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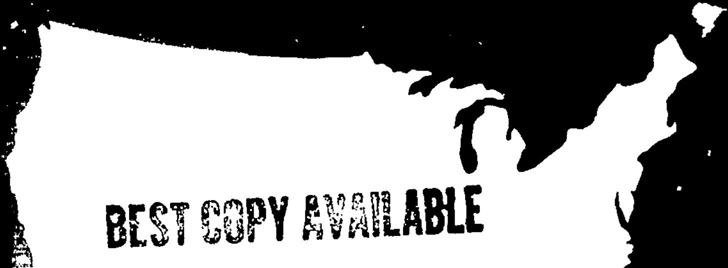
ABSTRACT

This monograph presents a critical essay and a comprehensive 454-item bibliography on the contemporary African-American filmmaker, Spike Lee. The essay, entitled "African-American Folklore and Cultural History in the Films of Spike Lee" (Gloria J. Gibson-Hudson), analyzes Lee's filmmaking approach from a cultural and historical perspective. The essay identifies Lee as a contemporary storyteller weaving his tales with the aid of a camera and demonstrates how his film narratives draw on both the historic and contemporary experiences of African Americans. The essay discusses five of Lee's films (made between 1984 and 1991) thematically, categorizing them under intra-racial issues and inter-racial issues. The bibliography (by Grace Jackson-Brown) provides citations from both scholarly and popular literature, encompassing newspaper articles, journal and magazine articles, chapters or sections from books, and reviews of films (most of the citations date from the last 5 years). The extensive 49-page bibliography is intended to be a comprehensive guide to literature that will assist students and researchers with an interest in Spike Lee. It is divided into six broad subject areas: Biography, Interviews, Production and Direction, Books and Book Reviews, Film Criticism and Film Reviews, and Entrepreneurship and Conduct of Life. (NKA)



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Spike Lee and Commentaries on His Work

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with the Assistance of
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A Martha C. Kraft
Professorship Publication

Indiana University

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Indiana University

Foreword

Spike Lee is the most prolific and controversial African American filmmaker of the 1980s and '90s. He has made five films, all of which have been successful both financially and aesthetically: *She's Gotta Have It* (1984), *School Daze* (1986), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), and *Jungle Fever* (1991). His sixth film, *Malcom X*, due to be released in November 1992, is eagerly anticipated by critics, film-study students, and the general public.

Because of his stature as a filmmaker, we decided to devote an expanded Occasional Paper to Spike Lee which contains two sections—a critical essay and a comprehensive bibliography. The essay analyzes Lee's filmmaking approach from a cultural and historical perspective, and the bibliography provides citations from scholarly and popular literature, encompassing newspaper articles, journal and magazine articles, and chapters or sections from books.

Finally, we wish to express our appreciation for the work of the two contributors to this special Occasional Paper, Gloria Gibson-Hudson and Grace Jackson-Brown, whose competent scholarship made this publication possible.

HERMAN HUDSON

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Photo: Hakim Rahsul

Gloria J. Gibson-Hudson is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Afro-American Studies and Assistant Director of the Black Film Center/Archive at Indiana University. She has conducted in-depth research and lectured extensively on the images of black women in film. She has published in *Wide Angle*, *New York Folklore*, and *The Western Journal of Black Studies* and has contributed chapters on film to two books. Gloria Gibson-Hudson received her Ph.D. from Indiana University-Bloomington in folklore and ethnomusicology with an emphasis on the use of music in film. For 1992-93 she was awarded a National Research Council fellowship to study films by women of the African diaspora.

African American Folklore and Cultural History in the Films of Spike Lee*

Gloria J. Gibson-Hudson

"Storytelling is a dynamic form of remembering /recreating." Barbara Christian

Introduction

In front of a crackling fire, many decades ago, African Americans would sit, gaze into the flames, and listen intensely to a storyteller weave a marvelous tale. Some of these narratives contained survivals from African folktales, others represented a unique synthesis of European and African motifs. Some narratives, however, were based on everyday personal experiences, including the relationship between slave and master. Many folktales and personal narratives were passed down from generation to generation and subsequently recorded and placed in collections. Scholars from various disciplines continue to analyze African American folktales, personal narratives, and folk music for their historic, folkloric, and cultural relevance.

Although research has demonstrated that folklore can function as an analytical tool to help understand and evaluate creative cultural expression within a historical context, the relationship between African American film, folklore, and cultural history has rarely been explored.[1]

*A version of this paper appears in *New York Folklore* Vol. 18, No. 1-2, 1992.

Recently, however, film scholars have called for a critical examination of African American cinema and its relationship to culture. Todd Boyd states: "What is needed is a clear articulation of African-American cinema within a culturally specific context so as to avoid imposing the dominant discourse upon a textual system to which it does not apply."[2] In line with this challenge, this paper approaches Spike Lee's work from a cultural perspective. The basic premise identifies Lee as a contemporary storyteller weaving his tales with the aid of a camera. His film narratives draw on both the historic and contemporary experiences of African Americans.

This investigation examines selected dominant themes that structure Lee's films: *She's Gotta Have It* (1984), *School Daze* (1986), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), and *Jungle Fever* (1991).[3] The analysis will demonstrate that Lee's themes are derived from African American cultural experiences and, further, that his themes reflect conceptualizations of black life found at the core of numerous African American folk traditions (music, folk narratives, jokes, etc.). A strictly thematic inquiry facilitates the analysis of the African American experiential relationships that exist in Lee's films as well as in other cultural creative expressions. The eminent scholar Houston Baker states of Lee's work: "His larger thematizations are what enable us to rank him among the creative company of blackamerican artists and intellectuals who have dedicated themselves and their works to cultural critique."[4] While this paper does not address plot development (chain of events), it does argue that Lee's thematic infrastructure (1) imparts cultural meaning in its own right over and above plot development and (2) evokes culture-specific images by presenting a unique synthesis of folk elements derived from everyday experiences.

The themes discussed in this article may be categorized under two major headings: intra-racial issues and inter-racial issues. These categories are not mutually exclusive. Intra-racial themes draw upon experiences such as color gradation, internalization of stereotypes, and the politics of identity within African American culture. Inter-racial themes explore the negative interactions between races, especially the effects of racism on African Americans.

In acknowledging the importance of Lee's themes, this analysis will demonstrate how the thematic infrastructure of Lee's work is derived from and informed by aspects of African American cultural history. The significance of this derivation resides in its ability to clarify aspects of African American culture for the viewer. As Baker observes: "Lee's films are not devastatingly original, telling us always things we do not know. What is striking about his work is that it is so thoroughly grounded in what we *all* know, but refuse to acknowledge or change."[5] This article concurs and maintains that the thematic use of folkloric and cultural elements within the film's context illuminates the folk-life experiences of African Americans. Moreover, Lee's use of folkloric elements functions as a creative mode of response to cultural and social conditions.

Lee's film themes incorporate aspects of cultural history mediated by African American folk traditions. Folklore functions as a mediator in that it reveals the "history of Black people in this country and their psychological reactions to the experience."[6] Scholar H. Nigel Thomas explains:

> To study folklore of black Americans is to examine their dreams, their aspirations, the mental curtains they designed to shut out the brutality of slave and postslave reality, the psychic wings on which they bore themselves temporarily away from oppressive pain, as well as the aesthetic objects—the blues, spirituals, folktales, toasts, etc. they fashion from their pain. Therefore, the study of black American folklore, is essentially a study of the survival of black people in America.[7]

Folklore, then, embodies shared cultural experiences. Awareness of the relationship between folklore and history heightens the understanding of African American social and cultural development through time. It also aids in the understanding of an evolving cultural identity, an important concern of Lee's films. As folklore scholar Simon Bronner states: "The center of folklore studies remains in tradition, in explaining human experience that takes the form of recurrent, expressive responses to social life and environment."[8]

A recent example of the folkloric approach used in literature studies is that employed by Thomas in his book *From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel.* In his analysis Thomas describes the means by which folklore and ritual are incorporated into African American literature not as isolated entities but rather as "an integral part of the quest of the characters and the revelation of the plot."[9] Thomas's analysis clearly demonstrates an intimate relationship between folk elements and literature.

In similar fashion, this paper asserts that Lee's use of folklore is central to the fabric of his films. In addition, analyzing the thematic structure of Lee's films within the context of African American cultural history enables us to recognize how his films correspond to other genres of African American expressive behavior and to see how these genres cross-pollinate. Scholars freely acknowledge the fact that "various artistic genres within cultures are not separate activities; rather they evolve from each other."[10]

The approach of this article, therefore, is not to critique the positive and negative attributes of Lee's individual films. (The bibliographic section of this publication contains numerous reviews and articles that provide in-depth criticism of his work.) Rather, this investigation seeks to uncover the dynamic, continual state of cross-pollination between African American folk traditions and cultural history and their creative manifestations within Lee's films. Cultural history and folklore, when viewed in concert, function to provide a powerful tool to depict Lee's work. Moreover, this analytical portrait suggests that Lee seeks not only to entertain but also to articulate the need for personal and communal enlightenment.[11]

Intra-racial Issues as Themes

Culture-specific interactions between African Americans—mates, friends, family and/or community members—constitute the conceptual framework for intra-racial themes. Lee's broad thematizations focus on attitudes, values, and subsequent behaviors that have an impact upon those relationships, such as sexism, intra-racial prejudice, the politics of identity, cultural devaluation, and internalized stereotypes. It is within the interpersonal intra-racial context that Lee transforms these and other issues derived from everyday reality into thematic structure. These issues are not mutually exclusive, nor can they be completely divorced from inter-racial reality. However, to isolate them demonstrates how they represent the cultural threads from which Lee composes his cinematic themes and how they form a kinship with other cultural creative expressions.

Intra-racial prejudice is deeply ingrained into the politics of identity and the fiber of African American cultural history. Moreover, the genesis of cultural identity is inextricably linked to the devastating experience of slavery, which helped form an ideology of identity perception. Miscegenation, perhaps more than any other agent, contributed to the development of a schism between light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks. The darker the individual, the more he or she was viewed as inferior and unattractive. Throughout African American history, attitudes of self-hatred and resentment have not diminished but, in fact, continue to thrive. Moreover, the adoption of a Eurocentric value system impedes individual and collective growth of African Americans. Scholars Geneva Gay and Willie Baber argue that African Americans need to be functionally bi-ethnic, Afrocentric and American. Further:

> The successful resolution of these challenges makes the difference between those Blacks who are psychologically encapsulated and

> politically impotent (i.e. those who suppress the African aspect of self) and those who are healthy and engage in purposeful, expressive action to define and advance all dimensions of their ethnicity.[12]

At one end of the continuum are African Americans who are knowledgeable and expressive of their heritage. At the other end are those who suppress their ethnicity and criticize others who choose to "be black" or "look black." Consequently, diverse themes addressing intra-racial prejudice are profoundly entrenched in numerous genres of folklore performance. Although the politics of identity shifted during the sixties toward an Afrocentric concept of self, vestiges of intra-racial prejudice still remain today.

In the chapter "A Nigger Ain't Shit: Self-Degrading Tales" in *Shuckin' and Jivin'*, Daryl Dance assembles narratives in which the evidence of intra-racial prejudice and self-hatred are illustrated. She states of this theme:

> Many jokes are intended solely for Black ears and contain severe criticism of alleged character defects in Blacks. Other tales ridicule the Black person's color and hair, apparently indicating an acceptance of them as badges of inferiority, or deal with the Black person's preference for things white.[13]

Stereotypes regarding skin color reflecting intra-racial prejudice permeate various folklore genres. Folk expressions such as "If you're brown—stick around, if you're yellow—you're mellow, if you're black—get back!" reflect Eurocentric values that are detrimental to self-affirmation and black solidarity.

The blues also provides commentary on skin color. Lawrence Levine states that "Brown was held up as the ideal in so many songs that it, rather than lighter shades, may have been the goal of those who used skin lighteners."[14] The following lyrics demonstrate how folk stereotypes were perpetuated by blacks through music. The lyrics of both of these blues songs represent a male perspective. However, the second song specifically identifies dark-skinned women as evil.

"Coon Song"

Coon, coon, coon, I wish my color would
    fade;
Coon, coon, coon, I'd like a different shade.
Coon, coon, coon, from mornin', night, and
    noon;
I wish I was a white man instead of a coon.

[Untitled]

Woh, I don't want no black woman, babe,
    to bake no bread for me,
Lord I don't want no black woman, yeah, to
    bake no bread for me,
Because black is evil. Lord, I'm 'fraid that
    she might poison me.[15]

Ethnomusicologists acknowledge the ability of music to reflect and reconstruct cultural history. Ethnomusicologist Alan P. Merriam posits: "Music is a part of culture, culture moves through time, and through music we can approach certain kinds of history."[16] Moreover, he maintains that "texts reflect mechanisms of psychological release and the prevailing attitudes and values of a culture."[17] Therefore, even though songs, jokes, and other expressions are sometimes performed in contexts of entertainment, they still function as social commentary. Most importantly, the deeply rooted prejudices found in everyday life and communicated in folklore performance "affected some of its victims to the point where they turned the hatred upon themselves and their peers."[18]

The theme and subsequent effects of intra-racial prejudice and the politics of identity are vividly portrayed in *School Daze* and *Jungle Fever*.[19] Both films capture the values associated with self-identity as they examine how those attitudes foster ill-will that impedes positive interpersonal development among African Americans. Racial stereotypes, which were perpetrated and perpetuated initially by whites, have been internalized by blacks and subsequently inflicted upon other black Americans.

School Daze is a multi-thematic, richly textured commentary that examines intra-racial prejudice. Toni Cade Bambara summarizes it succinctly: "*School Daze* takes a serio-comic look at caste, class, and gender contradictions among four rival groups of students: Da Naturals, the Gamma Rays, Da Fellas, and their frat members and pledges of Gamma Phi Gamma."[20] The major theme of the musical ingeniously pits the light-skinned Wannabees (want to be white) against the dark-skinned Jigaboos. Through verbal taunts, dialogue, and music, Lee exposes the innermost thoughts of these two groups. The psychological impact of color prejudice is juxtaposed with the behaviors of exclusion and self-hatred.

The music and lyrics of "Straight and Nappy: Good and Bad Hair" by Bill Lee communicate opposing ideologies of beauty and cultural consciousness. The Wannabees brag: "Don't you wish you had hair like this [straight], then the boys would give you a kiss," while the Jigaboos rebut: "If a fly should land on your head then I'm sure he'd break all his legs."[21] The issue here is not simply hair texture but cultural values, self-identity, and self-esteem. This song, as well as the film dialogue, demonstrates how Eurocentric values create a cultural schism that generates ethnic polarity.

The dramatization of intra-racial prejudice evokes a powerful audience response. For Lee, the relationship between film and audience becomes antiphonal. The audience is positioned inside the filmic experience, not outside. The concept of antiphonal interaction in African American expressive behavior acknowledges a "constant interaction between two sides of every performance frame."[22] As a dynamic interchange emerges, the theme excites personal and communal reflection and response.[23]

Conceptualizations regarding skin color are intricately linked to the issue of sexual desirability. Historically, the devaluation of black women, as well as the elevation of white women, has manifested itself in numerous ways. For example, during slavery, a visible difference between the treatment of male and female slaves existed. Feminist scholar bell hooks explains:

> The black male slave was primarily exploited as a laborer in the fields; the black female was exploited as a laborer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of white male sexual assault.[24]

Perhaps most troubling was the sexism levied against black women by black men. The devaluation of black women combined with an appreciation of Eurocentric standards of beauty placed the black woman at the bottom of social valuation.

In the chapter "Oh Lord, Will I Ever? The White Woman and the Black Man" (again, from *Shuckin' and Jivin'*), Dance acknowledges: "A popular folk motif is the Black man's preference for the forbidden white woman, a motif which at times, also includes the white woman's attraction to the tabooed Black man."[25] This attitude is realized in folk expressions such as "The only thing a Black woman can do for me is to lead me to a white woman" or "I don't haul no coal." Dance suggests that curiosity, proud revenge to finally partake of forbidden fruits, and preference of Eurocentric values of beauty have guided black men's desire for white women. One narrative states:

> This Black guy say, "I'm gon' get me a *white* woman, a *white* Cadillac, and a *white* suit, and ride down the roads o' Georgia in dat car!" The guy say, "Well, you go right ahead—you know what I'm go' do. I'm gon' get a *black* woman, a *black* Cadillac, a *black* suit, and ride down them same roads

> o' Georgia—and see your black ass hanging."[26]

The relationship between the devaluation of black women and intra-racial prejudice is graphically dramatized in *Jungle Fever*. Scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., states: "*Jungle Fever* is a film that explores the racial stereotypes and sexual taboos that Western culture . . . has found endlessly fascinating."[27] The scenario centers around Drew, a light-skinned woman, who is married to Flipper, a dark-skinned man. Problems erupt when he has an affair with a white woman. Even though the subject matter was "fascinating," because *Jungle Fever* addresses intra-racial prejudice and inter-racial love. the film was labeled controversial.

In a confrontation in Bloomingdales, Drew confronts Flipper's prejudicial attitudes, saying, "You've always had a problem with color." Drew understands the ramifications of sexual devaluation based on color prejudice. Even though she is light-skinned, she still is not white. Lee utilizes the theme of inter-racial love, color sensitivity, and crossing social boundaries to demonstrate how myths, taboos, and stereotypes can manipulate self-perception as well as inter-personal interaction.

African American women have been devalued because of physical attributes (skin color, hair texture, size), but they have also been stigmatized because of generalizations regarding their sexuality. Stereotypes concerning black women's insatiable sexual desire have also permeated numerous genres of folklore. In addition, many film characters, from Lydia in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to Dorothy Dandridge in *Carmen Jones* (1951) to

Pam Grier in *Coffee* (1973), suggest that black women are sexually promiscuous. The following is an excerpt from the folktale "That Las' Dude":

> This *very* huge Black woman was washing outside her old shack with a washboard, very scantily clothed. And these three salesmen passing by wanted to know the directions to the town. . . . One of them meddled, "Wonder if we can get a lil' action here." She said, "You kin get all the action you want if you just don't stop me from washing." So the first guy jumped on her back and he proceeded to backskuttle . . . and the second . . . and the third . . . and so finally they shoved the mule up to her and he worked out. And finally they said, "Do we owe you anything?" And she said, "Yeah, the name and address o' that las' dude!"[28]

Folk stereotypes concerning black women's sexuality become the focus of *She's Gotta Have It*. Nola Darling develops sexual relationships with three men. She then embarks upon a journey to convince others, and perhaps herself, that she is not a freak but a "normal," sexually active young woman (as normal as a sexually active and socially approved young man).

The thematic development of *She's Gotta Have It* has been analyzed variably from a feminist to a comedic perspective. However, the thematic core of the film examines stereotypes that comment on the sexuality of African American women. As Lee exposes the myth of black women's insatiable sexual appetite, he attempts to show that black women's desires as exemplified in Nola are not perverted. Most importantly, he calls attention to the fact that media and popular culture are not harmless. Many scholars, of course, debate whether Lee's development of this theme dispels stereotypes or actually helps to perpetuate them.

The theme of cultural devaluation as related to the plight of the black male is a prevalent issue in Lee's work. He positions this theme within the street culture from which it emanates. Current studies indicate that "institutional racism and economic marginality have forced Black males to disproportionately experience the ravages of inner city life."[29] Moreover, for many members of the underclass, "alcohol and drugs have traditionally been opiates used to ease the pain of their oppressed status."[30]

In his extensive research on black male populations, folklorist Roger Abrahams underscores the importance of investigating lore within its environmentally specific cultural context. In his two critically acclaimed studies, *Deep Down in the Jungle* and *Talking Black*, Abrahams assesses attitudes and behaviors prevalent in black male folk culture. His research, which evaluates their folklore expressions (jokes, toasts, dozens), demonstrates how black male conceptualizations of life inform their folklore performance. Specifically, as artistic, verbal performers, their expressive behavior intricately intertwines and vividly reflects aspects of their economic status and social marginalization.

Social marginalization, however, does not stifle creativity. Whether a preacher or a hustler:

> The artifice of Black communicative behavior is found in its ingenuity . . . and by such role functions as rhetorical leader, preacher, teacher, hustler, and the everyday "rapper." Black communication is truly the consummate art of articulation, and it involves form, performance, and functionality.[31]

Abrahams's research also identifies the black male as "performer." Moreover, the folklore performance embodies his need to maneuver and manipulate. Abrahams posits:

> Viewing life in terms of manipulation can lead to visions of infinite personal creativity, for the world may be shaped to one's own beautiful image, even if this usually occurs in dreams. Each encounter is potentially a manipulative act, and where one expects this kind of game of others and feels it is expected of him, life becomes in a sense a constant performance.[32]

Lee places the black male within a realistic context to examine the pressures that bear upon African American males. In every film Lee incorporates the theme of black male marginalization, directly linking it to the inconsistency in the American creed of equality. Mars (*She's Gotta Have It*), the inner-city brothers (*School Daze*), Mookie (*Do the Right Thing*), Giant (*Mo' Better Blues*), and Gator (*Jungle Fever*) are cultural performers, always appearing to be "on stage" as they attempt to manipulate those with whom they come in contact.

The theme of cultural devaluation demonstrates how they are caught within the grips of socially stifling environments. Theirs is a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty, and joblessness, with no focus on self-betterment. They seem to be content with their lives and do very little to improve their condition. These men are characters weighted with symbolic significance representative of black male subcultures. Work, fatherhood, and personal relationships become not opportunities for success but occasions where their individual social inadequacies unfold. Their condition is outlined in their in-group male conversations, which reflect issues that have an impact upon their lives. In each instance, as the character imparts information, he also seeks to entertain, manipulate, and/or impress. Sometimes his oral communication functions as a temporary release from his chaotic reality.

Mookie, a pizza delivery boy and unmarried father, manipulates his girlfriend and sister. Mars uses storytelling to win over Nola, proclaiming, "I saw Jesse Jackson walking down the block. . . . I said, Mr. Jackson, you would make a good president of these United States. A couple of years later he ran. I gave him the idea. It was me. Run, Jesse, run."[43] Giant manipulates Bleek to believe he can manage his career while he can't even manage his gambling obsession. Mars and Giant use boasting to enhance their self-portrait. Their communicative performance gives them a sense of personal power and status.

Perhaps most tragic of the male characters is Gator, who is placed within the context of street/drug culture. Through Gator, audiences understand that for addicts, "drug related behavior and the pursuit of the means necessary to sustain the drug-taking life style become the central life interests and the primary determinants of all social relations."[34] Interestingly, Gator uses "performance" (a little dance) and speech to manipulate his family to support his drug habit. *Jungle Fever* poignantly dramatizes that membership within drug culture results not only in physical or psychological dislocation but, for Gator, ultimately death.

Intra-racial prejudice, sexism, problems of identity and cultural devaluation are recurrent issues in African American folklore performance. These attitudes and values reflect those found in everyday interactions. These conceptualizations of black life not only permeate folklore performance but also become integral themes in Lee's films. As film refracts everyday reality, it provides the mechanism to discuss not only the film content but also the everyday reality from which the film emerges.

Inter-racial Issues as Themes

Racial intolerance, resistance to racial oppression, and economic exclusion from mainstream opportunities become powerful themes in Lee's films. As with his intra-racial themes, Lee's inter-racial themes draw upon a body of folkloric material. A preliminary examination of this material will clarify the importance of American attitudes toward race and inter-racial relationships.

Numerous genres of folklore performance provide a retrospective and contemporary look at the effects of racism. Music (rap), folk narratives, even jokes detail the horrors of racism. Dance explains:

> Although recently jokes about the white liberals have arisen, the white devil in Black folklore remains the cruel, racist, white Southerner, the harsh slave master, the unfeeling white boss, the brutal. sadistic white sheriff, the unjust white judge, and the ordinary, all-American white Christian who visits all manner of persecution onto his Black brother.[35]

The exploration of the effects of racism in African American folklore is extensive. The following narrative, although humorous, comments on the plight of the "have nots."

> A colored man was sittin' on the bus, and they had chinches in the cars. Say a white man was sittin' there—saw a chinch on the colored man's shoulder—so he walked up there and took 'im off. He [colored man] say, "Looka here! Looka Here! Yawl white folks don't wan' to see a nigger have nothin'. Put 'im back up there!"[36]

There is a real frustration with "not havin' nothin'." African American folklore captures not only the economic impact of racism but also the violence that accompanies the struggle for freedom. The following narrative, "The Suicide," communicates the penetrating effects of racism and the consequence of resistance to oppression.

> A Negro was pulled from a river in Mississippi. He had five stab wounds and two gunshot wounds in his head and chest.

> In addition, his feet had been set in concrete and his hands were tied. The sheriff called a Civil Rights leader and told him it was the worst case of suicide he'd ever seen.[37]

Some narratives warn protesters that liberation comes at a steep cost. Even so, narratives of resistance to oppression are an integral component of African American history and folklore.

In the chapter "Tales about the Cruelty of Whites," Dance discusses personal narratives that recount the deplorable treatment inflicted on black men by white men. More than just historical accounts, these narratives also function as a means of psychological relief from the obvious pain of prejudice. Dance comments on a group of black men in their seventies and eighties who recounted tales:

> They laughed uproariously at the end of the anecdote, and then they started talking about their own experiences with similar cruel bosses. . . . For one brief moment I saw in their faces the suffering of my people, I felt the magnitude of a pain so deep that none of them could ever have verbalized it.[38]

As has been indicated above, the primary agent of inter-racial conflict that has had diverse and prolonged effects on the status of African Americans is racism. *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing*, *Mo' Better Blues*, and *Jungle Fever* demonstrate that racism is not an abstract attitude of hatred against nonwhites but a philosophy of racial superiority imposed and legitimized by economic power. In 1903, the eminent black scholar W.E.B. DuBois wrote: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line."[39] This premonitory statement is as relevant now as it was in the early 1900s. Even if the ramifications of racism are less blatant today, they are no less damaging.

The struggle for economic and social justice continues to be a priority for African Americans. Persistent denial of economic opportunity has further intensified the schism between the "haves" and the "have nots." Researchers acknowledge that "The 1980s ended as a decade during which progress towards racial equality in economic life for black Americans as a group came to a grinding halt."[40] As racial inequality in economic life persists, the decay of the black community ensues, demonstrating that the effects of racism are quite pervasive.

In economic terms, then, the problem of the twenty-first century may well be the problem of the glass ceiling. Black Americans of all classes may perceive the possibility of a higher level of economic well-being, but access to that higher level is generally blocked by racist barriers. A look at economic opportunity through the glass ceiling too often discourages initiative and devalues accomplishment.

This common experience of black Americans in the workplace is used by Lee to fashion a motif of economic frustration. Mookie, the delivery boy in *Do the Right Thing*, is unlikely ever to become the proprietor of a pizzeria or even to share in the management of the one where he works. Flipper, the talented and productive architect in *Jungle Fever*, is denied the promotion that he believes his work merits. Much of the subsequent plot flows from the initial confrontation between Flipper with his white bosses:

> **Flipper**
> My contributions to this company's success speak for themselves. I've worked very hard, put in some very long hours.
>
> **Boss**
> We know that; we both know that.
>
> **Flipper**
> And now it is time for a vertical move. I've moved as lateral as I can go. The only fair thing to do is to accept me into the position as partner. I'm not making any demands.
>
> **Boss**
> You're not making any demands?
>
> **Flipper**
> I'm due. I deserve this. I'm the next one in line and besides you promised. . . .
>
> **Boss**
> I understand how anxious you are and how patient you've been. We can't do this now!
>
> **Flipper**
> Well, that really disappoints me. Ah . . . I can see you have no respect for me or my contributions to this company, so you force me to turn in my letter of resignation. I see

> I have no future here at Mast and Covingdon.[41]

No matter how talented an architect Flipper may be and no matter how much his productivity has contributed to the success of the business, he is barred from joining the upper echelons of the firm.

The theme of economic racism is also present in *Mo' Better Blues*. This film challenges institutional racism by suggesting that whites have historically controlled, and perhaps still do control, the major production and distribution of black music. This form of economic racism has historical validity. Jazz scholar Frank Kofsky acknowledges:

> With very minor exceptions, it is whites who do own the major economic institutions of the jazz world—the booking agencies, recording companies, nightclubs, festivals, magazines, radio stations, etc. Blacks own nothing but their own talent.[42]

In one key scene in *Mo' Better Blues*, Bleek confronts Moe and Josh, the white nightclub owners, to ask for a pay increase.

> **Bleek**
> I'm not happy at all. I came here to speak about the great sums of money you two are making off my music and the little I see in return.

> **Moe**
> You are mistaken, cuz you're talking 'bout management. Giant, your *manager*, was the one who negotiated this deal. One you agreed to. . . .
>
> **Bleek**
> I trust him. He's honest. I can't say that about you, Moe, or your first-class cousin.
>
> **Moe**
> *Nobody* can be trusted. Everybody *steals*. Everyone is *crooked*. The trick is to walk out of the deal with as much of your shirt on as possible.
>
> **Bleek**
> Y'know what that sounds like? Like the long, long history of Black artists being exploited.[13]

Lee then juxtaposes the economic rape of black music with emerging African American attitudes of apathy and ignorance regarding the importance of jazz. In an intense moment, Bleek vents his frustration and remarks to Shadow:

> I'm convinced Black folks are ignorant. We just plain are. I'm sick and tired of playing before everybody but my own people. They don't come out. We don't support our own. If Black artists, if I had to rely on niggers to eat, I'd starve to death. Jazz is our music,

> but we don't support it. It's sad, but true.[44]

Lee's message is echoed in a recent article on jazz by Levine. He charges that American society has not only neglected jazz but has also "pigeonholed it, stereotyped it, denigrated it, and distorted its meaning and its character."[45] Levine then challenges Americans "to make that empathetic leap and allow ourselves to see jazz as an integral vibrant part of American culture throughout this century. . . ."[46] While Levine addresses all Americans, Lee is especially concerned about the attitudes of African Americans. If white institutions control the production and distribution of jazz, and African Americans do not support it, the musician is placed in a precarious situation.

The theme of African American ignorance and apathy is also present in *School Daze*, where Lee addresses the issue of apartheid in South Africa. Some students are concerned but completely unaware of the condition of blacks in South Africa. Others are totally unconcerned because they have different priorities. Dap questions the student body, asking, "How is it those schools [Columbia, Harvard, Yale] that I mentioned have divested their money in South Africa and we backward Negroes here . . . are holding on to it like a wino who clutches his last bottle?"[47] Julian, a fraternity leader, retorts: "We don't approve of this African mumbo jumbo and we're here to let you know about it."[48] The stage is set for the two diametrically opposing views. By labeling the student body "backward Negroes," Lee questions black racial consciousness. He also draws attention to the plight of black South Africans, suggesting that African diasporic issues should concern everyone. Throughout the film, Dap challenges the student body "to wake up." Lee's message becomes a call for political awareness as the first step toward social maturation.

Themes of racial and economic oppression run throughout many of Lee's films. *Do the Right Thing*, however, is the film that most effectively communicates to the audience the explosive potential of racial conflict. Lee declares that the idea for *Do the Right Thing* grew out of the Howard Beach incident.[49] But he was also interested in the black underclass and the effects of economic marginalization. Lee explains:

> *Do the Right Thing* was not about Black people in three-piece suits going to work; it was about the black underclass in Bed-Stuy, a community that has some of the highest unemployment, infant mortality, and drug-related homicide in New York City. We're talking about people who live in the bowels of the socio-economic system, but live with dignity and humor.[50]

The scenario examines one hot day in a Bed-Stuy neighborhood. Ironically, even though the community is predominantly black, the local businesses are not black-owned. The vegetable market is operated by Koreans, and the primary setting, Sal's Famous Italian Pizzeria, is operated by Italian Americans. Tensions erupt after Buggin' Out and Radio Raheem demand that Sal place photos of prominent black leaders on his "Wall of Fame," rather than only photos of famous Italians and Italian Americans.

The conflict in *Do the Right Thing* is more deeply seated than the question of whose pictures will appear on the wall. Lee exposes and juxtaposes the structures of economic and social injustice. Does Sal, who has worked hard to build a business, have the right to place only his Italian heroes on the wall? What are the rights of the black patrons who spend their hard-earned money at Sal's pizzeria? Where are the black-owned businesses in the community? Who is being exploited? Who is oppressed? Ultimately, what is the right thing to do?

The personal becomes the political as the themes of racism and economic marginalization develop. By exposing questions that have only controversial and contentious answers, Lee examines the status quo with unflinching frankness. His audience is forced to see, to feel, to think. Through his craft as a storyteller, Lee breaks down the wall between filmmaker and spectator, between the world of art and the world of everyday reality. Once again, he draws the audience into an experience of action-participation in what is or what may be.

The theme of inter-racial love relationships appears in several of Lee's films. Sometimes it is a minor motif and sometimes it is the fulcrum of the plot for the entire film. The tension of black/white relationships operates as an undercurrent in *Do the Right Thing*. Mookie, the delivery boy, is incensed when he sees Sal, his boss, making advances to his sister Jade. Mookie confronts his sister and orders her not to see Sal. This theme also appears as a major and a minor element in *Jungle Fever*. As a minor element it involves the relationship between Paulie and Lucinda; however, the film focuses on the relationship between Angie and Flipper.

Jungle Fever poignantly examines racism within the familial and communal context. Lee dramatizes how racist attitudes can potentially erode interpersonal interactions. The film suggests that racism is not instinctual, but taught. Most importantly, *Jungle Fever* not only examines aggression between the races but also dramatizes the conflict of whites against each other as it functions to drive a wedge between Angie and her father and Paulie and his father.

In one of the most emotionally compelling scenes, Angie's father finds out she is sleeping with a black man. As he beats her mercilessly, he repeatedly screams, "I didn't raise you to go out with niggers!" After Angie's brothers pull him off her, he orders her out of the house.

Lee contrasts the effects of racism in the Italian household with the racial hatred displayed by Flipper's father when Flipper brings Angie to dinner. The Good Reverend Doctor Purify delivers an eloquent but searing statement recounting the horrors of white exploitation and cruelty. He then refuses to eat dinner with Angie and, referring to her as a whore, stalks out of the room. As in other Lee films, the personal becomes political, the familial becomes political, community interactions become political. *Jungle Fever* demonstrates that the family unit undergirds the community structure. Lee simply asks: "If both the familial and the communal succumb to racism and become dysfunctional, how will society move forward?"

In contrast to the realism of inter-racial conflict in Lee's films, the treatment of race relations in mainstream American cinema has generally avoided portraying the tensions and consequences of racial prejudice. Black film historian Donald Bogle summarizes the decade of the eighties, stating:

> The subtext of many Reagan era movies was that all was fine and dandy between the races, that racism had vanished, and that significant cultural distinctions and differences could be glossed over because they were just about nonexistent.[51]

While a probing examination of American racism is lacking in white mainstream historical and literary accounts, African American folklore traditions, oral histories, and films by Lee and other independent filmmakers have provided realistic commentary on race relations in America.

Conclusion

This paper defines Spike Lee as a cultural storyteller whose dramatic themes are derived from the lives of ordinary African Americans. As such, his films transmit cultural knowledge and stimulate political thought about what it means to be black in America. In particular, Lee's thematizations of black folklore represent a journey through the diverse quarters of everyday African American life experiences. Consequently, there is nothing "devastatingly original" in Spike Lee's films. He consciously and subconsciously manipulates distinctive themes found within cultural history and folklore performance. In addition, Lee's films, like other creative cultural expressions, employ an antiphonal structure that encourages introspection, dialogue, and perhaps political activism.

Undeniably, a dynamic interplay exists between Lee's cinematic themes and the documented themes prevalent in African American folklore and cultural history. These thematic commonalities represent observable and analyzable continuities. As scholars continue to develop means by which to analyze African American film, clearly cultural history, folk themes, and structures will emerge as key elements of the analysis. Much work needs to be done. Future research must continue to document how the use of African American folklore and cultural history function to signature the work of black filmmakers.[52]

Notes

I wish to extend my gratitude to Dr. William Wiggins, Jr., for his ever-present encouragement and for reading an early draft of this paper. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Herman Hudson for stimulating discussion of this material and for his editorial and research suggestions. Research for this article, in part, was supported by a grant awarded to the Department of Afro-American Studies (Indiana University) by the Ford Foundation.

1. In the 1980s two dissertations were written through the folklore department (Indiana University) that address the relationship between African American cinema, folklore, and cultural history: Adrienne Seward, "Early Black Film and Folk Tradition: An Interpretive Analysis of the Use of Folklore in Selected All Black Cast Feature Films" (1985), and Gloria Gibson-Hudson, "The Cultural Significance of Music to the Black Independent Filmmaker" (1987).

2. Todd Boyd, "The Meaning of the Blues," *Wide Angle: A Quarterly Journal of Film History, Theory, Criticism & Practice* 13:3 & 4 (July-October 1991): 59.

3. Lee's films are multi-thematic. Only select clips that illustrate the concept presented will be discussed. Future studies may provide more in-depth consideration to the relationship between film, folklore, and cultural history, not only in regard to theme but also in regard to filmic structure and aesthetics.

4. Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Spike Lee and the Commerce of Culture," *Black American Literature Forum* 25:2 (Summer 1991): 251.

5. Baker 252.

6. Daryl Cumber Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978) xvii.

7. H. Nigel Thomas, *From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 11-12.

8. Simon Bronner, *American Folklore Studies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986) 129.

9. Daryl Cumber Dance, "Learn It to the Younguns: Passing on Folk Wisdom," in H. Nigel Thomas, *From Folklore to Fiction* xi.

10. Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby, "From Backwoods to City Streets: The Afro-American Musical Journey," in Geneva Gay and Willie L. Baber, eds.,

Expressively Black: The Cultural Basis of Ethnic Identity (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1987) 111. See also a recent article by William Wiggins, Jr., entitled "Pilgrims, Crosses, and Faith: The Folk Dimensions of *Heaven Bound*," *Black American Literature Forum* 25 (Spring 1991): 93-101, which analyzes folk elements in the drama.

11. Future studies may also want to consider the cinematic objective of consciousness-raising in African American film and how this objective corresponds to film and/or folk expression within the African diaspora. Interestingly, Roger Abrahams notes in regard to African folktales, "[they] often end with 'a message,'a truth to remember as one confronts life's problems. . . they embody the inherited wisdom—social, personal, and moral—of the people whose world we see through the filter of folklore." *African Folktales: Traditional Stories of the Black World* xvi.

12. Geneva Gay and Willie Baber 350.

13. Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin'* 77-78.

14. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 287.

15. Levine 285.

16. Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 278.

17. Merriam 208. See also Portia Maultsby's article "Soul Music: Its Sociological and Political Significance in American Popular Culture" *Journal of Popular Culture* 17 (Fall 1983): 51-60, which draws a direct correlation between song texts and black nationalism of the sixties.

18. Levine 285. See also discussion of self-fulfilling prophecy in Richard T. Schaeffer's *Racial and Ethnic Groups*. His discussion entails an analysis of how individuals respond to stereotypes. In certain situations, individuals "respond to stereotypes and act on them, with the result that false definitions become accurate" (23).

19. Lee's work is generally considered "controversial." However, issues such as intra-racial prejudice have always been considered "controversial" within African American culture. One of the primary reasons his work may be viewed as "highly" controversial is because the medium of film is more expansive, reaching mass audiences, whereas other forms of folk expression are more localized and remain strictly "in-group." Overt expression to mainstream America is viewed by many African Americans as disturbing, threatening, and in some cases as a violation of cultural taboos.

20. Toni Cade Bambara, "Programming with *School Daze*." In Spike Lee and David Lee, *The Films of Spike Lee: Five for Five* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1991) 47.

21. Spike Lee and Lisa Jones, *Uplift the Race: The Construction of School Daze* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988) 155.

22. Barre Toelken, *The Dynamics of Folklore* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Company, 1979) 246.

23. For in-depth discussion of interactive, antiphonal response within African American cultural expression see Burnim and Maultsby, "From the Backwoods to City

Streets: The Afro-American Musical Journey," and Ceola Ross Baber, "The Artistry and Artifice of Black Communication," both in *Expressively Black*.

24. bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981) 22.

25. Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin'* 101.

26. Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin'* 107-108.

27. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "*Jungle Fever*; or, Guess Who's Not Coming to Dinner?" In Spike Lee and David Lee, *The Films of Spike Lee: Five for Five*, 164.

28. Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin'* 114.

29. Robert Staples, "Substance Abuse and the Black Family Crisis: An Overview," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 14 (1990): 198.

30. Staples 203.

31. Ceola Ross Baber 76.

32. Roger Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970) 33.

33. Spike Lee, *Spike Lee's Gotta Have It: Inside Guerrilla Filmmaking* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1987) 327.

34. Staples 199.

35. Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin'*, 165.

36. Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin'* 176.

37. Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin'* 173.

38. Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin'* 166.

39. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903) 78.

40. David H. Swinton, "The Economic Status of Black Americans During the 1980s: A Decade of Limited Progress," *The State of Black America: 1990* (New York: National Urban League, Inc., 1990) 25.

41. Taken from the soundtrack of *Jungle Fever*.

42. Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (New York: Pathfinder Press, Inc., 1970) 12.

43. Spike Lee and Lisa Jones, *Mo' Better Blues* 250.

44. Lee, *Mo Better Blues* 262.

45. Lawrence Levine, "Jazz and American Culture," *Journal of American Folklore* 102 (Jan.-March 1989): 6.

46. Lawrence Levine, "Jazz and American Culture" 20.

47. Spike Lee, *Uplift the Race* 187.

48. Spike Lee, *Uplift the Race* 190.

49. The Howard Beach Incident occurred in December 1986. The twenty-three-year-old black victim, Michael Griffith, was beaten and chased by a white gang. Griffith died when he ran out into the street and was struck by an oncoming car.

50. Spike Lee with Lisa Jones, *Do the Right Thing* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1989) 109.

51. Donald Bogle, "The New Black Cinema," *Spin Magazine* (Oct. 1990): 45.

52. Spencer William's *The Blood of Jesus*, Charles Burnett's *To Sleep with Anger*, and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* represent just a few films that are steeped in cultural history, folk music, and numerous dimensions of folklore.

Photo: Hakim Rahsul

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Bibliography on Spike Lee
(Shelton Jackson Lee, 1957-)
African American Filmmaker

Grace Jackson Brown

Introduction

Compilation for the "Bibliography on Spike Lee (Shelton Jackson Lee, 1957-)" began in late 1990. At the request of Dr. Herman Hudson, Dean for the Office of Afro-American Affairs, the "Bibliography on Spike Lee" was initiated by Wilmer Baatz, who served as the Indiana University Black Culture Center librarian for more than nineteen years. Mr. Baatz had compiled similar bibliographies in the subject area of Afro-American Studies. Mr. Baatz died on February 21, 1991, before completing the "Bibliography on Spike Lee." He is missed by his friends and colleagues and the generations of Indiana University students whom he served for many years. The bibliography has been updated through 1991. I would like to thank Jeffrey Graf, reference computing coordinator at Indiana University Main Library, for providing research assistance for the bibliography.

The "Bibliography on Spike Lee" documents the abundance of literature that was published on Spike Lee and his films during the extraordinary rise of his career as a filmmaker, especially during the five years from 1986 through 1991. A survey of periodical literature was conducted from 1980 through 1991. Only a few reviews and articles about Lee's work were published in the early eighties. Most of the citations in this publication date from the last five years of this period, during which time Lee directed five major films dealing with the African American cultural experience.

This compilation is intended to serve as a comprehensive guide to literature that will assist students and scholarly researchers with an interest in Spike Lee as director, actor, and entrepreneur. As the literature will attest, Lee's films have received acclaim among film critics and have been financial successes. However, Lee and his films are surrounded by controversy.

The "Bibliography on Spike Lee" encompasses the scholarly and popular literature that has been published on the filmmaker and his work. It includes newspaper articles, journal and magazine articles, and chapters or sections of books. By including academic and popular journalistic forms of film commentary, this bibliography aims at a middle ground, incorporating both wide-circulation periodicals and academic journals. The format of the bibliography is in accordance with the Modern Language Association (MLA) bibliographic style.

The bibliography is divided into six broad subject areas: "Biography," "Interviews," "Production and Direction," "Books and Book Reviews," "Film Criticism and Reviews," and "Entrepreneurship and Conduct of Life." The biography section includes factual and interpretive accounts of Spike Lee's life. Biographical reference books that contain information about Lee are included in the biography section. In the interview section are found citations of interviews with Lee (with the exception of a citation to an interview with prominent scholars and other professionals that discusses the portrayal of racism and violence in Lee's films). The production/direction category contains citations to literature that discusses Lee's career as filmmaker and his place within the recent emergence of African American directors in the Hollywood film industry. The books and book reviews section includes references to books that Lee has written or edited, in whole or in part, and reviews of those books. The film criticism and reviews section includes criticism and reviews of the seven films that Lee has directed, including the film on the life of Malcolm X, which was in production at the time of the publication of this bibliography. The entrepreneurship and conduct of life section covers references to literature about Lee's philanthropic, business, and sociopolitical activities. Bibliographic citations referenced in this work were reviewed or checked within several indices for accuracy by the compiler.

The following periodical indices for the years 1980 through 1991 were consulted in compiling the bibliography:

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Alternative Press Index
Art Index
Arts and Humanities Citation Index
Bibliographic Guide to Black Studies
Biography Index
Black Newspaper Index
Book Review Index
Books in Print
Business Periodicals Index
DataTimes
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