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BEATING SONGS:
BLUES, VIOLENCE, AND THE MALE BODY IN THE FILMS OF SPIKE LEE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the American Studies Program

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Mikal J. Gaines

2005

APPROVAL SHEET

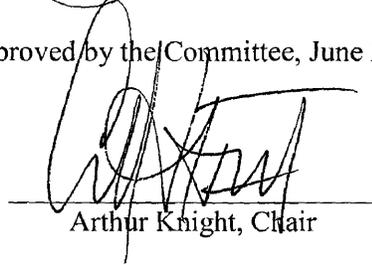
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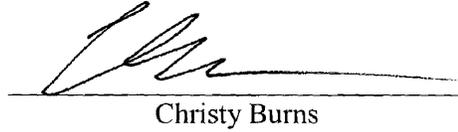


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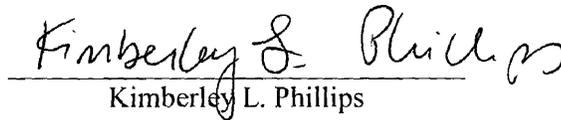
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Arthur Knight, Chair



Christy Burns



Kimberley L. Phillips

To all my family, friends, and colleagues for their support throughout this process.

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ABSTRACT

The male protagonists that dominate the films of Spike Lee are often the targets or agents of brutal, debilitating, and sometimes fatal violence. Inextricably linked to these characters' subject position in cultural space, this violence is part of a larger "blues ideology." Simply defined, blues ideology refers to the processes of abjection and given person's creative, expressive response to that abjection. Central to this formulation of the blues, is the body as a primary site of mediation— that is, as the place where power relations are negotiated.

The moments when bodily violence erupts in tandem with creative and performative expression can best be described as "beating songs." They are meta-narratives within the larger texts that make explicit the ways in which violence informs the cultural order. While certainly akin to what many have recognized as blues ideology and methodology in the African American literary tradition, I argue that this filmic manifestation of the blues is different because of the medium's unique ability to display bodily violence. By forcing the viewer into identification with the blues subject and *his* abjection, the beating song presents a theoretical framework for conceptualizing the blues as one of the most powerful ways of being.

To be clear, this specific case study of selected films from Lee's diverse body of work is by no means an attempt to engage still on-going debates about blues music and its appropriation (or misappropriation). Rather, it should be seen as a way of re-imagining blues culture beyond the strict boundaries of race, class, and regional identity markers. What the "beating song" suggests is that a person's connection to the blues is determined by subject position and in this instance, *his* response to what are frequently liminal, paradoxical, or contradictory circumstances.

BEATING SONGS: BLUES, VIOLENCE, AND THE MALE BODY IN THE FILMS
OF SPIKE LEE

INTRODUCTION

In the films of Spike Lee, violence functions less as an inevitability and more as a haunting, inexorable ghost. The bodies of the male protagonists that dominate Lee's films are frequently the targets of such violent outbreaks.¹ What is particularly intriguing about these bodies in jeopardy is that their subject positions and circumstances link them to blues subjects throughout the African American expressive tradition. Critics such as Houston Baker and Albert Murray, among others, have done considerable work in tracing the different manifestations of the blues throughout African American Literature, but a comparable study of blues ideology in black cinema has yet to appear.² This study will provide the beginning of a theoretical frame that might be used to inform such a discussion.

In Baker's seminal text, he argues that the blues are a "vernacular matrix" that "comprise a mediational site where familiar antinomies are resolved (or dissolved) in office of adequate cultural understanding."³ To simplify, a vernacular matrix refers to a site wherein culturally specific systems of discourse are bred. It is within this site, or sites, that opposing forces attempt to mediate conflicts that arise because of contradictions within structures of authority. Resolution or dissolution of these conflicts is the equilibrium that the blues performs. Thus, in Baker's formulation, the blues is a

site of contestation where one's ability to manipulate vernacular codes (via appropriation, improvisation, etc.) is paramount. In order to push Baker's concept further or perhaps change its polarity, I refer to the blues and its ideology as a performative strategy of creative resistance. A person, or subject, has the blues and is living according to a blues ideology when three things happen simultaneously: the subject ("he" in this case) confronts an impossible circumstance or choice; he recognizes and surrenders to those forces (cultural and otherwise) that prompt such circumstances; and he develops a creative and expressive means of *playing* within the seemingly immobile space. Always a betrayal and affirmation, an embrace and rejection, the blues is contradiction or paradox deployed as being. Ontology becomes power by refusing reconciliation and the blues subject becomes both powerful and vulnerable through his lack of coherence within given systems of meaning.

Through close reading of individual scenes in *Summer of Sam* (1999), *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Bamboozled* (2000), *A Huey P. Newton Story* (2001), and *25th Hour* (2002), this discussion will show how moments of extreme, and in some cases, mortal bodily violence are used in conjunction with music of various genres to relocate and establish the traditional expressive modes of blues culture in the realm of the cinema. This is not an attempt to simply classify the use of blues music in Lee's films; rather it is an attempt to formulate a pattern of understanding that traces the presence of blues ideology and deployment of blues methodology as it relates to the male body in Lee's films. Drawing upon Adam Gussow's work concerning violence and blues culture I mean to describe the way in which Lee's male protagonists utilize blues strategies to varying degrees of success. Both Gussow and Lee seem to view blues culture as

something that thrives both because of and in spite of the violence inherent to it. Gussow structures his arguments around traditional blues texts, historical primary documents, and African American literature, but I will extend some of his theoretical concepts as well as that of several others to examine what happens to blues in the work of one of black cinema's most provocative auteurs.

CHAPTER I

AN AUTEUR'S PARADIGM FOR BLUES

The specific moments in the Lee films examined what I refer to as “beating songs,” all share at least three primary elements in common: music, performance, and violence. Although the music is not blues by technical standards, it is often rooted there and draws its power from kindred vernacular spirits and connected musical traditions. In addition, the music is linked both thematically and aesthetically to the circumstances of the films’ main protagonists and is combined with “performances” of varying types and purposes that all end in violence, either actual or implied. Beating songs arise because of the build up of unstable energy, or more appropriately, the build up of competing energies in the film’s plots that come into conflict with one another. Violence is the extreme outcome of such conflict, and *doing violence* to the filmic viewer is as much a part of the beating song as the violence done to the story’s blues subject. What the beating song offers is a theoretical model that might help to reveal how the filmic blues text differs from the blues manifested in other mediums. Blues and blues subjects in literature have already received considerable treatment by scholars such as Baker, Murray, Valerie Prince, and others.⁴ *But the cinema engages its audience differently.* Film is in an inherently violent sensory medium that attacks the viewer by demanding a level of interaction that I argue,

is more akin to what the blues (at its core) is always interested in doing: assaulting subjectivities, destabilizing hierarchies, and building alternative routes to and centers of power.

Beginning with an analysis of a four minute musical montage at the center of *Summer of Sam*, I will examine how main protagonist, Richie, becomes the film's central point of cultural disruption through his theatrical performance of faux ritual violence; because Richie so symbolizes disruption in *SoS*'s world, he enacts some of the same ritual violence that is later perpetrated against him. Both instances are fueled in large part by cultural collisions and conflicts born out of a shift from stable and clearly identifiable sexual boundaries to unfixed, fluid ones. Self-referential in perhaps the most productive way, *SoS* is also the example that most clearly enacts the translocation of the blues into film that I hope to make apparent. The montage sequence manages to synthesize all the main themes of the film in a short period but remains an expansive filmic device rather than a restrictive one.

I also consider *SoS* out of the otherwise chronological sequence of the argument because it immediately dismisses one of the central assumptions of most blues scholarship: that the blues is an exclusively African American way of being. This is not to say that race is eliminated or that the blues becomes universally applicable in my conceptualization of it. Race remains central to the blues in *SoS*, as do gender, sexuality, and class, but all of these categories are troubled within the blues context by the instability of the vernacular culture shown in the film. Expansion of such a highly contested space as the blues, by an explicitly-raced director, is the element of the beating song that makes it most powerful but also most susceptible to incredulity. How can the

films of a director like Lee, known as a black director making black films, work as narratives that advocate the opening of blues space[s] to white subjects without simply condemning them for misappropriation of black methods? What does the expansion of blues mean for his black blues subjects? Lee can open up the space because the blues itself allows for such movement and, as for black blues subjects, it changes little. The blues is an evolving form, and when its strategies are unsuccessfully applied by blacks or whites, there are always consequences; blues ideology checks and balances itself.

Reaching beyond questions of ownership, appropriation, and even Amiri Baraka's attack of Lee's "buppie" class preference,⁵ this study instead hopes to illuminate the blues' innate pliability-- even if certain conditions consistently conjure its presence. If tracing the blues' manifestation in cinema is to be a truly valuable interpretive move, then essentialist conceptions need be replaced with nuanced and more importantly, realistic ones. Contact and context change even the sturdiest of ideologies, but this does not mean that those ideologies become something else entirely. *The blues persists*: it is more than what people do and what they do with it, although it is both of these. The other selected films will assist in drawing into focus exactly what this "more" means.

Jungle Fever and *Bamboozled* feature beating songs that end in the violent death of both their performers. The crack-addled "Gator" in *Jungle Fever* is executed by his own father in the kitchen of his childhood home at the culmination of an improvised dance, while in *Bamboozled*, the professional entertainer Man Ray is executed by a group of pseudo-revolutionaries after being forced to dance in the scathing satire. These executions leave two literal and symbolic bodies in their wake: Gator's body, a symbol of the black community ravaged by the crack epidemic, and Man Ray's body, a

representative of generations of African American performers forced to wear masks of many kinds and of differing degree. I will show that these are both essentially blues moments.

Mo' Better Blues contains the most obvious beating song of any of the films in that the characters Bleek and Giant are literally beaten to the soundtrack of a congruently violent jazz performance. Here the violence of the creative expression and the violence evident in the culture that spawns that expression become channels for each other. Bleek's body in particular becomes a visible portrait that wears ceremonial scars—the evidence of having tread without due care in the often hazardous back alleys of blues country. Following this, Bleek alters his proto-masculine blues identity in favor of a more feminine blues method.

The beating song in *A Huey P. Newton Story* nearly defies classification. It does not feature actual violence, as the other films do, but rather implies or references violence via the foreknowledge of the tragically violent “real life” death of its protagonist. What it does have, however, is a “dance”—although about as an unconventional a dance as is possible. Set to Bob Dylan's “Ballad of the Thin Man,” the character Huey P. Newton's “dance” is a demonstration of blues ideology that is both foreign and frighteningly familiar. Here is a beating song without the actual beating, but it is nonetheless a powerfully formulated response to a violent cultural and social history. More so than any of the other examples, it is the blues deployed *spontaneously* with direct acknowledgement and confrontation of the viewer.

The bodily violence that main protagonist Monty Brogan undergoes in *25th Hour* is utterly raw and uncompromising in its execution, situating the viewer as both the

perpetrator and victim of violence. When protagonist Monty Brogan, preparing for a seven year stint in state prison, asks his friend Frank to “make [him] ugly” a harsh and realistically rendered beating ensues that is presented from both sides. Linked in an obscure way to Monty’s familial relationships, his sexuality, and to an almost oppositional notion of healing, the bodily violence of *25th Hour* speaks with large scale implications about post September 11th America by positioning terrorism as the agent of abjection. This text lacks the obvious performative and musical elements that typically situate Lee’s beating songs, and therefore expands the paradigm even further by paradoxically adding sound through removal of it. Monty is clearly performing but in a different manner than any of the other blues subjects (even Lee’s only other white blues subject, Richie). Something happens to the blues in *25th Hour* that references traditional ideologies while also suggesting a paradigm shift in the post September 11th world.

Because of the prevalence of bodily violence in black film, because of the power of blues ideology in forming (unique and always fluid) means of resistance, because of what is at stake in the visual representations of bodily violation, I offer the beating song as a method of understanding, or at least interpretation. Admittedly, this interpretation is biased in that it is a deductive framework pulled from inside Lee’s work and read back onto it in order to address larger concerns. How are representations of violence, sexuality, gender, and race connected in black cinema? How might a blues frame shape an understanding of this connection? What does this filmic blues have to offer that literary and musical blues texts do not? What are its limitations? Does the filmic blues change some of the previously held conceptions of blues ideology and methodology?

CHAPTER II

A SONG FOR RICHIE

The musical montage in Lee's period drama *Summer of Sam* is both in and not in continuity with the otherwise linear plot. A great deal occurs within the sequence that features both familiar characters and settings, but the nature of the montage itself makes the action temporally dislocated in its arrangement. Rapid cutting, dictated by rhythmic cues taken from the soundtrack, is the sequence's dominant formal characteristic thus making it more stylistically akin to a music video than classical cinema. The primary element that provides the otherwise disjointed montage with its continuity is a set of parallel performances acted out by Richie (Adrian Brody). A sadomasochistic "dance" at an underground gay porn theater is juxtaposed against another performance wherein Richie plays guitar along with The Who's song "Baba 'O Reilly" in his garage apartment. The song provides the score for the entire sequence. Other events shown during the montage include one of serial killer David Berkowitz's executions, different characters engaging in drug experimentation, and a revenge-prompted beating, amongst other scattered shots. The film constructs this sequence in such a way that violence becomes the point around which issues of sexuality, identity, cultural expression, and power collide thus revealing cultural mechanisms—the constructions which create and control

cultural boundaries and subsequent modes of behavior. I will argue that the violence in this sequence as well as the violence that structures the rest of the film's narrative is consistent with the trope of violence typical of the blues tradition. *Summer of Sam* is an attempt to create a cinematic blues text that casts the central character Richie as a neo-blues subject not through his affiliation with a racially oppressed class but instead through his status within the vernacular culture of his neighborhood.

In "The Epistemology of Race and Black American Film Noir: Spike Lee's *Summer of Sam* as Lynching Parable," Dan Flory asserts that the film is structured as a literal and allegorical lynching of the character Richie.⁶ Richie is presented as a cultural outsider and "other" figure from the moment he enters the story. "The boys" from his neighborhood are shocked when he appears— returned from a stay in Manhattan-- sporting a union jack t-shirt, spiked hair, and a faux British accent; it is obvious that he is deliberately defying the identity markers of his predominantly Italian Brooklyn neighborhood. These outward alterations are only the beginning of several means that Richie deploys throughout in order to attack and reconstruct culturally imposed boundaries of sexuality, gender, and identity. These challenges are met with vicious and ultimately violent resistance from those who act as culture police in this very tribal atmosphere. These "policemen," Richie's former friends, sit atop the neighborhood's pecking order. The stereotypically bigoted and short-tempered gang members read his affiliation with the emerging punk rock aesthetic in 1977 New York as akin to that of a satanic cult member or degenerate. Thus, when they lynch Richie at the end of the film because they believe he is the serial killer "Son of Sam," the violence seems practically inevitable. However, these as well as the other characters in the film seem no less-- and

possibly more-- involved in excessive and decadent behavior than even Richie. Yet, none of them cross the proverbial line of cultural offense that he does. Flory observes that no one in the film manages to stir cultural sensibilities as profoundly as Richie because they still maintain some level of “normalcy” that is equivalent to a broader sense of whiteness.⁷ This critique is useful in conceptualizing the plot as a lynching parable but is still limited. What it does not adequately acknowledge or explain is the compelling relationship between Richie’s two performances during the montage sequence.

Dressed in a tight-fitting sleeveless shirt covered in safety pins, a spiked dog collar, revealing cut-off shorts, spiked hair, and a combat boots, Richie begins his performance at the theater by first pulling a pocket knife from his crotch. He then goes about stabbing and slicing into a strung-up, pillow-stuffed doll covered in a white sheet. His action stimulates raucous applause and a combination of pleasures amongst Richie’s audience. Obviously, their response suggests that they enjoy Richie’s act, but just what they are taking pleasure in is more illusory. Is their pleasure a result of their own symbolic abjection? Is it Richie’s sadism? Is it sexual pleasure derived from both of these? Or is it simply the quality of Richie’s performance as good art? These questions are not by any means answered in the montage but are perhaps useful in considering some of the other complexities in Richie’s show.

Richie’s costume seems to clearly reference that typical in sadomasochistic pornography.⁸ Nearly all its elements hint at violation, evisceration, or penetration of the body, and in this instance, all those threats are kept close to the skin suggesting an indulgence in the looming threat of bodily invasion. Another strand in the montage implies that Richie has begun prostituting himself in order to buy a “fucking new Fender

[guitar]” so that he can further support his career as a punk rock musician. Yet, this implication is at least as ambiguous as the precise dynamics of the pleasure in his stage performance. The viewer sees a shot of Richie entering the “Ladies Only” bathroom with one of the business-suited audience members of his stage show. While it is certainly implied that he is prostituting himself, the nature of this prostitution remains uncertain. The viewer does not know if Richie is actually having sex with this man or others at the theater. He could very well be performing another more private “show” similar to the one he performs on stage. What is definitely known is that this is a part of his identity that he demands remain secret. In fact, one of the only moments in which Richie enacts physical violence on a real person comes later when “Bobby the Fairy,” the respective neighborhood queer, threatens to reveal the secret performances at the club to others in the neighborhood. Richie actually grabs Bobby and begins to strangle him, even threatening to kill him if the secret is given away. This is the only moment in the film where Richie acts out malicious violence on a live victim. Richie’s desire to keep this part of himself closeted hints at the high stakes of his lynching of the hanging effigy. The unfortunate tradition white-on-black lynching, and lynching photography, can illuminate much of what is at work in the performance.

The mutilation of the doll begins with a kind of teasing dance where Richie passes the knife along the genital region and throat. This play escalates to wild stabbing and by the end of the montage sequence he is literally ripping the feather-stuffed doll into pieces. No less a form of lynching than the violent attack on him at the end of the film, this “act” in many ways more accurately represents the violence of lynching as a spectacular, public, and ritualistic exercise. In “Lynching Photography and the ‘black beast rapist’ in the

Southern White Masculine Imagination,” Amy Louise Wood identifies the politics of Southern lynching as a ritual in which “white Southern men enacted and inscribed their ideologies of race and sex onto the bodies of African American Men.”⁹ Lynching photography, then, creates a blurring or conflation of the visual image of violence and the methodology of social control that it represents. The two become indistinguishable thus making real violence and visual violence cooperating tools of cultural structuring.

Richie’s performance lynching can be read as a manipulated form of this mechanism that has five primary aspects of operation.

- A. The imagined threat of homosexuality, and especially the homosexual body, displaces the position that the imagined threat of black male sexuality would normally have occupied
- B. Richie’s dress destabilizes white heteronormative masculinity while his violent behavior simultaneously reaffirms it
- C. These destabilizations and reaffirmations operate as projections of white desire and fear
- D. Richie’s play then enacts, as pleasure, a dichotomy of that desire and fear
- E. The pleasure/pain play supplants actual sex with a kind of sexy violence

The audience for Richie’s show could, after all, have chosen to attend a more deliberately sexual pornographic show. They instead seem to be partaking in a very idiosyncratic kind of enjoyment from an act that is— at least technically —only implicitly sexual. The violence is the sex— at least as it is positioned within the rapid cutting in the montage.

Also compelling is the way in which the montage sequence positions this sexy violence as parallel to the creative expression in Richie's other more private performance. For example, one transitional cut in the montage moves from a close up of Richie's hands ripping the doll to a close up of his hands playing guitar. The inevitable synthesis of these images prompts the question: What is the difference between his sexually violent pornographic performance and the creative musical performance? Is there really a difference at all? In the case of an actual lynching there is of course actual victimization of an actual body, but in these semi-public and private performances there is only the suggestion of what Adam Gussow calls the "abject" lynched body.¹⁰ Abjection refers to a multivalent relationship of blues subjects to feelings of self-identification with the mutilated black form and subsequent strategies for coping with such confrontation.¹¹ In both of Richie's performances, there are abject bodies. Whereas the white-sheeted doll is symbolically destroyed during his staged performance, the guitar functions as the abject in his private performance. Richie plays, or more accurately, "attacks" the instrument. Additionally, the viewer sees the guitar inexplicably falling from the sky in slow motion only to crash into pieces at Richie's feet at one point during the montage. There is no indication of when or why this happens and Richie still mysteriously has the guitar at the end of the film. Thus, this abjection is a metaphoric counter or parallel to the "body" on stage. I argue that Richie is a blues subject that is repossessing, embodying, and rejecting the abject not by performance rooted in the travails of a racially oppressed class but rather from a subject position of cultural difference linked to his sexuality and cultural identity. To better articulate this assertion, it is necessary to contextualize the other representations of violence—beyond Richie's symbolic rites of violence-- that

appear in the montage and how they work in when experienced in coordination with Richie's two parallel performances.

The first violence that appears in the montage is not that performed by Richie at all, but is instead of a more direct and malicious kind. After all, the violence demonstrated in the recreation of David Berkowitz's execution style murder of a young couple kissing in a parked car seems hardly as ambiguous in meaning as that in Richie's performance. Or does it? The formal presentation of the montage begs this question and suggests that Berkowitz (and his work) is part of an inversion of abjection. The viewer sees Berkowitz (Michael Badalucco) approach from the side of the car, although his face is never shown. This seems like a deliberate choice in order that the eye of the camera stay true to the anonymity that Berkowitz was able to maintain prior to his capture. He pulls the gun, and begins firing directly at the couple. It is unclear which of the two is hit first, but the blood splatter and smashed window on the opposite side of the car quickly put a silence to the young girl's screams of shock and horror. The young man's death, however, is much more elaborate. He fights to get free from the vehicle and eventually crawls his way out of the window. Bleeding profusely, he falls to the ground and the viewer can only assume that he has succumbed to his injuries.

The re-staging of the crime is highly stylized by the gritty texture of the film stock and the incongruous, spectacular spot lighting. The lighting, which seems to shift inconsistently almost as though it were coming from traditional stage lights, gives the murders a sense of staged performance. This moment of the montage, not unlike in Richie's performances, is constructed not as realistic but as *hyper-realistic*. The point seems not to adhere to the historical details, but rather to elevate those details to a level

where every image and sound is given an extreme kinesic. The inclusion of this ultra violence is meant to do more than simply up the dramatic ante of the other elements of the montage, however, and is also connected to the positioning of Richie acting as a neo-blues subject in a neo-blues culture.

The violence of the “Son of Sam” murders was no less a part of what informed and shaped the culture presented in the film than any of the other many events that appear in the montage, be they the emerging punk scene, numerous forms of sexual and drug experimentation, or typical neighborhood violence. The montage in fact, situates Berkowitz’s reign of terror as both a motivating and symptomatic force that further heightens and distills the conflicted terrain that is already present; this is a terrain filled with paranoia, intolerance, and culturally sanctioned violence. The viewer is forced to view the sexual and ritual violence that occurs both in Richie’s sex show and in the revenge beating, which I will deal with in more depth shortly, as part of an environment that not only allows violence but also nurtures it. Film theorist Philip Simpson suggests that serial killer films construct their narratives intentionally to depict the killers as “monstrous beings” that represent a demonic “other” that while still human, operate from motivations outside culture.¹²

While *SoS* is not exactly part of the serial murder cinema genre, the film certainly uses David Berkowitz as a character to provide both momentum for the narrative and a frame for the picture of culture that it attempts to capture. He is unquestionably cast a demonic other and a self-proclaimed “monster,” but there is indeed a divergence in his characterization from that of the serial murderers, either factually or fictionally based, that appear in many other films of that genre. The premeditated nature of David

Berkowitz's crimes, the seeming inability of the police to capture him coupled with his taunting responses, and the victimization of specific targets (young white women and couples), all culminate to give the murders a quality that involves them directly *in* culture as opposed to some outside motivating force. Berkowitz's cultural "work," as it was, cannot be separated from the other stories the film tells anymore than they can be from it. Berkowitz does not, however, have the personal apocalyptic impulse of the fictional characters on which Simpson focuses. *SoS* implies that Berkowitz is not disgusted with the world because of religious piety or ambivalent because of moral ambiguity. He is in fact quite insane, but he is also part of a culture depicted as one that is devouring itself even if only to reform with new boundaries. This is an inversion of the paranoia and constant threat of bodily violence that Gussow's blues subjects channel into blues musical aesthetics. In a way, the Son of Sam murders become a propagation of a neo-lynching/blues culture produced not simply as a result of misplaced white masculine fear and desire but born from within these fears and desires and turned back on itself. Because of this directional shift in the flow of the schema of abjection, traditional blues music is obviously an unsuitable means of articulating the disruption. I am not arguing then that The Who's "Baby 'O Reilly" is in and of itself a blues song, but rather that the film's use of it in this context is consistent with a blues methodology.

Brutality, creativity, passion, sex, music, fear, and possibly even love all manage to squeeze themselves into a four minute, four second stretch of film with over one hundred shots. The violence that the viewer sees does not exist in a vacuum where it can be isolated from personal projections of sexuality, identity (or race, class, personal

emotional identification, etc.). Each of these subjective gazes within the viewer comes under assault. Vivian Sobchack discusses this process in more detail:

Our films are trying to make us feel more secure about violence and death as much as it is possible; they are allowing us to purge our fear, to find safety in what appears to be knowledge of the unknown. To know violence is to be temporarily safe from the fear of it.¹³

Sobchack's critique is useful here if we expand her conception of the "unknown." It is not just a place that houses primal fears about experiencing the details of death or bodily violation. Rather, the unknown becomes a transcendent blues space that represents the intersections of culture. It is a crossroads at which culture is confronted and the confronting subjects are either consumed by it or tear into it, reconstructing it so that it might be an instrument of discursive power. The montage sequence is an address to this unknown place. Much of what it displays reaches into a collective pocket of apprehensions not only about violence enacted on the body, but violence brought against identities and ways of being or, as Sobchack puts it, violence that destroys subjectivities.¹⁴

It would be remiss to leave out of this discussion the third violent occurrence in the montage. This "tribal violence" is a kind of vigilante revenge-beating acted out by the characters Anthony (Al Palagonia), Brian (Ken Garito), and Joey T. (Michael Rispoli). The term "beating" seems more appropriate than "fight" because from what is shown in the montage, their adversaries are not afforded the opportunity to put up much of a fight. This violence plays on two peculiar planes of irony. The vigilantes are seeking out retaliation on behalf of Bobby the Fairy. Bobby is disparaged and generally disregarded

as a viable presence by these characters in other scenes in the film and yet when the opportunity arises for them to act violently on his behalf, they jump at the chance. Part of their reaction is simply in keeping with their characterization. All these characters, Joey T. especially, are prone to violence and do not hesitate to use it (or at least the threat of it) as their primary means of engaging in almost all discourses. The shots of these characters leading vigilante mobs through the darkened streets in search of the Son of Sam later in the film illustrates their willingness to establish their cultural identities through violence. This alone, however, does not serve as sufficient explanation for their defense of Bobby whose lifestyle and cultural affiliations they clearly reject.

The discontinuity can then be read as a need to insure cultural privilege. The attack on Richie at the end of the film by these same characters leaves no reason to believe that they actually feel sympathy or tolerance for Bobby. More accurately, this violence can be read as a tool, a manipulation of force that informs the cultural order. Their actions here then become an affirmation of their status as the overseers of accepted modes of behavior. It is as if they were saying that “no one gets to pick on our queer (or our nigger) but us.”

The other irony of the display in tribal violence is that Richie is later lynched in large part because his sexuality is made suspect. This flexibility in Richie’s identity is coalesced into a whole list of associations: “...killer, fag, pimp, punk-rocker...queer, pervert, degenerate, whatever the fuck it is. I mean—c’mon. Who wants something like that around here anyway?”¹⁵ Apparently no one does, despite the film’s very detailed attempts to situate Richie as the most compassionate and understanding of virtually all the characters that populate the narrative. The montage works to create points that reveal

the junctures where culture itself exists in a state of instability and Richie is the central point of disruption. He is able to give a creative voice to this transitional space through his performances but unfortunately also pays a hefty price for this expression in the end. Richie is the neo-blues subject. What separates him from some of the blues people of the disparate class of the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction era is that he survives his lynching—just barely.

Unfortunately, all that *SoS* leaves its viewers with *is* survival. Whatever strategies Richie has enacted to confront the boundaries of his culture and thus reform them so as to create a space for himself are lost in the final confrontation with malicious physical violence. This is not reason enough to abandon the potential that the neo-blues text might offer. Rather than simply moving chronologically forward in using Lee's work as a case study, I will instead turn backwards to see what beating songs his earlier films present.

CHAPTER III

MO' BETTER BLUES WEAPONS

SoS is not the first film of Lee's body of work to tread in blues territory. In fact, the trope of violence, music, and "performance" begins most apparently during the strangulation of "Radio Raheem" at the climax of *DtRT* (1989). It seems only natural then that Lee's most blatant homage to blues culture would follow shortly after. *Mo' Better Blues* (1990) contains what is the most literal of the beating songs in that the blues subject/performer is literally beaten to a bloody pulp. The film's very title indicates a vested interest in constructing what is essentially a blues narrative despite its setting in the milieu of jazz. The blues subject at the center of *MBB* is Bleek Gilliam (Denzel Washington). Selfish, chauvinistic, egotistic, and often insensitive, Bleek is the quintessential representation of a highly problematic masculinity typically ascribed to jazz musicians in film.¹⁶ His talent and ability avail him a level of power and discursive access that transcends whatever other faults he may possess. What I mean by discursive access is, on one level, literal access to a stage and an audience that however liminal in the larger scheme of popular music, is still very much public. One of the polemics that haunts *MBB* is the issue of consumption of traditionally African American art forms like blues and jazz, though the film is ultimately somewhat ambivalent in fully addressing this

issue. My purpose here, however, is not to engage in a discussion about ownership of blues culture and practices but only to suggest that regardless of how far the boundaries reach to include blues methodology, its roots remain firmly planted in the “jook culture” that spawned its inception.¹⁷ What I also mean by discursive access is the opportunity to affect the means of resistance to dominating forces, the ability to assert power through creative expression, and the often unwilling desire to pull out of the depths of blues culture both the agony and joy of displacement.

Problematically, *MBB* has Bleek’s discursive access, his blues power, taken away from him not from outside forces but from the very blues culture from which it derives. This transitional moment in the film comes when Bleek comes to aid of his friend Giant (Spike Lee). Giant is accosted by two collection agents who make him pay for his gambling debts in flesh. This highly stylized and brutal attack is intercut with a simultaneous musical performance by Bleek and his quintet. The performance is unlike any other in the film and is presented in such a way as to suggest that it is psychically linked to the violent beating occurring just outside. Also fueling Bleek’s performance is that oldest of blues motivations: romantic jealousy. The scene just prior to this features Bleek getting in a fight with his band mate Shadow (Wesley Snipes) over a woman. Their rivalry is consistent throughout the film but seems more about creative tension, masculinity, and power. When Bleek discovers that Shadow is having sex with his former love interest Clark (Cynda Williams), however, their rivalry turns into blues rage of the same kind that Gussow suggests is an always looming threat in blues culture.¹⁸ Bleek’s performance is inspired as much by this altercation as it is by Giant’s beating.

The music, composed and performed by Lee's most frequent musical collaborator Terence Blanchard, as well as the editing does most of the meaning-making in the sequence. The viewer sees Giant being dragged out of the club by the two collection agents, Madlock (Samuel L. Jackson) and Rod (Leonard L. Thomas), in slow motion. These slow motion shots are intercut with Bleek performing in real time. Giant calls out to Bleek only to have his shouts quickly stifled by a punch to the stomach. Bleek acknowledges the disruption with a look but never stops performing. Giant and the two men continue toward the camera until the image is abstracted and then there is an abrupt cut to the reverse angle where the viewer sees the door of the club's back entrance kicked open. Madlock and Rod enter the alley and begin beating Giant. Each strike is delivered singularly with each blow increasing in volume and intensity. The hits, rather than sounding only violent, actually begin to sound musical in their percussive quality. It would seem that Madlock and Rod have their own blues to play. Giant again calls out to Bleek just before being struck again in the stomach. An abrupt cut back to Bleek's performance follows. By this point, Bleek's performance has become decidedly more violent. He aggressively points his trumpet, screaming with harsh and focused blasts that punctuate a steady stream of rapid fire notes. The editing makes it appear as though Bleek is trying to answer Giant's desperate pleas through his trumpet in a psychic display of violent call and response. It also seems significant to note that Bleek is performing in an almost absurdly fast jazz swing style, swing of course being the most direct rhythmic derivative of the blues. This is the blues accelerated to a fever pitch that is impossible to sustain.

The camera then begins to cut back and forth between Giant's beating and Bleek's hyper-kinetic, creatively violent performance. Each punch to Giant's face becomes a scream from Bleek's trumpet. Each kick to his stomach is mirrored by a rumble on drummer "Rhythm Jones" (Jeff "Tain" Watts) bass drum or a loud cymbal accent. The acceleration of the cuts increases, making the parallel connection between Bleek's performance and Giant's beating blatant and the tone reminiscent of a Frank Miller pulp fiction style graphic novel in its exaggeration and deliberateness.¹⁹ After squealing to an abrupt climax, Bleek exits the stage and proceeds to the alley to discover Giant lying beaten and broken. Out of anger and frustration he punches Rod in the face only to be quickly counterpunched by both the attackers. Bleek then deflects one of Madlock's punches with his trumpet. Madlock quickly takes the trumpet and strikes Bleek in the face twice with it splitting his lip open. This moment seems particularly harsh. The sound that accompanies the blows inflicted on Bleek is brutal. If the hits on Giant were a percussive combination of flesh and bone against flesh and bone, than the sound of metal against the flesh and bone of Bleek's face is a doubled injury upon the senses. The blows that Bleek sustains ravage his lip, which has been established by this point as the means through which he supports himself (there is an earlier scene in the film when Clark playfully bites Bleek's lip only to have him react angrily). The film does offer another painful blues moment when Bleek makes a failed attempt at returning to the stage, but this is ultimately the end of Bleek's life as a musician.

Returning for a few moments to the quality of Bleek's performance, it is as obvious as it is necessary to recognize Bleek's use of his trumpet as a blatantly phallic blues weapon. Krin Gabbard has done an impressive job linking Bleek Gilliam to an number of other

jazz musician characters in popular American cinema.²⁰ He effectively parallels this comparison by connecting Terence Blanchard to a tradition of other real-life trumpet players. Thus, Gabbard's essay puts forth two primary lines of argument: that Blanchard's "post-phallic" style is a very complicated choice for the performing voice a character like Bleek, whose masculine assertions are so prominent and that the history of Hollywood's dominant representations of jazz musicians cannot allow Bleek to love and be loved while still practicing jazz. He identifies Bleek's beating scene appropriately as one of castration and his attempt to return to the stage as a reenactment of that castration.²¹ I agree that Bleek is indeed castrated and that his placement within a highly normative relationship at film's end is an affirmation of the film's own ambivalence about the question of authenticity and audience. However, the particulars of Bleek's assault are even more complex than Gabbard's framework allows. Gussow, instead, outlines a tri-part configuration that adds another dimension. He suggests that blues weapons are deployed as phallic signifiers, as instruments of wounding others' bodies, and as transformers of musical-- particularly rhythmic-- violence.²²

Bleek's trumpet manifests as all these throughout and in the "comeuppance" sequence most dramatically. Bleek is not simply castrated, but is first made impotent when he tries to use his trumpet to shield himself from the attack. Then he is stripped of his phallus and assaulted with it. This last injury points not only to the horror of castration but to the trauma of rape. What has been Bleek's most effective phallic weapon fails him in the face of direct physical violence. Thus, while Gabbard's analysis is useful, it is also limited because it refuses to acknowledge that Lee's polemic extends beyond the purview

of jazz in popular film. The setting is jazz, but the narrative is all the way blues, and therefore its concluding act demands more careful inquiry.

MBB would be a highly disappointing addition to the blues tradition if the film simply left Bleek totally abject. This would also be true if the narrative simply shuffled Bleek, forcefully, into a heteronormative relationship in order to stabilize his characterization as Gabbard suggests. Rather, Lee uses the final act of *MBB* not to oppose the genre conventions of Hollywood but to offer an alternative to the violent deployment of masculine blues weaponry. After a descent into crippling despair following his beating, Bleek does attempt to return to the stage. This moment is also fraught with the sting of the blues tradition. After a melancholy performance of “Harlem Blues” by his former love interest Clark and old band mate Shadow, Bleek attempts to play a rendition of “Again, Never.” He is, however, unable to hit the notes the song requires-- his embouchure having been destroyed by the attack.

Watching Bleek’s performance here is at least as excruciating as witnessing his attack if not more so, because of the knowledge of what he was once capable. Bleek exits the stage mid-performance giving his trumpet away to Giant. He quickly rushes to the home of his other former love interest Indigo begging her to “save [his] life.” The humiliation Bleek experiences enables him to levy his pride and literally beg Indigo to pull him from out of the depths. It is this cry for help, a cry for what essentially becomes a black feminine strategy for blues existence that ultimately counters the film’s earlier outpouring of masculine blues violence. Bleek’s phallic weaponry proves useless in the struggle for discursive access. It simply gets cancelled out by even more phallic blues weapons or his

own musical impotence— a consequence of the scars he carries from his rape. The narrative's answer to this is the feminine blues weapon of the womb.²³

Bleek and Indigo's marriage, as well as the birth of their first child (not coincidentally named Miles after the legendary trumpeter), is the deepest and most powerful blues strategy the film offers. Just as generations of slaves passed along the knowledge of struggle-- often through the marks made upon their bodies both physical and otherwise, as well as constantly evolving strategies for coping and overcoming that struggle-- onto the blues people of the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction Eras, *MBB* has its bluesman (with the help of the blues woman) pass along his knowledge to the next generation. Bleek passes his beating song along to his son, and because of Bleek's experience in blues culture, he can also help his son better understand how not to be consumed by it. In this sense, *MBB* succeeds where *SoS* fails. Bleek's sacrifice of his musical career does not have the universalist tinge that Gabbard insists applies to all jazz musicians in popular film. What Bleek's fatherhood does mean is that this particular character was forced to find another means of creating a legacy. The final scene, that bookends the film, features a more mature Bleek allowing his son to go play with his friends instead of being forced to practice as he had been. This does not signal the abandonment of jazz for more normative activities like baseball, but rather Bleek's own recognition of the potential pitfalls he wants his own son to avoid.

CHAPTER IV

GATOR'S BLUES

The shooting death of Gator (Samuel Jackson) in *Jungle Fever* is a beating song of a somewhat different variety because the uncanny quality of the performative element. Gator's taunting dance seems on the surface to be only a performance in jest, an attempt to flaunt his inadequacies as a son in the face of his father's piety. As in the films already discussed, however, the circumstance and quality of the performance coupled with the music and culminating violence makes it a compelling moment for examination in a blues context. Why does Gator dance at a moment of extreme earnestness? Or, more accurately, why does performance enter into this moment of familial turmoil at all? How is this performance directly related to the violence that ends the scene? How might the scene that immediately follows this one be related to a proliferation of blues expressivity throughout the film's narrative?

Gator's "last dance" is a scene of uncommon intensity. Most of this tension is attributed to Samuel Jackson's charismatic and frenetic performance as a crack cocaine addict who has officially reached rock bottom. His relationship with his father, "The Good Reverend Doctor Purify" (Ossie Davis), has been strained beyond repair while his mother, Lucinda (Ruby Dee), remains devoted. An earlier scene in the film establishes

the dynamics of these relationships. Gator comes into his parent's home that is adorned with religious images and paraphernalia claiming to have gotten a new job. This is of course a ploy that will enable him to exploit his mother's generosity and gain money to feed his addiction. Interestingly though, Gator dances here almost as though he were performing for the money. He jokingly two-steps in the kitchen while his mother reaches into her secret money jar. The exchange is on one level meant simply to serve the plot. The characters and conflicts are firmly solidified. The reverend makes it known that Gator is not welcome while his mother is less judgmental of his addiction. But the money-for-performance exchange is still somewhat obtuse.

Gator's performance for his mother seems like a ritual clearly carried over from his childhood, thus suggesting performance is a regular part of their familial contract. Gator is performing, literally, the act of dance for an audience, but he is also performing an identity by evoking his childhood persona: innocent, playful, and eager to please. Gator's dancing is thus a kind of currency exchange and what he is trading for monetary compensation is memory in the form of nostalgic invocation. His disheveled appearance and cold unwillingness to perform are missing from his "last dance," however, and hasten his end.

The viewer sees Gator waiting outside of his parents' home. He remains out of sight so as to assure that his disapproving father does not see him. When the Good Reverend leaves the house to walk the dog, Gator tellingly says, "Showtime." An abrupt cut to an interior view of the home follows and Lucinda enters the frame. Mahalia Jackson, icon of gospel music, provides the score for the sequence. Lucinda stands at the door and, after some debate, agrees to let Gator inside. He enters, walking straight toward the

camera and nearly into it just before another abrupt cut to a close-up shot of he and his mother dancing in the kitchen. She is not buying into his performance this time, however, she is not willing to play her standard part in it. She pushes him away and he then takes to tearing through the house in search of money.

The reverend returns home interrupting the siege, and after a heated stand-off, the reverend leaves the room. He returns only to claim that, despite his love for Gator, he will be better off dead. The camera cleverly remains in medium close up here so as not to reveal the gun the Reverend carries in his hand. Gator then begins to leave and is nearly out the door until the Reverend exclaims, “The Devil’s work is never done. The Devil is always busy.” As if challenged by the assertion that the Devil has found work in him, Gator turns back toward his father says, “Mama. Check out this new step. I made this one up just for you.” He then begins shuffling toward his father, shimmying his shoulders back and forth. The dance climaxes with a spin that leaves Gator and the Reverend standing face to face. Significantly, Gator never removes his gaze from his father throughout. He focuses on the Reverend with a wide-eyed, almost grotesquely pointed look that essentially makes his father the target of the blues that Gator is attempting to play out at this last moment of desperation. His father’s response is cold and calculated: “I’ll pray for you my son. Father I stretch my hand to thee...” Upon the delivery of this line, he fatally wounds Gator with a shot to the stomach.

While this emotionally devastating scene might seem a regression backward, wherein another of Lee’s blues subjects is destroyed because of the inadequacy of his blues weaponry to combat purely physical violence (or even supply enough power to overcome his own self-destructive tendencies), there is at least one other way to read this beating

song. Once again, Gussow's study is helpful in illuminating the paradox. In speaking about the way man bluesmen literally beat on their guitars for rhythmic and symbolic emphasis, he suggests that: "The ritually repeated blows of the blues man's party game...are, as strange as it may seem, the mechanism of a deep healing—if a healing inevitably rendered partial by its inclusion of the very violence it seeks to redress."²⁴ It is admittedly difficult to see any kind of true healing in the Reverend's violent response. After all, Gator is left dead at the end of the scene, bleeding to death in his mother's arms. But healing is precisely what the Reverend intends. His spiritual invocation just before the delivery of the healing wound is certainly evidence of this. The words, "Father I stretch my hands to thee..." even suggest that the reverend is symbolically extending the power of divinity out to his lost son. Whatever the moral implications of this strategy, it seems unquestionably in keeping with blues methodology. This moment of violence is also the only time that the Reverend expresses anything aside from disdain for Gator. His love comes in the form of an embracing bullet.

This paradoxical theme carries over into the next scene of the film wherein Gator's brother Flipper (Wesley Snipes) and his estranged wife Drew (Lonette McKee) struggle to mend their relationship that has been shattered by Flipper's infidelity and subsequent affair with a white woman. This doubled scene bookends the film by paralleling the opening sequence in which Flipper and Drew passionately have sex. But here the passion displayed in the opening has been replaced by a melancholic combination of both pleasure and pain. Drew is racked with tears during their embrace and the torment in her face represents the contradictory situation of having her husband returned to her while being forced simultaneously to cope with the pain of his betrayal. This scene in

conjunction with the one that precedes it could not be more latent with the blues. The Reverend's display of violent mercy suggests that healing can come, at least in part, from a finite act of violence with hopeful intention. Drew and Flipper's attempt at reconciliation maps the road to healing in the repeated act of the very transgression that inflicted trauma in the first place. This is not the last time that the paradoxical strategy of healing through or with violence appears in Lee's body of work, and I will explore this idea further in my concluding analysis of *25th Hour*. Before moving onto that final analysis, however, I will examine two other beating songs that explicitly link music and performance

CHAPTER V

BLUES BEYOND THE MASK

Lee's 2000 satire *Bamboozled* contains what is arguably the most problematic combination of violence and performance of any of his films. Some critics have suggested that the violent escalation in the film's final act is simply inability on part of Lee to maintain focus on the film's central polemic: the effects of psychic violence and self-hatred that a constant bombardment of demeaning and dehumanizing images has had on African American consciousness.²⁵ I would agree that this is indeed the ground where *Bamboozled* lays its foundation, but that this psychic violence and rage transforms into physical violence at the film's conclusion is also significant and perhaps not the failure it seems to be. I argue that *Bamboozled* positions the predicament of blackface performance as parallel to what Gussow calls the most troubling predicament of blues culture: "inflicting wounds on black bodies and finding in such violent acts a source of fierce expressive pleasure."²⁶ Man Ray's (Savion Glover) "Dance of Death" at the end of the film is similar to Bleek's comeuppance in that it is a confrontation of blues weaponry that results in abjection, but this beating song prompts a wider trajectory of resulting violence. Man Ray, who over the course of the film becomes "Mantan" the New Millennium Minstrel, is executed not because of a desire to cling to his masculinity but

rather because of a karmic reprisal for his participation in an on-going tradition of minstrelsy that minimizes the humanity of black experiences. The unmistakable morality that the film attaches to this execution is, however, highly problematic. But through analysis of this scene as well as some earlier sequences in the film, I hope to offer one potentially illuminating reading of this violence.

The first scene of immediate relevance is Man Ray's audition for the proposed TV program the "New Millennium Minstrel Show." After Pierre Delacroix/Peerless Dothan (Damon Wayans) delivers his pitch for the show to his white boss Thomas Dunwitty (Michael Rappaport), Dunwitty asks Man Ray to give a demonstration on the large wooden conference table of his office. Man Ray, a tap-dancer forced to dance in the street along with his friend Womack (Tommy Davidson), jumps at the opportunity. Man Ray is literally a starving artist who wants only two things: the opportunity to perform his art in front of an audience and compensation for his performance. As Man Ray suggests in the scene just prior to this: "As long as the hoofin' is real, and I can get some loot, I'm good." Thus Man Ray climbs onto Dunwitty's table and begins dancing. The quality of his performance is precisely what Dunwitty asks for: "raw." Man Ray moves with dexterity, desire, and precisely controlled aggression that suggests that he is in one way or another dancing for his life. He taps out rhythm after rhythm and is literally kicking at Dunwitty's face during one moment. The innate violence in the percussive beating that Man Ray inscribes on the wood of Dunwitty's table might best be described as a kind of soulful violence.²⁷ Man Ray is beating out a blues that is as yet uncorrupted by the mask of minstrelsy.

This expressive performance style is clearly subverted after Man Ray dons the blackface mask. His performance in the “New Millennium Minstrel Show” is subdued, predictable, and usually in synchronization with the show’s other performers. The intensity of his movement is minimalized as is the technical difficulty level, and though his effortless mastery is still evident, the passion is absent. And what is most troubling about his minstrelized performance is the replacement of simultaneously violent and rapturous facial and bodily expression with the grotesque grin of the blackface mask. All of the passion of his earlier performances, even those on the street, is absent and so, therefore, is the resistive power that Man Ray possessed.

The predicament that Man Ray and his fellow performer Womack face seems fundamentally blues in its characterization. This becomes most evident during the sequences that feature Man Ray and Womack “blackening-up” to become “Mantan” and “Sleep ‘N Eat.” Perhaps *Bamboozled*’s master stroke, these scenes are as moving as they are painful in their detail. The first of these scenes features a voice over narration by Sloan (Jada Pinkett) who carefully describes the make-up process.²⁸ Womack is clearly more hesitant than Man Ray to don the make up and there is something unavoidably grotesque about the blackface mask fully applied. The scene cuts back and forth between the two characters in their separate dressing rooms and ends with a synchronous “showtime” grin from both. It is in these moments that the film gets closest to unraveling the disturbing tinge of the mask. As the minstrels confront their own reflections in their dressing room mirrors, the always-already confrontational nature of the blackface mask is felt. The mask seems to scream at all those who look at it; it is self-aware. It recognizes the conflated architecture of its own design as neither a true reflection of blackness or

wholly a projection of whiteness, but as instead some twisted, caricatured displacement of both. The mask assaults by triggering a history of painful associations while grinning and laughing at the wounds. Man Ray and Womack are talented performers who throughout the film, manage to give even their minstrelized performances a level of character not unlike the real life forbearers from whom their names are derived—Mantan Moreland and Willie Best a.k.a. “Sleep ‘N Eat.” But the blackface mask ultimately seems to obscure any potential for *real* expression to come through it. Womack recognizes this before Man Ray and quits the show refusing to denigrate himself any longer. Man Ray on the other hand, continues only to find that he too has lost his expressive voice. The “hoofin’ is *not* real” and even more problematically, Man Ray has contributed to a long legacy of damaging images that can never really be removed from circulation.

The predicament these performers face, that perhaps all black performers forced to don blackfaced, is a blues condition. They are more often than not trapped by the mask in a complicated web of reflexivity. Their experience gives them voice and their ability gives them power (or at least potential power); and yet, the avenues through which they are allowed to express these things are controlled by hegemonic forces that want to either stifle that voice entirely or distort it for other means. If a performer chooses to avoid the dominant avenues for expression, then he or she is relegated to the realm of secondary discourse where access to audience is vastly diminished and compensation is lacking or altogether absent. Thus, the mask puts its black wearers into an in-between space, a predicament of blues proportions wherein they are often forced to make a decision between basic mobility and survival or participation in an a larger apparatus that limits

their opportunities for expression while simultaneously causing psychic damage to other “blues people.”²⁹

Eric Lott refers to Man Ray’s look into the mirror while blacked-up as a “totally terrifying moment of self-alienation.” Lott goes on to suggest that there is perhaps “no real way out” of participation in some form of minstrelsy.³⁰ This is only partly accurate. Access to a world stage, to a level of mediation with a mass audience like the one presented in the New Millennium Minstrel Show, that is usually policed by what Lee calls “gatekeepers,” seems indeed almost impossible to engage in without the threat of minstrelization. This is of course something that Man Ray discovers first hand, but the film does also offer Junebug, Pierre’s father (Paul Rooney) who refuses to compromise his art for mainstream discursive access. As a stand-up comedian forced to perform in only small black clubs, Junebug is perhaps the film’s only true example of a way of being that does not assume participation in minstrelsy. This does not mean that Junebug’s decision is not latent with its own set of difficulties. His humor traffics in many of the same stereotypes upon which the minstrel show depends, but the specifics of Junebug’s medium prevent him from slipping into the same pitfalls as blackface performers. The dynamics of live stand-up comedy offer an arguably greater potential for expression void of the minstrelization that so often overcomes television sitcoms or variety shows. Relative autonomy over the content, presentation, and delivery of the material, the relative “safe” space cooperatively maintained by both performer and audience, and the contingency of the performative moment (there is only ever one take), are all elements that distinguish stand-up from many other performance forms. This being said, Arthur Knight’s assertion that the presence of a character like Womack, one who is seen putting

on the mask and more importantly taking it off, is progressive step is also correct.³¹

Womack, however, casts away his mask off stage where the stakes for such action are far less dire. Man Ray chooses a more confrontational attack.

In a last minute effort to redeem himself, Man Ray appears on the minstrel stage out of costume to the shock and awe of the audience who have themselves donned blackface in order to show their fandom. Man Ray demands that they proclaim: “I’m sick and tired of being a nigger, and I’m not gonna take it, ANYMOOOORE!!!” After this he falls slowly to the ground in what can be read as a metaphorical death of “Mantan” only to jump to his feet as if to signal the resurrection of Man Ray. He begins tapping furiously, with even more energy and violence than he displayed earlier in Dunwitty’s office. Man Ray has reclaimed his blues weaponry and is trying with all he can muster to assault the audience. The inherent danger in this manner of expression—the potential to reveal the anguish Man Ray carries from his experience as a blues subject—is unacceptable and Dunwitty has him physically removed from the stage. In this mode, he might threaten an audience that has come precisely so that they can make light of such experience. This is, however, only part of the consequence Man Ray is forced to endure. After being tossed into the studio’s back alley, Man Ray is kidnapped by the Mau Maus, a pseudo-revolutionary Black Nationalist hip hop group obviously meant to be a critique of misdirected black anger and aggression.

Rather than simply killing Man Ray, the Mau Maus decide to execute him on live television in a final “dance of death.” Several elements make the sequence a challenging one to watch. The violence, a spectacle death and black-on-black lynching, is being offered as an entertainment event. Presenting the “Dance of Death” in this way is, at best,

a means for the film to suggest a heavy-handed correlation between images and violence and is, at worst, perhaps its own disturbing spectacle for viewers. It is this level of doubled mediation that gives the sequence tension evident nowhere else in the film; spectacle is almost always on some level pleasurable even (and perhaps especially) if it is brutally violent. The sequence begins with Man Ray tied to a chair as the Mau Maus tease him about his impending doom. They are wearing blackface masks themselves, although made of plastic rather than the traditional burnt cork. There are then several quick cuts that show different characters watching the broadcast in horror from their living rooms, including Sloan, Pierre, Junebug, Pierre's mother, and Womack. The viewer can also see that one of the Mau Maus is holding a hand held camera to capture the action. This is the source from which the live broadcast takes its gaze. There is also a television set in background that is displaying the broadcast behind Man Ray that therefore doubles his image in the *mise en scene*. This doubling seems a reminder of the split consciousness of black performers performing in blackface. The Mau Maus demand that Man Ray be forced to his feet after which an abrupt cut follows to an animated sequence. The viewer sees an animated Man Ray dancing as a white slave master shoots at his feet. This short animation sequence features a classic Warner Brothers cartoon theme score.³² Although a heavy handed device, the brief animated sequence further identifies Man Ray's precise fault. He is not to be executed simply for "singin' and dancin'" as he claims, but for performing in a way that is demeaning for other blacks and ultimately re-fixes white hegemony. As the sequence ends, there is another abrupt cut to a medium long shot that features the real Man Ray dancing on a set of wooden planks as the Mau Maus shoot at his feet.

Perhaps the most intriguing quality of Man Ray's performance here is that he is actually dancing rather than just shuffling his feet to avoid the bullets. Thus the musical element of this beating song, rhythmic tapping, mimics the violent action being perpetuated against the performer; the sound of his tapping mixes in eerie similarity with the sound of gunfire making the two difficult to distinguish. Man Ray is literally dancing to save his life while the Mau Maus are deploying a combination of phallic weaponry in their use of guns on one level, and the camera, on another level. Their use of these weapons in lieu of a microphone cannot be separated from the fact that the Mau Maus earlier auditioned for the minstrel show, too. But the microphone is unsuccessful in assuring them stage access, whereas phallic weapons do precisely that. After a lot of shooting, the Mau Maus stop firing and for a brief few moments Man Ray actually continues dancing. There seems something particularly suggestive about this quick overstep. The viewer is left wondering whether this is simply a reflex action or perhaps Man Ray's insistence on taking ownership over his last performance. After finishing his last step, he is shot repeatedly by one of the Mau Maus and then falls to the ground much in the same way as he did earlier during his final protest of the minstrel show. Several more shots are fired at Man Ray and he slowly rolls over. The camera then picks up the shooters' gaze and shows a single gloved hand clutching a gun and the shooter says to Man Ray, "you done fucked up in the game now" just before firing one last fatal shot. Following this, the viewer's point of view picks up the gaze of the held hand camera in the diegesis. The gaze moves slowly in close up over Man Ray's devastated body pausing for an uncomfortable duration on his face.

The last scenes of the film are also of executions. Pierre, the progenitor of the New Millennium Minstrel Show, is executed by Sloan as are the Mau Maus by the police. It is admittedly troubling that everyone is forced to pay what is almost certainly depicted as a moral recompense for their participation in minstrelsy. But if I might draw upon Lott's assertion that there seems little way out of minstrelsy, I would add that there is also little way of avoiding some price to be paid for participation in minstrelsy. In keeping with Lee's penchant for blues narratives, this price is one often paid in blood. Perhaps this is also what is suggested by the montage sequence that concludes the film. As image after image of blackfaced performance appears, it becomes painfully evident that once an image is placed into mass cultural circulation, as one can suspect Man Ray's beating song now has been, control over the meaning and utility of that image are illusory at best. Sure, there is character, power, and dignity to be found in many blackface performances by performers both black and white, but it is character often hidden, power frequently usurped, and dignity earned always in spite of the mask.

CHAPTER VI

THE BALLAD OF HUEY P. NEWTON

A Huey P. Newton Story is a strong departure not only from the other films I have discussed thus far, but also from the rest of Lee's body of work. Adapted from Roger Guenveur Smith's one man stage play, the film resists a traditional linear plot and lacks the standard conventions of conflict that can be neatly resolved. *It is a beating song of a different kind.* First, the film lacks any *actual* violence. Second, the blues subject's performance defies fixed classification. Thirdly, the musical element of the "song," as was the case with *SoS*, is a simultaneous dislocation/relocation of the blues from and then back into an African American cultural context. Bob Dylan inserts himself into the blues legacy and his blues is then recouped back into the black expressive tradition through the performance here. Even despite these discrepancies however, *AHPNS* might very well be even more linked to the blues tradition than any of the other films.

Smith's embodiment of the infamous historical figure Huey P. Newton offers much to support this claim, invoking what he calls an "existentialist blues tradition" to inform the nature of the expression he exhibits throughout the film. The primary method is improvisation, but improvisation that is deeply linked to a long tradition ranging from classical blues artists like Bessie Smith to revolutionary rock icons like Jimi Hendrix.

“Huey” proclaims simply that, “It’s all blues.” For Huey, the blues becomes a mechanism for oppressed peoples to conceptualize and cope in a tumultuous American society that champions liberal notions of freedom and democracy while restricting access to opportunity at every turn. The blues becomes a way of understanding the world and finding a place in it even if that place is an impossible one.

At no point is this more evident than during Huey’s “performance” set to the music of Bob Dylan’s “Ballad of a Thin Man.”³³ A seemingly random and at times ambiguous outbreak of movement erupts in the middle of the film and destabilizes nearly everything the viewer has come to know about the character Huey up to this point. The conjunction of Smith’s performance, the song being played, the shot selection, and editing all work in this moment to create a meta-text; it is a text that deliberately reaches outside itself to engage in conversation with the expressive idioms passed down through virtue of the blues tradition. There is, not coincidentally, a lack of any dialogue from Huey himself during this burst of energy. This is not surprising considering the character’s earlier comments about language: “I just want to be brutally honest about language, about words. I don’t think that language is really good. I don’t think that language has caught up with the rest of the human evolutionary process...trying to express a Godly thing, we come up short.” Language seems insufficient to articulate what comes through in Huey’s movement here and even the carefully crafted lyrics of Dylan’s “BotTM” seem incapable left unto themselves. Huey has to get up and move even despite his own claims that he “can’t dance” and that he is not “an entertainer.” These coupled with his indictment of the audience as “freaks” watching the “geek in the cage” just prior to this points to a curious play of contradictions. What is the viewer to make of these contradictions?

Well, they could simply be attributed to the always-problematic figure of Newton himself, who even Smith suggests is “a man of profound, extreme, and largely self-acknowledged contradictions.”³⁴ More significantly, however, it seems appropriate to connect this to the character’s own definition of the blues: “The blues is a note between a note.” Although uncertain in its meaning, this statement seems to describe exactly what is happening in this sequence. This is a dance that is not really a dance. No one is likely to mistake Huey for James Brown and yet the camera cuts directly to his feet just as it might during a film of one of the legendary performer’s shows. Strangely enough, his movement does not seem entirely out of sync with the music, although he is definitely not moving in direct coordination with the 6/8 (more like four-on-twelve) rhythm of the song either. The music obviously prompts his body and seems to direct his body in ways which he is simultaneously does and does not control. Things are further complicated when he removes his shirt displaying his torso in what might only be described as a mock striptease. That he places his black shirt over his head to hide his face, almost as though he were wearing a funeral shroud, is one of the more troubling bits in the sequence, possibly because it foreshadows the character’s inevitable death or maybe just because it is so aesthetically disarming. If Richie’s performance lynching in SoS is attempt to displace white hegemony by attacking one of its most powerful symbols—the white sheet that undoubtedly alludes to the Klu Klux Klan—than Huey’s display here implies a suicidal attack on the black militant response to that hegemony. Huey, cloaked in black, is not only an abject body, but a war cry that calls for the eradication of all current symbols and signs.

Huey also seems to shadowbox in this sequence but certainly not with anything resembling the grace of Muhammed Ali and not even very convincingly for someone who has spent a significant amount of time in solitary confinement. It seems more like another “in-between,” a kind of violence that is only ever suggested. It is literally only the shadow of violence— not the real impact of it. Taken in along with his faux cocaine sniffs at the microphone and incessant chain smoking, even while doing push ups and staring directly into the camera, this portion of the “song cycle” is given a visceral physicality. The blues is given a body— Huey’s. At this moment Huey is taken over and the audience cannot help but hear Dylan’s words echo with disturbing resonance: “Something is happening here/But you don’t know what is.” It seems that what may be taking place here is possession. The blues are being inscribed on Huey’s actual body and it is struggling to signify an in-between space, the notes in between the notes. This struggle is one that seems inherent to the blues tradition: cathartic power, indulgent pleasure, and unrestrained freedom but always equally tinged with heartbreaking loss, multivalent pain, and enduring trauma.

Just whether or not Huey is successful in this matter seems entirely questionable though. The contradictory images do not exactly stop as the Bob Dylan song ends. They in fact become even more difficult to decipher as Huey seems to be driven into violent spasms by the voices of his contemporaries in documentary footage that plays in the background. One of these voices even explicitly remarks that perhaps Huey’s problem, as leader of the Black Panther Party, is his “complete incoherence.” Another of the voices says that, “You scare people Huey.” This being a notion that he handedly mocks later on: “good, people should be scared. Boo!” This sequence ends more specifically

with Huey refuting allegations that he is a “violent man” or a “crazy man.” While he successfully convinces the viewer that he is not simply violent or crazy, the rest of the film does not provide a tangible image of Huey P. Newton that reconciles the contradictions we have seen and heard and felt. But perhaps the point is that the audience is not supposed to get one. Perhaps there just is not a singular, easily accessible Huey P. Newton to be had by anyone. After all, does not the contradiction of the political activist and philosopher dying while suffering drug addiction suggest that he was no clearer about all of this than we are?

Huey could very well have exited the narrative by quoting the always universally applicable Shakespeare, but he, instead, draws Shakespeare into the blues tradition. The audience is left not with “sound and fury signifying nothing” but with a reference to blues legend Robert Johnson sitting at the crossroads with “sound to the left of me and fury on my right.” Most significant is Huey’s decision to also quote the late hip-hop artist The Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher Wallace): “Birthdays are the worst days/and now we sip champagne when we’re thirsty.” Having already previously pointed to rap music as “the new blues,” the connection here is powerful but not necessarily clear. Is The Notorious B.I.G. another Robert Johnson? Another Shakespeare? Perhaps a bit of both?

Ultimately, *AHNS* is just that: “A” story of Huey P. Newton and unquestionably never “The” story. The viewer is never granted closure or even coherence, and in keeping with the blues tradition, this seems absolutely appropriate. As Huey defines it, the blues is not about getting the whole story but about trying to understand the parts of the story that get left out, the parts for which there are no easy answers. How did one of the founders of one of the most politically and culturally volatile organizations in the

country die in the streets a drug addict? It is likely that there will never be any conclusive answer to this paradox. What is perhaps more important is that the song continue to play for in its repetition, its meaning can adapt. Sound designer Marc Anthony refers to the project as a “song cycle [wherein] we play the same song every night, but never in the same way.”³⁵ This description is telling for it hints at the constant instability that finds home in blues culture and expressivity.

The contradictory, the paradoxical, and the unstable, are precisely what I am suggesting are the elements that link blues methodology in Lee’s films, and it is the moments where violence enters into these states of being that are most intriguing. But even this claim is misleading. I would hope that what has become evident is that violence is an essential element in formulating these ontologies, not something that impinges upon (or wholly disrupts) the places where Lee’s blues subjects carve out their lived experience. In one final analysis, I will push on the boundaries of where the blues finds its home even further by removing some of the heretofore prescribed elements (namely performance and music) and searching for a broader continuity.

CHAPTER VII

“MAKE ME UGLY”

Lee's 2003 meditation on trauma, *25th Hour*, is a difficult film to pull into this milieu both because of its inherent ambiguities and because of its apparent resistances to the concept of the beating song in Lee's work. Montgomery Brogan (Edward Norton) does not seem to have any of the familiar markers of a blues subject. He is white and middle class, although *SoS* clearly suggests that these markers need not be disqualifiers for an abject position in blues culture. More importantly, Monty is not, at least not in any way akin to the other characters that I focus on in this study, a performer; he does not sing, dance, act, or play an instrument. Monty is a businessman (albeit an illegal one) who finds himself bankrupt. Set on the eve of Monty's impending seven year prison sentence for drug trafficking, *25th Hour* is a snapshot that makes Monty a blues subject by placing him in a blues-style predicament. There is something inherently paradoxical about a man being allowed to roam free before placing him into a world sure to be filled with violence and abjection of varying degrees and kinds.

It is not simply the knowledge of future abjection that makes Monty's situation so indicative of “Spike's blues,” however, but this knowing in context of other compelling dimensions: the complexities of familiar betrayal and blame, an atmosphere of

simultaneous mourning/indictment/celebration in a post-September 11th culture, and the recognition of the possibility that Monty's circumstance is the product of his own design. What is especially compelling about this particular manifestation of the blues is the way in which violence shapes into its configuration. Monty's ultimate strategy for coping through and with violence is the primary concern here. To make a clear differentiation from the other previously mentioned films, however, *25th Hour* engages violence on two levels. Physical violence is present but so is a carefully focused look at the effects of violence-- its lingering and open wounds.

Violence enters *25th Hour* aurally before the visual narrative begins. The sounds of a dog being beaten play overtop the opening credit for Touchstone Pictures serving as the film's informal introduction to viewers. The first shot features a speeding yellow muscle car that comes to an abrupt stop having noticed the wounded animal on the side of the road. Enter Montgomery Brogan, who after much debate with his friend Kostya (Tony Siragusa) and some vigorous resistance from the dog, too, manages to capture the less than grateful animal (who comes to be called Doyle) for rescue. He remarks later that this act is "the best thing [he has] ever done" because "every day [the dog has had] since then has been because of [him]." This opening scene characterizes Monty and embodies many of the concerns that echo throughout.

Monty's values are quickly established-- courage, compassion, loyalty, and culpability-- all of which become essential issues as the narrative unfolds.³⁶ The dominant theme of *25th Hour* concerns Monty's attempts to negotiate where his own loyalties lie as well as determining on whose loyalty he can depend. He has to determine all this while also trying to reconcile his own guilt in the aftermath of a rupture that will

change his life as well as all those around him. *25th Hour* opens by creating a miniature allegory of this. Neither Monty nor the viewer is actually present for the attack on Doyle— we enter in its wake. Thus, from the outset, *25th Hour* is intent on exploring how its characters cope with the violation evident in their wounds.

The scene that most aptly captures Monty in the midst of this struggle is the “fuck you” monologue that several critics have already latched onto as the most memorable moment in the film.³⁷ During a final dinner with his father, Monty enters the restaurant bathroom only to be accosted by a confrontational “fuck you” scrawled on the bathroom mirror. This prompts a long, incendiary rant against a whole list of New York’s different ethnic and racial groups, often demarcated by their geographical location. The scene is particularly relevant in context of the discussion here for two reasons. Firstly, two of the groups that Monty rails against are singled out specifically because of their acts of violence. Monty indicts both the terrorists who attacked New York on 9/11 (even citing Osama Bin Laden by name) as well as the NYPD for their acts of police brutality. Two groups one would expect to fall in dynamic opposition are brought into comparison to one another during Monty’s verbal assault. This sudden barrage of disparaging commentary, accentuated by cut-away shots that feature each of the representative groups, functions as a combination disavowal and praise song for New York City. Secondly, this contradictory tension is echoed in the formal elements of the monologue. At several moments, particularly at the end of speech when Monty critiques himself, it becomes clear that the Monty being reflected in the mirror and the Monty looking into the mirror are not necessarily the same person. In a truly psychoanalytic moment, Monty’s consciousness splits and this manifestation is also evidence of his blues circumstance.

There is an attempt to displace blame by shifting it to everyone but himself, but then there is also a self-reflexive indictment. The mirror enables a perverse game of projection that allows Monty to temporarily gain some distance from himself before being brought back to his unavoidable reality: “Fuck you, Monty Brogan! You had everything and you threw it all away.” It would appear that it is indeed only in the internal recognition of culpability that some sense of healing can happen.³⁸

25th Hour features two other scenes that reference the blues and, strangely, the two moments parallel each other despite significant difference in content and formal composition. The first comes after Monty’s two friends Frank (Barry Pepper) and Jacob (Phillip Seymour Hoffman) meet to talk about his impending plight. Frank, a wall street broker, lives in a lavish apartment that overlooks Ground Zero. After Frank accosts Jacob for his naiveté about Monty’s situation, the camera moves to the window looking down onto the eerily bare landscape. Instead of tons upon tons of rubble, the viewer only sees construction workers going about the very pedestrian business of cleaning up the site. The markers of devastation are gone; all that remains is a sordid sense of violation and victimization. Terence Blanchard’s operatic score, a mix of European and Eastern influences, crescendos lending a dire intensity to the sequence. Perhaps more remarkable than any other quality, is the sheer duration of the scene. Extended takes are common throughout the film but none seem quite as scarring as this one and therein lays the irony: this is a scene absent of any actual violence. This scene is more like the re-opening of an unhealed wound wherein the memory of violation is still fresh, sensory, and imminent. It is in this seemingly non-violent moment that the viewer is most violated.

Thus it comes as a paradox to discover that the healing of wounds, or at least the potential for healing, actually comes later during the film's violent climax. After a long walk along the waterfront, Monty, Frank, Jacob, and of course Doyle, make their way to an underpass. The setting is itself contradictory. A garden and fountain adorn the background and an almost ethereal light drifts into the tunnel. The aesthetic is almost confrontationally pastoral—as though this peaceful place is intruding on the otherwise callous and unfeeling city. Monty then asks for a last favor from Frank: “make me ugly.” Frank responds to the request with confusion, not understanding what possible good it might do. When he refuses, Monty provokes him suggesting that not only does Frank have to do it, but that he likely wants to “teach [him] a lesson.” He blatantly calls Frank's loyalty into question and then hits Jacob. This seems enough to give Frank the fuel he needs.

The following beating is shot from three primary angles: one medium-long shot which provides framing continuity, another close up that looks down onto Monty's face from Frank's perspective, and a close up of the opposing angle that pictures Frank's distraught and embattled visage. The intensity is also elevated by an assault of aural textures: the sound of Doyle barking raucously, the screaming pleas from Jacob begging Frank to stop, the painfully realistic sound of Frank's fist against Monty's face, Blanchard's score, and Frank's own cathartic screams.³⁹ There are several cuts between the three primary angles as well as some other shots such as a close up of the menacing Doyle. This beating song is markedly different from the others, however, in that after Jake is finally able to pull Frank away from Monty, the rage and chaos subsides and, most importantly, all the audio is removed. More intercut shots follow, perhaps the most

powerful of which is a shot of Frank wailing followed by a pan down to his bloody fist. Strangely, the absence of sound makes his wailing that much louder. Before stumbling away, Monty hugs Frank as if to thank him, although the viewer is never allowed to hear what he says.

Unlike in the aforementioned moments of the film, the violence is immediately present and devastating. Despite this, though, this beating seems less like a debilitating abjection and more like a healing. Frank is finally able to say, with his fists, everything he could not say with words. Monty simultaneously punishes himself while helping to remove the burden of blame from his friend's shoulders. This is possible because of the most important factor that separates Monty from the class of other blues subjects that pervade Lee's films— he is the one who actually instigates and, in fact, demands the abjection of his own body.

He claims to do this for the preservation of his sexuality. Although not emphasized with the same prominence as in the novel that is the film's source, the threat that Monty will face in prison because of his good looks is a consistent strain that runs throughout the film. The logic is of course warped; little if anything is likely to prevent Monty from facing assault or rape in prison and certainly not the preemptive abjection of his own body. Nonetheless, it is the impetus for the beating. In the larger scheme of the narrative, however, this seems a moot point because what the beating actually does is provide some level of understanding between Monty and his male friends. However distorted the logic, this is a decidedly masculine endeavor and it seems to work to some degree. This beating is really the only thing that Frank actually has to offer Monty, and he does this first with hesitation and then with rapturously cathartic passion. There is some level of healing

though it is transitory, uncertain, and elusive— as healing that comes in the form of violence could only be.

CHAPTER VIII

BLUES, BEATING SONGS, AND BLACK CINEMA

Spike Lee is by no means the only filmmaker making “blues films,” and although my examination has been extracted specifically from his texts, the blues (as manifested in cinema) is not confined to them. If the blues is truly contradiction deployed as being, then it can be found throughout the history of contemporary black cinema and likely even earlier. John Cassavetes’ *Shadows* (1959), Michael Roemer’s *Nothing but a Man* (1964), and Gordon Parks’ *The Learning Tree* (1969) are all films that position their protagonists in highly antithetical states of being. To echo Baker’s initial claim, the conflicts that these contradictory states pose, prompt either unconventional (albeit temporary) resolution or dissolution of familiar antinomies. Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song!* (1971) is steeped in the black vernacular culture of its period and uses its formal composition in conjunction with the narrative to propose blues strategies of resistance. Van Peebles’ mythic hero, “Sweetback,” is a blues subject for the ages; he is violent, rebellious, incongruous, and most interestingly, deploys sex as his principal method of performance. While pointing toward the future influence of hip hop culture on film in its use of repetition, montage, music, as well as visual and aural sampling, *SSBS* is a fictional biopic for a blues revolutionary.

Black musicals of the late 1970's and early 1980's also contribute potentially useful blues texts. The penultimate example is Walter Hill's *Crossroads* (1986) in which protagonists Willie Brown (Joe Seneca) and Eugene Martone (Ralph Macchio) travel from the urban North to the rural South in order to win back Willie's soul from the Devil. The film sets up Willie as a close friend of the late, great blues hero Robert Johnson who, legend has it, also sold his soul to the Devil so he could play the blues. *Crossroads* is an especially interesting film because it attempts to occupy several polarities at the same time. It immerses itself in the mythical history of the blues but is still constrained by the genre conventions of the musical, the buddy movie, and the classic "on the road" story. The film's climatic guitar battle posits Eugene head-to-head against Jack Butler (Stevie Vai), and just when it seems that Butler has bested Eugene, the young bluesman in training deploys some of the classical music he formerly abandoned in order to one-up Butler. Both inconsistent and predictable, this moment is in keeping with the spirit of "blues cinema." When confronted with what seems an unconquerable obstacle, Eugene uses what he already knows to make a way.

Much of the work of the Los Angeles Rebellion filmmakers also deserves consideration in this context. Haile Gerima's trilogy, *Bush Mama* (1979), *Ashes and Embers* (1982), and *Sankofa* (1993), all contain beating songs of different varieties and present an opportunity to expand on the gendered limitations of my study. *Bush Mama* and *Sankofa* situate female protagonists within vernacular matrices that give birth to revolution in the urban jungle of LA and on the sugar plantations of Haiti respectively. Ned Charles (John Anderson), a black Vietnam vet returned home to California, learns to adopt his grandmother's creative blues strategy for resistance at the end of *Ashes and*

Embers. Gerima's African ancestry is also significant because it suggests that the blues transcends national borders and crosses into other realms of the black diaspora. A more in depth study of his work, that recognizes the presence of blues ideology while utilizing Paul Gilroy's "Black Atlantic" paradigm, is long overdue.⁴⁰ Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) is similarly compelling in its diasporic scope. As one of the only black woman directors, Dash's approach to the story of a family of Gullah people at the beginning of the 20th Century is unique and carefully nuanced. The themes at the heart of the film— migration vs. imbedded-ness, tradition vs. modernization, myth vs. reality— bespeak the manner of quandary consistent in the blues tradition. Charles Burnett's *To Sleep with Anger* (1990) is also concerned with many of the same themes as Dash's *Daughters*, but in a more contemporary context.

Black action cinema, particularly those films imbedded within the "'hood film" cycle of the early nineties and those just outside it, might also be thought of as blues narratives.⁴¹ Moments in films such as John Singleton's *Boyz in the Hood* (1991), Allen and Albert Hughes' *Menace II Society* (1993) and *Dead Presidents* (1995), and even Mario Van Peebles *New Jack City* (1991) might be better examined with the blues in mind rather than only within the constrictions of a highly problematic genre. The morally complex characters in Carl Franklin's *One False Move* (1992) as well as detective by default, "Easy Rollins," of *Devil in a Blues Dress* (1995) are also blues subjects worth consideration. The undercover cop that gets in over his head in Bill Duke's *Deep Cover* (1992), and the crime lords in search of redemption in Abel Ferrara's *King of New York* (1990) and Leon Ichaso's *Sugar Hill* (1994) are some of the best examples of the kind of blues subjects that emerge in the genre. Abject bodies and

contradictory circumstances proliferate in these films, suggesting that the blues is not only present in the genre but integral.

One final category of films that might also be considered within the expanse of the blues is a crop of black films by non-black directors that stretch throughout the 1990's. The final scene of John Sayles *City of Hope* (1991) is one example. The character Nick (Vincent Spano) lies bleeding to death in his father's arms and the only person who can hear the father's pleas for help are a mentally handicapped man who can offer no assistance. This is a blues moment if ever there was one. The young protagonist of Boaz Yakin's *Fresh* (1994) employs all his shrewd know-how in order to better his situation and that of his sister. In a clever game of manipulation, Fresh (Sean Nelson) uses the abject degradation all around him to his advantage. Jim Jarmush's *Ghost Dog: Way of the Samurai* (1999) features a protagonist embodying a number of different contradictions. Ghost Dog (Forest Whitaker) is a deadly assassin who also appears to be gentle and utterly benevolent. He adheres to an ancient code severely at odds with the reality of his present day circumstance, and yet his suicide at the end of the film still seems like more a strategy of action rather than submission. If we think of Ghost Dog as a blues subject, however, this peculiar turn makes more sense.

What I have hoped to illuminate is that the blues is emergent in contemporary black cinema. It is the predominant ideology that informs the narratives even when other cultural influences are at work and genres shift. While Spike Lee's films offer what are some of the most compelling instances of the blues' manifestation, his work is part of larger cultural milieu that is perceptible in black cinema more generally. This study has been an attempt at identifying and exploring the blues conceived within a specific frame

of bodily violence, performance, and resistance, but it is not, and never could be the last word on blues in any medium.

NOTES

- ¹ The exceptions to this are Lee's first two studio releases *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) and *Girl 6* (1996) as well as *Crooklyn* (1994) and *4 Little Girls* (1997).
- ² See Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) and Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976).
- ³ Baker, 6.
- ⁴ Valerie Prince, *Burnin' Down the House: Home in African American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2004.
- ⁵ Valerie Prince, *Burnin' Down the House: Home in African American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2004.
- ⁶ Dan Flory. Article in *Film and Knowledge: Essays on the Integration of Images and Ideas*. Ed. Kevin L. Stoehr. (North Carolina: McFarland, 2002) 174-190.
- ⁷ Ibid, 183
- ⁸ See Linda Williams, "Power, Pleasure, and Perversion: Sadoomasochistic Film Pornography" *Representations* No. 27 (Summer, 1989) 37-65.
- ⁹ Amy Louise Wood. Article in *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture*. Ed Peter Lehman (New York: Routledge, 2001) 195.
- ¹⁰ I use "semi-public" to describe Richie's performance at the theater because the intended audience as well as the very nature of the performance place the action in the realm of secondary discourse that is open to the public but also immediately stigmatizing.
- ¹¹ Adam Gussow. *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 128-130. Gussow draws primarily from Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* trans. Leon S. Roudiez (1980; New York 1982), 4. Gussow outlines three different relationships between the blues subject and the "abject": possession, embodiment, and rejection.
- ¹² Philip Simpson, "The Politics of Apocalypse in the Cinema of Serial Murder," *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*, ed. Christopher Sharrett (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999) 119. Simpson's article focuses on three earlier films: *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *Kalifornia* (1993), and *Seven* (1995).
- ¹³ Vivian Sobchack, "The Violent Dance: A Personal Memoir of Death in the Movies" in *Screening Violence*, ed. Steven Prince. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000) 117.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 124.
- ¹⁵ Quote taken from Flory. "Epistemology of Race..." 182.
- ¹⁶ See Krin Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz at the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- ¹⁷ See Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" in *Signifyin[g], Santifyin', and Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, ed. Gena Dagele Caponi (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 303-306.
- ¹⁸ *Seems Like Murder Here*, 196.
- ¹⁹ The influence on both Lee and Miller is likely that of Soviet montage style, filtered most prominently via Francis Ford Coppola in films such as *The Godfather* (1972) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). For more on Soviet montage style see *Montage and Modern Life 1919-1942*, ed. Maud Lavin (Cambridge: MIT Press;

Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1992) and Gilles Deleuze, "Montage: The American School and The Soviet School" in *The Visual Turn: Classical Film Theory and Art History*, ed. Angela Dalle Vaache (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003.)

²⁰ Signifyin(g) the Phallus: *Mo' Better Blues* and Representations of the Jazz Trumpet," *Cinema Journal* 32, no. 1 (Fall 1992).

²¹ Ibid, 53.

²² *SLMH*, 221

²³ This is not so radical considering Baker's "matrix." The blues matrix is a womb if it is anything.

²⁴ Ibid, 203

²⁵ See Saul Landau, "'Spike's Revolutionary broadside' Race, Media, and Money: A Critical Symposium on Spike Lee's Bamboozled," *Cineaste* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2001). Michelle Wallace and Stanley Crouch also expressed concern about the film's ultra violent turn during "Minding the Messenger: Symposium on Bamboozled" held at the Institute of African American Affairs at NYU.

²⁶ *Seems Like Murder Here*, 200.

²⁷ See Mikal Gaines, "Soulful Violence and African American Expression: Freedom, Masking, and Recreating Discourse," Thesis; Hampton, VA: Hampton University, 29 April 2002.

²⁸ Sloan (Jada Pinkett) plays Pierre's assistant and is perhaps the film's most consistent voice of reason throughout. To be fair, however, she too is in many ways implicated in the disastrous consequences of the "New Millennium Minstrel Show."

²⁹ I admittedly use Baraka's terminology here loosely and he would almost surely object to my use of his term in describing one of Lee's texts at all. See Amiri Imanu Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963) and "Spike Lee at The Movies."

³⁰ "Minding the Messenger: a Symposium on Bamboozled," *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* (Summer/Fall, Vol. 3, Issue 3, 2001).

³¹ Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Blackface Performance in American Musical Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 248.

³² Lee claims that this bit is derived from an actual Warner Bros. cartoon from which he was denied access. Gary Crowds and Dan Georgakas, "Thinking About the Power of Images: An Interview with Spike Lee" Interview, *Cineaste* 26, no.2 (Spring 2001).

³³ This moment occurs at about fifty five minutes into the eighty seven minute film and lasts some five to six minutes including the montage of documentary footage that accompanies it.

³⁴ PBS, Interview with Roger Smith, 2002.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ That he is involved in some manner of illegal business is also subtly suggested via the nagging voice of his friend Kostya: "We have people waiting for us...people with money."

³⁷ Patricia O'Neill, "Where Globalization and localization meet: Spike Lee's *The 25th Hour*," *Cine Action* 64 (2004). O'Neill spends some time speaking about the sequence as well as responding to other critics.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Lee confesses in the director's commentary track, that one of Pepper's punches mistakenly made real contact and nearly broke Norton's nose.

⁴⁰ See *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). The intention of Gilroy's study is to replace a nationalized concept of black culture with one that more accurately reflects the natural fluidity of borders throughout the African diaspora. Gilroy is accurate in asserting that purely nationalistic frames limit our understanding of the movement across borders, but he is negligent in his exclusion of figures such as Gerima who would have better informed his study.

⁴¹ See Craig Watkins, "Ghetto Reelness: Hollywood Production, Black Popular Culture, and the Ghetto Action Film Cycle" in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: British Film Institute, 2002).

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