

CHAPTER NINE

Spike and Tyler's Beef: Blackness, Authenticity, and Discourses of Black Exceptionalism

—Karen M. Bowdre

Spike Lee made a name for himself inside and outside of Hollywood with the 1986 release of his independent film, *She's Gotta Have It*. Since that time, he has become one of the most prolific African American directors with films such as *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Malcolm X* (1992), and *Bamboozled* (2000). In May 2009, during the Black Enterprise Entrepreneurs Conference held in Detroit, Michigan, Lee was the keynote speaker at the Small Business Award Luncheon. During a discussion about Black media, Lee commented, "I think there's a lot of stuff out today that is coonery and buffoonery. I see ads for 'Meet the Browns' and 'House of Payne' and I'm scratching my head. We've got a black president and we're going back. The image is troubling and it harkens back to Amos 'n' Andy."¹

Though Lee did not mention him by name, he was singling out *Meet the Browns* and *House of Payne's* creator Tyler Perry in his criticism. Perry has captivated film audiences with his work since the introduction of his first scripted movie, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (Darren Grant, 2005). Perry's origins in Black theatre or the "Chitlin Circuit," his humor, and his often troubling class politics have irked many media critics.² However, Perry's success on stage (ticket sales, videos of the plays, and merchandise) provided him with the income, an estimated \$150 million a year, to create films. For the past ten years, Perry has directed, produced, and starred in at least one film a year, and most of these movies have been commercially successful earning over \$765 million to date. Perry's box-office receipts, along with his theatre ticket sales and television deals—most recently with the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN) and previously with TBS—have made him a media mogul and someone who cannot be ignored.³

Though there were other ways Lee's critique of Perry could have been framed, media outlets circulated a narrative which cast the comments as a type of problem or beef he has (or had) with Perry's work. Beef, according to the urban dictionary, is "to have a grudge or start one with another person."⁴ Yet professional jealousy, if this was indeed the case, is only part of the story. Though this may have been the first time Lee publically disparaged Perry's media productions, there are other issues at work here, including where his statement was made, in terms of both the type of the event and where the conference was held, and Lee's comments coming from a place of his expertise as a film and media director.

The months following Lee's statement, not surprisingly, brought a response from Perry. One of his early remarks elucidates the different approaches of the filmmakers. Perry observes that "it's attitudes like [Lee's] that make Hollywood think that these people do not exist and that's why there's no material speaking to them."⁵ Perry creates plays, films, and television shows that speak to his audience—mostly southern, Christian, African American women—in ways that Hollywood does not. While one can argue, as many have, that Perry's work lacks "quality," a term loaded with issues of class and taste, and trades on stereotypes, his films clearly have audiences, and those revenues have allowed him to make a number of films since his first in 2005. Perry's ascendance in several media venues should have engendered a more complicated examination of his products in relation to other directors. Instead, between 2009 (when Lee's comments about Perry first begin to circulate in the media) and 2013 (when the two state they reconciled), their comments were framed as a typical tabloid type of beef. Through an overview that focuses on these directors and the popular discourses that surround filmmakers in general, as well as how these conversations affect Black directors specifically, I argue that the beef between Lee and Perry is rooted in director discourses and the ways a director's blackness can often pivot around ideas of authenticity, region, and Black exceptionalism.

Where's the Beef?

The term "beef" was introduced in a Biggie Smalls song, "What's Beef," from his 1997 CD *Life After Death*. Since 1997, others have given their

definitions of the term, thereby expanding its meaning. In his examination of the term, Eli Sweet notes that while Smalls understood beef to be a "life or death battle that endangers even those around you," rapper Royce 5'9" describes beef as a "literary game written in rhyme and validated through belief."⁶ Sweet goes on to consider other nuances of beef:

Beefs are conflicts expressed through texts, but they are also conflicts about texts. In a song attacking another artist, a "beef track," a rapper often acknowledges the beef track of the other artist, as well as his magazine interviews and second hand comments. This recognition and response to texts is the essence of the discourse of beef—and the source of its power.⁷

Similar to the worlds of hip hop and rap, discussions that surround the beef between Lee and Perry are where power, notoriety, and potential marketability are located. Their beef, which uses films and other media products, along with interviews and comments about one another, feeds into a media construction of an exaggerated antagonism between two African American directors with a significant media presence. Since the late 1980s, Lee has been one of a handful of directors who has gotten "press, media, and academic attention to the point of saturation," as Wahneema Lubiano noted over thirty years ago.⁸ Currently, Perry incurs the same type of attention, though he is not the focus of a great deal of academic discourse. Moreover, their disagreement and the verbal shots that they made at one another and its coverage further illuminated how each man often overshadows the ability of other filmmakers to gain considerable media attention.⁹ And while this media scrutiny works well for both men, it obscures the creative work of several other Black directors.

Returning to the meaning of beef as a life and death battle, let's briefly consider that Lee does in fact view Perry as a threat. Perry's rise to prominence takes place at the same time Lee is having challenges with his films. Lee's recent movies have not done well at the box office, and the planned sequel to his biggest hit to date, *Inside Man* (2006), and a James Brown biography never came to fruition.¹⁰ Recently, Lee used Kickstarter, a platform for funding creative projects, to raise the money for *Da Sweet Blood of Jesus* (2014). He was able to raise \$1.25 million for the project and recently decided to distribute the film using Vimeo, a streaming service, a month prior to the film's theatrical debut. Lee

explained that he went with Kickstarter so he would have the freedom to make the film he desires, not one dictated by a studio. Though Lee does remain a creative force, his declining box-office and media presence make it understandable that he could be jealous of Perry's monetary success and media coverage. Moreover, based on his position as *the* Black director, he is well aware that his diminished media power could impact his ability to get future projects.

Using another definition for beef, it being more of a game than a life and death struggle, one could argue that Lee, who describes himself as an instigator, uses this aspect of his persona to maintain media attention as he publically criticizes the work of others.¹¹ Anyone who has followed Lee knows that he has had public squabbles with Quentin Tarantino, Clint Eastwood, Michael Rapaport, Samuel Jackson, and others. Thus, his "attack" on Perry could be more of a tactic to bring attention back to him. Lastly, Lee could have been offering commentary on Perry's work based on his "expertise" as a filmmaker and teacher with an extensive knowledge pertaining to historical Black images. If his comments had not been made in a public forum, they could have been interpreted as Lee trying to teach Perry how his media products replicate older forms of Black humor that are often associated with minstrelsy. Though the public nature of Lee's criticism makes it difficult to frame this as a potential teachable moment, if either man had utilized a different approach, this conversation could have been kept between them and not fodder for tabloids.

Perry's responses to Lee align more with traditional notions of beef—that is, a grudge against another person. He was upset about Lee's comments and, like Lee, made his feelings known in public media venues. His initial response to Lee occurs in 2009 during a *60 Minutes* interview with Byron Pitts. During the course of that interview, Perry mentions how he is "pissed" and "insulted" by the attitudes of Lee and others about his work.¹² He also makes the insightful observation, quoted earlier, that those who belittle his work also ignore and disregard his audience. Then, two years later, while promoting the film, *Tyler Perry's Madea's Big Happy Family* (Tyler Perry, 2011), Perry reacts to Lee much more aggressively, stating, "Spike can go straight to hell!"¹³ It appears that Perry had become exasperated not only by Lee's comments but also by how his press junket for *Madea's Big Happy Family* becomes an occasion to focus

on Lee's opinion and not his film. During this response, Perry discusses Lee and his tendency to talk unfavorably about others: "I'm so sick of hearing about damn Spike Lee," Perry said. "Spike can go straight to hell! You can print that. I am sick of him talking about me, I am sick of him saying, 'this is a coon, this is a buffoon.' I am sick of him—he talked about Whoopi, he talked about Oprah, he talked about me, he talked about Clint Eastwood. Spike needs to shut the hell up!" From his outburst, it's clear both Lee and his critique have touched a nerve due to his re-articulation of Lee's criticism. Then, Perry adds that Lee should stop talking about others and stop talking altogether. Finally, Perry's "allowing" the press to print and circulate his comments speaks to his own awareness of the media and their framing of the beef. Needless to say, Perry's response this time garnered more media attention, and the beef between these two Black directors continued.

Discourses of Authorship

Even among people who do not study or review films, there is an understanding of the importance of the role of the director in the film process. This notion has circulated in popular culture for over fifty years and exists today because of academic and critical reconsiderations of the director in the 1950s and '60s.¹⁴ French critics, after viewing Hollywood films from the 1930–50s, developed the idea that film is the creative vision of one sole author or auteur: the director.¹⁵ Since film is a collaborative process, this particular view has been and continues to be contested. Though the dispute over auteur theory continues in both academic and non-academic circles, its influence on popular discourses about directors is germane to this discussion because Perry and Lee are Black directors and, as such, have influence in Hollywood in ways that producers or writers often do not.

One of the problematic aspects regarding the cultural logic of director discourses is who is "allowed" to be labeled as such. French film critics who later became directors, such as François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, felt that certain directors created art in spite of Hollywood's studio system. However, there were also directors who were not worthy of the term.¹⁶ For many film critics, Perry is not a *real* director because

his films lack technical savvy and/or creativity. But as TreaAndrea M. Russworm mentioned in the introduction to this book, for Perry to be considered for critical praise and potential awards, his work would have to conform to "bourgeois aesthetic judgments."¹⁷ Perry has stated in an interview that he is not making his films for critics or critical acclaim; he is more than content to cater to his fan base than consider critics and their awards.¹⁸ Yet Perry's exclusion also reveals the slippery definitions of who is deemed extraordinary and does his/her work have distinct characteristics according to the taste of media critics.

Since Lee went to film school at New York University and his work has been praised as unique and highly stylized, his inclusion in auteur conversations is typically not contested. Yet, in spite of his films conforming to particular aesthetics, he has not received many award nominations for his work. Whereas Perry's lack of education and his affiliation with urban theatre or "Chitlin Circuit," which is often considered lowbrow, essentially eliminates him from significant director discourses. However, based on the control that Perry has over his films, his distribution deal with Lionsgate meant that he was free in creating his own content without studio interference. Within the studio system, most directors are given feedback from studio executives, but only important directors—auteurs—are allowed to disregard producer notes or are not given any notes at all. Thus, while some feel Perry's artistry is lacking, the power he wields places him in a conversation with other powerful and influential directors.¹⁹

The last troubling element of the centrality of the director within film discourses, especially when analyzing African American directors, is the media's tendency to focus almost all attention on one Black director, with other Black directors elided from conversations. There is a rich history of Black directors, including Julie Dash, Charles Burnett, Euzhan Palcy, Gordon Parks, and Sidney Poitier, to name just a few; many worked outside of Hollywood, a fact which gets eliminated from conversations about directors because of the focus on great men/individuals.²⁰ Moreover, the myopia of this mindset not only erases past African American directors, it also gives way to a "there can only be one" mentality about Black directors.²¹ While other African American directors get some media coverage if their films do well in festivals, with critics, or at the box office, they can still lack notoriety in spite of strong revenues, as

in the case of Tim Story, director of *Barbershop* (2002), *Fantastic Four* (2005), *Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007), *Think Like a Man* (2012), *Ride Along* (2014), and *Think Like a Man Too* (2014).²² Thus, Lee was the Black director, but his recent production struggles, coupled with the rise of Perry, have made the latter the new Black director, a kind of warped succession that continues focusing most media attention on one director and giving other African American filmmakers very little or significantly reduced coverage for their films.

Conflating Blackness

The idea of the director has had an interesting trajectory in African American communities because some were viewed as early race men as they combated the ways film was used as a tool of racist propaganda against Blacks. *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915), an adaptation of *The Clansman*, is the highly problematic and lauded film that propelled many African Americans to increase their filmmaking efforts to tell stories about Black people from a Black perspective.²³ Pioneers such as Oscar Micheaux and George and Noble Johnson established their own companies and produced their own films outside of the dominant system. The work of these independent Black filmmakers later becomes what historians classify as race films. Race films are movies that employed African American actors to tell stories about Black people. Though some companies that produced these films were controlled by whites and had white directors, the draw for many African American communities was seeing films that placed people who looked like them at the center of the narrative. Due to lack of capital and other resources, the production values for race films were not strong, but they did provide an alternative to mainstream films that would exclude Blacks most of the time or place them in secondary or tertiary roles.

The naming of motion pictures about African Americans as race films is reflective of the time and race relations. It also exposes the tendency in both commercial and academic communities, as well as industries like music, to pigeonhole products that do not feature white men as "other"—e.g., women's films and films categorized based on race,

ethnicity, or nationality.²⁴ Hence, Black films become a genre unto themselves, and in the latter part of the twentieth century, and when African Americans did direct films, most of those films are about blackness.²⁵

Films helmed by Blacks often presented a hope to African American audiences that blackness would be dealt beyond stereotypical stories and characters. Blackness is not a fixed term; as Herman Gray articulates, it is a "constellation of productions, histories, images, representations, and meanings associated with [a] black presence in the United States."²⁶ Although there is fluidity as well as competing claims to blackness and how it is defined, there is also a desire among some African Americans to rehabilitate or reimagine blackness outside of notions of white supremacy. Those hopes usually embody an eagerness to see a more "authentic" blackness that would portray positive and/or more complicated examinations of Black humanity that transcended what Stuart Hall calls a regime of racialized representation, racial stereotypes that persist over time.²⁷ Not surprisingly, Black audiences did not always view films from African American directors as steps towards making more productive images of blackness; these tensions inform another dimension concerning Lee and Perry's conflict.

Authenticity and Region

Debates about imagery also inform discussions about how directors qualify their blackness or demonstrate their credibility to tell stories about Black people. When Black directors create images that some deem to be questionable or contributing to the myriad of troubling Black characters and/or stories, his or her blackness is interrogated by critics and audiences. Hence, the question of what is Black, the positive/negative image dispute, moves to who is or is not truly Black. Similar to blackness, Black identity is also a contested definition. Sometimes "true" Black identity is defined on whether one dwells in the city or rural areas; one's class background or skin color; or one's ability to promote blackness through his/her talent and work.²⁸ When Lee aired "the dirty laundry" of colorism within the Black community in his film *School Daze* (1988), many felt he tore down African Americans and questioned his

blackness.²⁹ For Perry, his use of comedy (a genre with a complicated history and links to minstrelsy), Madea, and his class politics have been among the reasons why critics question his blackness.

Though blackness is a complex constellation, this fact does not stop people (including directors) from positioning themselves in relation to blackness or other markers of race or ethnicity (as well as excluding others). When critics question Perry about his legitimacy, he can claim an authentic blackness, or at least a relationship to blackness, due to his success in cultivating an audience that is largely African American and female. Obviously, this audience existed before but few media outlets were able to tap into it. Perry's financial success with this market now makes him the point of contact for other organizations wanting to financially capitalize on this group.³⁰

While Perry's associations with markets/audiences link him to a type of blackness, Lee's insistence of authenticity often lies in his claim that his films "tell the truth" about Black life in ways that most films, particularly those from white directors, do not.³¹ Lubiano interrogates Lee's position by illuminating how his truth claims purport to be "reality," when in fact reality within the context of narrative is "inherently problematic" because "realism poses a fundamental, longstanding challenge for counter-hegemonic discourses."³² Lee believes he is telling stories from a vantage point that privileges blackness, and in some cases parts of his films do this; however, realism "enforces an authoritative [or hegemonic] perspective."³³ Moreover, when Lee posits that his films are reality, his past position as *the* Black director with the greatest media presence has meant that other Black realities, especially those from African American women directors, are marginalized and greatly obscured.

In addition to these more commercial claims of Black authenticity, audiences, and filmic realism, there are also aspects of "true blackness" that come from a place of individual identity such as region. Important discussions about region have not factored into an analysis of blackness often due to the problem of African American communities being framed as singular without variation until recently. Riché Richardson demonstrates the significance of region in her book, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta*, through an examination of how Black men from this region have been constructed as problematic from the days of enslavement. Extremely negative discourses about

African American men started after slavery ended with the myth of the Black rapist being used in earnest later to counter Harriet Becher Stowe's Uncle Tom character.³⁴ Though these formulations started in white communities, Richardson maps how pathological perceptions of Black masculinity also circulate in many African American communities.³⁵ Her observations about Malcolm X and his construction of southern African American men provide insight about Lee and Perry, especially since Lee often frames his persona as a Black nationalist significantly influenced by Malcolm X.

Using his speeches, Richardson delineates how Malcolm X created a "discourse on authentic blackness and maleness" that established a "hierarchy of Black masculinity through a north-south binary."³⁶ He differentiated himself from Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights movement, which was based in the south, by constructing King and the movement with its focus on nonviolence and integration as "alien, inferior, and ineffective" for true liberation of African Americans. Though Malcolm X was born in Omaha, Nebraska, and lived briefly in Lansing, Michigan, before moving to Boston, the rural parts of his background are no longer an important part of his narrative once he joins the Nation of Islam. Malcolm X distinguished himself through his speeches as a "field Negro," with King and his allies drawn as "house Negroes" or "Uncle Toms."

Consciously or not, Lee, in his admiration of Malcolm X, appears to promote a hierarchical and regional view of authentic blackness in his films. Moreover, this particular notion of Black authenticity motivates his attacks on Perry. For Lee, Perry represents the southern Black man, an inauthentic "house Negro," making films that are not grounded in realism and in fact often are fantastic or escapist and cater to women. Returning to Lee's description of Perry's work as trafficking in stereotypes, it becomes evident that his initial concern about Perry operates on multiple levels. Perry can be a threat to Lee's media presence, as discussed earlier, as well as a danger because Perry does not, in Lee's opinion, create media products that promote the right type of blackness.

After his first public critique of Perry, Lee talked about Perry with Oprah Winfrey in November 2013. A few years removed from his back and forth with Perry, Lee told Winfrey that the two had resolved their differences and that "one day [they] might work together." Before this

revelation, Winfrey asked him about Perry, showing a segment with Perry and pointing out that their backgrounds are different from one another. Specifically, Perry is from the rural south and his parents were not highly educated, while Lee was raised in New York, his father was a musician, and his mother an educator. Interestingly, Lee did not want to affirm that their dissimilarities are motivated by regionalism; during the interview, Lee emphasized the southern influences in *his* life. Lee mostly explained that their difference in imagery is a matter of taste and style. As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu articulates, taste is linked to educational status and social origin; rarely is this term interrogated in venues outside of the academy.³⁷ Lee's attempt to mark his uniqueness from Perry as merely a stylistic choice elides his education and training as a filmmaker. While I am not suggesting that a film degree automatically makes one an exceptional director, it would be disingenuous to act as if Lee's training is not a factor in his style and a reason for his concern about Perry's. Comparatively, Perry's formal "training" was his early forays into theatre, specifically "urban theatre" or the "Chitlin Circuit." While Perry and Lee are indeed separated by their styles, Lee's candid conversation with Winfrey attempted to elide the class implications of taste, regional training, and style.

Directing Black Exceptionalism

The director discourses that often separate Lee and Perry from other Black directors function as a media-inspired form of Black exceptionalism. This trope or view of a Black woman or man as "exceptional" when compared to the rest of the race occurs when a person of African descent, who is gifted in intellect, musically and other arts, or in sports, is celebrated not only in African American communities but also in mainstream and white ones. Though this unique status may seem similar to the ways gifted people of European descent are written about, it is not. Black exceptionalism at its core espouses the notion of innate Black inferiority and is an unfortunate product of racism and white supremacy. According to this mindset, African Americans who accomplish notable feats are rare, and, in order to perpetuate the idea of these individuals being distinct from other Black people, exceptional Blacks are almost never

contextualized as products of their environment, particularly when their surroundings are composed of other people of color.³⁸ Importantly, this causes a type of erasure of other successful African Americans who were/are gifted in the same area as the newly discovered "exceptional Negro."

These ideals are also, of course, evident in the notion of talented tenth. Though W. E. B. Du Bois writings on the talented tenth are more well known, the idea originated with Henry Lyman Morehouse, a white man who developed this concept in response to Booker T. Washington's insistence that African Americans should only be exposed to an industrial or vocational curriculum and not college education. Morehouse, for whom Morehouse College is named, argued that there were some outstanding Blacks who needed to be college educated so they would be prepared for leadership.³⁹

Even before Du Bois elaborated further on the talented tenth in his essay from 1903, he and Washington were framed as leaders in the African American community by whites. To be clear, I am not saying these men were not leaders; rather, I intend only to stress that there were several Black leaders, some of whom were women, who had great influence among African American communities. Giving attention to one or two exceptional Black men further contributes to the ideology of exceptionalism because the majority of African Americans are understood as not only simply unremarkable but unintelligent and disposable. In the past, most mainstream newspapers focused exclusively on Du Bois and Washington as the leaders of the Black community because of their opposing views on education. In the 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X were cast as opponents to one another; also note that Du Bois and Malcolm X are aligned with the north, and Washington and King with the south. More recently, Professor Cornel West and media commentator Tavis Smiley have been viewed as foils and in opposition with President Barack Obama. This focus on one great Black man (maybe two) for a monolithic "Black community" continues to the present in politics and other social arenas. The notion of being extraordinary also has a specific resonance in Black communities aside from leadership. Since African Americans are familiar with structural inequality and racism, several generations of parents often taught/teach their children that in order to obtain employment, they must be twice as good as their white counterparts to get hired.⁴⁰

Though discourses of exceptionalism are sometimes intended to be complimentary to African American people, the persistence of these discourses perpetuates racial bias and deep-seated inequality. For example, the "exceptional Negro" also shares characteristics of a more recent media trope, the "Magical Negro," or Black characters with supernatural powers whose sole purpose are to assist the main (white) protagonist.⁴¹ Such characters mysteriously appear and disappear from the story so that it can be noted that "multicultural casting" has been achieved.

In Lee's early days as a filmmaker, he was framed using a similar logic and rhetoric. For example, reviews of his first film, *She's Gotta Have It*, place his work in conversation with white independent filmmakers like Woody Allen and Jim Jarmusch. In most of these reviews, there is no mention of other Black directors such as Oscar Micheaux, Melvin Van Peebles, or Gordon Parks.⁴² Though, as I have argued elsewhere, this may have been a strategy critics used to make Lee more palatable to art-house audiences, it still results in these same audiences not being educated about the breadth of African American directors. Further, during Lee's "discovery," there was no real acknowledgment of the LA Rebellion filmmakers and their work that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Similarly, almost twenty years after Lee's debut film, Perry's first film, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, was released. Perry did not direct this film but he wrote the screenplay and starred. The film ranked first in its opening weekend, and he became a compelling story of exceptionalism because the film's success took Hollywood insiders by surprise. Granted, two of the key reasons why most of Hollywood did not anticipate Perry was because they consistently ignored his audience of African American women, and because few knew of his success in theatre.

Lines of Symmetry

Beyond the discourses of exceptionalism that have informed their careers, Lee and Perry are more similar than dissimilar in various ways. While Lee believes his differences from Perry are extreme and aesthetic, neither director has successfully portrayed complicated Black women. Though Perry verbally praises Black women, *Madea* (Tyler Perry) and many of his other female characters often exacerbate racial regimes

of representation or gloss over severe trauma. Perry often dramatizes extreme trauma such as child molestation, generational sexual abuse, and domestic violence as obstacles his female protagonists can overcome through the love of a good man. *Tyler Perry's Madea's Family Reunion* (Tyler Perry, 2006) offers some crystallizing examples of Perry's typical representation of Black women. The film's protagonists are sisters, Vanessa (Lisa Arrindell Anderson) and Lisa (Rochelle Aytes), who are negotiating their romantic and family relationships. Vanessa despises her mother, Victoria (Lynn Whitfield), seemingly because her mother constantly belittles her and her young children. Later, audiences learn that Victoria allowed her husband, Vanessa's stepfather, to sexually abuse Vanessa as a child in order for Victoria to maintain her lifestyle. This knowledge is unveiled during a confrontation between Vanessa and Victoria where Lisa learns about her parents' behavior and her sister's abuse. Victoria also confesses that her mother was a prostitute and drug addict, who traded her for \$10 and some drugs. Vanessa admits she constantly worries about her children's safety and has difficulty allowing herself to be loved. She states that she has forgiven her mother, though the latter refuses to apologize for her behavior; later, the two physically fight one another after another one of Victoria's vicious comments. At the close of the film, Vanessa marries Frankie Henderson (Boris Kodjoe). When her mother approaches the bride and groom dance, Vanessa is able to hug/bless her in return.

In *Madea's Family Reunion* Vanessa's ability to truly forgive her mother and permit love into her life only occurs after her impromptu marriage. Though her boyfriend Frankie was present and physically pulls Vanessa away from her mother as they are fighting at the family reunion, a few scenes prior to the wedding, it appears the magic of marriage or at least the wedding enables supernatural forgiveness on Vanessa's part. Perry's use of marriage or love as a type of cure-all for serious trauma is part of his style; nevertheless, it could be beneficial for his audiences if he would use the didactic elements of his films to expand the possibilities, beyond catharsis and testimony, for those who have suffered from abuse.⁴³ Many of his viewers attend church, and though the stigma surrounding mental illness is decreasing in religious circles, Perry's suggestion of their behavior could encourage more engagement. Frankly put, women who have gone through the trauma that Vanessa, her mother,

and sister experience in the film should seek mental health treatment. And while being in loving relationships is important, learning how to cope with past abuse and anxiety from that abuse, as Vanessa has regarding the safety of her children, typically cannot be addressed by loved ones alone.⁴⁴

Similar to Perry, Lee often demonstrates his misunderstanding of powerful Black women. His breakout film, *She Gotta Have It*, masquerades as a woman's narrative of sexual empowerment when in actuality the film frames its protagonist, Nola Darling, through the eyes of her sexist suitors, who desire to date her exclusively and control her sexually. The film is consistently described as a romantic comedy yet it also features the protagonist being raped. Years later, Lee still struggles with female portrayals. The character of Sloan Hopkins (Jada Pinkett-Smith) in *Bamboozled* (2000) is clearly very intelligent and professional. She is the assistant of executive Pierre Delacroix or Dela (Damon Wayans), and Lee has described her character as being strong.⁴⁵ In this film, her boss, Dela, comes up with an idea that he hopes will get him fired so that he can be released from his contract. His twenty-first-century minstrelsy show becomes a runaway success, and Dela and Hopkins have to deal with the consequences. Throughout most of the film, Hopkins attentively keeps Dela abreast of his appointments, goes to meetings with him, and gets him coffee. She recruits the program's principal characters, Womack/Sleep 'n' Eat (Tommy Davidson) and Manray/Mantan (Savion Glover), and assists Dela in other aspects of production. Yet in spite of her hard work, when Hopkins and Dela clash over the program and the fact that he and his boss, Thomas Dunwitty (Michael Rappaport), feel she has gotten too close to Manray, he fires her. When Manray questions Dela about her dismissal, the latter disregards her past diligence for him and reveals she only obtained her job by sleeping with him.

Though Lee could have been trying to replicate a real-life problem in the entertainment industry, as Beretta E. Smith-Shomade suggests, it tremendously undermines the character.⁴⁶ Later in the film, Manray accuses Hopkins of only wanting to be with him to get his money, belittling her for sleeping with Dela. Whatever the reason Lee had for having Hopkins sleeping with Dela, the ramifications made her open to ridicule from her co-workers, Dela and Manray. And in the film's final sequence, where Manray is kidnapped and killed because his capturers believe he

is a sellout, Hopkins completely unravels. She shows up at Dela's office with a gun. When he tries to disarm her while she is telling him not to approach, she shoots him. But her reaction seems more passive and hysterical; he made her shoot him—instead of her intentionally shooting him for not complying with her demands. So, while the character may have started off as a different type of female character for Lee, Hopkins ends in madness and is therefore more consistent with Lee's problematic depictions of Black women in such films as *School Daze* (1988), *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), and *She Hate Me* (2004).

These similarities help better contextualize and complicate the war of words between Tyler Perry and Spike Lee. Whether their perceived differences have been informed by region, class, education, or a combination of all three, discourses of exceptionalism continue to eclipse some of the more interesting lines of symmetry between the two. Since both Lee and Perry are aware of the power they wield, as evidenced by their producing the work of other directors as well as their strategic deployment of media during their "beef," hopefully in the future, when/if they are pitted against one another or against the latest Black director, they (and others) will take care to enlarge the conversation to include directors and media-makers who are less well-known. This broader inclusion of both established and newer talent will distance analyses of film and culture from the ideology and discourse that privileges *the one* African American director over the diverse field of others.

Notes

1. Issie Lapowsky, "Tyler Perry responds to Spike Lee's claim that his work is comparable to 'Amos 'n' Andy,'" *Daily News*, October 26, 2009, accessed February 5, 2015 <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv-movies/tyler-perry-responds-spike-lee-claim-work-comparable-amos-n-andy-article-1.380544>.
2. In her chapter on Perry, Rashida Z. Shaw makes connections between Perry, the Chitlin Circuit, and Black theatre history extending back to the nineteenth century. See Shaw, "From the Margins to Center Stage: Tyler Perry's Popular African American Theatre." Other critics of Perry include Brittany Cooper, Latoya Peterson, Roxane Gay, and Andisheh Nouraei.
3. Paul N. Reinsch compares Perry with George Lucas and considers the similarities in their media empires, while Aymar Jean Christian and Khadijah Costley White examine Perry's effect on media production as a singular production entity. Also Artel Great discusses

Perry's prominence in television in connection with the "thirst" Black television audiences have for seeing programing reflective of their communities. See Reinsch, "The Case for Calling George Lucas the 'White Tyler Perry'"; Christian and White, "One Man Hollywood: Tyler Perry and the Limits of Niche Marketing"; Great, "Bring the Payne: The Erasure of the Black Sitcom and the Emergence of Tyler Perry's *House of Payne*."

4. UrbanDictionary.com, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Beef>, accessed January 21, 2015.

5. Lapowsky, "Tyler Perry responds."

6. Eli Sweet, "Bullet on the Charts: Beef, the Media Industry and Rap Music in America" (Senior Thesis, Haverford College, 2005).

7. Ibid.

8. Wahneema Lubiano, "But Compared to What? Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing*, and the Spike Lee Discourse," in *The Spike Lee Reader*, ed. Paula J. Massood (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 31.

9. The range of sources that report on the feud or its aftermath reflects Lubiano's idea of media saturation. Some of the articles on the Perry/Lee beef include: Keith Josef Adkins "Spike Lee Blasts a Hole into Tyler Perry," *The Root*, June 1, 2009, accessed February 5, 2015, http://www.theroot.com/blogs/on_the_dig/2009/06/spike_lee_blasts_a_hole_into_tyler_perry.html; Jimi Izreal, "Tyler Perry Vs. Spike Lee: A Debate Over Class And 'Coonery,'" NPR, April 22, 2011, accessed February 5, 2015, http://www.npr.org/blogs/tellme_more/2011/04/22/135630682/tyler-perry-vs-spike-lee-a-debate-over-class-and-coonery; Allison Samuels, "Inside Tyler Perry's Tantrum," *Daily Beast*, April 22, 2011, accessed February 5, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/04/22/madea-movie-inside-tyler-perrys-tantrum-spike-lee-feud.html>; Perez Hilton, "Tyler Perry Responds Heavily To Spike Lee Criticism," Perez Hilton.com, April 20, 2011, accessed February 5, 2015, <http://perez Hilton.com/2011-04-20-tyler-perry-responds-to-spike-lee#.VNqZNS4kT6A>; "Tyler Perry: 'Spike Lee Can Go Straight to Hell,'" *Hollywood Reporter*, April 19, 2011, accessed February 5, 2015, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/tyler-perry-spike-lee-can-179972>; Todd Gilchrist, "Tyler Perry Says Spike Lee 'Can Go Straight to Hell,'" *Wall Street Journal* blog, April 20, 2011, accessed February 5, 2015, <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2011/04/20/tyler-perry-says-spike-lee-can-go-straight-to-hell/>; Ken Tucker, "Tyler Perry rips Spike Lee on '60 Minutes': 'I'm insulted' and 'pissed off' by Lee's 'insults,'" *Entertainment Weekly*, October 25, 2009, accessed February 5, 2015, <http://www.ew.com/article/2009/10/25/tyler-perry-spike-lee-60-minutes>; Aisha Harris, Dan Kois, and Derreck Johnson, "Poster for the Upcoming Spike Lee-Tyler Perry Movie," *Slate*, November 14, 2013, accessed February 5, 2015, http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/11/14/spike_lee_and_tyler_perry_to_collaborate_maybe_now_friends_lee_tells_oprah.html.

10. Lee's latest films have grossed the following: *Oldboy* (2013) \$2,193,658; *Red Hook Summer* (2012) \$338,803; *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008) \$7,919,117; and *Inside Man* (2006) \$88,513,495. His affiliation on a James Brown biography was mentioned in Adkins, "Spike Lee Blasts a Hole into Tyler Perry." In 2014, Tate Taylor, director of *The Help* (2011), helms a James Brown project, *Get on Up*. Meanwhile, Perry's lowest-grossing film was *Tyler Perry's The Single Mom's Club* (2014), which grossed \$15,973,881; and his highest-grossing film was

Tyler Perry's Madea Goes to Jail (2009), which grossed \$90,508,336; the other Madea films grossed at least \$50 million, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/people/chart/?view=Director&id=spikelee.htm>; <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/chart/?id=tylerperry.htm>.

11. *Oprah's Next Chapter*, Oprah Winfrey, November 10, 2013.

12. *60 Minutes*, Byron Pitts, October 25, 2009.

13. Todd Gilchrist, "Tyler Perry Says Spike Lee 'Can Go Straight to Hell.'"

14. Melvin Donalson and Steve Neale posit that, due to the dissemination of auteurism in college film classes and film criticism in the early 1970s, the importance of the director has become a framework that the general public understands and engages. Donalson, *Black Directors in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 2; Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 10.

15. American critics Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris debated auteurism, the latter being credited with bringing the term to the US. Kael's concerns were the seeds to later critiques by media scholars who questioned why certain directors were being elevated and on what basis. Kael was an opponent of the auteur theory. Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," *Film Culture* 27, no. 27 (Winter 1962/63): 1-8; Kael, "Circles and Squares," *Film Quarterly* 16, no. 3: 12-26.

16. Kael, 12-17.

17. TreaAndrea Russworm, "Introduction: Media Studies has Ninety-Nine Problems . . . But Tyler Perry Ain't One of Them?"

18. Gilchrist, "Tyler Perry Says Spike Lee 'Can Go Straight to Hell.'"

19. In an article for *Slate* magazine, Doree Shafrir discusses the problem with auteur theory in the case of the films *Amores Perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003), and *Babel* (2006) from director Alejandro González Iñárritu and writer Guillermo Arriaga. <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Slate-2006oct-00290>.

20. Donalson examines sixty-seven African or African American directors in his book *Black Directors in Hollywood*, and he notes that when the book was finally published in 2003 there were others he was not able to include because of press deadlines. Donalson, x.

21. In their reporting on the Lee/Perry reconciliation, Aisha Harris, Dan Kois, and Derreck Johnson have created a fictional poster for their future collaboration titled "Mookie vs. Madea," with the following subtitle: "There can only be one [in very large font] 'mainstream' Black writer/director in the minds of the public, thanks to institutionally biased entertainment media [in much smaller font]." See Harris, Kois, Johnson, "Exclusive Poster for the Upcoming Spike Lee-Tyler Perry Movie." I had not seen their mock poster and my description of "there can only be one" comes from the television show *Highlander* (syndication, 1992-98).

22. In spite of the box-office success of his films, over \$690 million, which comes very close to Tyler Perry's total box office of \$765 million, Patrick Goldstein was concerned about his job security and future. Two years later, Tambay A. Obenson notes that Story is still not known to broad audiences. See <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/movies/2012/05/tim-storys-filmmaking-career.html>; <http://blogs.indiewire.com/shadowandact/tim-story-the-top-grossing-black-director-many-apparently-still-arent-familiar-with-despite>.

23. Thomas Cripps delineates the various men and companies to spring up in the wake of *The Birth of a Nation*. Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942*

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 70–89. Anna Everett details the development of Black film criticism and how the film sparked an increase in writing and activism. Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909–1949* (Durham: Duke University Press), 59–106.

24. In my book, I elaborate more on the problem of racial erasure in genre. Karen M. Bowdre, *Shades of Love: African Americans and Hollywood Romantic Comedies*, chapter 2 (University of Illinois Press, forthcoming).

25. Cripps's book about Black film being a genre follows the historical trajectory of films about those who are not white as understood as others. Thomas Cripps, *Black Film as Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 1–12.

26. Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 12.

27. Donelson, 6–7.

28. Todd Boyd articulates the authenticity problem within race and media studies when he notes that there are scholars who believe that Black identity is synonymous with working-class politics and those who cannot identify with this are not Black enough. Boyd, *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 22.

29. Toni Cade Bambara mentions how Lee's film put issues such as colorism and sexism into the open, although some thought it was dirty laundry. Bambara, *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays & Conversations* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 179–200.

30. Christian and White, 2.

31. Lubiano, 34.

32. Ibid, 37.

33. Ibid.

34. Being able to trace particular ideas and ideologies back through centuries is important because though blackness is not fixed, one can see elements of the past in many present formulations.

35. Riché Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 1–22.

36. Richardson, 159.

37. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 1.

38. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (New York: Free Press, 2009).

39. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Also on a blog post, Henry Lewis Gates posits that President Lincoln may have been the first to articulate the idea of an unusual class of African Americans. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/who-really-invented-the-talented-tenth/>.

40. For one recent article about minorities being twice as good as whites in order to get half the opportunities, see <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/04/graduates-ethnic-minority>. For employment statistics, see <http://www.pewresearch.org>

[/fact-tank/2013/08/21/through-good-times-and-bad-black-unemployment-is-consistently-double-that-of-whites/](http://fact-tank/2013/08/21/through-good-times-and-bad-black-unemployment-is-consistently-double-that-of-whites/).

41. Scholars either feel the Magical Negro is an extension of older stereotypes or a new distorted image. See Audrey Colombe, "White Hollywood's New Black Boogeyman," *Jump Cut* 45 (2002): 1; Matthew W. Hughey, "Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in 'Magical Negro' Films," *Social Problems* 56, no. 3 (August 2009): 543–50; Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham, "The Power of Black Magic: The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film," *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 2 (November 2009): 135–40.

42. Bowdre, forthcoming.

43. Ben Sher's chapter unpacks Perry's love of film, cinephilia, and penchant for trauma in his films. Brandeise Monk-Payton posits that Perry's films create a worship type of experience in the movie theatre. Finally, Keith Corson defines Perry's style as Gospel Cinema. Sher, "All My Life I Had to Fight": Domestic Trauma and Cinephilia in Tyler Perry's Archive of Feelings"; Monk-Payton, "Worship at the Altar of Perry: Spectatorship and the Aesthetics of Testimony"; Corson, "Tyler Perry, TD Jakes, and the Birth of Gospel Cinema."

44. Scholarly articles, as well as those in popular media, catalogue the hesitancy of African Americans to reach out to mental health professionals. The reasons for this resistance include lack of health insurance, distrust of the medical community, negative attitudes about mental illness, and churchgoing communities' distrust of mental health professionals.

45. Lee believes the Hopkins character is multilayered as well as the most intelligent and sympathetic character in the film. See Gary Crowdus and Dan Georgakas, "Thinking about the Power of Images: An Interview with Spike Lee," *Cineaste* 28, no. 2 (2001): 6.

46. Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, "I be Smackin' My Hoes": Paradox and Authenticity in *Bamboozled*, in *The Spike Lee Reader*, ed. Paula Massood (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 240.