

“No Brothers on the Wall”:
Black Male Icons in
Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing
by
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ABSTRACT

Hollywood's portrayal of African American men was replete with negative stereotypes before Shelton Jackson Lee, commonly known as Spike Lee, emerged as one of the most creative and provocative filmmakers of our time. Lee has used his films to perform a corrective history of images of black men, by referencing African American male icons in his narrative works. This strategy was evident in his third feature film, *Do the Right Thing* (1989). Baseball great Jackie Robinson, and freedom fighters, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, were the black male icons featured prominently in the film. The Brooklyn-raised filmmaker's film journals, published interviews, and companion books, have provided insight into his thoughts, motivations, and inspirations, as he detailed the impact of the black male historical figures he profiles in *Do the Right Thing* (1989), on his life and art. Lee deployed his corrective history strategy, during the 1980s, to reintroduce African American heroes to black youth in an effort to correct media portrayals of black men as criminal and delinquent. He challenged the dominant narrative in mainstream Hollywood films, such as *Cry Freedom* (1987) and *Mississippi Burning* (1989), in which white heroes overshadowed black male icons. Lee's work parallels recent scholarship on the history of African American males, as called for by Darlene Clarke Hine and Ernestine Jenkins. The prolific director's efforts to radically change stereotypical depictions of black men through film, has not gone without criticisms. He has been accused of propagating essentialist notions of black male identity, through his use of African American male icons in his films. Despite these alleged shortcomings, Lee's reintroduction

of iconic figures such as Jackie Robinson, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, in *Do the Right Thing* (1989), marked the beginning of a wave of commemorative efforts, that included the retiring of Robinson's number forty-two by Major League Baseball, the popularization of the Martin Luther King National Holiday, and the rise of Malcolm X as a icon embraced by Hip Hop during the 1990's.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my ancestors upon whose shoulders I stand.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Before the ascendancy of Shelton Jackson Lee, commonly known as Spike Lee, Hollywood's portrayal of African American men fell into five general categories: slave, buffoon, convict, wise-cracking detective, and pimp-like "player."¹ Lee burst onto the cinematic scene in 1987, with the success of his first independent film, *She's Gotta Have It*.² The budding filmmaker introduced complex African American characters that did not display the stereotypical traits typically found in Hollywood features. By the 1989 release of his third film, *Do the Right Thing*, a film brimming with diverse black characters, set in the working class Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, New York, Lee established a reputation for broadening representations of blacks in cinema. Syndicated film critic Gene Siskel suggested, "Spike Lee has given us more genuine and varied images of black people than in 20 years of American movies put together."³ Lee's films have deliberately presented diverse characterizations of black people. When asked about his motivations for pursuing a career in film, Lee asserted that, "all I wanted to do was make films to show different aspects of the African

¹ Lee's African-American predecessors of filmmaking include Oscar Micheaux, Melvin Van Peebles, Gordon Parks, Ossie Davis, and Michael Shultz. Lee, along with Robert Townsend, is credited with the emergence the modern era of black filmmakers. See Manthia Diawara, *Black American Cinema*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 5-9.

² *She's Gotta Have It* is a rough-edged romantic comedy about a strong and independent woman living in Brooklyn, New York, with three men and a woman aggressively competing for her attention. See *She's Gotta Have It*, DVD, directed by Spike Lee (1986; MGM, 2008).

³ Gene Siskel, "Spike Lee's Mission – He's A Filmmaker with a Message for Both Blacks and Whites: 'Wake Up,' *Chicago Tribune*, June 25, 1989, 4.

American experience. I knew what I wanted to see on screen and [I] wasn't seeing it, and I knew there were other people like me who wanted the same thing."⁴

The filmmaker has also depicted various cinematic images of African American through a gendered lens. Lee, an African American male, has revealed his influences. "People sometimes think that my source of inspiration is just filmmakers," he argues, "but it is athletes, musicians, so many people – Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King, Willie Mays, Muhammad Ali, Walt Frazier, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson." He referred to them as "very strong African American men," and "visionaries...at a time when you could get smacked down for taking a stance."⁵ It has been no accident, therefore, that the historical black male figures he has cited as his inspirations have been either profiled or referenced in his body of work.

Spike Lee has used his movies to illuminate the historical contributions made by African American men, a group that he believed has traditionally been omitted, marginalized, stereotyped, scandalized, and demonized through various forms of media. *Mo' Better Blues* (1990) was a response to white-produced films about black jazz musicians, especially Clint Eastwood's 1988 biopic, *Bird*, on pioneering saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker. Eastwood's World War II film, *Letters from Iwo Jima*, motivated Lee to adapt novelist James McBride's *Miracle at*

⁴ George Alexander, *Why We Make Movies: Black Filmmakers Talk About the Magic of Cinema*, (New York: Harlem Moon, 2003), 90.

⁵ Kaleem Aftab and Spike Lee, *Spike Lee: That's My Story and I'm Sticking To It* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004), 57.

St. Anna into a film.⁶ Lee felt that Eastwood's film's lack of African American military personnel failed to recognize the sacrifices made by black World War II veterans.

Spike Lee has included historical African American male figures in his narrative films in response to perceived historical inaccuracies about black males. He believed young people are not getting accurate information about the past and it is impacting their interest in the subject. He opined, "I do not think that you can ever be taught too much history. Today it seems like young people especially aren't taught enough of it and aren't interested in things that happened before they were born."⁷ As a writer, director, and producer of films, Lee has often given fictional characters names of historical figures, adorned actors in the jerseys of black athletes of a bygone era, has characters quote or reference historical black male figures, and filled the screen with still images of iconic African American men.

This thesis examines Lee's inclusion of African American male icons Jackie Robinson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X in his film *Do the Right Thing* as a form of corrective history to combat stereotypical media portrayals of black men.⁸ Lee understood that many of the conventional social perceptions of black males were fortified through cinema. His efforts to recast the image of black

⁶ Spike Lee and Lisa Jones, *Mo' Better Blues*, (New York: Fireside, 1990), 39-40.

⁷ Aftab and Lee, *That's My Story, 2*.

⁸ For the purpose of this study I define corrective history as the reinterpreting or reintroducing of historical persons or events in an effort to correct or counteract harmful portrayals of people or historical occurrences.

men through the use of historical figures in the film were in concert with scholarly efforts to examine history through the twin lenses of race and gender. Historians Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins' edited volume, *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity*, represents one of the first comprehensive efforts to jumpstart the field of black male history and manhood. They argued, "Women's historians have shown that gender is as important as race and class in understanding the past and contemporary modern society...and historians in all fields have been forced to acknowledge that men...have actively participated in the history of gender construction."⁹ Hine and Jenkins suggested that when Black men are studied, it is predominantly "with black men as a sociological ill." They asserted, "What it means to be a black man in America cannot be reduced to the sum total of negative experiences and stereotypes."¹⁰

Lee has used cinema to combat the "negative experiences and stereotypes" of African American men referred to by Hine and Jenkins. Lee has referenced real life black males, heroes and unknowns, throughout his narrative films to influence his audiences' perceptions of black men. As a commercial feature filmmaker his audience has been heterogeneous, but many viewers shared stereotypical perceptions of African American males. Inclusion of iconic black male figures in his films have been designed to combat an lack of cultural esteem, forged by

⁹ Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins, *A Question of Manhood, Vol. 1: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), xi.

¹⁰ Hines and Jenkins, *A Question of Manhood*, xii.

forces outside of the black community, that he believed has existed within black communities. When asked about the social power of cinema in helping to eliminate racism and prejudice, Lee stated, “Black people have been trained and taught to hate themselves. We’ve been taught that everything black is negative or derogatory.”¹¹ For non-black audiences, Lee is hoping to introduce them to alternative images of black men. He points to historic figures to add a sense of substance and credibility to the portrayal he is asking his audience to consider accepting. This strategy has been evident in Lee’s use of black male icons in his films.

Greenwood publishers has produced a series of multivolume encyclopedic text that profile historical icons. They have argued that an icon is an individual that “challenges the status quo, influences millions, and affect history.”¹² Media studies scholar Benedikt Feldges has placed emphasis on the essential role of visual media in the creation of icons. He writes, “...visual symbols of people, called ‘icons,’ acquire characteristic contours through repetition that distinguish them from others.”¹³ Commenting on the subjective nature of the African American icon, historian William Jelani Cobb writes, “It is not simply a matter of statistics and data...In some complex, perhaps unknowable way, icons mangle to

¹¹ Janice Mosier Richolson, “He’s Gotta Have It: An Interview with Spike Lee,” in *Spike Lee Interviews*, ed. Cynthia Fuchs. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 2002), 27.

¹² Matthew C. Whitaker, *Icons of Black America: Breaking Barriers and Crossing Boundaries* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2011), xxiii.

¹³ Benedikt Feldges, *Icons: The Genesis of a National Visual Language* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 2.

encapsulate a moment in history.”¹⁴ Baseball great Jackie Robinson and freedom fighters Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X are the black male icons featured in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*. The protagonist of *Do the Right Thing*, played by Lee himself, wears a number 42 Brooklyn Dodgers jersey, with Robinson’s last name emblazoned on the back, throughout most of the movie. Smiley, a supporting character appears throughout the film hawking a postcard with Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X shaking hands. These three men’s legacies are inextricably tied to the battle for racial equality in America.

Lee’s usage of icons to educate, inform, and pay homage to black men in history within *Do the Right Thing* is a calculated effort to reimagine black American men for his audiences. Armed with a passion for African American history and cinematic skills, Lee was determined to make a film that included a voice and people that had been either omitted or stereotyped prior to his arrival on the cinematic scene. When asked if he believes black filmmakers have a moral obligation to bring positive representation of blacks to the screen, Lee answered, “I think ‘truthful’ would be better than ‘positive.’ I think you’re truthful when you show that African Americans have bad qualities and good qualities.”¹⁵ Although *Do the Right Thing* is a narrative work, images, symbols, and plot devices based on iconic African Americans, namely Jackie Robinson, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, are salient throughout the film.

¹⁴ Whitaker, *Icons*, xxvi.

¹⁵ Alexander, *Why We Make Movies*, 97.

Scholars have rarely written about Lee's use of history or specifically, the incorporation of the black male historical figures in his films. Most of the writings on Lee have criticized of his portrayal of female characters, his narrow representation of Italian and Jewish characters, his depictions of gays and lesbians, and his Afrocentric ideological leanings.¹⁶ Interestingly, the literature is replete with praise and criticism of his entrepreneurial efforts, his role as a catalyst for a black filmmaker's renaissance, and his public spats with journalists and other filmmakers. This study examines Lee's efforts to present a corrective history of American black males by introducing and exploring the lives of African American male icons in his narrative films.

No body of literature exists that has studied Spike Lee films for either their historical content or the inclusion of historical figures - iconic, unsung, or otherwise. Multiple sources from social history and film history must be brought to bear to weave together the themes for this tapestry. Spike Lee's recognition of the excision and distortion of the narrative of the black American male experience compliments arguments made by social historians and gender studies scholars. Pioneering historian Darlene Clark Hine, co-edited *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, as part of her paradigm shifting examination of race and gender in American history. Published in 1993, this two-volume set with over 600 biographical profiles and over 150 other entries, confirmed the legitimacy of

¹⁶ See Molefi Asante, *Afrocentricity*, (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1991) and Ama Mazama, *Afrocentric Paradigm*, (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2002) for further information about the Afrocentric worldview.

black women's history as a field of study. The following year, in her collection of historical essays *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-construction of American History*, Hine revealed her motivation for pursuing such path in her research. She asserted,

If all previously excluded and marginalized groups are to find space on history's center stage, until recently a small proscenium occupied by privileged white men, then our intellectual repertoire must grow. Black women's history by its very nature seeks to empower and make visible the lives and deeds of ordinary folks.¹⁷

Fellow historians Elsa Barkley Brown, Rosalyn Terberg-Penn, and Wilma King responded to Hine's challenge to "grow" the field by writing about the lives of black women in history.¹⁸ This body of literature has blossomed with the publication of anthologies, readers, and monographs that examine the history and lives of black women.

Professor Hine, along with historian Earnestine Jenkins, co-edited another two volume set, *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity*, to spark a similar interest in the field of the historical black male, Acknowledging the genesis of black men's historical studies within black

¹⁷ Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women History and the Re-construction of American History*, (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994), xxiii.

¹⁸ See Thomas Holt, Elsa Barkley Brown and Thomas Paterson, *Major Problems in African American History, Vol.2: From Freedom to Freedom Now, 1865-1990s*, (Independence: Kentucky, 2000), Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998), and Wilma King, *The Essence of Liberty: Free Black Women during the Slave Era*, (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2006) for examples of their work.

women's history, Hine writes, "Taking a cue from women's studies, historians of gender have learned that the private sphere – the realm of courtship and marriage, the home and family...sexuality, religious beliefs, and cultural expressions – plays an equally important role in creating masculinities."¹⁹ The works addressed American slavery, resistance, black men in the military, African American myths and folktales, black men in politics, and biographies of unsung African American men. With its focus on history, the anthology separated itself from gender studies that focus on black males. Hine and Jenkins's anthology is a social history that avoids profiling iconic figures, while unearthing untold stories about obscure men whose stories add to the tapestry of literature on black men in history. Nevertheless, the study of icons can be instructive, especially as representations of social, economic, political, and cultural conventions of the past and present.

The term icon first referenced images used in Christian art. One of the more modern uses of the word points to more of a larger than life historical personality. The literature on modern definition of icons is nominal. Most texts concerning modern icons highlight the exploits of a particular individual, yet rarely explore the concept in depth. Media studies professor Benedikt Feldges examined the phenomenon of the icon in his book *Icons: The Genesis of a National Visual Language*. He wrote, "The icon and the man who provides its contours seem to hold different positions in history."²⁰ The relationship between

¹⁹ Hine and Jenkins, *A Question of Manhood*, 1.

²⁰ Feldges, *Icons*, xxi.

the biography of the historical person and the meaning of the person to spectators of the image is analyzed in this work. The Greenwood series of encyclopedic collections, dedicated to icons of various movements, eras, and fields, lists the criteria for an icon as “one that, challenges the status quo, influences millions, and affects history.”²¹ This criterion has supplied a standard for the icons examined in this study.

One must understand the film industry and its influence on historical memory to study the iconic black male in Spike Lee films. Two bodies of literature prove useful to this study; texts focused on films based on real people and events, and the African American image in cinema. The edited volume, *Hollywood as Historian*, is an interdisciplinary study of Hollywood’s depiction of the past and attempts to influence history.²² Historian Robert Toplin’s *History by Hollywood* examines eight films that portrayed real people and events.²³ His study addresses the historical perspective of the filmmakers, the incorporation of historical evidence, the effect of the social conditions of America at the time the film was produced, and the responses to controversies and political debates triggered by the films. The book emphasizes the impact Hollywood has on people’s perceptions of the past.

Donald Bogle’s *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films* is the consummate work on

²¹ Whitaker, *Icons*, xxiii.

²² Peter C. Rollins, *Hollywood As Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context*, (Lexington, Kentucky; University of Kentucky Press, 1983), 1.

²³ Robert Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

the perpetuation of African American stereotypes in film. Bogle explores the types of roles blacks have played in American films and the actors portraying these characters. He argues that blacks have taken the stereotypical roles given to them and elevated them to a unique form of artistry. Professor of film and comparative literature Manthia Diawara's *Black American Cinema* is a compilation of essays by scholars examining race, gender, and sexuality in films featuring or produced by African-Americans. Ed Guerrero's *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* covers similar territory as Bogle and additionally examines the works of the new breed of black filmmakers and films that emerged out of the 1980s.

African Americans have been writing, directing, and producing feature films since the 1919. Oscar Micheaux is credited with being the first black American filmmaker. Micheaux biographer Patrick McGilligan describes him as, "the Jackie Robinson of American film" and elaborates, that he was "a Muhammad Ali decades before his time, a bragging black man running around with a camera and making audacious, artistic films of his own maverick style, at a time when racial inferiority in the United States was custom and law."²⁴ For a period of roughly three decades, from 1919 to 1947, Micheaux wrote, produced, and directed films depicting black life for black audiences. Only in 1971, twenty years after his death in 1951, did scholars begin to discover his works.

²⁴ Patrick McGilligan, *Oscar Micheaux: The Great and Only, The Life of America's First Black Filmmaker* (New York: Harper, 2007), 3.

By this time in the early 1970s there were few black film directors, including Melvin Van Peebles (*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* [1971]), Ossie Davis (*Cotton Comes to Harlem* [1970]), and Gordon Parks (*Shaft* [1971]). None of these directors established themselves as filmmakers, although they did flourish in other careers. Famed actor Sidney Poitier saw limited success as a director of a trilogy of films he directed starring himself and Bill Cosby. Michael Shultz directed several low budget African American-themed films: *Cooley High* (1975), *Car Wash* (1976), *Greased Lightning* (1977) and, *Which Way is Up* (1977). He was able to leverage his success into directing 1980's cult classics *Krush Groove* (1985) and *Berry Gordy's: The Last Dragon* (1985). Shultz, working primarily as a director, was the sole career African American filmmaker in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Along with filmmaker Robert Townsend, who financed *Hollywood Shuffle* with credit cards, Spike Lee is credited with sparking the resurgence of black filmmakers and black film. In 1986 he entered the professional cinematic world with his independent film, *She's Gotta Have It*. Lee wrote, produced, directed and costarred in this off beat romantic comedy about a woman, Nola Darling, and her many suitors. Shot in twelve days on a budget of \$175,000, *She's Gotta Have It* earned \$8,000,000 at the box office and caught the attention of movie executives. The financial success of Lee's debut film opened the door for African American filmmakers to tell stories and introduce black characters that challenged the stereotypes of previous generations.

Lee wasted no time capitalizing on his success. Beginning in 1988 with *School Daze* and culminating with *Malcolm X* in 1992, he released five films in five years and had a book deal for each film. The books featured photographs by his brother David Lee, interviews with Lee and cast members, and the film script.²⁵ These companion texts, combined with the hundreds of interviews he granted the popular press, serve as key primary sources for insights on Lee's intentions as a filmmaker. Known for raising provocative issues about race, class, and gender in his films, one of the most common adjectives used in pieces on Lee is "controversial." Being labeled as such has not compromised Lee's vision and commitment to using his films as a corrective to challenge the negative stereotypes of American black males that has existed since Hollywood's genesis. Lee's 1989 hit film, *Do the Right Thing*, showcased his cinematic strategy.

²⁵ Spike Lee and Lisa Jones, *Uplift the Race: The Construction of School Daze* (New York: Fireside, 1988); Lee and Jones, *Do the Right Thing*; Spike Lee and Lisa Jones, *Mo' Better Blues* (New York: Fireside, 1990); Spike Lee, *Jungle Fever: A Spike Lee Joint* (New York: Fireside, 1991); Spike Lee and Ralph Wiley, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X* (New York: Hyperion, 1992).

Chapter 2

SPIKE LEE AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE IMAGE

Do the Right Thing, according to film historian Ed Guerrero, “covers a twenty-four-hour period on the hottest day of the year in a predominantly black lower-class Brooklyn neighborhood” filled with misunderstandings, racial tensions, and violence.²⁶ Confrontation is salient throughout the film. One of the most memorable conflicts take place inside of Sal’s Famous Pizzeria between Sal, the proprietor, and a local community agitator, Buggin’ Out. Buggin’ Out notices that Italian Americans are exclusively featured on the pizzeria’s Wall of Fame. After having this revelatory moment he shouts to Sal, “How Come You Ain’t Got No Brothers On the Wall?”²⁷ This leads to him being ousted from the establishment. To a certain extent, this question echoes Lee’s sentiments before he entered the film industry in regards to the absence of the iconic black male’s presence in Hollywood. Lee wanted to know where the representations of African American heroes were in Hollywood.

Lee has attributed his critical eye towards the mainstream narrative of American history to his parents. He explained, “From early on, my parents were telling me how it was, all the time. We were always encouraged to question stuff we read in newspapers or saw on TV.”²⁸ These informal lessons taught by his mother, a schoolteacher, and his father, a jazz musician, had an effect on his taste

²⁶ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 148.

²⁷ *Do the Right Thing*, dir. Spike Lee, (1989; Universal Pictures, 2000, dvd).

²⁸ Aftab and Lee, *That’s My Story*, 6.

in entertainment. Lee, born in 1957, came of age during the 60s and 70s as the Blaxploitation genre exploded onto the scene.²⁹ He was not a fan of the genre, stating, “I never went to those films, never liked them.”³⁰ Although Lee’s first love was sports, he also was a keen student of black history, culture, and politics.

His politics were heavily informed by the ideas espoused by the slain Black Nationalist leader Malcolm X. The filmmaker has gone on record stating, “For me, the most influential thing that I ever read was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, as told to Alex Haley.”³¹ According to his 1988 production journal, Lee had just completed rereading the story of the martyred leader while taking notes and drafting the script of the movie that would become *Do the Right Thing*. Lee perceived Malcolm X to be no-nonsense black radical whose philosophy was divergent from the advocates of the non-violent direct action during the Black Freedom Movement. In fact, while journaling Lee proclaimed, “The character I play in *Do the Right Thing* is from the Malcolm X school of thought: ‘An eye for an eye.’ Fuck the turn-the-other cheek shit. If we keep up that madness we’ll all be dead.”³² This attitude of defiance mixed with a need to set-the-record-straight has been evident in Lee’s work leading up to *Do the Right Thing*.

²⁹ Blaxploitation “is usually associated with the production of the sixty or so Hollywood films that centered in black narratives, featured black casts playing out various action-adventures in the ghetto, and were released roughly between 1969 and 1974.” See Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 69.

³⁰ Spike Lee and Lisa Jones, *Do the Right Thing: A Spike Lee Joint*, (New York: Fireside, 1989), 19.

³¹ Aftab and Lee, *That’s My Story*, 8.

³² Lee and Jones, *Do the Right Thing*, 34.

Lee's knack for being provocative and engaging in dialogue with history was apparent while he was in film school. Lee produced the silent film *The Answer* during his first year of graduate film studies at New York University. The twenty-minute movie tells of a black filmmaker being given \$50 million to write and direct a remake of *Birth of a Nation* (1915).³³ Directed by D.W. Griffith, *Birth of a Nation*, considered the first full-length feature film, altered American filmmaking with the introduction of techniques that have become standard in the motion picture industry. The film is also remembered for featuring the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) as American heroes and introducing the brutal black buck archetype to cinema.³⁴ Lee's twenty minute movie *The Answer* was a critical response to the revered status *Birth of a Nation* has held in cinematic history. His contempt for *Birth of A Nation* and those who boasts of its virtuosity is evident as he has referred to the film as, "the so-called greatest film ever made."³⁵ *The Answer* is one of the early manifestations of Lee's attempt to engage in dialogue with history's portrayals of African American men through his use of cinema.

After garnering success with his debut feature film, *She's Gotta Have It* (1987), the fledgling filmmaker made one of his boldest gestures in his mission to provide a corrective history of African American males.. Lee opens his second feature film, *School Daze*, with a choir singing the spiritual "I'm Building Me a Home" as a montage of still photographs of African-American historical figures

³³ Aftab and Lee, *That's My Story*, 16.

³⁴ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, (New York: Continuum, 1991), 10.

³⁵ Aftab and Lee, *That's My Story*, 258.

and events fill the screen.³⁶ The chronologically ordered images begin with a schematic of a slave ship and end with the Pulitzer Prize winning photo “The Soiling of Old Glory.” This photograph shows a white man in the process of spearing an African-American man, lawyer Ted Landsmark, with a flagpole bearing the American flag.³⁷

Sandwiched between these two images are black and white still photographs referred to by Lee as “a very condensed version of African-American history.”³⁸ Historical African-American men featured prominently in the sequence include activists and educators Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, E.D. Nixon, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Stokely Carmichael, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X and Jesse Jackson. Group photographs include black World War I soldiers, college students, and members of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. Black male athletes and entertainers incorporated in the slideshow are Paul Robeson, Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali. Many of these historical figures would be reintroduced in Lee’s films throughout his career.

Lee’s inclusion of African American male icons in *Do the Right Thing* was driven by more than stereotypical cinematic portrayals and a desire to pay homage to his childhood heroes. During the late 1980’s while Lee was breaking

³⁶ Set in a fictional southern black college during homecoming, *School Daze* looks at caste, class and gender through rival groups of students.

³⁷ See Louis P. Masur, *The Soiling of Old Glory: The Story of a Photograph that Shocked America*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008) for the full story behind the photograph.

³⁸ Aftab and Lee, *That’s My Story*, 57.

barriers in the world of filmmaking, young African American men were making headlines as both perpetrators and victims of violent crime. Crack cocaine arrived in American inner cities during the mid 1980s, and had a devastating affect on African American neighborhoods. The *New York Times* were consistently running stories on the ways in which this new, cooked form of cocaine, was wrecking havoc in black communities. A March 7, 1987 story by Peter Kerr in the *New York Times* titled “New Violence Seen in Users of Cocaine” does not talk about black specifically but piece opens by detailing a stand off in an East Harlem apartment. The *New York Times Magazine* chronicled a homicide investigation in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn between rival drug lords in the piece “Breaking the Crack Murders” in November of the same year.³⁹ New York City Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward, an African American, blamed the city’s violent crime on young black men, stating, “they are committing the genocide against blacks, the ripping off the neighborhoods, they are doing the shooting,” in a July 27, 1987 *Times* article.⁴⁰

During the summer of 1988, at the same time that *Do the Right Thing* was being shot, a story ran on the front page of the *New York Times* quoting an African American director of a church youth program as proclaiming, “The statistics on black men’s health risks, incarceration, homicide and drug abuse are

³⁹ Ron Rosenbaum, “Breaking the Crack Murders,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 15, 1987, 44.

⁴⁰ Sam Roberts, “Race and Crime: Beyond Statistics to Find Answers,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1987, 1.

so dismal it almost seems we're an endangered species."⁴¹ Lee was influenced by this climate of black male destruction. He claimed to have turned down the opportunity to direct *Tougher Than Leather*, a movie featuring popular rap group Run-D.M.C., because he "didn't want to be responsible for any more Black youth killing each other."⁴² The crack related crimes and stories reported in the *Times* painted the picture of the African American male as a hoodlum to be feared.

One of the most significant events to capture headlines in New York City during Lee's development of the *Do the Right Thing* script was the Howard Beach incident. On December 20, 1986, according to a *New York Times* report, "A 23-year-old black man was struck and killed by a car on a Queens highway...after being severely beaten twice by 9 to 12 white men who chased him and two other black men through the streets of Howard Beach in what the police called a racial attack."⁴³ The victim was Michael Griffith, a construction worker from the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. According to Lee biographer Kaleem Aftab:

Griffith was with two black friends...when their car broke down in front of a pizza parlour (sic). They wandered inside, hoping to call for help, and when they were refused the use of the phone they sat down to eat...Thereafter, a group of white men...chased the black youths out of the pizzeria toward a gang of accomplices with baseball bats...Griffith tried to

⁴¹ Tamer Lewin, "Black Churches: New Mission on Family," *New York Times*, August 24, 1988, 1.

⁴² Lee and Jones, *Do the Right Thing*, 1.

⁴³ Robert D. McFadden, "Black Man Dies After Beating by Whites in Queens," *New York Times*, December 21, 1986, 1.

stagger away from his pursuers, he wandered onto the busy Belt Parkway, where he was hit and killed by a passing automobile.⁴⁴

Reports on the incident, trial, racial tensions, and the community activism sparked by the death of Griffith filled the pages of the *New York Times* until the early 1990s. Lee confessed in the final pages of his production journal for *Do the Right Thing*, “The idea for *Do the Right Thing* arose for me out of the Howard Beach incident.” He continued, “It was 1986, and a Black man was still being hunted down like a dog.”⁴⁵ Lee’s statement contains an unstated historical allusion to a time in American history when it was common for black men to be murdered by white mobs. Politicians, police, and church leaders were debating the plight of the African American male due to crack cocaine related crime and community leaders organized demonstrations condemning the Howard Beach incident. Lee was plotting on how he could combine his craft as a filmmaker and interest in African American men in history to counteract the narratives that justified this kind of violence toward black men.

⁴⁴ Aftab and Lee, *That’s My Story*, 75.

⁴⁵ Lee and Jones, *Do the Right Thing*, 118.

Chapter 3

HOLLYWOOD AS HISTORIAN AND BLACK MALE HISTORY

Part of Spike Lee's mission as a filmmaker has been to combat historical falsehoods with corrective historical portrayals of African-American people and events. When asked about the social power of cinema, Lee contends, "I think the biggest lie that's ever been perpetrated on the American people is 'If you're American, it doesn't matter what race, nationality, religion, or creed you are – you're an American, and that's all that matters.' That's a lie and it's always been a lie."⁴⁶ As a filmmaker, Lee has embedded his films with elements he has believed will set the historical record straight. Lee has not been alone in this notion that the cinema is the appropriate battleground to engage in this duel of historical narratives.

Historian Robert Rosenstone has argued for a rethinking of the role of film as a delivery mechanism for historical narratives. Rosenstone recognized that "the chief source of historical knowledge for the majority of the population – outside of the much despised textbook-must surely be visual media."⁴⁷ He recognizes the limits of the visual medium in delivering the narrative, however, he responds with a few criticisms of the traditional written form as a counter to written history. Rosenstone wrote, "neither people nor nations live historical

⁴⁶ Richolson, "He's Gotta Have It," 26.

⁴⁷ Robert Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film," *American Historical Review* 93 (1988), 1174.

‘stories’...written history is a representation of the past, not the past itself.”⁴⁸

These critiques were aimed to illuminate the similar functions of history told by text and on film. He was keenly aware that films’ most potent advantage over the written text was its reach. Ultimately he saw films as “new possibilities for representing the past, that could allow narrative history to recapture the power it once had when it was more deeply rooted in the literary imagination.”⁴⁹

Ostensibly, for American audiences, Hollywood has operated as both entertainer and educator.

Film historian Robert Toplin has discussed the power of cinema as social, political, and historical context. In his book *History as Hollywood*, Toplin argues, “movies carry subtle messages of social and political importance and some forceful opinions of the past.”⁵⁰ These “opinions” have a lasting impact on viewers. According to film historian Peter C. Rollins, “Hollywood’s myths and symbols are permanent features of America’s historical consciousness.”⁵¹ Toplin and Rollins have suggested that movies have the power to mold a person’s perception about events and people. In many instances, the cinematic experience, has trumped the literary experience of moviegoers in terms of their interpretation of historical events, places, and people.

⁴⁸ Rosenstone, “History in Images,” 1180.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 1184.

⁵⁰ Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, 8.

⁵¹ Rollins, *Hollywood As Historian*, 1.

The messages that audiences have received are neither benign nor neutral. Toplin has argued, “Works of cinematic history are almost always partisan.”⁵² One social ill that has plagued American cinema since its inception has been racial bias. Film has been used to deliver a narrative to audiences reinforces racist attitudes and beliefs about African-Americans. Film historian Ed Guerrero, has explained the racial dynamics of the American narrative in cinema, suggesting:

What all of this means, specifically, for African Americans is that in almost every instance, the representation of black people of the commercial screen has amounted to one grand, multifaceted illusion. For blacks have been subordinated, marginalized, positioned, and devalued in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white dominated symbolic order and racial hierarchy of American society.⁵³

The unsavory representations of African American men in American cinema, and by consequence the historical narrative, has led to the typecasting of black actors. Donald Bogle, author of *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in Films*, has argued that the five archetypes that appear in the title of his book, “were all character types used for the same effect: to entertain by stressing Negro inferiority.”⁵⁴ Even when a black person is not cast in the five archetypes, this subordinate status is implied in film is by downplaying the role of black figures in movies based on historical events.

⁵² Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, 12.

⁵³ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 2.

⁵⁴ Bogle, *Toms, Coons*, 3.

While *Do the Right Thing* was in preproduction, two films were released that exemplified the concept of downplaying of black male historical figures. *Cry Freedom* and *Mississippi Burning*, released in November of 1987 and December of 1989 respectively, were movies based on real life events.⁵⁵ *Cry Freedom*, directed by Sir Richard Attenborough, is based on true events surrounding the death of South African non-violent, anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko and white journalist Donald Woods who exposes the cover up.⁵⁶ Biko's activism and subsequent murder, are featured in the first half of the film, while the remaining hour and a half focuses on Woods' investigation of the murder and his escape from South Africa. The plot shift stripped Biko of his agency and placed Woods at the center of the anti-apartheid story. Rob Nixon, literary and film critic, challenged the films shift of focus, arguing:

Once robbed of Washington's screen power, *Cry Freedom* develops not only dramatic but political failings. The two are not unrelated. Woods's story about Woods quickly supplants Woods's story about Biko, resulting in a serious case of displaced heroism.⁵⁷

Biko was not the only black hero replaced by written out of his own story in Hollywood motion picture under the guise of gaining mass appeal for the film.

⁵⁵ *Cry Freedom*, DVD, directed by Richard Attenborough (1987; Universal Studios, 1999). *Mississippi Burning*, DVD, directed by Alan Parker (1988; MGM, 2001).

⁵⁶ S. Torriano Berry and Venise T. Berry, *Historical Dictionary of African American Cinema*, (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 79.

⁵⁷ Rob Nixon, "Cry Freedom," *Cineaste* XVI, 1988, 38.

Mississippi Burning depicted white FBI agents as champions of the civil rights movement.

The 1988 drama, *Mississippi Burning*, told the story of two FBI agents sent to Mississippi to conduct an investigation into the disappearance of three civil rights workers in 1964.⁵⁸ The movie dramatized a tragedy that occurred near Philadelphia, Mississippi where three young civil rights workers; Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney, were killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan while participating in voter registration drives in the state during the summer of 1964.⁵⁹ The movie, directed by Alan Parker, an Englishman, placed the civil rights movement and the struggles of its participants in the background and focused on the investigation conducted by two fictitious white FBI agents, Anderson and Ward. Parker's decision to downplay the civil rights workers and at times portray them as cowardly, sparked severe criticism from historians and film critics.

One of the most critical responses to the film came from historian, Howard Zinn. He asserts that, "in the apprehension of the murders, it portrays two FBI operatives and a whole flotilla-if FBI men float-of FBI people as heroes of the episode. Anybody who knows anything about the history of the civil rights movement...would have been horrified by that portrayal."⁶⁰ In a piece titled "Just Another Mississippi Whitewash," published in the January 9, 1989 edition of

⁵⁸ Berry and Berry, *Historical Dictionary*, 227-228.

⁵⁹ Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, 27.

⁶⁰ Howard Zinn and Donald Macedo, *Howard Zinn on Democratic Education*, (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), 178.

Time writer, Jack E. White called the film a “cinematic lynching.” As scathing as White’s critique was, “the harshest criticisms came from African Americans who complained that the movie largely overlooks the important role of blacks in the civil rights struggle,” according to film historian Robert Toplin.

Toplin was correct when he asserted that blacks were the most stern critics of the characterization of FBI agents as civil rights heroes in *Mississippi Burning*. The common theme of assigning marginal status to the black historical heroes in both films *Cry Freedom* and *Mississippi Burning* was not lost on black film critics or filmmakers. Consequently, the two movies have often been mentioned in the same breath. Explaining his concept of the “white buddy as cultural chaperone” in Hollywood motion pictures, African American film historian Ed Guerrero references the Attenborough and Parker films sequentially. He wrote:

Noted variations on this latter strategy consists of seeing Black social struggle through White eyes, as when the comparatively petty travails of reporter Donald Woods marginalize the historical struggle of his Black “buddy” Steve Biko in *Cry Freedom* (1987). Or consider one of the infrequent White buddy vehicles of the eighties, *Mississippi Burning* (1989), which reduces Blacks to passive objects of their own history...⁶¹

Others, namely Spike Lee, shared Guerrero’s feelings of disdain about the bolstering of these manufactured white male heroes at the expense of real life heroic black men.

⁶¹ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 239.

Shortly after achieving success in the film industry, Lee began the 40 Acres Institute. The institute hosted classes on every Saturday and were designed to “challenge the conventional wisdom that filmmaking was a secret and magical society.” Lee hosted special guests during these sessions but taught many of them himself. According to Kaleem Aftab, Lee’s co-author of the semi-autobiographical, *That’s My Story And I’m Sticking To It*, “he would rail against the depiction of African-Americans in mainstream movies: he decried Alan Parker’s civil-rights picture *Mississippi Burning*, which like *Cry Freedom* before it, overstated the contribution of sympathetic whites in changing attitudes towards blacks.”⁶² Lee’s outrage about the two films served as fuel for his opposition to Warner Bros. initially tapping Norman Jewison, a white film director, to take the helm of a Malcolm X biopic. Aftab explained, “Spike was furious that the studio was about to repeat the same error that blighted *Cry Freedom* and *Mississippi Burning* and allow a white director to ruin a black story...”⁶³ Lee’s indignation could have stemmed from his understanding power of film in shaping attitudes and beliefs about black people.

The Brooklyn-raised director understood the role of telling the narrative of black men that represented empowerment and demonstrated agency. In many ways his inclusion of black male icons in his films were attempts to not only set the record straight on the silver screen but also in the literature. Lee’s efforts to include black historical figures in his film were not just to provide an alternative

⁶² Aftab and Lee, *That’s My Story*, 102.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 104.

perspective on black male history. Ultimately, he was declaring that his perspective was more accurate and therefore, correcting the marginalized versions delivered by mainstream films and some written historical accounts.

Hollywood has had the power to shape attitudes and affect audiences' perspectives on historical figures and events. Spike Lee has been aware of the influence movies have in shaping attitudes about race for audiences. When asked about the negative portrayal of blacks in media, he argued, "Look at the three earliest so-called 'landmark' American films – *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Jazz Singer*, and *Gone with the Wind*...Racism is woven into the very fabric of American society and it just make sense that it's going to be reflected in sports, in movies, in television..."⁶⁴

Historically, films often reach larger audiences than books; therefore they play a larger role in having an effect on perceptions. As Rosenstone has suggested, the line between history in film and literature are not as ridged as once suspected. Thus, the proposition put forth by Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins for a canon of black male history and exploding of racial and gender stereotypes is not confined to written text. Historian John Henrik Clarke has characterized this form corrective history as an extension of the Black Freedom Struggle. In a 1969 *Negro Digest* article titled, "Black Power and Black History," Clarke argued, "the concept of Black Power and Black History are twins that were fathered by the same historical experiences." Explaining the corrective intent of

⁶⁴ Gary Crowdus and Dan Georgakas, "Thinking about the Power of Images: An Interview with Spike Lee," in *Spike Lee Interviews*, ed. Cynthia Fuchs. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 2002), 204.

the pairing of history with calls of power he continues, “This concept was created to counteract another concept: that the people of African descent had no history worthy of respect.” Emphasizing the activist quality of the scholarship, Clarke posits, “They are beginning to learn (belatedly) that history, depending on how it is manipulated, can be either an instrument of oppression or of liberation.”⁶⁵

Spike Lee, as a filmmaker, has borrowed from the concept of history as a weapon in the combat for public perceptions of African American males.

By using black male icons in his films, Lee may not be able to change the attitudes or minds of his audiences toward black men but he can add his perspective to the dialogue. According to Toplin, “Cinematic history can deliver important insights.” Lee seeks to deliver an appreciation for black American males that heretofore was virtually absent from American cinema. Spike Lee was devising a way to reimagine black men by reintroducing to blacks and other Americans three African American male icons; Jackie Robinson, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X.

⁶⁵ John Henrik Clarke, “Black Power and Black History,” *The Life and Times of John Henrik Clarke*, ed. John L. Conyers, (Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press, 2004), 42.

Chapter 4

THE ICONS: JACKIE ROBINSON, MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. AND MALCOLM X IN DO THE RIGHT THING

Do the Right Thing, as with Lee's previous two features, is filled with references to real life black women and men. The community disc jockey, Senor Love Daddy, does a roll call in the film thanking musical legends from Mahalia Jackson to Ella Fitzgerald and John Coltrane to Marvin Gaye.⁶⁶ Black political heroes Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton are referenced in wall graffiti.⁶⁷ Near the conclusion of the film, when Radio Raheem is killed by police officers using the choke hold, the names of Eleanor Bumpers and Michael Stewart, both slain by New York Police Department officers, are yelled by members of the forming mob.⁶⁸ One of the most creative ways that Lee incorporated a historical black reference in the film was by having Mookie, the character played by Lee, wear a replica baseball jersey of Jackie Robinson.

According to Lee, black music executive Cecil Holmes gifted the jersey to him, and it was a last minute decision to wear the Robinson jersey as Mookie's costume.⁶⁹ Although an eleventh hour decision to use the jersey, Lee was clear on

⁶⁶ Lee, *Do the Right Thing*.

⁶⁷ Douglas Kellner, "Aesthetics, Ethics, and Politics in the Films of Spike Lee," *Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing*, ed. Mark Reid, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 80.

⁶⁸ Radio Raheem is a young black male in the *Do the Right Thing* that carried a huge radio throughout the film and assist Buggin' Out in confronting Sal about the lack of African-Americans on the walls of the pizzeria; Lee and Jones, *Do the Right Thing*, 247.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

the historical significance of the legendary Brooklyn Dodger number forty-two jersey. In his film journal, the filmmaker wrote:

The jersey was a good choice. I don't think Jackie Robinson has gotten his due from Black people. There are young people today, even Black athletes, who don't know what Jackie Robinson did. They might know he was the first Black Major Leaguer, but they don't know what he had to bear to make it easier for those who came after him.

For Lee, the choice of wardrobe made a statement and served as an educational opportunity. Having the protagonist wear the jersey throughout most of the movie placed Robinson into the consciousness of audience members. Lee has gone on record citing Robinson as one of his heroes in his pantheon of African American male icons.

Robinson, born to Georgia sharecropper parents in 1919, rose to national prominence on October 23, 1945 by signing a major league baseball contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers organization.⁷⁰ On this momentous occasion, Robinson became the first African American to play organized baseball in the twentieth century. Legendary Dodger executive Branch Rickey personally scouted and selected Robinson to be the trailblazer in the integration of Major League Baseball. Jackie Robinson was a complex figure that had many interests and talents but was defined by his lifelong battles with racism and discrimination.

⁷⁰ Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 71.

Robinson's mother, Mallie Robinson, fled the Deep South and headed to California for a better quality of life for her and her children.⁷¹ Mallie, a domestic, purchased a home in the predominantly white suburb of Pasadena. The family was subjected to harassment and abuse for several years.⁷² Jackie recalls the encounters; "Pasadena regarded us as intruders...My brothers and I were in many a fight that started with a racial slur on the very street we lived on." Despite the antagonism of racists, Jackie persevered and became an All-American athlete at the University of California – Los Angeles.

Robinson lettered in football, basketball, track, and baseball and was sports writers considered the best basketball player and ball carrier in the country in 1941. He showed promise in every sport he played. According to biographer Jules Tygiel, Robinson won the Pacific Coast intercollegiate gold championship, the swimming championships at U.C.L.A., reached the semifinals in the national Negro tournament in tennis. Due to racial discrimination, Robinson was not recruited to play any of the sports professionally. He left college his senior year to assist his mother financially and was drafted into the United States army in 1942. While serving in the military, the future baseball first ballot Hall-of-Famer, faced more challenges along the lines of race.

On July 6, 1944, Lieutenant Jackie Robinson, refused to comply with the demands of a bus driver go to the back of a bus in Fort Hood, Texas.⁷³ The black lieutenant was aware that the army had recently ordered the desegregation of

⁷¹ Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment*, 60.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 61.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 59.

military buses stood his ground and was arrested by military police. Four weeks later at his trial, Robinson escaped conviction and resumed his duties in the army. This act of defiance in the face of grave consequences illustrated the character of the player that would be pegged to break the Major League Baseball color line. Tygiel suggests, “His fierce competitive passions combined with the scars imbedded by America’s racism to produce a proud, yet tempestuous individual.”⁷⁴ Although not the best black baseball player in the country in 1945, Robinson was selected to lead the charge in integrating professional baseball because he was battle tested and had a diverse background as a college student and military veteran.

Once signed to Dodgers, sparks flew from both sides of the color line. Rickey scouted Robinson as he played shortstop in the Negro Leagues. The Kansas City Monarchs, Robinson’s former team, objected to his signing for contractual reasons.⁷⁵ Robinson also faced raced-based antagonism from both his teammates and opposing teams and consistently received death threats. Despite these challenges, Robinson had an illustrious ten-year career with Brooklyn. He retired in January of 1957 with a lifetime batting average of .311: the Dodgers won pennants six of Robinson’s ten years as well as, the 1955 World Series.⁷⁶ His exemplary career combined with his battles on the racial front has earned Robinson the status of icon. Spike Lee, as Mookie in *Do the Right Thing*,

⁷⁴ Ibid., 62.

⁷⁵ Tygiel, *Baseball’s Great Experiment*, 86.

⁷⁶ Jules Tygiel, *Extra Bases: Reflections on Jackie Robinson, Race, & Baseball History*, (Lincoln, Nebraska; University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 11.

understood this legacy and wore the replica Robinson baseball jersey to reintroduce the man and his significance to a new generation.

In his essay, “Aesthetics, Ethics, and Politics in the Films of Spike Lee,” philosophy professor Douglas Kellner examines the role cultural identity and style plays in Lee’s work. Kellner has argued, “The ways that mass cultural images pervade style and fashion suggest that cultural identity is constituted in part by iconic images of ethnic cultural heroes...”⁷⁷ In this case, the cultural hero is Jackie Robinson and he represents much more than the borough of Brooklyn emblazoned on the front of the jersey. He has represented the breaking of racial barriers and representing black people in a majority white and hostile environment.

Some writers, including Kellner, believed that Jackie Robinson and Spike Lee lives parallel on multiple levels. He suggests that the jersey symbolized “a Black who breaks the color line in the white man’s world (as Lee himself has done).” Art historian Kerr Houston, describes Lee’s admiration for Robinson as, “at once cultural and personal.”⁷⁸ In his essay, “Athletic Iconography in Spike Lee’s Early Feature Films,” has taken the argument for parallels between the baseball great and movie director even further, writing:

Robinson was born in Cairo, Georgia, in 1919, and then spent his entire ten-year career in the majors with the Brooklyn Dodgers. In a loose sense,

⁷⁷ Kellner, “Aesthetics,” 80.

⁷⁸ Kerr Houston, “Athletic Iconography in Spike Lee’s Early Feature Films,” *Fight the Power: The Spike Lee Reader*, ed. Janice D. Hamlet and Robin R. Means Coleman, (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 133.

his life thus paralleled Lee's own, as the young director had moved from Morehouse, in Atlanta, to Brooklyn after graduation.

These similarities can be seen a coincidental, however, the connection between the two men as pioneers in their respective arenas is quite evident. Harvard literary professor Henry Louis Gates characterized Lee as the "Jackie Robinson of the film community."⁷⁹ Comparisons aside, Lee's donning of the athletic icon's number forty-two represented much more within the context of the film and society in general.

The iconic status of Robinson and the struggle against the legacy of American racism he symbolized was on the forefront of the mind of Lee when he settled on a costume the night before he began shooting *Do the Right Thing*. It all came together seamlessly. The film was set in Brooklyn so the Dodgers jersey made sense. Mookie was the buffer between the white and black communities as an employee of Sal's pizzeria as Robinson stood between the two races on and off the field. Finally, Lee was able to reintroduce a black male icon to a generation that had either never heard of him or had forgotten about the gravity of his contribution to changing race relations in America. Perhaps the only other person that could stand as an historical peer to Jackie Robinson in terms of integrating American society would be Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

The image of Martin Luther King, Jr. is present throughout the duration of *Do the Right Thing*. His image is paired with that of Malcolm X. This combining of the two Black Freedom Movement leaders becomes evident at the close of the

⁷⁹ Aftab and Lee, *That's My Story*," 174.

film but serves as foreshadowing for things to come. Spliced within the events of the film, is the consistent presence of Smiley, “a character who was...trying to sell personally colored portraits of Malcolm and Martin Luther King,” as described by actor Roger Guenveur Smith.⁸⁰ Smiley, played by Smith, appears throughout the film hawking a postcard with Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X shaking hands.

The photograph captures the only face-to-face encounter of the two leaders within the Black Freedom Movement. Historian Clayborne Carson explains the context for the photo:

he (Malcolm X) had a brief, cordial encounter with King on March 26, 1964 as the latter left a press conference at the U.S. Capitol. As photographers gathered around, the two men shook hands. Malcolm orchestrated the impromptu meeting, grinning broadly at the clearly surprised Martin.⁸¹

Smiley’s commemorative photo of the two leaders is tacked on the wall of a burning Sal’s Famous Pizzeria after a melee breaks out partially due to the protest (orchestrated by Buggin’ Out) against the lack of African Americans on the pizzeria’s Wall of Fame. As some sort of cinematic exclamation point, *Do the Right Thing* ends with two quotes, one by King and another by Malcolm X. The quote by King is an exhortation against the use of violence, it reads:

⁸⁰ Aftab and Lee, *That’s My Story*, 83.

⁸¹ Clayborne Carson, “The Unfinished Dialogue of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics Culture and Society*, Volume 7 Issue 1 (2005): 17.

Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it us a descending spiral sending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than to convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers.

Conflict is salient for the duration of the film but actual violence does not erupt until the end. King's quote is instructive as the audience has just witnessed the bludgeoning of Sal and his sons, the choking-death of Radio Raheem, and the burning of the pizzeria. To invoke King, a lifelong advocate of nonviolence, was to raise the question in the minds of the audience of the best way to respond to racially motivated assaults. King earned is status as an icon through nonviolent direct action.

At the age of twenty-six Martin Luther King, Jr., was thrust into the national spotlight in 1955 as the leader of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA).⁸² King, a native of Atlanta, Georgia, was the newly minted pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama when the members of the black community organized a boycott of the bus lines after the

⁸² David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, (New York: Perennial Classics, 2004), 32.

arrest of Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955.⁸³ Similar to the situation that led to Jackie Robinson's court-martial, Parks refused to cooperate with the bus driver and surrender her seat to a white man. The forty-two year old seamstress was arrested and jailed. Community leaders decided to boycott the bus system organized under the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association. The young minister from Atlanta was elected its president. Not only did Parks's act of defiance serve as the spark to the bus boycott that lasted 382 days and desegregated the buses, it catapulted King onto the national scene.⁸⁴

King, the son of popular Atlanta pastor, Martin Luther King, Sr., was raised in the Baptist pastoral tradition.⁸⁵ King, Jr., the second child of Alberta and "Daddy" King, was born January 15, 1929, and grew up in a stable and loving home. Nevertheless he was not spared the sting of the racial segregation that dominated society. At the aged of six, one of his closest childhood playmates, a young white child, notified King that his father had ordered him to stop being friends with him. As a teenager, the future civil rights movement leader had another encounter with the American tradition of privileging whiteness. After participating in an oratorical contest where he gave a speech on "The Negro and the Constitution," King and his teacher were forced to yield their seats to whites on the long bus ride back to Atlanta from South Georgia.⁸⁶ He recalls the incident

⁸³ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 11.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

as making him the “angriest I have ever been in my life.” As an adult, his anger would fuel his activism.

King entered Morehouse College in the fall of 1944, majored in sociology, and earned mediocre grades.⁸⁷ He vacillated over pursuing a career in law or to follow in his father’s footsteps and enter the ministry. Ultimately, he accepted his calling to the clergy in 1947, became assistant pastor to Ebenezer Baptist Church, and enrolled in graduate studies in at Crozer Theological in Pennsylvania. King graduated valedictorian from seminary and enrolled at Boston University for doctoral studies in fall of 1951. While in Boston he met and married his wife, Coretta Scott of Alabama, and received his Ph.D. from Boston University in June 1955.⁸⁸

Prior to finishing his dissertation he accepted the invitation to serve as pastor of Dexter in Montgomery, Alabama and formally began lead the congregation in September of 1954. After the success of the bus boycott, King leading a new national body, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and led anti-segregation demonstrations throughout the South.⁸⁹ The moment that solidified the iconic status of the erudite Baptist minister was his delivery of his “I Have A Dream Speech” during a massive rally held at the nation’s capital, aptly called the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, on August 23, 1963.⁹⁰ This occasion solidified his role as chief leader of the civil

⁸⁷ Ibid., 36-37.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 50.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 97.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 283.

rights movement and earned him the Noble Prize for Peace in 1964.⁹¹ King's efforts along with other civil rights era leaders are credited with creating the climate for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 both signed into law by President Lyndon Baines Johnson.⁹²

The SCLC leader's lost popularity when he shifted his focus from racial equality to economic justice and began speaking out against America's intervention in Vietnam.⁹³ On April 4, 1968, King was killed by an assassin's bullet as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. He was there to lead a march for sanitation workers. King's legacy includes several streets, parks, and schools named in his honor. His wife, Coretta established the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change (the King Center) in Atlanta and there is a national holiday honoring Dr. King.⁹⁴

In 1989, the year *Do the Right Thing* hit theaters, the King national holiday had been celebrated for only three years and had just begun to be observed in most states.⁹⁵ As was the case with Robinson, commonalities linked King and Lee. Most apparent was the fact that they shared the same alma mater, the exclusively male Morehouse College.⁹⁶ Personally, Lee did not share the same affinity that he had shown for Robinson in his conversations about his idols

⁹¹ Ibid., 354.

⁹² Ibid., 337, 438.

⁹³ Ibid., 527.

⁹⁴ David Wessel, "When Is A Holiday Not a Full Holiday? When It Is Today – Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Made Official in 1986, Isn't Universally Observed," *Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 1990, A1.

⁹⁵ Carson, "The Unfinished Dialogue," 185.

⁹⁶ Aftab and Lee, *That's My Story*, 8.

and heroes. The filmmaker summed up his thoughts on the martyred civil rights leader : “I have deep respect for Dr. King, but I just cannot get with Dr. King’s complete nonviolence philosophy.”⁹⁷ With this understanding, it becomes clear that King’s presence in the film represented the juxtaposition between the tactics of nonviolence direct action versus armed self-defense.

To gain a clearer understanding of how the philosophies of both men have been compared and contrasted, it is essential to examine the life and legacy of the man paired with King in the photo, Malcolm X. Historian and Malcolm X biographer, Manning Marable attributes Malcolm’s iconic status to his “latter-day metamorphosis from angry black militant into a multicultural American icon...the product of the extraordinary success of the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, coauthored with Alex Haley.”⁹⁸ The book was published nine months after Malcolm X was assassinated but his life story became legendary.

Born Malcolm Little, to Earl and Louise Little, in Omaha, Nebraska, on May 19, 1925, he was born into hostile racial conditions.⁹⁹ Like King, Malcolm’s father was a preacher, however, of a different ilk. Earl Little was traveling preacher and organizer for the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA)

⁹⁷ Elvis Mitchell, “Spike Lee: The Playboy Interview,” *Spike Lee Interviews*, ed. Cynthia Fuchs, (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 64.

⁹⁸ Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, (New York: Viking, 2011), 7.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

and was harassed frequently by the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁰⁰ In the winter of 1925, the Klan rode out to the Little home in rural Omaha and shattered all of the windows of the home and warned the family to get out of town. Louise was pregnant with Malcolm during the episode and shortly thereafter gave birth to her redheaded son.

When Malcolm was six years old his father died after being ran over by a streetcar.¹⁰¹ Members of the Little family believed that there was foul play but the official report ruled his death accidental. Suddenly thrust into poverty with eight children to provide for, Louise Little suffered a mental breakdown and was committed to the Kalamazoo State Hospital, in Michigan, during January of 1939.¹⁰² The state took charge of the family and fourteen-year-old Malcolm was sent to live in a juvenile home. Like the two black male icons discussed earlier, he too had unpleasant encounters with racist whites in his youth.

The culprit in young Malcolm's incident was his eighth grade English teacher, Richard Kaminska.¹⁰³ The young orphan expressed to the teacher his aspirations to be a lawyer. Kaminska cautioned Malcolm, "You've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer – that's not no realistic goal for a nigger...Why don't you plan on carpentry?" Malcolm's experience had a profound impact on his life. The once promising student's grades began to drop;

¹⁰⁰ See Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association*, (Dover, Massachusetts: Majority Press, 1986) for more information about the Universal Negro Improvement Association.

¹⁰¹ Marable, *Malcolm X*, 30.

¹⁰² Marable, *Malcolm X*, 35.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 38.

he was soon thereafter expelled. His half-sister, Ella took Malcolm in at her home in Boston where he became acquainted with fast-paced life in the big city.

Never to return to formal education again, Malcolm became absorbed in the nightlife and eventually become involved in petty crime commuting by train between Boston and New York City.¹⁰⁴ During this phase of his life, Malcolm was known as Detroit Red (based on his previous residency in Michigan and his reddish hair color) and formed a crew, which included his white lover Bea Caragulian, to commit burglaries in the suburbs of Boston. They were arrested and charged with larceny and breaking and entering in January of 1946. Malcolm and his African American male accomplice, Malcolm ‘Shorty’ Jarvis were sentenced to serve six-to-eight-year sentences.¹⁰⁵ Both suspected that the time they received had more to do with their association with white women than it did the crimes they were formally convicted for committing.

While imprisoned, Detroit Red converted to Islam, and became a devout member of a small religious organization with Black Nationalist rhetoric, named the Nation of Islam (NOI).¹⁰⁶ Upon his release from prison on August 7, 1952, he became known by the moniker, Malcolm X, and was committed to spreading the teachings of the NOI leader, Elijah Muhammad.¹⁰⁷ In a few short years Malcolm would rise to the level of minister, be assigned as the leader of Temple No. 7 in

¹⁰⁴ Manning, *Malcolm X*, 39, 67.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁰⁶ See C. Eric Lincoln, *Black Muslims in America*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994) for more information about the Nation of Islam.

¹⁰⁷ Manning, *Malcolm X*, 98.

Harlem, and be appointed Muhammad's national spokesman.¹⁰⁸ As national spokesman the reformed ex-convict traveled throughout the United States spreading Muhammad's message of creating a separate black nation from the white people and challenging the leaders of the civil rights movement on their integrationist position.¹⁰⁹ Due to a couple of high profile incidents confronting police brutality committed on members of the NOI, both in Harlem and Los Angeles, Malcolm caught the attention of the national media and would stay in the limelight the remainder of his life.

Unlike King, Malcolm did not have a speech at a national rally to cement his iconic status. Actually, the quick-witted, Harlem minister's moment of glory came when he split from the NOI in 1964 and began to experience a political and spiritual transformation before the public's eyes.¹¹⁰ From March of 1964 until his untimely death by an assassination squad on February 26, 1965, Malcolm traveled extensively throughout Africa and the Middle East seeking allies and honing his approach toward his desired goal of creating a Pan-Africanist organization to challenge American racism before the world at the United Nations.¹¹¹ Although he moved away from separatist rhetoric, he continued to advocate for African-Americans to defend themselves when confronted with violent racist attacks as witnessed in demonstrations in the South. While still a member of the Nation of Islam, he agreed to "tell his life story in a book" with writer Alex Haley, to be

¹⁰⁸ Marable, *Malcolm X*, 112.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 132-133.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 293.

¹¹¹ Marable, *Malcolm X*, 307, 399, 436.

published by Doubleday.¹¹² Malcolm originally intended for the book to be a propaganda tool to highlight the transformative message of Elijah Muhammad. After his break from the NOI, that was not to be the case. Published posthumously, the book became and an American classic and solidified Malcolm X as a black American male icon.

In response to being asked about his first reactions after reading the bestseller, Lee confessed, “It was just a revelation.”¹¹³ In 1991 Lee would produce and direct a three-hour biographical film on the slain Black Nationalist leader.¹¹⁴ Albeit, prior to the biopic, Lee paid homage to one of his childhood heroes in his third feature film, *Do the Right Thing*. Malcolm X’s, alongside that of King’s, was consistently presented throughout the film. Ultimately, Lee gave Malcolm X the last word by following King’s quote with this polemic from the Black Nationalist firebrand:

I think there are plenty of good people in America, but there are also plenty of bad people in America and the bad ones are the ones who seem to have all the power and be in positions that you and I need. Because this is the situation, you and I have to preserve the right to do what is necessary to bring an end to that situation, and it doesn’t mean that I advocate violence, but at the same time I am not against using violence in

¹¹² Ibid., 247.

¹¹³ Mitchell, “The Playboy Interview,” 64.

¹¹⁴ Aftab and Lee, *That’s My Story*, 141.

self-defense. I don't even call it violence when it's self-defense, I call it intelligence.¹¹⁵

By presenting these two quotes regarding violence by two martyrs of the Black Freedom Movement, Lee was reintroducing some of the main arguments by non-violent activist and those of a more militant bent. The combination of the repeated presentation of the photograph with the quotes before the ending credits placed Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X back into the public conscious two decades after their assassinations. Smith, who played Smiley in the movie, asserts, "It's pretty amazing that we brought to *Do the Right Thing* this obscure image of Malcolm standing with Martin Luther King, and now it's a standard image that you see everywhere."¹¹⁶

Lee's production journal is replete with references to Malcolm X and his ideas. On December 27, 1987, his second day of writing in his journal, he proclaims, "The character I play in *Do the Right Thing* is from the Malcolm X school of thought: 'An eye for an eye.' Fuck the turn-the-other-cheek shit. If we keep up that madness we'll be dead."¹¹⁷ Keeping in mind that the initial impetuses for the script were racially motivated killings involving blacks as victims, Lee desired to send a message to his audiences using Malcolm X as a symbol of self-defense in the face of racial hatred. In the epilogue of his production journal for *Do the Right Thing*, the provocative filmmaker explains

¹¹⁵ *Do the Right Thing*, dir. Spike Lee (1989; Universal, 2000 dvd).

¹¹⁶ Aftab and Lee, *That's My Story*, 93.

¹¹⁷ Lee and Jones, *Do the Right Thing*, 34.

why he decided to end the film with quotes from the two freedom fighters. He explains:

King and Malcolm. Both men died for the love of their people, but had different strategies for realizing freedom. Why not end the film with an appropriate quote from each? In the end, justice will prevail one way or another. There are two paths to that. The way of King or the way of Malcolm.¹¹⁸

Lee is not attempting to answer questions with his film. Rather he is playing the role of a cinematic political provocateur, challenging his audiences to wrestle with the questions at hand. He uses King and Malcolm X as symbols, to educate and instigate the dialogue.

In their essay “Spike Lee Constructs the New Black Man,” Sharon Elise and Adewole Umoja contextualized the use of King and Malcolm X in *Do the Right Thing* in terms of the racial background of the audience. They have suggested:

To whites, this was at best ambiguous and, at worst, potentially volatile because it pitted nonviolent integrationist ideals against the opposition of violence and the maintenance of separatism. For blacks, such a dichotomy is artificial. It does not address the black political dynamic...In truth, both

¹¹⁸ Lee and Jones, *Do the Right Thing*, 282.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X are warmly embraced by the black community.¹¹⁹

This perspective is presumptuous, yet telling. Both men had black followers, and many argue that the two men, as they evolved, moved close to one another's ideological positions. Film philosopher Michael Silberstein, argues:

As it turns out, a reconciliation of sorts was under way toward the end of their lives. Although X did not reject the possibility of violence and the need for self-defense, he did move closer to the views of King on a number of fronts after he left the Nation of Islam...Although he never gave up on nonviolence, in all we can see King moved toward X's views in several respects.¹²⁰

In *Framing Blackness*, film professor Ed Guerrero, refers to the ideological positions of the two martyrs as “artificial differences.”¹²¹ He believes that Lee included representations of King and Malcolm X in the film to declare, “that the survival of African Americans in the contemporary situation will depend on grasping and synthesizing the political and strategic truths of Martin and Malcolm.” This is a popular position taken by scholars that study the lives and legacies of King and Malcolm X.

¹¹⁹ Sharon Elise and Adewole Umoja, “Spike Lee Constructs the New Black Man,” *Fight the Power: The Spike Lee Reader*, ed. Janice D. Hamlet and Robin R. Means Coleman, (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 294.

¹²⁰ Michael Silberstein, “The Dialectic of King and X in *Do the Right Thing*,” *The Philosophy of Spike Lee*, ed. Mark T. Conrad, (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 136.

¹²¹ Guerrero, 136.

James Cone, theologian and author of *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or A Nightmare*, declared, “The most important similarity between Martin and Malcolm was the goal for which they fought.”¹²² He takes the position that the two charismatic leaders “complemented and corrected each other.” There is value in the arguments made about the two men’s evolution over time and a moving closer to one another ideologically on several levels. That being the case, King and Malcolm X during the duration of their truncated lives did not reconcile on the use of violence as a form of self-defense against racist attacks. Neither man moved from their position on this issue. The question of nonviolence or self-defense was at the crux of Lee’s usage of the postcard and the quotes from the two freedom fighters.

In truth, both men’s legacies have been coopted by diverse camps and individuals, Lee included, based on their political leanings and personal philosophies. At times these agendas have placed unsubstantiated claims on the legacy of King and Malcolm X. Silberstein cautions, rather ironically, “Bear in mind that these were real men, not billboards for ideologies...although they have become icons – pictures on the wall – that does not reflect their reality.”¹²³

The same can be said for Jackie Robinson. His life experiences, like those of the aforementioned freedom fighters, show a complex man that took stances on issues related to race that were unpopular at the time but have been vindicated by history. In spite of the fact that essentializing and simplification has its limits,

¹²² James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 246.

¹²³ Silberstein, “The Dialectic,” 125.

using people symbolically, to represent an idea or cause, is a useful educational tool. As an African American man and filmmaker, Spike Lee recognizes the power of iconic images. Essentially, he counters the historical film depictions and '80's media representations of black men with representations of some of the most iconic men in American history, in terms of race relations, Jackie Robinson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. He is simultaneously attempting to inspire young black men using heroes of yesteryear, challenge whites on their position on the race question, and introduce a corrective history lesson to audiences that have been primarily exposed to the dominant narrative in American history.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Several scholars and critics are not sympathetic with Lee's mission to restore the black male image through the use of icons in cinema. There is also a body of literature that calls into question Lee's notion of black authenticity. These critiques are most aligned with the depictions of the historical black male. Feminist cultural studies professor, Wahneema Lubiano, takes issue with those who applaud Lee for "telling the truth" and "keeping it real" in his films. She writes:

The question of representation and what anyone should say about his/her community is a constant pressure under which African American cultural work is produced. But it is a question which constantly disenfranchises even as it reinforces the notion of absolutes – absolutes such as the "African American" community...or notions of the author or filmmaker as the one who does "something" which...an audience then simply consumes...¹²⁴

Lubiano is calling for writers and audiences to move away from essentialist views regarding the African American community even if a black filmmaker is behind images.

¹²⁴ Wahneema Lubiano, "But Compared to What? Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing* and the Spike Lee Discourse," *The Spike Lee Reader*, ed. Paula Massood, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 41.

Poet, playwright, and cultural critic Amiri Baraka did not buy into Lee's attempts at reimagining black men through the use of icons. He perceived Lee as fundamentally out of touch with black people and was therefore unqualified to use African American cultural heritage as a teaching tool. He has described the Brooklyn-bred filmmaker as, "the quintessential buppie, almost the sprit of the young, upwardly mobile, Black, petit bourgeois professional."¹²⁵ According to Baraka, Lee has been part of a "retrograde trend" in the trajectory of the Black Freedom Movement. Members of this regressive group, in this esteemed poet's opinion, have served as, "caricaturists of the Black revolutionary politics and art of the 1960s."¹²⁶ Baraka's class analysis insinuated that the auteur lacks a fundamental understanding of African American issues and is therefore, an unreliable source for an interpretation of black culture and history.

Sociologist Michael Eric Dyson has suggested that Lee's attempts at educating through the use of the icons King and Malcolm X have been inhibited by the director's "black cultural neonationalism."¹²⁷ Dyson has claimed that Lee's neonationalism "obscures the role of such elements as gender, class, and geography in the construction of racial identity, and by doing so limits its resources for combating racial oppression." This logic implies that Lee's approach would not get the desired effect of his corrective history, but would

¹²⁵ Amiri Baraka, "Spike Lee at the Movies," *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 147.

¹²⁷ Michael Eric Dyson, "Spike Lee's Neonationalist Vision," *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader*, ed. Michael Eric Dyson, (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004), 329.

instead have limited in its effectiveness. Specifically addressing Lee's use of the two quotes at the end of *Do the Right Thing*, Dyson argues the two leaders' words were used "free of context" which provided an "anachronistic and historical reading of the two figures."¹²⁸ Furthermore, the prolific sociologist posits, "Lee freezes the meanings of these two men," rather than using rhetoric from their later, more evolved thoughts for a reconceptualization of the problem of racism. Again, as with Baraka, Lee's use of King and Malcolm is not celebrated: it is seen as shallow, narrow, and unimaginative.

The theme of criticism Lee's credentials as a progressive is evident in Kellner's piece. Kellner has argued that *Do the Right Thing* fails at interrogating and deconstructing the standardized narrative of African American men. He believes that Lee "does not rise above the repertoire of dominant images of men, women, Blacks, and other races." In essence, Kellner's offered another commentary on how Lee falls short of truly "Fighting the Power," to borrow from the movie's theme song.

Indeed, the scholars and writers have pinpointed some of the flaws in the famed director's strategy. Lee is deserving of the harsh reviews. His use of icons in *Do the Right Thing*, is driven by a narrow political agenda and a sense of hero worship that lacks an analytical exploration of the evolutionary trajectory of Robinson, King, and Malcolm X. These shortcomings do not neutralize his efforts at presenting a corrective history and reintroducing, in some cases

¹²⁸ Dyson, "Neonationalist," 330.

introducing, the three important black male historical figures to the collective consciousness of the audience.

In many ways, Lee was ahead of the curve, some could argue trendsetting, in his referencing Robinson, King, and Malcolm X in *Do the Right Thing*. Mookie's donning of the replica Robinson jersey, predated the 1997 decision by Major League Baseball commissioner Bud Selig, to honor the pioneering baseball legend by retiring the number forty-two across the league "for the ages."¹²⁹ Although the third Monday in January was declared a national holiday in 1986, four states (Arizona, New Hampshire, Idaho, and Montana) had yet to recognize it by the time *Do the Right Thing* hit theaters.¹³⁰ Today, all fifty-states recognize the holiday. Writer Nelson George, credits Lee with being part of a small group of people in the hip-hop community to embrace Malcolm X before his "By Any Means Necessary" statement had become cliché on the 1990's. George observed, "Spike Lee was a vocal champion of Malcolm X in the late eighties, which made him a kindred spirit with voices of the disenfranchised and fed up."¹³¹ Lee's works alone did not lead to these declarations and trends but his use of Robinson, King, and Malcolm X captured the attention of audiences, critics, and scholars and placed their lives and legacies into the public and academic arena for exploration and reexamination.

¹²⁹ Marc Fisher, "Jackie's 50th; Baseball Retires No. 42 Forever As It Celebrates Day of Integration," *Washington Post*, April 16, 1997, A01.

¹³⁰ Wessel, "King Holiday," A1.

¹³¹ Nelson George, *Blackface: Reflections on African-Americans and the Movies*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 84.

Spike Lee's mission to present diverse images of African Americans is ambitious. He had been aware that he was part of an industry driven by box office receipts and many of his films have not been blockbusters. He has also been limited by his own experiences, tastes, and ideology rooted in a quasi-Black Nationalist philosophy that has not, until recently, focused on the black women in history with the same attention as placed on male figures. Lee makes himself a target of critics of all stripes with his works because a movie can only display so much that it is bound to leave some particular constituency wanting. Regardless of this host of barriers, Lee has achieved success in delivering to audiences of various racial, socioeconomic, and nationalities iconic black male figures.

After the era of Blaxploitation, Hollywood had no interest in catering to black audiences. This is evidenced by the virtual absence of films made by African-Americans until the mid-1980s. Spike Lee, according to film studies professor Paula Massood, "gained visibility at a moment when African American film was at a nadir."¹³² Not only did he make movies with black characters, he celebrated black historical figures and contributed to the movement toward building works on black male and manhood history. One Lee's most obvious attempts at this work, was his reference of the legacies of Robinson, King, and Malcolm X in *Do the Right Thing*.

Rejecting the constraints once tethering blacks in Hollywood to roles as coons and buffoons, Lee, in his own imperfect way, works diligently to provide

¹³² Paula Massood, "We've Gotta Have It – Spike Lee, African American Film, and Cinema Studies," *The Spike Lee Reader*, ed. Paula Massood, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), xv.

nuanced images of African American men. He continues to combine his passion for film, sports, and African American history to counter demeaning images of black men; both fictitious and real.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lasana O. Hotep was born in Los Angeles, California, on August 30, 1974, the son of Kim Stone and Lawrence Garrett Silas, Sr. His education began in Los Angeles, California and continued in Long Beach, California and San Antonio, Texas. After completing his secondary education at Oliver Wendell Holmes High School, San Antonio, Texas, in 1992, he Texas State University-San Marcos and graduated in 1997 with a Bachelor of Arts double majoring in Speech Communications and History. Professionally, Lasana has served as an associate producer in television news, vice-president of a wireless phone franchise, an elementary school teacher, and student affairs program coordinator at the university level. He is also an accomplished public lecturer and essayist on the topics of Leadership Development, Hip-hop, and Black Masculinity.

Authors of edited volumes have solicited his unique perspective and analysis. Lasana has contributed chapters to several publications including *African-American Men in College* (Jossey-Bass 2006), *The State of Black Arizona* (ASU 2008), *Be A Father to Your Child: Real Talk from Black Men of the Hip Hop Generation* (Soft Skull 2008), *The Black Male Handbook: A Blueprint for Life* (Atria 2008), and *Icons of Black America* (Greenwood 2011).

During the fall semesters of 2010 through 2011 he attended the Graduate College of Arizona State University and began his thesis in the fall semester of 2011.

Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* utilizes different camera angles to add movement, emphasize mood, and enhance the overall visual experience of the film. Spike Lee first captivated our cultural consciousness in 1986 with his debut film, *She's Gotta Have It*, a story about a sexually empowered woman in Brooklyn and her three lovers, told in black and white. Over his long and varied career, Spike has often drawn from the well of his own life, which encompass everything from historically Black colleges and universities, colorism in the Black community, culture clashes in Brooklyn, love and jazz, interracial relationships, and addiction. For a script that Spike Lee penned in only two weeks, the relationship with the actors becomes even more important, and he's quoted as saying "Do the Right Thing was like the first film where I really felt comfortable working with actors." *Do the Right Thing* helped launch a lot of careers, namely that of Rosie Perez, and it's cool to see some of the hesitations and struggles she expresses during that time. As you can see in the third video, she talks about having trouble getting into it, being that she never intended on acting or being a part of a film at all. As always, join the discussion in The short film "3 Brothers" splices the police brutality scene in "Do the Right Thing" with footage of the deaths of George Floyd and Eric Garner. 3 Brothers-Radio Raheem, Eric Garner And George Floyd. pic.twitter.com/EB0cXQELzE. â€” Spike Lee (@SpikeLeeJoint) June 1, 2020. [Via Twitter]. Want more stories like this? Gage Lorentz was pulled over for speeding on a dirt road in Carlsbad Caverns National Park. Minutes later he lay on the ground, dead from a point-blank shot to the heart. How did a trivial traffic stop lead to his death? A pressure cooker situation. Why So Many Men Cry On 'Shark Tank'.