

Communitysay's claims weren't far-fetched. Many Black colleges and organizations actually did raise funds in a direct way with screenings of *Daze*. And Black Greeks did commence to step all over the quads at Princeton, Harvard, and Yale. And although the various federal agencies and foundations that commission studies of Black colleges and universities can't support a causality theory, preliminary reports from the U.S. Office of Education, the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, and the Carnegie Foundation do show an unprecedented spurt in Black college enrollment, in Black student enrollment, and in gift giving in the past two-year period [1988–90]. And according to television newscasts during the Thanksgiving holiday of 1990, the Atlanta University complex has been overwhelmed by applications from transfer students and first-year enrollees. In all probability, the 1990 report from the Research Department of the United Negro College Fund will tell the tale more precisely.

The rest of the story is for the audience to report. The Lee films insist on an active spectatorship by the kinds of questions they pose. *School Daze* asks, so what are we going to do about this color/class thaang? Or as the student council president demanded to know at the homecoming parade confrontation, "What do you want to do—kill each other?"

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MICHELE WALLACE

Spike Lee and Black Women

In *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, Harold Cruse defined and described the impossibility for Afro-Americans of ever isolating a pure separatist or integrationist agenda. Yet in his rush to supply prescriptions, Cruse missed the implications of his own scholarship: "Integration," he warned, "is . . . leading to cultural negation." As Cruse saw it, integration-minded intellectuals like James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry were infected with a lethal dose of false consciousness—a severe case of neither knowing nor caring what was really black. Thus Cruse called for profound changes in black self-perception: Black intellectuals needed to toughen up, think more collectively, and, above all, black up their political, economic, and cultural projects, which they promptly did in the context of Black Power.

Almost twenty years after Cruse's initial call, black critic Greg Tate surveyed the results for high and low culture in a list-heavy celebration titled "The Return of the Black Aesthetic: Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deke" (*Village Voice Literary Supplement*, December 1986). Tate proposed postmodernism as a way to heal the apparent schism between assimilation and cultural nationalism. "Black artists," he wrote, "have opened up the entire 'text of blackness' for fun and games," which meant that it was no longer necessary to insist on African origins or the absence of European influences as the basis of black identity.

Michele Wallace, "Spike Lee and Black Women," in *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990). Reprinted with permission of the author.

Tate's most encouraging sign of the new age was *She's Gotta Have It*, a low-budget feature made by a young black filmmaker named Spike Lee, which Tate described as "a populist black poststructuralist dream." Not only had Lee formulated "an uncompromisingly black vision," he had "shot [the film] for jackshit with a collectivist cast and crew," thus demolishing "Hollywood's megabudget mystique." This was consistent with Tate's notion of a cultural resistance that "doesn't aim for transcendence of corporate culture's limits into some mystical liberated zone, but for critical intervention in the process by which capitalism is rationalized through mass culture and modernism." Cultural assimilation and even accommodation were now OK, provided they were in a separatist framework. Yet Tate also applauded Lee's "raceman" views on "Whoopi's blue contacts, Michael's nose" and *The Color Purple*: not black enough.

When it came to apparent transgressions in the field of sexuality, the charge of racial inauthenticity was brought out, brushed off, and presented as though it were brand new. Issues of sexual difference were the special blind spot of Tate's theoretical formulations: Women emerged only as also-rans in his numerous lists of who's getting it right, from Miles Davis to Amiri Baraka to Nona Hendryx. Nor did it appear relevant to mention that *She's Gotta Have It*, the showpiece of the new black aesthetic, was about a black woman who couldn't get enough of the old phallus and who therefore had to be raped. Tate's obsession with the prisonhouse of historical narrative (blacks have only walk-on parts in Western Civilization's version) and the groovy way it could be replaced by filmic spectacle, or "fun and games," rendered superfluous the mundane observation that in such spectacles, women almost always occupy a different status.

Since Tate's 1986 declarations, Spike Lee has provided further proof of some kind of major continental drift. His books, *Spike Lee's Gotta Have It* and *Uplift the Race: The Construction of School Daze* (the latter co-authored by Lisa Jones, both published by Simon and Schuster), as well as his new movie, *School Daze*, all participate in Tate's ambiguous vision of "blackness." This spring, Lee made a black-and-white, vérité campaign commercial for Jesse Jackson, and another movie is in the works. Melvin Van Peebles, whom this movement embraces as spiritual father, is also making a movie this summer. So is Robert Townsend, a West Coast actor who tired of the film industry's racism and decided to make his own vehicle. There are reported spinoffs from both the Lee and the Townsend projects, as well. Perhaps film's indeterminacy and power make it seem the likely place for black American culture to emerge from disadvantage and invisibility. But there's a problem here, too, with which the "blaxploitation" films of the 1960s and 1970s thoroughly acquainted us. Black films are obviously untenable without popular success in somebody's marketplace. I hope Lee, Townsend, and Van Peebles et al. are not intending to demonstrate that black filmmakers can reclaim blaxploita-

tion without revising its use of female humiliation as an inevitable byproduct of plot resolution.

The only way to avoid a renaissance of filmic black sexism—while this is still a movement and not yet a full-blown industry—would be to take on the field of sexual difference deliberately and oppositionally. At first, it seemed that Spike Lee had done exactly that with *She's Gotta Have It*. "It always amazed me," Lee wrote in the journal he kept while making the film, "how men can go out and bone any and everything between fifteen and eighty and it's OK. They are encouraged to have and enjoy sex, while it's not so for women. If they do what men do they're labeled whore, prostitute, freaks, nympho, etc. Why this double standard? Why not explore this?"

Lee thus invents a sex-loving female character named Nola Darling, who has three male lovers: Greer Childs, a narcissistic buppie actor who likes being seen with Nola because she's attractive; Jamie Overstreet, a solid, average guy who wants to marry her; and Mars Blackmon, played by Lee himself, a B-boy on a bicycle who always makes Nola laugh. Nola, her male lovers, and her female friends all address the camera to supply competing versions of who she really is. The structure of the film thus subverts whatever masculine authority Lee, as director, writer, and producer, intermittently imposes.

But this film's fun has its limits. Significantly, *She's Gotta Have It* begins with an epigraph from the beginning of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in which Zora Neale Hurston romanticizes the irreconcilability of men and women. Nola's three lovers also remind me of Janie's three husbands in Hurston's novel. Jamie seems most like Logan Killicks, who offers Janie the lackluster security of forty acres and a mule and wants to degrade her when she fails to appreciate it. Greer Childs resembles Joe Starks, who becomes the mayor of an all-black town and wants to put Jamie on a pedestal. Tea Cake, who offers Janie pleasure and companionship "on the muck" among the "folk farthest down" seems a dead ringer for Mars Blackmon, whose love of fun emerges as a critique of conventional masculinity.

Although it is Jamie who finally rapes Nola into submission when she refuses to marry him, Lee's journal clearly suggests that he views Jamie as the best man among her lovers. For instance, Lee often remarks that while Nola has sex with all three men, she has orgasms only with Jamie. He has to caution himself against writing too many scenes in which Nola is crying. He doesn't know how Nola should react to Jamie's rape. Should she enjoy it? He settles for having Jamie reluctantly admit that he enjoyed it. Perhaps most important, Lee never calls it a rape. These matters work out considerably better in the film than in the notebooks—on screen, Lee resists the obvious conclusion, in which the best man marries Nola, the prize. But the film's mistrust

of female sexuality is disturbingly obvious in Lee's handling of Nola's relationship with her lesbian friend, Opal Gilstrap, who comes on like the original serpent in the Garden of Eden. In many ways, especially in the scene where Lee's puckered lips traverse her flesh, Nola seems less a character than a dark continent to be explored and conquered. Although she addresses the camera directly, her language seems inane and self-canceling, as if she were selling something in a TV commercial. Still, *She's Gotta Have It* left me eager to see what Lee would do next.

School Daze takes on a scene that is already familiar to readers of the canon of Afro-American literature. It's the black college campus of Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Amiri Baraka's *Tales*. But such literary allusions cannot hope to compete with the film's animated pastiche of classic homecoming-football-game movies; slapstick humor and sight gags; Motown and Busby Berkeley production numbers; jazz, R&B, and funk performance; black English, style, and dance. To the perennial question of the classic Afro-American literary text—"What kind of education can a black man expect, even at a black college, except a lesson in how to heel to a white master?" Lee replies, "Not much," in a film pointedly devoid of classrooms, professors, and all the appurtenances of study. My question then becomes, reluctantly, what kind of education can a black woman expect to receive as audience for this film?

School Daze is a postmodern film version of Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, with the dichotomies of Pan-Africanism versus accommodationist economics and black pride versus assimilation transposed into the madcap goings-on of pop cult's *Animal House* and the neocultural nationalism of Ishmael Reed's playful *Mumbo Jumbo*. But the accompanying political issues of separatism and integration are all but silenced by the film's all-black universe. Also prominently displayed is postmodernism's vision of women as monster kewpie dolls, whose wayward desires require on-screen punishment in movies such as *Half Moon Street*, *Blue Velvet*, *Mona Lisa*, *The House of Games*, and *Ironweed*. While the film halfheartedly focuses on a conflict between students and administration over whether black Mission College should divest from South Africa, its obsession is with gender and sexuality: The viewer is invited to witness entirely distinct male and female versions of a contest between light-skinned, affluent Wannabees and dark-skinned, nappy-haired, lower-class Jigaboos.

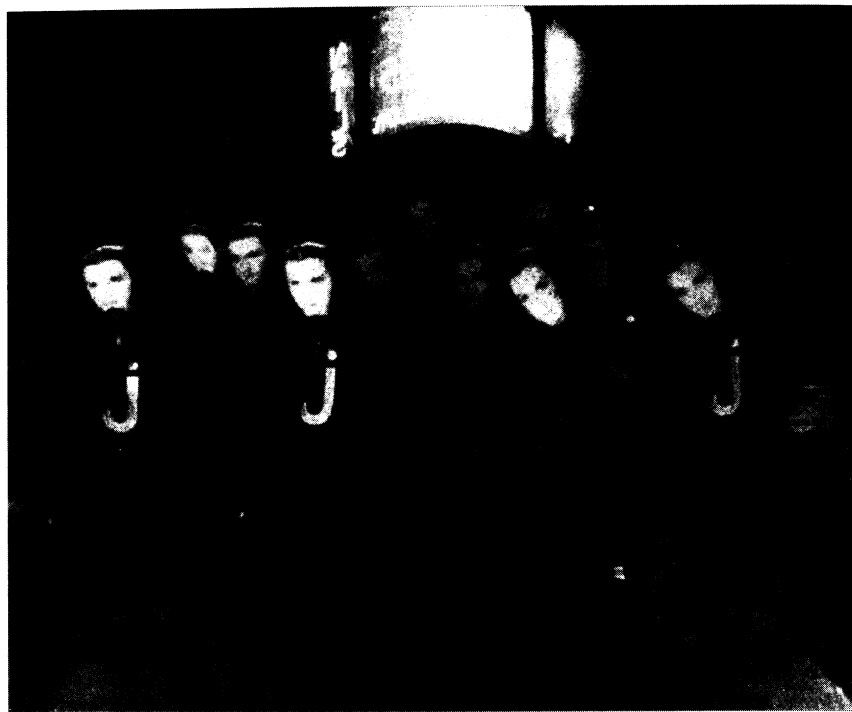
The film's opening scene provides us with an introduction to the major male contingents, who generally devote their attention to global issues of cultural leadership or political responsibility (although a lot of what they do appears to

be very silly). Dap, the story's protonationalist hero, and Da Fellas, or male Jigaboos, are participating in a rally to protest South African apartheid and the failure of Mission College to divest. The president of the college and the president of the board of trustees, either or both of whom participated in the civil-rights demonstrations of the 1960s, are watching from an administration-building window. Trouble promptly arrives in the form of the stylishly dressed Gamma Phi Gammas, the principal contingent of the Wannabees, led by a proto-Nazi Big Brother Almighty and flanked by the glamorous Gamma Rays. They don't give a damn about divestment or the plight of South African blacks. As Julian/Big Brother Almighty so succinctly puts it, "I'm from Detroit! Motown!"

The particular cause of conflict is the display the Gammas are making of breaking in eight baldheaded, sycophantic, slavetlike pledgees, who are being led along, chain-gang style, on leashes. "It takes a real man to be a Gamma man!" the Gammities chant at the top of their lungs, "Because only a Gamma man is a real man!" Among these Gammities, occupying a uniquely liminal status in the text (in that he is the only character we see communicating effectively with both groups) is none other than the bigeyed auteur Spike Lee, as Half-Pint, Dap's cousin, who is director, producer, and writer of this film, as well.

The women, both Jigaboos and Wannabees, take no apparent interest in either politics or culture except as passive consumers. The Gamma Rays wear expensive clothes, elaborate Farrah Fawcett hairdos, and lots of makeup. The film's preoccupation is with their falseness, which reflects both their "wanna be whiteness" and their femininity—as though they were black women in white women's drag. Jigaboo women, on the other hand, are natural women with natural hair; the film focuses on them primarily as objects of ridicule, humor, and negation. Rachel, Dap's girlfriend, "the darkest thing on campus," in her own words, seems the leader of the Jigaboo women by default. She doesn't really do anything except march alongside Dap, have sex with him, and argue with him about whether she should finally, in her senior year, pledge a sorority, which seems a puzzling contradiction of the Jigaboo stance.

Women's affairs are epitomized by the film's largest musical number, "Straight and Nappy." Suddenly, Wannabee and Jigaboo women are transported to a mod-colored Madame Re Res Hair Salon to have it out. The Cotton Club music and the Josephine Baker dancing have all the heat and none of the dignity of the confrontation between white and Puerto Rican boys in *West Side Story*. Although a comically fat Jigaboo dancer weighs in against the nappy-headed side, otherwise slender female dancers, black and tan, battle early in the film for this ambiguous turf. At one point, Jigaboos don masks of Vivien Leigh playing Scarlett O'Hara to present a mirror image to Wannabee women. The Wannabees respond by donning masks of Hattie McDaniel playing her Mammy. Which would you rather be? For black women, either/or is really neither/nor.



School Daze (1988). Da Naturals (as Wannabees).

On an even lower scale in the film's visual economy are the local yokels, or street bloods. Their confrontation with Da Fellas at Kentucky Fried Chicken begins when one local, feigning femininity, asks, "Is it true what they say about Mission men?" It ends with one of Da Fellas saying that a yokel looks "just like a bitch" because he uses jerri curl on his hair and wears a shower cap in the street. Thus, at the only moment when the film takes on the plight of poor black men, it simultaneously refuses even to consider black homosexual legitimacy.

I saw *School Daze* for the second time in Brooklyn's Fulton Mall, not far from where Jamie's first meeting with Nola in *She's Gotta Have It* was filmed. It was a Friday afternoon, and the audience was packed with black women, teenagers, and children. Every time the Jigaboo women came on the screen, perhaps because of their dark skin and their free-form, unstraightened hair, there was the uncomfortable laughter of disapproval. When the Gamma Rays appeared, there was more often the silence of complete immersion or the cat-calls of men, or the involuntary "oohing" of admiration. After all, the Gamma Rays look more like the women we're all used to seeing on movie screens. They also have their own musical number.

At the coronation of the Homecoming Queen, Gamma queen Jane Toussaint, who has long blond (dyed?) hair and blue eyes (contact lenses?), and the Gamma Rays, svelte and glamorous, sing "Be Alone Tonight" in a slick imitation of a Motown girl group. The four women perform in slinky silver-and-black gowns with bows and ruffles from their knees to their ankles. They wear black patent-leather high heels and sparkles in their long, cascading hair, T&A emphasized by dress cut and pelvis-gyrating choreography. They look like the ultimate Virginia Slims advertisement.

Light-skinned Jane Toussaint—who whispers softly, à la both white and black girl groups in the 1960s, "Boy, you know I love you"—is set up by this resplendent presentation of her wares for the anachronistic rape that will be the film's climax. While the dastardly deed is technically done by Half-Pint, he is commanded to do it by Julian/Big Brother Almighty while fellow Gammas wait in the hall. That Jane is also tricked into agreeing to it by her boyfriend only makes this act seem more like the collective will of the text: figurative gang rape as filmic imperative. Dap, presumably the representative of this film's utopianism—just as Jamie was the ideal image of masculinity in *She's Gotta Have It*—is moved to take the drastic action of waking everybody up at dawn, because he sees Half-Pint's act as going too far. But where does Lee stand in all of this: with Dap or with Half-Pint, whom he plays? And dare we interpret his progress from playing "the man who makes her laugh" to playing the rapist by popular demand?

I sat through *School Daze* twice that day in Brooklyn, wondering about my own increasing willingness to luxuriate in the film's youthful images and its seductive, playful musical score. I stopped in the theater's bathroom before I left. Two women were humming and singing "Do the Butt," one of the film's big musical performances, which has since become a hit on black radio. But there was a third woman who wasn't humming anything. She was standing in front of the mirror trying to comb her hair. Full-figured with dark brown skin, her short hair dyed traffic-light blond and covered with a long blond fall attached to a cloth headband, she was no "wannabee" in any sense that *School Daze* could articulate. She kept trying to comb the fall, which had grown stiff and artificial looking, into a shape that might approximate the one it had been in when she'd purchased it. On her young, pretty face, she had that worried look black women often assume in public places when they look in the mirror.

I couldn't figure out how this woman could fail to see a relationship between her dilemma and the film she'd just seen. Did she resent Jane, identify with her, or perhaps a little bit of both? Moreover, I had the uneasy suspicion that the blond hairpiece and the blond dye had something to do with that curious process by which black female frustration becomes black female fashion. Which leads me to wonder: Can black women survive another dose of "Black Pride"?