

But Compared to What? Reading
Realism, Representation, and
Essentialism in *School Daze*,
Do the Right Thing, and the
Spike Lee Discourse

Brothers and Sisters, we need to talk.

—Joe Wood, "Looking for Malcolm"

*Underneath it all, the posse don't know. Who, in fact,
are "our people"?*

—Joe Wood, "Self-Deconstruction"

One of the first things to do is to think through the limits of one's power. One must ruthlessly undermine . . . the story of the ethical universal, the hero. But the alternative is not constantly to evoke multiplicity; the alternative is to know . . . that this is a limited sample because of one's own inclinations and capacities to learn enough to take a larger sample. And this kind of work should be a collective enterprise. Other people will do some other work.

—Gayatri Spivak, "In a Word"

I am an African American feminist, with fragments of a recalcitrant cultural nationalism still in my veins, working primarily in the area of African American narrative, and I am interested in cultural studies; those four things account for the nature of my interest in Spike Lee. When I agreed to

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write this paper, I felt considerable frustration, because if there is one African American filmic who has gotten press, media, and academic attention to the point of saturation, Spike Lee is that one.¹ My frustration arose also from knowing that the mass media and its discourse around Spike Lee might not be accessible to a critique, for example, of that which makes him a totem. On the other hand, despite my misgivings about leftist and liberal fetishization of Lee,² as well as my distaste for the regressive and ultimately useless criticism from reactionary critics and commentators concerned with "negative images,"³ I think that he and his work represent a problematic through which the political difficulties that inhere in African American cultural production in this moment can be usefully discussed. The Spike Lee discourse and his production offer a site for examining possibilities of oppositional, resistant, or subversive cultural production as well as the problems of productions that are *considered* oppositional, resistant, or subversive without accompanying analysis sustaining such evaluation.

I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not criticizing Spike Lee for his representation of what some have called "damaging" or "negative" images of African Americans, images that drove Stanley Crouch to froth at the mouth in print. I want to consider instead the tendency (and the implications of that tendency) among the majority of critical commentators to uncritically laud Lee's films—especially *Do the Right Thing*—and Lee's presence in African American filmmaking. *She's Gotta Have It* and *School Daze* do raise complicated issues, despite both films' masculinist representations and the rampant homophobia of *School Daze*. I don't address *She's Gotta Have It* in this paper because so many other feminist critics, bell hooks preeminent among them, have said everything (and some more besides!) that I would have said about that film. While I find *School Daze* a more interesting film for my own close reading and, therefore, address it here, I also include *Do the Right Thing* because of the importance of that film to what I'm calling the "Spike Lee discourse."

The first part of my title—But Compared to What?—is taken from a Gene McDonald lyric (sung by Roberta Flack on her album *First Take*): "trying to make it real but compared to what?"⁴ The unvoiced of my title, of course, is the "trying to make it real." Trying to make what real? Lee's films' cultural production? Trying to make real African Americans' complicated existence in the minds of others, real in their own minds? Trying to make real the possibility of a counter-hegemonic discourse on race, a critique of race? Trying to make real or concrete a set of abstractions that achieve concrete form in material practices embodied in a film, in language about a film, in the effects of a filmmaker's presence in the cultural domain? And what is race in the United States if not an attempt to make "real" a set of social assumptions about biology?

But compared to what? Compared to what is not real? Compared to other things both real and unreal? Compared to whatever else exists, has existed, or might be able to exist within the present terms of cultural production, or under terms that might be changed by our examination of what is real? Compared to who else exists, has existed, or can exist within the specific histories—past and present—of Black people across the diaspora engaged in filmmaking? “Compared to what?” might just mean compared to whatever you have.

What do issues of realism, representation, and essentialism have to do with the Lee discourse and Lee’s films? I am concerned with the difficulty of thinking and saying anything at all about Lee and his work without contextualizing his work’s possibilities and problems as well as what Lee himself has come to mean in the current cultural/political climate. Yet much of the Lee discourse has been insufficiently contextualized. And when I say *political*, I mean political in the sense of discourse and cultural production concerned with issues of power. In order to talk about these things, I examine Lee’s evaluation of his work (specifically *School Daze* and *Do the Right Thing*),⁵ others’ evaluations of his work, the problems raised by Lee’s place in film production and discourse, and the films *School Daze* and *Do the Right Thing* themselves.

Gayatri Spivak, in the interview to which I refer in the epigraph, addresses the possibilities of politically engaged criticism in the academy. I evoke her language here to consider another kind of politically engaged work: African American film production within the constraints of Euro-American film discourse. She describes an interventionist political cultural project: doing one’s “sample” while others, presumably, do theirs. The problem of Spike Lee’s “sample,” his place in the sun, is that his presence, empowered by Hollywood studio hegemony and media consensus on his importance, can function to overshadow or make difficult other kinds of politically engaged cultural work, not because it is impossible for more than one African American filmmaker to get attention at a time, but because of the implications and manifestations of the attention given to his work.⁶ Further, the availability of different strategies of representation is foreclosed by the pressure many African Americans place on any artist to “speak” for the community, a pressure against which countless African American critics have inveighed, but a pressure to which Lee himself contributes when he claims to have “told the truth.”

Spivak’s discussion can serve to remind us that the *context* of the “samples,” their availability or unavailability, and the process of their reception determine how centered, unitary, or authoritative Lee’s work becomes. Were a variety of African American filmmakers framed with such a profile, such a salience, critics and commentators (both African Americans and others)

might be less likely to insist that Lee’s work is the “real thing” and celebrate it so uncritically. That is to say, the recognition of multiple filmic possibilities, created from variant points of view by various filmmakers, could function to preempt the unitary authority of any one of them. This is not to say that the *rhetoric* of the “real thing” would disappear under these conditions, but a reductionist African American representational hegemony would be more difficult to maintain. In other words, the combination of the increasing financial success of Lee’s films and the media’s fairly general deification of him functions to marginalize other African American filmic possibilities—possibilities, for example, such as those offered by independent African American women filmmakers.⁷

II

School Daze and *Do the Right Thing* are both engaged with problems of race and racism (external and internalized) in the context of a nation where race as a *construction* is not much talked about outside of academic circles and where the idea of racism as intellectual, systemic, or concrete individual practice is cause for far more anger than theory, more recrimination and defensiveness than focus. Against this background, Stuart Hall’s reading of the possibilities of Antonio Gramsci’s work theorizes race and racisms and enables us to focus on the ways in which race and racisms are historically specific and inconsistent, to understand that manifestations of both change across time and across the complexities of the social formation. Hall argues that, while race is consistently related to class, it is not always the *result* of class difference (nor, I want to add, is race consistently *mediated* by class difference). The political consequences of specific moments of racism differ. At one moment and geopolitical locale racism manifests itself in colonial enclaves; at another, in slavery; at another, in Bantustans; and at still another, in something referred to as an urban “underclass” (Hall 1986: 23–25).

This general line of theory offers a vantage point for connecting more specific arguments about constructions of “Blackness” in the United States context, including Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s arguments about the metaphorical nature of “blackness” in Western metaphysical discourse, Anthony Appiah’s work on the construction of race, and Frantz Fanon’s arguments about the effects on Blacks of the construction of “negroness.”⁸ I am not taking any of these arguments to Manichean extremes and suggesting that there is no biology; for, as Spivak (1990: 148) cogently asserts, “biology doesn’t just disappear,” it simply ought not to be the “ground of all explanations.” Hortense Spillers (1987: 65–66), for example, warns against the ideological manipulations of racialized biology. In her close reading of the Moynihan Report she

remarks on that text's confirmation of "the human body as a metonymic figure for an entire repertoire of human and social arrangements."

What has not changed in the history of race in the United States is its centrality within our culture, the importance of it to our socialization as produced and reinforced by schools, organizations, family, our sexual lives, churches, institutions—all of which produce a racially structured society (Hall 1986: 25). Race is a cultural factor of overwhelming importance. I raise these issues not only because Lee's work renders visible the African American presence within the terms of Euro-American dominance, but because he sees himself and his work in terms of racial, and hence political, engagement: He is quoted by Salim Muwakkil (1989: 18) as saying, "Someone has to force America to come to grips with the problem of racism." Additionally, Lee and his co-producer Monty Ross told an audience at the University of Texas, Austin, that they wanted to make films with a message and would try to make entertaining what was also thought provoking; they insisted that they would "tell the truth."⁹ Aware of the need to make changes in the film industry by bringing in African Americans, Lee has indicated that he is proud of the part that he plays. As part of his production deal for *Do the Right Thing*, he has made his films vehicles for African American employment and entrance into film craft unions: Two folks off the streets of Bedford-Stuyvesant are now part of a union because of him (Lee 1989; Tate 1989). Being a voice for the "real," effecting "reality," then, is the way that Lee sees his cultural mission.

His confidence that he has been able to force the United States to come to grips with the problem of racism is repeated in his insistence (in response to questions at the University of Texas) that he can retain his intellectual and political independence and still be financed by the studios as long as he continues to make money. In the first instance, however, he mistakes the media noise around race, racism, and his film for evidence that this country has "come to grips" with race. In fact, he must have realized at some point that his confidence was misplaced; in an article in *Mother Jones* he says that white people were more upset over the destruction of Sal's property than they were over Raheem's death (Orenstein 1989: 34). In the second instance, his belief that profit might not be somehow tied to how much a mass-distributed film can make itself acceptable to vast numbers of U.S. citizens is simply naive; he needs to consider that, if a production has to return a profit in the millions of dollars, the likelihood of that production's remaining oppositional or subversive with regard to race might well be in inverse proportion to the extent the film relies on the support of a large (of whatever races), politically uncritical audience to turn a profit. I do not want to argue that studio funding *always* means that a compromise in form and content is inevitable—profits have been made with more politically adventurous material—nor do I want to

argue that the relationship between funding and content is a simple one. In fact, in a session at the 1989 Modern Language Association convention, Ann Cvetkovich and I argued that, if one wants to engage politically with the majority of African Americans or any other marginalized group, one has to be prepared to think seriously about working in the mass culture (and, more to the point, mass distribution) arena (Lubiano and Cvetkovich 1989: 13).¹⁰ But I do want to insist that Lee's confidence needs to be mediated by a *complicated* awareness of market pressure.

In that vein, James Snead (1988: 17) has argued that, "without the incessant and confining restraints of box-office considerations, studio agenda, and censoring boards, the range of artistic choice in *independent* films is potentially *widened*, rather than *restricted*." I don't draw on Snead here in order to absolutize independent production as always politically empowered and empowering; I do not want to romanticize the coercive nature of inequitable access to the means of film production, something the Sankofa Film and Video Collective filmmaker Isaac Julien addresses in the Black British context.¹¹ (He and the other members of Black British video collectives became involved in separatist projects, opting for ethnically and/or racially based organizations, because of their exclusion from "White" institutions (Fusco 1988a: 8). Nonetheless, I think such consideration of the possible costs of studio/institutional support is especially timely when one sees critics such as Nelson George writing in the *Village Voice* about the economics of African American film production: He points out that, while some of Lee's investors have been African American, some of the most crucial have not and, therefore, that it is time for African American filmmakers to learn how to sit down and talk to studio money people because the "*Black Enterprise* crowd" would still rather invest in real estate than in African American cultural production (George 1990).

George's thinking raises a number of other questions. Would the financing from African American capitalists necessarily be more politically adventurous than that from Euro-American capitalists? I am not so sanguine, not so sure that Black nationalism breaches *class* walls. Black nationalist economics raise yet another issue: Both Spike Lee and Keenan Ivory Wayans talk about the necessity for African Americans to be in particular positions of power in relation to African American cultural production; Lee is "appalled by the dearth of Black executives in Hollywood," and Wayans thinks that "the destiny of Black art rests on Black people and Black corporate America" (Greenberg 1990: 23). To that last bit, "Black corporate America," I can only reply that if our cultural production rests on anybody's *corporate* America, then God/Goddess help us.

It is to Lee's dominant position as and his forthright claim to be a "political" filmmaker that I want to return for the next section of my essay. My

impetus for thinking about Lee in this way had its genesis in my reading of Manthia Diawara's article "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance." I found his argument that Eddie Murphy's character in *Trading Places*, *48 Hours*, and *Beverly Hills Cop I and II* is first allowed to appear threatening, then "deterritorialized from a black milieu and transferred to a predominantly white world" (Diawara 1988: 71), helpful in considering containment and domestication strategies for certain other kinds of characters. It spurred me to consider similar phenomena within what is at least represented as African American milieus—those depicted in *Do the Right Thing* and *School Daze*. How might one account for the domesticating processes of particular kinds of representations unless one rethinks the politics of what constitutes the possible "territory" of a "Black" milieu?

I find the idea of Lee as a politically radical or progressive filmmaker troubling for a number of reasons: (1) The politics of race, gender, class, and sexuality in *Do the Right Thing* and *School Daze* are inadequate to the weight that these films and Lee carry within the discourse of political cultural work; and (2) having Lee and his work deified by the media and critical establishment, especially (as far as my own interests are concerned) by members of the leftist and African American media and critical establishment, is bad news to other African American filmics who remain overshadowed by the attention granted to Spike Lee and bad news also to the larger possibility of more politically progressive and complex film production focused on African American culture and/or issues of race.

To return to the questions that I raise at the beginning of this paper, any evaluation of Lee's work as radical or counter-hegemonic has to be run past the question *Compared to what?* Against the underdeveloped, stymied state of discussion about race, racism, and racialization in the United States at this moment and against the paucity of productions about African Americans which we could invoke to situate Lee's work and stylizations, evaluations of his and his films' politics require considerably more analysis than has been available.

III

School Daze and *Do the Right Thing* were films discussed by most reviewers on the grounds of realism, authenticity, and relation to the "good" of the community represented in them. Many of the arguments that addressed the issue of *reception* fell into the trap of reducing the complexities of hegemony to simple polarities—White vs. Black audiences or Black middle-class vs. Black lower-class audiences—as though these categories are completely understood and separately distinct.¹² That is to say, the blurred lines between

unstable categories of people were firmly and falsely redrawn in the Spike Lee discourse. Omitted from discussion were the ways in which aspects of U.S. culture are internalized and contributed to (in some degree) by most of us (after all, how else does hegemony function?), as well as the ways in which culture constitutes contested ground—contested by different groups even within racialized communities under different circumstances. The complex problems of realism, representation, and essentialism were as apparent in the discussions around Lee and the films as they were in Lee's presence and in the films themselves.

Most of the reviews and articles written began, were imbued with, and/or concluded with references to how very realistic or authentic the films were; how much they captured the sounds, rhythms, sights, styles, and important concerns of African Americans.¹³ Armond White (1989: 46) tied the film's politics to its depiction of "Afro-American cultural style as triumphant opposition strategy." As Michael Kamber, writing about *Do the Right Thing* in *Z Magazine* points out, "He's so authentic!" seemed to be the refrain among liberal whites. That refrain, however, came from all corners—liberals, progressives/leftists, and even some conservatives and reactionaries (as troubling as such critics found the film's "reality"), and from the political range of African Americans. It came from organs as ideologically dissimilar as the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and *Ebony*. More importantly, whether the critic/commentator was heaping encomia on Lee for attempting to portray African American culture without the "distortions" to which we have all grown accustomed (Muwakkil 1989: 24), questioning whether or not the characters were "real" (Staples 1989: 9), or spouting vitriolic accusations of Afro-fascism because of what one critic saw as Lee's "fantastical" (i.e., "not real") distortions (Crouch 1989: 74), "realism" (or its lack) and the effect of the films' representation of the real have been the keynotes of an incredible array of commentary about them.

Realism as the bedrock of narrative is inherently problematic. Realism poses a fundamental, longstanding challenge for counter-hegemonic discourses, since realism, as a narrative form, enforces an authoritative perspective. According to Raymond Williams, while *real* has denoted the actually existing as opposed to the imaginary since the fifteenth century and, at the same time, was contrasted with *apparent*, by the nineteenth century the word additionally established the difference between the "true" or fundamental quality of some thing or situation and the "false" or mistaken quality, while at the same time marking the difference between concrete and abstract (Williams 1976: 216–17).

Reality, as Suzette Elgin (1984: 30–31) puts it, is established via the consensus of a particular group and marks the "real world, the actually existing,

true and concrete world" preserved by the absence of existing alternatives. Kobena Mercer argues that the "reality effect produced by realist methods depends on the operation of four characteristic values—transparency, immediacy, authority and authenticity—which are in fact aesthetic values central to the dominant film and media culture." By adopting this practice as a "neutral" or "instrumental" relation for the means of representation, black filmmakers seek to "redefine referential realities of race through the same codes and forms as the prevailing film language whose discourse of racism" they seem to contest (Mercer 1988: 53). Mercer goes on to argue that, "in short, black film practices which incorporate these filmic values are committed to a mimetic conception of representation which assumes that reality has an objective existence 'out there,' that the process of representation simply aims to correspond to or reflect" (Mercer 1988: 53).

Deployed as a narrative form dependent upon recognition of reality, realism suggests disclosure of the truth (and then closure of the representation); realism invites readers/audience to accept what is offered as a slice of life because the narrative contains elements of "fact." Realism, then, temporarily allows chaos in an otherwise conventional or recognizable world, but at the end the narrative moves toward closure, the establishment of truth and order. As Michael Kamber puts it, the morning after the riot (in *Do the Right Thing*) the neighborhood is "back to normal, . . . and the feeling is that, were Sal to rebuild his pizzeria"—and, I would add, slap some pictures of Malcolm X and a few others on the wall—"and were the cops to avoid killing anyone in the immediate future, everyone would go on back and eat there. Ignorant and apolitical, letting the system roll on" (Kamber 1989: 40).

Realism used uncritically as a mode for African American art implies that our lives can be captured by the presentation of enough documentary evidence or by insistence on another truth. The graffiti on Sal's pizzeria asserts, "Tawana told the truth." The implication is that her story was real, was actual and concrete, was *the* story of rape. The problem presented then is further cathected: Must *Tawana* be telling the truth for us to believe the larger truth about sexual abuse of African American women by Euro-American men? Is this "truth" compared to the "truth" of their abuse by African American men? Compared to what other African American women say? Compared to what Alice Walker, for example, says about African American men?¹⁴ Compared to what Jade herself is saying, or trying to say, to Mookie?¹⁵ In the name of preserving the "truth" of Tawana and her reality, is it okay for Mookie to *insist* that he *knows* the truth?¹⁶

Realism establishes a claim to truth, but it also presents the ground for its own deconstruction—somebody else's truth. Telling it like it is, as John Akomfrah notes, "has to be said with a certain amount of skepticism, because

ultimately one needs to challenge the assumption that you *can* tell it like it is" (Fusco 1988b: 53). Telling it like it is, for example, can be claimed by narratives that are politically regressive. Shelby Steele, the new African American conservative media superstar, in his numerous attacks on the victims of racism (available in a newspaper/magazine near you) claims to be "telling it like it is" from his reality (Applebome 1990: 18). "Reality" is promiscuous, at the very least.

Why the historically consistent demand for and approval of realism in African American cultural production? Fanon argues that the "natives,"¹⁷ in the face of the colonizer's big lies about the history and culture of the colonized, make a conscious attempt to reclaim their history and aspects of their culture (Fanon 1968 [1961]: 206–12). Against the constant distortions of Euro-American ethnocentric dismissal and burial of the African American presence, we respond with an insistence on "setting the record straight," "telling the truth," "saying it like it is." The Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, artists, and writers went to cultural war with each other over accurate depictions of the African American community; the Black Aesthetic critics in a subsequent period built a political and intellectual movement around an assertion of a counter-truth against the distortions of cultural racism; and, because the distortions have not ended, African Americans are presently preoccupied with the need to intervene in the dominant culture's construction of African Americanness. Nonetheless (and it is here that I am most concerned with the salience of Lee and his "truth"), despite the weight of a will to counter "lies," a marginalized group needs to be wary of the seductive power of realism, of accepting all that a realistic representation implies because of its inclusion of some "facts."

The reasons for "real" as a positive evaluation are tied, of course, to scarcity, the paucity of African American presentations of *facts* and *representations* as well as the desire for more of the first category, which in turn allows the second category to have its "selectiveness" forgotten in the rush to celebrate its mere presence. It is, however, because of the salience of Lee's representations that he and they warrant *critical* attention. In order to give them that attention, we have to first acknowledge that they are not *generally* "real" (however "factual" any part of the content might be) but *specifically* "real"—and that that specific "real" might be criticizable. If Lee's strength is a certain ability to document some of the sounds and sights of African American vernacular culture—its style focus—that vernacularity cannot guarantee counter-hegemonic cultural resistance. One can be caught up in Euro-American hegemony within the vernacular, and one can repeat the masculinism and heterosexism of vernacular culture. Vernacular language and cultural productions allow the possibility of discursive power disruptions, of cultural

resistance—they do not guarantee it. The particular politics of the specifics of vernacular culture that Lee represents are problematic. The films' presentation of and the critics' acceptance of these politics without a challenge encourages audiences to consider these representations as African American essences.

Telling the "truth" demands that we consider the truth of something compared to something else. Who is speaking? Who is asking? And to what end? I don't think that the problem of addressing the construction of reality can be answered by more claims to realism without considering how and why both hegemonic realism and resistance to or subversion of the realism are constructed. Reality, after all, is merely something that resounds in minds already trained to recognize it as such. Further, what happens in the shadow behind the "real" of Spike Lee once it becomes hegemonic for African Americans? In other words, what happens when this "representation" is accepted as "real"? What happens to the construction of "Blackness" in the public discourse?

According to Roland Barthes,

Representation is not directly defined by imitation: even if we were to get rid of the notions of "reality" and "verisimilitude" and "copy," there would still be "representation," so long as a subject (author, reader, spectator, observer) directed his [or her] gaze toward a horizon and there projected the base of a triangle of which his [or her] eye (or his [or her] mind) would be the apex. (Barthes 1985: 90)

Representation refers to images that are selected from what we recognize as reality; they are tied to and have meaning within particular settings. They come "from somewhere" (Barthes 1985: 96) and have meaning insofar as "there are differences of meaning" (Culler 1976: 83). Akomfrah argues that representation "is used to simply talk about questions of figuration. How one places the Black in the scene of writing, the imagination and so on. Others saw it in more juridic terms. How one is enfranchised, if you like, how one buys into the social contract" (Fusco 1988b: 43). In other words, we need to consider how one constructs identity through the vehicle of representation. And compared to what? If Lee is working in a small field, if too much rides on the few African American filmmakers working in this cultural domain and this pressure to variously "represent" cannot be met, how might we reconsider the possibilities of African American filmmaking?

In *Invisible Man*, Trueblood tells a white philanthropist a story explaining his incest, his daughter's pregnancy, and his wife's. The unnamed narrator is shocked by Trueblood's frankness in relating his story and wonders, "How can he tell this to white men . . . when he knows they'll say that all Negroes

do such things?" (Ellison 1952: 57). The question of representation and what anyone should say about his/her community is a constant pressure under which African American cultural workers produce. But it is a question which constantly disenfranchises even as it reinforces the notion of absolutes—absolutes such as the "African American" community, the non-African American or "Euro-American" community, or notions of the author or filmmaker as the one who does "something" which a reader or an audience then simply consumes, resists, or appropriates. Further, if one is enthralled by the idea of absolute representations, then "good" or "real" cultural production is impervious to reader or audience misbehavior (misreading), and "bad" or "non-representative" or "unrealistic" cultural production comforts racist Euro-Americans, or can be appropriated by them, or misleads African Americans. Believing and acting on these assumptions means deifying or demonizing African American cultural production or producers. In other words, it is as foolish to say that Lee has produced "appropriation-proof," *real* African American art as it is to say that he has produced "Afro-fascism" that distorts reality.

Lee is himself to some extent cognizant of how he is placed within the discourse of representation; on the other hand, he also produces representations that suggest particular Euro-American hegemonic politics. His *Do the Right Thing* is imbued with the Protestant work ethic: There is more language about work, responsibility, and ownership in it than in any five Euro-American Hollywood productions. The film insists that, if African Americans just work like the Koreans, like the Italians, like the Euro-American brown-stone owner, these problems could be averted; or, if you own the property, then you can put on the walls whatever icons you want; or, if you consume at (materially support) a locale, then you can have whatever icons you want on the walls. And its masculinist focus could be distilled into the slogan that screams at us throughout the film: "Real men work and support their families." These representations compared to what? Within the representations of *Do the Right Thing*, what are the ideologies being engaged here, or critiqued here, or, more to the point, not critiqued here? Contrary to Salim Muwakkil's assertion that "Lee's refusal to make clear his judgments has limited his popularity among audiences weaned on formulaic narrative" (Muwakkil 1989: 24), I find *Do the Right Thing* relentlessly formulaic in its masculinist representations and its conventional Calvinist realism.

To paraphrase Stuart Hall (1986: 15–16), there is no law which guarantees that a group's ideology is consistent with its economic—or, I would add, its race—position, nor is there any guarantee that the ideology of a group *isn't* consistent with its economic or race position. For the purposes of thinking about representation and Lee's films, we might want to consider the assumption held by his lower-class characters that work is the "right thing," that it

means always what we think it means. Drug dealers (absent from this picture) work; global corporate CEOs responsible for planetary and human degradation also work. Work or non-work, but compared to what? We (as audience) could consider this "work" emphasis to be parody, but the film uses "work" or "ownership" to justify intervention.

Or, to return again to identity politics, Hall writes "'Black' is not the exclusive property of any particular social or any single discourse. . . . [I]t has no necessary class belonging" (Hall 1985: 112). He is drawing on his experience in the Caribbean and British context, but it is an argument that has considerable force for race theorizing and the politics of racial representation within the U.S. context. What does "Blackness" mean in *School Daze* or *Do the Right Thing*? *School Daze*, the Lee film that has received by far the least amount of national critical respect, suggests far more complicated possibilities around the idea of identity politics than *Do the Right Thing* (despite *School Daze*'s foul gender politics and horrific homophobia, issues to which I will return). It is with regard to identity politics that unselfconscious realism and representation within the distorted discourse of Euro-American hegemony lead inevitably to a profoundly unstrategic essentialism.

Essentialism is, as Diana Fuss (1989: xi) defines it, "commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity." It assumes that certain characteristics are inherently part of the core being of a group. The idea of authenticity—a notion that implies essence—can derive from the idea that a particular group and individual entities of that group can be recognized by the ways in which they are shown with some measure of the "real" or authentic or essential qualities of that group. Fuss argues additionally, however, that, because essentialism is not in and of itself progressive or reactionary, the appropriate question is: "If this text is essentialist, what motivates its deployment?" (Fuss 1989: xi; my emphasis). Because I am mindful of Fuss's careful complications of essentialisms, I want to make clear my consideration of specific problem sites of essentialism—Lee, the discourse about Lee, and two of his films.

Some African American critics have indicated their impatience with criticisms of essentialism. Henry Louis Gates Jr., for example, has stated his suspicions about this charge as part of his defense of African Americanist canon formation or reformation (Gates 1989).¹⁸ He refers to the fact that African Americanists' "attempts to define a black American canon—foregrounded on its own against a white backdrop—are often derided as racist, separatist, nationalist, or 'essentialist'—my favorite term of all."¹⁹ He argues that "you cannot . . . critique the notion of the subject until a tradition's subjectivity (as it were) has been firmly established" (Gates 1989: 15), but he is not clear about *who* cannot critique the subject at issue here, the African American subject, or *for whom* this

subjectivity still needs to be established. I am mindful of the fact that Gates is skeptical of a *specific* charge of essentialism—that leveled against the institutionalization of an African American literary canon—and I agree with his arguments about the political usefulness at this moment of such defining. Attacks on African American "canons" are blind to certain political "realities." I am simply picking one small bone here: I think that it is possible to argue for the work of defining African American literary traditions without "saving" essentialism.

I find Gates's argument about the need to "establish" African American subjectivity a little inconsistent, given his tracing (in *Figures in Black* and *The Signifying Monkey*) of the complexity of the historical development of African American subjectivity (African Americans have been already at work developing *subjectivities*) and his deconstruction of the idea of a "transcendent black subject" (Gates 1984: 297). Part of the work of African American cultural criticism has been not only to claim, to insist on, African American subjectivity/subjectivities, but also to elaborate and complicate that subjectivity/those subjectivities by speculating on their varied and fragmented relations to their products—abstract and/or concrete, formalized and/or ephemeral.

Within the domain of African American cultural discourse, African Americans have been about the business of establishing that tradition's subjectivity and have been fighting about the terms of that subjectivity since the seventeenth century. Some African Americans, as various critics (among them Gates, Gloria Hull, Valerie Smith, Deborah McDowell, and Hazel Carby) have documented, historically resisted essences inscribed in African American cultural commentary, even when these essences were meant to counter essences held by the dominant culture. Vernacular culture, in fact, has allowed a space and mechanism for complicating essences. And in literature and literary critical discourse, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fauset, W. E. B. Du Bois, Sterling Brown, Jean Toomer, and Langston Hughes (to some extent) have complicated notions of African American subjectivity even against the African American male cultural and political hegemony of the Harlem Renaissance.

In her interview with Spivak, Ellen Rooney states that

to contextualize is to expose the history of what might otherwise seem outside history, natural and thus universal, that is the essence. . . . The problem of essentialism can be thought [of], in this way, as a problem of form, which is to say, a problem of reading. Context would thus emerge as a synonym for reading, in that to read is to demarcate a context. Essentialism appears as a certain resistance to reading, an emphasis on the constraints of form, the limits at which a particular form so compels us as to "stipulate" an analysis. (Spivak 1990: 124)

I am moved to consider the particular situation of Lee by Spivak's warning against "anti-essentialism" as yet another form of essence: "To an extent, we have to look at where the group—the person, the persons, or the movement[—]is situated when we make claims for or against essentialism. A strategy suits a situation; a strategy is not a theory" (Spivak 1990: 127).²⁰ Lee's films and his place in the discourse of African American and American filmmaking are situations which warrant my criticism of their essentialism; and even if what Lee does is a strategy and not an essence, it is still fair to be critical of that strategy and its power to essentialize within the context of Euro-American hegemony and African American cultural discourse. Lee's presentation of images that resonate with factual reality is glossed as the general truth. The deification of Lee as "truth sayer," and his production as "real," means that the indexing of his selections becomes the "essence" of "Black authenticity"—and thus impervious to criticism.

I understand that to be authentically "African American" or "Black" has, at various times in history and in the present, meant and sometimes means to be rhythmic; or to have a predilection for playing craps, drinking, using and/or selling drugs, or raping white women; or being a jungle savage; or being uninterested in marriage; or being on welfare—the list goes on and on. The resonances of authenticity depend on who is doing the evaluating. But I want to foreground the problematic of authenticity and its relationship to essentialism.

Coco Fusco has argued that "the tenet of authenticity is virtually incompatible with the strictures of narrative drama, since 'typical' experiences are presumed to stand for every black person's perception of reality" (Fusco 1988a: 8). To that I would add only that, when further strengthened by facticity, "typicalness" homogenizes differences. Being different within such a narrative economy, then, is read as "White" or "middle-class" or whatever the current sign used to signify "not Black." In any event, dramatic "play" or manipulation (and its political possibilities) is constrained. Authenticity becomes a stranglehold for political analysis and cultural practice beyond the strictures of narrative drama. When Michele Wallace asserts that "intrinsic oppositionality c[an] not be attributed only to the so-called Other" (Fusco 1988a: 9) and Akomfrah asserts that "Blacks are expected to be transgressive" (Fusco 1988b: 55), they, along with Fusco, point to the specific problem of essentialism in the context of Black film production. If, as Akomfrah, argues, we fall into the trap of Kant's categorical imperative—that categories carry with them their own imperatives, and, following that, that the category *Black* carries with it an essential obligation to oppose, to transgress constantly in specific ways—then we are "saddled with the assumption that there are certain transcendental duties that Black filmmaking has to perform, . . . [that] it has to work with the understanding that it's in a state of emergence, . . . [and

that] its means always have to be guerrilla means, war means, signposts of urgency . . . the categorical imperative imprisons" (Fusco 1988b: 53). "Black" essence can come to be read from its activity of transgressing another, even less elaborated essence—that of "Whiteness."

The categorical imperative is essentialist, whether imposed by dominance or volunteered for under the terms of Euro-American political or African American cultural hegemony. If we fail to problematize the notion that being African American *always* means *only* being embattled, that African American film is political only insofar as "someone" empowered to make the evaluation recognizes its political "reality" and calls the shots on its transgressiveness, and that "authenticity" is always already known and can therefore be proven, then we have fallen into the trap of essentialism. Both the celebratory and the hostile Spike Lee discourse have been amazingly, although not entirely, uncritically essentialist.

There are "honorable" exceptions: bell hooks and Michael Kamber writing in *Z Magazine*; Herb Boyd writing in the *Guardian*, Mike Dyson writing in *Tikkun*; and some of what J. Hoberman wrote in the *Village Voice*—all regarding *Do the Right Thing*, as well as parts of the multi-voiced exchange on *School Daze* that went on in the *Village Voice*—not only moved past celebration or dismissal based on explicit language about "reality" and "authenticity," but also managed to critique assumptions of progressive or radical cultural politics based primarily on representations of African Americans on the screen in practices that too many of us have been trained to identify as "transgressive."

When I ask, "Compared to what?" I am asking that we consider a larger domain of possibilities than the Spike Lee discourse has made available. The end of such inquiry is not to lead simply to a fuller explication of his films or his "presence" in cultural production—although that's not a bad side effect—but to enable us to think about the terms of African American cultural production and practice generally, and African American film production and practice specifically, without falling back on an uncritical and unstrategic essentialist celebration of any representations—on screen or embodied in a particular filmmaker.

IV

Although *Do the Right Thing* received far more positive press than *School Daze*, perhaps because its working-class subjects seemed more "authentic" to critics²¹ than the middle-class subjects of *School Daze*, I contend that *School Daze* is the more complicated movie. While both films are masculinist, and *School Daze* is also explicitly and viciously homophobic, *Do the Right Thing*

stays, for the most part, comfortably within the boundaries of static and essentialist propositions about racial identity, and about the relationship of wages and ownership to qualities of responsibility, "manhood," and freedom.²²

Do the Right Thing makes manhood synonymous with having a job (and being able to take care of one's monetary responsibilities). When one of the block's hip-hop young men taunts Da Mayor for his drinking and other problems, Da Mayor returns (as explanation) an account of his inability (in the past) to feed his children because he had no job. The teenager sneers back that Da Mayor put himself in that position. Unlike Da Mayor, we are given to understand, the young man would make sure that he had a job and could take care of his kids; in other words, *he* would be a *man*. In this vein, Mookie's wages make him responsible enough—or man enough—that he can abjure others to "get a job," enable him to make some feeble attempts to provide for his child, and give him the standing to tell Jade what she needs to know about sexual oppression. Jade tries to make him back down by participating in the "wages=right-to-speak" discourse: "You can hardly pay the rent and you're gonna tell me what to do?" Mookie responds, "I get paid." When Jade returns with, "You're getting paid peanuts," the point, I suppose, is that were Mookie to have higher wages, *then* it would be all right for him to tell her what to do. At the same time, Mookie is excoriated by Sal and Pino to do the work for which they are paying his wages/his peanuts.

Against, I suppose, the long-held racist charge that African Americans neither work nor want to work, this film spends much of its running time assuring its audience that African Americans in Bed-Stuy certainly do value work! (By its end, I am so overwhelmed by its omnipresent wage-labor ethos that I find myself exhausted.) I am not anti-labor; however, this film makes no critique of the conditions under which labor is drawn from some members of the community, nor are kinds of labor/work differentiated. Instead, without any specific contextualization, work is presented as its own absolute good, because work and ownership are what empower *men* to make decisions, to exercise freedom. The Euro-American brownstone owner need only reply to the block's hip-hoppers that he "owns" his house to have the last word in the encounter; Sal need only respond that he "owns" his pizzeria in order to maintain his freedom over decor; and Sweet Dick Willie is able to have the last word in a discussion of Korean ownership by insisting that since he has his *own* (or "*owned*") money, he has the freedom to ignore any form of critical analysis on the part of his buddies or Buggin' Out and patronize the grocery store and the pizzeria, respectively.

"I own," however, complicates neighborhood boundaries and identity politics. The gentrifier both "owns" his house and was born in Brooklyn and, thus, can be said to "belong" in the neighborhood (if not on this particular

block). And, ironically, the critique of the Korean grocery store owners because they don't "belong" in the neighborhood is begun by M. L., who is himself an immigrant, as his buddies are quick to remark. Yet, while Sal "owns" his pizzeria, Pino reminds him again and again that "this" is not "their" neighborhood; they don't "belong" here. Still, no one really needs to think about what might be at stake in these contradictions; it is enough to have the money: "When you own your own pizzeria, then you can put your own pictures up."

In these contradictions, *Do the Right Thing* raises an interesting issue: What is the difference, if any, between a person "born" (and thus able to lay some kind of claim to "belonging") in a neighborhood and a gentrifier who lays claim by "buying" his belonging? Further, the gentrifier's presence—as both "born in" (and therefore "native to") Brooklyn and as "buyer" in this block—raises the larger context of the relations of racial bodies, real estate and bank practices, and class issues.

Early on, the film promises a class critique of sorts in the discussion of Sweet Dick Willie and his buddies on the corner. M. L. begins a complaint that the Koreans, like so many other immigrant groups, move into the neighborhood and seem immediately to "make it," only to lose the focus of his critique. The men make no mention of differential capital bases or accesses to bank loans—and there is no reason to think that vernacular language could not handle that analysis. M. L. concludes his discussion (simplistically): "Either them Korean motherfuckers are geniuses or you Black asses are just plain dumb." The either/or proposition is reductionist: genius or dumb ass.

The discussion around, and the tensions raised by, the behavior of the Korean grocery store owners/employees as well as their economic relationship to the rest of the block degenerates completely when the film shows the rioting crowd suddenly stop seeing the Koreans as economically privileged and allow them instead to claim the common oppression of race: We are all colored (and therefore essentially equal) together. A moment's class hostility and film critique of stratification is disrupted and traded in for simplistic race unity without any of the complications of such change represented.

Nonetheless, it is in the realm of identity politics—of place and race—that the film both raises possibilities of complicated representation and undermines them. "Stay Black" is the keystone phrase for the neighborhood, although it seems to refer to something ineffable. "Blackness" is what? Perhaps it is the roll call of musicians on the radio, the DJ's rap, the sounds and sights of vernacular culture, the claims of female genetic "tender-headedness." Yes. But "Blackness" is also nailed down without specifics in the exchanges between Buggin' Out and Mookie, Mookie and Raheem, Raheem and Buggin' Out. Jade is "down for something positive" and Black—and neither she nor Buggin' Out feels the need to specify exactly what the "Black positive" is. "Blackness" is Malcolm X,



Do the Right Thing (1989): Mookie (Spike Lee), pizza deliveryman and neighborhood peacemaker.

although, as Smiley's picture and Lee's quotes after the conclusion of the film remind us, "Blackness" is also Martin Luther King Jr.; "Blackness," then, is reduced to the sacredness that inheres in the proper icons.

As Joe Wood asserts, "In the ever-evolving vernacular, Malcolm X has come to mean the real (black) thing, the authentic (black) thing, as close to (black) integrity as close can be. . . . Malcolm [is] the Essential Black Man" (Wood 1990a: 43). Wood goes on to argue that, if Malcolm (or, I might add, Martin Luther King Jr., for that matter) is to be treated as a symbol of blackness, then we've backed ourselves into a religion of "essential Blackness" and away from a historical analysis or exploration of its complexities, its constructedness. Iconography and fetishization are no substitute for history and critical thinking. The film offers no consistent critique of "pictures"—as icons, as fetishes—except for Jade's discussion with and aborted interruption of Buggin' Out's crude analysis. But the movie diminishes her intervention because, after all, within its terms, who is Jade but a sister who ought to but doesn't know when some White man is hitting on her and who has to be warned both by her brother and by the Tawana truth lurking behind and against her back?

Brothers and sisters, we *do* need to talk.

Blackness also seems to demand images that suggest African American males are prone to death by police violence—as bell hooks reminds us (hooks 1989: 31).²³ In fact, Lee dedicates this film to victims of the police, the dramatic high point of the film being Raheem's murder by the police (hooks 1989: 31). Lee has waxed indignant about that murder's dismissal on the part of some Euro-American viewers (Orenstein 1989: 34); on the other hand, Lee has said also that, if Raheem had just turned down the radio, none of this would have happened—so much for any representation of systemic racist oppression. What are we to make of identity politics within the domain represented by this film? For a filmmaker who claims the mantle of transgression, cultural opposition, political righteousness, and truth-telling, the political ambitions of this film are diffuse and, by its end, defuse into nothingness.

It is the film considered less politically ambitious (but equally masculinist and heterosexual), *School Daze*, that offers the possibilities of greater political depth—it at least raises interesting questions about identity politics "within the group." Although the film is undermined by its homophobia and sexism, it is within the terms of a consideration of these areas that identity politics and essentialism are, in fact, deconstructed.

School Daze is sloppy but complicated. It shows us frat hegemony-forging in action: "Q Dogs, that's what we want to be" is the refrain that bonds. "Q-Dogs are real men because it takes a real man to be a Q-dog"—tautological, yes, and therefore full of the comfort implied by unproblematicized allegiances. This refrain, however, is followed by insistences that have no basis in absolutes, that could be read as critical of absolutes, having meaning only by stating differences. A "real" man is *not* a virgin, *not* a "fag." Men know themselves by virtue of their comparisons to "others"—gay men and those individuals in states of pre-sexual being, untouched. Women, too, have their absolutes: "He's a man, he's sneakin'!" is clearly exegesis on the nature or essence side of the argument about the ontology of male being. Nonetheless, the women also have their moments of comparison and acknowledgments of constructedness: Some sororities are not "bad," and Rachel wants to "become" a Delta even though she is *not* a wannabee.

The film offers some poststructuralist comforts. Half-Pint begins the film firmly centered: "I'm your cousin, your blood." But he ends it reconstructed and differently centered (however problematically): "I'm a Gamma man *now*" (my emphasis). That new insistence marks a historicized difference. The film offers additional critiques of identity politics. Possibilities include the town-gown split, an explicitly political one that manifests its implicit politics in aesthetics as well: The townies, who are working-class and, therefore, under some rubrics "Blacker" than the middle-class college kids, are also the

ones with the "jerri curls" (generally recognized as evidence of aesthetic *disaffection* with "Blackness") protected by shower caps. And a concern with international politics—South Africa and apartheid—gets read by "wannabee" Julian as evidence that the male jigs really aren't "Black," because "Blackness" originates in and is concerned with U.S. geopolitical sites only—like Detroit.

The film's failing, of course, is that it does not explore the ways in which its (male) politics are also tied to its own forms of aesthetization. Males are not only socialized by the *behaviors* of their groups, whether within fraternities or within male-oriented, internationally focused political practices such as protests, marches, or rallies, but they are participants in the aesthetization of these practices. The film, unfortunately and myopically, presents aesthetics as formal matters of physical appearance in which women only participate.²⁴ Men *do*: They dance the beautifully choreographed Greek stomps, or the fellas' clever parody stomp, or make careful selections of political posters and other room decor items, and arrange that decor for sexual trysts.

Women, on the other hand, *show*. They wear or don't wear makeup; they straighten or don't straighten their hair; they show off the colors of the eyes with which they were born or show different eyes through the wonders of chemical technology. *School Daze* is incapable of making the connection between what the men do and what they are showing as their aesthetics, and the film is incapable of showing that women do anything other than look like components of male aesthetics. The film is allowed its specificity, but it could have chosen to self-consciously represent male constructions of aesthetics; there is work to be done in this area. Still *School Daze*, while not recognizing its own attitude toward the gendering of its discussion of aesthetics, does make the issue available for critique.

The film's homophobia offers a similar site for examining historical identity and gender politics. In its retreat from and fear of homosexuality and the homosexual, it plays out the fear engendered during the course of African American history and concretized by Robert Park's assertion (in the 1920s) that "the Negro is the lady of the races" (Park 1950: 280). The language around African American culture, intellectualism, and politics has been dominated by language analogous to that which has constructed and constrained women. Within a history that has used the same language to delineate the constructions of race *and* gender, that has insisted, against general Euro-American male privilege, that African American males can only share the space reserved for women, this film is a long commercial that reassures African American males that they *can* center themselves by asserting a salient difference: They are straight; all "real" men are straight; "Blackness" is like real manhood—straight. So there, Robert Park.

Again, however, in defense of a critique of the specificities of this film's representations, the feeble excuse of "reality" comes into play. Lee has consistently defended his film against criticism of its homophobia by claiming and privileging its facticity, by defending realism: Those (frat) guys really are that way. In so doing, he lets himself off the hook for the selection criteria at work in any representation. I respond as simply: Yes, some African Americans are like that; some are not; therefore, to what particular end is this specific "real" content being mined? If it is intended as a critique of African American homophobia, "how" (in form and/or content) is the critique available?

V

I would like to end where I began. The historical moment and the attention given to Spike Lee by an entire spectrum of critics, commentators, and media fora; the effects of his presence and deification on possible productions of African American presences in the cultural domain; the reductionist tendency in any U.S. discussions about race and racism—all combine to make it imperative that we continue to think about the issues raised by Lee and his production. It won't hurt and might help to begin by refusing to consider Lee or his production simply within their own terms. Trying to make things "real" has been the problem. What might more contextual criticism of Lee and his production offer us?

The May 1990 issue of *Emerge* points to the recent successes of African American independent filmmakers at Sundance (White 1990: 65–66). The news is cheering. But there were no African American women among their number and, even more troubling, the critic writing the article said nothing about their absence from Sundance or from his discussion of African American filmmaking. Instead, he described and contributed to the uncritical veneration of the work of Melvin Van Peebles, a tradition in African American film criticism that ignores both formal infelicities in Van Peebles's films and issues of sexism and homophobia.

Within the terms of simple celebration of African American male filmmakers, there is no space for the criticism that any artist needs—especially, given present political constraints, artists from marginalized and racialized communities. Yet, as critics we are responsible for the work of analysis and thoroughgoing contextualization lest we run the risk of continuing, in the name of affirming our cultural production, disabling essentialisms. Representations are not "reality"; simple, factual reproductions of selected aspects of vernacular culture are neither necessarily counter-hegemonic art nor anything else. They don't even "set the record *straight*" (pun intended). Therefore, in our critical considerations we do well to heed Fanon's warnings equally

against nationalist nostalgia for a precolonial past and uncritical nativist celebrations in the present. While beginning with the question of context—Compared to what?—does not foreclose productive discussions, it does make it harder to rest on simple resolutions. And that's the truth, Ruth.

NOTES

1. Amazingly, the *New York Times*, not exactly famous for its in-depth analysis of African American cultural life or production, invited a group of people, including academics in literature, education, and sociology; a psychiatrist; an administrative judge of the New York State Supreme Court; and a film director (among others), to "explore issues raised by the film" *Do the Right Thing*. The editors of the Arts and Leisure section devoted almost two full pages to excerpts from this gathering ("*Do the Right Thing*" 1989).

2. Included in this category are Aufderheide 1988, Canby 1989, Creedon 1989, Davis 1989, Day 1989, Ewen 1989, Hoberman 1989, Klawans 1989, Muwakkil 1989, and Tate 1989.

3. Included in this category are Crouch 1989 and Klein 1989.

4. The subtexts of the "Compared to what?" are both dominant cultural production and the possibilities for politically engaged film explored by the Black British film collectives—about which I do not write at any length (or in any depth) in this paper, but against which I look at Lee.

5. Lee sees himself and his work as politically engaged (see, e.g., Orenstein 1989: 43); that is the reason that I take his political claims as well as the critics who deify him so seriously.

6. I focus only on Lee instead of including a critique of Eddie Murphy, Robert Townsend, Keenan Wayans, or the Hudlin brothers (all African American male filmmakers getting considerable attention from the general media and African American cultural commentators) to keep this essay focused and of moderate length.

7. This is an issue Ann Cvetkovich and I raised in a paper presented at the 1989 Modern Language Association convention.

8. I refer to Gates 1987; Appiah 1986; and Fanon 1967 (1952).

9. The truth of his vision was also the theme of his letter-to-the-editor response (to Joe Klein's hysterical attack) in *New York* magazine.

10. I do not think, however, that all African American cultural production has to be nationally distributed for it to be a site of resistance to the dominance of Euro-American cultural hegemony.

11. Cvetkovich and I have argued also against seeing a simple dichotomy between politically "good" independent and politically "bad" commercial production and against as equally simple a dichotomy as that between "avant-garde" as an inherently elitist form and conventional narrative representation as an inherently popular form.

12. There were, for instance, those who thought Euro-Americans or middle-class African Americans needed to learn from *Do the Right Thing*. Consider the example of Barbara Day, who thought the movie was good because it was "as real as the nation's last urban Insurrection." Middle-class people (of both races), she opined, "needed to see what the poor in New York City ghettos see too often: a Black or Latino Raheem being

choked, feet dangling above the pavement." I could expend much ink and theoretical zeal on the tendency (need? pleasure?) on the part of many Euro-American commentators to romanticize African Americans represented at the most coercive sites, sites that bestow "authenticity," but I don't feel strong enough this time around. While there are differences among segments of the African American population, some circumstances of life in the United States for African Americans are fairly general. The existence of racist police practices is one such unifying factor. I will take issue, therefore, with another aspect of Day's myopia: the argument that racist police coercion is always lower- or working-class oriented. Day connects "a Black or Latino Raheem being choked" with ghetto residents only, but one of the Miami "urban insurrections" was kicked off by the police murder of Arthur Little, a middle-class African American who worked in insurance. The violent tendencies of racist police are not unknown to middle-class African Americans: At the National Black Male Conference workshop on police abuse (Kansas City, Mo., July 13, 1990), the largely academic and middle-class African American audience was unsurprised when Don Jackson, an ex-police officer (made famous by the videotape of a Los Angeles Police Department officer pushing his head through a window), said that "almost everyone in this room looks like a criminal to police officers so inclined." Class does not necessarily mediate racism. Even most middle-class African Americans understand (and many have suffered from) some form of racist police violence or hostility.

13. Muwakkil 1989, Tate 1989, and White 1989 were the most enthusiastic in this category, followed closely by Davis 1989 and Day 1989.

14. bell hooks examines the differences between critical responses to Alice Walker's representations of African American men and those of Spike Lee.

15. hooks also touches on this point (hooks 1989: 35).

16. How very much Mookie's insistence on the predatoriness of Euro-American males toward African American females echoes (while countering) Euro-American males' insistence on the myth of African American male predatoriness toward Euro-American females! Of course, one might argue, such insistences are meant to be counter-mythologizing, but such countering accepts the original structure—it does not transform or subvert it. Ironically, unlike the deployments of slippery indirections—the keynote of vernacular linguistic play—counter-myths are as *direct*, as centered as the racist myths they mean to displace.

17. Fanon argues that American Blacks might also be considered "natives" in the sense of being part of an internal colony. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he states that the "negroes who live in the United States and in Central or Latin American in fact experience the need to attach themselves to a cultural matrix. Their problem is not fundamentally different from that of the Africans" (Fanon 1968 [1961]: 215).

18. This defense might or might not be superseded—time will tell—by his more recent calls for a liberal humanist pluralism and attacks on social theory and critiques of race, class, and gender.

19. Gates is right to take issue with some pejorative descriptions of his work as essentialist. To this end, I disagree with Diana Fuss's argument, for example, that Gates's and Houston Baker's analyses inherently romanticize the vernacular (although some of their specific uses of vernacular analysis have done so; see Gates's media pieces on 2 Live Crew, for example) and that they speak *about* the vernacular and not *in* it. Such an argument is itself a romanticization, first, because it is not necessary to write in the vernacular to theorize about it. Most metacommentary systems employ their own jargon;

theoretical discussions about fictional texts, for example, do not necessarily go on in the language of the texts themselves. More importantly, African American vernacular is *not* necessarily synonymous with "Black English" or any form of Black dialect (rural or urban), although the vernacular and vernacular users often employ Black English and/or Black dialects. African American vernacular is an attitude toward language, a language dynamic, and a technique of language use (see Baker 1984; Gates 1988; Mitchell-Kernan 1973). African American fiction writers such as Toni Morrison frequently "signify" in standard English. And both Baker and Gates have also used vernacular signifying practices from time to time in their oral and written presentations. Vernacularity is not simply a marker for African American working-class or "street" verbal practices. To attach it only to such sites is to be caught in a search for false authenticity.

Fuss (1989: 90) further argues that "the quest to recover, reinscribe, and revalorize the black vernacular" is inherently essentialist. The vernacular is not in need of recovery or reinscription: it is alive and well—and multi-class within the African American group. To graph the specificities of African-American cultural production, its textual theoretical possibilities, is not to go on a ghost hunt.

20. I refer to Gayatri Spivak's interview in *Differences*. While I am aware that exigencies of specific political moments and their attendant strategies have historically demanded essentialism on the large scale—nationalism—nonetheless, I want to think about unreflective essentialism as a problematic generally and specifically in regard to the Spike Lee discourse. I try to be very careful about the way that I use Spivak here because her interview is long and complex; I pick and choose parts of it because, while I think that her warnings about essentialism and anti-essentialism are very much to the point, working through the implications of all of her (and Rooney's) discussion would demand more time and space than I have here. I use, therefore, what seems to me to be most to the point. Spivak argues, among other things, that anti-essentialism risks being another form of essence, that antiessentialism's insistence (in some quarters) on the primacy of "over-determinations" leads to paralyzing strategic anarchy. Further, she asserts, "Essences . . . are just a kind of content. All content is not essence. Why be so nervous about it?" (Spivak 1990: 145). I am nervous, however, because within the terms of Euro-American dominance, as far as African American cultural production and reception are concerned, there is no such thing as just a kind of content.

21. Sarah Shulman (1989) is an exception to this generality, although I find problematic her article's insistence that Lee usurped "authentic" working-class voices and substituted his middle-class voice. I am not interested in taking sides on whether or not he does so; however, while I find much useful in Shulman's reading of the film, this issue of African American middle-class lack of authenticity versus African American working-class authenticity simply reinscribes another debate contained in terms of essentialism: Who is the "real" Black person? The insistence that only the working-class African American carries African American culture is one side of a pointless debate that has gone on for more than a century. All African Americans, in their complexity—of which class difference is a part—make up African culture. One need only watch Cornel West and Hortense Spillers (to name just two) make academic presentations in order to see variations of African American academic, middle-class, vernacular culture at work.

22. hooks 1989, Kamber 1989, and Dyson 1989 have all provided excellent extended readings of *Do the Right Thing*. My work here contributes to discussions they have begun.

23. The death of an African American male by police is a television and cinematic cliché, and bell hooks argues that Lee's representation of Raheem's death does not explode or remap that cliché. Further, as Michael Kamber also notes, despite the tragedy of the disproportionately high numbers of African American males killed by police, such murders are still fairly atypical—less than 1 percent of African American homicides (Kamber 1989: 40). The vast majority of African American male and female homicides are committed by African American males, and the relationship of that fact to the representation of African American male homicide in *Do the Right Thing* is a fair enough question, since representation is the "practice" of the filmmaker's selection. Is the simplicity of murder by cops somehow more "real" than the complexities of murder by African American males? I am not ranking factual horrors, but I am interested in the representation "selection" at work in this film. Does the specter of male socialization within African American communities and its participation in hegemonic violence and masculinism seem too "inauthentic" to be represented?

24. Vernon Reid, in Davis et al. 1988, touches on Lee's depiction of African American color line internalization as played out by women only.

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