with. On the one hand, Blaxploitation provided us with moments of Black empowerment. On the other, they depicted Blacks in stereotypical ways that reinscribed racist and gendered social norms. Further, as West (1990) argues, "White supremacist assaults on Black intelligence, ability, beauty, and character required persistent Black efforts to hold self—doubt, self—contempt, and even self—hatred at bay" (p.105). The dangers in the struggle to fend off the micro and macro level assaults on Black identity are solely being viewed based on the responses Blacks deployed. For instance, Black identity becomes restricted to dialectal advancement in persuasive traditions, the various forms the Black body inhabits and strange and uncertain space, (i.e., afros, braids, slang, movement, stillness, and hand gestures), so then Black culture and responses thwarting Black identity become fetishized and

issues raised diverted. Although plagued with contradictions, one cannot deny the influence Black popular culture has had on mainstream popular culture.

However, before I begin with interventions and the strategic ways Blacks have utilized popular culture as a form of resistance and means to negotiate racial, gendered and class difference, it is mandatory to define what I mean as Stuart Hall ambitiously argues in his essay, as the "Black" in Black in Popular Culture." Some questions to consider are: what function does the "Black" in Black popular perform? How does it distinguish itself from mainstream popular culture? What are the dangers of the "Black" in Black popular culture? How do we distinguish which components of the "Black" in Black popular culture are performative and/or embodied? What is the aesthetics of the "Black" in Black popular culture? How does the "Black in Black popular culture shape the ways in which we see, experience, and embody Blackness? How does it shift the basis for Black cultural condemnation? As an entry point, it is imperative that this dissertation continues to destabilize the "Black" in Black popular culture.

The "Black" in Black popular culture does not fit neatly into any one category and exists in a contradictory domain. Black popular culture is a place of tension. Also, it is elusive and cannot be minimized or expressed with respect to the uncomplicated binary contestations that remain routinely utilized to trace it: high and low; struggle versus integration; genuine versus illegitimate; empirical versus ceremonial; resistance versus homogenization. As E. Patrick Johnson (2003) notes, "the concept of Blackness is a slippery one and as soon as you believe you have it in your grasp, it slips away again changing all that we know of how it functions" (p. 2). To understand the full scope of what Blackness entails, Johnson argues that our traditional beliefs of what it should be dispelled and relinquished.

Popular culture is a game of positioning and solidifying that position, however, the constant tension that embellishes popular culture makes victory even more difficult to anyone hoping to gain the upper hand. Put another way, the battle to win the best position in the war of popular culture leaves all participants without a win. As Stuart Hall (1993) brilliantly states, "what we are talking about is the struggle over cultural hegemony, which is these days waged as much in popular culture as anywhere else" (pp. 106-107). Stated differently, cultural hegemony is certainly not a game solely based on prevailing or total supremacy; it is not at all a game of monopoly where one's win is at the expense of another's loss; it is certainly and continuously about transferring power in the interactions of culture; it is continuously about shifting the temperaments and the formations of cultural influence.

Leaders of the Black New Film Movement Circa 1980s

In the 1980s, the Black independent film scene shifted forward in a myriad of ways that encompassed organizations to promote Black film, film screenings, festivals and the rise of scholarship centered on the development of Black independent film culture. Pearl Bowser was a significant contributor in this shift forward as a film archivist, researcher, and curator. Her organization of the *Paris of African American Cinema American Cinema-A Retrospective of Independent Black 1920-1980* exhibition opened in 1980, a crucial year for the Black film movement. Ten filmmakers and experts of Black film assembled and engaged in deep intellectual debates with audience members. Central to the discussions were theoretical debates on Black film—such as how Black film should be defined, the purpose of music, how jazz played a significant role in shaping the Black experience, and how African American culture influenced the shape and sound of Black films. As Yearwood (2000) notes in Black film as a signifying practice: cinema, narration, and the African American aesthetic tradition*, "*a new

agenda for Black film and Black film critique was now firmly established, bringing about a shift in the integrationist appeal for inclusion in Hollywood" (p.51). Now Black filmmakers were able to pursue work in Hollywood while creating their own independent projects.

The release of Madubuko Diakite's *Film, Culture and the Black Filmmaker* arrived at a crucial time for Black cinema because Diakete's work explored cinema as a cultural artifact and interrogated the relationships between Black film and the sociocultural climate of the community that produces it. More specifically, he focused on how Black filmmakers replicate their sensitivities of the world through the mode of film. Diakite's assessment shifted Black film criticism away from the earlier obsession with a Black Hollywood to address the breakdown of critics to venture into the wider study of expressive meanings. His framing of a phenomenology of Black film expression stands as an influential contribution to Black film historiography. He defines it as "a method of inquiry 'Zu den Sachen' (that looks at the thing itself) as it operates within the sociocultural community with which it shares values and meanings" (Diakité, 1980, p. 161). Juxtapose to a common vein of critique that found modest aesthetic value in Black independent cinema, Afrocentric theories triumphed in centering interest on the cultural performance of Black art and Black film. As Diakité (1980) stressed: "If the values reflected in Black made films are seen as mere reflections of white culture, then the realities of Black life, hopes, and aspirations are unjustly being overlooked, and occurrence which white Hollywood has refused to deal with, but one that black film makers dealt with in spite of handicaps whenever possible" (p. 51).

Instead of viewing Black experiences as liabilities or deficiencies, a more beneficial assessment envisions of it as a creative force. Ronald J. Green (1993) argues that although the double consciousness of African American life has inherent difficulties and is not a circumstance

to be envied, "nonetheless it is some knowledge worth having" (p. 51). Instead of viewing Black experience from a deficit model, the optimistic dependence on the Black cultural tradition as the basis for the growth of Black independent film made an essential contribution in identifying a primary focus of the Black experience. Bowser's archival research in the 1970s has been very useful in this respect. She raised questions about comparative obscurity of Black film history, especially in the post First-World period of a Black art and cultural resurgence. Bowser was relentless in questioning why the cultural revitalization of the Black artists during the 1920s and 1930s was well recorded, while the part of the Black film makers of the same era remains unheralded.

Inherent in these films was the notion that American Society could be enriched by African American culture. In what Yearwood (2000) terms "the third phase of Black independent cinema," which paralleled the period of the Civil Rights Movement, consciously explored concerns outside the traditional parameters of Hollywood. Reid (1993) commented that "this new wave of Black creative activity, which arose from the ashes of riot torn ghettos, rejected art that appeal to white America Aesthetic morality" (p. 75). The genius of the profane Black film appeared full-blown in 1971 during the third phase of the Black independent film movement, when:

> Melvin Van Peebles dropped the bomb. *Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song* was not respectful. It raged. It screamed. It provoked; its reverberations were felt throughout the country. In the Black community, it was both held and denounced for its sexual wrongness, its macho hero, Its depiction of the community as down pressed and in need of rescue (Cade Bambera, 1993, p. 118).

To describe *Sweetback's* implication to the third phase of Black independent filmmaking, Bourne (1994) described Van Peebles as "the Charlie Parker of American cinema" (p.21). He argued that Sw*eet, Sweetback* was instrumental in reestablishing African American films as a cultural force:

> When Melvin van People started production on *SweetBack,* he had no idea that his pioneering efforts would produce not only another film but an attitude. That attitude, based on Van Peeble's desire to see images of African American life as he had perceived it, was reflective and energized by the Civil Rights and Black power Movements. Melvin Van Peebles, in creating his own images that tapped into the Black rage of the times, encouraged the generation of others to create their own visions of life on film as well. (p. 21)

Nelson George (1992) contends that *Sweetback* remains a vital memory for Black filmmakers of what could be, and "its bastard child blaxploitation" (p. 5) remains a harsh recap of what they should escape. No Black filmmaker had produced a feature film without mainstream Hollywood involvement since Oscar Micheaux's era and Van Peebles' achievement wouldn't be replicated with comparable influence for another 15 years (p. 5). Hence, the emergence of a new generation of Black filmmaker who as Clair Bourne suggests, "seems to move to a different ideological drummer," is distinct from African American independent producers. Independent Black filmmakers were working to carve out a space in the industry. The "LA Rebellion" consisted of African American and African film students who studied at the UCLA film school from the late-1960s to the early 90s. The LA Rebellion was conceived by a group of Black students who were upset with the absence of opportunities for people of color in the film industry. The movement focused on establishing distinctive films that narrated stories

about Black characters. These characters viewed outside of racialized stereotypes or controlling images present in many blaxploitation films. Instead, they represented real people with real experiences. They were shown as they were, not as they were expected to be portrayed by society. The movements' most significant work materialized during the 1980s. Some of the key filmmakers were Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, Billy Woodberry, Haile Gerima, and Larry Clark. Rising from this generation of Black filmmakers, Spike Lee would become a prominent independent powerhouse and help resurrect interest in Black produced films.

Spike Lee's emergence onto the film scene came at a crucial time for Black films, especially since Hollywood had abandoned investing in Blaxploitation films in the mid-1970s. Spike Lee's debut film, *She's Gotta Have It*, released in 1986, launched Lee into the emerging area of modern American film production. Following the blueprint of Melvin Van Peebles who released the first independent Black film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971)*, Lee took the independent route. During this period, US independent film making was experiencing international success and Lee found himself carving out a special place in this history. Using innovative camera angles, shots, and language in his films, Lee developed a distinct look that provided him visibility during a time when Black films were at a low point. In this dissertation, I draw on Black popular culture to discuss how conversations surrounding Black identity get taken up in Spike Lee's film, *Do the Right Thing*. Over the years, much has been written about the tremendous skills Spike Lee displays as a writer, director, and marketeer in his film production.

Lee's films include: *She's Gotta Have It,* which explores of a Brooklyn woman's complex romantic arrangements *(1986); School Daze (1988)* which explores the contradictions of class and colorism among students of a fictional, well-recognized Southern Black school called Mission College; *Jungle Fever* which highlights the complications of interracial

relationships; and most relevant to this project, *Do the Right Thing* (1987), which examines the rise of racial tension in the predominately Black Bedford–Stuyvesant neighborhood located of Brooklyn. Centrally, I argue that Spike Lee's film, *Do the Right Thing* mobilizes "New Black Aesthetics" as a means to challenge constructions of "New Blackness."

Black Aesthetics, as noted by Fowler (1981), "because of it is historical, is non-exclusive. Under its umbrella can be lumped not only those writhers who have argued in favor of a Black aesthetic, but also those who have wished, consciously or otherwise, to encourage Black creativity along the lines of European art" (p. v). One key question that arises in Lee's DTRT and application of Black aesthetics is - should this film be aware of the history of negative images of Blacks in popular culture so that is does not perpetuate oppressive images, but contributes to social change? One could argue that Lee does in DTRT, however, I argue the latter is more prevalent. Shifting beyond the aesthetic preferences of individual filmmakers and particular films, we can consider the greater aesthetic systems or meaningful principles that offer a framework for comprehending a body of films. Historically in the context of art for example, we can identify diverse aesthetic systems such as those Greek or African tradition. As Yearwood (2000) offers, "the problem emerges when a particular aesthetic system is lionized and put on a pedestal as being superior embodying universal values" (p. 78). Drawing on the aesthetic model in Black cinema spotlights how cultural beliefs are reconstructed in filmic signification. For instance, Spike Lee's DTRT (1989) "can be viewed as the product of the filmmaker's creativity; but we can also consider it to be the product of a particular historical period, a particular environment and social structure, and specific expressive traditions or a specific aesthetic system" (p. 79).

In other words, DTRT can be regarded as representative of the filmmaker's concept as well as the product of the wider African American sociocultural locale within which it was constructed. In short, a Black cinema aesthetic implies a set of standards one finds in Black cinema. These principles provide a conceptual framework for engaging art, and they establish a concept for the creation of stories and the structures used for these narratives. They also outline the terms of engagement the artwork pursues with its initial onlookers and helps determine a pivotal framework for evaluating art. In this vein, aesthetics and critique as an interest is deeply connected to particular historical situations and social awareness. bell hooks (1990) argue aesthetic responsiveness "is more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty; it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming" (p. 104).

During his career, Spike Lee has primarily focused on social-based issues within the Black community. Each film varies from one another fundamentally and artistically, each introducing an innovative style, context, content differing from the previous one, with each film drawing from a specific historical period, pressing issues and conditions of creative expression, while avoiding reliance on traditional methods or genres. New Blackness, as a social framework, constructs Blackness as a fixed identity perpetuated by stereotypes and projected onto Black bodies. "New Black" and the "Old Black;" where the "New Black" believes in a post-racial society or era of "New Blackness" and the "Old Black" remains stagnate in their ideas or resist acknowledging progress. Furthermore, Black identity in 21st century is tied deeply to the historical and social context in regards to how first, Black identity was constructed during the reconstruction era; second, the variation of Black identity as a means of adaptation, principally, the role of what W.E.B. Du Bois calls double conciseness; and third, the historical and present

role of controlling images and how negative images represented through innumerable forms of media.

By situating both the historical and contemporary construction of Black identity in the U.S., I argue here how Blackness has been viewed through discursive representations. Considering Alain Locke's work on the "New Negro," the concept of "New Blackness" functions in similar ways. The comparison of "New Blacks" vs "Old Blacks" reinforces racialized narratives that portray African Americans in a negative manner while preserving the power of the dominant group. Specifically, the division is made by constructing a sense of "Otherness" inner-culturally but at the same time normalizing constructions of race, identity, and gender categories.

> Henry Louis Gates Jr and Jarrett (2007) discuss the fiction of an American Negro who is "now" somehow new or different from an "Old Negro" who sought to counter the image in the popular American imagination of the Black as devoid of all the characteristics that supposedly separated the lower forms of human life from higher forms." Prior to "New Blackness," the "New Negro" was a concept put forth as the "racial awakening" for Blacks during to the 1920s (p. 3).

Usually, this characterization is constructed to mobilize Blackness against Blackness. For example, take Spike Lee's character, Mookie, who continuously navigates two worlds; one as a Black man employed by the white owned Sal's Pizzeria and as surrogate son to Sal, which is always in conflict with Sal's son, Pino, and as much, Mookie is in constant conflict with many of the Black patrons who question his authenticity and willingness to work for Sal. While at face value, Mookie's motivation for working under Sal seems monetary, a closer examination suggests that Sal's consideration of Mookie as a son is what keeps him anchored. Throughout the

film, Mookie appears to be the only one of his friends who is employed which shifts his perspective of the racial tension forming as the summer months get hotter.

Mookie is positioned in a capitalist role as the only Black worker of the only white-owned pizzeria in the neighborhood. Even his job itself - pizza delivery - relies upon his capacity to mediate the contradictory metaphoric demands of a white owned workplace and Black customer base. The Brooklyn Dodgers jersey Mookie wears on his way to work in the morning - Jackie Robinson's #42 - suggests, as Nelson George puts it, that "he's a man watched closely by interested parties on both sides of the racial divide. Both sides think he's loyal to them - that's how he survives" (p.80). Throughout his employment, Mookie's is forced to consider where his alliance rests and growing tensions between his friends and Sal.

Additionally, these representations falsely suggest that Blacks are allotted the same opportunities to achieve success as Whites due to the emergence of an alleged post-racial society, and that it is unnecessary for Black people to struggle for social, racial, and economic justice. The old saying that we view everything in black and white is meant to suggest that there is nothing good or bad, but rather everything falls into either one of those two types. Blackness, on the other hand, is invasive; though, we hear that we are post-Black, and that post-Black is the new Black.

New Black Aesthetics (NBA) on the other hand, recognizes the continuous need for social justice, racial equity, cultural awareness, and economic change. NBA, combined with art curated by Black artists, signals a post-Civil Rights era. Moreover, NBA takes into consideration the ways in which post-Civil Rights Black cultural production expands the methodological approach and social reconstruction of Blackness in the contemporary moment.

Historicizing "The New Black"

I will address perceptions of New Blackness in later chapters but as a mental note, consider that I interrogate the "new" in New Blackness in an identical manner as I interrogate the "Black" in 'Black popular culture. Through a reading of Spike Lee's work in *Do the Right Thing* (1989), paired with Trey Ellis's *Platitude: & The New Black Aesthetic* (1988) and Greg Tate's *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*, I revive 'New Black Aesthetics' not necessarily to critique New Blackness but to highlight how NBA allows a different reading of Blackness through art and the embracing of Black multiracial identities. Influential usually comes to mind when The New Black Aesthetic is mentioned and as Bertram D. Ashe (2007) puts forth, in *Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction*, "along with 'Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deke,' 'The New Black Aesthetic' signaled the emergence of the aesthetic, identifying and loosely organizing it for interested parties" (p. 610). Ashe's essay is, nevertheless, at the same time perplexing, scattered, conflicting-and partisan. Collectively, Eilis and Tate (1986-1988) were both enthusiastically announcing the entrance of this new aesthetic, and they were shadowed, mostly, by Nelson George with his 1992 *Buppies, B-boys, Baps, And Bohos: Notes On Post-Soul Black Culture:* (the book that invented the term and includes an introduction less enthusiastic and more unconvinced than Tate's and Eilis's works).

As Ashe (2007) attests to, throughout the 80s and 90s, Black artists, scholars, and activists wrote endlessly on NBA:

> David Nicholson's "Painting It Black: African American Artists, In Search of a New Aesthetic, "in the book section of the Washington Post in 1989; Terry McMillan wrote of a "new breed, free to write as we please, in part because of our predecessors, and because of the way life has changed" (p.610) in her introduction to Breaking Ice: An

> Anthology of Conten1porary African-American Fiction (1990), Paul Beatty wrote the hilarious “What set you from, fool?" in Next (1992); and Lisa Jones contributed Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex and Hair in 1994. (Ashe, 2007, p. 610)

In each instance, these enunciations in one manner or another, proclaim the unearthing of an artistic disruption of post-Civil Rights movement artistic change. Paul C. Taylor’s expression in *Post-Black, Old Black* of the formal and self-reflective tendencies between this rising, youthful cohort of artists— what Greg Tate called the “open[ing] up of the entire text of Blackness for fun and games” (Tate, 1992)is an introductory presupposition of why their work deserves closer attention: “Where soul culture insisted on the seriousness of authenticity and positive images, post-soul culture revels in the contingency and diversity of Blackness, and subjects the canon of positive images to subversion and parody—and appropriation” (Ashe, 2007, p. 610). The year in which Trey Ellis’s ground-breaking essay, *The New Black Aesthetic* (1989), appeared in Callaloo and shamelessly broadcast that “African American artists just must be natural, [they] do not necessarily have to wear one” (236; stress in latter), Spike Lee was curating his most provocative work to date in *Do the Right Thing*. This dissertation continues the tradition of the Black artists pushing the boundaries to focus on the collective attention on artists whose work are (deliberately or unintendedly) in conversation with Ellis’s sense of a major shift within African American culture.

Racial Tensions Hit A Boiling Point in Bedford-Stuyvesant Brooklyn: Spike Lee Responds

As Massood (2008) notes, “following the shift into blockbuster filmmaking in the mid-1970s, the studios abandoned Blaxploitation film, their sole investment in African American cinema during the decade, (and only marginally associated with African American filmmaking, since a majority of the personnel involved were not themselves Black” (p. xv). In the midst of

the US film industry's transformation to blockbuster films like *Jaws* (1975) grossing $100 million, Black films were all but extinct and ignored. Hollywood found little need for Black audiences or casts. However, Spike Lee's release of *She's Gotta Have It* would usher in a new era of Black film production, resurrecting it from the graveyard and solidifying his place in film history. Since his arrival on the film scene, Spike Lee has always been vocal about social, political, and economic issues facing Black communities. Lee's heightened state of urgency, illustrated in his work, did and continues to be a stark reminder to Hollywood elites that the disenfranchisement of Blacks remains visible and persistent in the film industry.

Ranging from a lack of diversity in film casting, Black leads in major productions, directorial or production credit to studio ownership, Lee's independence helps us understand that Hollywood still has a long way to go. Lee's attention to style, context, content, and production would push the boundaries with his third film *Do the Right Thing*. Of the many films Lee produced, directed, or played a role in, DTRT remains one of his most controversial to date. The release of DTRT prompted a firestorm of reviews either in celebration of the film or condemning the complex myriads of issues it details including racism, classism, and sexism. The film's intersectional approach to economic instability and race placed small communities such as Bedford-Stuyvesant Brooklyn (Bed Stuy) within the context of the US as a whole and added to the ongoing conversation about historical racism.

Lee's insistence on discussing racism continued after DTRT in other films such as *Jungle Fever* (1991), his film about the complexity of interracial relationships between Black men and white women, *Bamboozled* (2000), his comedic film which interrogates a history of Black representation through minstrel performance, in, and *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006) - his film addressing the racialized media coverage of Blacks and government

response during the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe. Lee's films situate the local context of race, class, and sex within the larger national conversation surrounding these key issues. Lee's work does not exist within a vacuum but in conversations addressing systemic violence against Blacks with film makers such as Oscar Micheaux, Melvin Van Peebles, Marlin Riggs, and actors/actors such as Hattie McDaniel, Cicely Tyson, Sydney Portier, James Earl Jones, Ruby Dee, Ozzie Davis, and many others who have advocated on behalf of Blacks in film. As I will discuss later in this dissertation, one of Lee's aims was to shift the cultural dynamic of Blackness being confined to a specific concept, to centering the richness, complexity, intellect, artistry, and capabilities of Black people. Massood (2008) argues, "Lee's cultural critique is geared toward making cinematic and televisual looks representations of Black life more complex by showing its varied looks, sound, and textures" (p. xvi). In a multitude of ways, Lee's films such as *Do the Right Thing* and *Malcolm X* (1991) challenge Black viewers to contemplate how the normalization of racism can unite or divide Black communities or internalize self-hate.

Doing the Right Thing: A feminists Critique

Through his artistic lens, Lee invites his audience to embrace a critical viewpoint in reference to Black representation and experiences in the media and to consider positive figures in their communities fighting for their right to be free. Lee brings attention to the everyday citizens' courage when asking that the fight of the 1960s continues in a post-Civil Rights, Katrina New Orleans; he aims to reverse the damaging stereotypes placed on figures such as Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton, who stance was that of resistance and not complacency; his objective is to reclaim the debates surrounding radical Black groups such as the Black Panthers' history. As Letort (2015) argues, "Based on the narrative arc fashioned by the stories of individuals whose names have become renowned (or not) in relation to their deeds, Lee's documentaries and films

exploit the biographical focus that personalizes his approach to the social and historical topics he investigates" (p.10). Moreover, his films convey to viewers unaccustomed to Black life—and his films, although focused on Black audiences, draw a variety of viewers—that African American experiences are dissimilar and complicated. Lee's style of film making provides a feeling of surreal positions and movements, a series of poignant aspects, journeys, obstacles—the disconnected and detached glimpse which if often expected from a documentary; nevertheless, it insinuates disagreement over discussions of race and interprets the filmmaker's dedication to fighting bias through examining tangible paradigms.

One note of caution, although I examine Lee's work in DTRT and sing praises about this accomplishment, this does not mean critiques of his work are unfounded. One could argue that all, if not, most of his films are problematic or flawed in some way. The reasons for critique vary from lack of character development, incomplete ideas, lack of exploration of sexuality and gender or the organization of the storyline. The *Spike Lee Reader* (2008) addresses gender and sexuality in more detail. In the essay, *Whose Pussy is This: A Feminist Comment*, bell hooks offer an in-depth critique of how the film *She's Gotta Have It* makes certain aesthetic choices that are "political and ideological" (p. 135). hooks (2008) pose the questions, "can a man really tell a women's story?" and "did the film depict a radically new image of the Black female sexuality?" "Is Nola Darling a liberated woman or just a WHORE?" (p. 2) My goal throughout the chapters is not to dispute or to solidify these arguments but, to highlight how Lee's production of DTRT helped raise these questions within the context of a New Black Aesthetic. Media and film scholar, Wahneema Lubiano (1991), tangles with the contradictions in Lee's work arguing:

> The Spike Lee discourse and his production offer a site for examining possibilities of oppositional, resistant, or subversive cultural production as well as the problems of productions that are considered oppositional, resistant, or subversive without accompanying analysis sustaining such evaluation. (p. 254)

At the time of its release, many praised Lee for films such as *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) for their characters, and content. These films genuinely live outside of the scope of Hollywood's racial hegemony and challenge mainstream cinema's hostile attitude toward racism and discrimination. On the other hand, Spike Lee's work has met stark critique from feminists' scholars such as bell hooks, for his misogynistic characterizations of Black women. *She's Gotta Have It (1989)* centers on the protagonist Nola Darling, a graphic artist who lives a carefree, sexually liberated lifestyle which eventually comes to a halt when her three male admirers come together and match notes on Nola. While Greer rationalizes Nola's unsympathetic performance by asserting that she realizes the three not as individuals but as a group, Jamie and Mars become angry over how little Nola cares for all three men. Opal, a lesbian friend of Nola's who thinks every person is capable of sexual fluidity, articulates her attraction to Nola, and when Nola asks how having sex with a woman is, Opal offers her an opportunity to find out. However, Nola rejects the offer.

> In *Talking back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989), hooks highlights that in *She's Gotta Have It* that narrow scope of Nola's character which is reduced to the promiscuous, undecisive Black woman with very little depth. hooks suggest:
>
> > Overall, it is the men who speak in *She's Gotta Have It*. While Nola appears one-dimensional in perspective and focus, seemingly more concerned about her sexual relationships than about any other aspect of her life, the male characters are multi-

> dimensional. They have personalities. Nola has no personality. She is shallow, vacuous, empty. Her one claim to fame is that she likes to fuck. In the male pornographic imagination, she could be described as “pure pussy,” that is to say that her ability to perform sexually is the central, defining aspect of her identity (p. 137).

What hooks is arguing here is that emphasis is shifted away from the sexually active men who are not “pure penis” because this category does not exist. They are individually characterized by distinctive traits and qualities—"Mars by his humor, Greer by his obsession with bodybuilding, Jaime by his concern with romance and committed relationships” (p.137).

In contrast to Nola, they are not constantly obsessing about sex, are not diagnosed with “penis on the brain.” They have thoughts on a range of issues: politics, sports, everyday life, gender, etc. In constructing these characters in such a manner, Spike Lee questions and evaluates perceptions of Black male sexuality even while introducing a very conventional viewpoint on Black female sexuality. His creative explorations of Black male. Other film and feminists’ scholars such as Paula J. Massood, Toni Cade Bambara, Michelle Wallace, Wahneema Lubiano all agree that the risk of Lee's use of Black female tropes and conventions for his Black female characters is significant, and he make a conscious decision not to address his misogynist constructions of Black women in his films. The danger is that the idea of controlling images, as defined by social theorist Patricia Hill Collins, suggests that Black female stereotypes are present in all forms of media. This control is enacted through the use of racial tropes to represent Black women These include the Jezebel, Mammy, Welfare mom stereotypes, among others.

Again, my goal is to highlight the complexities of Lee’s work in DTRT and to use DTRT to add my own contribution about its connection to New Blackness. Scholars such as bell hooks,

Wahneema Lubiano, Stanley Crouch, and others have noted the issues with Lee's masculinist ideas, alleged race baiting, distorted views on sexuality, Black womanhood, class, character development, and gender. Lee's work has been exhaustively examined and I am looking at how Lee's work shapes perspectives of Blackness in the contemporary moment. In short, there has been no shortage of critique and scathing reviews of Lee's body of work, and I do acknowledge these issues. What Lee's work does allow for scholars of film, cultural, ethnic, gender and media studies over the past three decades, are a wide topography of issues to discuss.

Moreover, since Lee's body of work has included substantial practices altering the field (overlapping, for instance with Stuart Hall's intervention in Cultural Studies, the emergence of growth of Ethnic Studies programs, Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on *Intersectionality,* increasing film and media studies programs), *The Combahee River Collective Statement*, a measurement, of Spike Lee's scholarship affords a chance to assess the essential landscape. In my assessment of Lee's work, I join a tremendous number of scholars such as Ed Guerrero, Toni Cade Bambara, Keith M. Harris, and Beretta E. Smith who have raised key questions about his work's past, present and future. Central to many of the scholars mentioned and me included is how Lee's work raises key questions around Blackness, our understanding of it, how we define it, and how our experiences and lives are shaped by it or lived through Blackness.

Whether a fan a Spike Lee or not, by centering firsthand experiences of Black characters, Lee pushes to interrogate the burden of history and politics on their everyday being, in so doing creating an insight to racism which allows audience members a glimpse into their lives. Lee's nonfiction filmmaking has a political agenda, aimed toward representing the image of Black people, whose cultural contributions he hopes to emphasize. In addition to, the systemically racist structures Blacks face and resist. Yet, while Lee's films hold a political agenda, they

remain more generally American in parallel. They demand their spectators challenge traditional structures of emotion, the prescriptive methodologies to life as experienced in the United States, and to reconsider domestic fantasy. As Massood (2008) suggests, "fiction and nonfiction feature such as *Malcolm X* (1992), *4 Little Girls* (1997), and *Summer of Sam* (1999), for example, return us to seminal moments in American history to help us understand the present. Lee's film *25th hour* (2002), served as a warm tribute to New Yorkers and the US still mourning from the catastrophe of September 11" (p. xix).

Spike Lee's Filmmaking Within An American Context: The Call to All Spectators

Additional works, such as *Girl 6* (1996), *He Got Game* (1998), and *Bamboozled* investigate the illusion of "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps" fundamental to American literary and moviemaking storylines. What *He Got Game* highlights through a collaboration of Aaron Campbell's music and Spike Lee's directorial genius is that the African American basketball player from Coney Island is just as American as apple pie. In this instance, Lee modifies American aesthetics and parallels it with a Black cultural context and reciprocates the process, meanwhile developing a means of delivery that recognizes a Black partiality as part of a domestic perspective. Lee accomplishes this by speaking to a multitude of audiences, as demonstrated in his variations of films. Overall, the indication is that his films have sparked both intra-and interracial argument.

To fully comprehend the significance of Lee's style and context about "New Blackness" and NBA, we must revisit the era in which he emerged. During the mid-1970s and throughout the 1980s, American cinema was experiencing a new era of high-production "Blockbuster" films from young innovative filmmakers such as Francis Ford Coppola, *The Godfather* (1972-1990), Stephen Spielberg *Jaws* (1975), Martin Scorsese with *Taxi Driver* (1976), George Lucas *Star*

Wars Saga (1977-1980), *Raging Bull* (1980), Apocalypse *Now* (1979), *Indiana Jones* (1981-1989), and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). Each of these filmmakers produced films that existed outside of the normative parameters of traditional Hollywood cinema. Massood (2008) stresses that many filmmakers from this era were influenced, if not narratively, then stylistically, by post-WW II national film movements such as Italian Neorealism, the French New Wave, and the films of the Japanese filmmakers Akira Kurosawa and Yasujiro Ozu" (p. xvi). When the 1980s arrived, viewers were conditioned to cinema that challenged and reformulated genre and traditional storylines, and that seldom adopted methodologies destabilized audiences with allusion, citation, and tribute. Lee's black and white usage of film in *She's Gotta Have It* and studies in classic Hollywood cinema demonstrated his knowledge of French New Wave and Italian Neorealism film aesthetics. Further, *She's Gotta Have It* played a much more significant role in Lee's career outside of his emphasis on cinematograph, such as fiscal success, growing curiosity of Lee himself, conversations about sexuality, the changing role of independent film, imagery, and its context within Black filmmaking during a time when Black cinema all but disappeared domestically and globally. Blaxploitation film releases such as *The Mack* (1973), *Superfly* (1972), and *Foxy Brown* (1974) often portrayed Black heroes as gangster drug dealers, police officers, pimps or were beginning to weigh heavy on the consciousness of Black and White audiences alike.

Often, these images reflected a history of racist representations of Blacks in popular media/film stemming from minstrel shows of the early 20th century and more specifically during the 1970s. Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback A Badass Song* was coopted by white filmmakers reinforcing negative stereotypes of Blacks. Most Blaxploitation films released after 1971 placed Blacks within a stringent social context. Media scholar Catherine Squires (2009)

contends "*social location*" which refers to "the ways in which social identities, such as race, gender, or class, position individuals and groups withing a society's power structures, institutions, and inter-group tensions" (p. 4). A significant and unsettling conclusion deriving from the 'social location' Squires notes, was that Blacks are intellectually inferior to whites, an ideology that persisted in films during 1970s and beyond. As a result, the bombardment of negative and monolithic perspective of Black identities depicted in Blaxploitation and other films socially constructed Blacks as part of a lower-class citizen. Moreover, Blacks characterized within certain roles such as Superfly, Foxy Brown, and Mac have damaging influences on how society views Black more specifically. In turn, the very narrow and limited scope in which Blaxploitation films framed Blacks shaped our views and perceptions of what race and Blackness means. Although grateful for Lee's intervention with *She's Gotta Have It,* Whites were less accepting and conflicted with Lee's outspoken pro-Black personality which ruffled the feathers of whites and some Blacks for that matter. Lee's up front and direct approach made people reevaluate their own viewpoints toward race and representation.

On the other hand, Black responses to Lee's direct and pro-Black stance were more varietal, largely because the film provoked (and in other cases resuscitated) frequently challenging conversations related to Black representation—for instance how Lee constructed the idea of a "New Black Aesthetic," and if so, what did it mean for pre-existing definitions of Blackness in cinema and in society as a whole? In addition, how would the possibility of Black women fit within the New Black Aesthetic? Simultaneously, Lee's following films, *School Daze* and *Do the Right Thing*, played a significant role in revitalizing attention in Black film creation. It wouldn't be farfetched to claim that Lee motivated, over the ensuing years a new generation of modern Black filmmakers, "A New Black Renaissance" of ambitious filmmaking spanning the

years. Lee's attention to aesthetics and context would have impact beyond US borders influencing French and African filmmakers of the early to mid-1990s. For example, "Mathieu Kassovitz (*La Haine*, 1995) of France and Jean-Paul Bekolo (*Quarter Mozart*, 1992) of Cameroon both cite Lee for influencing their cinematic explorations of the politics of race, economics, and postcolonial tensions in their specific national context" (p. xix). Lee's attention to aesthetics can be traced through a generation of metropolitan backgrounds, youth populations, and popular culture quotations in general. Although significant, Lee's success should be considered beyond the scope of aesthetic sway. The release of *She's Gotta Have It* and *Do the Right Thing* point to the ways in which Lee's humble beginnings corresponded with, as well as impacted, a pivotal era in film studies. While my work highlights the role that DTRT played in reshaping perceptions of Blackness through aesthetics, I also note the complex and intersectional approach Lee brought to the film industry overall.

Lee's powerful and strategic film making not only demonstrated a New Black Aesthetic, but his work was also one of the first visual representations of a post-Civil Rights, multicultural, and multiracial society cohabitating in the same community. Further, Lee's catalog of work conjures up a series of key inquiries, ranging from efforts to define the landscape, or spirit, of a Black film aesthetic to a re-working of US cinema entirely. His work has raised crucial questions within the landscape of film genre, the embeddedness of Lee's own identity in his artistry, and the collaborative process of a moving text and a competing viewership. Lee's directorial artistry has challenged audiences to deeply reevaluate visual satisfaction and to bask in and criticize the intricacies of their contrapuntal photographic and auditory fields. Lee's work encompasses the often complex, rigid intersections, and intricate implication of race, gender, sexuality, and class, but as much, distorting the traditional categories in which they are placed. One key intersectional

component of his fictional and nonfictional methodologies is how they build upon each other. His feature films involve numerous notations to fictional worlds outside this universe though as Lefort argues, "his nonfiction films exhibit fictional devices that dramatize the documentaries' search for truth" (p.11). For example, DTRT embellishes the daily indiscretions imposed on individual interrelatedness in a multicultural community. I argue throughout this work that these moments of interrelatedness then and now continue to shape our perceptions of Blackness which is shaped by popular culture.

In short, Lee's films have driven and, in many cases, compelled us to intermingle with what is presented on the screen and, more significantly, with one another, being it in the theatre, coffee shops, classroom, workplace, in our neighborhoods, or withing our homes. This work examines the significance of Lee's work today in a moment of political unrest, social isolation, and instability, increase in racist and anti-Black acts, police brutality, and economic chaos. I believe that a deep reading of Lee's work in DTRT and his total body of work, frequently invite audiences to reevaluate American history through the lens of Blacks.

Lee's films have been central to Black life and letters for more than a century. Many of the articles, both old and new, return to seminal cultural and political figures, including W.E.B Du Bois, Booker T Washington, Martin Luther king Jr., and Malcom X, to remind readers that the desire to author an Black identity has long been bound up to define an Black aesthetic (Massood, 2008, p. xxi). Put differently, what Massood "argues is that, since the minstrel show performances and early Hollywood cinema, Black identity frequently has remained linked precisely to what is on page or screen" (p. xxi). Central to the question about constructions of Black identity, is the question about damaging or positive representation. Lee's work plays a fascinating role in these arguments. In one instance, the body of work and Lee repeatedly urge

audiences and its commentators to pinpoint what is shown on screen with an elemental Blackness or Black lens. And instantaneously, as Labiano (1991) articulately conveys, the films also "represent a problematic through which the political difficulties that inhere in Black cultural production…can be usefully discussed" (p.254).

In a critical review of Lee's films, which many claim tarnish the rarity of Black images, and being aware of the tropes and stereotypes of Blacks, conjured up through a long history of representation in film, and the ambitious beliefs many audience members have as a result, their limitation, lapses, and faults allow—in detail, initiate—a added prolonged conversation concerning representation, stereotype, and overemphasis. Each viewer brings with them a tactful and self-aware inner dialogue with representation which prompts us to consider, eventually, that they are speaking on real world experiences and how they are represented, not symbolizing truth itself. McKelly (1998) highlights this point arguing, "Du Bois calls this dilemma 'the waste of double aims,' a 'seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals" which can never be reconciled" (p. 5). The powerfully unitary pull of responsibility to community and responsibility to self, when configured as oppositional by a racist symbolic order, must inevitably become self-destructive. Thus, sublated in this polarized crisis of responsibility is an equivalently polarized crisis of identity" (McKelly, James C., 1998, p. 1). McKelly's point highlights the questions, contention, and internal dialogue present in Blacks who both enjoy and critique Lee's films. Further, as Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci protests in his theory of cultural hegemony, which Stuart Hall, and W.E.B. Du Bois support, these internal dialogues can also be the instrument of one's own oppression.

Throughout this project, each chapter carries a link to Spike Lee's film DTRT. While Lee's films are known for their distortion of traditional genre roles, his films move us far beyond

a rewriting of genre and this work hopes to highlight this accomplishment. According to Massood, Lee's films:

> draw from literature (for example, Zora Neale Hurston, Alex Haley, Richard Price), music (ranging from Aaron Copeland, Bill Lee, and Terence Blanchard to Public Enemy and Mos Def), visual culture (Black memorabilia, including print materials, sculpture, and other artworks), and contemporary popular culture" (p. xxii).

The constant recognition of Black culture beyond the plain text and traditional genre format tells us that one of Lee's unfailing objectives has been to establish a distinctive, historicized, Black perspective into a frame that is usually only linked to entertainment, at minimum, in its US (and Americanized) modification.

In Chapter 1 *Do the Right Thing: The Embodiment of a New Black Aesthetic*, I examine Trey Ellis's notion of the "cultural Mulatto" and how this concept is interrogated through Lee's usage of Black Aesthetics through Mookie's character. In Chapter 2: When Art Imitates Life: The Parallels Between Art, Life & Death Spike Lee, I leverage Blackness through the aesthetic of art displayed in DTRT. The term "mulatto," in spite of its problematic overtones, is an especially challenging attempt to express a postmodern perspective. In Ellis's text, the mulatto as a cultural figure of unity is described as the cement that connects a generation of Black cultural movers and shakers simultaneously. In what Ibrahim (2007) terms "impasse," she argues that Ellis' failed efforts to ignore-this space of political and cultural ambiguity within the struggle to describe postmodern Blackness-is artwork in the term "cultural mulatto."

> She continues, impasse, therefore, is a profound uncertainty over what the political and cultural stakes are of positing "postmodern Blackness" in such a way as to neutralize facets of a complicated past. Indeed, the term "mulatto," fraught as it is with static and

> retrograde implications, is a decidedly complicated way of describing a postmodern perspective, to say the least (p. 23).

While Ellis's effort in *Platitudes* is to declare the cultural mulatto as a figure of unity, meaning "mulattoness" as the foundation unifying a group of Black cultural powerhouses, he fails significantly in contextualizing the terms racist origins.

In Chapter 3 New Black Aesthetics & Music in the Consciousness of the Spectator explores, Spike Lee's meshing of blues, jazz, and hip-hop music runs parallel to the film's theme of a new Black aesthetic and his own experiences growing up in a predominantly Italian neighborhood. In Epilogue- The Tale of Three Brothers Radio Raheem, Eric Garner and George Floyd, I highlight the underlining moral dilemma present throughout the film that raises questions about whether doing the right thing means bringing about political and social change through economic success or resistance.

Put differently, I argue that DTRT not only demonstrates what living in the post-integration/ Post Soul Era consists of, but also how blackness is shaped by non-Black cultural and social identities. I argue that Lee's film puts on screen what Greg Tate and Trey Ellis put into words, suggesting the Black aesthetic as compared to a confined space, places in opposition to a black nationalist view of blackness as offered by Amiri Baraka, Marcus Garvey, Maulana Karenga, Nikki Giovanni, and many others - a definition of Blackness that is not necessarily Black at all. Regarding the *Black Arts Movement*, Lee's film illustrates a break from the past, a negation of Blackness that is no longer systemized by one definition but that also is uncategorizable and unrecognizable. Further, Lee's film highlights a new generation of Black artists, musicians, poets, activists, intellectuals, and film industry professionals such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Rebecca Walker, Patricia Hills Collings, Mark Anthony Neal, Saidiya

Hartman, Shonda Rhimes, Kara Walker, Beyoncé Knowles, John Singleton, Oprah Winfrey, and many others for whom Black consciousness and artistic liberty are not evenly absolute but corresponding. For those who believe Black identity encompasses a multicultural/multiracial tradition of embodied experiences and customs; they feel confident enough about Black identity to argue that the contributions of non-Black artists have also been inherited by Blacks themselves as part of their identity.

Chapter 1: Do the Right Thing: The Embodiment of a New Black Aesthetic

In the heart of a white majority society, it is no revelation that we are seeing an escalation of ethnic identity realization. The hope that aesthetics as promising tool in exploring the complexities of Black identity has been accompanied by an unmistakable rise in cultural nationalism and Black power thinking. Spike Lee's character Mookie leads us through the challenge to offering understanding and cohesion to the emotional and social meaning of Blackness. As the previous chapter focused on the historical context of constructions of NBA, this chapter looks at how Lee negotiates his own perspectives through Mookie.

In this chapter, I suggest that Trey Ellis's notion of the cultural interpretation is negotiated through Lee's character Mookie. The melodramatic assembly of DTRT locates Mookie, the film's protagonist played by Lee himself, through this style of divergences centered around the cultural lucidity of what two worlds. Equally, in the social and economic commerce of the neighborhood, Mookie is positioned in a correspondingly entrepreneurial part as the only Black employee of the only white-owned business in the community. Even his work itself - pizza delivery - depends upon his ability to mediate the discordant rhetorical anxieties of a white-owned workplace and a Black clientele. Now positioned, Mookie, according to McKelly (1998), is a Bed-Stuy embodiment of Africanus, who has the ability "to move easily between two discursive worlds," negotiating "the boundary between the white linguistic dominion and the Black" (p. 1571). The Brooklyn Dodgers jersey which Mookie wears on his way to work in the morning - Jackie Robinson's #42 - proposes, as Nelson George (1991) puts it, that "he's a man watched closely by interested parties on both sides of the racial divide. Both sides think he remains loyal to them - that's how he survives" (pp. 77-81).

Released several years after Trey Ellis's book *Platitudes* (1988), DTRT explores how Black identity is shaped through interactions with other non-Black minorities and whites who live in the same community. The film centers on how social class, race, and the moral choices that characters make have an immediate influence on exchanges between people. It centers around one day in the lives of racially diverse people who live and work in a lower-class neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. However, this normal day takes place during an intense heatwave. The start of the film shows the characters waking up and going about their day. The film then reaches a pinnacle with a neighborhood riot. This takes place after police officers violently kill a young Black man named Radio Raheem for fighting an older Italian American restaurant owner named Sal, both in his pizzeria and outside on the street. Although the film was released back in 1989, its social analysis on racialized police brutality is just as relevant today as it was 30 years ago.

Although literary works such as Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo (1972)* and *The Terrible Twos (1982),* Greg Tate in *Flyboy in the Buttermilk (1991),* Fran Ross's *Oreo* and bell hooks in *Outlaw Culture (1994),* helped us imagine a New Black Aesthetic, it was Lee's film DTRT (1989) that provided us with the first visual representation of how the New Black Aesthetic played out through a series of racial, gendered, social, and class constructions. More significantly, Lee leverages his personal experience and positionality as a Black male who lived in a majority white neighborhood to complicate any settlement on defining Blackness as one confined identity. As Ed Guerrero (2001) argues, "Lee constructs characters Mookie and Pino as a subtle mirror reflection on the issue of romance and separatism, thus tying Mookie more closely to the attitudes of Pino, the outright racist, than perhaps Mookie would care to admit in the contentious racial politics of the neighborhood" (p. 37). Spike Lee's approach adds a new

dimension to the preexisting conversations surrounding New Blackness and audience members can move between Mookie and Pino, whiteness, and Blackness. Ultimately, the movement between the two characters destabilizes perceptions of difference.

Spike Lee's rise came at the end of the Civil Rights era and at the crescent of what Ed Guerrero calls the "difference line, a much more layered, multifaceted formulation which derived out of the consequences of the struggle and gains of the Civil Rights Movement" (p. 42). Playing on the notion of difference, another way to articulate the obscurity and conflicts that permeate most of Lee's work and characters, and specifically DTRT, is to examine Lee's film generationally, in the context of emerging consciousness, vernacular, aesthetics, technique of a New Blackness. In *Soul Babies,* Mark Anthony Neal (2002) considers Spike Lee to be part of what he calls "the post-soul intelligentsia" - "a generation of Black thinkers in large part distanced from the nostalgia that pervades the civil right generation, who also experienced the terror of the Reagan and Bush Sr. Years" (p. 104). In this regard, Neal argues that this generation of thinkers and creative artists will establish transnational social and political blueprints for the twenty-first century, fabricating the compulsory connections between our most recent political turmoil and the challenges that will plague the generations that will immediately follow us. The challenge to this emerging generation is to disengage from the internal and external racial presupposition of the previous guard while providing guidance to the incoming group of intellectuals and artists.

Mookie's Story: The Conflicting Worlds of Black Identity and Tale of Twoness

In this chapter, I examine the nexus through which Lee's film demonstrates the complexity and tensions surrounding a monolithic Black identity, via the cohabitation of space with other marginalized and non-minoritized groups. Put differently, I argue that DTRT not only

demonstrates what living in the post-integration/ post-Soul era consists of, but also how Blackness is shaped by non-Black cultural and social identities. Once more, I shift back to Lee's character, Mookie, and Du Bois's notion of twoness which plays a central role in his relationship with Sal, Pino, and Vito. As the place which holds the most confusion of ideological binarism's that consist of Mookie's experience, living in Bedford Stuyvesant throughout the film takes on as James C. Kelly notes and Mikhail Bakhtin has describes as a "polyphonic quality" (McKelly, 1998, p. 220). The multitude of unconstrained and unmerged voices and consciousnesses includes the influence of Sal and sons as Mookie's surrogate family. As a result, by the time the audience arrives at Radio Raheem's death and riot that ensues at Sal's, the neighborhood, seen through Mookie's eyes, has become an avenue for the merger of an exceedingly assorted and unharmonious reality stemming from a collection of consciousness shaped by all experiences both of Black and white characters. Mookie's views then, are not confined to one common dominator or single ideology. As McKelly (1998) contends, "throughout film, Mookie has weathered an onslaught of imperatives from these various "consciousness-centers" - each imprinted, as we have seen, by the culturally pervasive logic of "two-ness" - which signify for Mookie's benefit their ideological values". From the voices Buggin Out, Mookie hears, "Stay Black"; from Mother Sister, "Don't work too hard today"; from Jade, "Take care of your responsibilities"; from his wife Tina, "Be a man"; from Sal, "You're fuckin' up"; and from Da Mayor, the determiner of this contradictory display of morally certain denotation: "Always try to do the right thing" (p. 220).

The year 1971 signified an especially important year for Black culture. The U.S. Supreme court ruled in the case of *Swann V. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* which upheld the desegregation of busing students in hopes of integration; the Federal Bureau of Investigation

formally ended COINTELPRO, and Angela Davis was acquitted of all charges ranging from aggravated kidnapping and first-degree murder. Finally, Melvin Van Peebles released *Sweet, Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, the first major successful Black independent film. In addition to many other historical events for Blacks living in the U.S., something else was brewing. The release of *Sweet, Sweetback's Baadaesesssss Song* demonstrated a cultural break from the era of Civil Rights and Black Freedom Movements to one that imagined and envisioned a multiracial United States. In other words, with the alleged end of segregation, a new generation of Blacks would encompass a newly embraced multiracial, multicultural identity that could imagine new possibilities of being in the world.

This chapter works through the genealogy of what George Nelson calls the post-Soul Era. In *Buppies, B-Boys, BAPS & BOHOS*, Nelson traces the beginning of the post-Soul Era to significant moments in Black popular culture beginning with Melvin Van Peebles' first film in 1971 and ending with the 1991 release of Eddie Murphy's *Boomerang*. I utilize Nelson's concept of *post-Soul* as a means of working backwards to engage Trey Ellis's *Platitudes & The New Black Aesthetic* (1988) which marks the first mention of the post-Soul generation of Blacks. Nelson (1992) argues, "*The New Black Aesthetic*, refers not just to musical style but a whole way of being" (p. x). Through his characters, Isshee and Dewayne, Ellis places central between these two characters a debate around their opposing interpretations of Negritude. Characters Earle and Dorothy's understanding of Blackness progresses and transforms and Isshee and Dewayne present contrasting views of Black authenticity. In another context, a reading of platitudes provides a multilayered insight to how young Blacks growing up in the 1970s and 80s negotiated Blackness. Magnified among mixed race Blacks, the standards of Blackness were more unstable as ever but, in a moment where interracial relationships were on the rise, the cultural differences

within Black communities became more prevalent as well. As many Black cultural scholars have noted, Trey Ellis's *Platitudes* was the first literary work to illustrate the shift between the Civil Rights Era and Post Soul Era through the New Black Aesthetic.

Ellis makes this point in the characterization of Earle as a "cultural Mulatto" who has navigated the world experiencing his identity through a different lens outside of the fixed Black tradition defined by the Black Art Movement. I argue that this is how Spike Lee positions his character, Mookie. Even within the confines of the narrow Black tradition, Blackness is negotiated through the guise of the intellectual. For instance, in one scene, Isshee protests she can't grasp Dewayne's "stand on negritude." Two theorists grappling with codifying the Black experiences, Aime Cesaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor (2013):

> they theorized about the Black experience through the Negritude movement which Senghor suggests, is neither racialism nor self-negation. Yet it is not just affirmation; it is rooting oneself in oneself, and self-confirmation: confirmation of one's being. It is nothing more or less than what some English-speaking Africans have called the African personality (p.300)

The negotiation of negritude indicates a well-defined distinction between Ellis's work in 1988 and perceptions of Blackness during the *Black Arts Movement.* Negritude no longer holds one static position among Blacks which Ellis makes apparent through the tension between Isshee and Dwayne.

As Ashe (1988) notes in the preface, beginning in the mid-1960s, writers and intellectuals such as Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Ron Karenga argued that all Black art, in Karenga's words, "must reflect and support the Black Revolution, and any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid" (p. xi). In response, Ishmael Reed challenged the narrow

interpretation of Black authenticity offered by Baraka, Neil, and Karenga in his novels *Black Radio (1969), Mumbo Jumbo (1972),* and *The Terrible Twos (1982).* The work of Ellis and Nelson provides a strong foundation for identifying markers for the New Blackness in the 21st century. Unlike any other text before its time, *Platitudes* explicitly discusses a variation of Blackness hinging on the concept of a growing mixed-race Black population. *Platitudes* destabilizes and disrupts the settled upon definition of Blackness as a uniform identity. Throughout my dissertation, I will continue to explore the contradictions and disruptions of Black identity withing Black popular culture.

The Post-Soul Baby: Spike Lee Grapples with Race, Politics and Black Identity

The NBA describes a break from the past or in other words, aesthetic symbolizes fluidity and the constant transformation of Blackness. The aesthetic allows the free flow of Blackness and as Ellis (1988) contends, "it's an open-ended aesthetic as opposed to a rigid cannon, which is what Karenga, and some other Black nationalists were trying to argue for" (p. xi). In the eyes of Ellis, the NBA became a gateway between the post-Soul Era and everything else - a gateway that encourages more conversations about politics, multiracialism, gender, sexuality, and authenticity of Blackness. In Greg Tate's (1992) chapter *Cult-Nats Meets Freaky*-Deke, he argues, "'The New Black Aesthetic'" is aimed at addressing the role of Black intellectuals - "anybody who has read Harold Cruse's scathing dissection of the Black leadership, *The crisis of the Negro intellectual*, knows his argument that each generation of Black leaders has failed from an inability to conceive Black liberation totally and systemically" (p. 198). Considering Tate's perspective, Spike Lee's approach and style allows him to bridge the gap between two generations making films regarding Black life from a Black perspective, but with the addition of his films not being confined to a particular or described in limited terms. In doing so, Lee has led

the movement with his emphasis on aesthetics and reconstructions and articulations of New Blackness, and his continuing nuanced prediction of Black life in the US urban sphere. Hence, Lee organically advances the intricacy of this perspective on present urban racial politics and culture, as much as the constructing conflicts that overrun DTRT's extended, sweltering day in a string of symbolic representations, scenes, and moments.

Tate's reference positions the "New" in New Black Aesthetic regarding time and not reinvention. His projections suggest a deconstruction of Black culture altogether and a new agenda that succeeds in uniting demonstrations and improve politics with a deep-rooted understanding of economic structures, enhanced cultural assessments, and a Marxist lens of the political economy. Tate continues, "the whatchamajiggy here is about how Black Aestheticians need to develop a coherent criticism to communicate the complexities of our culture" (p. 198). Tate, Ellis, and Nelson all note the death or disbandment of the traditional Black cultural nationalist movement and Black intellectuals consumed by the discursive practices, works within systems of White institutions which as a result, diminishes any opportunity of dialogue between academic institutions and the public or created boundaries between the intellectual and the artist.

Further, Tate's notion of the New Black Aesthetic on one hand, accuses emerging intellectuals during the 1980s of falling into the trap of the Black nationalist traditions by emphasizing White supremacist ideologies and the long-standing impacts of those ideologies on Black communities. He suggests that a New Black Aesthetic intervention needs to be made in which the Black intellectual no longer is complacent with a minimalist approach to viewing Blackness solely in relation to White supremacy but instead, in correlation with the embodied experiences conveyed through the Black arts. Tate (1992) states:

> Harold Cruse's remedies for the Black intelligentsia's failings seem more quixotic now than 20 years ago—particularly because back then, civil rights and Black power movements were producing a generation of artists and activists who could be provoked into getting hot and bothered (p. 199).

In the eyes of Tate, the shift away from the Black nationalist ideology while encompassing the rigor and dedication to theoretical implementation acknowledges the fluidity of Blackness. In other words, what the New Black Aesthetic allows is a perception of Black culture where anything connected to Blackness could be deemed an "aesthetic object" of observation more attractive than any imagery conjured up by white people. One contributing factor Tate observes, suppressing Black intellectuals was the emphasis on reimaging notions of Black beauty. For example, mantras such as "Black is beautiful," "the Blacker the berry," or "Black love" did little to change the deeply rooted White supremacist ideologies visible in text, art, media, and institutions.

Along the same line of thinking as Tate, Ellis and Nelson, Mark Anthony Neal (2001) in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and The Post-Soul Aesthetic* merges conceptions of the NBA and Post-Soul theoretical frameworks to close the gap between generational variations of Blackness by offering his definition of a "post-soul aesthetic" (p. 3). The 21st century was met by another major shift in Black popular culture. Hip-Hop and Rap continued to thrive from cultural and economic growth, spanning its influence globally. Black intellectual works such as Stuart Hall's What Is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture? (1993), Tricia Rose's *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), and Murray Forman, Mark Anthony Neal's "*That's The Joint" The Hip Hop Studies Reader* (2004) argued that the strength and scope of Hip-Hop and Rap music as a cultural construction through the globalization and

intercontinental projections of U.S popular culture, heavily influenced other variations of Hip-Hop and categories across the world further complicating notions of Blackness. Mark Anthony Neal's work builds on the previous contributions from Ellis, Tate and George that allows us deeply to consider the tropes that exist in Black popular culture and the arts.

Many of Spike Lee's films such as *She's Gotta Have it* (1986) and *School Daze* (1988) address key systemic issues surrounding race and gender; however, they also reproduce controlling images of Black women as hypersexual, the sapphire, the Jezebel, and pickaninny. While at first glance, one may launch a scathing critique of Lee's portrayal of Nola, the central character in *She's Gotta Have It* as a hypersexual Black woman or "Thot," (That Ho Over There), we must still consider the complex aesthetic choices in his artistic work. Mark Anthony Neal's conjuring of what he terms "post-soul aesthetic" moves us closer to understanding all-encompassing elements of Lee's positionality of a Black Aesthetic in addition to the larger looming questions regarding the film's economic success and global reach. In *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and The Post-Soul Aesthetic,* Neal (2002) argues:

> that there is an aesthetic center within contemporary Black popular culture that at various moments considers issues like deindustrialization, desegregation, the corporate annexation of Black Popular expression, cyberization in the workforce, the globalization of finance and communication, the general commodification of Black life and culture, and the proliferation of Black "meta-identities," while continuously collapsing on modern concepts of Blackness and reanimating "premodern" (African?) concepts of Blackness (pp. 3-4).

The Post-Soul Era can be defined as a tectonic shift in Black popular culture. As George Nelson alludes, the generational dismemberment was clear during the 1980s-1990s and the era was

about “going from Aretha Franklin to Janet Jackson, from Berry Gordy to Prince, from Muhammad Ali to Michael Jordan” (George, preface). In all, these shifts symbolized Tate and Ellis’s projections of the Black Aesthetic as a shift away from a homogeneous self-definition of all Black people and considered the intricate individual distinctions among them. The Post-Soul era entails resistance to police brutality and systematic violence through emergence of Hip-Hop culture, the acceptance of mainstream success and economic gains, and to demonstrate that Black artists such as Jean Michel Basquiat is just as genius as Rembrandt. This era can be considered metaphysically as the soul leaving the body of the Civil Rights Era and being embodied by the intellectuals, artists, activists, playwrights, poets, and filmmakers of the New Black Aesthetic.

I argue that Lee’s film puts on screen what Greg Tate and Trey Ellis put into words suggesting that the Black Aesthetic, as compared to a confined space, forwards a Black nationalist view of Blackness as offered by Amiri Baraka, Marcus Garvey, Maulana Karenga, Nikki Giovanni, and many others - a definition of Blackness that is not necessarily Black at all but a fluid identity. In regard to the Black Arts Movement, Lee’s film illustrates a break from the past, a negation of Blackness that is no longer systemized by one definition but that is also uncategorizable and unrecognizable. Further, Lee’s film highlights a new generation of Black artists, musicians, poets, activists, intellectuals, and film industry professionals such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Rebecca Walker, Patricia Hills Collings, Mark Anthony Neal, Saidiya Hartman, Shonda Rhimes, Kara Walker, Beyoncé Knowles, John Singleton, Oprah Winfrey, and many others for whom Black consciousness and artistic liberty are not evenly absolute but corresponding.

The 1980s exploded with a new generation of Black artists, creators, and scholars who were destined to create a "New Black renaissance" in response to the systemic police violence against Blacks, broadcasting of controlling images and stereotypes, and a drastically changing United States landscape in which multiracial families were becoming more visible. These Post-Soul babies had a different goal in mind for constructing the conversations around Black identity and creativity. Emerging artists such as Queen Latifah, the Wayans Brothers, John Singleton, and Jean-Michel Basquiat were just a portion of the up and coming "New Black" talent who would transition into super stardom. Emphasizing the fluidity of Blackness, the New Black Aesthetic (NBA) aimed to explore artists such as these in addition to creators in the post-Soul art realm and locally based New York artists.

Lee imagined four specific criteria that comprised the NBA. First, artists of the NBA must embrace a transcultural mindset in theory and practice, and they have shifted, traversed, and broken normalized genre roles while conferring to their own imaginative influences. Second, a significant indicator of the work of the NBA mimics the Black nationalist movement. Third, the reimagined, unwavering means through which NBA creators are examining Blackness and Black culture is mostly responsible for their rise to stardom.

> Fourth, the NBA gets at what Trey Ellis (1988) describes as the "cultural mulatto":
>
> Just as a genetic mulatto is a Black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents a cultural mulatto, educated by the multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world. And it is this rapidly growing crop of cultural mulattoes that fuels our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or Black people. The culturally mulatto *Cosby* girls

> are as equally as Black as a teenage Black welfare recipient. Neither side of the tracks should forget that (p. xiii).

Among this emerging group of artists, Lee was one of the emerging filmmakers to capture the essence of the New Black Aesthetic on film. During a time of uncertainty and anti-Black violence, Lee's film DTRT (1989) highlighted a shift in Black cultural politics. Widely anticipated, Lee's film negotiated the racialized politics, differences in culture, and the politics of power and privilege. Several influences for the inspiration behind Lee's film were the Twana Brawley rape case and the media spectacle in its coverage of the Central Park Five (Exonerated Five) in which, five Black teens were accused of the horrific assault against a White woman jogger, and a series of unjustified police shootings and White vigilante killings of Black people.

In addition to the list of influences mentioned earlier, Lee wanted to address the representation of Blacks often seen in media. For example, in the case of the Exonerated Five, news media outlets framed the five Black teens as "Super Predators" and Twana Brawley as "dishonest." While the racialized stereotypes persisted through media channels, the politics of multiracial identity was a concern of Lee's as well. While Lee's intervention through visual representation was paramount, the emphasis on the ambiguities and debates surrounding an emerging New Blackness in DTRT marked the generational separation in contextualizing or defining Blackness. Appearing on the scene after the dwindling of the Civil Rights movement and shortly lived pro-Black freedom and political push, coming of age Blacks found themselves at a crossroads. Post-Civil Rights and during the late 1970s, Blacks found themselves in a contradictory state. In one instance, they were beginning to financially benefit from the institutional efforts of the Black cultural and political movements that preceded them, recompences that excluded working class Black and benefited middle class Blacks, such as

increased accessibility to higher education, new housing developments, higher paying jobs in upper-management and placement into key political positions which materialized from the United States' unbalanced, reluctant push for social amalgamation.

Yet simultaneously, as Guerrero (2001) argues, "these 'New Blacks' faced building rearticulating and retrenchment of white conservatism, privilege and outright racism, with all of these ogres subtly codded at the discursive, political, and systemic levels" (p. 26). Stemming from the racist categorization and alleged demise of the Black nuclear family in the Moynihan Report (1965), to the proclamation of Black intellectual subservience in Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein's *Bell Curve* (1994), Nancy Reagan's *Just Say No* campaign, President's Ronald Reagan and George H Bush's (1980s-1990s) retractions of social and economic policies designed to help Blacks and other minoritized groups, including programs such as affirmative action, to President's Clinton's 1994 Crime Bill which accelerated mass incarceration and led to a disproportionately rate of Black imprisonment, whites' insolence towards systemic violence and racism only increased towards Blacks and non-Black minorities. During the late 1980s, intrenched images and stereotypes stemming from the Moynihan Report of "Welfare Queens," "Lazy Black fathers," and "violent Black gangbangers" fueled George H. Bush's alleged War on Drugs. In the written articulation of Ellis's *Platitudes* and visual representation of Lee's DTRT, people were getting their first glimpse of the New Black Aesthetic or the generation of New Blacks.

Succeeding the Civil Rights Era, Black identity continued to be influenced by opposing ideologies among Black artists, activists, and intellectuals, the transformation of heterogeneity as a debate about how one could or not 'be Black' increased with growing multiracial/multicultural communities and the various identities which construct Blackness such as, gender, multiracial

Blackness, ability/disability, class and LBGTQ identifying Blacks began to arise. This shift in Black culture was what George Nelson termed the Post-Soul Era. Considering the contradictory and rapidly shifting racial, political, and economic climate, DTRT captured the essence of these shifts and the New Black Aesthetic. More significantly, DTRT in addition to Lee's other films, all stem from pressing social, economic, or political tension with an emphasis on a Black perspective.

The movement from one generation to the next is a throughline between the characters and conflicts in DRT. Additionally, Lee's maneuvering between the two ideologies of Malcom X and Dr. Martin Luther King speak to the complexities of what Black is, Black ain't. The series of relationships Lee develops through Mookie utilizes satire and artistry that captures a vastly changing cultural landscape. As Paul C. Taylor (2007) highlights, "where soul culture insisted on the seriousness of authenticity and positive images, post soul-culture revels in the contingency and diversity of Blackness and subjects the cannon of positive images to subversion and parody and appropriation" (p. 631). Representation becomes a central modifier as Mookie represents the view in which the audience can interact with other characters. What makes Mookie particularly important is that he reinscribes qualities of racial stereotypes while challenging them as well. For example, DTRT equates manhood with gaining employment (and being able to take care of one's financial obligations). When one of the block's hip-hop young adults taunts Da Mayor for his alcohol and other dilemmas, Da Mayor responds (as justification) a memory of his failure (in the past) to support his children because he was unemployed. The teenager responds back that Da Mayor put himself in that situation. Different Da Mayor, we are assumed to realize, the young man would ensure that he had constant employment and could provide care of his children; in other words, he would be a man.

In a similar fashion, Mookie's earnings make him accountable enough—or man enough—that he can encourage others to "get a job," allow him to make some unconvincing efforts to provide for his kid and give him the footing to tell Jade what she should understand about sexual repression. Jade attempts to encourage Mookie to stand down by taking part in the "wages right-to-speak" discourse: "You can barely the rent and you're going to tell me what to do?" Mookie replies, "I get paid." Jade responds with "You're getting paid peanuts." The argument, I imagine, is that if Mookie were to earn a higher wage, then it would be acceptable for him to advise her what to do. In the same vein, Sal and Pino berate Mookie for doing the work for which they are paying his wages/his peanuts. Lubiano (1992) asserts that "the long-held racist charge that Blacks neither work nor want to work, this film spends much of its running time assuring its audience that Blacks in Bed-Stuy certainly do value work" (p. 112). In its place, without any specific framing, employment is described as its own fundamental good, because employment and proprietorship are what encourage men to make choices, to exercise independence. Sal's need only to respond that he "owns" his pizzeria to preserve his freedom over design; or Buggin' Out's willingness to patronize the grocery store and the pizzeria, respectively.

The perception of ownership as suggested by Sal, however, muddles neighborhood borders and identity politics. The gentrifier both claims ownership of his house and was raised in Brooklyn and, therefore, can be considered to "belong" in the community. And, paradoxically, the criticism of the Korean grocery store owners since they don't "belong" in the neighborhood is begun by M. L., who identifies as a migrant, as his friends are fast to comment. Nevertheless, while Sal "owns" his pizzeria, Pino tells him repeatedly "this" is not "their" community; they don't "belong" here. Even so, no one really needs to consider what is possibly at stake in these

inconsistencies; it is sufficient to have the money: “When you own your own pizzeria, then you can put your own photos up.” In these inconsistencies, DTRT elevates an interesting issue: what is the difference, if any, concerning a person born (and therefore capable to have some claim to “belonging”) in a neighborhood and a gentrifier who lays claim by “purchasing” his belonging? Moreover, the gentrifier's presence—as equally “born in” (and hence “native to”) Brooklyn and as “buyer” in this block— raises the larger context of the relationships of racialized bodies, land ownership, financial practices, and class issues.

Wahneema argues, nonetheless, that it is in the realm of identity politics—of place and race—that the film both raises possibilities of complicated representation and undermines them. “Stay Black” is the keystone phrase for the neighborhood, although it seems to refer to something ineffable” (p. 113). Blackness is what? Maybe it is the soundtrack of musicians on the radio, the DJ's slick talk, the vibrations and wonders of dialect culture, the assertions of female natural “tender-headedness.” Correct. However, Blackness is also pinned down without limitations in the discussions between Buggin' Out and Mookie, Mookie and Raheem, and Raheem and Buggin' Out. Jade is “on board for something encouraging” and Black—and neither she nor Buggin' Out understands the need to identify precisely what the “Black positive” is. Considering the competing perceptions of identity politics and Blackness as viewed among Civil Right alum and the New Black, Blackness is Malcolm X, although, as Smiley's image and Lee's quotes after the closing of the film mentions again, Blackness is also Martin Luther King Jr.; Blackness, then, is decreased to the sacredness that inheres in the proper heroes.

Like Father, Like Son? Mookie and Sal’s Love Hate Paradox & Racial Ignorance

The easy and less complicated way to read what’s transpiring in reference to racial relations in DTRT seems straightforward in reference to an “Old Black, New Black” dichotomy

or in reference to the racial tensions between for instance, Black patrons of Sal's pizzeria and Sal and sons. Nevertheless, as Paul C. Taylor reminds us, "the sense of being in the wake of an important historical shift encourages the NBA generation to borrow the "post" from post-modernism and use it to specify to their simultaneous debt to and distance from their favored historical dynamic" (Taylor, 2007 p. 625). This same argument can be made for the negotiation of racial relations in DTRT. Nelson George and Mark Anthony Neal delve into, amongst other things, the temperaments and expressive practices that describe what they refer to as post-soul culture. And Thelma Golden Herald's originality and assertiveness of those she identifies as post-Black artists (Tate, 2001 pp. 49-52). However, one realizes that there is substantial similarity between thoughts of post-soul culture, post-civil rights politics, and post-Black identity and aesthetics. We might consider these examples as synonyms, as different names for the same complicated reality. It seems more constructive, however, and a more effective use of the grammatical resources that we happen to have accessible, to hold on to the distinctions of emphasis that have created these terms. Each then develops a restricted window onto some comparatively distinct characteristic of the far-reaching and multidimensional restructuring of Black life that has happened over the last several decades spanning this period.

It is within this context we consider the identity of Mookie's character and his relationship to Sal and sons. What DTRT so noticeably exemplifies, and positions as catastrophic, is the epistemological drama of what it would necessitate to say that we can or cannot recognize the (in this case racial) Other, and what is at risk in expelling that Other from the opportunity of community as an aftermath of our knowledge claims. Thinking about Mookie's relationship to the two Italian American brothers, Vito and Pino are locked in conflict over their understanding of the relationship over with Mookie. To return to our two Italian

American brothers, with contrasting views: Vito explanation "You don't know" to Pino, is that his friend Mookie is not really the Other, he has grown close to Mookie, and Mookie is all good. This mimics when Mookie, earlier in the film, comes to the defense of Vito from his Black militant–hopeful friend Buggin' Out by saying, "Vito's alright. "Vito's down."). This is the pattern of race interactions that overshadows our cultural illusions about what racism is and how it can be defeated: without reference to the origins of racist beliefs, they are commonly conceived as being situated in unfamiliarity.

Racism, in other terms, is principally regarded as a class of epistemic catastrophe; that is, it is a collapse to know. We could say that racism is considered as a unique class of the "complexity of human minds." As Elizabeth Hope Finnegan suggests (2011) in (*Still) Fighting The Power:*

> In the United States, the Black has been broadly constituted as an immitigable and unknowable Other in relation to the white Self, which is constituted as central and universal. The mirror image of this claim, presented as its antidote, is that with the production of sufficient knowledge, racism (i.e., ignorance) could be overturned. Vito's assertion that Pino doesn't know (because he hasn't gotten to know Mookie the way Vito has) moves toward precisely the model of epistemic failure or success that the film dramatizes with regard to race (p. 78).

In this sense, the standard of racism and Vito's efforts not to acknowledge its existence has immense narrative power: it is transparent; it is dramatic; it requires precisely the kind of transformative knowledge that, in classical theater, allows for audience, relief; but above all, it is straightforward. What this paradigm equally maintains is the devastatingly strengthened perception that racism can be identified, understood, and challenged exclusively on the level of

individual bigotry. That is a pattern that usually disregards the larger spectacle of a society justified in white privilege and whose cultural, economic, social, and political institutions unnoticeably disseminate whiteness as a regulating state. Besides, this paradigm confirms the correspondingly popular notion of individual (rather than institutional) accountability for achievement, and the following notion that the United States operates as a meritocracy, a system in which anyone who works hard enough (as Sal, who built his pizzeria with his "own two hands," does) will flourish according to their worth. Finnegan notes:

> *Do the Right Thing*, however, demonstrates that claims to knowing the Other are insufficient to overcome racism precisely because racism is still built into our social, political, and economic institutions such as education, banking, housing, and even family systems. (p. 79)

Take establishments that permit Sal, for instance. The time and strength it takes to establish connections of warmth and truth with his sons is something that Mookie does not have. These are the moments throughout the film where race (institutional or individual) is brought back into the spotlight, but more significantly, how DTRT embraces some components of 'New Blackness' and challenges others. In this instance, Mookie doesn't suggest a sense of post-racial thought; instead, he conveys an awareness of racial tensions and the way his view of Blackness is influenced by his friendship with Sal, Pino, and Vito. As I highlighted earlier, the perception of difference between the New Black and the Old Black is as follows; where the New Black believes in a post-racial society or era of New Blackness and the Old Black remains stagnate in their ideas or resist acknowledging progress.

New Blackness not only assumes a post-racial society absent of racism but equal economic opportunities for Blacks and progress; something that the Civil Rights forbearers never

truly experienced due to their attachment to the Black cause. In the end, Mookie's ambiguous character allows both Black and white audiences to view themselves as the protagonists challenging what Du Bois famously termed the "color line." As Taylor (2007) has argued, "we are who we are because we are unique selves apart from our ethnic, cultural, or social origins. This requires decentering cultural differences (without obliterating them) as fundamentally definitive in favor of a 'difference-blind' universalism" (p. 627). In other words, If Mookie's connection with Sal and his sons barely reaches camaraderie, it is not moneygrubbing. Indeed, it is warm, and it is obliging. In an essential sense, Pino's racist explosions or Sal's allusions, both of which Mookie still always contests and always argues against, is always asserting himself as an equivalent partner in a conversation. This is the basis of his relationship with Sal, and of their shared in-your-face openness, a candor that continues to Vito, even Pino.

In the final conflict of the film, Mookie launches a trash can through Sal's pizzeria window in protest of Radio Raheem's death. William Bartley considers Mookie as a "wavering hero" (p.627) in the critical moment when Mookie takes his stand against Sal. Mookie's actions to launch the trash can in protest signal his alliance with the racism often perpetuated by Sal and Pino particularly. This is not to say that Mookie's in-betweenness has not been observed and accounted for in a range of ways. Ed Guerrero (2001) speaks of his pretense as a "slick negotiating middleman"; James C. McKelly (1998) designates him as a "Bed-Stuy avatar" of Gates's homo rhetoricus Africanus, who has the ability "to move freely between two discursive universes," traversing "The boundary between the white linguistic realm and the Black" (p. 75); Muyumba (2009) points out how Mookie's "thin, short, and weak physique" fits the figural properties of the animal trickster in folklore tradition (p. 15); Baraka (1991) calls him a

“messenger of the bourgeoisie” and a “crafty house slave” (p. 149). However, there is too much weight on Mookie's elusiveness and subversiveness.

Throughout the film, Mookie can be read as an ambiguous (racially and politically) hero or villain, moneygrubbing or unambitious which complicates his positionality. What is apparent at the end of the film is Mookie’s fluidity. He takes a clear stance on racial issues by launching the trash can through the window and somehow, allows the audience to feel in agreement and opposition to his cinematic betrayal to Sal. What DTRT allows us to see through Lee’s interpretation is the changing dynamics and upbringing of the cultural mulatto as Trey Ellis proposes. As Ronald A. T. Judy (1994) reminds us in *The New Black Aesthetic and W.E.B. Du Bois, or Hephaestus, Limping* “the NBA as "cultural mulattos," who following in the steps of the "Third Plane" (artists like August Wilson, Richard Pryor, Toni Morrison, and George Clinton). expand and explode "the old definitions of blackness, showing us the intricate, uncategorizable folks we had always known ourselves to be” (p. 273). The NBA is about identifying authentic Blackness as a ritual. It is the practice of creating new signs that disobey dominant cultural norms, and acknowledging that every new manifestation, no matter how subjective, is historically hybrid. The elusiveness of Black identity signifies the combined articulation of Black experience.

Chapter 2: When Art Imitates Life: The Parallels Between Art, Life & Death

"I can't breathe" were the last words echoed by Eric Garner and George Floyd as police officers drained the last bit of life from their bodies by way of chokehold. The strangulation deaths of Garner (2014) and Floyd (2020) signified a genealogy of these kinds of murders at the hands of law enforcement. For nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds, the world watched in horror as George Floyd's spirit left his body. In some cases, such of that of Eric Garner, a Black vender, whom police had suspected of illegally selling cigarettes on New York City's Staten Island streets, officers are never held accountable. After a confrontation ensued and police attempted to arrest Garner, officer Daniel Pantaleo placed him in a chokehold which resulted in Garner's death. The chokehold was banned in New York City after the death of 29-year-old Latino American Anthony Baez in 1994. Like Garner, Baez suffered from asthma and while playing a game of touch football with his brother the morning of December 22, 1994, a pass accidently hit a parked NYC patrol car. According to a report published by Tara Dooley, staff writer for the Columbia Daily Spectator (1994), "after a four-day visit to the Bronx to deliver Christmas presents to his family, Anthony Baez was waiting to begin an 18-hour drive home to Orlando, Fla., where he lived with his wife, Maribel." Once the stray pass hit the patrol car, police officers approached the Baez brothers and an argument ensued. The result was Anthony Baez being restrained and put in the chokehold which ended his life. Twenty years later, the death of Eric Garner would once again raise questions about police brutality and the use of the banned chokehold. In this chapter *When Art Imitates Life: The Parallels Between Art, Life & Death*, I examine how Lee leverages Blackness through the aesthetic of art displayed in DTRT. I argue that Lee's placement of art in the film holds a clear political and cultural agenda in which Lee continues grappling with his own double consciousness.

Following the national protest and deaths of Garner, Floyd and Breonna Taylor, filmmaker/writer/Actor Spike Lee released a short film, *3 Brothers*. The short, raw, and uncut film transposed the choking deaths of Garner, Floyd, and Radio Raheem played by Bill Nunn who passed in 2016. In almost prophetic fashion, in Spike Lee's 1989 film DTRT, Nunn's character is killed by a gang of cops, who utilized the same chokehold. Simultaneously, Raheem's death was an illusory reconstruction of what had transpired prior. In the 30th anniversary commentary on the film, Lee contends "I'm renaming this short film the *Anatomy of a Murder*. He describes how he based the scene of Raheem's death on the 1983 killing of graffiti artist Michael Stewart, who was choked by 11 NYC transit officers. "The things that are happening in this film," he declares, "continue to be relevant today." Lee then notes that the death of Eric Garner, murdered in the same manner as Raheem, signaled an exhausting history of police violence against Black people in America. The video played repeatedly of George Floyd calling for his momma with his dying breath will continue to haunt us all. These on-camera deaths are traumatic and highlight a continuous pattern of violence. Spike Lee wanted to continue demonstrating the power of documentary images and how history of police related deaths remain the reality for many Black people today.

Art has always and continues to play a pivotal role in shaping the New Black Aesthetic. Ronald Jemal Stephens, in his chapter, *The Aesthetics of Nommo in Films of Spike Lee*, argues, in a deconstruction of *School Daze* and *Do the Right Thing*, that Lee utilizes an array of characters as his sounding board to inspire Black audiences to "wake up" and "do right thing." The adherence of Lee's positioning and storytelling style suggests Lee uses cinematic art is to liberate the consciousness of the Black. Stephens (2009) argues, especially, in DTRT and *School Daze* "the unification between the speaker (Spike Lee) and his audience (filmgoers) creates a

persuasive atmosphere in which community values are voiced and redirected. Stephens argues "that art is used as a method to uplift the race" (p. 4). Using this framing, art functions as a mechanism for cultural revitalization. Art is purposeful.

In the first part of *When Art Imitates Life,* I move through a brief contextualization of the emergence of graffiti in the late 1970s through the mid-1980s. To understand Lee's intervention, one must understand the powerful influence Hip-Hop, and art had during this period. Since DTRT was a response to systemically racist policing and politics perpetuated by Mayor Ed Koch, I provide a brief history of the role of graffiti prior to the Hip-Hop explosion. Then, I examine several key moments in DTRT. First, is a scene where we see "DUMP KOCH" graffiti visible in the background as Radio Raheem played by the late Bill Nunn and Buggin' Out played by Giancarlo Esposito discuss organizing a boycott of Sal's Pizzeria. This scene foreshadows Radio Raheem's death.

Figure 1 Radio Raheem and Buggin Out: Courtesy of Do the Right Thing (1989)

In the second scene I analyze, Mookie, played by Spike Lee, warns his sister Jade, played by real-life sister, Joie Lee to stay away from Sal's Pizzeria. In the background, the saying "Tawana Told the Truth" Is sprayed in graffiti art. This is in reference to the 1989 vicious sexual assault and media condemnation surrounding 15-year-old Twana Brawley. Many critics of Spike Lee films view him primarily as an antiracist filmmaker. Scholars such as Robin R. Means Coleman and Janice D. Hamlet (2009) argue, "Lee has consistently disseminated, through all forms of his discourses, the argument that we must become astutely conscious of the damage being done to Black communities, notably, often by those external to those communities" (p. xx).

The Spike Lee Response: New York City's War on Blackness and Black Popular Culture

Guerrero (2002) notes that "in terms of engaging the politics of race, representation, cultural difference and power, *Do the Right Thing* couldn't have arrived at a more turbulent and opportune time, media focused moment locally, nationally, internationally" (p. 12). At the time the film was released, New York had experienced several destabilizing events including: the public and highly contested rape allegation launched by Twana Brown, the vicious rape of a white New York city jogger in which five innocent Black teens were charged, the racially motivated murders of Black Graffiti artist Michael Stewart by transit police, the murder of Eleanor Bumpurs, an elderly Black woman who was shot to death by police officers serving an eviction notice, and the Italian mob lynching of Yusuf Hawkins.

Figure 2 Mural dedicated to Yusuf Hawkins in Bedford-Stuyvesant; Brooklyn painted by Gabriel Specter. Photograph: HBO

Hawkins, Bumpurs and Griffith's names were invoked during the opening of DTRT and played a significant role in the film's development. In one of Lee's various artistic aspects and clever moves that places the film in the polemics and political tensions of that period, the public sounding board of DTRT utilizes graffiti to negotiate the blurred lines of discourse and lived experiences. Graffiti as a cultural design during the 1970s-80s presented challenges for political and economic projects due to its resistance to assimilating to the social and political climate at the time. The cultural nature of graffiti as a ritual that creates an open space and produces a collective, community, uncensored graphic space, is especially problematic for the project of neo-liberalization, which is focused on sweeping privatization of the public domain in the maintenance of capital accumulation.

As Maggie Dickinson (2008) argues in *The Making of Space, Race and Place: New York City's War on Graffiti, 1970–the Present*:

> Because graffiti culture and practice in public space remain problematic for the neoliberal vision of New York City, there is an ongoing battle against it, waged by political leaders who see their job as catering to the business community, not to the needs of the citizens of New York. (p. 28)

Historically, art has been a struggle over representation in which local politicians have labeled graffiti in a way to gain public backing for a war most New York residents feel indecisive about at best. As one of the key components of HipHop culture, graffiti rose as a subculture in the late 1960s. During the 1970s, the omnipresent existence of the more prolific writers' tags, or reputations, throughout the city were at their height and gained the attention of New Yorkers outside the subculture. In its earlier stages, as Dickinson (2008) highlights, graffiti had a more subtle reputation:

> The initial media coverage of the practice, most importantly an interview with Taki 183 in the *New York Times* in the summer of 1971, was sympathetic, portraying writers as young people with an interesting pastime. The article included long quotes by Taki explaining why he signed his name everywhere he went, saying he 'did it for himself." (p. 28)

As recognition of graffiti grew as a subculture, the more local politicians began to take notice. Prior to 1971, there were no official laws against graffiti except for some minor policies already utilized to limit eating or drinking on public transportation. Soon afterwards, Mayor John Lindsay recommended his anti-graffiti bill, condemning graffiti and labeling it a crime. Now deemed punishable by legal penalty, anti-graffiti legislation was passed by the city council on October 11, 1972. With this new designation:

> Graffiti writers would be referred to as vandals, thugs and criminals in the mass media, and their own voices would be shut out. In addition to the 1971 New York times piece, there were a few exceptions, like the articles in New York Magazine in March of 1973, which praised the writers' artistry and efforts and vilified the city administration for punishing such a harmless and potentially positive activity of young people. (Dickinson, 2008, p. 29)

In the end, the archetype had been irrevocably placed and articles such as these merely played into the metaphorical war among those who advocated for the "vandals" and those who aimed to stop them.

In *Framing Graffiti: "War on Terror" and Iconoclasm in American Writing on War*, Sudebi Giri (2017) argues that Mayor Lindsay's criminal designation of graffiti artists holds a much deeper meaning. According to Giri:

> This gesture of dramatic belatedness was a response to the crusade carried out by Mayor John Lindsay's 1972 slogan – "war against graffiti." By historical coincidence, it was also the same year when Richard Nixon, in a profound moment, first gave the world its catchphrase: "War on Terror." (p. 20)

What becomes indirectly paramount in this coincidence is the interpretation of punishment that could be theoretically connected to a particular type of expressive form (graffiti) and a community of a certain geopolitical space (Middle East). Hence, one could view this as a disciplinarian action that justifies framing of Black radical groups such the Black Panthers (1966-1982) as well. This conceptual framing applied to the alleged "War on terror" (Black Panthers) and later to the "War on Drugs" (1971-2006) declared by the Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) and George H. Bush (1989-1993). Although Mayor Lindsay pushed to crack down on

graffiti, very few artists were convicted of crimes. Penalties for writers were often minimal, usually with some sort of community service or cleaning graffiti. Mayor Lindsay confessed openly:

> These efforts did not appear as if they would successfully eliminate graffiti entirely. However, he stated that: "The cost of cleaning up graffiti, even to a partial extent, is sad testimony to the impact of the thoughtless behavior which lies behind . . . the demoralizing visual impact of graffiti." (Dickinson, 2008, p. 29)

As New York city experienced a tumultuous financial situation during Lindsay's reign, graffiti began to highlight many disparities regarding class, race, and the failing infrastructure of the Metro transit system which the city had no resources to repair.

Many of the more established artists viewed their artistic exertions as challenges to make the abandoned, dilapidated transit system that had been prone to years of underfunding and delayed repairs more aesthetically pleasing. Dickinson (2008) explains:

> The ability of young people to spontaneously initiate a project that completely saturated the insides and outsides of New York's massive network of subways with their names and images probably was demoralizing for a city administration that was virtually paralyzed by financial crisis. (p. 28)

Eventually, a small group of business elites decided to take matters into their own hands. During the economic crises in 1974-75, the small group of business elites decided to declare war on graffiti artists and take control of city finances to establish power.

> At this point in the mid-1970s the Lindsay, and subsequently the Beame, administrations still saw their job, at least partially, as defending the needs of everyday New Yorkers. However, the hijacking of oversight of the city's finances by the business community

> meant that these administrations had very little latitude in their ability to successfully initiate any project. (Dickinson, 2008, p. 30)

Nevertheless, the takeover of the city's funds by the business elite suggested that these administrations had very little reach in their ability to effectively start any project. The alleged war on graffiti turned out to be an exception to the rule. During this period, there was funding available for research and execution of numerous technological solutions to the "issue" of graffiti. The war on graffiti was very much a cultural and geographical struggle over space.

The Cultural Struggle: Space, Place & Spike Lee's Balance of Power through the Camera

The 1980s ushered in a new era for graffiti that viewed the empty spaces throughout New York as a tool to express social ills manifesting in poor neighborhoods. Graffiti writers highlighted New York culture and issues such gentrification, racism, classism, and systemic violence. As the popularity of HipHop grew, so did the graffiti's geography. Additionally, graffiti became a prized form of communication, illuminating day by day the apparent artistic value and ability of writers throughout the New York city landscape. Moreover, there were much more imbedded meanings to graffiti writing that were usually silenced by city officials and business owners. Graffiti evolved into a communication system.

> A writer would write someone's name whose style they admired with her own name next to it and he or she would write back. Young people called this "third rail mail." This communication system transformed writers' spatially segregated communities into a citywide community of practitioners. (Dickinson, 2008, p. 31)

The war on graffiti was very much a power move to silence the coded messages shared among people and communities, a mechanism utilized to minimize movement, promote gentrification,

and restrict space or geography. As Murray Forman (2002) contends in *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Rap Music and Hip-Hop (Music/Culture)*:

> Space is an influential factor in contemporary culture. It can be at once unifying or differentiating and is structured in and through numerous institutional agendas and public discourses. It is today obvious that the spaces we inhabit are susceptible to bids, in various forms, for increased influence, authority, and power. Spatialized power is expressed within a range of contexts, whether these be official housing policy and localized politics of urban development, the struggles between combative street gangs, or conflicts between members of minority populations and urban police forces.(p. 2)

Using the camera lens, Spike Lee reclaims space through his use of graffiti and by proclaiming "Twana Told the Truth" and "New York residents should 'Dump Koch.'" In this context, space is not a domineering element, however, it is prominent in the ways that seldom remain mysterious. Fascination in the social constructions of spatial dwelling and use demonstrates an importance on what Henri Lefebvre (1991) terms "spatial practices;" which distend all components, characteristics, and instants of social practice" (p. 8). The indication of new dialects consisting of spatially positioned symbols, representations, and narratives, much like those that arise from a variety of social divisions, could be viewed as a critical element perpetrating the articulation of practices, identities, systems withing an array of cultural milieu or social spaces. In other words, space and geographical local become both a point of resistance and a tool for silencing, vilifying, and a barrier between two worlds, the economically privileged and the culturally oppressed.

Through the camera lens, Lee utilizes space to distort the normalized articulations of practice, identity, politics, systems, and representation. His use of graffiti and geography merge together both the physical and imaginative ways space constructs identities or alters them.

Delphine Letort and Mark Reid (2015) suggest that "the creative tension between fact and fiction permeates the diegetic space of *Do the Right Thing*" (p.11). They draw a list of all the news items that transpire into the fictional representation of New York, highlighting plotlines and tropes that resonate with notorious cases of racist violence" (p.11). DTRT's storyline develops by drawing from graphic references to moments of racialized violence, specifically, like the murder of Michael Griffith, who was beaten to death by a group of Italian American teens as he left a pizzeria. Lee's narrative evolves alongside a chronological history of racial violence and highlight lived experiences, the person and community influence of which he grapples with through engagement of text. Reality and the imaginative habitually intermingle in Lee's filmmaking, permitting intersections that test generic rules and audience beliefs. The array of warm and mellow to harsh dark tones of images in DTRT acknowledge the pull of fiction, which contradicts a realistic conception of the ghetto's societal woes. In doing so, Lee merges together reality and the imaginative, making difficult the distinction between art and lived realities.

A City in Chaos: Spike Lee's Response to the Attack on Black People

During the early and mid-1980s, films such as *Wild Style* (1982), *Flash Dance* (1983) *Beat Street* (1984), *Breakin* (1984) and *Krush Groove* (1985) celebrated the rise of graffiti and Hip-Hop's ambitious rise. In *Arts in the Streets*, Deitch et al. (2011) highlight "the emergence of graffiti paralleled the genesis of Hip-Hop, its artistic vocabulary spilling over into the break dancing, street fashion, and the language and rhythms of rap music" (p. 10). As the innovative technology of graffiti quickly proliferated from major city to city such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, it also spread internationally to places such as London and São Paulo. Films such as Charlie Ahearn's 1982 *Wild Style*, which combines narrative with lived experiences recorded the curation of graffiti, rap music, and breaking at its height. *Wild Style* also served as a vital

platform for the international spread of the culture. As the art of graffiti writing grew and gained more notoriety, so did the push to bring it to an end. Among the films released in the 1980s, Spike Lee's DTRT was one of the most provocative. While films such as *Wild Style* offered a graphical description of Hip-Hop's emerging cultures of writing, progress, lyricism, dj-ing and aesthetics, they did not quite highlight the politically and racially charged politics taking place in New York during the eighties. Spike Lee, however, would change that in 1989. Much like the series of Hip-Hop films released during the 1980s, Spike Lee also recognized that Hip Hop culture played a significant role in ideological power and resistance, hence, his inclusion of graffiti and Public Enemy's *Fight the Power* blasting through radio Raheem's boombox. His goal in DTRT was not solely to address the political turmoil present in New York at the time.

The political landscape in New York city shifted in 1978. Newly elected mayor Ed Koch had different ideas about graffiti. Koch would once again ignite the war on graffiti, and he put this item at the top of his agenda early during his administration.

> Mayor Koch was the public official who once again put the war on graffiti front and center in the early 1980s. Throughout the 1970s the alleged 'war on graffiti remained at removal efforts and faded from public contestation between 1975 and 1981. This was in part due to the painstaking achievement in minimizing the volume of graffiti on trains. Elected politicians proceeded with caution and did not want to bring unwanted attention to failing programs during severe decreases for fear of having to rationalize expense. Koch differed from his predecessors in that he was a pro-austerity mayor. He did not need the enforced oversight of the business community to ensure that he would continue the austerity program initiated in the mid-1970s. He was happy to continue to cut services and the pay of city employees (Dickinson, 2008, p. 33).

Koch's revival of the war on graffiti mostly resonated with white racial groups. Their encouragement manifested racially contentious regulations that provided the implied implication that Black and Latino New York residents would be harmed significantly from these mandatory reductions. For instance, in 1980, Koch shut down four public hospitals, all which were located in Black or Latino communities, and no hospitals in white communities were touched. Koch's strengthened war on graffiti took advantage of racial polarity within the city to gain public outcry for a costly, challenging crusade to eradicate graffiti from New York subways. This revived war on graffiti connected to previous rhetorical approaches that deemed graffiti artists as crooks, postulating them as the adversary in a war on the city's integrity. Nevertheless, his antics and language also formed similarities between graffiti artists and the impoverished Black and Latino neighborhoods that were represented as the cause of New York's societal woes and urban deterioration.

These targeted attacks did not go unnoticed by Black and Latino activist, artists, politician, and community members. In what George Nelson terms The Post-Soul Era, not only was the politics shifting throughout the US, but so was the cultural and ethnic makeup of neighborhoods. This meant that some communities across the US were becoming integrated or at least, diverse in ethnic makeup. This was especially true in New York in neighborhoods such as the Bronx and Brooklyn. Throughout Koch's reign as Mayor, two events sparked outrage among artists, activists, community members, and politicians. The murders of Michael Stewart (1983) and Eleanor Bumper (1984) at the hands of police made national news. Eleanor Bumpurs, an elderly Black woman, was shot and killed by police when they were called to assist with evicting her from her apartment. Bumpurs, who was 66 years old, was killed during a struggle to subdue her; one officer fatally shot Bumpurs twice with a 12-gauge shotgun. A year prior to Bumpur's

death, graffiti artist Michael Stewart met the same fate at the hands of police. Stewart, a 25-year-old artist, was accused of writing graffiti on the subway walls when he was contacted by transit police who then detained Stewart and placed him under arrest.

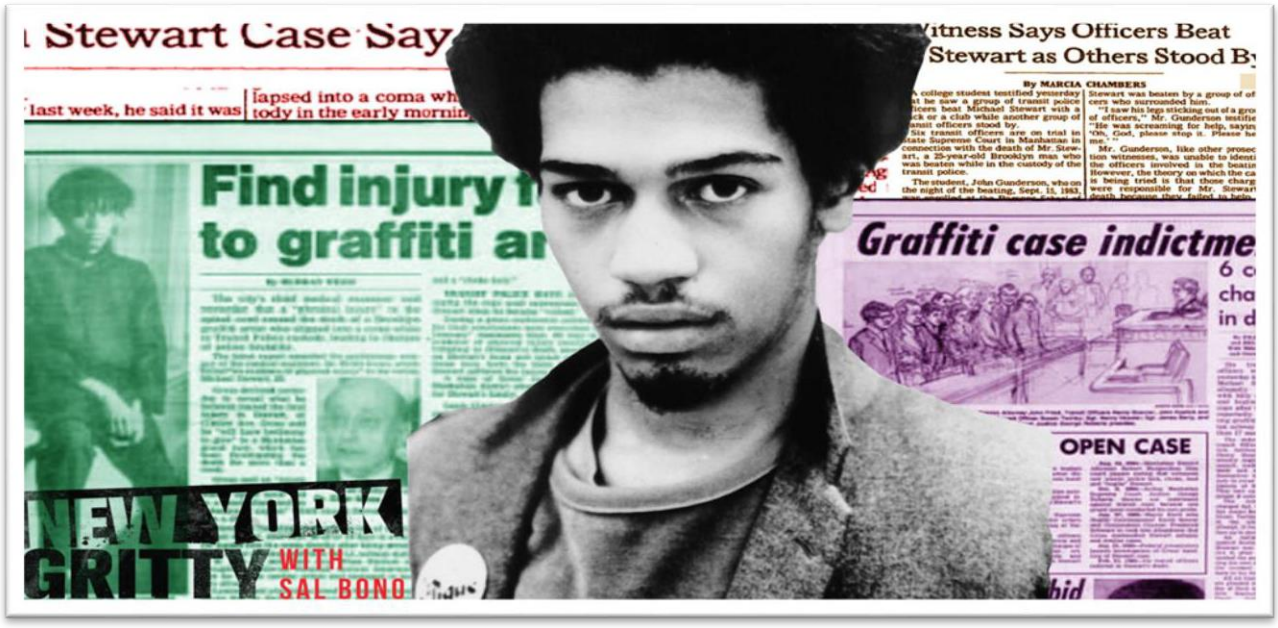

Figure 3Inside Edition 2020: Photo Michael Stewart was a victim of police brutality in New York City in 1983, his family received no justice, and his case is one many draw parallels to that of George Floyd, Eric Garner and Philando Castile.

Bystanders watched as police threw him to the ground after leaving the train station and proceeded to bludgeon Stewart with their Billy clubs. The transit officers claimed that Stewart fell, and his fall is what caused the injuries. Stewart died after 13 days in the hospital. Public outcry ensued arguing that the many deaths were racially motivated and promoted by Koch himself. In fact:

> It was disputed that Stewart even engaged in subway graffiti work on that particular night. At the time of his sudden death, Stewart almost exclusively dated white women. Stewart had kissed a white woman on the cheek prior to his fatal encounter, an action which allegedly enraged the cops who would later arrest him. (McClinton, 2019, p. 2)

In both cases no officers were held accountable for their role in the murders of Michael Stewart and Eleanor Bumpurs.

The murders of Bumpurs and Stewart only represented a few of the racially charged deaths that took place during Koch's tenure in the 1980s.

> Others were the fatal assault on Willie Turks in 1982, the subway shooting of four men by Bernhard Goetz in 1984, the fatal assault on Michael Griffith in 1986, the shooting of six NYPD officers by Larry Davis also in 1986, and the murder of Yusef Hawkins in 1989 (peoplepill.com, 2021).

In particular, the death of Stewart hit too close to home for fellow graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquiat and inspired one of his most prolific and personal pieces, *Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)*. "It could have been me," Jean-Michel Basquiat would say at the mere mention of the untimely death of Michael Stewart" (McClinton, 2019, p. 1). The deaths of Bumpurs and Stewart also caught the attention of the then young filmmaker Spike Lee. Released June 30, 1989, three years after Lee's first film *She's Gotta Have It*, DTRT aimed to address the racially and politically charged incidents spanning the entire decade of the 1980s.

Figure 4 Courtesy: http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/ 2019: On October 29, 1984, 60-something-year-old Bronx, New York, resident Eleanor Bumpurs was fatally shot by New York Police Department (NYPD) officer Stephen Sullivan after a botched housing eviction.

In an interview with film critic Logan Hill, he professed:

> [The police] had already shot Eleanor's finger off. Then they killed her with a shotgun. Sixty-six years old. Mayor Koch, he was the one responsible, I feel, because he was giving the signals, the wink-wink, like it's open season. (Lee S. , How I Made It: Spike Lee on 'Do the Right Thing', 2008)

Koch was approaching the end of his tenure as NYC Mayor and Spike Lee hoped his film would be the final push to get Koch out of office:

> Lee openly remarked on several occasions that he hoped *Do the Right Thing* would sway the upcoming mayoral election by convincing Black voters to unseat then-mayor, Ed Koch, whom he blamed for New York's poisoned racial climate. (Guerrero, 2001, pp. 12-13).

In one of Lee's many cinematic and clever graphical representations, he places the film in the debates and political challenges of the period. The public address of DTRT's wall of graffiti grapples with the elusive, conditional characteristics of mass mediated reality.

Lee declares with conditional satire, in the scene where Mookie warns his sister Jade about going to Sal's pizzeria that "Twana Told the Truth," While intentionally urging voters to "DUMP KOCH" in the final scene prior to Radio Raheem's death on another wall.

Figure 5 Image of Jade and Mookie: Courtesy of Do the Right Thing (1989)

The ramped up political and media environments surrounding DTRT's release also existed in a charged sphere of American art, rise in Black cultural production, and increasing conservative attacks on the arts. Through Lee's visual lens, many of the issues highlighted in the film leave very little resolve and remain ambiguous. What is at play in Lee's development of the characters and storyline, is the competing ideologies and schemas situated in an edgy connection to one another. Robert Stam's (1991) insight into these exchanges suggests that "all utterances inescapably take place against the background of the possible responding utterances of other social and ethnic points of view" (p. 259). Ethnicity is interpersonal, a signature of expansive practices embedded in history, among subjects prevailing in correlation to power.

One of the various defining instances that demonstrate the indecisive, dialogic overlapping of opposing discourses and symbols occurs in the scene where Mookie demands that Jade stay away from Sal's Pizzeria, after witnessing the cordial and playful exchange between the two. After publicly accusing Sal of attempting to seduce Jade or of "hiding is salami," Jade immediately objects, highlighting to Mookie that the time to be a big brother has passed. Mookie's social class and dependency on his sister while staying at her apartment further diminishes his authority to be her authority figure. Mookie unpersuasively pleads that Sal will make his move soon; more importantly, they disagree with the framework of a brick wall and on it, a vibrant pronouncement that becomes more apparent as the camera ends the scene slowing, intensifying draw back uncovering the contents of the wall's memo: "Twana Told the Truth."

However, embedded in the coded message and in the aesthetics of the film is the question, did Twana tell the truth? Possibly, a superficial reading of this illustration would endorse Mookie's stance: that Sal is in pursuit, and by contrast, Twana Brawly, who declared that the police department was guilty of kidnap and rape, did in fact tell the truth. "However, as Jade makes clear, Mookie has little authority in *Do the Right Thing*'s story world on which to hang his claims, material, moral, ethical, inferred or otherwise" (Guerrero, 2001, p. 37). Furthermore, Lee develops Mookie and Pino to emulate, in clever fashion, the question of passion and autonomy, consequently connecting Mookie more directly to the mindsets of Pino, the blatant racist, than imaginably Mookie would care acknowledge in the antagonistic racial environment of the neighborhood.

Tellingly, the argument with Jade is preceded in the pizza parlor by Pino and Mookie, linked by the camera's panning eye-line match, as they share the same suspicious look.

> Slyly gazing in complicity upon Sal and Jade talking over a meal, they both reveal an identical, visceral fear of miscegenation. (Guerrero, 2001, p. 37)

Subsequently, the graffiti writing pronouncement of 'truth' in the Twana Brawley thriller transforms into a noticeably comparative, tribal feeling and is destabilized by the contrapuntal layering of the vying signals, discourses, and subject positions; nor following a sequence of grievances and counterclaims, has the Brawley paradox become any more apparent in the communal made-up with the lapse of time.

Spike Lee's Final Act: The Death of Radio Raheem and What it Means Today.

In this chapter, I examine how Lee weighs Blackness through the aesthetic of art displayed in DTRT. I contend that Lee's placement of art in the film holds a clear political and cultural agenda in which Lee continues grappling with his own double consciousness. In the two parallel worlds, Lee expresses his challenges growing up in the predominantly white neighborhood of Cobble Hill Brooklyn in his interactions with Sal, Pino, and Vito. Yet, Lee takes a strong political position proclaiming "Twana Told the Truth" and to "DUMP Koch" during a time where the policing of free expression runs rampant in Mayor Koch's push to silence graffiti artists. More importantly, DTRT serves as a sounding board against racism, a warning signal that racism has various layers embedded in vastly changing communities encompassing many ethnic groups and beliefs. DTRT, as Spike Lee recounts, "even in its very title, sets up a moral universe and a code, so it's going to provoke a kind of scrutiny on the action that a movie in which things are more relative will not" (Breskin, 1997, p. 159). The moral universe, as Lee states, sets a course for action or heroism, antagonist or protagonist, bystander or participant, and justice or violence. Central to Lee's construction of the film are the unarmed, unwarranted murders of innocent Black people in which no justice was served. In addition, Lee

aims to address the racist imagery that has plagued Black people in film since its inception. This film takes place during the 1980s when five innocent Black and Latino teens were accused of violently raping a white woman in Central Park. The emergence of a new breed of "super predator" is on the loose, some headlines read. The media obsession and projections with Black men particularly play out in the killing of Radio Raheem.

Figure 6Radio Raheem shows off his knuckle rings in a scene from "Do the Right Thing."

Throughout the film, Radio Raheem can be read as unapproachable, unintelligible, and angry, neither politically active, welcoming or with any religious belief system. However, I view Raheem's positionality in the film as one that encompasses all the images that media presents when it comes to Black men. If you are constantly bombarded with projections of angry Black men being violent, then one may perceive that all Black men act in this manner. "The controlling images as being unintelligible, and angry," as scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2000) notes, "are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be

natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life. Even when the initial conditions that foster controlling images disappear, such images prove remarkably tenacious" (p. 77). Controlling images describes stereotypes which conceal history and underlying inequality and place the responsibility on those being stereotyped. Although portrayed as standoffish and serious in the film, Raheem never poses any real threat. In fact, Raheem is a deep thinker, a music fanatic, and does possess a political stance as his weapons of political choice is his boombox. Even in the final scene prior to his death, Raheem is provoked by Sal's smashing of his radio which held significant meaning to him. Radio Raheem's deafening sound system blasting Public Enemies' Fight the Power by no means justified his untimely death.

The two rings spelling out "Love" on one hand and "Hate" on the other bring us into the consciousness of not only Raheem's belief system on a vastly changing multicultural community, but further, highlights the complexity of a society that insists on painting all things in "Black" and "White." *In The double truth, Ruth: 'Do the Right Thing' and the culture of ambiguity*, James C. McKelly (1998) argues, "Radio Raheem defines his sense of identity - so decisively, in fact, that he adopts its very signifiers "LOVE" and "HATE" as salient features of his self-expressive style - terminally relegates both society and the individual subject to the "STATIC" resulting from irreconcilable moral antinomies locked in interminable conflict" (p. 63). In Radio Raheem's transmission of "Fight the Power" through his radio, we see his war-cry fittingly signifies the moral polarization inside which he understands his own being, the soul of his community, and cultural struggle as a whole, to be located.

In what I consider to be one of the most prolific scenes in the film, the exchange between Raheem and Mookie walks audience members through the twoness DuBois speaks of and more significantly, humanizes Radio Raheem. Raheem declares:

> Let me tell you the story of Right-Hand-Left-Hand - the tale of Good and Evil.....The story of Life is this: STATIC! One hand is always fighting the other. Left Hand Hate is kicking much ass and it looks like Right Hand Love is finished. Hold up. Stop the presses! The Right Hand is coming back! Yes, it's Love. Love has won. Left Hand Hate KO'ed by Love.

In the end Raheem chooses love over hate as the victor and his point of view in which he hopes to see the societal and cultural struggle. However, Lee confounds Raheem's perspective with his characterizations of his participation in the conflict leading up to his death outside Sal's Pizzeria. Although viewed through Lee's depiction and the gaze of the audience as unapproachable and mean, Radio Raheem certainly did not deserve to die. In a horrific depiction of a modern-day lynching, Radio Raheem is grabbed and subdued using the banned choke hold by four officers as they pull him off Sal. As witnesses stand by, contesting Raheem's treatment the camera shifts to a close-up shot or Raheem's left hand as HATE moves back and forth while Raheem fights for his life. LOVE has disappeared and in another close up shot, the audience see Raheem's dangling Nikes frantically moving until both feet stop moving.

As Raheem's lifeless body was met with a flurry of punches and kicks from the three officers, they decided to cover up his death by carrying and placing him in the back of a patrol car. The racial slurs that spewed from the officer's mouths situated the incident within the framing of public lynching. Once the officers speed off, the bystanders are paralyzed in horror of witnessing Raheem's death proclaiming; "it's murder…. Just like Elanor Bumpurs, murder, they did it again, just like Michael Stewart. Damn, it ain't safe in our own neighborhood," elders ML and Sweet Dick Willie argue. Today, over thirty-years later DTRT continues to have cultural, political, and social significance in the world. Originally, Spike Lee set out to address the vastly

changing cultural and political climate surrounding the New York, Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, however, the film is now an international representation of the violence Black Americans face at the hands of law enforcement and vigilantes. What transpired was one of the most prolific films in which Lee memorializes the deaths of Eleanor Bumpurs, Yusuf Hawkins, Michael Stewart, and Michael Griffith through the death of Radio Raheem.

Lee, in presenting the two slogans scribbled in graffiti writing, is what bell hooks terms "Counter-Hegemonic Art," a response to how mass media in the US controlled and manufactured racialized representation of Black folks involved in acts of violence, endlessly angry, and of Black women, men, children dying. The images become so repetitive and take place so frequently through television screens, audiences barely take notice. They then await some sort of intervention from the "hero" (usually a white man). The film overall is pushing against oppressions and the imaginative narrative realm runs parallel with the film's real-world events and political climate. The film also draws the audience into the ingredients of structural racism, arguing that the bad apples have all the power, and beneath these conditions, protests and resistance should not be a death sentence. Through an excavation of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X, the film also highlights two competing ideologies, segregation, and separatism; "we shall overcome" vs. '" he ballet or the bullet" embedded in the psyche of Black social thought. The two vying frameworks situate the film within W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness and has Guerrero (2001) notes, "Blacks in America continually feel their 'twoness — an American, A Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (p. 85). Spike Lee solidifies this notion of twoness in Black social thought, arguing in the epilogue of his production journal "in the end justice will prevail one way

or another. There are two paths to that. The way of King or the way of Malcolm" (Lee, Spike; Jones, Lisa, 1989, p. 316).

Throughout this chapter, I argued that Spike Lee leverages Blackness through the aesthetic of art displayed in DTRT. I contend that Lee's placement of art in the film holds a clear political and cultural agenda in which Lee continues grappling with his own double awareness. The film complicates the approaches of MLK and Malcolm X which highlights the dual and overlapping worlds of Blacks' experiences living in the US. The film relinquishes the Black subject from the multi-dimensional modes of resistance or acceptance regarding these two underlying narratives of ethical emancipation. The film's examination of compromise concerning "right thing"/wrong thing offers an understanding of dualism's indiscriminate and fabricated value to the politically oppressed. This is accomplished through the film's push to DUMP KOCH and by reminding us of all that "Twana Told the Truth," and that regardless of how people feel about Radio Raheem, he did not deserve to die.

Chapter 3: *New Black Aesthetics & Music in the Consciousness of the Spectator*

In this chapter, I examine two key components of the New Black Aesthetic (NBA) in Lee's film DTRT. First, I look at the incorporation of music as a theoretical instrument and its connection to shaping the Black experience. Lee draws on a combination of jazz, hip-hop, funk, blues, and classical music to symbolize the transition between the Civil Right Era and incoming post-Soul generation. Guerrero (2001) contends, "as with every other aspect of *Do the Right Thing,* the deployment of music is abundantly complex beyond its associations with the formal machinations of the classic Hollywood soundtrack" (p. 60). I argue that Spike Lee's meshing of blues, jazz, and hip-hop music runs parallel to the film's theme of a new Black aesthetic and his own experiences growing up in an Italian neighborhood.

Second, I analyze how Lee's incorporation of music also highlights what W.E.B Du Bois (1903) calls a 'twoness" or double consciousness' which he describes as "a sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (p. 9). For Blacks, Du Bois (1903) argues this 'twoness' "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (p. 38). The two worlds Du Bois speaks of allow Blacks to express and experience parameters of life that are not restricted to dualisms but are expansive, a point of contention present in the political messages via music and images produced throughout the film. Spike Lee uses Black music to give multivocal presence to his creative comprehension of New Blackness. Generally, this approach inherits three loose, and often intersecting, Black musical paths: commercial jazz-blues as a conventional vernacular; Black music as the representation of DTRT's Black past and

cultural plans; and rap music in the appearance of Public Enemy as the struggle music of a new generation of Black urban youth.

The combination of James Brown's soul music and Public Enemy's fighting lyrics declaring, "Our freedom of speech is freedom, or death / We got to fight the powers that be / Cause I'm Black and I'm Proud / Power to the People no delay" as Gibson (2017) proposes, "exemplifies Black Americans reconstituting expressions of Black consciousness while critically engaging in American politics that affect their communities" (p.184). Hence, the song also created Black dignity and declared love for oneself critical, once more. Black pride, as Public Enemy stated in many of their songs, was the motivation to maintain the practice of Black cultural consciousness significant in a moving society; they understood it was the only way Black America would progress socially, politically, and economically. David Sterritt (2013) noted, "The film's underscoring (background music) and source music (present in the world of the story) act out a complex dialogic pattern as different kinds of music intersect, contrast, and collide with one another and with the film's dialogue, sound design, and visual components, echoing three kinds of consciousness that coexist in the Bed-Stuy personality mix" (p. 50). Lee's decision to use Public Enemy's *Fight the Power* as the theme song propelled him into Black nationalist status, in addition to the "WE LOVE" musical mantra as a voice-over to a medley of community scenes and personalities, aired by Mister Senor Love Daddy:

> Thelonious Monk …Miles Davis…Aretha Franklin…Otis Redding…Bessie Smith…Duke Ellington…Sam Cooke…Bob Marley…Cannonball and Nat Adderley…Louis Armstrong…We want to thank you all for making our lives just a little brighter, here on WE LOVE radio. While many music's and styles are sampled

> throughout the film, the roll call voice-over keeps the focus on the Black musical tradition. (Guerrero, 2001, p. 60)

Hip-hop music represents the street folks, as the prevalence of rap on Radio Raheem's boom box suggests. In this mixture, hip-hop tracks are actually Dixon (1989) suggests, "incantations, chants which can correctly be seen as thematic variations on the question of power, racism, class" (p. 24).

The Connection of Environment, Perspective and Music

Like Spike Lee, Trey Ellis also grew up in a predominately white neighborhood. Ellis (1989) remembers:

> I grew up in the white, middle, and working-class suburbs around Ann Arbor, Michigan, and New Haven, Connecticut, while my mother and father worked their way through the University of Michigan and Yale. At public elementary school in Hamden, Connecticut, my sister, and I were the only Blacks not bused in from New Haven. It wasn't unusual to be called "or*o" and "ni**er" on the same day (p. 235).

Another way of thinking about the cultural mulatto is as a Black person who challenges the notions of authenticity based on one's geographic location or whether or not both parents are Black. In addition, the cultural mulatto is no longer constrained by definitions of Blackness that persist each piece any art, political beliefs, cultural shifts, perspectives of Blackness should solely benefit Black people or the Black cause. This way of thinking is what distinguishes the Civil Rights Era from the Post-Soul in which songs such as *Fight the Power* by public Enemy is a call for all to fight oppression. Through the intersection of W.E.B Du Bios' notion of double consciousness, Trey Ellis' notion of the New Black Aesthetic by way of the cultural mulatto, and Spike Lee' visual representation of these two cultural concepts, DTRT becomes the place where

all these concepts merge together. It is not unexpected then, that Trey Ellis considers Spike Lee as one today's most significant cultural mulattoes, a depiction Lee himself represents through his character Mookie, who maintains a complicated relationship with the Italian pizzeria owner Sal and his two sons.

As McKelly (1998) highlights, "the dramatic structure of *Do the Right Thing* situates Mookie, the film's protagonist played by Lee himself, in the midst of this architecture of polarities constructed around the cultural logic of "two-ness" (p. 66). Similarly, in the social and economic business of the community, Mookie is situated in an equally entrepreneurial position as the only Black worker of the only white-owned company in the area. The position itself, as a pizza delivery carrier, relies on his willingness to reconcile the contradictory metaphorical challenges of a white-owned business with a predominantly Black customer base.

In the *Criteria of Negro Art (1926)*, W.E.B. Du Bois asks:

> And then do you know what will be said? It is already saying. Just as soon as true Art emerges; just as soon as the Black artist appears, someone touches the race on the shoulder and says, "He did that because he was an American, not because he was a Negro; he was born here; he was trained here; he is not a Negro" -what is a Negro anyhow? He is just human; it is the kind of thing you ought to expect. (p. 297)

The Du Bois passage characterizes a complicated relationship between what it means to be Black in America, a Black American in relation to whiteness and a Black artist in America.

This passage is significant in several ways, one being Du Bois's reignition of how Black artists transcend racial restraints but more importantly, disrupt cultural norms. Du Bois highlights art as a form of expression bringing to light the dual worlds that Blacks face in an oppressive society focused on masking a history of Black captivity. In this passage the patriot seems

subjective, and erasure of all other contributions Blacks have made from enslaved labor, military service, scientific, cultural, and political contributions lost in the hegemonic webbing which maintains normalizing forms of power and violence. The true are' as Du Bois notes, tells a story of loss, perseverance, hopefulness and maintains remnants of cultural heritage severed during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. When Du Bois released *The Souls of Black Folk*, Negro spirituals, or "Sorrow Songs," had risen in what way as US musical popular culture. As a sequence of notes for each section in the text, Du Bois organized the music into different literary and academic scopes, eventually shifting the meaning of what a text could be by combining dialect and music in an innovative way.

The strategic way Du Bois constructed the text and music is significant because in a larger context, it shows white Americans that Blacks live in a world outside of what white society constitutes. Further, it illustrates that Black contributions to music and the arts linger in the consciousness of white Americans. In addition, as noted in "*Music More Ancient than Words": W.E.B. Du Bois's Theories on Africana Aurality,* Aaron Carter-Énỳi (2018) suggests that "even in a divided society following the U.S. government's disinvestment in Reconstruction and the sharp uptick in lynching and other forms of racial terror, the 'Negro folk-song' could not help but have a profound impact "as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas" (p. xiv). Specifically due to the hard work of Fisk's Jubilee Singers. Du Bois's decision to incorporate musical texts absent of lyrics at the beginning of each essay in *Souls* indicates a perspective of songs existing in a world–and having a value of their own.

Lee's incorporation of music, altering of space for the visage and opposition of various cultural and generational voices — which are significantly male represented — contradicts the advent of any particular emboldened voice. Theoretically, then, the film is a location of the

historical narratives, vocalized from the past. Put differently, the film's musical composition reverberates Black people's history and carries the narratives of enslaved Blacks in ways that reestablish voices that were suppressed — a characteristic anchored in the geography and resistance of rap representation. Although DTRT's implementation and goals are subtle at moments and not so philosophically suggestive, the film rejects the notion that the traditional observer is devised as inert and pacified by music of which they are unconscious. The audience is no longer passive but implicated in the messaging broadcast through Lee's use of various musical practices which resonate without requiring them to be culturally literate in the significance of music's metaphors.

Although the film's music can be understood predominantly in the musical sense void of cultural relationships, its incantation of musical composition that is noticeably established mainly in the experiences conveyed through Black culture, pushes the viewer to aggressively position themselves in contradiction of or within those conventions — prospectively, to be visibly conscious of the emblematically burdened morals of the musical text as a detached component in accumulation of the storyline's meaning. Through Lee's direction, the spectator is refined into understanding or knowledgeable consumers who become culturally etched in the interior or by the conversational control and social meaning of specific musical designs, and other spectators who are confronted to become knowledgeable to a discussion of artistic expressions that usually remains nonexistent or quiet from their realm of edifying — ideological function. Mystified reactions to DTRT's final scene and the metaphysical space that the various musical genres represent as a text, would appear to signal the disintegrated partiality, which is encouraged in the film's viewers, as constant mediation of the numerous musical vocal sounds of script is essential in order to fully comprehend the story. Finally, the question remains if musical content in DTRT

asks for an innovative kind of viewership, or a restructuring of traditional cinematic response separate from a standard of inactive consumption directed at the notion of engaged mediation of preestablished well-known texts, housed in an original pictorial framework.

Lee Spiked the Blues with HipHop and Jazz

As I mentioned earlier in this work, through his character's Isshee and Dewayne, Ellis makes central between these two characters, a debate around their opposing interpretations of Negritude. Character's Earle and Dorothy's understanding of Blackness progresses and transforms and Isshee and Dewayne present contrasting views of Black authenticity. Theorists such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Locke grappled with codifying the Black experience. Aime Cesaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor theorized about the Black experience through the "Negritude movement which Senghor suggests, is neither racialism nor self-negation. Yet it is not just affirmation; it is rooting oneself in oneself, and self-confirmation: confirmation of one's being. It is nothing more or less than what some English-speaking Africans have called the African personality" (Mills, Saylor, 2007, p. 3). Senghor also argues that by constructing the ideas of *Negritude* more meticulously, that Cesaire and himself, have developed it into a weapon for liberation and a gift to a humanism for the twentieth century.

Central in Senghor's argument is that many thinkers during the Enlightenment failed to consider humanism and critiques rationality as non-reflective of all human experiences. Senghor argues that African methods have already influenced this approach in Europe and the West through art, music, intellect, language, and experience. The method for Senghor in developing the concept of Negritude into a movement was by challenging existing perceptions of science. Through his artistic capabilities, political involvement and organizing, Senghor aimed to disrupt the idea that Western epistemologies and institutions as the gatekeepers of knowledge

production. Senghor "claims that Négritude is the embodiment of African cosmological approaches; these African approaches, he argues, are inherently holistic and integrative. They do not make artificial divisions between the material and spiritual worlds but see them as a continuous whole" (Mills, Saylor, 2007, p. 10). Put differently, objects seen as nonliving such as rocks, rivers, or material such as, trees, flowers and small animals all embody characteristics of the metaphysical and physical world. In conversation with Aime Cesaire and Léopold Sédar, Senghor, Chela Sandoval, and Amiri Baraka examine epistemology through the blues and jazz. The underlying theme among these theorists is that traces of the other have always been an influence in Western thinking and more attention should be aimed at this concept. I draw on this theoretical framing as a means to exploring the way Spike Lee utilizes music to define Blackness through aesthetics.

In his revolutionary work *Blues People: Negro Music in White America,* Amiri Baraka assembles the first complete critical and historical examination of jazz and blues music composed by Blacks. Baraka's approach is to highlight how music can be utilized as a means to measure the cultural assimilation of Africans in the United States during early 18th century to the 20th century. Baraka's controversial and intellectually dogmatic work challenged the ways in which whites see jazz and blues performed by Blacks and whites alike. Baraka (1963) argues, "that while the enslavement of Blacks devastated various conventional modes of artistic practices, Black creativity through music illustrates a particular African being in the world" (p. 25). Baraka does not view the blues as solely a musical expression but as particular moment of consciousness and origin of "African Americanness." In this sense, he highlights emancipation as the key moment when Blacks disengaged with white popular culture therefor, creating a counterculture of music. Baraka defines the blues as the beginning an instance of cultural

production, an instance that is characterized by the responses of Africans from various tribal factions to the conditions of systematic racism and subjugation in the United States.

As Baraka (1963) notoriously uttered, the period when the Black man in the field looked up and "shouted 'Oh Ahm tired a dis mess'… you can be sure he was an American" (p. xii). Further, he offers that it is through music that the African perspective of the world archives the historical narratives of an ostracized people. Moreover, Baraka suggests, although Blacks modified their tradition to the English vernacular and to Western musical devices and music arrangements, Blacks always sustained an ethnic perspective that protected and disseminated their music. Baraka accomplishes this by measuring jazz music performed by Black and white musicians during the 1920's and 1930's. Albert Murray (1970) views, "the blues—as ideology and practice—encompasses what is perhaps one of the most complex and fruitful analytic figures in the Black expressive tradition; it is a creative strategy of subsistence, resistance, power and transcendence that affirms humanity even in the face of the blues failure and existential absurdity" (Murray, 1970, p. 147). If the legitimacy of the blues is at stake based on it functions as a feasible approach to Black agency, then the stakes are high; nevertheless, the conversation encompassing the blues would barely be disputed.

As an artform, the blues is a practice of aesthetics, design, or what Murray (1970) calls "Stylization;" and as much art does, it shapes experience. What the blues portrays is an appreciation of life in the everyday aesthetics, organization, embodiment, intricacy, and meaning of human life itself. In *The Omni-American*, Murray (1970) contends that as an artform, the blues idiom by its very nature goes beyond the objective of making human existence bearable physically or psychologically. Murray's sense is that, at the core of any artistic expression, especially the blues and the least unessential purpose of all significant artistic manifestations,

being in the initial stages of creations or advanced is to make human life meaningful. Ellison (2001) defines the blues as “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from its a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (pp. 78-79). Ellison suggests, as an artform, the blues is an historical narrative of personal tragedy conveyed rhythmically.

Ultimately, Ellison’s poetic and enlightening description of the blues is plagued by his devotion to the predominately individualistic perspective of US culture and very sentimentalized idea of suffering's rehabilitative ability. Both Murry and Ellison’s construction of the blues, in hindsight, offer perspectives that the blues is established through epistemic movement, enigmatic or overt statis within classifications of significance, as much as its ability for superficial disorganization. The blues moves beyond a narrow viewpoint of pain, suffering, and endurance into the realm of embodying soul and goodness unbroken even in incredibly difficult conditions. This passion for some to ponder the construction of what the worldview ought to be and how individuals should exist in it implies that “blues people” consistently interrupt prevailing discourses. The gatekeepers of stylization, rhythms, soul, embodiment, and all other modalities that make up the blues people act as shields between the two conscious worlds DuBois speaks of while allowing the blues to expand its reach into other genres of music and transform everyday life. In all, the blues asserts one’s calamity instead of being consumed or silenced by it.

In Spike Lee's DTRT, there is a clear combination of classical, Blues, Jazz, and HipHop music. The intersectional implementation of music and narrative come together to establish one unified voice with an intricate text which examines systemic violence, art, shift in Black consciousness, and how that Black consciousness influences white society. Lee reconstructs tradition in a historical style to situate audiences within the film's narrative. As noted by Victoria E. Johnson (1997) in *Polyphony and Cultural Expression*, Lee's "expansion of traditional classical musical and visual expectations joins other musical traditions such as jazz, radio, and rap with camera movement and visual design to visibly depart from the classical idiom" (p. 52). While Lee's classical approaches are evident in the film, the total impact of his layering is one obstacle to those beliefs and to obscure style. Considerably, DTRT exemplifies Lee's most comprehensible application of music as engaging with a critical instrument of visual interpretation and cinematic, political trepidations. Songs such as *Fight the Power* performed by Public Enemy, function as the musical signifier for the political intent of the film, which embraces a new generation of rap music and style. The song which includes samples from Sly Johnson's *Different Strokes* (1967), Sly & the Family Stone's *Sing a Simple Song* (1968), James Brown's *Funky Drummer* (1970), and The Isley Brother's *Fight the Power* (1975) symbolizes Black history and struggle —Black popular culture and musical aesthetic designs which can be

Figure 7I mage Courtesy: Universal; a Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks production; a Spike Lee joint; produced, written, and directed by Spike Lee.

curated, promoted, and consumed by a large audience throughout film.

At the other end of the spectrum, the DTRT music score written and arranged by Spike Lee's father, Bill Lee, embodies the soul of jazz with artists, Branford Marsalis (on tenor and soprano), the leader of the jazz group which also includes trumpeters, Terence Blanchard and Marlon Jordan, altoist Donald Harrison, either Kenny Barron or James Williams on piano, bassist Robert Hurst and drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts. Collectively, the DTRT soundtrack and music score merge together jazz, rhythm, and blues, and Hip-Hop in ways that run parallel with the storyline. Within the framework of a new Black aesthetic, Lee not only aims to create a film that is widely consumed by all audiences but in addition, aims to shift the narrative of Black stereotypes represented in blaxploitation films of the 1970s. Prior to the opening scene of the film, Branford Marsalis plays a somber rendition of *Lift Every Voice and Sing* as the Forty Acres and A Mule Filmworks Production signage and notable "A Spike Lee Joint" credit is displayed. Then after a moment of abrupt darkness, actress Rosie Perez appears and performs a powerful dance routine to Public Enemy's *Fight the Power*. The abrupt transitional moment between Branford Marsalis' rendition of *Lift Every Voice and Sing* and Rosie Perez's opening dance scene to *Fight the Power* sets the tone for the aesthetics and artistry consistent throughout the film. The opening scene centers Rosie Perez within the frame of the film and more significantly, situates the audience within the immediate and corresponding association among the film's pictorial image and musical soundtrack. The abrupt shift from *Lift Every Voice and Sing* to *Fight the Power* is emblematic of emerging differences between the Civil Right generation and post-Soul babies of the 1980s.

Epilogue- The Tale of Three Brothers Radio Raheem, Eric Garner and George Floyd

It was 33 years ago when Radio Raheem played by the late Bill Nunn (2016) was choked to death in one of the final scenes in *Do the Right Thing* (1989). Inspired by the death of graffiti artist Michael Stewart (1983), who was strangled to death by New York city transit police, Radio Raheem's character as McKelly (1998) notes, "embodies individually, the moral dualism "love/hate" which the heat and Senor Love Daddy mutually delineate" (p. 217). One underlining moral dilemma present throughout the film questions if "doing the right thing" means bringing about political and social change through economic success or resistance. Hence, the two rings with "Love" and "Hate" inscribed in them. On the other hand, as William Bartley (2006) points out, "the spirit of retributive justice lies under the rubric of "progress." It is the will to do what is necessary, in violent self-defense, to bring an end to oppression, in defiance, if necessary, of precedent, of routine allegiances, and of customary social practices" (p. 18). The moral compass Radio Raheem tells in this context is extremely compelling. Within it, "good" is not, " merely recognizable and unconditional, but eventually more compelling than "evil," which, similarly, is just as pure and clear. The belief and simplicity of this interpretation are effective. However, the film muddles Radio Raheem's image with its portrayals of his role in the altercation at Sal's Famous Pizzeria and his unprovoked killing at the hands of the police. It is not clear that Radio Raheem is purely "good," according to Lee's highly editorial notes for the conflict with Sal. What is clear, however, is that Radio Raheem's actions that evening should not have resulted in his death.

Eventually, of course, Mookie himself has a more important right to "fighting the power" following the moment Radio Raheem is killed because he ascends to the opportunity at an instant of legitimate crisis. Now, a distinct feeling of community emerges with its own applicable public

traditions. Because of this predicament, the nonwhite community, now impulsively cognizant of its need to guard itself, reimagines itself in response to a shared memory of its past association to white authority, as signified by the display of neighborhood men who openly and ritually repeat, each in turn, a list of police crimes: “Murder, they did it again, just like Michael Stewart; Murder, Eleanor Bumpers, Murder!” Mookie, in instigating the annihilation of Sal's, whether or not it matters as doing the right thing, has also characteristically begun the exclusion of whites from a neighborhood that now mistrusts any talk of difference- shade universals in support of traditionally originated, racial-explicit differences as the crucial foundation of community. Thus, as the film portrays it, Bed-Stuy develops into what Linda Hutcheon (2006) calls a “postmodernist contradiction,” a "declaration not of concentrated sameness but of decentralized community" (p. 18) which, in its insistence on a plurality of differences, uncovers the established binary obstructions by means of which the cultural hegemony assures homogeneity and continues the status quo of its dominance. Robin R. Means Colemans and Janice D. Hamlet (2007) remind us in *Fight the Power*,

> As a film director, producer, screenwriter, author, educator and public speaker, Lee asks much of his audiences-to think, to choose sides, to “wake up”-to the racial, social, political, economic, gendered, and class issues that have troubled American society for over three decades (p. xix).

The death of Radio Raheem is a visual ask for the audience to understand the immediate importance of systemic violence at the hands of police. DTRT is a prophetic film in the sense that Radio Raheem’s death took place several years before the horrific moment that the world watched as Rodney King (1992) was severely beaten by several Los Angeles police officers which was videotaped; and the chokehold, utilized by New York City police that killed Latinx

security guard Anthony Baez (1994), was banned in New York City. Unfortunately, 20 years later, the Black vender Eric Garner (2014) was killed using the same banned chokehold. Garner, a 43-year-old Black man, had broken up a fight between two people and was questioned by the police about the suspicion of selling untaxed, loose cigarettes on a sidewalk. Garner pleaded "I can't breathe" 11 times before going unconscious, then dying. Ramsey Orta, a 22-year-old bystander, captured the death on his cell phone. Garner's death was blamed on his poor health. Four years after the death of Eric Garner, George Floyd was choked to death by Officer Derek Chauvin. On May 25, Minneapolis police officers arrested George Floyd (2020), a 46-year-old Black man, after a convenience store employee called 911 and told the police that Mr. Floyd had bought cigarettes with a counterfeit $20 bill. Seventeen minutes after the first squad car arrived at the scene, George Floyd was unconscious and pinned beneath three police officers, showing no signs of life. The world witnessed as Chauvin suffocated George Floyd to death.

Derek Chauvin, who is white, pressed his knee into George Floyd's neck for at least eight minutes and 15 seconds. I watched as he took his last breath but not before he uttered "Mama, mama, mama!"

Mia Moody-Ramirez and Hazel Cole (2018) highlight in *Victim Blaming in Twitter Users' Framing of Eric Garner and Michael Brown*:

> Michael Brown and Eric Garner are part of a growing number of Black people killed by police officers. According to MappingViolence.org, police officers killed at least 102 unarmed Black people in 2015, more than any other race. Nearly one in three Black people killed by police officers in 2015 were identified as unarmed, and 37% of unarmed people killed by police were Black in 2015 despite Black people being only 13% of the population in the United States (p. 385).

Since the deaths of Brown, Garner, and Floyd, many other innocent Black people have died at the hands of law enforcement. As a cultural messenger, Lee's visual texts introduce questions. What cultural meaning does Lee embed in these reconstructions of representations? What are we to gain from Lee's discourses, — opposition, frustrations, illumination, confirmations, and equality?

Twenty-seven years after the release of DTRT, Bill Nunn's (Radio Raheem) passing on September 2016, several months before the election once more, felt prophetic of the circumstances Lee highlighted in DTRT. Raheem's death, Lee claims, "was a fictional restatement of what had come before" (Lee explains above in the 30th anniversary commentary on the film (2020). Lee continues:

> I'm renaming this 'Anatomy of a Murder,' he says, explaining how he based the scene of Raheem's death on the 1983 killing of graffiti artist Michael Stewart, who was strangled by 11 NYC transit officers. "The things that are happening in this film," he says, "are still relevant today." Lee then addresses the death of Eric Garner, killed in the same way as Raheem. Now we have seen the murder of George Floyd, asphyxiated with a knee to the neck (Open Culture, 2020, p. 1).

These on-camera murders are distressing, but Lee has not avoided the power of documentary imagery. Lee's courage to utilize painful, real-life footage as he did in *BlackkKlansman,* detailed the murder of anti-racist activist Heather Heyer in Charlottesville. Lee's decision to use real-life footage didn't go without controversy. However, Lee has once more used real-life footage of racially motivated killings, this time by the police, and cut them together with fiction, editing together the death of Raheem with the deaths of Garner and Floyd.

Naming the short film *3 Brothers*, Lee opens with the question, "Will History Stop Repeating Itself?" Lee premiered the film on the CNN special, *I Can't Breathe: Black Men*

Living & Dying in America. The increasing consequences of history are vital to knowing the current state we are in, he says. The anger and protest on streets around the world are not a reaction to a single moment—they are a conflict with hundreds of years of violent control over Black bodies, a state of issues always involving murder with no restraint. "The attack on Black bodies has been here from the get-go," Lee says. Lee's short was difficult for me to watch, and I don't blame anyone who never wants to see this footage again. The murders of persons, defenseless Black men, women, children by groups of officers have taken on an unnerving repetitiveness in their similarity over time. "The killings caught on camera," writes historian Robert Greene II (2020), "offer a disturbing reminder of the numerous photographs of lynching's dispersed throughout the nation in the early twentieth century. Some were documented by the NAACP and presented as instances of American viciousness and savagery. Others, however, were highlighted on postcards and sent to white Americans throughout the country, small souvenirs of white terror" (p. 110). This disturbing past gives elevates a reasonable uncertainty about revealing videos of police murders. Are these pieces of proof of cruel injustice or racist kill films running on an infinite loop?

As in the lynching pictures, it hangs on the audience and the situation in which the videos are displayed. But when Spike Lee made *Do the Right Thing*—before-Rodney King and cell phone cameras—barely anyone outside of heavily policed Black communities personally witnessed the kind of violence that is now so disappointingly familiar in our news media. The death of Radio Raheem was devastating to viewers, as it was upsetting to the characters and continues, for those who grew up with the film, a moving cinematic benchmark of the time. It is truly heartbreaking and infuriating that such scenes have become commonplace currency on social media, instead of historical illustrations of the violence of the past—a narrative, as one

person wrote of the 1968 police killing of poet Henry Dumas, of "generations of lost potential." The deaths of the unarmed, innocent, gifted Black men, women, children at the hands of police should not only be of grave concern to Black people, but to the world.

The Protagonist: Who Launches the Garbage Can—Mookie or Spike Lee?

Robin Means Coleman and Janice D. Hamlet (2009) argue in *Fight the Power*, "Lee has examined and presented sensational, cultural, and philosophical ideas through a variety of outlets, ideas which have worked to inform the direction of cinema and Black cultural debate" (p. xxii) Much of the condemnation of the film has been phrased as an effort to explain the characters' intents, as though this would change how we see their actions. The significant action critics have concentrated on is Mookie's throwing a trash can through the window of the pizzeria. Lee and some of his critics have argued that the white media's reaction to the film mostly read Mookie's defacement as the key act of violence in the film (rather than the choking of a Radio Raheem by the white police). Some critics, taking the act out of its framework of the crowd's dismay and fury at witnessing Radio Raheem's tragic death, even stated that the film emboldened Black viewers to damage white-owned property. Other commentators (by far the minority) have proposed that by redirecting the crowd, Mookie is trying to save Sal's life. Driven by what Ramirez and Cole (2018) call "victim blaming of Blacks," this theme emerged quickly across media platforms. Malcolm X (2018) once stated, "The media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power" (p. 384). This power has increased significantly in the 21st century as images and reports of unarmed Black people killed by White police officers have become commonplace in mass media messages. Further, these instances of blaming connect to historical instances of representations of Black men particularly, being inherently aggressive and violent. Mookie's

moment of civil unrest in this moment (although the first significant outburst) becomes a means to shift the blame from the white officers who killed Radio Raheem to Mookie. Since Mookie's character appeals to a wide audience, the shifting of blame soothes the guilt of some audience members and resonates with others.

Adams-Price, Dalton, and Sumrall (2004) contend that victim blaming has historically been related to defensive attributions (p. 289). Adams-Price et al. (2004) adds that one of the principal problems in victim blaming is the differentiating between "blame and responsibility" (p. 290). Blame is "an attributional function: when someone is blamed for an accident, they are viewed as part of the cause of the accident" (p. 290). The first sense, to be sure, is clearly ridiculous, and the concluding is merely not there on the screen. Mookie's act may (and likely does) save Sal's life, but we have no entry to Mookie's inner life—because the film has made sure that we don't—so we cannot speak to his intents. All we have to go on is his action. Like the statement "I am in pain," at risk here is whether pragmatic interpretations can fulfill epistemological fears. And what is at risk in that question is whether our empirical connection to one another is something that can be reassured by those epistemological concerns.

As Kelley reminds us, if Mookie's violent act were construed as *Do the Right Thing's* presiding symbolic image and the univocal consummation of Lee's "intent" as auteur, then bell hooks would be correct in stating that "the film denies the problematical nature of identity and offers a simplistic view that would have skin color be all-encompassing" (hooks, 177). The image would then signify the protagonist's unique, conclusive determination of one of two conflicting metanarratives of resistance and therefore establish a reproduction of "the right thing." But if Mookie's act is realized as simply the first term, so to speak, of a mutual, deceptive act of radical Signifyin(g) in the Gatesian sense, a different picture emerges.

In categorizing Mookie as the "wavering hero," Bartley (2006) claims that this instance is one of the undeniable perceptions of the past relationship --it is the destiny of the contemporary, post-revolutionary self to be wedged between past, given conditions and future opportunity and to be continually replacing between them. The wavering hero is most alert to the conflicts this predicament necessarily sets in motion. However, as George Dekker (1987) adds in *The American Historical Romance*, there is more in store for 'wavering heroes:'

> seeking to mediate between the two, these characters are often torn apart in the process. Often, too, it is their very involvement with more than one camp that precipitates the catastrophe for themselves or for others. (p. 53)

It is merely because of the tragedies they cause that the relative worth of the conflicting situations is exposed even as they are pushed to choose between them. The concern over whether this single event in a two-hour film is intended to establish "doing the right thing," and whether the director's casting himself in this role suggest that Spike Lee as well as Mookie are somehow emblematically perpetuating or sanctioning this act, replicates the white anxiety over what "power" would entail for an Black and the supposition that this power will be—undeniably, must be—ratified through violence. Mookie's action is not an act of power; it does not shift the composition of power in the neighborhood. To suggest that Lee thinks it does strikes me as inexplicable. Mookie's act is exactly the act of the powerless; it has spiritual but not political force. The annihilation of property does not, in itself, cause entry into the space of manifestations. Elizabeth Hope Finnegan (2011) argues:

> When Spike Lee (director) has Mookie (character) smash the plate glass window, he is perhaps rendering visible his own transgressive breaching of the (allegedly) transparent

boundary that exiles African America speech—and art—from the public realm. (pp. 86-87).

Hollywood is a public place from which Black expressions are largely omitted; in a way, the pizzeria is the solitary space in the film that offers (through the possession of private property, which affords the qualifications for admission to public space) a stage from which an individual can "legitimately" express from and in and to the public sphere. Although Lee's position, even in 1989, was scarcely that of a disregarded Hollywood outcast—the film was dispersed by Universal Studios, after all—he nevertheless was (and continues to be) one of the few Black directors whose films have gained mainstream awareness. Despite Lee's consequent accomplishment and cultural power, Black film artists in general—directors, writers, actors, cinematographers—continue to be a small minority in Hollywood, often constrained by stereotypes of what is suitable for a Black narrative or persona. Ironically, if Lee's motion—making this film—thrives in breaking into a white-dominated sphere, this only underlines the disappointment of Mookie's action—tossing the garbage can—to do so. If anything shows that the character is not the on-screen stand-in for the director, it is the strong divergence between the action and the interpretation of the act: Mookie is, for all reasons, voiceless within the public space, but Lee surely is not. Mookie, in the end, is not the one whose film is under debate here. Today in the 21st century, Spike Lee continues to press the button on social issues; however, *Do the Right Thing*, Lee's most compelling work, continues to capture the past, present, and future of Black struggle.

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